THE ORDINARINESS OF BEING JEWISH: JEWISH ‘NORMALITY’ IN MANCHESTER, 1830–1880

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Between anti-Semitic and Whig presentations of the history of Anglo-Jewry lies the occasionally uncomfortable reality of Jewish normality. Despite the best efforts of the Anglo-Jewish elites, British Jews did not always behave as they were expected to do, and the city of Manchester in the Victorian period provides an excellent window onto the world of everyday Jewish diaspora life. It was a bustling city characterized by massive immigrant settlement, which juxtaposed popular anti-alien sentiment and the self-congratulatory platitudes of liberal Mancunians. Looking beyond the defensive posturing of local Jewish community leaders such as Nathan Laski, the historian is led to the sordid reality of bankruptcy, domestic violence, theft, perjury, con-artistry, assault, gambling, and prostitution. The argument presented here is that the danger of constructing Jewish life in terms of a rose-tinted collective mythology – or in terms of an anti-Semitic obsession with Jewish difference – can be tempered by the notion of ‘Jewish ordinariness’.

Conceptions of Jewish ‘normality’ are significant not only for the study of Anglo-Jewry, but also for understanding the perspectives of the social historians of Anglo-Jewry. The kinds of evidence which any social historian uses quickly reveal major differences in perception of the 19th century Anglo-Jewish experience. One perspective is that of the anti-Semite, whose narrative flows through deep-seated and all-too-familiar stereotypes. Although these hostile images are highly flexible, occasionally subtle and sometimes difficult to detect, historians are now sufficiently well-equipped with knowledge of how anti-Semitism might arise and the forms it might take to unravel the reality from the distortions. Another perspective has been described as a ‘Whig’ interpretation of Jewish history: Jewish history, that is, as a narrative of ‘progress’ under the auspices of a largely benevolent communal leadership in an essentially liberal society. Currently this perspective is being slowly, but radically, unpicked by a new generation of historians which includes, amongst many others, David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and David Feldman, all of whom have rejected a Whig orthodoxy usually traced to Cecil Roth.

This essay touches on what may be seen as another significant disjunction in Anglo-Jewish history: that between what is often presented as the ‘normality’ of 19th century Jewish communal life, and what might be described as its actuality, even as its ‘ordinariness’. It is another sharp clash of images, here between, on the one hand, images projected by Jewish communal leaders, the Jewish press, and liberal Judaeophiles, of what the 19th century community was like, or rather how they wished it to be seen (or, for that matter, what they thought it ought to be like), and the realities of Manchester’s late Victorian Jewry. The

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suggestion here is that the contrasting images may be traced to a diasporic experience in which the Jewish community had somehow to adjust to life in a non-Jewish setting. While the experience itself was common to all Jewish communities, the precise narratives to which it gave rise differ in detail from country to country and town to town.

In this chapter, the place and period of focus is late 19th century Manchester Jewry, particularly the community of the 1870s and 1880s, a period during which Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe was gathering pace and in which Manchester Jewry was subject to verbal attack from those who took objection to the size and what they saw as the nature of new immigrant settlement. It was a time, it might be argued, when the Jewish community was thrown on the defensive and when it seemed particularly important to the Jewish leadership to present images of communal life which somehow countered those of the anti-alien and the anti-Semite. It was a time, too, when liberal Christians felt the need to come out and be counted. Such strategies, however, both began earlier and continued long after the most intense phase of anti-alienism ended.

The Manchester Narrative

The public discourse which accompanied the quest for Jewish emancipation between 1830 and 1858 persuaded the leaders of the Jewish community in Manchester (as elsewhere) that it had somehow to ‘prove’ its entitlement to political equality. Communal leaders were made to feel that they had to show that Manchester Jews were (or were likely to become) sufficiently educated, anglicised, law-abiding, patriotic and civic minded to merit their elevation into full citizenship of the British state. This was also the hope of those who actually led the quest for emancipation. In Manchester these were cotton merchants of Dutch and German origin and a few successful retail traders: people, that is, who by 1830 had already achieved economic and social standing. It was in the interests of such leaders, both as a class and as Jews, to so ‘improve’ the community that its political future (and their social standing) would be assured. The Jewish middle-classes were also those most likely to achieve personal benefits from emancipation, in the shape of municipal or national office, as indeed they did.

