The Big Smoke: New Zealand Cities 1840-1920
By Ben Schrader. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2016.
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Reviewed by Eric Pawson

This substantial book focuses on the social life of the New Zealand city between the 1840s and about 1920. The evocative title is an invitation to the reader, the term originally emerging to portray "the sense of anticipation and excitement" of going to and experiencing the city and city life. Its application historically to New Zealand cities as they began to grow is described as "surely aspirational – or ironical" (p. 29). In a way, this description echoes the book itself, which in its own terms certainly delivers, but in other respects is quite partial.

The reader is drawn in with the opening anecdote about the author's family history, beginning with the emigration of his great-great-grandfather from London to Dunedin in the 1860s. He and subsequent generations moved between different New Zealand towns, the author observing that this is an urban family history. He contrasts this with the pre-occupations of most New Zealand historians with rural life. Yet, as he remarks, the country's urban population, including Māori, exceeded that of its rural counterparts as long ago as 1916. A century is a long time for scholars to be looking the other way. The historiographical discussion in the opening chapter indicates that by no means all have, but nonetheless this context certainly provides a gap for the author to fill.

He chooses to do this through a predominantly social focus. Having briefly explored towns as sites of settler capitalism, Schrader avers that "it was the ability to access or pursue urban life that provided the more enduring attraction" for migrants (p. 67). He considers five towns that became cities: Auckland, Wellington, Nelson, Dunedin and Christchurch, seeking to illustrate that the "experience of the five towns shows the high emphasis settlers placed on constructing civil society" (p. 51). Within this, his approach is essentially qualitative: from the discussion at the start of chapter 3, historians still seem to feel the need to do contest with Miles Fairburn's "ideal society" thesis of 1989. Here, and in an earlier discussion of the Dunedin Caversham project, the author is determined to capture more of "affect" than concerned these earlier researchers.

The first four chapters cover the building and promotion of cities; "towns becoming cities" as they acquired the functions and facilities of urban life; a lively account of urban social and cultural life; and the engagement of Māori with the city, although thin on economic relations. There are then two chapters on street life, broadly divided between the energy of the crowd (promenading and parades for example) and the demise of the street as shared space, with the removal of social "nuisances" such as hawkers and the arrival of modern means of transport. The last two chapters cover more familiar themes with the creation of healthier urban environments; and an emerging backlash against the city. There is lots of original material and interest here, often told through the experience of families or individual men, women or children.

This qualitative approach is supported by many excellent historical images, with first-rate black and white, and colour reproductions. The captions are informative although, as in many history texts, the images are often taken at face value, as illustrative rather than representational. There are some useful graphs, but little that is more quantitative or systematic: despite the author's work in the 1990s on the *New Zealand Historical Atlas*, there are no original maps. This is not merely an observation from another discipline: it indicates that certain questions are of less interest. Maps can both prompt and sketch answers to questions about systems, about how things connect and function as a whole. Such issues are not a priority here.

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The book "deliberately ignores" (p. 409) how towns and cities interlinked as a system, which seems ironic given the strong sense of mobility and connectedness that animates the author's opening anecdote of the intergenerational history of his family. In this regard it perpetuates a New Zealand tradition of writing about specific places. Nor is there much discussion of how towns and country worked together: to observe that urban landscape changes are of equal interest to those in rural areas may be true. But it misses the nature of the relationship between them, of the town producing the country, a theme explored by geographers since the 1960s. There is also surprisingly little about how the roles and functions of New Zealand's emerging cities were articulated within the wider networks of global business and investment that historians of empire such as James Belich have sought to untangle. These issues were also prised open in some of the innovative cartography of urban systems and their evolution in the 1990s *Historical Atlas*.

Rather, the author has chosen to play to his strengths. And by extending those of his discipline, he has produced a book that certainly makes a powerful case for the centrality of the urban in New Zealand's evolving identity. But equally, in terms of an overall analytical package, it leaves plenty of questions for others to tackle.

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