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Gelvin, James L

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## **The Global History of the Balfour Declaration: Declared Nation**

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Reviewed by James L. Gelvin  
University of California, Los Angeles  
gelvin@history.ucla.edu

Zionism—Jewish nationalism—emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, mostly among Eastern European Jews. Although confronted by anti-Semitism and exclusionary nationalisms, both of which “othered” Jewish communities, Jews were slow to embrace the doctrine. It is therefore likely that Zionism would have gone the way of Confederate nationalism and hundreds of other nationalisms that burned themselves out before achieving their goals had it not received the approbation of the British government. That government articulated its support for Zionist goals in the Balfour Declaration, which stated, in part, “His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object...” After World War I, when the British acquired the mandate for Palestine from the League of Nations, they integrated the language of the declaration into the “draft instrument” that outlined the procedures Great Britain would be obliged to follow in administering its new charge. A wartime pledge thus became a legally binding statute for the British government.

The year 2017 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, and a sizeable number of publications have already appeared on the topic. More are likely to appear as November 2, 2017—the anniversary of the exact date of the declaration’s publication on the pages of *The Times* (London)—comes and goes. None, however, is likely to be more innovative, or more important, than Maryanne A Rhett’s

small volume. And if anyone has wondered where the strange phrase in the declaration, “national home,” came from and what its meanings are, Rhett provides the answer.

Rhett’s book stands out for a number of reasons. Almost all writings about the Balfour Declaration deal with a limited number of questions, the most common of which concerns the British government’s motivations in authorizing its dissemination. Was it the influence of the prominent Zionist Chaim Weizmann, the desire to keep the United States and Russia in the war, the fear that Germany might beat the British to the punch, British government ministers’ belief that Jews wielded far greater power than they actually did? Rhett touches on this question, but her eyes are on a wider horizon. What makes Rhett’s book unique is that she focuses on the cultural history of the document. Rhett positions the document in both its global and imperial contexts to explore the conceptual framework in which it should be situated. As a result, rather than continuing the tradition that holds the declaration to be *sui generis*, Rhett demonstrates how unremarkable it actually was, given the span of early twentieth-century ideas about nation and empire; the interplay between Indian, Irish, and Zionist home-rulers/nationalists and the imperial center; and the experiences of would-be empire-builders like the Japanese and transnational schemers like those committed to Pan-Islamism.

Rhett begins with a description of each of the eleven iterations of the Balfour Declaration. By tracking the appearances and disappearances of terms like “race,” “nation,” and “people,” she teases out the meanings a broad array of actors ascribed to Zionism and its goals and explores the tension inherent in imperial promises of national self-determination.

For Rhett, the reason those promises were made in some places yet denied elsewhere had to do with the manner in which the imperial center situated each national movement—and each nation-in-the-process of formation—in a gendered and racialized hierarchy. Although nationalist movements throughout the empire attempted to create narratives that reflected the imperatives of masculinity and racial standing—the former through emphasis on martial valor and vanquishing the land, for example, the latter through the construction of a mythologized past—the Zionist movement was particularly adept at self-presentation, as any number of books on the topic attest. It was thus able to situate itself above the diasporic Jewish community of Europe, Oriental Jews, and the indigenous Arab population of Palestine and, in effect, aspire to build a hierarchic nation-based empire within an empire.

Where Rhett misfires is her analysis of nationalism in Chapter 5. “At its core,” Rhett claims, “the multifaceted belief structure of Zionism is nearly two thousand years old, but despite this age there is a disconnection between modern political Zionism and traditional religious Zionism (102).” If we are to hold by our definition of Zionism as Jewish nationalism, however, this is clearly a misreading. Nationalism is eminently political (and here Rhett misuses the term “political Zionism,” which actually refers to a tactical approach to achieving Zionist aims by gaining the support of a great power or multiple great powers—which, in effect was accomplished when the British issued the Balfour Declaration). Nationalism’s goal is the establishment of a sovereign state. To posit a nationalism that is not only apolitical but two thousand years old—in effect making “traditional religious Zionism” into what Eric Hobsbawm called a “proto-nationalism”—traps one within the teleological Zionist narrative of itself and conflates

two very different orders of phenomena, one cultural, one political. It also presupposes a theory of stages, whereby proto-nationalisms become nationalisms and Pan-Islamism begets Pan-Arabism which, in turn, begets “local nationalisms.” All these ideas have been rebutted in recent literature on the subject. Unfortunately, most of the secondary sources Rhett draws from on this topic date back to the mid-1990s or earlier.

Conceptual confusion about the nature of nationalism as viewed by contemporary social science does not detract, however, from the main thrust of this volume. This is particularly true in light of Rhett’s penetrating analysis of nationalism’s symbolic structuration and the role that structuration played in securing favorable reception for Zionist claims by the British government. Just when it appeared that there was nothing new to be said about the Balfour Declaration, Rhett offers a nuanced, contextualized reading of the document that should change the way future historians approach the topic.