BOOK REVIEWS


Immigrant communities seek to legitimate themselves in the eyes of the host society in which they dwell in one or more of a number of ways. They may acquire wealth – because money has a habit of commanding instant attention. They may enter the learned professions – because such entry earns respect (however grudging) from important host elites. They may achieve prominence in the world of entertainment – because this, in turn, brings them admiration and esteem, particularly from within the lower social strata. For much the same reason, they may enter the ranks of the criminal classes. And/or they may achieve prominence and its concomitant accolades in the world of sport.

Jewish diasporas in western societies have at one time or another chosen all five paths to legitimation: wealth; the professions; entertainment; crime; and sport. But in terms of their historiographies some of these paths remain un- or at least under-explored. This is admittedly not true of American Jewry, but it is certainly true of British Jewry. There are now a number of studies of wealthy British-Jewish landed and commercial elites – notably within Harold Pollins’ *Economic History of the Jews in England* (1982) and, most recently, Derek Taylor’s *Jewish Contribution to the British Economy* (2013). There are a number of studies of Jews in the British learned professions (such as the law and medicine), though much work remains to be done. A recent issue of the *Journal of European Popular Culture* (volume 3 (2), October 2012) was devoted entirely to Jews in British cinema history, and there is a growing library of biographies and autobiographies of Anglo-Jewish show-business personalities. However, the Anglo-Jewish contribution to crime remains largely unexplored. Until recently the same could be said of the relationship between Jews and British sport. But in his monograph *Sport*...
and British Jewry Dr David Dee has made an admirable start in filling this gap.

Dr Dee chooses as his point of departure the great migration of Jews from eastern Europe to the British Isles at the end of the 19th century. For the wealthy Cousinhood that then directed the affairs of British Jewry this influx presented multiple problems. Many of the immigrants were despatched on to the Americas. Some were bribed to return whence they had come. Those that stayed (around 120,000) had to be anglicised as quickly as possible. One way of achieving this was to get the Yiddish-speaking youngsters to immerse themselves in sporting activities: cricket (obviously), but also football, athletics and boxing. To this end a network of clubs was established – catering mainly for Jewish working boys (girls came later): in London the Brady Street Club (endowed by the Rothschilds in 1896); the West Central Jewish Working Lads’ Club (founded by the Montefiore and Mocatta families two years later); the Victoria Jews Lads’ Club (whose inauguration, in 1901, was assisted by volunteers from Clifton College, Bristol, the only public - i.e. private - school to have had a Jewish ‘house’).

Such initiatives were designed to achieve multiple ends. They certainly helped acculturate Jewish youngsters to the norms of British society. In so doing they assisted also in dispelling the myth that Jews were averse to (and indeed incapable of) physical exertion. In both respects their success is beyond doubt – no more so than in the case of boxing (which had in fact spawned a catalogue of Anglo-Jewish star performers since the 18th century) and athletics. And here we encounter one of the supreme ironies of the entire exercise: it was, if anything, too successful. Participation in sport certainly ironed out the ghetto bend. But it also drew youngsters away from their Jewish roots. The multiple strictures of Sabbath observance, synagogue attendance and observance of the dietary laws gave way to the delights of the football pitch, the boxing ring and the athletics track. Nothing illustrated this more dramatically than the career of Harold Abrahams (1899-1978), the Anglo-Jewish sprinter whose gold medal victory in the 100 metres at the 1924 Paris Olympics was famously celebrated – and infamously misrepresented – in the 1981 film Chariots of Fire. The truth is that Abrahams saw athletics as the way out of Jewish and into English society: he converted to Roman Catholicism, married out of the faith and was given a Christian burial.

“Sport,” Dr Dee concludes, “was a powerful factor in decreasing the ‘Jewishness’ of immigrant children and grandchildren and in lessening concern for aspects of Jewish religion, community and ethnicity.” So it was. Fascist campaigns against British Jews in the 1930s shamelessly exploited stereotypes of Jews as “others” – not really British – and these
campaigns happily extended into sporting milieux, in which (it was alleged) Jewish participation brought unwelcome professionalism – and a preoccupation with money - where the amateur should have been king, and undesirable commercialization where cash-flows ought to have had no place. These campaigns, and the prejudices that informed them, survived the Holocaust more or less intact: witness the wholesale exclusion of Jews from British golf clubs well into the 1960s and the unabashed discrimination, within the world of tennis, suffered by the Jewish tennis star Angela Buxton, who in 1956 won the women's doubles title at both the French Championships and Wimbledon, each with her black American tennis partner Althea Gibson.

But nowhere is this prejudice more in evidence than in the dressing rooms and playing fields of English football. And nowhere, perhaps, has this prejudice been fought with greater tenacity and with more success. In Does your rabbi know you’re here? the Jewish sports journalist Anthony Clavane tells the story of Jewish involvement in English football from the beginning of the 20th century. He reminds us that the Lithuanian-born footballer (and cricketer) Louis Buchalter [later Bookman], the son of a rabbi, achieved prominence playing for Bradford City before the first world war, that he was chosen to play for Ireland (his adopted country) in 1914, and that Harry Morris, “Swindon Town’s legendary goalscorer” in the interwar period, was in fact “a Brady boy.” But it was in the post-war era that the Jewish love-affair with English football reached maturity, both on the field and in the boardroom – a coming-of-age symbolised by the appointment of David (Lord) Triesman as the first independent chairman of the (English) Football Association in 2008.

Clavane’s is less a work of scholarship than a personal odyssey. Scholars will not find the book an easy or a comfortable read; it presupposes a knowledge of the basics of football and of the football universe that not all its readers (this reviewer included) will readily possess. That said, its pages are replete with earthy pen-portraits and warm, well-penned anecdotes of some of the great Jewish names in the English footballing world: the Leyton Orient chairman Harry Zussman, the Tottenham Hotspur “superfan” Morris Keston, and Mark Lazarus, the brilliant “winger” who scored the winning goal for Queen’s Park Rangers in the 1967 Football League cup final – to say nothing of the entry of Israeli Jews and Russo-Jewish entrepreneurs onto the English soccer stage in more recent decades. Clavane is also right to remind us that there was – and still is – a seamier side to the game, and that this side too has had its Jewish players.

In one sense Clavane’s monograph ought to be regarded as a primary rather than a secondary source. The potted history of British Jewry that he
offers in his Introduction is out of place and contains some basic errors (the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753 did not “grant the community English citizenship,” and to call Lionel de Rothschild “the first official Jewish MP” is to mis-represent his campaign to take his parliamentary seat as a professing Jew). On the other hand, Anthony Clavane commendably confronts the Jewish contribution to sports (or at least football) management in Britain in a way that seems to elude David Dee, who somehow manages to tell the story of Jewish involvement in British sport without once mentioning Sir Arthur Gold (1917-2002), a motor retailer by profession, who was honorary secretary of the British Amateur Athletics Board 1965-72, chairman of the British Olympic Association 1988-92 and an uncompromising opponent of professionalization in sport and of the use of performance-enhancing drugs.¹

But these are not major criticisms. In their very different ways both Dee and Clavane have made very original contributions to our understanding of the interface between British Jewry, British sports, and the British sporting instinct. They are both, therefore, seminal works.

Geoffrey Alderman
Michael Gross Professor of Politics & Contemporary History, University of Buckingham

¹ Curiously, Gold is given a passing mention in Dr Dee’s De Montfort University PhD thesis, upon which one assumes the book is based: see D. G. Dee, ‘Jews and British Sport: Integration, Ethnicity and Anti-Semitism, c1880-c1960,’ PhD thesis, De Montfort University (Leicester), p.126, note 194.