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1

Anglo-Jewish History and Early Modern England

In 1906, during a speech to celebrate the 250th anniversary of readmission, Lucien Wolf praised the two men he regarded as the pioneers of philosemitism in England:

Cromwell, the great-hearted Protector, and Menasseh ben Israel, the devoted Jew . . . it was their spirit of toleration and justice which invested [the Whitehall Conference] with all it had of dignity and usefulness . . . they are the figures of a Christian and a Jew, standing together in the dawn of English liberty, twin champions of a wronged people, and heralds of a free state. It is a picture on which we do well to dwell . . . which in its stability and fruitfulness serves as a beacon of toleration and liberty to the dark places that still linger on the face of God's earth.¹

The encounter between Menasseh and Cromwell symbolised, for Wolf, the beginning of a new era: the 'dawn of English liberty' and the 'herald[ing]' of a 'free state'. For him, as for other Anglo-Jewish historians, the English Renaissance was highly significant, as it produced not only a cultural rebirth but also the Renaissance of the Jewish people. During that period, England had become a unique and unprecedented haven for the Jews, the 'wronged people'. Wolf's reference to 'the dark places that still linger on the face of God's earth' was, furthermore, a reminder that he was also talking about his own age. The description of England as a 'free state' and a place of 'liberty' fitted a notion of English identity that had developed during the Victorian era. The 'dark places' were the areas of Continental Europe and Russia which had hosted violent pogroms against the Jews in the late nineteenth century: the Jews were being 'wronged' again.² Britain could consider itself an exception to this

dominant European prejudice, but only up to a point; and there is a note of persuasion in Wolf's speech. Because by the turn of the century, the waves of Jewish immigration from eastern Europe were prompting a backlash of antisemitism and xenophobia, and in the same year as Wolf gave his speech, Parliament passed the Aliens Act, designed to set up a new system of immigration control. This chapter describes how a combination of pride and anxiety led Anglo-Jewish historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to focus their attention on the early modern period, and to formulate a particular understanding of Christian references to Judaism in that period which was to hold sway long after their time. In order to unpack this interpretation, the chapter begins by outlining the events which have so concerned Anglo-Jewish historians, before turning its attention to the development and character of the resulting historical tradition.³

Jews in early modern England

In contrast to the dominant strain of Jewish history – a lachrymose narrative of antisemitism and adversity – the history of the Jews in England stands out as a philosemitic exception.⁴ This reputation is based, however, only on the post-Reformation era; medieval England's treatment of Jews was rather less edifying. A Jewish presence in England was probably first established with the arrival of William the Conqueror, and at its height, medieval Jewry was a thriving community of about 5,000 people. The community's primary occupation was money-lending, which was regarded as a sin by the church, but tolerated, in practice, as a fact of commercial life. Although the community thereby accumulated great wealth, it lost its wealth over time as successive kings imposed a series of punitive taxes. In 1275, usury was declared illegal, and the community found itself depleted both numerically and financially. When Edward I returned from Gascony in 1290, deep in debt, he resorted to asking his Parliament for money. The representatives of the shires and boroughs demanded, in return for granting a special tax, the expulsion of the Jews. The thirteenth-century expulsion is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

In 1290, therefore, England became the first country to expel its Jewish population. As medievalist historians Kenneth Stow and Robert Stacey have argued, however, the factors prompting this apparently egregious and decisive event were complex: a combination of Judeophobia, politics and economics.⁵ Despite the events of 1290, moreover, the Jewish presence in England never entirely disappeared. After Jews were

expelled from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, many migrated to northern Europe. There were Spanish and Portuguese Jews in England during the reign of Henry VIII, and in the Elizabethan era, they became more prominent; one of the most notorious was Roderigo Lopez, the Queen's physician, who was executed in 1594 for conspiring to poison her.⁶ During the late sixteenth century, there were up to 200 Jews living in England, mainly in London; although there was also a small community of Jewish traders in Bristol. In 1609, their numbers were reduced by the expulsion of Portuguese merchants residing in London, but in 1630, England signed a treaty with Spain which meant that Spanish and Portuguese subjects, some of whom were Jews, were exempt from the laws against recusants. A secret Jewish community was gradually established by merchants such as Antonio Fernandez Carvajal.⁷ These were not only *conversos* – Jews who had converted to Christianity – but also crypto-Jews who worshipped in private.⁸ Not only did this community exist, but it was also known about: the Royalist writer and spy, James Howell, wrote from London to a friend in Amsterdam in 1653: 'Touching Judaism, some corners of our city smell as rank of it as doth your's there'.⁹ A convert named Paul Isaiah wrote in 1655 that 'though perhaps there may not be now in England, any great numbers of professed Jews (some to my own knowledge there are, who have their synagogues, and there exercise Judaism) yet, they who live here, as often as they are bound to use their office of prayer (which is twice a day) so often are they bound to blaspheme Christ'.¹⁰

While the number of Jews in England was growing, contact between Christians and Jews both in England and on the Continent increased. A number of English Christians became interested in millenarian ideas involving the discovery of dispersed members of the 12 tribes of Israel and their conversion to Christianity, considered by some to prefigure Christ's Second Coming.¹¹ In 1644, a Marrano Jew named Aaron ha-Levi, also known as Antonio de Montezinos, returned from Quito Province in what is now Ecuador to his home in Amsterdam. A year later, he told Menasseh ben Israel that he had met Israelites descended from the tribe of Reuben living there in secret. Menasseh included Montezinos's account in a book entitled *The Hope of Israel*, which he published in Latin and Spanish in 1650. Later that year, *The Hope of Israel* was translated into English by Moses Wall, a friend of John Milton, and published with a dedication to Parliament.¹² Menasseh also sent a French version of Montezinos's testimony to the millenarian preacher John Dury, which was translated into English and published as part of Thomas Thorowgood's *Iewes in America* in 1650.¹³ John Dury, along with his

friend and patron Samuel Hartlib, was hoping to found a new Jerusalem in England, where doctrinal differences between Protestants would be eliminated, and where a college of Jewish studies would be founded in order to encourage the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

