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Civic identity, municipal governance and provincial newspapers: the Lincoln of Bernard Gilbert, poet, critic and 'booster', 1914

Andrew J.H. Jackson

The provincial press played a significant role in forming local attitudes and senses of civic identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Local and regional newspapers often adopted a 'boosterist' language, a style that enthusiastically promoted the particular qualities of places. The persistence of boosterism into the early twenty-first century makes it a concept worthy of further exploration. This study considers just one 'booster', Bernard Samuel Gilbert, and his illuminating series of articles on Lincoln for the *Lincolnshire Echo* in 1914. His correspondence illustrates the contrasting stances towards improvement typically employed within the local press – including the boosterist alongside the more critical.

Provincial newspapers, local politics, and civic boosterism

Local and regional newspapers became well established in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The lifting of stamp duties, advances in communication, printing and transportation, the expansion of literacy, and the growth of local democracy were among the various processes stimulating far greater levels of output and bringing much wider press representation. Newspapers performed a range of important political, economic, social and cultural functions on behalf of their host towns and cities. They were essential agents in promoting long-standing and new civic institutions and organisations. The stance of newspapers could be a critical factor in determining the fortunes of local associations and individuals. The press also assisted in the creation and consolidation of geographical spheres of political influence and of economic and financial exchange. In addition, publications articulated local senses of place identity: uncontested and contested, as well as real and imagined. The significance of provincial newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has, correspondingly, stimulated considerable historical research, including numerous general studies evaluating the role of the press in British society.¹ The historiography also

1. See, for example: J. Curran, 'Media and the making of British society, c. 1700-2000', *Media History*, 8 (2002), 135-54; M. Harris and A. Lee (eds), *The Press in English Society from the 17th to the 19th Centuries* (London, 1986); A. Hobbs, 'When the provincial press was the national press c.1836-c.1900', *International Journal of Regional and*

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incorporates much local study, which considers individual publications and the urban centres that they represented in a broader social, political and cultural context.² Furthermore, some historians have placed great emphasis on the appealing qualities – if also the methodological challenges – of using newspapers as a primary source: 'There is certainly no contemporary document more redolent of local identity and municipal pride'.³

The political function of newspapers became very sophisticated. The growth of the provincial press coincided with the expansion of local democracy and inclusiveness, the development of civic pride and municipal self-expression, and progress in welfare reform and urban improvement. The press had an instrumental role to perform in reporting on local political activity and governance, if for the most part underpinning the status quo as established by municipal and business elites – which could include newspaper proprietors. However, newspapers could be quick to deviate from conformity with dominant and 'official' ideologies in pursuit of popular endorsement from its readership or from more radical constituencies. The press might adopt a markedly more progressive line than local political representatives, employing detailed fact-based observation and commentary in order to inform its campaigns for reform. Issues of public health, overcrowding, and housing supply, for example, featured regularly and widely as typical agenda items for editors and reporters.⁴

Local Studies, 13 (2009), 16-43; D. Read, *The English Provinces c. 1760-1960: A Study in Influence* (London, 1964); A. Walker, 'The development of the provincial press in Britain c. 1780-1914', *Journalism Studies*, 7 (2006), 373-86.

2. Local studies include: M. Bromley and N. Hayes, 'Campaigner, watchdog or municipal lackey: reflections on the inter-war provincial press, local identity and civic welfarism', *Media History*, 8 (2002), 197-212; A.J.H. Jackson, 'Provincial newspapers and the development of local communities: the creation of a seaside resort newspaper for Ilfracombe, Devon, 1860-1', *Family and Community History*, 13 (2010), 101-13; M. Lester, 'Local newspapers and the shaping of local identity in North-East London c.1885-1915', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 13 (2009), 44-62; D. Read, *Press and People, 1790-1850: Opinion in Three English Cities* (London, 1961).
3. J. West, *Town Records* (Chichester, 1983), 224. See also: V. Berridge, 'Content analysis and historical research on newspapers', in Harris and Lee, *The Press in English Society*, 201-18; M. Murphy, *Newspapers and Local History* (Chichester, 1991); West, *Town Records*, 224-71.
4. On housing issues, for example: A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London, 1963), 274; Bromley and Hayes, 'Campaigner, watchdog or municipal lackey'; P. Broxholme, 'Back to the future: the Tory party, paternalism, and housing policy in Nottingham 1919-1932', *Midland History*, 38 (2013), 104-16; N. Hayes, 'Civic perceptions: housing and local decision-making in English cities in the 1920s', *Urban History*, 27 (2000), 2, 211-33; T.J. Hulme, 'Urban governance and civic responsibility: interwar council housing in Buxton', *Midland History*, 35 (2010), 237-55; P.J. Shinner,

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The local press skilfully blended fact and hyperbole in its quest for authority, legitimacy and subscriber numbers. Provincial newspaper proprietors and editors were quite typically representing towns and cities that were vying with other centres for regional leadership, and could also find themselves in competition with other press publications in the pursuit of the same task. Newspapers would draw on the genre of boosterism in pushing forward political as well as economic and cultural agenda. Boosterism was a mode of discourse accustomed to presenting wordy, heady or excessive claims regarding the greatness of a particular city. Boosterist expression was not exclusive to newspapers. The press was especially effective in deploying it, but it was also utilised in other media produced to serve political parties and associations, as well as commercial or cultural organisations and interests. Boosters, if not already influential members of local political, commercial and wealth elites, would seek to align themselves with them. Boosters sought to champion the economic success and future potential of their own city at a time of great industrial and urban growth, together with attendant stiff competition with other regional cities. Boosterist writers also celebrated and promoted prowess in local culture and the arts. Booster columnists were attracted to similar topics, such as: enlightened attitudes towards reform, civil order and good governance, commercial and industrial innovation, impressive architectural projects, developments in infrastructure and service planning, and notable cultural and artistic facilities and events. Civic patriotism combined with faith in the benefits of economic progress as well as aspiration for community solidarity. Boosterism features quite popularly in urban-historical studies. The term can be found inserted in passing, to acknowledge the presence of emphatic place-promotional discourse, or subject to fuller conceptualisation and contextualisation – particularly in research on the North American experience.⁵

'Pocket borough to county borough: power relations, elites and politics in nineteenth-century Grimsby', *Urban History*, 34 (2007), 499-500.

