

Dundee Responds: a reply to Nathan Abrams' article in Northern Scotland on the history of Dundee's Jewish community, and to his earlier book chapter, on which that article was based

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Nathan Abrams' representation of modern Dundee cannot go uncontested. This is not, and has never been, a city marked by anti-Semitism. The support that has been shown for the Palestinians is a product of a strong left - and anti-racist - movement, and there is nothing to suggest that this caused anti-Semitism. The activities of a few isolated neo-Nazis should never be elevated by presenting them as representative of wider society.

Abrams uses a very limited range of sources – overwhelmingly articles from the *Jewish Chronicle*, supplemented by the memoirs of Albert Jacob, a local GP who regarded himself as 'The Israeli Ambassador to the Grand Duchy of Dundee'¹ – to tell a compelling story. The trouble is that it is both misleading and potentially damaging. In Abrams' history, more than a century of good communal relations are brought to an end by pro-Palestinian/anti-Zionist campaigns at the university, and by the District Council's 1980 twinning of Dundee with the Palestinian town of Nablus in the West Bank. These, he claims, 'to some extent prepared the ground for the emergence of anti-Semitism', creating '[t]he perception that Dundee had become a particular focus for anti-Jewish activity', and leaving the city with 'the stigma of anti-Semitism', which continues to discourage Jews from settling here.² Abrams' account seems designed to conjure this stigma into reality.

He sets the scene by bombarding the reader with detailed examples of anti-Zionist campaigns and anti-Semitic neo-Nazi vandalism that took place over several decades, so giving an impression that both were much more dominant activities than was in fact the case.³ Dundee certainly provided a focus for pro-Palestinian action, especially at the time of the twinning, but activity was not always at that intensity, and though the twinning was unique, actions and debates were also taking place elsewhere. The far-right was busy in other places too, and often with much more serious results. While there was a sprinkling of far-right activists in Dundee,⁴ even some of the Nazi graffiti may have been the relatively mindless actions of youth gangs,⁵ and other ethnic minorities were also targeted. Abrams records that

¹ Albert Jacob, *The Day it Hit the Fan: Memoirs of a reluctant politician*, (Acco, Israel, 2005). The quote is from one of his chapter headings. Abrams also references the 1987 report 'Racial Tension in Tayside' produced by Tayside Community Relations Council, of which Jacob claims to be the main author (Jacob 2005, p251), and Abrams' book chapter quotes Debby Taylor, who is Jacob's daughter. Nathan Abrams, *Caledonian Jews: A study of seven small communities in Scotland*, (Jefferson, North Carolina, 2009), 65-94, page 90

² Abrams 2012, p92. A brief paragraph in Kenneth Collin's history for the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities took a similar line. See Kenneth E Collins, *Scotland's Jews: A guide to the history and community of the Jews of Scotland* (Glasgow, 2008), p26

³ Albert Jacob made it his business to seek out and draw attention to every sign of anti-Semitic and racist activity in Dundee, and Abrams' focus on the negative appears to be inspired by his work.

⁴ The most serious example was of a small group of young people recruited by the militarist National Socialist Action Party. See *Dundee Standard* (the paper produced by the local Labour Party) July and September 1983. The CRC report (see note 1) suggests that they had 12-20 members in 1983 and continued sporadic activity after that date. I can find nothing to explain why Abrams should mention this organisation in the same sentence as the Sabra and Shatila massacres.

⁵ People who came across some of the gangs in the 1980s have told me that there was a bit of shouting 'NF' and racist comments and even drawing swastikas, but without engagement with what this meant. It was a way of kicking against propriety.

