

BOOK REVIEWS

THEATRE COMES TO AUSTRALIA, by Eric Irvin,
University of Queensland Press, 1971.

In looking at the title of this book, few people will probably realise—and this, I think is a pity—that this is really a biography of BARNETT LEVEY, “the father of the theatre in Australia”. On the other hand, people who have probably never heard of Barnett Levey, but are interested in the theatre, will learn from this book that it was a Jew who founded and built the first real theatre in Australia and did so much to awaken interest in theatrical performances in Sydney.

Barnett Levey has not been treated too kindly in this Journal. In Vol. 1 Part 7, Colonel A. W. Hyman, a descendant of Barnett’s brother, Isaac Levey, wrote a paper “Barnett Levey, The Father of the Theatre in Australia”. Colonel Hyman who did very little original research on the life of Barnett Levey relied mainly on Mr. C. H. Bertie’s little booklet “The Story of the Royal Hotel and The Theatre Royal”, which contained a number of errors, as e.g. the date of Barnett’s arrival in Australia, which both Messrs Bertie and Hyman stated as before 1817, mentioning that “in 1817 Barnett L. moved to 72 George Street, having purchased the property from his brother, Solomon”.

In reality, Barnett arrived on 25th July, 1821, in the convict ship “John Bull”,¹ but he was not a convict and only one of the few passengers on the ship. He was joining his emancipist brother, Solomon Levey, who had arrived in 1815 as a convict—(a fact, incidentally not mentioned by Mr. Irvin)—but who in the short time of 6 years had made a spectacular commercial career.² Mr. Irvin gives full credit to Solomon’s abilities, but unfortunately missed Solomon Levey’s important part in the founding of the colony of Western Australia.³

Colonel Hyman completely omitted the difficulties with which Barnett had to battle, Governor Darling’s animosity, his refusal of a theatre licence to whom Darling termed “the bankrupt Jew”, Barnett’s eternal quarrels with his actors or partners, his constant impecuniosity which drove him, nolens volens, often to rely on his other talents as an auctioneer or watchmaker, and the unfriendly and sometime even malicious press.

Barnett's large real estate in the Blue Mountains had also been omitted, and so was his attempts as a "developer" at Waverley. And although Barnett built "Waverley House", as Col. Hyman wrote, "for himself and family", he never lived in this house which, like his Royal Hotel, went "down the drain" in 1830.

Contrary to his predecessors, Mr. Irvin did real research work, going through all available contemporary material, newspapers, books and archives. And so he was able to give us the full life story of Barnett, correcting the many earlier mistakes and adding many new facts.

The author pointed out the obsession Barnett had with his love for the theatre and that three years after his arrival in Australia he suggested the erection of a theatre in Sydney, a plan which he never abandoned, until he achieved his goal.

It must have been a great satisfaction to him, when in 1832, after holding his "At Homes" at the Royal Hotel, the "Sydney Gazette", whose reporters were later so often to attack him, concluded a favourable review with a specially written quatrain:—

Then let us sing, long live the King !
And Levey, long live he !
And when he is "At Home" again,
We WILL be there to see.

Alas, the critics were not always so kind to him and the last years of his life were made a misery by William Kerr, the loathsome reporter.

It is Mr. Irvin's merit to have pointed out that in spite of all harassments, Levey was able to produce in the short time from 1832 until his death in October, 1837, not less than 300 plays, the full list of which Mr. Irvin has published as an Appendix in his book, and, Mr. Irvin mentions, it was Levey who introduced the dramas of Shakespeare to Australia.

The book is well illustrated. Unfortunately, Mr. Irvin did not find out until the book was already in print that there is a painting of Barnett Levey and of his wife, Emma, in the possession of one of his descendants in Sydney, otherwise he would not have written that he "was not of very attractive physical appearance", because this picture shows him as a rather attractive young man.

