

Doomed from the Start: Australia's Rejection of Dr I.N. Steinberg's Kimberley Plan

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Abstract:

This article disambiguates an unanswered question from Australian history: why was the Kimberley Plan, a scheme that would have opened the East Kimberley region of Western Australia to large-scale, foreign Jewish settlement during the era of the Holocaust, rejected by the Australian government?

Introduction

Years ago whilst en route to an Aboriginal school in South Australia, I was told about the Kimberley Plan, an ambitious proposal that, had it succeeded, would have opened the East Kimberley region to large-scale Jewish settlement during World War Two era. Though I had heard the name Kimberley numerous times before, I had not related it to a region in Australia and had never heard of a plan for a Jewish colony there. I was also told the Kimberley Plan had been “shot down by the Australians.” Nevertheless, this footnote to Australian history became part of my general knowledge, though I admit I rarely thought about it in the subsequent years that followed. Years later, however, I set out to formally disambiguate a specific question lurking, as it were, in the background in regards to the Kimberley Plan and the reasons it was ultimately rejected by the Australian government. What, in other words, doomed this scheme to failure and what role – if any – did anti-Semitism play in its demise? This paper is the result of that effort and is an attempt to add a new layer of discussion into this obscure moment in Australian history.

The Kimberley Plan

Sometimes referred to as the Kimberley “Scheme”, the Kimberley Plan was a proposal that, had it succeeded, would have opened the East Kimberley region of Western Australia to large-scale, foreign Jewish settlement at some point during the era of World War Two. This proposal was a product of “the Freeland League for Jewish Colonisation, [an organization] founded in London in 1935 [that aimed] to settle up to 50,000 Jewish refugees [fleeing] Nazism on about seven million acres [of land] in the East Kimberley.”¹ Over a relatively short period of time, Dr Isaac Nachman Steinberg, a Russian Jew sent from London by the Freeland League, the aforementioned Jewish organisation tasked with procuring both the land as well as the public and political approval for the Kimberley Plan, was able to garner the support of many important “opinion-makers” in

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Australia, the Archdiocese of Perth and several trade unions among them. After a brief visit to Wyndham and what is today modern Kununurra, the two major population centres in East Kimberley, Steinberg first approached Robert Menzies' United Australia Party federal government in 1940 with his proposal, but World War Two broke out and the powers-that-be in Canberra proved sympathetic yet unresponsive to the Kimberley Plan due, as they claimed, to the sudden outbreak of global hostilities. John Curtin, the Australian Labor prime minister who succeeded Robert Menzies in 1941, later rejected the Kimberley Plan on behalf of the Australian Government in a letter to Dr I.N. Steinberg dated 15 July 1944:

"Dear Dr. Steinberg,

"I refer to previous correspondence and to your personal representations in regards to the proposed Jewish settlement in the East Kimberleys...

"As previously intimated, the Government sympathises with the serious plight of your people in Europe...

"After mature consideration of all the circumstances which had to be taken into account, however, the Government is unable to see its way to depart from the long-established policy in regard to alien settlement in Australia, and therefore cannot entertain the proposal for a group settlement of the exclusive type contemplated by the Freeland League.

"Yours truly,

"John Curtin."²

As his letter to Steinberg claimed, John Curtin, the fourteenth Prime Minister of Australia, cited an inability "to depart from... long-established policy in regard to alien settlement in Australia" as the basis for this rejection.³ Despite this, the Kimberley Plan enjoyed widespread support from many sectors of the Australian public and was widely and, in the adapted words of John Curtin, "maturedly" discussed and promoted by several well-known public opinion-makers in Australia.

In 1948, Dr Isaac Nachman Steinberg published an autobiographical account of his efforts to generate both political and public support for the Kimberley Plan. Entitled *Australia – the Unpromised Land* and written four years after Curtin's rejection, Steinberg recalls receiving support and encouragement for the Kimberley Plan from the Durack family

of Western Australia (an important development, as the Duracks were eager to sell their pastoral land to the Freeland League, thereby providing the organisation with actual territory upon which to establish a Jewish colony). Support also came from author Henrietta Drake-Brockman and from Charles Venn Pilcher, a leading Anglican bishop, as well as from the Catholic Archdioceses of every capital city, among them Daniel Mannix, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne.⁴ Sir Mungo MacCallum, the patriarch of the famous MacCallum family of Australian historians, as well as the *Argus*, a leading newspaper at the time, were both in favour of the Kimberley Plan, which was also endorsed by Archbishop Henry Le Fanu, the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Perth, and Dr Howard Mowll, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney.⁵ Support for the Kimberley Plan also came from Herbert Lambert, the editor of the *West Australian* newspaper, which “feted” Steinberg at a luncheon on 10 July 1939.⁶ Steinberg also received support from John Cramsie, the head of the Australian Meat Council, and from Percy Clarey, the then-president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, “a peak union body representing almost two million Australian workers and their families.”⁷ Professor Walter Murdoch, a noted Australian literary historian, was also in favour of the Kimberley Plan, claiming a large-scale Jewish colony was “Australia’s opportunity” and that “Australia would gain economically and strategically from the scheme.”⁸ In fact, so well known was the Kimberley Plan and so widespread the support it received that at one point the enthusiasm for a Jewish colony extended beyond the Australian mainland to Tasmania; both Steinberg and Leon Gettler, the author of *An Unpromised Land*, which details the history and contexts of the Kimberley Plan, tell how Sir Robert Cosgrove, the then-Premier of Tasmania, was so enamored by the idea of a large-scale Jewish colony in the East Kimberley that he approached Steinberg in person during a “conference of Premiers... in Canberra” in 1940 to declare that “Tasmania.... [is]... also interested in... a Jewish settlement.”⁹

