

## **The Life of Hugh McKinley, Knight of Bahá'u'lláh by Olive McKinley**

Everyone's life is unique but not everyone's life is exemplary. Hugh McKinley's life is of interest to all Bahá'ís but especially, perhaps, to the Irish. One might even say that long before Hugh's birth, Bahá'u'lláh had considered the land of 'saints and scholars' and had chosen one Irishman to be part of the remarkable and historic growth of His Cause. That man was David McKinley, Hugh's father, who came from Co. Armagh.

The story of how he met and married Hugh's mother is part of the saga of wonderful happenings which is his story. Violet Watson was suffering from duodenal pains, probably an ulcer, and was on her way to visit her doctor. She was walking into the town from her home when a thunderstorm arose and it began to pour with rain. As she was getting more and more soaked, she happened to pass a gate on which there was a doctor's plate. This was not her doctor, but she decided to try to see this doctor, perhaps in the hope that he would have some better advice for her about her condition.

The doctor was kind and caring and, when he had examined her, asked if she would be willing to take a prescription of his own that he would like to try and to let him know the result. Some days later he visited her at her home to see how she was feeling, and she was so impressed by his concern that there was an immediate bond between them. They became friends and later married. (As far as is known, her medical condition also improved.)

The next part of the story is not wholly clear as to the timing. But at some time after their marriage the couple began attending meetings of the Theosophists. This movement was very popular and widespread in the early years of the Twentieth Century. At one of these meetings there was a Bahá'í speaker and the McKinleys took home a copy of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* to find out more about the new Faith. Hugh says they read it together in one night, looked at each other and decided this was for them. This was in 1923.

Hugh was born in 1924 in Oxford and grew up in a Bahá'í home. His memories of his father, however, were few as unfortunately he died when Hugh was only four years old. Hugh's

upbringing was therefore the responsibility of his mother, who was also left in quite difficult financial circumstances since her own family had practically disowned her. They were well-to-do merchants, and as a girl Violet would have travelled abroad, had a French governess and generally a life of privilege. She quickly had to learn to be as self-sufficient as she could and to make do without help on very little money. Hugh was therefore used to hardship right from the start and was an only child. He was always insistent upon the fact that he had never been spoiled, in fact quite, the opposite. His mother was a strict disciplinarian and a good teacher who gave him his first years of education herself. They had moved to Cornwall where living was cheaper and Violet tried to make a little money from her craft work. She painted little water colours and was a skilled needlewoman. She had a few small investments of her own, but all through their lives was most careful not to spend a penny of her capital unless it was absolutely essential. Hugh was the same, never ungenerous but always thrifty.

Hugh later went to secondary school in Cornwall, but became very interested in country life and spent a great deal of his time with the children of the local farmers, learning how to farm himself which, when World War II erupted, was a very useful occupation. Years later, he still spoke of his 'Uncle Efe' with great affection any time he passed through the countryside, especially if the hedges were properly kept and the animals looked well. He went to work on the farm when he left school and this small income helped the family budget. He was even able to save up £23 for a second-hand motor cycle for which, like most boys, he longed, though he also wanted it by then for travelling to meet other Bahá'ís, especially when events for the youth were organised in other parts of the country.

It was on one of these trips that Hugh had a serious accident. He describes it as speeding through the countryside with nothing in sight. But suddenly he became conscious of a pillion rider on his motor cycle - no less a person than Quddús, the last and foremost of the Báb's Letters the Living. Then a lorry suddenly appeared from a side road, coming towards him. A car pulled out to pass it and crashed head-on into Hugh.

For two weeks he lay in hospital in a coma, his mother at his bedside day and night. When at last he came out of the coma she said he was repeating the Greatest Name. His injuries were severe, especially to his head. (There were no crash helmets in those days.) The side of his face was paralysed and it was feared this might never recover as the mastoid nerve had been severed. However, again Bahá'u'lláh sent help. There was a surgeon who had heard of a new electrolytic process and who managed to persuade the hospital to send him to Exeter hospital where he could receive this treatment. This treatment lasted nearly three months but was successful. Hugh later retained only a tiny irregularity of his facial features and some rather more serious damage to one ear, in which he had very little hearing ever afterwards. Fortunately his brain was certainly not affected by the accident, and he began to study the Writings in earnest during his recovery.

