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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Six Texts for Urban Geography: A Review

J. E. Tunbridge

Kennedy, Leslie W. *The Urban Kaleidoscope: Canadian Perspectives.* Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1983. Pp. xv, 184. Maps and Illustrations.

Short, John R. *An Introduction to Urban Geography.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. Pp. xii, 259. 52 black & white plates; maps and illustrations. $22.50.

Johnston, R.J. *City and Society: An Outline for Urban Geography.* London: Hutchinson, 1984. Pp. 296. Maps and illustrations. £5,95.

Ley, David. *A Social Geography of the City.* New York: Harper & Row, 1983. Pp. xii, 449. Maps and illustrations, including some black & white plates. $27.50.

Carter, Harold. *An Introduction to Urban Historical Geography.* London: Edward Arnold, 1983. Pp. xvii, 222. Maps and illustrations. $28.95.

Douglas, Ian. *The Urban Environment.* London: Edward Arnold, 1983. Pp. viii, 229. Maps and illustrations, including some black and white plates. $28.95.

This review deals with six broadly urban-geographical texts, but is primarily concerned with their value to historically-oriented Canadian urbanists; consideration of each book is necessarily too brief to be fully comprehensive. They fall into two groups: the first three are too marginal to merit the attention of this journal's constituency; the latter three all develop urban geographical thinking into important and innovative areas which very clearly call for our consideration.

Kennedy's book is one of the McGraw-Hill Ryerson Series in Canadian Sociology, but most of its content relates closely to urban geography. It surveys much of the scope of urban social issues, including: urban concepts; the origin and evolution of cities globally and in Canada; human ecology (including social areas and processes, patterns of segregation, crime, *et alii*); human and environmental interaction; power and resource allocation; and issues pertaining to quality of life, policy, planning and the urban future. It is not immediately clear why such a brief volume should attempt such a broad coverage, since it is not identified as an introductory overview to the other, more specialised, volumes in the series. Furthermore, its content has been extensively (perhaps excessively) documented elsewhere. Its scope condemns this book to superficiality; the Canadian content is too brief and has been provided before (eg. by Nader[1]), and it cannot be defended as an introductory text because it glosses over excessive generalisations, omissions and errors, the last things to which beginning students should be exposed. Some serious examples will serve to make the point: the account of urban origins (p. 20) gives no hint of the rival hypotheses so ably documented by Carter (reviewed later); material on the preindustrial city (pp. 44-5) is essentially based on Sjoberg[2] without reference to later qualifying ideas (also discussed by Carter); and the material on U.S. — Canadian contrasts in inner-city revitalisation is erroneous (p. 114) — the differences are much more subtle than indicated here (cf. Ley, reviewed later). It is an inexcusable error to portray redevelopment as American and rehabilitation as Canadian; these are distinctions more of time than of place (see, for example, Ford[3]). The concluding discussion of metropolitan growth pressures is dated (Ch. 8); the notion of using new towns as overspill centres was discredited a decade ago, notably by the British experience of related inner-city decline. Overall, Kennedy's sources tend to be dated; urban historians looking for an up-to-date, reliable summary of social patterns in Canadian cities will not find it here.

The appearance of yet more books purporting to introduce urban geography (Short, Johnston) is cause for some frustration to practitioners of the field. The question at once arises: can they justify the burden they create for libraries, bookstores and consumers? These two cannot, as far as Canadians are concerned. Short's volume seeks a perspective which is both cross-cultural and sensitive to urban processes, within a framework following an otherwise conventional sequence through urban evolution, the urban system, internal structure of the city, and people and environment. It does produce some fresh comparative insights, for example concerning the city as investment and as a political arena, but others have considered these dimensions also. However, urban spatial structure, an established focus of

Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine, Vol. XIV, No. 2 (October/octobre 1985)

urban geography, is not systematically dealt with, given the author's preoccupation with process. At times, Short is glib and superficial; one can only hope that beginning students (the intended market) can see the inconsistency between the material on suburban decline (pp. 22-23) and the reality of ongoing suburban growth which permeates much of the book. In 1984 (as against 1974) it is impertinent to suggest that others have neglected the cross-cultural examination of cities; while the attempt to promote cross-cultural comparisons is commendable, it could use some humility in acknowledging the work of others more knowledgeable than Short, such as Rugg,[4] Brunn and Williams,[5] or Agnew, Mercer and Sopher.[6] All in all, the book treats various topics and different cultural contexts too cursorily to satisfy a North American or "Third World" market — or perhaps even the chiefly intended British market, since the inner-city problems familiar to this are not extensively addressed. One is left with the impression that its chief justification could be the author's compulsion to publish it; such authors (there are quite a few) might save themselves and the rest of us a lot of trouble by desisting.

Johnston's book is a reprint of a 1980 work terminated by its original publishers. One suspects it would have been laid to rest but for Johnston's high profile as an exceptionally prolific geographer. Like Short's book, it uses the pretext of need for new theoretical perspectives to justify the regurgitation of widely-available material. It points to the inadequacies of the spatial approach to urban geography and puts forward an outline 'structural' theory in which urban spatial patterns are explained with reference to the social structure of an urban society, and recommendations for positive change seek to change social structures rather than the spatial patterns which are merely symptomatic of them (pp. 24-7). One need not take a position in this urban geographical debate to find fault with Johnston's book. Firstly, whether an outline theory admittedly (pp. 10-11) based on brief and somewhat conjectural sketches (embracing substance broadly parallel to that of Short's book) is sufficient justification for thrusting another urban geography text onto the market is an interesting moral point. Secondly, the theory itself is really not new; Harvey[7] pressed the debate before the discipline long ago, and it has been widely discussed since. Thirdly, he who would hook the substance of a discipline to a particular theory runs the risk of squeezing the substance to fit the theory, and there are certainly hints of this here; for example, is it enough to hang the "overurbanisation" of the Third World simply upon the colonial legacy of social exploitation, without reference to more recent failures of development policy and population control (p. 131)? Fourthly, the substance is presented in outline form with too many simplistic assertions or omissions for the intended student market. For example, pp. 143-5 discuss "counterurbanisation" (migration away from the largest urban centres) and the continuing (?) decline of small urban centres without discussing either the informal employment or the public subsidy of unemployment which substantially underwrite the economy of small towns (Cf. Hodge & Qadeer,[8] *inter alia*).

Ley's book is the "state of the art" text in urban social geography, certainly in its Canadian content and sensitivity, and arguably in its substance and quality overall. It builds upon the major growth of social geography during the 1970s, and tentatively integrates diverse bodies of research in a reappraisal of that greater part of urban geography which might be considered social. It deals with advanced industrial cities, particularly those of the English-speaking world, and gives the prominence to Canadian material which might fairly be expected of a Canadian author (based at the University of British Columbia). Furthermore the differences between American, Canadian, and other Western, urban culture and experience are masterfully summarised to the extent that existing research allows (e.g. pp. 50-53 on revitalisation); the subtleties of distinction which this entails are clearly brought out, in what is overall an eminently readable book. It is aimed at interdisciplinary urban students who have some background in human geography.

Ley's essential goal is a text which corrects the traditional overemphasis on economic theory (with which the spatial/"scientific" paradigm of urban geography is closely allied) in favour of the social, cultural and political aspects of urbanisation, with consistent reference to the historical context from which the advanced Western city has evolved (p. xi-xii). Established urban geography is critically and concisely appraised, and integrated with recent behavioural, radical and especially "humanistic" perspectives which direct attention to "the experience, the social processes and the broader contexts enveloping urbanization" (p. xi). A geography of everyday human concerns emerges, identifying the role of culture and values in urban experience and, ultimately, in the pattern of urban land use. The contents include discussion of residential segregation; the city of the mind (cognition) and urban sense of place; the spatial behaviour of informal social groups and formal institutions; power and politics in urban land use, including the housing market; the quality of urban life; and a philosophical conclusion on the attainability of the "livable city." This relates to the present post-industrial urban society, the pattern of which is determined largely by the "politics of consumption," in which favoured urban centres have become "places that allow the appropriation of values that are regarded as self-fulfilling," sought after for their perceived amenity and experiential value (p. 393); in the process of competition for space, "livability" for some may of course mean dispossession for others. In the post-industrial city, values and perceptions are seen as growing determinants of the amenity of location, lending particular significance to the contrasting existential regions which Ley identifies earlier: regions of stress, security, stimulus, ennui, status or stigma. While the reader may find that the wealth of social concepts extends beyond his needs, he will also find that Ley's book draws together numerous

