

From Copper to Gold **Finding Form***

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Abstract

Four areas concerning the biography *From Copper to Gold* are discussed: the historical context of this biography, the approach and pace of the book, typical problems associated with the writing, and the groundwork of beliefs from which Dorothy Baker gained her strength.

Résumé

Cet article, qui porte sur la biographie *From Copper to Gold*, dégage quatre champs d'étude: le contexte historique de cette biographie, l'agencement et le rythme de l'ouvrage, les problèmes inhérents à la rédaction et les principes même de la foi de Dorothy Baker qui lui inspiraient courage et détermination.

Resumen

Se discuten cuatro temas referentes a la biografía *From Copper to Gold*: el contexto histórico de esta biografía, el enfoque y desarrollo del libro, problemas típicos asociados con la obra, y la fuente de creencias de donde logró su fuerza Dorothy Baker.

I call on those that call me son,
Grandson, or great-grandson,
On uncles, aunts, great-uncles or great-aunts,
To judge what I have done.
Have I, that put it into words,
Spoilt what old loins have sent?
Eyes spiritualised by death can judge,
I cannot, but I am not content.

— Yeats, *Selected Poetry*

Yeats lived much of his youth in Ireland's barren and beautiful northwest and, as he foretold, "Under bare Ben Bulben's head, in Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid. An ancestor was rector there, long years ago ..." (Yeats, *Selected Poetry* 208). He seems to have felt strongly the blood-bond with his forebears, to have been warmed by it, and yet, from the above poem, quelled by it too. From the next world, they might view his efforts harshly, feel

*This paper is adapted from the Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture presented at the 10th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Vancouver, August 1985.

their lives and progeny impinged by a benighted vision not yet “spiritualised by death” (Yeats, *Selected Poetry* 194).

Having moved to Ireland in the autumn of 1984, I settled first on the North Atlantic coast, not far from Drumcliff churchyard and nearer still to the dark beaches of Rosses Point,

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
(Yeats, *Selected Poetry* 5)

It is not so much the judgment Yeats feared from his progenitors that I shared in writing about my grandmother, but the feeling of the above verse from “The Stolen Child.” The stations before and after death mingle without touching, olden dances are danced again, and the silver light of night illumines once more, for those who happen upon that mystic moon-washed beach, the days that passed before our own.

If feelings were enough to understand the background for telling the story of a life, papers and talks could be left for the realms of science, and poetry would suffice. Satisfying as this might be for some, for others it is evanescent, hence the present effort to untangle the intangible.

As for the approach *From Copper to Gold* takes, it may be worthwhile to look, in order to place this particular biography’s purpose in perspective, at how the telling of lives has varied in purpose. Biography has never been a consistently defined study. From its beginnings it was used to serve a variety of purposes. Earliest of these was to build the reputation of the individual as in the self-glorifying tomb records left by Egyptian kings five millennia past. In ancient Rome, the telling of lives also revolved around the time of death, and again, the purpose was primarily laudatory. The funerals of important members of society were sagas of ancestral grandeur, with actors playing the parts of the forebears and an orator expounding (and expanding) upon the outstanding accomplishments of the deceased. Finally, truth could not compete with the fame invention longed to supply until, according to Cicero, “By these laudatory speeches our history has become quite distorted; for much is set down in them that never occurred, false triumphs, false relationships” (quoted in Garraty, *Nature of Biography* 49).

A jaundiced view might reveal the general progress of biography over the next two-thousand years as being of medium rather than of message, the praise becoming published rather than spoken. Walt Whitman saw in the more modern tales of lives the same flaws that aggravated Cicero, “I have hated so much of the biography of literature because it is so untrue: Look at our national figures how they are spoilt by liars ... who put an extra touch here, there, here again,

there again, until the real man is no longer recognizable' (quoted in Garraly, *Nature of Biography* 94).

A second trend in biography's purpose was to spread a belief system through ascribing outstanding qualities to a particular follower of that group. It was assumed, perhaps rightly, that the more miraculous and pious the lives of saints of the Middle Ages seemed, the more interesting and compelling religion became for the public. The end was similar: untruth, the flavor of the untruth somewhat changed by its purpose.

In spite of the number of those who would use it for their own means, there were those in the ranks of biographical writing who saw in this unique form an opportunity to learn how life can best be lived. Plutarch wrote, "It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life" (*Lives* 8).

This understanding, that we share a common experience of living and can benefit from seeing how another lived, is the basis on which *From Copper to Gold* was written. Whatever it is not, it was meant to be this: a look into Dorothy Baker's life with the hope of seeing how and why and under what pressures this individual succeeded in answering the plea of existence first simply to go on and from there to find and fulfil her purpose.

The pace of this biography is described in the book's introduction. Briefly, it is to isolate the telling incidents and at those moments to slow the passage of time so the important aspects of the experiences can be recognized, then pull back and allow time to move much more quickly. From the close vantage point, we see an experience that changed the subject or which expands our understanding of her evolution or perhaps simply of her human nature. From a distance, the facts and dates mount and add their own weight to the telling of her life. It was important to me to explain that this woman who is recognized and respected by so many was not simply born perfect. The evolution reflected in the title of the book is the story.

George Kennan, in an address to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, said that history is

not the past in its pure form (no one could ever recreate that) but the past as one man is capable of seeing it, of envisaging it, of depicting it. It is perceived reality—reality in the eyes of the beholder—the only kind of reality that can have meaning for other human beings and be useful to them. ('History' 8)

It is probable that a great deal is lost in any one person's perception of another's life, but the alternative loses the theme in favor of a broad and thorough explanation of every known fact. Barbara Tuchman found biography to need certain containment:

It is a focus that allows both the writer to narrow his field to manageable

dimensions and the reader to more easily comprehend the subject. Given too wide a scope, the central theme wanders, becomes diffuse, and loses shape. One does not try for the whole but for what is truthfully “representative.” (*Practising* 89)

It was Lytton Strachey of the Bloomsbury Group, in some ways the father of modern biography, who changed the popular notion of biography’s purpose with his *Eminent Victorians*. In the preface he wrote:

The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England.... Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead.... They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker.... One is tempted to suppose, of some of them, that they were composed by that functionary, as the final item of his job. (*Eminent Victorians* viii, ix)

The more vivid dynamics of the approach Strachey brought to his biographical works has been reflected in the work of many modern writers. The critic J.D. Reed said of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Justin Kaplan, “...Kaplan’s sharply observed lives possess an imaginative drive found in the best tales” (“Raw Bones,” 57). Perhaps there is no tale as interesting as a life well lived, not only the facts of the life but also the reality of the suffering, inner victories and failures, then the final outcome. To understand even part of that truth is an opportunity worth seizing.

In writing *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*, poet Judith Thurman first tried the currently accepted practice of analyzing her subject psychologically but dropped this approach in favor of a deeper identification that grew through following closely the days and years of Baroness Karen Blixen, travelling through Africa and Europe, learning Danish and finally, in sixteen-hour days alone in a Long Island cottage, reliving the ecstasy and tragedy of Blixen’s life. This identification with her subject (limited though it must be) may seem the right of a poet but not necessary for a biographer. But, Thurman is not alone in her approach. Ted Morgan, author of several books including *Churchill: Young Man in a Hurry*, found that he was with his subject constantly, “The subject is something that you can’t get out of your head. They said that when William Manchester was working on MacArthur he started smoking a corn cob pipe and walking on the heels of his feet” (quoted in Reed, “Raw Bones” 57).

Such intense identification with Dorothy Baker was not a real issue for me. I was there to write it down. But being alive, having access to at least some of the same feelings and ideas as the subject was vital. It was not my goal to write from an omnipotent height and lose the main connection we each have with the subject—being human. Other than access to the all-important research materials compiled by Louise Baker Matthias over several years, it was the effort of trying to live as a Bahá’í that aided me the most in understanding Dorothy Baker. Without the experience of pioneering, it would have been more difficult. Being thrust into life outside the North American continent let me experience a taste of what her travels brought her. Being a woman helped too. Mothers have

written saying that in Dorothy Baker's life they found a balance between the responsibilities of motherhood and Bahá'í work. If I'd become a mother before writing this book instead of after, they might have learned more because I likely could have interpreted the facts with greater understanding.

These bonds of experience fall well short of identification. Still, the occasional sense of extending yourself into the subject's life cannot be ignored. The stage is empty, and, as the writer walks among the props of another's life, it fills with people, with responses, with a sense of another's presence, until the writer is temporarily lost in a new, but deeply familiar world, as Yeats says, "weaving olden dances, mingling hands and mingling glances."

Thomas Carlyle was an advocate of the theory that heroes make history rather than participate in it. In his work, we might hope to see society sculpted by the strong rather than a single life being formed by its response to inner and outer forces. To a degree, measured by the concept that truth is revealed to humankind progressively through the founders of the world's great religions, it is possible to agree with Carlyle.

