

‘A Change of Place is a Change of Fortune’:
Place Names as Structuring Devices
in Chaim Bermant's Novels

W. F. H. Nicolaisen
University of Aberdeen

Chaim Bermant (1929–1998), the Jewish novelist and journalist, has been one of my favourite writers since the last third of the last century of the last millennium. Anybody who claims to have spoken ‘The Queen’s Yiddish’ is likely to attract my attention for the wit and humour which this phrase epitomises, and his pre-occupation, in several of his eighteen novels, with the lives and fortunes of middle-class Glasgow Jewry has acted as a further incentive for keeping my interest alive throughout his publishing career as a writer of narrative fiction. Although that fundamental humour which, like all good wit, is capable of perceptive observation and profound comment, is also to be found in Bermant’s non-Scottish novels, it seems to have entered a particularly effective symbiosis when it has drawn on both Jewish and Scottish, especially Glaswegian, tributaries which, once channelled into a common bed, produce a delightful blend of crackling spiritedness and sensitive insights. For these reasons, though not for them alone, it appeared to be appropriate to explore Bermant’s employment of names as stylistic devices in some of his novels,¹ in order to ascertain how much and in what way they contribute to the special tone, characterisation, and storying qualities which mark the author’s narratives as distinctively and recognisably his.

As is often the case, when such an inventory has been finally assembled, any analysis beyond a mere listing tends to suggest directions which were not originally envisaged and to deflect the intended investigation from its laid-out paths; in other words, as the third section of this brief essay will

¹ The novels in question are: BMT, *Berl Make Tea* (London, 1965); BPU, *Ben Preserve Us* (London, 1965); DB, *Dancing Bear* (London, 1984), JSA, *Jericho Sleep Alone* (London, 1964); NNO, *Now Newman Was Old* (London, 1978); RBP, *Roses Are Blooming in Picardy* (London, 1972); SMW, *The Second Mrs Whitberg* (London, 1976); TC, *The Companion* (London, 1987); THW, *The House of Women* (London, 1983).

demonstrate, there are always surprises. Readers are therefore encouraged to regard the opening two sections as preliminary to the purposes and strategies of the third.

In the first place, in the process of sorting and labelling the evidence, it became clear very quickly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to divorce any examination of, and comment on, the use of personal names from the skilful and obviously competent and comfortable insertion of Yiddish or Hebrew words and phrases into the English texts. This is all the more significant since the first-person narrators of all the novels scrutinised for this study are Jewish in either the religious or secular sense and are, in one way or another, in their fictional autobiographies, concerned with a variety of aspects of their Jewish identity, from full acceptance via puzzled confrontation to severe questioning. It is therefore only to be expected and right that the narrating personae should, according to their position within the Jewish community and their linguistic ability, intersperse their English vocabulary with Yiddish/Hebrew expressions. How else could narrators like Jericho `Jerry' Broch (JSA), Berl Brisker (BMT), Ben Bindle (BPU), Joshua `Josh' Daniel Whitberg (SMW), Samuel `Sam' Zucker (RBP), Sidney Newman (NNO), Henrietta `Ducks' Courlander (THW) or Harry Newman (DB) be made to speak authentically? And Bermant's narratives are full of direct speech. Any writer who uses a mixed idiom like this—generally English but with occasional Yiddish/Hebrew encroachments—and relying on context for its intelligibility, does of course run the risk of satisfying neither of his main two audiences, but Bermant's interpolations adroitly avoid any problems that might have arisen. As is to be expected, most of his non-English lexicon refers to facets of Jewish religious practices or culinary items, although it is not limited to these.

On the whole, the items encountered might be placed in several categories of technical, homespun or apparently untranslatable terminology. Among them we find, without any attempt at classification, *sheigetz*, *ganef*, *shiksekricher*, *tzores*, *naches*, *lantsleit*, *Bar Mitzvah*, *Torah*, *shul*, *Mincha*, *Maariv*, *Bachad*, *kibbutz(im)*, *Shabbat*, *cholent*, *lockshen*, *kreplech*, *tzimmes*, *meshuga*, *schmock*, *schwantz*, *wursht*, *uf-ruf*, *maazeltov*, *tachles*, *kosher*, *goy(im)*, *kadish-seggers*, *chazan*, *Rosh Hashona*, *Yom Kippur*, *Succoth*, *Yeshiva*, *chupah*, *seder*, *kurve*, *kishkes*, *putzcha*, *mamzer*, *heimisch*, *yohr-tzeit*, *mentsch*, *shikse*, *klapping* vs *knipping*, *alter bock*, *schmaltz*, *shtum*, *cacker*, *bris*, *youngatz*, *schwartzter*, *schmorrer*, etc. When listed like this, they look quite overwhelming, but sprinkled judiciously

over many pages of text in helpful contexts they lose their threat for the general reader. Together with certain syntactic constructions,² they serve Bermant's purposes well and helpfully underpin and accompany usage of personal names, effectively intertwining lexical and onomastic elements of his fictions.

