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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Review Essay/Note critique

The *Urban History Yearbook* — Interdisciplinary Forum or Indispensable Research Tool?

Elizabeth Bloomfield

Urban History Yearbook, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974-present.

Urban history boomed in the early 1970s, following a decade of heightened public and academic interest in cities and in urban problems and policies. For English-language organs devoted to urban history began publication between 1972 and 1975. Two of these — the *Journal of Urban History* and the *Urban History Yearbook* — have been remarkably consistent in editorial policy, format and appearance since their debuts in 1974, though quite different from each other. Of the other two, the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* has changed considerably in scope and presentation since its beginnings in 1972. In 1985 it absorbed the subscription list and some of the features of the fourth, *Urbanism Past and Present* (1975-1985), which had grown out of the *Urban History Group Newsletter*. The *Yearbook*, more distinctive than the others in its range, emphasis and annual frequency of publication, deserves some assessment after thirteen years.

The *Urban History Yearbook* was established on the basis of the earlier *Urban History Newsletter* (1963 - present) by Professor J.H. Dyos of the University of Leicester, “the chief inspiration, proselytizer and ambassador of urban history in Britain”¹ until his death in 1978. The survival of the *Yearbook* reflects the dedication of Dyos’s associates and students, most notably David Reeder, Anthony Sutcliffe and Diana Dixon, the support of the Urban History Group of the Economic History Society and the commitment of the Leicester University Press as publisher.

How did Dyos see the purposes of the *Urban History Yearbook*? In the first editorial, he declared that the

... Whole purpose is to sustain the disciplined approach to the study of urban history, to encourage the sharper definition of its objectives and the pioneering of more precise analytical techniques, and to provide a thorough information service for its practitioners covering current research and publication across as wide a field as can properly be handled.²

The *Yearbook*’s scope was interpreted in the widest possible terms, reflecting Dyos’s view of urban history as “not a discipline, not even a clear-cut field,” but rather an “operational strategy.”³ In the “dilemma of catholicity and breadth versus specificity and definition,” Dyos chose the most comprehensive scope, to “allow for the exceptional range of disciplines” and the “almost infinite diversity of phenomena that belong to the urban past.”⁴ The *Journal of Urban History* adopted a similar view of the field of urban history. Its founding editor, Raymond Mohl, writing in the *Yearbook* in 1983, has recalled how the *Journal*’s first editorial board compared urban history to a “big tent” filled with methodological diversity” and “scholarly pluralism.”⁵ As with the *Journal*, the *Yearbook* was to be international as well as interdisciplinary in coverage; while at first biased towards Great Britain, this was to be extended more equitably to the rest of Europe, North America and the rest of the world, with the help of a network of overseas correspondents.

Unlike the *Journal*, the *Yearbook* was never intended to be a conventional academic journal, “another outlet for the publication of research papers.”⁶ Rather, its roles as forum and research tool would make it the “principal means of helping urban historians to clarify and explain the distinctive attributes of their subject-matter and approach,” by providing “for the exchange of information and ideas on the different methods and approaches . . . and for discussing sources and types of evidence.”⁷ Accordingly, prominent features of the *Yearbook* have been: reports on conferences and colloquia; reviews of books, periodical articles and theses; bibliographies and inventories of research-in-progress (the last transferred to a separate *Register of Research* published by the Urban History Group after 1980). Articles, a very small part of early volumes, were expanded after 1978 but were to be bibliographic surveys, comparative studies, discussions of major themes, methodological issues and approaches and of the use of historical sources, and reports on the teaching of urban history.

Yearbooks of the 1980s have had a consistent format and range of contents, as an analysis of the 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1986 issues may serve to illustrate. Much the same group of historians were responsible for the *Yearbook* in these years — David Reeder as editor, Anthony Sutcliffe and Diana Dixon as compilers of the bibliography, Martin Daunton then

Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine, Vol. XVI, No. 1 [June/juin 1987]

Richard Rodger for conference reports, David Cannadine then Richard Trainor for the review of periodical articles, and Derek Fraser and Peter Clark (succeeded by Joyce Ellis and John Walton) for the book reviews.

Articles, making up about one-third of each *Yearbook*, have represented periods from the medieval to the late twentieth century and a balance of thematic and comparative surveys with detailed expositions of sources and methods. There have been appraisals of the field of urban history in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Ireland, and of the treatment by U.S. historians of twentieth-century cities. Discussions of major themes have included Victorian urban elites, crime in nineteenth-century British cities, interdisciplinary approaches to urban morphology and the significance of local elites and initiatives in Canadian urban history. Studies of sources and methods have been virtually all of British material and for social and political analysis — poll books in Leeds, Hearth and Poll Tax records for Restoration Chester, lay subsidies in late medieval Grimsby, civic sacramental token books in seventeenth-century Southwark, civic ceremonial in early modern London, as well as nineteenth-century statistics of urban crime and directories in England and Canada.⁸ Two essays in comparative history were also the only ventures into Europe or the Third-World — inter-war Athens being considered in the larger context of the “capitalist periphery,” and the impact of the “global economy” and “world system” being explored in inter-disciplinary terms. There have also been special notes on new initiatives in teaching urban history and on major research projects.