In the case of a local non-Jewish liberal elite in Manchester, support for Jewish emancipation was both an expression and a proof of the liberalism of their New Athens. Since the 1820s their chief mouthpiece, the Manchester Guardian, had contrasted the anti-Semitism of other countries with the welcome accorded to Jews by Manchester. Typically this point, German and Dutch merchants and shopkeepers). They were law-abiding, sober, respectable, civic-minded and benevolent. They had undergone, it was left unsaid, the transforming chemistry of liberalism.

The inner ‘improvement’ of the Jewish community in preparation for its political freedom began in 1838 with the creation of a Manchester Hebrew Association whose self-appointed tasks were to organise an elementary education for Jewish children from poorer families (their own were educated by home tutors or in private academies) and to arrange for sermons in English to be delivered in the community’s only synagogue, then a tiny, unadorned building in Halliwell Street near the centre of Manchester. Within two or three years, both these tasks had been accomplished. After toying with the idea of sending Jewish children to
such non-Jewish schools as the Lyceums of Manchester and Salford, the Association opted for a Jewish elementary school, the Manchester Jews School, which opened in rented accommodation on Cheetham Hill Road, the heart of Manchester’s Jewish Quarter, in 1840. A religious minister capable of delivering sermons in English was recruited from the older, and then larger, Jewish community in neighbouring Liverpool.\(^1\)

What mattered most to the Association’s committee, led by the affluent and probably Jamaican-born cotton manufacturer, Philip Lucas, was not so much the reality of communal life as its image: how it was seen by others. Sometimes this was made explicit. Jacob Franklin, son of a Manchester optician (and later to become editor of Anglo-Jewry’s first newspaper, *The Voice of Jacob*) spoke of raising ‘the character of our nation in the estimation of others’.\(^2\)

The changes thought necessary by the Association clearly promoted the image of a community seeking respectability through anglicisation. The legacy of the emancipation ‘struggle’ was the continuing emphasis of its leaders not on how the community was, but how it looked. There were few Christian outsiders, at least at this stage in communal history, who had the will or the opportunity to assess the community from within.

It also tickled the humanitarian ego of the native middle-classes to go along with an image which appeared to confirm their liberality and its consequences. In their eyes Jews were ‘well-ordered and educated’, ‘peaceable and law abiding’, ‘a most wealthy and respectable section of the Manchester world’, ‘liberal in principle and purse’, ‘eminently loyal and useful citizens’, ‘high in reputation for wealth and charity’, a ‘straightforward and remarkably sober class or people’. For the liberal middle-classes the enemy within was not the Jew, who, in their eyes, had clearly come to adopt middle-class values, but the (supposedly) ‘riotous’ and drunken Irishman.\(^3\)

Jewish communal leaders, with power both within the community and outside it, also served as mediators, particularly in the setting up of ‘ritual occasions’, when middle-class Jews met up formally with middle-class Mancunians and civic dignitaries, and when each was expected to lavish praise on the other. The events might be anything from an annual general meeting of a communal charity to the consecration of new synagogues (on one occasion it was to confer a ‘civic blessing’ on a new *mikveh*). Such otherwise empty occasions of mutual praise served to confirm the community’s integration into the city, and the city’s reciprocal tolerance. On occasion mediation assumed a personal character, as when, in the 1880s, Henry Samson, a Reform Jew, was president of the Jewish Board of Guardians, while his business partner in the export trade, Henry Leppoc, a Jewish convert to Unitarian Christianity, served as chairman of the Manchester Poor Law Guardians. More frequently it represented the close bonds of class, apparently strong enough to overcome differences in religion and heritage.

