

Jewish Historical Studies
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Introduction: Historical boom and bust – and the (British) Jewish question

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How to cite: Berkowitz, M. 'Introduction: Historical boom and bust – and the (British) Jewish question.' *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2017, 49(1): 1, pp. ix-xiv. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2017v49.041>.

Published: 30 March 2018

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Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical boom and bust – and the (British) Jewish question

As media are fixated on the “reality” television show that has supplanted the United States’ government, flashes of Jews and their history erupt at press conferences, provide fodder for tweets, and chants by Nazis in horrifying torch-lit marches. The penultimate White House Press Secretary (as of November 2017), Sean Spicer, informed us on 11 April 2017 that “Someone who is despicable as Hitler who didn’t even sink to using chemical weapons.” In attempting to paint a picture of Bashar al-Assad as more reprehensible than the leader of the Third Reich, Spicer reveals that his grasp of history is as atrocious as his grammar. Prompted by a sympathetic reporter to offer an immediate correction, Spicer dug a deeper hole: Hitler, he said, “was not using the gas on his own people the same way that Ahshad [sic] is doing I mean there was clearly I understand that but thank you thank you I appreciate that there was not he brought them into the Holocaust centers I understand that.”

While Spicer, who has since resigned under pressure, may be chided for his astounding ignorance, the pandering of his Commander-in-Chief, President Trump, to white supremacy and neo-Nazism is unprecedented in the highest office of the United States. Culpability for the murder of an innocent protester and injuries to scores of others in Charlottesville, Virginia, he said, rested on “many sides” – and he repeated, “many sides” (13 August 2017) – equating the protesters to the Nazis and Klansmen who staged the rally. Two days later Trump asserted that “fine people” were among the Nazis.¹ For those who grovel to Trump, his defence of thugs who were (supposedly) inspired by an urge to protect Confederate monuments seemed a reasonable basis of his stance.

So what does this have to do with the Jewish Historical Society of England? There are, in fact, points of intersection. Certainly Holocaust denial and trivialization, which is a staple of the Alt-right, is alarming to everyone concerned with Jewish history – and basic decency. But the antisemitism of the Alt-right and their cohort does not stop there. “News”

1 Alexander Burns, “Rabbis Protest Trump’s Comments by Boycotting Conference Call”, *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2017.



Judah P. Benjamin,
 Senator from Louisiana,
 c. 1856. Courtesy of the
 Library of Congress,
 Washington, DC, LC-
 DIG-ppmsca-05642

about Jews from the time of the Civil War has also entered the fray, which complements the wave of denigration of African Americans and absurd apologetics for slavery. While Trump and other far-right politicians wish to cast themselves as populist heroes by supporting the valorization of General Robert E. Lee, one small corner of the controversy surrounds the Jew who graced the two-dollar bill of the South and occupied the second-highest office in the Confederacy. Judah P. Benjamin should interest us, because in the wake of the South's defeat, he escaped to Britain and managed to recreate his legal career, attaining no small measure of success in London. He kept his distance from all things Jewish but he never attempted to conceal his identity. That Benjamin is hardly commemorated in his native Southern US has prompted more discussion than the absence of a statue *per se*.² But, not surprisingly, the expressly racist Alt-right movement, spearheaded by Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, offers an antisemitic conspiracy theory to explain why a memorial to Benjamin, in sleepy Belle Casse, Louisiana, has been left standing: it is the work of "a certain globalist coterie". I think we have heard that before.

² Ari Feldman, "Why Are There No Statues of Jewish Confederate Judah Benjamin to Tear Down?" *Forward*, 20 Aug. 2017.

