Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

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Dr Samuel Solomon’s name is unlikely to have any particular significance for most people today. Even in Liverpool, where he gained fame and fortune, very few would be capable of identifying him.¹ Some Liverpool Jews, having heard their parents or grandparents refer admiringly to ‘Dr Cowan’ or ‘Dr Lowenthal’, might imagine him to have been a devoted physician who treated the sick, perhaps without charge, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet Samuel Solomon was neither a general practitioner nor a communal worthy. He made his name over 200 years ago on the strength of patent medicines that he devised and marketed with brilliant advertising and vast commercial success.²

Although it is generally assumed that the facts regarding Solomon’s life and career are too well known to require further investigation, references to him in many books show gaps and inconsistencies even about when and where he was born, who his parents were, how he began his career and when he died. The Jewish Encyclopedia claims that Solomon was born (no place mentioned) in 1780 and died in London in 1818. A more recent work gives ‘ca. 1853’ as the year of his death.³ The new DNB entry by T. A. B. Corley repeats the common mistake regarding his year of birth (‘1768 or 1769’) and maintains that ‘neither the identity of his parents nor the place of

¹ This revised version of a lecture first presented to the Liverpool branch of the Society on 10 June 2007 was delivered to the Israel branch in Jerusalem on 7 December 2008. It marked the designation of Liverpool as Europe’s ‘Capital of Culture’ 2008.
Plate 1 Portrait of Samuel Solomon, MD, his hand resting on *A Guide to Health* and with his spurious coat of arms displayed below, after a painting by I. Steel Bath. (Photograph by Arnold Lewis, courtesy of Liverpool Central Records Office.)

his birth is known'.

In researching this paper I consulted virtually everything written about Samuel Solomon, as well as his own publication, *A Guide to Health*, which had a wide readership.

This has made it possible to sort fact from fiction about his Jewish background, medical knowledge, commercial enterprise, social standing, family life and Gentile descendants. The character that emerges is, in some respects, different from the one portrayed hitherto.

4 Corley (see n. 2).

5 *A Guide to Health, or Advice to both Sexes in Nervous and Consumptive Complaints ...* by [samuel] Solomon, M.D. (London? 1796). It supposedly ran to sixty-six editions and 120,000 copies, each in turn having an expanded text and a slightly modified title. For further details, see below.
Jewish family background

He is first described in a genealogical study of the Anglo-Jewish Franklin family as an Irish Jew living in Cork. A more detailed account is provided by Cecil Roth, who describes how ‘There was a synagogue at Cork in the first half of the eighteenth century, with its own Shochet and its burial-ground in Kemp Street; it was founded apparently between 1731 and 1747, but was defunct by 1796. Abraham Solomon, naturalised in 1769, father of the notorious quack doctor, Samuel Solomon of Liverpool, was among the local residents...’ Roth adds in a footnote: ‘In 1753, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London informed those of its Yehidim who were accustomed to obtain kosher meat in Cork and other parts of Ireland that Abraham Solomons [sic] was the only person there qualified to perform shechita’.

The founders of the Jewish community in Cork, like those of the parent Dublin kehillah, were Sephardim, and one might assume from the Mahamad’s recommendation that the Solomon family was also of Spanish and Portuguese origin. The fact that older members of the family chose to associate with and marry Ashkenazim casts doubt on that assumption. Unfortunately, no records of the original Sephardi kehillah have survived and its members disappeared through assimilation and intermarriage. No Jewish tombstones dating from the eighteenth century are to be found in Cork. The old ‘Jews’ Burying Ground’ was covered over by a factory and later by a car park, its actual location being discovered only in the late 1950s.

Bernard Shillman’s pioneering work on Irish Jewry contains no details of the Cork shohet and his family, but Louis Hyman’s history, published twenty-seven years later, amply fills that gap and constitutes the most

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6 Arthur Ellis Franklin (compiler), Records of the Franklin Family and Collaterals (London 1935) 96.
8 Louis Hyman’s version of this in the Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem 1972) 8:1464 reads: ‘A congregation was established in Cork, as an offshoot of the Dublin community, in about 1725... In the 18th century, Cork Jews imported wines and merchandise from Spain and Portugal in their own ships, while others exported preserved meat, certified by the local shohet, to England and the West Indies. By 1796 the Cork community was defunct, to be revived only some 60 years later.’
9 Information supplied by Fred Rosehill, one of the last Cork Jews, in October 2006. A feature article in the Jewish Chronicle (hereafter JC) 23 Sept. 1955, p. 10, mentions this long-vanished burial ground.
10 Bernard Shillman, A Short History of the Jews in Ireland (Dublin 1945).
11 Hyman (see n. 2).
Gabriel A. Sivan

authoritative source to date. This is the publication that Bill Williams, the historian of Manchester’s Jewish community, has taken the trouble to consult.

It is clear that the merchant Abraham Solomon, who became a naturalized subject of the Crown in 1769, and the shohet whom London’s Mahamad called Abraham Solomons in 1753 were one and the same. For much of the eighteenth century ‘Ireland did an impressive business in the export of preserved meat’. A pamphlet of 1737 affirms that ‘shipment of beef and provisions was the most considerable commerce of Cork, with local Jews engaged in it, supplying foreign clients, of whom several were English Jews, as well as Jews living in the far-away West Indies. To comply with the customers’ ritual specifications, cattle were killed in Cork by the local shohet; the meat was prepared for shipment, as Jewish law prescribed, within three days after killing and dispatched overseas with a certificate from the shohet.

As for the question of Abraham Solomon’s origin, it transpires that when the Cork congregation was founded about the year 1725, with shohet and cemetery, it comprised Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews engaged in import and export... By the end of that century, the community had died out and synagogue and cemetery were closed down, although a few of the original group were still in the city during the first half of the nineteenth century – the Solomon, Hyams (Hymes) and Mandowsky families. This, together with other evidence, points to the Solomon family’s Ashkenazi descent.

