

'The Jew' in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa.

Edited by Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman. Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. xii + 241. £50.00 (hb). ISBN 9 7814 03997 029.

This much-anticipated volume was the culmination of two conferences convened at the University of Southampton in 2003 and 2005 respectively, which were united in their objective to consider 'the Jew' against the backdrop of the British Empire. Taking the South African War (1899-1902), the Uganda Plan (1903) – the proposed scheme to establish a homeland for Jews in East Africa – and the passage of the Aliens Act (1905) as key historical 'moments', the editors argue that 'the context of the Empire [...] is crucial for an understanding of the new dimensions of late-Victorian and Edwardian semitic discourse' (p.3). In order to comprehend domestic *fin de siècle* responses to Jews, Valman and Bar-Yosef suggest acknowledgement of the national context alone is not sufficient to appreciate the nuances of semitic discourse. Instead, it is the interface between the national and the international, the domestic and the imperial - a collusion of especial importance during this turbulent period - which accounts for the multifarious and multifunctional images of 'the Jew'.

The agency of empire in shaping the experiential and rhetorical climate in which Jews in Britain existed is not wholly uncharted academic territory. Bryan Cheyette broached the interplay between imperial discourse and semitic representation in his survey of turn-of-the-century British literary treatment of 'the Jew'. Cheyette drew upon Edward Said's seminal 1978 study *Orientalism* to explore how imperial culture facilitated a narrative which defined 'the self' in relation to the semitic 'other'.¹ More recently, Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek

¹ B. Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993); E. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

J. Penslar have extended this postcolonial reading of semitic discourse, directly challenging Said to argue that western attitudes to Jews as well as Muslims were shaped by a condescending imperialism.²

Yet whilst the collection of essays under review goes some way towards endorsing Kalmar and Penslar's conceptualisation of 'the Jew' as a passive player in the imperial context – Jasmine Donahaye's alignment of Jews in Britain with the Welsh as 'victims' of British imperialism provides a particularly intriguing example - a strong emphasis throughout is also upon the aptitude of Jews to become exemplary colonialists. In what are complementary treatments of Israel Zangwill's recourse to Jewish Nationalism, the Jewish Territorial Organisation (ITO), David Glover and Meri-Jane Rochelson agree that Jews were conceptualised by the novelist as 'among the foremost pioneers and nationbuilders' (p.138). Indeed Zangwill was convinced that the organisation's agenda to forge a new homeland in 'darkest Africa' was not simply self-serving but would facilitate a Jewish-led 'civilising mission'. In this way, Glover and Rochelson imply, Jews in Britain, not least Zangwill himself, had come to embrace a distinctly 'British' imperial worldview. However, it is the collection's editors in their contributions, together with Mark Levene, who bravely follow the line of this argument to its natural conclusion, acknowledging that 'European Zionists were shaped by the imperial ethos of the *fin de siècle*' (p. 23). By acceding to an 'affinity' between Zionism and colonialism - albeit not a straightforward one - the collection tentatively ventures beyond the politically-charged 'stalemate' position of Zionist historiography.

Indeed it is the decided emphasis throughout the collection upon a measured and thoughtful cultural approach which allows its authors to tackle with much-needed originality such 'big' questions: How was the Zionist movement, and Herzl in particular, shaped by British Imperialism? To what extent was anti-alien and pro-Jewish rhetoric fashioned by

² I. Davidson Kalmar and D. J. Penslar (eds.), *Orientalism and the Jews*, (Hanover, N.H: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

imperial anxieties? How complicit was the Anglo-Jewish community in Britain's colonial endeavour?

Adrienne Munich's essay, which opens the volume, engages with this final question in particular, exploring how the large presence of Jews in South Africa's diamond fields were imagined and articulated through fiction. Munich's neat analogy of 'Jews and Jewels' stresses a conceptualisation of 'the Jew' as a fluid construct onto which multiple, and often contradictory images were projected. 'Jews', Munich insists, 'were cast as an engine of commerce, but also as a problem, both exotic and admired'(p. 28). Nicholas Evans, in his essay on British commercial shipping and anti-alienism, would certainly agree that, by the Edwardian period, Jewish migrants had already proved their commercial 'value' as customers for the merchant trade. In this sense then, 'the Jew' was both a commodity and an asset to Britain's imperial interests. Yet it is the parallel Semitic image alighted upon by Munich – 'the Jew' and 'Jewess' as powerfully and dangerously sexualised – which highlights the absence of other considerations of the role and representation of gender and sexuality throughout the essays which follow. Although Nadia Valman's essay is something of an exception, touching briefly upon the threatening carnality of 'the Jew' in her accomplished survey of literary representations of the Jewish entrepreneur, there is an assumption even in her contribution, as throughout the rest of the collection, that both 'the Jew' and 'the empire' were unequivocally masculine constructions. Perhaps this volume is not the place to unpick this assumption. Certainly, it is already impressively ambitious in scope, research and execution. Yet further attention to gender dynamics beyond the masculine constructs would have rendered the conclusions even more compelling.

Indeed, although this is a minor quibble, therein lays the greatest achievement of this volume: it tantalisingly reveals near-virgin terrain to the intrepid researcher, throwing up as many questions as it answers.

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