

**JOSEPH JACOBS (1854–1916)  
— A BOY FROM OZ — ONE OF  
AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN SONS.**

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In 1949, David Benjamin wrote an article on Joseph Jacobs, which was published in this Journal. The present article adds to that piece, incorporating insights from his daughter's memoirs published in 1952 and more recent scholarship dealing with Jacobs. In secular circles Joseph Jacobs is probably best remembered for his contribution to children's literature and as an English folklorist. In his six volumes of English, Celtic, Indian and European tales he gave the world versions of its best known and most representative folktales in a form suited to children while remaining true in all essentials to the original oral versions of the folklore. Writing in 1952, his daughter, May Bradshaw Hays, shared these insights into his continuing passion for children's literature:



Until I was nearly eight, I thought all fathers wrote fairytales to earn a living for their families. As a matter of course every morning I would watch my father, Joseph Jacobs, take his bowler hat from the hallstand, place the crook of his umbrella over his left arm, and start out for the British Museum 'to find more stories to put in fairy books'.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere she also paints a delightful picture of his returning on a cold London evening having bought two hot baked potatoes from the old man on the corner by the museum and using them to warm his hands in his pockets on the way home ... where they shared the eating of them.<sup>2</sup>

### FAMILY BACKGROUND AND CAREER

Born in Sydney, New South Wales, to John and Sarah Jacobs on the 29 August 1854, Joseph was the fourth son — his elder brothers being Sydney, Edwin and Louis. (The death record of John Jacobs, dated 8 February 1885, in the Great Synagogue Burial Register indicates there were also a further five males deceased). A younger sibling — Frances — is also recorded.

A Londoner by birth, Joseph's father, John Jacobs, came to New South Wales about 1837. He married Sarah Myers in Sydney. Some records indicate Sarah was John's second wife and that the eldest son, Sydney, was by his first wife but the evidence for this claim is by no means conclusive.

Interestingly, there appears to be no official record of Joseph Jacobs' birth. In his article on Joseph Jacobs Benjamin argues that:

Jacobs was born before registration of births was compulsory in New South Wales. There is, therefore, no record in the Registrar-General's Office. The York Street Synagogue birth registrar makes no mention of him — but no parent was compelled to record his child's birth with religious authorities. The date (of birth) given ... is that contained in an article on him in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1905) written by his friend, Israel Abrahams, and as Jacobs was the editor of the *Encyclopedia*, its accuracy may be assumed.<sup>3</sup>

From an early age the young Joseph exhibited all the signs of a child prodigy: he was a voracious reader and had an insatiable curiosity in all things. As was noted in an editorial in 1916: 'He had a remarkable memory for the things he had once read or heard and would delight his friends "by reeling off" anecdotes and stories without end.'<sup>4</sup> At the age of six, according to Professor Graham Seal, Director of the Australian Folklore Research Unit at Curtin University, Western Australia, Jacobs was told the tales of 'Henny Penny' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk'.<sup>5</sup> That 'Henny Penny is No. 20 in Jacobs' first anthology of *English Fairy Tales* (London, 1890) bears testament, not only to the impression this early telling had but also, to the prodigious mem-



ory of Joseph, the child. The original text is reproduced in Seal's article.<sup>6</sup>

Of Joseph's early formal schooling little is known, but given his father's close association as a member at the York Street Synagogue from 1842, it is likely that he was taught privately at the Jewish day school then already in existence. In 1863, by the time Joseph was nine, his father was licensee of the Post Office Hotel on the west side of York Street, between King and Barrack Streets.<sup>7</sup> This position John Jacobs retained until 1874 when he went into business first in Elizabeth Street and later in Redfern. It is known that the young Joseph entered Sydney Grammar School in the April 1867 at the age of twelve years, eight months. Grammar was a non-denominational selective school for gifted boys and attracted many Jewish boys of the period. A.B. Weigall, who was to become one of Sydney Grammar's most noted academics, had taken up the position of headmaster in January of the same year.

