

9-2015

To the gates of Jerusalem : the diaries and papers of James G. McDonald, 1945-1947 (book review)

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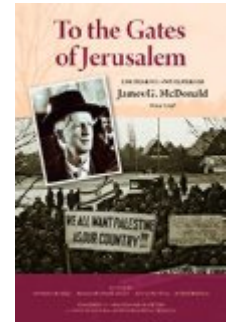
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Recommended Citation

Peck, Abraham J. PhD, "To the gates of Jerusalem : the diaries and papers of James G. McDonald, 1945-1947 (book review)" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. 32.
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Norman J. W. Goda, Barbara McDonald Stewart, Severin Hochberg, Richard Breitman, eds.. *To the Gates of Jerusalem: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1945-1947*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01509-9.



Reviewed by Abraham Peck

Published on H-Judaic (September, 2015)

Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Because there are so few of them, genuine “heroes” of the Holocaust draw great praise and attention. Some are those who saved lives, such as the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Others, such as the Polish diplomat/courier Jan Karski, sought to alert the world to the Final Solution, the destruction of European Jewish life, but were unable to save a single life. In the days and months after the end of World War II, other “heroes” emerged who sought to bring a measure of comfort and consolation to the “surviving remnant,” the few thousand Jewish survivors who were left to face the end of a thousand-year civilization and culture and to absorb the personal losses of entire families and whole communities. Among those, two individuals stand out. Earl J. Harrison, a former United States commissioner of immigration and naturalization and the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, visited, at the request of President Harry Truman, thirty displaced persons (DP) camps in the American zones of Germany and Austria as well as the Bergen-Belsen/Hohne camp in the

British zone of Germany. What he saw and heard outraged him. He reported back to Truman that “as matters now stand we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we do not exterminate them. They are in concentration camps in large numbers under military guard instead of SS troops.”[1] Because of Harrison’s report, most of the large DP camps that had housed not only Jewish survivors but also non-Jews from various Baltic nations, some of whom had served as concentration camp guards and Nazi collaborators, became entirely Jewish. Armed American military guards and barbed wire emplacements were removed. Rabbi Abraham J. Klausner, an American army chaplain, became the greatest single source of support for the survivors, collecting and publishing the names of those who survived, organizing a central committee of survivors in the American zone of Germany, and flaunting army regulations to obtain goods and services otherwise unobtainable to the “surviving remnant.”

That is where matters stood until 2003. In that year, the family of James G. McDonald (1886-1964) a former League of Nations high commissioner for refugees and chair of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, presented his private diaries to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to complement the extensive collection of his papers held by Columbia University. Within a half-dozen years, two volumes of those diaries appeared in publication (*Advocate for the Doomed: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1932-1935* [2007] and *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1935-1945* [2009], edited by two outstanding historians associated with the USHMM, Richard Breitman and Severin Hochberg, and by McDonald's youngest daughter, Barbara McDonald Stewart, herself an academic and scholar.

Based on the diaries, James G. McDonald became a new "American hero" of the Holocaust and its aftermath, as the USHMM described him in its publications. It was a far cry from the assessment of McDonald's activities during the 1930s and WWII on behalf of European Jewry in the opinion of two historians who did not see him "as a person of great stature ... he never fought strongly enough to get his way"[2] and who, in either his role with the League of Nations or with the Advisory Committee "did not exhibit the energy or determination needed to overcome obstacles that the Roosevelt administration and other governments placed in his path." [3]

Shortly after Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany in early 1933, McDonald interviewed him in fluent German and criticized Hitler's pronounced anti-Semitism and attack on German Jewry. Hitler responded that the world did not know how to deal with the threat of Jews but that he, Hitler, did and he would show the world how it could be accomplished. From that moment forward, McDonald began to publicly appeal to both governments and private organizations on ways

to prevent what he felt was a mortal danger to German Jewry. His lack of success with the League of Nations led to his resignation after only two years as high commissioner, and he continued in his capacity as a member of Roosevelt's Advisory Committee. He pleaded for American financial support of refugee resettlement and visas for Jewish refugees. He received little or no support from Roosevelt or the US Department of State.

Between both of these appointments, McDonald pursued his case for the rescue of German and European Jewry as a member of the *New York Times* editorial board and as a radio commentator on a national network. But he was unable to find a federal position of any note although he maintained ties to the highest levels of the US government.