In the world depicted by the Brochs, Briskers, Bindles, Whitbergs, Zuckers, Newmans and Courlanders, the Jewish communities to which they belong or of which they have knowledge are therefore peopled, in different capacities and with varying social and occupational status, by individuals like Luis Baranovitz, Philip Cohen, Ray Cranman, Ninna Boaz, Harry Levy, Inis Klein, Benny Black, a Mr Scholemazel, Katrina Kamenetz-Podolsk, Mr Epstein, Simcha Smeltzer, Mrs Nussbaum, a Board of Management of a synagogue consisting of Messrs Schrayner, Bills, Balls, Arkard, Balchack, Basil Plotz (cantor), and Asher Ochsher (beadle), Mrs Globber, Mrs Schmaltzhalter, gentlemen called Liftchick, Krapotkin, Greenfield, Slutzki, Shutef, Sheineretzke, Korncob, Abraham Pickholtz, Mr and Mrs Bosun, Monty Koch, Kluvnick (another cantor), Pushkin, Levine, Fish, Klapholtz, Drapkin, Grisewold, Grosschalk, Kravis, Kriskol, Flecker, Edwin T. Telfer, Otto Shoenberg, Katanchick, Eissemachar, Ignatz Wolf, Jacob and Avner Markovitch, Rhiner and so on. Like the above word list, this remarkable and often ludically selected anthroponymic palette suggests ironic exaggeration bordering on parody when presented in such density, but one has to recall that the occurrence of these names, alone or in clusters, is spread over a number of novels and thus never loses its effectiveness or detracts from the credibility of the characters so named; it is also worth remembering that in much of his novelistic output Chaim Bermant writes *Human Comedy* against a background of frequently unspeakable *Tragedy*.

This becomes especially poignant when he wryly refers to the onomastic means by which a certain amount of outward acculturation is achieved, as when recognisably Jewish surnames are altered by their bearers into what sound or look like Gentile equivalents, thus not only obliterating the original ethnic environment of the names but also suggesting a false onomastic heritage. Thus he comments on (fictive) name changes such as *Schwartzenheimer* to *Blackholm*, *Cohen* to *Colquhoun* or *Connely*, *Laski* to *MacLuskie*, *Malchaski* to *MacDonald*, *Kropotkin* to *Carmichael*, *Abraham*

² Also in that most deprecating of Jewish verbal shoulder-shrugs: “Blows up, schmoz up”, “Your Ninnas and Schminnas”, “sermon schmermon”.

to Ballantyne, Tiffenbron to Tiffen, Courlander to Lander or Lancer, Moshe Markovitch to Maurice Marshall, and (Nahum) Robinowitz to Raeburn. In particular, he plays, in *The Second Mrs Whitby*, with the varied forms of their name which members and descendants of the enormously rich Schwartzwald clan have adopted, such as Schwartz, Wald, Walden, de Walden, Black, Blackwood, Blaikie, and even Du Bois. Bermant, in general, manages to see the funny side of such name changes without losing sight of their more serious implications, especially in terms of his covert or overt quest for the nature or essence of Jewishness, or what some of his characters call 'Jewish Jewishness', a theme which is also central to his extensive journalistic and other non-fiction writings.³ It goes without saying that, apart from scenarios set in Israel, the bearers of the names in question usually inhabit minority enclaves—social, cultural, religious, linguistic, customary—embedded in non-Jewish societies, mostly in cities like Glasgow or London, although these can shift within the cityscapes.

As indicated earlier, these brief surveys of the incorporation of Jewish lexical and onomastic items into some sample narratives of Bermant's are only intended to provide a surface impression of the presence of such devices in his novels. The temptation is, of course, considerable to flesh out these skeletal lists further but this would, in its over-simplification, not do a writer of Bermant's stylistic accomplishments any justice. It suffices to have drawn attention to his abilities as a name-conscious and linguistically sensitive writer, qualities that permeate all his novels, not just the ones investigated in this essay.

