

President's Report 2011-2012 Season

The Lit's 124th season saw talks ranging from the Arab Spring to breast-feeding, and included one film. It had seven events in total, although eight were scheduled. Unfortunately one speaker moved to America during the season, and it proved impossible to find a substitute. Overall the attendance was good, averaging around 20-25 per event. Although not as high as in the past, the numbers seem at least to have stabilised over the last few years.

The season opened with a talk by **Dr Ben Outhwaite**, the new Head of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University. This famous collection hosts most of the Cairo Genizah, as collated by Solomon Schechter in the 19th century. Dr Outhwaite provided a lightning tour of the collection, and argued that medieval Jewish life was neither a Golden Age nor a horror, but showed how the community coped in its day.

Dr Maria Diemling, Senior Lecturer from Canterbury Christchurch University, spoke next on the little-known relationship between Jewish mothers and the non-Jewish wetnurses they relied upon in the days before baby formula. The talk led to an interesting discussion concerning the general nature of the relationship between employers and the employed across cultural boundaries, and in particular the establishment of links across the Jewish-Christian divide of the early-modern period in Europe.

Dr George Wilkes spoke on the philosophical work *The Star of Redemption*, by the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. The author addressed the question of what is a "just war," drawing on biblical and rabbinical sources, with implications, as the speaker pointed out, still of interest today.

The first half of the season was ended with a Chanukah showing of the Coen brothers' *A Serious Man*. The film was well enjoyed, drawing chuckles from even some of the rabbis in the audience over their portrayal of rabbis. The film is well worth multiple viewings for the subtlety with which it deals with the question of uncertainty and fairness in life, including many references to Physics motivated by the Coen brothers' upbringing by a physicist father.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind opened the second half of the Lit with a discussion about the Arab Spring. He offered his personal insight into understanding these epochal events of our time, drawing on his considerable foreign affairs experiences. He pointed out how Arab monarchies tended to provide the most stable governments; by contrast, the dictators who rose to power in the region were being ousted in large part because they lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The implications for Israel are as yet unclear; even Islamist governments recognise an element of economic real-politik. In the long run, it can only be hoped increasing democratization will lead to increasing stability.

Dr Patricia Allerston of the National Portrait Gallery presented to us a portrait by Sickert of the Jewish writer Zangwill, a friend of his. The talk was more an exercise in solving a mystery than art criticism. Why, where and even when the portrait was painted is unknown. It was the first purchase of a piece of modern art by the National Gallery, or so it was thought at the time. But new research has brought this into considerable doubt, as there are good reasons for believing the painting dates to the 19th century. Zangwill is apparently portrayed sitting at a café in Venice; but is he inside the ghetto, or possibly sitting outside its walls? Was the artist making a suggestion about the sitter? If so, what? The mystery remains.

The season concluded with a talk by **Dr Stephen Bowd** of the School of History at the University of Edinburgh, on Jews in early modern travel literature. As a middle class began to emerge in Europe, so did touring. Guidebooks began to spring up indicating what not to miss, including the regional Jews. Regrettably, rather than promoting a deeper understanding of Jewish communities and their way of life, the descriptions often sought to reinforce stereotypes, some stemming from obvious misunderstandings, such as wearing a hat in Synagogue rather than removing it as in a Church. The literature indicated how wide a gulf there still was between Jewish communities and non-Jewish at these times.

Finally, the President would like to express his gratitude to Tony Gilbert, who provided the posters advertising the events, while also serving as Secretary, and to our Treasurer Micheline Brannan. Both provide the essential and substantial efforts needed to keep the Lit running. Many thanks are due to Hannah Holtschneider and Maurice Naftalin for a major revamping of the Lit website, giving it a new e-look. The other Lit committee members and some of the Lit members as well deserve our thanks for helping to set up and

clean up after the meetings now that we no longer have a caretaker's assistance. After some hiccups, this now seems to be working smoothly, without all of the burden on just the same few. The Lit will continue to require this added goodwill to ensure its future.

Avery Meiksin, President
Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society, 6 May 2012