

# Book Review

*Abdu'l-Bahá in America*. By Robert H. Stockman. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 2012; 413 pp.

*Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity*. Edited by Negar Mottahedeh, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2013, xiii + 196 pp.

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It would be no exaggeration to say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in Europe and were a major event in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. "Abdu'l-Bahá's historic journeys to the West," Shoghi Effendi states, "and in particular His eight-month tour of the United States of America, may be said to have marked the culmination of His ministry, a ministry whose untold blessings and stupendous achievements only future generations can adequately estimate" (*God Passes By* 291). A faith born a mere half-century earlier in Persia and virtually unknown beyond its cultural confines suddenly entered the Western stage, proclaiming its message of unity of mankind, universal peace, equality of races and sexes, harmony of religion and science, universal education, and essential unity of religions.

The events of those two years were recorded, however incompletely, in the Bahá'í magazine *Star of the West* and in Mirza Mahmud Zarqani's detailed chronicle, *Kitab-i-Badayi'u'l-Athar*, known in its English translation as *Mahmud's Diary*. The significance and repercussions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Western travels were emphasized in the relevant chapters of Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By* and admirably treated in Hasan Balyuzi's biography, *Abdu'l-Bahá*. Allan Ward's *239 Days: Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America*, provided a welcome guide to a memorable journey that found a prominent place in the memoirs of individuals too numerous to mention, who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá and became his devoted disciples.

Robert H. Stockman's *Abdu'l-Bahá in America* is a straightforward account from the day 'Abdu'l-Bahá received the invitation to visit the to

the day He embarked on His return voyage. Stockman is no novice at writing on the history of the Faith. His biography of Thornton Chase, the first American Bahá'í, is an important contribution, throwing light on the person in the wider context of his life and times. His two volumes, *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, beginning with its origins on this continent in the late nineteenth century and continuing to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1912 journey, make Stockman's latest book in a sense a sequel to his earlier works.

As he had previously demonstrated, Stockman is a thorough researcher who carefully analyzes his sources that include institutional documents, speeches, private correspondence, published and unpublished memoirs, and a large number of newspaper and magazine articles, many of which had not been studied before. Access to the archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States opened to him a treasure trove of information that is both new and valuable. Throughout his book he pays attention to details that add to the authenticity of his narrative. He corrects, for instance, a number of chronological mistakes in the otherwise reliable Zarqani's *Mahmud's Diary*, mistakes that may have been caused by the problem of dealing with more than one calendar when he was writing his chronicle.

Stockman is constantly aware of the environment in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá moved. The comparison he makes between the messages of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and those of several prominent Oriental sages shows the differences both of the messages and of their effects on American society. Attention to context enriches Stockman's narrative and raises question that other historians will have to address.

In *'Abdu'l-Bahá in America* Stockman gives a panoramic view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's coast-to-coast travels and multifarious activities: a meeting with a former president of the United States and a visit to the homeless in the Bowery; dinners at embassies and wealthy homes; speeches at universities, including Stanford, Howard, and Columbia, as well as at churches and synagogues, at peace societies, at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and at private homes; in addition to uncounted conversations with individuals of all classes, ethnicities, and beliefs. To each and every one, 'Abdu'l-Bahá proclaimed Bahá'u'lláh's mes-

sage in a way that moved both minds and hearts. The legacy of His odyssey lives on in the North American Bahá'í community and throughout the Bahá'í world.

*'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity*, edited by Negar Mottahedeh, is a collection of essays that deal with the various aspects of that extraordinary journey. As is inevitably the case with such collections, its component pieces are not of equal significance either in content or in execution.

Mona Khademi's essay on Laura Dreyfus-Barney is one of the very few places providing information on that remarkable woman to whom the world is indebted for the collection and translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table talks, published in 1908 as *Some Answered Questions*, although these talks were given not in the West but in Haifa. Laura Barney awaits her biographer.

Robert Stockman provides a summary of his book reviewed above. Guy Emerson Mount writes of W. E. B. Du Bois's original fascination and subsequent disappointment with the Bahá'í Faith. This subject certainly deserves further investigation particularly in the light of Du Bois's later thinking that brought him to membership in the Communist Party, eulogies of Stalin, and self-exile in .

Nader Saiedi's "Abdu'l-Bahá's Critique of Nationalist Amnesia" discusses one of the most important issues with which 'Abdu'l-Bahá dealt in numerous speeches in America. Whereas the prevalent opinion at the time was that "modernity," whatever that ambiguous term may mean, had made war unlikely, if not outright impossible, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned His listeners of the approaching worldwide conflict. Applying sociological analysis to historical material, Saiedi shows that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's solution to conflict was multifaceted and included the establishment of "harmony between material civilization and moral/spiritual civilization, and commitment to the principles of the oneness of humanity, collective security, and global peace" (84).

Ever since Europeans settled in the New World, the race issue, a

byproduct of slavery, has been central to the history of . 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as nonconfrontational and gentle as He was, challenged American racist attitudes head on, proclaiming equality of races, breaking social barriers, and even encouraging interracial marriage while it was still illegal in many states. The operating principles He advocated were the abandonment of prejudices and all-embracing love. In his detailed commentary on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's speech at , Christopher Buck addresses 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings and actions on this "most vital and challenging issue" (*Advent* 33). Buck engages in an interpretation of the "myth" of the Civil War, invoking the views of several historians of the period, and shows how 'Abdu'l-Bahá used that "myth" to advocate race unity in terms that were controversial then and continue to be controversial today. Buck's views may be controversial as well, but they are thought-provoking and deserve serious attention.

The concluding essay by Mina Yazdani, "Orientals Meeting in the West: Foes Become Friends," is somewhat mistitled. It tells of 'Abdu'l-Bahá meeting several prominent Iranians, some of whom had indeed been inveterate enemies of the Bahá'í Faith, among them the journalist Zaim al-Dawlah, the scholar Muhammad Qazvini, and Mas'ud Mirza Zill al-Sultan, the ambitious and unscrupulous son of Nasir al-Din Shah. Whether driven by curiosity or some less legitimate motives, they all requested to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who unhesitatingly granted their requests. With every one of them 'Abdu'l-Bahá engaged in friendly conversation, never bringing up their antagonism toward the Faith or the harm they had inflicted on the Bahá'í community in Iran. It is precisely this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's infinite capacity to forgive, that Yazdani correctly stresses. These three individuals had good manners and behaved correctly, but one may doubt that they had in any sense become friends. Episodes adduced by Yazdani as examples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's capacity to love and to forgive and forget wrongs make a fitting conclusion to this welcome collection.

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