Menasseh ben Israel did not confine his efforts to the readmission of the Jews to England, however. During this period, the migration of Marrano and Sephardi exiles from Brazil, Spain and Venice to the Dutch republic was at its height, and the Jewish community in Amsterdam was actively pursuing schemes to accommodate these people elsewhere.¹⁴ In 1649, two English citizens resident in Amsterdam, Johanna Cartenright and her son Ebenezer, published a petition to Lord Fairfax and the Council of War: it requested that Jews 'be received and permitted to trade and dwell amongst you in this Land, as now they do in the Nether-lands'; this petition was, however, ignored.¹⁵ In 1651, Menasseh himself petitioned the English government to readmit the Jews, and a committee was set up in November 1651 to discuss the matter. In 1654, Menasseh became ill, and sent his son Samuel to England to follow up the petition, along with Manuel Martinez Dormido, alias David Abrabanel, a Spanish Jew who was living in Amsterdam. They arrived in London in October, and sent two further petitions to Cromwell. The first petition included a request by Dormido to the English government to help him recover his property, and the second asked the government to reconsider readmitting the Jews. Both petitions were rejected by the Council, but in February 1655, Cromwell responded to Dormido's financial request, sending a letter to the king of Portugal asking for help on his behalf. It is likely that Dormido, along with a number of Jews in England at that time – including Antonio Carvajal – was acting as an intelligencer for Cromwell's government. Furthermore, in October 1655, England went to war with Spain to compete over South American trade, and it was thought that the Jews might have useful mercantile connections in South America.¹⁶ With the outbreak of war, the English authorities announced that they would confiscate the goods and property of any Spaniards living in England. In March 1656, a wealthy crypto-Jew living in London named Antonio Rodrigues Robles was charged with being a spy. Robles sent Cromwell a petition in which he attempted to keep hold of his property by identifying himself as a Portuguese Jew. The authorities decided that since Robles had been attending Mass, and was not circumcised, this 'induceth vs to conceave he is noe Jew or one that walkes under loose principles, and very different from others of that profession', concluding that they 'upon examinacon doe not finde any convicting evidence to

cleare vp either the Nation or Religion of the peticoner', and Robles was allowed to keep his property.¹⁷

Towards the end of 1655, Menasseh arrived in London and presented Cromwell with a *Humble Address*, entreating the Protector once again to readmit the Jews to England, on the basis, firstly, that since the millenium was approaching, the Jews must be gathered together, and, secondly, that the Jews could be of material benefit to the English Commonwealth.¹⁸ Menasseh also asked for the establishment of a public synagogue and cemetery, as well as religious toleration, the freedom to trade and the right to try cases according to Mosaic Law. The Council of State appointed a sub-committee to investigate these requests, which came up with a list of seven conditions which would have to be met before Menasseh's proposals could be countenanced. In November, a delegation of theologians, merchants and lawyers was selected to determine whether these seven safeguards would be sufficient to allow the Jews to be readmitted; these delegates comprised the Whitehall Conference, which opened in December 1655. The delegates found, however, that they were unable to arrive at a consensus, and the Conference was dissolved.¹⁹ According to a later account, written by Nathaniel Crouch, Cromwell made a speech which attempted to persuade the delegates to arrive at a more settled verdict: 'He had hoped by these Preachers to have had some clearing of the Case, as to matter of Conscience; but seeing these agreed not, but were of different Opinions, it was left more doubtful to him and the Council than before'.²⁰ It is difficult to determine what Cromwell's own view of the prospect of readmission actually was. In Crouch's account, Cromwell emphasised that his only interest lay in the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, as 'he had no ingagement to the Jews but what the Scriptures held forth'.²¹

In March 1656, Menasseh attempted yet again to persuade the English government to readmit the Jews, along with six members of England's existing Jewish community. They produced a document entitled 'The Humble Petition of The Hebrews at Present Residing in the city of London', and sent it to Cromwell. The petition requested 'such Protection may be graunted vs in Writing as that wee may therewith meete at owr said priuate deuosions in owr Particular houses without feere of Molestation either to owr persons famillys or estates'. It also requested permission to establish a Jewish cemetery outside the city limits. Cromwell referred the petition to his Council of State, but it was ignored.²² Menasseh attempted one last time to persuade Cromwell, by publishing a defence of the Jewish race, the *Vindiciae Judaeorum*. But after this too fell on deaf ears, Menasseh was forced to admit defeat.

He appealed to Cromwell for financial help, but with limited success. In September 1657, his son Samuel died, and Menasseh attempted to take his body back to the Dutch Republic to bury him there. He did not complete the journey, however; and died in Middleburg. His widow remained in London, and her subsequent requests to Cromwell for help were also unheeded.

Although Menasseh went away empty-handed, a Jewish community was gradually established in the second half of the seventeenth century; but it was a slow and difficult process. In December 1656, a floor of a building in Creechurch Lane, in the City of London, was leased to Antonio Carvajal, and a small Jewish congregation started to worship there. Steadily, the congregation became more established: Samuel Pepys records in his diary a visit to the synagogue in 1659, and John Greenhalgh describes the synagogue in a letter dated 1662.²³ In February 1657, a small plot of land was acquired by the community and subsequently used as a cemetery.²⁴ In 1701, the large synagogue in Bevis Marks in the City opened; but according to the records there, only four people were buried in the cemetery between 1657 and 1660. In this period, Jews were customarily buried with Roman Catholics, and of the Jews known to have been resident in England before 1659, about two thirds were buried in Christian cemeteries.²⁵

Estimates vary as to the number of Jews who arrived in England after the Whitehall Conference. Taking an average of the figures, between 1656 and 1701 the Jewish population increased from between 100 and 200 to between 500 and 800.²⁶ To put this increase into context, other foreigners arrived in England in much greater numbers during the same period. In 1681, the king announced to the Huguenots of France that they were welcome to come and settle in England; between 50,000 and 100,000 arrived. By 1709, an estimated 13,000 persecuted Protestants from the German Palatinate had arrived in England, and Parliament passed its first naturalisation law for their benefit. Furthermore, Jewish populations elsewhere in Europe increased substantially in this period; Berlin Jewry, for example, increased from a few dozen in 1671 to nearly 1,000 by 1700.²⁷

