



This paper seeks to explore some of the 'moral implications' for writing

1. The author would like

biography from a Baha'i perspective.<sup>1</sup> It proceeds by searching out the

to thank Katayoun

Hassall, Will C. van

modes, intentions and problems of Baha'i biography in order to ground its

den Hoonard, Jack

theoretical observations empirically and to point to some issues of method

McLean, and several

associated with biographical practice. A related purpose is to offer some

anonymous reviewers

for their comments

initial observations on the ways in which biographical literatures frame

on earlier drafts of

understandings of the individual in the context of community.

this paper. W. P.

Biography, as distinguished from all other texts, places the life experience of

Collins's Bibliography

of English-Language

an individual (or individuals) at the centre of investigation. The

Encyclopaedia Works on the Babi

Britannica describes a biography as a 'narrative which seeks, consciously and

and Baaha' i Faiths

artistically, to record the actions and recreate the personality of an

individual life 1844–1985 (Oxford:

George Ronald, 1990,

...'<sup>2</sup> Other works such as histories and other types of commentary may well

505) has just over two

consider the same person or people, but without placing them at the centre of

hundred references to

the investigation. There are, for instance, descriptions of Horace Holley in

Gayle 'biography' as a

subject and advises

Morrison's study of Louis Gregory,<sup>3</sup> but the latter is at the centre of focus.

the reader to look

Similarly, Robert Stockman's survey of the Baha'i Faith in America

describes a also under 'history'.

great number of individuals, without seeking to write a biography of any one of

This paper, even

though examining a

them.<sup>4</sup> A further distinction can be made between biographies written about

comparatively small

oneself (autobiographies) rather than about others. The noblest goal of an

auto- and recently

biography is to examine one's life and to share the results of this

examination commenced tradition,

can only refer in brief with others. It requires the capacity to observe oneself at a distance.

to the range of titles Autobiographies may also be written for other purposes, whether for the available.

instruction of others or simply to record the times one has lived through and

2. Quoted in H. H. E. the events one has witnessed or participated in.

Loofs, 'Biographies

in Stone: The Not all biographies intend to explore their subject in similar depth.

Significance of Those that are essentially chronological and descriptive intend to document

Changing Perceptions a life 'for the record'. They seek, that is, to preserve or to record information

of the Buddha Image

in Mainland Southeast of interest about a person, and they seek remembrance (tadhkira) of a subject

Asia for the without exploring the relationship between his or her values and actions,

Understanding of and without placing these actions in some specific historical or sociocultural

the Individual's Place

in Some Buddhist context. In the case of religious biographies, they offer an assurance that a

Societies', in Self and subject possessed the qualities of the spiritual and the virtues of the holy,

Biography: Essays on but do not necessarily bring the reader any closer to an understanding of

the Individual and

Society in Asia the struggles and achievements of their actual existence.

(ed. Wang Gungwu, A more complex biographical exercise presents relevant events in some

Sydney: Sydney actual context, and examines the progression of the biographical subject

University Press for

the Australian through the conditions of their life. It takes the step of seeking the significance

Academy of the of the subject's existence, of extracting the essential from the myriad events

Humanities, 1976), 9. and happenings in their life. For example, biographies of George Townshend<sup>5</sup>

3. G. Morrison, *To Move* and Louis Gregory seek to position their subjects in the context of their times.

the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Biographic traditions

Unity in America Traditions of biography and autobiography have evolved in each of the world (Wilmette: Baha'i religions. Devoted at first to depicting the life of the prophet and the lives of Publishing Trust, 1982).

the first disciples, they have expanded to include accounts of martyrs, saints

4. R. H. Stockman, *The* and holy men and women. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines this Bah a' i Faith in America Vol. II: Early Expansion, literature as 'Hagiology' – 'literature that treats of the lives and legends of 1900–1912 (Oxford: saints'. But this literature in its original form was not as concerned with the George Ronald, 1995). details of an individualized life as with the generalized moral story that it

5. D. Hofman, *George* could be called on to tell. Such idealized biographies of saints that were the Townshend (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983).

focus of medieval hagiographies, explain Averill and Nunley:

6. J. R. Averill and E. P. ... were little concerned with the idiosyncrasies of individual lives. Their Nunley, *Voyages of the* purpose was to further Christian ideals, and medieval biographers felt free to Heart: *Living an Emotionally Creative* borrow anecdotes from one saint's life to embellish the life of another. To the Life (New York: The extent that differences among people were accorded significance, such differ- Free Press, 1992), 12. ences were based on pre-established regional, class, and gender expectations.

7. Godzich continues: A person was born into a certain social station (a nobleman, say, or a serf), 'The mechanism of and that station determined the meaning of his or her life.<sup>6</sup>

exemplum is simple: a singular happenstance is related so that it can The 'exemplary' purpose of such texts has recently been elaborated by serve as an instance of studies of the 'broad injunctions' found in Christian texts, in contrast to the a universal principle, 'specific regulations' found in Judaism:

which can now be imposed as a moral imperative on the models of proper, and improper, recipient of the story. Inevitably, there arose a need to identify behaviour to compensate for the excessive laconism of the New Testament on The universal principle may have been this topic. Lives of saints were written and accounts of the lives of famous pagans were scrutinized to extract from them explicitly stated in the models that would guaran- revelation, but, more tee the moral uplifting of righteous Christians. We know these models under often than not, it is enough that it be the name of exempla, narratives of others' lives, or of events in others' lives, derived from the admitting of a moral lesson.<sup>7</sup>

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The Buddhist tradition offers a slightly different approach to biography, exemplum in such a which yields a somewhat similar result. According to Gungwu, the practice way that it is consistent with the rest of of biography was inhibited by the attempt to limit the 'aggrandizement of revelation. There the self' through placing little emphasis on 'any individual self' at any par- occurred thus a subtle ticular point or place in time: 'Self was knowable but specific selves were shift in authority from revelation itself, not worth knowing except where they might show a capacity to merge with though it remains the universal, with the infinite and the eternal. There was, therefore, no unchallenged, to meaningful biography except where it might demonstrate how a few extra- experience, the past experience of the ordinary men conquered their selves.'<sup>8</sup> exemplar. Moreover, China's Confucian tradition elaborated Shih Chi, biographies exemplify- since the signifying ing a 'Confucian moralism whose ultimate aim was to guide the conduct of economy of the exemplum follows

statecraft'.<sup>9</sup> In Japan such literary figures as Mori Ógai developed a 'typology of virtue' to describe a vast corpus of biographical literature.<sup>10</sup> A similar hagiographic intention also informs Islamic biography. Biographies of the Prophet Muhammad were given the name *sira*, and the tradition of *rijal* in Shi'a Islam focused on the study of the lives of the transmitters of the traditions of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Eventually clergy and caliphs, saints and missionaries, were equally subject to written remembrance. In some parts of the Islamic world these are known as *tarjama*, an Arabic term referring to both biography and autobiography.<sup>12</sup> *Tarjama* marshalled the particulars of the lives of learned men into settled categories: and general is not material in this case).<sup>13</sup> The components include a genealogy, an account of formal education and Qur'anic memorization, a list of teachers (often including close relatives, which indicates family support for religious learning), the books and subjects studied, and selections from the subject's poetry, aphorisms, or other literature (ed. H. U. Gumbrecht, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), vii–xvi.

