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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Simpson, Michael. *Thomas Adams and the Modern Planning Movement: Britain, Canada and the United States, 1900-1940*. London and New York: Mansell, 1985. Pp. viii, 262. Illustrations.

Many Canadian urban histories have touched on the role of Thomas Adams and the Commission of Conservation in initiating an explicit urban planning function here. From the first I have felt uneasy about the interpretations of Adams' role, as it presents many contradictions. Simpson clarifies these apparent contradictions by placing Adams' Canadian role in context. He covers Adams' formative years in Scotland, which shaped his lifelong philosophy, and describes his professional work in Canada in the context of what preceded as well as followed it. This comprehensive view provides what is in my opinion the most satisfying interpretation to date of Adams' work in Canada.

This is no mean achievement, but Simpson has also accomplished much more. Through meticulous research in Britain, Canada and the U.S.A., Simpson provides the first detailed account of Adams' professional career. Furthermore, he conveys this account in the context of neat summaries of the planning history of each of these countries. Additionally, Simpson weaves a major theme through his book; namely, how did Adams reconcile his utilitarian, pragmatic liberal, *laissez faire* philosophy with the energy, organization, enthusiasm and charm he applied to promoting public planning in Britain, Canada and the U.S.A. Lastly, Simpson's work presents a picture of Adams as a person, but it emerges primarily through an understanding of his professional work.

Simpson achieves all of this in a compact, well-paced book moving regularly from facts about Adams, to context, to interpretation of Adams' work and the circumstances surrounding it. Simpson has indeed produced a *tour de force* that other biographers of the planning fraternity could do well to emulate.

Given this richness a reviewer is hard pressed to comment selectively on just a few aspects, and to decide whether it is better to dwell on Simpson's remarkable accomplishments or those of Adams. I have chosen the latter and wish to comment on Adams' struggle to rationalize his utilitarian and liberal philosophy with the logic of collective action. I should, however, emphasize that this short review can hardly do justice to the wealth of information, insight and potential for further interpretation provided by Simpson's work.

To understand Adams it is necessary to start at the beginning. Although his experience in Scotland prior to the age of 30 influenced many aspects of his future career, it was largely fortuitous that shortly after moving to London he

became the first Secretary of the Garden City Association. Prior to that appointment he was educated in one of the best Edinburgh schools; looked after the family farm on the outskirts of the city after the early death of his father; and then became part of the Edinburgh literary and political scene (e.g., founder of a monthly journal for young authors and a councillor for West Linton).

Although the origin of British Planning is conventionally and somewhat crudely interpreted as a movement of social reform, frequently with socialist overtones (e.g., government intervention in the market to create a more egalitarian society), in response to the squalid, unhealthy living conditions in its swollen industrial cities, or the poverty of its rural areas, and Adams was certainly aware of these circumstances, his agenda for social reform had a different origin. To quote Simpson selectively, Adams was:

profoundly distrustful of the power of the state . . . he sanctioned state intervention only to prevent abuses of freedom. . . . A via media between absolute liberty and the public welfare had to be found which would . . . restore society's natural harmony and vanquish domestic ills without increasing the authority, cost and scale of government. Adams' version of this refurbished voluntarism was "associated individualism," the co-operation of individuals to achieve by free association those ends beyond their capacity to attain alone. . . . Adams had no acquaintance with socialist thinkers or the working class to which he manifested a somewhat patronizing if sympathetic attitude. . . . He refused always to countenance redistributive measures (such as council housing) which benefitted one group at the expense of others. Adams was also a confirmed utilitarian . . . he was convinced that the greatest good of the greatest number could be ascertained through scientific enquiries conducted by experts. He was . . . a pragmatist remarking . . . that 'It is a waste of time set up idealistic utopias of what we would like to do but cannot.' The idea of . . . the professional planner as the disinterested rationalist dominated Adams' conception of planning.

