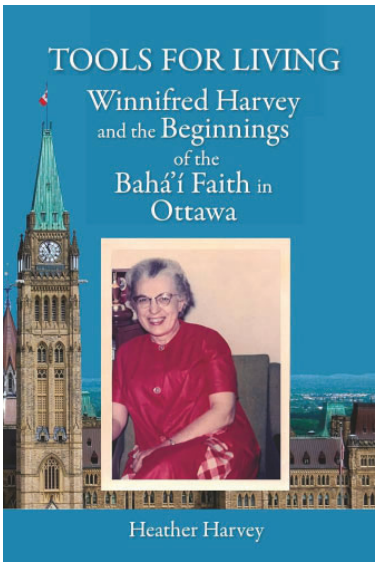

Book Reviews

Tools for Living: Winnifred Harvey and the Beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith in Ottawa, by Heather Harvey. Nine Pines Publishing, 2026, ix +287 pages including bibliography, list of illustrations, index

J.A. MCLEAN

Tools for Living, Heather Harvey's book about her paternal aunt Winnifred, is a model work of biography. Based on a decade of careful and patient research that includes not only all the familiar printed materials—books, periodicals, and newspapers—but also previously unseen archival material and unpublished resources such as personal papers, letters, emails, interviews, and conversations between the author and the subject of the biography, it is a welcome addition to the study of Canadian Bahá'í history. More than that, it also stands out as a sure testimony to what one dedicated and gifted believer can accomplish, bringing to light an admirable record of service not only regionally, in Ottawa and West Quebec, but also in the international travel-teaching field, and later at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

Winnifred Isabella Harvey was born on 23 June 1911 in Rapid City, Manitoba, a hamlet whose population was then slightly higher than today's four hundred souls. She was the eldest girl in a family of twelve children. Winnifred was richly endowed with both intellectual and spiritual gifts. She read "early and well, possessed a photographic memory, and was acknowledged as the most intellectual of the family" (xiii). The large Harvey family experienced straitened economic circumstances during the Great Depression, but Winnifred won scholarships and was able to attend Brandon College, where she excelled. Later she taught at a business college in Winnipeg, where she also joined the Phoenix Club, a now defunct intellectual-cultural association that appealed to young professionals. It was there, circa 1940, that Winnifred met Mr. Rowland Estall, a well-known, accomplished early Canadian Bahá'í teacher, originally from London, England. Estall was persistent in his efforts to teach Winnifred the Bahá'í Faith, but Winnifred proved to be of a skeptical turn of mind; she was not so easily convinced.

In May 1940, Winnifred moved to Ottawa to work for the Canadian federal government's Bureau of Statistics. She eventually gained a position in the department as a senior manager. Shortly after her arrival in Ottawa, Winnifred was invited by Lorol Schopflocher, a prominent Montreal Bahá'í to attend a ladies' tea in that city. When one of the senior ladies present began to share her personal reminiscences of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the Three Central Figures of the religion, who had spent a nine-day sojourn in 1912 in Montreal, Winnifred was moved by a sudden, strong conviction that the religion she had been patiently investigating was true. She declared her faith in June 1940, and wasted no time in embarking on service to the Bahá'í Faith, which would define the rest of her life.

Although she was the lone Ottawa Bahá'í in 1940, through her determined efforts, she helped to establish the first Local Spiritual Assembly in 1948. Winnifred went on to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada for a period of eleven years from 1950 to 1961, while continuing to serve on Ottawa's Local Spiritual Assembly. The highlight of Winnifred's Bahá'í life was her pilgrimage to Haifa in 1956, where she had the great privilege of meeting Shoghi Effendi, the head and Guardian of the Bahá'í community. Although Winnifred was an adept and prolific writer, no record has been found of her personal impressions of Shoghi Effendi. However, Winnifred made pilgrim's notes of eight different topics treated by the Guardian during her stay that have been recorded by the authorHhHHH. These include "The Spread of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada," "Materialism and Suffering," and "Progressive Revelation and the Future World Civilization." Within a year of her pilgrimage, the Bahá'í world was shocked to learn of the Guardian's sudden passing on 4 November 1957 in London. Winnifred was one of the members of the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly who attended the Guardian's funeral, her account of which was published in *The Round Robin*, a newsletter for Canadian pioneers.

