

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Ingham, John N. *The Iron Barons: A Social Analysis of an American Urban Elite, 1874-1965*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978. Contributions in Economics and Economic History, No. 18. Pp. xix, 242. Tables. \$19.95

Wallace Clement

Volume 10, Number 2, October 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019100ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019100ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Clement, W. (1981). Review of [Ingham, John N. *The Iron Barons: A Social Analysis of an American Urban Elite, 1874-1965*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978. Contributions in Economics and Economic History, No. 18. Pp. xix, 242. Tables. \$19.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 10(2), 58-59. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019100ar>

Gardiner, or Gardiner and Drapeau, are missed. Indeed, Colton's frame of reference for analyzing municipal government is American, not Canadian. Perhaps because of this, he has little to say about the way Gardiner's policies related to the development strategies being pursued by other governments in Canada at the same time. Given recent interest in the role of the sub-national state in promoting economic development, it would have been interesting to have a more complete comparative analysis of Metro's role under Gardiner in relation to the activities of other governments.

To make such criticisms is, of course, to suggest that Professor Colton ought to have attempted a more ambitious book. To say that is somewhat unfair, but it is also a compliment, for it reflects the confidence inspired by the work which has already appeared. *Big Daddy* is an important addition to the literature on municipal government and politics in Canada, and its central chapters are a model for the analysis of political leadership. Every student of urban politics in Canada should read it.

Warren Magnusson  
Department of Political Science  
University of Victoria

Ingham, John N. *The Iron Barons: A Social Analysis of an American Urban Elite, 1874-1965*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978. Contributions in Economics and Economic History, No. 18. Pp.xix, 242. Tables. \$19.95.

*The Iron Barons* is not social history as we have come to expect it, breathing meaning into the everyday life of days past, but social profiles of an elite based on detailed, statistical depictions. It is part of a tradition which seeks to debunk the Horatio Alger myth of 'rags to riches' in American business built around the biographies of exceptional men like Andrew Carnegie. This tradition, represented by authors such as E. Digby Baltzell, G. William Domhoff, C. Wright Mills, Thomas C. Cochran, F.W. Taussig and C.S. Joslyn, Ferdinand Lundberg, Gustavus Myers, Chester McArthur Destler, William Miller, Suzanne Keller, Mabel Newcomer, Reinhard Bendix and Frank Howton, and Frances W. Gregory and Irene D. Neu, has successfully demonstrated that the privileged reproduce themselves and access to the upper-most positions in the economy is very restricted. The novelty of John Ingham's study is its focus on six key steel cities during the period when the iron and steel industry was being consolidated as a major avenue to wealth and power.

In many ways the all too short Preface is the most important part of the book, providing something of the business background for the industry. It outlines the movement from many small iron producers prior to the Civil

War to the huge vertically and horizontally integrated complexes which arose thereafter to service the booming railway and construction industry. Aside from some casual remarks suggesting the determinism of location (coke in the northeast and iron ore from Minnesota's Mesabi Range) and technology (the Bessemer process which changed the economy of scale), there is no explanation for the processes of centralization and concentration within the steel industry. Since this forms the basis for the elite Ingham is studying, it is surprising that he chooses to ignore these basic structural factors. This would have served as a valuable complement to what Ingham says is "the major purpose of this book to trace the rise of hundreds of men and families to positions of wealth and power in the rapidly expanding iron and steel industry of the late nineteenth century" (p. xviii).

Ingham's data include "every listed officer from every iron and steel plant, regardless of size" in the cities of Bethlehem, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, and Wheeling, as listed in the *Directory of Iron and Steel Manufacturing Plants in the United States and Canada* for the years 1874 to 1901. This major source, supplemented by some local sources, resulted in a set of 907 iron and steel manufacturers located in 164 companies. Of these he located 696 or 77 per cent of those listed. These data are systematically presented for each city using such independent variables as class origins, neighbourhoods, religion, education, social clubs, marriage patterns, and listings in *Social Registers*. Readers of *Urban History Review* may be particularly interested in the discussion of neighbourhood and class.

Strictly restricting the analysis to social profiles of the powerful, as Ingham does, abstracts their 'characteristics' from their practices and effects. In this case it also separates them from the prevailing social forces – the processes of consolidation and organizational changes mentioned in the Preface but then dropped. As a result, the book is a key reference work for those interested in specific aspects of each city rather than one which will be read throughout.

