Urban History (2026), **53**, 15–19
doi:10.1017/S0963926824000828

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SURVEY AND SPECULATION

SPECIAL ISSUE: R. J. MORRIS: AN APPRECIATION

Apple seeds: R.J. Morris' pedagogy in history and computing

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Abstract

Once the disorderly output from the mainframe was pushed to one side, R.J. Morris was quick to realize the potential of the early Apple Mac personal computer to enhance how he taught the historical method. In this article, I reflect on Morris' pedagogy in the fields of urban history and middle-class formation, and in his approach to nominal record linkage. These insights come from my experience as both an undergraduate and postgraduate student under his guidance and then later as collaborator in the classroom and in research. When teaching the power of the computer to advance the historian's craft, Bob Morris never lost sight of the 'concept' as his favoured means of exploring and understanding historical transformation.

These reflections on Bob Morris's research-led teaching at the University of Edinburgh derive first from my experience as an undergraduate on his newly created course – 'Wealth, Consumption and Welfare in Britain since 1850' – and from later teaching with him on its successor: 'Dissertation and Project Preparation'. To this is added discussion of Bob's approach to teaching the history of middle-class formation, his doctoral training on occupational coding and nominal record linkage and, finally, our shared experience creating the master's course 'Urban Society and Civil Society in Historical Context' at a time when Scotland's parliament was being returned to its capital city.

Bob's teaching offered a level of abstraction and generalization that matched the best traditions of the Scottish dominie, but with a focus not on the parish but on the city, be it Leeds, Belfast or Edinburgh. His concept-driven approach explains the ease with which he collaborated with a broad range of social scientists and was able to bring a rich international dimension to his pedagogy. To use one of his favourite sayings, concepts were there to be 'taken down from the shelf, unpacked, and kicked around'. Yet whichever conceptual approach he adopted, his teaching was rooted in a close reading of urban history: from the industrial centres of Manchester and Dortmund, or the 'Airport cities' of twentieth-century America, to his insistence that Edinburgh was a quintessentially Victorian city. He was motivated to introduce evidence from multiple cities across the world – notably in 'Social History Two' – to

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

illustrate the emergence of collective action and urban management. As an admirer of Louis Wirth's *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1938), he explained how the city's size, density and heterogeneity created the space within which the middle classes would form, and where many spaces became class specific.[1] Bob would later conceive the urban world as filled with actions that carried a democratic purpose, abstracting an historically grounded concept of civil society from classic statements by Adam Ferguson, Alex de Tocqueville and Robert D. Putnam: from Scotland to America, to Italy, and back to Edinburgh.[2]

As with any excellent teaching experience, generous collaboration was essential. In teaching history and computing to undergraduates, Bob benefited from a long tradition in computer science at Edinburgh University, one bridged by the pioneering introduction of the computer into the social sciences by Michael Anderson that led to a 2 per cent sample of the 1851 census across Britain.[3] Much of my discussion reflects on teaching decisions hatched between the two men, and involved collaborations with Stana Nenadic and David Greasley amongst other colleagues in the Department of Economic and Social History. Neither 'Wealth, Consumption and Welfare' (WCW) nor 'Dissertation and Project Preparation' (DPP) could ever be considered elegantly titled courses, with the latter carrying the utilitarian hope of many a Periodic Programme Review that the discipline's undergraduate dissertations be improved. Their delivery took place in the grandly titled Social Studies Microcomputer Laboratory, with little in the way of internet distractions, and certainly no social media, although help was given for the core tasks of typing, sending email and pointing a mouse. The exam paper from the inaugural delivery of WCW – a remarkable nine pages in length – asked students to reflect on the challenge of ensuring consistency of conceptualization and measurement in long-term socio-economic trends, and to explore the difficulties of using employment and population statistics to understand labour markets.[4] The students had earlier been provided with an electronic folder of data, along with a paper guide to explain what was to be found on their 3.5 inch floppy disks. That course was succeeded by DPP where the first semester of teaching found Anderson in the classroom introducing coding, data presentation and the history of technology within historical research, and Morris holding forth in the micro-lab to instruct the students in spreadsheets, graphics (using Cricket Graph), observed vs expected outcomes from basic correlations, coding, list processing and 'simple databasing'. The student's output was sent to another building to appear from a line printer, before remarkably modest dot matrix and then laser printers were installed in the Lab.

In the best traditions of being one step ahead of the class, the teaching materials came in the form of screen grabs from Bob's desktop computer. The teaching was data led, but in the days when not one member of that department could lay claim to

[1]R.J. Morris, 'New space for Scotland, 1800 to 1900', in T. Griffiths and G. Morton (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1800 to 1900* (Edinburgh, 2010), 225–55.

[2]R.J. Morris, 'Introduction: civil society, associations and urban places: class, nation and culture in nineteenth-century Europe', in G. Morton, B. De Vries and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places: Class, Nation and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot, 2006), 1–16.

[3]M. Anderson *et al.*, 'The national sample from the 1851 census of Great Britain', *Urban History Yearbook*, 4 (1977), 55–9.

[4]University of Edinburgh. Faculty of Social Sciences. Degree of MA with Honours: 'Wealth Consumption and Welfare in Britain since 1850'. Exam 12 Jun. 1989.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an undergraduate History degree, instead coming from cognate disciplines, still the team was too well versed in the historical method to eschew training their undergraduates in the centrality of historiography. The need for students to understand the historical significance of statistical data led Bob to remind educators to challenge the philosophical meaning of computer-generated evidence.[5] He often reflected on the success of the methodological training provided by WCW, his first foray into the pedagogy of history and computing. The inaugural year of that junior honours class produced two students who went on to doctoral research, with the support of research council funding, and one other who later returned to do so.

