

Introduction

Approaches to the History of Urban Reform

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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHES TO THE HISTORY OF URBAN REFORM

The historiography of reform in North America permits a clear distinction between Canada and the United States. Reform occupied for thirty years a vital position in the writing of the Republic's history. It is tempting to attribute the emphasis to ideological considerations with "pursuit of happiness" and an unabashed sense of triumph generating works like Eric Goldman's Rendezvous with Destiny (1952) and a host of studies on the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Goldman's thesis that "the modern American reformer has been the gadfly and the conscience . . . of the only nation in man's history which has dared to live by the credo that any individual's rendezvous with destiny is a rendezvous with a better tomorrow"¹ reflected a wholly American proposition. A provocative contrast is provided by humourist T. C. Haliburton's skepticism: "changing one thing for another is not always reform." Whether such individual views describe broad cultural distinctions or not, the fact remains that controversy about a reform tradition has been a prime ingredient in American historical writing and a peripheral feature in Canadian work. Yet, the urban centres of the Dominion experienced the same fascination with new forms of municipal government, public ownership, planning and even social engineering, particularly from 1890 to 1930. Aside from an ideological explanation, historiographic emphasis has paralleled national issues. Regionalism, national unity and identity crowd centre stage in Canadian debate while the working out of New Deal promise continues to absorb American attention. National self-perception influences the historian's use of the past; a converse relationship holds true as well. In both countries, historians have ventured forth as myth-makers, apologists and pundits. What prevents a narrow intellectual and political environment are new traumas in search of explanation or the injection of convincing ideas from the outside.²

In both the sudden Canadian attraction to urban studies and the decade-long "campaign" of American revisionists we have examples of

breaks from the norm. The "new politics" of Toronto and Vancouver in addition to Federal and Provincial discovery of urban issues promoted an academic search for antecedents and traditions. Researchers in several instances have combined studies of the past with involvement in current urban affairs. Geographers Walter Hardwick and James Lemon have examined the urban past while in the thick of local politics. "It seemed oddly appropriate," wrote participant-historian Desmond Morton, "that I should have written much of the book [Mayor Howland] in spare moments during the weeks of a reform campaign."³ Contemporary policy, namely the creation of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs and a revitalized Institute of Local Government at Queen's University, prompted my own research in the field. A further element in explaining the growing research on Canadian cities and the related matter of urban reform, derived from the contrasting of American and Canadian cities that received an impetus in the wake of ghetto turmoil during the late sixties.

Undoubtedly many other considerations explain the recent attention historians have given to problems and reforms set in urban Canada. A generational reaction against mainstream political-history and exposure to burgeoning American literature have been significant. Robert Wiebe's The Search for Order and Sam Bass Warner Jr.'s The Private City have not only marked an advance in American historiography, they have exercised a direct impact on major Canadian books. Wiebe's themes appear in G. R. Cook and R. C. Brown, Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed. The influence has extended to work by Paul Rutherford and Walter Van Nus both of whom describe the rise of new professions and the connections with reform.⁴ Warner's notion of "privatism" finds a Canadian haven in A.F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth. Then, too, specific personal episodes have moved several "reform historians" along their course. Sons of the manse and participants in the Student Christian Movement, Richard Allen and Ramsay Cook, contributed to the North American literature on the social gospel.⁵ With a similar humanitarian and theological background, one of Professor

Allen's students, Stan Kutcher, has contributed to this issue of Urban History Review, presenting an appraisal of motivation in the reform endeavours of John Wilson Bengough whose career asserts the presence of an evangelical involvement in Toronto's urban reform movements.