From the very beginning, Joseph proved himself an exceptional scholar. In his first year he won his form prize for mathematics. The following year he won a prize for English, while in 1869 he topped his form in mathematics, English and the physical sciences. At the end of 1870, when he was just over sixteen, he won the Knox Prize for the highest aggregate of marks in the upper school competing against others a year older. In 1871, his final year, he won the Senior Knox Prize,<sup>8</sup> as well as the coveted title of Captain of the School, given not to outstanding footballers, but to the Dux in languages. Interestingly, by the end of his life Jacobs reputedly knew forty different languages. From Sydney Grammar Jacobs won a valuable scholarship to the University of Sydney, having taken honours for general proficiency in English, mathematics and classics. In addition to his academic pursuits during 1871-2, Jacobs was an honorary teacher of the Sydney Jewish Sabbath School. This interest in Jewish faith, culture and history developed into a major thrust of much of his later writings.

The significance of Joseph's Grammar School days is underlined in a letter he wrote from America which was later published in the school's magazine, to his former headmaster, Mr Weigall, still at Sydney Grammar, to congratulate him on being named in the King's Honours List. Jacobs wrote:

Dear Mr Weigall: Permit me to congratulate you most heartily on the distinction conferred upon you by His Majesty, of which I have just heard from my brother Sydney. As one of the oldest of your 'Old Boys' I feel that I have a small share in the joy it must have given you. I always look back to my School days under your charge as the happiest times of my life, and per-

haps the most successful in intellectual acquirement. Whatever I have of scholarly tendency and method, I owe to your influence and training.

You may be interested to know that about ten years ago I left England to carry through a big 'Jewish Encyclopedia,' in twelve volumes, which I succeeded in doing in about five years which was regarded as a great triumph of constructive scholarship, as the materials for such a work had never been gathered together. In recognition the University of Pennsylvania conferred upon me (at the same time with the Emperor of Germany!) the degree of Doctor of Letters (Litt. D.), and I was thereupon appointed Professor of English and Rhetoric at the great Jewish Seminary here. This, with the Editorship of the *American Hebrew*, the chief Jewish weekly published in this country, occupies my time so fully that I am afraid I cannot look forward to much literary work for the rest of my life. ... I thought you would be interested in these details of the fate of one of your oldest pupils, and with the kindest regards to yourself and any of my old fellow-students who may happen to remember me," — Yours very sincerely, JOSEPH JACOBS.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1872 Jacobs entered the Faculty of Arts of University of Sydney where again he had a most successful year, winning his class prizes in classics, mathematics, chemistry and experimental physics. By this time, at the age of eighteen, the breadth of his reading was amazing. He owned an extensive library of classics, and both English and European History. Instead of completing his degree at the University of Sydney, Jacobs' father and elder brothers, who by now were well established in business, decided to send him to St John's College, Cambridge in time for the opening of the academic year in October, 1873. This was reported in *The Australian Israelite* as follows:

Mr Joseph Jacobs, son of Mr John Jacobs of York street has been announced as "first" amongst the first year University students in classics, mathematics, and physics, in the examinations just concluded at our local Alma Mater. This gentleman gives great promise of future distinction in his educational career, and is about proceeding to the mother country to enter the lists at Cambridge.<sup>10</sup>

Although, Jacobs never returned to Australia,<sup>11</sup> according to his daughter, May Bradshaw Hays, when he left Australia Jacobs fully intended to study law and return here to practise.<sup>12</sup>



In Cambridge Jacobs resumed his run of academic successes, including the Freshman's Award in his first year and in his final year, the Wright Prize — a highly valued distinction among Moralists — and the College prize for an English essay. This interest in literature and anthropology continued to shape his future. Upon receiving his B.A. (Hons, First Class) in 1876 Jacobs went to London to become a writer.