Conference reports — up to 15 in each *Yearbook*, a little over half of British conferences — are a most valuable service to urban historians. Synopses of the main sessions and papers and commentary on the discussions are routinely provided for meetings of the Urban History Group, Planning History Group, the Institute of Historical Research (notably the Pre-Modern Towns Group), the Construction History Group, the Economic History Society and the Institute of British Geographers' Urban Geography Group. But this section of the *Yearbook* also significantly increases its international range, reporting conferences as far-flung as Paris (*L'art urbain à travers l'histoire de l'architecture*, 1982), Münster (*Comparative Historical Research in Urban Areas*, 1983), Belgium (*Public Initiative and City Government*, 1984), Cracow (*Economic and Non-Economic Factors of Urban Development*, 1983), Tokyo-Yokohama (*Society of Architectural Historians*, 1983/4), Pittsburgh (*Sister Cities Conference*, Pittsburgh and Sheffield, 1981), Iowa City (*Cliometrics*, 1984) and Winnipeg (*Canadian Urban Studies*, 1985).

Summaries of recent theses for higher degrees (usually 16-18 in each *Yearbook*) are similarly useful, given the long delays before such urban research is published in books and journal articles. Virtually all the theses are on British subjects and for British universities. The review of periodical

articles is necessarily selective, but usually includes about 100 papers from journals in economic and business history, archaeology, transport, social and labour history, historical geography, urban studies, sociology, politics and regional science. Summaries and commentary on these articles are organized thematically within the broad periods: Pre-1500, 1500-1800 and Post-1800.

Book reviews and the bibliography each comprise between one-fifth and one-quarter of each *Yearbook*. There are usually 50-60 reviews grouped in three sections: General and Thematic, Individual Towns and Regions and Methodology and Sources. There are no review essays of the kind in which the *Journal of Urban History* excels. About three-quarters of the books reviewed are of British subjects and cities, the proportion being even higher in the Methodology and Sources section. The “current bibliography of urban history” has been a significant part of the *Yearbook*, with the same compilers, classification and format since 1974. Coverage of British books and journals related to urban history is both comprehensive and systematic, but the inclusion of items from outside Britain depends on the more random contributions of foreign correspondents. The total number of bibliographic entries has steadily declined during the period surveyed here — from 1475 in 1983 to 776 in 1986. The classification is mainly thematic, with major divisions (each finely subdivided) on General, Population, Physical Structure, Social Structure, Economic Activity, Communications, Political Structure, Shaping the Urban Environment, Urban Culture and Attitudes to Cities. There is always a useful index to all towns cited in the bibliography.

How well has the *Urban History Yearbook* served urban historians, in relation to its own stated goals, and in comparison with its contemporaries? By dint of a great deal of sustained effort by its editorial board, the *Yearbook* has undoubtedly provided a valuable research tool for urban historians, through its regular conference reports, reviews of books, theses and periodical articles and its annual bibliography. These features are still dominantly British and reflect the particular connections of British urban history, and especially Leicester, with economic history and local history.

There is scope for reappraisal and improvement in this user's opinion. The bibliography, for example, could be improved in several ways. A fair proportion of the references, especially of British publications, can only be described as local history, even antiquarian works. The inclusion of so many items in which the urban significance is only incidental might be justified as providing a “rich quarry” to be mined by urban historians, but it can also distract the user. While each major section is finely subdivided (perhaps at times too finely subdivided), there is a very large, undifferentiated, “catch-call” section entitled “History and Fortunes of Individual Towns” and another “Portraits of Towns — Literary, Graphic, Statistical.” In these sections, as many as

225 items of very unequal significance are listed alphabetically by the name of town. This arrangement has some bizarre effects, such as the juxtaposition of a major book on Rome with six-page article on "Robertson: portrait of a small Cape town" or of a volume on Vienna next to a local history of Vaughan Township, on the urbanizing fringes north of metropolitan Toronto. Names of journals are drastically abbreviated, even if they are obscure and only a single article from each is cited.

The *Yearbook's* success as an international and inter-disciplinary forum is less clear. As the editor of the *Journal of Urban History* remarked on its tenth anniversary, "there are really very few truly international journals."⁹ When one quantifies their contents by nationality, the *Yearbook* is no more British than the *Journal* is North American (70 per cent of the latter's articles and review essays in the first ten years were on North America). But the *Yearbook* seems more particular to Britain, has a restricted appeal outside Britain, and is largely unknown in North America. One wishes that the *Yearbook* could provide much better coverage of urban history in Europe for the rest of the English-speaking world — to complement the emphasis of the *Journal* and the *Review* on North America.