5. On the nature and continuity of 'boosterism', see: E. Bloomfield, 'Community, ethos and local initiative in urban economic growth: review of a theme in Canadian urban history', *Urban History Yearbook*, 10 (1983), 55-8; Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 47-8; R.J. Morris, 'Urban biography: Scotland, 1700-2000', *Urban History*, 29 (2002), 276-83; P. Payne, 'Boosterism', in C. Kammen and A.H. Wilson (eds) *Encyclopedia of Local History* (New York, 2013), 57-60; J. Stobart, 'Identity, competition and place promotion in the Five Towns', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 163-82; J. Stobart, 'Building an urban identity. Cultural space and civic boosterism in a "new" industrial town: Burslem, 1761-1911', *Social History*, 29 (2004), 485-98.

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Boosterism was inherently partial, with its discourse likely to give emphasis to, or evade, areas of tension and contradiction. Its authors picked between the contrasting local claims to what was of significance for a particular city, or what was in its best interests. Boosters might well involve themselves in the conflicts that could arise between the promotion of a city's sense of its status and the nature of its development in the present, and the preservation of older, more historical activities, customs and identities. Through the twentieth century boosterism would mutate, typically with the turning of the economic fortunes of many major centres. Boosters would aim to perpetuate the language associated with the preceding phase of growth and improvement of their cities, or would turn to a more ancient past as a reference point for evolving and renewing civic character. Boosterism featured prominently in the years following the Second World War, a phase associated with post-Blitz reconstruction and post-austerity revival. In the later twentieth and into the early twenty-first centuries the rebranding of cities as heritage, tourism and cultural centres has also been a widely shared pre-occupation for boosters.⁶

Boosters share with antiquarians and historians a fascination for the local past. However, a distinctive and essential trait within boosterist writing is making a connection between the past and the future, and expressing concern for ensuring the civic well-being of tomorrow. Boosterism's heyday was in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. During that period its authors, if quite typically uncritically: gloried in the past, promoted the present, and promised great times ahead. Boosterism still occupies a place and relevance in contemporary historical scholarship, with some authors juxtaposing, if perhaps uncomfortably, objective and critical analysis of a city's past alongside a celebration and promotion of its present.⁷

Bernard Gilbert, the *Lincolnshire Echo* and the city of Lincoln

This study of Lincoln is based on an analysis of the work of a single contributor to one provincial newspaper: Bernard Samuel Gilbert and his articles for the *Lincolnshire Echo*. His writings provide a

6. J. Beckett, 'Inventing and reinventing the modern city: the 2012 city status competition in the United Kingdom', *Urban History* (FirstView); J. Garrard and M. Goldsmith, 'Municipal progress and decline in Britain since 1800', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 7 (2012), 43-5; P.J. Larkham and K.D. Lilley, 'Plans, planners and city images: place promotion and civic boosterism in British reconstruction planning', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 184-205; P. Shapely, 'Civic pride and redevelopment in the post-war British city', *Urban History*, 39 (2012), 310-28.

7. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 48; Payne, 'Boosterism'; Morris, 'Urban biography'.

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stimulating literary context for exploring the interrelationship between provincial newspapers and local politics and government, and the adoption by press commentators of a range of critical and boosterist stances. Gilbert's articles are an illuminating source for exploring local and more general circumstances prevailing in 1914 in relation to: population expansion, housing pressures, working conditions, welfare reform, urban enhancement, and civic culture. He discusses short and longer term causal processes, as well as pragmatic and more utopian factors contributing to change. Gilbert also integrates empirical observation with more exuberant and creative expression of a boosterist nature. His nineteen articles for the *Echo*, generally between 1,000 and 1,500 words in length each, form a large body of material. They appeared in editions of the newspaper over the course of six months from February 1914. Popular reception to them persuaded the *Echo* to collect them together in a book publication in the same year, *Living Lincoln*. The 'Foreword' to the publication claims, if with a note of caution:

When these articles appeared they aroused such widespread interest that the publisher, thinking them worthy of a more permanent setting, decided to issue them in a book form. They are not intended to set down in detail the forces at work in the social and commercial life of the city, but are merely the impression of one who, being a country-man by birth and up-bringing, has come to live under the shadow of the Minster.⁸

Gilbert's articles for the *Echo* on urban life are certainly something of a curiosity. His background and interests were firmly rooted in the rural scene. He was born to the south of Lincoln, and until the age of 30 he was employed in his family's seed merchant business. It was his turn to professional writing that would take him to Lincoln, briefly, and then to London, where he died in 1927 at the age of 45. Over his fifteen-year writing career Gilbert's various works of literature (including poems, novels, plays and pamphlets) would be dominated by his consideration of country life, much in dialect verse. The work of Gilbert for the *Lincolnshire Echo* is also unexpected in that the newspaper was Conservative in its political leanings. The *Echo* was a relatively new publication, appearing in 1899. It joined five longer standing county papers, all

8. Anon., 'Foreword', in M.D. Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln by Bernard Gilbert* (Lincoln, 1983), 7. Hodson's *Living Lincoln* is a facsimile of the volume published by the *Echo* in 1914, without accompanying commentary.

