

Book Review

The Maxwells of Montreal: Early Years 1870-1922, by Violette Nakhjavani, with the assistance of Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, George Ronald, Oxford, 2011, xx + 422 pp.

The Maxwells of Montreal: Middle Years 1923-1937, Late Years 1937-1952, by Violette Nakhjavani, with the assistance of Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, George Ronald, Oxford, 2012, 442 pp.

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When only seventeen years old, Mary Maxwell made an extraordinary promise to her mother. Unprompted, she volunteered to write her mother's biography (Nakhjavani, vol. I, viii, 23). This was not simply the pledge of a daughter who intensely adored her mother, nor the naïve vow of an aspiring writer, for Mary had recognized at that early age that her mother, Mary "May" Ellis Bolles Maxwell, had already won a prominent place in Bahá'í history, not only as one of the first members of the Cause in the West but also as midwife to the birth of the Faith in Europe and as its tireless proponent in Canada and the United States during its first decades in those countries. Young Mary's assessment of her mother's merit was affirmed years later when Shoghi Effendi designated May a "martyr" in his cable at the time of her passing in 1940: "to sacred tie her signal services had forged priceless honour martyrs death now added double crown deservedly won" (qtd. in vol. II, 367). A decade after the promise was given, Mary became Madame Rabbani, better known to Bahá'ís as Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, wife of and helpmate to Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith—the "sacred tie" referred to in the above cable. From that point forward, her public and administrative duties consumed her attention to the end of her life, so the girlhood promise remained unfulfilled—although it was seldom far from her thoughts.

Ultimately, she was never able to complete the biography, though she chose its title: “The Maxwells of Montreal,” and made a start by drafting a beginning shortly after her mother’s passing; years later she penned an introduction. Those two works constitute the opening pages of *The Maxwells of Montreal*,¹ She also filled leather-bound notebooks with memories, notes, and lists of topics to include in the work. Over time, the realization came to her that, because she was part of a close-knit family, any biography of her mother must also be a biography of her father, the celebrated architect and Hand of the Cause of God, William Sutherland Maxwell, as well as a recounting of her own childhood and youth. Her research expanded as she sorted through her parents’ papers, choosing letters, notes, and journal entries. Years passed, and as she entered her twilight years, Rúhíyyih Khánúm made one last attempt to fulfill the commitment of her youth by tracing family papers held by relatives (vol. I, viii, x). Finally, after her passing in 2000, her younger, devoted friend and travel companion, Violette Nakhjavani, with the aid of a team of others who were devoted to her memory, took up the unfinished task (vol. I, xi). The two volumes: *The Maxwells of Montreal: Early Years 1870-1922, Vol. I* and *The Maxwells of Montreal: Middle Years 1923-1937, Late Years 1937-1952, Vol. II*, are the realization of the promise made by young Mary Maxwell more than eighty years earlier.

Violette Nakhjavani did not conceive of the work as a proper biography but as a selected collection of correspondence from the Maxwell papers. She envisioned herself more as editor than author and allowed May, Sutherland, and Mary to tell their stories in their own authentic voices (vol. I, xii). Her narrative guides the reader as well as provides background. Rúhíyyih Khánúm had initiated the process of researching, sorting, typing, and cataloging her family papers with the assistance of her long-time, devoted secretary, Miss Nell Golden. Despite that groundwork, Mrs. Nakhjavani faced a daunting task. The Maxwell archives

1. “Mother’s Biography,” by Amatu’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, pp. 3–25. Maxwells of , vol. I.

included more than 60,000 items of correspondence, of which at least 4,100 were letters between the family members (vol. I, xix). There were gaps in the correspondence, especially from the earliest years. In addition, there were many Tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and letters from the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, and the Greatest Holy Leaf, Bahiyyih Khánum, as well as correspondence from over five hundred individuals. Mrs. Nakhjavani, with the assistance of her daughter Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, Miss Golden, and sister-in-law, Anne Banani, made selections that largely comprise this two-volume work—a history that can best be described as an invigorating first swim in an ocean.

The two volumes rely almost entirely upon research from the Maxwell archives, except for a limited number of published works. Therefore, there are only a few points within the books where the three protagonists are placed within the greater context of the times and places of their lives. Even a discussion of William Sutherland Maxwell's professional work as one of the most noteworthy architects of is explored primarily in a separate article by Nancy Yates, which is included within the appendix. Mrs. Nakhjavani recognized the limitations imposed upon her and states in the introduction that full, proper biographies of each of the Maxwells would have to await future historians (vol. I, xiv, xx). Despite these omissions, the end result is a treasure for the Bahá'í world because it not only provides the general framework of the life-stories of three important early members of the Faith, but it also makes available many previously unpublished Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, letters from Shoghi Effendi and the Greatest Holy Leaf, as well as significant correspondence from and items regarding early believers such as Lua Getsinger, Keith Ransom-Kehler, Agnes Alexander, Hippolyte and Laura Dreyfus-Barney, Dr. Zia Bagdadi, Louise Bosch, Mariam Haney, Emogene Hoagg, Marion Jack, Saffa and Vaffa Kinney, Lucienne Migette, and Martha Root, to name a few. Consequently, it is a primary resource for students of the history of the Faith.

