

# Editorial

A European research register, a major American conference, the foundation of research centres in both Spain and France, a new journal in Spanish, three volumes of readings on British urban history from medieval times, and the appearance of a second volume of essays synthesizing urban and social development in modern Scotland are amongst the exciting developments in urban history in 1990. Together with ongoing research projects and the normal rhythm of annual meetings, many of which are reported in this the eighteenth *Yearbook*, urban historians obviously have had an innovative year, and a productive one. The extensive bibliography compiled by the *Yearbook's* bibliographical team is yet another indicator of such vitality.

In America, and in the space of only two years, the Urban History Association has provided a focus for scholars, museum curators and others, a rate of progress which was acknowledged in substantial financial support to mount a conference on 'Modes of Enquiry into American City History' from the prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities. The list of paper givers reads like a Who's Who of American urban history, and if little unanimity existed on the contribution of theory to urban history, a healthy diversity of research methods was clearly evident. The 'excuse' for the meeting was the fiftieth anniversary of Schlesinger's contention that 'the city, no less than the frontier, has been a major factor in American civilization.'<sup>1</sup> With some seventy papers and commentaries the pioneer spirit and urban frontiersmanship remains vigorous.

Erasmus himself might have approved of the diversity of approaches present in reviewing the history of American cities. Almost certainly, he would have been delighted by the Erasmus-sponsored Register of Research in European Urban History<sup>2</sup> in which some 1,000 individuals from 11 countries are identified. The national distribution of respondents who identified themselves as having an urban history focus to their research and teaching is in itself instructive. In descending numerical terms, the UK heads the list with 250 urban historians; France 207; Spain 93; the Netherlands 57; Belgium 55; Italy 50; (West) Germany 43; Denmark 16; and Portugal 11. Apart from addresses, the Register records areas of urban history research,

a select list of recent publications from each individual, graduate students and theses completed, and other vital information. A prediction – not normally part of the urban historian's armoury – might be ventured that the Register will at the very least improve the transnational reservoir of information about active researchers in the various countries, better inform Europeans of work in cognate fields, and induce a measure of confidence amongst urban historians regarding the scale of interest in their subject area. To achieve any one of these objectives would be sufficient justification for the enterprise.

The numerical strength and range of urban historical interest in Spain and France was also reflected during 1990 in the foundation of important new research centres and publishing enterprises. Based in Strasbourg, the Centre de Recherches Historiques sur la Ville has ongoing research projects on the social and spatial dynamics of urban areas, utilizing excellent documentary material based both on the 'registres domiciliaires de la population' and the 'police du bâtiment', though it is to be anticipated that further French national and international comparative studies emerge as the Strasbourg centre becomes more fully established. In Spain, the first issue of the interdisciplinary journal *Historia Urbana*, based in Valencia, is imminent, and the establishment of the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, which has as its initial research focus a multi-volume *Historical Atlas of European Cities*, symbolizes the resurgence of Spanish urban history. This is a product of two forces: first, a contemporary policy concern for the nature and quality of the urban environment; and secondly, as a direct reaction to the centrism of the Franco era, a priority amongst local councils for rediscovering urban characteristics and regional identities by means of sponsored town histories. As the project title implies, the city is the main focus of the new research institute, but the parallel existence of a taught MA degree in urban design and planning, and the sponsorship of major international exhibitions dealing with various aspects of city life is further evidence of the eclectic vitality of Spanish urban history. Urban history atlases and maps have, of course, for long attracted scholars' attention,<sup>3</sup> but the ambitious aim of the Barcelona Centre to re-present existing scholarship so as to capture the spatial dimensions of social relationships and morphological change in the city, and thus to integrate research findings not conventionally conceived in map form, can only enrich the field, all the more so since 100 cities in 20 countries are to be included.

If the teaching of urban history was an important theme in 1990 nowhere better was this purpose served than by a series of readings, editor's overviews and commissioned essays offered in the three-volume series *People and Society in Scotland*, and the four-volume series of *Readers in Urban History*.<sup>4</sup> Neither series is as yet complete but the multi-authored volume of Scottish essays distils enormous volumes of recent research and publication, and does so in an accessible and cost-effective form. The chapter structure of the two

volumes so far published provides a model for taught courses, and the volumes already figure on the reading lists of many Scottish universities and colleges. It is a formula which might with good effect be adopted elsewhere. The *Readers in Urban History* draw upon papers published in the 1970s and 1980s, and include many which have had a formative influence on the methods, approaches and interpretations of urban historians. In both series, the aspiration to inform, to reach a readership not normally exposed to thinking of the urban as having a special dynamic, is laudable, and reflects a responsible attitude amongst urban historians regarding the next generation of researchers.

## Notes

- 1 A.M. Schlesinger, 'The city in American history', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 27, 1940, 43-66.
- 2 P. Clark and B. Haynes, *Register of Urban History Teaching, Research and Publications*, Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester, Special Publication no. 1, 1990.
- 3 See, for example, H. Carter, 'The map in urban history', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1979, 11-31; L. Borgwik and T. Hall, 'Urban history atlases: a survey of recent publications', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1981, 66-75; E.A. Gutkind, *International History of City Development*, 7 vols, 1964-72; T.R. Slater, ed., *The Built Form of Western Cities* (Leicester, 1990), and city mapping initiatives sponsored under the Auspices of the International Commission for the History of Towns.
- 4 T.M. Devine and R. Mitchison, eds, *People and Society in Scotland Vol. I, 1760-1830*, and W.H. Fraser and R.J. Morris, eds, *People and Society in Scotland Vol. II, 1830-1914*, published as *A History of Modern Scotland in Three Volumes* by John Donald Publishers and the Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, respectively 1988 and 1990; R. Holt and G. Rosser, eds, *The Medieval Town*; J. Barry, ed., *The Tudor and Stuart Town*, and P. Borsay, ed., *The Eighteenth Century Town*, published in the general series by P. Clark and D. Reeder, *Readers in Urban History* (Longmans, 1990).