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founded between 1833 and 1869.⁹ Gilbert's writings were frequently radical in their tone, and in some of his publications he explicitly challenged central Conservative-party policy.¹⁰ He became the secretary of the Lincolnshire Farmers' Union and dedicated his second book, a work of political commentary on the state of agriculture, to the National Farmers' Union.¹¹ In addition, he had published five political pamphlets on agrarian economy and society by the end of 1914. Nonetheless, his *Echo* articles on city life are diverse, well observed and insightful, their approach drawing on his experience of quite prolific critical and creative writing acquired over the preceding two years. In Gilbert's pre-1914 poetry he had clearly relished stereotyping and parodying rural and urban life, generally expressing his preference for the former. In one of his first poems, for example, the city is cast in a relatively less favourable light:

Noa, let me keep my farmin',
My 'orses an' my dogs;
I'd allers be contented
W'out your shops and fogs.
I doan't care for grand houses,
An' trams wean't make me shout,
Like I does on frosty mornin's,
Afore the sun is out.¹²

However, during Gilbert's first spell of city living, through 1914, he was generally and consistently positive about the merits of urban culture. In 'The city streets', one of his nineteen articles, he claims: 'to one who desires companionship, and who loves humanity, there can be no comparison. For human nature you must go to the town'.¹³ Gilbert's articles provide various perspectives on the life and changing character of Lincoln. The contents are rich descriptions of the city pre-1914, if, in places, indicating Gilbert's personal preferences. He was greatly animated by sport, for example:

9. D. Griffiths, *The Encyclopedia of the British Press 1422-1992* (London, 1992), 441; R. Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1979), 161; I. Packer, 'A curious exception? The Lincolnshire Chronicle and the "Starmer Group"', *Journalism Studies*, 7 (2006), 415-26; West, *Town Records*, 255.

10. For example: Lincoln Central Library (LCL), UP189, B.S. Gilbert, *Farmers and Tariff Reform* (London, 1913).

11. B.S. Gilbert, *Fortunes for Farmers* (London, 1912).

12. B.S. Gilbert, 'Farming', in *Lincolnshire Lays* (Horncastle, 1911), 10-11.

13. Gilbert, 'The city streets', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 48.

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'Sincil Bank [the home of the city's football team] is a word of magic and a centre of attraction to more people than all the churches and chapels put together'.¹⁴ He was equally attracted to horseracing on the city's West Common: 'What a democratic sport! How the hope of getting a sovereign for sixpence animates the multitude!'¹⁵ Gilbert was also fascinated by the cinema, if not all films: 'too often the majority are Yankee rubbish – melodramatic twaddle and sentiment'.¹⁶ He was less enthusiastic as well about the style of worship associated with the city's cathedral: 'the independence bread in my bones stirs as I listen here. Harsh and unlovely are the Puritans . . . but they are the backbone of our race'.¹⁷ Gilbert's pieces for the *Lincolnshire Echo* spell out in places Gilbert's rural origins and personal inclinations. He writes of a visit to the factories in the city: 'A mere walk, however extended, through the foundries is but a mockery; for one could take a week to any department. The whole affair', he adds, 'is staggering to a countryman'.¹⁸ This said far more striking are other features that are typical of his writing: his general political awareness, a frank and passionate expression of local context, and his deep concern for the social conditions arising out of economic change. Such dimensions are characteristic of his sympathetic and satirical, while not sentimental, writing.

It is uncertain whether Bernard Gilbert entered into any form of contractual arrangement with the *Echo*, for example, whether he was commissioned to write a series, and if there was any understanding determining the tone of the contents. In a few sections Gilbert indicates that he was attempting to, or was perhaps required to, resist from expressing personal political opinion - as he had in his earlier pamphlets. In one of the articles he writes:

All the real matters – the vital questions, such as the future of the Labour Movement and Trades Unionism, the Insurance Act, Labour Exchanges, the rights and wrongs of capital, the coming demand for a universal living wage coupled with the abolition of charity, the incidence of Tariff Reform upon wages and unemployment and all the rest – I cannot deal with, because they involve taking a definite side which I have avoided in the 'Impressions' as far as possible; seeking only to give the result of my observation.¹⁹

14. Gilbert, 'The football crowd', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 19.

15. Gilbert, 'The Handicap', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 29.

16. Gilbert, 'Amusements', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 88.

17. Gilbert, 'Within the Minster', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 34-6.

18. Gilbert, 'Labour', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 77.

19. Gilbert, 'Labour – continued', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 81.

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However, it is clear that Gilbert found it difficult to exclude political comment and partiality. In the same article he turns to a discussion of the need to reconcile capital and Labour, and, while not prescribing a solution for the British context, drifts into a brief overview of Australian politics and its progress towards greater democratic representation of labour interests.²⁰ Elsewhere Gilbert is far more direct. His views on particular areas of political reform surface, and he points towards the groups or interests with whom his sympathies lie. On universal adult suffrage, for example, he argues:

It is not the wealthy widow wanting an equal voice with her groom, nor the political woman demanding a vote with a hatchet, but the wretched woman who waits outside the Public Houses, or starves with her children, that arouses my anger, and spurs my determination as a Suffragist.²¹