Abraham Solomon had a brother named Isaac, a daughter (Rachel) and two sons (Samuel and Isaac). His brother, who lived in Dublin, worked as a druggist and called himself ‘Dr’ Isaac Solomon, was declared insolvent in March 1777. He was evidently the quack from whom Samuel Solomon learned various tricks of the trade. The other Isaac Solomon, Samuel’s younger brother, earned his living as a jeweller and made his mark as a silversmith. He is the only Jew known to have remained in Cork, dying there in 1845.

Samuel Solomon’s precise date of birth is not recorded, but why virtually

12 Ibid, 72 and 308, n. 5, gives a more precise date for the Mahamad’s recommendation and (inter alia) quotes the following sources: Minute Book of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, 3 Tammuz 5513 (July 1753); James Picciotto, Sketches of Anglo-Jewish History (1877) 160; A. M. Hyamson, The Sephardim of England (London 1951) 146.
13 Hyman, ibid. 72–3.
14 Ibid. 218.
15 Of Rachel nothing more is known; her uncle and brother were presumably named after the same ancestor.
16 Hyman (see n. 2) 60; Williams (see n. 2) 14.
17 Hyman, ibid. 76–7. This Isaac Solomon was evidently a bachelor.
every writer has identified it as 1768 or 1769 is far from clear. Louis Hyman declares that Samuel was born in Cork around 1745, which (in view of the facts now available) seems a fair deduction. We have no information about the earlier part of his life, although – as the son of a shohet – he must have received a traditional upbring.

Around 1768 he moved to Dublin and (presumably with Isaac Solomon’s advice) opened a depot for the sale of remedies which were eventually advertised and marketed throughout the British Isles and North America. This disposes of the claim that he started out as ‘a street urchin, hawking either black-ball shoe cleaner in Newcastle upon Tyne or hair curlers in Birmingham on Saturday nights after the Sabbath was over’. An advertisement in the Dublin press, shedding light on the outset of his career, reads as follows:

Dr. Solomon in Fleet Street, having performed many Cures on Persons with Inverted Scurvies, Cancers and Evils, thinks it his Duty to inform the Public thereof that his Medicines may become more useful by being more generally known, for which purpose it will be sufficient to name a few Instances only, as the Degree of Credit due to the Persons whose cases he shall quote and whose Certificates are in his Possession can Leave no Room to doubt their Veracity and [the] Efficacy of his Medicines.

The date of this advert surely indicates that Samuel Solomon could not have been a child of four when he was selling his cure-alls in Dublin.

He presumably remained there for another fifteen years, since we next hear of him around 1789, when he and his uncle – ‘Dr’ Isaac Solomon – transferred their operations to Liverpool. At about that time one of Isaac’s daughters became the wife of Meyer (Myer) Lemon, a Liverpool ‘slop-seller and itinerant dealer’, whose name and address appear in Gore’s Directory (1790). Meyer Lemon, a founder of the organized Jewish

18 Ibid. 69, 76.
19 Ibid. 76.
20 Corley (see n. 2).
21 Hyman (see n. 2) 76 and 308, notes 21–2, quoting the Hibernian Journal (Wed. 30 Dec. 1772 to Friday 1 Jan. 1773). One of the ‘Instances’ mentioned here was provided by a non-commissioned officer: ‘I, Charles Cooth, Fife Major belonging to the 38th Regiment of Foot, commanded by the Right Hon. Lord Blaney, certify that I have been perfectly cured by Dr. Solomon of a violent dry Scurvy all over my Body which was of several years standing, Given by me, 22nd Oct. 1771.’ The period of Solomon’s activity in Dublin is confirmed by Eoin O’Brien in his article, ‘“From the Waters of Sion to Liffeyside”’. The Jewish Contribution: Medical and Cultural, Journal of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons X:3 (Jan. 1981) 110.
22 Benas (see n. 2) 9. According to information supplied by Joe Wolfman, the Liverpool Jewish community’s former archivist, records show that the wedding took place in Kingston upon Hull.
Gabriel A. Sivan

community in Manchester (1793–4) where he had business interests, became one of the more affluent Jews in Liverpool at the turn of the century.23 His son, Moses Lemon, would strengthen the family ties by marrying Samuel Solomon’s daughter Maria (his first cousin) in 1815, but their union was tragically brief.24

Meanwhile, Samuel met and married Elizabeth Aaron, the third child and eldest daughter of Moses Aaron (1718–1812), a Birmingham pencil maker and an ordained rabbi.25 She was about twenty-nine at the time and thus fifteen years younger than her husband. It is unlikely that Moses Aaron would have allowed his daughter to marry a completely non-observant Jew.

The two self-styled doctors, Isaac and Samuel Solomon, went into business in Liverpool’s dockland area, where Jews had lived and traded for some years: Isaac practised as a ‘surgeon and chemist’ in Cleveland Street while Samuel purveyed his medicines in the Old Strand.26 The success of these remedies facilitated the inventor’s move to 12 Marybone, off Tithebarn Street, and then, before 1800, to ‘a large, newly erected house, surrounded by a pleasant garden, at the Dansie Street corner of Brownlow Street’.27 Seven of Elizabeth and Samuel’s ten children grew up in that house.

