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Irish Questions and Jewish Questions: Crossovers in Culture

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REVIEWS

Irish Questions and Jewish Questions: Crossovers in Culture, ed. Aidan Beatty and Dan O'Brien (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2018), ISBN 978-0-815-63561-1, pp. 280, \$65.

This is a welcome collection of a dozen essays on the historically significant relationship between Irish Jews and Irish non-Jews, and between both of these categories and non-Irish Jews. It reflects the growing amount of scholarship on the subject and builds on the work of Aidan Beatty, one of its editors, on Zionism and Irish nationalism.

Natalie Wynn's essay on "Irish Representations of Jews and Jewish Responses/ Jewish Representations of Jews and Irish Responses" should be read by anyone about to write about Jews in Ireland. Her contribution to the collection clearly identifies assumptions and simplifications that have marked and marred a number of the few studies in this area to date, and which even this collection has not consistently avoided. She suggests that broad and imprecise interpretations of antisemitism that are characteristic of the Irish context have led scholars such as Dermot Keogh and Cormac Ó Gráda to sidestep conclusions that are potentially uncomfortable for both the Jewish and non-Jewish Irish. One such conclusion challenges the idea that the Irish were somehow uniquely tolerant, which is an assumption that the present reviewer has addressed in a number of recent academic articles. Wynn also discusses differences within the Irish Jewish population that resulted in a small and established or acculturated community of Jews in Ireland responding to significant Jewish immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by mirroring prejudices of their non-Jewish neighbours when it came to immigrants from Eastern Europe. Wynn's call for academic rigour and context is welcome.

Stephen Watt's examination of "The Discourses of Irish Jewish Studies" looks especially at George Bernard Shaw, Max Nordau, and certain evocations of the cosmopolitan. He takes issue with what he describes as "the oxymoronic qualities" of the phrase "Irish Cosmopolitan". But are these qualities really "oxymoronic" or peculiarly Irish? Few if any persons who consider themselves "cosmopolitan" are without some ethnic or national or religious identity, including those "wandering Jews" who for long glanced backwards to their lost homeland. It is wise to acknowledge

the benefits or strengths of such cultural and psychic rootedness before decrying its excesses in Ireland, Israel, or elsewhere. Overcoming nationalism is easier said than done and has frequently been an objective of empire or an aspect of unrestrained globalization. The kind of avowed internationalism that Watt points to – citing the playwright Sean O’Casey’s reference to “Cathleen Ní Houlihan”, the personification of Ireland, as a “bitch” – may be based on bitter personal experience of a society but it scarcely constitutes a persuasive philosophy. Watt thinks that the “active socialist” O’Casey thus indicated that “the plight of international workers . . . superseded the aims of the nationalist project” (p. 171), but the aims of that project were centrally freedom from oppression by another nation as well as parity of esteem between peoples. Deracinated internationalism has frequently dissolved like mist in the heat of war or economic pressure, whereas a rooted and restrained nationalism that admits of shared values and commonality across cultures may be a more robust basis for mutual respect and international stability.

Muiris Ó Laoire interrogates “The Historical Revitalization of Hebrew as a Model for the Revitalization of Irish”. From the 1920s onwards, the new Irish state long adopted a crude and punitive methodology aimed at getting the population that by then mostly spoke English as their daily language to turn back the clock and speak Irish (Gaelic). That effort has been summed up by one journalist quoted in this collection with the words, “My generation was administered Irish the way we were administered cod liver oil” (p. 129).

Trisha Oakley Kessler’s contribution, “Rethinking Irish Protectionism: Jewish Refugee Factories and the Pursuit of an Irish Ireland for Industry”, tells an unpleasant story of doors being opened only narrowly when Jews from elsewhere in Europe sought refuge from fascist persecution. Some were let into Ireland on terms that left their dependants to fend for themselves and even die in Europe, while the immigrants’ money was accepted as an investment in new industries in which their crucial role was obscured. Kessler makes clear that economic protectionism was by no means exclusive to the recently independent state of Ireland, which had long been a victim of British protectionism and restraint of trade. Nevertheless, she demonstrates that the industrialization policy of Éamon de Valera’s Fianna Fáil party was layered with complexities, and that “Jews became a fault line in a contested discourse of national identity and change” (p. 122).

