REVIEW

Review of *A Networked Community: Jewish Melbourne in the Nineteenth Century* by Sue Silberberg

Sue Silberberg. *A Networked Community: Jewish Melbourne in the Nineteenth Century*. Melbourne University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780522876345. 456 pp. Paperback $34.99, hardback $69.99, eBook $22.99.

Some years ago, I paid a visit to the Jewish Museum of Australia, where I was struck by a 'folk saying' emblazoned on a wall: 'Jews are just like everyone else – only more so.' This is perhaps the defining sentiment of Sue Silberberg's *A Networked Community*, a history of Melbourne's Jewish community in the nineteenth century. Over and again, Silberberg emphasises how Melbourne's Jews were deeply and seamlessly integrated into the broader settler community; her account suggests that antisemitism was virtually absent from Melbourne before the twentieth century. Yet she also makes it clear that this community took pains to ensure the maintenance of their culture and religion, particularly through strict enforcement of endogamy.

The book is organised thematically. After a brief introduction, the first substantive chapter provides a potted history of Jewish urbanism up to the mid-nineteenth century; subsequent chapters address issues surrounding identity, family, migration, participation in urban development and involvement in public life. For the most part, this thematic approach works. Personally, I have a preference for arranging historical events in chronological order, and there are points in the book where Silberberg may have benefited from putting the horse in front of the cart, as it were. For example, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom is first mentioned on page 43 and intermittently alluded to many times afterwards, but it is not until page 124 that this figure and his significance to the Jews of Melbourne are fully explained. While the structure can feel muddled at times, Silberberg's prose – though far from lyrical – is unfailingly clear.

Silberberg avoids turning her research into a paean for Jewish excellence and achievement. Nevertheless, the successes of the community are astounding. Victoria's Jews relished the opportunity to participate in public life in ways that were prohibited in Britain, Europe or the Caribbean, whence most of them came. *A Networked Community* is replete with stories of Jewish professionals, artists, entrepreneurs and politicians who 'made good'. One particularly impressive example is that of Edward Cohen. The son of a transported convict, Cohen became a highly successful businessman. He was a member of Victoria's Legislative Assembly for most of the 1860s and 1870s, simultaneously serving as Melbourne's mayor in 1862-1863. At one point, Silberberg provides a lengthy quote from a speech Cohen gave in parliament on the topic of education reform, for which he was a passionate advocate:

I am a descendant from a race that has been persecuted more than any other race under the sun. And for what reason? Because we chose to worship God after our own

hearts, according to the laws of our fathers. This being a new and free country, let us leave behind us all the superstitious nonsense of the old world. Let us meet here on common ground. (190)

This is inspiring rhetoric – liberalism at its best – and it is easy to admire Cohen. But reading this, I found myself compelled to ask: under what conditions was this country 'new and free'? This is a question lurking beneath the surface throughout Silberberg's book, one that she consistently refuses to acknowledge, much less answer. Silberberg freely uses the words 'settler', 'colony' and 'empire', but she makes no reference to the original human occupants of the land on which Melbourne was built. Even a glance at the book's index reveals no entries for 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' or 'Kulin'. It matters little whether or not Aboriginal people were visible in the primary sources – such a significant silence is itself worthy of commentary. Silberberg goes to lengths to emphasise the presence of Jewish people among the very first settlers of Melbourne and, in a section titled 'Establishing Melbourne', she goes into detail about Jewish businessmen who bought huge amounts of land in colonial land sales (142-7). We can suppose – generously – that Silberberg simply took the dispossession these land-grabs entailed for granted, assumed it was something that all readers would be aware of. The trouble is that settler-colonialism thrives on such silences. *A Networked Community* plays into the false and harmful idea that Australia at the time of colonisation was 'new', existing only to provide opportunities and refuge for European colonisers. Can we celebrate Australia as a place where Jews could at last flourish, knowing what the cost of that flourishing was? Jews were able to make a new home for themselves here only through the wreckage of Aboriginal cultures, only through dispossession, ecological havoc and massacre. In this way, too, Jews were 'just like everyone else' – like all settlers, their paradise was built on an apocalypse.

Let me be clear: this is not an attempt to denounce Silberberg or her book. I will be clearer still: this is a book of much merit. Members of Melbourne's Jewish community will appreciate the colourful anecdotes about their forebears. Moreover, historians of Melbourne will profit greatly from Silberberg's research. *A Networked Community* is, among other things, a timely reminder that our city is yet to fully acknowledge 'the Jewish community's contribution to the urban fabric and cultural production' (140); historians have a central role to play in rectifying this. But it is now more than fifty years since WEH Stanner spoke of 'the Great Australian Silence', and still we find people writing works of Australian history, on matters intimately bound up with settler-colonial dispossession, telling stories about those who benefited from that dispossession the most, that do not even mention Indigenous people. That is not simply an oversight or an omission – that is an injustice.

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