Medical respectability

Was Samuel Solomon just an impostor who made money by selling naïve folk bogus remedies? To answer that question we must define the term quack, an abbreviation of ‘quacksalver’ (from kwakzalver in Dutch). According to the Oxford Dictionary, it means ‘an ignorant pretender to skills, especially in medicine or surgery; one who offers wonderful remedies or devices…’. A quack or quack doctor was ‘a puffer of salves, an itinerant drug vendor at fairs who “quacked” forth the praises of his wares to the credulous rustics’.28

24 See below.
25 Hyman (see n. 2) 76; Williams (see n. 2) 14. Born in Birmingham, Moses Aaron was reportedly the son of Hungarian immigrants; the gravestone of his eldest child, Jacob Aaron (1756–1808), indicates that Moses had obtained semikhah. In the eighteenth century, Birmingham evidently had its own bet din and rabbis who followed secular occupations. They are said to have undertaken Lord George Gordon’s conversion to Judaism: Records of the Franklin Family (see n. 6) 96.
26 Williams, ibid.; Wolfman (see n. 22).
27 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 16.
28 The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, based on the original book of E. Cobham Brewer; revised by Ivor H. Evans (Ware, Hertfordshire 1993) 879.
Two closely allied terms are charlatan (from the Italian verb ciarlate, ‘to prate, chatter, babble’), denoting ‘one who claims knowledge or skill he does not possess … usually applied to vendors of quack remedies who cover their ignorance in a spate of high-sounding, often meaningless words’; and mountebank, another word of Italian origin, which denotes ‘a vendor of quack medicines at fairs, who attracts the crowd by his tricks and antics; hence any charlatan or self-advertising pretender. The bank, or bench, was the counter on which traders displayed their goods … street-vendors used to mount on their bank to patter to the public.’

Those claiming an ability to heal the sick were long ridiculed as ‘quacks’. Molière’s last comedy, Le Malade imaginaire (‘The Hypochondriac’, 1673), with its savage attack on doctors, is a notable example. (Molière fell ill while acting in his play and died shortly after its fourth performance.) Even in our own time, some jocularly use the term ‘quack’ when referring to general practitioners.

By the end of the seventeenth century quacks were pouring into England from Central Europe – ‘High and Low Germans and Germanic Jews, such as Drs. Bossy and Brodum, becoming common in the eighteenth century’. Bossy, a ‘German charlatan’ whose real name is said to have been Garcia, was ‘the last of the London itinerant empirics’ (c. 1790). From a stage erected in London’s Covent Garden market he made his daily pitch to the crowd and sold medicines to gullible folk. Various artists portrayed ‘Dr’ Bossy at work, and he may have inspired one of Rowlandson’s famous caricatures.

The career of William Brodum (fl. 1767–1824), which has been thoroughly investigated, foreshadows that of Samuel Solomon in more ways than one. He was born in Copenhagen under the name of Issachar Cohen, arrived in London at the age of twenty and gained his livelihood as a street-seller before touring England as a huckster of medicines. Brodum’s rags-to-riches story was phenomenal. In January 1791 he was awarded an MD degree by Marischal College, Aberdeen, and four years later he published a Guide to Old Age, advertising his own patent medicines, which he dedicated to King George III. This ‘shameless marketing exercise’, which ran

29 Ibid. 212, 733.
30 Porter, Health for Sale (see n. 2) 160.
31 Alfred Rubens, Anglo-Jewish Portraits (London 1935) 12; idem, A Jewish Iconography (London 1981) 18 and figs 157–9. See the accompanying illustration, where his name is spelt ‘Bossey’.
33 This was probably the first university in Great Britain to confer degrees on professing Jews; see Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem 1971) 2:70–71. No examination was required by the college: so long as its fees were paid, the recommendation of two qualified doctors was deemed sufficient.
34 The Guide to Old Age: or, A Care for the Indiscretions of Youth, 2 vols (London 1795–1802).
Plate 2 ‘Dr’ Bossey selling his medicines on a stage in Covent Garden Market, London. (Aquatint by A. Van Assen, 1792, reproduced by courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, USA.)

to four editions (each containing the author’s freshly engraved likeness) and exploited widespread fears of venereal disease, demonstrated Brodum’s awareness of the fact that orange, lemon or lime juice cured scurvy. With the help of a Fleet Street chemist, Brodum added citrus juice to the ingredients of his botanical syrup, which was then sold by agents in London and Philadelphia in bottles costing up to £1 2s. Nothing else in his Guide suggests that he had any knowledge of medicine.

When an eminent physician published defamatory remarks about him, Brodum threatened legal action and obtained an out-of-court settlement and a retraction. He even managed to overcome efforts by the Royal College of Physicians to have the brass doctor’s plate removed from his house. The medical faculty of Marischal College then sought counsel’s opinion as to whether Brodum’s MD might be cancelled in view of his ‘notorious and impudent quackery’ and the ‘immoral tendency’ of statements in his publications. Solicitor-General Blair felt that they had no power to do so and pointedly suggested that they should make ‘the case of

35 Rubens, Anglo-Jewish Portraits (see n. 31) 18–19; idem, A Jewish Iconography 22, figs 202–4.
36 Porter (see n. 2) 55.
Dr. Brodum a lesson of caution and circumspection for the future in the bestowing of academical honours’.

It was in the Jewish communal sphere that Brodum eventually fell from grace. As a man of wealth he was elected to the committee of a fundraising banquet that Abraham Goldsmid organized in 1798 to establish a free school for the children of poor Jews in London (an early incarnation of the contemporary ‘JFS.’). Goldsmid somehow discovered that Brodum had declared himself a Protestant – thus renouncing Judaism – when he had been naturalized earlier in the year. He was immediately dismissed from office and treated as an apostate.

