

# Shoghi Effendi in Oxford and Earlier

by Riaz Khadem. George Ronald, Oxford, 1999, xviii + 173 pages. Illustrated (32 plates). Available at [George Ronald](#).

reviewed by Anne Furlong in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1-2 (2000)

The claims of Bahá'í history are corroborated by authenticated texts. Many Bahá'ís therefore assume that documenting pivotal figures or events in Bahá'í history will be relatively straightforward. An account of the thirteen-month period spent by Shoghi Effendi in Oxford seems just such a simple task, given that the records are held in technologically advanced Western countries, with their passion for amassing and recording ephemera. In fact, writing history can be frightfully complex. In *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948*, Dr. Will van den Hoonaard describes the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada. The Master visited Canada for less than two weeks, and the press coverage of His visit was extensive. Nevertheless, as Dr. van den Hoonaard discovered, "there is a surprising dearth of information about his trip," "discrepancies" about "the published dates of his visit," and even "contradictory statements of fact."<sup>[1]</sup> The reconstruction of the events of this brief period impressed upon him how scant the records actually were. When we consider that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit had been eagerly anticipated by the Bahá'í community, and that the press coverage was "successful" and well planned, the gaps and contradictions in the historical and documentary record of this event are startling.

In the light of these difficulties, it suddenly becomes clear that an account of the life of Shoghi Effendi before the Guardianship was instituted could prove a daunting task. Who among the believers would have paid much attention to the daily life of a grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, particularly during the crises of the first two decades of this century, both in the Bahá'í community, and in the world? And why would strangers in Paris, London, or Oxford have thought it worth their while to study the life, habits, and work of this modest, cheerful "Oriental"? Even university records have breaks; and the collegial system of Oxford University—where Shoghi Effendi was enrolled for just over a year—hampered the development of a central archive. Students' lives must be reconstructed largely from sources such as college bills, or from the reminiscences of their fellow students. While the written record of Shoghi Effendi's activities survives to the present—though misfiled and perhaps forgotten—there is virtually no chance of finding any of his contemporaries who can give us some picture of those days.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that this brief book brings Shoghi Effendi so vividly to life during the period before the Guardianship. In part, this is because some thirty years ago, at the encouragement of the Universal House of Justice, Riaz Khadem had begun research for a biography of the Guardian. He conducted an exhaustive search for documents relating to Shoghi Effendi at Oxford University. He also contacted hundreds of former students of Balliol College, where Shoghi Effendi pursued his studies from 23 October 1920 to 29 November 1921. Fifty-two of these men were able to supply

information or recollections of “Rabbani.” These precious records nevertheless did not seem sufficient basis for a biography, especially in the light of Rūhíyyih Khánum’s definitive book, *The Priceless Pearl*, which appeared in 1969.<sup>[2]</sup> However, Khadem has been persuaded that they furnish the basis for a book focusing on the Guardian’s Oxford years.

*Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* is thoroughly charming and admirably accessible. Because Khadem is writing for his fellow-believers in the United States, he provides invaluable background information about systems of education in the United Kingdom and in the Near East, which relatively few North Americans know or understand. His description of the collegial system in Oxford is notable for its clarity, brevity, and usefulness. As a former student of Balliol College himself, he is intimately familiar with its history, its ethos, its practices, and its routines; and these he intelligently conveys to an American audience. Without this context, the North American reader cannot construct a true picture of Shoghi Effendi’s life in the West, its place in his education, and its effect on his development as a stylist and thinker. Still, the achievements of this book go well beyond allowing the reader a glimpse into Shoghi Effendi’s student years.

The materials concerning the Oxford period are meager, and so Khadem has included an outline of Shoghi Effendi’s early life. These early chapters are not simply a preamble to the “important” parts of his life; instead, they establish the focus of this narrative. A single theme dominates and unites the book: the education of a Guardian. Unaware of the Institution of the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi regarded himself simply as the servant of his Master. From his earliest days, he devoted himself to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as amanuensis and interpreter, often at the expense of his own health. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tried to protect His tiny grandson from his own appetite for work, but Shoghi Effendi’s thirst for learning only intensified as he grew older. To fulfill his desire, he endured schools he deeply disliked, and, what was far more painful, extended separations from his beloved Master. In the process, he followed exactly the course which would best prepare him for his role as Guardian of the Faith. The education described by *Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* is better thought of as the apprenticeship of the protector and custodian of the Institutions of Bahá’u’lláh.

