

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Boyer, Paul. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978. Pp. xvi, 387. \$18.50

John C. Weaver

Volume 8, numéro 1, juin 1979

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019398ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019398ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Weaver, J. C. (1979). Compte rendu de [Boyer, Paul. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978. Pp. xvi, 387. \$18.50]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 8(1), 135–137. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019398ar>

mid-nineteenth century to its "Modernization and Renewal" after the Second World War. Unfortunately what appears in these chapters and the ones in between is in fact simply a commercial chronicle devoted to the major and the minute accomplishments of the city's business elite in their never-ending desire to capitalize on their geographic and well nurtured political advantages to retain hegemony over the prairie hinterland. When they did fail, as was often the case after 1920, Bellan almost bemoans this development as something approaching heresy. Yet he still continues to record the beginnings of almost every enterprise, the letting of nearly every contract, the construction of almost every building and the hiring of every significant group of employees and embellishes these accounts with such suitable phrases as "tremendous upsurge," "spectacular rise" and "dramatic transformation."

Like all such chronicles, Winnipeg, First Century is almost totally devoid of interpretation. The only thing resembling a pattern appears in the chapter titles which chart the yo-yoesque economy of both Winnipeg and the Prairies: Rapid Expansion, 1896-1906, Recession 1907-08, The Building Boom, 1909-12, Recession, 1913-14. The readers first response; is to say, "So what?" Economic history and urban studies have progressed far beyond such unsophisticated presentations. Moreover, it is not even a careful chronicle since it contains obvious errors in fact (eg. "The Progressive Party . . . held the balance of power in Parliament after the federal election of 1926 . . ." p. 168) and there are doubtlessly others less obvious but they are hard to check since the book is virtually devoid of documentation. One suspects that most of the evidence had been gleaned from the press. In short, Winnipeg, First Century is really just a coffee table book which is long on captions and short on pictures. It is the product of a local writer discussing local matters for local readers (The extensive use of the word "here" gives it away). Yet, as such this "booster book" serves a purpose in that a Board of Trade member can point to it with assurance and say "That is truth" and be reasonably certain of being correct.

W.J.C. Cherwinski
 Department of History
 Memorial University of Newfoundland

* * *

Boyer, Paul. Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920.
 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978. Pp. xvi, 387.
 \$18.50.

Paul Boyer has skillfully turned his furrow in a richly documented field, producing something more than a survey history of moral crusades and social reform. Incorporating familiar topics--temperance, Sunday Schools, the Children's Aid Society, the YMCA, City Beautiful--he avoids both whig praise and reflex criticism of associations or movements which sought to enforce standards of proper conduct. One suspects that

Boyer's grandfather having opened a Dayton working-class mission brings an affectionate understanding to analysis. The balance achieved deserves an illustration and the conception of social control is an instance worth citing: "Except in totalitarian situations it [social control] usually involves considerable mutuality with a nexus of shared social assumptions and aspirations linking the 'controllers' and the 'controlled'. Certainly . . . it would be a mistake to assume that the wish to re-create a cohesive moral order was confined to the well-to-do or that the urban poor always greeted the social-control efforts . . . with hostility." Nonetheless, there are no illusions about achievements in moral order campaigns. The lasting rewards in the Jacksonian era, we are told, went to the volunteers themselves "as they groped for institutional supports and moral anchors."

To fairness, nuance and irony, Boyer adds the advantage of a chronological sweep. This affords opportunities to point out how trial and error as well as shifting social conditions produced variations in the moral order campaigns. Protestant clergymen, prominent in the beginning, are alleged to have declined in influence for immigration affected the American religious consensus: the charity organization movement of the late nineteenth century worked to remove itself from the church's shadow; attempts to keep open downtown churches to serve ethnic or working-class communities faltered. The ultimate change, effected during the 1920s, involved acceptance of urban disorder, elevating it from degeneracy to diversity. The city received cultural blessing as a counterweight to sterile conformity. A reading of Louis Wirth's "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938) with its portrait of nervous and anonymous urban man challenges a detail of Boyer's neat conclusion, but despite this instance, and perhaps notions behind green belt towns, it is probably true that the city was no longer considered a massive challenge. Boyer does not work out whether this cultural phenomenon came as a consequence of a diminished turbulence in urban society or of new interpretations of the city by individuals raised as urbanites as opposed to earlier spokesmen from small towns, men not schooled in neutral observation. It is too much to expect an answer; posing the question is important and this is omitted.

Amidst one hundred years of transmutations in the quest for urban moral order are memorable insights. Charles Loring Brace, not an unfamiliar subject, appears as a fresh character. City Beautiful, treated here as primarily an attempt to engender civic loyalty and cohesion, is handled with originality. Fundamentally a study in American thought, reminiscent of the White's The Intellectual Versus the City, Urban Masses and Moral Order in America stands knocking at the door of urban social history. To return to a previous criticism, the thesis about a revision of opinion concerning the city should have taken into account research on trends in urban crime. Other complex social history issues are involved, because Boyer reiterates a contrast between village life with community sanctions and the alleged atomistic existence of city dwellers. At times, this difference is presented as one perceived by moral reformers, but the author mixes his own voice into the text.

Therefore, it is not clear whether he accepts the village/city dichotomy. There are other ways of looking at moral order. Historians of the family likely would adjust the setting of issues away from a sheer contrast between cities and other communities; they would examine the age profile, life-cycle characteristics and family networks of a population. No doubt Boyer is aware of this, just as he must realize the liberty he takes in referring to anxieties in "middle-class parlours" during the labour strife of the 1880s. Proof absolute, when all is said, is not possible nor necessary. It is enough to have written an intelligent exercise in persuasion.

John C. Weaver
Department of History
McMaster University

* * *

Adams, Ian H. The Making of Urban Scotland. London: Croom Helm and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978. Tables, figures, maps and illustrations. Pp. 303. \$23.95.

Although Scotland produced Patrick Geddes, the biologist who pioneered town planning, urban history has not exactly flourished there. Dr. Adams ambitious survey of town and city development, from the middle ages to the present, is successful partly because the secondary writing, upon which much of his account depends, and which is drawn from a variety of academic disciplines, is not impossibly extensive and complex. His familiarity with unpublished sources, especially those in the Scottish Record Office, often enables him to deepen or push beyond conventional generalizations. His book is mainly, however, a valuable summary, attractively presented, with numerous tables, graphs, maps and photographs.

The first chapters deal with the medieval origins of burghs and their development, the eighteenth-century attempts at planned towns and villages, and the impact of industrialization. Two chapters on the influence of transport and on nineteenth-century municipal reform provide a prelude to the second part of the book. Here a central, unifying concern is with the intractable and distinctive housing problems which marred the facade of nineteenth-century Scottish society, and which in the twentieth century made Scotland the country in Western Europe with the highest proportion of municipal council tenants and the lowest proportion of owner-occupiers. It is particularly in its discussion of housing policies and regional and town planning that the book does more than draw together existing knowledge. It is perhaps least satisfactory when it raises issues concerned with the relationship between the urban environment and social problems, because this is one area where the need for further research is evident.

To some extent, the gaps are undoubtedly being filled. It is to be hoped that Graeme Dunstall will soon complete the substantial work