threads — including cultural and institutional — which have received inadequate attention in the past.

Carter's work also develops a specialised area of urban geography, albeit the more neatly circumscribed historical dimension. Carter implies that progressive specialist extension is most appropriate to the present stage of "high mass consumption" in urban geography (Preface), a perspective of which Short and Johnston might take note. The selectivity of the book is honestly admitted, reflecting the relative paucity of work in the field: one wonders, however, whether its Anglo-Saxon (especially British) emphasis fairly reflects material available from Continental sources. Nonetheless, it is a timely contribution filling a clear gap in the textbook literature; it makes many points of wide applicability and diversifies its examples to a reasonable extent, including work on Toronto (pp. 194-8)[9]; and it is clearly a product of the methodical scholarship which characterises Carter's earlier work.[10] The author has consistently expounded the view that understanding present towns requires reference to past processes and conditions, which provide a necessary background for contemporary decision-making; this will strike a chord among Canadian urban historians.[11]

Carter's Foreword identifies the book's relationship to urban history but stresses that the "approach is geographical and hence concerned with the identification, interpretation and explanation of spatial patterns" (p. xv; he is an unrepentant "spatialist"). The book is conventionally structured, but with each part concerned with the evolutionary patterns that underlie the present: origins and diffusion of urbanism; urbanisation and the city system; formation of the town plan; and internal structure (functional and social) of the historic city. In the first part, origins, diffusion and medieval resurgence are all discussed with thorough evaluation of alternative theories (ca. pp. 3, 10, 34). There follows a similarly thorough discussion of rank-size regularities in the evolution of urban systems, the interaction within which has been "critical to the whole field of urban growth and its understanding" (p. 113). The discussion of urban form develops the theme of form as an expression of cultural values and prevailing social power structure (p. 129). The final part considers (*inter alia*) the central area of the city, the evolutionary character of which is stressed, reflecting the mutual spatial impact of competitively evolving land uses; this fundamental insight derives from Carter's early research.[12] Following discussion of the evolution of social and ethnic segregation, Carter concludes with a reaffirmation of the role of evolutionary studies in putting present problems (such as inner-city decline) into perspective and rationalising present trends (such as urban conservation). Throughout the book, the reader is struck by Carter's pithy and economical conclusions following a scholarly appraisal of the available evidence; the urban historian may also find his references to various data sources of particular interest.

Douglas' work is a pioneer survey of the interface between the city and the physical environment, another specialist contribution which fills a quite different hiatus among urban texts. It addresses both students and a general urban readership. It is strongly recommended as a complementary resource to urbanists of all persuasions, and as a text for whatever courses exist that attempt to do justice to this vital but hitherto neglected area of urban study. Indeed, it provides a basis upon which urban environmental courses could be developed. The merits of the book extend well beyond timely expediency, however; it is full and detailed, yet highly readable and immediately relevant to everyday experience. The complexities of the urban environmental system are clearly presented, with effective chapter summaries. The book is well substantiated and illustrated for a variety of global contexts; it is as universally relevant as its subject matter, but is sensitive to the local variants of man-environment patterns which result from, in particular, climatic and cultural diversity.

