

Book Review



Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers

by Evelyn Loft Watts & Patricia Verge.
One Voice Press; 2011. ix + 211 pages,
including 5 Appendices, Sources,
Notes, Index and Bibliography.

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It is not often that one can find and read about the history of the beginning of a spiritual evolution. In 2012, through the publication of *Return to Tyendinaga*, a biography of two unsung heroes of the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada, Melba and Jim Loft, co-written by Evelyn Loft Watts (Mohawk/Objibway) and Patricia Verge, such a period in Canadian Bahá'í history was finally documented.

It is this reviewer's opinion that *Return to Tyendinaga* is essential

reading for young and old, particularly those interested in the socio-political history of Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Furthermore, it is a most timely work in light of what is taking place amongst Aboriginal peoples in their attempts to increase awareness among the general public about the injustices of the past: the oppression through colonialism, the placement of children in Indian residential schools, the loss of land, language and culture (including spiritual beliefs) together with the weakening of family ties and traditional governance practices.

Although in written form, the book remains true to the oral traditions of Aboriginal people and thus proceeds like a story narrated by the voices of ancestors, the voices of their own and extended family and—what would have been most precious to the Lofts themselves—the global voice of their worldwide Bahá'í family.

This is the story of the first Aboriginal Bahá'ís in Canada, their struggles, accomplishments and leadership and how they continued to exemplify a “world embracing vision” throughout their entire lives. This book also provides us with a glimpse into the Loft's community, one that could well serve as a model by enabling us to grasp how to build a community based on the principle of unity in diversity. No doubt reading this story could well inspire many young people who are advocating changes in Aboriginal leadership by demonstrating that that true leadership must be based on the foundation of service to others.

Return to Tyendinaga was written following many years of meticulous note-taking by Evelyn, Jim and Melba's daughter, who recorded her parents' memoirs and organized messages from Shoghi Effendi, from the Universal House of Justice, and from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. In addition, the work is enhanced by a variety of rich sources: letters written by Hands of the Cause, a number of interviews with those who knew Jim and Melba, and photographs of family and friends.

It is important to note that Evelyn was at a crucial stage of finding an editor for the manuscripts of her book when she had to undergo major heart surgery. In her quest for a co-author, she was fortunate enough to find Patricia Verge, author of *Angus*, the historical biography of another important Canadian Bahá'í. Indeed, it was the work of Patricia that was crucial in readying the manuscript of *Return to Tyendinaga* for publication.

This biography revolves around the true story of two courageous people, Jim and Melba Loft, who at the suggestion of Shoghi Effendi, then Head of the Bahá'í Faith, left a life of comfort in the United States and travelled to Tyendinaga, Jim's native reserve in Canada. There, this dedicated couple helped establish the Bahá'í Faith among his people. The result was that Melba is designated as the first Canadian Aboriginal believer and the Loft family as the first Aboriginal pioneers to Canada.

It is noteworthy that writing this book resulted from a pledge Evelyn made to her father, who had recognized her writing abilities when she was very young and had asked her to write a book about her parents and the promise they made to Shoghi Effendi to return to Tyendinaga. This book admirably fulfills that commitment. The collaborative effort of Evelyn and Patricia describes the fulfillment of Jim and Melba's promise but, more importantly, it is a means of encouragement, a gentle reminder to Aboriginal Bahá'ís to follow the Lofts' example of perfect obedience and complete dedication. Given the theme of this book—the sacrificial service of her parents and their exemplary efforts to enlighten their community—it could have only have been written by Evelyn, who witnessed and captured this precious milestone marking the beginning of the spiritual illumination of Aboriginal people in Canada as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world" (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 33).

Finally, it should be mentioned that included in the pages of this book are treasured copies of letters from Shoghi Effendi responding to Jim Loft and poignantly signed "Your true brother." Likewise, several photographs of significant and historical value allow the reader an intimate glimpse into the fifty years lived in the service of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

Clearly, *Return to Tyendinaga* constitutes a very important story in the annals of Canadian Bahá'í history, one that will continue to inspire and inform the larger Canadian community well into the future. It illustrates how the Lofts were concerned with justice, and how despite the many injustices they endured during their forty years on the Tyendinaga reserve, they came through their adversities with an abiding sense of nobility.

By embodying the principle of unity in diversity, a principle of both the Bahá'í teachings and their Aboriginal traditions, Jim and Melba Loft were able to build bridges between the past and the present, between the present and the future. Their home, their lives, their family, and their time on earth will long be remembered as chronicled in this touching book, and readers will emerge from this reading feeling a debt of gratitude to this inspiring couple, their unwavering service and their firmness in the Faith.

In a poem entitled "Illumination," Canadian poet, Roger White, conveys poignantly and powerfully the noble contributions the Lofts made towards the betterment of their people, their country, and the world;

Your arrows of truth
will pierce the hearts of those
who hunt for love;
your fire will grow bright,
the sick and the sorrowful
will be healed in your camp