

The Jewish Journey: A Passage through European History

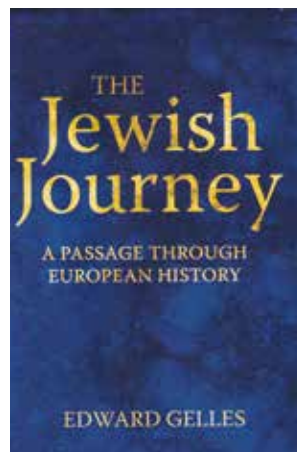
Edward Gelles (1944), The Radcliffe Press, 2016

John Jones (1961 and Emeritus Fellow)

Edward Gelles was born to liberal Jewish parents in Austria in 1927. They escaped with him to England in mid-1938 following the Anschluss: many relatives vanished without trace in the Holocaust and others were scattered and contacts lost. After schooling in Oxford and London, Edward was elected to a Brackenbury Open Scholarship at Balliol in 1944. His tutor was R.P. Bell (who was also mine a generation later), and Edward stayed with Ronnie for his DPhil.

Edward's parents, Dr David Isaac Gelles (1883–1964), a distinguished lawyer, and Regina Griffel (1900–1954), were born into strictly orthodox Jewish families in Austrian Galicia. But he was brought up in Vienna, geographically, culturally and socially distanced from that background. The gulf between him and orthodox Jewry was very wide by the time he completed his education in England. He knew something of his ancestors, but it was not until he reached three score years and ten that he became seriously interested and embarked on a quest for his roots. Since then he has made up many times over, with a series of scholarly studies, culminating in *The Jewish Journey*, which needs to be read together with his earlier book *An Ancient Lineage: European Roots of a Jewish Family: Gelles-Griffel-Wahl-Chajes-Safier-Loew-Taube* (Valentine Mitchell, 2006).

TV programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are?*, popular magazines, and the explosion of online information in recent years have fuelled enthusiasm for narrow family history studies, but these are often undertaken uncritically and with little appreciation of historical context. The many family trees to be found on subscription sites like www.ancestry.com are frequently riddled with error, and amateur investigators are inclined to repeat each other's errors. Edward's work is on an altogether superior and critical plane which is interdisciplinary, involving both traditional (i.e. documentary) and scientific (i.e. DNA-based) methods, and is placed in historical context.





The Master (left) with Edward Gelles

A full list of Edward's publications with an introduction may be found on the College website;¹ there is also a brief note there about the Edward Gelles Papers, pending their deposit, when there will be full processing and availability to scholars. A long video discussion with the Master about Edward's work was recorded by Voices from Oxford last year.² The photograph above was taken on that occasion. The Master also hosted the official launch of the present book at the Athenaeum on 28 January 2016.

Edward's Gelles forbears were rabbis for centuries; his father's father was Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles, Chief Rabbi of Sopot in Galicia for 50 years, who married Esther Weinstein. Their ancestry shows Edward to be a sixth-generation descendant of Chief Rabbi Shmuel Helman of Metz, a seventh-generation descendant of Chief Rabbi Isaac Horowitz of Hamburg, and a descendant of the 16th-century Chief Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe of Prague and Chief Rabbi Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen of Padua and Venice. On the maternal side, the Griffels were businessmen who also had connections with ancient rabbinical clans. Edward descends through both his parents from Saul Wahl (1545–1617), son of Chief Rabbi Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen: he was a key figure in 16th-century Poland–Lithuania, and tradition says that he held power during a hiatus between kings of Poland. Saul Wahl's progeny

include Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Karl Marx, Isaiah Berlin and Yehudi Menuhin. Wahl was also a descendant of the 11th-century scholar Rashi of Troyes, a possible descendant of King David. So Edward's extended family tree is rich with distinction.

An Ancient Lineage set out to map these distinguished roots going back for many hundreds of years. *The Jewish Journey* expands into a wider study and takes in many of the most important Ashkenazi rabbinic families (which repeatedly interacted with each other) and is to a considerable extent a study of Ashkenazi Jewry, throwing light on the genetic admixture acquired by them and other Jews in the course of their European migrations, persecutions, ghettos, expulsions, inbreeding by intermarriage, and conversions. This gives valuable background to the history of Europe, and is a scholarly *tour de force* on genealogy in broad perspective. It invites comparison with the magnum opus³ of another distinguished Balliol genealogist, Sir Anthony Wagner (Balliol 1927).

Many with Jewish strands to their ancestry seeking to follow those strands back into the past will find specific connections in these books. Of even wider interest to genealogists, however, are the methodology, the complexities of Jewish onomastics (the origin, history, and use of proper names), and the use of DNA analysis in genealogy, a rapidly developing field.

And there is much food for broad historical reflection: the essay on Davidic descent, to pick but one chapter, is a fascinating commentary on a grey area between legend and documented fact. Whether what biblical scholars have postulated about King David and his genealogy is myth or truth matters much less than the reality of its impact. The phrase 'the divine right of Kings' will prompt anybody with a passing interest in English history to think of Charles I and our Civil War, but it is an ancient notion which underlies a span of medieval and early modern history that is wide in both time and place: it has roots in David's anointment as a God-ordained monarch. And the Tree of Jesse, depicting the descent of Jesus from King David's father, is a frequent theme in mediaeval Christian art.

We congratulate Edward, and are glad that the College will be permanently associated with his work and the whole field of Jewish genealogy, through the deposit of his papers in our Historic Collections Centre at St Cross Church.

¹ <http://archives.balliol.ox.ac.uk/Modern%20Papers/gelles.asp>

² www.voicesfromoxford.org/video/the-jewish-journey/639

³ A.R. Wagner, *English Genealogy* (OUP 1960, 2nd edn 1972)