
BOOK REVIEWS

THE SELF-MADE ANTHROPOLOGIST (A life of A.P. Elkin)

by Tigger Wise
Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1985

Professor Elkin, first Australian-born Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University, member of the University Senate; a well-known name in Sydney for decades. But how many knew how wide was his influence? From grand designs like International House, the newest residence of its time on the Sydney University campus to house students of different denominations and nationalities, to suggestions for signs to indicate the presence of marked pedestrian crossings on roads. Those two trousered legs on a yellow background at every pedestrian crossing were Elkin's suggestion from signs he had seen in Sri Lanka.

A cold, intensely private man, he was financially a wizard. Behind his prim clergyman's image and attitude, who would have guessed that his grandfather was Moses Elkin, who with his wife, Deborah, was sent to New Zealand in the middle of last century by the Chief Rabbi to become Minister of Emily Place Synagogue in Auckland? For fifteen years they laboured to keep the congregation viable, but finally returned to England dispirited. Their son Rheuben had left home earlier and finally came to Singleton in New South Wales where he married Ellen Bower and had a son, Adolphus Peter Elkin.

I knew Elkin as an Emeritus Professor lecturing on Pre-history and the Aborigines in the anthropology course at Sydney University in the 1960s. An elderly man, his lectures were dry and humourless but full of intricate detail. His attitude to the Aborigines — narrow, looking back to their position in Australian society as he had seen them in the 1920s. In short, he seemed a one-dimensional man.

I approached this book with interest to find out something about the man, and found it so well written that he became a fully three-dimensional figure before I had read a quarter of the book. It is a fascinating insight into the private and public life as well as the emotions and experiences of the man. He comes alive from his first enthusiasm as an inexperienced young man, to the final bitter committee struggles as an old wily "numbers" man.

Tigger Wise, who followed the trail of Elkin's life through his papers, from speaking to his family and friends and from reading many background hooks, has done an excellent job with what could have been very dry material. Elkin was apparently a very meticulous man; there must have been a great deal of chaff to sort through. She follows his philosophical development and makes us part of it. She ably places us in the correct time zones by brief references to contemporary events outside Elkin's obsession with anthropology. She has cleverly introduced now well-known people who had dealings with Elkin and yet presented them in their time as young fledglings — Stephen Roberts, Jack McEwen, Paul Hasluck.

It is a book that one can indulge in nostalgically. After all, Elkin's life spanned nearly nine decades during which many exciting events occurred in Australia and he took part in many of them.

Tigger Wise puts many homely touches in drawing thumbnail sketches of the many characters in this biography. She highlights peoples' weight, little habits, par-

ticular facial features. She uses her source material well, sometimes weaving it unobtrusively into her text, sometimes using it surprisingly, bringing the man and his era truly alive. She even uses such ephemeral objects as dinner menus and conference lapel tags in this ingenious manner, while mention of meat safes and the unfinished arches of the Sydney Harbour Bridge place scenes in their right times.

If you knew the man, it throws a floodlight on his character; if you didn't, the book is worth reading for the influence that Elkin had on contemporary events in anthropology and Aboriginal affairs over five decades.

Technically, the book is well presented. The chapters have catchy titles as they carry the reader from decade to decade, the photographs are interesting with brief notes beneath them. The sources and notes section is scholarly detailed and the index (mostly of names) is precisely listed.

My only criticism of this most readable book would be a feeling that the author's obvious sympathies for Elkin in the beginning turn sour towards the end.

Helen Bersten

VOICES OF JACOB, HANDS OF ESAU: JEWS IN AMERICAN LIFE AND THOUGHT

by Stephen J. Whitfield, Archon Books, 1984

“Composed out of a certain wonder at the paradox of so ancient and fragile a people replenishing itself in the social flux of the United States,” Stephen Whitfield has gathered and introduced a collection of his own articles and review essays published between 1979-82.

Any student of American history will warm to essays on the Jews and the South, the Trade Union movement and performing comedy. The collective attempt to reconcile Judaism and the American experience may be full of complexity and tension but has yielded mutual rewards. The United States is the ultimate paradox; her distinctive national character is a “nation of nations”. Jews have nurtured the paradox. They have shared in every wave of immigration and then adjusted their voice and customs. They are free to submerge or to interact with the larger group. Isaac Stern explained the first exchange of classical musicians: “they send us their Jews from Odessa, and we send them our Jews from Odessa”.