Biographical information on Gilbert is fairly scant. He is best known for his dialect poetry, but his literary legacy, regionally and nationally, is overshadowed by that of the fellow Lincolnshire-born writer, Alfred Lord Tennyson. This article is one of a number aiming to draw Gilbert's literature out of undue neglect and bring his publications to a wider readership.²²

Gilbert on politics, civic identity and municipal policy in Lincoln in 1914

For this research attention turns to six of Gilbert's nineteen articles, ones which explore and explain most fully the nature of local politics, civic culture and urban development in Lincoln just before the First World War: 'Civic pride', 'Labour', 'Labour – continued', 'The water tower', 'The future', and 'The soul of Lincoln'.²³ The analysis of these articles begins with the penultimate piece, 'The future',

20. Gilbert, 'Labour – continued', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 81-2.

21. Gilbert, 'The city streets', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 52.

22. Hodson, 'Introduction', *Living Lincoln*, 1; Anon., 'Obituary: Bernard Samuel Gilbert, 1882-1927', in Hodson, *Living Lincoln*, 4; A.J.H. Jackson, 'On the preconditions for council-estate building in Lincoln: some contemporary observations by Bernard Gilbert', *The Lincoln Enquirer*, 22 (2012), 6-8; J.J. Sawyer, 'Bernard Gilbert. Mediocrity or Genius? *The Lincolnshire Poacher*, 1 (1953), 7-9; P. O'Shaughnessy, 'Introduction', in O'Shaughnessy (ed.), *Lincoln Fair and Other Dialect Poems* (Boston, 1986), 4-5; J.R. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert* (London, 1915); LCL, UP7883, W.E.G.R., 'Death of a Lincolnshire novelist. Mr Bernard Gilbert – a writer who depicted Lincolnshire for future generations', typescript, from *The Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 14 May 1927, 2. I am grateful for the helpful comments and pointers, and encouragement, received from two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article.

23. Gilbert, in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, respectively: 38-41, 58-63, 74-7, 78-82, 94-7, 98-103.

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for this contains the most substantive discussion of the critical pressures bearing upon the city in 1914. Gilbert remarks upon the outstanding and accelerating growth of the city's population: 7,000 in 1801, 20,000 in 1861, and 60,000 in 1911. This expansion was not just physical, but had implications for the city's identity and perception of itself. He observed somewhat foresightedly:

If one includes the natural city, taking in the continuous houses – the parishes soon to be absorbed – there must be nearly 70,000 already. This is an accelerating growth, the curve slopes upward, and if the rate of the last ten years is maintained Lincoln will soon be in sight of a hundred thousand, at which it would call itself one of England's great towns, instead of merely 'a cathedral city'.²⁴

Lincoln's population doubled over the four decades following the census year of 1831. It would then almost double again during the thirty years between 1871 and 1901, with the 1870s being the decade of most marked expansion. Moreover, growth at a rate above the national average would be sustained subsequently, during the early to mid-twentieth century.²⁵ Lincoln's growth struck Gilbert, so much so that he elaborates upon it and its causes in a wider geographical context:

the tendency is for the countryside to draw into the towns, and a time may come when the farms will be almost deserted and when agricultural labourers – or rather agricultural mechanics sleeping in the city will speed to their farm work in swift motor-'buses along the rubber-faced roads . . . It may be so; it has been predicted; the town is magnetic enough with its amusements, companionship, and, above all the evening-life for its workers. The population of England (and indeed of all Europe and the United States) is flocking citywards, with accelerating speed . . . and if nothing comes to check it, the emptying of the countryside is only a matter of time.²⁶

Gilbert continues, indicating a possible solution for such demographic pressures:

On the other hand there is a strong movement to resettle the country, to cut up our great estates and farms, and generally carry folks 'back to the land'. People are realising that the city slums are not the best breeding ground for a sturdy race, and in the coming generation we shall see concerted attempts to stem the rural exodus.²⁷

24. Gilbert, in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 'The future', 94.

25. C. Cooper, 'Housing and social structure in Lincoln, 1842-2000', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 22 (2002), 1, 21; F. Hill, *Victorian Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1974), 290; D. Mills, 'The revolution in workplace and home', in Mills (ed.), *Twentieth Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1989), 23; West, *Town Records*, 320-1.

26. Gilbert, 'The future', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 95-6.

27. Gilbert, 'The future', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 97.

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Gilbert makes reference in 'The future' to the work of Seebohm Rowntree, industrialist and philanthropist, and his prescription of new continental practices in town planning, including the redistribution of population from crowded centres and its relocation to the urban-rural fringe.²⁸ It is evident that, for Gilbert, the back-to-the-land agenda was not just a way of resolving rural issues and tackling the depopulation of the countryside. For the city of Lincoln, its industrial workers were the key to progress, and it is they who should be the beneficiaries of urban expansion, related resettlement and more generous accommodation:

it is the workers and the money that they earn and spend that is the great factor in the making of modern Lincoln. It is fifteen thousand working men with from one to three pounds a week who keep affairs astir, and in the next generation they will affect Lincoln much more than they have done . . . We might live to see Lincoln dispersed over a radius of ten miles. Granted a good cottage, and a piece of land – be it a large garden, allotment, or a small holding – and a motor-bus service, I daresay many thousands of Lincoln workers would spread out in some manner such as this; a movement that would alter the destiny of the place.²⁹

