Introduction

In 1939, a parcel of land in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA) was earmarked as a site of settlement for up to seventy-five thousand persecuted Jews of Europe. The Kimberley Scheme (as it was known) would be funded and organised by a London-based Jewish philanthropic group, the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization. It was not an unprecedented proposal. Several years earlier, other visionaries had floated the idea of possible Jewish settlements on Melville Island, in the Barkly Tablelands and Victoria River regions of the Northern Territory and the Port Stephens area of New South Wales.¹ The Kimberley Scheme represented a bolder and more ambitious plan. Remarkably, the proposal received support from the WA state government, leading religious,

labour and business figures across Australia. Yet it also bitterly divided Australian Jewish leaders and was opposed by successive federal governments. It was a plan destined to fail from the very start. This article investigates how such a plan was developed and promoted, and how it was received and responded to by Jewish and non-Jewish Australia.

The story of the Kimberley Scheme and its reception in Australia has become a mere footnote in Australian Jewish historiography. With the exception of Leon Gettler’s Unpromised Land no book has devoted itself to a comprehensive study of the Kimberley Scheme. A number of academic and popular articles have recounted the ambitious nature of the Scheme, including opposition from the Australian federal government but few have probed it in depth. They have treated it as a curious and minor episode that was eventually sidelined2 or they have incorporated it into the wider history of Australian Jewry.3 No study to date has adequately accounted for the support the Scheme received.


from civil society in Australia, nor its hostile response from much of the Australian Jewish communal and Zionist leadership. The task of this article is to illuminate both. While there were Australian Jews who campaigned tirelessly for the Scheme, and equally, non-Jewish Australians who publically opposed it, they did not account for the dominate public reactions (and therefore will not be examined in depth here). Before addressing the two polarised responses, an examination of what the Scheme envisaged in practical terms is warranted.

The beginning of the Kimberley Scheme

In May of 1938 Australian journalist and editor of the British Australian and New Zealander A.R. Chomley wrote an open letter to the daily Jewish newspaper in London, The Jewish Chronicle. He outlined the virtues of the Kimberley region of WA as a possible site of settlement for the growing number of Jewish refugees in Europe. He suggested that for their salvation, Jews needed to ‘find a land where any man may sit under his own vine and fig tree, untroubled and secure’. Chomley’s letter piqued the interest of the Freeland League who had actively been combing the world for such a refuge. They embarked on an audacious campaign to find the Kimberley soon after.

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4 *Jewish Chronicle*, 13 May 1938, 32.

5 Founded in London in 1935. The organisation’s objective was to procure tracts of land for colonisation projects. The search saw them investigate possible schemes from Surinam to Madagascar and Alaska. The literature on the organisation is thin and almost all written in Yiddish.
The League knew that if the Scheme was to have any success it needed the support of the Australian public at large. Twelve months after the tabling of the letter, the League sent out its charismatic secretary, Dr. Isaac Steinberg, to survey the land and win government support for the Scheme. Steinberg was, and remains to this day, a mercurial figure. A one time leading Bolshevik activist in Tsarist Russia, he went on to become the Soviet Union’s first Attorney General following the Revolution. A disastrous falling out with fellow Bolsheviks saw Steinberg escape to Berlin and then London were he edited several Yiddish publications and devoted himself to journalism and broader political issues, including the problem of the stateless Jews of Europe. With a powerful intellect, an ability to speak nine languages fluently and a magnetic personality, Steinberg was the ideal candidate to argue on the League’s behalf.

In May of 1939 Steinberg arrived in Fremantle, WA, before setting off on a two-week long survey of the East Kimberley region. He was joined on this expedition by George F. Melville, a young geographer from the University of Western Australia. The two set their sights on a parcel of land leased by the cattle grazing Durack family, 10,800 square miles spread across the East Kimberley of Western Australia to the Northern Territory.6

**The Scheme in practical terms**

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6 Department of Interior Memorandum, ‘Settlement of Jewish Refugees in East Kimberley District, Western Australia’, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, file 40/2/274.
The interim report filed by Steinberg and Melville for the Freeland League was glowing. It spoke of the possibility of various primary and secondary industries, of the plentiful water flow provided by the Ord and Fitzroy Rivers, of the potential for great development of roads, housing, irrigation and hydroelectricity. Lease holder Michael Durack proudly declared to the men that the land would grow anything and would return great rewards. Durack spent 54 years living and working the land and believed that it was a region for ‘white men who were prepared to make some sacrifices and work hard’. It would not be easy to build a settlement from the ground up, in a climate noted for its stifling hot conditions during much of the year. Yet the challenge of hard work, of labour and toil, was more of an inspiration to the Freeland League than anything else. Having completed his two-week tour of the East Kimberley region, Steinberg made the first of many formal proposals to government in Australia, on this occasion the WA government. With an attached copy of the interim report, he outlined how the Freeland League would implement the Kimberley Scheme. This would come to form the framework of all future Kimberley Scheme proposals thereafter.

