

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

TONY KUSHNER
University of Southampton

The year 2006 was chosen as the official three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the readmission of the Jews to England. Although less extensive than the tercentenary celebrations in 1956, there was still widespread recognition and affirmation by politicians and the media during 2006 of the continuous British Jewish presence since the mid-seventeenth century. Indeed, compared to almost all other immigrant and minority groups in Britain,¹ the historiography and wider memory work associated with the Jews of Britain is long-established and plentiful. The Jewish Historical Society of England was formed in 1893, building on a foundation already established by both Christian and Jewish authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially relating to medieval Anglo-Jewry.² Yet considering the volume and wide coverage of British Jewish historiography, which now fills several bibliographies,³ it is surprising how few seminal publications can be identified amidst the many hundreds of books and articles devoted to the subject.

It is true that in recent years the study of medieval Anglo-Jewry has been transformed, enabling a subtle and sophisticated understanding of these Jews and responses to them.⁴ The interest and expertise of 'mainstream' scholars — literary, archaeological as well as historical — has been the driving force behind such progress in understanding the place of Jews and 'the Jew' in medieval England, as well as the internal dynamics of this remarkable community. The same cannot be said for the post-readmission Jews. Modern British historians have shown little interest in the various Jewish communities that have developed since the mid-seventeenth century. With a few exceptions, those in the field of Jewish studies have also tended to dismiss the significance of modern British Jewry. Jews born or living in Britain are seen to lack the 'greatness' of the key religious thinkers who emerged on the continent. Had there been a figure such as Moses Mendelssohn in Britain it would have given lustre and credibility to the community.⁵ Moreover, the absence of violence, mass murder and widespread discrimination has made Britain appear a quiet and uninteresting backwater compared to the rest of Europe. For a scholar to be able to successfully challenge the 'boring' image of British Jewish history requires something special. To have been able to do this *and* to have challenged approaches in both Jewish and general historiography has been truly remarkable. This is the achievement of Bill Williams, as this article aims to illustrate.

Any student of modern British Jewry who wants to understand not only the subject matter and how to approach it has to begin with Bill Williams' *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740-1875* (1976). Legend has it that the late Joseph Heller responded to the criticism that after *Catch 22* he never wrote anything as good by pointing out 'well — who has?' As will emerge, Bill Williams has published key articles and books beyond *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, an output that is still ongoing. It remains, that both before and after this remarkable monograph there has been no work in British Jewish history

-
- 1 By immigrant, I am referring to those who settled in Britain but were born elsewhere. By minority, I am referring to those either born in Britain or outside who are part of an ethnic or religious group within British society.
 - 2 See the articles in Tony Kushner, (ed.), *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).
 - 3 The latest of these is Ruth Goldschmidt-Lehmann, Stephen Massil and Peter Salinger, (eds), *Anglo-Jewish Bibliography 1971-1990* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1992).
 - 4 See, for example, Patricia Skinner (ed.), *Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003).
 - 5 Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p.10 eloquently confronts this absence whilst making the case for the study of British Jewish history.

Tony Kushner

that comes close to matching its significance and overall achievement. It is not only the most outstanding book on British Jewry, but can hold its ground internationally with regard to twentieth century Jewish history writing. Equally importantly, and recognised by Steven Zipperstein in an overview of 'Jewish Historiography and the Modern City', *The Making of Manchester Jewry* 'is an outstanding social history'.⁶ Sadly, and reflecting the failure of historians to confront ethnic diversity in Britain's past, or the contribution of local studies, the brilliance of this social history has been largely unrecognised within non-Jewish historiography.

So what is so good about *The Making of Manchester Jewry*? First, there is the issue of style.⁷ Zipperstein rightly notes that the work is 'well documented and elegantly crafted'.⁸ It should be added that this is a combination that is extraordinarily hard to achieve. All of Bill Williams' work is stamped with elegance and subtlety. The clarity and richness of his prose enables the expression of complex ideas, underpinned by detailed research, to be articulated without hiding behind any unnecessary jargon. His writing acts as a model for any young scholar to emulate. But Bill Williams' prose is also notable for its power and commitment.

Inspired by the History Workshop Movement, the study of history matters to Bill Williams: there is a passion to all his work and a desire to empower those often marginalised groups he writes about. Taken as a whole, Bill Williams' work is a fine example of how academic writing can be committed, and deeply ethical, without falling into the limitations of polemics. It is forceful, compassionate and empathetic. There is a certain irony that *The Making of Manchester Jewry* was originally published in the same year that the leading historiographer, Gordon Wright, pointed out, approvingly, that 'The idea of consciously reintroducing the moral dimension into history runs counter to the basic training of most historians, and probably to their professional instinct as well.'⁹ In the three decades that have subsequently passed, it would seem that a new generation of historians are less sure of Wright's desire to impose objective distance in their work.¹⁰ Williams' oeuvre illustrates how concern for the 'now' and the 'then' can enrich rather than undermine the strength of historical research and its representation. This is as true for Williams' skills as a verbal communicator — whether in public lectures or teaching — as it is on the written page. Bill Williams is the only historian I have encountered who received spontaneous applause *before* he had brought his talk — in this case on Holocaust education and museology — to a close, so fervent and articulate was his delivery. Disseminating his work widely and entering into genuine dialogue with those he is addressing, whether to friendship clubs or academic audiences, has always been a feature of his career. It again fits within the democratic and radical spirit of the early History Workshop Movement as exemplified by the scholar and activist who brought it into existence, Raphael Samuel.

