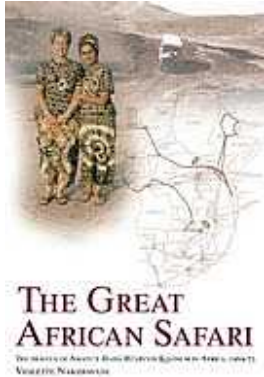




Book Review



The Great African Safari
The Travels of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm
in Africa 1969-1973

By Violette Nakhjavani
Publisher: George Ronald

THAT Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm gave her life, and decades of devoted service, to the Faith is well known. The materials and records are at present scattered through a number of publications, however, so it is difficult to gain a comprehensive picture without quite extensive research and study. No doubt a biography of this very special figure will be forthcoming in due course, and will be a valuable contribution to Bahá'í literature.

Rúhíyyih Khánúm served in so many ways, one of them being her travels (expeditions and safaris) through the more challenging parts of the world so that she could meet and live with the people as they lived. For Bahá'ís of a certain age the phrase that comes to mind is "The Green Light Expedition", up the Amazon and through the rainforest long before such things became fashionable and recorded in a film that was in the 1970s eagerly sought after for meetings, summer schools, and similar gatherings. This book deals with another great journey, or rather sequence of journeys, as recorded by Khánúm's faithful travelling companion and chronicler, Violette Nakhjavani.

Tribute has to be paid at the outset to these two ladies, neither in the first flush of youth, for the sheer doggedness they showed in pursuing these journeys. Not for them the carefully managed token discomfort of modern packaged so-called safaris. These were real expeditions, requiring physical and mental commitment and a preparedness to suffer difficult conditions, sometimes for long periods, in pursuit of their goal, that of taking the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the peoples of the vast African continent.

The book is a source of information at many levels. It chronicles the journeys themselves (and they deserve to be recorded), they are part of our shared heritage, the development of our Faith. The exhaustive detail will prove most valuable to future historians and highly impressive to current readers. It contains many historic photographs, which are interesting and of great archival value. And it has some talks...

In fact there are more than a hundred pages of extracts from talks given by Rúhíyyih Khánúm in various places during the safari. They exemplify her straightforward and down-to-earth approach and are well worth reading, indeed one can learn from them a number of approaches that could be taken in firesides and discussions.

While the book is valuable, interesting, and historically very

...time we see as famine, mourning, and mourning. Very important, there is also a sad aspect to it. To what extent does the continent it describes still exist? Africa thirty years ago was not a paradise; it had experience of war, civil unrest, corruption, famine and disease, but not on the scale its people have suffered since then. It also had a sense of hope and a vision of positive future development. Since the book was written the negative things have increased dramatically, and to them have been added new burdens such as AIDS, whose full impact have yet to be felt. The vision has largely gone; the future is not what it was. In this sense also the book is a work of history, not just of the Faith but also of Africa itself. And that realisation prompts in its turn an awareness of the even greater need for the Faith and its teachings.

If I have one criticism of this book it is my customary one. Here is a work of six hundred pages of great archival and historical value, one that deserves not just to be read and shelved but to be revisited and used as a work of reference, and it is not robust. It is a paperback.

I realise this is the harsh reality of the economics of publishing at this time, but I regret it nonetheless.

Iain S. Palin

