

*The life and times of*  
**N M Rothschild**  
*1777-1836*



*London. Engr<sup>d</sup> by Tho<sup>s</sup>. H. Legg. 25. Haymarket. 1824.*

*Drawn & Engr<sup>d</sup> by R<sup>a</sup>. Dighton. Oct<sup>r</sup>. 1817.*

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF

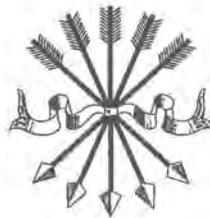
*N M Rothschild*

1777-1836

Edited by Victor Gray and Melanie Aspey

With a Foreword  
by Sir Evelyn de Rothschild

With essays by Victor Gray  
Fritz Backhaus, Bill Williams, David Kynaston  
Rainer Liedtke, Melanie Aspey  
and Michael Hall



N M Rothschild & Sons, London 1998

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## Mrs Rothschild

MELANIE ASPEY

Nathan Mayer Rothschild's family expected him to make a full recovery from what turned out to be his final illness. His death in Frankfurt, at the age of 58, was premature and shocking. His wife, Hannah, and son, Lionel were with him in his last days, during which time he drew up his final will.

My beloved wife Hannah ... is always to co-operate with my four beloved sons on all important occasions and to have a voice in all deliberations. Moreover it is my special wish that my sons shall not engage in any transactions of moment without having previously asked her maternal advice.'

The role he prescribed for Hannah was all the more significant in view of the exclusion of women from the family business which had been ordained by Mayer Amschel Rothschild in a partnership agreement drawn up in 1810 which created the firm M A Rothschild & Sons. Rothschild women were certainly used to the work of the family firm, as book-keepers and cashiers, even helping to unload silver from the coaches during the family's work to make the subsidy payments to Britain's allies. Hannah was not given the right to inspect the books of the firm, but her role as adviser, policy-maker even, was a new departure. That this unique arrangement within the family was never repeated, at least through any legal document, is more a testimony to the dynamics of the relationship between Nathan and Hannah than a judgement on a failed experiment.

Born in London in 1783, Hannah was the sixth of eleven children of Levi Barent Cohen, the third child by his second wife, Lydia née Diamantschleifer. Lydia's sister, Fanny, had been Cohen's first wife. Both the Cohens and Diamantschleifers were Dutch by origin, with properties in Ammersfort, one of which later served as the Town Hall. The Cohens were related to the

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*Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Rothschild  
in an Interior* by an unknown  
artist, n.d.

*Private collection, London  
Catalogue, page 92*





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Levi Barent Cohen, Hannah's father: a caricature by Richard Dighton, 1817

*The Guildhall Library, Corporation of London Catalogue, page 95*

Goldsmids by marriage. Levi Barent Cohen had been born in Amsterdam in 1747 and settled in London around 1770 where he achieved some standing as a merchant. His House was one with which Mayer Amschel Rothschild of Frankfurt had dealings, and one of those to which he recommended his third son, Nathan Mayer, for an informal apprenticeship on his arrival in London in 1798.

Cohen was a significant figure in the Anglo-Jewish community and was regarded as an observant man, keen to debate points of law with learned rabbis. He was founder and first President of the Bread, Meat and Coal Charity, the first charitable institution of the Ashkenazi community in London, and a founder of the Jews' Hospital. Hannah's upbringing would have been broadly in line with that of her sisters.<sup>2</sup> Private tutors were engaged to teach English literature, music and singing, French, German and Italian. She would also have learnt Hebrew and something of the practical application of the tenets of Judaism.

Every analysis of the success of the Rothschilds in business highlights the importance of the network of cousins and in-laws employed as couriers and agents. Many members of this network were derived from the

connection to the Cohen family. Hannah had five brothers, whose marriages forged links to the Goldsmid, Montefiore and Samuel families. Joseph, the eldest, took over the main direction of the firm of L.B. Cohen on the death of his father in 1808, along with Solomon and Benjamin. Some consideration was given to changing the name of the firm to Widow L.B. Cohen & Sons, but the firm continued under its old name. Benjamin and his brother, Isaac, were also closely involved in Nathan's affairs, acting with power of attorney during his absences, especially the final one in Frankfurt in 1836.