The encouragement, enthusiasm and support for the Kimberley Plan seemed bountiful coming as it did from various Catholics, Anglicans, trade unions and intellectuals as well as from a variety of state and federal politicians, yet this support was not universal. Though the Kimberley Plan received widespread support from various Australian opinion-makers, it was also met with hostility and derision by others. William Dartnell Johnson, the Western Australia Legislative Assembly member for Guildford-Midland, opposed it on humanitarian grounds while many others, “Australia’s security service” and the Postmaster-General HVC Thornby among them, were concerned with the potential security risk in allowing Jewish refugees – or any refugees, for that matter - from Germany to settle in Australia while

the Commonwealth, along with Britain and the Allies, was simultaneously at war with the Third Reich.¹⁰ Adolphus Peter Elkin, the famed anthropologist, was similarly opposed to the Kimberley Plan based on a concern for the impact a Jewish settlement would have on hastening the extinction of local Aboriginal groups, which he believed was a foregone conclusion as per the government's "smoothing the dying pillow" edicts of the day.¹¹ AP Elkin is unique in that he was the only individual involved in the discussion surrounding the plan to voice concern for local Indigenous people in the East Kimberley.¹² AP Elkin is doubly unique in this opposition: his father, Reuben Elkin, served as a rabbi in Auckland, New Zealand, until his parents divorced in 1901. Reuben Elkin then left New Zealand, and "Peter never saw his father again."¹³ His mother died a year later and, as the Australian Dictionary of Biography indicates, Elkin was "raised as an Anglican by his maternal grandparents."¹⁴ The fact that Elkin's father was a rabbi who left his wife and son problematises his opposition to the Kimberley Plan, especially when set against the backdrop of the Australian Jewish response to the issue.

The Australian Jewish Response to the Kimberley Plan

According to Dashiell Lawrence, author of "To no avail: supporters and opponents of the Kimberley Scheme", which was published in the January 2014 edition of the *Melbourne Historical Journal*, "though it was not said explicitly, a large segment of the [Australian Jewish] community and its leadership did not want *Ostjuden*, Jews from Eastern Europe" in Australia as they appeared "overtly Jewish... [and were] unskilled, less affluent, less educated and more religious" than most Australian Jews and "likely to populate a large proportion of the Kimberley scheme."¹⁵ Many other Australian Jews spoke out against the scheme publicly, pouring "scorn" on the Kimberley Plan with disdain and derision.¹⁶ Two prominent Australian Jews of the era, Sir Samuel Cohen, the president of the Great Synagogue of Sydney as well as the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, and Aaron Patkin, a prominent Australian Jewish Zionist based in Melbourne, published op-ed pieces in *Truth* and the *Australian Jewish Herald* advising readers to dismiss the Kimberley Plan in light of various economic concerns and "the absorptive capacities of Australia for new immigrants."¹⁷

In an article titled "Jewish Migration to Australia: Its Obvious Problems and Its Equally Obvious Difficulties," Patkin claimed that "if the [northern part of Australia] had the climate and soils for a normal agricultural production, [then] the neighboring peoples of the Asiatic archipelago would have colonized it centuries ago." Patkin further stated that the Kimberley Plan would "never have the support of the Australian

Jewish community,” adding in a memorable quip that “the agricultural industry [of] Australia... does not require more people.”¹⁸ In short, “many Australian Jewish leaders were reluctant to help Jews trapped in Europe”¹⁹ with “the most outspoken critics of the Kimberley scheme... drawn from within the Australian Jewish community” where many “were suspicious of an alien colony in their midst.”²⁰

The Jews and the Australian Government

Though “it is unclear how the [Australian Jewish community, as represented by the Australian Jewish Welfare] society... shaped Canberra’s response [to the Kimberley Plan]... there is evidence to show it at least had the ear of the Government.”²¹ One of the first indications of a dynamic between the Australian Jewish Establishment and the Australian Government—in particular the Secretary of the Department of the Interior—in regard to Jewish immigration to Australia dates back to “a seven page letter, written by Paul Cohen to the Department of the Interior... [which] was met with the approval of the Secretary of the Department, [Joseph] A Carrodus.”²² It is important to note that Paul Cohen was, at the time, the Honorary Co-Secretary of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society and, more importantly, the son of Sir Samuel Cohen.²³