As explained by Renard, the significance of the depiction of religious heroes in literature lies in that they 'live and move in a world ordered according to

8. Wang Gungwu, 'Introduction', in Wang (ed.), *Self and*

a divine plan', and that they exist 'only to reflect and point out God's signs and presence in creation':

9. 'Indeed, the shiden project in its entirety When they conquer they do so by God's leave and power; and even when they may be interpreted as a biographical lose in time, as rejected prophets or martyrs for justice, they win in eternity. Religious heroes function as custodians of hope against terrible odds, testifying following exemplary ing to the virtual certainty of ultimate victory. Their life stories bear witness to the reality of a transcendent dimension in human experience. Most of all, (kenshin); martial spirit the reality of a transcendent dimension in human experience. Most of all, (vuahi no awiahin); for-prophets and Friends of God represent the best of religious and cultural bearance, magnanimity, ideals in accessible form, perhaps too far away to attain fully but not so far as (no michi); learning to discourage an attempt.<sup>14</sup> (gakumon) self-reliance and inner Religious biography, of course, exists within a larger practice of biography, strength (Zuchi ni tanomu tokoro); and which in the modern period has become dominated by studies from popular indifference to material culture – cinema, literature, music and war. In the twentieth century biographical endeavour came to include accounts of previously silenced voices – of (muyó).' M. Marcus, Paragons of the 'common' people, of women and of the oppressed and marginalized, who Ordinary: The are now 'writing back' to their oppressors. In finding these voices, the practice Biographical Literature

The Modes and Intentions of Biography

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of Mori Ógai (Honolulu: of autobiography (i.e. writing one's own story) has also burgeoned. With the University of Hawaii emergence of secularism in western society, the hagiographic function elabo-

Press 1993), 10.

rated within the religious traditions has been modified rather than com-  
10. *ibid* 178.

pletely rejected. Modern biographies generally avoid questions of ‘ultimate

11. A. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 35.

purpose’,<sup>15</sup> but proceed in the knowledge that

‘each human life recapitu-

lates common human experience’.<sup>16</sup>

and Renewal: The

Making of the Babi

Movement in Iran,

1844–1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 35.

There seems little need to defend the practice of either history or biography in Baha’i discourse. The writings of Baha’u’llah are replete with references

12. D. F. Eickelman,

‘Traditional Islamic

to history; those of ‘Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi similarly draw on past Learning and Ideas of events and persons when referring to present and even future concerns.

the Person in the Baha’u’llah immortalized the lives of those devoted to his cause and he

Twentieth Century’, in

Middle Eastern Lives:

referred to the lives of the past prophets and sages as being lives worthy of

The Practice of emulation. Furthermore, Baha’u’llah described

his own experiences in his

Biography and Self-Tablets.<sup>17</sup> Autobiographical references by him point

to the worth of his expe-

Narrative (ed. M. S.

Kramer, Syracuse, NY:

rience, and allow the reader to compare the records of that experience with

Syracuse University those of the lives of previous prophets.<sup>18</sup>

Press, 1991) 35–9. ‘Abdu’l-Baha recalled the lives of kings,

rulers and learned in *The Secret*

13. *ibid* 39. An exemplary of Divine Civilization and extolled sincere

Babi and Baha’i believers in

study of the Memorials of the Faithful.<sup>19</sup> He suggested that

contemplation of the lives of

relationship between

religious training and heroic Baha’is in Persia would set an example

that others might aspire to

power is found in R. follow, once advising that time be taken at the

Nineteen Day Feast to:

Mottahedeh, *Mantle of*

the Prophet: Religion



years of its tradition, produced  
the Son of the Wolf  
(Wilmette, IL: Baha'i studies ranging from the twin 'Great  
Souls' (the Bab and Baha'u'llah) to  
Publishing Trust, 1988). their followers of stations high and low alike, and  
even those who worked  
His Tablet of the as servants and slaves.<sup>22</sup>  
Holy Mariner (Baha' i

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The question as to whether accounts of the prophets are biographies or

Prayers, Wilmette:

some other form of literature is left aside in this essay – except to say  
that Baha'i Publishing

Trust, 1991, 220–8)

any attempt to place them 'outside' risks dilution of scrutiny. The

biographies can be regarded as

of the central figures by Balyuzi combine the approaches of meticulous  
'metaphorical

western scholarship and religious attachment to produce studies that are at  
autobiography'. David

Ruhe has included

once faithful to and somehow detached from their subjects.<sup>23</sup> David S. Ruhe

'every crumb of autobi-

acknowledges the hagiographic element in his biography of Baha'u'llah,  
ographical material' by

Robe of Light, and suggests also that a cold objectivity is neither possible

Baha'u'llah in Robe of

Light: The Persian Years

nor desirable:

of the Supreme Prophet

Baha'u'llah 1817–1853

A natural tendency to reflect a feeling for Baha'u'llah well beyond

hagiography (Oxford: George

Ronald, 1994).

must be moderated through such objectivity as is possible so soon after the  
life-

time of the Prophet. Nevertheless, the author's subjective emotional

conviction <sup>18</sup>. This, for instance, was

one of the devices used

has been sustained by a steadily deepening appreciation of the Great Soul.<sup>24</sup>

by the Bab to prove

his own prophetic

Ruhe points to a shift in perspective that is gaining ground in the 'post-

statement; see Amanat,

Resurrection and modern period'. Consisting of many ungathered strands, it is a perspective  
Renewal, 193–8.  
that questions the certainties of much modern thought, particularly the  
Whatever difficulties  
idea that knowledge can be produced 'objectively', and in a way that deter-  
practitioners of Baha'i  
history may face, they  
mines some 'absolute' or 'scientific' truth. This new perspective is  
prepared do not equal those  
to admit its own boundaries, and to seek validity through disclosure of its  
facing anyone who  
own limited capacities to find meanings. Such a perspective finds many  
searches, for instance,  
for the 'historical Jesus'.  
parallels that are useful in approaching Baha'i biographical literature.  
At this early stage in a new tradition, the lives of the central figures of  
19. 'Abdu'l-Baha, The  
Secret of Divine  
the Baha'i Faith have been presented anecdotally more than through com-  
Civilization (Wilmette,  
prehensive narrative.<sup>25</sup> The life story of 'Abdu'l-Baha has been told in  
such IL: Baha' i Publishing  
early studies as Myron Phelps's *The Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi* (New  
Trust, 1990); 'Abdu'l-  
Baha, Memorials of the  
York: G. P. Putnam's Son, 1903), and more recently in Balyuzi's  
'Abdu'l- Faithful (Wilmette, IL:  
Baha: Centre of the Covenant of Baha'u'llah (1971).  
'Abdu'l-Baha's sister, Baha' i Publishing  
Bahiyiyih Khanum, has only recently become the subject of close biographi-  
Trust, 1971). This latter  
book contains short  
cal observation.<sup>26</sup> Shoghi Effendi has been the subject of an initial biogra-  
sketches of the lives  
phy by his widow, Ruhiyiyih Rabbani,<sup>27</sup> and of numerous memoirs by early  
of 73 followers of  
Baha'is.  
Baha'u'llah, including  
two women. 'Abdu'l-  
Of the more than 50 individuals appointed 'Hands of the Cause' by  
Baha's essays were  
Baha'u'llah and Shoghi Effendi, only a handful have to date been the  
subject written in 1915 and  
of serious (English-language) biographies. Accounts of Rahmatu'llah Muhajir  
published in Persian  
in Haifa in 1924.

and Zikrullah Khadem have been written by family members, primarily using personal notebooks and diaries, with later revision and supplementa-