Although the status of the Jews in England remained unstable in the second half of the seventeenth century, with a great deal of Judeophobic harassment and conversion to Christianity, there is little doubt that the community became better established under Charles II. The synagogue in the building in Creechurch Lane was expanded, and in 1663 the community appointed a governing committee; in 1664, they recruited, temporarily, a rabbi from Amsterdam. Soon after Charles II's accession,

the lord mayor and corporation of the City of London petitioned the king to enforce the expulsion order of 1290, but he refused. When the Conventicle Act of 1664 came into force, banning any religious services which did not conform to the Church of England, the Earl of Berkshire and Paul Rycaut, an associate of English merchants in the Levant who resented Jewish competition, attempted to use the Act to blackmail Jews. Dormido and two other members of the community petitioned the king for protection, and the privy council responded in their favour, declaring that the Jews might 'promise themselves ye effects of ye same favour as formerly they have had so long as they demeane themselves peaceably and quietly with due obedience to his Maties Laws & without scandal to his Government'.²⁸ This was the first official statement in favour of the toleration of Jews in England. Another attempt to expel the Jews failed in 1674, and in 1685, after two brothers, Thomas and Carleton Beaumont, had 37 Jewish merchants arrested for not attending church, the king reassured the community again.²⁹ There were several other attempts by English merchants and their supporters to disturb and expel the Jewish population, but they were resisted by both Charles II and James II.

Early interpretations of 1656

The establishment of a Jewish community in the second half of the seventeenth century was, therefore, an ambiguous and fitful process; and as a result, during the following century and a half, the question of who had readmitted the Jews to England, and indeed of whether they had been readmitted at all, was subject to considerable debate. Furthermore, those who made claims either way were motivated by partisan attitudes towards Cromwell and Charles II. Shortly after Charles's accession, a merchant named Thomas Violet sent a petition of his own to the king asking him to expel the Jews. In his petition Violet described the Whitehall Conference and its aftermath, writing that

Upon several days hearing, *Cromwell* and his Council did give a Toleration and Dispensation to a great number of Iewes to come and live here in *London*, and to this day they do keep publick Worship in the City of *London*, to the great dishonour of Christianity, and publick scandal of the true Protestant Religion, and to the great damage of the Kingdome, especially our merchants, whose trade they engross, and eat the children's bread.³⁰

Violet continues, sarcastically: ‘May it please your Sacred Majestie, to behold *Cromwells* blessed Reformation, he stops the mouths of all Orthodox Ministers, both in publick and private, not permitting them to teach School to put bread in their heads, and at the same time invites into this Nation the Iewes, who killed the Lord Jesus’.³¹ In Violet’s description, the readmission of the Jews becomes a nightmarish spectre:

Oliver Cromwell’s design to bring in the Iewes amongst us, was to make them Farmers of the Customs, and Excise, and to have naturalised them, by that means to have drawn into this Nation the principal Iewes in the World, with their Estate and Credit, which if death had not suppressed the Tyrant, he would have made these Iewes very instrumental to carry on his designs by furnishing Cromwel with vast sums of treasure; Anthony Fardinando the great Iew, told me the Iewes were to advance one Million of Money, to have libertie to bring in two thousand Iewish Merchants, and their Families, to be naturalized, had that design gone on, which was prevented by the death of the Tyrant Oliver, All the English Merchants of this Nation would have been supplanted of their birth-right, and oppressed by the gripping extortion of the Iewes.³²

This fanciful projection, with its wildly exaggerated detail, resembles another commonly repeated rumour: that the Jews were plotting to take over St Paul’s Cathedral and use it as a synagogue.³³ Furthermore, although Thomas Violet complains about Cromwell’s generosity to the Jews, he maintains nevertheless that formal readmission has not yet taken place:

The Iewes being banished by Act of Parliament, as appears by the Records of the Tower, cannot be restored but by Act of Parliament . . . so that the Iewes being banished by common consent in Parliament, and their Estates and Lands sold by the King, as appears by many Records in the Tower they were, and this Act never repealed. It is Felony for any Iew to be found in England, by the Law, neither can any man give them Protection, but by common Consent in Parliament.³⁴

Violet expresses the hope that Charles II and his Parliament will ‘shew their detestation of so wicked a design, as of suffering the Iewes to make their abiding amongst us, if this toleration should continue, and be admitted among us, it would check and hinder the growth of the Gospel of Christ’.³⁵ Violet’s account suggested, therefore, that Cromwell

had unlawfully tolerated the Jews; but his accusations also served as flattery to the new king. Violet was not the only commentator to refer to readmission as a potential possibility rather than an accomplished fact: in a book published in 1692, the bishop of Lincoln, Thomas Barlow, was still debating 'the Damage or Benefit, the Conveniences of Inconveniences which may accrue to the State by [the Jews'] Admission or Rejection'.³⁶ He did not seem to think the Jews had been readmitted as yet:

If indeed the admission, and tolleration of them were disadvantageous to the Gospel, and really tended to the abolition or diminution of the true Faith, or the subversion and hinderance of Christianity, it were certainly neither pious in the supreme Magistrate, nor prudent to admit them; but he ought (in this case) rather to expell them if they were here, then readmit them, now they are away . . . in short, (if after all things considered) the Wisdom of the State shall judge it convenient and beneficial for the Publick to readmit the Jews, (and we are bound in Charity to think that unless they judge so they will not admit them) then they are in Duty bound to do it, notwithstanding any Displeasure (or pretended Scandal) which their Subjects will or can conceive against them for so doing.³⁷

