

Reviews

Jewish Local Studies and Memory Work: A Case Study of Cornwall

KEITH PEARCE and HELEN FRY (eds), *The Lost Jews of Cornwall*. Redcliffe Press, Bristol, 2000. 344 pp. £14.95. ISBN 1-900178-27-3.

THE HIDDEN LEGACY FOUNDATION (eds), *The Jews of Devon and Cornwall: Essays and Exhibition Catalogue*. Redcliffe Press, Bristol, 2000. 123 pp. £7.50. ISBN 1-900178-82-6.

RUTH ELLEN GRUBER, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002. 304 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-520-21363-7.

Picture David Attenborough hiding behind a menhir amidst the bleak, powerful landscape of Cornish moorland. Here he is, whispering excitedly as, after many months of exploration, he has finally come across the rarest of creatures. There, dawning amongst the heather and bracken, are a group of old men, perpetuating their ancient rites. If this image—25 per cent *National Geographic*, 25 per cent Bronislaw Malinowski and 50 per cent Monty Python—seems particularly absurd, then it is only fitting when trying to explain the title of the book *The Lost Jews of Cornwall*. At times, the title of this collection of essays is more revealing than much of its contents. Part-sponsored by the 'Hidden Legacy Foundation', it seems inspired by a wider European confrontation with Jewish history—especially the memory and preservation of the Jewish physical heritage. On the continent, as Ruth Ellen Gruber has shown in her important study, *Virtually Jewish*, such engagement has manifested itself in the form of Jewish museums, exhibitions, tourist trails, concerts, and festivals in places which, until the Nazi era, had thriving Jewish populations. Gruber does not include Britain in her survey of European countries. Indeed, it would have been somewhat bizarre had she done so, as the confrontation with the Holocaust, where its impact was direct, is her starting and finishing point. Gruber concludes (p. 235):

The Holocaust, compounded by the Cold War, created the biggest and most wrenching Jewish gap in history ... [and] the contemporary embrace of the Jewish component and creation of Jewish virtualities is, consciously or not, an attempt to deal with that gap and its effect. The memory of Jews and Jewish heritage is emotionally charged, whether because of official postwar taboos, government policy, lingering anti-Semitism, a sincere sense of loss, or guilty conscience.

She adds that the 'remembered presence of Jews and Jewish space can become a symbol of the past, but it can also become an idealised symbol of contemporary aspirations: to multiculturalism, to identity, to "authenticity", to a pan-European ideal'. Such idealised symbols, warns Gruber, represented by the 'virtual Jewish phenomenon', frequently have 'little to do with Jews' (p. 236). Such memory work, a Jewish and non-Jewish nostalgia for a past that cannot be retrieved, has its echoes across the English Channel, illustrated by the specific local Jewish history books, museum and exhibition representation under review here. Whether it is appropriate or not is, however, debatable.

In *The Lost Jews of Cornwall*, its subject matter is presented as being totally in the past. The final chapter, entitled 'The Disappearing Heritage', refers to the fate of the synagogue buildings in Falmouth and Penzance and their contents since their demise

as places of Jewish worship from the 1870s and 1900s respectively. In the conclusion, Godfrey Simmons, Keith Pearce and Helen Fry write: 'The Jews who lived in Cornwall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be lost as communities but diligent private research by numerous people over sixty years has been incorporated into this book with a determination that these "Lost Jews" should not be entirely forgotten' (p. 306).

The Jews of Cornwall are thus defined by the existence of organised religious groupings and dated in *The Lost Jews* to between 1720 and 1913, the beginning and end of the Penzance community. On closer inspection, however, the date of 1720 is somewhat arbitrary. It is believed that Jews from the Rhineland and Holland came to Penzance in the 1720s but, as Simmons and Pearce acknowledge, 'arrangements for worship at this time are unknown, as is the size of the Jewish population' (p. 130). A more formal community with a synagogue building did not emerge until the 1800s. The final closing of the two Cornish synagogues, as their membership fell through death and dispersal, provided what Cecil Roth, in articles published in the *Jewish Chronicle* (1933), called the 'Decline and Fall of an Anglo-Jewish Community'.¹ Even the end point is imprecise. Roth dated it to 1911, when the last burial up to that point had taken place, but, as is argued by one of the editors, the synagogue itself had ceased functioning and was sold in 1906.