20. 'Abdu'l-Baha, from a Tablet to an individual tion. Iran Muhajir considers the biography of her husband Rahmatu'llah Baha'i – translated Muhajir an incomplete record of the life of this man who 'lived only to serve from the Persian, Baha'u'llah and who tried to carry out the instructions of the beloved Compilation of Compilations (Mona Guardian to the best of his ability'.<sup>28</sup> The life story of Dorothy Baker has Vale: Baha' i been written by her granddaughter, Dorothy Gilstrap,<sup>29</sup> that of Leroy Ioas by Publications Australia, his insightful daughter A. Chapman.<sup>30</sup> Other Hands of the Cause who have 1991), vol. 1, 428. been the subject of biographical treatment include Martha Root,<sup>31</sup> George 21. The Baha' i World (vols. 1–12, 1925–54, rpt. Townshend,<sup>32</sup> Louis Gregory,<sup>33</sup> William Sears,<sup>34</sup> and John Esslemont.<sup>35</sup> Wilmette, IL: Baha' i Barron Harper has produced a volume of essays on all Hands of the Cause Publishing Trust, 1980; in Lights of Fortitude.<sup>36</sup> The majority of other Baha'i biographies focus on the vols. 13–14, Haifa: The Universal House of first adherents of the Baha'i Faith in particular countries, and on pioneering Justice, 1970–74; vol. activities.<sup>37</sup> 15–20, Haifa: Baha' i

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World Centre, Biography as exemplum (1976–98). The traditions of hagiography in both Islamic and Christian literature have

22. See for example, undoubtedly and quite understandably influenced much of early Baha'i bio-

A. Q. Afnan, Black graphical literature. Elements of tarjama (Islamic hagiography) are clearly

Pearls: Servants in the Households of the evident, for instance, in Nabil-i-A'zam's account of the Bab, The Dawn-

Ba b and Baha'u'llah Breakers. So too is Mirza Abu'l-Fadl's Short Sketch of the History and Lives of

(Los Angeles: Kalimat ?  
the Leaders of This Religion reflective of this style.<sup>38</sup> Typical of scholarship  
in  
Press, 1988).  
both East and West at the time, Abu'l-Fadl does not detail his sources, but  
23. H. M. Balyuzi, does show that he has considered the  
evidence ? of writers who were sup-  
Baha'u'llah (London:  
Baha'i Publishing portive of his subjects, as well as those who  
were not, and he supports only  
Trust, 1938);'Abdu'l- those facts he is confident of.  
Baha: The Centre of More recent Baha'i literature also draws  
on the hagiographic and docu-  
the Covenant of  
Baha'u'llah (Oxford: mentary Islamic and Christian traditions.  
This includes many biographies  
George Ronald, 1972); that appear in the 'In Memoriam' section of  
volumes of The Baha' i World.  
The Bab: Herald of the These are mostly based on the recollections of  
relatives or acquaintances  
Day of Days (Oxford:  
George Ronald, 1973); and seldom rely on extensive use of documentary  
sources. They intend to  
Baha'u'llah: a brief life, honour the memory of their subjects and to  
acknowledge their contribution  
followed by an essay on to the progress of the Baha'i Faith rather  
than to explore their individual con-  
the Manifestation of  
God entitled The Word tribution in detail. In fulfilling these  
functions, they encourage and inspire  
Made Flesh (Oxford: their readers and locate contemporary Baha'i  
activities against a background  
George Ronald, 1974); of worthy tradition. Furthermore, they establish  
a record of the past, which  
Baha'u'llah, The King  
of Glory (Oxford: acts as an essential collective memory – a  
consciousness of the past – that  
George Ronald, 1980). strengthens individuals and communities as they  
operate in the present.<sup>39</sup>  
24. Ruhe, Robe of Light: Baha'i literature also includes  
several valuable collections of what might  
The Persian Years of the be termed 'biographical essays'. Some of  
these are by a single author, such  
Supreme Prophet  
Baha'u'llah 1817–1853  
as O. Z. Whitehead's Some Early Baha'is of the West, Some  
Baha'is to Remember,

(Oxford: George and Portraits of Some Baha' i Women;40  
and Dipchand Khiarra's Immortals.41  
Ronald, 1994), 180. Multi-authored collections of this genre include  
And The Trees Clapped Their  
25. Some of these are Hands, edited by Claire Vreeland, Why They  
Became Baha' i s, compiled by  
listed in G. Faizi, Annamarie Honnold, and S. Sundrum's portraits  
of Malaysian Baha'is in  
Stories about Baha' i  
Funds (New Delhi:  
Mystic Connections.42  
Baha' i Publishing These volumes of biographical essays  
each cohere around a specific  
Trust, 1993). theme. Whitehead's first volume (Some Early  
Bah a' i s) narrates the lives of  
26. The life of Bahiyyih 23 individuals who met 'Abdu'l-Baha.43  
The volume edited by Vreeland  
Khanum is currently includes both biographical and autobiographical  
accounts of pioneers,  
remembered in  
numerous histories  
while that compiled by Honnold presents 34 autobiographies and 101  
and in the compilation biographies of 'first generation Baha' i  
s by 1963'. Khiarra presents stories of  
of letters to and from Baha'is from the Indian subcontinent. Numerous  
essays from among these  
her, Bahi yyih Khanum,  
The Greatest Holy Leaf:  
four sets of biographical essays rely on existing secondary sources and on  
A Compilation from the primary materials offered by subjects'  
relatives and acquaintances; not one  
Baha' i Sacred Texts and among them suggests any reliance on  
formally archived materials.44  
Writings of the Guardian  
of the Faith and  
Baha' i biographical and autobiographical literature also includes an  
Bahi yyih Khanum's increasing number of works privately  
printed, or otherwise printed in small  
Own Letters (Haifa: numbers, by family members or Baha' i  
communities and institutions.45  
Baha' i World Centre  
1982). J. A. Khan,  
Some works written in Arabic and Persian have been published in English  
Prophet's Daughter: translation.46  
The Life and Legacy For the most part these biographical essays  
are vehicles for exempla – for  
of Bahi yyih Khanum:

## Outstanding Heroine

inspiration and the consolidation of tradition. Such exemplary biographies of the Baha'i Faith are not inherently problematic, but they may become so when (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2005). Tension results from differences between a writer's intentions and readers'

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expectations, or else through the selective (non-)use of biographical evidence,

Publishing Trust,

leading in some instances to 'biographies of denial'.

2005); M. Momen,

'The family and early

The life story of Fatimah Zarin Taj Baraghani (also known as Tahirih =

life of Tahirih Qurrat

? is one

'The pure one', and Quratu'l-'Ayn = 'Solace of the eyes'), for

instance, al-'Ayn', Baha'i Studies

still to be imagined from within its prism of both eastern and western bio-

Review 11 (2003),

35-52.

graphic traditions. Being female, her learning did not satisfy the criteria of tarjama, and only her individual brilliance has saved her from being

27. R. Rabbani, The

Priceless Pearl (London:

silenced like so many of her sister believers, as lamented in Bahiyyih

Baha'i Publishing

Nakhjavani's insightful Asking Questions:

Trust, 1969).

28. I. F. Muhajir,

The pages of Nabil's Dawn-Breakers are filled with countless women. They ride

Dr Muhajir, Hand of the

beside their husbands and sacrifice their children. They are humiliated, beaten

Cause of God, Knight of

Baha'u'llah (London:

and raped. They are paraded on horseback as the heads of their sons and

Baha'i Publishing

husbands are held aloft on pikes. They carry stones and build forts; they cut

off Trust, 1992), xvi. This

their hair and use it to bind together the fracturing guns at Nayriz. They were

no biography takes a

straightforward

doubt among those who helped grind the bones of dead horses and who rushed

approach to the genre

out under cannon fire to gather the new grass to eat at Fort Shaykh Tabarsi.

But of biography, and many they have no names and Nabil does not go out of his way to mention them ...<sup>47</sup> details noted in haste

by Dr Muhajir while on his travels appear to

As a martyr for her Faith, her persona as 'heroine' is more familiar than her have been transferred individuality. An instance of difference between author's intention and reader's directly into the book without verification.

expectation on the subject of Tahirih occurred in a critic's response to Martha

?

