

*A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America.* By Frederic Cople Jaher. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. xii, 339 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 0-674-79006-5.)

*Antisemitism in America.* By Leonard Dinnerstein. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. xxviii, 369 pp. \$25.00, ISBN 0-19-503780-4.)

What Harvey Wish described in 1948 as "a dimension in general American history which we have tended to ignore, perhaps through a conspiracy of silence" has in recent decades burgeoned into a minor scholarly industry: the study of American anti-Semitism. Robert Singerman, in a 1982 bibliography and research guide, listed 219 secondary sources dealing with the subject, and that was before the appearance of the excellent volume edited by David Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History* (1986).

In 1984, Leonard Dinnerstein announced to his colleagues, "Fred Jaher and I are in the process of preparing a book on antisemitism in the United States." Now, after more than a decade of effort, two books have appeared, one from each of these erstwhile collaborators. While they complement one another chronologically and share a common overarching thesis, they diverge in significant ways (even in how they spell anti-Semitism!) and are by no means of equal value.

Frederic Cople Jaher focuses on the roots of American anti-Semitism to 1865. Building on the research of earlier scholars, he shows that no era in American history was completely free of anti-Jewish hatred. The interpretation that dated the emergence of anti-Semitism to the past century may now firmly be laid to rest. More questionable is his thesis that from the late 1830s through the Civil War, "American anti-Semitism assumed its modern contours, if not its subsequent intensity and scope." While new forms of bigotry certainly emerged during this period, one is hard pressed to find either the racial justifications for anti-Judaism or the public displays of social discrimination that developed later on. Indeed, although Jaher never mentions this fact, the very word "anti-Semitism" only emerged in the 1870s; the use of this racially charged term to describe earlier religiously based hatred is anachronistic.

Jaher's principal thesis is that Christianity bears the brunt of the blame for American anti-Judaism. He concludes with a syllogism: "Christianity has a powerful anti-Semitic impulse, America is a Christian country, and America is anti-Semitic." As evidence, he devotes more than a quarter of his volume to a lachrymose recital of Christian anti-Judaism through eighteenth centuries. Yet the more significant historical question — why anti-Jewish hatred cycled up and down through those centuries — eludes him.

Nor does he seriously confront alternative interpretations of anti-Semitism, of which there are no small number.

Jaher stands on somewhat firmer ground when he moves on to the New World, but here again the data he presents cry out for analysis. How do we reconcile anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic elements in colonial thought? How do we account for attitudinal differences in urban and rural areas and in different regions of the country? What impact did Jewish settlement make on early American attitudes toward Jews? And so forth. In some cases, Jaher's facts are simply wrong: "Rabbi" Gershom Mendes Seixas of Congregation Shearith Israel was not a rabbi, and he never preached at St. Paul's (Episcopal) Chapel. Nor was there a synagogue in Boston in 1754 (his account is off by a full century). Even broader generalizations are questionable. Few scholars, for example, would agree that "[American] independence and nationhood . . . brought little departure from the customary experience of American Jewry." As for the supposed turning point of 1840, Jaher himself offers little evidence to back it up.

Leonard Dinnerstein's volume, billed as "the first comprehensive survey of antisemitism in the United States," is far more reliable. The most prolific student of American anti-Semitism, he has produced four earlier books that illuminate its history, including *The Leo Frank Case* (1968). Here he draws on this lifetime of research to shape a narrative that is without peer in the field. Like Jaher, he believes that "all aspects of American antisemitism are built on . . . Christian hostility toward Jews," and he identifies manifestations of anti-Judaism from the dawn of the colonial period. Unlike Jaher, however, he dates the emergence of what he calls "a full-fledged antisemitic society in the United States" to the last third of the nineteenth century, when Jewish immigration to the United States soared. He also devotes the core of his book to twentieth-century developments, with solid chapters on the narrowing of opportunities for Jews after World War I, the rabid anti-Semitism of the depression era, and what he sees as the "high tide" of American anti-Semitism: World War II. In his final chapters, he examines the post-war decline of anti-Semitism, southern anti-

Semitism, and African American anti-Semitism, which he, unlike others who have studied this subject, considers deeply rooted and historically continuous. Nevertheless, he concludes on an optimistic note: American anti-Semitism "has declined in potency and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future."

Dinnerstein's synthesis is not without problems. First, his periodization is open to question. To take just one example, most American Jews believed that their situation deteriorated, not in the mid-1860s, but in the late 1870s, a date that correlates with the rise of European anti-Semitism as well as of domestic racism and nativism. Other dates too seem somewhat arbitrary. Second, he provides no basis for his comparative judgments. How do we know, for example, that anti-Semitism was worse in the Great Depression than in the relatively prosperous 1920s? Morton Keller, writing in 1966, argued precisely the opposite. Third, except for the chapter on the South, he overlooks significant local and regional variations in the intensity of anti-Semitism. Why, one wonders, were conditions for Jews so much better in some places than others? Did Jews face less anti-Semitism in communities that they helped found than they did elsewhere? Fourth, by focusing as he does, he sometimes loses a sense of proportion. Comparatively speaking, after all, American anti-Semitism has been *less* significant than many other forms of domestic animus and far less so than European anti-Semitism. Is not the relative weakness of anti-Semitism as important to explain as are its moments of strength? Finally, Dinnerstein makes no more than a perfunctory effort to integrate social scientific theories concerning group hatred into his analysis. Even if he is right that for many years anti-Semitism was the norm in America rather than the exception, both the motivations of those who spawned the hatred and the reasons for its peaks and troughs cry out for explanation. His narrative suggests some answers, but scholars have provided many more, and some of these might have been tested here. Even many of the brilliant insights of John Higham in *Send These to Me* (1975, 1984) have not been followed up.

In short, Dinnerstein has provided a great

deal of reliable data set forth in a well-organized and readable narrative. What exactly these data mean remains to be explored.

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