For Roth, the Jews of post-emancipation Britain held little or no historical interest, an indifference intensified by his antipathy towards east European Jewish culture represented by the new mass migration. The more buoyant years of Cornish Jewry were thus contained neatly within what he saw as 'proper' Anglo-Jewish history. The various contributors to *The Lost Jews of Cornwall*, whilst adding many valuable details and minor corrections, do not fundamentally dispute Roth's chronology. Post-1913, or now 1906, is presented as simply memory work through the surviving physical heritage. It is thus not surprising that cemeteries feature prominently in this volume, including transcriptions of gravestones and fragments of gravestones from those in Penzance and Falmouth. Cemeteries and gravestones have too often been neglected by Jewish historians, not only for the information they contain, but for what they reveal about place. They often show the rich interplay of local, national and global identities, no more so than in communities such as Penzance and Falmouth with their strong trading links. The material presented in this volume, a labour of love compiled by Simmons (himself the great-grandson of the longest-serving Rabbi of Penzance), Pearce, Nicholas de Lange and Jennifer Speake, who have also been actively involved in its preservation, is extremely valuable. As they point out, without formal protection, their long term future is in doubt. Keith Pearce, a local historian, has played a particularly valuable role in acting as custodian of the Penzance cemetery, taking over from Godfrey Simmons. The Falmouth cemetery, lacking such attention, has fallen into greater disrepair. There are, however, dangers inherent in the representation of British Jewish life through the example of the cemetery.

In a moving article 'No one should take the last journey alone', Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen of Stanmore United Synagogue relates officiating at a funeral at Bushey cemetery where 'not only was there no minyan, but, apart from myself, not one single person [was] present to pay respects'. The photograph to accompany the *Jewish Chronicle* article (21 June 2002) was of the old Jewish cemetery at Penzance. However evocative and well-cared for, such sites place the Jewish experience firmly in the past. The photograph of the Penzance cemetery in the *Jewish Chronicle* is captioned 'respected memories', and it is tribute to many who have contributed to this volume, Jewish and non-Jewish, local and otherwise, that it is now so well maintained. Yet it is the sad

¹ Published in May and June 1933 supplements.

absence of live Jews through the representation of this cemetery that was also being emphasised by the *Jewish Chronicle*. Even so, according to the 2001 census, there are 435 people in the county of Cornwall who describe themselves as religiously 'Jewish'.² In the 1840s, when the community was still flourishing, Falmouth Jewry consisted of roughly fourteen families, or probably seventy to eighty individuals. The Penzance community was of similar size. In short, there may be more Jews living in Cornwall today than ever before—many others might well have described themselves as Jewish had they been allowed to do so through an 'ethnic' category in the census. There is the makings of an ecumenical community, *Kehillat Kernow*, around Truro,³ but on a formal religious level there has been an absence of a Jewish community for close to a century.

This discrepancy between a larger Jewish presence and the lack of a synagogue or other Jewish organisational structure points to a wider historiographical question. The real Jewish experience, from antiquity onwards as that more generally, has been about movement, forced or voluntary, as well as settlement. Jewish historians have become increasingly adept at highlighting the permanence of the Jewish presence. They have done so against a background in which Jews have been deemed to be alien to national and local society and culture. The myth of the 'wandering Jew' has been a powerful one and it is not surprising that this anti-semitic trope should have historians anxious to show the rootedness of Jews in the local world.

