

Bruce Matthews, Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Goose Bay, Labrador

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I (Susan) met Bruce Matthews at a Bahá'í Summer School in Minden Ontario in the late 1980's. He'd been asked to be the guest speaker for an adult school, and his topic was "Body, Mind and Spirit". I was impressed because he had enough material to engage us in this topic for a week, and we still only scratched the surface of what he wanted to share with us, all from the Bahá'í Writings.

He arrived early and as the organizer of the school, I picked him up at the bus station in Minden and brought him to the University of Toronto Survey Camp, where the school was being held. After he settled in, we went for a walk together, and being good at asking questions, I tried to gather some information about his life, but it was like pulling teeth!

When I pioneered to Labrador, to fulfill a goal in a "virgin territory", I remembered hearing that Bruce had been named a "Knight of Bahá'u'lláh" when he pioneered to Goose Bay Labrador in April 1954, during the Ten Year Crusade.

For these two reasons, I felt an affinity towards Bruce and chose him for a talk participants were asked to give during a Ruhi Book 8 Study Circle, when we were discussing those who arose to pioneer during the 10 Year Crusade.

Unable to find any information on him through traditional channels, I turned to my friend Lynn Wright, who knew him during his later years, when he didn't get out much. She used to visit him, to discuss the Writings, share a game of scrabble or a meal. She confirmed that because of his extreme humility and modesty, it was hard to really get to know the details of Bruce's life. The information that follows is from her recollections.

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

Early Life

Bruce was born in Scotland and till the end of his life he had a beautiful voice with a bit of a Scottish accent. He was small in stature, small boned, with a cute face and twinkling eyes. He often wore a greatcoat with a wool cap that made him look like a character out of a movie. He was always immaculately dressed and clean and always punctual and never late.

I (Lynn) have no recollection of his family history. I know that during WW2, he was in North Africa fighting Rommel in the desert. He was a secretary in the field of communications and travelled with the troops. He never talked about his travels but I expect he was very good at his job since he was very ordered. He kept himself up to date and was always informed. When he learned something, he did it the best way possible.

He loved being in the military and had a lot of responsibility. Although he never talked about it, I can imagine him being the top secretary and being with the commander. He was so competent why wouldn't they make him that? That's how I imagined him, though he would never talk about it.

Bahá'í

Bruce was a very devout and steadfast Bahá'í. He prayed a lot, read the Writings a lot and never missed a Bahá'í meeting or Feast. He meditated and thought things through carefully, and always referred back to the Writings. He was unswerving and firm in his convictions, and in his love for the Manifestations of the Faith and its Institutions. He knew what was important as a Bahá'í and he followed it to the letter.

Bruce had a huge Bahá'í library and saved all of his copies of "Bahá'í Canada" and "Star of the West" volumes. He bought and read all the books he could on religion. He even had books on the Zoroastrian Religion. He read all of the Guardian's writings, and all the Bahá'í books when they came out. When he heard that the Guardian had recommended a particular version of the Bible, he searched high and low for it (in the days before computers) and then when he couldn't find it in Canada, he had it ordered from England.

His library was immense and he knew where everything was. He could find any quote, in any book; that was his focus. If you took a book out, he'd notice if you didn't put it back in the right spot. He'd never say anything. He'd just put it back where it belonged.

He understood Shoghi Effendi so profoundly and his allegiance was unwavering. He was in Newfoundland when the Guardian died and remembers being asked if he was faithful to the Guardian and said "yes" as if "of course!" or "there would never be any doubt in my mind". It was a real shock and test for the whole community that there would be people who wouldn't be loyal to him, and would, in fact, become Covenant Breakers. It really shook people up.

He loved to read the Writings; and loved it when other people read them with him. Whenever I'd ask him a question, he'd never give a short answer or scratch the surface. He would bring out 5-6 books and we'd study the Writings together, exploring every possible avenue.

He could use his masculine side to be very warrior-like in his ability to find the truth (in everyday life and on the Assembly) and to proclaim the faith. He thought the community should focus on teaching and was really happy in organizing, planning and setting up a teaching event.

He wrote a book on "Body, Mind and Spirit", which had quote after quote on God's will and man's; on the ego and how to follow God's will. It was very deep. Unfortunately his book was never published.

Bruce was a deep, disciplined person and he really thought things out. He was totally focused on each step he took. Each step was done purposefully and each step mattered. For example: He had two 16 inch floor fans and had figured out where they had to be put in order to blow at their maximum. You didn't dare move them or suggest another way because you knew he put things in a certain place for a very good reason. This is why he was a good warrior for Bahá'u'lláh. You'd follow him because you might not know why but you knew he'd done all the research and had figured things out. He was on the LSA of York for a long time. He worked at the Bahá'í National Centre.

He was always quiet and never said anything about himself. He never talked about own life, his difficulties and struggles because he was so focused on the Writings and on the Faith. He was a warrior who always fought his inner demons and his battles using the Writings.

He was so aware of that other realm that he never, ever talked about petty things. He just sat there silently communing with his spiritual reality. For example, he might get irritated and grouchy and wouldn't say why. You could see something was happening and didn't know if he was sick or not. You'd go into the bedroom and realize that it was full of mould and the plaster was falling off the wall but he'd never mentioned it or the effect of it on his health.