Returning to *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, its second level of significance lies in its approach and methodology, one that influenced and inspired a new generation of British Jewish scholars and practitioners. In 1950, Cecil Roth, the most prolific Anglo-Jewish historian of his day, published a collection of articles on the evolution of the Jewish provinces that had first appeared in the *Jewish Monthly*. Covering over forty communities, most in one or two pages (including Manchester in less than five hundred words), Roth, rather than being interested in mass migration or the Jewish urban experience, was determined to show, in defensive mode, that it was 'not only of interest, but of importance, to demonstrate that the English Jews are rooted in this country'. The approach of *The Rise of Provincial Jewry* was summarised by its subtitle: 'the Early History of the Jewish Communities in

6 Steven Zipperstein, 'Jewish Historiography and the Modern City: Recent Writing on European Jewry', *Jewish History* vol.2 (1987), p.82.

7 More generally, see Peter Gay, *Style in History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).

8 Zipperstein, 'Jewish Historiography', p.78.

9 Gordon Wright, 'History as a Moral Science', *American Historical Review* vol.81 no.1 (February 1976), p.2.

10 See, for example, the extensive response to the special issue of *History and Theory* vol.43 no.4 (December 2004) devoted to 'Historians and Ethics'.

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

the English Countryside, 1740-1840'.¹¹ It is worth contrasting Roth's introduction with the preface to *The Making of Manchester Jewry*.

Both Roth and Williams' books have the same starting date — 1740. To Roth that date enabled provincial Jewry to be contextualised within the historic cities of Britain. To Williams, having origins in the mid-eighteenth century enabled the narrative of Manchester Jewry to be placed at the beginnings of the modern urban setting and mass industrialisation. Furthermore, this was within in a city which, in essence, the immigrant and migrant had founded:

it emphasises that in no sense can the Jewish community be regarded as 'alien' to Manchester. It was not a late addition to an established pattern of urban life, but an integral part of the pattern itself. Its role, like that of other minorities — the Germans, the Italians, the Greeks, and, particularly, the Irish — was not peripheral and derivative, but central and creative, in a city which has always been cosmopolitan in character.¹²

The rootedness of provincial Jewry was important to both Roth and Williams. But if the documenting of the large scale, immigrant urban world was anathema to the former, it was relished by the latter.

In the 1970s Bill Williams was the director of the Manchester Studies Unit of the then Manchester Polytechnic. Its ethos owed much to the History Workshop Movement and the Oral History Society under the respective leadership of Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson. Similarly Bill Williams was a major supporter of the Working-Class Movement Library founded in Manchester by Eddie Frow which both collected material and aimed to disseminate it to a wide audience beyond the academic sphere. It was out of his intimate and sophisticated understanding of Manchester's history as a whole that enabled the superb contextualisation of *The Making of Manchester Jewry*. Earlier and subsequent histories of Manchester have largely dismissed its Jewish and other minority experiences in their overall narratives. Bill Williams' work showed that to ignore the presence, contribution of and responses to the Jewish community (or communities) was to provide a distorted and ultimately unsatisfactory history of the town. In this respect, especially in respect of the continuing tendency to ignore diversity in Britain's past,¹³ it is worth further quotation from Bill William's preface:

In considering [the] interplay between the town and one of its many cultural components, I have sought to shed some light upon the role of the minority group in the life of the Victorian city... The degree of their individuality and independence, the process of their integration, their interaction both with each other and with the city as a whole, the attitudes and feelings they evoked, and the influence they exerted *are all matters of concern for the urban historian* [my emphasis].¹⁴

Yet the importance placed on the 'local' in *The Making of Manchester Jewry* was not at the expense of marginalising the national and global connections of the Jews themselves. Nevertheless, whilst sharing 'the changes experienced by Anglo-Jewry as a whole', Williams highlighted how the Manchester community 'evolved a distinctive personality of its own'. Even the Reform movement in Manchester, which was largely led by recent German Jewish immigrants, 'subsequently gained adherents from local causes [and] it also ha[d] a place in the internal history of the community'.¹⁵ The distinctiveness of Manchester Jewry came partly through its remarkable setting in the world's first modern industrial city, but it was also because of 'its unique human composition' which resulted from 'its central place on a

11 (London: Jewish Monthly, 1950), p.12.

12 *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, pp.vii-iii.

13 See Kathy Burrell and Panikos Panayi (eds), *Histories and Memories: Migrants and Their History in Britain* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006).

14 *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, p.viii.

15 *Ibid*, p.260.

Tony Kushner

major route of transmigration between Eastern Europe and the United States'.¹⁶ The interplay of the local, national and global, the Jewish and the non-Jewish, made *The Making of Manchester Jewry* totally pathbreaking. It is hard to locate a subsequent study of Jewish urban history that has come close to matching this achievement.

If the style of this book deserves credit, so does the depth, quality and originality of its research. First, Williams located (and often helped save from destruction) a range of individual, synagogal and other communal records of Manchester Jewry. Much material had already been lost but never before in British Jewish history — local or national — had so many 'inner' Jewish sources been consulted. Of equal importance, and enabling the potential of the communal records to be realised, was his utilisation of local non-Jewish sources. Newspapers, and, from 1841, the census, directories and contemporary pamphlets and reports, as well as the records of many non-Jewish organisations, were mined for detail and melded with the Jewish archives to produce his multi-layered and intricate account of Manchester Jewry. The detective skills of Bill Williams' research provide a gold standard for any historian, whether amateur or professional. Questions of minority (and majority) identity, for example, which are often dealt with without sufficient care for evidence, are convincingly answered in *The Making of Manchester Jewry* because the source base is so extensive and is dealt with in such a critical yet constructive manner.