Root's biography, *Tahirih the Pure: Iran's Greatest Woman*.<sup>48</sup> F. W. Ebner, who 29. D. F. Gilstrap, From

*Copper to Gold: The*

received a copy of Miss Root's book at the time of her visit to China in 1938, Life of Dorothy Baker

wrote in the *North-China Daily News*:

(Wilmette, IL: Baha' i

Publishing Trust, 1999).

Were this book written primarily to show the life and influence of a nineteenth- 30. A. I. Chapman, Leroy

*Ioas: Hand of the*

century Persian woman who suffered martyrdom in her attempt to emancipate Cause of God (Oxford:

women, it would have resulted in a unique contribution to oriental biography.

George Ronald, 1998).

However, the author's interest in her subject, *Hadrat-i-Tahirih, Her Highness*

31. M. Garis, Martha

*the Pure One*, has been secondary to her interest in the promotion of the

Root: *Lioness at the*

*Baha'i Faith*. The review does not take exception to the purpose of the

book as Threshold (Wilmette,

IL: Baha'i Publishing

conceived by the author. He merely states that the ostensible purpose of the Trust, 1983).

book seems to be of secondary concern.<sup>49</sup>

32. D. Hofman, George

*Townshend* (Oxford:

While Miss Root gathered much of her material first hand, in Iran, her treat-

George Ronald, 1983).

ment of the life story of Quratu'l-'Ayn emphasized her role as champion of

33. G. Morrison, *To Move*

women's emancipation and Babi heroine rather than her individuality.

*the World*: Louis G.

Ebner, on the other hand, was evidently more interested in Tahirih's indi-

Gregory and the  
 viduality as poetess and religious reformer.50 ?  
 Advancements of Racial  
 Unity in America  
 Another instance of tension between biography as exemplum and narra-  
 (Wilmette, IL: Baha' i  
 tion of a unique life is related by anthropologist Michael Fischer. During  
 Publishing Trust, 1982).  
 extensive fieldwork in Yazd, Iran, Fischer befriended Nuru'llah  
 Akhtar-Khavar i , 34. M. R. Sears, Bill: A  
 a Baha'i employed to handle international affairs at the Kerakhshan wool-  
 Biography of Hand of  
 the Cause of God  
 spinning and weaving mill. Akhtar-Khavari was a courageous advocate of his  
 William Sears (Eloy,  
 Faith, who was executed by the Khomeini government in 1980. In re-presenting  
 AZ: Desert Rose  
 the story of his life, Fischer recognized that 'two stories' could be told:  
 Publishing, 2003).

35. M. Momen, Dr. J. E.  
 The more powerful one is of the exemplary figure, the modern man who had  
 Esslemont (London:  
 Baha' i Publishing  
 decided to operate in a very conservative society, not to badger or embarrass  
 Trust, 1975).

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36. B. Harper, Lights of it, but to show a new and open mode  
 of behaviour. The challenge here is to  
 Fortitude: Glimpses show how one operates in such a society:  
 it is almost an ethnographic chal-  
 into the Lives of the  
 Hands of the Cause of lenge, the kind of challenge that  
 requires the eye of a novelist for local colour  
 God (Oxford: George and knowledge of local detail. It is a  
 challenge to describe how a society  
 Ronald, 1997). changes, sometimes moving in reactionary  
 self-destructive directions, but  
 37. See, for example, nonetheless irrevocably changes, in  
 ways involving considerable internal conflict.  
 R. Weinberg, Ethel The exemplary individual as well as all  
 other individuals have to make choices,  
 Jenner Rosenberg: The  
 Life and Times of have to negotiate pragmatic as well as

moral decisions.

England's Outstanding The other narrative that can be  
told – by far the weaker story, I think – is to  
Baha'i Pioneer Worker turn Akhtar-Khavari into a standard  
Baha'i martyr. It is this that I fear will be

(Oxford: George

Ronald, 1995). his fate. I fear it not only because I  
will no longer recognize my friend, but also

L. Rowden, Hidden because he was larger than such  
stereo-typing allows. His personality (like

Bounties: Memories of every human being's) was unique: it  
was also graceful, informed, and forceful,

Pioneering on the

Magdalen Archipelago and thus worth preserving.<sup>51</sup>

(Ontario: Nine Pines

Publishing, 1994). Fischer's understandable concern is that  
hagiographic treatment of Akhtar-

38. Abu'l-Fadl Khavari would have a moulding effect,  
which would 'disembody' the

?

[Gulpaygani], The authentic self. He sees the 'typing' of  
an individual as 'martyr' as a reduc-

Baha'i Proofs (Hujaja'l-

Bahiyih) and A Short tion of the subject, a shrinking of  
personhood into a brave but futile heroism.

Sketch of the History He regards the legacy of Nuru'llah

Akhtar-Khavari not as 'a dialogue of

and Lives of the Leaders martyrdom with Shi'ism' but 'the  
possibility of living in Yazd as if it were the

of This Religion

(Wilmette, IL: Baha'i twentieth century, as if one could live  
without fear of religious fanaticism, as

Publishing Trust, 1983). if people could live and let live each by his  
or her own lights'.<sup>52</sup> His purpose

39. Other examples is not to 'denigrate the suffering or  
the heroism of Baha'i martyrs' but to

include M. Gooljar, 'raise for discussion the possibilities for  
more effective ways of countering

The Teachers of the

Baha'i Faith: The World

the genocidal atrocities of the Khomeini regime'.

is One Country and

A survey of Baha'i biographical

literature suggests that Fischer's fear

Mankind its Citizens has not been realized. In the first place,  
despite the many deaths of

(New York: Vantage

Press, 1986).

Babis and Baha'is in the nineteenth century and the continued martyrdom of Baha'is in both pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, these martyr-

40. O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Baha'is of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976); does eventually emerge, need not betray the individuality of the subject

Some Baha'is to Remember (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983); honourable in the Baha'i tradition as in those of the past, and lives that have been offered with the purest of motives will be remembered among the Baha'i Women (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996).

41. *Immortals* (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988) recounts the character, there also exists a path of 'waywardness'. Where one is a path of lives of 16 outstanding Indian Baha'is. Many faithfulness, the other is that of deceit, and one role of biography is to clarify the distinction between the two. Thus the central figures of the Baha'i biographies draw on Faith exalted the character and actions of the praiseworthy and noted the author's personal acquaintance with the condition of its opponents for the purpose of instructing others in right subjects, in addition to conduct.

drawing on previously published sources. The extent to which accounts can vary in their evaluation of an individual's place in Babi and Baha'i history is illustrated in studies of the life of Baha'is, such as the Persian activist Jamalud-Din 'al-Afghani' (1838/9–1897). Afghani was Isfandi yar Bakhti yar i, an Iranian of considerable

intellectual and political capacity who wove

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deception into every phase of his eventful life. Renowned Persianist Nikkie Narayenrao Vakil and Keddie suggests that Afghani saw himself as a 'kind of prophet or messiah, Pritam Singh are to an extent already known destined to reform, reawaken, and reunite the Muslim world and free it outside India; accounts from its infidel conquerors'.<sup>54</sup> While there is no doubt that Afghani knew of the lives of others, much about the teachings of the Bab, his association was with Azali Babis – such as Knight of Baha'u'llah to Daman, principally Shaykh Ahmad Ruh i and Mi rz a Aqa Khan Kirmani.<sup>55</sup> Kedourie Ghulam-'Ali Ibrahi mji has suggested that during? ? his last years in Istanbul Afghani associated with Kurlawala, are a signifi- 'Persian Bab i s prominent in the dissemination of heterodoxy, and active in cant contribution. As men were considerably subverting the authority of the Persian Government',<sup>56</sup> and suggests that an freer than women in anti-Babi article attributed to Afghani in the fifth volume of Butrus al-Indian society, only four Bustani 's encyclopaedia Da'irat al-Ma'arif published in Beirut in 1881 was women are described in Immortals, although written by Bustani himself.<sup>57</sup> Shoghi Effendi, however, is clear in his assess- several other chapters ment of Afghani's relationship to the early Baha'is, and describes Afghani include mention of as one of those 'enemies who have sedulously sought to extinguish the work achieved by men in partnership with light of Baha'u'llah's Covenant': their wives.

