

H-Net Reviews

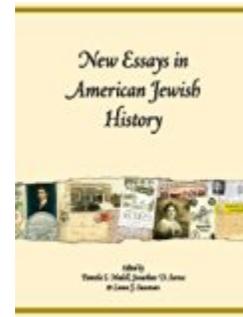
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pamela Nadell, Jonathan Sarna, Lance Sussman, eds. *New Essays in American Jewish History*. Cincinnati, Ohio: American Jewish Archives of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2010. xvii + 642 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60280-148-6.

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A Variety of Essays in American Jewish History

This collection of essays was published to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) and the tenth anniversary of Gary P. Zola as its director. As the preface to the book notes, *New Essays in American Jewish History* “has a sweeping range of historical themes, is chronologically comprehensive, and contains the seasoned work of a highly diverse group of scholars” (p. xi). It might be said also that some of the articles in the collection deal with rather narrow subjects while others explore larger topics, and that while some of the articles in the work are apt to appeal mainly to specialists in particular subfields, others are likely to be of interest to a broader readership. These salient features of the volume make the work exceedingly difficult to discuss in a review.

New Essays in American Jewish History opens with an “Appreciation” of the AJA, its founder Jacob Rader Marcus, and its director Gary Zola, written by David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR); and with an essay by Kevin Proffitt, the longtime senior archivist at the AJA, relating the establishment of the Archives to the development of similar institutions nationally. So too, several of the articles in the collection are based at least in part on research undertaken at the AJA. Nonetheless, the AJA is seldom mentioned in the twenty-two essays that make up this collection, and the essays bear very little relationship to each other. Thus, in order to describe the contents of this book, one can do little more than provide brief accounts

of a few of the articles within it in order to convey a sense of their wide-ranging subjects. The essays in this collection are presented in roughly chronological order, beginning with contributions related to colonial times and ending with those dealing with relatively recent developments.

Articles that appear early in the volume include, for example, a convincing reconsideration of the initial settlement of Jews in New Amsterdam by Paul Finkelman arguing, in part, that “the handful of Jews in seventeenth-century Manhattan helped shape a culture of religious diversity that became an important prologue not only for their future co-religionists, but for all Americans” (p. 19); and an essay by Aviva Ben-Ur and Rachel Frankel that describes the Beraha VeShalom synagogue of Jodensavanne in Suriname and speculates about the messianism that informed its design. Further along in the book one finds Cornelia Wilhelm’s helpful description of the complex relationship between Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith; Dianne Ashton’s exhaustively researched article on Hanukkah in nineteenth-century America, showing how references to the holiday were used by both religious traditionalist and reformers as they attempted to adapt Judaism to a new American environment; and Leonard Greenspoon’s exploration of the influence of Bible scholar Max Margolis on his sometime student Harry Orlinsky, drawing heavily upon Orlinsky’s correspondence and quoting extensively from it.

Even later in the volume are articles such as Jeffrey Gurock's "rethinking" of the meaning of Halachic observance and non-observance in America over the centuries; Alon Gal's piece (an English version of an earlier Hebrew article) describing how Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver "boldly and nobly integrate[d] his passionate Zionism and his everlasting Americanism" (p. 343); Hasia Diner's persuasive account of the way the post-World War II interest in American Jewry's past "yoked the Holocaust to the study of American Jewish history" (p. 376); and Shuly Rubin Schwartz's discussion of how Henrietta Szold became a symbolic figure "appropriated by feminists, Americans, Zionists, and Jews" alike (p. 466).

The three editors of this volume have all made their own individual contributions to its content. Pamela Nadell has written an enlightening discussion of the way Isaac Bashevis Singer's character Yentl and especially Barbra Streisand's version of that character have achieved iconic status. Jonathan Sarna has provided an essay, illustrated with several fascinating examples, reiterating his contention that with the American Revolution, Jews in the United States entered upon a period of democratization, that is, a period of "burgeoning religious ferment, challenges from below to established communal authority, and appeals to American values" (p. 105). Lance Sussman, for his part, has written the volume's preface. On the other hand, the great diversity of the articles in this collection suggests that its editors provided those who contributed to it with few guidelines concerning their vision of the festschrift as a whole.