In 'The future', therefore, Gilbert draws upon a number of prevailing discourses that were providing an impetus for the emergence of more interventionist town and country planning: the resolution of the land question through property redistribution, or at least the resettlement of people into the countryside; the remediation of the social ills of urban living that had arisen as an outcome of supposed economic progress; the regeneration of the much neglected rural economy and society; and the cultivation of a nostalgic yearning for the recreation of idealised, pre-industrial and pre-urban structures and relations. Gilbert's arguments align with the opinion, gradually swelling through the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, favouring the development of state-housing policy, a view blending idealistic thought with pragmatic reaction.³⁰

28. Rowntree's influence is remarked upon in, for example: J. Butt, 'Working-class housing in Glasgow, 1851-1914', in D. Chapman, *History of Working-Class Housing* (Newton Abbot, 1971), 82; M. Harrison, 'Housing and town planning in Manchester before 1914', in A. Sutcliffe, *British Town Planning: The Formative Years* (Leicester, 1981), 110, 169; S. Pepper and M. Swenarton, 'Home front', in Swenarton, *Building the New Jerusalem: Architecture, Housing and Politics 1900-1930* (Bracknell, 2008), 15.

29. Gilbert, 'The future', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 94-6.

30. G.E. Cherry, *Town Planning in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), 24-65; M. Day, 'The contribution of Sir Raymond Unwin (1863-1940) and R. Barry Parker (1897-1947) to the development of site planning theory and practice c. 1880-1918', in Sutcliffe, *British Town Planning*, 156-68; A. Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social*

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Gilbert discusses the state of Lincoln and its inhabitants, and causal processes bringing pressure, in two further articles on 'Labour' and 'Labour – continued'. In the second he compares Lincoln's situation with that elsewhere, and strikes a less critical note than in 'The future'. Lincoln's economy, with foundry manufacture still dominant and successful, had given rise to working conditions that warranted some admiration:

My general impression of Lincoln's industrial class is one of comfort. They seem to be pretty well provided for. The city's trade steadily increases, there is little unemployment, hardly any casual labour (in the proper term), and, as far as I can gather, practically any man of average ability can earn a living wage. When I say this I do not forget the poverty that exists among certain underpaid men; but I am comparing Lincoln partly with what I know of other towns . . . Taking the able bodied workers of Lincoln, I certainly think their position is not uncomfortable.³¹

The dominance of engineering in Lincoln in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, including its ability to respond at a major level to the demands for munitions during the First World War, meant relative prosperity for the town into the 1920s – although uncertainty and decline would set in soon afterwards. Moreover, although confrontational labour relations did develop in the early twentieth century, these were generally limited when compared to the scale of working-class protest evident elsewhere.³² 'I would like to say here', Gilbert observes, 'that on every hand I hear a good word for the employers in Lincoln', adding: 'It is a good omen for the city's future'.³³ Gilbert makes no reference to the mass demonstrations, rioting and looting that came to a head in August 1911, which required suppression by armed troops; a local reflection of a more general heightening of class consciousness and conflict in this period.³⁴ Perhaps, for Gilbert, tensions had eased sufficiently in the two years between this event and his move to Lincoln. Gilbert, in the same article, also shows an awareness of the housing situation in the city in terms of levels of

Experiment (London, 2001), 2-5, 41-55; Swenarton, 'The education of an urbanist', in Swenarton, *Building a New Jerusalem*, 95-124.

31. Gilbert, 'Labour – continued', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 78-9.

32. N. Wright, 'The varied fortunes of heavy and manufacturing industry 1914-1987', in Mills, *Twentieth Century Lincoln*, 74-83.

33. Gilbert, 'Labour – continued', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 79.

34. Cooper, 'Housing and social structure', 26-7; P. Nurse and T. Gadd, *Devils Let Loose: The Story of the Lincoln Riots, 1911* (Grantham, 2001).

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overcrowding and private-rental rates. His tone here, though, is not especially alarmist, claiming that the remedying of the deficiencies that did exist appeared to be readily achievable:

The number of houses in Lincoln on March 21st, 1912, was 13,568 . . . In 77 houses overcrowding (in the official sense) exists . . . There are no large slums in Lincoln, and a bold hand might clear away what there are . . . Rents seem high for workers, and this, I suppose, is inevitable with the steady rise in population. It is proposed that the city shall build a considerable number of houses which should relieve matters . . . Some foundrymen - it is estimated a thousand - live in villages around Lincoln, up to a radius of five miles, but mostly because of the lack of houses in the city.³⁵

Some official accounts also support the view that housing conditions were not that pressing, or at least were not foremost among the factors causing general public ill health and requiring municipal action. It was not that critical accounts of the conditions within Lincoln's slums were absent, but the problems associated with housing were linked more to levels of rent and the availability of accommodation. It was matters of poor water supply that had attracted notoriety.³⁶ Gilbert does not appear to identify much evidence of, or grounds for, working-class pressure for reform. However, it appears that he was still of the view that intervention was required on behalf of labour, noting the emerging proposals for council-house provision. In 'The future', if not in his articles on 'Labour', he is in fact quite indicting and calls more forcefully for policy making. Demographic pressures demanded planned and radical responses, declaring that:

What Lincoln seems to need is a Town Planning Committee - or perhaps it is town planning citizens that are wanted. I must give the Council credit for some of their recent achievements, like the Public Library and the Water Tower. Still, there it is! A mass of slums and crooked streets want dynamiting . . . After all, what really matters is not the shops nor the mansions. The houses of the servant-owning class are of no importance (so far as the future is concerned) compared with the workers and their homes. Are they all going to get a living wage? Are the slums to be cleared away? Are the hundreds of workmen's cottages, that are rising like mushrooms, going to have a decent garden and a bathroom?³⁷

35. Gilbert, 'Labour - continued', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 79.

36. E.I. Abell and J.D. Chambers, *The Story of Lincoln: An Introduction to the History of the City* (Lincoln, 1949), 204-7; Cooper, 'Housing and social structure', 24-8; Hill, *Victorian Lincoln*, 232-40, 290-292; Local Government Board, *Report of Medical Inspectors of the Local Government Board, No. 226: Dr R.J. Reece's Report to the Local Government Board of the Epidemic of Enteric Fever in the City of Lincoln, 1904-5* (London, 1906), 12.

