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SURVEY AND SPECULATION

‘Why don’t you...’: R.J. Morris and the European Association for Urban History

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Abstract

Bob Morris was elected as president of the European Association for Urban History (EAUH) ahead of its 2002 conference in Edinburgh. Bob’s presidency, and the Edinburgh conference specifically, took place at an important point in the development of urban history within Europe and further afield. First, the programme reveals several emerging themes and topics of interest that have since shaped the sub-field in new and innovative ways. Second, Bob’s informal and collegial approach towards networking is reflected in the decision to place the EAUH on a quasi-formal constitutional basis. Both of these developments reflect, in part, Bob’s own research interests, as well as the sub-field’s welcoming approach to younger researchers, including taught and research postgraduate students, interested in networking with more established scholars.

In September 2002, at the end of my first year as a Ph.D. student, I presented at my first international academic conference, organized by the European Association for Urban History (EAUH) in Edinburgh. My paper was presented as part of the well-attended Round Table on Industrial and Modern Urban History, ably chaired by Clemens Wischermann who strictly kept all the speakers to time.¹ I applied late, having been encouraged by my supervisor, Professor Richard Rodger, which meant that I missed the deadline to stay in the University of Edinburgh’s Pollock Halls student accommodation. However, I was thoroughly glad to have attended and I have fond memories of my first nerve-jangling presentation and, more significantly, in meeting many fellow urban historians who have since become lifelong friends.²

¹ A Medieval and Early Modern Round Table was also held at the same time. These round tables were later merged into a single student round table, ostensibly to encourage Ph.D. students and other new researchers to present at their first conference in friendly and encouraging surroundings. I recall Bob attended the student session that I organized in Rome (2018) and, always armed with a relevant ‘Why don’t you...’ question, contributed fully to the Q&A discussion.

² R.J. Morris, G. Morton and T. Griffiths, ‘Introduction: power, knowledge, and society in the city’, *Journal of Urban History*, 32 (2005), 3–7; R. Roth, ‘Conference report: the Sixth International Conference on Urban

Presided over by Professor R.J. (Bob) Morris and a local organizing committee, which also included fellow University of Edinburgh historians Graeme Morton and Trevor Griffiths, the Congress was the sixth international conference of the EAUH, having held its first biennial meeting at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam a decade earlier. The EAUH was established in 1989 with funding from the European Community (EC), to promote the study of all aspects of urban history in Europe and beyond, from the origins of towns and cities through to the present. In part to foster pan-European co-operation in scholarship, the association also built on existing student exchange programmes, including the EC-funded ERASMUS and TEMPUS programmes. Planning meetings were held at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, and hosted by the Groupe Internationale d'Histoire Urbaine, which had been set up by Maurice Aynard in the late 1970s. The 1990s witnessed the growth of the EAUH, with conferences held in Strasbourg (1994), Budapest (1996), Venice (1998) and Berlin (2000), with much of the early organizational work done by leading urban historians such as Peter Clark, Hermann Diederiks, Jean-Luc Pinol, Pim Kooij and others. As membership grew in size,³ urban history was being internationalized at the airport as well as in the friendships cultivated during these – and other – conferences.⁴ Bob Morris was a central player in this international network, regularly attending such meetings, and he was elected as president of the EAUH in 2000–2. As someone who, as other essays in this special section demonstrate, took a keen interest in the work of younger and emergent scholars, it is significant to note that the attendance list for the Edinburgh conference contains a good number of postgraduate students and early career researchers.

The theme of the 2002 conference, 'Power, Knowledge, and Society in the City', was, like other EAUH conferences, broadly framed so as not to exclude any original urban history scholarship, but it also reflected Bob's own research interests in the city and urban civil society.⁵ As the call for papers explained, the title was chosen both to celebrate Edinburgh's (and Scotland's) rich and diverse history, while also recognizing the variety of methodologies, intellectual approaches, periods, places and topics that were prevalent within urban history scholarship at the time.⁶

History: Power, Knowledge and Society in the City, University of Edinburgh, September 4–7, 2002, Scotland', *UHA Newsletter* (2003).

³Membership of the EAUH (and the UK-based Urban History Group) was, and remains, loose and informal. A draft document by Bob, from 2004, notes the view that membership should include 'all who have attended a recent congress, all members of associated national associations and groups and all listed in the European Register of Urban Historians'. Thanks to Richard Rodger for this note.

⁴For a full list of EAUH conferences held since 1992, see <https://eauh2018.ccmgs.it/eauh/>, last accessed 2 Jul. 2024. See also P. Clarke, 'Early years of the European Association for Urban History', *Helsinki Quarterly*, 2 (2016), 89–93; R. Rodger, 'Explorations in European urban history: perspectives from Leicester', *Moderne Stadtgeschichte*, 2 (2020), 64–85.

⁵Bob's most recent publications leading up to the conference included R.J. Morris and R.H. Trainor (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750* (Aldershot, 2000), and S. Gunn and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City* (Aldershot, 2001). Both of these volumes were based on earlier themed conferences and contributors included Ph.D. students as well as experienced academics in permanent employment.

⁶The call for papers, dated 23 Aug. 2001, has been archived by ArtHist.net at <https://arthist.net/archive/24590>, last accessed 2 Jul. 2024.

