

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

1. The author would like

biography from a Baha'i perspective.¹ 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,

...'² 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,³ 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.⁴ 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 Townshend⁵

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.⁶

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 guarantee the moral uplifting of righteous revelation, but, more 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.⁷

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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 particular 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.'⁸ 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'.⁹ In Japan such literary figures as Mori Ógai developed a 'typology of virtue' to describe a vast corpus of biographical literature.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² *Tarjama* marshalled the particulars of the lives of learned men into settled categories: and general is not material in this case).¹³ 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 (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 and generosity (kekku no michi); learning to discourage an attempt.¹⁴ (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’,¹⁵ but proceed in the knowledge that

‘each human life recapitu-

lates common human experience’.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²²
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.²³ 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 18. This, for instance, was

one of the devices used

has been sustained by a steadily deepening appreciation of the Great Soul.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ Shoghi Effendi has been the subject of an initial biogra-
sketches of the lives
phy by his widow, Ruhiyiyih Rabbani,²⁷ 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'.²⁸ The life story of Dorothy Baker has

Vale: Baha' i

been written by her granddaughter, Dorothy Gilstrap,²⁹ that of Leroy Ioas by

Publications Australia,

his insightful daughter A. Chapman.³⁰ Other Hands of the Cause who have

1991), vol. 1, 428.

been the subject of biographical treatment include Martha Root,³¹ George

21. The Baha' i World (vols.

1–12, 1925–54, rpt.

Townshend,³² Louis Gregory,³³ William Sears,³⁴ and John Esslemont.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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.³⁹
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 ...⁴⁷ 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*.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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.⁵¹

(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'.⁵² 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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Graham Hassall

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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'.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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',⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸
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
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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰
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
mentioned 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
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,⁶¹ even if more fully
volume; other essays
developed by Marcus;⁶² and August Forel, world-renowned Swiss scientist,
in these works may
whose life is partially explored by Vader.⁶³
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-

The Modes and Intentions of Biography

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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.⁶⁴ 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'.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ The Baha'i literature, conversely, notes Locke's involvement in race amity conferences in the 1920s without examining in any detail (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990).

his work in philosophy.⁷⁰ Will van den Hoonaard has recently explored the notion of partial biography.⁷¹ 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,⁷² could almost be mistaken as the story of a person other than Harry 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...'⁷³
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.⁷⁴
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.'⁷⁵ 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
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.⁷⁶

*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.⁷⁷ 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.'⁷⁸ 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

Philosophers and Kings:

The Modes and Intentions of Biography

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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 theologies⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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 Remembrance⁸¹ and Arches of the 59. Biographies of those Years⁸² 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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Hassall

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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*

everyday, of observing the saintly in the common believer, as in the extraor-

Romantic: A Biography

of Queen Marie of

dinary person of some other time and place. Here is a biography of difference,

Roumania (London:

of identification and examination of that sense of individuality that is to be

Weidenfeld &

achieved in the context of community. Here is celebration of the subject's

Nicolson, 1985).

consciousness of individual worth, of being at one with other believers and

62. D. L. Marcus, *Her*

community rather than of being the same as all other believers.

Eternal Crown: Queen

Marie of Romania and

the Baha'i Faith

Reformulating the biographical framework

(Oxford: George

Most contemporary biography seeks to convey not merely the facts and

Ronald, 2000).

example of a subject's life, but interpretation and even evaluation of it.

63. J. P. Vader, *For the*

Most importantly, this critical approach has been encouraged by the pre-

Good of Mankind:

August Forel and the

sumption that an author occupies some superior and objective vantage

Baha'i Faith (Oxford:

point from which to view, and judge, the subject. 'In the recent past', it

has George Ronald, 1984).

been suggested,

64. 9 July 1921, 8:7 –

criticizes arbitrary reg-

ulations in new tariff

the usefulness of a 'critical biography', one that purports to connect life

and

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 nar-

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

charges; 21 November

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.⁸³
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.⁸⁴ 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

The Modes and Intentions of Biography

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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). scious 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).
future (post-physical) life: such is the journey – should the biographer attempt to depict it. 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,

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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.⁸⁵ 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,⁸⁶ and Szepesi's account of life as a migrant.⁸⁷ The life of Thomas the Divine Philosophy of Breakwell was short, undocumented, but spiritually potent.⁸⁸ 'Abdu'l-Baha (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989); In this essay I have suggested that the contexts in which Baha'i biography and J. A. McLean, phy 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).

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(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).

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Hassall

Graham

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