The careers of William Brodum and Samuel Solomon do have a remarkable similarity. Both men devised panaceas that brought them fame and fortune, their medical degrees were purchased from the same institution, and both published works extolling their patent remedies. One writer, at least, has claimed that Solomon was Brodum’s protégé. I have found no evidence for that assertion and no proof that the two men ever had contact with one another. Samuel Solomon was vending his remedies in Dublin years before Brodum attracted attention in London. It is more likely that Solomon, after transferring his operations to Liverpool in 1789, made it his business to emulate techniques developed elsewhere. Unlike Brodum, he had acquired a basic knowledge of drugs from his uncle, together with a grasp of medicine from qualified doctors, from reading and from practical experience. At a time when qualified doctors were often ‘leeches’ who favoured blood-letting, Solomon offered sensible advice about personal hygiene as well as wholesome placebos. Their beneficial effect on some individuals is clear from the testimonials quoted in his Guide to Health and in numerous advertisements.

It has been maintained that Solomon’s medical degree was a sham. However, like Brodum, he purchased it from Marischal College in the usual fashion. The records state that his MD was conferred in 1796 on the recommendation of Drs Joseph Moore and Isaac Fisher. A note attached to the entry runs as follows: ‘Strong suspicions of this degree having been obtained by forged certificates’. Whether there was good reason for those suspicions, apart from the alarm over Brodum’s ‘notorious quackery’, is hard to tell. Jealous rivals may have attempted to discredit Samuel Solomon, but he had well-connected friends and jeopardizing his career with fake documents seems rather improbable.

37 Corley (see n. 2).
38 See, for example, Hyman (see n. 2) 76.
39 P. J. Anderson (ed.) Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis: selections from the records of the Marischal College and University, 1593–1860, XVIII (1898) 137. Information supplied by Ms June Ellner, Special Libraries and Archives, University of Aberdeen (28 August 2006).
For particulars of Solomon’s life and achievements we are largely indebted to a Mr R. C. Isaac of West Kirby, Cheshire, who published two detailed accounts early in the twentieth century. An incidental reference to his ‘family connection’ with Dr Solomon makes it clear that the author of those accounts was Raffaele Colman Isaac, eldest son of John Raphael and Sarah Amelia Isaac. His mother was a granddaughter of Benjamin Eliakim Yates (Goetz), the eighteenth-century Liverpool seal-engraver and ‘Jews’ High Priest’ (hazan and shohet) whose descendants also included Samuel Montagu, First Baron Swaythling, and Herbert Samuel. His father was a grandson of Jacob Aaron and thus a great-nephew of Elizabeth and Samuel Solomon. One might add that John Raphael Isaac was appointed Medallist, Lithographer and Engraver to HRH Prince Albert in 1846. A view of Liverpool’s New (Hope Place) Synagogue, dated 1856, was printed and published by him.

The Balm of Gilead

Numerous surveys have been devoted to Solomon’s most famous remedy, the ‘Cordial Balm of Gilead’, first marketed in 1796. Its name was derived from the biblical verse: ‘Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?’ (Jeremiah 8:22). According to the proprietor’s sales literature, this wondrous cure-all had been ‘sanctioned by the most learned physicians of the age [and] preserved its reputation from the period prior to the birth of Christ, growing in Gilead in Judea in 1730 BC’. A bottle of the elixir, with embossments on the glass to deter counterfeiters, sold for half-a-guinea. Those who could afford it were offered a bargain family-size bottle (equivalent to four ordinary ones) costing 33 shillings. An affidavat sworn in

40 His letter under the heading ‘Samuel Solomon, M.D.’ appeared in the JC, 1 Feb. 1901, p. 19. It was evidently a condensed version of his earlier ‘memento’ in the Liverpool Daily Post (26 April 1900), which provided material for ‘Solomon in All His Glory’, chapter 2 of Richard Whittington-Egan’s Liverpool Characters and Eccentrics (1985). I am grateful to Arnold Lewis, the Liverpool Jewish community’s archivist and chairman of the Society’s Liverpool branch, for drawing my attention to Whittington-Egan’s book and for helping to locate other source material.

41 Lucien Wolf, History and Genealogy of the Jewish Families of Yates and Samuel of Liverpool (London 1901); R. J. D’Arcy Hart (ed.) The Samuel Family of Liverpool and London from 1755 Onwards (London 1958). See also Benas (n. 2) 9–10

42 Records of the Franklin Family (see n. 6) 96–9.

43 Rubens, A Jewish Iconography (see n. 31) 77.

44 A typical advertisement in The Cumberland Pacquet (25 Feb. 1812) extolled this ‘most noble medicine, composed of some of the choicest balsams and strengtheners in the whole Materia Medica … Every genuine bottle has a stamp, which bears the Proprietor’s name and address,
Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

Plate 3 Advertisement for the ‘Cordial Balm of Gilead’, Liverpool, January 1799. (Photograph by Arnold Lewis, courtesy of Liverpool Central Records Office.)

“Saml. Solomon, Liverpool,” to imitate which is felony.’ Not a trace of the Balm has survived and even the bottles containing it were extremely rare until a few years ago, when a number turned up in the United States. Examples of these bottles from the ‘Charleston Hoard’, with Samuel Solomon’s name and ‘Cordial Balm of Gilead’ embossed on them, were first auctioned in 2001 and are now collectors’ items (see the accompanying illustrations).
Plate 4. Large and small ‘Balm of Gilead’ bottles with Samuel Solomon’s embossments. (Photograph by courtesy of the Jeremy M. Kemp collection, York.)

