SOUNDING

Early European Bahá'í involvement in social activism

Robert Weinberg

Many early western Bahá'ís had little concern about involving themselves within a Bahá'í context in campaigns for social reform, such as the emancipation of women, the education of children, and the support of the needy and dispossessed. For some of them, the Bahá'í movement was simply another organisation they belonged to alongside other cherished causes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own involvement in social and economic development was recognised by the British government when he was knighted in 1920 for his work for the relief of distress and famine. But before this time, many western visitors had the opportunity to see first hand his active involvement in serving the poor and needy of Palestine. This example was reinforced on his visits to Britain. Lady Blomfield wished for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to visit King George V whom she knew through her father-in-law, the late Bishop of London. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declined the audience, saying he felt it might be misconstrued. He said his place was amongst the poor. Thus on his visits to London we find him speaking at the Passmore Edwards Settlement Centre, visiting a children's home, spending Christmas Day 1912 at the Salvation Army shelter with poor men, speaking at the Cedars Mission House and Club for working women and their children, and talking to a crowd at the Women's Freedom League on the equality of women and men.

The need for universal education was repeatedly stressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his western travels. The Passmore-Edwards settlement in Tavistock Place, London, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited four days after his arrival in England was the site for a number of innovations. It housed the first fully equipped classrooms for children with disabilities living in the community. The school provided course work, physical therapy and meals. It was among the first institutionalised play centres. By 1902, more than 1200 children were attending sessions. An early follower of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, intimately involved in the work of the Passmore-Edwards Institute, was Alice Buckton. Buckton had a passionate desire to improve the lot of the poor in London and concentrated strongly on the education of women. With this in mind, she went to visit the Pestalozzi-Froebel Haus in Berlin and made a lasting friendship with its principal Annet Schepel. Buckton persuaded Schepel to come to London and manage a similar house in St. John's Wood. This "Sesame House" was part of an education network, spreading to Britain from Europe. Buckton and Schepel were deep sympathisers with the teachings of the Faith and they opened their home at Byfleet in Surrey to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

A more direct early attempt at providing Bahá'í education for underprivileged children was a school set up by Victor and Fanny Ponsonaille. Ponsonaille felt his work for the Bahá'í cause should take place among Paris' children, waifs and orphans. They settled in a poor quarter and foregoing their midday meal, they gave what they saved to

needy children. From an old car, the Ponsonailles began going out to the children, serving them and sharing with them the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. So many children began coming that the clergy of other religions approached them to have the service consolidated under their auspices. When the Ponsonailles refused, the jealous priests managed to have the car confiscated. The Bahá'ís in Paris offered to build Ponsonaille a place for his work and he agreed, saying that if they would provide the boards and nails he would build the place himself, which he did. In this small board cabin, about 20 by 25 feet, the Ponsonailles ran their Bahá'í school. At one end was a raised platform and a desk made of rough boards. On 15 October 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself went to visit the school telling the Ponsonailles, "This is a great work you are doing for the love of God in this great day, through the power of Bahá'u'lláh. Your station is great. Your names will go down through all the ages. Kings and Queens have never been talked of and remembered as you will be."[1]

Florence George, one of the founders of Bahá'í education for children in England, had been instrumental in helping establish the Bahá'í group in Bournemouth in 1915. Along with John Esslemont, she gave talks to various groups and organizations and started regular meetings. Shortly before hearing of the Bahá'í teachings, one of Dr Esslemont's predominant concerns was the setting up of a national health service. With a number of eminent colleagues, he set up the state medical service association and was a member of its executive committee. It produced the Sawson report, acknowledged by medical historians as an important and far-sighted document, the recommendations of which were the foundation of the British National Health Service. Dr Esslemont also argued for the setting up of a state board of health with a minister of cabinet rank to coordinate and regulate the medical and allied professions—suggestions which were in part enacted by the Government in later years. The Bournemouth believers also attempted as a community to raise collectively an orphaned baby whose mother had been a believer. The baby's father had died before she was born and the mother soon after. One of the Bahá'ís who had lost her husband offered to care for the child and the Bournemouth community met the cost of raising her. Tragically the baby died a year later in its sleep.

More than any other social cause, women's suffrage captured the attention of the early British members of the Bahá'í movement. In this campaign, Bahá'í women saw aims parallels with their Faith. Elizabeth Herrick, a prominent early British Bahá'í, ran a millinery salon in Kensington High Street. Taking her orders one day from the Pankhursts, she went out into the street and broke a window with a hammer. She was sent to Holloway prison and when she came out her business was ruined. However, even while locked up in Holloway prison, Herrick found a way of influencing her environment and instigating change. She complained bitterly of the atmosphere of the prison cell. The walls were covered with obscenities and Herrick spent the entire first night in her cell attempting to cleanse it with unceasing prayer. Herrick exercised her right as a prisoner to have an interview with the governor, the doctor and the chaplain every day of her confinement. She demanded deletion of the graffiti, insisted that the chaplain recognised her right to be recorded as a Bahá'í (rather than an Anglican), and gave him information

1 *Sur les pas de 'Abdu'l-Baha á Paris* (Paris: Librarie Bahá'ís, 1998) 47.

on the Baha'i Faith. From the doctor she demanded a daily ration of fruit as a hygienic necessity, even obtaining an "apple a day" not only for herself but for all other prisoners.

