Bernard Leach, Potter: A Biographical Sketch

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[1] In order for a potter to begin to throw a perfectly balanced shape, there is one critical routine to be performed – that of 'centring' the lump of clay on the wheel. Bernard Leach wrote that: 'The clay spins like a top, seeming to prefer the centre of the wheel to any other position, but if the onlooker tries his hand his first discovery is that the clay actually has a preference for any other place than that. So the first thing a beginner has to do, before there can be any question of making shapes at all, is to learn how to centre the clay and keep it centred.'[2]

The life of Bernard Leach revolved around just such a centre. From his earliest years, he identified the centre of life as 'Spiritual Energy (God)'. Later, in the aftermath of the Second World War, he realised that the key to a harmonious and peaceful future was the 'replacement of self at the centre of the circle by "The Other Power" – God'.[3] The act of throwing thus became a metaphor for the unique soul, centred in God, allowing itself to become malleable so that His will might use it as a vehicle through which to operate. Leach's lifelong commitment to the coming together of East and West was reinforced by his belief in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. But this acceptance and devotion came hard to him, after years of agnosticism, dabbling with Eastern spirituality, and doubt.

Bernard Howell Leach was born in Hong Kong on 5 January 1887. His father was a Judge, his mother died in childbirth. Shortly after he was born, he was sent to Japan to live with his grandparents, until his father remarried. At school, Leach showed a talent for drawing and in 1903, he went to study at the Slade School of Art under Henry Tonks, transferring later to etching classes at the London School of Art. During this period, freed from his Roman Catholic background, he opted for agnosticism. At the Slade he formed a lifelong friendship with the painter Reginald Turvey who would also in later years become a Bahá'í.

In the spring of 1909, Leach returned to Japan. For two years, he drew, painted and tried to introduce etching to Japanese artists. He married his cousin, Muriel, built a house and lived on an income from his father's will and remained in Japan for the best part of eleven years. It was in 1911 that Leach's much-reported epiphany with pottery occurred at a raku party. Here, guests were invited to decorate pots which were then immediately plunged into a burning kiln to be fired. Leach was entranced by the process, amazed that the pots did not explode. Through the craft of pottery, he sensed a way could be found to transfer the values and techniques of the past into the future, bringing East and West together, allowing the artist to have a wholesome impact on people's lives in a mechanised society. Leach was suspicious of industrial methods and blamed them for the destruction of spiritual values in society. It was during this period that Leach developed his fundamental philosophy about East and West. To him, the West embodied materialistic values, an over-emphasis on the intellectual and the mechanical, while the East represented spirituality and intuition. Coincidentally, it was during this period also that Leach first encountered the Bahá'í Faith through the person of Agnes Alexander, who had been encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to pioneer to Japan. Leach asked her why she was there, to which she replied, 'You will not understand, but I came because a little old Persian Gentleman asked me to come.'[4]

When Leach returned home in 1920, he hoped that he could introduce his newly discovered enthusiasms into England. He wanted his pottery to be appreciated in the same way as fine art was and saw himself fundamentally as an artist-potter. He was accompanied to Britain by Hamada and the two men set about founding the Leach pottery at St. Ives in Cornwall. The lack of suitable raw materials in the area meant that the challenges were immense but they forged ahead, building a traditional wood-fired eastern kiln consisting of three chambers.

Leach was shocked by the lack of interest in artist pottery in England. Their work was criticised as precious and eclectic, at worst dull. Soon, out of financial necessity, Leach was forced to reinvent himself more as a functional potter, initially opting for tile production but later moving into a whole range of ware for use in the home. For the rest of his life, he would promote a philosophy by which the potter, in the repetition of similar shapes and forms, expanded his true spirit at the expense of the lesser ego. The Leach Pottery began to take on students who carried out much of the production work. More than a hundred pupils worked in the pottery over the decades.

Leach however longed to reconcile the dilemma he faced between his beliefs about the value of pottery as an art form and the necessity of producing a range of functional items for the home to ensure a regular income. His marriage to Muriel was also running into difficulties and increasingly he felt the need to break away. What appeared to be the perfect solution was offered when he was invited to set up a pottery in 1932 at Dartington Hall in Devon, an experimental community founded by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhurst who hoped to integrate education, arts and crafts with the agricultural work on their large estate. The Elmhirsts were also fascinated by oriental thinking and practices and Dartington became a magnet to all manner of creative minds. It was here that Leach began a devoted friendship with the American painter Mark Tobey, a practising Bahá'í.

The two men talked especially about Tobey's belief in Bahá'u'lláh. 'After my loss of faith at about the age of eighteen,' wrote Leach, 'following a long period of uncertainty, this was more than I could take.'[5] Nevertheless Leach read the Bahá'í literature which Tobey had given to him and went to meetings of the Bahá'ís which deeply challenged him. In 1934, the Elmhursts, seeing how close Tobey's friendship with Leach had become, gave Tobey the funds to accompany him to the orient. After a week in Hong Kong, the two friends separated, Tobey stopping in Shanghai while Leach went to Japan, where Tobey later joined him. There Tobey studied calligraphy and painting, writing, poetry and meditation. During the period while they were apart, Leach realised that the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith were totally 'without egocentricity.' 'I found myself convinced, almost against my will, that the absence of self implied the presence of Truth – the Universal 'I am that I am.'[6] Leach saw this realisation as a door opening between Buddhism and Christianity, between East and West but he still struggled with the concept of Bahá'u'lláh's claim to being a Manifestation of God. It was not until 1940, at a public meeting in Torquay, Leach asked the speaker Hasan Balyuzi whether it was sufficient to consider Bahá'u'lláh as a 'spiritual genius'. Balyuzi replied 'Yes' at which point Leach 'declared' his faith in Bahá'u'lláh.

