

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Clark, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. II: 1540–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Pp. xxvii, 906. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$140 (cloth)

David Dean

Volume 31, Number 2, Spring 2003

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015771ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015771ar>

[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

Dean, D. (2003). Review of [Clark, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. II: 1540–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Pp. xxvii, 906. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$140 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 31(2), 49–50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015771ar>

Book Reviews

la médecine, ils n'arrivent cependant pas à montrer ses effets dans les transformations structurelles du Bureau de santé. Par ailleurs, cette périodisation, qui met l'accent sur les individus, les amène à de curieux *flash back*. Ainsi, le débat sur la pasteurisation du lait dans les années 1920 est traité dans le chapitre 5 portant sur Adélarde Groulx et les années 1937-1964, car ce chapitre évoque la carrière du docteur Hood, chef de la division des aliments de 1912 aux années 1940. Certaines imprécisions ou omissions se sont glissées. Elles n'entachent nullement l'ouvrage dans son ensemble. Il aurait fallu, par exemple, spécifier que le maire Hingston, élu en 1875, était un médecin. Les auteurs le savent puisque, quelques pages plus loin, une note en bas de page laisse échapper l'information. Dans la section sur l'œuvre des gouttes de lait, il aurait été utile de donner un aperçu de sa mission. La création du Conseil provincial d'hygiène se fait en 1888 à la page 212 et en 1887 à la page 226. Les épidémies de poliomyélite, remarquent les auteurs, respectent un cycle épidémique de quinze ans. Il y a tout d'abord celle de 1931 et «une nouvelle épidémie va survenir en 1959, quinze ans après celle de 1946». Une erreur de calcul s'est manifestement glissée ou l'épidémie a eu lieu en 1961 ! Finalement, on regrette que l'IQRC, éditeur d'ouvrage savant, n'ait pas inclus un index à la fin de l'ouvrage, outil indispensable pour tous les chercheurs.

L'ouvrage de Gaumer, Desrosiers et Keel n'est pas sans faute. Il constitue néanmoins une contribution importante à l'histoire des institutions liées aux questions de santé publique.

Robert Gagnon
Département d'histoire
Université de Québec à Montréal

Clark, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. II: 1540-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Pp. xxvii, 906. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$140 (cloth)

Peter Clark's collection of essays is a work conceived on a monumental scale. It offers twenty-seven contributions divided into three parts. The first, consisting of seven essays, surveys five regions of England (East Anglia, the South-East, the South-West, the Midlands, and the North) and the urban history of Wales and Scotland, over the three hundred years between the Reformation and the restructuring of urban life in the 1830s. The second offers nine essays that explore "themes and types" between 1540 and 1700, the third presents another eleven thematic essays for the period 1700 to 1840. With a judicious selection of pictures, twenty-five maps, and an array of graphs, charts and tables, this book is clearly intended to be comprehensive and authoritative, and for the most part it succeeds.

As Peter Clark outlines in his introduction, British society became highly urbanised between 1540 and 1840. In England, around 5% of the population lived in urban communities at the time when the dissolution of the monasteries transformed the social and spatial fabric of towns across the island, and a smaller percentage in Wales and Scotland. By 1841 around 51% of the

British population lived in towns and cities. This urban revolution was uneven, erratic and perhaps never inevitable, but it certainly allows for the claim that in Britain the world witnessed the emergence of the first modern urban nation.

London, of course, became a metropolis, its population rising from some 75,000 inhabitants in 1550 to 400,000 by 1650, reaching over a million by 1811. What characterised the larger English urban scene was stability, at least until the eighteenth century. League tables of the major towns show that while there was some jockeying for positions at the middle of the table, Norwich, Bristol, York, Newcastle, and Exeter were the leading towns in 1700 as they had been in 1524-25. There were some dramatic falls due to economic change: Lincoln and Winchester fell into the lower divisions because of the shift away from new draperies, Southampton because it lost its foreign trade. Conversely, Birmingham and Manchester rose through industrial development, Liverpool and Plymouth did so because of new patterns in overseas trade. The shift to the Atlantic ports and the new industrialised towns intensified in the long eighteenth century. Economic fluctuations and temporary setbacks (such as plague) ensured that decline was gradual, improvement and growth uncertain.

Regional variations, as the first set of essays demonstrates clearly, were considerable and argue against over-generalisation. Certainly there was a general shift in economic power and demographic base from the south and east to the industrialising regions of the north and west, but East Anglia retained its urban identity, the towns of the South-East remained prosperous, and if South-Western towns lost ground in terms of their national importance, their local and regional importance intensified. Wales, by contrast, experienced a dramatic restructuring from the late eighteenth century, with the expansion of ports and industrial centres such as Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil and Newport. Scotland, less urbanised than England but which, like England, boasted a capital that could hold its own among European cities, also experienced significant urban growth from the middle of the eighteenth century, notably due to the reorientation of trade, commerce, and industry to the west where Glasgow grew from 31,700 inhabitants to 147,000 between c.1750 and 1821.

There are problems, inevitably, with the regions adopted here, and most authors are sensitive to the complexities involved. Essex, for example, is detached from East Anglia, a development that would have surprised most of its inhabitants between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries even had they considered the intensification of the county's commercial links to London. The towns of Cheshire and Lancashire lie somewhat uncomfortably with "the north", their links with Wales underplayed though certainly acknowledged. Alongside and along with regional boundaries, on occasion one wishes that differences within regions might have received stronger treatment.