37. Gilbert, 'The future', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 96-7.

In two other articles Gilbert discusses the city's record in terms of municipal provision. An article entitled 'Civic pride' considers the subject of the city's new library. Gilbert is evidently impressed. The design had not succumbed to the demands for compromise and economy that typified municipal enterprise, and it stood unusually as a city building that ranked well alongside those to be found elsewhere. Gilbert also evaluates another area of action and its related architectural structure in 'The water tower', and reflects more expansively on the nature of local civic culture. Lincoln's council was not known for its municipal activity. Its library, for a city of Lincoln's size, was a relatively late-built civic asset. Its improvement of water supplies, meanwhile, scandalously lagged behind demand and standards, with action forced upon it following 131 deaths from typhoid in 1904-5. This prompted a marked, if belated, turn towards interventionism in local policy making, a cultural shift acknowledged in contemporary accounts as well as in more recent histories.³⁸ In 'The water tower' Gilbert articulates with poignancy the connection between the typhoid scandal and a new orientation towards municipal engagement in civic improvement. He in fact elaborates at length upon the literal and metaphorical significance of the water tower, a structure that had joined the medieval castle and cathedral, standing on top of the ridge above the lower and greater part of the city:

The tower is a symbol of more than water. It challenges the Castle and Cathedral in more ways than one; for it is a token of the new spirit. We still build Castles, or what is the modern equivalent in Dreadnoughts, and occasionally we achieve a new Minster, but our faith is in the future instead of the past . . . We can no longer, in cities, play hazard with our share. Lincoln has had a sharp lesson, and her wounds are hardly healed. It is well that these pipes should bear the fountain of life to our lips instead of a darker cup.³⁹

As Gilbert notes in 'The future', the city's council was also just turning its attention to a further area of municipal enterprise to follow up on its enhancements to library provision and water supply: public housing. This intervention is perhaps surprising given the lower levels of concern that

38. Hill, *Victorian Lincoln*, 232-40; Abell and Chambers, *The Story of Lincoln*, 204-11; Bray, C., Grantham, K., and Wright, A., *The Enemy in Our Midst: The Story of Lincoln's Typhoid Epidemic 1905* (Lincoln, 1987); City of Lincoln Urban Sanitary Authority, *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health* (Lincoln, 1910-14); Cooper, 'Housing and social structure', 23-5; Local Government Board (1906) *Reece's Report*; S. Scott, 'The early days of planning', in Mills, *Twentieth Century Lincolnshire*, 185-7.

39. Gilbert, 'The water tower', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 63.

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surrounded housing conditions in the city in the early twentieth century. Moreover, Lincoln was also quite unusual in acting in the area of housing at this point, ahead of most local authorities. Lincoln would establish a Housing and Town Planning Committee, answering the calls of Gilbert and others, and this would be a decisive element in bringing intervention. The council had come to accept the need for major local-authority provision, approving some 900 homes across 65 acres. It would receive central government approval for the scheme, secure a loan, and fund land purchase before the outbreak of the First World War. The first 200 homes, if delayed by the war years until 1920, are a legacy of what was being aspired to in Lincoln pre-1914, and their generous specifications would probably have satisfied what Gilbert was envisaging in his vision for 'The future'. The homes reflect the garden-suburb spirit, with ample proportions and plots, and quasi-rustic lines. The city would go on to propose major housing developments inter-war as part of a grand development plan. In a county where local policy restraint was the norm, Lincoln's expenditure on this particular area of municipal responsibility stood out.⁴⁰

Lincoln's sudden swing from a culture of entrenched inaction to being a model of intervention, most evidently in housing provision, is quite striking in national terms. Most local authority housing schemes would await the supports and incentives that would follow after the First World War. The activities of councils like Lincoln's cannot be understood simplistically, that is, as an expression of local party-political structures and relations and their influence. There were certainly local authority areas in which there was a strong and readily discernible causal interconnection between local party-political identities, central-party agendas and local-policy initiatives. However, there were places where local-policy needs and senses of civic duty opened up alternative factions within dominant, ruling parties, from the interventionist to the non-interventionist. There were, furthermore, local authorities that were not known for party-political extremism, and the local adoption of municipal action was not necessarily associated with conspicuous shifts in party-political structures. Party politics could in fact be downplayed, with a local tradition of non-affiliation strong. Moreover, particular personalities, and the degree to which councillors or their

40. City of Lincoln Council, *Lincoln Townscape Assessment: St Giles Inherited Character Statement* (Lincoln, 2008), 3; O. Hartley, 'Politics 1885-1974', in Mills, *Twentieth Century Lincolnshire*, 235-8; Hill, *Victorian Lincoln*, 238-40, 291-2; E. Horner and N. Horner, 'Population growth, housing reform and the St Giles Estate', in A. Walker (ed.), *Uphill Lincoln II: The North-Eastern Suburbs* (Lincoln, 2010), 64-9; A.J.H. Jackson, 'Twentieth-century residential: the St Giles Estate', in Walker, *Uphill Lincoln II*, 58-61; A.J.H. Jackson, 'The Boultham housing estate', in A. Walker (ed.) *Survey of Lincoln, vol. 8: The South-West Suburbs* (Lincoln, 2013), 44-7; Scott, 'Early days', 204-5.