A cursory look back at the programme shows a sub-field that was very much evolving at the turn of the present century.⁷ Established topics of interest were certainly present: cities as sites of economic production and property accumulation featured prominently, while several sessions were concerned with the operation and practice of urban power structures. Others dealt with the long-standing issue of urban scale and the documentation of physical space, including a session reporting on the valuable work of the International Historic Towns ATLAS Project to produce historic atlases for several European cities. These sessions, many of which reflected Bob's own research into the industrializing city, civil society and the visualization of urban growth, spawned several excellent books and historic atlases in the years that followed.⁸

Yet there is also a discernible air of change looking back at the programme, with a good sprinkling of sessions and individual papers reflecting emerging topics and themes of interest. This includes a growing recognition of the diverse and intersecting forms of social and cultural identity of urban citizens moving beyond a strictly class-based approach (as Bob did so too with his later study of *Men, Women and Property*).⁹ Max Weber's account of urban power in the form of the fort and the market – a staple on any Morris course as I was to find when co-teaching with Bob on the 'Social History Two' course at Edinburgh in 2004–5 – was present, but so too were newer ways of theorizing the city, including the post-structural ideas of Michel Foucault and the recognition of the heterogeneity of ethnicity, religion and national identity in creating international networks of imperial and post-imperial cities. Moreover, the programme reflected the 'cultural turn' of the past decade within History, with its emphasis on patterns and practices of urban consumption, behaviour and representation; one session, on youth culture and leisure in the twentieth century, was later published as part of Ashgate's 'Historical Urban Studies' series.¹⁰

The urban geographies of empire and imperial spaces also featured with papers on the contested histories of colonial planning and settlement, which hinted at the increasing internationalization of the EAUH over the ensuing decades. Other sessions responded to pressing socio-economic changes in the contemporary urban world, including the decline of industrial cities and the challenges of working with civic museums in sharing the history of European cities in an increasingly globalized world. The seeds of the turn towards integrating questions of urban heritage and preservation are also evident in some of the paper titles.¹¹ Bob increasingly turned his attention to the changing meaning of heritage for place attachment after his

⁷I am grateful to Manon van der Heijden, the present EAUH secretary, for forwarding me a copy from association files.

⁸For example, R. Beachy and R. Roth (eds.), *Who Ran the Cities? Elite and Urban Power Structures, 1700–2000* (Aldershot, 2005); A. Simms and F. Oppl, *List of the European Atlases of Historic Towns* (Brussels, 1998); F. Oppl, J. Moore, T. Kniep and D. Stracke, 'European Towns Atlas List' (Münster, 2023), available at www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/staedtegeschichte/portal/europaeischestaedteatlanten/european_towns_atlases_updated_master.pdf, last accessed 2 Jul. 2024.

⁹R.J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780–1870: A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Class* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁰A. Schildt and D. Siegfried (eds.), *European Cities, Youth and the Public Sphere in the Twentieth Century* (Farnham, 2005). For more on the 'cultural turn', see S. Ewen, *What Is Urban History?* (Cambridge, 2015), 24–8.

¹¹For example, T. Vahtikari, 'Heritage negotiated: interpreting ideas of preservation in urban planning and policy making in the Finnish World Heritage town Rauma, 1960–2000'.

retirement, and I fondly recall a paper he gave on ‘Castles, chapels, houses and the charisma of place’ at the ‘Urban History Beyond the Academy’ conference I co-organized with Tosh Warwick at Leeds Beckett University in 2018.¹²

It was also during Bob’s presidency that discussions surrounding the formalization of a constitution for the EAUH took place. This decision was a result of the continued growth and diversification of the association and also sought to guard against some of the perceived fragmentation that was affecting other historical sub-fields at the time. Having already worked with Richard Rodger in revitalizing the Urban History Group in the UK during the 1990s, Bob advocated a more ‘informal’ form of organizational structure that was based on the principles of voluntarism and knowledge exchange between senior historians and early career scholars.¹³ Amidst growing interest from younger historians in towns and cities, coupled with a lack of theoretical awareness shown towards either the social sciences or cultural studies, a tradition of ‘Why don’t you...’ conversations was cultivated, which proved to be extremely successful at the turn of the present century.¹⁴ The conference dinner and accompanying social activities (guided walks and visits to heritage sites, amongst others) often proved to be the breeding ground for such conversations, and they continue to be popular today,¹⁵ signalling Bob’s legacy for the development of urban history on a more informal, if concrete, grounding. European urban history was thus internationalized in the conversations that took place around the conference dinner table and at the evening bar, as well as on the organized (and also sometimes spontaneous) trips into the surrounding urban neighbourhoods with Bob, his camera and a keen sense of urban exploration. It was Bob’s dedication to collegiality and his lifelong curiosity towards the urban that made him such a valued member of these international networks, whether that be as president, keynote speaker or as a member of the audience of a student panel.

¹²See S. Ewen and T. Warwick, ‘Introduction: urban history beyond the academy’, *Urban History*, 48 (2021), 290–1.

¹³EAUH, minutes of the meeting of the committee, Paris, 23/24 February 2001, 2. On the Urban History Group, see P. Laxton, ‘Round-table discussions and small conferences: reflections on the slow gestation of the Urban History Group’, *Urban History*, 35 (2008), 275–87.

¹⁴R.J. Morris, ‘Author’s response to Dr. Barry Doyle’, *Reviews in History*, 20 Oct. 2009, <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/179/>, last accessed 2 Jul. 2024.

¹⁵Most recently at the 50th anniversary conference of this journal, held at the University of Leicester, in 2023. See W. Sanders, ‘Conference report: “The state of urban history: past, present, future”’, Leicester, 11–13 July 2023’, *Urban History*, 51 (2024), 654–6. See also reflections by Richard Rodger and Tosh Warwick in this special section.