

## Anglo-Jewry Since 1066: Place, Locality and Memory

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William Rubinstein

Anglo-Jewish history is a growing and arguably important field within the mainstream of British history, although probably much more for what never happened than for what did. The Jews were present in numbers in Medieval England, as money-lenders and tax collectors. The violent and tragic history of this community, and their expulsion in 1290, are well-known. Readmitted by Cromwell in 1656, the Jews of Britain and their more recent history seemingly present a contrast to the history of the Jews elsewhere in Europe: no ghettos, no pogroms, no massacres, no Holocaust, only what many observers have seen as a seemingly effortless, however gradual and chequered, evolution to full acceptance as a model minority. This is the rose-coloured traditional view. It has been challenged in recent decades by historians like Tony Kushner, as well as Geoffrey Alderman, David Cesarani, David Feldman and others, their views themselves challenged by more optimistic historians like David Katz, Todd Endelman, and this reviewer. Indeed, the debates over the nature of the history of Anglo-Jewry are arguably more interesting than the actual facts of their history during the past 350 years, which has plainly lacked the tragedy and persecution of European Jewish history, culminating in the Holocaust. David Cannadine, in a remark often quoted by recent historians of Anglo-Jewry, noted that 'In the context of international history, the history of British Jewry is neither very interesting, nor very exciting. In the context of British history, it is just not that important.' It is hard to disagree with this assessment, although Cannadine has here surely missed the point that it is the unimportance, indeed near invisibility, of British Jewish history which strikingly sets it apart from the history of the Jews in most other places. In Britain, Jews were always a small, low-profile minority, who never 'controlled' the British economy, comprised a major segment of the British left, or were significant as cultural modernists. Until after the Second World War there were few if any Strictly Orthodox Jews who adopted outrageously distinctive dress, while only after 1881 did urban areas of large-scale and obvious Jewish settlement emerge in the East End, Manchester, and Leeds. Within a generation or two most British

Jews became indistinguishable from other Englishmen. While it always obviously existed, and exists, British anti-Semitism almost never attained a political dimension or force; the most striking thing, surely, about Sir Oswald Mossley in the 1930s was how unsuccessful he was.

For these reasons, until recently Anglo-Jewish history was long a celebration of 'British exceptionalism', especially in the writings of its main exponent, Cecil Roth (1899–1971); the more negative recent view of modern Anglo-Jewish history finds more anti-Semitism and has emphasised it, but has been unable to identify a single massacre or pogrom. Somewhat similarly, the subject-matter of modern Anglo-Jewish history has normally revolved around a predictable table of contents of readmission – emancipation – mass migration – 20th-century challenge – assimilation. It is, seemingly, this second form of stereotyped conceptualisation that Tony Kushner challenges in this book, although he is also a notable dissenter from the 'British exceptionalism' interpretation. His aim is to take Jewish history from the London-based political, legal, and religious emphasis it has so often had, to the local and the personal, very much in keeping with the recent popularity of studies of historical memory and the like. Although, as he will know, I am unsympathetic to much of his interpretation of modern Anglo-Jewish history, I certainly welcome this endeavour as important and innovative, even path-breaking, when written with his sophistication and deep research.

Tony Kushner – who should not be confused with the controversial, gay, radical, anti-Zionist Jewish American playwright of the same name; they are two different people – is professor of Jewish/non-Jewish relations in the History Department at Southampton University, and is one of the most prolific and innovative of the newer historians of Anglo-Jewry. His book represents something of a departure for him, although the history of memory is also a subject in keeping with his general approach.

*Anglo-Jewry Since 1066* is an attempt to break out of the usual paradigm by looking intensively at the Jews of Hampshire down the ages. To reiterate, it is important and innovative, although possibly not as successful as it might be. The first reason for this is the choice of subject matter, the Jews of Hampshire. Since Readmission, the Jews of Hampshire have probably never constituted more than say 2 per cent of the total Jewish population of Britain. In the 2001 Census, there were 235 declared Jews by religion in Portsmouth, 293 in Southampton, and 2100 in Bournemouth (part of Hampshire before 1974, but not since), out of a total Jewish population in Britain by religion of 267,000 (and with probably 350,000 being the actual number of British Jews). In 1900, Portsmouth, then probably the largest of these communities, had an estimated Jewish population of 500 out of around 200,000 in the city. One is, in other words, looking at a tiny and possibly unrepresentative group of Jews, who are, moreover, not a single distinctive community, but divided into several main centres. The two most important factors influencing Hampshire Jewry, in all likelihood, are the strong pressures upon such a small community to assimilate, with the maintenance of a distinctive Jewish identity for very long being obviously difficult, and the fact that Hampshire's cities are 60–75 miles from London, pre-eminently the main centre of Anglo-Jewish life, which plainly acts as a magnet and matrix for Jewish identity and attitudes. Strangely, neither of these factors is analyzed in the book, at least not explicitly. Indeed, the peculiarities of being Jewish in Hampshire – if these exist – are not explicitly discussed, again curiously.

