

shapes suggest the exceptional precision and professionalism that led the president of the British Publisher's Association to rank Paul's among the best 14 bookshops in the world.

*Landmarks* includes an essay by Jeanette Ward and Barbara Rogers recalling the many years they spent working in Blackwood Paul's Hamilton shop. Paul was no easy employer and the account of their labours under his benign tyranny induces the odd shudder. 'Careless errors were rewarded with scorn sufficient to unnerve the calmest of us'. Yet their recollections have a strong undercurrent of affection and admiration. He gave his staff in-house bookselling courses—'give in one short phrase the kinds of subjects treated by the following writers of novels: Koestler, Orwell, Rex Warner, [and] Graham Greene'—and sought to instill in them his own love of literature. Ward and Rogers felt that in working for Blackwood Paul they were 'part of, and sometimes at the centre of, the world of books'.

Thomson and Paul have achieved a delicate and skilful balance with *Landmarks*: producing both a useful research tool and a book that should appeal to the general reader. The tone in these 24 pages is appropriate to its subject and intention: it is informative and readable with carefully chosen illustrations. The list of 'Paul Publications in Date Order' which fills the inside covers is a clever and effective way of presenting necessary information.<sup>1</sup> That most essential feature of any scholarly work—a bibliography—is here in full, right down to the number of editions and year of reprinting. In all, a seemingly effortless combination of utility and elegance, sets this book apart.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> A number of these titles are educational publications; concerning these Janet Paul comments that they were "imaginatively commissioned and scrupulously edited from 1958 until 1965 by Phoebe Meikle". Given that members of Blackwood Paul's family were stung by the "welter of negative criticism" of him in Meikle's recently published autobiography this, admittedly brief, mention shows a commendable generosity of spirit. In *Landmarks*, Ward and Rogers, by offering a contrasting view of Blackwood Paul as an employer, speak eloquently in his defence.

*The exhibition 'Landmarks in New Zealand publishing: Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945-1965' will be on display at Waikato Museum of Art and History during April to August 1996.*

*The Historic Places Trust intends putting a commemorative plaque on the site of Paul's Book Arcade in Victoria Street, Hamilton.*

#### BOOK REVIEW

## A comfortable level of understanding?

*Far from the Promised Land? Being Jewish in New Zealand*

Ann Beaglehole and Hal Levine. Pacific Press, Wellington, 1995, 146pp.

Reviewed by Paul Morris

Jews have come to New Zealand since the beginnings of colonial settlement and they are still coming, although these days they are more likely to come from South Africa and the countries of the former Soviet Union than from Britain, Australia and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Their number has always been, and continues to be, small. The 1991 census recorded only just over 3,000 Jews in New Zealand, approximately 0.1% of the population.

In this new study, the two Wellington-based authors seek to provide an 'up-to-date and comprehensive picture of Jewish identity by capturing something of what they call 'a Kiwi style of Jewishness'. They attempt to convey what it is like to grow up Jewish in New Zealand and the sorts of religious lives lived by Jews here; to portray the experiences of antisemitism and levels and types of identification with Israel and Jews living overseas; to question the significance of the Holocaust for New Zealand Jews; to discuss the attitudes of Jews to marriage to non-Jews; to discern the extent of Jews' commitment to transmitting their Jewish identity to new generations, and to consider what part being Jewish plays in the lives of this tiny band of New Zealanders.

In addressing these issues this book offers fascinating insights into the nature of New Zealand's multicultural society from the perspective of the experiences of one of its minority groups. Also, unlike earlier studies, these views are enhanced by the inclusion of material on Jews who have voted with their feet and left New Zealand to live in Australia, Israel or the US.

Since 1958 when the last book-length study of New Zealand Jewry, as a whole, was published, New Zealand society has undergone dramatic changes, not least in how we understand ourselves and our history. There is an evident need for a new study to reflect these changes. Also, in spite of the fact that only just over half of those self-identified Jews in the 1991 census are affiliated to a synagogue, until most recently studies have tended to focus on the norms of established synagogue communities and all but ignored those who have fallen 'beyond the Pale'. Beaglehole and Levine attempt to redress this imbalance by casting their net

very widely indeed, giving rise to one of the major merits and principal deficiencies of this volume (see below).

By largely allowing New Zealand Jews and Jews who once lived here to speak candidly for themselves, the authors admirably succeed in portraying something of the inner lives of New Zealand Jews, of their concerns and fears, of their doubts and certainties, and of the tensions between life as a Jew and a New Zealander. For example, a Jewish education has often served to educate young Jews not to live Jewish lives in New Zealand but has led them to emigrate to larger Jewish centres overseas. Knowledge of these sentiments has, in general, been confined to those inside the community. And, as the authors themselves note, the Jewish community in New Zealand has tended to follow a 'keep your head down and don't make waves' policy and some will not thank them for going public with the community's 'dirty laundry', as it were.

Who did they speak to? In a rather brief introduction on method, the authors report that their study was based on tape-recorded interviews with 93 people – 53 in Auckland, Wellington and Otago, and 40 New Zealand Jews now living overseas, 31 in Australia and nine in Israel. I would have liked to know what criteria



Sefer Torah (parchment scroll) rescued from a desecrated Czechoslovakian synagogue after WWII, repaired, and presented to the Wellington Hebrew congregation. Above the scroll is a portrait of Wellington Rabbi Herman van Staveren (1849-1930). The occasion marked 150 years of religious services in Wellington, 1843-1993. Photograph Evening Post.

