

## **Review of *Freud's British Family: Reclaiming Lost Lives in Manchester and London* by Roger Willoughby**

Willoughby, R. (2024). *Freud's British Family: Reclaiming Lost Lives in Manchester and London* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032652023>

Reviewed by Dr. Edward Bloomfield

This book is clearly a labour of love by the author and was over a decade in the making. It is academically rich, thoroughly researched, containing careful and scholarly documentation. There are often meticulously described details of Freud's life and circumstances. The academic rigour does not detract, and the author's narrative style has a consistently human quality to it. The writing has a compelling quality, and I found this an absorbing read.

The book is intriguing in its psychologically nuanced focus and piquant observations. One gains a sense of becoming more closely acquainted with Freud and the familial and cultural context and circumstances that forged the man and his ideas. One of the frequently recurring gems of this book are the thoughtfully observed and insightfully narrated descriptions of daily family life, where episodic details (like screen memories) are interwoven and suggestively linked to broader aspects of Freud's psychological makeup and his theoretical orientation and key concepts. This approach, of emphasising the importance of specific biographical details, is congruent with Freud's own examination of formative life experiences that constituted the core of his self-analysis and were the foundations for his subsequent development of psychoanalytic theories.

Often using a psychoanalytic framework and concepts, Willoughby (2024) intriguingly highlights the importance and deeper meaning inherent in events and contexts of Freud's everyday life. These are artfully exemplified at various stages in the book when narrating circumstances, incidents and encounters between Freud and his older half-brothers. Willoughby's own inferences, hypotheses, or even interpretations of the importance and significance of these biographical details are never delivered in a heavy-handed or unilateral fashion. They are offered in a balanced, thoughtful and thought-provoking way. Alternatives and supportive evidence are often provided for different perspectives. As a reader, I found this piqued my curiosity and imagination. This was one of the more enriching and satisfying experiences I had while delving into this book.

The book's explorations start from Freud's childhood and early adulthood, characterised by financial instability, hardship and the precarious social circumstances in Freiburg, and subsequently Vienna. This was a situation aggravated by antisemitic attitudes, prevalent and significant during those early stages of Freud's life. The financial austerity of his younger years clearly affected Freud's fear of poverty and his determined

efforts to avoid it through a strong work ethic and emphasis on industriousness, which lasted throughout his life.

Freud's family set up is characterised by a marginal, gentle and equanimous, but largely financially unsuccessful father and a more central, and somewhat domineering mother and an increasing number of siblings, of whom Freud was the first and eldest. Freud also had two considerably older half-siblings, Emmanuel and Philipp from his father's previous marriage. The book's primary focus is on Freud's hitherto less well documented later associations with these two older half-brothers, who migrated with their families to Britain in 1859, settling in Manchester. Willoughby (2024) suggests these two half-brothers exerted an important influence on Freud's emotional life. The significant age gap is postulated by the author to have added an Oedipal dimension to the sibling relationship with his older half-siblings, partially conflating vertical (parental) and horizontal (sibling) dynamics.

The younger of the two half-brothers, Philipp, had less of a relationship with Freud. Willoughby (2024) comments that Freud saw Philipp irregularly and only briefly in his adult years. Although their relationship was cooler, Freud recognised and admired certain qualities of the younger half-brother, such as his endurance and determination; the capacity to do what is necessary, often in the face of adversity. He comments on Philipp's grit, which he contends: "made Philipp into something of a Joycean hero, who exhibited considerable psychological strength and endurance across his life, characteristics the young Freud also endorsed in 1875." (Willoughby, 2024, p. 99).

The eldest of the two half-brothers, Emanuel, is portrayed as a desired alternative, younger father figure. Emanuel comes across in these pages as authoritative and strict (bordering on controlling), but effective and decisive. These traits, although also potentially problematic, are described by the author as having likely to have been a counterbalance to disappointing aspects of Freud's experiences of his own father, Jacob. Emanuel is also described as an enthusiastic advocate and staunch admirer of Freud. Willoughby (2024) argues, for Freud, Emanuel was therefore not only an admired older brother but functioned also as an important father figure. Emanuel, in this respect, is described as confident, assured, pragmatic and successful in building his business in the UK. The book argues coherently this is likely to have been influential in the earlier years of Freud's burgeoning career and ambitions.

As Freud established himself and gained his own identity, his relationship with Emanuel seems to have changed in later years, with Freud being able to acknowledge more consciously that Emanuel's character could be quite difficult, resulting possibly in less enthusiasm in the latter years to meet up with Emanuel, prior to his death at the age of 82; resulting from an accidental fall from a train in 1914. The author speculates that "Freud's complicated grief over the loss of Emanuel seems likely to have informed his key text 'Mourning and melancholia', which was verbally delivered to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society on 30 December 1914, ten weeks after Emanuel's death." (Willoughby, 2024, pp. 134-135).

Freud visited his half-brothers twice in England, in 1875 and 1908. The book outlines how these encounters and associations with his British half-brothers, Emanuel in particular, influenced Freud's Anglophilia and were ultimately influential in his decision to choose Britain when seeking refuge from Nazi persecution in 1938. The chronology of Freud's visits in 1875 and 1908 interestingly also charts the progression of Freud's

developing reputation. From an early stage, both in Vienna and in Britain, the Freud family viewed him in almost messianic terms, prophetically anticipating great things from him. The reader's access to the everyday family context, interactions and correspondence provides an interesting backdrop and contrast to Freud's trajectory to international renown. It is interesting that during his visit to London in 1908, Freud, despite being well into his middle age (52), had not yet reached the international fame he would subsequently achieve. Around 1908, psychoanalysis was on the cusp of achieving international recognition. The 1908 visit contrasts with Freud's subsequent time in the capital, 30 years later, which is described in more detail later in the book. The author comments poignantly, regarding the 1908 visit to London, that "had his visit been timed just two or three years later, Freud might have had a very different social and professional experience in London." (Willoughby, 2024, p. 112).