As the Australian Archives in Canberra indicate, “the Jewish establishment’s charity arm, the Australian Jewish Welfare Society,” contacted Carrodus on 27 February 1939 to demand as “a condition of entry that all refugees... become naturalized [citizens of Australia] within the requisite time.”²⁴ That same month, the Australian Jewish Welfare Society “arranged a conference” between the “representatives of the [Australian Jewish] Welfare Committees” and Joseph Carrodus, and though the discussion was not related to the Kimberley Plan,²⁵ what this contact indicates is a dynamic between the Australian Jewish establishment and the Secretary of the Department of the Interior. This dynamic was solidified on 1 March 1939 when “Carrodus noted that his Department should not deal with ‘any Jewish Society unless it is... approved by the [Australian] Jewish Welfare Society’” whose then-President, it bears mentioning once again, was none other than Sir Samuel Cohen.²⁶ These efforts appeared successful when, in 1940 and in his capacity as Secretary of the Department of the Interior, Joseph Carrodus “sent a brief note” to the Honourable Harry Foll who, at the time, was the Minister of the Interior under Prime Minister Robert Menzies, warning him “that Steinberg had come to Australia to investigate the Kimberley, and not to rally... the nation behind him.” This “brief note” also mentioned “earlier warnings... that [Dr Isaac Nachman] Steinberg was a brilliant ‘propagandist.’”²⁷

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While there were many people opposed to the Kimberley Plan, many of them Jewish, Steinberg nevertheless drafted his proposal, dispatching it in August of 1940 in a memorandum sent to the Australian Prime Minister at the time, Robert Menzies but, “owing to the critical stage of the European War at that moment, official decision had to be postponed.”²⁸ The Menzies Government collapsed a year later as John Curtin, the leader of the Labor Party, swept into office. Japan declared war on the Allies in December of 1941, forcing the Curtin Government to focus their attentions on the Pacific War. Steinberg’s proposal would not be again entertained at the governmental level until 1943 when, on 28 October, “Curtin informed Steinberg that the Kimberley project had to be put in the context of post war reconstruction and that the Government had established an interdepartmental committee to examine this particular issue.”²⁹

Nearly five months later, on 22 March 1944, the Interdepartmental Committee on Migration, which was chaired by Joseph Carrodus, the Secretary for the Department of the Interior, “began examining the proposals” where, as Gettler reports, “Carrodus... expressed doubts about the [Kimberley] scheme.”³⁰ Carrodus, as previously indicated, corresponded with Sir Samuel Cohen, the president of both the Great Synagogue of Sydney as well as the Australian Jewish Welfare Society. Both Carrodus and Cohen were against the Kimberley Plan, Sir Samuel going so far as to pen an article entitled “Jewish Influx” to warn the readers of *Truth*, a tabloid newspaper with separate sister publications in both Melbourne and Sydney, “against any influx of a rabble of dispossessed European peoples” and to oppose any plan that would “allow hordes of refugee European peoples to flock into [Australia].”³¹ In such concert with prominent Australian Jews of the day, and in the words of Leon Gettler, “the role of Joseph Carrodus cannot be under-estimated”:

As the permanent head of the Department of the Interior, [Joseph Carrodus] was able to shape Government policy in areas [of] immigration.... Canberra’s refusal to accept... Jewish refugees between 1936 and the end of the Second World War has been... attributed to Carrodus’ unwavering stance to refuse entry.³² [Carrodus] was just as instrumental in the failure of Australian Governments, both conservative and Labor, to endorse the Kimberley scheme. From the start, Carrodus had told prime ministers and his own ministers that Steinberg’s plans were unacceptable.³³

In his role “as chairman of the interdepartmental committee into migration, [Carrodus] made sure the proposals were taken off the political

agenda once and for all.”³⁴ As a result, “the [interdepartmental] committee rejected the [the Kimberley Plan],”³⁵ yet it took another four months for the Prime Minister to send an official letter to Steinberg rejecting the Freeland League’s proposal. At the time Isaac Steinberg received this letter of rejection, John Curtin had been in office for approximately three years and eight months, yet for the sake of *this* discussion, the question must be asked: who was John Curtin?

