

# Legacies of the Heart

by Larry Rowdon. Borealis Press, Ottawa, 1997, 66 pages. reviewed by Ian Kluge in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1999)

A poem is like a handful of pebbles thrown into a pond: as the stones strike the water, circles spread out, interacting and forming all sorts of intricate patterns. Likewise, in skillfully written poetry, memorable patterns of remembrance, feeling, and thought spread out from the “pebbles” of diction, rhythm, and imagery, creating what I call the “circles of significance” that make a poem personally meaningful to the reader. The more far-reaching and intricate the patterns, the better the poem.

By these standards, Larry Rowdon's *Legacies of the Heart* is an outstanding work. This is especially true of his narrative poems and nowhere better illustrated than in “Casualties” with its dramatic story, strong rhythms that do justice to the content, precisely chosen diction, and simple yet highly evocative imagery.

*Our army came in from the Channel over low-lying dunes and wind-braided grasses up through the yellow wheat of Normandy's fields and summer blue passed as skies turned black from constant battle. (1)*

By sticking to essentials, Rowdon keeps the poem moving: this is battle, not a tour, so we notice only occasional details like “wind-braided grass.” In one action-packed stanza, we go from the boats coming “from the Channel,” to the actual invasion “over low-lying dunes,” and to the fighting in “the yellow wheat” of inland farms. The lines rhythmically evoke the lurching movement of battle as objectives are gained, painfully, one at a time.

However, as with Rowdon's other narratives, there's a twist. Spiritually numbed by the death of a comrade, the poet is finally reawakened to the realities of war when a companion senselessly kills a teenage German soldier trying to surrender. He suddenly realizes that war has many “Casualties”: his friend, the nameless German youth, the men in the platoon whose natural human compassion has been sacrificed, and, finally, the man who killed the boy. But there is hope, too, in the narrator's moral awakening: if war can bludgeon our feelings, it can—if we let it—resurrect them as well.

Rowdon's ability to evoke place and character with carefully chosen diction is demonstrated in “A Sunbeam”:

*“Ya' gotta' be washed in the blood of the lamb, boy,” the preacher said, (9)*

The words instantly evoke the revival tent and the preacher's insistent fervor—and lead us to its poignantly underwhelming conclusion. Despite all his later good deeds, the young man only once had the feeling that “Jesus wanted him / for a sunbeam.”

“The Time of Turmoil” displays Rowdon’s light but effective use of irony. This poem is a carefully constructed dance of uncertainties as the narrator reflects on how his family has been affected by the martyrdom of the Báb. He cannot forget that his first wife might have sympathized with the new cause and that his son joined it. Having lost so many he loves to this movement, he now wonders if perhaps the Báb was a divine messenger. Our reactions to his plight are ambiguous: we sympathize but wonder why it took so much loss to start him thinking. It also makes us wonder if we too are among those who learn best by losing what we hold dear.

In some narratives, Rowdon courts disaster by providing a simple chronicle of events that seemingly leads nowhere special and then suddenly explodes in a brilliant image that reflects the whole story in a new light. “The Banishment,” for example, features a companion whose tale of Bahá’u’lláh’s journey into exile serves only as a prelude to a marvelous image:

*but oh, how profusely in the flush of spring can one visualize those fragile mountain flowers blooming where He had rested. (45)*

Bahá’u’lláh as a bringer of life—and enlightenment, for the image clearly alludes to the story of the Buddha from whose infant footprints lotus flowers blossomed. Here, as elsewhere, images are revealed as one of Rowdon’s special virtues.

“Ninth Morning” leads to a similarly memorable ending. A recently declared Native believer goes to the waterfall where his ancestors once worshipped and cries out the Name he’d newly learned, Bahá’u’lláh! Bahá’u’lláh! and hears his echoing voice repeated in the deep ravine Bahá’u’lláh...‘ulláh... lách... (37)

Even in his most moving narratives, Rowdon’s poems maintain a quiet and reflective calm that reminds one of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Poetry like this requires especially attentive reading because it is all too easy to miss the powerful events and emotional catastrophes presented in this manner.