Some commentators believed that it was Charles II rather than Cromwell who had readmitted the Jews, on account of his government's explicit statements in their favour.³⁸ D'Blossiers Tovey wrote in his 1738 chronicle *Anglia Judaica* that 'King *Charles* the *second* must justly be consider'd as their *Introducer* . . . about the Year sixty four, or five, great Numbers of them came into England, and have continu'd to this present Time'.³⁹ In 1753, 15 years after the publication of *Anglia Judaica*, the Jewish Naturalisation Act passed through Parliament. Known as the 'Jew Bill', this Act, designed to enable the naturalisation of foreign-born Jews, prompted such an outcry that it was repealed a few months later. The public reaction to the Jew Bill was illustrated in satirical prints by William Hogarth, and it became the subject, too, of a large pamphlet debate. Some contributors to the Jew Bill controversy believed the Jews had been readmitted by Cromwell a century earlier: an anonymous pamphleteer, writing as a Jew in favour of the Bill, describes how 'from 1291, we had no Re-admission into *England* till 1655, being the Space of 364 Years. The Wisdom of *Cromwell* then brought us into this Country again by a Treaty with *Manasseh Ben-Israel*, wherein the *Jewish* Nation were restored to the Exercise of their Worship in *England*'.⁴⁰ To others, it appeared that the readmission of the Jews was being mooted as if it had

not already happened: an anonymous pamphlet entitled *An Historical Treatise concerning Jews and Judaism, in England* contained 'a Confutation of the Arguments made use of for their Re-admission'.⁴¹ The *Historical Treatise* offered a catalogue of reasons why the Jews should not be allowed to return; it described itself as

A circumstantial Narrative of the Punishments that People have from time to time undergone in this Kingdom, since the Reign of Edward I. With an Account of their particular Crimes and Impieties which occasion'd them. Collected from our Historians and ancient established Laws; by which it appears, that a Jew has no Right to appear in England, without a Yellow Badge fixed on the upper Garment . . . that Synagogues are to be suppressed, and that no Rabbi, on Pain of Death, is to pervert any one to Judaism, and that a Return of the Jews after their Expulsion, renders them incapable of receiving any Benefit from our Laws.⁴²

Also writing against the Bill, the London clergyman William Romaine described how Edward I expelled the Jews from England, after which time, Romaine writes, 'we read nothing of them till the Time of *Cromwell*, and even he was not hardy enough to give them a Licence to return: He only connived at it, as did King *Charles II* and King *James*, and since the Revolution they have continued on the same Footing: For they could never be made natural-born Subjects, while the Act of Parliament, by which they were outlawed, was in full Force against them'.⁴³ There is a reason why the verdict on 1656 varied so widely in 1753: the Jew Bill controversy was inflected by the Parliamentary politics of the time, with – broadly speaking – Whigs in favour of the Bill, and Tories against. The anonymous pamphleteer, a Whig, was a supporter of Cromwell and religious liberty, while William Romaine, a Tory, was vehemently against both Cromwell and the Jews.⁴⁴

The controversy over the circumstances of the Jews' readmission continued well into the nineteenth century. In a study published in 1830, entitled *A History of the Establishment and Residence of The Jews in England; with an enquiry into their Civil Disabilities*, the barrister Elijah Blunt concluded a description of the Whitehall Conference and its aftermath with the following words:

As the circumstances above related are all that is known of the proceedings that took place under the Commonwealth, there seems no sure foundation for the assertion which is frequently made, that

Cromwell first permitted the re-establishment of the Jews in England. After the Restoration, however, they seem to have begun, by degrees, to take up their residence in this country; and in the latter end of the year 1660, an order of the Lords of the Council was presented to the House of Commons, recommending to the house to take into their consideration, measures for the protection of the Jews.⁴⁵

By contrast, William Godwin attempted to prove, in a footnote to his *History of the Commonwealth* (1824–8), that it was Cromwell and not, as Blunt and D'Blossiers Tovey had asserted, Charles II who readmitted the Jews.⁴⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, Godwin's view had decisively prevailed, prompting the question, first, of how the controversy had disappeared; and second, of what motivated those who decided not only that Cromwell had readmitted the Jews, but also that he was right to do so.

1656 in the Victorian age

The nineteenth century witnessed a transformation in the Anglo-Jewish community's view of its origins, and in the location of those origins in the seventeenth century, and this transformation was mirrored by the English nation at large – in part, as a result of Victorian philosemitism. From the early nineteenth century onwards, there was a dramatic increase in the number of books written about Jewish history – from the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem to the present day – and these books were mostly by Christians.⁴⁷ One author, James Huie, explained in the preface to his *History of the Jews, From the Taking of Jerusalem by Titus to the Present Time* (1840) that 'the very peculiar interest at present taken in the condition of the Jews, and the recent movement in their favour' had prompted him to write the book. Huie was presumably referring to the events of the previous decade: in 1837, Moses Montefiore, the Jewish philanthropist and president of the Board of Deputies, was elected to a fellowship at the Royal Society, and knighted in the same year.⁴⁸ At the same time, David Salomons, who would later become London's first Jewish Lord Mayor, was campaigning to take up a seat on the Corporation. During the 1830s, 'Parliamentary Emancipation', the notion that incumbent MPs would not have to swear an Anglican oath in order to sit in Parliament, was publicly mooted for the first time. The reaction to what became known as the Damascus Affair in 1840 enhanced a sense of British philosemitism further; in February 1840, a

Sardinian Capuchin monk, Father Thomas, disappeared along with his Arab servant, and they were rumoured to have been murdered by Jews who drained their blood to make Matzahs, or unleavened bread, for Passover: the traditional blood libel. Several leaders of the Jewish community in Damascus were interrogated and tortured; three died. In Britain, non-Jewish politicians, journalists and clergymen publicly dismissed these rumours, and a group of British merchants and bankers met at Mansion House, the headquarters of the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London, in support of the Jews.⁴⁹ In 1858, after 11 years of public debate, Baron de Rothschild took up a seat in the House of Commons, becoming the first Jew to be made an MP without swearing an Anglican oath. Rothschild never actually made a speech in Parliament; but this moment became known as the Emancipation.