The Kimberley Scheme would be implemented over two stages. The first would be the pioneering stage. A select group of young men and women would be identified to settle parts of the territory. Steinberg assured the WA government that they

7 ‘Report on the Kimberleys July 1939’, University of Sydney, Archive of Australian Judaica.
8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1939, 14.
would be chosen from ‘young Jewish trained agriculturalists, technicians and artisans’. Their task would be to adapt themselves to the new climatic and economic conditions, to build the infrastructure and housing required for settlement and to establish the primary industries the colony would depend on. Their role was to lay the groundwork for the second stage of colonisation, the arrival of the majority of the settlers. Though the original proposal to the WA government included no mention of the number of potential settlers, by later proposals Steinberg had fixed the first stage migration at five hundred to be followed once the basis of the colony had been established, by between fifty thousand and seventy-five thousand settlers.

Steinberg was anxious to allay the predicted doubts of the WA government and the public from the outset. He stressed the ‘non-political’ character of the settlement when he wrote

> it is not intended that the settlement should any way become a political entity. The settlers would, in due course, become Australian citizens, and the settlement be organically incorporated into the economic and political framework of Australia.\(^9\)

They would be educated in English and would ‘think as members of the Australian community’.\(^11\) Far from being an

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\(^9\) ‘Memorandum Containing Proposals for the development of the North-West of Australia by organised Jewish settlement’, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, file D.349/3/5.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid.
economic burden on the state or people of WA, the Scheme would be funded exclusively by overseas Jewish funds (primarily the Freeland League’s). The second pervading fear, that settlers would depart the colony soon after arrival and drift to the cities, was to be guaranteed by the moral and economic obligations the League would place on the settlers.\textsuperscript{12} The League was confident that given the ingenuity of the settlers, and their instinctive determination to make the land their own home, the Scheme would not fold. In addition, the League anticipated compelling all settlers to declare they would not leave the settlement for up to five years.

As an experienced and wily political campaigner, Steinberg knew the Scheme needed to appeal to the self-interest of the Australian government and its people. Thus he sought to craftily promote its economic and strategic benefits. The memorandum issued first to the WA government and later the federal government argued that the Scheme would open up the isolated northern end of WA; it would promote traffic and trade that would lead to new employment and prosperity. The freeing of the isolated north would be of strategic interest to Australia to prevent possible invasion. Steinberg was at pains to point out the benefits of the Scheme to Australia.

The practical task of creating a Jewish colony in an undeveloped, inhospitable tract of land posed major challenges. The plan the Freeland League offered in their first proposal for the Kimberley Scheme was designed to appease the fears and doubts of WA government and people. The first

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
proposal was well received. The WA Premier John Wilcock offered his conditional support to Steinberg and the Freeland League.\textsuperscript{13} However the federal government was another matter. With the WA government’s approval in tow, Steinberg’s next hurdle was to convince a government that was historically reticent towards non-British migration and strictly opposed to group settlement to sanction the Freeland League’s grand vision. As we will learn, it would prove to be an insurmountable hurdle.

**The Non-Jewish response to the Kimberley scheme**

Although they did not know it at the time, Steinberg and the Freeland League faced an impossible task in attempting to convince the federal government and its people to support the Kimberley Scheme. The proposal to create a large-scale alien colony of anywhere up to seventy-five thousand settlers went against every trend Australia’s immigration record had been built on. For successive decades since 1901 federal immigration policy was bound by an unofficial White Australia Policy, a racist immigration doctrine that sought to maintain Australia’s overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic stock to the exclusion of all non-British migrant groups.\textsuperscript{14} This policy hampered efforts to bring in Jewish refugees from Europe to

\textsuperscript{13} Willcock demonstrated this in a letter to Steinberg: ‘we desire to advise that we have no objection to your making this necessary approach to the Commonwealth Government’, in ‘Letter West Australian State Premier J. C. Willcock to I. Steinberg, 25 August 1939’, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, file A433, file 1944/2/50.

\textsuperscript{14} Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Carlton North: Scribe, 2005).
Australia throughout the 1920s.\textsuperscript{15} By 1938 this policy was eased slightly at the Evian conference when the federal government joined other states in agreeing to admit Jewish refugees facing persecution in Germany. After agreeing to play its part, the government announced a quota of five thousand Jewish refugee arrivals. While the quota represented a shift in policy it also suggested publicly that the federal government would continue to approach the matter of non-British immigration cautiously and conservatively. Simply put, if the government only reluctantly agreed to some five thousand refugees (after significant international pressure from the United States and the United Kingdom) what hope did the Freeland League have with its seventy-five thousand?