‘individual Jews received death threats’;⁶ but the only actual damage was to property, albeit this included property with deep emotional significance such as the synagogue and cemetery. As a city abandoned to industrial decline and unemployment, Dundee could have provided fertile territory for the growth of far-right groups. However it is also a place with a radical and socialist tradition. Left organisations have channelled some of the frustrations against the system into a different direction, and resisted attempts by far-right groups to gain a foothold. There is no significant history of sectarianism in the city, so no big loyalist organisations to give the far-right sustenance.⁷ There have always been a few people attracted to fascist ideas – including from long before the twinning and today - but only a few.⁸

Dundee seems to have been a relatively trouble-free place to be Jewish, but it has not, of course, been immune from the casual racism and anti-Semitism of wider British society.⁹ Abrams makes no attempt to look at this, but instead uses the actions of a small number of relatively isolated neo-Nazis as an indication of a new anti-Semitism. This allows him to take at face value the statement made to the Secretary of State for Scotland by Greville Janner MP, leader of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which claimed:

The whole history of the relationship of the Jewish minority in Scotland has always been one of good citizenship and total harmony. These boys [i.e. Dundee’s Labour councillors] have succeeded in a short space of time in stirring up more ill-will than existed in centuries.¹⁰

While Abrams’ article, unlike the earlier book chapter on which it is based, is careful to state that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism ‘are not identical’, it clearly assumes a causal and culpable link between Dundee Labour Party’s support for the Palestinian cause and the activities of the far-right. This was the line pushed by Jacob and by the Jewish Chronicle, whose front page headline ran ‘Swastikas in Dundee follow PLO coup’,¹¹ but there is no reason to think that the fascists cared much about the Palestinians.¹² The only relevance of the twinning for them was that the protests flagged up the existence of the Jewish community and identified its most outspoken member.

⁶ The only name mentioned is Albert Jacob (Abrams 2009, p94). When Jacob received a hoax bomb threat in 1990 a similar threat was made to Mary Ward, a former council leader and supporter of the Palestinian cause. Abrams records neo-Nazi attacks in 1990, but does not mention that in the same year the city council was happy to appoint a Jew, Henny King, to organise Dundee’s octocentenary celebrations.

⁷ Thanks to Anthony Cox for this observation

⁸ Discussions with anti-racist activists

⁹ Esther Herman, who has lived in Dundee since she was a child in the 1920s, claims never to have come across anti-Semitism (interviewed 15 January, 2013). Leonard Koppel remembers only very very minimal anti-Semitism from his time at Harris Academy in the 1960s, and that the one boy he had some trouble with came and apologised a few years after they had both left (phone conversation 16 January, 2013). However, Debby Taylor was bothered by anti-Semitism (and snobbery) at the private Dundee High School in the 1960s and 70s (phone conversation 10 January, 2013). A historic example of classic anti-Semitism can be found in the poem *Character sketches, modern trade battles, ten years’ conflict, and Mrs Juteburgh* by DM Nicoll (Dundee, 1896)

¹⁰ Quoted in the *Courier and Advertiser* 16 April, 1981

¹¹ *Jewish Chronicle* 27 February, 1981. The article describes swastikas painted on the home of Albert Jacob’s father. (The painters presumably confused it with that of his son.) Albert Jacob is quoted calling this ‘the inevitable’.

¹² Desecration of Jewish tomb stones nine years later included the spray-painted initials PLF (*Courier and Advertiser* 19 October, 1990). If these were intended to stand for Palestine Liberation Front, this suggests the same negative motivation as the waving of Israeli flags by the anti-Muslim Scottish (and English) Defence Leagues today.

However, the twinning has played an important part in creating Dundee's image, and deserves to be looked at in more detail.

In the late 1970s, a new left-wing leadership gained control of Dundee Labour Party, and the administration that took over the District Council in 1980 was ready to put socialist ideas into practice. Support for the Palestinian cause is in line with international socialist principles of opposition to colonialism and support for oppressed peoples. While the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was not particularly left wing in either policy or composition, it was the dominant Palestinian organisation, and had been recognised as the official representative of the Palestinian people by the United Nations since 1974. In their official stance, the PLO still demanded that there be a secular democratic state in the whole of Palestine, and refused to give recognition to the separate, and constitutionally Jewish, state of Israel; but at the same time they wanted a full part in the peace negotiations that followed after the 1973 war, in which Israel was a main negotiating partner. The position of the Soviet Union was key to both international politics and attitudes on the left. They had always recognised Israel, but the PLO was a Soviet ally.¹³ The United Nations had also determined, in 1975, that 'zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination'.¹⁴

Campaigns in support of the Palestinian cause, and criticism of the concept of a Jewish state, were common on the left, including in student politics. These were not anti-Jewish, but a large majority of British Jews feel a strong identification with, and loyalty to, Israel. This is a loyalty that comes from the heart rather than the head. It is born from centuries of persecution culminating in the holocaust, overlaid onto a deep-rooted religious yearning for a 'return' from exile to the Promised Land.¹⁵ The link has been strengthened by family ties; however, a small but growing number of Jews have felt able to criticise publically, not only Israeli policy, but Zionism itself.

The first links between Dundee Labour Party and Palestine were made by students at the university. In the mid seventies there was a large number of Iraqi students, including half a dozen members of the Iraqi Communist Party who approached fellow communist, Graham Ogilvy, chair of the student Socialist Society, to help them establish a Friends of Palestine Society.¹⁶ They were soon joined by some Palestinian students, and one of these, Sa'ad Jabaji, wanted to make contact with the local Labour Party. Ogilvy directed him to the party's dynamic young activist, George Galloway, for whom the meeting was life-changing.¹⁷ In 1977, Ogilvy and Galloway joined a fact-finding trip to Beirut, planned by the British Anti-Zionist Organisation, and were able to visit the Palestinian refugee camps and meet PLO leaders.¹⁸ In 1978, Colin Rennie, who, along with Galloway, used to socialise with Ogilvy

¹³ Gilbert Achcar, *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist mirror* (London, 2004), 129-174

¹⁴ This resolution was revoked in 1991

¹⁵ As a politically naive Jewish student at an English university in 1979, I naturally went to the student union along with fellow members of the Jewish Society to vote against the motion that Zionism was racist. We saw no contradiction in the expectation that we would support Israel and vote against such a motion on the basis of our ethnicity.

¹⁶ Telephone interview with Graham Ogilvy, 18 January, 2013. The Iraqi Communist Party had agreed an alliance with the ostensibly-socialist ruling Ba-ath Party in 1973, although this did not prevent repression of CP members. The alliance ended after Saddam Hussein took full control of the government in 1979, after which there was also trouble in the university, with Ba-athist students intimidating their co-patriots.

¹⁷ Interview with Ogilvy, 2013; George Galloway, *I'm Not the Only One* (London, 2004), 29-30. The exact sequence of events varies in different people's accounts.

¹⁸ Ogilvy recalls that their party included several left-wing Jews.

and the other students, was elected to the District Council, and he visited a refugee camp in Jordan the following year. And Ernie Ross, recently elected Labour MP for Dundee West, also went to the Middle -East, visiting Lebanon Syria and Jordan. He found it a revelatory experience - 'like someone lifting the blinkers'.¹⁹ Galloway, Ross and Rennie, together with Bill Speirs, then Assistant Secretary of the STUC, and Bill Gillby, who was a senior officer in NUPE, met with Nabil Ramlawi, the PLO's representative in London, to discuss how to promote the Palestinian cause within the Labour movement. As a consequence, Trade Union Friends of Palestine was established in Dundee in June 1980; and, with the very active help of a Palestinian student, Youssef Allan, (who later became the Palestinian representative to Ireland) the campaign would be taken to trade unions across Britain.

That same month, the mayor of Nablus, Bassam Shaka'a, lost both his legs when an Israeli terrorist planted a bomb in his car. Shaka'a was invited by the British government to get treatment at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, and Ross, Galloway and Rennie went to meet him in his London hotel room, where they found him 'full of energy and determination'.²⁰ Rennie, who had already been investigating the idea of a twin city from a non-Western country, proposed the idea of twinning with Nablus. He wanted both to improve understanding in Britain and give hope to the Palestinians.²¹ Labour's majority guaranteed that they would carry the vote on the twinning, which was passed by the Lord Provost's Committee on 17 November and ratified by the full council ten days later. Between the two meetings, Shaka'a visited Dundee and was given a reception at the city chambers, where he presented the Lord Provost with a Palestinian flag.²² He told the *Sunday Post*, 'My hope is that not only the people of Dundee but throughout Britain will urge the British Government to recognise the P.L.O. It's simply a matter of human rights – the Palestinians no longer want to be treated as if they are living in a hotel in their own land.'²³ The British government remained unmoved, but less than two years later, in the wake of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the Labour Party conference recognised the PLO.²⁴ By that time, Dundee councillors had visited Nablus, and Shaka'a had revisited Dundee. Levels of commitment and understanding varied, but the 'dominant voice' of the councillors who went on that visit, as summed up by members of Dundee Presbytery who discussed with them afterwards, reflected the contradictory politics of the time:

They reject the charge that [taking the side of the Palestinians] is to be anti-Semitic or even anti-Israel, but claim that it is indeed anti-Zionist, anti-Israeli expansionism. They rejected the suggestion that to accept the aims of the P.L.O. is by its own constitution to question the right of the State of Israel to exist.²⁵

¹⁹ Ernie Ross, interviewed 11 January, 2013

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Colin Rennie, interviewed 15 January 2013

²² Abrams has followed opponents of the twinning by referring to it as a PLO flag, but this design of flag predates the PLO. See http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/meaning_of_flag.htm [accessed January 2013]

²³ *Sunday Post* 23 November, 1980

²⁴ There were two overlapping motions, one proposed by Dundee East Labour Party. See *The Times* 30 September, 1982

²⁵ Report drawn up for Dundee Presbytery after a delegation had met representatives of both sides of the argument, untitled and undated manuscript from around September 1981 in Dundee City Archives

The Tory councillors and a collection of Tory MPs were firm in their opposition to the twinning,²⁶ as were Gordon Wilson, SNP MP for Dundee East, and the Labour MP for Dunfermline. The councillors' old opponents within the Dundee Labour Party were also active in trying to undermine their rivals,²⁷ and there was tremendous hostility from the media, including from the Labour-supporting Scottish *Sunday Mail*.²⁸ However, government ministers dismissed claims that there was increasing anti-Semitism, and had to concede that, although the twinning breached the letter and spirit of local authority guidelines, these were only guidelines.²⁹

Dr Jacob went to Shaka'a's first reception at the city chambers as a representative of the Jewish community, and shook his hand. But Shaka'a's mention of the PLO placed the mayor in the enemy camp. In the debate before the twinning was ratified, Jacob expounded on the community view, telling councillors that the PLO 'was a terrorist organisation whose stated aim was the destruction of Israel.'³⁰ Thus started a long and impassioned campaign in which Jacob worked increasingly closely with the Israeli embassy and the Board of Deputies. As he describes in his memoir, he was determined to use every opportunity to keep the issue in the limelight and publicise his case that the council's decision should be reversed. Members of the Board came to Dundee, and Janner spoke at a big public meeting, augmented by Jews from across Scotland and beyond, where anti-Semitic and fascist graffiti was presented as evidence of the impact of the twinning.³¹ Jacob's name dominates the campaign, though Harold Gillis, the chair of Dundee Hebrew Congregation, was with Jacob at the first council debate, and others contributed letters to the papers.³² Jacob's combative approach (which extended to uncritical support of Israel during the Beirut war) was not universally popular in Dundee's small Jewish community. One member described him to me as causing no end of trouble,³³ and Esther Herman, who did not like the twinning and whose husband wrote of his objections to the local paper, made a similar observation, adding, 'sometimes it's better to let sleeping dogs lie' but that in fact there was 'not much trouble in the long run'.³⁴

Within the university, the tiny Jewish Society was heavily outnumbered by students from Iraq and other parts of the Middle East who were supportive of the Palestinian cause

²⁶ Bill Walker, Tory MP for Perth and East Perthshire told the House of Commons that 'the anti-Jewish activities in Dundee, which are the direct result of the flying of the PLO flag, are reminiscent of the early days of Hitler'. (House of Commons Debates, 8 April 1981, vol. 2 col. 942)

²⁷ Rennie, interviewed 2013

²⁸ Rennie claims they were constantly misquoted. One misquote that he publicly refuted at the time was the idea that they would be the PLO's voice in Scotland (*Sunday Mail*, 5 April, 1981). As he pointed out, the PLO already had an office in London (See *Scotsman* and *Courier and Advertiser* 9 April 1981); however, Abrams (2012, p91) gives the disputed quote. The *Sunday Mail* is the sister paper to the *Daily Record*, and has no links to the British *Daily Mail*.