Again, this accident was a blessing in disguise, as he was naturally unfit for service in the armed forces during the War, but also unable to go back to farming as the noise of driving a tractor was still too difficult for him to bear. He and his mother wrote to the British National Spiritual Assembly and asked if they could be of use somewhere else, where Hugh might also find other work. And so they arrived in Cardiff, one of the 'pivotal centres,' goals of the Six Year Plan (1944-1950). (Dublin was another.) They stayed first with one of the Bahá'ís, and then went looking for their own bed-sit, where they managed to scrape together the rent but had almost no money for food. Hugh said they used to buy two kippers each day and share one for their lunch and the other for supper.

While in Cardiff, Hugh took a course in accountancy and went to work for a fruit importer, earning £5 a week, a welcome improvement in the family circumstances. He was also receiving great encouragement to train his singing voice. He wrote to one of the most prestigious teachers in London, Dino Borgioli, and asked for an audition. When he heard nothing more, he telephoned the great man and to his surprise, Borgioli remembered his letter: 'Oh, you are the bass!' So Hugh became his pupil and used to travel up each week for his lesson. He had a magnificent voice and was soon singing in many places all over the country. Later, he and his

mother moved from Cardiff to Brighton, from where it was easier to continue his singing lessons.

The following words of Hugh's give an impression of the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Britain, as well as of his own character and passionate desire to serve the Faith:

I went up in 1948 to Convention. This was overwhelming. There must have been 60 or 70 Bahá'ís in the underground Centre at Victoria in London ... And seeing, in amazement, that everybody could find very good reasons for not doing very much, and I wanted to do everything all at once. Quite fiery!

During this period, the National Youth Committee was set up in the UK and Hugh became the editor of its Bulletin. He sent me a number of copies to Dublin in 1951 or 1952, not at all suspecting that I was the only Bahá'í youth in the whole of the country. I still have a copy somewhere of this, with its cover design by the famous potter, Bernard Leach, who then lived in Cornwall.

Perhaps a personal note is appropriate here. In 1951 Hugh had asked me to marry him and I had rather ungraciously turned him down, not of course without reason. I felt for one thing that I could never be the wife of a singer as I wasn't nearly musical enough. But the main reason was that I was not then in love with him and it would not have been fair to either of us. He came to Dublin on behalf of the National Teaching Committee some time later and went to visit the contacts on a list I had been given, but none of whom I'd ever seen at meetings. We had one long day, trudging from one address to the next on foot. This was characteristic of Hugh - why take a bus if you could walk? But it was fun and we always remembered that day afterwards.

Then the Ten Year Crusade began in 1953, and Hugh wrote to Shoghi Effendi about his singing career. He said of this:

Shoghi Effendi is exactly like Bahá'u'lláh, you know. He wrote back and said 'Do what you like! If you have a famous international career and become very well known, this is good for the Faith. If you go pioneering that also is very

good for the Faith.’ But it was Rúhíyyíh Khánúm who wrote a little postscript, with marvellous sarcasm, that ‘whatever we do for the Cause of God is eternal, of eternal value; the success of our struggles in life is uncertain, problematic.’

So going to Cyprus was in many ways a wrench for Hugh, mainly the thought that he had most probably to give up all thought of a career in singing. Cyprus did not have a Covent Garden or La Scala – it just would not happen. However, his accountancy stood to him and providentially, almost the first person he asked about a job was able to point him in the right direction, so that he got one where he could use English as well. Later he became quite fluent in Greek, but at first it was another challenge to be met. And the pioneer move of the McKinleys to Cyprus in early 1954 meant that both were elevated to the rank of Knights of Bahá’u’lláh.

In 1955 he married for the first time, a Persian nurse whom he had known in Brighton. At all events, it did not work out and he was soon back living with his mother who was at the time well over 70 and in need of his help. She passed away on the island in 1959 after a short illness, during which Hugh nursed and cared for her on his own. Her grave in Famagusta is visited quite often by the Bahá’ís.

Hugh always remembered his years in Cyprus as his most useful to the Cause, although from his early youth he had been encouraged and was a willing helper in any way he could be. However, when asked at the end of his life which of his experiences was the most satisfying, he said he thought one would get a really good reference for him from the National Spiritual Assembly of Cyprus.

In another way, being in Cyprus was a wonderful time for the McKinleys since almost as soon as they arrived, they wrote to ask whether they might come on pilgrimage to the World Centre. Shoghi Effendi was still alive then, and when the permission came, they immediately packed their bags, sent a telegram that they were on their way and took the next boat. It was the experience of a lifetime but one of which many pilgrims, and this included Hugh, cannot speak adequately, cannot ever describe their feelings there,

and are even more helpless to do so when theirs was the bounty of meeting the Guardian himself.