In contrast to the insipid discussion of the Judah Benjamin memorial on the Alt-right website, which will not be dignified with a footnote, the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, brilliantly argued in 2002 that Benjamin should be seen as a “giant in the law”, despite his centrality in the Confederacy. Bader informs us that

Judah Benjamin, in 1853, declined the nomination of President Millard Fillmore to become an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Just elected U.S. Senator from Louisiana, Benjamin preferred to retain his [Senate, legislative branch] post. His choice suggests that the U.S. Supreme Court had not yet become the co-equal Branch it is today. Had he accepted the Third Branch nomination, Judah Benjamin, not Louis D. Brandeis, would have been the first Jewish Justice to serve on the High Court. It was just as well, for Benjamin’s service would not have endured. In early 1861, in the wake of Louisiana’s secession from the Union, Benjamin resigned the Senate seat for which he had forsaken the justiceship. No doubt he would have resigned a seat on the Court had he held one, as did his friend Associate Justice John Archibald Campbell of Alabama. (Campbell, incidentally, opposed secession and freed all his slaves on his appointment to the Supreme Court. But when hostilities broke out, he remained loyal to the South. He eventually settled in New Orleans where he built up a thriving law practice.)³

Benjamin predictably lost his personal fortune when the South was defeated. But he managed to escape to London, where he became dedicated, Bader asserts,

again to the practice of law, this time as a British barrister. He opted for a second career at the bar notwithstanding the requirement that he start over by enrolling as a student at an Inn of Court and completing a mandatory three-year apprenticeship before qualifying as a barrister. This, Benjamin’s contemporaries reported, he did cheerfully, although he was doubtless relieved when Lincoln’s Inn determined to waive some of its requirements and admit him early.

Benjamin became a British barrister at age 55. His situation at that mature stage of life closely paralleled conditions of his youth. He was a newly minted lawyer, with a struggling practice, but, he wrote to a friend, “as much interested in my profession as when I first commenced as a boy.” Repeating his Louisiana progress, Benjamin made his reputation among

3 Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “Four Louisiana Giants in the Law”, Judge Robert A. Ainsworth, Jr. Memorial Lecture, Loyola University New Orleans School of Law, 4 Feb. 2002, available at www.supremecourt.gov/publicinfo/speeches/viewspeech/sp_02-04-02, accessed 31 Oct. 2017.

his new peers by publication. Drawing on the knowledge of civilian systems gained during his practice in Louisiana, Benjamin produced a volume in England that came to be known as *Benjamin on Sales*. The book was a near-instant classic. Its author was much praised, and Benjamin passed the remainder of his days as a top earning, highly esteemed, mainly appellate advocate. His voice was often heard in appeals to the House of Lords and the Privy Council.⁴

The first article in our volume offers a glimpse of Benjamin from the 1960s along with perspectives on Jews in the South, by the distinguished art historian Gail Levin, reflecting on her youth in Atlanta. Levin suggests how to deal with the thorny issue of Confederate monuments – by recalling the earlier history of the fate of memorials left by the British, after the American Revolution. Her thoughtful piece is followed by a highly original analysis of a reluctant politician, the Jewish civil servant Sir Matthew Nathan. Nathan did not court controversy, but found himself in extremely delicate and desperate circumstances in two of the empire’s hot spots where there was no easy answer. Graham Dominy reveals how the juxtaposition of Nathan’s assignments in South Africa and Ireland may have had unintended and weighty consequences for the history of the Empire.

Volume 47 of *Jewish Historical Studies (Transactions)*, many will recall, was dedicated to the career and memory of our colleague David Cesarani. Among David’s formidable monographs was a history of London’s *Jewish Chronicle* (1994), which also (apparently) was a subject explored by Cecil Roth in a JC in-house publication of 1949. In this issue Geoffrey Cantor details the establishment of the *Jewish Chronicle* from an alternate and comparative perspective, situating its history in the explosion of periodical press publishing in London in the mid-nineteenth century, along with the other newspaper of the same name (*Jewish Chronicle*, that is) and the *Voice of Jacob*. Given the role the JC came to play, it is little wonder that newspaper comprises a major source for Aaron Simons’s research on the Second World War. Simons recounts and analyses the response of British Zionists to Nazism and the Holocaust from 1939 to 1949, and what he perceives as the subsequent transformation of dominant trends of institutional Anglo-Jewry. Some four years after the war’s end, and around the time of Israel’s War for Independence, Zionism was now cast as an absolutely life and death matter.

