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The Jews of South Wales

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REVIEWS

The Jews of South Wales, ed. Ursula Henriques (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), ISBN 978-0-7083-2671-8, pp. xviii + 238, £19.99.

When *The Jews of South Wales* was published in 1993 it was the first volume of its kind to consider the history of Welsh Jewry. Republished twenty years later with the addition of a foreword by Paul O’Leary, it continues to be the only historical work on the subject. The eight case studies in this volume focus on the Victorian and Edwardian periods (an exception is Anthony Glaser’s piece on the history of Jewish refugees in Treforest during the 1930s and 40s) and document the histories of Wales’s two largest Jewish centres, Swansea and Cardiff, as well as the smaller communities established in the south Wales valleys. O’Leary’s insightful introduction aligns the work with current scholarship in the field and discusses the debates surrounding the alleged antisemitic riots in Tredegar in 1911.

In terms of scholarly output, the field of Welsh Jewish history is minute and has yet to mature from a subject on the periphery of British Jewish studies, or “Anglo-Jewish” studies as the field has often been designated, into a serious topic for historians to consider. The main reason accounting for this is demographics. Welsh Jewry was never large, a mere six thousand individuals at its peak in the early twentieth century, and thus to some their history tells us little about the main currents and trends of Jewish life in Britain. Yet, although a huge proportion of Britain’s Jews have lived and live in major Jewish centres such as London and Manchester, it would be a mistake to think that the full story of the British Jewish experience can be told without considering the history of Welsh Jewish life. Scholars have long recognized the powerful role played by “place” in shaping the way history unfolds, and one of the main weaknesses of *The Jews of South Wales* is its failure to place the history of Welsh Jewry within the wider context of British Jewish history and to draw out its unique features. Indeed, whether the “cultural” activities of south Wales Jewry were “typical of provincial Jewries all over Great Britain”, as Henriques suggests (p. 38), is a moot point. The engagement of Welsh Jews with the Welsh language and with distinctively Welsh cultural events such as *eisteddfodau* suggests otherwise. Even so, the history of south Wales Jewry is also part and parcel of the wider British Jewish fabric, and while this volume discusses

the presence of some of Britain's influential Jews in the region – Albert Goldsmid, for instance – many are absent. Missing from the narrative, for example, is the British industrialist and financier, Alfred Mond, who served as a Liberal MP for Swansea between 1910 and 1918.

According to Henriques, the neglect of Welsh Jewry as a serious topic of research is partly down to “the incomplete and sketchy nature of the available sources” (p. vii). She acknowledges from the start that only a fragment of synagogue records survive for south Wales and other non-religious materials have apparently disappeared. Her concerns were echoed by the late Leo Abse, who, on the basis of a lack of written and archival sources, made the pessimistic assertion that the full story of south Wales Jewry will never be told (p. xvi). Nonetheless, the absence of obvious source material does not totally excuse the dearth of historical study of Welsh Jewry. Oral history interviews, for instance, would be extremely useful in gleaning information on the social history of Welsh Jews, and their absence in this volume is startling, considering that an oral history project devoted to south Wales Jewry, albeit a small one (a mere ten interviews), was conducted in the 1970s. Why Henriques ignored these interviews is unclear (perhaps she was unaware of their existence), but she justifies the absence of oral testimony in this volume by pointing to the fact that “most . . . of the families of the original Jewish immigrants have dispersed, taking their memories with them” (p. vii). Most does not mean all, however, and efforts could have been made to interview the children and grandchildren of immigrants, as was successfully achieved by the “Hineni” oral history project jointly conducted by the Butetown History and Arts Centre in Cardiff and the Cardiff Reform Synagogue in 2012. Moreover, cultural and literary sources produced by Welsh Jews such as memoirs, poems, and novels offer insight into the everyday histories and subjective experiences of Welsh Jewry, while the digitization of the *Jewish Chronicle* and a large number of Welsh newspapers in recent years has increased both the discoverability and searchability of this source type, making it easier than ever before to uncover vital information on Wales's Jewish population that was once hidden in a sea of words.

