

Mackenzie, Suzanne. *Visible Histories: Women and environments in a post-war British city. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. Pp. xv, 217. Tables, index*

Mary Kinnear

Volume 19, numéro 3, february 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017610ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017610ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kinnear, M. (1991). Compte rendu de [Mackenzie, Suzanne. *Visible Histories: Women and environments in a post-war British city*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. Pp. xv, 217. Tables, index]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 19(3), 250–251.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017610ar>

understanding of the industrial revolution." One wonders how the close argument and detailed quantification of *Continuity, Chance and Change* could have been absorbed aurally, but its striking reinterpretation of "the most important of all historical transformations to have taken place within [Britain's] shores" make reading this brief book well worth every challenge.

Dr Wrigley asserts that the central meaning of the industrial revolution is the significant augmentation of real incomes enjoyed throughout most of the population. He then argues that the reasons for this rise in productivity had to do with exponential increases in the supply of energy applied to so many human endeavours undertaken in Britain in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Dutch economy had led everyone else in Europe, as could be seen in its agricultural productivity, its commercial activity, and its urbanization. Wrigley fails to credit the Dutch for what the English learnt from them, but he does show why the English economy was outstripping the Dutch by about 1700. In the "advanced organic economy" (Wrigley's first thesis), the relatively larger Dutch and English utilization of livestock augmented both fertility of soil and productivity of labour, but the Dutch peat bogs could not keep up with English coal fields in the quantity and efficiency of fuel.

Coal is the bridge between Wrigley's first thesis and his second. Although both coal and peat may be used to cook food, heat homes, and fire some industrial processes—in each case freeing up land from its formerly necessary contributions to heat, housing and energy, so that land

could be exclusively devoted to food and clothing—it was the virtually inexhaustible supplies of coal that, especially when harnessed to steam power, lifted the English into the "mineral-based economy" in which hitherto unheard of productivity could be realized. Nothing in the advanced organic economy made such a transformation the logical next development, Wrigley argues, as the eventual Dutch stagnation and originally slow English growth demonstrated. It was chance—a key word in the title whose use is explained in but one paragraph (p. 115)—that England sat upon such a rich capital stock of energy, which, in conjunction with its otherwise advanced economy, freed it from the centuries-old dependence upon the annual flow of agricultural production. This exploitation of coal and steam could be imitated in other countries similarly endowed with coal, without any prior need to develop the Anglo-Dutch "bourgeois" culture that had been so advantageous in the advance organic economy; Britain's former lead could no longer be maintained.

Continuity, Chance and Change has little to say about urbanization, except as a measure of Dutch and English advance over other parts of Europe. Wrigley does point out that a more efficient fuel allowed bricks to displace wood in construction (which further reduced the acreage required for timber), but for his thesis he need not follow the bricks to town, where their resistance to both fire and rats enhanced the safety and sanitation of urban living. And of course the whole story of agricultural and industrial productivity has important implications for any urban growth. His brief excursions into nuptiality, fertility, mortality, reinvestment, and social

welfare—not to mention his close reading of Smith and Malthus—also bear indirectly on urban phenomena in instructive ways. Though not focused on "urban studies" per se, this important and stimulating reinterpretation of some central issues in the industrial revolution should become required reading in the field.

Donald A. Bailey
Department of History
University of Winnipeg

Mackenzie, Suzanne. *Visible Histories: Women and environments in a post-war British city*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. Pp. xv, 217. Tables, index.

In the early 1980s, Suzanne Mackenzie conducted 60 interviews with women in Brighton, the Regency seaside resort in southern England. These provided the data for *Visible Histories*. Mackenzie notes the ways in which Brighton, and the respondents, were both typical and idiosyncratic. Although she is at pains to credit them with individuality, her major justification for the book is that the data illustrate an important, and hitherto unexplored, development in the history of contemporary Britain, revealed in the way women exercise control over their homes and neighbourhoods. The book is a human historical geography, chronicling a series of "mercurial and powerful women and environments."

The core of Mackenzie's evidence is in the interviews whose guiding questionnaires are reproduced in the appendix. Her respondents were "working-class," a term she makes no attempt to define although she describes her interviewees in economic terms of income, household amenities and aids, as well

as by their demographic characteristics. Through their responses, Mackenzie draws a picture of women's work and consciousness. She explores the way domestic working conditions have changed over her subjects' lifecycles with respect to services concerned with birth control and childbirth, childcare, nursery schools and education, and examines women's work as consumers and domestic managers. One chapter examines women's paid work in the labour force in terms of its furnishing a supplement to family resources. Her assumption that all women regarded their involvement in the paid labour force as auxiliary to a primary familial role is problematic; but sustained by her data.

Mackenzie sought, and found, a proud, activist and optimistic women's community. The women "retained a sense of their

ability and their right to intervene, whether this took the form of energetic, collective acts of 'swimming against the tide' and creating concrete alternatives, or of quiet, individual decisions to distance themselves from forms of behaviour they felt were wrong, of acting in principled ways in their relations with their children with (the supermarket) Sainsbury's with the local council . . . Women had carefully, constantly and incrementally constructed their lives."

This book is a refreshing development beyond the historiography of "woman as victim" and a clear celebration of what women have done well. Mackenzie notes that women were less successful in controlling, or even making a mark, in "the unionizable and professional sectors of the labour force." She is more interested in the thesis that

"the very essence of social change in post-war Brighton" is located in the "activities which define 'what a woman does.'" If so, her assessment of what (some) women do is timely and important. She rightly re-claims this work for contemporary feminist analysis, but such a project could benefit from a wider reading in recent women's history. The work of historians such as Jane Lewis and Elizabeth Roberts is grist to Mackenzie's mill. Nevertheless, Mackenzie's documentation of women's work in Mrs Thatcher's Brighton contributes to a more measured appreciation of women's power and autonomy.

Mary Kinnear
Department of History
St. John's College, University of
Manitoba.