42. C. Vreeland, *And The*  
The scheming Jamalud-Din Afghani, whose relentless hostility and powerful Trees Clapped Their influence had been so gravely detrimental to the progress of the Faith in Near Hands (Oxford: Eastern countries, was, after a chequered career filled with vicissitudes,

George Ronald, 1994);  
A. Honnold, Why They  
stricken with cancer, and having had a major part of his tongue cut away in an  
Became Baha'is (New  
unsuccessful operation perished in misery.<sup>58</sup>  
Delhi: Baha'i  
Publishing Trust,  
1994); S. Sundrum,  
In this passage Shoghi Effendi combines judgement of character ('the  
Mystic Connections:  
scheming Jamalud-Din') with matters of historical fact relating to  
his political and physical decline. While few biographies have been written to date  
Baha'is of Malaysia  
(Kuala Lumpur: Baha'i  
about those who occupied themselves in active opposition to the central  
Publishing Trust of  
Baha'i figures and to the Baha'i community itself, the references to their  
Malaysia, 2003.)  
actions in such works as Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By* suggests that such  
43. The volume also  
studies will in time be required in the ongoing search for historical under-  
includes the story of  
Queen Marie of  
standing of past events.<sup>59</sup> Studies of the life of Mason Remey, for instance,  
Romania.  
will be required to understand the positive contributions made in his earlier  
44. I make this observation  
life and the circumstances leading to his tragic defection following the  
cautiously, for an essay  
passing of Shoghi Effendi, and also to correct the inaccuracies in both fact  
by this writer about  
and interpretation offered in works such as that by Spataro.<sup>60</sup>  
Florence and Harold  
Fitzner that appears  
in *And The Trees*  
Partial biographies  
Clapped Their Hands  
There are many individuals whose lives as Baha'is are only partially uncov-  
relied greatly on  
archived materials, but  
ered in the biographical literature. These include the famous film actress  
footnotes to the essay  
Carole Lombard, who did not live long after becoming a Baha'i; Queen  
were removed in  
Marie of Romania, whose allegiance to Baha'i principles is only marginally  
keeping with the style

and format of the  
explored in the otherwise masterful study by Pakula,<sup>61</sup> even if more fully  
volume; other essays  
developed by Marcus;<sup>62</sup> and August Forel, world-renowned Swiss scientist,  
in these works may  
whose life is partially explored by Vader.<sup>63</sup>  
have followed a similar  
path from research  
Roy Wilhelm (1875–1951), the trusted servant of ‘Abdu’l-Baha designated  
to publication.

a ‘herald of Baha’u’llah’s Covenant’ and later a Hand of the  
Cause by

45. Some recent examples

Shoghi Effendi, is known to Baha’is for his service on the Baha’i Temple  
include H. Falahi-  
Unity Board (from 1909) and the North American National Assembly (from  
Skuce, A Radiant Gem:  
its inception in 1922 until 1946, when he retired at the age of 71); and  
especially A Biography of Jinab-i  
Fadil-i Shirazi (Victoria,  
for the property in New Jersey which became the East Coast Baha’i commu-  
BC: Trafford Publishing,  
nity’s first summer school. Less well known is the fact that Wilhelm rose  
2004); B. Fitzpatrick-

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Moore, My African from being a high-school drop-out to become  
one of the largest coffee

Heart (Johannesburg: brokers in North America, a story better told  
in the pages of the New York

Baha’i Publishing

Trust, 1999); T. K. Times.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps even less well known are the  
troubled formative years that

Foroughi (ed.), My prepared Wilhelm for a life of service. As  
recalled by Wilhelm’s butler,

Love is My Stronghold Walter Blakely:

(New Delhi: Baha’i

Publishing Trust, 1995);

F. Mayberry, The Great Roy was born in Zainsville, Ohio. He went  
to school; when he got to high

Adventure (Manotick, school he didn’t like it so he ran  
away. His people found him and brought him

Ontario: Nine Pines

Publishing, 1994); back, then he ran again the second time,  
and he told me he covered his tracks

P. Matchett, Down thoroughly. He got a job as a pottery salesman on the road, what they called a Memory Lane: The 'drummer' in those days, and he used to go all over the US selling pottery, Autobiography of an Irish Baha'i (Bangor, and finally he told me he saved up \$750. It was like \$7,500 now, and a confidence man came and cheated him out of it, Co. Down: privately dence man came and cheated him out of it, which he said was a good thing, published, 1999). B. because he never got cheated again. Sims, In the Light of the Rising Sun: Memoirs of Roy Wilhelm used to write to the Guardian every day. I used to mail them a Baha'i Pioneer to for him, and he used to get a letter back about once a week. He sent the Japan (Tokyo: Baha'i Guardian an automobile, a brand new Buick, the best ever made. I picked it Publishing Trust, 2002). out, because Roy said 'you pick it out Walter, and pick out all the parts he will

46. Haydar Ali, Stories need for a number of years, 10 years'.<sup>65</sup> from The Delight of Hearts: The Memoirs of Ha j i Mi rza Haydar-'Al i Two valuable studies of recent times treat the lives of John Birks 'Dizzie' (trans. A. Q. Faizi , Los Gillespie and Bernard Leach.<sup>66</sup> Leach's Baha'i affiliation is widely known, Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980); A. but his struggles with religious ideas and values are only revealed through 'Al i zad, Years of the meticulous scholarship of Cooper, an author principally concerned with Silence: The Baha' i s in Leach as potter but aware of the significance of the potter's Baha'i commitment-the USSR, 1938-1946: The Memoirs of ments.<sup>67</sup> While Shipton's study of Gillespie similarly focuses his subject Asadu'llah 'Al i zad from an artistic rather than religious point of view, his treatment of Gillespie's (trans. B. R. Ma'ani, Baha'i commitments leaves the reader keen to know more.<sup>68</sup> Oxford: George Ronald, 1999). The black American philosopher Alain Locke (1886-1954) is another whose activities within the Baha'i community have only recently been

47. B. Nakhjavani, Asking

Questions: A Challenge assessed, with most biographies focusing on his achievements as philosopher and writer.<sup>69</sup> The Baha'i literature, conversely, notes Locke's involvement in race amity conferences in the 1920s without examining in any detail Ronald, 1990).

his work in philosophy.<sup>70</sup> Will van den Hoonaard has recently explored the notion of partial biography.<sup>71</sup> In the Australian context, the life of 'Burnam Pure: Iran's Greatest Woman (New York: Burnam', who gained fame for his upholding of Aboriginal rights (in 1988 Baha'i Publishing he marked the bicentenary of Australia's 'founding' by claiming the White Committee, 1938). Cliffs of Dover on behalf of Australia – mocking Captain Cook's act two hundred years earlier claiming the Australian continent on behalf of the News, 13 September 1938. British crown) and documentation of Aboriginal culture, as depicted by Norst,<sup>72</sup> could almost be mistaken as the story of a person other than Harry 50. Ebner: 'A modern biographer might well Penrith (1933?–1997), by which name this individual was known within the find in Tahiri all the Baha'i community from the time of his first association with it in 1956 until qualities which build a his passing. fascinating story. Miss Root has suggested Not all biographical subjects were in the public eye, and another source these – a medieval of 'partiality' in accounts is the obscurity of the subject, generally through society in the lack of documentation. Thus Hellaby's account of Sarah Ann Ridgway nineteenth century, the daughter of a admits after 90 pages exploring the life of the first Baha'i in the north of Mohammedan priest England that 'We have really very little to go on in trying to find out what who has cast aside the kind of a personality Sarah Ann Ridgway was and of what kind of character.

