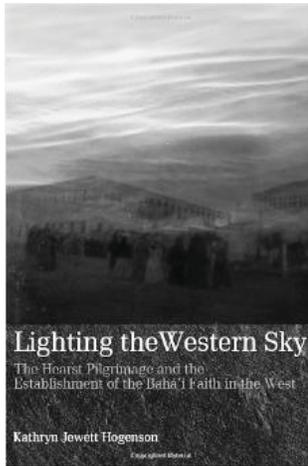


Book Review



Lighting the Western Sky: The Hearst Pilgrimage and the Establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the West, by Kathryn Jewett Hogenson. Oxford: George Ronald, 2010, reprinted 2012. xix + 348 pages including notes, index.

JANET RUHE-SCHOEN

In 1898, the first Westerners to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in 'Akká while He was imprisoned, under strict guard, and in great danger. Driven by intense longing to enter His presence, said to be Christ-like, they reached His side. They also fulfilled what He taught them was the real obligation of Bahá'í pilgrimage, to pray at the holy shrines, especially that of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí.

The composition of that first Western pilgrim group and its chronology (dates of visits drifting from the end of 1898 into 1899) has long baffled historians and other interested parties. But, what was more frustrating, it was hard to discern just who the pilgrims were, where they came from, and what had awakened them to seek the man who wanted no title but 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Servant of Bahá (Glory).

Because 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guards and murderous enemies—jealous half-brothers and their confederates—could regard such visits from Westerners as highly suspicious, those first pilgrims spaced their journeys to arrive at different times and circumpectly entered the prison city. Phoebe Hearst, benefactress and arranger of the pilgrimage, actually arrived in 'Akká by night, under cover of darkness, in an effort to deflect dangerous suspicions that could arise due to her wealth, fame, and connection to William Randolph Hearst—her son, the newspaper tycoon.

I had personally discovered, many years ago, that May Bolles Maxwell was another of the first pilgrims. As a new Bahá'í hungrily pursuing knowledge about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, anything that could give me a hint of His presence, I immersed myself in May Maxwell's brief, illuminating work, *An Early Pilgrimage*—and then wanted more. But, at least as concerned that particular pilgrimage, I could not find more. And in fact, it seems *An Early*

Pilgrimage was out of print for years, coming back into existence in 1969, which was around the time it fell into my eager hands.

I had read Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East* and was disappointed in everything about it except the fact that the servant, Leo, turned out to be the leader. And now here was May Maxwell telling of her very un-disappointing journey to the East to the leader who refused any title but Servant.

Later, around 1990, researching May Maxwell and her soul-sister Lua Getsinger, I still could not find much more than *An Early Pilgrimage* and several paragraphs in *God Passes By* to tell me about the 1898 to 1899 visit, or visits. Not until I read *Lighting the Western Sky* for the purposes of this review could I finally answer the questions of years.

On page *x* of her introduction, Kathryn Hogenson gives Shoghi Effendi's partial list of the intrepid travelers: "Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, the well-known philanthropist, . . . Dr. and Mrs. Getsinger, Dr. Khayru'lláh and his wife . . . May Ellis Bolles, Miss Pearson . . . Ann Apperson . . . Mrs. Thornburgh and her daughter . . . Dr. Khayru'lláh's daughters and their grand-mother whom he had recently converted" (*God Passes By* 257). The passage later mentions Robert Turner, the first African American Bahá'í. *Lighting the Western Sky* elucidates who these people were and how they

became pilgrims and adds important others, including Ella Cooper, Margaret Peeke, and Phoebe Hearst's personal maid, Emily Bachrodt.

With Kathryn Hogenson's deep research, empathy, and sensitive synthesizing of information, we find out not only who the first Western pilgrims were but where they came from, how they came to be joined together on that pilgrimage, and the paths they followed afterward. In other words, we find out what became of them, which is always gratifying.