In his essay, “Irish, Jewish or Both: Hybrid Identities of David Marcus,

Stanley Price, and Myself”, George Bornstein, whose *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews and Irish from 1845 to 1945* was published by Harvard University Press in 2011, falls back on anecdotes and personal recollections, including even the apocryphal yarn about an immigrant to Ireland being asked if he is a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew. The present contribution might have been stronger had he again concentrated more closely on comparisons between the experiences of Jews in Ireland and those of hybrid or hyphenated Irish in the USA such as Joe Kennedy, father of JFK.

Regrettably, like several other contributors to this volume, Bornstein too perpetuates what has become something of a caricature of Arthur Griffith, the creator of the Sinn Féin political party and founder of the Irish state that is about to celebrate its centenary. This matters for two reasons. Firstly, scapegoating Griffith may obscure a broader problem of prejudice. Secondly, while he undoubtedly at one time publicly articulated some vile antisemitic sentiments, Griffith is interesting as someone whose views matured and who eventually affirmed the place of Jews in the new Irish state and its government. In the interest of full disclosure, I should state that I have a book on Griffith coming out with Merrion Press in 2020, in which I address, among other things, the phenomenon of Griffith as a whipping boy and also James Joyce’s views on him.

Bornstein’s reliance on a book by his distant cousin Stanley Price is just one example of the way in which Griffith comes to be used in this way. For, like a number of other authors who have berated Griffith, Price did not substantiate particular statements that he made by giving a range of exact sources or dates. This holds true, for example, for his claim that Griffith was “obsessed with” and “penned endless editorials” about the Dreyfus case. One of merely two “editorials” that Price quoted is actually an extract from the “Foreign Secretary” column of Griffith’s *United Irishman* paper of 29 July 1899 – a column that appears to have been penned at that time by F. H. O’Donnell, whose relationship with Griffith’s paper was soon terminated. Griffith as the editor was undoubtedly responsible for publishing the column, as he was for publishing a few weeks later, on 26 August, a letter from the socialist Fred Ryan criticizing Griffith for filling his columns with “Anti-Semitic ravings”. Moreover, with the exception of some months during the Boer War in 1899, references to Jews in his papers during their twenty years of publication were relatively rare (if sometimes pungent) and far from “endless” or consistently hostile. As Michael Laffan writes in the Royal Irish Academy’s recent *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Griffith largely outgrew his prejudice in that respect.

In the present collection, as elsewhere, Griffith is contrasted unfavourably with Michael Davitt, who earlier led a national movement for land reform before settling into a career as a Member of Parliament and an international journalist. Yet, juxtaposing Griffith to Davitt, as some of the contributors here do, can be misleading. The two men never debated relevant issues in any substantive manner. The comparison between them hinges on no more than a few statements in which they articulated differing responses to the anti-Jewish violence in Limerick. For example, Bornstein points to the fact that Davitt “vented” his outrage “passionately” in a letter or statement published in December 1904 in *The Freeman’s Journal* (the newspaper for which James Joyce has Leopold Bloom work in *Ulysses*). This newspaper itself was no great liberal champion but one that just as happily published a notice guaranteeing customers of a private clothing mart that they would meet “no Jew man” there, and that was equally willing to provide a platform to a well-known firm of Catholic publishers assuring its readers that, contrary to rumour, “no Jew has any financial interest direct or indirect, in the firm, or is in any way connected with it”.

Where Bornstein conjures up a “debate” between Davitt and Griffith, Abby Bender, in her essay, “British Israelites, Irish Israelites and the Ends of an Analogy”, refers to “a series of rebuttals to Griffith and the Limerick incident” (p. 28). This “series” seems to consist of little else than a few letters published in the *Freeman’s Journal* and the *Limerick Chronicle*.

