

Book Review

Take My Love to the Friends: The Story of Laura R. Davis by Marlene Macke. St. Mary's, Ont.: Chestnut Park Press, 2009. 287 pp., 37 photographs, index.

LYNN ECHEVARRIA

Marlene Macke's work about the life of Laura Davis is a delightful, inspiring book. It takes its place in the Bahá'í literature of the social history of Canadian Bahá'ís as an educational biography that is both personally engaging and historically detailed.

The seminal work of Will van den Hoonaard, *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898–1948* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996) presented the grand sweep of this history using a sociological focus to explicate the facts and firsts about many people, events, and institutions. In this work, Marlene takes the reader on an intimate journey through one person's life. Through personal stories and archival research, the author reflects on the beginnings of the Toronto Bahá'í community, institutional development across Canada, and national signal events. In so doing, she illuminates the life of Laura Davis, her family and friends, as well as twentieth-century Canadian society.

The book opens with a synthesis of the key themes of Laura's life, and of her work and service through the first century of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada, 1895–1990. It promises to reveal—and the book subsequently delivers—a first-time telling of keystone events that occurred in Toronto, and people's involvement in them, such as Martha Root, Mabel and Howard Colby Ives, Marion Jack, and Jinab-i-Fazil. It notes Laura's own outstanding contributions, such as her weekly firesides for forty years, her hundreds of traveling teaching trips in Canada and abroad, her service in volunteer organizations, and her stalwart service to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada.

Marlene spins a fascinating web of the interconnections between the many people that came into Laura's life, and the relationships she had with

mentors and role models, friends, and boarders. At the same time, she records the development of Laura's character in responding to these people, and the challenges and opportunities life offered to her. The text maintains a fine balance between describing Laura's discovery of her own path of service and the varied details of the establishment of the Bahá'í community. The book demonstrates how Laura discovered her true self through community building and the mission given to her by Shoghi Effendi.

The author sketches a brief history of Laura's family, and there is sensitivity shown in outlining Laura's life as a child and young woman, for example, how her adventuresome, outgoing personality was able to find an outlet, as well as training, in the welcoming Guiding movement, and how as a young woman, she duly managed the particular challenges she and her frugal mother, Violet Rumney, faced economically. These small details laid out for us by the author help foster an understanding of how Laura's lessons in discipline and self-sacrifice stood her in good stead for the many times in her life when she needed to make ends meet in order to provide hospitality, save to travel, and give to the Bahá'í Fund. Laura married Victor Davis in 1923 and the book weaves in accounts of their devotion and support to each other through the many years they spent together in mutual work and Bahá'í service. The author relates personal tales of her development as a young woman, attending intellectual gatherings of artists, poets, writers, and thinkers in Toronto, eventually leading to a moving description of Laura's acceptance of the new message after an encounter with Martha Root.

Violet and Laura traveled together to conventions, summer schools, and visited homes of other Bahá'ís, thus widening their networks and friendships. The book then turns to how Laura begins to hold regular fire-sides and becomes involved with causes for social justice. While Laura found mentors for such activity in the persons of May Maxwell and Rose Henderson, Marlene explains that it was through the example of Mabel Colby Ives that Laura would find the ideal teaching method that suited her—one she would rely upon for the next fifty years of her life. The author documents the gradual advance of Laura's skill set, starting from

when she gives her first talk: "I am now an old standby, filling in places" (85), and then later in the book cites Laura's surprise as she takes on speaking engagements at public meetings: "I am becoming a speaker or something . . . and to think that a year ago I could not speak at all" (107). This aptitude evolved into giving talks on regional and national teaching trips, and eventually to speaking engagements in many other countries.

A core part of the book are the sections where the author outlines the extensive and exciting work undertaken to form Assemblies across Canada in order to support the election of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in 1948. Laura herself was elected to the first National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, becoming a charter member and serving on that institution until 1954 and afterward serving on various committees and undertaking special assignments for the National Spiritual Assembly.

Considerable mention is made of the house and furnishings at 44 Chestnut Park, where Laura and her husband lived. While this might seem odd at first, its importance is due to the house's position as an historical entity, with a character in and of itself. Known for its purpose as the National Spiritual Assembly's first meeting place and its office for many years, it also holds memories for the many people who attended the firesides and other meetings held there over the course of nearly a half a century. Marlene dispels some of the myths about the Davises' acquisition of the many memorable and exotic antiques which graced their home. They were memorable not only for their intrinsic value, beauty, or exotic nature, but also because of the effect they had upon fireside guests and visitors.

Marlene enhances this biography throughout by presenting snippets of details about the 1900s, in details that ground the stories of Laura and her family in a reality that reflects what challenges and opportunities they faced, how hardworking they were, and how generous, kind, and thoughtful they were to others.

The last three decades of Laura's life are covered by the final chapters, where the author explains that Laura, upon finding herself not elected to the National Assembly in 1954, immediately searches out other possibilities

of service, and seeks to realize the dream of a lifetime—to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and meet the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi. Included are eight pages of a moving account, mostly in Laura's own words, about her experience. The days in the Guardian's presence served to refocus Laura for the rest of her life. She was asked by Shoghi Effendi to encourage the friends, and he specifically said to her, "Take my love to the friends." This was a transformational moment for Laura, who took this message to heart, and thereafter traveled extensively across Canada and internationally, sharing memories of her pilgrimage. The last section of the book is a sensitive, poignant, yet straightforward portrayal of Laura's last days living with dementia, and the experiences of the Bahá'ís who supported her at that challenging time.

Marlene mentions by name the scores of people who sent her their reminiscences. These letters are really a gold mine of personal insights, which Marlene uses adroitly throughout the book. Through them and other means, she is able to offer a multifaceted perspective on a remarkable woman. Laura's love and warmth, her practical everyday nature, her tender care of those who were ill or needy, her ability to listen and provide wise counsel, and finally, her capacity to bring people together, all are remembered and given in testimony by the people who personally knew her and loved her. In this book, we are left with a moving account of an indefatigable worker in the Bahá'í Cause.

Marlene is gracious and indeed humble in describing her efforts to write this book. She conducted at least seventeen interviews (this is recorded quietly in her footnotes) and had personal communications with over 100 people who provided their stories, memories, and reminiscences. The author does explain briefly about the research undertaken to provide precise information on the subjects of Christian Science, optometry, and other background topics. Put simply, this is a well-researched biography.