

# Hidden Bounties: Memories of Pioneering on the Magdalene Islands

by Larry Rowdon. Nine Pines Publishing, Manotick, Ontario, Canada, 141 pages, 20 illustrations, introduction by Roger White, 1994.

reviewed by Will C. van den Hoonaard in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no.4 (1994)

In a note to a fellow Bahá'í, Margaret Rowdon once wrote that she and Larry had received a first-hand account of the Magdalen Islands—some 264 sq. km. of islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence haunted by wind and salt. It was “a rather gloomy picture,” she remembered saying. She also remembered thinking at the time, “Wouldn't it be difficult to move to a place like that?” But, of course, she “felt perfectly safe thinking this,” for they were expecting to move to the Queen Charlotte Islands. Suddenly the Queen Charlotte Islands were settled by other Bahá'ís and within a matter of weeks, Margaret and Larry Rowdon were on their way to the Magdalen Islands in 1954, accompanied by their infant child, Ayn. They, with more children to be born, remained faithfully in this remote archipelago until 1969.

What happens when two resourceful people land in a remote post? is a question that would stimulate some to recount their tales with a weary list of accomplishments, a chronology of events, or an introspective of their personal battles and hopes. What Rowdon has achieved in his *Hidden Bounties* is not a blend of these kinds of accounts, but an insightful, gentle, and frank assessment of his pioneering days in the Magdalen Islands and of the society to which he and his family became attached for fifteen years.

The language abounds with graceful turns of phrase that effortlessly evoke his experiences, impressions, and moods of a relentless landscape. “Delicious” is the first word that comes to mind when describing this tender recollection of memories. The use of twenty of Rowdon's own drawings underscores the ebb and flow of this narrative. Form and content meld to heighten the whole recollection.

The final paragraph of the book sums up the aim of this recollection, namely to “perhaps cheer ... another pioneer”<sup>[1]</sup> in whatever condition they might find themselves” (138). In twenty brief “chapters” (more like vignettes), the author provides essential glimpses of the inner and outer meaning of pioneering. These vignettes are arranged in chronological order of events, but, like the islands of the Magdalen Archipelago, each seems to stand alone, yet linked underneath by Rowdon's love for Bahá'u'lláh and for the Magdalene people. A real storyteller, the author leaves readers wanting to sit with the Rowdons in their warm kitchen on a cold wintry day, with feet on the opened stove door, listening to the wind and watching the fading sunset!

Here are glimpses of the vignettes: the small airplane landing on an impossibly small beach; finding small change on the beach just as the Rowdons were left wondering where the next meal would come from; the failed attempts at crafting a table; their relationship with another pioneer; unclogging a stubborn toilet with dandelion wine; the heartwarming and sometimes sudden

friendships with Madelinot families; the arrival of electricity (in the same year as the first arrival of Bahá'ís); beachcombing out of necessity; baleen whales that had washed ashore; telephones; a broken chimney; a homegarden; the death of a newborn; Bahá'í visitors; efforts to convince someone that the Rowdons were neither Catholics, Protestants, nor Communists; and healing sick budgies in the local convent. The Rowdons seem to trip over these events, and with the author as storyteller, they illustrate the deep wonder of selfless service exerted by a pioneering family, and their growing admiration for the Madelinots:

In the beginning of our friendship with a number of individuals and families, the blunt corners of their mannerisms and personalities began to intrude and I was often stunned by the way their hard language hit me. Later I was to pay it little heed for their enormous cordiality was such that one sensed the sincerity behind it and could not but admire their human kindness. (111)

As icing on the cake, many readers like myself will undoubtedly enjoy the self-effacing humor that runs through the whole text and that leaves one chuckling too loudly for anyone else in the room to ignore.

Even the one small discrepancy in the account which states that another pioneer, Kay Zinky, arrived in February, 1953 (instead of April, 1953 as indicated in other published accounts [e.g., *Bahá'í World* 13: 453]) becomes less important in the face of the spiritual and practical insights offered by *Hidden Bounties*.

These memories are important to us. More than any practical handbook on how to live in an unfamiliar society, *Hidden Bounties* is replete with examples of how to make do with less (and even with nothing!), conveying at the same time the spiritual framework of pioneering.

The book is no less significant for its contribution to the small number of published memoirs of Canadian Bahá'ís who have served with distinction at home and elsewhere. The spirit of magnanimity, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, counseled Canadian Bahá'ís to develop, has reached a zenith in *Hidden Bounties*. Only Roger White could have written the introduction of this recollection of memories. Fortunately for us, he did. The ruse worked: Roger White got our attention, and before too long we enter the world of an eloquent and prosaic pioneer family.

Nine Pines Publishing should be commended for taking this memoir under its wing, along with an earlier one by Doris McKay, entitled *Fires in Many Hearts*. Let us hope that those who know Larry Rowdon will encourage him to write other stories.

[1] The term “pioneer” is used here in the Bahá'í context of those who leave their homes and establish new lives in remote regions of the world in an effort to spread the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to assist their new communities in their social and spiritual development.