

the author in 1908.

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[photograph: `Abdu'l-Bahá]

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Preface

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willhelm_cobb_in_his_presence_preface.pdf [PDF, 1.5MB].

`Abdu'l-Bahá has always held a special place in the hearts of Western Bahá'ís. This is not simply because of His station as the Center of Covenant, which is acknowledged by all Bahá'ís, or even because of His saintly life. The Bahá'í communities in Europe and America came into being during the ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá. Large numbers of the early believers had been taught that `Abdu'l-Bahá was the Return of Christ and had accepted Him as such. Though their understanding of His true station would change, `Abdu'l-Bahá would remain their Master, the Head of their Faith, and the perfect Example of what it was to be a Bahá'í. For many, He remained the living embodiment of the numinous.

`Abdu'l-Bahá effectively adapted His presentation of the Bahá'í Teachings to

this new Western audience. He addressed issues that were current and controversial in the West

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and, at times, He even adopted Western styles of discourse. These early Bahá'ís had little access to the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. For them, the major corpus of their Sacred Scripture consisted of the Tablets (i.e., letters) of `Abdu'l-Bahá.

In these early days, there were only two avenues of communication with `Abdu'l-Bahá. The first was through correspondence. American Bahá'ís began writing to `Abdu'l-Bahá as early as 1894, and He received an almost continuous stream of letters from Bahá'ís in the West from that time on. His replies, the fruits of this correspondence, are collected in such books as Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, and Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá.

The second avenue of communication with the Master was meeting Him in person. Before His travels to Europe and America (1911-1913) such meetings were only possible for pilgrims who journeyed to Palestine, where He resided. In the almost quarter century during which this option existed, a significant number of Bahá'ís did travel from the West to the Holy Land. Of course, the majority of Bahá'ís never did. And so, to share their experiences with their fellow believers, the pilgrims often published

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or circulated manuscripts with descriptions of their trips.

The value of these "pilgrim's Notes" to the Bahá'í community has changed over time. Most of them consisted only of transcripts of `Abdu'l-Bahá's table talks, as they were recorded or remembered by the pilgrims. At the time, these notes provided important insights on issues that were not addressed in the limited Bahá'í Scripture that was published and available.

However, the accuracy of the notes, the quality of the transcription and the translation, was always open to question. Indeed, pilgrims could and did return from Palestine with contradictory reports of `Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings and instructions. Therefore, the Master instructed that these should not be regarded as binding on the community, unless He had Himself reviewed and corrected the notes. Such approved transcriptions of `Abdu'l-Bahá's talks, in fact, comprise a significant part of His writings available to us today. Some Answered Questions is the most important example.

The value to the Bahá'í community of unapproved transcriptions of `Abdu'l-Bahá's talks has waned with time. There are, however,

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other pilgrims' notes which recount experiences with `Abdu'l-Bahá, with only brief accounts of His conversations. In the early years, these had been common.

After `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West, they were published less often. Presumably, this was because most Bahá'ís had been able to meet `Abdu'l-Bahá themselves, or to talk directly to others who had. Written accounts of visits to `Abdu'l-Bahá were naturally less sought after — though anecdotes about the Master, and especially the Master in America, became a vital part of the oral culture of the community. Stories from this period still circulate among Bahá'ís today.

At this point, seventy-five years after His trip to America, there are few persons who remain among us who have had the bounty of meeting `Abdu'l-Bahá in person. Most Bahá'ís have no experience, therefore, of hearing about such meetings first-hand. So, it seems appropriate now to republish some of the more touching accounts of meetings with the Master. Those collected in this book were chosen almost at random: the notes of Roy Wilhelm, Stanwood Cobb, and Genevieve Coy.

Since these believers visited `Abdu'l-Bahá at different periods during His ministry, their accounts reflect the changes that were occurring

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[photograph: Roy Wilhelm]

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in the Bahá'í world, and especially in the circumstances of `Abdu'l-Bahá, during this thirteen-year period (1907-1920). Of course, they also reflect the personalities of the authors.