Khadem’s book provides an affecting and detailed picture of the providential preparation of this young man for the immense responsibilities that fell to him upon the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Stories about Shoghi Effendi, from his childhood to the abbreviated conclusion of his studies at Balliol, recreate the world into which the youth was born. We learn about the historical and social conditions Shoghi Effendi grew up in, and the training his successive schools—the Jesuit schools, the Preparatory School, the Syrian Protestant College, and finally Balliol College—gave him. We discover how profoundly affected this young man was by the forces shaping the world in which the Bahá’í Faith would come of age. In contrast to the lives of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, spent almost exclusively in the East (‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s contacts with the West coming late in His life), Shoghi Effendi experienced, from his earliest years, the forces of East and West “in close embrace.” As would later become apparent, everything in his life contributed to the formation of a soul fit to assume the mantle of the Guardianship. Even his

eagerness, his zest for life, his good humor, and his boundless energy were cultivated by his experiences and poured into his monumental labors for the Cause.

*Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* also sheds light on the roots of his development as the foremost translator of Bahá'í Scriptures. Initially, Shoghi Effendi concentrated on the acquisition of languages, a task at which he excelled. In the annual declamation contest at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut), Shoghi Effendi won at least twice—in French. His studies at the College broadened to include the sciences (physics, mathematics, biology, astronomy), engineering, the social sciences, and law. His core studies, though, continued to be English, logic, Arabic, and rhetoric. His BA in 1917 thus represents an education both broad and deep. The purpose of his college education was to fit him to be the translator for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and his output as a translator over the next three years was staggering. In one thirteen-day period in 1919, the twenty-two-year old Shoghi Effendi translated forty-seven separate Tablets. This work was in addition to his attendance on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, his life with his family, the family and private devotions, his correspondence with friends and on behalf of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and his journal, which he kept faithfully. Not for nothing does he remark to a friend from college days that “often I am kept working at my desk and translating Tablets till past midnight.” But, he hastens to add, “still I am happy and grateful” (45).

In spite of the astounding workload, this would be the happiest time of Shoghi Effendi's life. Passed in the presence of his Beloved, his days were filled with work, joy, and service. His devotion led him to drive his body beyond its limits (a pattern that would repeat itself over the years). In 1920, at the insistence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His grandson entered a sanatorium on the outskirts of Paris for a lengthy convalescence. Shoghi Effendi would never be in the physical presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá again. Scarcely twenty months later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would pass away in Haifa, leaving his devoted grandson prostrate with grief.

The story of those twenty months—the final stages of the education of the Guardian in the person of the charming, earnest, jovial, and “bouncy” Shoghi Effendi—is told with a sweetness that makes the book a pleasure to read. But the book is also surprisingly substantial. For the student of the translations of Shoghi Effendi, it provides a glimpse into the maturation of the style and approach of the Guardian. For the student of the Institution of the Guardian— and I believe that there will be more such students in the future, as we grasp the nature of this unique Institution—this book allows us to see how Shoghi Effendi was prepared for his role. He believed, and hoped, that he would be called on to serve the Cause, and this is what shaped his education. At the present stage in the development of the Faith, virtually no aspect of Bahá'í life is untouched by the legacy of the Guardian. We may find it curious, therefore, that Shoghi Effendi's future station was clearer to his fellow-students in Balliol (who assumed he would be the “head” of the Bahá'í Faith, and nicknamed him accordingly) than it was to the believers in both the East and West. This book helps explain why.

Finally, *Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* gives us an impression of the joys and sufferings of the youth upon whom the future of the Bahá'í world would soon rest. According to late

recollections of Dr. Fallscheer, a German woman physician who attended the ladies of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household, the Master described Shoghi Effendi as having "the shadow of a great calling in the depths of his eyes" (66). This book allows those of us who have known only the Guardian—either personally, or through his writings—to make the acquaintance of the boy and youth who existed before the great calling. We discover his charm, his sense of fun, his intense devotion, and his love of life. We also discover his capacity, so radiantly evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh, to win over even the coldest and most skeptical people through the force of his conviction, integrity, modesty, and good humor.

Apart from the apparently effortless way in which this slim book makes the most of scarce documentary evidence and personal recollections, *Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* is written with exemplary economy and clarity. While it is perhaps too closely directed to the Bahá'í community of the United States, and while I deplore the lack of an index, it is an excellent addition to any Bahá'í library. Particularly for families with young children, the stories of Shoghi Effendi's apprenticeship are rich sources for inspiration, encouragement, and instruction. The illustrations, which should have been numbered, are significant additions to the text. The reproductions of documents by and about him, and the photographs of his college and contemporaries, are invaluable.

*Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* is not merely a narrative of the early life of one of the great figures in religious history; it affords a rare insight into the ways such men and women are raised up. While it is true that Oxford completed the training of the Guardian, we can never forget that it was the boy, Shoghi Effendi, who wholeheartedly sought the education that prepared him for a station he did not look for, and could not have anticipated. We should come away from Khadem's book with a profound gratitude for and devotion to the boy who grew into the towering figure who articulated the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and who did so by rising to the opportunities which his character and situation afforded through ceaseless and joyful work. The book will appeal to a wide range of tastes; a supplement to the magisterial *Priceless Pearl*, it is also a revealing introduction to the Guardian through the boy he once was.

[1] Will C. van den Hoonaard, *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996) 44.

[2] Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969).