For nineteenth-century Christian philosemites, defending the Jews was not incompatible with their conversion to Christianity. James Huie writes in his preface: 'If the account now given of what has been hitherto done shall, by the divine blessing, in any degree promote the cause of Israel's conversion, the time and labour which the author expended upon collecting the materials will not have been thrown away'.⁵⁰ The dedication to another book by Jack Myers, entitled *The Story of the Jewish People*, illustrates the benefit which Myers hopes his work will provide to both Jewish and Christian readers alike:

Being Jews, they may feel greater pride of race and faith when they learn something of their ancestors who lived noble lives and died heroic deaths in days of old. Or, being non-Jews, they may perhaps see in clearer and more accurate perspective the real meaning of Jewish history – the history of Judaism and those who have upheld its banner in the fierce blast of prejudice, ill-will, and persecution through the ages.⁵¹

For Myers, the 'real meaning of Jewish history' was a sympathetic form of missionary Protestantism. Myers was not alone in this attitude; another writer, James Hosmer asks in his preface, 'Among its tragedies is there any quite so dark as the story of the Jews? Where else are problems presented which so defy satisfactory solution? . . . Where else is there anguish so deep and long-continued?'⁵² Nineteenth-century histories of the Jews were characterised by a philosemitic desire to put an end to the persecution of the Jews – by rescuing them from Judaism.⁵³

Moreover, from the 1870s onwards, British Jews began to face a new type of antisemitism, based on race rather than religion, which implied

that they could never become fully English because they were fundamentally alien.⁵⁴ The Jews began to experience pressure to conform to certain ideals of citizenship and respectability – in other words, to assimilate. This development was prompted, in large part, by the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to England which began at this time.⁵⁵ Tens of thousands of Jews fleeing persecution in Russia and Poland arrived; the resulting anti-immigration sentiment was to culminate, ultimately, in the Aliens Act of 1905. In this context, the English Jewish community became anxious that the relatively comfortable *status quo* they had established within English society would be threatened. They regarded the new immigrants, moreover, as a rather different kind of Jew, with radical politics and working-class Eastern European culture. During the 1890s, the British Jewish community set up organisations such as the Russo-Polish Committee and the Jewish Lads' Brigade in an attempt to anglicise the immigrants and turn them into patriotic, respectable Jews.

The English Jewish community also turned its attention to the establishment of a foundational historical tradition. The scholar and Jewish community leader, James Picciotto, who claimed to be the first Jewish historian of English Jewry, published his *Sketches of Anglo-Jewish History* in 1875, and Lucien Wolf's work began to appear shortly afterwards.⁵⁶ Jewish scholars, many of them writing outside the academy, were keen to emphasise the well-established status of Jews in England, and accordingly, began to tell a positive story about Jews in the nation's past. They were not the first to undertake Anglo-Jewish history: Sidney Lee, the Shakespeare scholar and the first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, had written about the Jews of the Elizabethan period in the mid-nineteenth century;⁵⁷ but during the 1880s, the history of the Jews in England was consolidated and institutionalised.⁵⁸ In 1887, an exhibition of Anglo-Jewish history was held at the Royal Albert Hall, and in 1893 the Jewish Historical Society of England was founded by Lucien Wolf and the Jewish scholar Israel Abrahams, who declared that 'the new era for scientific Jewish historical research' had begun.⁵⁹

The Jewish community was not alone in writing history with apologetical motivations; historical scholarship in general was becoming a patriotic project. In an essay entitled 'The Science of Jewish History', Abrahams described the circumstances under which the new European organisations for the study of Jewish history had been created:

They arose out of the wave of nationalism which passed over Europe and America in the middle of the nineteenth century. In every country local patriotism led to pride in the local past, and the new spirit of

history can be traced, not so much to the idea of a general evolution in human affairs, which was one of the pet theories of the nineteenth century, as to the national idea, to which equally the nineteenth century gave birth in every State of Europe.⁶⁰

The birth of Anglo-Jewish history coincided, moreover, with the formalisation of history as a discipline in British universities, and the founding of organisations such as the British Academy and the English Association.⁶¹ Anglo-Jewish history went hand in hand with this dominant historical enterprise, but it also had particular motivations of its own.

From its inception, Anglo-Jewish history was divided into three periods: the medieval period, the 'Middle Period' and the modern period. The medieval period, which extends up to the expulsion of the Jews by Edward I in 1290, was thought of as the first, negative phase of Jewish life in England: a time of Judeophobia and persecution. The period between 1290 and 1655 was classified by Wolf as the 'Middle Period' of Anglo-Jewish history,⁶² and it was the study of this 'Middle Period' that was pioneered by Sidney Lee, who wrote about the secret Jews and *conversos* of Elizabethan England. The 'Middle Period' was thought to have come to an end in 1656, and in this narrative of steady progress, that date stood out as a significant turning point; accordingly, from the birth of the Jewish Historical Society onwards, scholars concentrated, almost exclusively, on the 'Middle Period' of Jewish history and the readmission. This emphasis on a definitively positive chapter in Jewish history served an important purpose at a time of communal insecurity: to express gratitude to the English nation for welcoming the Jews and to emphasise that Jewish immigration had a successful precedent.⁶³ The first 'Resettlement Day' was held in 1894, and the anniversaries of readmission became increasingly elaborate, culminating in the large-scale celebrations of the 250th anniversary in 1906, just months after the Aliens Act was passed. It was as if the troubling formulation of an ethnic category of 'Jew' in the 1870s resulted, through a process of compensatory projection, in the positing of a sanctioned transformation from *conversos* and crypto-Jews to 'real' Jews in 1656.

