Haters, Baiters and Would-Be Dictators: Anti-Semitism and the UK Far Right

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It has become a cliché to begin articles, reviews or books covering research into Britain's far-right by explaining how the field has blossomed over recent years. Studies of the inter-war period in particular have developed over the last few decades, from a few books and articles into a large and – for those who are new to the subject – overwhelming discipline. However, the bulk of this research is focused upon British Fascism, a term used to describe the three fascist (or professed fascist) groups that arose between 1923 and 1939. These were the British Fascists (formed as the British Fascisti), the Imperial Fascist League, and most famously, the British Union of Fascists. Other groups have attracted interest, but for the most part, this interest comes through the lens of fascist studies. In other words, a variety of far-, extreme-, and radical-right groups emerged between the wars, but they are usually studied insofar as they preceded or worked with fascists.

The Britons, one such group, and their founder are the main focus of Nick Toczek's *Haters, Baiters and Would-be Dictators*. Founded in 1919 by Henry Hamilton Beamish, an outspoken antisemite, the Britons were an extreme, nationalist, conspiracy-theory obsessed group whose views were encapsulated by the name of their journal, *The Hidden Hand*. Their founding motivations were centred on the idea that British immigration policies were too lenient, and the state's attitude towards aliens was likewise permissive and dangerous. Jews were the main threat to Britain, and the Britons' attitude towards Jewry alternated between restrictions, to expulsion (to Palestine or Madagascar) to extermination. However, the actual body of the Britons was small and despite soaring aspirations, they were never close to being a mass movement. Their real strength was their publishing wing, the Britons' Publishing Society. The Britons' biggest contribution, perhaps, was that they bought the rights to publish the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* in 1920s, and continued to make it available to a British audience. The *Protocols*, an infamous antisemitic forgery which supposedly revealed the machinations of world Jewry, proved to be the Britons' most enduring publication – as Toczek points out, over 80 editions were published during the Britons' history – and it remains essential reading for antisemites.

Haters, Baiters and Would-be Dictators is laid out in a straightforward and useful manner. It begins by

exploring Beamish himself, expanding upon the sparse biographical details that appear in other books. This presents a detailed, rounded image of Beamish, a London-born nationalist who developed his views through a lifetime of working in the British Empire, as a farmer, entrepreneur, publicist and soldier. This provides further context for his views, usually explored in terms of English society, through an examination of Beamish's time in South Africa. At around 70 pages, this biography is far more detailed than the usual page or two devoted to HH Beamish, and adds useful details about his role in connection far-right movements in Europe, Africa and America with the Britons. A brief chapter on the British Brothers' League, an ideological precursor to the Britons, and Arnold White – another antisemitic leading light – flesh out the context in which the Britons developed.

The main bulk of this study concerns the history and influence of the Britons. Chapter three explores the Britons from its inception, through the Second World War to 1949, while chapters four and five explore the Britons in the 1950s, and the 1960s and 1970s. This is particularly interesting, given that most studies of the Britons are focused on the inter-war experience. This is followed by two chapters that trace the Britons' influence through its relationship with Arnold Leese, and then Colin Jordan. Taken together, these four chapters make a compelling study, not only because their material is often new, but also because they demonstrate the long-lasting influence of the Britons' society. Leese, a founder of the Imperial Fascist League, became 'Jew-wise' (his term for one who believed in the Jewish world conspiracy) after befriending Arthur Kitson, another leading member of the Britons. Leese in turn mentored Colin Jordan, one of Britain's leading post-war Neo-Nazis. Jordan in turn established the first British National Party, which became part of the National Front, thus linking the Britons into a far-right lineage that continues to the modern day.

The last two chapters are less Britons-specific, instead presenting a study of the 'origins, circulation and influence' of the *Protocols* and the influence of Henry Ford in spreading the *Protocols* further afield. These help contextualise the importance of the Britons, by showing some of the influences one of their most successful publications had on the Western far-right. However, despite what one might expect given the subject of this book, there was no direct relation between Ford and the Britons (except for Beamish's unsubstantiated claim that he taught Ford 'the meaning of the Jewish menace', p. 38). This chapter, then, throws the Britons' limited successes into contrast with Henry Ford's much more successful attempt to alert people to the so-called 'Jewish peril'.

The book is finished with seven useful appendixes. The first four cover groups which preceded the Britons, the Britons' peers, journals and magazines that operated in the same spheres, and key figures within the Britons. These serve as potted biographies that are useful in their own right, and serve to enhance the main body by explaining and contextualising the right-wing world within which the Britons operated. The fifth appendix is a reproduction of a draft Constitution for the Britons, a useful primary source that helps readers get a feel of the group, while the sixth appendix provides a list of Britons publications. The last appendix gives a list of known addresses from which the Britons operated. Taken together, these appendixes are a suitable and useful addition. A lot of the information, especially that relating to smaller groups who worked with the Britons, is new or expands upon existing historiography. The appendixes will certainly help those new to the field, students especially, understand the often convoluted world in which the Britons operated.

Most studies that feature the Britons view them as an appendix of fascism. The problem that arises from this perspective is that it presents success and failure in specific, political terms. Groups are deemed to have failed if they did not take power, like their Italian and German counterparts, or at least win some representation in Parliament. By these measures, the Britons failed massively, and they failed to even attract the mass support that could have made electoral success plausible. Some studies do approach the Britons from a different angle however, particularly those of Gisela Lebzelter and Colin Holmes, whose studies of antisemitism in British society feature sections on Beamish and the Britons. However, both of these studies and others on fascism – such as Richard Thurlow's *Fascism in Britain* – are wide-reaching and the Britons only receive a comparatively small examination. Furthermore, most previous studies focus on the inter-war period, while the Britons continued to operate until the 1970s. The real strength of Toczek's study is that it places the Britons centre-stage, rather than examining them as a supplement to fascism. Acknowledging that

they failed as a mass movement, Toczec instead argues the Britons' success was rooted in its other activities. Lebzelter has argued that the Britons created a 'niche' filled with other conspiracy-theorist antisemites, and this allowed for the sustainment of antisemitic theories.⁽¹⁾ Toczec begins his study with this concept, writing, 'for bigotry to thrive, not merely persist, it requires the steady sustenance of justification. To achieve this, it needs to build itself a culture ... within such an environment, even the most outlandish of views can gain the appearance of authority, authenticity and ... normality' (p. 1).

So while the Britons failed as a mass movement, they succeeded as a publishing house. Despite constant financial difficulties, the Britons Publishing Society catered to the fringes of British society, publishing books by and for leading fascists, antisemites and other extreme figures. Toczec shows the Britons, while still a fringe movement, were able to cater to a varied fringe audience. As such, the Britons helped nurture an antisemitic tradition that legitimised antisemites by providing them with a back-catalogue which they could cite for some credibility. In doing so, the Britons – intertwined with the fascist Arnold Leese – were able to link pre-First World War prejudices to the inter-war period, and link the inter-war conspiracy theories about Judeo-Bolshevism and the 'hidden hand' to the post-war racism of Colin Jordan (a contributor to the Briton's journal and disciple of Leese). Moreover, the numerous Britons publications provided a more rounded (if conspiracy-based and extreme) examination of the apparent Jewish Conspiracy. While the *Protocols* was influential, it was also abstract. Other works like Beamish's *Jews' Who's Who*, an examination of leading Jews that provided details on their public roles, company positions and personal wealth, added some less abstract details, and by drawing upon pre-war prejudices towards successful Jewish people it provided some 'evidence' that Jews were working along the lines of the conspiracy outlined in the *Protocols*, to the detriment of Britain.

One of the problems with this study is that Toczec's bibliography seems sparse at times, and unfortunately, he does not always interact with the wider historical debates surrounding the place of antisemitism in British society. However, given the extremity of his subjects – Beamish, Leese and post-war figures like Jordan were some of the most extreme of Britain's far-right – it is probably wise to avoid basing general theories about society on such irregular figures. As Colin Holmes argues of the Beamish, 'personality traits' need to be considered when analysing the beliefs of the Britons, alongside the social context of their ideas.⁽²⁾ Not engaging with the historiography is a pity, however, as Toczec's material covers a broader period than previous studies of the Britons, and as such implicitly challenges the conclusions of historians who cease to study the Britons around 1939, by showing that the Britons were part of a long and unsavoury strain of politics stretching across the 20th century. Repeated references to other groups with which the Britons worked, and the appendices listing related groups, reinforce the idea that the Britons operated at the centre of a network of sympathetic organisations. These connections are central to Toczec's main thesis, that the Britons' influence was greater than its small membership suggested. While he has done very well in showing some of these connections, in particular Leese and Jordan, Toczec's argument would be strengthened by deeper analysis of the connections between the Britons and their numerous peers. It would have been fascinating to see the possible impact of this relationship of inter-war politics – and to find out more about the numerous small groups, relatively unknown to historians, with whom the Britons were allied. However, Toczec can probably be forgiven, since giving these groups proper attention would likely require a whole new book.

While Toczec's study does not challenge the prevailing historical theories about the Britons, it complements them with a wealth of biographical information and primary research. The general conclusion about the Britons is that they failed as a mass movement, but had an impact at an ideological level. Toczec notes Beamish is little remembered even among the extreme right. In contrast to figures like Mosley, Beamish left little in the way of literature, and we have few pictures and no recordings of him speaking (p. 190). The extremism of Beamish, Leese and other subjects of *Haters* made them exceptional, but also limited their influence. This is apparent in the figures given for Britons' publications, and their newspaper the *Hidden Hand* had a circulation of around 150 in the 1920s (p. 93). Numerous reasons appear for the Britons' failure. Financial troubles dogged the organisation and its founder. Beamish was difficult to work with, and during the crucial early stages of the Britons' history, he argued with other anti-Jewish journals and figures, losing

out on the valuable contacts they could have provided. At the same time, Britons' publications were apparently boycotted – the extreme nature of their content meant they were not for sale in newsagents at least (p. 92).

Where they failed as a mass movement, the Britons succeeded in the field of ideas. Previous historians, Thurlow in particular, argue that that through its polemics, press attacks on wealthy and successful Jews and the involvement of pre-war antisemites, the Britons linked to the Edwardian radical right and the pre-war anti-alienism most commonly associated with the British Brothers' League.⁽³⁾ Likewise, through the IFL/Britons mentorship and support, the foundations were laid for the post-war extreme-right, particularly the (first) British National Party and the National Front. Toczec provides a lot of material that complements this argument, and he also shows the Britons were connected with numerous smaller groups – as Liebzelter argues, the Britons were central to the antisemitic 'niche'. Toczec reinforces this argument with reference to the numerous groups which co-operated with the Britons and concludes that the Britons were successful, partially, because they did manage to spread their hatred. Furthermore, they created a 'façade of pseudo-factual, historical, academic and cultural legitimacy' through their publications (p. 191). The fact the Britons were only part of an antisemitic, ultranationalist culture, rather than the dominant mass-movement they aspired to be, gave them some verisimilitude as they formed a semi-independent library that other groups could reference. In this way, their hate was spread far and wide, and other ultranationalists could learn more and spuriously justify their positions through the Britons' back catalogue.

Overall, Nick Toczec has provided a useful and timely study with his examination of the Britons and their founder, H. H. Beamish. In addition to Beamish, we are provided with details about the other Britons' members, their publications and their connections. Toczec has expanded upon our knowledge of an understudied organisation and shown that extreme groups can have long-lasting impacts and influences, even when they attract relatively few members. The Britons served as an important link between pre-First World War and post-Second World War society. Thus, they demonstrate the continuity of antisemitic, and broader anti-alien/immigrant, ideas throughout the last century. It is a pity that these links between the Britons and the far-right in general have not been analysed in more detail – it would be fascinating to see what indirect influence these connections had on inter-war politics. Nevertheless, this is a particularly useful exploration of a group that is usually glossed over, particularly in regards to its later history. While the Britons were hardly an unmitigated success, they aimed to inform the world about the Jewish 'hidden hand'. Their publications and connections did just that, appealing to many different extreme groups from the 1920s to the near-present, providing material that supported antisemites and allowed them to reinforce their beliefs. Because of this, Toczec is able to make the persuasive argument that the Britons partially achieved their aims, especially considering the importance of the *Protocols* to the formation of Jewish stereotypes and antisemitic campaigns.

Notes

1. Gisela Liebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England* (New York, NY, 1978), p. 88.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–1939* (London, 1979) p. 160.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 42–3.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/160360](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/160360)