For Jacobs, life as a student and academic was accompanied by the problems that plagued many a student — not the least of those being financial. For someone who was to become such an eminent writer in so many fields it is amusing to note that his first published book in 1876 was one he wrote as a ghostwriter for a dentist entitled *Dental Bridges and Crowns*.<sup>13</sup> According to Fine: 'Until he moved to America, he had no teaching position, and probably lived off his writings'.<sup>14</sup> Shaner argues that Jacobs never gained financial security and needed the extra income he earned through his work on translations and reviews.<sup>15</sup>

In 1876, George Eliot's controversial *Daniel Deronda*, a book that foreshadowed the movement for a Jewish Palestine, was published. The ensuing controversy made a deep impact on Jacobs, fresh out of Cambridge, in love with literature — and painfully aware of the antisemitic feelings in Britain as evidenced by the adverse criticism of the book.<sup>16</sup> In a spirited defence of Eliot's book, Jacobs responded with his first published article, 'Mordecai' in *MacMillan's Magazine* of June 1877. In it Jacobs set out to show the adverse criticisms directed at *Daniel Deronda* were 'due to lack of sympathy' and 'want of knowledge on the part of critics'. So strong was his reaction, it had the effect of directing Jacobs' immediate attention to the historic development of Judaism.<sup>17</sup> Bergman suggests it was this incident led Jacobs to devote most of his life to Jewish studies.<sup>18</sup> Shaner also asserts the *Daniel Deronda* controversy aroused in Jacobs 'a desire for a deeper knowledge of his own people and culture'.<sup>19</sup>

In 1877, Jacobs spent a year at the University of Berlin studying Jewish literature, philosophy and ethnology under the distinguished Jewish scholars, Moritz Steinschneider and Moritz Lazarus. On his return to England in 1878, he studied anthropology and statistics with Sir Francis Galton, an eminent statistician of the period, as his mentor. During this period also, from 1878–1884, he was secretary of the Society of Hebrew Literature. These activities laid the foundations of Jacobs' knowledge of folklore and racial history.

Jacobs never lived the life of an isolated scholar indifferent to the world outside. Deeply shocked by the Russian pogroms in 1881 he used his pen to stir the conscience of the English people. His



series of articles published in *The Times* in January 1882 drew attention to the persecution of the Jews in Russia<sup>20</sup> and led to the formation of the Russo-Jewish Committee and the historical Mansion House meeting.<sup>21</sup>

His anthropological studies naturally led him to folklore and in 1888 he edited *The Earliest English Version of the Fables of Bidpai* followed by what appears to be his first contribution to folklore scholarship in a series of articles on the diffusion of Jewish Folktales, entitled 'Jewish Diffusion of Folktales' published in *The Jewish Chronicle* of June 1888.<sup>22</sup> By 1878 the anthropological folklorists had organised the Folk-Lore Society in London. Through the society, Jacobs met and became friends with the prominent folklorists of the day and by 1889 had become a member. It was not long before he was co-opted by the so-called 'great team' into the Folk-Lore Society.<sup>23</sup>

Jacobs' theoretical orientation of 'diffusion' in respect to how folktales spread around the world soon brought him into conflict with the prevalent theory of 'survivalism'. An energetic debate between Andrew Lang (later, also well known as folklorist and compiler of children's literature) and Joseph Jacobs ensued. Jacobs was a strong and enthusiastic proponent of the 'diffusionist' theory in which tales diffused outward from a central place of origin. He contended that up to 50 per cent of the 'common stock' of European folklore originated in India and was dispersed via oral transmission to Europe by merchants and travellers. Andrew Lang, on the other hand, argued that many folktales, however similar to other tales throughout the world, arose independently at different times in different cultures; that the needs of the culture at a given point in time generated the folklore that emerged — that they were an independent invention.<sup>24</sup>

Given Jacobs' background and experience with Jewish history, literature and its dispersion, his sympathy for the migration hypothesis should come as no surprise. Perhaps, even the memory of English folktales told to him in Australia as a six-year-old added strength to his view of the ways in which tales may be dispersed through migration, war, gypsies, travellers and trade routes.

Despite Jacobs' deep involvement in the study of folklore and the activities of the Society throughout the 1880s and 1890s and his voluminous output of writings — articles, reviews, lectures, literature studies and his numerous compilations of fairy/folk tales for children — his interest in Jewish History never waned. Nonetheless, his series of fairytales — *English Fairy Tales*, *Celtic Fairy Tales*, *Indian Fairy Tales* and many others in 1890 — make him one of the most popular writers of fairytales for English speaking children.