II

Undergraduates until a very few years ago had one inspiring volume related to non-agrarian reform. In the context of Liberal and Conservative biographies, Kenneth McNaught's A Prophet in Politics (1959) conveyed an inspirational message and it had an implicit urban dimension. Macdonald's nation building had unconvincing moments; Meighen's honesty still seemed to have engendered national and class tensions. But here was a man of principle who "stuck to this central theme - that democracy must be broadened out from the political to the economic field."⁶ McNaught also shifted away from the "staple thesis" and "wheat economy" themes by suggesting that "the enduring elements in the C.C.F. spring not so much from the agrarian revolt as from urban labour and urban intellectuals."⁷

At times, the biography had the elements of a moral drama. The Karsh photograph alone inspired reverence. Contrasted with the conservative clergy, the Winnipeg elite or Mackenzie King, Woodsworth could readily shine as a social prophet. Grey areas were not exposed. However, Woodsworth's contention that to admit into Canada certain classes of immigrants would "only delay the application of measures that will abolish the conditions which produce these classes"⁸ might have suggested a mind-set somewhat abstracted from day-to-day hopes and fears of urban immigrants. For all of his contact with working-class newcomers, he never wrote with the understanding of a social worker like Chicago's Jane Addams.⁹ Curiously, his major published works exhibited a reliance upon the observations of others and one wonders about an equilibrium between a knowledge of life and an understanding acquired through the written word. The success of "workingmen's friends" from

other parties, the popularity and success of Communists like Joseph Penner and J. B. Salsberg, and Woodsworth's position on the Declaration of War raise the same point. Was Woodsworth too steeped in the logic of principles to reach the constituency of workingmen that he attempted to defend? Whatever the answer, his designation as a reformer remains firm and his career stands as a benchmark. Not all candidates for the reform label were the measure of J.S.W. But since the terms "reform" and "reformer" are so value-laden, their definition is an important, though frustrating, exercise. Does a measure which imposes regulations on new tenements, indirectly reducing their construction and thereby adding to a housing crisis, qualify as a reform? Does a public owned utility which aims at servicing business and industry rather than the small consumer truly constitute a reform? What criteria define a reformer? Does the acclamation of one's contemporaries tip the scale? Is self-designation valid? Do good intentions make a reformer? The long career of Edmonton politician Joe Clarke illustrates the problem. A vain demagogue with a sense for political survival, a lawyer who advised prostitutes because he accepted them as a frontier necessity, Clarke nonetheless fought the arbitrary actions of civic bureaucrats, stood alone in defense of an eight hour day for civic employers and dared expose fellow aldermen as associates of real estate promoters. Undoubtedly, his opportunism and flexible moral stance contrasts with Mayor Howland, Bengough or Woodsworth, but his record of achievements and causes was solid enough to prevent his dismissal as just another City Hall manipulator.

By the late sixties, the biographic focus in Canadian historical literature had widened to include secondary figures and collective biography. Reconstruction of the Dominion's political traditions was joined by the description of intellectual heritages in Carl Berger's The Sense of Power, Joseph Levitt's Henri Bourassa and the Golden Calf and Richard Allen's The Social Passion. All three, but particularly the latter two, assessed the reactions of thoughtful men to urban crises. While the reform notions of imperialists, nationalists and clergymen

were considered, the vast web of reform ideas in a national and international context was subsequently explored as sui generis by Paul Rutherford.¹⁰ From an individual to groups, reform literature proceeded to trickle down to yet another unit of analysis - class. Rutherford's research on reform and the popular press have a common feature, namely a presentation of the middle-class as agent for change.¹¹ The theme could not have been more appropriately timed. Canadian universities had just begun to accommodate the middle-class "masses" in the mid-sixties. As one of several influences, educational policy made Canadian historians more conscious of issues and forces that American counterparts had appraised for decades. The historian's discovery of the middle-class and new professions, however, carried the narrative of reform just short of considering what actually became of reform ideas and measures. Were they co-opted and altered by a civic elite? In the reformers' assertions of success, what was rhetoric and what was reality? Did the moralism of middle-class reform imply excessive paternalism or mask self-interest?

