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Book Reviews

Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Jewish, Confederate, Expatriate Sculptor. By Samantha Baskind. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2025. 294 pages.

Samantha Baskind describes the eponymous subject of her new book, *Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Jewish, Confederate, Expatriate Sculptor*, as “a study in contradictions,” who spent decades as an expatriate in Italy but never renounced his American citizenship or emotional attachment to his natal South (2). Born into a prominent Sephardic family in Richmond, Virginia, Ezekiel (1844–1917) took pride in his service to the Confederacy and later cherished the opportunity to demonstrate his love for the South when he was commissioned to create a Confederate memorial for Arlington National Cemetery.

Although Ezekiel’s Confederate ties cast a shadow over the entire book, Baskind takes a broader approach to his work and establishes three goals that guide her through the entirety of his oeuvre: to recover and contextualize Ezekiel’s work within the society that initiated it; to explore the business of art in the late nineteenth century and the market Ezekiel navigated; and to examine how his sculpture was influenced by the triad of identities that appear in the book’s title. However, none of these purposes define the book as much as the “additional dimension” that Baskind embraced halfway through the project, “when Ezekiel—or at least some of his sculptures—became relevant again for all the wrong reasons” (2). Ezekiel was swept up in the broader conversation that reemerged in the 2010s about how Americans commemorate our past. The book is as much a

scholarly monograph about a nineteenth-century Jewish American artist as an exploration of how the past intersects with the present.

Baskind organizes the book to reflect her interest in the full body of Ezekiel's work. She wades through the various subjects that occupied Ezekiel—his monument *Religious Liberty* in Philadelphia, the Bible, the arts and antique, and American presidents—before ending with a chapter focusing on his Confederate monuments. She explicitly asks readers not to jump to the final chapter, explaining that it

"is not the beating heart of this book, even as it is essential" (11). Readers who heed her request will see Baskind emerge as an authoritative voice on Ezekiel, perhaps best attested by the fact that she located eleven lost sculptures over the course of her research or her insightful analysis that Ezekiel quietly encoded Judaism in *Religious Liberty*, which appears on Baskind's cover, by crafting the outstretched right hand of its central figure in the form of the priestly blessing. Future researchers will appreciate that Baskind shares her deep knowledge of Ezekiel and his work in the form of one hundred illustrations, many of which reproduce artwork that has been lost or relocated.

Baskind adds historical depth to the study by exploring the afterlives of individual sculptures, treating them as characters who deserve their own biographies. Chapter four explains why a set of statues Ezekiel created for elevated niches in the exterior of an art museum at one point decorated the land around a private swimming pool on the way to their current home at the Norfolk Botanical Gardens. Some readers may find that, at times, Baskind gently sidesteps the afterlives of certain sculptures. For example, chapter five develops an argument about why Thomas Jefferson was an attractive figure for nineteenth-century Jews like Ezekiel and the Bernheim brothers, who commissioned Ezekiel to sculpt the third president in Louisville. It focuses on Jefferson as a symbol of religious

freedom but noticeably avoids entering a longer discussion about how changing attitudes towards Jefferson and his relationship with slavery may affect the sculpture's valence in the present.

At other times, readers may sense that some of the sculptures have a more complicated afterlife than the text suggests. For instance, some readers will be skeptical about the idea that Ezekiel's first Confederate monument, *Virginia Mourning Her Dead*, now has a meaning "divorced from the Civil War" (169). Earlier in the book, Baskind analyzes how the meaning of Ezekiel's *Religious Liberty* has evolved since it was moved to its current location outside the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History. She emphasizes that its location near Independence Mall in Philadelphia, "mere steps away from the Liberty Bell, a block south of the National Constitution Center, and a block north of Independence Hall, where American liberty was born," allow the monument to serve as "a proud reminder of the liberties that have allowed Jews to thrive, finally in freedom, in America (the very theme of the museum)" (36). For some viewers, *Religious Liberty* undoubtedly evokes the sense of pride that Baskind describes. Yet, if one were to use her spatial analysis to guide them through the Independence National Historical Park, they would encounter a site that provokes deeper reflection about pluralism and American democracy. As they approached the Liberty Bell or went from the National Constitution Center to Independence Hall, they would find the President's House site and its multiple displays that honor the enslaved people who toiled in George Washington's household in Philadelphia. Thus, when read in conversation with its present-day location near the Independence National Historical Park, Ezekiel's *Religious Liberty* engages in a more complex conversation about American democracy than Baskind suggests.