The many of us who experienced his long-standing honours option, 'The Making of the British Middle Class', sought to answer why the commercial and professional men and women of the cities came to associate as a class. We gratefully turned to Bob's exploration of voluntary societies and associations made across various research outputs, and being keen, devoured his bibliography.[6] Like many, he had been influenced by E.P. Thompson's analysis in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), notably the discussion on organizational structures during the process of transitioning from class in itself to class for itself. Yet the mixture of structure and action Bob foregrounded was more Weberian than Marxist. When the material generated from many years teaching this course made it into print under the headline title *Class, Sect and Party*, the debt to Weber's 'Class, status, party' was acknowledged by him, with the tribute repeated when his Special Subject option on the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 was published as *Men, Women and Property in England*.[7]

Bob's teaching of class formation and class action had been developed and nuanced through nominal record linkage, but he saved his methodological instruction on how he got there for his doctoral students. As the inaugural editor of *History and Computing* (launched in 1989), Bob edited articles that showcased the potential as well as the encouragement to error that came from computer and computer-assisted record linkage.[8] When explaining his approach to nominal record linkage, he laid down two principles. The first was that links were to be made only, or primarily, by matching a unique name found in two discrete sources created close in time. He encouraged a willingness to accept failed linkage rather than extend the criteria to occupation or address to circumvent bias from the very variables he wished to analyse. Secondly, he designed record linkage to a single 'base' source rather than between any number of nominal lists. Methodologically, the base functioned as the control group, and by linking first to the base a consistent measure of linkage strength could be achieved. Conceptually, the base functioned as a proxy for the middle class; initially the case-study was Leeds, later it was Edinburgh. Purposely, this involved the introduction of known biases of economic status that tilted towards the commercial

[5]R.J. Morris, 'Computers and the subversion of British history', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), 503–28.

[6]R.J. Morris, 'Petitions, meetings and class formation amongst the urban middle classes in Britain in the 1830s', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 102 (1990), 294–310.

[7]R.J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party. The Making of the English Middle Class: Leeds 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990); R.J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780–1870. A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Class* (Cambridge, 2005).

[8]R.J. Morris, 'History and computing: expansion and achievements', *Social Science Computer Review*, 9 (1991), 215–30.

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classes. The cost involved in having one's name in the trade directory helped the historian classify that person, with indicators of social action revealed by their inclusion in subscriptions to the likes of a literary and philosophical society or a mechanics' institute.

Bob characterized the rules and regulations of voluntary societies as forms of social organization and social power that had grown out of quasi-masonic activity. These ideas and arguments, he maintained, were the relevant raw material written before the language of civil society crept into academic discourse.[9] It was in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s that Bob was influenced by the flowering democratic movement around the campaign for a Scottish parliament. From his scrutiny of this associational activity, he deployed the idea of 'a nation within a nation' in his Introduction to the still important teaching collection *People and Society in Scotland* (1990).[10] What he saw before his eyes, in the city as classroom (an idea he shared with Patrick Geddes), was civil society in action. This insight entered his teaching through 'Urban Society and Civil Society in Historical Context' (USCS) and its second semester cousin where we focused on the four nations of Britain. Reading Ernest Gellner's *Conditions of Liberty* (1994), Bob was swayed by a characterization of Western society pivoting away from the tyranny of cousins to the openness of the association. To incorporate Gellner's ideas in this new course, Bob re-read Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). He then added Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1994) to stress civic traditions with long continuities and the propensity to create social capital. Tocqueville was his next influence. In *Democracy in America* (1835), the Frenchman's insight into the ways in which associational culture brought balance to the state helped Bob explain 'why democracy worked', yet also why one must fear 'the tyranny of the majority'.[11] To quote him on a point that summed up his aims and objectives for a course taught contemporaneously with the return of the Scottish parliament: 'Associational culture could contribute to a liberal pluralist society but did so in a manner bounded by class, status, nationalism, religion and ethnicity.'[12] It was an astute summary of the power and potential of associational culture to support liberal democracy across Europe's uneven economic development and emerging nationalisms, given with due regard to the historian's awareness of time and place. His passion for heritage varieties of apples, grown in the Scottish Borders, led him to further stress that civil society emerged from long roots and had to be protected and nurtured.

The Apple Mac computers that were the tools used to convey his pedagogy later ended up as colourfully painted exhibits in the Main Library of Edinburgh University. The hardware had been superseded, but still his approach to teaching remains central to the historical method. Bob led the discipline in the benefits that computers bring to

[9]R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, societies and associations', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain,* vol. III: *Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge 1990), 395–444; R.J. Morris, 'Urban associations in England and Scotland, 1750–1914: the formation of a middle class or the formation of civil society?', in Morton, De Vries and Morris (eds.), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places*, 139–57; R.J. Morris, 'Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780–1850: an analysis', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), 95–118.

[10]R.J. Morris, 'Scotland 1830–1914: a nation within a nation', in W.H. Fraser and R.J. Morris (eds.), *People and Society in Scotland,* vol. II: *1830–1914* (Edinburgh, 1990), 1–7.

[11]Morris, 'Introduction', in Morton, De Vries and Morris (eds.), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places*, 4–8.

[12]*Ibid.*, 16.

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the historian's craft. Before, during and after these innovations, he taught via the medium of the concept, insisting it be assessed with rigour: that is why we students were always invited to unpack it, and to kick it around until we got somewhere useful.

Cite this article: Morton, G. (2026). Apple seeds: R.J. Morris' pedagogy in history and computing. *Urban History*, **53,** 15–19, doi:10.1017/S0963926824000828

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