There is not much with which a non-specialist can find fault in the individual articles included in this volume, although there are some small matters with which one can quibble. For example, the account by Natalie Zemon Davis of the experience of the Suriname notable David Nassy, his slave Mattheus, and their sojourn in Philadelphia is interesting, but its implications for larger concerns is unclear, and Mark Bauman's article, which attempts to move "Beyond the Parochial Image of Southern Jewry," is weakened somewhat when he writes in one place that the individuals discussed in his essay "are not necessarily typical or representative" (p. 140) but then goes on to assert that the story he tells about some of them "is more typical than unique" (p. 146).

Eric Friedland's description of the development of the *Union Prayer Book* by Rabbi Isaac S. Moses, while no doubt valuable for specialists in liturgy, is a bit disjointed and overly detailed for a collection of essays such as this, and it is somewhat short on context. Why we should

be aware of all the fine points discussed in this essay is never made clear to the casual reader, nor even to the non-specialist scholar. William Toll's examination of the situation faced by college students at a public university, in this case the University of Oregon in Eugene during the 1920s, is a well-researched study in local history, and Toll suggests that the situation at Oregon was representative of that at other public universities, but he presents little evidence to substantiate this claim.

The wide range of articles in this collection reflects the breadth of subjects and approaches that constitute the field of American Jewish history, but it also makes the collection into a random assemblage of disparate essays, rather than a volume with any sort of focus that would give it coherence as a whole. Moreover, for all its breadth of content, one can still legitimately question the inclusion of some of the articles found in this volume; a few are very much at the margins of "American Jewish history," if they can be subsumed under that rubric at all. An essay by David Ellenson and Michael Marmor concerning Abraham Joshua Heschel's understanding of "responsibility" and of *kavanah* (inner devotion) is really more a study in philosophy and theology than in history. Similarly, Samuel Haber's essay about Robert King Merton (né Meyer R. Schkolnick) and his optimistic views about science and society can certainly be considered a contribution to scholarship, but one would be hard-pressed to argue that it is a contribution to our understanding of American Jewish history, unless one assumes that anything written about an individual who happened to be a Jew in America constitutes a contribution to that field. It appears that Merton's Jewishness had no influence on his life as a scholar and, in fact, Merton hardly even acknowledged his Jewishness until the end of his life.

Alfred Gottschalk's essay on the relationship between the ideas of the Galician philosopher and theologian Nachman Krochmal and those of the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha-Am is even further removed from the domain of American Jewish history. Gottschalk was president of HUC-JIR from 1971 to 1996 and thus closely associated with the American Jewish Archives, and he died just as this volume was being completed, so it is understandable that the editors wanted to include a contribution from him in this collection. In deciding to do so, however, they chose to honor the memory of an important figure in American Jewish life over maintaining even the most tenuous sense of the volume's internal coherence.

Ultimately, much of what is contained in this volume is interesting and informative. However, the book might

have been even more rewarding to its readers had the volume as a whole attempted to address one or more specific themes, even very broad ones. One might contrast this volume with another festschrift published in 2010, *Gender and Jewish History*, honoring Paula Hyman, in which all of the articles that were contributed relate in one way or another to the general theme of gender's importance to an understanding of Jewish history. It is telling that Lance Sussman's brief preface to *New Essays in American Jewish History* does not even mention the individual articles that constitute the collection; it would have been

quite a feat to come up with a way to relate the articles in the book to each other.

The sixtieth anniversary of the American Jewish Archives and the tenth anniversary of Gary Zola's leadership of that institution are certainly milestones deserving of celebration, and there is almost no such thing as knowing too much about our collective past. Thus, the publication of a volume of essays to honor the Archives, its journal, and its director is a most worthy undertaking. Nonetheless, *New Essays in American Jewish History* has turned out to be somewhat less than the sum of its parts.

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