

Introduction

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Introduction

Cai Parry-Jones and Nathan Abrams

The origins of this special thematic issue of *Jewish Culture and History* date back to September 2011, when a small group of scholars were invited to Ulster University’s campus in Belfast for a colloquium on ‘Jews on the “Celtic Fringe”’. Focusing on the three most populated Celtic nations —Ireland, Scotland and Wales— the colloquium brought researchers together for the purpose of sharing and comparing their research on Jewish experiences in the British Isles beyond England. The first gathering of its kind, it provided inspiration for other similar scholarly meetings later in the decade, such as the ‘Narrative Spaces in Scottish Jewish Culture: A Comparative Perspective’ colloquium, an international gathering held at the University of Glasgow in April 2017 that extended the “Scottish” brief to other non-English Jewish identities’ across the British Isles.¹ Some seven years in the making, this special edition includes reworked versions of the contributions presented at the 2011 colloquium (not all presented papers are featured, however), as well as articles by two contributors who were not present in Belfast.

Given the presence of Jews in Ireland, Scotland and Wales for centuries, readers may wonder why such a scholarly meeting only took place for the first time in recent years.

¹ Details of the ‘Narrative Spaces’ Colloquium at Glasgow University can be found here:

<http://jewishmigrationtoscotland.is.ed.ac.uk/index.php/2017/04/25/narrative-spaces-colloquium-at-glasgow-university/>.

Additionally, the absence of English Jewry from the Belfast gathering, as well as Glasgow, may strike some as peculiar, derogatory and exclusionary. The explanation is twofold. First, while every country's situation is unique, the focus on Irish, Scottish and Welsh Jewry at both colloquiums provided an opportunity to compare and contrast Jewish experiences within a Celtic setting, as well as assess the peculiar idiosyncrasies that were unique to these Jewries such as engagement with Celtic languages. Second, the absence of English Jewry can be seen as a form of protest on behalf of a group of dissatisfied scholars of British and Irish-Jewish Studies who have become frustrated by the dominance of England in the study of Jews in Britain and Ireland.² For some, particularly British-Jewish scholars, the discipline's long overused name, 'Anglo-Jewish History', has been an irritant, with 'Anglo', that is English, being long overused as a collective noun for the Jews of the United Kingdom.

Some scholars, including Todd Endelman and Harold Pollins, are satisfied with the term and have seen no need for change. For Endelman the 'usage' of 'Anglo' 'is too well established to be dropped', while Pollins suggests that loosely referring to 'Anglo-Jewry' to describe the Jews of Great Britain and Ireland is justifiable as the term isn't 'clumsy', even though he is 'conscious that this is a dangerous step'.³ One cannot help feeling that the term

² British-Jewish studies is defined here as a collective term that includes the histories of Jews in England, Ireland (replaced by Northern Ireland from 1922 onwards), Wales and Scotland. While Irish-Jewish studies can be treated as a branch of British-Jewish studies, and northern-Irish Jewry can simultaneously be treated as part of Irish-Jewish studies, Jews in Ireland, unless born in Northern Ireland, have not been British subjects since 1922.

³ Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p.12; Harold Pollins, *Economic History of the Jews in England* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 10.

is used out of indolence, with some scholars choosing to shy away from complex and challenging discourses that conflict with conventional narratives. The history of the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland cannot be adequately understood as a function of England's occasional interaction with its 'Celtic fringe', but rather should be viewed within the interrelations of England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Of course, the dominance of English-Jewish narratives is to some extent justified for the Jewish population of Britain and Ireland has always been heavily concentrated in England. In the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, approximately 92 percent of all the Jews in Britain and Ireland lived in England. Yet, while the largest Jewish centres in Britain and Ireland can be found in major English cities such as Leeds, London and Manchester, a significant number were situated outside of England (more than fifty), playing a critical role in Jewish settlement and migration patterns. It would be incorrect therefore to think that the full story of British and Irish Jews can be told without considering the history of the Jews in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, despite claims made by Todd Endelman who justified the dominance of English Jewry in his *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* since 'what happened elsewhere, however, piquant or arresting in human terms, reveals little about the main currents of Anglo-Jewish history...folding them into 'Anglo-Jewry' does not distort the overall picture'.⁴ Endelman himself admits that British Jews outside of England 'were not, in a strict sense, "English" Jews', therefore folding them under 'Anglo' Jewry is, as Jasmine

⁴ Endelman, *The Jews of Britain*, 130. While Endelman was referring specifically to Wales and Scotland in this instance, the absence of Ireland, as well as a discussion of the complex history of Ireland and Northern Ireland in relation to Great Britain, suggests that Irish Jewry would be subjected to the same treatment.

