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Obituary

William (Bill) Rubinstein: *in memoriam*

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William (Bill) Rubinstein: in memoriam

William (Bill) Rubinstein, who was born in 1946, passed away on 1 July 2024, leaving a significant gap in Australian Jewish intellectual life. From the time that he settled in Melbourne he sought to improve Jewish academic research.

An American political scientist, he immigrated to Australia together with his librarian-historian wife, Dr. Hilary Rubinstein, whom he met at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, where he had studied before moving to Australia. After Rubinstein had worked for two years at the Australian National University in Canberra, the family moved to Melbourne where he took up a position at Deakin University in 1978.

His initial academic forays into Australian Jewish research were in association with Isi Leibler. After working on two research projects, with Hilary's involvement, he suggested that Australian Jewry needed a think-tank to allow for more strategic forward planning. Leibler encouraged him to develop a proposal for an Australian Jewish think-tank. Rubinstein made his initial pitch in October 1980.

After he and Hilary returned from a visit to Britain, he presented a follow-up report recommending that the proposed Australian Jewish think-tank be modelled after the London-based Institute of Jewish Affairs, then directed by Dr. Stephen Roth. Meanwhile Isi pulled together funds to start Rubinstein on his research and writing. From then, until he took up a position at Aberystwyth University, Wales, in the mid-1990s, there was close collaboration between Leibler and Rubinstein. The former created the Australian Institute for Jewish Affairs (AIJA), and Rubinstein conducted several important studies on Australian Jewry which were published by the AIJA. Bill also became deeply involved with the Australian Jewish Historical Society and in the late 1980s took over editing its journal, filling the position as Melbourne editor until he moved to Wales.

He was also one of the key founders of the Australian Association for Jewish Studies, served on its committee, and was deeply involved with the affairs of the association while in Australia.

Rubinstein has left a significant body of published works, including the first history of Australian Jewry, published in 1985 as part of a series on ethnic groups in Australia, as well as the second volume of the

monumental *Jews in Australia: A Thematic History* (published in 1991), Hilary having written the first.

In addition to his academic publishing, Rubinstein was a regular contributor to the Jewish press and general press, and was a powerful, if at times controversial, voice for the Jewish community. He was a personality who was larger than life and will be greatly missed.

Suzanne D. Rutland

Bill Rubinstein made a significant contribution to British Jewish history in his years in higher education in Britain. I always had a soft spot for Bill, even though our politics and historical approach were a long way apart. Our first meeting in the early 1980s was a comic one of mutual misapprehensions. It was at the University of York and the Economic History Society's annual conference. As a young Ph.D. student, I gave my first ever academic paper, on Jews and the black market in Britain during the Second World War. It was an evening paper and Bill was kind about it and said he would like to chat further over breakfast – a welcome boost to a nervous would-be academic. At breakfast my wrong assumption was that I felt I should keep as kosher as possible and went for strictly vegetarian options. I found Bill waiting for me at a table with his plate laden with forbidden meats. Bill's false assumption was that as I had mentioned left wing "rich Jew" antisemitism in my paper, I was of a fellow Conservative disposition!

Bill's work on British Jewish history (especially *A History of the Jews in the English-Speaking World: Great Britain*, 1995) and *The Myth of Rescue* (1997) on Allied responses to the Holocaust were provocations. The "new school" of British Jewish historians which had developed in the 1980s and of which I was one of the "young Turks", largely rejected his Whiggish assumptions about British Jewish success and absence of antisemitism (Bill, of course, did not include the left in such an analysis). We also were less sanguine about Allied responses and Bill's sweeping statement that not one single Jew was rescuable from Hitler's grasp.

Bill's strength was providing a strong argument that could stimulate debate. In this respect, I found his books excellent for student engagement. He was never an archive-focused researcher, and because of this his strident arguments often lacked nuance in both print and in conference debate. Yet despite his combative approach, he was pleasant

and affable in private conversations and encouraging in our common fields of interest. He also played an important civic role as President of the Jewish Historical Society of England. Academic life was never dull around Bill and his absence will be sincerely felt.

Tony Kushner