Despite the federal government’s cool approach, the Kimberley Scheme quickly gathered momentum in Australia as an unlikely alliance of supporters emerged to back the proposal. These advocates included an extensive list of influential members of Australian society, including leaders of commerce, education, senior churchmen and lord mayors. These elements combined with a segment of Australia’s press gave prominence to the Freeland League’s campaign. Between 1939 and 1943 they petitioned the Australian federal government to approve the Scheme, produced letters of endorsement to daily newspapers and passed motions declaring their sympathy. These actions gave the Freeland

League’s proposal the public endorsement it desperately needed. It also helped legitimise their campaign in the eyes of the federal government.

The most significant public validation the Kimberley Scheme received centred around a coalition of influential Australians. Their support came in the way of manifestos independently written, drafted and signed in WA, Victoria and New South Wales. The manifestos urged the federal government to give the Scheme a ‘fair and unprejudiced hearing’. They stressed the economic benefits of the Scheme, arguing that the Freeland League’s proposal was viable, and would support primary and secondary industries. The manifestos described potential settlers in terms that would deem them as desirable migrants. They pointed out the cost of the Scheme would be borne by the Freeland League and sought to quash the fears of Australians that settlers would become troublesome minorities. The manifestos argued settlers would ‘want to adopt to our culture’. At a time of global upheaval and insecurity the manifestos would have done much to ease Australian anxieties about the Scheme and its intentions.

Hilary Rubinstein, a noted historian of Australian Jewry, has suggested the manifestos were designed to not only persuade the federal government to endorse the Kimberley Scheme but

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17 Sydney Morning Herald, 19 April 1940.

to influence public opinion at large. Among the signatories was an array of distinguished non-Jewish Australians: Sydney’s Anglican Coadjutor Bishop Pilcher, Official War Historian Charles Bean, leader of the Victorian Australian Labor Party and later Premier John Cain, Melbourne Lord Mayor A.W. Coles, Australian Broadcasting Commission Chairman William Clearly, Sydney’s Lord Mayor Stanley Crick, Sydney University Vice Chancellor Dr Robert Wallace and the leaders of business and industry in Sir Marcus Clark, George Sanderson and Sir Sydney Snow to name but a few. These prominent figures highlighted the appeal the Kimberley Scheme had among the public, and even powerful and influential Australians. The signatories, though often motivated by what they saw as the economic benefits of the Scheme, were also gravely concerned with its humanitarian elements. They formed a small but prominent minority of Australians willing to raise the plight of persecuted Jewry publically. They argued that the overwhelming majority of Australians would hate the idea of turning a deaf ear to the plea of the homeless. These statements did in part pay dividends: the federal government noted in a memorandum in 1941 that Steinberg had succeeded in obtaining the support of a number of influential people in Australia to the Scheme.

The Kimberley Scheme found significant support in the pages of three prominent newspapers, The Sydney Morning Herald,

19 Ibid.
20 West Australian, 6 September 1939.
21 Department of Interior Memorandum, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, file 40/2/274.
The Argus and The West Australian. While it was virulently opposed by other publications, particularly the notoriously anti-Semitic *The Bulletin*, it is worth sampling the supporters to illuminate the level of sympathy the League and its proposal received. The Sydney Morning Herald editorialised in December 1939 in favour of the League’s proposal, describing it as an excellent opportunity to develop the economic resources of the vast, untenanted lands of the north-west.\(^{22}\) It rejected fears of those in the community who regarded the settlement as a threat to Australian security, writing that the ‘Kimberley Scheme could neither cause friction with any Australian community nor give any ground for embroilment with a foreign state, in the case of other alien settlers’.\(^{23}\) The paper again canvassed its support for the Scheme in April 1940, this time with urgency in particular reference to rising Nazi persecution, whose depopulation methods against European Jewry ‘made the refugee problem more extensive and difficult every month’.\(^{24}\) The West Australian indicated it was amendable to the plan during 1939 and 1940. The newspaper published several articles, all broadly supportive, including one by writer H. Drake-Brockman, who spoke exclusively of the humanitarian consideration to backing the Scheme. He wrote of the potential Jewish settlers as the ‘world’s unhappy youth’, declaring Australia should be human enough to place a few of

\(^{22}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1939.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 19 April 1940.
its millions of empty acres at their disposal. The Scheme received the passing sympathy of a number of other sectors of the Australian press including the ABC radio show *News Behind the News* who on 28 November 1939 made reference to the issue of the mounting Jewish refugees in Europe and argued that the Freeland League’s proposal reminded ‘us that Australia must lay a part in solving this refugee problem’. Sympathetic coverage such as this ensured the Kimberley Scheme was brought forward onto the broader Australian public agenda as a serious and meaningful proposal.