Plate 5. Two small ‘Balm of Gilead’ bottles with similar embossments. (Photographs by courtesy of the Jeremy M. Kemp collection, York.)
Liverpool before Thomas Golightly, JP, on 29 August 1796, maintained that Dr Samuel Solomon was the Cordial Balm of Gilead’s sole inventor.45 Medicines were expected to have an unpleasant taste, but Solomon compounded a delicious tonic. Although its ingredients were kept secret, being purchased in different towns, rumour had it that the elixir consisted of ‘fine old French brandy’ laced with spices from the Holy Land and even ‘dissolved gold’. Not surprisingly, sales of this cure–all were phenomenal. Its reputation spread from England to other parts of the world, and some purchasers – mistaking ‘the frenzy of inebriation for the natural glow of renovated health’ – became alcoholics.46

The standard dosage was from two teaspoonfuls to one tablespoonful three times a day, ‘by itself, in water, or in white wine, hock, Madeira or sherry’. An alleged cure for ‘weaknesses, debilities, relaxations, loss of memory, and nervous afflictions in general’, it was also ‘recommended to boys, young men and those who in the prime of life feel the consequences of a secret vice [i.e. masturbation], too frequent among youth, especially in the great Schools’.47 Like Brodum, Solomon knew how to play on the sexual fears of young men and women and conceived a devastating sales pitch.48 He also made a point of reproducing an English translation of the Latin text of his MD, bestowed in recognition of his long study, practice and ‘proficiency in the salutary art of Medicine’.49 Following Brodum’s example, Solomon commissioned a number of portraits to enhance his Guide to Health and boost the sale of his nostrums.50

He and his elixir were acclaimed in mediocre poems, such as the following lines written by a grateful mother (and signed ‘Andromache’, Birmingham, 26 March 1804):

Two matrons once, to David’s son,
Appeal’d – a son to gain;
When – strange to tell – Great Solomon
Cry’d – ‘Cleave the babe in twain!’
But of a Solomon I sing,
Who, Heaven his portion be,

47 A Guide to Health (see n. 5) 247–8.
48 Porter (see n. 2) 179; Williams (see n. 2) 16.
50 Details of these engravings, which are often accompanied by his spurious coat of arms and the Latin motto Mens sana in corpore sano, appear in Alfred Rubens, Anglo-Jewish Notabilities: Their Arms and Testamentary Dispositions (London 1949) 78 and plate iv (facing p. 88); Anglo-Jewish Portraits (see n. 31) 113–4; and A Jewish Iconography, 246–7.
Eclipsing Israel’s sapient King,
Made whole a son for me!
‘Swell then the plaudits of his fame,־
Says Gratitude’s sweet voice,
‘And in the health-restoring name
Of Gilead’s Balm rejoice!’

Not everyone shared that lady’s opinion. There were angrily dissatisfied customers and authors who poked fun at Dr Solomon and his cure-all. An amusing account of the sovereign remedy thus appeared in a letter written on 14 October 1801 by Robert Southey, later to become Poet Laureate. An epigram that Charles Lamb composed in 1802, when Solomon was at the height of his career, had a wider circulation. Entitled ‘On a Late Empiric of “Balmy” Memory’, it reads as follows:

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Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

His namesake, born of Jewish breeder,
Knew ‘from the Hyssop to the Cedar’
But he, unlike the Jewish leader,
Scarce knew the Hyssop from the Cedar.52

It is now claimed, however, that Samuel Solomon rose far above the medical quacks of his era and that he was a forerunner of entrepreneurs such as Thomas Beecham, who ensured that his celebrated pills were made to the highest standards.53 ‘With an elaborate distribution system and an advertising bill of £5,000 a year from 1800 onwards,54 Solomon did very


52 First printed in The Champion, 15–16 July 1820. Lamb was referring to King Solomon’s knowledge of botany, ‘from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall’ (1 Kings 5:13), as well as to the biblical use of hyssop and cedar-wood to cure leprosy (Lev. 14). The reappearance of this epigram in Notes & Queries, 9th series, 7 (1901) 12, inspired a letter from M. L. R. Breslar in the JC, 18 Jan. 1901, p. 10, to which Albert M. Hyamson replied in the next issue.


54 One such advertisement, which carefully avoided sensationalism, appeared in the Battle of Trafalgar issue of the London Times (7 Nov. 1805). I am grateful to my brother, Rabbi Vivian
well out of his remedy, soon adding two other varieties, a liquid tonic named Solomon’s Drops to cleanse all impurities from the blood ... and an “abstergent lotion” to treat skin diseases and beautify the complexion. In 1807 he claimed to be paying £6,000 annually in patent medicine tax, equivalent to a home turnover of about £40,000. His sales overseas were alleged to be extensive, through agents in all major European capitals, in India, and in most American states. He boasted of having saved many lives by shipments to the United States during a yellow fever epidemic in 1800–01.

Louis Hyman notes a fact that many others have overlooked. Not content to rely on his American agents, Samuel Solomon made a lucrative three-year tour of the USA in 1800–03. This ‘handsome Liverpool Jew who claimed a medical degree from Aberdeen’ initially had a local reprint of his Guide to Health sold in New York. It advertised the marvellous cures wrought by his Balm of Gilead and promoted the tonic’s sales. He then switched his campaign to Philadelphia, where he is thought to have amassed another fortune. ‘Solomon’s Cordial Balm of Gilead’ was thereafter advertised for many years in the Philadelphia Gazette.

Liverpool life

Except for matters of Jewish interest, the Samuel Solomon saga from 1803 onwards has been covered fairly thoroughly by historians. After returning to Liverpool, he devoted himself to public as well as private affairs. He invested some of his new-found wealth in the purchase of land and in an attempt to supply the northwest of England with a daily newspaper. The Mercantile Gazette and Liverpool and Manchester Advertiser first appeared on 6 August 1803, but proved short-lived.

A year later he built himself an imposing mansion just north of the road to Prescot, in a rural district known as Kensington Fields. Gilead House, Charles Silverman of the Hove Hebrew Congregation, for drawing my attention to this item. Even earlier examples can still be found. In August 2008, a London junk shop had for sale (price £40) the framed front page of a newspaper, The Sun (12 Jan. 1797), with a column-length advertisement for the Cordial Balm of Gilead. Information supplied by Dr Jeremy Schonfield.

Corley (see n. 2).

Hyman (see n. 2) 77 and 309.


Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 16.

There are various depictions of this mansion, e.g. in Rubens, A Jewish Iconography (see n. 31) 247.
which was surrounded by 'beautiful shrubberies, flower-strewn parterres, perfumed rose-gardens and smooth-shaven, emerald green lawns', was the first elegant structure that passengers would observe as they neared Liverpool on their dusty London coach.\(^{60}\) The grounds attracted many sightseers, but the house served a number of purposes: Solomon made it the family home, lived regally and entertained guests there, but also took in resident patients and manufactured his nostrums in a rear wing. 'He charged a guinea for every personal consultation and half a guinea for written advice.'\(^{61}\)

Wealth and prestige enabled Solomon to cut a figure in local society. He carried a gold-handled cane, made friends with the ‘top people’ and spared no expense in entertaining them, although he tolerated no abuse of his generosity. When guests attending one of his dinner parties urged Solomon to let them taste the miraculous Balm of Gilead, he ordered a footman to bring some bottles for them to sample. ‘At the end of the evening, as the guests were preparing to depart, a servant appeared bearing upon a silver

\(^{60}\) Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 16–17; Benas (see n. 2) 13–14. Their accounts are largely drawn from Sir James A. Picton’s two-volume work, *Memorials of Liverpool* (London 1873, rev. 1875). Picton also supplied details of Solomon’s ‘Balm’ and mausoleum.

\(^{61}\) Corley (see n. 2).
salver a quantity of small envelopes. These were distributed among the
guests who, upon opening them, discovered that each contained a bill
amounting to one guinea in respect of the amount of Balm which they had
consumed.' One gentleman indignantly asked if he must now pay for the
hospitality he had received. Solomon good-humouredly replied that he
would never dream of such a thing, but that his Balm of Gilead did not
come free of charge since it was the source of his livelihood and enabled him
to provide hospitality. 'Each guest paid his bill, admitting that the doctor
was right and that they had merited the reproof which their bad taste had
caued to be so properly and so promptly administered.'

He also figured in popular anecdotes. 'It was said that a quantity of
"Balm of Gilead", upon which drawback [duty refunded on exports] was
claimed, had been seized by the Custom-house people as not being of the
specified value to entitle Dr. Solomon to so large an amount ... The doctor
was, as may be supposed, very wrath at his "goots" being waylaid, but he
determined upon revenge [having surmised that no thorough inspection of
the cargo was undertaken]. Making up a lot of sugar and water, well-
flavoured with spice, he entered a large case "outward", declaring it to be of
the same value as the former case. The trap fell and the Custom-house
authorities were caught, to the intense satisfaction of the doctor, who told
them he "would teach them to seize his goots!" ...'

On another occasion, Madame Tussaud, 'having recently acquired the
relics of Napoleon, decided that she would also like to add the effigy of this
Liverpool Emperor of Empirics to her waxwork gallery of celebrities'. She
came especially from London to make a cast of Solomon's features, but
forgot to leave air holes for his mouth and nose, a mistake that almost had
fatal consequences.

Impressed by the four-in-hand carriage which Lord Sefton often drove
past Gilead House on his way to town, Dr Solomon bought a similar vehi-
cle, but once had to be rescued by his groom after nearly throttling himself
with an inexpertly flourished whip. As an Irish peer, the Earl of Sefton was
eligible for a seat in the House of Commons, and in the parliamentary elec-
tion of 1818 Dr Solomon organized his campaign. At a reputed cost of
£1,000, he flooded Liverpool with banners and ribbons, had letters which
he signed as 'the friend of Lord Sefton' distributed to electors, and engaged
a band to accompany his supporters from Gilead House to the polling

62 The earliest version of this story can be found in Recollections of Old Liverpool (see n. 2) 136–7;
cf. Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 17. Isaac (see n. 40) relates it more succinctly.
63 Recollections of Old Liverpool (see n. 2) 136. The anonymous author of this book, who had never
met Dr. Solomon, may well be caricaturing 'Jewish' speech in the time-honoured manner.
64 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 18; Isaac (see n. 40) ibid.

40
Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

station. These efforts proved unavailing, as Lord Sefton received the fewest votes and George Canning was elected.65

Samuel Solomon may have been persona grata among local bigwigs, but his contact with Liverpool’s Jewish kehillah was evidently minimal. His uncle, Isaac Solomon, left Liverpool for Manchester in 1795 and died a year later, having acquired a Jewish burial plot there. Samuel purchased a much larger one for his family in the same cemetery, leading Bill Williams to assume that the two doctors had quarreled with Liverpool’s synagogue wardens, possibly over some question of religious observance, inducing them to stake a claim in the newer Manchester Jewish community where both were well known. That would explain the terms of an agreement drawn up on 7 February 1797:

We the undersigned, being the Jewish congregation of Manchester, in consideration of the sum of ten pounds, ten shillings, paid to our manager and overseer [by] Mr. Samuel Solomon of Liverpool (Doctor of Medicine), grant and acknowledge the said Samuel Solomon to … have a sufficient place in our burial ground lying in Pendleton near Manchester that will contain the corpse of the said Samuel Solomon when he may depart this life, and also sufficient space and ground … to contain Elizabeth, the wife of the said Samuel Solomon, and the children of the said Samuel or Elizabeth Solomon either or any of their issue lawfully begotten in wedlock according to the Jewish rites and ceremony, being such as are acceptable to the Jewish Synagogue, not having been converted to any other religion, when it shall please God to take away the life of him or any of his or her children.66