Until she became a Baha'i there is literally no information to be unearthed  
veil, one who contrary  
on the matter...'<sup>73</sup>  
to custom carried on  
religious controversies  
Apart from the investigation of lives lived in loyalty to the Covenant of  
with men and publicly  
Baha'u'llah, there remains too the issue of lives lived outside it, or in  
wilful took part in religious  
opposition to it. A small number of biographies focus on subjects who  
conferences. The  
author has described  
were not Baha'is, but whose lives intersected significantly with the Baha'i  
Tahirih as a "poetess  
revelation. These include Edward Granville Browne, the Cambridge orien-  
whose work is sought  
talist who devoted some three decades to the study of the Babi movement.  
by scholars in every  
land", yet but two of  
Balyuzi's study Edward Granville Browne and the Baha'i Faith does not  
her poems are trans-  
explore all facets of the scholar's life and work, but focuses, as the title  
lated in an appendix.  
suggests, on his activities and publications in relation to the religion and  
Oriental scholars of  
the character of Lord  
community of the Bab. More specifically, Balyuzi writes from the perspec-  
Curzon, Valentine  
tive of one who has examined Browne's early and later writings and who is  
Chirol and Sir Francis  
puzzled at his increasingly contradictory and oftentimes disapproving con-  
Younghusband have  
written of Tahirih with  
clusions.<sup>74</sup>  
admiration. Abundant  
Biography, it seems, cannot aspire to full re-presentation of a subject's  
testimony of her  
life. Its function and purpose is, rather, to select and present facets of that  
remarkable personality  
and gifts exists. Yet  
life which the biographer finds important. In doing so, biography offers  
this book cannot  
commentary on the significance of that life, and on the uniqueness of that  
satisfy those who  
life. In contemporary terms, one commentator has suggested, 'The biogra-  
want an unbiased  
interpretation of that

pher imposes pattern on experience to declare the comprehensibility of personality.' North-human existence. Learning of other people, we learn of ourselves.'<sup>75</sup> To aid

China Daily News,  
the task of finding and commenting on meaning, biography makes use of  
13 September 1938.

such devices as metaphor and critique.

51. M. M. J. Fischer and  
M. Abedi, *Debating  
Muslims: Cultural  
Biography as metaphor*

Dialogues in  
St Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*:  
Postmodernity and

Tradition (Madison, WI:  
University of Wisconsin

Many things ... are done, which seem disallowable to men and yet are  
Press, 1990). See

approved by thy testimony; and many things again are commended by men,  
chapter 4, 'Social

which by thy testimony are condemned. For the appearance of the act is often  
Change and the

Mirrors of Tradition:

different from the intention of him that doth it; and the precise circumstances  
Baha'is of Yazd', 247–8.

of the time, which are hidden from us, must often vary.<sup>76</sup>

Mr Nuru'llah Akhtar-  
Khavari was one of  
seven Iranian Baha'is

The Christian tradition of biography developed metaphors with which to  
martyred in Yazd on

describe the evolution of the religious life, and against which to compare the  
8 September 1980, see

specifics of the life of their subject. Vincent Brummer explains a three-stage  
The Baha'i World, vol.

18, 1979–1983, 291.

growth process within the Christian tradition of mysticism, commencing  
with purification (or purgation), followed by illumination (or enlightenment)

52. *ibid* 249–50.

and finally ecstasy (or union). In the stage of purification one learns repen-

53. One of the few  
tance, self-denial and humility.<sup>77</sup> This first stage is one of self-knowledge, a  
monographs in

English focusing on

stage in which the 'spirit of God inflames our will with love. This is a love  
the theme is M. Labib,

that is chaste, holy and ardent.'<sup>78</sup> The third level, union, is not possible

in the The Seven Martyrs of  
mortal realm, although enlightened mystics may gain glimpses of it.

Hurmuzak (trans.

M. Momen, Oxford:

If a metaphor such as Brummer's is accepted, the biographical task

George Ronald, 1981).

becomes that of making evident the progress of the spirit as it becomes

54. N. R. Keddie,

refined through the tests it encounters and endures in the material world. The

'Sayyid Jamal ad-Din

stages of search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment, poverty

"Al-Afghani": A Case

of Posthumous

and absolute nothingness explored in Baha'u'llah's mystical work The

Charisma?', in

Seven Valleys refers to stages that souls traverse in life in varying degrees

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Studies in Leadership of intensity, which relate to varying degrees of  
capacity. This model has been

(ed. D. A. Rustow, explored in systematic theologies<sup>79</sup> but has seldom  
provided the foundation

New York: George

Braziller, 1970) p. 170. for biographical study. The literary subject might

render the biographer's

task easy by depicting his or her spiritual state on paper, but few people

55. I am grateful to Dr

Moojan Momen for are so inclined, and the interpretation of their

interior journey on the basis

pointing out these of their exterior one remains extremely difficult.

The most accessible bio-

associations to me: graphical subjects are those who themselves

engaged in literature. Thus

email 20 May 2005.

biographer Wendy Heller found Lidia Zamenhof a subject at once tragic

56. E. Kedourie, Afghani and accessible.<sup>80</sup> Zamenhof was the daughter of

Ludwik Zamenhof, a

and 'Abduh: An Essay

on Religious Unbelief Polish Jew who created the language of Esperanto.

She devoted herself to

and Political Activism propagation of the Baha'i teachings through the

medium of Esperanto lan-

in Modern Islam

gauge and culture, until her life was terminated

by the Nazis of Hitler's

(London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), 20. Germany. Heller's treatment of Zamenhof's restless life excels in narrating her life journey against the backdrop of pre-war Europe, when Baha'i communities laboured innocently in the context of a mounting maelstrom. sentence, which says: "This is what the well-known Sayyid Kamal al-Din al-Afghani and the pilgrimage from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. This physical progression provides a metaphor for the spiritual journey that gives meaning to the physical: it may, of course be true that, sceptic as he was, Afghani had little periods of crisis and test use for the involved and abstruse speculations of the Bab, but this would not prevent him from collaborating (becoming familiar with the value with his followers in a political cause.' Various motifs recur in the depiction of the life cycle of an individual believer in the Faith of Baha'u'llah. These include the process of conversion/confirmation of faith, socialization (acts of teaching the 58. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1944), 317. those by Marzieh Gail. In *Summon Up Remembrance* and *Arches of the Years* Gail graciously introduces the reader to the world as lived in by her who opposed the Baha'i central figures parents, Ali Kuli Khan and Florence Breed, quite possibly the first include R. Hollinger, Persian-American marital alliance and certainly

a meeting of culture and  
'Ibrahim George learning on both sides. As a child witness to  
much that she records, Gail  
Kheiralla and the Baha'i  
Faith in America', in  
gives an account that benefits from her intimate association with her char-  
From Iran East and actors, and permits the reader not merely an  
understanding of the involve-  
West, Studies in Babi ment of Khan and Breed in the affairs of the  
Baha'i community – whether in  
and Baha'i History,  
vol. 2 (ed. J. R. Cole  
Persia, Palestine, Turkey, France or the United States – but insights into  
the  
and M. Momen, Los influences that shaped the development of their  
characters, and the forces  
Angeles: Kalimat Press, in the world at large that shaped their  
destinies.  
1984), 95–134. Much is  
known of the life of  
Gail describes the heroic without creating generic heroes or heroines,  
Mason Remey, a Hand and in this she follows Ruhe in instinctively  
developing another of the  
of the Cause who broke 'ungathered strands': the new framework for  
observation of lived lives does  
the Covenant following  
the death of Shoghi  
not seek to be prescriptive, does not set up 'personas' modelling or some-  
Effendi, although no how defining a set of 'ideal' behaviours. That  
modernist effort to standardize  
scholarly treatment of our every action, to stifle difference, to create  
categories which we can  
his life has appeared.  
clearly label as 'the heroic' teacher or defender of the faith, or the  
'stalwart'  
60. F. C. Spataro, Charles and tragic martyr or saint, has been  
dismissed. Here instead is an effort to  
Mason Remey and the  
see subjects in their individuality, to find qualities of humility, of love, of