One gets dizzy remembering how many Jewish performers, or their parents, have changed their names. Did you know that Lauren Bacall (nee Betty Persky) is a cousin of the former Prime Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres (ne Persky)? Somehow it seems proper that Irving Berlin should compose “White Christmas” and Allen Ginsberg should describe himself as a “Buddhist Jewish pantheist”. Israel Zangwill and the chief character of his play, “The Melting Pot” (1908) were outspoken Jews with a message for all mankind.

The Jewish input may take strange and subtle transformations in “the legacy of Radicalism”. Most, as individuals, are unobservant, even ignorant. However, the dogma, Messianism and bookishness of their tradition may seek a substitute or outlet. They know Hillel's Golden Rule and his call to serve, even if they have forgotten his name. They have absorbed the role models of priest, scholar, wanderer and guilty son. Theories of “status deprivation” are insufficient because other minorities provide such a different outcome.

So many scholars have tried to explain Humour that it is no longer funny. A rich Jewish tradition has developed it as shield and opiate, and America's Hollywood and

vaudeville houses have provided ready employment. The Jewish comedians run from A to Z, from Allen and Benny to Youngman and Zero (Mostel). The verbal flair of Jules Feiffer and Woody Allen has a Jewish source. You don't have to be Jewish or Yiddish-speaking to appreciate the tonal subtleties of Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*, although he enters this book in his professional capacity as a sociologist and pioneering student of the media.

Anti-Jewish prejudice has appeared in the South but Whitfield finds it unsystematic and shallow. Perhaps it has been deflected elsewhere in ways known to other countries. The region's Jews have been few and adaptable and find affinity with the true Southerner's sense of family, place and tradition. On its tree-lined way to Tulane University, New Orleans, where I took my doctorate, the St. Charles Avenue tram passed the Jewish Community Centre and two synagogues. Jews were prominent, but not too prominent, among the Orchestra Committee, the doctors and Garden District mansions. The community has produced the noted author, Lillian Hellman, and the philosopher, James Feibleman, who still taught at Tulane. It was old, well-established and never more than 10,000 people. They were visible but very much part of the South.

A flourishing community in colonial Newport, Rhode Island, erected the first synagogue in the United States in 1763 which still stands as a splendid example of the classical Georgian style. The poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, visiting the Jewish cemetery ca. 1850 wrote: "The groaning earth in travail and in pain/ Brings forth its races, but does not restore./ And the dead nations never rise again." Whitfield quotes and deems him a bad prophet, for Jewry has flourished in the United States and a new community was later formed in Newport.

But Longfellow in another stanza writes: "Gone are the living, but the dead remain./ And not neglected; for a hand unseen,/ Scattering its bounty, like a summer rain./ Still keeps their graves and their remembrance green." It is the task of the historian to explain the "hand unseen" and why Jewish communities in the Diaspora survive, adapt and are replenished.

L.E. Fredman

PHILLIP BLASHKI — A VICTORIAN PATRIARCH

by Gael Hammer, P. Blashki & Sons Pty Limited 1986

This is Gael Hammer's first published book, but her name is well known amongst A.J.H.S. members for her interest in historical and family documentation. She has had several papers published on the subject, and delivered a paper on the life of the artist Miles Evergood (Myer Blashki), the eleventh child of the Blashki family. The author is also a member of this extended family being one of the eighty-eight great-grandchildren of Hannah and Phillip Blashki.

In compiling such a book and the arduous task of rounding up the descendants of this long standing Australian family, Gael Hammer genealogically embraces a time span of 128 years and seven generations. The result is more than dry factual accounting of who-begat-who (although there is, for the general reader, perhaps more than enough). What emerges as a *raison d'être* for such detailed research is a picture of the life and character of the founding figures, set against a changing backdrop of Australian economic conditions and social mores. After all, the founding of the Blashki family almost coincided with the founding of Melbourne. Hannah and Phillip arrived (from Poland via England) in 1858, only two years after Victoria was separated from N.S.W.

