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England's Jewish Solution. Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290

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This has been a long awaited book. The wait has not been in vain. Dr Mundill's is the last, well-considered word on Edward's final solution of a so-called Jewish problem. If there was a problem, Dr Mundill believes, it was that the Jews would not become Christians. They were, however, becoming merchants. The result of the author's patient and meticulous scholarship are original conclusions about the Statute of the Jewry of 1275, which in prohibiting the taking of interest and the granting of mortgages, stopped the age-old Jewish involvement in the land market. The view hitherto has been that the statute undermined Jewish business, that English Jewry subsequently became impoverished, and that it was a bankrupt and diminished community which was expelled in 1290. Too little is known about pawn-broking to say more than that it was certainly an avenue of diversification taken by some Jews. More importantly, and as Dr Mundill evidences in impressive detail, Jewish businessmen in London, Lincoln, Canterbury, and elsewhere across England went in for 'advance sale credits' on the basic commodities of grain and wool. They even specialized: wool at Lincoln, corn in Canterbury. In those places, as on a smaller scale in other towns, Jewish business thrived. Business generally was thriving in England in the 1280s. It was a time of boom in agriculture and commerce. Anyone with cash ought to have been able to use it advantageously. Jewish businessmen were doing so. By 1290, stopped in one lucrative place, they were opening up in another. Dr Mundill shows that far from meekly going under, English Jews responded to adversity with imagination, resilience, and courage.

What Dr Mundill does not tell us, probably because there is no evidence to suggest it, is whether English, or rather non-Jewish, businessmen resented these intrusive newcomers. Were those shipmen who murderously mistreated the departing Jews of 1290, like Henry Adrian who was imprisoned at Sandwich for his genocidal act off the Isle of Sheppey, shipowners too? Were they actively vindictive (and they appear to have been the only people who were) because they were of that commercial world which had most recently experienced Jewish resourcefulness? I begin with a question Dr Mundill does not ask to show that his splendid book stimulates thought. Most other questions he has not only asked; he has come up with compelling answers.

The 2000 or so Jews who left England in 1290 were not, therefore, a demoralised and sorry remnant. We have to stop thinking that they were, must cease to see them in such time-honoured fashion. Like most of the Jews who fled Germany and Austria in the 1930s, the English Jews of 1290 were productive and contributive citizens, super-contributive where taxation was concerned. To contemporaries, however, that was beside the point. In both cases what counted was that, whatever else Jews were, they were Jews. Dr Mundill makes Edward I's responsibility for the expulsion crystal-clear; he also illuminates Edward's winding path towards so final a Final Solution. Edward shared with his fellow West European rulers, scholarly and mendicant clergy, and clerical civil-servants the notion that something had to be done about the Jews; in some sense they had to be got rid of, if possible in the sense of transforming them into Christians. All these people believed they knew about Jews, much in the fashion Rosenberg, Goebbels, and Hitler thought they understood them. It was an arrogant as well as a mistaken belief. The merciless coin-clipping affair of 1278-9, which the gifted and tenacious Israeli scholar Zefira Rokeah has taught us to regard as a bureaucratic iniquity of major proportions, bears an uncanny resemblance to Kristallnacht. It was, like Kristallnacht, a pogrom: a government orchestrated persecution of a group targeted as criminal. Radical measure though it was, which the numerous hangings and the imprisonment of 600 Jewish men in the Tower (probably all the heads of Jewish households in the country) illustrate, was it a staging post on the road to the Endlösung? Not if that road was as twisted as Dr Mundill says it was. It was, for example, Edward himself who brought to a close the persecuting zeal of his first- and second-line managers in 1279. Nevertheless, thereafter the 'ever-present threat of confiscation of his goods and chattels was one which hung over every Jew's life, his family, and his business transactions'; those are Dr Mundill's wise words; they need to be carefully pondered when we examine the last years of Medieval English Jewry.

The expulsion itself was not financially motivated. Dr Mundill makes that crystal-clear also. Money is not everything. It is, however, something. Governments plunder their people: not all of their people all of the time, but some of them most of the time. Edward I plundered the Jews, as his father had done before him, and his father before him. Moreover, in tallaging the Jews he was taxing his Christian subjects. The Statute of the Jewry was one solution to that problem. Yet, what impresses a reader about the financial exactions of Edwardian government is the immense effort put into them. Take, for example, the painstaking national investigation into the goods and chattels of the condemned Jews of 1278-9: all for a paltry £2000. There was more to it than royal avarice and administrative experience. Even if, as Dr Mundill notices, the association of Jews with money appears to have been so imprinted on the minds of some historians they have been unable to think of little else when endeavouring to explain the relation between Edward I and English Jewry, there was far more to that relation than wealth creation. Bureaucrats are driven not only by a need to impress their superiors by doing a good job. Knowing the boss's mind is the first, often the only, imperative of careerists: Edward I's mind, the mind of his archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham, and probably of his Chancellor, Robert Burnell, were set like stone towards the Jews. Nor is it difficult to understand why. The Jews were not only usurers, they were stubborn usurers who refused to see Christian reason. The so-called Jewish problem in England by the 1270s had nothing to do with a commercial class which facilitated the land market and was, as a consequence and by the familiar process of a rationalizing projection, seen as causing the distress, decline, and ruin of the profligate, negligent, and born loser. That might have been the case in 1190; it was not a hundred years later. By 1290, after his attempts to make them less than Jewish, Edward appears to have believed the Jews were incorrigible cheats and rogues, incorrigible by nature, in other words racially incorrigible, for a devastating racial myth had taken root in West European intellectual and pseudo-intellectual minds. There were exceptions, John le Romeyn, archbishop of York, might have been one Righteous Gentile; he threatened to excommunicate any who molested the Jews as they made their way out

of England in 1290. His lone example does not amount to much: not a single voice was raised against the Expulsion itself. Nor was Edward an innovator, despite the expulsion of the Jews from Gascony in 1287. The Papal and Mendicant campaign against the Jews in the 1280s, the anti-Jewish measures of St Louis, Philip III, and Alphonso X of Castille, the earlier expulsions of Jews from English towns, the anti-Semitism of his wife and mother, the example set by Charles of Anjou in 1289, all these played a part in making up Edward's mind in 1290. He might have hoped to gain from the expulsion: a lay grant of taxation as Charles of Anjou had obtained one in 1289, a church more amenable to clerical taxation, and the windfall of Jewish property. Yet, what he most hoped to gain was a name for himself. A good name, because getting rid of the Jews was for a Christian prince the right thing to do. Even so, it demonstrates something about the English perception of their history that Edward is not known as the Hammer of the Jews, but of the Scots, whom he hammered, but not with the finality he did the Jews.

This is a necessary book. It is not always easy reading. Chapters six and seven which fill in the picture of Jewish business and Christian indebtedness do so in abundant and repetitive detail. They might have been trimmed. A book is not a thesis, however important the thesis, however necessary the book. These days that maxim is too often forgotten and the book of the thesis is like a beached iceberg: the submerged five-eighths one does not want to know about are there for all to see. That said, and carping laid aside, Dr Mundill has put us all in his debt. The book, as well as being learned, is pondered, temperate, perhaps too temperate, and wise. Dr Mundill exhibits due respect for the historians who have worked on the financial records of English Jewry before him, the extent of those records itself a testimony both to the importance of the Jews to English government revenue and to the archival mindset of England's governors. With England's Jewish Solution Robin Mundill has added to the canon and shown himself to be a worthy successor to Lionel Abrahams, James Parkes, Cecil Roth, and Barrie Dobson.

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