The marriages of Hannah's sisters were of no less significance to the Rothschilds. Esther married Samuel Moses Samuel and Judith married Moses Montefiore, both outstanding figures in the Anglo-Jewish community. Adelaide married John Helbert, the stockbroker, whose descendants were to work in close co-operation with Nathan's firm. In 1816, Jessy married Meyer Davidson, who had been involved with the Rothschilds in their work for the British Government during the Napoleonic Wars. Davidson was based in Amsterdam for some months during 1814 and 1815, co-ordinating the purchase and delivery of coin to Wellington's troops. His closeness to Nathan and his popularity within the family made him an ideal mediator in the frequent family spats, usually caused by Nathan's impatient outbursts against his brothers.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of his marriage, Nathan might not have seemed the obvious choice for a young woman of Hannah's background, certainly not to her father, but Cohen clearly had the measure of the young Rothschild's potential. Lucien Wolf had an explanation for this.

When Nathan Rothschild was courting Hannah Cohen, his future father-in-law one day asked him for the name of his solicitor so that the settlements might be put in order. ... [Rothschild] remembered having seen on the door-post of an adjoining house in Angel Court the inscription, 'Edwin Dawes, Attorney', and with his usual self-possession he gave that name to Mr Levy Cohen. "That is very fortunate," answered Mr Cohen, "for Mr Dawes happens to be my own solicitor." Nathan Rothschild at once walked round to No. 9, and interviewed Mr. Dawes. "I am going to marry Levy Cohen's daughter, Hannah," he said, in his slap-dash way, "and I want you to draw up the settlements on my behalf." ... Mr Dawes was delighted to act for a gentleman who had found such favour in Levy Cohen's eyes, and Mr Cohen himself was not less gratified to know that his future son-in-law, to whom some suspicion of recklessness then attached, was in the hands of so prudent an adviser.<sup>4</sup>

Cohen settled £5,248.14.6 in 3% consolidated bank annuities on his daughter and the marriage was held in London on 22 October 1806.

In late November 1806, Hannah went to Manchester to share her husband's home. Nathan was well established in a community made up of merchants, textile manufacturers and his own staff. They embraced Hannah wholeheartedly. She was as popular there as she had been in London with the group of merchants and clerks gathered around her father's house. They certainly missed her. One, Abraham Hertz, who handled the correspondence between the Cohen and Rothschild firms, always added a few words for Hannah. The pattern of Nathan's life changed little after his marriage and he was frequently absent on long business journeys, leaving Hannah in the company of his Manchester associates. The birth of their first child, Charlotte, in Manchester in 1807, served to strengthen the bonds with this community.

Hannah took part in the work of the business, dealing with correspondence and orders and signing cheques on behalf of the firm. Nathan's associates acknowledged her role by directing letters to her attention if they knew Nathan was absent. "Dear Madam ... I have the pleasure to inclose you 5 bills value £2012.10.0."<sup>5</sup> wrote Peter Fawcett, a dyer, who worked closely with Nathan in Manchester. When the Rothschilds finally went to London in 1808, Nathan's clerk, Joseph Barber, reported, "Mr Fawcett returned from Liverpool last night and has brought with him the Gold watch which I mentioned to you some time ago that he had manufacturing there to present to Mrs Rothschild when finished; I have seen it today and it appears to be in the Fawcettian stile [sic] of perfection."<sup>6</sup>



Fawcett was overcome with delight on receipt of letters and small gifts – including the Christmas turkey – which Hannah sent from London. “My best respects to your dear lady, she is all that is kind and good in writing me so often – I wish I was worthy of it”.<sup>7</sup> Others felt the same. Nathan’s friends found Hannah ‘most charming’, and complimented Nathan on his good taste (and good fortune, no doubt). Hannah’s sophistication rubbed off on the Rothschilds. In 1817, the Rothschild ladies, Hannah included, were invited to a grand Parisian party. Hannah “proved herself to be a lady of great distinction, who could take her place at any social occasion,” reported her brother-in-law, Carl, gleefully noting that their host was thoroughly upstaged by the former ghetto-dwellers.<sup>8</sup> In her absences, Nathan was miserable and Amschel wrote to his Paris-based brothers that they should release Hannah: “That good man is of decent morals; he should not be put on too hard a trial. I beg Madame Hannah to return. Nathan is pitiable.”<sup>9</sup> James de Rothschild, who met her first when she lived in Manchester, remained devoted to his ‘sister’ (as he always addressed her in letters) and the two enjoyed a mild, distant flirtation.

