

THE GENETICS OF BIBLIOPHILIA

Jonathan Fishburn quizzes a leading book collector about the works of Cecil Roth

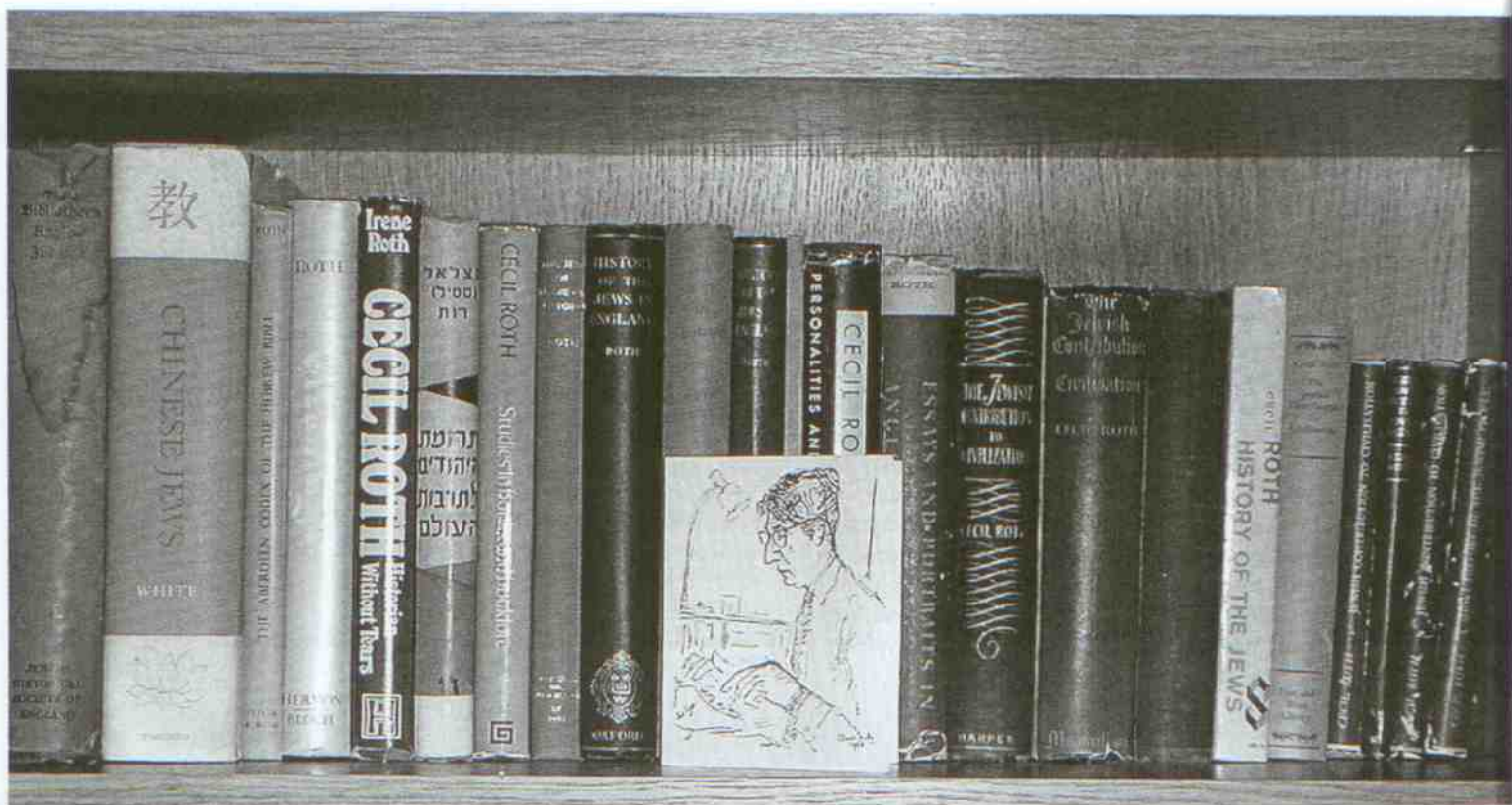
Professor David Latchman, the Master of Birkbeck College, suffers from *abibliophobia*, a common affliction amongst book collectors that manifests itself as a morbid fear of running out of reading material. Fortunately, I have the remedy and have been regularly supplying him with pamphlets, books and artifacts about Anglo-Jewry and, more specifically, the English historian and writer Cecil Roth.

In all my book dealings, I am increasingly convinced that collectors are born, not made – there seems to be a genetic predisposition, although I am wary of suggesting this to David, who has been Professor of Human Genetics at University College since 1999. To my relief, however, he agrees, and it occurs to me that the sort of focus, curiosity, diligence, patience and accuracy necessary to make a successful scientist are also the traits needed to be a successful book collector.

'Although my family were not book collectors,' he says, 'my parents valued education, studying and learning and I am sure this had an influence. Collecting as an activity is also enjoyable – it's about putting things in order, classifying them and making the links between the different items. You see, if you collect china, you have the objects; if you collect books, you have the object, but also the information that's contained in it.'

And then we laugh, because we both know that David collects books in languages that he can't read.

David's interest in Cecil Roth was kindled by the distinguished Anglo-Jewish historian Vivien Lipman, himself a disciple of Roth. Although David never met Cecil, he did meet his wife, Irene, who gave him a copy of the Russian edition of Roth's seminal work,



A History of the Jews, that was published in Israel and distributed to refuseniks in the 1970s.