Finally it should be noted the Kimberley Scheme enjoyed the support of one influential sector of Australian society: Christian churches. The clergy, like the trade union movement (another prominent backer of the scheme) had not been a traditional friend of Jewish culture or large-scale immigration in Australia, yet their support was wide-ranging and deeply felt. Steinberg and his plan was warmly received from a number of Christian figures including Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix, Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church, the Right Reverend Robert Macaulay, and the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney Howard Mowll. The most enthusiastic among them was Bishop Charles Pilcher, the Anglican Coadjutor of Sydney.

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25 *West Australian*, 8 July 1939, 5.

26 *Jewish Settlement in the Kimberleys—Supported by Australians: A Collection of Articles and Documents* (Sydney: Kepson Printing Company).


28 For more on Bishop Pilcher’s life see: Maurice Laserson, *Bishop Charles Venn Pilcher, D. D: A Biographical Study* (Sydney, 1949).
Bishop Pilcher had long been troubled by the plight of Jewish refugees and compelled by a sense of Christian duty to help find shelter he became an advocate for Zionism and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. In the Kimberley Scheme he recognised another possible solution to Jewish statelessness and in time Bishop Pilcher became a key ally of the Scheme and friend of Steinberg’s. He signed the manifesto in Sydney, penned letters to the Australian government on behalf of the League and authored a number of articles for the Australian Jewish Forum in praise of the Kimberley Scheme and rebuking those who criticised the Freeland League. His support, and the support of the powerful Archbishop Mannix, showed publicly, in words at least, that churches in Australia sympathised deeply with the plight of Europe’s refugees. As we will discover, it mattered little.

**The established Jewish response to the Kimberley Scheme**

Undoubtedly the most outspoken critics of the Kimberley Scheme were drawn from Jewish communities in Australia. It is true to say while many Australian Jews supported Steinberg and the Freeland League, just as many if not more were suspicious of an alien colony in their midst. This Jewish opposition was largely drawn from Australia’s small

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30 In Melbourne’s *Argus* newspaper (19 December 1939), Mannix declared his good wishes to the Scheme, believing that it would ‘both help refugees and wipe out the stain upon our common humanity’.

but burgeoning Zionist movement and established, assimilated and Anglicised Jews.

Their rejection of the Kimberley Scheme revealed Australian Jewry and its leadership as a complex pattern of shades. It reflected the fear and self-doubt of Jewish communities at once comfortable, assimilated yet insecure and fatalistic. It also revealed a whole gamut of individuals and organisations who responded in differing ways to the call of the Freeland League. Among them were the courageous, idealistic, stubborn, realistic, weak and the self-interested. There were those who were willing to stop at nothing until the safety of their European brethren was guaranteed and those whose silence on the issue of Jewish refugees formed what was observed as a ‘united front of passivity’.32

Yet this opposition also needs to be recognised as the product of a large deeper historical intra-Jewish communal tension. The campaign launched by some Australian Jews against the Kimberley scheme reflected the complex and fractured nature of relations between East European Jewry and West European Jewry. In the section that follows I will examine these tensions with the view to better understand the grounds on which Australian Jews attacked the Kimberley Scheme. In particular, I explore how the Scheme captured the hearts and minds of a segment of Australian Jewry and how this unflagging support maintained itself for over a decade. First some context is required to understand the place of the

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32 Australian Jewish Forum, February 1941, 6.
Australian Jewish diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century.

Australia has been home to Jews since the beginning of British settlement. Charles Price suggests Jews remained until the late 1940s, a highly assimilated, economically comfortable, Anglicised community. Their position in Australian society, though marginal, was highly respected for the number of prominent citizens produced, including the commander of the Australian Defence Force in the First World War Sir John Monash and the first Australian-born Governor-General, Sir Isaac Isaacs. Australian Jews remained predominantly British in heritage until after the Second World War. By the late nineteenth, early twentieth century demographics were adjusted slightly by the arrival of migrants from Western and Eastern Europe, specifically from Germany and Poland. Though many of these new arrivals ushered in Zionist activism in Australia, they were numerically too small to have a major impact on the political or social structure of Jewish communities in Melbourne and Sydney. These communities remained frozen in an Anglo-Jewish mould, typified by a reluctance to develop or engage in communal activity, combined with an almost obsessive concern with Jewish conspicuousness. Such an environment favoured stability and stagnation and opposed structural and

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34 Ibid., 120.
demographic change. Isolated from the major developments in Jewish consciousness in Europe and elsewhere as it had been for generations, Australian Jewry appeared every bit a ‘fossilised community’.\(^{36}\)