The Jewish community was in need of a firm historical foundation, therefore, and Victorian philosemites were keen to lend a sympathetic hand; but why did this project come to be associated so exclusively with Cromwell? The explanation lies in the fact that the Whig support for Cromwell that was already in evidence during the Jew Bill controversy of 1753 evolved during the nineteenth century into full-blown

hagiography. This was a dramatic transformation; before the nineteenth century, Cromwell had been dismissed, mostly, as a villainous and radical insurrectionist; but as the century went on, he came to be regarded as a heroic, noble revolutionary: in the words of Raphael Samuel, he was transformed from 'a usurper, a soldier or a statesman' into 'a soul-striver'.⁶⁴ Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth* contributed to this new portrait of Cromwell as a tolerant liberal, and Thomas Carlyle's *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, published in 1845, went even further: Carlyle's portrayal had the effect of granting Cromwell a new status as a misunderstood and underestimated hero. In turn, the readmission story was recruited by the wider English establishment into its elevation of Cromwell's reputation.⁶⁵ Godwin describes Cromwell resolving to readmit the Jews in definitive terms:

After the lapse of three hundred and sixty-five years, Cromwell determined to signalise himself by putting an end to this proscription. It was an enterprise worthy of his character. His comprehensive mind enabled him to take in all its recommendations and all its advantages. The liberality of his disposition, and his avowed attachment to the cause of toleration, rendered it an adventure becoming him to achieve. As a man, he held that no human being should be proscribed among his fellow-men for the accident of his birth.⁶⁶

Despite the lack of evidence, a firm belief in Cromwell's benign sympathy towards the Jews took hold.⁶⁷ A few years after the founding of the Jewish Historical Society of England in 1893 and the first anniversary of readmission in 1894, the status of Cromwell reached its peak. In 1899, a statue to commemorate the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth was erected by the Liberal government, and there were celebrations held around the country.⁶⁸

The dramatic improvement in Cromwell's reputation was made possible, in turn, by an elevation of the status of Puritanism. Prior to the nineteenth century, broadly speaking, Nonconformists had felt marginalised and compromised by their regicide past, and Puritanism was sidelined in histories of the Civil War in favour of the order restored by Charles II and the generosity of the 1688 Act of Toleration.⁶⁹ During the nineteenth century, however, both the Nonconformist tradition and its roots in the Civil War period were consolidated. A significant influence on the transformation of Puritanism's reputation was, again, Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth*, which helped to vindicate Britain's dissenting tradition. Godwin wrote an account of the Interregnum which

presented it in more positive terms than before; in 1845, Thomas Carlyle declared in his *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* that 'Puritanism was the last of all our Heroisms'; and S.R. Gardiner's volumes of Puritan history started to appear in 1876.⁷⁰ Nonconformists were not only granted a greater degree of toleration but also became more politically powerful, and by the 1880s, the events of the mid-seventeenth century were referred to in flattering terms as 'The Puritan Revolution'.⁷¹

The rise of Puritanism in the nineteenth century occurred, furthermore, at a time of intense sectarian divisions; and debates about religious toleration and the relationship between church and state proliferated. Although Puritanism was a single denomination, it had acquired, through its prominent lobbying for religious liberty, an image of a more generic inclusiveness; and Puritan writers identified their forebears as the tolerationist 'pioneers' of the 1640s and 50s.⁷² This reading of the seventeenth century through the lens of the nineteenth did entail, however, a certain amount of wishful thinking. The inclusive aspect of Nonconformity, for example, was more of a reality in the nineteenth century than in the seventeenth, and Victorian commentators often elided their own liberalism with seventeenth-century religious liberty.⁷³ Godwin was not alone in associating religious freedom with freedom of thought and ascribing this virtue to seventeenth-century Independents.⁷⁴

The sceptical legal historian H.S.Q. Henriques, writing in the first years of the twentieth century, recognised early on the idealistic nature of nineteenth-century representations of seventeenth-century Puritanism and of Cromwell's treatment, not only of dissident Christians, but also of Jews:

During our own and our fathers' times a great change has taken place in the opinions men have formed of Cromwell's character and his place in the history of his country. It was at one time the fashion to write him down a self-seeking hypocrite; but thanks to the powerful advocacy of Thomas Carlyle and other writers contemporary with and subsequent to Carlyle, he has become a great statesman, nay, a hero . . . and so in the course of the apotheosis of the great Oliver, his virtue as an upholder of Religious Toleration has been much dilated upon; and his conduct towards the Jews has been selected as one instance of it. But it should not be forgotten that by the men of his own time Toleration, in those who held the reins of government, was regarded as a vice rather than a virtue; and accordingly it was not

his supporters, but his political opponents, such as Walker, Evelyn, and Burnet, who laid most stress on the favours he was alleged to have shown to the Jews.⁷⁵

Undaunted, Anglo-Jewish historians in the late nineteenth century chose Cromwell as their protector, in tandem with their British hosts, and the comparatively definitive gestures of toleration made by Charles II and James II towards the Jews were downplayed and explained as the result of pragmatic, rather than benign, motives.⁷⁶ By 1905, the year before the 250th anniversary, H.S.Q. Henriques was one of the only writers still admitting any doubt on the issue.⁷⁷ Henriques's expertise was that of a legal historian, and he took a systematic, analytical approach to the evidence for readmission presented by Wolf and others:

The theory itself rests upon no sufficient evidence, and the statements which are put forward as corroborating it are either wholly irrelevant or absolutely inconsistent with it; the excuse for dealing with it at such length must be that for a number of years a learned society claiming an important place in the Jewish community has held a public dinner in the early days of February to celebrate what it has been pleased to call 'Resettlement Day'. The dinner was announced in 1900, but not held, owing to the death of Queen Victoria; it has not since been revived, possibly because the organisers have discovered the futility of attempting to create an anniversary for which there is no historical justification.⁷⁸

Henriques was evidently unaware that the anniversary would be revived the following year; despite his own scepticism, the weight of historical justification and public celebration was, by this time, overwhelming.⁷⁹

An informal readmission

Anglo-Jewish historians had a clear motivation for determining readmission as a decisive event but they still faced the problem of making the facts support their case. Cromwell's Whitehall Conference had come to nothing, and there was no evidence that he had readmitted the Jews by any other route. The only way of arguing that readmission did happen under Cromwell was to shift the focus of attention away from Menasseh's efforts, and towards the subsequent actions of the Jewish community already resident, undercover, in England. Accordingly, a tradition was established according to which the readmission of the Jews

to England was thought to have occurred not as the result of a formal act, but rather informally, with Cromwell assuring the Jews of London that he would tolerate their presence, and the Jews taking steps to establish an open community. Informal readmission was even considered advantageous, the idea being that countries which formally tolerated Jews through the passing of laws could then revoke them at a later date.⁸⁰ This belief in the virtue of informal readmission had its origin, indeed, in the patriotic notion that the English style of toleration was uniquely *ad hoc* and unofficial. In a presidential address to the Jewish Historical Society of England in October 1955, Cecil Roth described readmission as ‘so gradual a process – and in this so typically English – that it is difficult to say when it began, and when the Middle Period with which I am dealing here in reality ended . . . the Resettlement was based not on doctrine, but on fact; it resulted not from a dramatic action, but from experiment, thereby becoming as it seems to me all the more English in its nature’.⁸¹

