

of 1939 warned President Franklin D Roosevelt that the chain reaction of uranium atoms could be harnessed to make a powerful bomb. 'This requires action' Roosevelt said. The result was that he immediately started the Manhattan Project in a race to develop the bomb before the Germans did. Ironically, and happily for Einstein, essentially a pacifist, he was deemed a security risk and allowed to remain at Princeton rather than sent to Los Alamos. His FBI files show that the head of the FBI, J Edgar Hoover, never trusted him.

In the spring of 1945, with Germany on the brink of defeat and nowhere near a bomb of their own, Einstein wrote another letter to Roosevelt, urging him to meet with concerned scientists. Roosevelt died on 12 April, never having read it. Nor did his successor, Harry Truman, who went ahead and dropped the bomb anyway, not once but twice. Einstein thereafter had to live with the label, as *Newsweek* headlined, 'The Man Who Started It All'.

Isaacson tells this absorbing story by encompassing the bits of theoretical physics in clear, short paragraphs just a few sentences long. It must be admitted, however, that his impressive skill and succinctness are insufficient to enable the non-scientific reader to digest what has been

SARAH WISE

THE EMPEROR OF VICE

THE FOX AND THE FLIES: THE WORLD OF JOSEPH SILVER, RACKETEER AND PSYCHOPATH

By Charles van Onselen
(Jonathan Cape 646pp £20)

IN 1978, THE author of this book, an academic based in South Africa, first glimpsed the name Joseph Lis in a late-Victorian newspaper cutting. Lis (meaning 'fox'), who later adopted the surname Silver, was a Polish-born pimp and sex-trafficker extraordinaire – a violent, syphilitic super-criminal, who during his thirty-year career had the police forces and attorneys of several cities in his pocket. Charles van Onselen has spent almost three decades hunting the Fox through the archives of four continents, and the result of his researches is a book that is profoundly unsettling, containing virtually no acts of kindness or decency. It catalogues crimes of relentless brutality and lifts many stones to reveal a subculture so squalid that reading *The Fox and the Flies*, you feel you want to take your brain out and scrub it.

'White-slave trading' was the melodramatic and inaccurate fin-de-siècle name for the trafficking of poor and/or vulnerable women to brothels in Continental

explained.

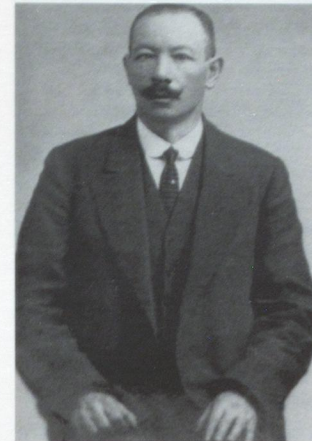
Even so, Isaacson is very comprehensible on the later development of Einstein's theories. Always a loner, Einstein did not follow his fellow physicists into the next theoretical jump, into quantum physics. He simply could not accept Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle enunciated in 1927. In this, Heisenberg declared that it was possible to know either the position or the momentum of an electron but not both. Moreover, he said, the electron had neither property until it was observed. In other words, there was no objective reality, only observation. This concept of an either/or universe was too wobbly for Einstein. He dismissed the uncertainty principle with his most famous aphorism, God 'does not play dice'.

But he did not believe in a personal God. Always loyal to his Jewish origins, he also remained sceptical of ardent Zionism. In 1948 he turned down the offer of the presidency of the new state of Israel. Until his death at Princeton in 1955 he worked hard against nationalism and for peace, and kept on searching for a unified theory that would bring together relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Would it dismay or satisfy him that we still do not have it yet?

To order this book at £20, see LR Bookshop on page 18

Europe, the Americas, southern Africa and across Asia. To its perpetrators, women ranked only just above the animals – a non-hardy form of livestock to be traded, controlled, abandoned and even slaughtered if that were more expedient. The mass migrations of males to the industrial and mining boom-towns of the late nineteenth century led to gender imbalances in these new communities as extreme as ten males to one female. In such rapidly expanding cities as Pittsburgh, Johannesburg and Kimberley, policing and the judiciary failed to evolve quickly enough to deal with their volatile new populations. Border controls and immigration policies for the most part did not exist, or were poorly implemented, and white-slave traders were easily able to out-run bureaucratic attempts to trace who was going where, and why.