In its interdisciplinary dimensions, the *Yearbook* has not yet fulfilled the hopes of Jim Dyos, that urban history "ought to throw itself open to the influence of all kinds of cognate disciplines, and it ought to be an arena into which people come from outside."¹⁰ Though there have been contributions from geographers, an archaeologist and a planner/economist in the past four *Yearbooks*, the dominant influence by far is that of historians, particularly those associated with Dyos and with Leicester. The editors of the *Yearbook* might consider the models of some other serial publications which are more successful in their inter-disciplinary and/or international/transatlantic roles — such as *Technology and Culture*, the *Journal of Historical Geography* and the new *Planning Perspectives*.

The *Urban History Yearbook* has shared in the vicissitudes of higher education in the 1980s — the drying up of flows of research funds and doctoral students. Urban history generally has seemed to lose confidence and a sense of direction. In Britain, these tendencies were intensified by the death of Dyos, who had had such a "crucial role in creating, defining and promoting" both British urban history and the *Urban History Yearbook*. The loss of his enthusiasm and "extraordinary entrepreneurial energy," his presence and personality, has been considerable: nobody else has assumed his "influence, confidence or vision."¹¹ Had Dyos lived, his commitment to the "totality of the city," his view of urban history as the "conjuncture of the particular and the general, the cynosure where process and place interact,"¹² would have given the *Yearbook* more direction and dynamism. He might have achieved more of the comparative perspective, the

frameworks, scaffolding and typologies for which he hoped, by asking the right questions.

Some factors in the *Yearbook's* restricted appeal might be remedied. Outwardly handsome, it is very solid in format, closely printed and "densely evidenced," an annual "feat of compression" as Dyos remarked in 1978.¹³ With no photographs (except on the front covers of issues since 1979) and very few maps or diagrams, even the most elegant prose appears daunting to all but the dedicated. Its annual publication is hardly frequent enough to encourage the debate and scholarly interchange needed to provide a forum for urban historians. The cost is fairly high — about the same in Canadian dollars as for the four annual issues of the *Journal of Urban History* and nearly twice the cost of the *Urban History Review!*¹⁴ For those outside Britain, it can also be difficult to obtain. Unit production costs might be lowered by including some publishers' advertising and by a determined drive to widen the *Yearbook's* appeal and demonstrate its relevance.

By reconsidering its format and frequency, and by commissioning more comparative and thematic pieces to stimulate and maintain debate, the editors would help the *Urban History Yearbook* to be both research tool and forum.

NOTES

1. David Reeder, "H.J. Dyos: An Appreciation," *Urban History Yearbook* (1979): 4.
2. H.J. Dyos, "Editorial," *Urban History Yearbook* (1974): 3.
3. Quoted in Bruce M. Stave "A Conversation with H.J. Dyos: Urban History in Great Britain," *Journal of Urban History* 5, 4 (1979): 491.
4. H.J. Dyos, "Editorial," *Urban History Yearbook* (1974): 4.
5. Raymond A. Mohl, "The New Urban History and its Alternatives: Some Reflections on Recent U.S. Scholarship on the Twentieth-Century City," *Urban History Yearbook* (1983): 26.
6. H.J. Dyos, "Editorial," *Urban History Yearbook* (1974): 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 8.
8. Full details of the two articles relating to Canada are: Elizabeth Bloomfield, "Community, Ethos and Local Initiative in Urban Economic Growth: Review of a Theme in Canadian Urban History," *Urban History Yearbook* (1983): 53-72; Gareth Shaw, "Directories as Sources of Urban History: A Review of British and Canadian Material," *Urban History Yearbook* (1984): 36-44.
9. Blaine A. Brownell, "After Ten Years — An Editorial," *Journal of Urban History* 11, 1 (1984): 5.
10. Quoted in Stave, "A Conversation with H.J. Dyos," *Journal of Urban History* 5, 4 (1979): 492.
11. David Cannadine, "Urban History in the United Kingdom: The 'Dyos Phenomenon' and After," in *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History by H.J. Dyos*, edited by David Cannadine and David Reeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 205-221. For a less sympathetic assessment of Dyos and British urban history, see: Seymour J. Mandelbaum, "H.J. Dyos and British Urban History," *Economic History Review* 38, 3 (1985): 437-447.
12. Cannadine, "Urban History in the United Kingdom," 221.
13. H.J. Dyos, "Editorial," *Urban History Yearbook* (1978), 5.
14. There is approximately the same amount of printed material in the *Yearbook* as in the four issues of the *Journal*. The three annual issues of the *Urban History Review* contain nearly twice as much material as either the *Yearbook* or a year of the *Journal*.