The generation of leaders typified by Lucas, who in 1851 became Manchester’s first Jewish city councillor and who exercised communal power during the 1870s and 80s, was


made up largely of a minor plutocracy of merchants and industrialists engaged in the manufacture or export of cotton goods, and highly successful retailers like Benjamin Hyam, Manchester’s first manufacturer of ready-made clothes: a miniature, but localised version of the London ‘Cousinhood’. It was they who served as the patrons and managers of such communal educational, social and welfare organisations as the Manchester Jews School, the Manchester Jewish Board of Guardians, founded in 1867 on the model of a similar organisation created earlier in London, and the Jewish Working Men’s Club, founded in the early 1880s, also after a London blueprint. It was they who felt called upon, although as much to preserve their own hard-won status as to protect the community, to respond to the anti-alienism of sections of the Manchester press. It was they who shaped the flow of ‘official’ communal news to the non-Jewish press and to the Jewish press in London. It was they who felt the need to ally themselves with their liberal Christian peers, who, in turn, found in the situation another opportunity to advertise their liberality.

The contrast between an idealised version of communal life and a more complex normality is to be found in the contrast between, on the one hand, the official reports of Jewish institutions, the official pronouncements of the London Jewish press (Manchester had no Jewish newspaper of its own until the 1930s) and the pronouncements of Manchester’s liberal elite, amply reported by the Manchester Guardian, and, on the other, the spontaneous, unmediated reports of events involving Jews in the more parochial and less liberal sectors of the local press, typified by the weekly Manchester City News.

Images and Realities, 1870s and 80s

Official reports from the Jews School, the Jewish Board of Guardians and the Jewish Working Men’s Club (JWMC) intended for the local press went out of their way to stress the charitable intentions of Jewish leaders, the merits and potential for citizenship of the Eastern European immigrants then under attack as ‘undesirable aliens’, and the ways in which the JWMC was introducing immigrants to English social etiquette, English forms of leisure, English patriotism and the English language. It was claimed that the work of the Jewish Board of Guardians and the Jews School was ‘superior’ to that of the English Poor Law because it ‘had introduced into it the feelings of charity and religion [and] had endeavoured to uphold the cause of education and charity.’ It had offered the Jewish poor ‘those manifestations of sympathy to which they were accustomed’; unlike the Poor Law, the Jewish Board did not ‘pauperise’ its applicants, but had simply ‘given as a charity for which they have a right to ask.’

Poorer Jewish immigrants also supposedly differed from the applicants to the Poor Law. They were not by nature ‘paupers’, but the victims of temporary misfortune. They looked to the Board only for initial help towards economic independence. Their ‘foreignness’ was also temporary, a ‘Ghetto bend’ which philanthropy would iron out. If not themselves always as open to immediate change as they might be, the children of immigrants, it was said, would soon adjust to English standards of behaviour and the obligations of English citizenship.

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4 Williams, The Making of Manchester Jewry, Chapter 4; ‘The Plutocracy’.
5 AGM of the Manchester Jewish Board of Guardians, as reported in the Manchester City News (hereafter MCV), 21 June 1879.
Meantime they were hard-working, religiously devout, imbued with exceptional loyalty to their families, and as anxious themselves to escape pauperism and become economically independent as Manchester was to keep them off the rates.

The London Jewish press reserved a brief column for Manchester news, which was made up of the formal activities of Jewish charities, the foundation (and committeemen) of new synagogues and societies, Jewish achievements (scholarships, medals, presidencies, elections to the city council), and the kind of ritual occasions intended to confirm Jewish-Christian harmony. Obituaries of the Jewish great and good were accompanied by notes of the progress of the aspiring in communal life and/or English politics.

All this was underwritten by liberal Mancunians, whose praise for the Jews reached what might be seen an extreme of liberal narcissism, in part to distance themselves from equally extreme Czarist persecution of Russian Jewry. In 1882, at a public meeting to decry Russian anti-Semitism, John Slagg, a Manchester Liberal MP, summarised his view of Jewish emancipation:

In every country where they were allowed full rights and privileges of citizenship they conformed to the laws of that country: they blended with its institutions and they constituted an element in their societies of the finest and most useful description... [W]e had no better Englishmen in England than the Jews. [In Manchester] the Jewish community... constituted one of our greatest ornaments. They were, whether considered socially in their aspect as merchants or in any other relationship of citizenship, an element of the community of which the people of Manchester might be and were justly very proud.⁶

This was the Jewish community as its leaders wished it to be seen: a respectable, anglicised, philanthropic, and loyal middle-class, paving the way to integration, civic virtue and economy of the city.