Although empirically rich, the study is theoretically naive. There is an electric use of sociological theory but it bears little on his evidence and does little to illuminate 'the facts.' Indeed, the key concepts used in the study are most confusing. He defines elite "as a group of individuals who have attained the principal economic decision-making positions in the iron and steel industry" (p. 10) and "the term 'upper class' describes a social class rather than describing a purely economic category; it stresses non-economic, social relations" (p. 11). These definitions are fine as far as they go and reflect conventional wisdom within the literature. Where the confusion enters is when they are actually used in the study. Ingham says, for example, "Those neighbourhoods with over 90 per cent [listed in the city's *Social Register*] shall be considered *upper class*;

those ranking between 50 and 89 percent shall be considered *elite*" (p.86). This is a long way from their original usage; elite and upper class become variables along some continuum rather than two distinguishable dimensions of analysis.

The study's major findings confirm those already established within the literature but provide important documentation specifically with respect to these six cities. The major finding is that 71 per cent of the data set "were the sons of relatively well-to-do fathers already among the mercantile, manufacturing or banking elite," 13 per cent "were the sons of professional men – doctors, lawyers, ministers, and public officials, all upper-class or upper-middle class occupations in the nineteenth century," and only 6 per cent were farmers' sons and 10 per cent from blue-collar families (mainly skilled craftsmen). Since the first two categories represented only 8 and 2 per cent of the American population in the mid-nineteenth century and the latter two 59 and 31 per cent, respectively, the top 10 per cent of fathers' occupations fill 84 per cent of the elite occupations (pp. 15-19). A mere 2 per cent of the iron and steel entrepreneurs "were from identifiably poor or lower-class families" (p.79), including the widely acclaimed Carnegie brothers.

Ingham ends with four conclusions, each of which reflects a summary of his data and not a test of theory or application of analysis. They are almost trivial. First, "the role of a businessman was not confined to his activities in the business corporation alone." Indeed, Ingham does not explore their role within the business corporation, concentrating exclusively on their "interrelated social contexts." "These range from family and cultural background, to a series of social institutions – residence, school, clubs, marriage and community" (p.221). Second, and difficult to distinguish from the first, "most of these business entrepreneurs were not isolated individuals, but were members of a group, a class" (p.225). This conception of a class reduces it to a very limited notion of the social and fails to explore the political and ideological dimensions, such as their attitudes or beliefs and how these affect their behaviour. Third, "these upper-class business entrepreneurs and their families remained, despite strong class ties, very community oriented and place oriented" by which he means only a few were "cosmopolitan" (p.228). Finally, and it would have been a shock had he concluded otherwise, "there has been more continuity than change among the business elite and upper class in America" (p.231).

As urban history, *The Iron Barons* tells us surprisingly little about the six cities it studies. What effects the iron and steel elites had on each of the cities, their relationships to others within the cities, their politics and activities, even the way they thought, all are set aside. Nor are we told of their business practices and how the iron and steel industry itself changed during this crucial period.

Wallace Clement  
Sociology and Anthropology  
Carleton University

Borchert, James. *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980. Blacks in the New World Series. Pp.xiv, 317. Tables, maps, photographs.

Behind the imposing homes that lined the streets of Washington, D.C. were the alley dwellings of the class at the bottom of society. Black migration accompanying the Civil War and its aftermath increased the alley population which peaked in about 1897. In that year a special census conducted by the Police Department reported 18,978 alley dwellers, 93 per cent of whom were black. The campaigns waged by housing reformers and the competition for land by businesses and automobile garages gradually decreased the number of alley dwellings during the first half of the twentieth century. By 1970 some of the black "mini-ghettoes" had been transformed into expensive and highly sought-after residences for affluent Washingtonians.

James Borchert's thesis is that Washington's alley dwellers did not demonstrate the social disintegration and pathology described by middle-class students of alley life. By drawing on a rich and complex folk heritage, by utilizing survival strategies developed under slavery, and by adapting positively to urban conditions, the alley population established viable patterns of behaviour and social order.

To Progressive reformers the alley family represented "discord, disorder, and a constant seething 'mixup' of the population," but, in fact, it was a strong institution with considerable flexibility. It extended its boundaries to include relatives and even unrelated children who were generously looked after when they had nowhere else to go. Young, unmarried mothers stayed in their parents' homes, and no particular shame was attached to their situation. The fact that boarders were taken in meant that more people could be drawn on for help in times of trouble. There is some evidence to suggest that families related to one another often lived in the same alley. These extended kinship networks gave support to individuals threatened by unemployment or sickness. Reformers pointed to filthy, junk-filled back yards as outward symptoms of social breakdown, whereas they were actually "the family's savings account and insurance policy." Scrap metal, broken glass, old rags, paper, iron, and tin were potential sources of revenue. Broken orange crates were saved for fuel. The alleged overcrowding of alley households was to a large extent an illusion based on the middle-class notion that every human function requires a different room.

Discussion of the alley community, childhood, work