The Lost Jews of Cornwall, and a parallel travelling exhibition, *The Jews of Devon and Cornwall* (the catalogue of which has been published by the Hidden Legacy Foundation, Bristol, 2000) are part of this process. In his *Jewish Chronicle* articles on the Jews of Penzance, Cecil Roth pointed out what he saw as 'the greatest shortcoming of Anglo-Jewish historiography ... It concerns itself preponderantly—indeed, almost exclusively—with the community of the capital'. Roth himself, aside from his work on Penzance, did much to remove that lacuna, bringing together much of his work in *The Rise of Provincial Jewry* (Jewish Monthly, London, 1950). Roth's provincial researches covered the period only up to the mid-nineteenth century, but they at least provided the platform for later work. It was not, however, until the seminal work of Bill Williams, especially his *The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740-1875* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1975) that provincial British Jewish historiography came of age. Williams's researches came out of the Manchester Studies Unit of what was then Manchester Polytechnic. It was typified by contextualisation of the Jewish experience through a close reading of Manchester's complex and rapid development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and especially its class make-up based on extensive use of local Jewish and non-Jewish materials. Steven Zipperstein, in an overview entitled 'Jewish Historiography and the Modern City', has criticised Williams's *The Making of Manchester Jewry* for underplaying ethnic and religious solidarity at the expense of emphasising class conflict and division. Nevertheless, Zipperstein praises Williams for producing 'an outstanding social history'.⁴

Since 1975, there have been a steady stream of books on modern provincial British Jewry, including studies, amongst many others, of the Jews of Scotland, South Wales, Oxford, Bristol, the South West of England, Leeds and Birmingham. Only the last mentioned, through the Birmingham Jewish Historical Research Group under the remarkable stewardship of the late Zöe Josephs, produced local history of real quality. It is not accidental that Josephs was inspired and instructed by Williams in the setting up of the Birmingham group.

² Figures taken from the Census 2001 website.

³ See their website on <http://kehillatkernow.com/>.

⁴ In *Jewish History*, vol. 2 (1987), p. 82.

The recent essays in *The Lost Jews of Cornwall* are very much part of this 'new wave' of local Jewish history writing in Britain. Well-presented and, for the most part, well-written, they make good use of Jewish records and more obvious non-Jewish sources. Nevertheless, they do not always have a firm grip on the wider local context. This weakness partly reflects the failing of local and regional studies to include minority experiences. There is thus an absence of a firm underpinning to help the specialist place their particular work in more general perspective. In the case of Cornish historiography there is perhaps a more pronounced problem: the tendency to emphasise the homogeneity and separateness of Cornwall so as to bolster local identity. Indeed, the desire to show 'apartness' from the rest of Britain even extends to its neighbouring county, Devon. In a shire league table, Cornwall would not come near the top in relation to receiving migrants and immigrants (although out-migration, through economic necessity, has been very marked).⁵ Nevertheless, is far from the unchanging world that many local activists within Cornish studies believe it to be. Indeed, a rather dangerous, quasi-*völkisch* sense of Cornishness has developed, moving into the extraordinarily dubious world of genetics to prove the 'difference' of the local population. Rather than being limited to extreme Cornish nationalists, such work (as well as critiques of it) has appeared in the journal *Cornish Studies*, coming out of the University of Exeter. Such exclusive, part-racial, definitions of Cornishness, on a more everyday level, have made it extremely difficult for those regarded as 'different', including visible ethnic minorities, to be accepted as part of local society.