**Jewish Ordinariness**

It is not so much a matter of such an image being entirely false as being very far from complete, as air-brushing out everything which might suggest an alternative. No doubt Slagg was right in his account of Jewish merchants. What is absent is the other two-thirds of a community then numbering around 7,000, particularly, the Yiddish-speaking Eastern European immigrants, who had been arriving since the mid-1840s,⁷ living in 1882 in overcrowded slums like Red Bank and Strangeways (about to attract the attention of the xenophobe and the anti-Semite), working long hours for low pay in cramped and insanitary clothing and furniture workshops and living a religious life in makeshift *chevraoth* separate not only from the city but from their richer co-religionists.

But the divorce of image from reality was more than demographic. In the pages of the *Manchester City News*, edited, it is true, by the nativist, John Nodal, associated with a group of less than mediocre anecdotalists, antiquarians and aspiring writers and artists, there emerges a community like any other: with elements and individuals mired (as in any other) in extreme

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⁶ Manchester Guardian, 4 February 1882.
poverty, petty criminality, social disorder, violence, murder, fraud, prostitution, sexual misdemeanour, and inter-filial betrayal.

Between 1875 and 1882 (the year of Slagg’s speech), interspersed with news of Jewish office-holders at the Royal Manchester Institution, the spectacular donations to charity of a Jewish optician, William Aronsberg, the presentation of an oil painting to Henry Julius Leppoc for his work on the Manchester Board of Guardians, Jewish shareholders in the Manchester Aquarium, commissions awarded to Jewish members of Manchester Volunteer Regiments, Jewish invites to the Lord Mayor’s Juvenile Ball, Jews present at the Lord Mayor’s ‘grand soiree’, Jewish language teachers and chess-players at the Manchester Athenaeum, and an admiring article on ‘Jews in the Yarn Trade’, are City News reports of the following:

An itinerant Jewish shoemaker housed in a lodging house for foreigners situated in Crown Square, the most squalid sector of Manchester’s worst slum, Angel Meadow, absconding to Liverpool with the takings of a fellow-lodger, also Jewish;

Two Jewish pawnbrokers fined for ‘detaining’ the watches pledged by clients, others for using illegal weights;

The palatial mansion of a bankrupted Jewish merchant sold, with all its contents, by public auction;

Five Jewish lodging-house keepers with property in Red Bank fined for overcrowding on information supplied by the Superintendent of the Manchester Nuisance Department;

Esther, Louis and Moses Feinberg and Moses Frankel, all of Strangeways (one focus of Eastern European Jewish settlement), as part of a gang which stole £1,000’s worth of silk from a Manchester warehouse; the police caught up with them in London. The City News carried regular reports of their trial and conviction in the City Police Court and the Manchester Quarter Sessions (and imprisonment) under the heading ‘The Great Silk Robberies’;

Harris Kimeroski deserting his wife and family (who are thus confined in the Manchester Workhouse) and turning up in a ‘low lodging house’ in Liverpool, where, until the police catch up with him, he is preparing to cross the Atlantic, ‘with a young woman’;

Louis Kaufman, a tobaccoconist, appearing in the City Police Court for defrauding a firm of stockbrokers by false representation. One of his witnesses, also Jewish, is charged with perjury. Although both are acquitted (to ‘cheering and clapping of hands’ from Kaufman’s friends in court) the Stipendiary magistrate comments: ‘Technically, I don’t think you can prove a case… I won’t say anything about what it is morally’.