John Curtin – Fourteenth Prime Minister of Australia

John Curtin was the fourteenth Prime Minister of Australia and is, to date, the only Australian Prime Minister to die in office; these facts are part of the known historical record.³⁶ John Curtin is also a revered figure in Australian history most famous for his American pivot away from Great Britain during the Second World War that, many argue, saved Australia from foreign invasion.³⁷

Prior to becoming prime minister, the historical record indicates that John Curtin started working as a teenager in an effort to support his family after his father fell ill,³⁸ landing a “well-paid position as an estimates clerk at the Titan Manufacturing Company in South Melbourne” in 1903.³⁹ In 1911, John Curtin “left Titan to become secretary of the Timber Workers’ Union,” and though Curtin did “not seem to have taken an active interest in union deliberations... he marched with the union on Eight Hours Day.”⁴⁰ According to David Day, author of *John Curtin: A Life*, Curtin, as “a lowly worker in a variety of jobs that he never seemed able to stick at... [Curtin] was able to witness at first hand... the oppressive working of unfettered capitalism.”⁴¹ Thusly, “it was not long before Curtin was drawn into... politics.”⁴²

John Curtin’s life took its inevitable turn at a meeting in “a small hall in [the] East Brunswick [suburb of Melbourne during] the 1902 federal election campaign.”⁴³ The meeting had been convened by Frank Anstey, “the Victorian State Parliament member for Bourke”⁴⁴ who was, at that moment, standing as a federal Labor candidate for Brunswick.⁴⁵ Up until now, the seventeen-year old John “Jack” Curtin had never met the Labor candidate for Brunswick, but that all changed when Frank Anstey watched “a long-legged youth”⁴⁶ rise up to propose “the customary vote of thanks at... Anstey’s public meeting,” (though “another story has it that Curtin first came to Anstey’s notice at a meeting of the Brunswick Football Club”).⁴⁷ Either way, that meeting “was... the beginning of the long friendship between [Frank] Anstey and [John] Curtin.”⁴⁸ Anstey was “the man of the moment... [and] Curtin soon came under Anstey’s sway.”⁴⁹ Irene Dowsing, author of *Curtin of Australia*, mentions “a sense of kinship” between Curtin

and Anstey, while Michael Blakeney, the author of *Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933-1948*, uses the phrase “profound influence” to describe the dynamic, adding that “the mercurial Anstey would remain central to Curtin’s life for more than three decades.”⁵⁰ The question then arises: who was Frank Anstey?

Who was Frank Anstey?

“Firebrand politician” Frank Anstey is—first and foremost—principally remembered today as John Curtin’s influential personal and political mentor. Described by Lloyd Ross in *John Curtin: A Biography* as “a bizarre, gnome-like figure... [with the] stature [of] a hunchback,” Frank Anstey is defined by David Day as the “hard-drinking, hard-swearing voice of the people,” with Ross further contending Anstey “retained the outward characteristics of an illiterate seamen... he swore and got drunk,” he “hated snobbery... temperance... Puritanism... bankers, monopolists, the rich[,] the Church of Rome and the British Monarchy.”⁵¹ According to Mungo MacCallum, the author of *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia’s Prime Ministers*, Curtin was taken “under the wing... of Frank Anstey” early on “and, as a result, Curtin became a heavy drinker, a problem which was to continue for much of his career.”⁵²

As such, “Anstey was often a drinking companion” as “Curtin came under the influence of drink.” With “Anstey’s support,” John Curtin “became the editor of the *Westralian Worker*,” a Labor-leaning newspaper based in Western Australia, in 1917.⁵³ It appears that “Anstey’s intervention [in landing the editor position for Curtin] was crucial;” “Anstey lobbied hard for Curtin,” whose “reputation for drinking” was whispered “against him getting the job.”⁵⁴ Previous to these pulled strings in Perth, it is known that a younger John Curtin “repeated Anstey’s phrases and ideas” and that he “rewrote Anstey’s pamphlets.”⁵⁵ It therefore must appear somewhat natural that as “a loyal friend and comrade... [John Curtin] repeatedly offered the pages of *Westralian Worker* for the propagation of Frank Anstey’s views.”⁵⁶

For example, in 1917, shortly after taking position as editor of the *Westralian Worker*, John Curtin “began to serialize Frank Anstey’s antiwar tract, *The Kingdom of Shylock*,” a text that “blamed the [First World War] on what Anstey... called ‘the money power.’” *The Kingdom of Shylock* is, more importantly, notable for “its anti-Semitic overtones.”⁵⁷ In the words of Kim Beazley, the former leader of the Labor Party and author of *John Curtin: An Atypical Labor Leader*, “Anstey’s... *Kingdom of Shylock*... [and] its incipient anti-Semitism... might have found a place among milder Nazi publications.”⁵⁸ To put it bluntly: Frank Anstey, John Curtin’s

influential mentor, was an anti-Semite and while the biographies and, for that matter, historic record remain reticent as to whether or not John Curtin maintained similar anti-Semitic views, what is known is that while the mentor produced anti-Semitic material, the protégé—in his capacity as editor of the *Westralian Worker*—enabled its distribution.⁵⁹ Add to this the extensive and well-documented account of “buddy drinking” between the two and it can be presumed that Anstey, at one point or another, shared his anti-Semitic views with the young “impressionable” Curtin who, it has been said, represented to Anstey “only malleable material.”⁶⁰ Lloyd Ross quotes the fourteenth prime minister of Australia directly: “...of all the men who have influenced me, [Frank Anstey] influenced me the most.”⁶¹

