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St Ann's, Nottingham: inner city voices
Ruth Johns
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By any standards, and especially considering the relatively limited scope of the subject, this book has been conceived and written on a truly massive scale. On the face of it Ruth Johns' purpose is simple: to recreate the recent history of a large area of inner city Nottingham through the perceptions of its people. Thus the book is largely, although not entirely, the recollections of past and present inhabitants. However, there is rather more to it than that. In the first place, in fully appreciating the book, it is important to understand the author's very personal commitment to St Ann's. Coming from a broad background in housing and community self-help she tells us how, while working with youngsters in the area, she became aware that 'they knew nothing of the recent history of their area ... (but) were very interested when offered an opportunity to find out'. Secondly, Ruth Johns is very clear about the rather dubious reputation St Ann's has acquired, whether it be the levels of deprivation uncovered by previous studies, or by a reputation for violence sedulously cultivated from time to time by stories in the local media. Not unreasonably she (and her respondents) seem to have concluded quite rightly that the time had come for a little rehabilitation. The result is a truly impressive work, written with commitment but also carefully balancing what the residents have to say with illuminating comment and analysis.

Interesting as the detailed reconstruction of the past infrastructure and services undoubtedly is, perhaps the sections which make most impact on the outsider are the individual Life Stories and, perhaps inevitably, that entitled 'When Things Go Wrong'. The Life Stories are arranged in two parts, the first with respondents born mainly in the first quarter of the last century, so this is very much the older generation speaking. The second group is drawn from people in the generation or so after 1930. This material throws up some very significant facts, not the least being that pre-1960s there was a much closer regular contact between the generations. This leads to Johns' personal, thought-provoking prescription, 'Somehow we have to get better at making children from a very early age feel they belong. If they get to 12-14 and feel they don't belong, it cannot be their fault or all their parent's fault or all their school's fault.' Furthermore in the section 'When Things Go Wrong' she makes an unequivocal connection between the inadequate social provision for the young and the recent events culminating in the street murder of a teenager in February 2002.

Worryingly the evidence in this section is drawn almost entirely from 'official' respondents - police, probation and benefits officers. Johns is thus constrained to admit, 'This has been the hardest piece to write because many people have expressed views but do not wish to be quoted'. And almost despairingly, her argument continues with a warning of the dangers 'when people don't speak'.

At first sight the book's very brief concluding section looks inadequate in view of the huge preceding mass of material, but it makes up in power what it lacks in length. For what, after all, has happened to St Ann's and indeed many similar inner city districts across the United Kingdom? A whole way of life and environment has been torn up with precious little in the way of consultation with the inhabitants. To compound the felony we have then allowed 'brutal market forces to over-run (such districts) so they become part of the so-called mainstream'. Yet in the last resort the evidence of this study suggests that we might all do better to 'relearn some basic way of life and values which are not determined by the ideology of maximising profit'. What should have become abundantly clear by now is that the book operates on two levels. First, it is a piece of history and the author has used the techniques of oral history most effectively to detail the social development of an inner city district over the period of the last century. But then she has gone on to analyse and suggest remedies for the problems that have arisen in that time. No doubt this would cut very little ice with readers of the *Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail* or *Sun*. Nor would it go down at all well with the correspondents to the Letters page of the *Nottingham Evening Post*. But it certainly ought to ring some bells with policy makers at both local and national level. Thus the final thought that this radical, refreshing, affectionate picture of St Ann's deserves a rather wider audience than it will probably receive.

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