

Passing the Torch

JOHN S. HATCHER

At the inception of the Five Year Plan of 1974 to 1979, the Universal House of Justice specifically called upon the Canadian Bahá’í community to “cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses and lectureships on the Bahá’í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning” (21 March 1974). In response to that call, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada convened a “policy conference”—a free-flowing consultation among a group of believers especially invited because of their connection to the line of action being considered.

The result of this fruitful convening of devoted souls was the creation by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá’í Faith in February 1975. Among the members of its first Executive Committee were four individuals who were, at that time, serving as members of the National Assembly and whom we are honored to consider the founders of the Association: Hossain Danesh, William S. Hatcher, Douglas Martin, and Otto Donald Rogers.

I was privileged to attend the first annual conference of the Association in December 1976, where I presented a paper that would develop into the monograph “The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality.” It was a lovely time, some fifty or sixty of us staying in wooden cottages in the

snow-covered forest near Cedar Glen, Ontario, and meeting in a room the size of an ordinary classroom with other notable friends of the Association—Dr. David Smith and Dr. Jane Faily among them—as well, of course, as the founders. That was but forty-four years ago—like yesterday in my mind. And yet, since then, this agency has become the Association for Bahá’í Studies—North America (ABS-NA); its annual conferences now bring in thousands of attendees from across the globe; the annual monographs have become a quarterly journal; and similar Bahá’í scholarly associations have been successfully established throughout the world.

As of a month ago, all four of our beloved founders have winged their way to serve in another realm, though doubtless they pray for us who strive to maintain this institution, even as we pray for them. My own dear brother, Dr. William S. Hatcher, who taught me about the Bahá’í Faith, died in 2005, after having served on the National Spiritual Assemblies of Switzerland, Canada, and Russia, having written several major scholarly studies on the Bahá’í Faith, and having pioneered extensively, always focused on serving the Faith wherever he resided. He was a noted mathematician, educator, and philosopher who excelled at using logic to expound spiritual verities. During one of his final years, he gave talks at universities across Canada and the United States in which he explained to overflowing crowds of students his enduring logical proof of the existence of

God, on which occasions he challenged anyone to refute his argument, and try as they might—whether student or faculty member—none was able to do so. And at the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, after his passing, observances were held across Canada in his honor.

On June 2 of this year, the second of the three founders, Dr. Hossain Danesh, passed away after a life dedicated to promoting education, healing, and the establishment of peace through his writings, his talks, and the many creative educational programs he established all over the globe. For twenty-two years he served on the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, and upon his passing, this institution applauded “his keen interest in the intellectual life of the community” that “found expression over many years through contributions to the development of the Association for Bahá’í Studies, strengthening its foundations and stimulating its growth.” Some of my fondest memories of that first meeting I attended were the times between sessions when he, Bill, Doug, and I would find such joy in discussing matters of theology and philosophy, as well as purely practical matters about how to help the Association thrive and expand.

On September 28 of this year, the third of the three founders, Douglas Martin, passed away after having served the Bahá’í Faith at the highest levels of administration, in addition to having co-written with Bill possibly the most widely distributed introductory book about the Bahá’í Faith, *The Bahá’í*

Faith: The Emerging Global Religion. So notable as an engaging, delightful, loving, and humorous speaker, Doug served for a quarter of a century on the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly. He was then appointed Director General of the Bahá’í International Community’s Office of Public Information, and, subsequently, he was elected to the Universal House of Justice, on which he served for twelve years.

Upon his passing, and in commemoration of his remarkable service, the Universal House of Justice observed, “The special gifts he possessed for presenting the Faith with clarity and vision shone through as much in his scholarly writings as in his public presentations, including in vigorous defense of the Bahá’í community in Iran. Much of this work was undertaken while he simultaneously discharged weighty responsibilities in the administration of the Faith.”

Last year, we lost Otto Donald Roger, a beloved and enthusiastic supporter whom I met at that first ABS conference, and with whom I have been fast friends until his passing on 28 April 2019. He was the first to read my article on metaphor, and he related it to the very heart of his own thoughts about the function of art, especially his own highly regarded painting and sculpture. A Canadian painter and sculptor from rural Saskatchewan, his abstract works reflect his Bahá’í beliefs about unity in diversity, as well as his love of the natural landscapes so lastingly dear to his heart. His work has adorned the covers of two issues of this journal.

