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Review:

Jews in Nineteenth Century Britain: Charity, Community and Religion, 1830–1880, Alysa Levene

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Jews in Nineteenth Century Britain: Charity, Community and Religion, 1830–1880, Alys Levene (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), ISBN 9781350201767, pp. 262, £26.09.

Before the influx of significant numbers of Eastern European immigrants from the 1880s onwards, British Jewry was comparatively small. Consequently, the bulk of research on British Jewry has focused on the post-1880 period, and, to a much lesser extent, on early modern times. Moreover, London as the biggest Jewish community by far has received the most attention. Levene's study, which explores seven provincial Jewish communities during the early and mid-Victorian decades, is therefore a highly welcome addition. This socio-economic history of Jewish life in the country's industrial heartland regards the historical experiences of Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham Jewry in particular, while also incorporating evidence from Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, and Hull. Levene builds on research on provincial Jewry undertaken since the 1970s by Bill Williams, Todd Endelman, David Cesarani, David Feldman, and others. Innovatively, she makes extensive use of the Anglo-Jewish Database, which at the time of her research contained information on just under 30,000 individuals. This invaluable online research tool, which is based on the 1851 census and, through extensive cross-referencing, is able with a high degree of accuracy to identify the Jewish individuals living in Britain at the time, has been underutilized in academic projects to date.

Findings from this treasure trove of data underpin the first part of the study, which provides empirical data on where provincial Jews resided, what kinds of communities they formed, how households and families were structured, and their means of livelihood. Levene establishes that, overall, Jews lived in close proximity to other Jews, a remarkable development given the relatively small numbers of Jews in most of these locations. This residence pattern was only partly based on kinship, which leads Levene to argue that geographical clustering was also due to a "sense of responsibility" in a religious but also a personal way. When it comes to occupations, Levene ascertains that while Jews in these major industrial hubs were generally rarely involved in the classic or heavy industrial economy, they did partake in the manufacture of lighter, consumer-oriented goods. They were thus an important part of the industrial side of

the modernization process and not only, as previously determined, visible in the commercial and financial sectors.

The second part of the book takes a closer look at communal networks, especially focusing on those relating to charity and philanthropy. Levene's contention is that better-off Jews showed generous support for other Jews, motivated by shared bonds but also the need to "improve" their communities in the eyes of surrounding non-Jewish society. This is particularly true for the later decades of the period under investigation, when levels of poverty began to rise in general and among Jews in particular. The study, therefore, confirms the findings of extant research, especially of the era of large-scale Eastern European migration to Britain, which has demonstrated that fear of rising antisemitism and insecurity in their British identity prompted the Jewish establishment to do everything in their power to anglicize poorer and visibly different coreligionists. Yet Levene also demonstrates that this form of social engagement, in combination with the formation of distinct Jewish neighbourhoods, provided an ideal avenue for preserving a Jewish identity in a rapidly secularizing society.

Levene places her findings firmly in the wider field of minority and migration studies, comparing Jewish patterns to those of other ethnic, national, or religious groups in various geographical and historical settings. Moreover, the study contributes an interesting perspective to the historiography on industrialization, which generally holds that urbanization and industrial patterns of working and living led to the decline of family and community ties. Levene demonstrates that her subjects preserved a high degree of social cohesion and community within rapidly modernizing industrial environments. Countless well-organized associations provided the backbone of communal structures. Patterns of housing, workplace relations, and also religious practice – which the census data in particular have shown firmly point towards such arrangements – Levene emphasizes were not primarily due to centrally led communal institutions and organizations.

Levene's meticulously researched study is a highly valuable addition to British Jewish historiography. While it does not break radically new ground, it confirms and occasionally challenges existing views and contentions by providing data, connecting dots, and drawing lines in the hitherto relatively overlooked provincial Jewish arenas of Britain. Refreshingly, it uses social history methodology to provide an intimate

picture of British Jewish life before the onset of successive waves of Eastern European immigration.

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