

## Remembering the Master

A REVIEW OF RAMONA ALLEN BROWN'S *Memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Recollections of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Faith in California* (WILMETTE, IL.: BAHÁ'Í PUBLISHING TRUST, 1980) XXIII + 122 PAGES, NOTES, INDEX

**BY FIRUZ KAZEMZADEH**

HOW DOES ONE REVIEW memoirs when they have been written by a woman one has known since one was a teenager and whose kindness, devotion, steadiness, and humor one has experienced firsthand? Should one set up formal criteria appropriate to the criticism of all autobiography? Should one demand that the author attempt to match Henry Adams' or Leo Tolstoy's descriptions of childhood and intellectual maturation? Or does one settle back in a comfortable chair, as I did years ago in Ramona Brown's apartment in Oakland, and listen to her tell stories of "the early days" in the Bay Area, stories that always led up to the paramount experience of her life: meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá?

Such questions have no single answer. This book is not an autobiography, nor is it a history. It is not richly documented. It does not set the early Bahá'ís of the West Coast in the cultural context of their time and place. It is episodic, providing only glimpses of people about whom one would like to know so much more. If one's sojourn in the San Francisco Bay Area overlapped Ramona's, one would miss in her pages many mutual friends. Bijou Straun is there, but where is Lucy Marshall, whom many suspected of being an angel disguised as a little old lady?

No matter. Ramona's memoirs cannot be judged by what they omit, by what they fail to do, by what they are not. These are her memories of times and people who are and will always remain important to Bahá'ís.

At the center of the book stands 'Abdu'l Baha. He not only dominates it but gives it meaning and significance. It is fascinating how at His touch a Bahá'í community comes into being on the farthest edge of the world. The earliest recipients of Bahá'u'lláh's message in America had access to little information about the Faith. It was 'Abdu'l-Bahá who transmitted to them its spiritual reality. It was their love of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that transformed a few dozen disparate individuals into apostles of a new world religion and inspired them in their struggles to lay the foundations of the Bahá'í community not only in America but over much the world.

Glimpses of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are the most precious part of Ramona's book. She conveys her memories of the Master vividly and precisely because they remained forever fresh in her mind. This

she shared with other Bahá'ís and with many non-Bahá'ís as well, who had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá and could not forget Him no matter how long they lived. I saw the look of admiration and respect in the eyes of Professor Albert L. Guerard, one of my teachers at Stanford and not a Bahá'í, as he, on learning that I was one, told me in 1945 of hearing 'Abdu'l-Bahá speak on campus thirty-three years before. The same expression appeared on the face of "Prof." Rogers, Principal of the Montezuma School for Boys and a Bahá'í only in the broadest sense of the term. As for an Ella Cooper, a Fujita, a John Bosch-strong and devoted disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá-they lived the rest of their lives in His invisible presence that gave them a depth and a luminosity that overcame quirks of personality and minor failures, making it possible for each in his or her own way to transmit the experience of having known 'Abdu'l-Bahá to those of us who had been born too late. I am indebted to them and to others like them in Tihiran, London, New York, and Boston, for letting me see in their eyes and hear in their voices the emotions evoked in them by the Master.

'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the San Francisco Bay Area in the fall of 1912. He found there a small but dedicated Bahá'í community that had come into existence a decade or so earlier through the efforts of Thornton Chase, Lua Getsinger, Ann Apperson and her aunt Phoebe Hearst, Helen Goodall and her daughter Ella, and others. Ramona met Helen and Ella Goodall in 1904, when she was only fifteen years old. "That was the most important day of my life," she recorded half a century later. "I sat spellbound, listening to those friends speaking about that wonderful Person, 'Abdu'l-Bahá ..." Her enlightenment was instantaneous: "I turned to my mother and said, 'I believe this!' for I had instantly accepted Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings and knew that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the spiritual Teacher for this day..."

Ramona came to know and established friendships with many outstanding early Bahá'ís. She became part of a group of young girls who were taught by "Aunt Ella" Goodall, later Cooper. Aunt Ella affectionately called them her peaches, they called her "Mother Peach," and the whole group was known as the "Peach Tree." She met Thornton Chase, the first American Bahá'í; Kanichi Yamamoto, the first Bahá'í of Japanese origin; Saichiro Fujita; John Bosch; Agnes Alexander; Martha Root; and many others whose names have become familiar to Bahá'ís throughout the world.

The magnet that attracted and held them all in place was 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Ramona's family anxiously awaited His coming to California. He arrived in San Francisco on 3 October 1912. That same day Ramona, her brother, and her parents - Dr. and Mrs. Allen - came to pay their respects at 1815 California Street, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá was staying.

For a moment we stood at the open door. I knew as I stood there that I expected to see an angel from Heaven. And I did! I saw the Master! He came toward us, a wonderful smile on His saintly face, extending His outstretched arms to us and saying in Persian, "Welcome! Welcome!" ... As we entered the presence of the Master, He appeared to be enveloped in a beautiful, ethereal, luminous light. The room seemed flooded with sunshine.

No one has succeeded in describing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Ramona says only that His carriage was majestic and His posture remarkable. “He was strong and vibrant. He walked lightly, so that there were moments when He seemed hardly to touch the ground.” He enjoyed walking. He wore a low turban, an abá, and soft leather shoes. “To the astonishment of each person who talked with Him, His eyes seemed to change color as He spoke.”

During His stay in California, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave many talks at churches, synagogues, clubs, and universities. Ramona heard a number of these talks and reproduces passages from some of them in her book. Though available elsewhere, they fit the pattern of her reminiscences, adding to them a touch of certitude. Some of the statements attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá either have not been or cannot be authenticated, but apocrypha pose no threat to Bahá’ís since no words attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá carry authority unless they can be verified by comparison with a text written or dictated and signed by Him.

Among passages that to my knowledge have not yet been authenticated is the report of a discussion ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had in San Francisco on 21 October with three medical doctors who asked about the nature of healing. Was spiritual healing possible? If it was, why bother with medicine, why use imperfect material means instead of relying on prayer? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained that there was no contradiction between the spiritual and the material methods of healing. Both should be applied, and neither is fully effective without the other. “Pray and give medicine too,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have said, indirectly reaffirming the principle of harmony of religion and science.

Ramona Brown’s memoirs are colorful, rich in anecdote, and permeated with love for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and for all people. Reading this well-edited, well-produced volume, and looking at the photographs, one is grateful to the author, the editor, and the Bahá’í Publishing Trust for giving us a book that will help preserve the spirit of the early days of the Bahá’í Faith in America.