

"Regional" Urban History: Small Towns and their Hinterlands, 1820 — 1985

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Review Essay/Note critique

“Regional” Urban History: Small Towns and their Hinterlands, 1820 — 1985

Fred Dahms

Bloomfield, Elizabeth; Gerald Bloomfield and Peter McCaskell. *Urban Growth and Local Services: The Development of Ontario Municipalities to 1981*. Guelph: Department of Geography, University of Guelph Occasional Papers in Geography, No. 3, 1983. Pp. 179. 38 tables, appendix. \$12.00.

Fuller, A.M., ed. *Farming and the Rural Community in Ontario: An Introduction*. Toronto: Foundation for Rural Living, 1985. Pp. x, 364. Maps, tables, graphs and illustrations. \$25.00.

Hodge, Gerald D. and Mohammad A. Qadeer. *Towns and Villages in Canada: The Importance of Being Unimportant*. Toronto: Butterworths, 1983. Pp. xx, 250. Figures and tables. \$19.95.

Otto, Stephen A. and Richard M. Dumbrielle. *Maitland: A Very Neat Village Indeed*. Erin: The Boston Mills Press, 1985. Pp. 143. Maps, illustrations and photographs. \$9.95.

Spelt, Jacob. *Urban Development in South Central Ontario*. New Edition. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1983. Pp. xxiii, 296. Maps and tables. \$9.95.

One might wonder what theme links a group of books ranging from a detailed discussion of one small Ontario town, to a survey of places under 10,000 in Canada, to a history of farming and the rural community in Ontario. Only one (Bloomfield and Bloomfield) deals explicitly with cities, and the scale of the remainder varies widely. Nevertheless, this group of books illustrates some recent themes in urban history, and all can provide useful data and concepts to the urban historian.

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Several recent articles have called for more research on city regions. Stelter, Artibise and Linteau have all suggested additional emphasis on the relationships between metropolitan areas and their immediate hinterlands as well as some attention to rural and “sub-rural” areas.¹ Chad Gaffield has proposed “a regional approach to analyzing the process of urbanization” while I have argued that one cannot view the evolution of urban settlements in isolation.² To fully comprehend the development of cities and towns we must also appreciate their places and functions in systems of settlement that have evolved over time and space. These views seem to accord with those of Davis who has suggested that urban historians should no longer attempt to use the Metropolitan thesis to interpret the relationship between central cities and the settlements in their commuting areas. He reiterates the need to understand the evolution of places in their spatial context, but eschews metropolitanism as an important paradigm.³

The books reviewed here all contribute to an appreciation of urban evolution and function, especially at the smallest scale. They illustrate the wide variety of sources available to anyone attempting to view the evolution of cities in their regional contexts and attempting to understand city-hinterland relationships through time. The discussion to follow will consider each as it falls into the settlement hierarchy from local to national, and along the continuum from rural to urban.

In *Farming and the Rural Community in Ontario* Tony Fuller has attempted to provide the public with a handy source on agriculture and rural issues in Ontario. The book grew out of projects sponsored by the Rural Development Outreach Project at the University of Guelph, and simply because urban and rural are so inextricably linked, has many chapters addressing urban and urban-fringe issues. Even the primarily rural chapters will be of interest to the urban historian in that they outline the history and function of the vast areas supporting our towns and cities.

A wide range of topics is covered in *Farming and the Rural Community*. Part one provides an excellent summary of the evolution of agriculture in Ontario from 1871 to 1981.

Part two looks at agriculture as a business while part three examines contemporary issues in the rural community. For the readers of this journal, parts one and three are the most useful since they address topics directly related to urban evolution. Part two does provide insights into the functions of rural areas, and provides an appreciation of urban hinterland problems and prospects. It does not, however, make the specific rural-urban links that might interest an urban historian.

In the section, *Issues in the Rural Community*, a number of chapters make explicit links between urban areas and their hinterlands. Kay looks at physical and policy factors affecting farm land loss and productivity while Mage discusses absentee ownership of farmland. Mage's chapter lays to rest some of the misconceptions about European ownership of our best farmland. He concludes that much absentee ownership is the result of local farm consolidation. Wolfe examines rural land use planning in areas near and far from urban places. Here emphasis is on local community participation in planning. FitzSimons presents a case study of rural-urban conflicts in the Regional Municipality of Halton, while Penfold analyzes the factors affecting the location of agribusiness in small towns and villages. The Halton chapter highlights rural-urban links and the problems of agriculture in an urbanizing area. Dahms traces the factors affecting the changing functions of small settlements in south-western Ontario from the 1800s to the present. He suggests that such places are changing but not "dying."

This book provides a context within which events in towns and cities may be interpreted, and gives details of hinterland development not available elsewhere. Although writing styles vary, it is generally readable, provides a wealth of statistical data (highlighted in summaries) and contains some useful maps and diagrams. A number of typographical errors have been corrected in a second printing. For anyone interested in the "regional" part of regional urban history it is a valuable source indeed.

Otto and Dumbrille's *Maitland* is but one step up the hierarchy from rural. It traces the history of a village on the St. Lawrence shore southwest of Prescott from its earliest foundations in the 1750s to the present day. Its major emphasis is on the people and architecture of Maitland which have combined to make it "a very neat little village indeed." In some respects this book represents conventional idiographic local history in that it considers Maitland almost as an entity unto itself. On the other hand it is based on solid research, is beautifully produced and induces the reader to visit the village. Numerous photographs and sketches of important local buildings plus a detailed map reflect the authors' original intent to purchase an illustrated walking tour of the village.

