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E.P. Hennock 1926–2012: an appreciation

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Of the British scholars gathered by H.J. Dyos in 1966 to give substance to his vision of urban history as a distinctive genre of history only a few would claim the study of cities and city life as their prime academic interest. No more than a handful of those involved in the Urban History Group in the mid-1960s went on to publish major work in urban history. That was left to the generation whose careers were established in the early 1970s. The handful included Jim Dyos himself, Tony Sutcliffe, David Reeder, John Kellett and Peter Hennock. For the latter part of his career Hennock concentrated on the history of the welfare state and social policy in Britain and Germany and that is what those historians familiar with his name will associate him with. But his first book, based partly on his doctoral research, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government* (1973) was as squarely a work of municipal history as one could find, and if a test of a contribution to history is not the quantity of publications but what endures of them, then Ernest Peter Hennock more than justifies our recognition amongst historians of towns and cities.

He was born Ernst Peter Hennoch on 6 June 1926 in Berlin of Jewish parents who had him baptized as a Protestant, a gesture towards assimilation that proved futile after 1935 but which enabled him and his brother Rolf to fly to England in January 1939, courtesy of Bishop Bell of Chichester and a parish in Worthing wishing to adopt and rescue a 'Non-Aryan Christian'. At Ardingly College, encouraged by an able history master, he won a scholarship to Peterhouse. Then followed three years in the army as an interpreter with German prisoners of war in Wales before he began his studies at Cambridge, graduating with a First in history in 1950. His postgraduate career had a shaky start. Encouraged by Walter Ullman to become a medievalist he found himself under the supervision of Noel Annan whose approach to history he found uncongenial. As he describes it in his revealing memoir 'Myself as historian',[1] his strong Christian faith – shortly after he trained as an Anglican lay reader – gave him a distaste for 'the thought of the Enlightenment'. He began again, under Sir Herbert

[1] Peter Alter (ed.), *Out of the Third Reich: refugee historians in post-war Britain* (London, 1998), 73–98.

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Butterfield, learning 'the proper ways of historical research'.[2] The topic of his Ph.D. thesis, 'Religious dissent and municipal reform in Birmingham 1865–76', had been approved (at Butterfield's insistence) by Asa Briggs before the latter's *History of Birmingham* appeared in 1952. But Briggs' work and the draft of his *Victorian Cities* (with, as Hennock tactfully puts it, 'handsome acknowledgments of his debt to my thesis')[3] were enough to discourage the younger scholar from going into print: a not unfamiliar story of academic life. Briggs, only five years older, was the examiner for Hennock's Ph.D.

In 1953, he was appointed to a lectureship in the Departments of Politics and History (from 1957 solely in History) at Keele University, still a new institution with a distinctive interdisciplinary ethos. His much-cited paper on sanitary reform before Chadwick was published in *Economic History Review* in 1957. In 1963, he moved to the new University of Sussex where Briggs was Professor of History and later vice-chancellor. There he taught for 13 years becoming Reader in History. He also had visiting fellowships at All Souls, Oxford (1966–67), and Tübingen University (1972). His love of the Sussex countryside went with an exciting and fulfilling academic life in another new university. So much so that he found research trips to Leeds during vacations irksome; it had been chosen with Birmingham on the assumption that his local station was Crewe.

In 1963, a paper in the *Historical Journal* on 'Finance and politics in urban local government in England 1835–1900' and 'The social compositions of borough councils in two large cities, 1835–1914', a contribution to Dyos' seminal Leicester conference of 1966, announced his approach to a detailed comparative view of Victorian urban government.[4] Reading the report of the animated debate in 1966 over his assessment of the composition and effectiveness of town councillors, there is little doubt that Hennock had his critics on the run. Victorian public probity and administrative efficiency in municipal government were recognized as the only means of rescuing the Victorian city from the squalor that (*pace* those with a rose-tinted view of jolly Georgian England) was normal urban experience before the mid-Victorian reforms. That aspect of Victorian public life, founded on Christian rectitude, would have appealed to a man with Hennock's personality. And, along with Dyos, Kellet, Fraser and others, he demonstrated with detailed local research that the solutions to urban problems came not from Westminster, as generations of students were taught, but from local initiatives taken by local councillors, officers and community leaders.

