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Review:

Defenders of the faith: The history of Jews' College and the London School of Jewish Studies, Derek Taylor

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Defenders of the faith: The history of Jews' College and the London School of Jewish Studies, Derek Taylor (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2016), ISBN 978-1-910-38312-4, pp. xvi + 320, £39.50.

Jews' College, which opened its doors in 1855, was the brainchild of Dr. Nathan Marcus Adler, the German-born cleric who had been elected the Ashkenazi chief rabbi in London a decade earlier. As Derek Taylor reminds us, there was not a single British-educated candidate short-listed for that post, a circumstance that was hardly surprising, given that, at that time, there existed absolutely no tradition of rabbinical education in England – or indeed anywhere in the British Empire.

In establishing Jews' College it was by no means Adler's intention to fill this particular gap, though. British Jewry – in which Orthodox practice was (and was for a long time to remain) in exceedingly short supply – was simply not interested in Talmudic scholarship, and Adler, though a noted Talmudic scholar himself, certainly had no interest in conferring rabbinical diplomas. So, as originally conceived and founded, Jews' College did not train rabbis. What it was meant to, and did, produce was a long succession of more or less competently trained “reverends”, who, complete with clerical dog-collars, could be trusted to act as local synagogue administrators, functionaries, and, above all else, preachers, but who were in no sense authorities in *halakha*, the exposition of which Adler reserved unto himself.

Jews' College had, originally, another purpose: to act as a grammar school to educate, to university-entrance standard, an Anglo-Jewish middle-class (and, naturally, all-male) elite; the site of the college – Finsbury Square, north London – was chosen as a fashionable neighbourhood that would attract the parents of such pupils. This part of the scheme drew adverse comment from the start. Traditionalists found fault with the intrusion of secular subjects into the curriculum, but it was from the emancipationist side that the criticism was greatest; Ashkenazi communal leaders such as David Salomons were completely opposed to the idea of separate education for Jewish youngsters and argued that such an institution was bound to act as a barrier to true social integration and equality.

The school failed, and was allowed to die. But the college survived – leading, as Taylor is right to emphasize, a precarious financial existence,

always short of money – “the Cinderella of Jewish charities” (pp. 68, 190). But in time, indeed, under a succession of principals who were undoubtedly Talmudic heavyweights (notably Adolph Büchler, 1907–39, and Nahum Rabinovitch, 1971–83) the college did come to train rabbis, and over the course of the twentieth century educated no less than three future British chief rabbis (Brodie, Jakobovits, and Sacks) and scores of other rabbinical luminaries. But Jews’ College was never going to compete with the yeshivas of Israel and the USA. Rebranded in 2002 as the London School of Jewish Studies, it has repositioned itself as a rather different though lively mixed-sex educational establishment. The last full-length academic history of Jews’ College (written by Albert Hyamson) was published as long ago as 1955. A great deal of turbulent water has passed under the bridge since then, and a new history is certainly needed. My difficulties with the volume Taylor has produced are threefold.

In the first place, Taylor’s is a history of the College leadership rather than of its students. To take an example, one of the pupils both of the Jews’ College school and of the college itself was Joseph Frederick Stern (1865–1934), who was appointed minister of the East London Synagogue in 1887, at which he served for forty years. In time, Stern also acted as a member of the governing body of the Jewish Religious Union, from which Liberal Judaism grew and flourished. Yet the only reference in Taylor’s volume to this important figure in the history of London’s Jewish East End is his inclusion in a list of students who studied at the college under the principalship of Michael Friedländer.

Then there is Taylor’s evident aversion to confronting and chronicling matters of still-current contention. In recounting the refusal of Chief Rabbi Brodie to consent to Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs’s appointment as Jews’ College principal in 1961, Taylor merely hints at the dark role played in this celebrated affair by the retiring principal, Isidore Epstein. In fact the machinations of the much published but bitter Dr. Epstein (bitter because he faced compulsory retirement) were absolutely central to Jacobs’s fate.

Or take the so-called “Lieberman Affair” of 1985 – the dismissal of the then senior lecturer in Talmud, Rabbi Simche Lieberman. While it is true that Lieberman declined to have the matter arbitrated by the United Synagogue’s Beth Din, it is also true but not mentioned by Taylor that by mutual agreement all sides to this very public quarrel consented to refer the dispute to an independent Beth Din. The relevant Deed of Submission (13 May 1985) is freely available on the internet, but seems not to have caught Taylor’s attention. Writing in the *Jewish Chronicle* (21 April 2017,

p. 30), Taylor defended his tiptoeing over “the delicate and confidential discussions” that were a central feature of the Lieberman Affair by proffering the view that “there are occasions when ‘discretion is the better part of valour’”. No professional historian wishing to be taken seriously would ever advance such an absurd dictum.

Finally, there is the matter of Taylor’s polemical and highly conversational style. For instance, in opening his account (chapter 9) of the Jacobs Affair, Taylor opines that Jacobs, then a lecturer at the college, was initially considered to succeed Isidore Epstein as the college principal, and “was even tipped” to succeed Israel Brodie as Chief Rabbi, but that “everything went pear-shaped”. Nor can I see any relevance or merit in the inclusion (in chapter 1) of an entire paragraph devoted to an account of the 1854 funeral in London of Nathan Adler’s first wife, Henrietta. I am aware that this mode of writing, redolent of books one encounters on hotel coffee-tables, has its supporters. I am not one of them.

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