The third aspect of *The Making of Manchester Jewry's* significance relates to its analytical model. Zipperstein rather sweepingly stated that the book 'is subtle, and at times strikingly reductionist'.¹⁷ The second half of Zipperstein's critique reflects the challenging nature of Williams' work in which the idea of Jewish communal solidarity is never taken for granted and, indeed, is often queried. Class conflict and class divisions within Manchester Jewry are not ignored or downplayed in Williams' account, as the following passage describing the early nineteenth century makes clear:

There were, in effect, two communities in Manchester during the later 1820s and early 1830s, the one increasingly anxious to live down the reputation of the other. On one side, there was a settled community of shopkeepers, overseas merchants, share brokers, and professional men, anglicised in speech and custom, comfortably off (or reasonably so), generous to local causes, the providers of essential goods and services to the middle classes; on the other, a flotsam of pedlars and petty criminals, some the unsuccessful residuum of eighteenth-century Jewry, others pauper immigrants of the post-war years, illiterate in English, incoherent in speech, uncouth in appearance, often associated with the criminal underworld, most frequently as the receivers of stolen jewellery and plate.

The relationships between the settled and the newcomer were at the heart of the book's analysis: 'The fact that Manchester's settled community was itself shaped out of the itinerant population of an earlier age if anything served to emphasise the social divide. The further the early members moved from their itinerant origins, the more they were plagued by the memory of them.'¹⁸

Such tension between the 'two communities' was to continue throughout the nineteenth century, and, as Bill Williams' later work was to emphasise, well into the twentieth century. Never a crude Marxist, the work of Bill Williams has insisted on the importance of class as an analytical tool, one that is generally absent in wider Jewish historiography, often much to its detriment. The various strata of Manchester Jewry are never defined solely by class alone — national identity, religious identity, politics, location and many other factors are brought into the equation. Nevertheless, the assumption of internal consensus out of ethno-religious solidarity is quite properly queried by Williams. His approach in *The*

16 Ibid.

17 Zipperstein, 'Jewish Historiography', p.78.

18 Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, p.57.

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

Making of Manchester Jewry and elsewhere has allowed insights into Jewish communal and individual responses to other Jews that were previously discounted.

Equally challenging has been Bill Williams' work on non-Jewish responses. In the British context, particularly, the general assumption up to *The Making of Manchester Jewry* was that Britain provided, almost uniquely, an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance within Europe and in which the Jews could prosper. Manchester itself prides itself on being *the* liberal city, home of free trade and committed to equality. In this model of British exceptionalism with regard to antisemitism, articulations to the contrary, such as those during the 1930s through Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, have been analysed as foreign-inspired exceptions that prove the rule of English tolerance. Beginning with *The Making of Manchester Jewry* and then developed thereafter, Bill Williams was to provide a very different perspective.

Until the 1980s, most of the work on antisemitism in Britain had focused on groups, organisations and individuals manifesting exceptional hostility towards the Jews and wanting to partially or totally exclude them from British society.¹⁹ Whilst there can be no doubting of the extremism of those such as The Britons or the pro-Nazi coterie around Arnold Leese, it is much harder to make the case that they were influential beyond their own world of hatred. Bill Williams' seminal article, 'The Anti-Semitism of Tolerance: Middle-Class Manchester and the Jews, 1870-1900', published in 1985, provided a new way of approaching the subject. Rather than treat the existence of racism as being due to liberalism failing to exert itself completely, Williams placed the emphasis on the nature of liberalism itself. Using late Victorian Manchester as his template, he argued that 'Jews were validated not on the grounds of their Jewish identity, but on the basis of their conformity to the values and manners of bourgeois English society'. The conditional acceptance, or 'informal mechanisms of liberal toleration', of groups such as Jews, Williams controversially argued, 'remain the quintessential means by which British society accommodates ethnic minorities: the central driving force of British racism'.²⁰

In this article and in other writings, Bill Williams was re-focusing the debate onto mainstream society and away from the marginal world of antisemitic organisations and individuals in Britain. Moreover, politics and culture, rather than being peripheral to the debate, were central to Williams' thesis. Middle-class Jews might be accepted in Manchester, but only if they behaved in a certain manner. Part of the expectation of non-Jewish society was that these more 'assimilated' Jews would help 'police' their poorer, foreign brethren, either encouraging them to become 'respectable' or in moving them on to other places. In particular, he argued, instituting a programme of anglicisation for the east European Jews settling in Manchester was a manifestation of middle-class Manchester Jewry's insecurity. Anglicisation was thus a form of social control. In the field of philanthropy, only those wealthier, immigrant Jews such as Simon Marks, the so-called alrightniks, were able to show a degree of understanding of and empathy for the east Europeans.²¹

The importance of Bill Williams' insights into the dynamics of power relations both within British Jewry and between Jews and non-Jews is that they still dominate the framing of historiographical debate several decades later. A generation of scholarship has engaged with it — nuancing Williams' analysis in some cases and being more critical in others. David Feldman, for example, has argued that the agency of the immigrants themselves has been understated in Williams' arguments about the nature

19 See, for example, Gisela Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978). A wider perspective, certainly up to 1918, was provided by Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979).

20 In A.J.Kidd and K.W.Roberts (eds), *City, Class and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p.94.

21 Bill Williams, "'East and West": Class and Community in Manchester Jewry, 1850-1914', in David Cesarani (ed.), *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp.24-5.