In the first of three forays into pre-modern Anglo-Jewry in this volume, Dean Irwin meticulously excavates the material forms of acknowledg-

4 Ibid.

ments of debt involving medieval Jewry and its moneylending activity. Focusing on the paleographic and linguistic features of this evidence, Irwin complements the project initiated by Judith Schlanger and others, which is nearly as archaeological as it is historical. Irwin's work here helps set the stage for a discussion of a two-volume study to be reviewed in the forthcoming *Transactions*: Julie Mell's substantial revision of *The Myth of the Medieval Jewish Moneylender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Alex Kerner's article, the first of two in successive issues of *Transactions*, belongs to a select group of scholarly treatments of the Jews of eighteenth-century Britain that is based on little-known, relatively unused archival documents. Centering on a court of arbitration, Kerner sheds light on Sephardi social and religious history in London which emerges as more richly textured and rambunctious than previously imagined. While more temperate in its interpersonal relations than the cases recounted by Kerner, Julia Lieberman revisits the history of the Sephardi hospital from this same period. In Simon Schama's rollicking *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492–1900*, to be reviewed in the next *Transactions*, we are reminded of the "outrage" of Isaac Furtado over the hypocrisy of the Bevis Marks leadership, whose "hospital for the Jewish Poor on which they took such pride had a mere six beds; that for the most part the patients were treated by an apothecary rather than a physician; and that at Passover all they got to eat were matzoth."⁵ One of the earliest and still important investigations of the subject appeared in *Transactions* 27, an article by Richard David Barnett, which was the first item edited by our contributing editor, Jeremy Schonfield.⁶ Lieberman reveals that the conception and administration of the small hospital was perceived, at the time, as elevated from the realm of traditional care for the poor associated with Tzedakah (of the Sephardi variety, *sedeca*), but the more complicated and secularized management of the institution did not necessarily advance the actual treatment of the patients. It was a move towards the modern but caught up in conflicting agendas that reflected changes in social attitudes beyond the Jewish fold.

Like the article by Kerner, which will be continued in the next issue, Grace Idle's history of Jewish Bradford is the first of two instalments. There are a number of features of Bradford's Jewish history that make

5 Simon Schama, *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492–1900* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), 335.

6 Richard David Barnett, "Dr Jacob de Castro Sarmiento and Sephardim in Medical Practice in 18th Century London," *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 27 (1982): 84–114.

it distinctive, and this was matched, to no small extent, by their self-definition in Jewish affairs, which meant marching to a different beat from the usual run of Anglo-Jewry.

While we continue hear a great deal about the Jewish entanglement in history, serious treatment of it is often lacking. I have been graciously invited to attend the forthcoming “Balfour Centenary Conference” sponsored by the *Jewish News* and the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM). In the announcement ten speakers are mentioned but not a single historian among them. While the commemoration of the Balfour Declaration is laudable, the lack of engagement with its complicated background is disturbing. The callousness with regard to history on the part of the conference organizers was further revealed by an a-historical summary of the issue of the Declaration, and misspelling the name of Israel’s Prime Minister. We have no such shortage here, as the articles in this volume conclude with an analysis of the history of the Balfour Declaration by the President of the Jewish Historical Society of England, Professor Philip Alexander. To accompany that piece and provide a different angle on the commemoration, I will seize editorial licence to display one of Anglo-Jewry’s more playful, if not bizarre images: the second Lord Rothschild (Lionel Walter) driving his team of zebras. Rothschild, to whom Balfour’s letter was addressed, is one of the forgotten men of the history of that contentious proclamation. He was, however, known to and greatly respected by Balfour, in part because of his consequential efforts as a naturalist. It is common knowledge that Balfour held Chaim Weizmann in high esteem due to his work as a chemist. The same may be said of his regard for Rothschild, in a different field of scientific endeavour. Balfour was, in fact, himself deeply committed to raising educational standards in the country (beyond the upper crust to which he was born) and, in particular, strengthening research and teaching in science.

As has now become custom, I wish to thank Katharine Ridler, Jeremy Schonfield, and Lars Fischer for their invaluable assistance in producing this volume.

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