Hugh and, I believe, his mother were always wonderful correspondents and their visit to the Guardian resulted in quite a number of letters from Haifa, which were discovered only after Hugh's passing. (There was one from Rúhíyyih Khánum, in which she thanked Violet for a recipe.)

Hugh remained in Cyprus for the ten years of the Crusade and we met again at the World Congress in London in 1963. By this time the British National Assembly had been formed and it was probably an appropriate moment to leave, even if we had not met then. However, we had a consultation in Athens that summer and after almost two years of anxious searching and praying, found there was a way to marry. And finally in April 1965, we did. Hugh moved then to Sligo where I was already teaching, so he was the second believer to move there. (We did not know then that the Townshend family had stayed at Rosses Point during their summer holidays on occasion, in a little house used often by visiting clergy in return for relieving the incumbent of parish duties for the time.) During his time in Sligo, Hugh managed to make many friends and a very good impression on our landlady, who was horrified when she heard that he had been looking for a job all the time we were with her. He was always so busy writing and gardening for her, that she did not realise he needed to be more gainfully employed.

In 1966 Hugh left to be in Greece for Ridván. There had been a passionate call by Marion Hofman at the Teaching Conference for pioneers there, and because Hugh already spoke Greek it was natural for him to go. I stayed in Sligo until the end of the school year and then joined him in July on the island of Syros in the Cyclades.

We had been extremely happy in Sligo, but Syros was a test which finally was too much for me. I cannot praise too much, however, the role played by Hugh in my studies at the time. It had been agreed that I should carry on with my external degree course, even though that no longer applied to my job in Sligo, and Hugh was unfailingly encouraging in all my work. When I had written an essay, he would want to hear it, usually at the lunch table, before I sent it off to my tutor in England. He had never even

finished his secondary schooling, but was so well read that he knew far more than I did at one stage about French literature. He certainly knew more about Greek culture and English literature. By this time he had begun to write poetry on a regular basis. Up to then and when in Cyprus, he wrote mainly prose and actually finished a novel which he had sent to me to read; unfortunately this has never been found among his papers.

In Greece there was a small Bahá'í community in Athens, pioneers in Crete and Rhodes and a couple living in Evvia. Life was not going to be easy on Syros as neither of us had permission to work, so the German National Spiritual Assembly, whose responsibility it was, sent us a monthly budget of the equivalent of £30. When we had been there a little while, a young bank clerk came to Hugh and begged him to give him English lessons. Hugh did not refuse and George later became the first Greek believer on the island.

During this time I also remember his great joy when he received a letter from one of the Turkish Cypriots saying that he and his friend had become believers and were working for the Faith in that part of the island. Hugh, though extremely isolated socially on the island of Syros, found ways of communicating with many people around the world. He went to the editor of the English-language *Athens Daily Post* and offered to write a literary column for them. His offer was accepted and he was thus able to obtain books free of charge for review. But he made sure to send these reviews to the authors, thus enabling him to have a correspondence with them and often mention the Faith in his first letter, tying it to some aspect of the book reviewed. Some of the writers thus approached remained in correspondence with Hugh until the end of his life and one, the eminent poet Kathleen Raine, sent a very appreciative letter upon his passing. Many of Hugh's poems were written in Syros and later included in *Skylarking* (Ferdia Press, Belgium, 1994), an anthology of his work. A number of poems have been published in *New Day* and two in the previous issue of this journal. There is hardly one which is not about his spiritual life, his relationship with the Cause of God or his views on our purpose here on earth.

But teaching the Cause continued to be difficult in Greece. When I had finished my Degree, I left for a year to complete my

Higher Diploma in Education at Trinity College, Dublin. The intention was that I should return to Syros the next year, but never did. This was not Hugh's fault as much as mine. It was, of course, difficult to live on an island where only about four other people spoke anything but Greek, and so I was daily dependent almost solely on Hugh for company. It was the climate that finally got to me and I felt unable to carry on. I therefore stayed in Ireland and hoped that a solution would be found. It never was.

Hugh's isolation at that time must have been hard to bear but the following poem shows how he resolved the problem - it is typical of his whole life, but especially so of his island existence. It came to me without a title and shows he has no regrets for what his life has become. (The punctuation and lineation are Hugh's - he was most insistent on this.)

Fortunate am I in needing NOTHING  
But pen, but paper, table, chair;  
AND soundless invisible intimation  
from . . .

Had I but followed Initial bent,  
'Imperativer Requirements' had been mine:  
The Opera House  
Make-up, Costumes, Chorus, Orchestra;  
And good Conductor.