Turning to parts two and three, one is immediately struck by the range of themes and topics covered. During the past thirty years there has been an enormous amount of research into the urban life of early modern Britain. As a synthesis, this book is a considerable achievement. Clark has gathered together an impressive group of scholars, many of them leading authorities on the sub-

Book Reviews

jects they are writing about, and all in their own ways offer considered and thoughtfully crafted essays which will become a first point of reference for students and scholars alike. Some, such as those on London and on culture, offer succinct and carefully balanced introductions to topics much discussed and somewhat controversially so (as, for example, the debate over stability in London). Others introduce subjects newly studied or recently invigorated by new work, such as politics and government, population, industrialisation, the formation of regional and county centres, disease, and belonging.

A further pleasure comes in reading parallel essays across the 1700 divide. Thus one learns a good deal about ports between 1540 and 1800, or small towns, or the role of towns in the predominantly agrarian economy before 1700 and in the rapidly changing economy thereafter, or the changing nature of urban space. However, as with the regional divisions, there are problems with choosing 1700 as a decisive dividing date. To take one obvious example, the division of the two chapters on culture implies that religion was the essential feature of urban culture before 1700, but not thereafter, which sits awkwardly with several recent studies of religion and urban society in the nineteenth century.

The decision to avoid separate chapters on women, children, and the poor, in preference to integrate their experience, was an understandable one, but several essays could have gone further in insisting upon the importance of gendered experience. Topics such as childhood, youth, and aging get short shrift here, which is unfortunate given our rapidly expanding knowledge of children, youth, and the old in urban societies. Overall, aside from the chapter considering urban identities – ‘belonging and estrangement’ – the impression given is that this is a worthy, but somewhat traditional, selection of topics and themes. There isn’t as much as one might have hoped on such topics as food, consumption, health and medicine, theatre, and the professions. Readers would have also benefited from a much stronger attempt to integrate the picture section with the text.

These reservations aside, this is most certainly a very rich collection, and readers will want to return to its essays several times. One of its great successes is that Wales and Scotland are not abandoned after the two early chapters devoted to those countries; many authors worked especially hard to ensure their contributions were truly British. Overall, then, this volume of *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* goes a long way to providing an authoritative introduction to the state of the field. Clark’s volume of essays is timely in another sense, for as the British urban landscape and structure changes with developments such as the construction of suburban shopping malls and mayoral elections, never was there a more pressing need to understand the nature of the dramatic changes that took place in Britain’s urban communities between the Reformation and the railway age.

David Dean
Carleton University

Musset, Alain. *Villes Nomades du Nouveau Monde*. Paris: Editions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2002. Pp. 398. Tables, maps, illustrations, bibliography, glossary, geographic index, thematic index. (Civilisations et sociétés 109). ISBN 0069-4290.

Commentary on and analysis of the city as a tool of Spanish conquest and colonization in the Americas have existed since settlers on Hispaniola overthrew Christopher Columbus in part for failing to understand that, for Spaniards, to “discover and settle” meant founding a proper town and establishing a local government. Yet substantial scholarship on colonial urbanization has traditionally concentrated on broad theory or local practice, shying away from systematic analysis of geographically separate but culturally or politically related phenomena. French geographer and historian Alain Musset breaks this trend in a study of the practice of relocation of colonial Spanish cities and towns, finding colonial administration and society open to, and actively supportive of, “nomadic” urban practices.

As is often the case with paradigm-breaking historical research, coincidence piqued Musset’s initial interest in the topic. Present in Mexico City during discussions of relocation after a devastating 1985 earthquake, he learned that similar proposals had been made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While that metropolis never moved, seven years in European and American archives, combined with gumshoe work on location in ruined cities of Mexico, the Caribbean, Central and South America showed Musset 161 instances of successful *traslados*, or relocations, of colonial capitals and strategic cities over a period of three hundred years. From these disparate cases, he developed a theory of causes and consequences of “nomad cities” in colonial Spanish America.

The lengthy study is divided into four sections (3 chapters apiece), each accompanied by useful black and white maps, tables, drawings, and photographs that illustrate an often-spatial argument. The first, and more compelling, sections – “Towns of paper” and “Times of Error and Wandering” – address the theory and practice of Spanish settlement that created conditions favoring municipal relocation as a tool of empire. Musset’s principal task is to explain close to 300 relocations experienced by 161 Spanish towns he believes comprise about 15% of those founded during the colonial period (p. 120). To do so, he demonstrates how ideas from Roman to Renaissance influenced the choice of the city, an idealized community, as Spanish America’s principal political institution and shaped settlers’ expectations as well as royal ordinances for city layouts and location that addressed issues of health, geography, and order. Musset then shows that when, despite careful planning, the ideals failed to produce viable results, the same demands for health, physical security, and order justified relocation. Limits of early modern scientific knowledge about climate, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes (80 moves) and failure to plan adequately for Indian and pirate attacks (112 moves) accounted for the majority of relocations. Regional maps refine this information to demonstrate how natural disasters and health concerns occurred in all areas of the Americas, whereas human challenges