

**SIR ISAAC ISAACS**

by

*Zelman Cowen, Melbourne University Press, 1979***SIR JOHN MONASH**

by

*Bernard Callinan, Melbourne University Press, 1981*

The subjects of the second and third in the series of the Daniel Mannix Memorial Lectures were Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir John Monash, delivered respectively under the auspices of the Newman College Students' Club (Melbourne) on 29 June 1978 by Sir Zelman Cowen and on 17 June 1980, by Bernard Callinan. The aim of these lectures, which honour the memory of Archbishop Mannix, is apparently to focus attention on great Australian leaders of the past and to emphasise the need for courage and principle in leadership. The lectures have since been published by the Melbourne University Press in booklet form of about 30 pages each, including two portrait illustrations. Both of the authors have attempted an essay in biography and, as I have indicated, the object has been to distil the fine and outstanding qualities of leadership from the life and work of such eminent Australians. Every student of the broad canvas of our national history would assuredly profit by a careful reading of these two texts. Mature school students ought to be encouraged to assimilate the content of these lectures, for they would both provide an appropriate discipline and mental stimulus to the youthful mind. One would hope, also, that these comments may have a special relevance particularly for the Jewish reader, whether historian, school pupil, or our co-religionists in general. Few, indeed, would not already have acquired some basic familiarity with the facts about the lives of Isaacs and Monash, including the significance of their contributions to the development of Australia as a nation.

Sir Zelman Cowen is naturally the obvious author on Isaacs, seeing that he had previously written a biography which it will be difficult to excel. Although he wrote from a complex of reasons, he had a special interest in a fellow Jew who made for himself a brilliant career in this country. However, as Sir Zelman notes, the memory of Isaacs has grown faint. He was one who, even as a High Court Judge, was readily swayed by patriotic and imperial feelings which, as our author remarks, later also coloured Isaacs' stand on the question of "political Zionism". His earlier career as a lawyer and politician are briefly traced, noticing that Isaacs was prominent in the Constitutional Convention of 1897-98, that he was Commonwealth Attorney General in 1905, a High Court Justice in 1906, and Chief Justice for a few months prior to his appointment as the first Australian born Governor General in 1931 — appointed on the nomination of the Australian Government. His legal learning, intellectual capacity, his dedication and energy, were extraordinary. Yet, as the lecturer rightly observes, Isaacs revealed an "appalling certainty" in all his opinions and convictions which, we are reminded, was particularly true in his strong objections to Zionism. As a member of the Bench he consistently strove to

uphold the central power vested in the Commonwealth under the Constitution.

A good biography never appears to be an exercise in adulation, and it must be recognised that Isaacs suffers from the defects of his greatness. He was an egocentric and dogmatic personality, and in his final comments, whilst conceding that Isaacs ranks as a major national figure, Sir Zelman Cowen adds that he remained remote from the Jewish community and that he raised issues that were "deeply divisive" for his co-religionists.

In his lecture on Monash, the author, Bernard Callinan, points out that Monash came from a family of standing and substance, that he had a number of Rabbis among his forbears, and a grandfather who founded a well known Hebrew publishing firm. He could also have mentioned that the Jewish historian, Graetz, had ties with his family. It is interesting to notice the cultural influence of the mother of the young John Monash which, in some respects, resembled the maternal influence to which Isaacs was subject. At a time when diversions and entertainments were not as many as they are today, we learn that Monash had a passion for knowledge on a wide scale, and that he completed University courses in Engineering, Arts and Law, finally emerging as a successful Civil Engineer. As one would expect, the greater part of this biographical essay concentrates attention on Monash as a military leader in World War I. The author stresses Monash's care in the preparation, and his lucidity in exposition, of operations, winning recognition as an outstanding Commander — perhaps one of the very best Generals of his time.

On his return to Australia at the end of the War, it was Monash who "came nearest to the universal hero figure". Callinan believes that Monash was "socially unassertive", although there were some who regarded him as egotistical. He had hoped that he might have been rewarded by an appointment as State Governor but perhaps the time had not yet come for such a radical step. The last phase of his career finds Monash in charge of the Yallourn brown coal project, as head of the new State Electricity Commission. This assignment was certainly no sinecure and the appointee succeeded in firmly laying the foundation of a Government enterprise that was of critical importance for the future welfare of Victoria.

Today, just 50 years after the death of Sir John Monash, occasional doubts are still sometimes raised about the nature of his military achievements. Many questions should be resolved when Dr. Geoffrey Serle completes the biography of Monash on which he has embarked, noting that he alone will have had the advantage of having the personal papers of his subject at his disposal. But, even if the serious Jewish reader will appreciate historical biography of the present type, he would wish to understand the impact of racial and religious background, including family tradition in the extraordinary careers of men such as Isaacs and Monash. In some instances, although not so much in the case of Monash, explanations may even be sought, negatively, so to speak, in the attempt of the particular subject to react against and to play down his background. Neither of the above publications, however, do more than to contain a passing hint about these aspects of the personalities under consideration. As regards Monash,

there is, in any event, a consensus that he sought active identification with the Jewish community. Perhaps it is not generally known that his coat-of-arms was surmounted by a crest in the form of the lion of Judah, denoting thereby his Jewish origin.

Both of these booklets are printed in an attractive format, they are modestly priced at \$2.80 each, and they provide the reader, in each case, with a penetrating biographical sketch of a notable Australian whose contributions are in danger of being forgotten, not only by the general public, but even by others who should now be induced to make closer studies of their lives as Australians of Jewish origin.

M.Z.F.

**BACKYARD OF MARS**  
**Memoirs of the "Reffo" Period in Australia**

by  
Emery Barcs  
*Wildcat Press, Sydney (1980)*  
227 pages. \$14.95

Martin Buber teaches that one generation passes on to the next a memory which has gained in scope for "new destiny and new emotional life were constantly accruing to it". The "memory" recorded in *Backyard of Mars*, confirms this premise. Its title indicates the mental attitude of "Reffos", who, after having fled a hostile and war-threatened Europe, found themselves begrudgingly taken in here, then relegated to various internment camps around Australia.

Emery Barcs, the author, is today a well-known and highly respected journalist and commentator, semi-retired. He was amongst the first Jewish refugees to come from Mussolini's Italy of 1938. Hungarian born, Barcs was working in Italy as a correspondent for a firm of Hungarian newspapers, and was only one of a great number of educated and cultured people, doctors, dentists, academics, businessmen, rabbis, literary figures and artists to come to Australia at that time. Rumour had it then that many Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans, Poles and others had come here with vast wealth, secretly removed from Europe. We were suspicious and resentful of them — they found us prejudiced and insular, apathetic about the rest of the world. One ship bringing European internees via England to Australia during the War, the *Dunera*, contained about 200 Jews, including 10 or 12 qualified rabbis. But behind the bitterness of Barcs' memories there is humour. If one can find things to smile about when recalling the mid-20th century's negative destructive elements of violence, blood shed, discrimination and civil hostility engendered by racial, religious or political differences, then that should be welcomed.

But *Backyard of Mars* is important also because it gives a highly