The essays that follow have bearing on these questions. Stan Kutcher's article about Bengough confronts some of them directly and reaffirms the position that self-interest and psychic satisfaction simply cannot explain the whole thrust of reform. It sheds insight, as well, on the frustrations and compromises inherent in democratic politics that could wear down an ardent critic of social evils, leading him to abandon civic politics. Were high-minded reformers just what Boss Plunkitt of Tammany Hall alleged - "mornin' glories - looked lovely in the mornin' and withered up in a short time?"¹² Could this leave their innovative notions in the hands of more persistent, but less scrupulous individuals? It did in one instance. The Single Tax which Bengough considered an instrument for social justice (see the cover) enjoyed brief application in Vancouver and Edmonton where local boosters believed that by taxing property alone they would stimulate a construction boom. A major thesis of Melvin Baker's "The Politics of Municipal Reform in St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1892" is worth considering at this point. He suggested that the introduction of

changes "must be seen above all else in terms of the adjustment of an elite to a new institution that potentially threatened but ultimately confirmed its status." These revisionist considerations which raise doubts about reform measures, though perhaps not about the motivation of individual reformers like Woodsworth or Bengough, have received extended treatment in Alan Artibise's discussion of public ownership and town planning in Winnipeg and H. V. Nelles' analysis of Ontario Hydro's genesis. To be fair, Baker registers more than a revisionist's skepticism and revision is not his purpose. He introduces the distinctive political and urban environment of St. John's, Newfoundland. The topic of "home rule" or "responsible government" has a familiar ring which Baker notes. The division of responsibilities and power between local and senior government is as old as the other municipal charters which he sites and as recent as Quebec's pressures on Montreal.¹³

III

In the past five years, Canadian urban reform has received considerable attention with emphasis falling on the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growth-related crises of urban life were most acute in this era and the intellectual ferment had a special intensity. Perhaps the elements of continuity, the accumulation of precedents and experience, are not as fully understood. Planning in Canada, for example, received its professional cachet and abundant publicity between 1910 and 1920, but fundamental concepts had been unfolding at least since the mid-nineteenth century. In lieu of landscape architects and planning engineers, other professionals fashioned land-use. Insurance underwriters encouraged building by-laws. Serious fires like that which decisively terminated a "golden age" for Saint John in 1877 resulted in the laying out of fire zones which specified land-use and construction standards. Medical health officers similarly persuaded civic authorities to ban noxious and dangerous activities from business or residential areas. These interventions assisted a transition away from mixed land-use. Under the aegis of these health

and safety regulations, the civic authorities also instituted controls that supported racial prejudice and protected property-values. By World War I a number of municipalities had passed by-laws restricting the location of those "harbingers of neighbourhood decline," tenements and Chinese laundries. The control of building permits presented an additional planning device before the passage of town-planning acts. The difficulty with such ad hoc tactics became apparent in the Courts; they lacked legal underpinning and stretched municipal police powers beyond toleration. Without the half-century background, the sudden interest in town-planning and zoning as well as their manipulation by realty interests cannot be fully appreciated. Other innovations have a similar lineage. Public ownership of water distribution preceded the period of intense reform activity, but had much in common with the founding of later civic enterprises. The merchants of Kingston condoned a private waterworks which a few of their number operated until a serious fire demonstrated its inadequacy by destroying part of the waterfront and business area. Hamilton undertook construction of an advanced waterworks in 1856 with civic promotion an acknowledged dividend. Whether by hindsight or foresight, public ownership was discovered as a useful aid to business.

An enthusiasm for flash-points, fascinating individuals or impressive ideas attracts us all, but one cannot avoid mundane fiscal considerations when working on the history of reform. The debt that Newfoundland's government incurred on behalf of St. John's complicated the securing of an all elected City Council; the colony, as Melvin Baker has written, insisted on having appointed members. In his article on "The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in Canada, 1893-1930," Walter Van Nus stressed the impact of austerity on planning.¹⁴ Understanding municipal finance is not likely to excite research; yet, as at least one western city discovered, finance and financiers dictate civic policy. Blunt letters from Wood, Gundy Limited to the City of Edmonton in the early twenties provide a sequel to that city's municipally owned streetcar line, power and telephone systems.

