

books

## Painter of the Caribbean

*In Colonial Jamaica, a Jewish Artist and the Slaves*



**Winter in Jamaica:** During the Jonkonnu festivities, all would celebrate in temporary equality. This lithograph is 'Red Set Girls' from *Sketches of Character*, 1837.

● **BELISARIO: SKETCHES OF CHARACTER**  
By Jackie Ranston  
The Mill Press, 432 pages, \$120.

By Edward M. Gómez

Jewish families who trace their roots back to England, Spain, Portugal and beyond have distinguished themselves for generations as merchants and financiers in the Caribbean. Reminders of the contributions they have made to the varied cultures and societies of the region can be found in the graveyards and in postcolonial, national archives of what are now its many small, independent countries.

With this history in mind, Jamaica's Mill Press has published "Belisario: Sketches

Edward M. Gómez, a former U.S. Foreign Service cultural-affairs officer stationed in Jamaica, has written about art and design for numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *Art & Antiques*, and *Art in America*.

of Character." A large, lavishly illustrated volume that looks like a coffee-table art book, it is, in fact, a sweeping saga of overlapping family histories, a high-drama page-turner complete with a Central American property-sale scam (the offering of an entire, imaginary country, that is) that makes the Bernard Madoff and not-so-long-ago Enron frauds look, in its publisher's words, "like child's play." Part biography and part cultural history, the book sets the stage for a look at the work of the 19th-century, Jewish-Jamaican artist Isaac Mendes Belisario (1794–1849), about whom little hitherto was known. Exquisitely produced by a small publishing company based in Kingston, Jamaica's capital, it offers a vivid portrait of colonial-era Caribbean Jewry in general, and of merchant-class Jews in Jamaica, in particular.

Jamaica, the region's third-largest island, today counts only a few hundred Jews among its total population of nearly 3 million inhabitants. Their ancestors contributed significantly to the development of the country's commercial infrastructure. In the past, some of the island's most prominent Jewish businessmen also were deeply involved in its notorious slave trade,

right up until Jamaica freed its slaves in 1838. It was against this commercial-social backdrop — Belisario's relatives profited from selling slaves — that the artist's life unfolded.

Belisario was no giant of the art of his time, neither in Jamaica, where he was born, nor in London, where he spent part of his life and then died of tuberculosis. Nevertheless, he is for "Sketches of Character," a series of lithographs of

**Many of Jamaica's leading businesspeople can trace their Jewish ancestry.**

Jamaican slaves outfitted in the traditional costumes of their Jonkonnu music-and-dance celebrations, that he earned renown. Issued to subscriber-patrons in 1837 and 1838 (a third of whom were Jewish), these detailed images, with accompanying texts composed by Belisario himself, are ele-

gant, skillfully drawn renditions of fantasy personages made real. They offer a cultural anthropologist's treasure trove of information about one of the most colorful folk customs of the slavery era in the Caribbean.

The story of the artist's creation of these portraits lies at the heart of "Belisario: Sketches of Character." To provide a sense of the historical and cultural contexts in which these works emerged, Ranston goes back to the Inquisition, which got under way in Spain and Portugal in the late 1400s, and to the exploits of branches of the Jewish Lindo and Belisario families that survived it. Their descendants' paths crossed two centuries later, at a London synagogue that became the spiritual home of the British capital's small but no longer hidden community of "Mosaic people." In time, they crossed again in Jamaica.

The Mill Press's founder-director, Valerie Facey, recalls: "We had no idea our research would take us back so far, but in order to understand the culture out of which Belisario emerged, Jackie had to go deep." Of British and American origins, Valerie Hart-Collins arrived in Jamaica on a banana boat in 1951 and there married Maurice William Facey, a businessman who went on to become an influential figure in Jamaican civic affairs. Today, the Faceys are one of the best-known families in the Jamaican business world, and some of their ancestors were Jewish. To some degree, this aspect of Valerie Facey's own family history spurred her long-standing interest in the Belisarios of Jamaica. In fact, although the Jewish population in the Caribbean is small, the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean points out that many of Jamaica's leading businesspeople "can trace Jewish ancestry in their genealogy."

The British-born Ranston, who arrived in Jamaica from London in 1970, began researching the Belisario story nearly two decades ago. Her sleuthing took her to Britain, France and Italy, where she dug up documents, works of art and clues to Isaac Mendes Belisario's life story and the origins of the Jamaican folk types he had depicted. Among her finds, Ranston discovered a document in Jamaica concerning an 18-year litigation between Belisario's father and maternal grandfather. That paper proved that Belisario had been born in Jamaica of a Jamaican-born mother (who happened to be the great-great-grandmother of Blanche Lindo, mother of Chris Blackwell, the well-known Jamaican businessman and record producer who catapulted reggae star Bob Marley to fame in the 1970s). In Jamaica, it seems, everybody is related.

