

Allan Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City: The Canadian Jewish Experience* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2018), 484 pp., ISBN: 978-0771048050.

A number of years ago a Toronto publisher told me that Canada is a one-book country. By that he meant the economics of Canadian publishing dictates there is only room in Canada for one book on any given topic. Allan Levine's recently published history of the Canadian Jewish community, *Seeking the Fabled City: The Canadian Jewish Experience*, challenges the one-book thesis and now becomes the second survey history of Canadian Jews sitting on my bookshelf. For the past decade, my go-to volume on Canadian Jewish history was Gerald Tulchinsky's *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* published in 2008. Does *Seeking the Fabled City* supersede the Tulchinsky volume? Since both books attempt to encapsulate the broad sweep of Canadian Jewish history from the first known Jewish encounters with this land down to our own time, there is bound to be some overlap between the two volumes. After all, there is only so much recorded Canadian Jewish history to go around. However, Levine's book is neither an updating of Tulchinsky nor a scholarly next step beyond Tulchinsky. Rather, it is a gateway book designed to introduce readers to the broad outline of Canadian Jewish history. As such, *Seeking the Fabled City* is a volume unto itself. Levine, who has ten other non-fiction books to his credit, also puts his own stamp on that history, both in what he presents and how he presents it.

The book's title, *Seeking the Fabled City*, is drawn from a mid-war A. M. Klein poem about Eastern Europe Jewish immigrants to Canada, immigrants who hoped to find in Canada a hospitable land where they and generations to follow would find welcome and security. How welcoming Canada was to Jews is a core theme of Levine's book. But, since no single survey history can be exhaustive in scope or detail, Levine was forced to make choices about what to include and what to leave out, choices dependent in large part on the sources of information, primary and secondary, available to him. While Levine shows himself to an able researcher, including in his volume both archival-sourced materials and memory history gathered from more than fifty informants, he also makes good use of published research he had at his disposal. And coming as it does a decade after publication of *Canada's Jews*, Levine's book owes an especially large debt of gratitude to a remarkably rich body of Canadian Jewish scholarship that became available during the past ten years.

Levine's skill is in carefully picking his way through the available primary and secondary resources to create an accessible and storied account of the Canadian Jewish past. Rather than a narrowly internal history of Canada's Jews – a history of Jews who find themselves in Canada – Levine locates his story at the points of intersection between Canadian geography and Jewish geography, Canadian history and Jewish

history. And as Levine makes clear, virtually every issue of the past 250 years of Canadian history somehow touched or involved Jews. While never more than two and a half percent of Canada's population, Jews, whether as individuals, as a community, or as an active polity, left their mark on Canada's colonial experience and the development of Canada's democratic institutions. Jews were also significant in the shaping of Canadian immigration policy, the unfolding of western settlement, the country's economic development, the struggles of organized labour, the Canadian war effort, the growth of the welfare state and the campaign for equal rights, national and regional identity debates, multiculturalism, Canada's foreign policy, and the flowering of the arts, media, and scholarship. The list goes on. Not even the history of crime in Canada is without Jewish connections.

What is more, as Levine shows, writing a history of Canadian Jews requires balance, including balancing earlier and later periods of Canadian Jewish history. While there was a small population of mostly Anglo-German Jews in Canada before Confederation and before the turn of the Twentieth century, they were quickly overwhelmed, at least in numbers and need, by Eastern European Jews arriving in Canada in the years that straddle the turn of the last century. The challenge in writing a survey history of Canadian Jews is to ensure that the former period does not eclipse the latter. Levine meets this challenge not just by carefully guiding his readers through the history of the early period of sparse Jewish settlement in Canada, but also, where sources allow, by introducing readers to the lived experience of Jewish individuals and families of the era, arguably the best known of whom were the Harts, prominent in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles.

Finding a balance between earlier and later Canadian Jewish timeframes was not Levine's only balancing act. He also had to balance the historical place of the almost 80 percent of Canadian Jews who are today concentrated, as they have for the past century and a half, in Canada's two largest cities, against the experience of the 20 percent of Canadian Jews who were and are to be found elsewhere in this vast land. And perhaps because he is from Winnipeg, Levine takes care to ensure that Canada means Canada and not just Toronto and Montreal. One must appreciate Levine's references to the experience of Jews in smaller communities across Canada and, in particular, his discussion of efforts to build Jewish agricultural settlement in western Canada.

For all Levine's skill as an author and historian, it is impossible for *Seeking the Fabled City* to do equal justice to all aspects of Canadian Jewish history. The history of Jewish religious life in Canada, Canadian Jewish intellectual history, and the history of Jews in politics, the arts, and media are among topics deserving more attention. But one subject that impacts all Canadian Jews and a subject to which Levine circles back again and again is antisemitism. As he makes clear, to one degree or another

and in one form or another, antisemitism has been ever present in Canada. Whether antisemitism is intended to wall off individual Jews from access to employment, housing, education or entry to Canada, or to deny the truth of the Holocaust or, more recently, to deny the validity of a Jewish state, antisemitism has also generated Jewish pushback. As Levine explains, Canadian Jews may be a fractious population but they have been and continue to be united on the need to combat antisemitism. And the struggle against antisemitism at home and abroad remains a priority item on the agenda of the organized Canadian Jewish community, alongside concern for Israel and support for Jews under threat.

When it comes to Jewish concerns, Levine, uncharacteristically for a historian, demonstrates little inclination to play the neutral or dispassionate observer. As a child of the Jewish community, he lets his readers know where he stands, especially as related to his support of Zionism and Israel and his hopes for Jewish continuity in a welcoming Canada.

Although *Seeking the Fabled City* is replete with scholarly footnotes and a comprehensive bibliography, the book is written in an easily approachable style, free of jargon and given more to storytelling than analysis. I offer one spoiler: I found Levine's overuse of the past-perfect tense to be distracting. By the last page I had had enough of 'had.' This is a small irritant in an otherwise good book, however, a book that should be read by anyone seeking an introduction to Canadian Jewish history. Levine also deserves thanks for proving yet again that Canada is not a one-book country.

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