Hannah’s involvement in the business amounted to more than giving practical assistance with the books and correspondence. The suggestions of strategy and reports on political and economic developments which are recorded in her letters must also have been a constant source of support to Nathan when she was with him. “My dear Rothschild, your letters of today were rather grumpy ... today the reports are of a much better cast and the funds also are assuming a better appearance. I think dear Rothschild a little more patience and courage and the prices will again attain a good price.”<sup>10</sup> The correspondence between the couple was not without warmth and concern. In the same month, Hannah wrote, “I also must beg that you put on your slippers when you get out of bed; the season is getting changeable and you must take care not to get a cold.”<sup>11</sup>

Hannah’s advice reached into the wider world, including drafting letters to politicians:

My dear Sir

I have not heard the opinion of many persons upon this important reform bill but I have seen a few intelligent persons who think it better to oppose the bill immediately as if it should be allowed to be read, the people will imbibe some expectations and be more irritated when there is a strong opposition to it than if the question meets a decided and immediate opposition. I will endeavour to ascertain the opinions here upon the subject in the course of the day and have the pleasure to inform you of the result early in the afternoon.<sup>12</sup>

Hannah was in her element discussing politics. For her, the best dinner parties saw her seated next to a political figure with whom she could debate the issues of the day. Her circle of friends included Robert Owen, to whom she

*Portrait of Hannah Rothschild*  
by Sir William Beechey  
*N M Rothschild & Sons*  
*Catalogue, page 92*

was “the excellent Madame Rothschild.”<sup>13</sup> In common with all her family, Hannah’s main political agenda focused on the removal of civil disabilities from the Jewish community, perhaps even more so than her husband. Her brother-in-law, Moses Montefiore, recorded in his diary for 22 February 1829 (the year of Catholic Emancipation), “Judith and self took a ride to see Hannah Rothschild and her husband. We had a long conversation on the subject of liberty for the Jews. He said he would shortly go to the Lord Chancellor and consult him on the matter. Hannah said if he did not, she would.”<sup>14</sup> In 1847, she threw all her energies into her son Lionel’s election campaign, writing to him, “I enclose you the names of persons of respectability who have promised their votes which you may rely on ...”<sup>15</sup> The Duke of Wellington was moved to record that “the Rothschilds are not without their political objectives, particularly the old lady [Hannah] and Mr. Lionel. They have long been anxious for support to the petitions of the Jews for concessions of political privileges.”<sup>16</sup> Although she was seen as the driving force behind Lionel’s political ambitions, she was for a time in danger of being deflected by the offer of a barony in 1846; she thought it was bad taste to refuse.<sup>17</sup>

In the years after the death of her “best friend”<sup>18</sup> Nathan, Hannah spent a good deal of time travelling around Britain and Europe. In Britain, she was often accompanied by her youngest child, Louise, until she married her cousin Mayer Carl of the Frankfurt House in 1842. Hannah had done all she could to encourage the union, and always took a keen and gleeful interest in matchmaking. “I do not know if there is not a little flirtation between Mayer Carl and our Lou, but they are very close – this is in its infancy and therefore not to be spoken of.”<sup>19</sup> She broadly supported the Rothschild family’s aim for their daughters; that is to say, they should be encouraged wherever possible to choose a husband from among the ranks of the family. For some time the family had assumed that Mayer Carl would marry Hannah Mayer, Louise’s older sister. But not only did Hannah Mayer choose a husband from outside the family, she chose a Christian, Henry FitzRoy, the second son of the Earl of Southampton. The Rothschilds felt betrayed by her behaviour, anxious lest it encourage other daughters of a similar age to disregard the wishes of their parents. The sombre wedding went ahead on 29 April 1839. Hannah accompanied her daughter to St George’s, Hanover Square, but would not enter the church. Time eventually healed the rift, and Hannah made sure she received word of her daughter through third parties. Writing from Paris one month after the marriage, she asked, “if there should be any news from an Individual who still so much interests me but who has separated herself from me, let me know.”<sup>20</sup>

Hannah’s travels through Britain in the autumn and winter of 1841 took her through Derbyshire, where she visited Matlock and Chatsworth, Manchester, York, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dumfries, Lancaster, Liverpool, Birmingham and Oxford. The development of the industry of these places and rail connections were of great interest to her, as well as the condition and



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tastefulness of some of the country houses she visited. In Manchester, she made a donation of £50 to local charities, “testifying her remembrance of a town in which she was for many years a resident.”<sup>21</sup> Only in Oxford was there some irritation: “... the place is too orthodox to be an agreeable residence for any other sect beside Protestant. Bibles and other religious books are placed in the different apartments of the hotel we are in, but the inhabitants are civil and attentive.”<sup>22</sup> In spite of the unhappy memories of the town, she was also a frequent visitor to Frankfurt where her daughters, Charlotte and Louise, lived.