With Roosevelt's death in April 1945 and the ascension of Harry Truman to the presidency, McDonald felt that he had a unique opportunity--to head the 1945 survey of the Jewish DPs in Europe. Although he had support from the American Jewish community, which was long aware of his efforts on behalf of European Jewry, McDonald was not chosen for the position that went to the American "hero" Earl G. Harrison. One of Harrison's recommendations was the immediate entry into Palestine of 100,000 Jews suffering in the DP camps of Germany and Austria. It was a call that President Harry Truman endorsed but that brought a sense of dread to the British authorities responsible for the Palestine Mandate. That fear resulted in a British initiative, the creation of an Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry on Palestine. The commission would consist of six British and six American members. While McDonald was not an immediate choice for the commission, especially given the concern of the State Department that he was too deeply involved in American and Palestinian Jewish affairs, perhaps even in the employ of the Zionist Jewish Agency, he was ultimately made a member.

To the Gates of Jerusalem focuses on the months between December 1945 and the Israeli declaration of independence on May 14, 1948. Although McDonald's diary ends in April 1946, the remaining years of his activities are superbly documented by the editors. Indeed, this is perhaps the best example of an edited diary that this reviewer has seen. It is clear that these are first-rate historians (including the very fine Holocaust scholar Norman J. W. Goda), themselves working on archival and secondary materials that help to illuminate McDonald's diary entries and beyond.

The volume includes a varied cast of characters. There are those who make up the Commission of Inquiry, those who support the admission of the 100,000, and those who oppose any further admission of Jews to Palestine despite the Balfour Declaration and support the British White Paper severely limiting Jewish immigration. There is the list of those who testify before the commission. We read of the testimony of leading American Zionists such as Rabbis Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, leading Palestinian Zionists such as Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Shertok, and Golda Meir, as well as the anti-Zionist Palestinians and Arabs from across the Middle East. Lurking in the shadows are the influence and machinations of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, living in exile and fresh from several years in Berlin working with the Nazi government on propaganda against the Allies and the Yishuv, the Palestinian Jewish community. The arguments for and against Jewish immigration to Palestine are eerily similar to those that continue to be heard nearly seven decades later, with the exception that there now exists an independent Jewish state.

James G. McDonald plays an extraordinary role in the commission's activities. He is relentless in his insistence on the right of the 100,000 to immigrate to Palestine and yet is extremely fair in seeking to understand both sides of the argument. In the end, the commission, despite the opposition

of the British government and the American Department of State (in one diary entry McDonald refers to the American ambassador to Baghdad, George Wadsworth, as "so prejudiced that compared with him the [Grand] Mufti is a Zionist" (p. 266) unanimously upheld the right of the 100,000 Jews to enter Palestine, among other recommendations.

The commission's conclusions did not sit well with either the British government or the State Department. In fact, the British, with State Department approval, backed a second plan (the Morrison-Grady Plan) that would nullify the commission's recommendations and partition Palestine between a large Palestinian portion and a tiny Jewish one. Truman was swayed by the plan until he met with McDonald on July 27, 1946. The latter openly criticized the president for allowing the State Department-led committee involved in the Morrison-Grady Plan to dilute Truman's own acceptance of the commission's recommendations. McDonald wrote that Truman "exploded at this point.... I came back time and time again that even if indirectly he gave assent to this thing (Grady-Morrison Plan) he will be responsible for scraping the Jewish interests in Palestine" (p. 248). In a letter to the American Jewish entertainer Eddie Cantor, McDonald later recounted that after the meeting with Truman, "Senators Wagner and Mead, who were my sponsors, told the American Zionist Emergency Council that they had never heard a more frank and effective presentation to the President. Well, I had nothing to lose save honor, so I let him have it straight" (p. 249).

Convinced that McDonald was correct in his assessment, Truman reiterated America's endorsement of the admission of 100,000 and rejected the Grady-Morrison Plan. Yet the commission's recommendations were never implemented. Events in Palestine escalated quickly with the British withdrawal from the mandate, the United Nations vote for partition, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the beginning of hostilities

with its neighboring Arab states. McDonald would go on to become the first American special representative to Israel and then its first ambassador. But that story will have to await the fourth volume of the diaries. What can be put to rest is the impression that James G. McDonald was not a “person of great stature” who did not “exhibit energy and determination needed to overcome obstacles.” On the contrary, his legacy as an American “hero of the Holocaust” is assured.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in Abraham J. Peck, “A Continent in Chaos: Europe and the Displaced Persons,” *Liberation 1945* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1995), 112.

[2]. Haim Ganizi, “James G. McDonald, High Commissioner for Refugees, 1933-1935,” *Wiener Library Bulletin* nos. 43-44 (1977): 51.

[3]. Bat Ami Zucker, review of Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg, eds., *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1933-1945*, H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews, November, 2009.

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Citation: Abraham Peck. Review of Goda, Norman J. W.; Stewart, Barbara McDonald; Hochberg, Severin; Breitman, Richard, eds. *To the Gates of Jerusalem: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1945-1947*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

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