It is clear that the figure of 'the Jew' has played some significance in the making and remaking of Cornish identity throughout the centuries. *The Lost Jews of Cornwall* reproduces Venetia Newall's essay entitled 'The Jews of Cornwall in Local Tradition' (1979). It, as well as a new piece by one of the editors, Keith Pearce, 'The Jews' Houses and Cornish Place-Names', helps debunk the romantic idea that they had any connection to a real Jewish presence in the medieval period and even earlier. But these two articles do not explore the mythology sufficiently, or what function these imaginary Jews and their alleged possessions had for contemporaries. As late as 1998 the Penlee House Gallery and Museum in Penzance helped publish a history of the Jewish community of that town which included the statement:

The first Jews came to Cornwall before written history, legends abound but there is also visual evidence in the artefacts found in Mounts Bay. Oil and wine jars and other pottery have been found hidden in the sand, very different and more sophisticated than local pottery of the day.⁶

Cornishness has been invented and re-invented for many centuries in what has been called 'the cultural construction of place'.⁷ The role of 'the Jew' or 'the Black' in these racialised processes has not, so far, received the attention it deserves. 'Real' Jews and Blacks, for example, are absent from the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro. Nevertheless, the problematic, indeed, offensive, tradition of 'blacking up' in several Cornish village celebrations, such as Padstow's 'Obby 'Oss' or 'Darkie Days', is represented but never commented on in the permanent exhibition.⁸ Observing such rituals, the Anglo-Jewish novelist Howard Jacobson, once a resident of the county, remarked:

⁵ Thus the Cornwall Galleries at the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth highlight the 'Cornish Abroad' and the migration process, but do not mention incomers to the county.

⁶ Elizabeth Brock, *The Jewish Community of Penzance* (Elizabeth Brock, Penzance, 1998), pp. 5–6.

⁷ Ella Westland (ed.), *Cornwall: The Cultural Construction of Place* (Patten Press, Penzance, 1997).

⁸ Exhibition visited in 2001.

'Dark suspicions, fear of foreigners, a passion for wreckage, have hardened the Cornish heart and contracted the Cornish voice until it is as comforting as splintered glass.' In the presence of such grotesque representations of Black people, Jacobson himself, as a Jew, felt a total outsider.⁹ In contrast, *The Lost Jews of Cornwall* will have a positive impact in showing that the county has experienced diversity, if only in the past. It has already been incorporated, if only in the form of secondary, interactive text, in one of the permanent exhibitions of the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth which opened in 2002.¹⁰ Yet the implied assumption in *The Lost Jews of Cornwall* of an absence of a community of Jews in the county since the 1900s works in the opposite direction. It may therefore inadvertently help exclusive mythologies to develop further. It is unfortunate, for example, that mention of Jews in the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth comes under the label 'foreign visitors'. Inclusion of the local minorities is only the first step, however necessary: *how* they are represented is more complicated and challenging.

Away from debunking mythology, the newer essays in this volume help add more detail to our knowledge of the Jewish communities of Penzance and Falmouth. It is disappointing, however, that it is the essays by Roth (1933) and Alex Jacob (1949) which give a real sense of how these communities evolved. Even then, their internal dynamics are only hinted at—not enough attention is given to the flows in and out of these Jewish settlements. These were later examples of what David Sorkin and Lois Dubin have dubbed 'Port Jews', maritime centres dependent on the sea and trading for their prosperity.¹¹ After reading these essays or visiting its parallel exhibition, a sense of what it was like to be a Jew in one of the remotest parts of Britain remains largely elusive. Ultimately they are about emphasising presence and contribution, integration and the absence of local hostility, continuing the apologetic tendencies in British Jewish historiography. The edited volume and the exhibition have both proved extremely successful. Those that have 'consumed' them, probably, are for the most part not Jewish, a parallel here to the memory work carried out on the continent and outlined by Gruber. It is Jewish history without tears or conflict—the death of the two established communities is represented as peaceful and inevitable, like that of a trustworthy old dog. The exhibition makes brief reference to the attempt to reestablish a formal Jewish community in Cornwall. Even so, neither it nor *The Lost Jews* has a place for those whose connection to the county might be more complicated or challenging through the nature of their Jewishness and the impermanence of their stay. There are, in short, other stories to be told about the Jews of Cornwall.

