

Moses Montefiore – Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero by Abigail Green.

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It is probably true to say that definitions of what makes a good biography vary; my own criteria are that it must be meticulously researched, bring its subject fully to life, both in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, give a rich and interesting account of the events with which they were involved, setting them in as broad an historical and cultural context as circumstances permit, and concluding with an appraisal that takes into account the impact of their lives not just in their time but in terms of posterity.

By these standards Abigail Green's biography of Moses Montefiore is not just good it is a triumph!

Moses Montefiore was a towering figure of the late 18th and 19th centuries; born in Livorno in Italy into a merchant Sephardi family, and brought up in England where he spent the rest of his life, Montefiore was part of the golden cousinhood of established Sephardi Jewry in England, the self-styled elite. His working life started simply enough, as a counting house clerk in the City, then joining the Stock Exchange where he began to build up what became in Victorian terms, and modern ones, a vast fortune. His union with Judith Barent-Cohen, whom he adored and to whom he was devoted – though possibly not always faithful - throughout a long marriage, brought him into the fortuitous position of being Nathan Rothschild's brother in law, and the Montefiore-Rothschild nexus was to prove of critical importance to his later life, particularly in terms of influencing foreign governments and performing grand acts of philanthropy.

Green takes the reader through every stage of Moses Montefiore's life, in fascinating and highly-readable detail, introduces those who played a significant role in that life, not least various members of his well-connected extended family and his devoted secretary Louis Loewe, and also the several Christians who both admired and loved him for his sincerity and commitment to the welfare of those of all faiths less fortunate than themselves.

The famous events of Montefiore's life are all included: his long and passionate involvement with Jerusalem, the Damascus and Mortara affairs, his contacts with previously unsympathetic autocrats in pursuance of ameliorating the Jewish

condition, his knighthood and subsequent baronetcy, and other crises and blood libels with which he became involved.

But there is also much about the development of Anglo-Jewry, Montefiore's long association with the Board of Deputies which he served as President, his deep religious conviction and loathing of the Reformers of Judaism, which included members of his own family, and his unwitting contributions to the Zionist cause before it was firmly established.

As is widely known Montefiore lived to be 101, and as is always the way with the long-lived they not only lose most of their contemporaries and close family and friends, Judith pre-deceased him by 23 years, but as their faculties diminish so too does their influence and importance, which can be a major blow to their amour-propre. Montefiore further had to do with a reappraisal of his approaches in a number of specific situations, and the strong voice of challenging and opposing opinions.

Nevertheless when he died he was revered across the world and the celebrations of his ninety ninth birthday, both in Ramsgate on the south coast of England and across the world were quite unique, and probably would never be repeated for any Jew.

Abigail Green's magnificent biography of Moses Montefiore is truly worthy of its extraordinary subject, and it is unlikely to be bettered.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh