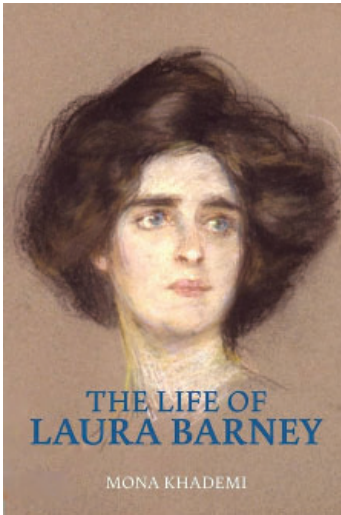


## Book Review



*The Life of Laura Barney* by Mona Khademi, George Ronald Publisher, 2022, xxii + 399 pages, including epilogue, index, appendixes and abbreviations.

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Author Mona Khademi's interest in Laura Barney was unsuspectingly awakened in the year 2000, when she learned that Studio House, Barney's former home in Washington, D.C., was being sold and its contents auctioned off. She later learned that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had visited Studio House at least three times during His historic tour of Canada and the United States in 1912. Ms. Khademi's attendance at the auction turned out to be providential: though initially prompted by simple curiosity, the visit sowed the seeds for the genesis of her noteworthy book. Her research began then and continued systematically over the next twenty-one years, until

it finally produced what can probably be considered the definitive biography of Laura Barney.<sup>1</sup>

On the evidence, Laura Dreyfus-Barney, the subject of Mona Khademi's copious and finely detailed biography, deserves to rank among the most eminent of all western Bahá'ís of her generation. Members of the Bahá'í community remember Laura Barney as the compiler and first translator of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*, published in London in 1908—a book described by Shoghi Effendi as an “imperishable service” (*God Passes By* 260).

Beyond that basic information, until Ms. Khademi's book appeared during the summer of 2022, most informed Bahá'ís were aware of only a few other basic facts of Laura Barney's life: she was an American expatriate who lived in France; she married Hippolyte Dreyfus, a lawyer and oriental scholar who was the first Frenchman to become a Bahá'í; her mother Alice Pike Barney was an accomplished painter.

As for so many others who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá and who became His devoted followers, Barney's life was changed forever by their meeting. Laura made her first pilgrimage in October 1900, after learning of the Bahá'í Faith

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1 It should be noted that after her marriage in 1911 to Hippolyte Dreyfus, the erstwhile Laura Clifford Barney preferred joining her married to her maiden name, just as her husband Hippolyte also favoured the double-name Dreyfus-Barney in recognition of his wife. For simplicity's sake, however, the author chose to refer to Laura by her maiden name in the book's title.

from May Bolles (later Maxwell) in Paris during the same year. In her letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Laura wrote that she wanted to meet Him before accepting the Bahá'í teachings.

Barney describes in telling words the alchemical transformation produced by her first meeting with her "Master." I direct the reader to Mona Khademi's full report of this transformative moment, in which Barney, as the tears ran down her cheeks, felt as if she was being liberated from a dark prison, after being locked up for years (34). This sudden and profound change in the young Laura Barney was to have lasting consequences throughout the rest of her long life, for she was destined to become not only an historical, eminent Bahá'í, but also a committed humanitarian who was singularly praised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for her rare intellectual and spiritual attributes. This distinguished woman became, in fact, one of only a few ever to be honoured with the title of "Amatu'l-Bahá" (Handmaid of Bahá) by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself (69)

One of the many sub-themes included in Khademi's book is the somewhat complex relationship between Laura and her older sister Natalie, an influential benefactor and supporter of arts and literature, as well as a significant feminist and queer literary figure in her own right. The author notes that during their long relationship, it was Laura who had always striven to maintain their sisterhood on the friendliest possible terms. It is significant that Laura chose to be buried together with Natalie.

Khademi's book makes readers more

fully aware of how Laura Barney demonstrated her spiritual beliefs in active social service. This gifted and accomplished woman believed that her spiritual commitment to the Bahá'í Faith—a commitment that was intimately tied to the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—should be expressed in and fulfilled by the various humanitarian causes that she espoused. These causes came to occupy the centre of her life even more after the premature death of her husband Hippolyte. As close and harmonious companions, they had been married happily for seventeen years.

The various contributions of Laura Barney to the wider community were perhaps just as significant as the main contribution for which she is best known by Bahá'ís. In non-Bahá'í society, although we cannot say that she was famous in the worldly sense, Laura came to public attention as philanthropist, war-relief worker, peace-advocate, promoter of women's rights, arts educator, author and sculptor—to name only a few. The reader will be impressed with a list, first printed in *Who's Who in America* and reproduced by the author in Appendix B, of the committees and organizations that Barney either founded, promoted, or financially supported.

*The Life of Laura Barney* succeeds remarkably well in informing readers that the Bahá'í who was known mainly for producing the book *Some Answered Questions* was a far more accomplished and distinguished woman than most Bahá'ís ever suspected. Mona Khademi could not have chosen a more worthy subject for her investigation.