The narrative bent of Rowdon’s sensibility is also felt in his strongest lyric poems. Usually, lyrics are simply expressions of deep personal emotion, but Rowdon’s add a meditative reflective element based on the poem’s narrative substrate. Sometimes, as in “Sojourn Belsen,” the narrative is explicitly part of the poem, while in others, such as “Elegy for My Father,” the narrative element is only suggested. Indeed, narrative and lyric are often so closely linked in Rowdon’s work that identifying a poem as one or the other is often quite difficult and somewhat arbitrary.

“Elegy for My Father” shows how the rawness of physical reality may be transformed through faith and reflection into a positive vision of the meaning of death:

*Someone will clean up the mess remove the bandages strip you of bedclothes and the dignity of sheets (24)*

As usual, Rowdon's manner is calm, dignified, and even subdued, allowing us—but only through a glass darkly—to catch a glimpse of the previous sorrows that form the narrative foundation of this meditative lyric. Eventually, these griefs are transformed through the alchemy of faith and meditation into understanding and joy. He recalls "Love's first command" (25): "My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting."<sup>[1]</sup> Thus he regains the strength to

*arise, gird up again pay out the right of God look back in laughter feel truly blessed about the strange phenomenon of death (25)*

"Fishing" portrays the subtleties of father-son, "male-bonding" love. At first, the narrator recalls only the silent but real conflict between the father's enthusiasm for fishing and his own sensitivity which made him feel "the sharp hook's pain" (11). Consequently, the narrator never took his own sons fishing. Now—and too late—he remembers all the quiet moments when he and his father merely went through the motions of catching fish while enjoying each other's presence. Fishing was simply an outward reason to be together: "there was more to fishing / than catching fish" (12). This poem once again demonstrates Rowdon's strengths: quiet reflection, understatement, and powerfully evocative suggestion.

Rowdon's most successful conventional lyrics, that is, lyrics whose prime purpose is the expression of feeling rather than thinking, are occasioned by death and regret. The thoughts in these lyrics are less for intellectual reflection than for kindling deep emotions, expressed in a restrained and dignified manner that characterizes all of his best poetry. My favorite is "The Visit," about a pilgrimage to the tomb of Shoghi Effendi.

*Searching to find the, prayers we could not move away appearing to stand for hours contained as though by strange invisible bonds*

*.... Was it because that death after almost two decades still remained one of those inexplicable things life asked of us to understand? (64)*

The truncated action, the failed attempt to read prayers, the stasis is a marvelous expression of grief beyond all understanding.

"The Return" expresses the regrets of a young man who went "off to war / for all the wrong reasons" (23). Returning to the abandoned family farm, he poignantly imagines what might have been: a farm saved and a "mother's face less streaked / by tiredness and tears" (23). Such feelings are common to all and Rowdon skillfully saves them from becoming trivialized through the quiet dignity and restrained eloquence of his style. This is especially true of the poem's last image of a tired and grieving mother which, in the hands of a lesser poet, could easily have slipped into bathos and laughable clichés.

I have no doubt that Rowdon is essentially a Wordsworthian writer, one whose strengths lie in the recollection of strong emotions and ideas in tranquility and their

expression in simple but highly evocative language and carefully crafted lines. When he strays too far from his natural sensibility, as in “The Martyrdom of Quddús,” where he tries a direct approach to explosive content, Rowdon is less sure of himself and the language often falters. A phrase such as “vilest of women” (41) is too polite and clichéd to create the atmosphere of hysteria, degradation, and violence required by this poem. Fortunately, such lapses are rare in this book.

Larry Rowdon’s *Legacies of the Heart* is an important addition to the literature inspired by the Bahá’í writings. The Wordsworthian sensibility causes it to stand out among the many volumes of poetry offered in our time.

[1] Bahá’u’lláh. *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985) 3.