

Some twenty years ago, Sir Robert Blackwood, Chancellor, when opening Monash University described Sir John as "one of the two or three of the greatest of all Australians". To be privileged to write on such a public figure is indeed an honour and reward to an historian. Geoffrey Serle had an excellent advantage of access to his subject's extensive personal papers. He has compiled a wonderful social history of a Jew and has very rapidly grasped an understanding of Jewish values and a deep appreciation of both ethnic attachment and religious conviction in Australian Jewish life. It is a very fine insight of a personality and the author has shown his marked literary abilities. He is to be complimented for this very full biography — a must for any real student of Australian Jewish history — indeed up front for anyone interested in reading about the character development of a national personality — in every way John Monash has gained an imperishable place in the niche of fame.

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### "DINKUM MISHPOCHAH"

by

Eric Silbert

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In the interests of the collection and recording of Australian Jewish history, here is a rich store-house of communal, social and political history in its developmental stages. The autobiography is a genre of literature to be welcomed by historical societies. This work, begun as a letter to the author's children, was later extended into history, written autobiographically, for the public. Thus, it is rich in detail, written with the easy fluency of one familiar with his subject, and writing a letter to his children. The style is to be recommended for those who "have a story to tell".

Having said this, though, it is necessary to add that one could have wished for a more positive analysis of the events of history. Eric Silbert's family (through the marriage of Abraham Silbert to his niece, Fanny, at the turn of the century), and his wife, Joan Tate's family, have been closely associated with the history of Western Australian Jewry, and particularly that of Perth, for almost 10 decades. Much of this story is recorded in detail in the approximately 340 pages of the book. The reader is given a full account of families whose communal and synagogal involvements the author attributes to the fact that "A vital part of the way of life of both my grandparents was their Jewishness . . ." The grandparents, Abraham and Fanny Silbert and Joseph and Bella Masel, and their descendants, and the families inter-linked are set out in the accompanying family tree. Besides

the families Silbert, Masel, Breckler, Tate, Sharp, Troy, Arkwright, Freedman, there are a score of other families. Abraham and Fanny "discovered" Australia just when the Perth and Fremantle synagogues were being built. The (first) Perth Synagogue was consecrated in 1897, and the (shortlived) Fremantle Synagogue, some six years later.

Because of its easy style, "Dinkum Mishpochah" tends to be gulped down in hearty draughts: it is anything but subtle and sensitive, and, by its very nature, its rough, tangy Australian flavour lies a little harshly on the tongue, giving the palate plenty to interest it. One feels, reading the book, that through the writing of it, the author will find an integrated identity: through these personal recollections, history comes to life. Some of it is rather too subjective, though. The reader is warned in the Introduction that the author is a "talker not a writer". Then, in conclusion, he reminds his children that it was to meet their request, "Tell us about some of the things that have happened to you", that he embarked on what turned out to be for him "a rewarding exercise". It is an episodic and anecdotal book. Silbert was born into a comfortable Jewish Fremantle family in the early 1920s. He was educated at the Christian Brothers College and Aquinas College, whilst attending Hebrew School at weekends, and, with an attachment to a Wesleyan scout troop. He joined the RAAF as soon as he turned 18. Later, he seems to have enjoyed the adventures as Wireless Operator with a Pathfinder bomber crew. It has been noted elsewhere that he received the D.F.C., and, held the Pathfinder Award.

After the War, Silbert entered the family business of his father, Barney Silbert; then he married, and, became involved in Jewish communal and civic life, and, particularly with the Liberal Jewish movement in Perth. Although not a foundation member of Temple David, he held every honorary position on the Board of Management, including that of President. He was active in the establishment of the Anzac Forest project in Israel, and, attended the opening of the Memorial Forest. Returning to Australia, he addressed over 60 Jewish and non-Jewish organisations in city and country areas, as far distant as Esperance and Moora, to speak about the State of Israel and its objectives, its aims and its achievements. He worked hard to encourage migration to the Perth community, both from overseas and from the Eastern States. One of the most distinctive elements of the work is the author's handling of the disputes between Orthodox and Liberal congregations.

Silbert was a prominent member in Rotary, also, as President and District Governor. He was a Justice of the Peace, and an honorary probation and parole officer. He was elected, in 1970, unopposed, to the presidency of the W.A. Jewish Board of Deputies. He served as President of the Methodist Ladies College Parents and Friends, was associated with Rostrum, and, he encouraged his children to participate in sports, as he himself did. Several of his four children represented Australia at the Maccabi Games in Israel.

The author includes a kind of rough glossary of Yiddish terms, which he describes as "some of Dad's words and expressions. They are not necessarily correct but are what they represented to me." This may explain

his rather irritating colloquial distortions — in one instance the term “Yontif”, a Festival day, and in another, “Yom Tov”.

I doubt whether his children, or posterity, would have lost much from the omission of details of the girls who had hoped to become “Mrs. E.S.” He would surely know that polite society requires that a lady’s name is never mentioned “in the mess”. Also, certain well-known rabbis, who have done much for the causes of Australian Jewish history, and inter-faith goodwill, as well as the strengthening of Jewish identity, are dealt with less than kindly.

Despite its flaws, the book deserves a wide and thoughtful readership. Historical data is the chief merit of the book, and here, the author has made good use of articles published in the *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*.

**Louise Rosenberg**