

BOOK REVIEWS

**Agnon's story: a psychoanalytic biography of S. Y. Agnon**, by Avner Falk, Leiden, Brill, 2019, viii+765 pp., \$187 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-36777-7

Shmuel Yosef Czackzes (1887–1970) – better known as S.Y. Agnon – is widely and deservedly regarded as one of the greatest of modern Hebrew writers. He is certainly the only one to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature – and at a time when this award actually favoured literary merit over political correctness. Predictably, therefore, Agnon himself, along with his body of work, has become the subject of a large and ever-growing mound of literature.

One of the most recent entries in the field is a hefty and perceptive psychoanalytic biography by Avner Falk, a prominent Israeli psychologist who has written a number of other psychoanalytic biographies (of Napoleon Bonaparte, Theodor Herzl and Barack Obama), as well as a number of psychohistories (of the Jewish people, the Crusades and the Arab–Israeli conflict). To construct this biography, the author has mined seemingly every piece of correspondence that survives between Agnon and his family, relatives, friends and acquaintances for insights into the writer's mind. He has also assiduously consulted Agnon's own works, as well as the secondary literature about the writer, to that same end.

Though Falk is essentially non-judgemental towards his subject, as one would expect of a psychologist, the portrait he paints of Agnon is not particularly flattering; but, then, psychoanalytic portraits by their very nature are rarely complimentary. We learn that Agnon had mother and father 'issues', as they say. Who amongst us does not? We also learn that Agnon was quite full of himself, a real cheapskate, psychologically abusive towards others and an often rather unpleasant, cantankerous fellow – in other words, he was no different than scores of millions of other men before, during and since his time. His personality traits took a considerable toll on his family: his emotionally fragile wife suffered from depression and anxiety throughout her life and his children were frequently the victims of an absentee father. Agnon's own life and work, observes Falk, typically took precedence over his family's wellbeing.

In addition to providing a no-holds-barred portrait of the man, Falk's biography sheds light on the atmosphere surrounding Jewish cultural life in central Europe and Mandatory Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century. Everybody who was anybody in this regard appears to have moved in the same circles, and Agnon was no exception to the rule; thus, he regularly rubbed shoulders with such other cultural luminaries as Haim Nahman Bialik and Gershom Scholem. True to his nature, he often did not get along with such 'rivals'.


Following the establishment of the Jewish state, Agnon's prominence continued to grow, especially in the non-Jewish world, as Falk demonstrates by exploring some of the many accolades that the writer received during his visits to the United States and Europe. In Israel, Agnon remained a cultural icon to his last day, even as he continued to cross swords with fellow writers and literary critics.

Whilst he generally eschewed politics, Agnon was certainly not without opinions on controversial topics. Some of his opinions, notes Falk, were quite strongly held, and many of his present-day admirers would undoubtedly find them rather unpalatable. Agnon's experience during the 1929 riots in Palestine – in which some 130 Jews were slaughtered by Arab mobs in pogrom-like violence and in which his own Jerusalem home was ransacked and destroyed – created in him hard feelings towards Arabs in general, which he would carry around for the rest of his life. Agnon was also a vocal proponent of the 'Greater Israel' movement after the 1967 Six-Day War, calling for Judea, Samaria and Gaza to be incorporated into the Jewish state.

A brief review of Falk's lengthy biography cannot possibly do justice to the book's full complexity and richness. Suffice it to say that the author's tome also digs deeply into facets of Agnon's life other than the few mentioned in passing here, such as the writer's long and fruitful association with the well-known German publisher Zalman Schocken. For those individuals keen to know all about Agnon's life and personality, warts and all, this book is heartily recommended. For those individuals whose interest in the writer is more casual in nature, a less challenging appraisal of the man and his work might be in order.

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**Palestine to Israel: mandate to state, 1945–1948, volume I: rebellion launched**, by Monty Noam Penkower, New York, Touro University Press, 2019, xvii + 340 pp., \$119 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-6181-1873-8

**Palestine to Israel: mandate to state, 1945–1948, volume II: into the international arena**, by Monty Noam Penkower, New York, Touro University Press, 2019, 463 pp., \$119 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-6181-1876-9

Ironically, both pro-Israel and anti-Israel advocates often invoke precisely the same historical myth (albeit in defence of very different political positions). The myth in question holds that the Holocaust, the annihilation of most of European Jewry during the Second World War, paved the way for the creation of a Jewish