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patrons were reformist in their inclinations, could be clearer and more relevant than any party allegiance. In addition, the commercial or business interests of local leaders may have had a greater part to play than party.⁴¹

Historians agree that Lincoln's shift towards municipal action was quite late, but appreciable when it finally materialised – most especially with regard to housing. Its genesis is to be found in complex and nuanced readings of the role of individuals, local-political parties and other organisations. Reform might have been an inevitability, a product of deterministic central-local relations, but local-political cultures were clearly essential in determining the scale and speed of policy implementation. The significance of personalities can be highlighted in Lincoln's case, with swift decision making and the building of a cross-party consensus owing much to the skill of a particular Liberal councillor, Clement Newsum. Local party-political composition was of importance, but the ability of particular individuals to overcome civic cultures appeared to be instrumental in the adoption of action.⁴² Historians also acknowledge the influence of external organisations. An independent and voluntary Public Welfare Committee, chaired by the Dean of Lincoln Cathedral, pressed for intervention. Meanwhile, a Trades and Labour Council would also call for policy making, petitioning for more working-class housing and achieving representation through the election of a socialist councillor. The construction of housing schemes for Lincoln also had the specific and added attraction of being an opportunity to extend municipal boundaries and authority.⁴³

Gilbert does consider the political structures and relations in the city. His concluding article for the *Lincolnshire Echo*, 'The soul of Lincoln', is devoted entirely to an examination of the city's culture and governance. In the piece Gilbert claims that he had found the 'body' of Lincoln in the form of its buildings and the human figures that comprise its populace, and had articulated this through his preceding articles. On seeking the city's 'soul' or 'spirit', though, he continues:

41. For relevant local studies: Broxholme, 'Back to the future'; M. Dresser, 'Housing policy in Bristol, 1919-30', in M.J. Daunton (ed.) *Councillors and Tenants: Local Authority Housing in English Cities* (Leicester, 1984), 156-68; Robert Finnegan, 'Council housing in Leeds, 1919-39: social policy and urban change', in Daunton, *Councillors and Tenants*, 102-22; J.H. Jennings, 'The geographical implications of the municipal housing programme in England and Wales 1919-39', *Urban Studies*, 8 (1971), 121-34; Hulme, 'Urban governance', 240-1; Shinner, 'Pocket borough to county borough'.

42. Hartley, 'Politics', 223-8.

43. Cooper, 'Housing and social structure', 27-8; Scott, 'Early days', 185-204.

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I have sought Lincoln's spirit everywhere, in the Minster and all places where spiritual influences are likely to exist, but I felt it more strongly than anywhere in the beautiful Guildhall. There, if anywhere, is the soul of Lincoln, there, where the City Fathers meet to guide and guard its fortunes; for the past and present are intermingled with the living in that ancient shell . . . Here, then, is Lincoln: its very soul!⁴⁴

Gilbert proceeds to place Lincoln in a wider context, as an exemplar of broader-ranging and ideal processes. In this city faith could, or certainly ought to, be placed in its local government and democratic representation:

These City Councils are more representative of their constituents than our Parliament. Women may vote, the elections are not necessarily fought upon political lines, and any man of note or worth, in a city like Lincoln, who does public service and desires public life, may attain Council rank.⁴⁵

Moreover, the city's culture was also one that lent itself towards, and represented a mirror of, progress:

A young soul bursting its olden bands, a new spirit striving through ancient ways, the Twentieth Century emerging from the cradle of the Twelfth; that is Lincoln – one everlasting compromise . . . Not only is compromise the soul of Lincoln, but of England also, the very essence of our race; its inner spark of genius that guides us through the ages; and whilst it remains, our cities and our country will never fall to the earth.⁴⁶

Gilbert does not get drawn into discussing particular local political parties or policies in this concluding article. He had declared that it was intention in the nineteen articles to resist expressing explicitly personal political allegiances and opinions, and he appears to succeed here. Instead he focuses on the nature of civic culture and general attitudes towards tradition and progress. It is evident that Gilbert indicates his own liking for political reform and advance. However, moving to Lincoln in 1914, he has found a city which, by this date, was reaching a worthy and effective compromise between continuity and change. It is in this final article that Gilbert is found at his least critical and most 'boosterist'; his other articles are generally positive, but here he gives himself over most to celebration and optimism.

44. Gilbert, 'The soul of Lincoln', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 101.

45. Gilbert, 'The soul of Lincoln', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 102.

46. Gilbert, 'The soul of Lincoln', in Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln*, 102.

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In a broader sense his articles, and most especially 'The soul of Lincoln', are typical of the age in which Gilbert was writing. Their content supports one of the well-established interpretations of this period, that it witnessed a heyday for both municipal socialism and utopianism in town-planning ideology. His articles form something of a model of sophisticated civic-culture discourse. They contain many of the themes that characterise place-boosting literature: local distinctiveness and pre-eminence, the worth of industry and commerce, the purpose of municipal governance and political authority, rootedness in ancient traditions and values, and outstanding and pioneering construction and improvement.⁴⁷ Gilbert was evidently making a pledge of faith in what local-state interventionism was offering to deliver, and also investing hope in what the idealism of early town planning was promising.

