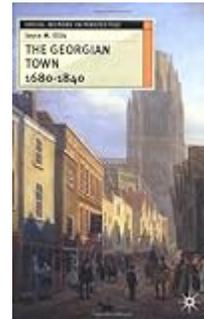




**Joyce M. Ellis.** *The Georgian Town, 1680-1840.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. 182 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-71134-7.



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British studies of the town in the “long 18th century” continue to flourish. As well as a host of monographs and the relevant section of the new *Cambridge Urban History of Britain, 1540-1840*, vol. 2 (2000), we now have Joyce Ellis’ long awaited work. This is the latest of three recent survey text-books on the period (the others by Christopher Chalklin and Rosemary Sweet), and it is, surely, the best. Unlike its rivals, it covers not just England but Scotland and Wales. Well-written, lively and enjoyable—the story carried forward by the sharp use of vivid quotation—the book offers a wide-ranging account of the urban system, population, economy, social life, landscape and environment and culture: only politics and administration are short-changed.

To a considerable extent, Ellis summarizes the recent consensus on British urbanization in the period: that far from being marginal players in the economic and social transformation of the eighteenth century, the great majority of British towns had a key role in that process, with the decades after the Glorious Revolution seeing the onset of “sudden and sometimes dramatic change in the urban system” (p. 3). High levels of urban growth—by European standards—were fuelled by heavy immigration, with female movement significant. Though almost all towns expanded, even small market towns, the most successful were those which developed a specialist func-

tion, not only in the industrial sphere, but in services and commerce. In dynamic regions like the West Midlands there was a rationalization of functions within the network of towns, reducing harmful competition and boosting economic integration. Marching arm in arm with increased regional differentiation came the rise and rise of London—by 1800 the largest city in the world, its centrality in economic, social and cultural life extending out across the urban system (more could have been said here about the levers of metropolitan hegemony). As ever, Ellis is excellent on the nature and complexity of communal development: on the personal imperative of occupational diversity—not now as an “economy of makeshifts” in Olwen Hufton’s term, a buttress against down-turns in trade, but as a strategy for exploiting new economic opportunities; the important contribution of women to family incomes; the variety of local social structures; the pivotal position of towns as centers of sociability for an area, reaching out into the countryside; the growth of clubs and societies as a pervasive form of social organization.

Where Ellis departs from the consensus view about the British town is in her more critical analysis of some of the achievements of urban growth during the eighteenth century, particularly in the last decades. Despite the general improvement in living standards, she argues,

conditions for the working classes remained precarious and there were large pockets of real or potential immiseration. Urbanization was accompanied by environmental degradation: the loss of public spaces, the growth of traffic congestion, the growing incidence of smoke pollution caused by domestic coal fires as well as by industry. Even the urban cultural renaissance, stressed by Peter Borsay and John Brewer, had a meager effect: “the social and cultural world of many provincial towns [was]... stuffy, shallow and sparse” (p. 82).

Such points need to be taken seriously. There is a danger that proponents of the recent consensus about Georgian towns, concerned to combat the old negative account of their passive role during the first phase of industrial growth, may have over-played their hand. At the same time, when one takes the wider comparative perspective, it is difficult to escape the impression that some important advances, however incomplete, did take place after 1700. Compared to the Tudor and early Stuart period, real incomes for the urban working classes were certainly higher. Compared to the Georgian countryside, urban families had a better life-style (household furniture, clothes, range of foodstuffs, leisure activities). Compared to the situation on the continent, where even in the fabled Dutch towns living standards for the lower classes were declining, the position was more comfortable for English laborers and artisans, as foreigners were quick to point out. On environmental developments there are, as we know from our contemporary experience, few free lunches. Thus smoke pollution in the eighteenth century was the result of growing access to cheap coal for many ordinary people which meant that they could heat their hearths and cook at home in a way which was difficult for their Tudor predecessors or many foreign counterparts (in mid-nineteenth century Paris many poor families still had no access to a hearth). Again, in terms of cul-

tural innovation and diffusion, recent comparative work has highlighted how more widespread and vigorous new cultural activities—commercial music-making, theaters, societies—were in small provincial towns in England than in France, in the former enjoying a broader, less elitist, following. Joyce Ellis quotes William Stukeley’s dismissive remarks in the early eighteenth century about the small town of Stamford, nobody there having “any taste or love of learning and ingenuity” (p. 136), but a few years later, as his diary shows, music making and club activity in the town was flowering, with important middling class participation, and Stukeley himself could boast “this is true life, not the stink and noise and nonsense of London”: such was the scale and speed of change.

It is widely accepted that there was a general deterioration of urban conditions in Britain in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Did it occur considerably earlier, as Ellis suggests? The evidence is problematic. Certainly many upper class commentators are talking about growing urban degradation and disorder by the 1780s, but it is possible that their agenda was shaped as much by religious and political factors as by the real situation on the ground. For what they are worth, statistical data on living standards, heights, mortality rates, and house-occupancy rates point mainly in the opposite direction: to the period after the Napoleonic wars, when the valiant and successful efforts of many towns in the earlier era to cope with urbanization were increasingly swamped by the exploding rates of demographic and industrial expansion.

This then is a lively, stimulating book which deserves to be read not only by students (who will find it invaluable), but by everyone working on towns and society in the eighteenth century.

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