Frank Anstey was largely absent from the discussions regarding the Kimberley Plan, (in fact there are indications that he and John Curtin had a falling out sometime in 1940),⁶² yet Anstey nevertheless “exerted the greatest influence” over Curtin.⁶³ Arthur Calwell served in Curtin’s Cabinet as Minister of Information during World War Two. In 1972, Calwell published his memoirs, *Be Just and Fear Not*, devoting an entire chapter to Dr Isaac Nachman Steinberg’s Kimberley Plan, stating “the biggest objection [to Steinberg’s proposal] was [that] no part of Australia should ever be handed over to any one race or religion for the establishment of a completely separate entity from the rest of the nation.”⁶⁴ According to Calwell, “Curtin had already made up his mind” against the Kimberley Plan as early as 24 October 1941, or as late as 31 March 1943;⁶⁵ both dates are well before Curtin commissioned the Interdepartmental Committee on Migration on 22 March 1944, which, it ought to be recalled, was chaired by Joseph Carrodus, the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, who was—as stated previously—in communication with various Jewish leaders who were, similar to Carrodus and Curtin, opposed to the Kimberley Plan. It would thus appear that Dr Isaac Nachman Steinberg’s proposal for a Jewish colony in the East Kimberley was not given “mature consideration” at the highest levels of government, as claimed by Curtin in his letter to Steinberg dated 15 July 1944, but was in fact deprived of a fair hearing right from the very start.

The Role of Anti-Semitism in the Failure of the Kimberley Plan

The myth of Australia as the land of egalitarianism, mateship and the fair-go proved, in the case of the Kimberley Plan, to be just that—a myth—and this lack of a fair-go is due to many factors, the most prominent of which is the role anti-Semitism might have played in its rejection. To start with, “Curtin’s hostility to the idea” seems to be based on one particular issue: the government’s reluctance to “depart from... long-established policy

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in regard to alien settlement in Australia.”⁶⁶ Curtin did not cite “the influence of Frank Anstey,”⁶⁷ nor did he reveal the minutes of the Interdepartmental Committee on Migration, which advised against the plan. Curtin only mentioned a strict adherence to “long-established policy,” which can be taken as an oblique yet direct reference to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the Commonwealth’s inaugural piece of legislation. Serving as the basis for the White Australia policy, the Immigration Restriction Act discouraged and, at times, barred immigration from anywhere other than Britain and Ireland in an attempt to preserve “Australia for the White Man.”⁶⁸

Though the general Australian mindset at the time was to keep non-British immigrants out, that does not, in and of itself, imply anti-Semitism was afoot the day Curtin “made his mind up” about the Kimberley Plan.⁶⁹ Curtin understood “full well that it would not be long before... [Jews] from the [East Kimberley]... would... want to move to... the... state capitals... [causing]... anti-Semitism to grow” in Australia,⁷⁰ thereby indicating that he was at least *aware* of anti-Semitism—some might say *wary* of it—as a reason to reject the Kimberley Plan. It is also evident that Curtin sought advice from other members of his government—from people like Joseph Carrodus—who were, in turn, influenced by various leaders of the local Jewish community who were, in yet another turn, outspoken in their opposition to the Kimberley Plan for different yet not altogether dissimilar reasons.

Where is the anti-Semitism? *Is* there anti-Semitism? Did anti-Semitism doom the Kimberley Plan? The short answer is opaque at best. For instance, an article warning Australians about “hordes of refugees” waiting to swarm the country could be considered anti-Semitic, especially given the article’s title—“Jewish Influx”—yet this notion is confounded when it is revealed the author of the article is not just Jewish, but was regarded at the time as *the* voice of Australian Jewry, (in this case Sir Samuel Cohen, the then-president of both the Australian Jewish Welfare Society and the Great Synagogue of Sydney). Given the “close personal and political connection between young John [Curtin] and his older mentor,”⁷¹ does this mean a charge of anti-Semitism can be laid at Frank Anstey and, perhaps to a lesser extent at his protégé, (or, for that matter, at AP Elkin, the anthropologist abandoned by his Jewish father), but *not* at Sir Samuel Cohen or Aaron Patkin simply because they were Jewish? Perhaps none of these people were anti-Semitic or, conversely, perhaps they all were?