Secondly, this book grows out of a wider previous research project on 'Port Jews', which itself resulted in a previous book. While the notion of 'Port Jews' is novel and possibly valuable, in fact only rarely did Jews in the modern world have anything to do with the economic activities of ports (apart from resorts like Miami), Portsmouth in the 18th century being an exception. In Britain, Jews played no significant role in the shipping activities or related trades of Liverpool, Bristol, Hull, or even the port of London, and, again, apart from 18th-century Portsmouth, there is little in this book about port activities involving Jews. New York became the largest Jewish city in the world by 1900, but, again, Jews had virtually no involvement in the port of New York as either entrepreneurs or workers. Both of these factors might be overlooked if the book presented a cogent analysis of memory and identity among Hampshire Jewry, but the evidence, from memoirs and contemporary accounts, is simply not full enough for this to be successfully done, however worthy the intention here may be.

There is also the matter of the book's title, *Anglo-Jewish History*. The clear implication of the title is that the work is intended as a broad general history of Anglo-Jewry over the past millennium. (Something which very few histories of Anglo-Jewry have attempted to do, it should be noted. Most cover only the medieval period, or all, or more usually part, of the post-Readmission period.) But it is no such thing and, indeed, is so far removed from what the title implies as to fall foul of the Trade Descriptions Act. As noted, it is, and is intended to be, a quasi-post-modernist history of the Jews in Hampshire, with some reflections on Jewish life elsewhere. I suppose it has been given its title because a book entitled *The Jews of Hampshire Since 1066* would do even less well on the amazon.co.uk tracking system than one on *The Irish in Bolivia*, but *caveat emptor*.

The book consists of 8 loosely connected chapters, not notably well integrated or connected, and reading more like a collection of previously published articles than a monograph. Indeed, I searched the introduction to find where they had previously appeared, but it seems that they were all written for this work. Chapter one, 'Placing the "Local"', consists of a long discussion of the notion of 'race' in English local history, with special attention paid to Cornwall and the Cornish, a notion which has been continuously invented. Its use was almost casually ubiquitous in semi-popular accounts of the people of Cornwall published down to the 1960s, and especially so in the 19th century, with that era's all-embracing ethnic lenses. Yet here little or nothing is said of the status or nature of Jews who are surely, among other things, a consciously separate ethnic group, bearing in mind the ambiguity of Jewish identity. And while Cornwall is so remote and distinctive as arguably to harbour a separate ethnicity of a kind (there was, after all, a vernacular Cornish language until the 18th century), only with difficulty can Hampshire be viewed in the same way. Chapter two, 'Wessex Tales/Yiddisher Spiels' (sic), extends the first chapter and addresses the difficulties in 'Imagining Hampshire' (p. 28), showing how Hampshire has been seen by a variety of writers on the county. The nature of 'Jewish Memory and the "Local"' (pp. 41-8) is discussed, and some valuable points made, although some central issues are not examined, for instance whether Hampshire's Jews viewed themselves as a part of a much broader Anglo-Jewry or world Jewry, whose leaders were in London or elsewhere, or whether they considered themselves to be Hampshireites of the Jewish persuasion, or some mix of these assumptions. Kushner dissents from the 'Hoskins/Leicester School style approach' (p. 46) to local history, exemplified before in Anglo-Jewish local studies by Bernard Susser's *The Jews of South-West England* (1993), which charted the 'rise and decline of [the Jewish] medieval and modern communities' (p. 46), preferring (although this is not made entirely clear) an internalised narrative of a community as it was actually seen by those who lived it.

Chapter three, 'Winchester: Constructing the City of Memories' centres on how modern historians and popular writers have, until very recently, almost always ignored the important role of the medieval Jewish community of Winchester, consistently obfuscating the brutal anti-Semitism they often encountered. This black hole is evident even in official or public histories of Winchester. Only recently has this been reversed, and any attempt made to provide a balanced description of the range of Jewish experiences there. Chapters four and five, 'Point of Contestation: Jews in Portsmouth During the Long Eighteenth Century', and 'Jewish Emancipation and After: Locality, Brotherhood and the Nature of Tolerance', charts the somewhat curious evolution of the Jewish community of Portsmouth from one widely despised in the 18th century as rip-off tradesmen and money lenders, especially to sailors on shore leave, to pillars of the Victorian community, exemplified by the career of Emanuel Emanuel, a well-respected early (1866) Jewish mayor of Portsmouth. The less successful career of Abraham Abraham of Southampton is also examined. Kushner and other recent historians are well-known for their views about the ambiguous nature of tolerance as it was experienced by 19th-century British Jews. He paints these lives as evidence of the pervasive racism which often accompanied the Jewish experience in Victorian Hampshire, although a Whig interpretation, based upon the clearly increasing acceptability and success shown to the community and its leaders is surely a more warranted inference. Some relevant instances which might have been discussed are not: Nelson's great friendliness towards the Jews, in Portsmouth and elsewhere; the establishment of Aria College, founded in 1855 in the will of Lewis Aria, a Jewish native of Hampshire, for the education of Hampshire natives who wished to train as Jewish ministers ( a provision impossible of fulfilment due to small numbers, and widened

