

ETHEL JENNER ROSENBERG: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ENGLAND'S OUTSTANDING BAHÁ'Í PIONEER WORKER**Author:** Robert Weinberg**Published by:** George Ronald, Oxford, 1995, 309 pages, plus index

The primary history of the Bahá'í Faith resides in the documents, commentaries, and memoirs written by or directly relating to its central figures during what Shoghi Effendi has called the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith. With the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'í biography—an art initiated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself in his *Memorials of the Faithful*—is becoming an important genre in documenting the history of the Formative Age, which begins with the Guardianship in 1921. The craft of Bahá'í biography itself is maturing, moving from dramatized anecdote, to a considered and researched view of a life.

Indeed, the influence of religious faith on the lives of individuals—and through them on the structure of society—is an unlimited, evolving subject that still awaits exploration. Biographies of Bahá'ís could come to occupy an important place in Bahá'í Studies and may eventually find a special niche in the wider field of religious studies. The recent origin of the Bahá'í Faith and its historical continuity in this age of documentation, double-checking, and respect for the authentic past—“*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”—makes it an ideal setting from which to view the role of believers in the spread of a religious faith. Curiously, because of the Bahá'í Faith's world scope and recent origin, Bahá'í hagiography—if indeed it can be called that—may also pose a challenge for historians in comparative religious studies. Any attempted comparisons between well-known saints, imams, or followers of the Buddha and the recently deceased, or living, people who have contributed to the growth of the Bahá'í Faith during the Formative Age may be difficult, both because we have at our fingertips so much more information on the latter group and because for many Bahá'ís the spiritual mission of the Bahá'í Faith is so closely integrated with “administration.”

The life of Ethel Rosenberg is a striking example of how a spiritually dedicated person can find fulfillment and perform vital services primarily inside a religious organization. The book places Ethel in a historical context that helps make understandable her personal choices and actions. The author begins by sketching from pre-Roman times the local history of Bath, the family home of the Rosenbergs. In 1761, an Austrian boy with the arresting name of Charles Christian Rosenberg, a page to the consort of George III, arrived in England, eventually becoming a highly successful miniaturist profile-painter until his death in 1844. His son and grandson (Ethel's father) were also professional artists. Their wives and daughters played important roles as artists and teachers, and the family enjoyed a reputation for good character.

Ethel Jenner Rosenberg was born in 1858. In the family tradition of the Rosenbergs of Bath, she studied art and made her living painting miniatures. She became a Bahá'í in 1899, and over the course of thirty years she served on various British administrative bodies. (The book gives quite a detailed history of the evolution of the Bahá'í administrative structure in Great Britain.) She also rendered services as a teacher and friend to many British Bahá'ís. Many of the names that appear and reappear in the book will be familiar to those who have read anecdotal histories.

It is through her connection with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, however, that the reader comes to understand Ethel's special distinction. She visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land on a number of occasions, and in 1904 assisted Laura Clifford Barney and Dr. Yúnis Khán in recording and transcribing the predinner conversations that became known as *Some Answered Questions*. By the early years of the Guardianship, "Ethel's understanding of Persian was . . . very good . . ." (254), and Shoghi Effendi invited her collaboration in reviewing and implementing George Townshend's proposed changes to the Guardian's translations of *The Hidden Words*. For example, the author gives an early translation of the third Hidden Word, followed by the Guardian's first translation, and finally the result of the collaboration in print today; Ethel Rosenberg and George Townshend are the "English Friends" referred to on the title page of *The Hidden Words*.

Throughout her Bahá'í life, Ethel was cherished by both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Although the book gives us cause to admire her good character, fortitude, and intelligence, it does not paint a picture of a saint in the romanticized sense of the word. The author admits that his subject was not a self-revelatory person. The narrative never ventures into psychography or speculation about motives. This abstention is especially appropriate as this biography is at the leading edge of biographies of early Bahá'ís written by authors who did not know their subjects personally.

While the author has contributed a valuable and readable narrative of the life of an outstanding Bahá'í, he does not attempt a historical analysis or a synthesis with other biographies of "early" Bahá'ís, and the viewpoint is always that of a Bahá'í. Yet, the reader finishes the book with the feeling that perhaps analysis and reinterpretation are not necessary after all: the brilliant, dedicated life of Ethel Jenner Rosenberg speaks for itself.

PETER P. MORGAN