

# BENJAMIN, George & Isabella (con't.)

the local militia, helped put down the Rebellion of 1837 and was ultimately elected a member of the Canadian legislature.

He had an ongoing relationship with some of the key political figures of the era, and was even offered a cabinet position as minister of finance if he would desert Macdonald's Conservatives and join the opposition Liberals in government. Loyal to the end, Benjamin declined.

In the 1860s, there were barely a thousand Jews in a population of some 3.5 million. How could a Jew achieve so much in a society which was so predominantly Christian? The Godfreys argue that Canada was far more open and receptive to minorities in the middle of the 19th century than it would later become.

For a Jew a career such as Benjamin's would have been impossible even a generation later when a benighted anti-Semitism would envelope Canada with the arrival of tens of thousands of penurious East-European Jewish refugees. The pre-Confederation period was



**ISABELLA BENJAMIN:** His wife, from an oil painting by William Sawyer, 1847.

perhaps the "golden years" of Canadian Jewry, an era free of the restrictions, quotas and overt bigotry.

Yet it is also true that Benjamin's achievements were largely the result of his determined and successful efforts to assimilate and to keep his Jewishness to himself.

Though his enemies denounced him as a Jew — Susannah Moodie, for example, whose husband was a long-time political opponent of Benjamin, was particularly vitriolic — he did not live as one.

He observed no religious practices, save for the recording of important events in his life in a Hebrew prayer book. He kept no holidays and ate pork — indeed he even had a smoke house for curing hams on his large estate — raised his children as Christians, and had himself baptized just before his death so that he could be buried in the local Anglican cemetery. His descendants today are gentiles, which perhaps explains why it took so long for Jewish historians to discover him.

Benjamin was certainly a peculiar Jew, but he was little different from the untold number of other Jewish settlers in North America in his day.

This is a fascinating little book that deserves a wider audience than it will likely receive. The Godfreys have done all Canadians a great service by reminding us once again that the British and the French were not the only pioneers in Canada.

■ Irving Abella is the author of *A Coat Of Many Colors: Two Centuries Of Jewish Life In Canada*.

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