

## Some Comments Concerning a Meeting of Ontario Historical Geographers

Darrell A. Norris

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[See table of contents](#)

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DARRELL A. NORRIS

SOME COMMENTS CONCERNING A MEETING OF  
ONTARIO HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHERS

The title is misleading: participants from outside Ontario, historical geography, or geography not only attended the March 20 meeting at McMaster University, but also stimulated some of the more worthwhile exchanges that occurred. The programme focussed on two themes: the urban historical geography of Ontario and of Canada's native peoples.\* In the session devoted to the latter theme, Conrad Heidenreich (York University) put forward strong arguments for greater teaching and research emphasis on the historical geography of Canada's Native Peoples. Other disciplines, he argued, had ignored important spatial and environmental issues and had at times neglected, distorted or even destroyed important evidence.

In the paper which followed, Leonard Ugarenko (York University) discussed the role of the Indian fort hunter, suggesting that despite the large quantities of meat required by the fort from its surrounding territory, this European imprint on the geography of Western Canada could be seen as having achieved an ecological balance. Frazer Mark (University of Western Ontario) described the variety of soil analyses which supplement or expedite archeological investigation of pre-European settlement sites in Ontario.

Discussion not unexpectedly focussed on Professor Heidenreich's initial assault. William Noble (McMaster University) replied to the comments concerning archeology by suggesting that the criticism might have been valid ten years ago but that current practice in archaeology already stressed the approaches and analytical techniques Heidenreich had called for. Both Professor Noble and Charles Bishop (S.U.N.Y., Oswego) appealed for greater mutual exchange between the disciplines of geography, history and anthropology and for recognition that differences in emphases were

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\* A complete list of papers presented follows these comments.

inevitable. Professor Ray (York University) commented on the fact that geographers had emphasized European-native contact situations. Clear-cut disciplinary lines were broken after the chairman, Victor Konrad, adjourned the debate and amicable discussion ensued in the bar.

Although the necessary ingredients existed for similar debate concerning Ontario's urban past, this did not occur. Exchange of views by the urban historians and geographers was muted not only by the brevity of time allotted to discussion but also by the distance which separated the perspectives represented in the three urban sessions.

The first two urban papers dealt respectively with initial urban development and the pre-railway urban pattern in Ontario. John Jackson (Brock University) discussed the factors which underlay the location and urban morphology of St. Catharine's. His subsequent comments concerning the Welland canal emphasized the independent and important role of the mill-races which flanked the canal proper. Discussion of this paper led by Brian Osborne (Queen's University) and Gilbert Stelter (University of Guelph) centred on a lack of comparison, and perhaps comparability, with other early urban centres in Ontario. They also called for more attention to the criteria and decision-making processes influencing the kind and amount of capital investment which had occurred. Professor Jackson replied by noting the power exercised by William Hamilton Merritt and his evaluation of the site in terms of its expected United States commercial, and possibly territorial control.

Drawing on W.H. Smith's Canadian Gazeteer (1846), Professor Wightman (University of Western Ontario) identified an urban structure in which proto-industrial production was virtually ubiquitous but commercial variety was largely confined to a small number of the largest centres. The discussion which ensued questioned the sources this paper had, and had not, employed. When the chairman, Louis Gentilcore (McMaster) closed the debate discussion had shifted from the geographer's narrow preoccupation with pattern and structure to a brief exchange of views concerning the terms 'urban', 'colonial' and 'pre-industrial' and the

dangers of applying them too freely to early Ontario places.

The second urban session was a vehicle for three papers which sheltered under an umbrella of classical central place notions applied to patterns of places in the past. John Marshall (York University) and Fred Dahms (University of Guelph) reviewed the evolution of systems of central places in the Queen's Bush and the Guelph area respectively. Both papers noted a progressive concentration of activities in the largest centres, especially after 1880. Both also discussed the decline or disappearance of smaller centres, and discussed factors which seemed to be associated with growth or decline within a structurally quite stable system. Floor discussion was less concerned with the observed regularities of pattern and change than with identifying the processes which underlay these regularities, particularly the effects of business enterprise and acumen. The third speaker in this session, Peter Bulthuis (McMaster University) had explored this issue tangentially by examining patterns of newspaper advertising in late nineteenth century Central Ontario. Although changing hinterlands were observable in the fluctuating patterns of information transmitted between places via advertisements, Bulthuis did not build on this finding by integrating his results with independent measures of actual and expected change. As Alan Baker (Cambridge) suggested, despite the theoretical framework one might expect in historical central place research, the three speakers had regarded all observed changes as being of equal import. Darrell Norris (McMaster University) closed the session by reminding the speakers that explicit, rather than implicit, notions and observations of consumer and entrepreneurial behaviour were needed, and that this might be best achieved at a more local scale of analysis. Dahms' and Marshall's regional 'systems' had also been questioned from the floor on the grounds that they ignored adjacent areas and de-emphasized exogenous trends.

The final urban session was devoted to the internal characteristics of the city in the late nineteenth century. Chaired by Michael Katz (York University) the session commenced with a paper by John Fierheller (McMaster University) on the residential location patterns of

criminals in Hamilton during 1891. Fierheller observed that the characteristic offender had an Irish Catholic background, was employed in an unskilled occupation, lived in rented accommodation in the north or south-east of the city, and was charged with drunk and disorderly behaviour. The absence of one or more of these traits in the residents of south or south-west Hamilton was associated with these areas containing very few residential locations of accused persons. Fierheller interpreted this contrast as a reflection of the social disorder associated with groups who were spatially and socio-economically trapped in the industrial city at the end of the nineteenth century.