The history of south Wales Jewry may be the overarching subject of this volume, but the case studies on the alleged “Jewess Abduction Case” of 1867–8 and the so-called “antisemitic” Tredegar Riots of 1911 are clearly its focus. Two separate chapters are devoted to these events, while O'Leary's welcome preface places them both within the framework of “tolerance”, offering closure to often competing claims of a long tradition

of antisemitism and/or philosemitism in Wales. According to O’Leary, “a tolerant society . . . holds within it the possibility of a negative response to minorities as well as a hospitable one, on the grounds that a minority culture will not be endured where it is perceived to threaten the values of the host society” (pp. xiv–xv). He also rightly points out that the Tredegar Riots (and the abduction case of 1867–8 to a lesser extent) have been “scrutinized so assiduously precisely because they were not a common occurrence” (p. xv). Indeed, Jewish/non-Jewish relations in Wales are often synonymized with these two events, and what is now desperately needed is an examination of this relationship from a much broader perspective.

Although mistakes found in the first edition have been amended, a number of errors continue to remain in this new edition. Cardiff’s early Jewish settlers, Levi and Michael Marks, were not brothers but in fact father and son (p. 11). There is also no evidence to suggest that a synagogue was built in the mining village of Ystalyfera, as Henriques claims (p. 55). Jews were certainly present in the village, but an interview with the late Joseph Shepherd, now held by St Fagans National History Museum, reveals that the nearest purpose-built synagogue was situated in Swansea, with occasional services held at the Ystalyfera home of Tobias Shepherd. To confuse the reader even more, the map produced by Anthony Glaser and Henriques to accompany the volume (p. 46) reveals that no synagogue ever existed in Ystalyfera. Indeed, the map shows most of the synagogues established in the region between 1850 and 1918, but certainly not all of them. Absent are the synagogues of Tonypany and Abertillery, for instance. Although the volume never set itself up to be a comprehensive history of Judaism in Wales, it is surprising to see no mention of the four Hebrew congregations established in north Wales during this period – Bangor, Llandudno, Rhyl, and Wrexham – in either O’Leary’s introduction or the revised main body of the book. Reading this book, one could easily infer that the Welsh Jewish experience was limited to the south.

Until this publication, little was known of those Jewish immigrants who settled in south Wales. Henriques’s book is a meaningful effort to rectify this situation and by offering eight case studies it provides the first attempt to present a holistic picture of the region’s Jewish history. More work on this topic still remains to be done, however, and whoever takes up the task can build upon Henriques’s work by researching and writing a comprehensive history of Welsh Jewry – one that covers the history of Jews in Wales as a geographical whole and considers the experiences of Jewish individuals living both within and outside established Jewish

centres. Although the book's epilogue briefly discusses the demographic decline of south Wales Jewry throughout the twentieth century, a fuller examination of this aspect of Welsh Jewish history is needed. This is suggested by Henriques herself: "There is more to be discovered yet of the life of these people, especially during the period of the long decline" (p. ix). Moreover, contrasting the Jewish experience in Wales to its counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom would also allow us to appreciate the important role played by place in shaping British Jewish history, and shed light on the complexity and diversity of Jewish life in Britain. Despite its obvious weaknesses, *The Jews of South Wales* has provided a good basis for further enquiry into the field of Welsh Jewish history, and British Jewish history more generally.

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Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives 1917–1948,
Michael J. Cohen (New York and London: Routledge, 2014),
ISBN 978-0-415-72985-7, pp. 518, £90.

This is a revelatory book, which comprehensively details Britain's contentious and anguished moment in Palestine as ruler and colonizer. In one sense this is a solid "old-fashioned" factual overview of British policy during the thirty years of the Mandate in that it revives issues that are cursorily glossed over in post-modernist literature about this period, whose authors would otherwise have to acknowledge that the servants of the British Empire and Zionist leaders did not read from the same hymn book. Neither does the central Palestinian Arab leadership between 1933 and 1945 come out of this smelling of roses – their seduction of the Nazis began shortly after Hitler's ascendancy to power in 1933.

Michael Cohen's book is unconventional in that it looks at the third side of the Israel–Palestine triangle. It examines the conflict primarily from the British side and is not simply a rendition of the evolution of the Israel–Palestine conflict from a Zionist or Arab nationalist perspective. Thus the persona of Churchill, for example, is central to this period. While sympathetic to Zionism and often hostile to Arab nationalism, he clearly placed British interests, the preservation of the Empire, and halting the advance of both fascism and Bolshevism before all else.