

BOOKS

• OUR REVIEWERS •

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PHOTO: MASSIMO CATARINELLA



HISTORIC SPLENDOR: the interior of the Esnoga Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, completed in 1675

The Jewish chronicle

A beguiling narrator exploits a rich treasure house of stories to great effect

DAVID J. WASSERSTEIN

Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900

SIMON SCHAMA

(BODLEY HEAD, 800 PP, £25)

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THE FIRST volume of Schama's monumental trilogy dealt with two and a half millennia. This middle volume treats of just five centuries, reflecting perhaps not only the vastly greater source material available but also the greater popular interest in the early modern and modern periods. Going from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 to 1900, just after the summoning of the First Zionist Congress by Theodor Herzl, it takes Schama some 700 pages to tell his tale. (As Schama so often stresses, Jewish history is the living past of a living people; it is odd that he has chosen as his epigraph a poem by the Israeli writer Yehuda Amichai which seems to make of it a museum.)

Simon Schama is the perfect companion for a time-travelling journey through Jewish history. He has been everywhere, seen everyone and experienced everything. With Schama (and David Ha-Reuveni), we ride a white mare into the Vatican to meet the Pope. With

Schama (and the Marrano sisters Beatriz and Brianda de Luna, or, by their Jewish names, Gracia and Reyna), we feel the terrors of preserving a few Jewish rituals while hiding in Tudor London. Together with Schama, we leave our sandals at the door and walk on exquisite Chinese blue and white tiles in the synagogue of Fort Cochin in India. At his side, we tremble with delight as the Chinese Jew Major Zhao, a new Nehemiah, restores his synagogue in Kaifeng following a catastrophic flood at the end of a siege in 1642. With Schama (and Alexander Herzen), we wring our hands at the conscription of Jewish lads for 25 years by the tsar's army. With Schama (and the Baltimore artist Solomon Nunes Carvalho), waist-deep in snow in the Rockies in 1853-54, we not only coat, buff and mercurialise early photographic plates but balk at eating roasted porcupine because it looks so much like pork, though we manage to down some raw pony liver (don't ask).

This is really a history of Jews, about Jews and for Jews. Schama is less interested in the larger context, except as a framework for his story. He is not a Heinrich Graetz or a Salo Baron. Not for him a grand over-arching theme or argument – *Belonging* is an awe-inspiring treasure house of stories; if it has a message, it is that, in the words of Tom Lehrer, “everybody hates the Jews”. When Jews do

badly, it is because they are discriminated against or persecuted; when they do well, we await the inevitable disaster that will follow. But, whether the news is good or bad, Jewish history is packed with great material, and Schama is a beguiling narrator.

As we have learned to expect from Schama, the illustrations are well chosen. One shows Moses Mendelssohn standing at the entrance to Berlin waiting to meet Frederick II; another (this one a reconstruction because the original was bungled) shows Herzl waiting to meet Kaiser Wilhelm in late-nineteenth-century Palestine. Many men (and Mendelssohn's eyeglasses – who would have thought they would survive, and who but Schama would have thought to include them) are pictured; fewer women. And Schama has found an excellent photo of Herzl, wearing a sea captain's hat (looking a bit like a mixture of George V and Captain Haddock without the pipe), and the Zionist delegation cross-legged on deck aboard ship on the way to Palestine in 1898. All of them are looking quizzically at the camera, as if the photographer had been taking too long.

WHAT IS Schama's intended readership? With his relaxed – sometimes too relaxed – narrative style, it is perhaps the general reader, who might have seen his television versions of the story, but with its generous scattering of Hebrew and Yiddishisms and the inclusion of a jokey origin of the name Isaiah, told to Schama by the “tenderly witty Sammy Kramer” in his *cheder*, or Sunday school, one wonders. The 15-page glossary doesn't explain everything – “*dayenu*” (“enough is enough”), for example – is not included.

The five centuries Schama covers offer a rich web of the Jewish experience. We travel from the glories of Jewish culture in Spain before their expulsion to the *shtetls* and *yeshivot* of Hasidism in Eastern Europe; from the half-fulfilled promises of the Enlightenment to the massacres by the Cossacks (who appear six times in the index, each reference being to a bloodbath); from expulsions and persecutions to religious false messiahs like Shabbetai Zevi and secular saviours like Theodor Herzl; we meet rich and poor, good and bad, learned and ignorant, men and women, and children too; all the way to Dreyfus (and the pogrom in Algiers, then part of France, when a crowd marched through town chanting “Death to the Jews, Death to the Jews; They must be hanged, By their Snouts” – it rhymes in French) and the birth of Zionism.

Schama ends on a note that is sour and hopeful at the same time: the kaiser and his entourage making snide anti-Semitic remarks, while Herzl is imagining that he has won some sort of support for his Zionist project and is dreaming of a traffic-free Jerusalem for walkers only – of all faiths and none.