Professor Stewig credits Jacobs by the age of thirty-six years with being 'the person most responsible for preserving the body of British folk tales'.<sup>25</sup> The collection's greatest significance is that it recorded old tales at a critical time when they were in danger of being lost. As Eloise Ramsey credits, Jacobs rescued the fast-disappearing English tales from a threatened oblivion and rekindled interest in them by rewriting them in a style he himself once described 'as good as an old nurse will speak'.<sup>26</sup>

### JOSEPH JACOBS, THE MAN, THE HUSBAND, THE FATHER AND GRANDFATHER

It is difficult to offer much insight about the man, Joseph Jacobs as, apart from a short biography written by his daughter, May Hays, it has been left to the writers of his obituaries to speak of his wit, warmth, humility, gentleness, and kindness. Mathilde Schechte<sup>27</sup> recalls her first meeting with 'the slight blond debonair Joseph Jacobs walking into our study' shortly after his arrival in London; and records Jacobs response to a question as to whether he thought he had talent or genius, as 'I have perhaps more than talent, but I am too sane for a genius.' She also reports on conversation with a friend as follows: 'A Cambridge lady friend once said to me of Jacobs who was an Australian by birth: "You see, he is a Colonial, and a Colonial has all the nice English traits, but in addition he is more free and warmhearted"'.<sup>28</sup> Schechter also reported how Dr Donald McAlister, one time tutor at St John's, Cambridge 'spoke of Jacobs' kindness ... how he had tended a student through a dangerous infectious illness and insisted on doing any number of kind little things for him'.<sup>29</sup>

In his 1916 memorial passage to Jacobs, Sulzberger wrote: 'His was a pure soul and uncontaminated, a mind engaged in high thoughts, unalloyed by that striving for material advantage which to many is the goal of high ambition. He was withal, as simple as a child, as unaffected and sincere'.<sup>30</sup> Such tributes provide a timely balance to be set along side the numerous accounts of the lively and sometimes seemingly acrimonious debates within the Folk-Lore Society to which Jacobs was a major player. While little is known of relations between Jacobs and other members of the folklore circle, the positions he held within the Society between 1889 and 1895 as an elected member of its Council and editor of the *Journal, Folklore*, suggest he was respected and accorded firm friendship. Certainly a comment by Alexander Marx, a contemporary, describes Jacobs as 'free of egotism and self consciousness... a man of sweet disposition of an unusual modesty which never gave the outsider the idea of his

eminence in many respects, a staunch friend and one who bore malice to no-one, not even if attacked.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the difficulties of interpreting the rough and tumble of the debates written and reported in this period are due to the tendency to compare these to the somewhat restrained style of contemporary academic discourse. Despite some apparent vitriol and sarcasm on all sides there is no evidence of any deep personal rupture between Jacobs and his colleagues.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Shaner asserts that 'Jacobs had a gift for friendship'.<sup>33</sup>

His daughter, May Hays, recalled one such stormy argument between Jacobs and Lang during which Andrew Lang complained about folklorists who would not publish any story for children that had not been handed down from Granny to Granny. She wrote: 'To which my father mildly replied, "Now Andrew do me justice, old man. In collecting stories for my fairytale books I have had a cause at heart as sacred as our science of folklore — the filling of our children's imaginations with bright trains of images. If a story will advance that cause I have always used it whether I knew its derivation or not, I simply want to make children feel that reading is the greatest fun in the world; so that they will want to get books for themselves at the earliest possible moment."' <sup>34</sup>

During his time as a writer in London, Jacobs met and married Georgina Hall. All evidence points to their having enjoyed a happy marriage with Jacobs being a devoted father to his three children — a daughter, May, who married David Hays, and two sons, Sydney and Phillip. May Hays describes his nightly homecoming as a child's delight — surprises in his pockets, stories on his tongue. The children were his test cases; he tried out on them the tales he would publish in his fairy tale collections. In writing for children, Jacobs rarely failed to consider his audience. According to his daughter, he trusted their responses absolutely. The centrality of these children to the shaping of the fairy tale volumes is reflected in the tenderly worded dedications of three of the works to his three children. His 'deep affection for and compatibility with children extended to the next generation: his last fairy tale collection ... is dedicated to his granddaughter, Margaret in all her diminutives: To Peggy, and Madge, and Pearl, and Maggie, and Marguerite, and Peggotty, and Meg, and Marjory, and Daisy, and Pegg, and MARGARET HAYS (How many granddaughters does that make?) <sup>35</sup>