In addition to his prestigious achievements as an artist—his works are held in many private and public collections and galleries in Canada and other countries—his service to the Bahá’í Faith was recognized by the Bahá’í World Centre. At the behest of the Universal House of Justice, in 1988 Rogers left the University of Saskatchewan and moved to Haifa, Israel, where for ten years he served as a member of the International Teaching Centre. In 1998, Rogers returned to Canada where he settled in Milford in Prince Edward County, Ontario, to continue his art.

This year also saw the passing, on September 25, of another luminary in the field of education, Dr. Farzam Arbab. Among his myriad other creative endeavors in service of the Bahá’í Faith and its institutions, Dr. Arbab was known for his avid support of the Association of Bahá’í Studies, and heralded for his presidency, from 1974 to 1988, of the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a nongovernmental development agency in Colombia on whose board of directors he continued to serve until his passing.

Dr. Arbab was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia from 1970 to 1980, and then served as a Continental Counsellor from 1980 to 1988. He was subsequently appointed to the International Teaching Centre in 1988, and he was elected to serve as a member of the Universal House of Justice in 1993, a position he held for two decades, from 1993 to 2013.

Among his many accolades were earning an honorary doctorate in science from Amherst College in 1989 and being selected to give the 34th Balyuzi Memorial Lecture at the annual meeting of the Association of Bahá’í Studies in 2016, a talk appropriately titled “The Intellectual Life of the Bahá’í Community.” Of course, perhaps the most memorable of his many contributions to the education and progress of the global Bahá’í community was the early work he did in Colombia developing the Ruhi Institute courses and the framework for the institute process as a whole. For the past two decades, this model of education and action for community building on a global scale has been at the forefront of massive community development and enrollment, most prominently in some of the most remote regions of the world. In some of these places, the progress in the Administrative Order of the Bahá’í Faith now provides glimpses of the vision set forth by Shoghi Effendi of the rise, in the fullness of time, of “the Bahá’í Commonwealth of the future, of which this vast Administrative Order is the sole framework,” and which “is, both in theory and practice, not only unique in the entire history of political institutions, but can find no parallel in the annals of any of the world’s recognized religious systems” (*World Order* 151).

In the context of the passing of these giants on whose shoulders we stand, it is now my privilege, after seven years of editing the journal which they founded, to pass the torch of editorship to another generation of scholars.

Therefore, it is with utmost pleasure that with this issue we introduce you to the new Editor for the journal, Michael Sabet, who, over the course of the past six months, has already proven himself extremely capable and an inspired appointment by our beloved institutions.

Dedicated to Bahá’í scholarship and inaugurated by the founders of the Association of Bahá’í Studies more than three decades ago, the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* has garnered the respect of scholars by maintaining the highest of standards and by establishing a vital space for those who wish to explore the integration of the Bahá’í teachings with the vast variety of fields that can find in those teachings and beliefs the *mizán*—the standard—by which they can assess their efforts in whatever academic endeavors they pursue.

In conclusion, I am confident that with Michael’s guidance—assisted ably by Editorial Coordinator Nilufar Gordon (without whom this effort would not be possible), and greatly inspired by the sterling efforts modeled by the noble forebears, Arbab, Danesh, Hatcher, Martin, and Rogers—the journal will continue to serve an increasingly important function for both the Association of Bahá’í Studies and the Bahá’í community at large.

A Note from the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá’í Studies

JULIA BERGER, SECRETARY

As we welcome the new Editor of the *Journal for Bahá’í Studies*, Michael Sabet, the Association for Bahá’í Studies wishes to recognize the rich and wide-ranging contributions of Dr. John Hatcher, now retiring from that role, under whose gifted leadership over the past seven years the stature and content of the *Journal* advanced markedly. In November 2013, he assumed the position of Editor with enthusiasm and vigor, pouring his talents and creative energy into this arena of service. Many readers were already familiar with his distinguished academic career, which included forty years as Professor of English Literature at the University of South Florida, and with his illustrious contributions to Bahá’í scholarship with over twenty-five published books and over one hundred poems and articles spanning the fields of literature and philosophy as well as Bahá’í theology and exegesis. In addition to his vast erudition, he brought to the role of Editor a penchant for frank and honest discourse, a jovial spirit, and a subtle sense of humor.