

BENJAMIN, George (con't)

Now, scarcely a week later, Dr. John Edward Barker, editor and publisher of Kingston British Whig, had carried the matter a step further. Barker had been born in England in 1799, the same year as George Benjamin. Trained as a physician, he had remained in England until 1832, when he arrived in Kingston with his wife. In February, 1834, just six months before Benjamin had launched the Intelligencer, Barker had given up the practice of medicine and had established the British Whig as a vigorous proponent of reform in Upper Canada. Benjamin's unflinching defence of the Conservative order made him a logical target for Barker's sarcasm.

The Whig used the report of the incident of Benjamin's hanging in effigy as the basis for a poem which it called "Elegy of the Execution of the Belleville Jew." By almost any standard, the poem was scurrilous. It suggested that it would be no loss if Benjamin were to be hanged. It called his newspaper a "Smut-machine." Worse, it attacked Benjamin for not only being born a Jew, but for being a "snarling hypocrite." It referred to him as "Benjie", as the "Saintly Belleville Jew" who may have died more from eating pork than from any hanging. In the words of the refrain "For Pork's the meat Jews must not eat, No doubt it killed the Jew."

There was no doubt Benjamin did not follow most of the religious traditions of the Jewish people. There is little doubt, either, that the family of Isabella Jacobs, his wife, had not followed strict religious observance in New Orleans. An account of that city, written in 1842, had noted that of 700 Jewish families, only four kept a kosher table and only two observed as Sabbath.

The editor of the British Whig would have had even more ammunition if he had known about Benjamin's practice of registering family information of the end-papers of his leather-bound Hebrew prayer-book. But was Benjamin a hypocrite? Did he not consider that he was still Jewish, even though he kept it to himself? Outwardly, George Benjamin lived in a manner that made his family indistinguishable from their Christian neighbours. But inwardly, he drew a line between what he was, a Jew, and what he felt he had to appear to be in order to be fully accepted. Although he may have had to appear like he Christian neighbours, he was still a Jew. Us-

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ing his Hebrew prayer-book was a symbolic act, to be sure, but it was an act of self-definition. It helped him draw the line. He was no hypocrite. He was doing the best he could under the circumstances. Like the Maranos of Spain, he was following a tradition of trying to blend in as quickly as possible, to gain acceptance and achieve equality in a new land, while secretly maintaining his own links with his religion.

It was just Friday. There was still time for Benjamin to write a counterattack, change the galleys, and still publish the Intelligencer on time on Saturday morning.

Mac Bowell, Benjamin's helper, was waiting for his decision. Shortly after they had arrived in Belleville, the Benjamins had taken in Mac, then a motherless immigrant child of about 12. As one of Benjamin's daughters later recalled, Mac "made himself useful around the house and especially in the print shop." Benjamin supported him, saw to his education, and treated him as a son. Over the years, Bowell would become, progressively, Benjamin's employee, business associate, protege, and closest political ally. Sixty years later, long after Benjamin's death, Mackenzie Bowell, senator, would become Canada's fifth prime minister.