Then - Concert Hall - Accompanist;  
and AGENT!  
All ways travelling,  
All days rehearsing;  
Weighted down with Possessions  
learning new roles;  
Faithfully interpreting genius of others - - BUT

The poet's calling other;  
Calling with awe and reverence

Upon Calliope Erato  
 I wait their gift assured  
 As - and when received - refined,  
 Tuned to Their lyre, orchestrated  
 Into mortal tongue for Mortal ears  
 - Such verses shall stand Witness:

'Public Property', they may not die;  
 Recording - some times  
 Illuminant -

Steps into Transcendence...

During the early lonely years in Syros, Hugh must have written hundreds of letters to me, most of which have been preserved. They were unceasingly encouraging, loving, ever anxious to share whatever large or small triumphs for the Cause had been achieved, whatever good news received, accounts of his contacts the world over. There is still a huge amount of research to be done from this source alone.

I made one tremendous effort to return in 1976, having suffered a small tragedy myself early in that year, but it was then too late. It later appeared that Hugh, having been alone for nearly eight years in Syros, had already met Deborah, who was to become his third wife. He did return to England soon afterwards but not to Ireland. By 1979 he had obtained his divorce and married Deborah, settled in Suffolk and stayed in that part of England until his death in 1999.

Obviously it is not easy for me to research his life during their time together. But as he said in his last interview with Wes Huxtable, he only ever did anything for the sake of the Faith. One of the efforts he and Deborah made was to start the North Sea Conference, which was a link between East Anglia, Holland and Belgium. After some years, however, this had to come to an end as the various National Assemblies did not feel the Conference had the authority to function as a teaching institution on its own. On the English side, however, it turned into a very successful Spring School, which, to my knowledge, still continues with great success every year.

During his first years in Suffolk, I had no contact with Hugh, but finally re-established this on reading in the *Bahá'í Journal* that he was offering signed copies of his poetry anthology in aid of the fund. We exchanged a few letters subsequently, and one day he suddenly telephoned to ask if I would translate into English the *Life of Thomas Breakwell*, which had come out in French at the time of the discovery of the whereabouts of Breakwell's remains in Paris. Of course, I was delighted to make this translation, and the collaboration resulted in my visiting Suffolk several times before Hugh died, on the second occasion to give a talk about George Townshend at their Spring School.

At that time Hugh was not looking well; we little guessed that he was as ill as he really was. He was always extremely slow to consult the medical profession and had almost bled to death in the 1970s when he finally went for an operation for piles. He had to be given seven pints of blood before he was fit for that. Now, in 1998, he was suffering from angina and prostate cancer. Again, he could probably have been helped if the diagnosis had been earlier, but perhaps he longed too much for his reunion with the 'saints and Messengers' in the Abhá Kingdom to remain any longer with us here. He had telephoned me not a week before his death, saying he was very tired. I told him he must take more rest and his last words to me were: 'Not much chance of that.' I knew what he meant. He would keep going for the sake of the Faith until he could no longer go at all.

He is buried under a green headstone in the graveyard at the little church in Lawshall, Suffolk, where he had again made many friends over a large area who came to his funeral and came, too, to the memorial organised by Deborah on the erection of the headstone.

The message from the Universal House of Justice on his passing deserves special study by historians of the Faith:

HIS INDEFATIGABLE LABOURS PIONEERING FIELD, HIS TEACHING ACTIVITIES COUPLED WITH PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLY WRITINGS AND FIRMNESS IN THE COVENANT BROUGHT GREAT VICTORIES TO THE CAUSE.

His last letter, posted on the morning he died, reached me afterwards. It contained what is probably his last poem. The poem read at his graveside the year following his death, however, is also typical, including his fine sense of humour:

## GARDENER WITHIN ETERNITY

'Where' is but my limiting perceptions;  
OR 'hither' :Earth: OR 'thither' : Beyond  
----- Out of Time and Place.

'Soil' Various - all who may hear;  
Those hearts able to respond;  
The condition of Eternity itself.

'And what do I sow' Because I do not  
'cultivate Eternity' Task that none may dare!

'endeavouring to plant Works whose content bright  
reflects that Ideal Power emerging from  
the Sun of Truth the Word of God;  
Works which impart their origins to all who  
Read Hear Rede are moved.'

On Earth, emotions spiritual develop and increase -  
Their growth transferrable - by planting,  
And perpetually re-planting

Deep within Soil of the Hearts:  
proliferation  
Only limited by opportunity. . .

For some through Door of the Mind: Thought;  
For some, colour, scent and Invisible Doors!

But in whose heart?

Not my business -

HIS!