Conclusion

Studies of boosterism typically consider the role of place-promotional discourse in relation to the course of development of particular towns and cities. The art of the booster is contextualised with reference to: evolving civic cultures, factions and interests; municipal policy making and entrepreneurial action; and the representative function of contemporary media. However, close examinations of individual boosters themselves, and their connection with their home cities, appear to be relatively lacking. This study has sought to shed light on the special qualities of boosterism by bringing personal biography, that of Gilbert's, into the investigation as much as 'urban biography', that of Lincoln.

Buried in the writings of the boosters there is an enormous mass of invaluable material for the historian, and the civic pride which they demonstrated is just as interesting an urban phenomenon to study as the social problems of the city which have captured most attention from general historians. The main difficulty with the literature is that it is totally uncritical. And it was never counterbalanced by the kind of 'muck-raking' literature about 'the shame of the cities'.⁴⁸

47. Cherry, *Town Planning*, 24-79; B. Doyle and A. McElligott, 'The rise and fall of European municipal power since 1800', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 7 (2012), 10-17; Sutcliffe, 'Introduction', in Sutcliffe, *British Town Planning*, 4-6; Stobart, 'Building an urban identity', 486-7, 498.

48. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 48.

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Gilbert was no 'muck raker', but neither was he solely a booster. Gilbert's articles, and indeed local-newspaper media more broadly, are especially appealing as a historical source for they illustrate how objective critical observation and boosterist sentiment blended with one another in the early twentieth century. Gilbert, as critic and booster, wrote reports that were partial and subjective by their very nature, and aspects of their content invite further investigation and contextualisation, in particular: Lincoln's planning problems and the causal factors bringing about municipal intervention; the prevalence of reformist, radical or utopian language in the *Lincolnshire Echo* and elsewhere; and the nature of the city's civic culture in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, Gilbert offers a lucid, evocative and emphatic, if singular, impression of the condition of the city in 1914, the character of its politics and governance, and what its municipal-reform priorities should be.

In certain respects the Lincoln case and the articles of Gilbert serve to mirror circumstances to be found elsewhere. It was a city that appeared to succumb to generally prevailing and centrally derived pressures. Particular development processes unravelled in Lincoln in much the same way as they did in other provincial centres. Clearly, however, local factors did give a certain character to how inevitable outcomes were arrived at. The city's sudden embrace of council-house building before the First World War, for example, stands out as being relatively distinctive and unusual in terms of national trends. A complex array of motives, from the pragmatic to the utopian, was driving such policy responses, and study of the decisions by councils and of contemporaneous representations in the press reveal much about the essence of local civic character, culture and discourse in the early twentieth century.⁴⁹ The writings of Bernard Gilbert are a particularly inviting medium through which to explore the contextual complexity, and how the processes of expediency and idealism, and of the generally ranging and the locally distinctive, fused.

For Gilbert, his engagement with description of urban life proved to be fleeting, as was his writing for newspapers. Upon returning to full-time writing after the war, he concerned himself primarily with the rural scene. His civic-boosterist phase had passed. He did not swing towards 'muck raking', but he was certainly critical. When he wrote of cities it was in bleaker and more

49. Bromley and Hayes, 'Campaigner, watchdog or municipal lackey'; Daunton, 'Introduction', in Daunton, *Councillors and Tenants*, 20; Day, 'Contribution of Sir Raymond Unwin', 156-68; Hayes, 'Civic perceptions'; Hulme, 'Urban governance', 240-4; Ravetz, *Council Housing*, 2-5; Swenarton, 'Introduction', in Swenarton, *Building a New Jerusalem*, 3-8.

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despairing terms. He would revisit the back-to-the-land agenda, but no longer saw the improvement of cities as one of the ways forward. 'White men have crammed themselves in to cities', he wrote in 1923, 'and deserve all that has happened to them'. Gilbert also asked 'What's wrong with the city?', answering: 'that it *is* a city; that it is not the country; that man is not ready to leave the cradle of his youth'. Furthermore, in a 'Credo', he went as far as anticipating a future 'when the cities and their smoke have cleared away'.⁵⁰ In addition, Gilbert was no longer hopeful for a better future under municipal socialism, and veered towards a more reactionary view of political systems and forms of governance. In his *Old England: A God's Eye View of a Village* of 1921, he remarks:

It is the ancient democracy of the Feudal System, the one which has stayed longest in our history and which has its roots deeper and more firmly in the soil of Old England than town-dwellers can guess or know.⁵¹

The change in the direction and tone of Gilbert's writings paralleled general processes. Reaction against the urban, the industrial and the modern became a more prominent theme in the work of leading ruralist authors through the early twentieth century. In addition, the inter-war years saw a weakening of municipal socialism's force, a steady withdrawal of middle-class elites from engagement with civic governance, and a lessening of provincial-press interest in local-political activity and urban progress.⁵²

50. B.S. Gilbert, 'General introduction', in Gilbert (ed.), *The Rural Scene* (London, 1923), 30-1.

51. B.S. Gilbert, *Old England: A God's Eye View of a Village* (London, 1921), viii.

52. A.R.H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, 2003) 121-4; B.M. Doyle 'The structure of elite power in the early twentieth-century city: Norwich, 1900-35', *Urban History*, 24 (1997), 179-99; S. Gunn, 'Class, identity and the urban: the middle class in England, c. 1790-1950', *Urban History*, 31 (2004), 40-4; Garrard and Goldsmith, 'Municipal progress', 49-50; J. Kirk, 'Figuring the landscape: writing the topographies of community and place', *Literature & History*, 15 (2006), 1-17; Shapely. 'Civic pride', 310; R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), 197-214.