in 1876), surely suggesting confidence in a Jewish future there; or the relationship of Emanuel Emanuel to London's Jewish elite (His daughter Katie married her second cousin, Philip (later Sir Philip, 1st Bt.) Magnus (1842–1933), a major figure in the history of British technical education and Tory M.P. for London University 1906–22; her entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) notes that she was 'related to all the big families of British Jewry in the nineteenth century', including the Rothschilds and Montefiores. Emanuel himself was only a jewellery retailer in a provincial town, yet was an acceptable father-in-law to relatives of the 'Cousinhood').

This section does, however, have an interesting and surprising discussion (pp. 165–9) of Samuel Emanuel, a 'staunch Conservative' of Southampton, who, in 1866, hosted a banquet in support of Governor Eyre, whose controversial and violent suppression of an uprising in Jamaica deeply divided Victorian England's governing classes and intelligentsia, with a range of liberals condemning his 'feast of blood', but conservatives like Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley strongly supporting him. That a local Jewish conservative organised a major banquet in his honour is indeed curious (although another Jewish conservative became Prime Minister two years later), but Kushner's strictures about Emanuel 'allying himself not only with the aristocracy and monied elite, but also to the concepts of Englishness defined by masculinity, "race" and class' (p. 168) represents a predetermined ideological interpretation of what he thinks, nearly 150 years later, Jews ought to have believed at the time, which contrasts awkwardly with avowed intention to depict a community more multifaceted and ambiguous than has been portrayed.

Chapter six, 'Settlement and Migration From the 1850s to 1914' examines Southampton and Portsmouth Jewry at the time of heavy Jewish immigration and – unlike the other chapters – examines in detail a number of internal Jewish religious disputes, as well as the growth of Jewish communities in Bournemouth, Basingstoke, and Aldershot. It focuses on the lives of (among others) the Portsmouth-born scientist Hertha Ayrton and the Portsmouth-born Ian Mikardo. It is an interesting chapter, but here (p. 203) Kushner's citation of historian Bill Williams's remark that the Jews of Manchester 'were validated not on the grounds of their Jewish identity, but on the basis of their conformity to the values and manners of bourgeois English society' ignores both the desire of very many Jews – in all likelihood the majority – to be so 'validated', and the fact that exceptions to this process have not remained 'unvalidated' but romanticised, as, for instance, so many glowing and nostalgic accounts of the old Jewish East End demonstrate. Chapter Seven 'Historicising the Invisible: Transmigrancy, Memory, and Local Identities', concerns the role of the Atlantic Hotel (formerly the Emigrants' Home), a hostel for steerage immigrants to America, now forgotten in the recent memorialisation of that area as the place where the first Spitfire flight took place. Finally, chapter eight, 'Memory at the Margins, Matter Out of Place: Hidden Narratives of Jewish Settlement and Movements in the Inter-War Years', highlights the colourful interwar Jewish community of Canal Walk and the Ditches in Southampton, something like the old East End: unmemorialised, it is nostalgically recalled. There is a general rule, I have noticed, that the more wretched the slum from which someone has emerged, the more nostalgically it is later recalled.

A number of points emerge from the resume. It is clear that the chapters do not form a coherent and connected analysis, but are a series of slices or sketches, rather miscellaneous, although valuable and well-researched. Secondly, it seems even more clear that much is missing from them above all – and rather oddly – the personal narratives of upward social mobility which must have loomed so large in Jewish life. After all, Dr. Kushner is a professor of history, not a market stallholder in Petticoat Lane, having followed the normal path of upward social mobility into the professions or management; he speaks English, not Yiddish. Why, then, should the rest of Hampshire Jewry be any different? And why should the outcasts and the marginal in the Hampshire Jewish community, in any account of their history, be privileged at the expense of the mainstream?

Nevertheless, having said this, it is equally important to note that, in its way, this is a valuable and path-breaking book, which does attempt to expand the matrices of Anglo-Jewish history beyond what other historians have made the norm. But, as Disraeli once put it, in a democracy it is occasionally necessary to defer to the wishes of the majority; this is no less true of democratic history.

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