Her service in this period was by no means confined to Ottawa. Winnifred cared deeply about supporting Bahá'í pioneers. She not only served on the National Pioneering Committee (initially the New Territories Committee), but she used her own vacation time to visit Canadian pioneers in such far-flung locations as the Yukon, Iceland, Newfoundland, St. Pierre, and the Magdalen Islands; on these trips, whenever possible, she gave talks. She also undertook numerous international trips as a travel-teacher in her own right; her destinations included Reykjavik, London, Paris, Rome, Geneva, Oslo, Copenhagen, Nigeria, Ireland, as well as the Canadian North and West. Winnifred became a respected and cherished mentor and teacher to a considerable number of young adults wherever she went. She was an accomplished fireside speaker, capable of expounding on a wide variety of topics.

"Tools for Living," from which this book's title is taken, was one theme she explored in a series of fireside talks, consisting of practical insights based on the Bahá'í sacred writings to assist believers "to live the life."

On one of her regular teaching trips to Kingston, Ontario, Winnifred met the young poet Roger White, whom English academic Geoffrey Nash would dub "the poet laureate of the Bahá'í world." While Winnifred was not the first Bahá'í White had met, he would eulogize her in his poem, "A Call on the Sleepers," as the one "who passed to him the chalice containing the immortal draught." In 1965 she pioneered across the Ottawa River to Hull, Quebec (today's Gatineau), where she lent her efforts to the formation of the first French-speaking Local Spiritual Assembly in West Quebec (having learned the language while helping establish a Bahá'í community in the francophone municipality of Eastview, today the neighborhood of Vanier in Ottawa).

In the same year that the Local Spiritual Assembly was formed in Hull (1970), Winnifred was called by the Universal House of Justice to serve in Haifa. Her service there included ten years as an archivist, helping to lay the foundation for a systematic organization of all documents at the World Centre.

Tools for Living brings its protagonist to life through stories from those who knew her. It recounts, for example, how Winnifred faced one of her greatest challenges when her office was moved to the newly completed seat of the Universal House of Justice in 1983. She had been a heavy smoker all her adult life, usually giving her fireside talks with a cigarette in hand, puffs of white tobacco smoke circling about her head as she paused to inhale and exhale. But Winnifred knew there could be no smoking in the pristine seat of the Universal House of Justice. Her colleagues knew very well of Winnifred's habit but, much to their surprise, she quit "cold turkey" without any seeming adverse effects.

Towards the end of her life, Winnifred was diagnosed with cancer, and after a brief respite following surgery, it was clear to her by late 1989 that her time on earth was limited to months, not years. In one letter to a few close friends and family, dated 4 March 1990, Winnifred wrote: "In fact, I rather look forward to a totally new experience. Just as a child in the womb given intelligence, could not visualize the world it would be born into, so we cannot imagine what it will be like to be born into a spiritual world" (283). Her last visit to Canada occurred in January 1990, when she visited friends and family in Ottawa and Gatineau.

Winnifred Harvey passed away on 27 September 1990 and was laid to rest in the Bahá'í cemetery on Mount Carmel. The Universal House of Justice sent a message of condolence to her family, an excerpt of which was inscribed on her gravestone: "Indefatigable efforts in promoting teaching work . . . service on National

Spiritual Assembly, constancy, self-abnegation her responsibilities at the World Centre assure her bountiful reward Abha Kingdom."

Far from a mere catalogue of events—far more than the few highlights I have mentioned in this review—*Tools for Living* gives an impression of who Winnifred Harvey was, and what outstanding qualities her Faith elicited from her, and she in turn put to its service. These cannot all be mentioned here, but chief among them was her absolute conviction in the truth of the Bahá'í Faith and her iron determination to serve it. She had a unique ability to explain difficult questions to inquiring minds, a quiet but determined and methodical pursuit of her objectives, and—along with her outstanding intellectual capacity—a strong intuitive and mystical sense that was not always at first apparent to the observer. What interested Winnifred Harvey was awakening the individual soul to the foundational spiritual realities of existence that would enable the soul to progress both in this world and the world to come.

Tools for Living is an exceptionally well-documented biography of one of Canada's outstanding Bahá'í teachers, whose exemplary life deserves greater attention from the reading public. It is also a model for others to follow. Every community where the Bahá'í Faith has taken root in North America—and globally—has its Winnifred Harveys: souls undaunted by the fewness of their numbers, who devoted their all to the propagation of Bahá'u'lláh's message. Future generations will be grateful to those who, like Heather Harvey, preserve and share their inspirational stories.