

## *President's Report*

### 2009-2010 Season

The Lit had a varied and innovative programme in its 122<sup>nd</sup> year, featuring 8 events. It opened with a thought-provoking talk by **Antony Lerman**, the former Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, who spoke on the meaning of 'antisemitism.' Analysing the subject with an almost Talmudic level of hair-splitting argument, he made the case that so-called 'new antisemitism' is an abuse of terminology that works towards obscuring the important topic of anti-Semitism, claiming that the term has been re-worked partly for rhetorical and political reasons. He called for a renewal of interest in forms of classic anti-Semitism, which is still all too present in the world.

For the second event, we were treated to a true literary event when the young Glaswegian author **J. David Simons** spoke about and read from his novel, "The Credit Draper", which paints a vivid picture of Jewish life in Glasgow and of how Jews fared in the Gorbals and even in rural Scotland in the earliest decades of the Twentieth Century. It was a reminder of the difficulties immigrant communities have in adjusting to their new home.

Coinciding with Chanukah for our third event, **Dr Eyal Poleg**, a British Academy postdoctoral fellow, gave us a glimpse of the how the Maccabees were viewed throughout history. Surprisingly, interest in the Maccabees among Jews is relatively recent, spurred by the rise in a Jewish national consciousness over the past 100-150 years. Historically, the Maccabees featured more in Christian theology, resonating with Christian martyrdom legends and, ironically, an ideal after which crusaders modelled themselves.

The Lit was privileged to open the second half of the season with a talk by **Sir Jeremy Beecham**, former leader of Newcastle City Council and currently Chair of the Local Government Association. A member of the Board of the New Israel Fund, Sir Jeremy spoke on the efforts made by the fund to promote democratic change in Israel generally and complete social and political equality of all of its citizens, regardless of religion, race or gender. He particularly emphasised the need to improve the social and political status of its Arab minority.

In the light of National Holocaust Day and other non-Jewish efforts to address the Holocaust, **Dr David Kaufman**, a historian at Stirling University, spoke at the next event on the history of the history of the Holocaust. He expressed his concerns over how well the events around the Holocaust are being transmitted, a topic that needs addressing as we approach the time when there will no longer be living witnesses surviving to tell their stories.

For those who always wondered what the Kabala is and were too afraid to ask, **Bill Shakman**, a PhD student pursuing studies in the history of the Kabala, spoke next on the Kabbalistic view of the Pesach story. It was a delightful quick lesson in the esoteric thought and symbolism of the Kabala that one wonders may well have informed Freud's theories in psychoanalysis.

At the seventh event of the season, **Claudia Nocentini**, Senior Lecturer in Italian at the University of Edinburgh, spoke on her current interest and work in progress on the enigmatic figure Natalia Ginzburg. The speaker gave us a glimpse into the achievements of this original novelist, playwright, journalist and politician, including an original translation of a remarkable poem by Ginzburg, one of the very few she's known to have written.

The season concluded with an unusual and delightful literary event involving the reading of just published Jewish short stories in a collection, *The Sea of Azov*. Featuring the publisher, **Ross Bradshaw**, and the editor, Anne Joseph, of the small press Five Leaves, the event included an engaging discussion of the press and the assembling of the collection, and was topped off with lively readings of three stories selected by members of the Lit.

The Lit continued with its experiment of serving tea prior to the events as well as after, in the hopes of encouraging greater attendance. The experiment was subject to some criticism, and should perhaps be re-addressed. Lastly, the President would like to express his gratitude to Julia Merrick, who provided the posters advertising the events, and to our Secretary Tony Gilbert and Treasurer Micheline Brannan for their essential and substantial efforts in keeping the Lit running.

Avery Meiksin, President

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