The writing is unpretentiously forthright and faithfully substantiated by quotes from letters, reports, personal memoirs and recollections, together with old family photos, which add visual flavour to the author's written description. Often self-consciously posed in oval frames, the family is portrayed in starched collars, morning coats and neck-ties, as stiff and formal as the Victorian respectable bourgeoisie society to which (with a few renegade exceptions) they aspired.

The story begins with Phillip Blashki (born Favel Wagczewski, in 1837) escaping before the age of 18, going to Manchester where his English employer named him Phillip Blashki. Working as a tassel maker, he met and married the elegant, high-bosomed, willow-waisted Hannah nee Immergut. Already at 23 she had borne four children, three of whom had died. She was inured to the trials and tribulations that awaited the couple when they decided to start a new life in the New World, meaning America, to which they had paid their fares, shipped ahead all their worldly belongings, then missed the boat. Accepting their fate, they took the next boat, which happened to be going to Australia.

They arrived in Melbourne in the midst of the gold rush. On borrowed capital Phillip became a "hawker", while Hannah gave birth to the first Jewish twins in Australia. Now a dealer, Phillip was trading jewellery for gold on the diggings. The family moved to Geelong to reduce the time he spent away from home. The mines were producing abundantly and he was beginning to make something of a living, which he needed, as by the age of 30 he had fathered nine children. His fortunes fluctuated when he was robbed of £700 of jewellery (all his capital), jailed for suspected collusion for the insurance, declared bankrupt, and eventually vindicated with some of his goods returned. He opened a shop in Bourke St. with residential premises above to pack in his wife and expanding family. In 1876, when Hannah was 43, there were 14 children (altogether she bore 18 of whom 15 survived). As Aaron, the second-eldest son, wrote, "Mother slaved from early morning till late at night and this went on until my sisters were old enough to lend a hand". Apparently, money was still too short to provide much outside help, but by 1889 Phillip could afford to send the two youngest girls to the Presbyterian Ladies' College. Their climb to middle class prosperity and respectability in the community was complete. The firm of P. Blashki and Sons achieved recognition and prestige when they won the tender to manufacture the coveted Sheffield Shield for cricket, which is still competed for.

Throughout all the vagaries of time and place in his life, Phillip Blashki retained with tenacity and unquestionable faith his commitment to the tenets of Judaism, and saw to it that the rest of his tribe followed suit. In business and civil life he was both shrewd and determined and at home he was the complete authoritarian. When his daughters attempted to teach Hannah English (she was illiterate), Phillip objected, saying she didn't need it.

The family was badly hit by the Depression in 1893, and after that Phillip left the problems of the firm to his eldest sons, while he retired to carry on the voluntary charitable activities in which he had become involved. He became a man of some standing in the general community, in the Freemasons, on the Magistrates' Bench and in business, founding the Victorian Chamber of Manufactures and the Victorian Employers Federation. In the Jewish community he was on various charitable boards, pioneered Jewish education in schools and founded the Jewish Aid Society (with Hannah's encouragement) and the Chevra Kadisha.

Their two characters, his strong, principled and benevolently autocratic, hers more gentle, seem to be confirmed in the family photos, such as those reproduced on the lid of the chocolate boxes given to each member of the family who attended

their Golden Wedding Anniversary in 1907. To this event the prodigal son, Myer (now established as the artist Miles Evergood), sent a beautifully framed sepia photo of one of his acclaimed paintings from New York. However, as he had married out of the faith, this gesture did not melt his father's heart. He was still considered an embarrassment to the family and disinherited.

From the day Phillip and Hannah Blashki arrived in Australia to the present day, there have been about 500 descendants who have made their mark in commerce, professions, academic posts, and generally contributed to the economic and cultural growth of Australia, U.S.A., Europe, South Africa and Israel. The firm of P. Blashki and Sons, which is still in operation, has existed for 128 of Victoria's 151 years, thus making it, indeed, one of the oldest firms in Australia.

The book includes a Roll of Honour of those who have served or died for their country in war. Those who perished in the Holocaust appear in independent genealogical charts that punctuate the narrative.

Ruth Faerber