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8 *MCN*, 12 May 1877.
9 *MCN*, 7 July 1877.
10 *MCN*, 10 January 1880.
11 *MCN*, 23 February 1875.
12 *MCN*, 3 and 10 February 1877.
13 *MCN*, 31 January 1880.
14 *MCN*, 2 January 1875.
15 *MCN*, 16 January 1875; 17 January 1880.
16 *MCN*, 20 March 1875.
17 *MCN*, 12 June 1875.
18 *MCN*, 19, 26 June; 10 July 1875.
19 *MCN*, 27 November 1875.
20 *MCN*, 28 October; 18 November 1875.
A Jewish quack doctor, Isaac J. Lewis, fined for describing himself as an MD and selling worthless cures;\(^{21}\)

The wife of a Jewish export merchant imprisoned for 12 months for shop-lifting two shawls, three yards of velvet, two neck furs, 25 pairs of gloves, 16 stockings, one muffler, three yards of belting, 64 yards of ribbons, 54 yards of ribbon velvet, one flower and one feather;\(^{22}\)

Conflict between Jewish merchants taken to the Civil Court, which suggest that the Jewish plutocracy was nothing like as coherent as its public face;\(^{23}\)

A Jewish money-lender fined for damage to property in an attempt to seize the furniture of one of his clients, who is stabbed in the process by one of a gang of thirty men;\(^{24}\)

Trapowski, a jeweller in Strangeways, taken to court by the Chorlton Board of Guardians and ordered to pay for the maintenance of a wife, also Jewish, whom he had deserted. In court he stated that ‘he was willing to pay for her in the [Union] Workhouse’ (which lacked facilities for kosher meals);\(^{25}\)

Mary Blundell, a prostitute, occupying one of the ‘disorderly’ houses in Chorlton-on-Medlock, let furnished and cheaply by a Jewish merchant, Maurice Youngerman, who said ‘he could find her another... if there was any bother’;\(^{26}\)

An illegal still found in the house rented by a Jewish family in Red Bank, with bottles of wine in the gutters;\(^{27}\)

Michael Chefnoski, a Jewish tailor residing in Beswick’s Row, Angel Meadow, gaoled for one month for neglecting his wife and child. He is described as ‘a great gambler’ who abused his wife, once threatening to strike her with a [tailor’s] sleeve board.\(^{28}\)

Much of this was trivia. Some of it was perhaps given undue publicity because of the Jewish identity (often noted) of the perpetrator, but what it offers is part of a more accurate view of Jewish normality. So do significant aspects (omitted in their official reports) of Jewish educational and philanthropic bodies, particularly the intensity of their hostility to Yiddish and to aspects of immigrant religiosity regarded as ‘un-English’. Most recipients of charity from the Jewish Board of Guardians were Orthodox; many of the managers Reform. To keep the immigrants on the move, financial support could be offered only once during an immigrant’s first six months of residence in Manchester. Support of any kind was refused to parents who would not send their children to the (anglicising) Jews School or who belonged to ‘clandestine societies’ (that is, _chevroat_). Immigrant children arriving at the Jews School with Yiddish first names had them forcibly changed to names that were recognisably English (so Tauba became Matilda).

The idea that the Jewish Board was more ‘sympathetic’ to applicants than public charities, although true in some of the details of its mechanisms, needs to be read with the reservation that the Jewish Boards in London and Manchester were modelled on the Boards of

\(^{21}\) _MCN_, 28 October 1876.

\(^{22}\) _MCN_, 16 December 1876; 13 January 1877.

\(^{23}\) _MCN_, 23 January 1878.

\(^{24}\) _MCN_, 16 November 1878; 26 January 1879.

\(^{25}\) _MCN_, 23 August 1879.

\(^{26}\) _MCN_, 13 September 1879.

\(^{27}\) _MCN_, 8 March 1884.

\(^{28}\) _MCN_, 3 April 1880.
Guardians of the English Poor Law Unions, with their typical rejection of the ‘undeserving poor’. Jewish wives temporarily deserted by husbands who had gone ahead to the United States were routinely incarcerated in Union Workhouses.