Instead of pursuing this undeniable strain in his fictions any further, we will therefore turn to an onomastic strategy in his novels which, after initially appearing to be mere accident, on closer reading reveals itself as having considerable significance particularly in the toponymic marking of locational continuity or movement in the narrative structure; this device is better known from the temporal-spatial sequencing of events in the episodic arrangement of traditional folk-narratives, the single-stranded storying patterns of which are not dissimilar from those of first-person reminiscences

³ Bermant was on the staff of the (London) *Jewish Chronicle* from 1961–1966. Many of his journalistic writings are collected in *Murmurings of a Licensed Heretic* (1990). Relevant non-fiction books are *Israel* (1967), *Troubled Eden* (1967), *The Cousinhood* (1971), *The Walled Garden* (1974), *Point of Arrival* (1975), *The Jews* (1978).

or accounts, like those of Bermant's favourite protagonists—young people about to enter mature adulthood and old persons faced with or experiencing the challenges of retirement or the loneliness of widowerhood.

Let us look at two prominent examples of such human beings on thresholds in their lives; at the very beginning of the very first chapter of *Ben Preserve Us*, the young Ben Bindle, who has already spent three years in Cambridge and two in Jerusalem during named phases of his education, is about to leave London to become a Rabbi to a Jewish congregation in a Scottish town. That is a very prosaic summary of Chaim Bermant's inimitable version of a dialogue between a Jewish mother and her son (*Ben Preserve Us*, pp. 5–6):

Mother jumped into the taxi as it was beginning to move.

“Where are you going to?” I said.

“I’m seeing you off to the station.”

“But I don’t like being seen off. You know I don’t. I’ve told you I don’t.”

“All right, I’m not seeing you off. I’m taking a ride in the taxi. I like taxi rides. Do you mind? It’s not as if it’s going to cost you any more, and if it does, I’ll pay for it.”

We travelled on in silence for a time. Then she said.

“Do you still want to go?”

I sighed but did not answer.

“All right,” she went on, “all right. You want to be a Rabbi? Be a Rabbi. Be anything you like. Be a dustman, a—a—scavenger, a strip-tease dancer. It’s your life. You want to throw it away? Throw it away. But if you must be a Rabbi, why not in London? What’s wrong with London, tell me? Ten million people live in London, but it’s not good enough for my prince. Tell me what’s wrong with it? I live in London, all my family live in London, the Queen, all the best people. Do you have to run away five hundred miles to what-do-you-call-that-place?” “Auchenbothor.”

“Auchen who?”

“Auchenbothor, I’ve told you a hundred times.”

“If you would tell me a thousand times I still wouldn’t be able to pronounce it. All I know about the place is that Aunt Hilda lives there, which believe me is a good enough reason for not going there. Did I ever tell you about Aunt—”

“A hundred times.”

Thus, personal development—from student to Rabbi—is mapped by

two named places, one London (fictionalised reality), the other Auchenbothor (factualised fiction). What cannot be achieved in London, in spite of his mother's insistent protestations, appears to be possible in Auchenbothor, several hundred miles away; therefore, relocation is required. The train journey from one location to the other is a rite of passage which allows Ben to become what he is destined, or at least wants, to be, with London as the named place of departure and the somewhat parodic Auchenbothor as the named place of destination.

At the other end of the spectrum—again at the beginning of the first chapter—Sidney Newman recently retired, titular protagonist of *Now Newman Was Old*, reluctantly, on the verge of leaving London for Crocus Hill by the seaside near Brighton, rehearses again with his wife Dora the arguments for and against their imminent departure (*Now Newman Was Old*, p. 3):

“That's it then.” I said when the removal van pulled up.

“You got regrets?” asked Dora.

“Sure I've got regrets.”

“Habit's everything with you,” she said. “You'd have regrets leaving hell.”

“Sure I'd have regrets. You got no regrets at all?”

“No I haven't. The stairs is killing me. I can't wait to have everything on one floor.”

“We could have let the top floor.”

“Let the top floor? I should keep lodgers at my age?”

“What's age got to do with it? And besides they wouldn't be lodgers, they'd be tenants.”

“They'd have been coming through our hallway and up the stairs there, right?”

“Right.”

“They'd be lodgers.”

