

REVIEW

SPINNING THE CLAY INTO STARS - Bernard Leach and the Bahá'í Faith

Edited by Rob Weinberg

YEARS OF SILENCE - Bahá'ís in the USSR 1938-46

Asadu'lláh 'Alizád

Published by George Ronald Available from the Bahá'í Publishing Trust

As has been pointed out more than once in this column, the Bahá'í community is blessed in the way it has unfolded in the light of history at a time when making and keeping detailed records is both possible and valued. This is not to say that we know all about everything. As the Guardian memorably says of the first Ridván:

"Of the exact circumstances attending that epoch-making Declaration we, alas, are but scantily informed. The words Bahá'u'lláh actually uttered on that occasion, the manner of His Declaration, the reaction it produced, its impact on Mírzá Yahyá, the identity of those who were privileged to hear Him, are shrouded in an obscurity which future historians will find it difficult to penetrate." (God Passes By, p153).

But it does mean that we have resources that far outstrip those available to the followers of previous religions, accounts which are vital to our understanding of our Faith and its development, are an example to us, and are often materials which can be shared with others in its proclamation and teaching.

The two books dealt with in this review seem to have little in common beyond the fact that they both deal with historical aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. Their very difference is an indication of the extent and range of the Faith.

The late Bernard Leach is widely regarded as this country's greatest potter, and one of that craft's greatest-ever exponents. Born in Hong Kong and living for many years in Japan, he exemplified in his life and his art a fusion of East and West. It is no surprise that this remarkable man was drawn to and accepted the message of Bahá'u'lláh.

In Spinning the Clay into Stars Rob Weinberg brings together an interesting range of material. There is an excellent short account of Leach's life, the reprinting of essays and poems which he wrote either about or inspired by his beliefs. There is also a valuable collection of photographs.

This short book therefore makes a useful contribution to an aspect of Bahá'í history but it does more, it offers a resource for the outreach of our Faith. It should be presented to art colleges and places where the memory of Bernard Leach is honoured. People, both staff and students, who are not ready to study an overtly-religious book about the Faith will be more inclined to dip into this one and thus be exposed to information about it in a setting which appeals to them.

Years of Silence is a very different work. While the Leach book deals with a positive and uplifting subject, this covers a black period in the Faith's history, although the ultimate effect is no less uplifting. First penned as a manuscript in 1973, its very publication was only possible because of the great changes that have overtaken European and Asian politics in the past few years. In the early years of this century the Bahá'í community of 'Ishqábád was probably the best-established in the world. They were strong in numbers and in resources, had their House of Worship, elected administrative bodies, schools for girls and boys, and other facilities, and enjoyed an unparalleled degree of official recognition and tolerance. All this changed after the communist revolution in Russia and a community which had left behind intolerance in Iran faced first disability and then outright persecution.

Parts of this book are not for the faint-hearted. We read of the increasing difficulty faced by the Believers, of the pressure and of the brutality and tortures which characterised what the Soviet authorities called "scientific interrogation". We see how they were maltreated in prison, had the prospect raised of their being deported to Iran, and how many of them found, rather, a life of privation as exiles in Siberia and other places. The litany of their difficulties will shock the comfortable Western reader who realises that these events happened this century in a country anxious to be regarded as both European and cultured.

The author has compiled a record of these things and listed those who suffered them as a memorial for these devoted Bahá'ís and their vanished community. He shows how the heavy hand fell on more than the Bahá'ís, the Muslims of 'Ishqábád also suffered, but it was clear that there was a special effort to uproot the Bahá'í community. He explains how the best qualities of the Friends came to the fore in these difficult times, and how the women of the community bore more than their fair share of suffering. And even at the end, when they were released from exile after the Second World War and finally being deported to Iran, they faced journeys of a length and a degree of privation that we can only imagine.

This is not a book for an easy read but it strengthens one's faith in people and in the power of the Cause to overcome difficulties. It is a reminder that persecution can arise at times and in places that are totally unexpected and that the 'ulamá of Iran do not have a monopoly on vicious intolerance. It makes one feel honoured to be a Bahá'í, and at the same time unworthy of that honour. In the end it is a call to action for us, the fortunate ones in the prosperous and free parts of the world. We must strive to be worthy of it.

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