The answers to these questions depend on point of view; anti-Semitism, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder, but in terms of the role it played in the rejection of the Kimberley Plan, it would appear that anti-

Semitism was more than a faint ghost in the room at the time the scheme was gazetted. It appears that what ultimately thwarted the fruition of Dr Isaac Nachman Steinberg's Kimberley Plan was a sort of sinister star alignment that included an Australian Jewish community hostile to the idea due to issues of self-interest and self-preservation along with a Secretary of the Department of the Interior evidently bent to their will, coupled with a prime minister adhering to the infamous White Australia policy and likely predisposed to—if not historically complicit in—his mentor's "incipient anti-Semitism."⁷² Add to this the afterthought that was AP Elkin's objection to the Kimberley Plan: citing the impact a Jewish colony would have on the hastening of Aboriginal extinction, (an event he believed was inevitable but has never come to pass), Elkin's negative response to the scheme might have been aided by a sense of paternal grievance, though this is speculative. Also, the role the White Australia policy played in the decision must not be overlooked; several other Australian Governments, including the governments of James Scullin as well as Robert Menzies,⁷³ among others, had rejected similar proposals for large-scale settlements for non-British immigrants, yet none of these other schemes involved Jews under the rule of Nazis during the Second World War. One could argue a larger role for anti-Semitism in the demise of the Kimberley Plan, yet this research indicates something far less organised and perhaps inadvertent, at least in regards to the Australian Jewish negative response to the proposal, doomed the scheme's fruition at a variety of levels.

Coda for John Curtin: Australia's Anti-Semitic PM?

In April of 2018, I travelled to New York University to attend the annual conference for the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies where I presented a discussion focused on the collision of history, culture and politics in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, a novel not generically classified as alternate history. At this conference, I met Dr. Toby Davidson, an Australian poet based at Macquarie University in Sydney in New South Wales who just happens to "share a love of poetry with his great grandfather John Curtin" ("John Curtin's great grandson a guest scholar at Curtin University"). A few weeks after that conference, on 22 May 2018, I sent a draft of this article to Toby Davidson via email; I received the following note in response two days later:

I enjoyed [this] article, it was fluidly written and showed an even-handedness, as well as solid understanding of the fractious nature of Australian politics at the time. You might be interested to know that one of Curtin's earliest employers, the artist Norman Lindsay (who employed him as a 'printer's devil' on a six-month long magazine The

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Rambler) was also a raging anti-Semite. Lindsay's influence was definitely less than that of Anstey, but it was earlier - a year or two prior to Curtin first meeting Anstey. One of Lindsay's biographers suggests that [Lindsay's anti-Semitism] might have stemmed from Lindsay being bullied for being a Jew (which he wasn't) when he was a child, on account of his large nose (have racists ever needed any more proof than their own warped suspicions?). Mind you, as [Lindsay's] biographer notes, it didn't stop Lindsay from being just as nasty to the Afghans or Chinese. Curtin and Lindsay were both from Creswick, Victoria[,] and... Curtin was actually delivered into the world by Lindsay's father, the town doctor. (Davidson)

In contrast, a reviewer for *this* article suggested that 'John Curtin had remote Jewish ancestry [and that] he was descended from Esther Abrahams,' a Jewish-born convict from England who arrived with the First Fleet to Australia in January 1788. I quickly posed this question of 'remote Jewish ancestry' in the Curtin family to Dr. Davidson at Macquarie and, as quickly as daylight, I received the following response:

This is all news to me, though. No Jewish ancestry as far as I'm aware (and nothing on a recent DNA test I did, as well). His father-in-law was Abraham Needham (who wasn't Jewish either as far as I know), so perhaps that led to some confusion. I don't know the family tree back further than a few generations, but I've never heard of any Jewish link, so I'd be interested to know which sources the reviewer was working from. (Davidson)

These incidental revelations do not by any means indicate that John Curtin was an anti-Semite but, of the two, the first certainly does suggest that the fourteenth prime minister of Australia was at the very least surrounded at various times throughout his life and career by people who, according to the historical record - or, as is the case in the email excerpted above, family lore - were "raging" anti-Semites which, as ought to be imagined, probably influenced John Curtin to some unknown degree that is difficult if not outright impossible to assess eighty odd years after the fact. In particular regards to the Kimberley Plan and Curtin's rejection of it, we can only look at the facts itemized here in order to arrive at our own twenty-first century conclusions about what likely doomed "the Kimberley Scheme", as some call it, to failure.

Endnotes

¹ Hilary L. Rubinstein, “The Three State Manifestos in Support of the Kimberley Scheme, 1939-40: Texts and Signatories,” *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 15.1, p. 35-58, 1999.

² Isaac N Steinberg, *Australia- The Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home* (London: Victor Gollancz), 166.

³ Steinberg, *Australia- The Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home*, 166.

⁴ “A Land of Milk and Honey? A Jewish Settlement Proposal in the Kimberley,” Brian Wimborne, Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed 3 March 2016, <http://abd.anu.edu.au/essay/9/text29488>.

⁵ Gettler, Leon, Interview with Rachel Kohn, “The Kimberley Plan,” ABC National Radio, 15 January 2006; www.abc.net.au, accessed on March 19, 2016; Gettler: “You had his Anglican counterpart, Dr Howard Mowll, in Sydney, urging the government to sanction the [Kimberley Plan].”

⁶ *ibid*, 81.

⁷ *ibid* 103; and “About the ACTU,” actu.org.au, accessed March 20, 2012.