Baskind begins and ends the study in the world of a twenty-first-century historian involved in controversies stemming from Ezekiel's life-long Confederate ties. The preface focuses on an event Baskind calls "the Princeton exhibition debacle" in which she and a donor canceled a planned exhibition after university officials asked her to omit Ezekiel and another artist with connections to the Confederacy from the show (xii). A second controversy exposes a different side of the discourse about Ezekiel. Baskind had already completed the conclusion, in which she artfully ties the book together by demonstrating that its title is also her own epitaph

for Ezekiel and the intended final line of the volume, when a petition from a group who called themselves the Society for the Preservation of Jewish Civil War History compelled her to add an epilogue. Reproducing both the petition and the response, the epilogue is most memorable for its poignant and appropriate criticism of the petitioners' attempt to construe the removal of Ezekiel's Confederate memorial *New South* from Arlington National Cemetery as an incident of antisemitism. These two episodes frame the six well-paced chapters that constitute the core of the volume.

Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Jewish, Confederate, Expatriate Sculptor responds to a pressing need to understand a figure in the crosshairs of the American culture wars. It successfully recovers a once-acclaimed artist who contributed, but was not limited to, the memorial landscape of the Lost Cause. Readers may not agree with all of the book's conclusions, but it ultimately raises a set of questions that should occupy scholars engaged in the emerging conversation about Southern Jews, race, and religion in the years after the Civil War.

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Melting Point: Family, Memory, and the Search for a Promised Land. By Rachel Cockerell. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024. 400 pages.

What can you learn about history from investigating your family's story? Rachel Cockerell's *Melting Point: Family, Memory, and the Search for a Promised Land* provides an excellent example of how exploring one's past can offer valuable insight into the larger events of history. Cockerell's research into her great-grandfather, David Jochelman, took her on a globetrotting journey of discovery which resulted in this narrative. The author's artful retelling invites readers to follow David and his descendants through Switzerland, England, New York City, Galveston, and a young State of Israel as the Jochelman family migrated and branches diverged from one another over time.

The book is divided into three sections: "Part One: Vienna, Basel, Galveston," "Part Two: New York," and "Part Three: London." Part One

explores the development of the early Zionist movement, looking at the founding of the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO) and the role David Jochelman played in it. The ITO was an offshoot of the Zionist movement that rerouted eastern European Jews away from overcrowded New York to the port of Galveston in an effort known as the Galveston Movement. The Galveston Movement was short-lived, 1907–1914, and sought to redistribute Jews in the American West and Southwest. Part Two examines the life of Jochelman's son from his first marriage, Emjo Basshe (born Emmanuel Jochelman), who became a playwright in New York City. Basshe's life took a different trajectory than his younger sisters, Fanny and Sonia, who are at the heart of Part Three.

In the final section, Cockerell focuses on her grandmother Fanny and aunt Sonia's experiences in England from the 1930s to early 1950s, including Sonia and her family's immigration to Israel. This section also includes interviews with Cockerell's father, aunts, and cousins, who provide readers with firsthand accounts of life in England during World War II. Especially poignant, they emphasized the experience of children who at the time did not grasp the extent of the horrors being committed by the Nazis towards Jews. These accounts contrast with the inclusion of newspaper excerpts describing British Jews protesting their country's lack of action against the growing threat of Adolf Hitler in 1933 (259). These moments in *Melting Point* demonstrate the variation of Jewish experiences in Europe during World War II. Not until the family moved to Israel after the war did they learn more about the Holocaust (341).