Tony Kushner

of anglicization, and Todd Endelman has queried the idea of conditional acceptance.²² Yet whether more positive or sceptical, the significance of Williams' work was that it could not be ignored. As was the case with so many of his contributions, the whole way of seeing Jewish history and responses to the Jews was shifted. Perhaps most importantly, Williams' inclusive approach removed the artificial barriers between politics, culture and society. His influence can be detected as much within literary and cultural scholars of British Jewry, such as Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman, as historians such as myself and David Cesarani.

So far the discussion has focused on the academic sphere and on Bill Williams' major publications from the 1970s through to the 1990s. Mention has been made of his work as a public communicator and how this corresponds to the ideals of the History Workshop movement. The most obvious physical manifestation of Bill Williams' work in making accessible Jewish history is in the form of the Manchester Jewish Museum, which was officially opened in 1985. Now very much part of the Manchester heritage landscape and used extensively in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, it is hard now to imagine the struggle — from both from an intellectual and a practical perspective — that was involved to create this award-winning museum.²³ The comment within the local *Jewish Gazette* in 1978 that Manchester Jewry needed a museum 'like it needed a ham sandwich' provides some indication of the challenges that had to be confronted.²⁴

There are various elements that should be highlighted to reveal the full triumph of the Manchester Jewish Museum and Bill Williams' input into the project. First, whilst his own effort, energy and vision would be hard to overstate, one of his finest achievements was bringing together a team of talented young people into the Jewish History Unit of the Manchester Studies team — one that was to form the basis of those who created the museum. The key figures were Rickie Burman, pioneer scholar of Jewish women's experience in Britain, and Ros Livshin, whose research focus was on the acculturation of the children of immigrant Jews.²⁵ Both have subsequently played a crucial role in the promotion of the Jewish heritage in Britain. Rickie Burman established the Museum of the Jewish East End (later the Museum of London Jewish Life) and more recently has become the director of the amalgamated London Jewish Museum. Ros Livshin continues her work as one of the leading oral and local historians of British Jewry. Others emerged from the early years of the Manchester Jewish Museum project. Indeed, to add a personal note, the year I spent working closely with Bill Williams at the Manchester Jewish Museum from 1985 to 1986, an exciting period as it established its first exhibitions on both east European Jews and refugees from Nazism, was of crucial importance in my career and shaping me as a social historian.

The second significance of the museum relate to its achievements with regard to the built Jewish heritage. Jewish conservation in Britain had, until the Manchester Jewish Museum, failed to grasp the imagination of either the general heritage world or British Jewry itself. The restoration of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, built during the 1870s in a 'Seracenic' style, and described by Bill Williams as 'the oriental gem in Manchester's religious crown',²⁶ rightly received rewards in its own right. Yet the success story of the lovingly carried out repairs and the restoring of a building that was in religious use as late as the 1970s only highlighted the immensity of the losses elsewhere. Thus the Great Synagogue, elite neighbour of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue a short distance down

22 David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840-1914* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.292-3; Todd Endelman, 'English Jewish History', *Modern Judaism* vol.II (1991), pp.91-109.

23 See Tony Kushner, 'Looking Back With Nostalgia? The Jewish Museums of England', *Immigrants & Minorities* vol.6 (July 1987), pp.200-11.

24 Bill Williams, 'Heritage and Community: Manchester's Jewish Past', in Kushner, *The Jewish Heritage*, p.140.

25 See, for example, their contributions in Cesarani (ed.), *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*.

26 Bill Williams, *Manchester Jewry: A pictorial history 1788-1988* (Manchester: Archive Publications, 1988), pp.19-20.

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

Cheetham Hill Road, was demolished a year after the opening of the Manchester Jewish Museum in 1985. Ironically, the Great Synagogue, formed in the 1850s, had been the first building choice of the committee formed to create a Jewish museum in Manchester.

In 1974, the executive of the Great Synagogue decided to sell their building and move further north to reflect the location of their congregants. A plea to preserve rather than sell the building was ignored. As a second appeal, the committee 'asked that steps be taken at least to protect the building and its furnishings from vandalization'. As Bill Williams, with typical passion and eloquence, relates,

They were not. Within ten days of its closure, the building had been wrecked by vandals of every variety. Scrap-metal vandals had salvaged the synagogue's two copper domes. Antique vandals removed everything that could be detached (and much that properly could not). Teenage vandals destroyed what was left. Stain-glass windows were shattered, the pulpit was split in half, the *bimah* reduced to splinters. A week later a wooden candelabra which had stood before the Ark were on offer in one of Manchester's seedier antique arcades.²⁷

Then and subsequently, Williams was astonished that the leadership and much of Manchester Jewry as a whole could stand by and watch the slow, and often not so slow, destruction of its local past. There is, moreover, an irony that the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which originally catered for the religious needs of a small number of mainly prosperous Sephardi trading families, should be re-invented as a museum which told, as its dominant narrative, the story of the largely impoverished Jewish immigrants/refugees from the Russian empire. Painfully little now survives in Manchester of the built heritage of those *ostjuden*.

