Jacob Danglow in his time was the leading rabbinical figure of Australian Jewry. Born in London in 1880, he became minister of the St. Kilda Hebrew Congregation in 1905 and stayed for 52 years. He and St. Kilda were intertwined for all that amazingly long period, and generations of congregants grew up regarding him as the fixed point of reference in their lives. He did not actually establish the St. Kilda tradition – that was the achievement of the founders and of the first minister, his predecessor, Rev. Elias Blaubaum, who served for 30 years before his untimely death in his 50s – but it was Danglow that moulded the congregation into a leading exemplar of integrated British patriotism and Jewish urbanity.

He served the Jewish community as a whole, not without episodes of considerable controversy. He was involved in countless civic and national causes, where his view was increasingly recognised as the voice of reason, tolerance and wisdom. Everybody fully expected that he would go on forever. His death in 1962, exactly fifty years ago, was almost a surprise: all of a sudden, it seemed, we had come to the end of an era - in more ways than one.

He lived a long life that in some respects remained set in an Edwardian time warp. People regarded him as the quintessential British gentleman. He was the embodiment of an Anglo-Jewish ministerial tradition that had few such admired exponents. The model of a British patriot for whom utmost loyalty to the Empire was totally axiomatic. The chaplain who could minister to all faiths. The orthodox rabbi who was constitutionally unable to go to extremes. The army colonel with a commanding officer’s dignity but none of the egotism and ostentation that sometimes go with high rank. The proponent of Jewish education who was not sure about Jewish day schools. The lover of Zion who sternly opposed political Zionism. Above all, the commanding personality and presence.

There are aspects of his opinions which others did not always support, but there was also a record of solid achievement that went far beyond St. Kilda and even beyond his considerable military service. To him is owed much of the structure of the Jewish community – institutions for youth, like the Jewish scouts and the Jewish Young People’s Association (the “Jippa”); for the old, like various endeavours of the Montefiore Homes; not only for the living but for the dead, such as the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha. Many
years on the Melbourne Beth Din, where for a time he was chairman; for the United Jewish Education Board; for almost every Jewish communal organisation you can name – he supported the creation of the Association of Jewish Ministers, of the Melbourne Jewish Advisory Board, which became the Board of Deputies... and even of the Kadimah. Move outside the Jewish community and you find him giving solid service to countless public bodies and holding high office in Freemasonry. Nowhere was he just a name on a letterhead but a presence, a heart and mind, a voice and a vote – a man of eminence.

This was Rabbi Danglow – great in his time, but gone these fifty years, and hardly remembered except by the remnants of a now almost vanished age. While he lived, one thought he would be eternal or at least immortal, but now there is a new generation that knew not Danglow. St. Kilda has recast itself in a more modern image, the Jewish community has radically changed and diversified, the Empire has gone and the Commonwealth is groping for a role, the monarchy amuses more people than it impresses, Australia is moving in new directions, and Israel is there to stay. And the “establishment” rabbinate is more concerned with traditional learning and practice than used to be the case.

I hope I may be permitted to be rather personal in the rest of these remarks. A septuagenarian who was a boy when Danglow was in his prime, I recall my infant feeling that the grand figure in the synagogue pulpit was larger than human. The boy was not quite certain what God was, but he rather thought that God was the rabbi or the rabbi was God. He had no idea what theological tangles his childish belief represented.

By his teenage years he probably had a more realistic view of the rabbi, and though he no longer confused Danglow and the Almighty, he thought that every rabbi was or should be in the Danglow image – clerical collar, officer’s stride, hardly needing much Talmud but strong on derekh eretz, an ecclesiastical personage who stood for reason and rationality. The boy remembers coming home from Shule one day quoting Danglow’s doubts about Zionism, and finding that his parents had doubts about Danglow. He remembers, though, that when family tragedy struck, Danglow, with the faithful Rev. Kowadlo at his side, was the consummate pastor.

He recalls consulting Danglow about the choice of a career. The conversation centred on the law and/or the diplomatic service, and the boy did indeed proceed to study law. At the same time he came closer to orthodoxy, and though he did not discuss this development with Danglow (possibly feeling that deep orthodoxy was better raised with others), the
eventual decision to enter the rabbinate received Danglow’s approval and his practical assistance including collecting funds to help financially. During his rabbinical studies in London he renewed acquaintance with Danglow, who was in England on a visit. He had already made the acquaintance of some of Danglow’s ministerial contemporaries, and whilst he suspected that they, and Danglow, thought of him as a protégé, he knew his style of ministry would not entirely be theirs.

Yet over the years he realised how much he owed to that rabbi whom he now knew was even greater than Divine in being eminently human. He often found himself doing things in Danglow’s way, and when the decades had passed and he retired from the active ministry he wondered if the word “wise” which some people flatteringly attached to him in retrospect was not part of the Danglow heritage. This ceremony is partly about that heritage, and I am proud to have a part in the proceedings, albeit from afar.

Danglow’s name is attached to various buildings and institutions in the Melbourne Jewish community. More importantly, his memory still moves those who were part of the generations that grew up under his eye, who as children somewhat hesitantly came up to the rabbi’s seat in the synagogue and found on the table that was installed there a book to read and enjoy during what was a sometimes lengthy service. Today there are better books and a new rabbi, but the present is always built on the past. In St. Kilda, Danglow is now the past, but in his time he unreservedly loved his congregants – especially the children – and was unreservedly loved by them. Today is a tribute of love. His foibles forgotten, his doubts dispelled, his gift to the lives of so many members of the community is honoured and cherished... and sometimes even embellished a little. May his name be a blessing.