Jacobs' cheerfulness, wit, and lively intellect won him many friends in many countries — many of whom worked with him closely on various projects and had known him almost thirty years. Throughout his life, he retained his passions and his warm personality. As his daughter recorded: 'People age in different ways — the



lucky ones age only on the surface and keep the sensitive core of childhood within. After his death, the editorial the family treasured most was one that read:

‘THAT FOUNTAIN OF FUN FROZEN — impossible!’<sup>36</sup>

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*Sydneian*, March 1910, 15-16

### NOTES

1. May Bradshaw Hays, 'Memories of My Father, Joseph Jacobs', *Horn Book* 28: 1952, p.385.
2. Ibid, p.386
3. David Benjamin, 'Joseph Jacobs', *The Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol.111, Part 11, December 1949, pp.72-91.
4. Editorial, 'Death of Joseph Jacobs', *The American Hebrew*, 4 February 1916, Vol. 98, No. 13, p. 352.
5. Graham Seal, 'Joseph Jacobs and 'English' fairy tales in Australia 1860', *The Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, No.10, May, 1986.
6. Ibid.
7. Benjamin, op. cit., 1949, p.73.
8. Sir Edward Knox was the founder of Colonial Sugar Refining Co. He was a Trustee of S.G.S. from 1863-1866. His son E.W. Knox, who was later a Trustee from 1884-1923, was a student in 1863 and won the prize in the first year. The prize (from 1863) is awarded annually for proficiency in the Upper School (6th Form). There is a similar Knox prize for the Lower School. The name of each winner is inscribed on honour boards at the School. It is still awarded today and is highly regarded.
9. *Sydneian*, 1910, pp15-16.
10. *The Australian Israelite*, 1873, p.6.
11. G.F.J. Bergman, 'Australia's Forgotten Jewish Historian', *Australian Jewish Times*, 28 September 1978, p.41.
12. Hays, op.cit., p.386.
13. Ibid.
14. Gary Alan Fine 'Joseph Jacobs: A Sociological Folklorist,' *Folklore* 98: 2, 1987, p184
15. Mary E. Shaner, 'Joseph Jacobs', in Jane Bingham (ed.),



- (1987), *Writers for Children: Critical Studies of Major Authors Since the Seventeenth Century*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987, p.311.
16. Ibid., p.309
  17. Benjamin, op. cit., p.78.
  18. Bergman, op. cit., p.41.
  19. Shaner, op.cit., p.309.
  20. Bergman, op.cit., p.41 and Fine, op. cit., p.183.
  21. R. Brasch, *The Star of David*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955, p.268.
  22. Bergman, op.cit., p.41, Fine, op. cit, p.184 and Shaner, op. cit., p.310.
  23. Fine, op. cit. pp.183-4 and Shaner, op. cit., p.309.
  24. Dorson, Richard M. *The British Folklorists: A History*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1968, p.266; Shaner, op. cit., pp310, 314 and Fine, op. cit., p.184
  25. John Warren Stewig, 'Joseph Jacobs' English Fairy Tales: A Legacy for Today' in Perry Nodelman (ed), *Touchstones Reflections on the Best in Children's Literature: Fairy Tales, Fables, Myths, Legends and Poetry*, Vol. 2, 1987, p.128.
  26. Eloise Ramsey, *Folklore for Children and Young People*, American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, 1952
  27. Mathilde Schechter, 'Salute from Mrs Solomon Schechter', *The American Hebrew*, 4 February 1916, Vol. 98, No. 13, p.354.
  28. Ibid.
  29. Ibid.
  30. Mayer Sulzberger, 'Judge Sulzberger's Appreciation', *The American Hebrew*, 4 February 1916, Vol. 98, No. 13, p.354.
  31. Alexander Marx, 'The Jewish Scholarship of Joseph Jacobs', Alexander Marx (ed), *Essays in Jewish Biography*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947, p.254.
  32. Fine, op. cit., p.185.
  33. Shaner, op. cit., p.313.
  34. Hays, op. cit., pp390-1.
  35. Shaner, op. cit., p.310.
  36. Hays, op. cit., p.392.