– gender, age, educational level, marital status, affiliation, and so on – were used to select the sample. Why were there no interviewees from Christchurch? Over what period of time were the interviews conducted? If a basic questionnaire was used, what questions were asked or themes addressed? Was gender really not an issue? Sections of the transcribed tapes were then thematically arranged into the seven major chapters – Childhood; Youth; Marriage; A Comfortable Level of Jewishness; Anti-Semitism; Israel; and, Emigration to Australia. Generally this works well although there is often a tension between the views of the different generations that challenges the appropriateness of the chosen themes.

While the decision to be as inclusive as possible is commendable, the authors' attempt to give all groups a fair hearing has resulted in a misleading and distorted view of the community, qua community. There is no authorial guidance to help the reader discern the significance of one opinion over any other. The authors devote unwarranted and disproportionate space to some sectors of the community and fail to reflect the comparative import of the different sectors of the community to the community as a whole. This results in a most unbalanced volume and limits its value in terms of the stated intentions of the authors. For instance, the fourteen page section entitled, 'Some New Zealand Jewish "Types"', in Chapter Four, gives only a page and a quarter to Orthodox Jews, the single largest identifiable sector of the community; a page and a half to Liberal Jews, the next largest; and four and three quarter pages to converts to Judaism. This is followed by four pages devoted to a section on 'Māori Jews' – based on profiles of just two of them!

This lack of balance indicates a much deeper problem which further limits the value of the study to future scholars – the definition of identity and the understanding of the way in which it is constructed. While the authors rightly reject what they refer to as the 'self-justificatory' and 'overtly ideological' definitions of earlier researchers, their own position appears to be differently but just as overtly ideological.

The authors subscribe to a somewhat extreme version of the constructivist view of identity – 'we accept the view that individuals build their (ethnic) identities from the stores and narratives of identity which are available in circulation in our culture'. This is never argued for but merely asserted at the beginning of the study. Although this principle has been used to organise the interview material, many of the interviewees (based on what they report) obviously do not adhere to such a view. The authors' focus on the question of Jewish descent belies the free choice that they insist is the case. I know of no other study of Jewish identity – Israeli, American or other – which does not recognise the importance of identity (normally, although there are, of course, cases of identity by conversion) as something understood as a given, or as an obligation. For most Jews their identity is beyond choice and not of their own making. Dictated by the selected themes, the authors fail to address the nature of Jewish identity itself.

I suspect that a significant number of those interviewed would have responded positively to the notion that being born Jewish was not only traditionally of great importance but continues to be existentially so as well. Whilst it is true that the style of one's Jewishness may well be a choice constructed along the lines of the

authors' view, Jewish identity itself is in almost all cases a prior element on the basis of which subsequent choices are made and evaluated. One's identity as a Jew is not generally a free choice at all but is only the decision to recognise, and act upon the recognition, that one is a Jew being accorded so by an existing community of Jews.

Levine's earlier article, entitled 'Making sense of Jewish ethnicity: identification patterns of New Zealanders of mixed parentage',<sup>1</sup> focused on cases where choice played a much greater role and the identities that he studied were genuinely ambivalent and plural. In this work however, it seems that he has generalised his choice model, appropriate in one context, to Jewish identity as a whole. His generalised, atomised, liberal individualistic assent model of identity is very much in tension with the well established and traditional descent model that operates among Jews. If the majority of Jews did, in fact, decide not only to live in a particular way but also chose to be Jews then this volume would be a very valuable contribution to ethnic identity in New Zealand but while many Jews made the former decision, most did not, and could not, make the second. In a world where there is an intensification of revived ethnic identity, the question of identities understood as being beyond individual choice becomes central.

I began writing this review the day after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the day that marks the climax of the annual, six-week, Jewish penitential cycle. Sitting, standing, fasting and praying, I joined others in a somewhat crowded synagogue in central Wellington. The other synagogue in town, I am sure, was equally full. Three, or perhaps even four, generations of New Zealand Jewry – stalwarts of their communities, religious and not very religious, and those rarely seen in a synagogue – took a Wednesday off work to attend services. An important question might be – what were they all doing there? *Far from the Promised Land? Being Jewish in New Zealand* will not help much, if at all, in providing an answer to this question.

#### NOTES

- 1 Visiting Rabbi L.M. Goldman's *The History of the Jews in New Zealand*, Wellington, Reed, 1958. There have also been surveys, articles, collections of essays on particular communities and a small number of historical studies, see, for example, Michael Salinger, David Esterman, David Levy and Linda Young, *Wellington Jewry*, Wellington, B'nai B'rith, 1983; Ann Gluckman (ed.) *Identity and Involvement: Auckland Jewry, Past and Present*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, 1990; Odeda Rosenthal, *Not strictly Kosher – Pioneer Jews in New Zealand, 1831-1901*, Starchard Press, 1988.
- 2 *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16, 2 (1993), pp.323-244.
- 3 On assent and descent, see Paul Morris, 'Community Beyond Tradition', in *Detraditionalisation: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (eds.), Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, pp.223-249.