The fact that Griffith sided against Alfred Dreyfus is mentioned several times in this collection; the fact that Davitt did so too, by contrast, not once. For example, in 1899, US newspapers reported that Davitt had written to an English newspaper, claiming that “English sympathy for the prisoner [Dreyfus] is entirely due to the fact that Dreyfus is a rich Jew instead of a poor one, and to the desire to injure a rival nation.” Davitt reportedly thought that the possibility of Dreyfus being innocent, of his being the victim of a conspiracy by “men educated, cultured and responsible, like the French military chiefs”, was a supposition “too monstrous to be entertained by any mind unwarped by anti-French feeling” (*New York Times*, 16 September 1899).

In his essay on “Irish and Continental European Antisemitism in Comparative Perspective”, R. M. Douglas goes so far as to describe Davitt as “one of Ireland’s relatively few philo-Semites” (p. 32), which is a description that I recommend scholars not to repeat before they have acquainted themselves fully with Davitt’s papers in Trinity College Dublin. Indeed, even Davitt’s published views include an unashamed and explicit

defence of antisemitism in certain circumstances. Moreover, in his 1903 book *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecution in Russia* (New York: A. S. Barnes), Davitt wrote that “His [the Jew’s] powers of dextrous money-mongering are blunted in some pronounced Christian lands by methods as expert and morals as accommodating as his own” (p. 90). Davitt undoubtedly dispatched some gripping journalism from the Russian empire about the Kishinev pogrom for publication in William Randolph Hearst’s *American* newspaper in New York, but the editor spiked at least one long piece that Davitt sent because it contained anti-Jewish observations at a time when Hearst was trying to attract Jewish readers for his new titles.

We are reminded once again that the Jewish community in Dublin honoured Davitt at his death with a funeral wreath (p. 28), not, however, of the (rarely if ever mentioned) report in the *Irish Times* in 1922 according to which the Dublin Jewish Students’ Union expressed its “dismay” at Griffith’s sudden death, sending a message to his widow assuring her of “its sincere and respectful sympathy”. Nor is there sufficient room in some historians’ narratives for reference to socialist antisemitism in Ireland, including that of James Larkin about which I have written elsewhere. One of the contributors quotes a letter from Davitt protesting against a reported call to exclude Jewish immigrants from Ireland, for example, without explaining that the call was made not by Griffith but under the auspices of the Labour Federation of Bandon, Co. Cork.

Bender’s suggestion that Griffith “rejected” W. B. Yeats and Douglas Hyde as “non-Catholic and nonnative” (p. 19) is unsustainable. Griffith had great respect for Hyde and boosted Yeats’s early career, only falling out with him later, not because Yeats was a Protestant or Anglo-Irish (if that is what Bender means by “nonnative”) but because he thought that Yeats took the Abbey Theatre in a direction that misrepresented Irish society and damaged the Irish nationalist objective of political independence.

Peter Hession, in “Constructing Jewish Space in Ireland, 1880–1914”, at least acknowledges that Griffith moved away from his brief associations with “the inveterate antisemite Frank Hugh O’Donnell” (p. 59), but his use of the term “alliance” in this context seems misleading since the relationship between them went no further than O’Donnell writing for some months for one of Griffith’s papers, possibly at the behest of its funders, albeit for months in which he did lasting damage to Griffith’s reputation. However, Hession’s reference to the “fundamental anti-Semitism” (p. 59) of those cultural nationalists who (like Griffith)

espoused Zionism, requires firm evidence of its “fundamental” nature and a definition of antisemitism rather than its mere assertion. Any implicit insinuation that a particular person might not outgrow prejudice or that non-Jews who supported the Zionist movement only did so to rid Europe of Jews requires more than its articulation to be convincing.

The editors of this collection note in their introduction that “Jewish Ireland” has emerged as a flourishing academic topic. As far as Griffith is concerned, this brings with it a responsibility to ensure that academics identify clearly what he himself wrote as distinct from what he published; acknowledge a certain maturing and progression in his own attitudes and statements; recognize that he distinguished between the sins of some Jews and Jews as such (albeit not always in an entirely convincing way); note his later publication of more enlightened views; and admit that various of Griffith’s contemporaries – nationalist, socialist, and unionist or others, but especially some of those who have been compared favourably to him in terms of their attitude towards Jews – also made antisemitic comments. Only when such methodological rigour is applied, in this case as in others, can Irish Jewish studies mature.

Colum Kenny