Melting Point employs a unique approach to its writing, as Cockerell offers little of her own analysis. In her preface, she explains that previous drafts included her thoughts in each chapter, but it did not feel right to her to include these (i). Instead, *Melting Point* is a collection of excerpts from primary source materials: newspaper articles, advertisements, diaries, and oral history interviews. Cockerell skillfully crafted these together to form a cohesive narrative that, for the most part, flows chronologically. This book provides a broad resource for scholars and others interested in Jewish and Zionist history between the 1890s and 1950s, as many more than one hundred primary source documents are utilized.

However, although this tactic offers valuable insight to some readers, I would caution against it being one's introduction to Zionist

history. For a novice in this content, it can be confusing to recognize the significance of several of the figures featured in the work. Cockerell does examine a few historical figures in detail. Her first chapter opens with personal accounts of people describing their meetings with Theodor Herzl, and chapter 2 uses the same tactic to introduce Israel Zangwill. Zangwill and Herzl were two of the most prominent Zionist leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their significance should be rightfully fleshed out. Others such as Alexander Z. Gurwitz would also benefit from a more thorough discussion in the text. Gurwitz's accounts—taken from his memoir *Memories of Two Generations*, edited by Bryan Edward Stone—give insight into the Galveston Movement (chapter 15), but need further elaboration for those unfamiliar with Texas Jewish history.

I enjoy the stylistic choice of using the snippets from primary sources to craft the narrative, but *Melting Point* would be stronger with some sort of identification for these figures. This could either be done by including an appendix of all the historical figures whose perspectives are shared or by including explanatory footnotes. Even if not every person with a firsthand account is famous, including information about who they are would help other researchers searching for lesser-known individuals who were impacted by the Galveston Movement and the Zionist Revisionist movement.

Furthermore, while Cockerell does note that her offline research outside of her home in England occurred after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, citations with the dates for the specific interviews she conducted should be included in the book. Without this, readers have only a general timeframe between the end of restrictions and *Melting Point's* publication in 2024. Again, such information would be helpful for future researchers so that they could be mindful of the time when that information was gathered and potentially compare it to other accounts from those

interviewees at different points in their lives. While Cockerell has introduced great resources to the scholarly community, they need more context. The book includes many photographs throughout, yet, once again, a lack of citations and descriptions makes them less impactful.

Although *Melting Point* would be a stronger work had it overcome these issues, I believe it remains a great addition to the scholarship in fields such as Jewish, Zionist, and immigration history. Cockerell shows readers how, even with the same Jewish families, opinions on Zionism differed, such as Sonia Jochelman's indifference to the Revisionist movement while her husband, Yehuda "Leva" Benari, was a devout follower of the movement's leader, Vladimir Jabotinsky (273, 298). She also highlights how drastically the paths of once close families can diverge. In her afterward, Cockerell ponders the moment the Mapesbury Road household in London, comprising both Fanny and Sonia's families, was destined to grow apart. She wonders if it was when Sonia and Leva decided to move to Israel or earlier, when her grandmother, Fanny, chose to marry a non-Jewish man (347–48). Although the book could have differed structurally to improve its utility to historians, Cockerell's research into the world of her great-grandfather and his children ultimately provides historical insight into the complexity of the Jewish experience.

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I Am a Georgia Girl: The Life of Lucille Selig Frank. By Ann Hite. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2025. 337 pages.

"Women is losers," sang arguably the greatest blues singer of all time, Janis Joplin. Sadly, she was correct in the field of history, in which women's voices have often been squelched, silenced, censored, or ignored. Having been an undergraduate at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, during the early 1970s, I can attest to that fact. There was no such thing as "women's studies" until late in my college career. Which brings me now to this new biography of Lucille Selig Frank, *I Am a Georgia Girl*, by Ann Hite. When I first met Hite three years ago, she was knee-deep in her study of Lucille Frank, the wife of Leo Frank, who was lynched in 1915

in Marietta, Georgia. She introduced herself to me after a lecture and asked simply, "What do you know about Lucille Frank?" I was embarrassed to admit that her question left me gobsmacked by my ignorance of the topic. "Well," I said, "she was Leo Frank's wife." And that was the extent of my knowledge. Admittedly I know a great deal about Leo Frank. I have worked toward his complete exoneration for the past thirty years, but my knowledge of Lucille was notable for its absence. And so, for me and for many others, Hite has stepped into the breach of that ignorance. Her book sits at the intersection of women's history and Southern Jewish history, a field that is only beginning to receive sustained scholarly attention. Her work joins a growing canon of scholarship, including *Daughters of Israel*, *Daughters of the South* by Jennifer Stollman, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* by Debra L. Schultz, *America's Jewish Women* by Pamela S. Nadell, *A Southern Woman's Story* by Phoebe Yates Pember and introduced by George C. Rable, and *The Civil War Diary of Emma Mordecai* edited by Dianne Ashton and Melissa Klapper.