It was in this climate and context that the Kimberley Scheme was brought to the attention of Australian Jewry. From the outset it did not represent a plan Australian Jewish leadership traditionally aspired towards. Some leaders favoured increased Jewish migration, yet most leaders were either indifferent or opposed to it. Sir Samuel Cohen, founding President of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society (AJWS), articulated this latter perspective when he argued Jewish migrant to Australia should be restricted otherwise ‘we shall find our present amicable relations between Jew and Gentile undermined’.\(^{37}\) Jewish communal leadership believed potential refugees such as the settlers of the Kimberley Scheme would bring unwarranted attention to Australian Jews, would upset relations with non-Jewish Australians, and would lead to a growth in anti-Semitism. Most Jewish communal leaders, almost all of whom were Anglicised, cared little for developing their Jewish cultural or political identity and were more concerned with being Australian.\(^{38}\) As one foreign Jewish visitor observed in 1937:

> Australia is so far away from the rest of the world and its Jewry less interested in Jewish

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\(^{38}\) Rutland, *The Jews in Australia*, 35.
affairs than any other have visited...it is a spiritually poor, intellectually poor, nationally poor Jewry without any leaders and without any feeling of responsibility.\textsuperscript{39}

This might appear a damning assessment of Australian Jewry, but based on the evidence at hand there is little to suggest otherwise. Until 1936, no community body in Australia existed to receive Jewish migrants. Only under the behest of the Australian federal government was the AJWS created to fund and assist in the coordination and reception of new Jewish arrivals. The AJWS perceived its role to ensure new arrivals were \textit{Australianised} as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{40}

Another important function was to ensure that refugees did not become a charge on the state with Sir Samuel personally signing the forms of all refugees sponsored by the AJWS. The Society was acutely aware of the distinctiveness of many of the new arrivals: their accents, their European dress, their tendency to cluster in groups, their desire to speak Yiddish or German in public. The anxiety was typified by an oft-quoted notice placed in the Australian Jewish News in 1939:

\begin{displayquote}
Modulate your voices. Do not make yourself conspicuous anywhere by walking with a group of persons, all of whom are speaking a foreign language. Remember that the welfare of the old established Jewish communities in Australia, as well as of every migrant, depends upon your personal behaviour.
\end{displayquote}

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\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] \textit{Australian Jewish Herald}, 14 April 1939, 2.
\item[41] \textit{Australian Jewish News}, 19 May 1939, 11.
\end{footnotes}
Underlying this unease about Jewish refugee arrivals was an inherent intra-Jewish communal tension. Though it often went unstated, a large segment of this leadership did not want Ostjuden: Jews from Eastern Europe, overtly Jewish in appearance, Yiddish speaking, ghettoised, unskilled, less affluent, less educated and more religious than West European Jews. Steinberg and the Freeland League did not specify where the majority of the settlers for the Kimberley Scheme were to be drawn from. Besides selecting a small number of settlers who could contribute to the creation of the settlement, the view that prevailed was that the Kimberley Scheme should accommodate Jews who were most in need — regardless of their country of origin. While the many thousands of Jews of German and Austrian origin were desperate to escape Europe, so too were the Ostjuden whose desire to emigrate from Eastern Europe was just as pressing as their brethren. This meant a vast number of settlers would come from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania. A large-scale movement of Yiddish speaking, ghettoised and unassimilated Jews, to a Jewish diaspora where most were Anglicised and fluent in English, posed a serious problem to Jewish communal leadership.

For much of its history Australian Jewry had developed autonomously of European Jewish thought. Yet it too had absorbed many of the longstanding prejudices held against East European Jews – Ostjuden.  

studied the historical relationship between *Ostjuden* and West European Jews. His scholarship has revealed an ambivalent, troubled interaction, shaped largely by the experience of *Ostjuden* migrations to Western European from the 17th and the late 19th century. According to Aschheim’s study, the arrival of *Ostjuden* in Germany, Austria and other West European countries dislocated relations between Jews and non-Jews. Their arrival brought about a rise in anti-Semitic behaviour as non-Jews vigorously opposed the rise of new Jewish migrants. West European Jews came to fear the implications of being associated with *Ostjuden*. Many expressed their disdain for Eastern European Jews as others sought to distance themselves from their co-religionists.43 By the early twentieth century in Germany the migration of *Ostjuden* was seen as being responsible for the heightening of anti-Semitism.

Much of the reconfiguration of communal relations, however, predated Jewish arrival in Australia. With its Anglo and West European origins, similar prejudices against East European Jewry reappeared. In many ways this also reflected the prevailing attitude of the Australian community, including government immigration officials, that distinguished between ‘good Jews’, West European Jews, and ‘bad Jews’, East European Jews. Bartrop has found that Australian immigration officials perceived Jews from Germany and Austria more likely to exhibit Western European habits and

appear, therefore, more desirable as migrants and less likely to ‘appear as strangers’ than Jews from Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{44} The immigration of Jews from Poland had already been the subject of special restrictions from the Australian federal government from 1928 on the grounds they were of ‘poor physique’ and were not agriculturalists or skilled labourers.\textsuperscript{45} The impact of these attitudes undoubtedly sharpened existing intra-communal tensions and ensured that any future migration of East European Jews faced barriers.