As a reward for finding the Americas, Ranston writes in "Belisario," the Spanish Crown awarded Christopher Columbus hereditary and proprietary rights to Jamaica. Thus, the explorer's family, not the Spanish government, controlled the island, and Columbus chose not to extend the Inquisition there. Ranston notes that the first Jews, refugees from Spain, "arrived in Jamaica during the Spanish

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books

## Two Minority Reports From 1948

● **1948: A SOLDIER'S TALE — THE BLOODY ROAD TO JERUSALEM**  
By Uri Avnery, translated by Christopher Costello  
Oneworld Press, 400 pages, \$19.95.

● **THE FIRST TITHE**  
By Israel Eldad, translated by Zev Golan  
Gefen, 420 pages, \$24.95.

By Joel Schalit

For better or for worse, the shadows of 1948 still hang over half the world as reminders of what was and harbingers of what will be, but these shadows are always half-glimpsed. Two recently published translations of memoirs by legendary Israeli political figures solidify some of the shadows for English speakers.

As I sat inside San Francisco's Castro Theatre last summer, waiting to watch Shai Pollak's award-winning documentary "Bil'in, My Love," there was a group of older American Jews in the row behind me, discussing the filmmaker's politics. "I hear he's an anarchist," one of them remarked. An uncomfortable moment of silence briefly followed. "I understand there are a lot of anarchists in Israel these days," a member of the same party replied. Following a year of increasing press visibility for Anarchists Against the Wall (the Israeli organization

Joel Schalit is the culture editor of *Zeek*. His fifth book, "Israel vs. Utopia" (Akashic Books) is forthcoming. He lives and works in London.

that Pollak is associated with, and whose Web site has hosted his work), the addition of another layer of ideology to Israeli life was clearly frustrating. "What will they come up with next?" I expected to hear. Instead, as if to pre-empt any further speculation, the filmmaker took the stage to introduce his film, and the folks behind me fell silent.

Dressed casually in jeans and a sweater, Pollak looked nothing like the stereotype of the hooded and pierced rock-throver Americans first came to fear during the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle. Sounding a little nervous to be introducing his film at the renowned San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the Tel Aviv filmmaker looked so inconspicuous, he easily could have been one of the Americans sitting behind me, discussing his politics. Yet, because this was San Francisco, it was the audience members' anxiety that surprised me the most. No other region in the United States has had a more talked about culture of left-wing, explicitly Jewish political activism than the San Francisco Bay Area. Besides, this was a film about the biggest progressive Jewish bête noire, the so-called Apartheid Wall.

That Pollak's otherwise uncontroverted appearance would have stoked such discussion is nevertheless instructive, because of what it says about American Jewish perceptions of Israeli politics. Despite American Jewry's intense preoccupation with cataloging all things Israeli, there are certain things about Israel that remain very much alien to it, such as how ideologically driven Israeli politics has always been. That it would be a surprise that anarchists exist in the country is very much the same thing

as the level of shock and embarrassment American Jews feel when they hear about such things as the recent "pogroms," to use Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's language, that took place in Hebron. In contrast to American Jewish life, Israel has always been marked by extremes — not necessarily only in terms of extremists, but certainly, in comparison to American Jewry, in terms of extreme ideological differences.

The two new translations bear out these distinctions, offering ample opportunity to reflect on the history of the political divisions around which Israeli life has formed. The first and, in literary terms, the better, is Uri Avnery's "1948: A Soldier's Tale — The Bloody Road to Jerusalem." A combination of two best-selling accounts of the Israeli journalist and peacenik's experiences during Israel's War of Independence, this English-language publication could not be more overdue — or timely. Finally compensating for a glaring lack of book-length publications by Avnery in the United States, these two stories, by one of the original founders of Israel's peace movement, bear witness both to Avnery's immense influence on the Israeli left and the left's ideological consistency over the years.

Given the fact that this legacy would take the original form of war reporting for Yom Yom, the former evening edition of Haaretz, also helps provide a rather compressed sense of time when reading these accounts of Avnery's experiences 60 years ago. Moving, in the second, decidedly darker half of 1948, to calling for an alliance between Israel and Arab nationalists makes

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**The Road to Peace?:** Uri Avnery, with dove and Palestinian flag, standing overlooking the road to East Jerusalem.

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