This paper brought down, if not a storm, then at least a steady rain of criticism. How many policemen were Irish? Which laws were enforced, where, and upon whom? Which traits were symptomatic, and which merely associative? Some protection from substantive criticism had been afforded the four geographers who had treated patterns of places. Their topics had been secured from broad criticism by their selective emphasis on issues which were unfamiliar or of less than central concern to many members of the audience. The fact that Fierheller sought meaning in spatial patterns of people rather than places brought his assumptions and interpretations under more universal and critical focus. In discussing this paper John Radford (York University) and Peter Goheen (Queen's University) included comments to the effect that the speaker had seemed to revive the Darwinian social ecology of the Urban Reform movement and the Chicago school. Goheen, however, also noted that the much longer text which Fierheller's address summarized had in fact recognized the inferential difficulties inherent in the data source and research design. Goheen also felt encouraged by the developing interest in records which permitted a greater insight into the workings and problems of contemporary society than assessment rolls and manuscript censuses.

The second paper in this section also dealt with nineteenth century Hamilton. Michael Doucet (York University and the University of Toronto) argued that the city newspaper not only aided, via its advertisement pages, repeated phases of speculative interest in land, but

also abetted the activities of land agents by failing to warn its readers of the risks which were manifest from common-sense and past experience. Editorial comments were enthusiastic during the periods of greatest speculative activity, probably because the city growth this activity anticipated promised increased readership and advertising revenue. The discussants wondered if this was true of all newspapers and periodicals of the time; or confined to those publishers who were most inextricably tied to capitalist interests. John Radford commented that the encouragement of boosterism, or using Doucet's term, of hype, was universal in North American publishing and transcended the second half of the nineteenth century. Publishers were, however, not unwilling to ridicule the promoters' wildest claims. Doucet had stressed that his report was preliminary in nature, and that the degree to which his results had general applicability, or could be related to the pace and nature of urban development, were both areas for further research.

In reviewing the day's proceedings, Alan Baker complimented the inter-disciplinary ties and noted a willingness to explore unusual sources. He felt that research objectives and methodology had been neither explicit nor satisfactorily grounded in the existing literature. Baker expressed surprise at the apparent continued popularity of a spatial analytic tradition at the expense of other stances appropriate to studies of the past. Neither the time allotted to debate nor the limited discussion that had occurred had given sufficient attention to these problems.

If geographers left this meeting uneasy over their preoccupation with spatial pattern, and non-geographers departed with a feeling that a spatial context is a necessary but by no means sufficient ingredient, this meeting served a useful purpose. In one sense, Professor Baker's criticisms were misplaced in that a primary purpose of these meetings is an airing of ongoing but not irretrievably committed research frameworks, especially at the graduate level. This reviewer felt that few new ideas and problems emerged from the sessions devoted to urban origins and patterns. Richard Alcorn and Peter Knights have recently commented in the June 1975 issue of the Historical Methods Newsletter that the time has

come for the development of appropriate conceptual distinctions between the study of places and the study of people. If geographers tacitly assume that the movement, behaviour and motivation of the latter are not of central concern in studies of the pattern and structure of places--are in fact peripheral to such research and its critical evaluation--then the future of urban historical geography is bleak indeed. Nor will historians of the city wish to be closely involved with or draw heavily on the results of such research. This meeting, like HUNAC in 1973,\* indicated that merely bringing together historical geographers and historians of the city will not alone produce the co-operation, sympathy and similarity in research objectives that are arguably needed. It is to be hoped that in future meetings of this kind, we too have the courage to emulate Professor Heidenreich and his fellow-workers in geography, archeology, anthropology and history. Their familiarity in research is such that Professor Heidenreich could exaggerate their differences to stimulate debate. When urban historical geographers can publicly meet their fellow social scientists in this vein without acrimony, we too will have earned the luxury of amicable ensuing discussion in the bar.

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#### ONTARIO HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHERS

Spring Meeting, March 20, 1976, McMaster University

#### PROGRAMME

#### SESSIONS

1. The Urban Historical Geography of Ontario
  - A. Origins and Structure. Chairman R.L. Gentilcore (McMaster)  
 Jackson, J. (Brock) "St. Catherines: the foundations of a city".  
 Wightman, W. (Western) "Some aspects of urban functionalism:  
 Ontario, 1845".  
 DISCUSSANTS: B. Osborne (Queen's), G. Stelter (Guelph).

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\* A report on this conference can be found in Urban History Review, No. 1-73 (May 1973), pp. 10-14.

- B. Pattern and Competition. Chairman D.A. Norris (McMaster)  
 Bulthuis, P. (McMaster) "Some aspects of market dominance:  
 centres of newspaper publication in late nineteenth century  
 Central Ontario".  
 Dahms, F. (Guelph) "Settlement patterns in the Guelph area:  
 1851-1961".  
 Marshall, J. (York) "The urban network of the Queen's Bush 1896-  
 1962: a pilot study in comparative statics."
- C. Internal Characteristics. Chairman M. Katz (York)  
 Fierheller, J. (McMaster) "Social disorder within a city: a  
 spatial analysis of criminals' residence in late nineteenth  
 century Hamilton".  
 Doucet, M. (York) "Some aspects of the land development process:  
 Hamilton, Ontario 1847-1881".  
 DISCUSSANTS: J. Radford (York), P. Goheen (Queen's).
2. Prehistoric and Historical Geography of the Native Peoples of Canada.  
 Chairman V. Konrad (McMaster)  
 Heidenreich, C. (York) "The historical geography of Canada's native  
 peoples with special reference to Ontario: retrospect and prospect".  
 Ugarenko, L. (York) "The role of the Indian for hunter".  
 Mark, F. (Western) "Pedological investigations on archaeological sites  
 with some Ontario examples".  
 DISCUSSANTS: W. Noble (McMaster), A. Ray (York), C. Bishop (S.U.N.Y.,  
 Oswego).