It is here that the work of Hasan Balyuzi, by whose name these yearly lectures are honored, must be considered. Both historian and biographer, his writings on the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith cannot be compared to most other biographical writing. Yet he was writing of lives, often of the life of Bahá'u'lláh. Necessarily, the relationship between writer and subject was different. Balyuzi himself wrote:

The towering grandeur, the compelling majesty, and the tender beauty of the life of a Manifestation of God cannot be comprehended by events usually associated with a saintly life. The immensity of such a life presents itself in that mysterious influence which it exerts over countless lives.... The Manifestation of God is the Archetype, and His life is the supreme pattern. (*Bahá'u'lláh* 7)

Here neither writer nor reader can fully understand the nature of the subject. We can see and feel and be attracted without a real hope of knowing. This is a dilemma quite different from that of most biographers, though the wish to communicate how that life was led is still present, if anything to a greater degree. As the poet Roger White wrote after meeting Balyuzi, "...your will pinned furiously to one awesome purpose, / the writing of that Life" (*Witness* 12).

When viewing the finished work of others, it must be without a full sense of the original limitations and efforts, only with a view of the completed project. Many aspects of writing *From Copper to Gold* surprised me. Though I never truly doubted the book would be completed, there were times of stillness—some simply the paralysis of doubt or of life's complications, others more specific. These latter form a pattern of need and assistance that might encourage others to persevere.

Sitting at a desk in our rented house on the Caribbean island of Barbados, I listened to workmen just outside the window chipping away the daylight hours and the walls of our house with hammers and chisels. "Almost finished now,

lady,” they said, week after week. Finally I started carrying my lawn chair, umbrella (it was rainy season), and the day’s research materials to the beach 300 yards away—idyllic, if inconvenient.

When we finally resettled in a less noisy house, this time just at the edge of the sea, I was coming to the three-quarter mark in writing the first draft. By that time in Dorothy Baker’s life, she was well known and loved by so many that the stories were too numerous to tell, but too interesting to omit. Instead of culling a few dozen pages of research for a chapter, I found myself faced with many times that amount of material.

The frustration was not as great as was the conviction that it would be impossible to continue in the same pattern of focusing on an incident, then pulling away for a broader look. There were too many fascinating moments. Many people had a great deal to say, and the stories, because of their content and because of the individuals telling them, gave new understanding of the subject. Also, since they were not stories Dorothy Baker had repeated in detail, but rather reports, it was impossible to retell them in the same personal way.

I went downstairs from the second-floor bedroom where I worked and walked past the rocky landing in front of our house to the smooth coral beach of Sandy Lane Bay, surely one of the most beautiful spots in the Caribbean—white sand holding a deep bowl of turquoise water. From far out in the water, swimming on my back, the beach made a circle. Manchineel trees towered above it, rich and verdant next to the dusty green of the taller coconut palms. Up as high as the tops of the trees the wind was blowing. The fronds of the palms waved, each leaf in unison, moved by the same wind but minding the message of their common stem. Nature holds metaphors for life, I believe, or I have since that day. Instead of trying to work the memories and stories of that period into a whole, they would remain separate, the parts moving together in the unison of the separate leaves. That simple thought gave me a path to follow.

Other problems were not always so quick to find resolution. For a number of reasons, I had become convinced that Dorothy met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Montclair, New Jersey on June 23, 1912, the story of which meeting formed the prologue. There happened to be a transcript of Frank E. Osborne’s notes of that evening in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. His record of the occurrences of the evening made it possible for the prologue to include ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s actual utterances to the group, both his casual words of welcome and his review of the meaning of earthly life, which at that time could have meant a great deal to Dorothy as she grappled with the conflicting worldviews her Bahá’í grandmother and publisher father offered her. Also, this more intimate vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through Mr. Osborne’s notes was particularly important as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence was the center of interest for Dorothy. In her own words:

It is a blessed thing to remember the child who sat entranced at the feet of her Lord and received His all-merciful love. In that hour all fear was replaced by a passion for all people. (Quoted in *From Copper* 313)

Months later, the book written, but still being rewritten (as indeed it was many times) I came upon a piece of research material that shook my faith in the events as recorded. It was a form presumably filled out by Dorothy Baker for a statistical report at the Bahá'í National Office. Places she had spoken, teaching trips, etc., were all included. Finally, the last blank was preceded by the request, "Meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá?" In it was neatly written, "New York, autumn, 1912." My mind tried to deny it, perhaps this was a second meeting, perhaps she had the location wrong? I telephoned a few people who had an interest in the book and who had been of help in the past. It must have been easy to hear in my voice the tension this piece of evidence created for me, as it would require that all the delightful details of the meeting in Montclair be scrapped. It also went against other accumulated research. The consensus was that I was the only one who would be seriously concerned about the conflicting evidence, and it might be best to leave well enough alone, as the truth was not clear. Relieved, I agreed, though I wasn't really satisfied and continued to feel uneasy.