On the basis of that agreement, Dr Solomon arranged for the burial at Pendleton of his fourth child, Henry, who died on 9 May 1798 at the age of nine months.67 There is no reason to suppose that such a man ran a traditional household, but this document proves that he and his family still wished to be considered members of the Anglo-Jewish community. According to B. L. Benas, ‘Dr. Solomon never occupied a seat in the synagogue, nor did he identify himself with the affairs of the Jewish community … He seems to have had racial sympathies, but was indifferent to Jewish practices.’68 That statement is not entirely correct. We know, for example, that the Old Hebrew Congregation’s minute book records the marriage of his daughter, Sophia, to a Mr Samuel Tobias of London on 22 August 1810.69 Furthermore, Benas himself reproduces this letter of thanks70 to Dr Solomon:

65 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) ibid.; Benas (see n. 2) 14–15.
66 Williams (see n. 2) 14–15.
67 Ibid. 15.
68 Benas (see n. 2) 13; cf. Williams (see n. 2) 16.
69 Benas, ibid.
70 Copied from the OHC’s minute book (Benas, ibid. 15). The new house of worship, Liverpool
Old Hebrew Congregation, Liverpool, July 11, 1808

My Dear Sir,

I am to acknowledge receipt of Ten Guineas, which you was [sic] pleased to hand me on the 9th inst., as a donation towards the completion of our new Synagogue. Permit me, in the name of our Congregation, to tender thanks for this mark of your attention and liberality, particularly so as it was unsolicited. Sincerely hope these will find you better than when I left you on Saturday.

I am, with sincere regard for Mrs. Solomon and family,  
Your obliged and humble Servant,  
ELIAS JOSEPH  
Treas. and Secy.

Since July 11 was a Monday, the cash must have been given to Elias Joseph on Saturday 9 July, when Solomon was apparently not in the best of health. Unless they met rather late on Saturday night (when Shabbat terminated around 10 pm), Mr Joseph must have been no more averse to handling

Plate 9 Plaque marking the site of the Old Hebrew Congregation's Seel Street Synagogue in Liverpool, 1807–1874. (Photograph by the author.)
money on the Sabbath than was the non-observant Dr Solomon. This sheds interesting light on the religious standards of Jewish communal worthies at the time, even allowing for the fact that Elias Joseph belonged to the most Anglicized Jewish family in Liverpool.

One question remains unanswered: if Samuel and Elizabeth Solomon had interment rights in the Manchester Jewish cemetery, why were they not buried there and why did Solomon erect a family mausoleum in Liverpool? The historian’s assertion that ‘neither he nor his family could claim any congregational privileges from the Hebrew community’ has no logical basis. The mausoleum was constructed no earlier than 1810–12 — well before any of Solomon’s children had married out of the faith, let alone ‘converted to another religion’. One can only hazard a guess that Solomon had become an agnostic and disliked the thought of either Jewish or Christian burial.

There are various descriptions of the mausoleum ‘built on some land in Mossley Hill, remote, at that time, from habitations’. The costly monument of fine, white sandstone was provided with several doors and surmounted by a large central obelisk surrounded by four cone-shaped pinnacles. R. C. Isaac declared in his letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* that it stood in a field that Dr Solomon owned, between Wavertree and Mossley Hill, ‘near the spot where Penny Lane crosses the London and North-Western Railway’. Yet Whittington-Egan places the mausoleum in a railed enclosure about a mile further south: ‘According to Sheriff’s map of 1816, it was situated in a field by the edge of a stream (known as Solomon’s Brook) which formed part of the Allerton–Garston boundary … and the trim, pebble-dashed villas of Cooper Avenue now occupy its site’.

The first member of the family to be interred there was Samuel and Elizabeth’s twenty-one-year-old daughter Sophia, the wife of Samuel Tobias, who passed away on 21 June 1813. Next came her mother, Elizabeth Solomon, who died in her mid-fifties at Gilead House on 14 March 1815. Three months later the seventy-year-old Dr Solomon married Jane Martin, a non-Jewess, at Walton Church, but she died childless

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71 Benas, ibid. 13.
72 Benas, ibid.
73 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 19 and Corley (see n. 2). According to Arnold Lewis, the illustration which he kindly sent me appears in a book by Thomas Troughton, which must have been a later edition of his major work, *The History of Liverpool, from the earliest Authenticated Period to the Present Time; illustrated with Seventy Views of the Principal Buildings in the Town and its Vicinity* (Liverpool, Wm. Kelly 1807, 1810).
74 See note 40 above.
75 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) ibid. For the actual location in maps of the time, see below.
76 Her premature death inspired a sixteen-line elegy by an anonymous writer.
77 Whether he had formally abandoned Judaism is not clear.
Plate 10 Solomon family mausoleum, ‘Mossley Hill, near Liverpool’.
(Photograph by Arnold Lewis, courtesy of Liverpool Central Records Office.)

Plate 11 Elegy on the death of Sophia Solomon (1813).
(Photograph by Arnold Lewis, courtesy of Liverpool Central Records Office.)
Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

shortly afterwards, at the age of thirty-eight, in December 1818. He promptly married for a third time, in January 1819, his wife, named Sarah, outliving him. Following Solomon’s own death during a visit to Bath on 21 May 1819, his body was also conveyed to the Liverpool mausoleum. With the interment of sixteen-year-old Sarah Solomon on 17 November 1824 this chapter of deaths was complete.78

Sales of the Cordial Balm plummeted after 1819, mainly because of Solomon’s failure to employ a reliable wholesaler. The value of his estate was then £30,000, the firm and its secret formulae being worth another £30,000. When Ebenezer Daniell, its manager, died in 1842, the firm collapsed. Two years earlier, the mausoleum had been demolished after the London and North Western Railway purchased the site from the late owner’s representatives in order to shorten the Runcorn-to-Liverpool railway line. The interred remains were moved to the Necropolis (now Grant Gardens, West Derby Road), which in turn disappeared in 1912.79 Owing to the city’s expansion, Gilead House was likewise dismantled in 1846 and the land sold for development.80

No relic of the mansion or mausoleum has survived, although the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation’s new burial ground (off Deane Road, Kensington) was dedicated close to Gilead House approximately ten years before the demolition of Solomon’s residence.