Since the 1980s, even more of the Jewish built heritage has crumbled away or been the victim of the vandalism of property speculators. Nevertheless, the restoration and re-use of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue has acted as an inspiration to others across the British Isles. If there have been further heritage disasters, there have been some positive stories in the listing and conservation of Jewish buildings and in raising awareness in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. English Heritage, especially, has proved sympathetic and sensitive to the need to incorporate buildings that are not Christian and has proved a formidable ally in the work of Sharman Kadish, now director of Jewish Heritage UK. It is perhaps appropriate, given Bill Williams' pioneer work in this field, that Sharman Kadish's indefatigable efforts to preserve the built Jewish heritage and to provide an architectural history of it should be based in the University of Manchester's Centre for Jewish Studies, to which Bill has contributed so much in the later part of his career.²⁸

The third significance of the Manchester Jewish Museum lies in its approach. As already pointed out, a former elite synagogue building for Sephardi merchants was utilised to tell the story largely of poorer Jews — pedlars, tailors, artisans, small shopkeepers and the like of east European origin. This was 'history from the bottom up' and the collecting policy of the museum project reflected this aim of empowering the stories of ordinary people. If, at this stage, the Jewish Museum in Woburn House, London, 'appeared to exclude anything which was produced after 1880', its Manchester rival made a determined effort to collect everyday artefacts from the domestic and economic spheres relating to immigrant Jews and their offspring from after that date.²⁹

Through a pathbreaking oral history project carried out by the Jewish History Unit hundreds of testimonies were collected of first and second generation Jews from eastern Europe and later those refugees escaping from Nazism. Williams, Livshin and Burman were not just pioneers of oral history

27 Williams, 'Heritage and Community', pp.135-6.

28 See Sharman Kadish (ed.), *Building Jerusalem: Jewish Architecture in Britain* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1996) and idem, *Jewish Heritage in England* (London: English Heritage, 2006).

29 Williams, 'Heritage and Community', pp.134-5.

Tony Kushner

in Britain but amongst its finest practitioners. With a deep empathy for the importance of the everyday experiences of ordinary people, the tapes provide a unique archive allowing insights into the trials, tribulations and triumphs of those establishing for themselves and their offspring a new life in Britain. Never before had the lives of non-famous Jews been taken so seriously. In both depth and scope, it provides a rich reservoir of Jewish history.

The interviews and the connections established also provided a wealth of related material — domestic, religious and work-related artefacts and, even more evocatively, photographs. It was these that were to form the basis of the museum's displays, both in the permanent exhibition and in temporary displays. They were, in Bill Williams' words, 'deployed to create a history readily recognizable to those who shared it rather than one dictated by the community's image-makers or shaped according to the narrow predilections of traditional Anglo-Jewish history'.³⁰

Linked to this collecting policy of the Manchester Jewish Museum, Bill Williams was to show its remarkable potential in a pictorial history of Manchester Jewry, published in 1988 to mark the 200th anniversary of its foundation 'by a small colony of down-at-heel pedlars'. Intended as a 'brief social history', the book was 'not meant to reconstruct the deeds of the great and famous... but to outline particularly those changes which most affected the everyday experience of ordinary Jewish men and women'. As Williams emphasised, the photographs especially 'lend themselves to the purpose, for they are drawn chiefly from the family albums of Manchester's Jewish residents'.³¹ In this respect it is worth dwelling on one image that Williams reproduced that reveals the dynamic, multi-layered identities of Manchester Jewry. It is a photograph of Bertha Claff, 'wife of Samuel Aaron Claff, the money-lender, Zionist activist and philanthropist'. Taken just after the end of the First World War, Bertha is in fancy dress. With Union Jack hat and dress, she has on her apron the slogan 'Buy British Empire Goods'. Humour and a rootedness based on a pride in both national-imperial and ethnic belonging are portrayed in this photograph, just one of thousands that makes up the Manchester Jewish Museum's collections.³²

The use of British Jewry's communal records tends to promote a historiography that is, through their focus, male adult dominated with a focus on the synagogue or narrowly-defined communal politics. The social history material collected by the Jewish Heritage Unit and later by the Manchester Jewish Museum enabled much greater inclusivity. For example, women's history and the experience of childhood became accessible through oral testimony and other sources as did otherwise unrecorded elements of the everyday lives of men in relation to work, leisure and politics. Bill Williams' approach, as exemplified by the Manchester Jewish Museum, was to provide the foundation for what has now become two successive generations of British Jewish social historians. It is this work, bridging the gap between social, economic, political and cultural history, that has, for the first time, made the study of British Jewry distinctive and of global historiographical significance. Furthermore, at a non-professional level, it inspired a series of local Jewish studies projects across Britain including in Scotland, Wales, Liverpool and Birmingham. It was perhaps in Birmingham and its Jewish History Research Group, under the skillful direction of Zoe Josephs, that the Manchester example was most successfully translated into a different urban context with a set of subtle publications in a three volume Jewish history of the city.³³ The final volume, a history of Jewish refugees in Birmingham during the

30 Ibid, p.145.

31 Williams, *Manchester Jewry*, p.4.

32 Ibid, p.54.

33 Zoe Josephs (ed.), *Birmingham Jewry* vol.1 1749-1914 (Birmingham: Birmingham Jewish History Research Group, 1980); idem (ed.), *Birmingham Jewry* vol.II *More Aspects 1740-1930* (Birmingham: Birmingham Jewish History Research Group, 1984) and Zoe Josephs, *Survivors: Jewish Refugees in Birmingham 1933-1945* (Oldbury: Meridian Books, 1988).

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

Nazi era, drew particularly from oral history, enabling the lives of ordinary people, including those who came to Britain as domestic servants, to be incorporated for the first time.³⁴

It is worth dwelling further on the oral history achievements of the Jewish History Unit and the subsequent Manchester Jewish Museum. Their significance was twofold. First, it was inclusive and democratically so — oral history enabled elite approaches to Jewish history to be challenged, fulfilling Bill Williams' agenda of the Manchester Jewish Museum being 'by the people, for the people and about the people'.³⁵ Second, the approach to oral history was innovative and challenging. Rather than interview individuals about specific aspects or moments of their lives, a life story approach was adopted, empowering the interviewee. The life stories gathered were then taken seriously in their own right, not just for the detail contained within them but through a critical examination of the individual narratives that were constructed.