Lady Blomfield also helped the suffragettes in many ways in the early stages of their campaign. But the later developments, such as pouring corrosive acid into pillar boxes and destroying works of art, shocked her. Even so, the Blomfields' stance on suffrage became known in a very public way. King George V had instituted a series of receptions with the intention of allowing closer contact with his people. On Thursday 3 June 1914, attending one such occasion, Mary "Parveen" Blomfield, with her sister standing beside her, on being presented to the King and Queen dropped on her knees before the King and cried, "For God's sake, Your Majesty, put a stop to forcible feeding!" She was hurried, as the *Daily Mirror* put it, from "the Presence" which, so the public was relieved to learn, had remained serene. Lady Blomfield had to intimate to the press her repudiation of what her daughter had done. News of the event reached the ears of Bahá'ís around the world. Mirza Ahmad Sohrab, in a letter dated 23 June 1914, described 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reaction to the event.

> The paper was given to me by the mail-man in the morning, and I read the article on page 7 with much interest. In half an hour, every Bahai knew about it, the Pilgrims were talking about it and admiring the supreme courage and fearlessness of Parveen Khanum. "What matchless resolution! What an heroic deed!" were the words uttered by every lip as soon as they heard the story and looked at the picture. I had the hardest time to keep the paper in my possession, because everyone wanted to have it for himself. At last the afternoon came around and the Beloved sent for me. I took the paper with me to show it to him. I knew he would be interested to hear the news. As soon as I entered the room, he said, "What is in thy hand?" I gave the paper to him. At first glance he recognized Lady Blomfield and her daughters, "Oh! What is this?" Then I gave him an outline of this most dramatic event. He listened most attentively, and then laughed heartily. "What courage!" he said "Come! Take the paper and read the article to me," which I did with equal ardour and spirits. He was especially pleased with the remark in the *Christian Commonwealth* of June 10th, in an Editorial on "King and People", in answer to the criticism of the Press. It says: "The original idea of these Royal receptions was to afford an opportunity for the Sovereign to become personally acquainted with his subjects and to receive any communication they might wish to make to him"... He continued to speak along this line and admired the pluck and energy of Miss Mary Blomfield.[2]

Lady Blomfield's courage and desire to be of service to the suffering was also evident during the First World War. Soon after war broke out, Lady Blomfield arrived with her daughters to lend their support, administering to the injured as V.A.D.s (Voluntary Aid Detachments) under the French Red Cross, based in the Haden Guest Unit at the Hospital Hotel Majestic. In a book about the women volunteers who rose to serve in a medical

[2] Letter from Mirza Ahmad Sohrab to Joseph Hannen, 23 June 1914. UK Bahá'í Archives.

capacity during the war, historian Lyn Macdonald has written, "On the face of it no one could have been less equipped for the job than these gently nurtured girls who walked straight out of Edwardian drawing-rooms into the manifold horrors of the First World War. It was all a far cry from the old myth of the 'ministering angel'. These girls had to be tough... They nursed men with terrible wounds and saw them off to convalescent camp, or laid them out when they died. They nursed in wards where the stench of gas-gangrenous wounds was almost overpowering. They nursed men choked to death as the fluid rose in their gassed lungs, men whose faces were mutilated beyond recognition, whose bodies were mangled beyond repair, whose nerves were shattered beyond redemption."[3] Lady Blomfield and her daughters were shocked by what they found on their first morning in the wards. "Any kind of suffering touched my mother profoundly," wrote Mary, "but the sight of young men maimed for life, and the new and horrible experiences she had to endure during the dressing of their wounds, her mental agony reflecting their pain, tortured her beyond words. After that first heart-rending morning in the wards, we were silent as we walked back to the Hotel d'Jena for luncheon. We imagined ourselves unable to touch any food. But my mother's courage and strength of mind prevailed. She said quietly: 'We must eat, or we shall be ill ourselves. Then we shall not be able to help.'"[4] When the hospital unit moved from Paris, the Blomfields returned to London. Throughout the war, Lady Blomfield volunteered in various hospitals, served on a number of committees and kept open house at Cadogan Gardens for the Anzacs (troops from Australia and New Zealand) who were recovering from their wounds.

Having witnessed first hand the devastation of the war and the chaos it wreaked on young lives in particular, Lady Blomfield welcomed the formation of the League of Nations and recognised the possibilities of its work being indirectly influenced by the Bahá'í teachings. She returned to Geneva in January 1920 and from her base at the Hotel d'Angleterre, she wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá telling him of her arrival and subsequent meetings with individuals who were working to send help to the famine hit areas of Central and Eastern Europe. Of particular concern was the plight of millions of children, now orphaned, dispossessed or dislocated as a result of the conflict. Lady Blomfield had met and quickly become a close collaborator with another Englishwoman of Irish descent, Eglantyne Jebb, and her sister Dorothy Buxton, founders of the Save the Children Fund. Jebb believed that children should receive help wherever they were, regardless of race, nationality or creed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was swift to praise their work, telling Lady Blomfield that he hoped she would be confirmed in what was the greatest service. One major contribution Blomfield made to raising awareness of the Fund's work was the publication of a small booklet entitled *The First Obligation* in which she called upon the Bahá'ís in particular to support the Fund's work and ideals. She stated that this duty should consist not merely in giving children food to eat, but in training them to earn food for themselves in later years by their own works. Lady Blomfield firmly believed that joining the Bahá'ís with the work of the Fund would give to the world a practical demonstration of the Bahá'í teachings on child education.

3 Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Penguin, 1980) xi.

4 Mary Basil Hall, Unpublished memoir of her mother, Lady Blomfield. UK Bahá'í Archives.

Such social activism in the early 20th century was replaced in the 1940s and 1950s by an emphasis on community building and the development of publishing and residential schools. During the period of Shoghi Effendi, the building of the Bahá'í administration became the dominant focus for the energies of Bahá'ís. Individual Bahá'ís continued to support charities and educational projects, until the Universal House of Justice's call in 1983 for Bahá'ís to be at the forefront of social reform,[5] when social and economic development became a major focus of Bahá'í activity.

[5] Message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 20 October 1983.