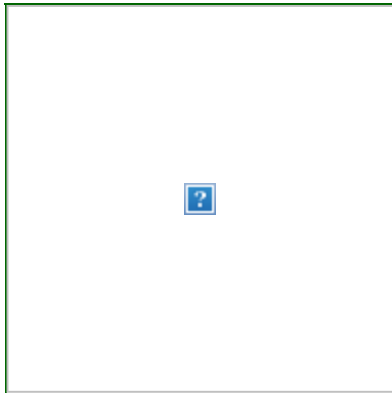




LARGE PRINT / Standard Print.

Book Review

## Book Reviews



Sarah Ann Ridgway  
by Madeline Hellaby  
Publisher: George Ronald

THIS IS AN interesting little book with a misleading title. It should perhaps have been called something like “Sarah Ann Ridgway – Her Life and Times” or even “In Search of Sarah Ann”, and that in itself has a message for us about the way some people are treated by the historical record. Sarah Ann Ridgway was the Lancashire cotton worker who was the first person to become a Bahá'í in the North of England. She declared her faith while living and working in the United States and following her return to Britain she was an active member of the tiny community until her passing in 1913. We know very little about her life, we only have her photograph by virtue of the chance that she posed for one at her loom in what seems to have been promotional material for her place of work, and when she died suddenly of a stroke she was buried in a pauper's grave because the news did not reach her fellow-

Bahá'is until too late. Very little is written about her – and Madeline Hellaby's research shows that even some of that, such as the date and year of her birth, is wrong. About much of her life we have no information at all, which says something about the way a workingclass woman could in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pass through this world without generating the sort of record that someone of higher social standing would have. There is therefore not a lot about Sarah Ann Ridgway in this book, despite the author's painstaking and sustained efforts to trace out the facts of her life, using sources and records in England and the USA: hence the comment about the title. As a biography it is limited, but it stands as a memorial to Sarah Ann Ridgway and to others like her and is a credit to the author.

In a sense the book is the story of a quest. Mrs Hellaby describes her involvement and efforts in a very personal way, starting with her first visit to the pauper's grave Sarah Ann shares with others and her wish to find out more about this woman.

A fair amount of the book is an account of how the research was pursued, and yet more is about Miss Ridgway's world. We learn about the grim lives led by those who laboured in the “dark satanic mills”, about the industry itself, about the wider society. The result is as much a social history as an individual's biography, which paradoxically has the effect of telling us more about the book's subject by letting us into her world. The style is individual and personal – Mrs Hellaby has no time for the dry third-person narrative style of biography, and this also helps to bring the subject alive. We join the author on her quest. In short the book is readable, informative, and a positive contribution to our knowledge of the history of the Faith in this part of the world.

Dr Iain S. Palin (May 2003 CE)

**Backlash**  
by Rod Duncan  
Publisher: Simon & Schuster

IF YOU LIKE your crime novels fast and furious and your thrillers thoughtprovoking and leaving you begging for more, then Rod Duncan could be the author you've been waiting for.

“Backlash” is his debut novel and it is a cracking good read – intelligent yet accessible

... is the best novel that is a cracking good read ... intelligent yet accessible, raising important issues about race and politics in contemporary Britain, but never at the expense of a powerful yarn.

“Backlash” is the first of a trilogy of crime-thrillers Duncan has set around a fictional race-riot in modern-day Leicester. It tells the story of Mo Akanbai a community police officer, whose quarter-West-African racial background and uncompromising honesty thrust her, unwittingly, into a dangerous world of racism, politics and terrorism.

The story begins with the discovery of a slaughtered pig in the local Mosque which triggers a race-crime investigation. But with the murder of a Muslim factory-owner and the ensuing riots, Mo uncovers a terrorist conspiracy with a more organised and deadly logic to the crimes than anyone else will believe. One senses that Duncan – who is a longtime member of the Bahá’í Faith – shares Akanbai’s strong sense of justice and belief in a better world and, despite being drawn inexorably into the dark heart of crime and terror, the reader is left optimistic and full of hope about humanity’s higher nature.

Leicester is a critical choice of setting for the book – it is Duncan’s home town, but it is also the United Kingdom’s most ethnically diverse city, projected within a few years to be the first in the country with a non-white majority. Importantly, it is also generally regarded as a model of harmonious race relations. But in “Backlash”, as in reallife, the harmony of our daily lives and the proper functioning of the institutions that regulate them are in fragile balance. It was only two years ago that race riots swept the northern towns of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley. Earlier the same year, a retiring Member of Parliament, infamously said that Enoch Powell would have been elected Prime Minister if it had known that people with a “permanent tan” would come to make up more than half of the population of a city such as Leicester. This book’s difficult and confronting theme is that if it can happen in Leicester it can happen anywhere in the UK.

That Simon and Schuster have given Duncan a three-book deal on the basis of his first novel is a sure sign that they have recognised a major new talent. One can only anticipate how strong Duncan will grow as an author. This is a thinking person’s page-turner and a great way to begin a literary career.

Rob Weinberg