The major criticism of this and all such books is its almost total lack of regional context. It does not even contain a map

showing its contemporary location relative to nearby towns and cities. On the other hand it is an exemplary specimen of its genre, and at \$9.95 a real bargain. A little more detail on its commercial links through time would enable the reader to place Maitland in its appropriate regional context in the settlement system of eastern Ontario.

The re-issue of Jacob Spelt's *Urban Development in South Central Ontario* deserves comment here because it is a model of its type. The latest edition contains an excellent bibliography on urban systems in Ontario along with a discussion of recent urban development and planning in the Toronto area. This book remains the definitive description and analysis of the evolution of a system of settlements. In my opinion, it exemplifies the study of regional urban history as process, even though it was written by a geographer. The evolution of a number of interdependent places is traced through time and across space. History and Geography are skillfully combined to give the reader a real feel for events in south-central Ontario from its earliest settlement to the 1950s.

I have one minor criticism of Spelt's book which could easily have been rectified in the re-printing. Why are the very useful maps still grouped at the back, when they would have been much more accessible had they appeared where mentioned in the text? Nevertheless, this book remains the standard source on south central Ontario. If you haven't referred to it for a while, take a look at the 1983 edition. It's well worth the effort.

Gerald and Elizabeth Bloomfield have been compiling data again; this time on the history of urban population growth and local services in Ontario. Their book is much more than a compendium of statistics on urban municipalities in Ontario from the early 1800s to 1981. Each chapter contains an excellent and readable discussion of its topic supported by an extensive bibliography. The scope of the book is very broad when one considers the vast effort required to compile such information. A chapter of text and tables (some up to 20 pages long) covers each of the following: Incorporation History; Local Newspapers; Boards of Trade; Railways; Gas and Electricity; Street Railways and Interurbans; Waterworks and Sewage Systems; Public Libraries; Hospitals. In each chapter the significance of the service is discussed and numerous examples and case studies are provided.

The chapter on railways is typical. First the building of the trunk and local lines is discussed and then their general effects on settlement development are outlined. Tables document railway connections to urban centres and construction by decade; names of all railway companies, and major systems and major railways operating in 1920 and 1980. Finally a list of all places ever incorporated as urban in Ontario with the name and date of connection of their first three railways is provided. The chapter is supported by 33 references, several of which are bibliographies.

This volume is certainly not bed-time reading, but for any student of urban history in Ontario who requires data on any place that was ever incorporated, it is a must. Every chapter contains detailed information and discussion similar to that in the chapter on railways. A final summary table by location consolidates much of the data discussed separately in each chapter. The book is accurate, easy to use and will undoubtedly save many scholars vast amounts of time and effort.

Gerald Hodge and Mohammad Qadeer have long been the champions of towns and villages in Canada. Their national survey of such places from 1961 to 1976 is by far the widest in scope of the books reviewed here. This book is essentially a plea for more recognition of the persistence and importance of places under 10,000 in Canada. Their population growth, economies, regional relations, social structures, life, housing, land use, needs, planning and future are all discussed at the aggregate level. Fortunately, a number of local case studies provide immediacy and historical perspective on what might have become a dry statistical compilation (the book contains 98 tables, some several pages long).

The volume is useful to the urban historian because it deals with those generally neglected places at the bottom of the settlement hierarchy. It looks explicitly at linkages between and among small settlements and at their links with their larger neighbours. It reviews a good selection of the literature tracing the historical evolution of small settlements in Canada and then brings us up to date with a discussion of their contemporary functions and problems. One of its strongest sections is an excellent discussion of small town planning issues and possible solutions in Canada. This

book provides a regional context for the study of Canadian urban history, if only by drawing our attention to all those other places affecting and affected by the larger settlements that we so often study.

Each of the books reviewed above has a contribution to make to the study of regional urban history as process. Fuller sets the agricultural scene for Ontario, while Spelt fleshes out the history of its urban settlements and economy. The Bloomfields provide historical data for the whole province while Otto and Dumbrille have produced a delightful example of one approach to local history. Finally, Hodge and Qadeer have reminded us that there is more out there than Toronto, Winnipeg and Montreal. In combination these books might provide a model for the integrative regional urban history that unfortunately has yet to be produced.

NOTES

1. G.A. Stelter, "A Regional Framework for Urban History," *Urban History Review* XIII (February 1985): 193-206; A.F.J. Artibise and P.A. Linteau, *The Evolution of Urban Canada: An Analysis of Approaches and Interpretations*, Report No. 4 (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984).
2. C. Gaffield, "Social Structure and the Urbanization Process: Perspectives on Nineteenth Century Research," in *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History* 2nd edition, ed. G.A. Stelter and A.F.J. Artibise (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1984), 262-281; F.A. Dahms, "The Process of 'Urbanization' in the Countryside: A Study of Huron and Bruce Counties 1891-1981," *Urban History Review*, XII (February 1984): 1-18.
3. D.E. Davis, "The 'Metropolitan Thesis' and the Writing of Canadian Urban History," *Urban History Review* XIV (October 1985): 95-113.