We had been through all that before, if not a hundred times then a thousand times, and of course she was right. The house was big, it was difficult to get help (and expensive when you could get it), and the stairs were awkward.

Or, as Sidney puts it a little later (p. 7): “It was taken for granted, at least by Dora, that once I retired we would move house.”

As in Ben Bindle's case, London remains the place to which one returns, for various reasons, from time to time, but Auchenbothor and Crocus Hill are, after the initial leap in the dark, the places where their respective lives

are now moored and, it must be said, flourish. Both Ben Bindle and Sidney Newman continue to make smaller journeys or sorties from time to time; the latter even travels to California (one of the most humorous episodes in the novel) before ending up in a nameless mental hospital, but the main change in their lives is flanked by the name London, on the one hand, and Auchenbothor or Crocus Hill, on the other. It is probably not without significance that the latter two are acartographic.

Other novels, too, link named places with phases in Bermant's protagonists' lives, utilising them as stations on a journey, so to speak, mainly to be stopped at for a while for a particular purpose but always with the possibility of being revisited. Change of location as an outward sign of innovative action and new experiences is, of course, employed quite frequently as one of a storyteller's tricks of the trade, but what is remarkable about Chaim Bermant's stories is that many of these significant locations are named. Heinz/Heinschein, puzzled and sometimes confused identity seeker in *Dancing Bear*, for instance, has to go to Frankfurt to lose his virginity, and 'Ducks' Courlander in *The House of Women* loses hers in Leeds, both places having been primarily the destinations of journeys for other purposes. Heinschein is perhaps more than any other of Bermant's first-person narrators associated with a series of named places in his two-pronged quest for professional advancement and discovery of self. Resznitz on the Latvian-Polish border (boyhood), Cairo (further education), Oxford (study), Frankfurt (see above), London (bank), Gulf States (tour), South Kensington (love-making), Firwood Hall (falls in love), Moscow (professional posting), Yalta (holiday, breakdown of his marriage), London (meets former girl-friend again), Cairo, Riga and Resznitz (revisits), house in Brondesbury Park (circumcision of his son Jacob), Chicago (checking on his parentage, especially his mother), New York (professional assignment), London (return for professional reasons). No wonder the narrator, in an outburst of frustration, comments at one point (p. 91): "I had been a Latvian, a German, and an Egyptian, and I was finally becoming an Englishman, and did not want the added complication of being a Jew." Heinschein's expression of vexation is a negative mirror image of the Prologue with which Bermant prefaces his largely autobiographical account *Coming Home* (p. 11):⁴

⁴ *Coming Home* (London, 1976). Parts of this book had previously appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle*, *The Observer* and *Present Tense*.

I was born in a part of Lithuania which was then Poland and is now Russia. When I was three my family moved to Latvia; when five I was sent to a school in Poland; at eight we all moved to Scotland; at twenty I first went to Israel. In Latvia I was known as a Polack, in Poland as a Lett, and in Scotland as a foreigner. In Israel, however, I was known as a Scot. In a sense I had come home.

It is perhaps not too far-fetched to seek a source for the novelist's practice of naming places as geographical as well as structural markers in the voluntary or involuntary mobility which underlies such personal experience, as well as the behaviour of many of the community to which he belongs.⁵ As Josh Whitberg, the narrator of *The Second Mrs Whitberg*, silently exclaims in exasperated commentary (p. 146):

My fellow Jews. Bless 'em, are caught up in a leap-frog game all their life. No sooner are they established in one place, than whoop! They're off to another, a third, a fourth. They're the answer to an estate agent's dream (which is perhaps why so many of them are estate agents). You would think they were living in tents. Earlier generations—in Russia at least—had to keep moving because they weren't allowed to stay and I suppose if you're used to doing things one way for two thousand years, you can't change to another overnight, but somebody had to make a start.

Characteristically, though, Josh Whitberg's vision of greater permanency in a more settled life style is also named as a Glasgow street called Tulloch Terrace, and specifically number twenty-two, a domicile which he refuses to leave even after most of the Jews who had lived there (Walden, Carmichael, Kropotkin, Klapholtz, Ballantyne, Abrahamski, Kluvnick, Pushkin, Levine, Fish etc.) “had fled to Gimmock, to Whitecraigs, to Newton Mearns” (p. 55) and had been replaced mostly by Pakistanis. His daughter, when he visits her in America, accuses him of regarding “Tulloch Terrace, Glasgow” as “paradise” (p. 82), and he chides her in return: “You've only been married four years and you've already moved twice”, now living, as she admits, “sort of nowhere”.