Some concluding thoughts

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the dates given for Solomon’s birth are usually wide of the mark. One reason for this might simply be a coincidence: Samuel moved from Cork to Dublin in 1768 and his father was naturalized in 1769. The records of two similarly named but different families may also have been confused. One Jew named Samuel Solomon, who was born in 1781 and died in 1863, had three children listed as John Isaac (1834–1902), Maria (1840–1908) and Jonah (1841–1904).81 Another Samuel Solomon, born in Essex in 1782, who was trading as an umbrella maker and haberdasher in Bath when the ‘purveyor of Balm’ died there in 1819, also had ten children, three of whom were named Henry, Elizabeth and Sarah. He was tried at the Old Bailey on 6 September 1832, convicted of stealing a bracket clock worth 10 shillings and sentenced to be transported for life, but

78 I have been unable to ascertain where another daughter, Frances Solomon (1802–5), was buried.
79 Isaac (see n. 49); Corley (see n. 2); Whittington–Egan (see n. 2) 19–20.
80 Benas (see n. 2) 14.
81 Records of the Franklin Family (see n. 6) 166, 183.
released in 1842. He then joined the nascent Hebrew congregation in Sydney, New South Wales, where he died and was buried in 1856.⁸²

Our main source of information about Samuel Solomon’s descendants is the genealogical work compiled by Arthur Ellis Franklin.⁸³ All but one of the doctor’s surviving children married non-Jews. The exception was John Solomon (1798–1881), who entered the legal profession but never bothered to practice law as he was of independent means. An amateur boxer in his

⁸² Information supplied to Joe Wolfman by Mrs Judith Samuel of Bath (2006); Central Criminal Court Session Papers, Old Bailey, 1830–32, FM4/5849, pp. 758–9, case no. 1824; interment records, Great Synagogue, Sydney.

⁸³ Records of the Franklin Family (see n. 6) 117–8.
younger days and a keen Cheshire huntsman during the 1840s, he died at a good old age in Southport, but never married. By that time, he had seen ‘the beautiful grounds of his early country home built over and thickly populated’.  

Another son, Abraham Solomon (1790–1827), an oculist in Birmingham, had nine children. His four sisters also abandoned Judaism. Maria’s first husband, a Liverpool Jewish cousin named Moses Lemon, died barely six weeks after their wedding in 1815. She then married Dr James Byron Bradley of Buxton. Their daughter Josephine’s son, Henry James Byron (1834–84), became a well-known playwright and actor, and manager of the old Alexandra Theatre in Liverpool. Eliza Solomon (1800–69) married George Bradnock Stubbs and their younger daughter, Emily, gave birth to Sir Henry John Newbolt, CH (1862–1938), the poet and naval historian.

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84 Isaac (see n. 40).

85 Quoted from a letter in the JC, 30 Aug. 1907, p. 11, signed ‘S. J.’ I have not managed to discover the identity of this mysterious correspondent, ‘a grand-niece of old Dr. Solomon of Liverpool, who lived at Gilead House, Kensington, many, many years ago’.

86 Now chiefly remembered for his ballad, ‘Drake’s Drum’ (Admirals All and other verses, 1897), Sir Henry Newbolt made no secret of his Jewish descent in My World as in My Time (1932).
Gabriel A. Sivan

Plate 14  Detail of Johnathan Bennison’s Map of the town and port of Liverpool (1835), showing Dr Solomon’s estate and former residence (now styled ‘Kensington House’). (Courtesy Liverpool Central Records Office.)

and to Sir Francis George Newbolt (1863–1940), a lawyer with an interest in the arts and sciences. Thus, by maternal descent, Henry Byron and the Newbolt brothers were fully Jewish.87

From Louis Hyman’s discussion of the Jewish themes and personalities that James Joyce evoked in his great novel, *Ulysses*,88 it appears that Joyce

87 See the appended family tree.
88 Hyman (see n. 2) 167–92.

50
Samuel Solomon (1745–1819): quack or entrepreneur?

knew all about the Irish-born Dr Solomon, since there is a distant echo of his Guide to Health in the novel:

If he must dispense his Balm of Gilead in nostrums and apothegms of dubious taste to restore to health a generation of unfledged profligates, let his practice consist better with the doctrines that now engross him. His marital breast is the repository of secrets which decorum is reluctant to adduce. The lewd suggestions of some faded beauty may console him for a consort neglected and debauched, but this new exponent of morals and healer of ills is at his best an exotic tree which, when rooted in its native orient, thrave and flourished and was abundant in balm but, transported to a clime more temperate, its roots have lost their quondam vigour.

What, then, remains of ‘Solomon in all his glory’? No mansion, sepulchre or elixir, and not even one Jewish descendant. Richard Whittington-Egan thought that the story of Dr Solomon’s life pointed to ‘a moral concerning the futility of worldly ambition’. In the 1860s Liverpool’s city fathers did ensure that the memory of an astounding entrepreneur would be perpetuated in three little streets (Balm, Gilead and Solomon) built next to Kensington Gardens. Over the road, where Gilead House once stood, the names of twentieth-century Liverpool celebrities are now enshrined in John Lennon Drive, George Harrison Close, Paul McCartney Way and Ringo Starr Drive.

Let this cheerful quatrain, written by an anonymous wit, conclude our story:

Great Solomon has gone,
His house and sepulchre and Balm;
If his mixture did mankind no good,
At least it did no harm.

89 Ibid. 309, n. 26.
90 Ulysses, Episode 14, ‘Oxen of the Sun’.
91 Whittington-Egan (see n. 2) 20.
92 See the accompanying illustration.