Hite begins by explaining her early fascination with the Frank case, sparked by her grandmother's recollection of being present at the site of the lynching in Marietta. The oft-told story — that Frank gave his wedding ring to a stranger to deliver to Lucille — has haunted Hite since childhood. Her central argument is that the story of Leo Frank must be told through the perspectives of the women most intimately connected to the case: Mary Phagan (the victim), Fanny Coleman (her mother), Rae Frank (Leo's mother), and Josephine Selig (Lucille's mother). Above all, Hite contends, the case can only be fully understood through Lucille's perspective.

The Frank case is, in many ways, like an onion. You peel one layer away and you think everything is uncovered. Until you look closer. And then you realize there is another layer to the story, and yet another one after that. And then, even one more after that. Hite immediately sees the importance

of sex and gender issues in shaping the Frank trial. The American South had been devastated by the Civil War. By 1913 their rich farm lands had been denuded and many Southerners were thrown into poverty. The Coleman/Phagans were one such family. They had to send their thirteen-year-old daughter to work in a crowded and dirty pencil factory in order to help pay for their rent and food each week. To a once proud agrarian family, nothing could have been more shameful.

During Frank's murder trial Coleman gave a lengthy interview to the Atlanta newspapers. The interview is more than just a recounting of what happened to the little girl on the day of her murder. She used this interview to raise concerns about putting little girls in factory jobs that were meant for adults. In an early iteration of the #MeToo movement, Coleman told other mothers that, without protection or regulations, their daughters could likewise fall victim to adult predators. During the Frank trial itself, women were browbeaten and threatened with incarceration unless they gave the testimony that the prosecutor needed to convict Frank. Minola McKnight, the Frank and Selig family cook, gave damaging testimony about Frank's alibi. She later recanted her statements, attributing them to having received the "third degree" treatment at the hands of the Fulton County police. This became a pattern in the Frank trial as one woman after another testified that Frank was of low moral character, only to recant that testimony after their appearance in court.

The centerpiece of Hite's book is Lucille Frank's writing. After having been criticized because she had not visited her husband during the first two weeks of his incarceration, she wrote a long letter to the three newspapers in Atlanta defending her actions and proclaiming his innocence. Hugh Dorsey, the prosecutor, responded by questioning whether Lucille had written the letter since he could not imagine a woman having such strong opinions! In one startling piece of irony, Hite reminds us that women were totally banned from the courtroom at one stage of the trial because Judge Leonard Roan deemed women too sensitive to hear the violent details of Phagan's murder.

Where *I am a Georgia Girl* falls short is in its reconstruction of scenes lacking eyewitness accounts. On page after page, Hite has to imagine what must have been said: "We can only guess Lucille's state as the case closed in"; "She must've harbored some worry even if she didn't speak the thoughts aloud"; "One can only imagine Lucille watching from the door

with thoughts racing through her mind” (90). Although this limitation is understandable, it occasionally blurs the line between historical analysis and imaginative reconstruction. Nevertheless, Hite makes a significant contribution to the vast literature on the Frank case. Lucille Frank emerges as a compelling and active advocate for her husband rather than a peripheral figure. Hite ultimately argues that a full understanding of the Leo Frank case requires elevating Lucille Frank’s voice. In doing so, Hite’s voice—clear, persistent, and interpretive—plays a crucial role in reshaping the narrative.

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Translating the Ketubah: The Jewish Marriage Contract in America and England. By Benjamin Steiner. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2025. 320 pages.

