



Ruth Finnegan. *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xiii + 212. £59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-62334-6.



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Tales of the City is about story telling, and the stories told are about Milton Keynes, the New Town in Buckinghamshire, England, which was designated in 1967. It was guided into place by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC). MKDC was wound up in 1992, and replaced with the Commission for New Towns. This book is of particular interest to this reviewer because I am both a resident of Milton Keynes, and I am also interested in the history of the British new towns programme. Officially, Milton Keynes is still a town, but it is currently bidding for city status. The main entry signs to Milton Keynes, evincing a touch of hubris, already refer to it as a 'city'.

Ruth Finnegan is a Professor of Comparative Social Institutions at the Open University, which is based in Milton Keynes. She is a social anthropologist with a particular interest in story telling, and in the multi-faceted meanings of narrative. Hence, a great deal of the book is concerned as much with academic theorising about narrative, or story-telling, and its problems and potential, as it is about the narratives themselves. Finnegan provides the reader, within a rather dense interpretative apparatus, with a wealth of stories told by 'ordinary people' who migrated to and settled in Milton Keynes. Experiences are often narrated at length, over a number of pages. They include considerable detail not just about

Milton Keynes, but also about the pre-histories of migrants when they lived elsewhere in Britain or abroad. Testimonies thus recall childhoods, war experiences, relationship problems, and many other fascinating aspects of biographical detail. Whilst some readers might be critical of the presentation of such lengthy stories told in this fashion, one strength of this approach is that it allows the reader to understand the often highly personal motives which led to the decision to move to Milton Keynes. Finnegan also supplies accompanying paragraphs of biographical detail of the narrators.

Some of the testimonies reveal that, despite early adjustment problems, many people liked the new city, and appreciated its housing and environment. Yet this appreciation was not static. For as the years passed, some narrators became acutely aware of neighbourhood decline, and of the appearance of graffiti, litter, and of worse forms of anti-social behaviour, such as burglary. Therefore, as a source of resident's perceptions of the changing nature of the city, this book is a valuable resource. Finnegan also notes the narrative differences between external observers of Milton Keynes, who often resort to negative and superficial stereotypes of the city, and of the residents who, despite its problems, have found it a decent and rewarding place to live.

Finnegan's concern with ordinary people perhaps ex-

plains why she does not provide the personal narratives of the planners of Milton Keynes. Instead, she constructs the 'planner's tale' in terms of the narrative conventions and cultural imagery of the 'garden city stories', first told by Ebenezer Howard, and re-told and adapted since by planners within the garden city tradition. Her sources for this are the official materials of Milton Keynes Development Corporation, including some of their promotional photographs and advertisements of the new city. It comes as little surprise to discover that the green and pleasant nature of the garden city is emphasised continuously within the pro-garden city planning literature.

This opens up an interesting and problematic consideration, and that is Finnegan's emphasis upon Milton Keynes as 'urban', and upon its urban imagery. In the sense that Milton Keynes filled North Buckinghamshire with roads, houses, shops, retail sites and industrial estates, it is urban. Many writers, for example Terence Bendixson and John Platt, in *Milton Keynes: Image and Reality*, however, emphasise its suburban ethos and design. They point to its trees, parks and lakes, to its low-level buildings, and to the low-density and dispersed nature of its housing estates, which derives from the garden city/garden suburb tradition in Anglo-American town planning.

Finnegan's discussion of the planning literature, and of the narratives contained therein, require more depth. For example, she quotes a writer from the stylish metropolitan magazine *Harpers and Queen*, who critically described Milton Keynes as 'the non-place urban realm'. However, that phrase was originally coined by Melvin Webber, an American writer on urban affairs who was used as a consultant by the Milton Keynes planning team. Webber's tale is a crucial one for understanding the nature and imagery of Milton Keynes. His readings of Californian decentralisation, and of the potential of communications technologies for human interaction beyond local places, were influential in 1960s British planning thought. Webber provided an important intellectual rationale for the dispersed, suburban and road-based adaptation of garden-city principles to late twentieth-century conditions in an advanced capitalist country. Hence, rather than a focus upon the city as 'urban', this study of Milton Keynes could have and should have focused upon Milton Keynes as a 'suburban' city. I think that the pur-

suit of suburbanity is implicit in some of the migrant's narratives. Thus, it follows that where the city possesses shortcomings, in some of its resident's eyes, this is because it becomes more 'urban'. By this I mean that some of its housing estates develop the grubby, noisy and often threatening social conditions which people associate with older, inner-city areas.

However, Finnegan's approach does allow for an exploration of some key practical experiences from below, in relation to the ideals of MKDC from above. MKDC's principles for the good city were discussed at length in its Plan for Milton Keynes, published in 1970. Both the testimonies which Finnegan uses, and many surveys which she does not use, reveal that residents like the greenery and scenery of Milton Keynes, thus affirming some key principles in the Plan. Most citizens of Milton Keynes are also pleased that homes are zoned separately from employment centres. Furthermore, they appreciate the ease with which they can drive along fast, straight grid roads. However, the inadequacy of motorised public transport remains a standing joke among the residents of the new city. And for those with problems of mobility and of access, it is no joke at all.

Tales of the City is a rich source of migrant's testimonies for oral, social and urban historians of town life in late twentieth century Britain. In particular, the book will appeal to sociologists and social anthropologists who are concerned with narrative as a source for understanding (sub)urban life in England. For as Finnegan argues, there are recurring themes in the stories told, for example, the decline of community, and the opposition between the rural past and the troubled present. This tells us much about the values and self-constructions of individuals, and about the ways in which they interpret and perceive the city. In this sense, Finnegan has made a new and particularly interesting contribution to our understanding of how Milton Keynes is constructed not just as an external entity but in the minds of its residents. For Milton Keynes is still a city whose archive is largely dominated by planning materials and official reports researched and written up 'from above'.

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