Returning to England in 1936, Leach moved permanently to Dartington with his secretary Laurie Cookes who would become his second wife. His son David continued to run the St. Ives pottery allowing his father time to concentrate on writing a book on pottery making which became a bible for the ceramicist's art and is still in print today, A Potter's Book. During the years of the Second World War, Leach was in the privileged position to be able to keep the St. Ives pottery running in spite of the fact that many of its workers were conscripted. At the end of the war, this gave him the great advantage of being able to satisfy the boom in consumer demand and supply the major

London department stores with pottery which was attractive and refreshing to customers who had become bored with the plainness of wartime products. Leach also became a member of a National Committee looking after the interests of craftsmen. Consequently, Leach had an enormous impact on the standards and ethics of the British craft movement. The outcome of these reforming endeavours in the 1940s was the establishment of the Crafts Centre of Great Britain which received an annual grant from the Treasury.

1948 saw Leach's second marriage in trouble. Despite having formally accepted the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, Leach had not yet fully come to terms with the claims of Bahá'u'lláh as a divinely-inspired Messenger from God. He was open about his belief in the teachings with his close friends and colleagues but, 'there remained a hidden wavering' on the issue of the station of Bahá'u'lláh, 'which undermined my activity.'[7]

In 1950 Leach travelled in the United States for four months at the invitation of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Washington. While there he met a young potter named Janet Darnell who subsequently became the third Mrs Leach. The immediate post-war years meant good business for the Leach Pottery, and Leach found time to develop further his theories of the contribution potters might make to society. A turning point in his thinking occurred in July 1952 when he organised the International Conference of Craftsmen in Pottery and Textiles at Dartington.

Leach hoped the Conference would raise the issues which confronted craftsmen in contemporary society and what they could do to transform society. What he found however was a sudden awareness of how small a group of people he was expecting to change the world through the integrity of crafts. As a result, he found his wavering on the Bahá'í Faith was broken down. He came to understand more fully that individualism does not answer the communal need and that unity was the only solution to meeting the needs of society and ensuring survival. 'I believe that Bahá'u'lláh was a Manifestation and that His work was to provide the spiritual foundation upon which the society of mankind could be established,' he wrote to his friends and associates, 'In becoming a convinced Bahá'í, the only discarding of slowly gathered convictions has been the replacement of self at the centre of the circle by ... God – and the result has been strange, for the jigsaw pieces begin to fall into place – seemingly by themselves.'[8] Leach's religious sentiments were even more stirred when in 1954, he was able to make a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Holy Places in Israel and personally meet with Shoghi Effendi. His experience praying in the shrines had a profound effect on him, reinforced his feeling that he should step up his efforts to unite East and West, and return to the Orient to 'try more honestly to do my work there as a Bahá'í and as an artist ...'[9]

Leach planned to move with Janet to Japan leaving the St. Ives pottery in the hands of his sons, David and Michael. However both sons left to set up their own potteries and Janet took charge of the day to day running of St. Ives, thus freeing Bernard up to concentrate on his art pieces, exhibiting, travelling and lecturing.

The remaining two decades of Leach's long life were filled with activity – exhibitions throughout the world, the accumulation of awards, honours and honorary degrees. The marriage to Janet was not an altogether happy one either but they remained united by their interest in Japan, and their mutual respect endured.

As his life drew to a close, Bernard Leach was increasingly horrified by the world's nuclear arsenals and the implications of the Cuban missile crisis. He felt instinctively that he should use his position of fame and respect to speak out on the Bahá'í solutions to the world's problems. Thus the octogenarian Leach spent his mornings working on articles and books, and would arrive at the Pottery in the afternoon to make his pots. As his eyesight failed in the early 1970s, it did not frustrate him to the extent that people might have expected. For Leach, it was almost a release and he was no longer torn between potting and developing his writing on religious matters. He accepted his loss of sight as the will of God. He died in 1979, aged 92, following a major retrospective exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the publication of his memoirs 'Beyond East and West'.

Leach's death was widely reported throughout the world. On hearing of his death, the Universal House of Justice sent a cable saying

HONOURS CONFERRED UPON HIM RECOGNITION HIS WORLDWIDE FAME CRAFTSMAN POTTER
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EAGER WILLINGNESS USE HIS RENOWN FOR SERVICE FAITH EARN ETERNAL GRATITUDE
FELLOW BELIEVERS.[10]

Robert Weinberg

End Notes

Adapted from Spinning the Clay into Stars – Bernard Leach and the Bahá'í Faith, Edited by Robert Weinberg (Oxford: George Ronald, 1999).

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