The story of Margaret (Maggie) Peeke is particularly interesting, and it is new to Bahá'í history books. Margaret Bloodgood Peeke of Ohio was a sixty-year-old writer, quite well known in her day, on a journey to "learn some of the peculiar mystic phases of the East" (152). She sought out 'Abdu'l-Bahá first on a wing, then on a prayer. Her report of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's egalitarian welcome to her and her dragoman, who had been barred entry by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guards, illuminate His spirit and insight. He initiated correspondence with her after she arrived home, and she and her daughter-in-law became dedicated Bahá'ís.

Peeke is just one of the formerly faceless figures in Bahá'í history sketched in by Hogenson's book. Another is Anton Haddad, who did not visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá along with that first group at all. He was the first Bahá'í to actually set foot on U.S. soil, and

unlike his friend Ibrahim Khayru'lláh, the charismatic teacher of many of the first North American Bahá'ís, Haddad remained true to the unity of the Faith. He upheld 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant when Khayru'lláh would have ruined Him, if that had been possible.

In fact, Khayru'lláh joined forces with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's archenemy during the days and nights of that epic pilgrimage. While May Maxwell, Lua and Edward Getsinger, Ella Goodall, Phoebe Hearst, Robert Turner, and their fellow pilgrims bowed their heads before 'Abdu'l-Bahá and hoped they would be able to please Him, Khayru'lláh, angry that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not appoint him head of the Bahá'í Faith in the West, vowed to destroy Him. The titanic battle between good and evil—the good being 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the prison-city and the evil being the Covenant-breakers ensconced at Bahji—was the dark percussion crashing beneath the lyrical tune of that early pilgrimage. For example, Hogenson examines and explains the pathology of Khayru'lláh's pernicious egoism and its repercussions, including the fact that his wife, Marion Miller, left him at the end of the pilgrimage.

Drama, tragedy, passion play, and, yes, comedy, too—everything is there. Future historians and artists of every ilk will never tire of exploring the first pilgrimage in all its light and darkness. As they do, *Lighting the*

Western Sky will be a treasured source-book.

With Hogenson, they will follow the trail of Phoebe Hearst, who eventually estranged herself from the Bahá'í community, offended by the shameless greed of some Bahá'ís and her misunderstandings with others. The flame of faith did not die in her heart, however, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá twice compared her to Mary Magdalene and called her the Mother of the Faithful. In fact, aside from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Phoebe Hearst, prime mover of the pilgrimage, is prime mover of *Lighting the Western Sky*, receiving justice long overdue in our collective memory.

The long-lost story of Anton Haddad also adds tremendously to Hogenson's portrayal of that seminal period in Bahá'í history. Soon after Khayru'lláh arrived back in the United States to foment discord and disillusion, Haddad made a special trip to 'Akká to hear 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wisdom on maintaining unity. He knew English and could understand the Master and translate for Him; he wrote some mainstay Bahá'í literature that his co-believers used to rebuild the community shattered by the self-aggrandizing Khayru'lláh. Hogenson gives deserved attention to Haddad's pamphlet *Message from Acca*.

Perhaps one of the most moving passages in *Lighting the Western Sky* is the quote from Haddad's introduction to that pamphlet where he pays homage to the Master:

These words are sent to you by the Greatest Branch, Abbas Effendi, the one whom God has chosen and desired, the one who is branched from the Ancient of Days. . . . It is sent by Abdu'l-Baha [sic], the servant of God, who has clad Himself with the mantle of servitude and devotion for the beloved of God, and who is the Eldest Son. . . . By the One whose Supreme and Exalted position is acknowledged by everyone, and even by his most bitter enemies. By the One to whom the Manifestation referred to [sic] in the Tablet to the Czar of Russia, saying: "The Father has come, and also the Son in the Holy Valley, who cries out, 'Labeick, O God, Labeick.'" Meaning, I am ready, O God, I am ready. By the One whose Love is incomparable, whose character is unquestionable. By the One who sends to you His great Love, salutations and blessings. (208–9)

stronger as the ages roll on and humanity's heart opens more and more to His spirit.

Such passages, along with excerpts from previously unpublished notes and letters of Ella Cooper and even lesser known pilgrims, such as Anne Apperson, answer the seeker's desire to feel close to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In all, *Lighting the Western Sky* is an invaluable addition to the growing collection of literature that fulfills that longing, a need that will, I am sure, only grow