Benjamin Steiner’s *Translating the Ketubah* transforms a seemingly narrow subject—the Jewish marriage contract—into a sweeping study of adaptation, law, and culture, with particularly important implications for understanding regional variation in American Jewish life. Steiner demonstrates that ketubah translations were never neutral; they were cultural acts with both legal and social implications through which Jews negotiated belonging in distinct local contexts. The book opens with a vivid anecdote about the apocryphal claim that George Washington signed a ketubah in 1784, which frames Steiner’s central argument that the ketubah has long served as a site of aspiration and adaptation. From colonial New York onward, Jews translated ketubot to ensure enforceability under common law, especially within the constraints of coverture, which subsumed married women’s legal identities under their husbands. In this context, the ketubah took on heightened importance as a protective instrument for Jewish women.

While Steiner’s early chapters establish the ketubah’s legal adaptability, the book’s most original and compelling contribution lies in its treatment of the antebellum South, where Jewish law, regional legal structures, and the slave economy intersected in stark and unsettling ways. In

South Carolina and Georgia, Steiner shows, the ketubah's economic provisions retained unusual durability, functioning not only as symbolic documents but as tangible mechanisms for property transfer. His analysis of *Levy v. Hart* (1840) is particularly arresting: the court's inventory of Jane Hart Levy's marriage portion included enslaved individuals alongside household goods, revealing how Jewish marital practice became entangled with the legal and moral frameworks of slavery. That nearly 40 percent of surviving antebellum ketubot in these states referenced enslaved persons underscores the extent to which Southern Jewish life was embedded within – and implicated in – the region's "peculiar institution" of slavery.

Yet Steiner resists reducing this history to complicity alone. Instead, he highlights the paradoxes that defined Southern Jewish experience: the same ketubot that reinforced systems of racial exploitation also afforded Jewish women forms of property protection unavailable to many of their Christian counterparts. In this sense, the Southern ketubah emerges as both a conservative and adaptive instrument – one that illuminates how minority communities navigated the legal and economic structures of a slave society while preserving distinct religious traditions. This regional focus significantly enriches the historiography, positioning the South not as peripheral but as central to understanding the evolution of American Jewish legal culture.

Subsequent chapters extend Steiner's geographic scope while reinforcing his core argument about adaptation. In California, the ketubah became a tool of social integration in a frontier environment lacking formal religious infrastructure, as lay leaders and later rabbis modified its language to align with American norms. Figures such as Julius Eckman – whose career linked Charleston and New Orleans to San Francisco – underscore the continuities between Southern and Western Jewish networks, suggesting that regional adaptations were part of a broader national

pattern rather than isolated developments. Similarly, Steiner's discussion of Victorian London and Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler's 1880 "abstract" of the ketubah situates these American innovations within an international context of ritual reform and linguistic accommodation.

The book's later chapters trace the ketubah's transformation in twentieth-century America, particularly within Conservative Judaism's efforts to reconcile tradition with modern family ideals. Steiner's reinterpretation of the Lieberman clause as a tool aimed as much at preserving marriage as at facilitating divorce adds nuance to existing scholarship, while his epilogue on contemporary practices highlights the ketubah's continued evolution as both a legal document and an artistic expression.

What makes *Translating the Ketubah* exceptional is its ability to braid legal history, gender analysis, and cultural interpretation into a narrative that is both erudite and accessible, while also drawing attention to the importance of regional context—especially the American South—in shaping Jewish lived experience. At times, the book's thematic breadth feels diffuse, and a more explicit theoretical framing of translation as cultural performance might have strengthened its cohesion. Nevertheless, Steiner's archival depth and interpretive ambition are impressive. The volume fills a conspicuous gap in Jewish historiography, complementing recent studies of material culture while opening new avenues for examining legal pluralism and vernacularization. For historians of American Judaism, the book is particularly valuable in foregrounding how regional settings—from Charleston and Savannah to San Francisco—mediated the translation of religious tradition into lived practice. In doing so, Steiner not only recovers the ketubah's legal and cultural significance but also reveals how American Jews, especially in the South, navigated the tensions between adaptation and continuity in a complex and often contradictory society.

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