

# HAPPY TWENTIETH BIRTHDAY

Edgar Prais, QC, reviews the last 19 issues of "The Edinburgh Star"

Why me? Not even at my smuggest can I delude myself into believing that I am qualified on literary, historical, religious or journalistic grounds. I have just turned fifty-two and I have yet to be accused of insight or objectivity. Far less than half my years have been lived in Edinburgh and, horror of horrors, I belong to the genus (or is it the species?) Glasgwegian. I seem to remember a visit to the Synagogue some years ago; only recently did I learn that "Lit" was not some unfathomable acronym but simply an abbreviation adopted by men and women whose attachment to matters cultural is genuine rather than formal. And as for what my own pen usually does to paper – well, this effort speaks for itself.

I return, therefore, to the question with which I began. Edinburgh – and its "Star" is incontrovertible evidence of the truth of what follows – boasts a megaminyan of talent and experience whose scope and range only serve to illustrate that C P Snow's neurosis qualified him for honorary Jewish status. Sons and daughters of the Edinburgh Jewish community grace every aspect of city life – from the halls of academe, through the chambers of commerce, the galleries of the arts, the schools of philosophy and the courts of so-called justice, all the way to the laboratories of science. There is not a need for which your community cannot cater (a plumber's telephone number would be most welcome). All of which explains my astonishment at being invited to cast a reviewer's eye over the previous editions of "The Edinburgh Star". I feel like the spectator plucked from the terracing to captain the team (maybe not such a bad idea for the Hearts).

Whatever else I may or may not be, I am most certainly Jewish which means, of course, that I am the person best suited to answer my

own question. There are, in fact, two obvious reasons for my being asked to review the back numbers: first, the other people invited to do so refused and, secondly, I am sufficiently "semi-detached" to tread on toes without fear or favour. "He didn't know any better" is not a bad plea in mitigation when all else fails. I promise neither perspicacity nor profundity; I am by instinct impetuous and insensitive. Actually, I think the time has come for me to seek some improving advice from a friend – if only I had one.

To the business at hand. I do not plead for sympathy when I say that reviewing nineteen issues of a magazine born as long ago as March 1989 is something of a daunting task. Just translate the problem (and I don't suppose anybody will object to the analogy) into Burns poems or Shakespeare plays. Realistically, can the reviewer be expected to arrive at a conclusion other than one which falls into the category of the curate's – or chazan's – egg? You must forgive me, therefore, for adopting an impressionistic approach to my task; you would not in any case expect me to read all nineteen issues from cover to cover. I have already told you how old I am and I am not sure that I have that long left. What is more, I cannot see myself opening envelopes at a glittering awards ceremony, singling out particular contributions worthy of a statuette called an "Eitan". I am wearing my Gestalt spectacles.

There can be no greater tribute to the inspiration behind the launching of "The Edinburgh Star" than the fact that it continues to twinkle and to shine. Credit for the light it sheds is due to its indomitable editorial crew (I note that Messrs Cosgrove, Sischy and Shapira are permanent members of the chain gang) and to the contributions they have elicited. It in no sense detracts from the appreciation of the growth and

development of the magazine to say that, if any one name associated with "The Edinburgh Star" should be inscribed in the Book of Local Heroes, it is that of its creator and first editor Eitan Abraham. There is surely an element of the majestically ironic in the community's having to wait for somebody from Argentina, whose first language isn't even English, to prod it into regular print. Nor does the debt to Eitan end with his initiating drive.

The first seven issues, from March 1989 to September 1990, were edited by him and created a very distinctive mould. When one examines Nos. 1 to 7, the overriding impression is one of balance between horizons wide and parochial, between an article on Tay-Sachs and one on the Goodwins, between a contribution on the Intifada and one on Paul Gilbert's Bar Mitzvah, between a personal recollection of the Kindertransport and one of post-war Edinburgh. Politics, science, the arts, literature, communal affairs, religious issues, personal reminiscence, all were tackled.

By the time the third issue came along it was clear that the tentative had become the established. The bulletin format had been converted (forgive the word) into the glossy journal. The twenty-eight pages of the pilot number had grown to forty-eight and their contents were as impressive for their range as for their depth. It contained no fewer than sixteen separate sections, several of them comprising more than one contribution, covering the complete gamut from religion to sport, all contained within a cover specially drawn by Robin Spark. At least two articles in the section on the Holocaust and one under the Research heading on Medieval Spain were worthy of inclusion in just about any serious journal dealing with such subjects. The third issue also contained three

elegantly written pieces about various facets of the diamond which is Edinburgh – one on a Jewish ghost, one on the Fringe and one on Robin Spark. All in all, No.3 featured twenty-nine articles plus a double editorial and four pages entitled "Yom Teruah" – Chagmanay messages of goodwill.

I write at such length about No.3 because it strikes me as the most outstanding of all nineteen produced. I do not go so far as to suggest that it towers head and shoulders above all its brothers and sisters; what it does is epitomise all that is most ambitious and worthwhile in the venture which is "The Edinburgh Star". Quality writing on a wide variety of interesting topics must be the aim of any magazine publication and No.3 proved that the Abraham team could certainly achieve that end. So now at least you know which one I'm taking with me to the desert island where those who invited this contribution will undoubtedly be banishing me.

With the appearance of the seventh issue, however, there were discernible signs of a change in direction. The scales were coming down rather more heavily than previously on the parochial-community side, a trend which appears to have continued to the present day. Whether or not that is a welcome development is

ultimately a question of personal delectation. Is that what the readers want and, if so, should they have it? Ask Rupert Murdoch. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not for one moment suggest that from No.7 "The Edinburgh Star" became "The Edinburgh Sun". What started to happen was that the emphasis shifted from the third to the second word of the title. It is clear that editorial objectives narrowed at about that time and it comes as no surprise that No.8 features a new editor, the desperately missed Ruth Adler. Hers, too, was a marvellous series of "Stars" but not quite in the Abraham mould; she cast her own.

No.3 came out for New Year; let me take another New Year issue to illustrate my point. No.13 (September 1992) has shrunk to thirty-two pages, half of which are devoted to communal affairs of one kind or another, while much of the remainder is given over to family albums and family holidays. There are, of course, one or two articles with broader perspectives but the overall impression is one which is preponderantly local. If that is what the readership wishes, it has it. For my part, I regret the change of flavour. Where once the "Star" would have had real appeal for readers from both home and away, it has very definitely become a strictly Scottish, particularly Edinburgh-orientated publication.

Yes, it continues to print those fascinating articles on all manner of topics wide and abstruse; just take a look at No.15 – Spinoza, Primo Levi and Avrom-Nokhem Stencl (I don't believe any of them was from Edinburgh). No, what I have in mind is a trend, a tendency, away from the distant horizon to the narrower prospect; the telescope has been turned around.

What worries me above all else about "The Edinburgh Star", from first to latest number, is that it is far too goody-goody. It wouldn't raise a blush from infant to maiden aunt, and as for laughs ... I do not, of course, expect to have an issue drop through my letterbox whose contents would warrant the cry of "Eat your heart out James Kelman". What I do miss, however, is that touch of pepper and spice. The bland and the deferential anaesthetise. There are worse crimes than mildly to offend. I have always been led to believe that it is one of the other religions which cherishes its sacred cows. Go to sea on "The Edinburgh Star" and you'll never know you've left dry land – this is an earnest plea to rock the boat from time to time. Maybe I am missing something, but I can detect nothing in any of the nineteen issues which could properly be termed controversial. Where are the irate letters to the editor? Is the "Star" not ashamed of itself that it never has to

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