He had all his teeth pulled out and had false teeth but they didn't fit properly. Instead of complaining how difficult it was to eat, he'd just find some way around it and eat things without his teeth. He loved to eat nuts, for example, and would get a grinder and grind the nuts so he could eat them.

Pioneering

Bruce was living in Newfoundland when the Guardian put out the call for pioneers, and he responded quickly, agreeing to go to Goose Bay, Labrador. When the call came, it was instant, complete obedience as he asked: "how can I be of service?" He knew who his commander and Lord was and was always obedient to his Lord; so when the call went out, Bruce went. He gave up this beautiful life he had and went somewhere unknown because he was asked by his commander.

He worked as a medical secretary or librarian in the military base in Goose Bay. He had a really old book about a different way of typing and may also have taught shorthand and typing. He was very, very happy in Labrador and loved his life there. He had an apartment in a house, a job he enjoyed and a cat he adopted. Again he never talked about how he taught or how difficult it was; he just went. He never talked about what it was like with all the military men around him drinking and having a different lifestyle. At that time he wasn't a military man, he wasn't a soldier. He was hired to work in the library or medical records. There must have been people who became Bahá'ís because of him, but he never talked about how he taught or

how many he converted, but there was always a twinkle in his eye when mentioning Goose Bay. He wasn't in Labrador long – perhaps 3-5 years, when his job was phased out and he had to leave.

Interests

He was an accomplished photographer and had some beautiful black and white photographs of night scenes in Scotland and Labrador hanging on his wall. I asked who took the photographs. He never would have admitted it was him, if I hadn't asked.

He loved classical music, particularly Beethoven and Mozart and went to the music store every week to check out the new classical CD's. He would often talk about how spiritual music was and how it could transport you into realms of unity and love; into the spiritual world. He listened to it non-stop, communing with the music for hours and hours.

He loved to take walks in the park, and talk about the birds that he saw. He had an amazing memory. He had two huge dictionaries on pedestals and had memorized all these obscure words. If he wanted to know something, he'd sit down and figure it out. For example, groups of animals such as a "gaggle of geese" or a "business of ferrets" or a "grist of bees" - he collected them all and knew 50 of them by heart. He spent hours playing scrabble and was a three-time National Scrabble Championship winner.

I loved playing scrabble with him because he was the best scrabble player. He'd take his time and think and think and think and then put down his word – perhaps it would only be 3 tiles and he'd get all these points. He never complained that I was a bad scrabble player, frequently putting down 3-4 letter words that didn't count for much. Playing with him was so much fun! He loved cats and plants. He tried an experiment once where he put one leaf from a plant in his bedroom and another in his living room. The one in the living room he talked to all day and told it he loved it, and prayed over it. It lived a long time, but the other one died really fast because he didn't do those things. Prayer and love worked with roses too. Most people can't grow roses in the city but he grew a rose bush which flowered in his apartment.

He liked working as an extra in the movies, particularly one called "Canadian Bacon", where he got a real kick out of working with John Candy and Alan Alda. He was surprised at how many scenes they had to do over. He found it quite challenging to have to pretend to be drinking in a bar. He couldn't even pretend to be drinking without being affected by it. There is a beautiful cameo shot of his face at the end of the movie.

He liked beautiful things but was frugal and didn't spend a lot of money on himself. When he did, he always bought good quality things. He had some beautiful things from Africa, leftovers from his time there during the war: carved eggs, carvings and place mats.

Virtues

He was always focused on the path ahead and always focused on teaching. He didn't teach by proselytizing of course, but taught by inviting you to a scrabble game, is the impression I got.

He had a well-developed balance between his masculine and feminine side. He wasn't a typical North American male, in that he wasn't aggressive, egotistical, harsh or demanding. He balanced his warrior side perfectly with his soft, spiritually-based side. He never used his warrior side in personal interactions; only in teaching the Faith.

He was fastidious and liked to have everything orderly, tidy and neat in his apartment. He was a vegetarian and ate simple meals, and then he'd sterilize his dishes and wash them right away so he'd never get sick. Although he had his own well-conceived way of doing things, he was very accepting of other people's limitations. He would never say "do it my way". If he didn't like something, he'd tell you, because he was used to doing things a certain way; but at the same time, he would never watch to see if you made a mistake. Instead he would just put the thing back where it belonged, or do it his way.

Although I knew he loved me dearly, he wasn't a demonstrative person. He didn't gush all over people. Instead he was dignified and exalted in his bearing. He did not display any signs of frivolous conduct and understood there were certain standards that had to be adhered to.

He could be really charming and had a lovely, giggly side with people of his own generation; I didn't have the same kind of humour so I didn't see that side often. He knew I loved chocolate so when I was playing scrabble he'd produce a chocolate bar just for me, with a twinkle in his eye.

He was happy with himself and who he was and really knew how to live in the present moment. He was really ahead of his time in that he knew how to "be" and how to love live.

When I think of Bruce, the virtues that come to my mind include, dignified, brave, honest, high-minded, truthful, kind, gentle, quiet-spoken, sweet, lovely, thoughtful, selfless, very independent and bright. Bruce really was a "Knight" in every sense of the word.