As the reader progresses through the chronology, the book also outlines the 1918 postwar economic blockades and austerity, which again reintroduced financial deprivation to Freud's daily life. Foodstuffs and commodities were in short supply. The situation was further aggravated by hyperinflation in Austria. Despite Freud's, by now international, reputation, severe food shortages meant Freud himself experienced hunger and even malnutrition at that time. His nephew, Samuel, sent him food parcels from the UK, before Freud was able to restore greater financial stability, indefatigably rebuilding his private practice, predominantly through international (mostly English-speaking British and American) patients, who could pay in sterling and dollars and thereby offset the impact of hyperinflation on the devaluation the Austrian Krone. We learn that Freud employed at that time a language coach to improve his English, which had already been greatly assisted through his associations with Emanuel and his extended British family.

As the book moves through the years, we become aware of the ominous rumblings of a politically shifting landscape. By 1933 Hitler had come to power. In that year two of Freud's sons, Oliver and Ernest, had to flee from Berlin. Ernest settled in London. The persecution of Jews increased and many German psychoanalysts, the majority of whom were Jewish, fled the country between 1933 and 1936. We learn that Freud himself delayed departing to London, until it was almost too late (impossible) to leave. Aside from the oral surgery for cancer in 1923, Freud's health had been declining since 1931, further compounded by heart complications in 1933, leaving him considerably weakened. Freud left Vienna in June 1938, shortly after Nazi Germany annexed Austria in March of that year, his life being at significant risk under the Nazi regime. For four of his sisters, Dolfi, Rosa, Pauli, and Mitzi, it had become impossible to leave. Freud's attempts in 1938 to rescue them, by removing them from Vienna, failed. They tragically later died in concentration camps between 1942 and 1943. The book powerfully conveys the mounting menace and direct threat to the Freud family. The concerted diplomatic efforts and negotiations to secure the safety and evacuation of the Freud family are also described.

Willoughby (2024) argues that Freud's choice of Britain, as the country to emigrate to, was strongly influenced by his prior visits to the UK and close ties with his British half-brothers and their families. Freud's son, Ernst, who had settled in London since 1933, assisted in finding a property in the capital. Freud finally settled in Hampstead, which remained his abode for the final months of his life and is now the location of the Freud Museum. Hampstead exerted a gravitational pull for psychoanalysts, many of them asylum seekers from Austria and Germany, where psychoanalysis had already taken root before

the Second World War. It became a hub for the discipline and remains influential to this day. Despite successfully gaining asylum in the UK, Freud remained a person of interest to the Nazis and was on the Gestapo list of people to be automatically arrested, in the eventuality of success of German's planned invasion of the UK.

Willoughby comments that: "for an 82-year-old, with very serious debilitating health problems, and constant pain and discomfort, Freud still managed to use his time creatively." (Willoughby, 2024, p.180). Freud's pertinacious and unwavering work ethic persisted, as he dedicated himself to his final significant works: *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939) and *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (Freud, 1940). Freud also maintained his psychoanalytical practice, although this was severely reduced as a result of his move to the UK and his deteriorating health.

This book benefits from a detailed account of his last year in exile to London in 1938. Freud had distinguished visitors and patients. These include, among others, H G Wells, Salvador Dalí and Virginia Woolf. These encounters are described and explored, accompanied and interspersed with interesting observations and reflections by the author. The reader also gains a sense of loss and mourning for the life that Freud had left behind in Vienna. The grim tidings of family members that had remained behind and the growing recognition of the powerlessness to help, as Viennese Jewry were subjected to increasing anti-Semitic persecution.

The concluding chapter of the book, and of Freud's life, is both poignant and moving. In September 1939 war is declared against Germany and Freud would have witnessed the preparations for the impending air raids. Freud's own battles with cancer and his own impending mortality also overshadowed these final months of his life. Willoughby (2024) gives an intimate account of Freud's life and a new perspective on previously unexplored associations between Freud, his two older half-brothers and his extended British family. The book gives a fresh emphasis on the psychological and historical significance of these relationships, leading Freud, in his final year, to seek asylum in London.

Freud is universally recognised as a man of significant historical stature, as the founder of psychoanalysis. A genius and a pioneer, he was one of the most influential thinkers of the last century. His intellectual and cultural significance reverberates to this day. As someone less familiar with Freud's biography, I gained, from Willoughby's book, a true appreciation of the adversity, and tragedy that featured recurrently in Freud's personal life. Willoughby's writing style has a consistently personal quality to it. While reading, I developed a strong sense of Freud's human qualities of sensitivity, resolution, endurance and strength of character.

### **Contributor**

Dr. Edward Bloomfield is a Jungian Analyst and Consultant Clinical Psychologist and has trained as a practitioner in Cognitive Analytical Therapy. He has an MA in Jungian and Post-Jungian Studies. He works part-time in the NHS and has a private practice in London.

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