David talks animatedly about Roth: 'He wrote extraordinarily fluently and his literary style was easy to recognize because it is so readable. On the plus side, he used that style to write prolifically, but at the same time he was a tragic figure because he had to write in order to survive. There were no established academic Jewish studies departments for him to work in, so in order to make a living, he had to write the popular stuff. To a certain extent, his ability to publish scholarly works was limited. It was also tragic that he was not properly recognized in the UK, partly because there were no positions in Jewish history at university level, but more fundamentally because Anglo-Jewry doesn't appreciate scholarship – it didn't then, and it certainly doesn't now.'

Was that, I wondered silently, a swipe at the wholesale sell-off of treasures belonging to the London Beth Din, or the sale of manuscripts belonging to the Montefiore endowment?

Cecil Roth was born in London in 1899, died in 1970 and was buried in Jerusalem. He lived in tumultuous times, and David points out to me how this is poignantly reflected in the Preface to the fifth (third illustrated) edition of the *History of the Jews*:

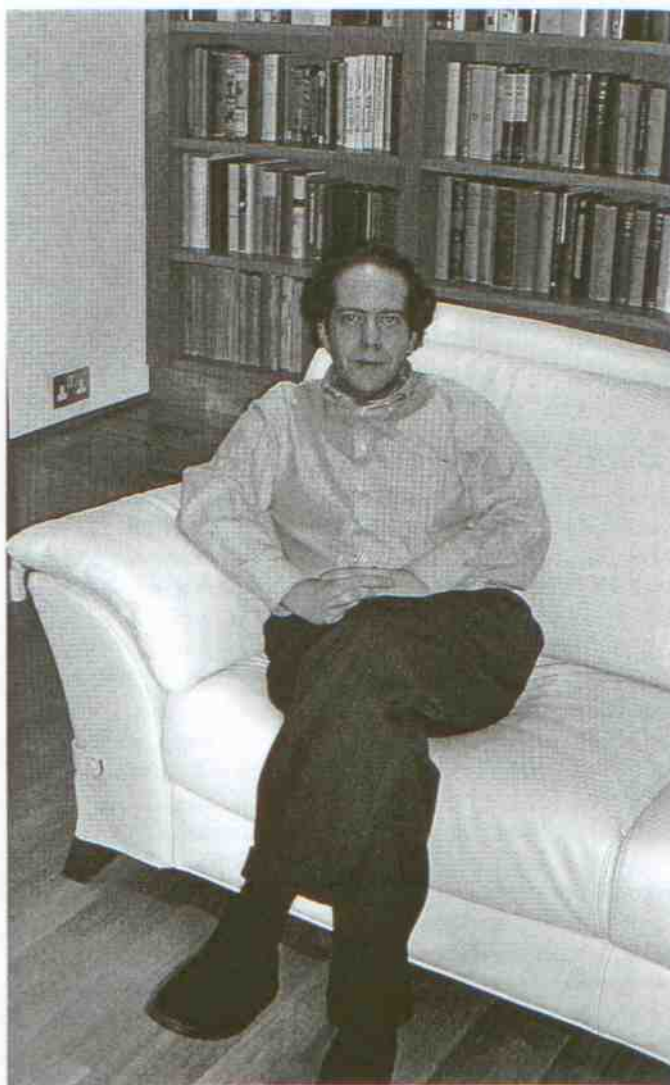
The first edition of this book (1936) appeared when the Nazi persecution had already begun its deadly work and the noble twists of Jewish emancipation were being destroyed in Germany. The second (1943) was distributed to the fighting forces when the reaction had already engulfed, in a manner too ghastly for belief, almost all of the continent of Europe, and the note of optimism at the end of the new material was justified only by faith. The third (1948) had to chronicle in its additional pages the virtual annihilation of European Jewry. But the fifth (1953) was privileged to tell the amazing story of national resurrection and the establishment of the State of Israel whose first ten years of heroic achievement are briefly summarized in the final section that has now been added (1958).

In the Preface to the sixth edition in 1969, the last in his lifetime, he paid homage to the Six Day War of 1967 and wrote:

Thank God that I have been privileged to witness and to record the crowning mercies inadequately described in the new pages now appended to this work.

He died soon after in 1970; David, naturally, has all these editions and those in every language except Japanese (a tip to my bookseller colleagues), but his favourite is Roth's own first edition of the *History* interleaved with his manuscript notes for revisions: 'It's something special to have the handwritten notes of an author one admires and see how those notes make their way into the next edition.'

After he died, Roth's library went to Leeds



University as he specifically wanted it to go to a non-Jewish institution where there were no Jewish books. While David is still busy collecting material from a variety of sources, ultimately he has a similar goal: 'I would never leave or sell my collection to a Jewish library as it creates too many duplicates that end up collecting dust.'

It seems fitting that Roth ended his life as editor of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, an extensive compendium that made Jewish knowledge accessible to a wide audience. 'I could just imagine,' mused David, 'nowadays, he'd be presenting history programmes on the television.'

Makes me think: perhaps I should consider buying DVDs for future generations of collectors who may acquire a morbid fear of running out of things to watch on the telly. ❧

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookseller specializing in Judaica (www.fishburnbooks.com). His latest catalogue has 1,000 items relating to Zionism.