Silver was born in 1868 in Kielce, halfway between Warsaw and Krakow, in Tsarist 'Russian Poland'. His burglarious family were a source of shame and disgrace to fellow Jews in the town. He left for England when he was sixteen, arriving, it is believed, in East London in 1885. For the next thirty years, he founded various small vice empires across 'the Atlantic World', raping, beating and psychologically torturing as a routine part of his procurement procedure, and supplying girls for the burgeoning brothels of the boom-towns: the Fox's trail leads to New York, Rio, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Paris and Antwerp as he and his cohorts crossed and re-crossed the ocean on the steamships that had made international travel affordable



Silver: the pits

and unprecedentedly swift.

The white-slave trade was dominated by French criminals; but close behind in 'over-representation' in this crime (to use modern sociological parlance) were Eastern European Jews, moving westwards in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they fled increasingly violent persecution. Van Onselen could not have written so comprehensively about white-slaving, and probed so forensically, if he had

suppressed this aspect of the trade – one made devastating use of by anti-Semites then and subsequently. But he explores with sympathy why the centuries-long vilification and marginalisation of an entire race could drive some of its members into antisocial and criminal activity – barred as they were from so many legitimate trades, forms of ownership and rights of settlement. The horror felt by more established, settled Jewish communities in Britain, France and the Americas about their Eastern European co-religionists' level of involvement in vice led them to make strenuous efforts to stamp it out – but little credit would be accorded them, as van Onselen points out.

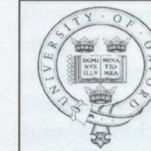
If Flaubert was correct that writing history is drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful, van Onselen's cup runneth over, and it's a top-quality brew. The underworlds of eleven cities at the turn of the century are laid bare, and not the least feat of this book is its detailed description of the mechanics of corruption – precisely how criminals and the authorities fed off each other, and how it was that organised crime got itself organised. Local-government structures – rather than parliamentary activity and party politics – determine the nature of civic life, and van Onselen has rightly shone his spotlight into these neglected and unfashionable corners of historical research.

In his appendix, 'Clio and the Fox', van Onselen describes the difficulties of tracing habitual liars through surviving documentation – people who went by several aliases, with false birth-dates and invented autobiographies. And if, among the tumultuous events and variety of locations related here, the personality of Silver is lost, it is perhaps churlish to expect a historian to be able to reconstruct the inner workings of a mind so pathologically unknowable. All that can be fruitfully undertaken by a historian – and van Onselen does it well – is to chart how society accommodated itself around such a deadly, insatiable creature as Silver. Over his lifetime (1868–1918), his activities would be increasingly circumscribed by the development of fingerprinting and

photo identification, by increasing anti-vice agitation in the press, and by immigration policy and international accords to stamp out sex-trafficking.

Van Onselen invokes the latest findings of psychiatry to help 'explain' the Fox himself, and – more specifically – to present the more crowd-pleasing aspect of his book. For it is posited that Silver was Jack the Ripper. It's an audacious claim, and it hangs by extremely slender threads. Van Onselen is unable even to prove that Silver was in Whitechapel in 1888, and constructs the case against the Fox from his proven violent misogyny and psychopathy; his deep involvement in the lives of prostitutes; his later evasions about his movements in 1888 (though he lied about many things); and from an ingenious reading of five Ripper crime scenes as illustrative of the Book of Ezekiel's advice on how prostitutes should be dealt with. More convincingly, Silver's appearance largely matched the description given by the only person to have seen the Ripper full-face (George Hutchinson, who stood at the end of Miller's Court on the night of Mary Kelly's evisceration, and was glared at by a well-dressed man 'of Jewish appearance', who passed up the Court with Kelly). 'What then are you, members of history's jury, to make of this case?', van Onselen asks, rather loftily, in his final chapter. This juror would have to plump for the Scottish verdict.

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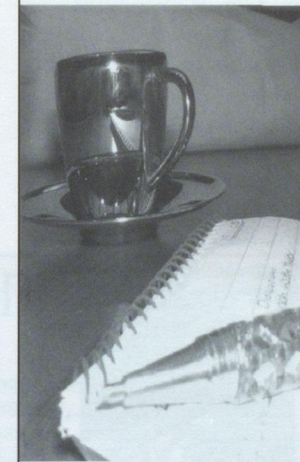


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