⁵ This is reflected both in the first volume of his autobiography, *Genesis*, published posthumously a few months after his death, and in his fictional “Jewish family saga” *The Patriarch* (London, 1981).

While it is dangerous to allow an author's fictional creations to speak for him, it seems nevertheless permissible to interpret frequently expressed opinions and attitudes, and especially the repeated use of particular devices, as echoing some of the writer's own predilections and basic instincts. The assumption is therefore not misleading that even more fundamental to Bermant's naming practices in the depiction of locations as holding areas in temporal developments in somebody's life is the author's innate, ingrained sense of space, for even when movement is absent or not yet contemplated, spatial relationships are prominently displayed, as in young Jericho Broch's description of Glasgow as seen from the university, a view familiar to numerous students (*Jericho Sleep Alone*, p. 47):

As we stood by the University flagstaff on Gilmore hill we could see much of Glasgow stretched out below us: the Gingerbread pile of the art gallery, the children's hospital, like an Oldham mill; the river Kelvin, white with foam, gushing its noxious way, and in the distance the scaffolding and cranes of the ship-yards like a black, leafless forest, and beyond them the hills of the Clyde, grey-green.

If one adds to this nostalgic vision names (all with different functions in the plot) like Langside, The Victoria Infirmary, Queens Park, the Cosmo (cinema), Bath Street, the Langside, Gorbals, and Mitchell libraries, the Campsie Hills, Gorbals Cross, Ayr, the Maryhill Barracks, Pollockshields, the Trossachs, Kelvin Avenue, Loch Lomond, Woodland Road, St Andrew's Hall, Camphill, the image of the city of Glasgow, and of the delightful places to which Glaswegians can escape so easily, becomes irresistible. `Jerry' Broch, of course, also travels as he grows up—to Thackford in Essex, to London, to Tel-Aviv, Halfa, Jerusalem and a kibbutz in Israel, but Glasgow remains both origin and satisfying destination of his life: “All was well with the world and the world was well with me” (*Jericho Sleep Alone*, p. 218).

It is not surprising that Bermant's novels do not contain many references to named places which are of little relevance or none at all to the plot for, in practically all instances, places that are given names by the author have some bearing on the lives of his protagonists, like a holiday trip from Crumpshall to Frinton's Queen Anne hotel and Clapton, or a day visit to Dorset in *The Companion*, the education of the girls in *The House of Women* at a boarding school called Hellenslea, Berl Brisker's offer of a job on a farm

near Bletchley and his ultimate return to Eastleigh in *Berl Make Tea*, Bournemouth as a holiday destination in *Ben Preserve Us*, Sunday trips to the Strath-Eden hotel in Helensburgh for kosher suppers in *The Second Mrs Whitberg*, or an unexpected invitation to provide musical entertainment in Pontefract in *Roses are Blooming in Picardy*. While some of these may be of little significance, most of them represent important stepping stones, for in the terms of Uncle Yehudah's favourite Talmudic saying in *Jericho Sleep Alone*, *Meshane Hamokom*, *Meshane Hamazel* “a change of place is a change of fortune” (p. 32, also p. 300).

As is appropriate, in a corpus of novels like Chaim Bermant's, Israel is a frequent destination of those who travel to or settle in named places. It is therefore somewhat presumptuous of a student of literary onomastics to highlight only those aspects of Bermant's works which illuminate the use of names as structuring devices because, in the end, many of these novels, as well as his non-fiction writings, are about something even more fundamental than names, as this exchange between Mrs Kamanetz-Podolsk and Berl Brisker in *Berl Make Tea* demonstrates (p. 56):

Mrs K.-P.: “... for ordinary people like you and me, Berl, if we're not Jewish we're nothing.”

B.B.: “Mrs K.-P., I'm as Jewish today as I was the day I was circumcised, and heaven forbid that I shall ever try to be anything else—because I should never get away with it. It's built into me.”

This is a heart-felt, profound sense of identity which even the strong individuating power of names can foreground only with difficulty, but perhaps even the limited examination of the presence and function of names in some of the humorous novels of an accomplished Jewish writer like Chaim Bermant has made some kind of acceptable contribution to that fascinating and ever-growing field of intellectual endeavour—literary onomastics.