

THE SEVEN CANDLES OF UNITY: THE STORY OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ IN EDINBURGH**Author:** Anjam Khursheed**Published by:** Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1991, 270 pages

'Abdu'l-Bahá spent the years from 1853 to 1908 in prison or enforced exile. After his release, he travelled to Europe and North America to spread Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. There are many published accounts of these visits, seen as pivotal to the growth and development of the Bahá'í communities of the West, and of the talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave during them. However, this is the first book to examine in detail 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Scotland and to describe the context in which the visit took place, the personalities and culture of the era, as well as the results of the visit.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spent only five days in Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, arriving on 6 January 1913 and leaving on 10 January. Thus the core story is very short, requiring only 60 of the 270 pages of the book to tell. Some might argue that much of the book is somewhat superfluous, padding a description of a fairly unremarkable and short visit to one city with unnecessary details. This conclusion would, in my view, be wholly wrong. The heart of the book is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, but unlike other books in which no attempt is made to relate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks to the ideas, beliefs, or values of the time or to the very different audiences he addressed, Khursheed has set the visit in context, describing not only something of the Bahá'í Faith itself and its history but also the cultural and social milieu in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit took place. Thus there are chapters on the origins of the Bahá'í Faith and its development in the West both before the visit and afterwards, 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself, life in the Edwardian era, Edinburgh, Christianity in Scotland, Jane Elizabeth Whyte (who was the instigator of the visit), the Theosophical movement (whose members attended the lectures given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá teachings and tablets. This wide-ranging survey enables the reader to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Edinburgh not as a single event, separate from the world around it (as so many descriptions of Bahá'í events do), but rather as an integral part of the social evolution of the planet itself as understood in Bahá'í terms. While this may seem too much to derive from a simple five-day visit by the head of a religion to a fairly remote part of Europe, nevertheless Khursheed succeeds in making the connections that make this analysis plausible.

Most people do not realize that Scotland is a separate country from England, that it has its own national identity, languages (e.g., Scots Gaelic, Shetlandese), as well as legal and educational systems. That it is joined to England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom does not obviate its unique history and distinct culture. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that the maintenance of different cultures and identities is important within the context of a wider loyalty to the

human race as a whole. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in this book many references to Scotland, Scottish ideals, Scottish culture and to Scots who were somehow connected to the Bahá'í Faith. For example, care has been taken to point out that Bahá'í literature has been translated into Scots Gaelic, even reproducing a page of the Scots Gaelic *Hidden Words*. Mention is made of those Scots whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá met in North America, Alexander Graham Bell and Andrew Carnegie. The Scots poet Robert Burns is quoted to illustrate the links between the Bahá'í ideals of universal brotherhood and those held by the Scots. Even a relationship between Scotland and Iran is found—both countries successfully resisted conquest by the Romans. As one who first read this book in an early draft, I feel that much of this emphasis may be due to the editor and publisher of the book, both Scots themselves, whose own enthusiasm for their homeland is much in evidence (for those interested, a photograph of the editor can be found on page 241). Khursheed himself is a Pakistani who for a number of years made Scotland his home and whose own love of his adopted country has encouraged him, with his editor, to ferret out even tiny details, heretofore unknown, which connect the Bahá'í Faith to Scotland. Bahá'ís are wont to concentrate on the "unity" aspect of the Bahá'í teaching of "unity in diversity"—here is a book that is not afraid to dwell on "diversity." In any case, it is most refreshing to find a Bahá'í book that uses examples other than North American ones to explain the Bahá'í teachings.

Khursheed has attempted in this book to appeal to a wider audience than merely the Bahá'ís. A number of devices—some of which may appear strained or odd to the Bahá'í reader—are used to help the general reader understand the significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and this particular journey. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is described as a prisoner of conscience and as the first Bahá'í. Twenty-five pages are given over to a discussion of the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, arising out of the fact that while in Edinburgh 'Abdu'l-Bahá was sponsored by some members of the Christian community. This sponsorship fuelled a debate in the press over the relationship between the two religions. Khursheed points out that the debate was among Christians who held different views of Christianity, rather than between Christians and Bahá'ís. Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Scotland and his exposition of Bahá'í teachings are seen as a catalyst, highlighting and exposing the differences among Christians, some of whom welcomed change in the churches, others of whom resisted it.

The title of the book is taken from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablet to Jane Elizabeth Whyte. This tablet forms the central theme of the book. Whyte, a Christian from Edinburgh, was married to a leading clergyman in the Free Church of Scotland, one of the strictest and most austere of the Presbyterian churches. Mrs. Whyte was among the early Westerners to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká. She wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the conclusion of her visit to him, and his reply to her contains what has come to be known as "The Seven Candles of Unity," succinctly

expressing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision of world unity, peace, and freedom. A reproduction of the original tablet in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own hand, along with its English translation, makes an interesting centerpiece. Khursheed describes each candle as representing "a different stage in the peace-building process. Together they light the path to the future" (163): political unity, unity of thought in world undertakings, unity in freedom, unity in religion, unity of nations, unity of races, and unity of language. Khursheed provides a commentary on each of these "candles," something less than an analysis. On the one hand, he does cite other Bahá'í writings to clarify and expand each theme somewhat, but the reader is left feeling that a deeper exploration would be beneficial. On the other hand, perhaps this book is not an appropriate place for such an analysis.

Another theme highlighted in the book is the role of women, a contentious issue at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Edinburgh. Khursheed provides a fascinating glimpse of the suffragette movement in Britain in Edwardian times and briefly discusses the Bahá'í teachings on the subject of the equality of women and men, explaining that 'Abdu'l-Bahá approved of the cause of women's suffrage but not always of the methods used to achieve it.

