



## Ole Münch

### Rag Fair.

A Different Migration History of London's East End,  
1780–1850

(Studies in British and Imperial History, Vol. 10)

Berghahn Books | New York/Oxford 2024  
384 pages, Hardback | £115.00  
ISBN 978-1-80539-689-5

E-Book | £22.95  
ISBN 978-1-80539-690-1

*reviewed by*

**Adam Mendelsohn**, University of Cape Town

The book under discussion is the English translation of a study first published in German in 2022, based on a PhD thesis at the University of Konstanz.<sup>1</sup> In this masterful microhistory, Ole Münch analyses Rag Fair, the substantial street market for second-hand clothing in the East End of London during its heyday from 1780 to 1850. Across seven compelling chapters, Münch explores the economic and social dynamics of the market, as well as its historical development. His purpose, however, is broader. Münch focuses on the market as a site of intercultural contact between Jewish and Irish traders and other denizens of the East End. In contrast to other historians, myself included,<sup>2</sup> who have adopted a narrow ethnic lens to explain the clustering of Jews and Irish within this economic niche, Münch instead emphasises the variety of relationships that developed *across* religious and ethnic lines. He describes how the mechanisms of the market and the political and social dynamics of the neighbourhood brought together traders of diverse backgrounds. In doing so, Münch draws liberally on sociological and anthropological concepts to explain how and why these relationships developed. The result is a sophisticated study that will be of broad interest to those who work on ethnic economies, as well as to historians of London and of the rag trade.

»Rag Fair« is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the traders and their market. Chapters one to three systematically describe the different occupations that underpinned Rag Fair: the collectors who trawled the streets of London for second-hand clothing and returned daily to Rag Fair to sell their accumulated harvest; the long-distance traders, most of whom were themselves transmigrants, who purchased clothing at Rag Fair for export to Europe and

<sup>1</sup> Ole Münch, *Cutler Street Market. Interkultureller Austausch im Londoner East End 1780–1850* (Moderne Zeit. Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, Bd. 33), Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2022, 382 S., geb., 38,00 €.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Adam Mendelsohn, *The Rag Race. How Jews Sewed their Way to Success in America and the British Empire*, New York 2015.

further afield; and the shopkeepers who bought and sold second-hand from fixed premises in and around Rag Fair. These chapters provide a bottom-up view of the functioning of the second-hand market, as well as insight into the role and importance that the figure of the Jewish rag trader occupied in the popular imagination. Münch argues that this folklore aided Jewish traders: »Londoners preferred to sell their clothes to those collectors whom they thought were Jewish« (pp. 59–60). Münch adds much to our understanding of why Jews clustered within this trade, highlighting, for example, the role of coffee houses and family networks. In the fourth chapter, Münch explains how the considerable risks of the second-hand trade encouraged »interfaith integration« (p. 22). In a commercial and legal environment where there were few institutional protections, trust was all important. Münch argues that in this unpredictable and insecure system, traders sought partners and clients based on reliability and reputation, not on religion and ethnicity.

In the second section of the book, Münch describes a sequence of political conflicts that roiled the Portsoken ward – where Rag Fair was located – from the 1780s until the mid-nineteenth century. He argues that these conflicts had the inadvertent effect of preserving Rag Fair as a centre of the second-hand clothing trade and, for a time, of advantaging Jewish traders. More importantly, he proposes that mass political action at a neighbourhood level had an integrative effect on the diverse population that lived within the ward. In contrast with previous scholarship on these local disputes which claimed that conflicts in Portsoken followed ethnic and religious lines, Münch demonstrates that political alignments primarily reflected occupational and neighbourhood divisions within the ward. By providing a granular account of the development of local political culture and practise in Portsoken over time, Münch reveals that local political movements possessed a multireligious character. This in turn buttressed other processes of integration and identity formation in which religious and ethnic differences were secondary.

Both sections of the book benefit from a wealth of primary sources that evoke the everyday world of rag traders, offer depth and texture for structural analysis, and provide the detail necessary for recreating long ago political disputes. These sources include court transcripts from the Old Bailey, a wealth of journalistic accounts, tax lists, census records, and the minutes, petitions and correspondence of local government in the Portsoken ward. Münch extracts much from these sources and offers an additional layer of interpretation derived from a broad reading of the research literature on economics, ethnicity, social movements and other fields.

Münch succeeds admirably in giving new life to the long-forgotten traders and shopkeepers of Rag Fair and to the now obscure political activists who battled over Portsoken. More importantly, this serious and sophisticated book challenges scholars to think more carefully before making glib and easy assumptions about the role and significance of ethnicity in economic and social relations. By de-centring ethnicity at Rag Fair, Münch has asked questions with applicability and implications well beyond the boundaries of the rag trade in Victorian London.

### **Zitierempfehlung**

Adam Mendelsohn, Rezension zu: Ole Münch, Rag Fair. A Different Migration History of London's East End, 1780–1850, Berghahn Books, New York/Oxford 2024, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte (online) 66, 2026, URL: <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/82128.pdf>> [25.2.2026].