²⁹ *Courier and Advertiser* 16 April and 1 May, 1981. Recently released documents show that ministers were not at all happy that they could not get the flag removed (*Press and Journal* 12 October, 2009).

³⁰ *Courier and Advertiser* 28 November, 1980

³¹ *Courier and Advertiser* 23 March, 1981. Besides the earlier graffiti on Jacob's father's house, graffiti had been found covering the secluded rear wall of the synagogue, though there is disagreement as to the nature of this.

³² Including David Koppel, who got advice on what to write from London (phone conversation with his son Leonard Koppel, 16 January 2013). The *Courier and Advertiser* also published a letter from a Glasgow Jew supporting the twinning (1 April 1981).

³³ Phone conversation 13 January, 2013

³⁴ Esther Herman, interviewed 16 January, 2013. Sam Herman had a letter in the *Courier and Advertiser* about PLO terrorism on 3 February, 1981, and another pro-Israel letter on 20 April.

and formed an effective voting bloc with the broad left.³⁵ On the other hand, the Rugby crowd could be brought in from the bar to swing votes the other way.³⁶ A vote in support of an anti-Zionist motion was subsequently reversed; and, while Glasgow University voted to twin with a West Bank University, a similar proposal in Dundee was voted down. Andy Myles, who was Student Association President at the time of the city twinning, recalls that Palestine was the biggest issue among the students other than perpetual questions about affiliation to the NUS.³⁷ Although Debby Taylor, Jacob's daughter, found Dundee University a 'horrible experience',³⁸ Zionist students were not without support. Myles, who had spent a year on a Kibbutz, had three Jewish flatmates, and the student newspaper published articles from both sides of the Palestine debate.

Looking at the wider community, despite Abrams' assertion that 'the majority of Dundee's citizens opposed the twinning',³⁹ we have no reliable way of knowing what they felt. A *Sunday Mail* 'poll', picked up by the *Jewish Chronicle*, dutifully reflected the editor's rejection of Dundee Council's policies,⁴⁰ but although plans for a mass petition were repeatedly announced,⁴¹ the petition never materialised. Rennie feels that negative press coverage prevented the council from making headway with the general public, though they had more success in the Labour Party.⁴² Probably, for most people the issue was not a priority. At any rate, the Labour council was re-elected in 1984.⁴³

To bring the story up to date, Abrams refers to two events from 2011. The first began as an attempt by pro-Palestinian activists to persuade Dundee City Council to follow the lead of West Dumbartonshire and Stirling Councils, who had agreed to boycott all Israeli goods following the attack on Gaza in the winter of 2008-9. Far from being an 'echo' of the 1980s, this demonstrated how cautious the council has become. Quoting advice from their lawyers, they refused to discuss boycott at all, and when it came to the debate, they voted for a Labour/SNP amendment that replaced the reference to apartheid.⁴⁴ On this occasion, the only Jewish voice was my own, speaking on behalf of Scottish Jews for a Just Peace in support of the motion. Abrams' second example concerns the University of St Andrews, not Dundee at all. In the drunken hours of the morning, an English student, and passionate anti-Zionist, had defiled an Israeli flag belonging to a Lithuanian-born Jewish student from the United States.

³⁵ *Annasach* (Dundee Student Association newspaper) 16 February, 1979; Telephone interview with Andy Myles, President of the Student Association 1980-81, 11 January 2013

³⁶ Phone conversation with Mike Arnott, who was a Dundee University student at that time

³⁷ Telephone interview with Myles 2013

³⁸ Telephone conversation with Taylor 2013

³⁹ Abrams 2012, p 91

⁴⁰ *Sunday Mail*, 5 April, 1981; *Jewish Chronicle*, 10 April, 1981. A form enclosed in the Tayside edition of the previous week had produced almost 400 responses, with a big majority against all the policies attacked in the editorial, including fighting council house sales (*Sunday Mail*, 29 March, 1981). Given the nature of the paper's coverage of the twinning, significant support could not have been expected.