⁸ Steinberg also sought encouragement and support from the realm of Australian politics. Steinberg devotes over ten pages to his discussions with Sir Thomas Bavin, the then premier of New South Wales, wherein he swayed Sir Thomas to support the Kimberley Plan. Additional support came from Frank Wise, the Western Australian Minister for Lands, and from Aubrey Coverley, the Western Australian Minister for the North-West, both of whom served under John Willcock who, at the time, was the premier of Western Australia and was also swayed by Steinberg to support the plan, though with some notable reluctance. Charles Latham, the then-leader of the Country Party which was, at the time, the opposition in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, also came out in favour of the scheme, as did the Australian Governor-General, Alexander Hore-Ruthven, the First Earl of Gowrie, among many notable others, as cited in Steinberg, *Australia - The Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home*, 35-37; Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 81-82; Dashiell Lawrence, “The Kimberley Scheme—An Unpromised Land”, (Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2008), 1; Michael Astour, *History of the Freeland League* (New York: Freeland League, 1967) 429; and there is a letter from Willcock to Steinberg dated August 25, 1939, file A433, 1944/2/50, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

⁹ Steinberg, *Australia- The Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home*, 128.

¹⁰ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 139: “An isolated colony of aliens in the north-west also would have been perceived as a security risk because of suspicions about aliens at the time. Nobody wanted a Nazi cell being established in the North”; Rubinstein, “The Three State Manifestos in Support of the Kimberley Scheme, 1939-40: Texts and Signatories,” 35-58.

- ¹¹ Isaac N. Steinberg, "What an Outrage," *Australian Jewish Forum*, February 1945, pages 9-11; G.C. Bolton, "Aborigines in Social History: An Overview," in *Aboriginal Sites, Rights and Resource Development*, ed. Ronald M. Berendt (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1982), 59.
- ¹² Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933-1948*, 273.
- ¹³ Steinberg, "What an Outrage,"; Tigger Wise, "Adolphus Peter Elkin," Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed May 2, 2012. www.adb.anu.au/biography/elkin-adolphus-peter-10109
- ¹⁴ Wise, "Adolphus Peter Elkin", Australian Dictionary of Biography.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence, "The Kimberley Scheme—An Unpromised Land", 215: To say the least, the Australian Jewish response to the Kimberley Plan was perplexing and diverse with strong opinions running for and against the "scheme." On one hand, there were Australian Jews "who were willing to stop at nothing until the safety of their European [Jewish] brethren was guaranteed," while many others were "stubborn... weak... [or] self-interested... [forming] a 'united front of passivity.'" Additional citation: *Australian Jewish Forum*, February 1941, 6, (as cited in Dashiell Lawrence).
- ¹⁶ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 98.
- ¹⁷ Aaron Patkin, "Jewish Immigration to Australia: Its Obvious Problems and Its Equally Obvious Difficulties," *Australian Jewish Herald*, March 24, 1938, 6-7; Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 95; Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933-1948*, 153.
- ¹⁸ *ibid*, 6.
- ¹⁹ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 94.
- ²⁰ Lawrence, *The Kimberley Scheme – An Unpromised Land*, 19.
- ²¹ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 95.
- ²² Anne Andgel, *Fifty Years of Caring: the Australian Jewish Welfare Society 1936-1986* (Sydney: AJWS and Australian Jewish Historical Society, 1988), 28.
- ²³ *ibid*, 4.
- ²⁴ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 93; and a memorandum from Joseph Carrodus dated March 1, 1939: AA: CRS A433 43/2/46, as cited in Gettler.
- ²⁵ Andgel, *Fifty Years of Caring: the History of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society 1936-1986*, 31: The discussion revolved around an "increase [to] the number of [landing] permits [to be] granted directly to the [Australian Jewish Welfare] Society and, as such, had little to do with the Kimberley Plan.
- ²⁶ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 95; and on a Joseph Carrodus memorandum dated March 1, 1939: AA: CRS 433 44/2/50, as cited in Gettler.
- ²⁷ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 119; and a Department of the Interior memorandum, dated May 10, 1940, AA: CRS A433 44/2/50, as cited in Gettler.
- ²⁸ Steinberg, *Australia- An Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home*, 154.

²⁹ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 129; AA: A433 42/2/50, as cited in Gettler.

³⁰ *ibid*, 129.

³¹ Samuel Cohen, "Jewish Influx," *Truth*, August 7, 1938.

³² Lyn Anne Redditt, "Joseph Aloysius Carrodus," Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed May 22, 2012. www.adb.anu.au/biography/elkin-adolphus-peter-10109: "Consolidating his position as an administrator and government adviser, [Joseph Carrodus] played a major role in developing policies on Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory and on the growth of the Australian Capital Territory, and was influential on immigration issues. The failure of successive federal governments to accept a large number of Jewish refugees in 1936-45 reflected Carrodus's persistent advice to refuse them entry, as much as it did the wishes of politicians. In his attitude to Jews suffering persecution in Europe, he showed a clear understanding of their circumstances, but shared the common indifference to their needs."