**Australian Zionist response to the Kimberley Scheme**

We have now examined the opposition of Australian Jews to the Kimberley Scheme, including those who feared large scale Jewish migration to Australia for its social implications. However, there were also many vocal Australian Zionists who opposed the Scheme for political reasons. While some of the earliest supporters of the Kimberley Scheme were ardent Zionists (Dr Leon Jona, onetime President of the Zionist Federation of Australia, Aaron Patkin editor of *The Zionist* and Rachel Jerdan in particular)\textsuperscript{46}, Zionist organisations and their leadership eventually came to ridicule the Freeland League and its plans. They recognised in the Freeland League and its Kimberley Scheme Jewish territorialism, a rival form of Jewish nationalism that began from a schism in the Zionist


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{46} Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia*, 188.
congress in 1903. This division emerged when leading Zionist convener, Theodor Herzl, submitted to the congress a British offer to create a Jewish settlement in East Africa under the British Uganda Program. Herzl’s proposal had its supporters but it was strongly opposed by many Zionists who wanted nothing to do with the plan. The British offer of Uganda was formally rejected by the Congress in 1905 but not before it inspired a number of Zionists to pursue other undeveloped lands for Jewish settlement.\(^4^7\) One of those dissident Zionists, Israel Zangwill, formalised the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO) in 1905 to rival the Zionist Congress.\(^4^8\) It was a fruitless campaign and the ITO ultimately disbanded many years later. While the Kimberley Scheme was not an ITO proposal, it still represented a Territorialist plan. It was seen as an unnecessary distraction for the Australian Zionist movement not unlike the complication brought to the Zionist congress with Herzl and his Uganda proposal. Territorialism had long challenged the primacy of Zionism as the self-appointed voice of Jewish national identity; in the eyes of some it needed to be stopped.

The dilemma with which the Freeland League’s proposal brought Australian Zionists, was typified by the changing attitudes of Samuel Wynn. Wynn, a noted figure in the Melbourne Jewish community, was one of a few Zionists to


initially support the Scheme. He accounted for his support several years later:

“held the view that as the Jews long to leave forever the anti-Semiticly infested countries of Europe, and since the absorptive capacity of Palestine is not unlimited, we must not turn down any opportunity for settling Jews in friendly countries”.\(^{49}\)

When the Freeland League made its initial proposal to the federal government in 1939, international Zionist organisations were no closer to securing the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine than the breakthrough Balfour Declaration of 1917. The British Foreign Office had given international Zionist leaders no further indication that a Jewish state could be secured in the immediate future. The Kimberley Scheme presented the Zionist movement with an immediate and potentially viable option for Jewish settlement. For Australian Zionists like Wynn, the WA government’s approval of the Scheme in 1939 combined with the support of some of Australia’s non-Jewish elite, added credence to the League’s proposal. Though not the ultimate goal of Zionists, the Freeland League offered the potential to deliver an immediate solution to Nazi persecution. As war progressed, the position of Europe’s Jews became increasingly more precarious. The Kimberley Scheme confronted the Zionist movement in Australia with a meaningful proposal of Jewish resettlement, yet most Zionists remained unmoved.

Indeed the Australian Zionist campaign against the Freeland League only intensified as the war progressed. Wynn’s view switched to one that rejected the Kimberley Scheme and repositioned Palestine as the only land worth pursuing. He argued ‘the tragedy of our people has become so vast, and the need for immediate rescue so great, that we cannot afford to dissipate our energies on long-range experimental Schemes’.  

Hardline elements of the Australian Zionist movement had long expressed their opposition to the Freeland League and its Kimberley Scheme. They regarded the League as a Territorialist organisation and therefore an ideological enemy of the Zionist movement, the same as anti-Zionists and fascists. They were considered a thorn in the side of the Zionist movement but, also a threat and a danger to be crushed. Zionist leadership publicly rallied against the Scheme and the League. Dr Shlomo Lowy, a professional Zionist organiser sent out from Jerusalem to establish the Jewish National Fund, identified the challenge posed by Steinberg. Dr Lowy informed the central Zionist authorities in Jerusalem: ‘We will have to work on propaganda against Territorialism...I see problems ahead’. Their tactic centred on building broader opposition within Australian Jewry to the Scheme. They would use the periodical, Zionist, to publically