One of the final tasks in writing *From Copper to Gold* was to investigate the lives of ninety-six people who were mentioned but not clearly enough identified in the manuscript. Something about each of them had to be worked in so readers would have an idea who they were, apart from whatever small or large part they played in Dorothy Baker's life. This research involved perhaps two months of investigation, as many of the individuals were not widely known.

During this time, another piece of evidence concerning her meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared. It was a brief biographical document written by Dorothy Baker late in her life and sent to the Bahá'í of Iran. In it she wrote, "The bounty of Bahá'u'lláh was first conferred through the faith and generosity of a paternal grandmother, 'Mother Beecher', with whom I visited His Holiness 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the city of New York" (quoted in *From Copper* 313). It could not be denied any longer, she had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the City of the Covenant, not Montclair, which meant the prologue was wrong and all the references to the Montclair meeting that tied in so well were also wrong.

It was late in the day. I left my office and went home, knowing what had to be done, but dreading it: a lot of work resulting in a less interesting book. But there was consolation in at least knowing what the truth was, a truth that had lingered just beyond my field of vision for some time. The next day I went in and began. It was as simple as skimming the leaves from a pool of water. In half an hour, what I thought would be the work of several days was done.

Ultimately, though, the facts of the labor are incidental. The life of the subject is what matters. And if life events have to be distilled, then the acts of the subject should concern us most. But those require a biography to tell. Instead, for the purpose of this article, we must distill further to uncover the basic principles that guided the subject.

Perhaps more often than on any other aspect of her life, people comment on Dorothy Baker's ability to move people, to speak to them and touch their hearts. Though many qualities made up the whole, there is one essential quality that could not have been replaced in her teaching. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "This

sincere intent is like unto a magnet attracting the divine confirmations.... when sincere intent hath been attained and the power of detachment and an eloquent tongue bestowed, these attract mighty confirmations” (quoted in Nakhjavani, *Four* 98). This passage suggests that of the gifts mentioned only the one need necessarily be “attained” or sought after by the individual. That one gift is sincere intent. The others—detachment, an eloquent tongue, and “mighty confirmations”—are bestowed or attracted as a result of this essential attitude. Dorothy Baker felt this strongly and spoke of it in words her son, Dr. William Baker, found to hold the secret of her character, “I swear by the bounty of the Blessed Perfection, nothing will produce results save intense sincerity” (Dorothy Baker quoted on *From Copper* dust jacket).

From the book, it is obvious Dorothy Baker believed in and used prayer. This state of longing, of urgent supplication, and finally, her faith in the solution once discovered gave her much of her strength. She was an American woman born before the turn of the century. She spent a good part of her life taking the position life gave her, not excellent preparation for speaking on the same platform with Nehru in India, or lecturing on world peace and other Bahá’í teachings at hundreds of American colleges, or hearing the burden of persecution her allegiance to an unknown Faith brought her in the town where she and her family lived. But she fortified herself, always, with prayer. It sounds a pious occupation unless one has been put in a position where nothing else works. As Mrs. Baker said in one of the radio lectures, which helped end the persecution of the Bahá’ís in Lima, Ohio, “Prayer gives us sharpened perceptions and intuitive powers; a sense of Divine Companionship” (quoted in *From Copper* 146).

Less dramatic, but equally present in Dorothy Baker’s life, was her obedience to the laws of the Bahá’í Faith. Again, she perceived this as a source of strength and said, “Liberty is to be sovereign over life with law; one obtains power through discipline” (quoted in *From Copper* 155). The other option for her, as indeed for anyone, is to believe certain truths but not to apply them to one’s own life. This makes a hollow individual. However grand one may appear from the outside, there is no transforming strength because one does not allow the power of these beliefs to be manifested explicitly in one’s life.

There are many secrets no doubt hidden in the lives of devoted servants of this Faith, secrets found in their daily choices, in their lonely moments. These form a living vision of the power of Bahá’u’lláh’s words to transform them, and even us, from copper to gold.

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