

# DAVID PATTERSON (1922–2005)

*S. Ilan Troen*

David Patterson was a pioneer in the reemergence of Jewish studies in postwar Europe and one of the preeminent figures in the field. In 1945, Jewish studies in the universities of Great Britain scarcely ranged beyond the study of Hebrew and the Bible, and was for the most part little more than a handmaiden to theology and philology. At Oxford, Cambridge, and Manchester scholarly attention was focused almost exclusively on ancient texts and rabbinic literature. Only at the School for Oriental and African Studies in London was it possible to receive a diploma (but not a degree) in modern Hebrew. In 1945 Manchester initiated an Honours Degree in which modern Hebrew played a significant part. David Patterson was the first to enroll and the first to graduate. He recalled “the thrill of excitement when the first books of modern Hebrew literature, about two dozen in all, arrived at the Manchester University Library early in 1946.” It was in this field that Patterson established his scholarly reputation with studies of Abraham Mapu and of the Hebrew novel in Czarist Russia. Fascinated by the challenges facing a translator, he both wrote about this issue and provided readers of English with extraordinary examples of the genre, including translations of Bialik, Brenner, and Moshe Shamir.

Europe’s decline as a setting for Jewish scholarship was of course a consequence of the Holocaust. In fact, as Patterson himself wrote, “At the end of the World War II in 1945, Jewish Studies in Europe had ceased to exist.” It was therefore inevitable that scholarship in Britain and the continent would be outpaced by the surge in Jewish studies in Israel and

America in the 1960s and thereafter. David Patterson consciously undertook the often lonely responsibility of fostering a renaissance of Jewish learning in Europe. Indeed, he sometimes described the endeavor in which he was engaged as an attempt to raise a phoenix out of the ashes of destruction. The prime locale for this project was Oxford University, to which he came in 1956 as the Cowley Lecturer in Post Biblical Hebrew. Starting with but one room in the Oriental Institute of Oxford University in 1972, he imagined and realized the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (originally the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies) with facilities in Oxford as well as a splendid campus at the Yarnton Manor Estate. These venues constituted a wonderfully vital setting for a renewal of Jewish scholarship. Under Patterson’s leadership as many as fourteen fellows taught at Oxford a variety of subjects from classic to modern Jewish studies; diploma programs were authorized; an impressive library and archives were established; and seminars and conferences were organized. Yarnton became one of the most important venues in the world for scholars of Jewish studies, with more than 350 senior scholars spending extensive periods of time there.

Israel Studies was an area of great personal interest for David Patterson. Active as a youth in Habonim, he lived in Israel on a kibbutz and in Haifa, and delighted in presenting his Israeli passport on his frequent returns to the country. During his presidency the Centre probably hosted more scholars of the literature, culture and history of Israel than any academic institution outside



of Israel. By 1990 it had four specialists in different areas of Israel studies, a number larger than that found at perhaps any other university outside of Israel. His own literary interests led to the establishment of a visiting Hebrew authors program that attracted a galaxy of the best-known and most creative writers of modern Israel, including Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and Aharon Appelfeld. Not a few contemporary classics took shape in the environment he created. A natural consequence of his interests was the sponsorship of lectures, seminars, and conferences on topics germane to the diverse interests of students of Israel. Indeed, the journal *Israel Studies* was spawned at one of the international workshops at Yarnton Manor. He was a visionary who understood the academic validity of the subject and the need for it, and consistently nurtured it. It was for this and for his encouragement to Jewish studies generally that in the Queen’s Honours List of 2003 he was awarded the CBE “for services to Jewish Studies,” the only individual ever to be so recognized.

David Patterson passed away on December 10, 2005.

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