The late Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, a collaborator with Bill on various national oral history projects, have written about 'the myths we live by'. Samuel and Thompson emphasised that 'to identify the element of myth in oral sources is certainly *not* to say that we are working with memories of a false past', adding that 'a high proportion of the rich detail in a typical life story remains objectively valid'. They recognise, however, that

every life story is also potential evidence for the subjective, and even the unconscious. We do not have to choose one and jettison the other. Oral memory offers a double validity in understanding a past in which, as still today, myth was embedded in real experience: both growing from it, and helping to shape its perception.³⁶

The use of the life story material by Bill Williams and others linked to the museum project exemplified this complex approach, alert to silences as much as to the emphasises within testimonies.

The fourth and final area of significance relating to the Manchester Jewish Museum project to be highlighted here relates to its challenging political agenda. Williams later wrote that within the Museum's ethos the

(male) elitism, romanticism and apologetics of an older Anglo-Jewish history were decisively rejected ... It implied no particular definition of 'Jewishness'. It did not celebrate (still less, propagate) any particular kind of communal 'conformity'. About things Jewish, it was assertive rather than deferential. The emphasis was on the Jewish experience in its own right rather than the real or supposed 'Jewish contributions' to the history of the city. Nothing else about it lent any credence to the notion that the place of the Jews in English society depended upon behaviour or images acceptable to English gentiles. It was not defensive or didactic in the face of anti-Semitism.³⁷

That absence of defensiveness was also evident in the commitment of Bill Williams to draw comparisons between the Jewish experience and more recent minority groups in Britain. Rather than distance Jews from those whose position in British society was often more marginal and vulnerable, Williams saw important parallels. Rather than the glib and often patronising assumptions that newer groups should follow the Jewish example, pull their socks up and get on in society, Williams stressed the pressures to assimilate as well as the exclusion that past Jewish immigrants had faced. Not surprisingly in the 1980s he and others linked to the Manchester Jewish Museum were heavily

34 Josephs, *Survivors*.

35 Williams quoted in *Jewish Chronicle*, 30 March 1984.

36 Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 'Introduction' in idem (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.6.

37 Williams, 'Heritage and Community', pp.142,143-4.

Tony Kushner

involved with anti-deportation campaigns on behalf of asylum seekers, most famously the Sri Lankan Marxist, Veraj Mendis, who had sought sanctuary in a Manchester church.³⁸ Such openness and a willingness to connect was not without its controversy within the Manchester Jewish Museum. Williams' vision of a museum that was both particular and universal, taking risks that it could offend in both aspects, is still ongoing and unresolved. Yet Williams' philosophy that the museum should reflect a commitment to both past and present is part of his powerful legacy to this remarkable project.

The final section of this overview will focus on Bill Williams' later and ongoing work. In this respect, the first area for consideration are his two books on Manchester Jewish civic leaders, Michael Fidler and Sir Sidney Hamburger.³⁹ On the surface, they reflect a change of direction for Bill Williams whose energy previously had generally been focused away from the communal elite. Nevertheless, there is more continuity than change in these important — if relatively neglected — publications. Both leaders were children of ordinary east European immigrant family origin and their communal and wider societal impact reflected the political coming of age of that huge population movement. These studies also showed the chronological range of the author who had started his research on Manchester Jewry with the 1740s and was now prepared to take it through to the late twentieth century. Whilst not full accounts of second generation east European Jews in Manchester, these rich and subtle biographies for the first time explored the cultural, religious and political milieu of Jews in the town through the twentieth century. Taken together, they remain the only attempt to deal with British Jewish life *beyond* the age of mass immigration, exploring both inner dynamics and wider societal influences.

Fidler was born in 1916 and Hamburger two years earlier, the former becoming a Conservative MP and President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the latter a major civic and communal leader in Manchester and a prominent member of the Labour party. Aside from the importance of these books probing a scarcely touched British Jewish historiographical chronology, they were also landmark works with regard to the origins and nature of Jewish leadership and politics:

How do leaders 'emerge' in a voluntary minority society within which leadership is not legally defined or structurally determined? What expectations does a minority community have of its 'leaders' and how are they discharged? And what, if any, is the relationship between the exercise of communal and of civic authority?

Such issues are clearly of tremendous relevance in the contemporary world beyond the Jewish example, as debates about national identities in the context of the tensions of multi-cultural societies are played out. As Williams adds, 'Underlying such questions are issues of even greater moment surrounding minority identity as it is perceived personally, communally, and by the majority society.'⁴⁰

In these two works Williams, as ever sensitive to the local dynamics, pinpointed the cultural context in which Fidler and Hamburger emerged in the interwar period, playing especial attention to the Manchester Union of Jewish Literary Societies which was founded in 1920.⁴¹ In spite of their different personalities and politics, both, argues Williams, perceived their role as mediating between Jewish and non-Jewish society as diplomats and ambassadors. In the process, they negotiated their powerful sense of local and national belonging with a commitment to the Jewish cause whether at home or abroad. Both works are critical of their subject matter — Fidler's increasingly reactionary approach to immigration is a particular case in point.⁴² But as with his earlier work, Williams highlighted the

38 See Steve Cohen, *Deportation is Freedom! The Orwellian World of Immigration Controls* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), pp.18,44,165.