Donahaye reminds us, another kind of distortion because it ‘erases the particularity’ of Jewish experiences beyond England and asserts the English-Jewish experience as the definitive one.⁵

Indeed, collective groupings run the risk of overlooking particularities and uniqueness, and a central concern of this special edition is to examine how Jewish life differed and varied throughout Great Britain and Ireland. It is much more polychromatic and complex than some scholars would lead us to believe. Moreover, given the overlapping and shared history of Great Britain and Ireland, as well as the four nations of the United Kingdom, it is important not to treat each of these Jewries in isolation and to appreciate their transnational character, makeup and relationships.

Almost two decades have passed since *The Jews of Britain* was published and recent years have seen a rise in publications on the history of Jews in Ireland and British nations beyond England, a pleasing sign that a growing number of scholars disagree with Endelman. At least five monographs exist on Irish Jewry, for instance, while the number of books published on Scottish Jewry numbers approximately nine.⁶ It is also promising to see that in

⁵ Jasmine Donahaye, “‘By Whom Shall She Arise? For She is Small’: The Wales-Israel Tradition in the Edwardian Period”, in Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman, eds., *‘The Jew’ in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 163.

⁶ On Ireland, see, for instance, Bernard Shillman, *A Short History of the Jews in Ireland* (Dublin: Cahill & Co., 1945); Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from the Earliest Times to the Year 1910* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1972); Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998); Cormac Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Ray Rivlin, *Jewish*

the 25 years since the publication of Ursula Henriques' edited volume, *The Jews of South Wales* (1993), six books now exist on the subject of Welsh Jewry.⁷ Nevertheless, the vacuum

Ireland: A Social History (Dublin: History Press Ireland, 2011). On Scotland, see, for example, Kenneth Collins (ed.), *Aspects of Scottish Jewry* (Glasgow: Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, 1987); Kenneth Collins, *Go and Learn: The International Story of Jews and Medicine in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988); Kenneth Collins, *Second City Jewry: The Jews of Glasgow in the Age of Expansion, 1790-1919* (Glasgow: Scottish Jewish Archives Committee, 1990); Kenneth Collins, *Be well!: Jewish Immigrant Health and Welfare in Glasgow, 1860-1914* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001); Ben Braber, *Jews in Glasgow 1879-1939: Immigration and Integration* (London: Vallentine Mitchell in association with the European Jewish Publication Society, 2007); Kenneth Collins with Ephraim Borowski and Leah Granat, *Scotland's Jews: A Guide to the History and Community of the Jews in Scotland, 2nd Edition* (Glasgow: Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 2008); Nathan Abrams, *Caledonian Jews: A Study of Seven Small Communities in Scotland* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009); Judah Passow, *The Scots Jews: Identity, Belonging and the Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Kenneth Collins, *The Jewish Experience in Scotland: From Immigration to Integration* (Glasgow: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, 2016); Kenneth Collins, Aubrey Newman and Bernard Wasserstein (eds.), *Two Hundred Years of Scottish Jewry* (Glasgow: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, 2018).

⁷ Grahame Davies (ed.), *The Chosen People: Wales & the Jews* (Bridgend: Seren, 2002); Glenn Jordan (ed.), *Hineni: Life Portraits from a Jewish Community* (Cardiff: Butetown History & Arts Centre, 2012); Jasmine Donahaye, *Whose People?: Wales, Israel, Palestine* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); Ursula Henriques (ed.), *The Jews of South Wales*,

left by a long absence of scholarly literature and research has meant that the history of Jews in Ireland, Scotland and Wales has often been speculated and is consequently shrouded in a web of folklore, myth and legend. Challenging and examining these myths and rumours form the focus of the first two articles in this special edition.

We open with an article on Ireland. In her examination of Irish-Jewish myths, Natalie Wynn argues that a major failing of Irish-Jewish history is that it has not kept up-to-date with developments in Russian-Jewish historiography. Irish-Jewish studies has been based for some time on the assumption that the origins of the modern Jewish community in Ireland came into existence through the settlement of Jews fleeing from anti-Semitic violence and pogroms in southern Russia. However, Wynn highlights that the waves of Jews arriving in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had departed from Lithuania, an area distant from centres of violence and now proven to have been barely affected by anti-Jewish agitation. Offering a more rigorous approach, Wynn argues for a narrative of economic chain migration, whereby Jewish migration to Ireland is seen as a conscious and calculated decision, based on the opportunity for petty capitalism in the uncompetitive Irish rural economic landscape, rather than an ‘accidental’ arrival of refugees. With the true context of Jewish immigration to Ireland laid out, Wynn proceeds to question both how and why these myths developed in the first place.