The education of all her children had been of major concern to Hannah during Nathan’s lifetime, and increasingly so after his death. Her youngest son Mayer was the only one of the family to attend a British university – ‘Maudlin’ College, Cambridge, as Hannah believed before she was corrected by the student. Hannah wanted to hear of any attempt to force her son to attend the chapel, and reminded him of the need to retain a ‘proper sense’ of his religious duties. In fact, Mayer migrated to Trinity College, possibly after Hannah had taken legal advice about his position.

She had educated her children in a wider way too. While Nathan is renowned for a certain philistinism, Hannah had other ideas. Her children became great collectors of art (her own weakness was for Murillo), musicians

*Beauties of Brighton*

by A. Crowquill (A.H. Forrester),  
etched by Cruikshank, 1826.

Hannah promenades (right of  
centre) with her husband, Nathan  
Rothschild in front of the Brighton  
Pavilion

*The Jewish Museum, London  
Catalogue, page 103*



*Hannah Rothschild* by Moritz  
Daniel Oppenheim, c.1828  
*N M Rothschild & Sons*

and patrons. Their house at Stamford Hill was described by one visitor as lacking in any decoration save the pictures of heads of European states presented in gratitude for services rendered. However, it was the scene of a number of soirées. Her daughters in particular were skilled musicians, with teachers such as Chopin and Rossini. Hannah Mayer followed in her mother's footsteps with her talent as a harpist.

There are only a few known images of Hannah: one by the Rothschilds' 'court painter' Moritz Oppenheim and one by Sir William Beechey. She is also portrayed arm-in-arm with Nathan in the Cruikshank cartoon *The Beauties of Brighton*, in which she is wearing a broad-brimmed hat, not unlike the creation seen in the Beechey portrait. Most notable, however, is a joint portrait of Hannah and her husband. They are shown working together harmoniously, in a setting which could be either domestic or business, but which is perhaps deliberately ambiguous, since it shows how the threads of Nathan's life were all drawn together. Hannah's presence enables the young merchant to look ahead, boldly and confidently.

Hannah's homes after Nathan's death were 107 Piccadilly and Gunnersbury Park, which the family had leased in 1835. She died at Gunnersbury Park on 5 September 1850 after collapsing while playing with her grandchildren, and was buried alongside her husband in the cemetery of the Great Synagogue, identified as Baroness de Rothschild.

*Melanie Aspey is the Archivist to The Rothschild Archive, London*

## Notes

This essay relies heavily on *The English Rothschilds* by Richard Davis, Collins, 1984 and 'Silent members of the first EEC' by Miriam Rothschild in Heiberger, G. (ed.): *The Rothschilds: a European family*, Frankfurt, 1994.

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4. 'Lady Montefiore's Honeymoon' by Lucien Wolf in *Essays in Jewish History*, (ed.) Cecil Roth, London, 1954.
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6. Joseph Barber, Manchester, to Nathan Rothschild, London, 18 February 1808, RAL XI/58/41B.
7. Peter Fawcett, Manchester, to Nathan Rothschild, London, 5 August 1808, RAL XI/112/7B.
8. Carl von Rothschild, Frankfurt, to his brothers, Salomon and James, Paris, 18 May 1817, RAL T27/265.
9. Amschel von Rothschild, Frankfurt, to James de Rothschild, Paris, 5 June 1817, RAL T62/54.
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13. Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen ...* vol. 1, London, 1857.
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17. Hannah Rothschild, Frankfurt, to Lionel de Rothschild, London, n.d., c. October to December 1846, RAL RFamC/1/99.
18. Hannah Rothschild to Mayer de Rothschild, 11 October 1856. The Rosebery Archive, Dalmeny House.
19. Hannah Rothschild, Frankfurt, to Anthony de Rothschild, London, 10 July 1856, RAL RFamC/1/64.
20. Hannah Rothschild, Paris, to Nat de Rothschild, London, 19 May 1859, RAL RFamC/1/85.
21. Bill Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740–1875*, p.22, Manchester, 1976.
22. Hannah Rothschild, Oxford, to Charlotte de Rothschild, London, 22 November 1841, RAL RFamC/1/14.