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50 Wynn, The Fortunes of Samuel Wynn, 147.
51 Max Freilich, Zion in Our Time (Sydney: Morgan Publications, 1968), 186.
52 A fundraising body established in 1901 to buy and develop land for Jewish settlement in Palestine.
condemn the Freeland League and undermine the Scheme. Wynn, once a supporter of the Kimberley Scheme, turned vitriolic opponent. He accused Steinberg of using Zionism for the betterment of his campaign: ‘he feels that he no longer needs Zionism and can perhaps enlist anti-Zionist forces for his Scheme, he makes statements that can only be attributed to the worst enemies of Zion’.\(^5^4\) Alec Masel, a power political operative and President of the Australian and New Zealand Zionist Organisation, told Australian Jews that the Freeland League was incompatible with Zionism: ‘Territorialism can never be accepted by Zionists’.\(^5^5\) In December 1944 with the Scheme all but quashed by a third and final rejection by the Australian federal government Masel again denounced the League and the Kimberley Scheme in the Herald Sun stating that while he was not opposed to ‘Jewish immigration into Australia for absorption into the Australian population’ it was the proposal of a large scale settlement like the Kimberley Scheme that drew Zionist opposition: ‘Palestine is the only place for a large scale Jewish settlement’.\(^5^6\) For leading Australian Zionists there could be no alternative.

Australian Zionist leaders such as Masel and others feared the charismatic and persuasive Steinberg. They also feared the Freeland League, their prominent Australian supporters, their campaign and the attention the Kimberley Scheme received. They believed that the proposed settlement played into the hands of the British Foreign Office, who did not want

\(^{54}\) *Zionist*, 29 February 1944, 2.

\(^{55}\) *Zionist*, 1 February 1945, 4.

\(^{56}\) *Herald Sun*, 18 November 1944, 7.
to antagonise Arabs by opening the way for Jewish refugees into Palestine. Australian Zionists anxiously stressed that Britain would deny the Zionist Congress Palestine if Jewish refugees found shelter in the Kimberley.\textsuperscript{57} Though many initially supported the Scheme in principle, a concerted effort by the likes of Masel, Freilich and others ensured the Freeland League and its Kimberley Scheme, did not receive the wider Jewish support it desperately sought.

**Australian Jewish support for the Kimberley Scheme**

We have just addressed the opposition of Australian Jews to the Kimberley Scheme, yet the Scheme and the Freeland League received three elements of support from Jewish communities.\textsuperscript{58} One major source was supporters of the Jewish Labor Bund,\textsuperscript{59} who were attracted to the Scheme for its promise of auto-emancipation, inspired by Steinberg’s talk of reawakening Jewish consciousness and the Scheme’s plans for cooperative labour and the League’s disassociation with the Zionist obsession for Palestine. Bundists constituted the most politically left leaning members of the Australian Jewish diaspora, they advocated for Jewish emancipation throughout the diaspora and were for the most part thoroughly anti-Zionist. Many Bundists contributed articles to the League’s periodical, the Australian Jewish Forum, and engaged in public battles with various Zionist organisations through the

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\textsuperscript{57} Honig, “The Kimberley Scheme in North-west Australia”, 292.

\textsuperscript{58} Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia*, 187.

Jewish press. For his part, Steinberg worked tirelessly during an extended stay in Sydney between 1939 and 1942, to establish a cultural centre for Yiddish activities, something that appealed greatly to the Yiddish-speaking Bund.\(^6\) As a consequence, Bundists, more than any other group maintained a close alliance with Steinberg, the Freeland League and their proposed Scheme.

It is ironic that the next two elements to constitute support within the Australian Jewish community also carried members and leaders among them who vigorously opposed the Scheme: Anglicised Australian Jews and the Zionist elements of the Australian Jewish community. Rubinstein has suggested that both these elements supported the Kimberley Scheme in its initial phase after being convinced by the profound support the Scheme received from prominent non-Jewish Australians.\(^6\) Among this group were Anglo-Jewish leaders Harold Cohen, Archie Michaelis and Rabbi Jacob Danglow, many of whom had conservatively approached the issue of Jewish migration in the 1930s.\(^6\) Rubinstein has suggested, however, that Anglo-Jewish support for the Scheme should be considered as little more than a gesture, a way of demonstrating that though many of these members had relinquished Zionism, they had not surrendered their sense of responsibility towards their fellow


\(^6\) Ibid.
Jews. Indeed the hollow nature of Anglo-Jewish commitment to the Kimberley Scheme, can be measured by the lack of response which these figures made to the federal government’s rejections. When the federal government rejected the Scheme in 1941, almost all of the initial Anglo-Jewish supporters discontinued their public advocacy for the Kimberley Scheme. Most were unwilling to continue to lobby the federal government further on behalf of the Freeland League. A notable exception to this was in 1944 (after the third rejection from the federal government) when the influential Rabbi Jacob Danglow of St Kilda Hebrew Congregation wrote to Alec Masel, then chairman of the Jewish Advisory Board, asking him to meet the Acting Prime Minister with a ‘small deputation’ from the Jewish community, to stress that the government’s rejection would not ‘be accepted passively’. Masel, one of the most vocal Zionist critics, refused to act on Rabbi Danglow’s pleas. The initial sympathy of some prominent Anglo Jews towards the Scheme can be viewed as an attempt to attach themselves to a cause that would arrest Jewish persecution. The shallow nature of their support revealed itself once they refused to publically press for the campaign further.