With this background, let us turn to his two most significant professional activities in Britain prior to his arrival in Canada. The first was to serve as the initial Secretary of the Garden City Association and later as the initial Secretary of the company that built the first garden city at Letchworth. Leaving aside Adams' tireless, innovative, and successful accomplishments, Letchworth stripped of its rhetoric was a new town constructed as a limited dividend real estate investment that attracted industry and middle class housing. Its earliest concession to the working class was a not very successful "Cheap Cottages Exhibition" that called for ingenuity in design and construction in order to lower building costs. When capital for Letchworth remained short and dividends uncertain, Adams was replaced by a more experienced

company manager. For a few years thereafter he continued to work for the Garden City Association and was later engaged as a consultant in planning suburban estates. He was then appointed to his second major position in Britain as an official of the Local Government Board responsible for hearings under the first Town Planning Act adopted in 1909. Adams criticized the Act for its limited scope and excessive red tape but nevertheless did his best to make it work. His contribution was appreciated and the government sponsored several trips for him to study planning on the Continent and in the U.S.A.

How does all of this help us to explain the apparent contradictions in Adams' work in Canada? A question frequently asked but not explicitly addressed by Simpson is why didn't Adams, who was one of Ebenezer Howard's closest associates, not promote the Garden City movement here? Simpson's work can be used to provide several interpretations: (a) Adams was a pragmatist and did not believe in Utopias; (b) much of Adams' work for the Garden City Association was in getting Letchworth built with private capital, he understood the obstacles to success in Britain and was not about to knock his head on that wall in Canada; (c) as an alternative to private development he would have been philosophically opposed to government-sponsored garden cities; (d) although some of his compatriots in Canada saw bad housing here, he did not equate Canadian conditions with those in the U.K.; and lastly, (e) he decided his primary mission in Canada was to put in place a framework for rational urban and rural planning. This leads to my second question.

Why did Adams put so much effort into promoting sophisticated Provincial Planning Acts, when government in Canada was still rudimentary and there was hardly anyone available to do the planning or the administration these Acts required? Relying on Simpson, the answer could be: (a) as a man of action, Adams was not predisposed to years of talk and small successes, he wanted to put in place a comprehensive planning system all at once; (b) he had faith that the scientific rationality he saw in planning would persuade others to accept his proposals; (c) he had faith in his ability to convince government not only to adopt but also to implement the legislation he proposed; (e) he had no other model of planning to propose. In the long run, Adams was vindicated because, broadly speaking, the kind of statutory planning he initiated has remained a feature of Canadian Planning to this day. So that while he may have been early, he was in general not wrong about what Canadians were prepared to accept even if the ideas were not indigenous.

My last question is why did Adams propose a well articulated system of national physical planning linked to economic development in Canada without at the same time embracing a socialist ideology. The answer here probably lies in his utilitarian philosophy, his belief that experts had the competence to complete such a task and that these plans

would be accepted as "in everyone's interest." He did not embrace a socialist alternative because it was obviously in conflict with his liberal ideology.

Simpson's work did not set out to explicitly address these three questions or many others about Adams' work in Canada. Indeed, to have entertained such conjecture would have weakened his powerful broader scale interpretations. But his work certainly does provide more than enough information and insight to allow those who are interested in these questions to posit better answers than before.

I can find nothing to criticize in Simpson's work but I do wonder what it would have been like if Simpson had decided to contrast Adams' ideology in practice, not with a more interventionist one as he has done, but with the currently faddish radical right wing liberalism. From that perspective I suspect Adams would be seen not as a respected member of the establishment but as a dangerous reformer, trampling upon sacred property rights.

Although Adams was for many years accorded great respect nationally, and had access to those in power, Canadian circumstances conspired against him towards the end of his tenure here so that with the exception of some important city plans he lost much of his influence during his last years in Canada.

As Adams said:

the greatest difficulty in Canada was the strength of resistance to the . . . proper use of land for healthful community use, even to the point of causing unhealthy conditions in town and country. This resistance is strong in other countries, but in Canada, still being exploited as a new country, it was exceptionally strong.

But Adams' disappointment was short-lived. After leaving Canada he had a brief period of trans Atlantic consulting and was then asked to direct the preparation of the monumental plan for the Regional Planning Association of New York.

Simpson has provided a new appreciation of Adams and claims he was the greatest figure in Planning in his time. He presents much evidence not so far mentioned here, such as his leadership in planning education and professional organizations to support that view. I suspect many readers will be convinced by Simpson's argument, but if his elegant work doesn't do it, no one else's will.

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