Myths about Jews also emerged in Scotland. As was the case in Wales, one of the most prominent was that non-Jewish Scots were exceptionally tolerant of Jews, founded on

2nd Edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013); Jasmine Donahaye, *The Greatest Need: The Creative Life and Troubled Times of Lily Tobias, a Welsh Jew in Palestine* (Aberystwyth: Honno, 2015); Cai Parry-Jones, *The Jews of Wales: A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017).

the tradition of Scottish Presbyterians' love and admiration for the 'People of the Book'. Kirk Hansen's article makes an important contribution to revising this myth by examining a number of early-twentieth-century Scottish newspapers to illustrate how widespread anti-alien attitudes during the First World affected the Scottish Jewry. Scottish historiography has largely forgotten this strain, owing to a contemporary focus of displays of inter-communal solidarity and patriotism in Scotland. Hansen argues that the Scottish press is a neglected, but vital, resource for a more critical approach to established myths of Scottish tolerance because it provided an outlet for both journalists and the public to vent their anger and frustration towards Scotland's Jews. In turn, the press also offered the Jewish community a venue to respond to any challenges or hostility they faced.

In the final three articles, the focus shifts from questioning historical narratives to an examination of prevailing historiographical attitudes towards the history of Jews in the British Isles' peripheral centres. Using examples from Northeast Scotland, North Wales and West Ireland, Nathan Abrams, Cai Parry-Jones and Trisha Oakley Kessler scrutinise historians' assumptions about the nature of links between major Jewish centres and 'the periphery'.

Drawing on a cache of letters addressed to the Chief Rabbi concerning the provision of a trained Jewish butcher (*shochet*) in 1883, Abrams considers the Jewish community of Dundee in northeast Scotland as an example of Jews at a temporal, organisational, cultural and geographical frontier. The episode to which these letters refer tests the assumption of Anglo-Jewish historians that such non-metropolitan and regional communities were seen, and considered themselves, as subordinate to the mainstream ecclesiastical authorities in London, namely the Office of the Chief Rabbinate. By contrast, Abrams argues that the relationship between the Dundee community and its congregations (note the plural) was far from a unidirectional one, and in the face of the increase in the power, authority and remit of the

Chief Rabbinate, was one of tension and push and pull. Thus, he concludes, the relationship between centre and periphery in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, at least in this Celtic example, should be redrawn to correct previous thinking.

Parry-Jones examines Jewish life at the periphery by offering pioneering research into five previously neglected small communities in north Wales. Focusing on the differences between life in the British-Jewish periphery and centre, his article also explores the powerful role of place in shaping the Jewish experience in north Wales, particularly the additional integration hurdles that Jewish immigrants faced in the region's Welsh-speaking heartlands. Parry-Jones also draws our attention to the symbiotic relationship between the regions minute Jewish communities and the neighbouring major Anglo-Jewish centres of Liverpool and Manchester, and in doing so makes the argument that, despite appearing marginal to some scholars, the histories of peripheral Jewish communities can enhance our understanding of the centre.

Finally, Kessler critically explores Jewish economic activity in Irish-Jewish history. Given the power and longevity of Jewish economic stereotypes in Irish culture, such a critical examination of Jewish economic life in Ireland is long overdue. Furthermore, Kessler looks beyond the Jewish experience of the main Irish communities, which, as she states, has been almost entirely overlooked. She focuses on the experiences of a young Jewish migrant from Lithuania who hoped to create a new life for himself and his family in Connacht, in the west of Ireland, long a focal point for Irish mythology. Crucially, Kessler shows how this migrant's dreams ended in failure as it clashed with a rising anti-Jewish economic discourse. Yet, this was because, in part, such Jews were aligned with the economic interests of the British Empire, which was seen in direct contrast to the interests of a nascent Irish nation.

This special edition of *Jewish Culture and History* intends to contribute new insights into the development and characteristics of Jewish life in the Celtic Lands. Ultimately, by

understanding how Jewish life in Ireland, Scotland and Wales reflected and diverged from the Jewish experience in England, its metropolitan centres in particular, we can begin to appreciate and acknowledge both the complex makeup of Jewish life in the Britain Isles, as well as show that there is a great deal more to this history than first meets the eye.