Adolph Salzmann was the last person to be buried in the Penzance cemetery. He died in 1964 and all we are told about him in *The Lost Jews* was that he 'may have been a refugee who settled in Redruth' (p. 133). It would have taken little energy to have out more about Salzmann but it appears that he was disregarded because he did not fit into the chronology of the volume. Whether or not Salzmann was a refugee from Nazism, there were others who were, and who settled for time at least in Cornwall. These included Ingrid Jacoby and her sister, children who came on the *kindertransport*. They were sent to Falmouth in 1939 and stayed there for the bulk of the Second World

⁹ Howard Jacobson, 'Think of England', BBC2, 29 October 1991.

¹⁰ It is in the 'Look-out' section of the museum's tower and provides a history of the Jewish community of Falmouth with special reference to its surviving physical heritage.

¹¹ David Sorkin, 'The Port Jews: Notes Towards a Social Type', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1999), pp. 87–97; Lois Dubin, *The Port Jews of Hapsburg Trieste* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999); and the essays in David Cesarani (ed.), *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950* (Frank Cass, London, 2002).

War. The account of Ingrid's life in the town was published in 2000.¹²

Among some of the most famous refugees were those who joined the modernist art colony at St Ives, including Naum Gabo, the constructivist sculptor, who moved to the town in 1939. It has been suggested: 'The presence of Gabo was of great importance, stimulating ambition and raising the awareness of art beyond St Ives. His work and ideas provided a direct link to the heart of European and international modernism, crucially restating the validity of abstraction at a critical moment.'¹³ Gabo and some of the other refugees were of Jewish origin.¹⁴ Their connections to Cornwall were often brief and their link to the wider British Jewish community generally non-existent yet, even as displaced people, their impact was immense. Similar temporary movements in the Second World War occurred through evacuation from England's major cities. Cornwall was one major location of re-settlement of individuals and schools, including many Jews.

Another site of significance was Charles Singer's house, 'Kilmarth', at Par on the south Cornish coast. Singer, Professor of Medicine at London University, whose father was the translator of *Singer's Prayer Book*, was a leading light in the Council of Christians and Jews until his death in 1960. It was at his house in Cornwall, however, that Jews and non-Jews gathered during the 1930s to discuss the threat posed by Nazi racialism. Out of these discussions emerged perhaps the most powerful pre-war critique of the Aryan myth, *We Europeans* (1935). Singer and his friend Charles Seligman were key contributors to this book, but, fearing that it would be dismissed as Jewish propaganda, their names were excluded from the title page.

Returning to the title of the local Jewish studies book under review: those deemed 'lost' by its authors have never really been missing. Now portrayed as 'one of the more exotic pockets of Anglo-Jewish history',¹⁵ there is a danger of an unreconstructed and romanticised anthropological gaze on the Jews of Cornwall continuing to evolve. In fact, the concept of 'lostness', in a Cornish Jewish context is much more applicable to Gabo and Singer, and, more obscurely, Jacoby and Salzmänn. They are 'lost' not in the crude way that might be argued for by Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, and his desire for 'Jewish continuity' through organised (orthodox) communities.¹⁶ Instead, their loss is better located within the dominant trends in Jewish historiography which has still to get to grips with the plurality of Jewish identities across the ages and the reality of movement, forced or otherwise, as against stasis, in the Jewish experience.

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¹² Ingrid Jacoby, *My Darling Diary: A Wartime Journal—Vienna 1937–39, Falmouth 1939–44* (United Writers Cornwall, Penzance, 2000). This is a moving but curious piece of writing that appears at times to have been re-written through a more contemporary perspective and seems to be deeply influenced by *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

¹³ Michael Tooby, *Tate St Ives: An Illustrated Companion* (Tate Gallery Publications, London, 1993), p. 34.

¹⁴ Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000).

¹⁵ *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 March 1900.

¹⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? Jewish Continuity and How to Achieve It* (Valentine Mitchell, London, 1994).