The Continuity of Image-making

During the 1880s and 90s the old mercantile elite was gradually displaced by a new communal leadership made up of successful entrepreneurs of Eastern European (and chiefly Russian) origin. These were men who, after starting life on the unremunerative shop-floors of small clothing and furniture workshops, or as clerks in the warehouses of export merchants, had, by their skill and enterprise, risen to become entrepreneurs, at first on a small scale, and, in some cases, subsequently as the owners of factories each employing 1,000 works or more. Most were manufacturers of what had been the staple product of earlier workshops: clothing and furniture, footwear, cloth caps, cigarettes and waterproof garments. A few branched into cotton after apprenticeships typically with their merchant co-religionists of German, Dutch or Sephardi origin.

One of these latter was Nathan Laski, born in Russian Poland, and brought to England in the 1860s as a child by his parents, first to Middleborough, then to Manchester. His father, who in Manchester became a ‘jewellery traveller’, sent his son to the Manchester Jews School and, when he left, found him a clerical apprenticeship with a German firm of export traders. Laski rose quickly to become first a partner in the firm and then, with one of his brothers, an export merchant on his own account. A man of striking appearance, rich oratorical powers and dictatorial inclinations, with a particular gift for fund-raising and mediation, he moved fairly rapidly up the ladder of communal institutions to become, by 1891 the youngest ever president of the Manchester Great Synagogue, by 1910 president of the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Manchester Shechita Board and the Manchester Victoria Jewish Hospital, and in 1924 president of the Manchester and Salford Jewish Representative Council, a position he held with only a brief interruption, until his death (in a motor accident) in 1942.

From his predecessors Laski inherited what had become the major strategy designed to protect the security and inner life of the community, that is, the manufacture and promotion of an imagery deemed to correspond with what Christian Manchester had by then learned to accept: respectable, stable, law-abiding, civic-minded and eminently English. With powerful contacts within the Christian city, as a merchant, magistrate and a Liberal (he became chairman of the Liberal Association of North Manchester, in which capacity, he helped secure the 1905 victory of Winston Churchill, then a Liberal, in the North-West Manchester constituency), he was in the ideal position for mediation. This he did with deferential aplomb. At the time of Queen Victoria’s death he had the whole of the (very large) Great Synagogue draped in black. He attended Christian services and invited his Christian friends to attend synagogue on special occasions. He was openly critical of those communal institutions he judged to be un-English: the Manchester Yeshivah, for example, which conducted its teaching in Yiddish and which avoided secular learning.

Laski was a master-craftsman in the construction and sustaining of images of Jewish respect for the law, orderly conduct and patriotism. At his mansion in Smedley Lane, a plusher sector of Cheetham Hill, he chaired a private ‘court’ which dealt with minor offences
and communal disputes before they could reach open court. It is said that by the time of his death he had adjudicated in hundreds of such cases. When refugees began to seek entry to Britain from Germany after 1933, although he associated himself with the Central British Fund, he did all he could to keep them away from Manchester, where they might have suggested a renewal of the ‘alien invasion’, of which his own family had been part, and which had then attracted fierce anti-Jewish feeling in the city. He warned Jewish anti-Fascists to desist from militant confrontation with Mosley’s Blackshirts, as he had warned others to avoid causing any kind of disorder on the Manchester streets. Before 1938, when Kristallnacht and the British response to it finally persuaded him to promote Manchester committees for their reception, he took no public action to ease the settlement of refugees in Manchester. Nor did he publicise in Manchester the terrors faced by German Jews, though he knew of them well enough, for fear of alienating a government which had settled for appeasement. It might be said that he took image-making to its very highest levels.

There is a real danger of the history and heritage of the Jewish community being constructed out of images which have melded into a collective mythology. By detaching the Jewish experience from the more rounded experiences of others, this might achieve a result far from that intended: delivering to the anti-Semite just that separate and distinct target they most crave. It might, by sharply differentiating the experience of Jews from that of other and later immigrants, persuade Jews that in some way their experience was qualitatively different from that of other newcomers to British society, and therefore irrelevant to their understanding. It might persuade Jews, historians and others that the images somehow constitute Jewish normality.

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