Central to the informal readmission thesis was the belief that Cromwell granted the requests of the March 1656 petition verbally.⁸² Wolf wrote in 1888 that ‘the precise terms of this grant, which was doubtless oral, have not been preserved’, but ‘we may assume that it was a kind of informal *fays ce que voudras*, the Protector relying on the tried discretion of the Jews’.⁸³ Later on, Roth admitted there was no written evidence that the petition was answered favourably, but claimed that the London Jews’ requests for permission to establish a synagogue and cemetery were agreed to, nonetheless.⁸⁴ A recurrent trope in accounts of readmission is that of a document which has been lost or destroyed, and according to a conspiracy theory developed by Roth in 1961, two crucial pages were cut out of the minute book of the Council of State; pages which would have contained a favourable reply to the petition. Roth writes that a ‘Miss Daphne Gifford, of the Public Record Office, re-examining the Order Book of the Council of State for 25 June 1656 . . . observed . . . a curious fact, which no previous enquirer had noticed or thought fit to place on record – *that the pages containing the minutes for that day’s proceedings are missing*. Here obviously we have the key to the mystery which we are attempting to solve’. Roth continues, ‘*It is now possible to state categorically that the decision authorising Jewish public worship in England, after a lapse of 366 years, was reached on Wednesday, 25 June 1656*’. Roth never referred to this ‘discovery’ again, but Cromwell’s verbal assurance has lived on in subsequent accounts.⁸⁵

It followed that if Cromwell had verbally granted the terms of the petition, then a synagogue and cemetery were established soon after.

Accordingly, a great deal of historical research was invested in the search for evidence of these two institutions.⁸⁶ In 1924, Wilfred Samuel, the scholar and founder of the Jewish Museum in London, claimed in a book entitled *The First London Synagogue of the Resettlement* that the establishment of the synagogue in Creechurch Lane and the leasing of land for a cemetery 'were in fact the outcome of the Petition to Oliver Cromwell of March 1656, consideration of which had been stayed until the summer of that year'.⁸⁷ Moreover, evidence that they were founded was not enough; there was also considerable investment in demonstrating that these institutions were known about and – at least informally – sanctioned by the English authorities. In his essay on the establishment of 'The First London Synagogue', Samuel emphasised that 'these proceedings – albeit discreetly conducted – were authorised and *publici juris*'.⁸⁸ This combination of discretion and visibility is a recurrent feature of accounts of 1656.

Similarly detailed, almost forensic, evidence was called upon to prove public awareness of the cemetery. Samuel placed great emphasis on his discovery that the bells of the church of St Katherine Creechurch rang for the burial of prominent London Jews, writing that 'I must confess to a feeling of amazement when I unearthed these facts, and I think my Jewish readers will share my surprise and gratification at the kindly and tolerant attitude of the Church towards the newly formed Jewish congregation'.⁸⁹ Samuel also paid a lot of attention to a Parish Account Book entry of February or March 1656–7 which refers to an amount 'paid for warning the workmen before the Court of Aldermen that were Employed in building the Jewes Synagogue'.⁹⁰ It was not in Samuel's interests to observe the paradox inherent in unearthing hidden yet widespread official acknowledgement.

The attempt to fix readmission as a definite event resulted in a number of historiographical problems. One such problem concerned the date on which the modern era of Anglo-Jewry began. From 1894 onwards, 4 February was established as a convention, because it was at one time thought that this was the date on which Cromwell gave his verbal assurance to the community that the terms of their petition would be granted, but it was 1658, not 1656, which was being celebrated.⁹¹ In 1924, Samuel pointed out that this was simply the date on which Cromwell dissolved his Parliament.⁹² By 1906, when the 250th anniversary was celebrated, the official year of readmission had shifted back to 1656, while the traditional month of celebration, February, remained in place. By 1956, the 4 February tradition had been abandoned, and readmission was celebrated over the course of several months.

Another problem concerned the extent to which the events of 1656 constituted the beginning of a new era. Alongside the desire to present 1656 as a decisive turning-point, there existed a contradictory desire to present the 'Middle Period' as one in which Jews were never entirely absent from England. According to this competing narrative, Jews maintained a continuous presence in England through the ages. This contradictory phenomenon is illustrated by two statements written by Wolf in 1887: 'Fully five years before Menasseh ben Israel came to England there was a small Jewish congregation in London, and a Jewish marriage was solemnised in its midst. The members were secret Jews, but they do not seem to have incurred any danger by the fact of their race and religion being known' and later, 'in 1656 Cromwell put an end to the long period of Jewish outlawry by permitting the formation of a Jewish congregation in Aldgate, and the acquisition of a burial ground in Mile End'.⁹³ In a lecture delivered at the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition, Wolf emphasised the importance of establishing that there were Jews living in England between their 'expulsion' in 1290 and their 'readmission' in 1656 because it 'fills up important blanks, and completes the thread which connects the years 1290 and 1656'.⁹⁴ The assertion of continuity before and after 1656 allowed historians to portray the Anglo-Jewish community as always having had an abiding presence in the country, despite the eruptions of Judeophobia. However, this version of events sits uncomfortably with the notion that 1656 brought about a rupture with the past.