The first volume follows the story through the time of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The second volume continues the story through the period of the ministry of the Guardian until the passing of Sutherland Maxwell

in 1952. May has center place in this family history throughout the first volume and the first half of the second. From the beginning of her life, she was stricken with a chronic illness that several times held her at the margin between life and death. Even on good days she had little strength. Following her marriage, this affliction sent her south during the coldest months of 's winters, sometimes only as far as her native area. She found in Sutherland a loving, devoted husband, willing to indulge her long absences, increasingly caused not only by ill health but also by her tireless promotion of the expanding work of the Bahá'í Faith in North America and Europe. The by-product of these separations is an invaluable collection of letters covering topics as varied as housekeeping details to the deepest themes of life and faith.

William Sutherland Maxwell, a Canadian native, was a classmate of May's brother, Randolph Bolles, at the architecture school of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in . brought his friend, "Max," home for luncheon in October 1899, some months after May's return from her first pilgrimage to the . Max couldn't divert his eyes from 's ethereal older sister and by the end of the meal was determined to marry her. But May's heart could not be won without at least tacit obeisance to its ruler—her Faith. This religious ingredient of their romance created dilemmas that challenged the relationship. Slowly, through May, her husband developed his own commitment to the Bahá'í Cause, a process that ebbed and flowed for almost a decade before he could state without equivocation that he was a believer. Throughout the period of their first years together, they received numerous letters from 'Abdu'l-Bahá that reinforced May's drive not only to lead her husband to the Faith but to create a deep spiritual bond between them—much more than simply a stable marriage. Finally, by 1910, her goal was achieved, for in response to their letter informing 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the birth of their daughter, Mary, the couple received a Tablet from Him stating that May and Sutherland had "become like unto one soul" (vol. I, 268). They were privileged in 1912 to host 'Abdu'l-Bahá in their Montreal home—the maestro Who directed the development of the Maxwell family from its inception.

Volume II begins with May's 1923 pilgrimage to the Holy Land as an

antidote to her inconsolable mourning of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; a grief so intense that it triggered yet another near-death health crisis. Mary, then still a child on the verge of adolescence, accompanied her mother. During this extended pilgrimage, Mary met the youthful Shoghi Effendi for the first time. As Mary began to find her own paths of service within the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, in his role as Guardian of the Cause, followed her development from afar and sent her messages of encouragement and advice. Just as May and Max had an unusual marriage, their parenting of their only child was unconventional as well. Mary was both indulged and given adult responsibilities as a child. Her formal schooling was intermittent but far ranging. Like her father, Mary adapted to her mother's extended absences and periods of illness as the normal rhythm of the Maxwell household; consequently, the three cultivated a familial closeness that transcended space and time. At the center of their world was an intense love of the Faith, which was complemented by their deep love for each other. If the Cause of God required them to be apart, they willingly accepted that price as small payment to promote goals they all shared.

These two volumes provide a glimpse of this exceptional family as though the reader is overhearing their conversations around their kitchen table. It is impossible to disagree with Mrs. Nakhjavani's appraisal that "the letters were priceless; their message was timeless. And they were telling a magical tale" (vol. I, xi). The letters often sparkle, even as they stimulate the reader with deeply moving insights. All three members of the family were articulate writers. But this approach of drawing primarily upon correspondence, while painting an engaging picture of the relationships within this family and the development of their characters, leaves many aspects of their portraits unfinished. Those readers seeking a fuller exposition of the development of the Faith in the West from May Maxwell's arrival in Canada in 1902 until her death in 1940 will find tantalizing details but very little of depth on that topic, despite her service on the National Spiritual Assembly as well as on numerous and various committees. Absent as well is all but a cursory look at Sutherland Maxwell's noteworthy professional career and promotion of the arts in Canada, as

well as his work within Bahá'í administration and on the development of the Bahá'í World Centre; though a detailed description is given of other little-known invaluable services he rendered to Shoghi Effendi at the World Centre during the 1940s (vol. II, 385, 398–401). And Mary's adult life, particularly following her marriage to Shoghi Effendi, is largely untouched (vol. II, 291–92).

Despite these omissions, the first volume provides new material about the important nascent years of the Paris Bahá'í community between 1898 and 1902, including previously unpublished correspondence between May and Thomas Breakwell, the first English believer (vol. I, 147–49, 162–67, 187–89, 193–94). It also adds to the history of Phoebe Apperson Hearst's pivotal role in the development of the Faith in the West as well as that of Lua Getsinger, May's "spiritual mother." The second volume provides a look at the development of the Faith in France and Germany in the years immediately preceding World War II, as well as the teaching work in the United States and Canada from 1902 through the 1930s.

During the last half of Rúhíyyih Khánum life, Mrs. Nakhjavani became her close friend and often accompanied her on her travels. Together, they visited all but the remotest regions of the planet. During the months, days, hours of uninterrupted time they spent together over those many years, Mrs. Nakhjavani would have often heard Rúhíyyih Khánum relate Maxwell family stories, all the while expressing unquenched longing to document them for posterity. In what became a final loving act of friendship, Mrs. Nakhjavani, in the last few months of her life, finished writing of the second volume of the story. Thus, through her devoted and dedicated efforts in close collaboration with Bahíyyih Nakhjavani, Nell Golden, Anne Banani, and others, the fulfilment of the pledge made by the young daughter from Montreal was finally realized (vol. 1, xii). These volumes must be read in that light; not as scholarly tomes, but as gifts brought to fruition on behalf of a cherished, departed friend.

Without a doubt, these volumes will be valued by future generations as the significant, timeless contribution to the literature of the Faith that they are.