No Rabbi, No Standards

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John S. Levi and G.F.J. Bergman

_Australian Genesis:_

_Jewish Convicts and Settlers, 1788–1860_

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ABBI EMERITUS John Levi, the author of this revised edition, is one of the notable Australians of his generation. The first Australian to be ordained a rabbi, he served Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne from 1960 to 1997. He was founder and past-president of the Council of Christians and Jews, a member of the governing body of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, President of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, an acclaimed scholar, holder of advanced degrees, including a Doctor of Divinity from Hebrew Union College, and is a Member of the Order of Australia. Levi also has a passion for history — for documenting in the most meticulous detail the first Jewish communities of Australia. It comes as no surprise that he has in the 1850s. Australian Jews comprised 0.5% of the total population, a proportion that has been maintained to the present day, with variation mostly within the 0.4–0.6% range, a remarkable constancy.

More than 700 names are recorded in the index, which runs to twenty-three pages. They include noted First Fleeters, Esther Abrahams and John Harris, whose children and grandchildren would rank amongst the highest; Joseph Samuel, ‘the man they couldn’t hang’; Israel Chapman, Australia’s first detective; Solomon Levey, spurned financial backer of the Swan River settlement; and Edward Davis, the ‘Jewboy bushranger’. Among the notable entrepreneurs, Barnett Levey is regarded as the father of Australian theatre. Levey lost a fortune erecting a Sydney building that was a combined warehouse, theatre, hotel, and a wind-driven mill. Had the windmill worked, the whole structure would have been endangered. The _Sydney Times_ commented: ‘the theatre and the windmill were in one respect alike; they were both useless.’

The establishment of Jewish institutions was not easily achieved. Levi observes that ‘old Jewish religious and family loyalties were erased by the pressures of penal life, the struggle for existence precluded the development of a Jewish community, and the rigid colonial hierarchy had no place for religious dissent’. There was little opportunity for marriage within the faith due to the small number of Jewish women: less than thirty amongst the transportees to 1838. By the early 1840s Sydney had a synagogue but ‘no rabbi, no teacher and no standards’, and Jews remained ‘myopically unaware of changes being wrought in Europe as Judaism, both orthodox and liberal, faced the challenge of emancipation’.

While the milestones of Jewish life are recorded, and, while there is analytical discussion in part, the main focus is biographical. On display is an encyclopedic knowledge of sources, read with a learned insider’s knowledge of religious practice and tradition. But the book lacks critical reflection and scrutiny of evidence. A chapter of over 10,000 words on ‘Ikey Solomon’, possibly the inspiration for Dickens’s Fagin, draws heavily on newspaper reports and pamphlets whose reliability could well have been questioned. There is no overt discussion of problems of interpretation, no comparative reference to other Jewish communities of the New World to inform understanding of the distinctive elements of the Australian experience. In keeping with a traditional approach to recording the early history of European settlement, there is little feeling for the Aboriginal people of this land.

Readers of this book will learn much of the minutiae of individual lives. Not infrequently, the accumulation of detail assumes epic proportions, but Levi is an accomplished stylist and rarely loses the reader’s attention. The publisher’s claim that the book ‘reads like a thriller’ is no overstatement. This handsomely designed edition, incorporating eighteen pages of colour plates and ninety-two text illustrations, creditably serves this labour of love.