Douglas starts from the premise that urban growth is increasing the stresses of environment upon cities, and vice versa (Preface); this is most obvious in developing countries, as anyone who has seen the proliferation of shanty towns on hazard land will appreciate. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that the city as an economic system is inseparable from an ecological system in view of the food, raw material and energy inputs required, and the waste generated by production and consumption; the growth in both inputs and outputs produces negative feedbacks, such as air pollution and conflicts between the city's own growth and its surrounding resource base (for agriculture, mineral aggregates, etc). Following chapters consider the city's energy, water and mass balances, respectively involving urban impacts upon climate, river regimes and physical and chemical distributions (including inadvertent consequences such as acid rain). Pages 85-6 provide an illuminating discussion of sediment runoff hazards during the construction which urban growth entails, and how these are magnified in the tropical soil/climate conditions in which most urban growth is now occurring; this is one of many useful vignettes providing important background insight to the student of socioeconomic urban patterns. Douglas then considers geomorphology (landforms), the core of physical geography, with respect to its impact on, and reciprocal modification by, urban development. He notes, among other things, how man-made intrusions such as mining spoil tips are now undergoing useful secondary modification to effect environmental improvements in cities. The planning significance of urban geomorphology, particularly redevelopment on hazard lands, is made very clear. Biogeography is then discussed, including an interesting analogy between green areas of cities and the ecology of island populations, which considers the value of planning green corridors for wildlife access and human environmental quality. The book continues with practicality — relevant chapters on waste disposal and health issues. It concludes with a more philosophical discussion of the avail-

ability of resources, the equity of their distribution, technological capacity to cope with environment as against cultural problems of awareness and adaptability, and the ultimate importance of the political arena in the satisfactory reconciliation of urban man with the physical environment.

Douglas' book performs an invaluable service in directing the insights of physical geography to the understanding of man's increasingly urban habitat. Furthermore, the work is central to the man — environment paradigm in geography, which is widely regarded as the discipline's greatest intellectual contribution in an age of man — environment stress. One modest philosophical criticism might be made: like other discussions of the urban environment (mostly brief text chapters, as in Short) Douglas largely misses the conceptual continuum between the physical and the built environment. The tasks of conserving and developing cities in harmony both with their physical environment and with the cultural heritage of their built environment should be closely interconnected, not least because the inherited built environment is usually sensitive to physical conditions through past technological necessity. But since these twin threads of urban environmental management draw upon different intellectual traditions their inherent integration is seldom noted.

In summary: Kennedy, Short and Johnston make no very worthwhile contribution, from the perspective of Canadian urban students or professionals on a tight time budget, be they historians or otherwise. In contrast, Ley, Carter and Douglas are broadly parallel as specialised intellectual extensions appropriate to the present advanced stage of urban geography's development; all three are essential teaching aids in their respective fields, and valuable resource volumes for urbanists whose principal focus lies elsewhere.

NOTES

1. G.A. Nader, *Cities of Canada, Vol. 1: Theoretical, Historical and Planning Perspectives* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975).
2. G. Sjoberg, *The Pre-industrial City* (New York: The Free Press, 1960).
3. L.R. Ford, "Urban Preservation and the Geography of the City in the U.S.A.," *Progress in Human Geography* 3 (1979): 211-38.
4. D.S. Rugg, *Spatial Foundations of Urbanism*, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1979).
5. S.D. Brunn and J.F. Williams, *Cities of the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).
6. J. Agnew, J. Mercer and D. Sopher, eds., *The City in Cultural Context* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984). Most contributors have published previously, and are widely known, in the field.
7. D. Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).
8. G.D. Hodge and M.A. Qadeer, *Towns and Villages in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1983).
9. P.G. Goheen, *Victorian Toronto, 1850-1900: Pattern and Process of Growth*, Department of Geography, Research paper 127, University of Chicago (Chicago, 1970).
10. Especially H. Carter, *The Study of Urban Geography*, 3rd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1981).
11. See e.g. A.F.J. Artibise and G.A. Stelter, *The Usable Urban Past: Planning and Politics in the Modern Canadian City* (Ottawa: Carleton Library Series, 1979).
12. E.g. H. Carter and G. Rowley, "The Morphology of the Central Business District of Cardiff," *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 38 (1966): 119-34.