39 Bill Williams, *Michael Fidler (1916-1989: A Study in Leadership* (Manchester: no publisher, 1997); idem, *Sir Sidney Hamburger and Manchester Jewry: Religion, City and Community* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1999).

40 Williams, *Sir Sidney Hamburger*, p.2.

41 Ibid, p.29.

42 Williams, *Michael Fidler*, chapter 11.

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

pressures and expectations from non-Jewish society and how this shaped their politics inside and outside the Jewish community. That Hamburger was still alive, and was also a more interesting if less nationally prominent character, may have restrained the later work: the emphasis on the 'civic and communal achievements' of Hamburger sits a little uneasily in the wider context of Williams' work as a whole and his critique of the 'contribution' school of Jewish historiography.⁴³ Overall, however, Williams' analysis of the relationship between Jewishness and Englishness, rooted in a deep understanding of the construction of local identities, makes both these works of major significance for any student of twentieth century British Jewish history. This is especially so with regard to the impact of the second generation and the forging of suburban identities.⁴⁴ They are equally important as case studies of minority politics and the strategies that have been employed to ensure well-being and security. In this respect, the differences between the two, with Hamburger motivated more by his religious identity and commitment than the more secular Fidler, are particularly fascinating and relevant to the contemporary political scene in Britain and in other liberal democracies struggling to deal with religious and ethnic diversity and the perceived problem of 'loyalty'. Fidler and Hamburger used their strong local roots and loyalties to be able to argue the case for Jews not inside but also outside Britain, whether in relation to their support for Soviet Jewry or the state of Israel. Post '9/11' and '7/7', Williams' biographies of these figures should be considered by anyone concerned about the nature of majority-minority politics and the dynamics of power.

Bill Williams' work as a whole is notable for its bravery in exploring uncharted waters and doing so in an ambitious and innovative manner. It is thus not surprising that having moved boldly into the post-1945 world with the Fidler and Hamburger biographies, his work beyond would again seek fresh challenges. It has already been noted that the Jewish History Unit and then the Manchester Jewish Museum had incorporated not only the experiences of east European Jewish immigrants but also refugees from Nazism in their oral history, archive and artefact collection projects. Indeed, one of the first temporary exhibitions of the new museum in 1986 was 'Before the Holocaust', an exploration of the ordinary lives of German and Austrian Jews based on family photograph albums and oral history interviews of those who escaped to Britain during the 1930s.⁴⁵

At this point there was little awareness of or interest in the much smaller number of individuals who came to Britain after the war having survived the Holocaust. Exact figures are difficult to come by as these Jews came on different schemes, such as that for Distressed Relatives and another that was intended to give only temporary entry to recuperate for a thousand children from the concentration camps.⁴⁶ Others came on their own through wider, mainly non-Jewish, influxes into Britain. As with the refugees during the 1930s, there was also much movement and re-migration, making estimates of numbers even less reliable. It is probably the case that between 2 and 3,000 Holocaust survivors, as they would later become known, came to Britain in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War. Outside London, Manchester became the major place of settlement for them, providing possibilities of work as well as the security of a large and diverse Jewish community of mainly east European origin.

From the 1990s, as awareness and engagement in the Holocaust developed rapidly in Britain, albeit from a very low base, interest in these survivors similarly evolved. As ever, Bill Williams was at the forefront of recording these previously neglected experiences and, in conjunction with the British Library's National Life Story Collection, he helped organise a national scheme to interview those still

43 Williams, *Sir Sidney Hamburger*, p.1.

44 See the exploratory essay by David Cesarani, 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Suburbs: Social Change in Anglo-Jewry Between the Wars, 1914-1945', *Jewish Culture and History* vol.1 no.1 (Summer 1998), pp.5-26.

45 See Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.162.

46 Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp.206-8.

Tony Kushner

in Britain. Eventually over 700 interviews were carried out across the country.⁴⁷ Out of the material and contacts established through the locally-based survivors came the idea of a permanent exhibition or wider museum project in Manchester devoted to the Holocaust. Known as the *Shoah Centre*, the various building schemes, including a museum project designed by the internationally-renown architect, Daniel Liberskind, were never realised. Yet rather than dismiss this simply as a failure, it is of importance to the future to examine both the ambitions of those connected to the Shoah Centre and why to some, especially in positions of influence, these may have been regarded as too challenging and therefore not to be supported.

The idea of creating either a major memorial or a museum of the Holocaust faced major opposition in Britain. Even as late as the 1970s, proposals to build a small monument to the Holocaust were rejected as they were deemed to be irrelevant to the country's memory work.⁴⁸ The Imperial War Museum paid little attention to the subject. Indeed, it was only with the opening in Washington of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 that a stimulus and a reason to hope was given to British campaigners — survivors and others — who wanted there to be an equivalent in London. In 2000, the permanent and extensive Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum opened to general acclaim. Why, some asked, would Britain need a second major Holocaust museum?