Some in Edinburgh must have wondered why 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke on the futility of war, given that the Edwardian period was one of hope rather than fear. However, Khursheed notes that the unstable political situation in Europe and the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá knew world leaders had rejected the charter for peace proffered by Bahá'u'lláh some forty-five years before, compelled 'Abdu'l-Bahá to warn that war was inevitable if political changes were not made immediately. Only nineteen months after his visit to Edinburgh, the First World War erupted.

The book cleverly interweaves Bahá'í teachings and ideas on a variety of subjects: the Covenant, service, how the material advantages of civilization and the new inventions of the time must be tempered with spiritual development. The author has carefully crafted his text so as to mention these without drawing too much attention to them, subtly packing in much more information about the Bahá'í Faith than the reader might suspect.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's life has always been an inspiration to both Bahá'ís and others. As the exemplar of his father's teachings, one perhaps expects to find the larger-than-life examples of generosity, friendliness, and kindness. It is, however, in small, day-to-day ways that the exemplary nature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life can best be demonstrated. The author mentions, for example, that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá left Whyte's home in Edinburgh, where he had stayed as a guest, he called together the servants and maids, commended them for their services, and gave them each a guinea (a pound and a shilling, a considerable sum in those days). Further, he donated ten guineas to a charity supported by Mrs. Whyte.

The author does not end his book with the departure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from Edinburgh, as other authors might have done. Rather, he examines the impact

'Abdu'l-Bahá made on the thinking of the city's people, particularly those Christians who maintained a discussion of his teachings through the press. He also looks at the development of the Scottish Bahá'í community to the present, describing the establishment of the Spiritual Assembly of Edinburgh and other spiritual assemblies in the country in the years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. Khursheed also mentions the role of Mrs. Whyte in securing the safety of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during the First World War.

Khursheed makes a fascinating excursion into the establishment of Bahá'í houses of worship, based on the connection of Sir Patrick Geddes with the Bahá'í Faith. Geddes was president and founder of the Outlook Tower Society and a friend of Mrs. Whyte. He conducted 'Abdu'l-Bahá on a tour of the Outlook Tower and chaired one of his talks. Geddes went to the Holy Land in 1919 to develop an interfaith university in Jerusalem. While there, he renewed his acquaintance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with whom he was much impressed. In 1920, Geddes attended a Bahá'í convention in India at which the possibility of building a Bahá'í house of worship was raised. Geddes, together with his nephew, Sir Frank Mears, an architect, drew up plans for the building inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. The plan was submitted, but it is not clear what happened to it after that. From this, Khursheed moves to a description of other houses of worship and presents an architect's design for a future house of worship in Edinburgh.

There are, inevitably, some less than satisfactory features of the book. The frequent use of "seven-score and ten," "eight score" and so on, can irritate. There is a tendency to simplify history for the purpose of making the book read well and not to distract the reader from the main theme. For example, it is implied that the reason for Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál was due solely to his acceptance of the Báb—no mention is made of the attempt on the life of the Shah. Again, later in the book there is no mention of the activities of the Covenant-breakers, many of whom were, after all, members of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own family, in describing the reasons for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's re-internment in 'Akká in 1901. While the focus is, naturally, on 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his visit to Edinburgh rather than on the early history of the Bahá'í Faith, this sort of "fudging the issue," for whatever reason, makes one slightly uneasy.

In a few places there are repetitions of information, causing one to think that perhaps the book was not written as a whole but was written over time or perhaps rearranged significantly by the editor. For example, T. K. Cheyne's book *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions* is described in two places in almost identical words.

There are also a few minor errors of fact. On page 7, the book describes the exiles of Bahá'u'lláh and his family, stating that their last exile, from Adrianople to 'Akká, took them farther away from their homeland. 'Akká is, of course, closer to Iran than is Adrianople. In another place, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is said

to have visited Paris three times, when he visited four times. Very occasionally American-British spelling inconsistencies intrude—scepticism rather than scepticism, for example. These are, however, very minor points in a book that is packed with information that will be new to most readers and which is, on the whole, very well edited.

The production of the book is elegant and unusual. Printed in brown ink, intended, no doubt, to evoke the period, the book is in a large format with wide left-hand margins and ragged to the right. This provides a shorter line, making the book somewhat easier to read than if the line had extended across the page. It also prevents word breaks, which can be so distracting. Occasionally a sentence is broken too soon, leaving too much space to its right. This is, however, infrequent and does not detract from the overall beauty of the presentation.

The book is well illustrated, with over 100 halftones carefully chosen to show not only the personalities but also the geography and landscape of Edinburgh and events of the period. Particularly interesting are the reproductions of newspaper and journal articles of the time, some providing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks *in toto* and many describing the impression he made on people. Often described by those Bahá'ís who met him as a magnetic personality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is seen here through the eyes of journalists who had no reason to find him compelling and yet did so. One journalist writing in *The Scots Pictorial* described him as "a great reconciler of all faiths, as the forerunner of universal peace."

Playing off its title, the book is decorated by stylized candles, one for section one, two for section two, and so on. This device is perhaps a bit obvious and twee, but does serve to remind one of the theme of the book.

Altogether, Khursheed has put together a book that is more than a mere description of a short visit made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a northern European city. He has woven innumerable threads to make a rich tapestry, placing that visit in its historical, spiritual, and cultural context and making the book suitable for presentation to those interested in the Bahá'í Faith, particularly those of Scottish ancestry.

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