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brilliance, of courage, in their specific locations, rather than in some prede-  
Baha'i Faith (New York:  
fined categories into which our infinitely diverse characters must somehow  
Carlton Press, 1987).

be put. Instead is the project of finding heroic acts in the ordinary and

61. H. Pakula, *The Last Romantic: A Biography of Queen Marie of Roumania* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985).  
everyday, of observing the saintly in the common believer, as in the extraordinary person of some other time and place. Here is a biography of difference, of identification and examination of that sense of individuality that is to be achieved in the context of community. Here is celebration of the subject's consciousness of individual worth, of being at one with other believers and

62. D. L. Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Baha'i Faith*  
community rather than of being the same as all other believers.

*Reformulating the biographical framework* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000).  
Most contemporary biography seeks to convey not merely the facts and example of a subject's life, but interpretation and even evaluation of it.

63. J. P. Vader, *For the Good of Mankind: August Forel and the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984).  
Most importantly, this critical approach has been encouraged by the pre-  
sumption that an author occupies some superior and objective vantage point from which to view, and judge, the subject. 'In the recent past', it has been suggested,

64. 9 July 1921, 8:7 – criticizes arbitrary regulations in new tariff bill; 15 March 1925, work, was thought to consist mainly in giving the work a limiting context ...

IX, 18:3 – praises Today, when the range of critical approaches has widened beyond the narrow commercial arbitration; 4 January 1936, 14:7 – row verities of formal criticism, we are permitted an ampler view of critical letter on calendar biography. To understand any literary work requires, to begin with, a grasp of its genre and of its historical context. Equally essential is a personal

1937, IV, 9:7 – letter  
on calendar;  
context ... that biography provides to put the subject's work in adequate  
21 December 1951, 27:5.  
perspective. The work never provides sufficient information in itself for  
65. Interview with Walter  
proper interpretations.<sup>83</sup>  
Blakely, 28 August 1984,  
Burbank, Los Angeles.  
Exponents of the critical mode of biography suggest its superiority over tra-  
66. Mention of Leach  
ditional hagiography, and over mere chronologies and purely descriptive  
brings to mind  
works. It could be argued, however, that extreme practices of both critical  
Leach's lifelong friend  
Mark Tobey, the Baha'i  
biography and hagiography are best avoided, and that the most satisfactory  
artist responsible for  
biography emerges from critical examination that constructs and contextu-  
introducing Leach to  
alizes more than it merely deconstructs a life story.  
the Baha'i Faith.  
While Tobey's Baha'i  
The Baha'i writings provide immense insight into the nature of man and  
affiliation is well  
the purpose of existence and can assist in formulating the criteria upon  
documented in work  
which sound biographical enquiry may proceed. They create, on the other  
examining his role in  
modern art, it cannot  
hand, a dilemma for the writer of biography. We know that humans are  
be said that his life  
imperfect; the Baha'i teachings also tell us not to dwell on the faults of oth-  
has yet been given  
ers. Since we also know that in the discipline of biography the biographer is  
full biographical  
consideration. Recent  
challenged to reveal the life of the subject, how can such a life be revealed  
academic work  
without displaying imperfections, and at the same time avoiding simple  
includes E. R. Kelley,  
hagiography? If we are to reveal our subject – and we know subjects are  
'Mark Tobey and the  
Bahai Faith: New  
imperfect – then we will reveal blemishes of character. But if we are true to  
Perspectives on the  
the facts as we find them, and reveal blemishes of character, then we are

Artist and His

exposing the faults of others, and this appears to be contrary to the spirit of  
Paintings', Ph.D.

thesis, University of

the Baha'i teachings.<sup>84</sup> If, furthermore, we sift the facts to present a

partial Texas at Austin, 1983.

picture of our subject, dwelling only on those aspects that we think will

The classic treatments

show our subject in a positive light, we are in danger of distorting the real-

are W. C. Seitz, Mark

Tobey (New York: The

ity of 'things as they are': how might the biographer resolve this dilemma?

Museum of Modern

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Art, 1962), and W. First, I suggest, the intention of Baha'i

biography is not to critique for

Schmied, Mark Tobey critique's sake, but to explore the relationship

between a subject's con-

(London: Thames &

Hudson, 1966). conscious purpose and the fruit of the enactment of

that purpose. Baha'i

biographies are not stories of selves engaged in rational strategies towards

67. E. Cooper, Bernard

Leach: Life and Work fixed objectives, but voyages of beings through time

and space, being

(New Haven: Yale tested as they approach stations of spirituality.

Baha'i biography, in other

University Press, 2003). words, attempts the depiction of enlightened

ontological states, in which

68. A. Shipton, Groovin' life meanings constructed in unique and

specific circumstances accord with

High: The Life of Dizzy universal theological foundations; each human being

has a specific path to

Gillespie (Oxford:

Oxford University tread, partly preordained, partly self-defined; each

has a rational soul and a

Press, 1999). physical form, and possesses capacities of spirit,

intellect and moral capac-

69. C. Buck, Alain Locke: ity which the life journey presents with

opportunities to either develop or

Faith and Philosophy ignore, through the voluntary application of will.

Interactions with the

(Los Angeles: Kalimat worlds of nature, of culture and of the spirit

refine the soul for entry to a

Press, 2005). Johnny Washington, *A Journey into the Philosophy of Alain Locke* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994). Second, since we understand that the highest capacities inherent in the person are to know (to seek knowledge of God), to love and to act, these capacities should emerge in biography, through consideration of an individual's spiritual concerns, mental development, relationships with others and use of will. In writing about the mind of an individual, furthermore, such an approach would be informed by the relationship between the spirit and the intellect as this is explained in the Baha'i writings.

The juxtaposition of scriptural passages, which at one time stress individual 'nothingness' and at another celebrate individual worth suggests not contradictory elements within the Baha'i writings but the range of levels available for interpreting the worth of the self, and the individual life.

His essay 'impressions of Advocacy of self-effacement does not denote lessening of individual value, Haifa' appeared in The Baha'i Yearbook, 1925, 81-8, and was repeated in The Baha'i World, must decide on some understanding of the self as the combined effects of physical, spiritual and intellectual selves. A mature biographer may feel confident to offer an evaluation of a subject's life; but those who write within a Baha'i perspective will temper their evaluation of the worth of the life of another human being through consciousness of

the biographer's own

Linfoot appeared in limited access to a suitable plane from which to judge. Baha'u'llah's admo-

The Baha'i World,

vol. 13, 1954-63, 894-5.

nitions to observe the good and to ignore the shortcomings of others discourage the hasty passing of judgement. The more we consider the

71. W. C. van den

Hoonard, 'Biographical

immensity of the task, however, the less we feel inclined to assume the role

Zoning and Bahai of 'judging observer'.

Biographical Writing: No biography can fully 'represent' a life story. It can, at best, provide a

The Case of Rose

Henderson', Baha'i

well-intentioned 're-presentation' of that story. Furthermore, the

qualities of

Studies Review 12 such a re-presentation are determined by several factors, including the

(2004), 50-66. intentions of the author and the nature of the records disclosed.