On the surface, the easiest response was geographical distance and, as with the Imperial War Museum North, the possibility of bringing in an audience without easy access to the capital. Such a pragmatic justification, however, disguises the huge intellectual, political and general ideological gulf between the realised Holocaust exhibition in London and that proposed by the *Shoah Centre* in Manchester. Although the Imperial War Museum Holocaust exhibition makes extensive use of survivor testimony, it does so in a very different way than that intended by the *Shoah Centre*. Testimony, for the *Shoah Centre*, was to be at the heart of the exhibition. By utilising a life story approach, the full complexity of the individual lives — before, during and after the Holocaust — would be explored in depth. By such inclusivity, the dangers of presenting the Jewish experience as being one only of persecution, death and destruction would be avoided. The approach would also put the individual at the heart of the narrative rather than the chronology being driven only by the perpetrators, as is the case in the Imperial War Museum exhibition. It is telling that those planning the permanent exhibition in London did not initially intend to use testimony so extensively. Although the quality of the testimony collected by the Imperial War Museum made them incorporate more into the exhibition, it remains the case that the voices of survivors are used only as illustrative devices and they never disturb the smooth narrative structure of the exhibition as a whole.⁴⁹

The focus on the life story of the survivor and her/his every day artefacts would have been far more challenging from a museological perspective. But the focus on the individual had a wider ideological significance. Taking the lives of ordinary people seriously, without the dangers of either patronising or romanticising them, has run through all the work of Bill Williams and those working with him. In this sense, the approach of the *Shoah Centre* was in keeping with the early History Workshop ethos and its manifestations through the Jewish History Unit and Manchester Jewish Museum. The *Shoah Centre* would have been rooted in the idea of local place identities — either in the place in which the victims of the Holocaust came from or the place in which its survivors came to live. The *Shoah Centre* would have thus spoken directly to Manchester and would have confronted the space between 'here' and

47 These are deposited at the British Library. Copies of the Manchester-based survivor tapes are available at the Manchester Jewish Museum.

48 See Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), chapter 7.

49 See Tony Kushner, 'Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting', *Oral History* vol.29 no.2 (Autumn 2001), pp.83-94, and more generally, idem, 'The Holocaust and the Museum World in Britain: A Study in Ethnography', in Sue Vice (ed.), *Representing the Holocaust* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present and Future

'there', an ambition totally alien to the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition. The *Shoah Centre* was also intended as a radical intervention: by showing how ordinary people were affected by prejudice, including through the state structure, parallels would be drawn with other individuals and peoples damaged and destroyed by racism. The *Shoah Centre* was thus to be a challenging alternative museum in which the visitor would explore the lives of ordinary people from ordinary places caught up in extraordinary events. The richness and diversity of minority life (including internal struggles), and the impact of and resistance to antisemitism and racism, would have been at the forefront of the exhibition. The physical design by Libeskind and the exhibition itself would have not made for an easy visitor experience. Those promoting the *Shoah Centre* relished this possibility, but for the potential funders and 'stakeholders' in Manchester and Manchester Jewry, it was, ultimately, perhaps too dangerous a concept. The dilemma will remain for anyone linked to a museum or exhibition linked to traumatic history — a safer and more 'traditional' approach may fail to do justice to the toughness demanded by the subject matter.⁵⁰

From the frustrations of the *Shoah Centre*, the ambitions of which still remain to be fulfilled by others, this overview of Bill Williams' work will finish with a related project which is close to completion. *The Making of Manchester Jewry* is a triumph because its author has a mastery of the intricate dynamics between place, people, migration and settlement. Similarly, Bill Williams has applied his skills of being able to understand the complex relationships between locality, particularity and movement in a study of refugees from Nazism who settled, either temporarily or permanently, in Manchester during the 1930s. As ever, his research technique is both exhaustive and innovative. Oral history of former refugees and those involved in aiding them has enabled neglected and marginalised experiences to come to light, often querying the Whiggish assumptions of recent historiography on this subject.⁵¹ An even greater achievement of this project, however, is that it provides a deep and detailed examination of the strengths and weaknesses of 'liberal' Manchester and its confrontation with the refugee crisis. Religious and secular organisations and key individuals in Manchester's civic life have been explored with the aim of explaining why they did (and did not) engage with the refugees and the Jewish plight as a whole. No other study of a large city with many thousands of refugees coming to it has ever been attempted. As with so much of Bill Williams' work, his total history approach and critical perspective provide a deeply challenging perspective missing in other literature. Most works on the history of Manchester ignore the refugee presence. Where refugees and responses to them do appear briefly the approach has normally been celebratory, reflecting wider national tendencies.⁵² Bill Williams' latest work shows how important refugees were in the process of forming local identities in Manchester during the Nazi era, regardless of whether responses to them were positive, negative, ambivalent or even simply marked by total indifference.

Bill Williams' work on Manchester and the refugees from Nazism is another triumph and endorsement of his unique brand of micro-history. To conclude: taken together his past and ongoing work across the fields of heritage and history has provided a remarkable legacy in terms of publications, museums, organisations and in the training and inspiration of later generations of scholars and activists. Sander Gilman has asked us to

50 For a brief overview of the *Shoah Centre* see Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp.48-50 and p.ii for a reproduction of Libeskind's design.

51 See, for example, Marian Malet and Anthony Grenville (eds), *Changing Countries: The Experience and Achievement of German-speaking Exiles from Hitler in Britain from 1933 to Today* (London: Libris, 2002) and Daniel Snowman, *The Hitler Emigres* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002). By Whiggish, I am referring to a historiography which emphasizes the alleged tendency towards gradual progress in social and political matters in British history. In this particular case it would be in reference to the acceptance of refugees from Nazism over time in Britain.

52 Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*.

Tony Kushner

imagine a new Jewish history written as the history of the Jews at the frontier, a history with no center; a history marked by the dynamics of change, confrontation, and accommodation; a history which focuses on the present and in which all participants are given voice. It is the place of the 'migrant culture of the in-between'...⁵³

Rather than a utopian vision, Bill Williams' work has provided an example of how this ideal can be achieved in practice.

53 Sander Gilman, 'Introduction', in idem and Milton Shain (eds), *Jewries at the Frontier* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p.11.