

Bill Williams: "The ordinariness of being Jewish."

British Jewish history has often been written within a restrictive Jewish framework. One consequence is a pervasive notion that Jewish events have Jewish causes: that for example, the beginnings of Jewish education in Manchester (in 1840) might be put down to a traditional Jewish valuation of education, or that Jewish philanthropy might be attributed to a Talmudic insistence on charity. Or that the creation, division and dispersal of synagogues reflects the different preferences of Jewish theology and ritual.

Another consequence of historiographical introspection is what has been described as the Whig interpretation of British Jewish history: British Jewish history as the story, told, for example, by Cecil Roth, of progress in a liberal society. That is, the history of British Jewry as a narrative of social, economic and political improvement through successful integration into a tolerant British society under the aegis of a benevolent Jewish elite. This is also the liberal narrative: the liberalism (supposedly) shown by Britain towards incoming minorities is repaid by their peaceful integration, their cultural deference and their subsequent contributions to British life.

My recent research into the reception of refugees from Hitler's Europe between 1933 and 1940 suggests that this Whig perception has been applied to the narrative of their arrival and settlement in Manchester and, to an extent, has coloured the refugee's perception of their own experience. I have found it particularly difficult to deal with the near-unanimous gratitude of those whose right of entry to Britain was severely restricted, whose friends and families in Europe were subsequently murdered, who were interned by Britain in 1940 and who in other ways were effectively denied equality in British society. This poses particular issues for the interpretation of oral testimony gathered from refugees in the post-Holocaust years.

It is her own Whig perception of the Jewish experience which led Mrs. Thatcher, on numerous occasions, to suggest that other new immigrants to British society 'take the path chosen by the Jews.'

Since the late 1970s these assumptions have been challenged by a new school of historians which includes, for example, Tony Kushner of the University of Southampton, and with which I associate my own work.

This challenge does not belittle the 'inner life' of the Jewish community and its effect upon Jewish communal change, but it attempts to set this within the context of change within the wider society. It seeks to draw Jewish history out of its 'ghetto' and into the mainstream of change within British society. In this wider setting, the Jewish community might be seen as drawing on (or participating in) wider developments, for example in education and charity, but adapting them to conform to Jewish religious observance and to serve particular Jewish needs. The challenge, in particular, draws into play the economic and social divisions which overtook an integrating community.

Nor does the challenge to a Whiggish Jewish history deny the tolerance of the British government, the (limited) altruism of the Jewish elite, the progress which the (majority) Jewish community has made in British society, the degree of its integration, the gratitude which this has evoked or the contribution which Jews have

made to British life. The challenge simply places reservations around the nature and extent of British tolerance and poses questions around the motives of the Jewish elite, the nature of integration and the sources of 'gratitude'. It takes a look at what might be seen as the underbellies of liberal Britain, Jewish integration and the modern Jewish community.

These are the major assumptions which underlie my interpretation of Manchester's Jewish history in *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740-1875* (1976), my biography of the Jewish communal leader, Sir Sidney Hamburger, and my recent pictorial history of the community.

I would be interested to hear of the extent to which the same issues arise in tracing the arrival, settlement and 'integration' of other immigrant groups.