72. M. J. Norst, Burnum Biographies are 'source-dependent', in that the extent to which the life of

Burnum: A Warrior for another may be 're-presented' depends much on the quality and quantity of

Peace (East Roseville:

Kangaroo Press, 1999).

records - written or otherwise - that remain. To textualize lived experience

is to theorize it, to place a grid on it. The tarjama and hagiography are

73. M. Hellaby, Sarah Ann

Ridgway (Oxford: examples of such grids. They provide conventions and criteria for appraising

George Ronald, 2003). a subject's acts. Least accessible are 'inner motives', which are rarely exposed,

84

Graham

Hassall

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except perhaps in autobiographical accounts, which are in and of them-

74. H. M. Balyuzi, Edward

selves not a guarantee of authenticity.

Granville Browne and

the Baha' i Faith

A well-crafted biography grounded in Baha'i texts would address the

(London: George

nature of the individual person, noting his or her elemental qualities and

Ronald, 1970).

underlying motivations. It would, furthermore, be informed by past tradi-  
 Nineteenth- and  
 twentieth-century Iran  
 tions. Existing traditions of biography need not be rejected. To the contrary,  
 yielded a number of  
 the positive functions of each must necessarily be drawn on in the quest for  
 individuals who were  
 more encompassing approaches to life writing. Certain steps are required,  
 not Baha'is but whose  
 relationships with the  
 however, to transform brief adulatory and uncritical accounts into more  
 Baha'i community  
 substantial biographies. These seek to position a subject in context and,  
 await closer investiga-  
 beyond that, seek to make a judgement, or an evaluation, of the subject's  
 tion. One thinks of the  
 nationalists Malkam  
 significance. I have suggested also that a biography should examine  
 Khan and Jamalu'd-Din  
 notions of public and private selves and distinguish between active and  
 'Al-Afghani'.  
 passive, or contemplative, facets of individual existence – between the  
 capacity 75. Patricia Meyer Spacks,  
 to reflect and the will to act. Such 'spiritual biography' – if it can be  
 so called – 'Gossip', in Bloom (ed.),  
 James Boswell's Life of  
 must additionally be constructed on the bases of well-considered conceptions  
 Samuel Johnson, 144.  
 of the terms 'person' and 'society'. But all of these biographical  
 objectives 76. St Augustine, The  
 are subject to the availability of evidence and literary devices that can  
 Confessions of St  
 use this evidence to 're-present' their subject. The self is always in some  
 Augustine (London:  
 Collins 1957), 84–5.  
 relation to an order and biography is text that seeks to represent this  
 77. V. Brummer, The Model  
 relationship.  
 of Love: A Study in  
 On the foundation of the arguments laid out in brief above, Baha'i biog-  
 Philosophical Theology  
 raphy is essentially the depiction in literature of moral heroism. Its expo-  
 (Cambridge:  
 Cambridge University  
 nents and readers must, therefore, consider deeply what concept of hero  
 Press, 1993). It is

they seek to establish. We are most familiar with the hero/heroine whose interesting to note that exploits are apparent in the physical world and in the 'public' arena, and these conditions are expressed in the Baha'i whose travels and exploits are well documented in the source literature. But Long Obligatory Prayer. the concept of the heroic conveyed in Baha'i scriptures includes heroes and 78. *ibid* 62. 'Chaste love' heroines whose arenas for victory are the 'inner life', or the life at home in means, to Brummer, the family – lives far less accessible to the biographical process. The 'hero', love for the sake of love thus, need not be famous, and what is 'heroic' need not be 'public'. itself, not for some other interest. He gives Thornton Chase led a significant Baha'i life which examination shows to be the example of a one of daily and for the most part anonymous struggle.<sup>85</sup> An integrating and servant who may love unifying personality may not be one that takes the lead, stands out, and his master for the wages he is paid, rather breaks new ground. Such an integrating personality may make no specific, than through any love outstanding contribution and hence not attract individual attention. But invoked by the master's such a life is quite an achievement, an outstanding contribution in its own personal qualities. way, worthy of celebration, worthy of examination. In this category we can 79. See, particularly, J. Savi, The Eternal Quest For include such works as Douglas's description of her parents' mixed-race God: An Introduction to marriage,<sup>86</sup> and Szepesi's account of life as a migrant.<sup>87</sup> The life of Thomas the Divine Philosophy of Breakwell was short, undocumented, but spiritually potent.<sup>88</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989); In this essay I have suggested that the contexts in which Baha'i biography is written include each of the existing cultural and religious traditions. Dimensions in The hagiographic traditions of Christianity and Islam have influenced Baha'i Spirituality (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994). biographies toward depictions of subjects as exemplars, as heroes, saints

80. W. Heller, Lidia: The and martyrs. In the 'modern' biography the 'religious' or 'spiritual' orientation Life of Lidia Zamenhof, of life stories has given way to more secular views of the origins, character Daughter of Esperanto and motivation of the 'human spirit'. The modernist tradition has also (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985).

allowed for representations of 'ordinary' believers, and for critical accounts

81. M. Gail, Summon Up that value factual accuracy as much as representations of 'ideal' personas. Remembrance (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987).

The Modes and Intentions of Biography  
85

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82. M. Gail, Arches of the Rather than privilege one of these traditions above any other, however, this Years (Oxford: George Ronald, 1991). paper has suggested that the Baha'i biographical project, in keeping with

the facility that underlies Baha'i theological and philosophical pursuits,

83. F. Brady, 'James Boswell: Theory and Practice of Biography', will allow Baha'i authors to continue to draw on the skills of the craft elaborated across many generations, divergent cultures and traditions, yet draw Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson, 99–100. on the Baha'i scriptures for inspiration

productive of new insights into how

84. I am thinking here lived lives can be depicted in literature.

also of the seeming

impossibility of Suggested citation

knowing the 'real'

person, as opposed to Hassall, G. (2008), 'The Modes and Intentions of Biography', Baha'i Studies Review

knowing the 'façade' 14, pp. 71–86. doi: 10.1386/bsr. 14. 71/7

that a subject presents

to the world. In the

context of Japanese Contributor details

culture, Takeo Doi, The Dr Graham Hassall is Professor of Governance at the University of the South Pacific,

Anatomy of Self: The Suva, Fiji Islands. He is working on biographies of

Effie Baker, and Clara and Hyde

Individual in Japanese     Dunn. In 2005 his chapter 'The Baha'i Faith in the Pacific', appeared in *Vision and*

*Society* (New York:

Kodansha, 1986),

*Reality in Pacific Religion: Essays in Honour of Niel Gunson* (Pandanus Press, Canberra).

refers to the omote     E-mail: [hassall\\_g@usp.ac.fj](mailto:hassall_g@usp.ac.fj)

(the 'face', or the front

of things) and the ura

(that which is hidden,

for instance, that

which remains secret

in the mind). The

Baha'i writings warn of

the error of cultivating

a public persona that

differs markedly from

the 'inner life and

private character'

which is only known

to God; contemporary

philosophers speak of

'authenticity' in the

construction of

identity.

85. R. H. Stockman,

*Thornton Chase: First*

*American Baha'i*

(Wilmette, IL: Baha'i

Publishing Trust, 2002).

86. D. Douglas and

B. Douglas, *Marriage,*

*Beyond Black and*

*White: An Interracial*

*Family Portrait*

(Wilmette, IL: Baha'i

Publishing Trust, 2002).

87. A. Szepesi, *Dreams,*

*Nightmares and*

*Dreams Again* (New

Liskeard, Ontario:

*White Mountain*

*Publications*, 2000).

88. R. Lakshman-Lepain,

*The Life of Thomas*

*Breakwell* (London:

Baha'i Publishing  
Trust, 1998).

86  
Hassall

Graham

— The Modes and Intentions of Biography (Used by permission of the curator)