Our object in writing you at this time is to point out to the Mayor and yourself the great importance of continuing to operate with the utmost caution. We would appreciate your presenting our views on this subject to your Council. There is no question that the debt in relation to its assessment and population is altogether high, and we feel every possible effort should be made to keep down expenditures and to reduce liabilities whenever and wherever possible.¹⁵

Since the sale of debentures depended upon Wood, Gundy and other bond companies, their advice was taken seriously. The police force was trimmed, vacant city lands were not converted to parks and the civic owned streetcar line did not expand. Along with the presence of reform spokesmen of ability, the priorities of a civic elite which might absorb a reform out of self-interest, a city's credit rating and the swelling of its assessments affected the conversion of reform ideas into action. If, in this process, western cities had demonstrated greater initiative a portion of their dynamism stemmed from a rash faith in sustained growth. When the collapse came in 1913/14 and eastern financiers proved to be fair-weather friends, one can appreciate urban origins to western protest. The circumstances of unfulfilled expectations made it easy to vilify eastern bankers, claiming they acted from hostility toward western reform zeal.

This brief discussion of finance and reform presents a final counterpoint to the historiographic theme of reading the past in light of today's concerns, for the financial perils and quality of services in New York and Montreal render prior experiences more vivid. The fact that erstwhile reformers, Jean Drapeau, Robert Moses and John Lindsay, committed their cities to heavy debt burdens makes comparison all the more interesting.¹⁶ Haliburton's maxim, though not to be swallowed whole, should be kept in mind when reading the following articles as well as when evaluating current civic affairs.

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1. Eric F. Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 347.

2. For a theory of change in belief systems see Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
3. Desmond Morton, Mayor Howland, The Citizens' Candidate (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), p. vii.
4. See footnote 12 in "Introduction", Paul Rutherford, editor, Canadian City: The First Phase, 1880-1920 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Walter Van Nus, "The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in Canada, 1893-1930," Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers, 1975, pp. 191-206.
5. Richard Allen, The Social Passion, Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1928 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Richard Allen, editor, The Social Gospel in Canada (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, 1975); Ramsay Cook, "The Professor and the Prophet of Unrest," paper presented at the Colloquium on Canadian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century, McGill University, January, 1975.
6. Kenneth McNaught, A Prophet in Politics, A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), p. 186.
7. Ibid., p. 53.
8. James S. Woodsworth, Strangers Within our Gates (The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, Canada, 1909), 275.
9. See for example Jane Addams' shrewd assessment of immigrant society in the city, "Why the Ward Boss Rules," The Outlook, 58 (April 2, 1898), pp. 879-882.
10. Paul Rutherford, "Tomorrow's Metropolis: The Urban Reform Movement in Canada," Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers, 1971.
11. Paul Rutherford, "The People's Press: The Emergence of the New Journalism in Canada, 1869-99," Canadian Historical Review, 56 (June, 1975), p. 170.
12. William L. Riordon, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (New York: E.P. Dutton), p. 17.
13. For an excellent study which treats some of the same themes as Baker and likewise raises questions about self-styled reformers, see David A. Sutherland, "Gentlemen vs. Shopkeepers: Urban Reform in Early 19th Century Halifax," unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, June, 1972.
14. Walter Van Nus, "The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in Canada, 1893-1930," p. 203.
15. Report Number 24 to Council, 1922. Enclosure: Wood, Gundy and Company to C. J. Yorath, May 17, 1922.
16. For the most comprehensive study of a "reformer's" rise and fall from power and grace see Robert A. Caro's massive study, The Power Broker, Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).