⁴¹ *Courier and Advertiser* 11, 17, 20 and 23 April, 1981

⁴² Rennie, interviewed 2013

⁴³ Colin Rennie was the only one of the key players not re-elected, and that was due to unusual circumstances. The Conservative candidate had to withdraw when it was found that in 1977 he had put himself forward as a National Front parliamentary candidate, so the SNP gained support from Conservative voters. And another man (with connections to the SNP and the corrupt former Labour Bailie, JL Stewart) also described himself as 'Labour' and – crucially – split off some of the remaining votes. (*Courier and Advertiser* 11 April and 4 May, 1984; *Glasgow Herald* 24 September, 1984)

⁴⁴ Tactically, pro-Palestinian campaigners may not have been helped by the fact that the motion was put forward by the council's lone Liberal Democrat. (For the record, he had opposed the original twinning on the grounds that 'international affairs are of no concern of the council' (Letter from Fraser Macpherson to the *Dundee Standard*, May, 1982).)

That this resulted in a conviction for acting ‘in a racially aggravated manner’, tells us more about the open ended definitions at the centre of anti-racism law than it does about the actions and motivations of the perpetrator.⁴⁵

Finally, in summing up the current situation, Abrams suddenly introduces the throwaway remark that, ‘[e]ven today, Dundee remains a recruitment centre for Islamic fundamentalists’. Where does this assertion come from? Dundee has a resident Muslim population, though this is not large compared with many British cities. In addition, the Al Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, established in 2001 alongside the city’s two universities, means that there are high numbers of Muslim students. For many of these, Islam is central to their daily lives and world view, and their faith encourages them to invite others into Islam. However, Abrams is suggesting something much more sinister. His comment stems from a report produced in 2005, which urged a crackdown on ‘possible extremists’. It included Dundee in a list of 21 universities where Islamist ‘extremist and/or terror groups have been detected’, and noted that one of the men wanted in connection with the Bali bombing had formerly studied in Dundee.⁴⁶ It was a product of, and contributor to, the paranoia inspired by the War on Terror, and Tayside police were prompted to institute intrusive monitoring of Dundee’s Muslims, only modifying their tactics after a campaign by students, trade unionists, human rights campaigners and left activists.⁴⁷ The report has been widely discredited.⁴⁸

Dundee’s elected representatives still show public support for the Palestinian cause – in its UN approved two-state version. More radical interpretations and purposeful action have long since moved away from the Labour Party and the council, but Dundee activists continue to play a disproportionate part in pro-Palestinian campaigns, and the last two summers have seen the Palestinian flag flying with those of our other twin cities above the central square.⁴⁹ At the same time, although the number of Dundee Jews involved is very small, communal life at the synagogue, cultural as well as religious, has found a new burst of energy. And last September, when the far-right Scottish Defence League bussed in supporters to ‘rally’ in Dundee they were sidelined by a large anti-racist festival where young Muslims served samosas and Jewish songs were heard alongside local bands.⁵⁰

(All interviews were carried out by the author)

⁴⁵ In the opinion of the Appeal Court Judge, the American’s ‘sense of connection with the state of Israel’ gave him an ‘association with Israel of a kind that qualified him as a member of a racial group’, according to the Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995 Section 50A (See <http://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/opinions/2012HCJAC53.html> [accessed January 2013]. The exact nature of the comments made by Paul Donnachie is disputed and uncorroborated.).

⁴⁶ Anthony Glees and Chris Pope ‘When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses’, Report for The Social Affairs Unit (2005). Abrams references the *Sunday Times* article about the report in his book chapter.

⁴⁷ Scotland Against Criminalising Communities, ‘Dundee anti-terror unit is based on a dodgy dossier Craig Murray to speak at Dundee meeting’, Press release (6 December 2006): <http://www.sacc.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=317&catid=27> [accessed January 2013]

⁴⁸ http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/glees_report.html; <http://www.spinwatch.org/-articles-by-category-mainmenu-8/74-terror-spin/3625-terrorism-studies-and-the-war-on-dissent> [both accessed January 2013]

⁴⁹ This was a result of a concerted campaign, of which the curtailed council motion was also part, carried out by the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Tayside for Justice in Palestine.

⁵⁰ SDL supporters were escorted by police to a fenced off area, where they were shouted at by a large crowd of anti-fascists before being taken away again.