³³ Gettler, *An Unpromised Land*, 139: According to the minutes of the Interdepartmental Committee on Migration, Joseph Carrodus believed the Kimberley Plan was "doomed to economic failure" and that this "alien" colony of Jews would "likely... develop into a new political entity which would inevitably be non-Australian in outlook"

³⁴ *ibid*, 139; Minutes of Interdepartmental Committee on Migration, March 22, 1944, AA: A446 68/71049, as cited in Gettler.

³⁵ *ibid*, 129.

³⁶ Mungo MacCallum, *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia's Prime Ministers* (Collingwood: Black Ink Press, 2012), 101.

³⁷ MacCallum, *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia's Prime Ministers*, 101; David Day, *John Curtin: A Life* (Sydney: HarperCollins Australia, 1999), 1: It is important to note that, since then, Australia has participated alongside the United States in every major American-led conflict including Vietnam, both Gulf Wars as well as the current fight against the Islamic State "death cult." (Death cult references: James Glenday, "Tony Abbott labels Islamic State a 'death cult,'" ABC Online – [abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au), September 1, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2014/s4078629.htm>; Jennifer Rajca, "Tony Abbott says Islamic State is an 'apocalyptic death cult,'" News Corp Australia, September 30, 2014, <http://www.news.com.au/national/tony-abbott-says-islamic-state-is-an-apocalyptic-death-cult/story-fncynjr2-1227075281992>; Daniel Hurst, "Tony Abbott intensifies rhetoric about Isis, calling it an 'apocalyptic death cult,'" *Guardian*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/30/tony-abbott-intensifies-rhetoric-about-isis-calling-it-an-apocalyptic-death-cult>).

³⁸ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 202.

³⁹ *ibid*, 72.

⁴⁰ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 58; Page 9, Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 9.

⁴¹ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 61-63

⁴² *ibid*, 63

⁴³ Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 12

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 12

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 63

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 12

⁴⁷ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 63-63; and the Lloyd Ross Papers, as cited in David Day.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 12

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 64, 103: As a matter of course, every major biography about John Curtin as well as every reputable book focused on the history of the Australian Labor Party explicitly cites John Curtin's relationship with Frank Anstey as a type of foundational bedrock upon which Curtin's revered legacy blooms; Irene Dowsing, Mungo MacCallum, Michael Blakeney, Arthur Calwell, Peter Love, Norman Lee and Kim Beazley—to name only a few—note this important detail about the life and political development of the fourteenth prime minister of Australia. Lloyd Ross and David Day have penned what are considered the authoritative biographies of John Curtin; David Day claims on page 65 that “[Anstey] also seems to have been almost a surrogate father for John [Curtin]” whose same named father, it can be recalled, was incapacitated due to advanced syphilis, further detailing “the close and personal connection between young [John Curtin] and his older mentor [Frank Anstey].”

⁵⁰ Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 4; Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 64.

⁵¹ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 65; Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 11.

⁵² MacCallum, *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia's Prime Ministers*, 102.

⁵³ MacCallum, *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia's Prime Ministers*; Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 235.

⁵⁴ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 235, 237.

⁵⁵ Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 12.

⁵⁶ Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 249.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 249.

⁵⁸ Kim Beazley, *John Curtin: An Atypical Labor Leader*, 4.

⁵⁹ Peter Love, *Labor and the Money Power: Australian Labor Populism 1890-1950* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984), 64: The “anti-Semitism in [Anstey's] *The Kingdom of Shylock* [is] no aberration.

⁶⁰ Dowsing, *Curtin of Australia*, 9.

⁶¹ Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, 12.

⁶² Arthur A Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not* (Hawthorn: Lloyd O'Neill, 1972), 45.

⁶³ Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, 45.

⁶⁴ Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, 112.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 113.

⁶⁶ Steinberg, *Australia- The Unpromised Land, In Search of a Home*, 166.

⁶⁷ Norman E Lee, *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1983), 16.

⁶⁸ "The Bulletin magazine axed," ABC Online - *abc.net.au*, accessed February 29, 2016. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-01-24/the-bulletin-magazine-axed/1022254>: The magazine was founded by two Sydney journalists, JF Archibald and John Haynes, in 1880... The paper's masthead slogan at the time was "Australia for the White Man."

⁶⁹ Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, 113.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 112.

⁷¹ Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, 103.

⁷² Beazley, *John Curtin: An Atypical Labor Leader*, 4.

⁷³ "A Land of Milk and Honey? A Jewish Settlement Proposal in the Kimberley," Brian Wimborne, Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed 3 March 2016, <http://abd.anu.edu.au/essay/9/text29488>. On the one hand, Robert Menzies appeared to be more receptive to the Kimberley Plan but, on the other hand, his cabinet in 1950 rejected Steinberg's proposal a second time on 15 March 1940.

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