The third element of support the Scheme received from within the Australian Jewish diaspora came from some elements of the Australian Zionist movement. As has already been outlined, many Australian Zionists like the aforementioned

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63 Ibid., 188.

Sam Wynn looked at the Scheme in the pre- and early war period as a short term measure to alleviate the plight of European Jewry. Other Australian Zionist supporters of the Kimberley Scheme included established Zionist leaders and organisers Dr. Leon Jona, Rachel Jerdan and Aaron Patkin. The support of these prominent Zionists undoubtedly influenced others to consider the Kimberley Scheme favourably. Their sympathy towards the Scheme, as has already been explained, eroded as the situation of European Jewry worsened. This could be said with one notable exception: Aaron Patkin editor of Zionist, who unlike many others in the Zionist community believed that for practical reasons, a Zionist solution to Jewish homelessness could not lie in Palestine alone. In 1943 he articulated the view to the Australian Zionist movement that Palestine could not absorb more than a fraction of Hitler’s victims and that homes for them must be sought elsewhere. Patkin’s support, like Rabbi Danglow’s, went against the tide within the Australian Jewish diaspora where indifference and opposition to the Kimberley Scheme stood as a stark reminder of the political and social fragmentation of a people.

Conclusion

This article has revived a forgotten episode in Australian Jewish history, by investigating the response from Jewish communities and leadership in Australia to the Kimberley Scheme. In doing so, it has endeavoured to highlight elements of Australian Jewish and Zionist history, largely neglected by

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65 Zionist, 30 November 1943, 2.
previous historiography in this area. While it has not concerned itself with all of the reasons for the Scheme’s ultimate failure, it was not, as Alan Jacobs and others have argued, due to the deep opposition of the Australian Jewish community.66 This is a simplistic and naive explanation. To suggest that the voices of the comparatively politically insignificant Jewish communities of Carlton or Bondi could somehow shape Canberra’s decision to admit or deny the group settlement of European refugees in the late 1930s early 1940s is reflective neither of the historical circumstances nor of the full spectrum of Australian Jewish responses. Given the federal government’s attitude towards alien immigration, the scheme never stood a chance of success. It would not matter that a vanguard of influential Australians urged the government and its people to accept the Freeland League’s proposal. Nor would the vocal lobbying of Australian Jews either for or against the Scheme influence the ultimate outcome. The response of the Australian federal government, Labor and conservative, to the Kimberley Scheme was the continuation of a cautious and discriminatory attitude towards Jewish refugees. In such a climate, the Kimberley Scheme was almost certain to be rejected.

In addition, the Kimberley Scheme faced trenchant opposition from non-Jewish Australians, from those who questioned it on practical grounds and others who were opposed to group migration and in some instances Jewish migrants. Among them were politicians, community groups and the notoriously anti-Semitic publication *The Bulliten*. Not to be forgotten was

A.P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. Elkin was a lone voice, raising the plight of three hundred Indigenous Australians who lived in the region. He urged the government to settle Jewish refugees in an area that would not be ‘at the expense of natives’, who he reminded the government were refugees of ‘our encroaching civilization’.67 These responses, though on the margins, underline the great ambivalence with which the Scheme was met by the wider Australian community.

The Freeland League proposed a radical alternative to the plan of a Jewish nation state in Palestine. Out of the ashes of European Jewry’s liquidation in the Holocaust, rose the plan Zionists had campaigned tirelessly for since the nineteenth century, but at what consequence? Steinberg could foresee this better than the Australian Zionists who opposed him. He wrote in 1946: ‘I am not afraid of the fight for the establishment of the state; I am afraid of the consequences of the fight’.68 Without the co-operation and goodwill of the Arab population, he predicted, the settlement of Jews in Palestine would put his people in an eternally compromised position. To survive, Jewish energy would forever be placed in self-defence. A man of practicalities, but also a great idealist, Steinberg valued the moral, spiritual and economic development of his people above all else. He and the Freeland League envisaged a settlement where Jews could finally fulfil this development in peace and freedom; others in Australia

67 ‘Letter, Professor Elkin to Minister for Interior’, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, file 40/2/214.

68 Australian Jewish Forum, February 1946, 17.
shared his bold vision and publically called for a Jewish place of refuge in the Kimberley. The historical record shows Steinberg and his supporters were blocked by the Australian federal government and thwarted by elements of Australian Jewry, particularly Zionists. Their campaign was to no avail.