Roy Wilhelm made a pilgrimage with his mother in April 1907. `Abdu'l-Bahá was still a prisoner then, confined by the Ottoman authorities to the prison-city of `Akká. For this reason, He was unable to accompany the pilgrims everywhere. Because of unpredictable prison conditions, most Western pilgrims were allowed to stay in `Akká for only a short time. Some of those who came to see `Abdu'l-Bahá during 1907, were turned away completely; others had their visits cut short. The Wilhelms were able to stay in `Akká for about a week.

Despite such restrictions, the pilgrimage was spiritually invigorating for Roy Wilhelm. He went on to become one of `Abdu'l-Bahá's most trusted followers in America. It was on his property in West Englewood, New Jersey, that `Abdu'l-Bahá arranged for a Unity Feast, in an effort to unite the Bahá'ís of the New York area. This choice demonstrates `Abdu'l-Bahá's confidence and trust in Roy Wilhelm, that his home would be chosen as a place of unity where antagonistic factions might be

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safely brought together. For years, all of `Abdu'l-Bahá's letters to America were sent to Roy Wilhelm, who would then forward them on to their intended recipients. He also handled the Master's financial affairs in this country. Because of his faithfulness and devotion to the Cause, he was appointed (posthumously) a Hand of the Cause in 1951.

Stanwood Cobb tells the story of meeting with `Abdu'l-Bahá on five different occasions. His first visit took place near the end of January 1909, though he recalls the visit to have been in February. Restrictions on the Master's movements had recently been lifted. However, because He was still closely observed, this new freedom was only used cautiously. Stanwood Cobb had the impression, in fact, that He was still under guard. When he returned to the Holy Land in 1910, he saw the Master moving about more freely.

His last three meetings with `Abdu'l-Bahá took place in the West: Boston, 1912; Washington, D.C., 1912; and Paris, 1913. He felt that the last meeting was the most important, for his own subjective reasons. We learn as much about Stanwood Cobb in these memoirs as we do about `Abdu'l-Bahá, and this is the

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[photograph: Stanwood Cobb]

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great value of his remembrances — we catch a glimpse of the effect the Master could have on the thoughts and feelings of the believers, how He could adapt His message to the specific spiritual needs of one individual. It was Stanwood Cobb's willingness to reveal himself in this way, in various publications, that has earned him the reputation of a sage in the American Bahá'í community.

Dr. Genevieve Coy went on pilgrimage in 1920, in the company of three other Bahá'í women. They stayed for one week. Her account is valuable in that it holds more details about the daily aspects of her visit. We note that the spread of the Faith around the world was now reflected in the Master's Household: Khusraw, from Burma; Fujita, from Japan; and Mrs. Emogene Hoagg, from America, were serving in the Holy Land. More than thirty pilgrims — from Asia and Europe, as well as the United States — were `Abdu'l-Bahá's guests, including one from Ashkhabad (Ishqábád), in Russian Turkestan, where the first Bahá'í Temple had been completed.

Genevieve Coy's pilgrimage had a tremendous influence on her life. Within a few months, at the request of `Abdu'l-Bahá, she was on her way to Tehran to teach in the Bahá'í School for

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[photograph: Genevieve L. Coy]

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girls. Returning to America, some years later, she served as a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New York City, as an administrator of the Green Acre Bahá'í School, and in various other capacities until her death in 1963.

A common theme can be found in these, and in most other pilgrim accounts from this period. The central purpose of Bahá'í pilgrimage is to pray in the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, the Manifestations of God. But, in

reality, the goal of the early pilgrims was to attain the presence of their Master, `Abdu'l-Bahá. Though He consistently turned their attention to the Holy Shrines, placing the greatest importance on their visits there, it was the presence of `Abdu'l-Bahá that the pilgrim's longed for; meeting with Him transformed their lives; His example caused them to dedicate their remaining years to the service of the Cause.

It is our hope that republishing these accounts will put our own generation of Bahá'ís in touch with a part of our spiritual heritage, deepen our love for `Abdu'l-Bahá, and confirm our dedication to the Cause of His Father.

— THE EDITORS

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chapter 1

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