The situation was complicated, moreover, by the fact that, at a certain point in the story, Menasseh ben Israel's activities and those of the London Jewish community came together. There were benefits to be gained from both interpretations. For historians who argued that readmission was a result of Menasseh's arrival and his efforts to resettle Dutch Jews in England, the event became a foreign import, an influx of foreign Jewry: in other words, a true readmission. For historians who argued, on the other hand, that after Menasseh's mission failed, the real impetus for readmission came from London's Jewish community, the moment of readmission could be integrated, more seamlessly, into the assertion of a continuous Jewish presence in England. According to the latter scenario, however, the origins of the Jewish community in England were therefore to be found in the community which was present during the reign of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, thus compromising the notion that the readmission was a readmission at all. This tension between continuity and change produces a curious effect: in accounts written by historians invested in readmission as a decisive event, that

community seems, at the moment of Menasseh's arrival, to be mysteriously absent; indeed, the Jewish community in London prior to 1656 appears and disappears according to the fluctuations of opposing historiographical imperatives.⁹⁵

From Jews to Judaism

Although modern historians of Anglo-Jewry are aware of the apologetical nature of accounts written by an earlier generation, the traditional – and problematic – narrative of readmission remains prevalent, and 1656 is still portrayed as more than a sum of its parts.⁹⁶ As far as non-specialist accounts are concerned, the claim that Cromwell welcomed the Jews back into England is still made without nuance or qualification.⁹⁷ Readmission continues to be the central founding event of Anglo-Jewish history,⁹⁸ and it is rare, indeed, to find any accounts which question the facts or the interpretation of readmission at all.⁹⁹ Anglo-Jewish history remains teleological in character,¹⁰⁰ and the same narratives are repeated time and again: namely, that the English attitude towards Jews in the Roman Catholic medieval period was one of intense antisemitism; that with the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism, and especially Puritanism, Christian attitudes were gradually transformed from anti-semitism to philosemitism; that interest in Hebrew, the Talmud and Kaballah spread, and Christian contact with Jews resident in England and on the Continent increased; and that the mid-seventeenth century saw the rise of religious toleration, which eventually culminated in the Jews' informal readmission.¹⁰¹

It is certainly the case that Christians were greatly preoccupied with Judaism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pamphlets, tracts, sermons and literary works of the period contain detailed references to the Jewish religion, Jewish history, the Hebrew language and Jewish mysticism.¹⁰² Major protagonists in the formation of the early modern church and state, including John Foxe and Richard Hooker, as well as a multitude of scholars and writers, such as Hugh Broughton and John Selden, repeatedly referred to Judaism and the ancient Jewish constitution.¹⁰³ During the Interregnum, as the church fractured into varied and extreme religious persuasions, this interest in Judaism increased and intensified, but it was always highly ambivalent in character: the anxiety of influence resulting from Christianity's Jewish origins permeated theological discourse, and early modern Christians moved between two versions of Judaism – one typological, the other heretical – with almost incomprehensible agility.

In the work of Anglo-Jewish historians, this enthusiasm for Jewish ideas has been and continues to be represented as the precursor of sympathy for Jewish people. And yet the trajectory from Judeophobia to philosemitism did not always run in the same direction, and English attitudes towards Jews tended to fluctuate throughout the early modern period. For example, in 1623, William Sclater (1575–1626), rector of Pitminster, mused, ‘how would my soule wish rather to be a Jew, that dissolute nature might be restrayned in mee by lawes, and my Conscience inioy the sweete comforts found in obedience’.¹⁰⁴ By contrast, for the Puritan controversialist William Prynne (1600–1669) in 1656, Jewishness signified whatever it was that Christians did not like: ‘Better we cannot express more cut-throat dealing then thus, *None but a Jew would have done so*; lower we cannot prize any one of most abject condition, then by comparing him to a *Jew*’.¹⁰⁵ Prynne not only saw Jews in a negative light, but also declared this view to be a generalised cliché, at the very moment when support for the Jews might be assumed to have reached its peak.

In both these cases, Sclater and Prynne alike are not declaring straightforwardly what they think of Jews; rather, they are comparing themselves or others with them. This formulation is axiomatic; Christians rarely referred to Jews in a neutral, disinterested fashion. More commonly, they either used Judaism as a way of insulting other Christians, or they identified with Jews themselves. Indeed, a common habit among early modern Christians was not only the adoption of Jewish ideas, but also the adoption of Jewish practices. Scholars have struggled to account for why Christians practised Jewish customs, often regarding such behaviour as eccentric. ‘Judaizing’ was a complex and ambiguous process, however; because in the process of becoming ‘Jewish’, Judaism lost its essential quality: a paradox which was subject to considerable debate.¹⁰⁶ In fact, Jewishness was frequently imagined less as a characteristic of the Jewish people, and rather as one which could be attached to Christians. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites John Milton as being the first to define Judaism (in 1641) not as a religion but as ‘the act of Judaizing; adoption of Jewish practices on the part of Christians; a practice or style of thought like that of the Jews’, but this meaning can be found considerably earlier.¹⁰⁷ From at least the second half of the sixteenth century, the label ‘Jewish’ could indicate not only a preference for Jewish ideas, but also the threat of becoming Jewish through that very preference.¹⁰⁸ To the extent that Judaism was thus regarded as a mobile characteristic which could be adopted by Christians, it was not necessarily an integral, non-Christian category. This is not to say that Christians lacked a strong sense that Jews were different, or abhorrent.

But, as the remainder of this book will argue, Jewishness did not necessarily signify a connection to the Jewish people.¹⁰⁹

Judaism was a mobile characteristic, indeed, not only in terms of identity, but also in terms of discourse. When William Sclater wrote 'how would my soule wish rather to be a lew', he was not simply expressing his love for Judaism. Read in context, his words are a contribution to the controversy over the payment of church tithes in the early seventeenth century, in which the employment or rejection of Jewish precedents was a major crux of the debate. Advocating the application of Jewish precedents, Sclater was presenting the Jews as exemplars of discipline and virtue. Thus what appears to be evidence of philosemitism is, here and – as the following chapters will illustrate – elsewhere, evidence of the instrumentality of Jewishness for Christians engaging in particular debates. Reading Sclater's and other Christians' words in context does not negate the interest in Judaism which undoubtedly existed in this period, but it does show how the nature of that interest was inflected differently depending on the controversy at hand. Attempts to understand early modern Christian Judaizing have been dominated by the events of 1656; but if early modern interest in Judaism was not about laying the foundations of an Anglo-Jewish community, what was it about? The remainder of this book seeks to answer that question.

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