Col. Hyman kept silent about Barnett's marriage. The reason for it was probably that Barnett married on 25th June, 1825, Miss Emma Wilson, the step-daughter (not the daughter) of Jacob Josephson, a baptised Jew, at the Church of St. John at Parramatta. All his children were baptised and brought up in the Christian faith. But Barnett remained a Jew and was buried in the Jewish Section of the Devonshire Str. Cemetery, from where his tombstone was transferred in 1900 to the Botany Cemetery, where it can still be seen. I cannot see why Mr. Irvin wrote that with this marriage, Barnett "consolidated his position", because Josephson was by no means a person with the best reputation. That Barnett had still some attachment to Judaism might be proved by the fact that he called his Blue Mountain grants, near the present-day Lawson, "Mt. Sion" and the nearby rivulet "brook of Josaphath". . . .

In Vol. II, p. 495 of this Journal, the famous impertinent letter of 1827 by Barnett to Governor Darling was published as well as the report which Darling sent to London with this letter. In 1947, when this letter was published in this Journal, one was obviously still of the opinion, that anything which was "not good for the Jews" should be omitted. And so in this letter, which was reprinted from the Historical Records of Australia, Series I, Vol. 13, p. 81/83, three words were left out which have become so famous that Mr. Irvin even named one chapter in his book after them. Darling wrote of Barnett that "this man of the lowest class" erected a windmill, etc., but in the reprint in our Journal the words "of the lowest class" were left out. Whoever was responsible for this omission, did obviously not realise that the words did not reflect on Barnett Levey's reputation, but only showed the malice of Governor Darling, whom Barnett had offended in another matter.

I have already pointed out very often that Jewish—as well as Gentile—convict history remained "taboo" until about twenty years ago. One does not need, therefore, to wonder that when in 1941 in Vol. I, p. 178ff, an article was written by Miss M. L. Cohen (now Brass) about Solomon Levey as the first Sydney University Benefactor, no word was said that he had been a convict. To-day, fortunately, one is no longer afraid to write the truth.

Mr. Irvin's book is so well-written, that it sometimes reads like a novel. There are other people mentioned in his book who are interesting enough to remember. There

was e.g. William Corlett Elyard, the Surgeon-Superintendent of the "John Bull", the ship which brought Barnett to Australia. He had a lot of trouble with the unruly women-convicts on board, but little was he, or Barnett Levey, to know that his 5 year old son, Samuel Elyard, whom he brought out with him to Sydney, would spend most of his life in the vain attempt to convert Jewish women to Christianity.

I am especially grateful to Mr. Irvin for introducing to the general public a long forgotten Jewish identity, Joseph Simmons, the gifted Jewish actor, author and theatre director, of whom our Journal—not mentioning his theatrical merits—only knows that in 1855 he was the President of the Sydney (York Street) Synagogue¹ and in 1859 an "actor" in the great "Macquarie Street Secession Drama". A detailed biography has still to be written of Joseph Simmons who was a partner of Barnett in his Royal Theatre and later director of the New Victoria Theatre in Sydney, and who was man of many parts, e.g. a gold buyer during the goldrush. This is so much more to be hoped for, because the biography of Joseph Simmons in Vol. II (p. 445-6) of the "Dictionary of Australian Biography" left practically nearly 50 years of his life, from 1845 to his death in 1893 at the age of 83, open, whilst the date of his death is wrongly recorded there as 1880.

Our Society has been privileged to listen to Mr. Irvin's interesting lectures on Barnett Levey and I think many members will be glad to recollect these lectures now recorded in his book, one which can be thoroughly recommended.

G.F.J.B.

NOTES

1. Dr. G. F. J. Bergman, "Barnett Levey" in Vol I p. 108/110 of the Dictionary of Australian Biography.
2. Solomon Levey in Sydney, Vol. 49 Part 6 Journal and Prov. of the Royal Australian Historical Society.
3. Solomon Levey, The Foundation of Western Australia, Vol. 54 Pt. 1 Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society.
4. Vol. III Part 1 of the Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Jewish Historical Society.