Fit and Proper Persons was published in 1973, the second volume of Dyos' 'Studies in Urban History'. It remains the deepest study of Victorian urban government. As Dyos wrote in his foreword, 'No work that I know in this

[2] *Ibid.*, 79.
[3] *Ibid.*, 81.
[4] H. J. Dyos (ed.), *The StudynUrban History* (London, 1968), 315–36.

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field has penetrated so far into the political workings of the urban machine as it set out on the terrible task of civilising the first nation of city-dwellers'. Dyos also noted the comparative framework of Germany and the United States that made Hennock's work so impressive: 'We need more studies that can embrace so much.' We still do. A surprising feature of *Fit and Proper Persons* is the three-chapter third section after the analyses of Birmingham and Leeds: 'Looking abroad' illustrates Hennock's constant interest in comparative approach; 'Town councillors: the history of an ideal' extends his search for the aspirations of municipal government far beyond his two case-studies and into the mid-twentieth century; 'The present state of the question' shows Hennock applying his historical perspective and thorough critical reading to a burning question in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Redcliffe–Maud report, the botched and gerrymandered consequences of which we are still suffering in British local government.

In 1976, Hennock was appointed to the Andrew Geddes and John Rankin Chair of Modern History at Liverpool University, where he remained until his retirement in 1993. By then, his major research interest was in the origins of social security in Germany. This resulted in *British Social Reform and German Precedents: The Case of Social Insurance, 1880–1914* (1987) and, long after his retirement, in *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850–1914: Social Policies Compared* (2007). At Liverpool, in addition to serving as head of a large department, Hennock was director of the Centre for the History of Social Policies from 1985 to 1992 – which he regarded as his main achievement at Liverpool – he served on the Council of the Royal Historical Society. With his interdisciplinary instincts, he formed links with geographers and sociologists as well as a wide circle of social, economic and political historians.

His move ostensibly from urban history to social policy need not be seen as a change of direction and the questions he continued to explore should beckon urban historians back to central issues about the winners and losers in and between changing cities. (As professor emeritus at Liverpool, he listed 'Nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban history and the history of local government' among his research interests till his death.) It was his interest in urban poverty that lay behind his work on social insurance. At a meeting at Lancaster in 1983 on the 'Roots of welfare', his contribution was on the measurement of urban poverty, the work of Booth, Rowntree and Bowley, later published in *Economic History Review*, 40 (1987), 208–27. The specificity of place is a major theme in that study; London did not represent urban Britain as a whole. In 'Central/local government relations in England: an outline 1800–1950' (*Urban History Yearbook*, 1982), he summarized the complexities of local government systems that urban historians need to know in order to understand the diversity of the English urban experience and how decisions were made: 'local provision, for local wants, locally identified'. The approach should be a salutary lesson to those tempted to generalize about the Victorian urban experience and thereby

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risk describing it in platitudes. His studies of municipal government also led him to wider questions, notably, who governs and in whose name?

Peter Hennock was a private man not given to frivolous or small talk. He could appear rather serious and even his closest colleagues were not allowed to indulge in sloppy thinking. To be cross-examined by Peter about your work required clarity as well as persistence. As a teacher, he was too demanding for most students. With an iron sense of integrity and unpractised in the use of euphemism, his direct and inquisitorial manner did not always inspire. Those who persisted, however, gained lessons not only in rigorous scholarship but in justice. Though not an easy colleague, Peter was widely admired as a scholar, teacher and administrator. As a head of department, he applied his long experience to reward good teachers and (an old-fashioned notion in the modern academic Olympiad) spot those putting career before duty. As an appreciative colleague put it, 'he was the sort of person who would say to your face what others would only say behind your back', an observation I can certainly endorse.

His partnership with Elizabeth Zuckerman, a refugee from Vienna, after the failure of his marriage, gave him a new extended family. Elizabeth mellowed him and also renewed his love of music, ceramics and especially poetry. In his last two years, as he was cruelly attacked by limbic encephalitis, he often reverted to speaking German, and would recite verse by heart. Before his death, he drafted nine chapters of a long-promised autobiography under the provisional title *Professing*. He remarked to his daughter Mary that compared with all his academic writing, every sentence slow hard work, it flowed from him. He was, indeed, a fit and proper person.

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