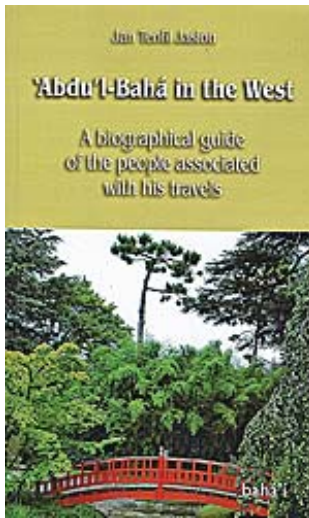


Book Review



Abdu'l-Bahá in the West: A Biographical Guide of the People Associated with His Travels, Jan Teofil Jasion. 499 pages; Paris, Librairie Bahá'íe, 2012.

ANNE GORDON PERRY

This important new reference work serves as an excellent companion volume to any of the other sources about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in the West. Providing entries on almost 2,000 persons whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá met between 1911 and 1913, it offers details including name, dates, occupation, education, writings, where and when they met 'Abdu'l-Bahá (with street addresses often included), and, if Bahá'ís, their service to the Faith. Notes provide information about publications that reference an individual's meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In some cases information on spouses or other family members is added to the entry.

Photographs of some of the individuals reveal visual information and interest.

In many cases, the person profiled might be a person of some renown but still largely unknown to many readers and researchers. For example, consider this sample entry:

Suttner, Bertha von, Baroness (4 June 1843 Prague, Bohemia, Austrian Empire—21 June 1914 Vienna, Austria-Hungary)

Austrian peace activist

Met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Chicago Sept. 1912 and in Vienna, 23 April 1913 (Balyuzi 389).

She was an Austrian novelist. She founded an Austrian pacifist organization in 1891 and was ceaselessly active in the movement. In 1905 she became a Nobel peace laureate. In 1876 she married Baron Arthur Gundaccar von Suttner (d. 1902). (Jasion 413)

Jasion's facts serve as a tantalizing foray into the complex synchronicity of when and how people met—and sometimes re-met—'Abdu'l-Bahá. One might ask, what was Bertha von Suttner doing in Chicago? Was her encounter with the Master intentional or random? Did she perhaps have friends among the Bahá'ís? Did she study the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and incorporate them into her thoughts on peace? How did she happen to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá again in Vienna, just a year before her own death? Did she ever correspond with Him? And so

forth. Jasion's "guide" does not provide all of the answers, but gives enough clues to set one off on related journeys of discovery.

Not all of the people surveyed were from Europe, the United States, Canada, or Persia (Iran). For example, there is an entry on Manuel Calero y Sierre, a Mexican diplomat and politician who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in May, 1912 while serving as the Mexican ambassador to the United States from 1912-1914 (Jasion 82). One wonders whether he might have shared his impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá upon his return to Mexico.

Unlike other sources that have been generated featuring famous individuals who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this source provides information on anyone known to have met Him in the countries He visited in the West—Austria, Canada, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Scotland, Switzerland, and the United States. The individuals included reflect a staggering array of backgrounds—rich, poor, black, white or other, Eastern, Western, pioneers and leaders in various congregations or movements, servants, those who offered Him transport or accommodation, the journalists who endorsed Him and those who voiced skepticism or attacks, intellectuals, artists of many genres, people who were scientific-minded or consumed with faith-based seeking. Researchers might follow an interest based on any number of attributes of those profiled. For

example, Charles Edward Bentley, an African-American dentist and social worker born in Cincinnati but living in Chicago, met 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the NAACP (*National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*) Fourth Annual Conference (Jasion 55). One might trace his associations with W. E. B. Du Bois, Robert S. Abbott, or other prominent members of the African-American community.

While the number of entries is staggering, the author notes in his introduction that the list may represent about two percent of the tens of thousands who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in over sixty cities. Still, it was a daunting research task, no doubt involving much time, sleuthing, and careful documentation. We are now the beneficiaries, and future works can draw on the vast material gathered. One might wish for an index providing a list of people by country to accommodate specialized research, but this is a minor complaint.

Some information eluded the author because of the standards of the day in keeping records. In the introduction, he notes that though most of the active Bahá'ís in the West were women, only around forty-nine percent of the entries are about women, and of these, in the original sources two out of six are identified only by their surname. While he was able to find additional information on some of them, over one hundred women "remain known only as appendages to their parents or their spouses" (XII). Sometimes there is not even a reference to a relative. Here is one such entry: "*Bell* _____,

Ms. Servant in the Parsons' household. Met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Dublin, New Hampshire, 23 July 1913" (Jasion 52). There is scant information on some men as well, for example: "*Reade, Potter A.* American Freemason. Wrote about 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the *New Age Magazine* [1912]" (Jasion 351). In some cases, Jasion speculates on possible meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example:

Gedalgo, Amélie André (née d'Obigny de Ferrière) (21 Feb. 1885 Paris—July 1931 Saint Egrève, France)

French theosophist, music teacher and composer

Wrote a knowledgeable article about the Faith in 1911 and was probably present at the meetings of the theosophists when 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke 26 Oct. 1911 and 13 Feb. 1913... (Jasion 158)

Jasion posits that the question of who 'Abdu'l-Bahá was does not so much rest with the facts and details of His life as it does with the impact who met Him, how they were influenced, and how their lives might have changed because of the interaction. In this regard, his biographical notes can only give a slight indication of the profound implications of these various encounters.

I did not expect that I would find perusing the various entries to be emotionally evocative, since they are mostly grounded in facts. And yet, while contemplating the variety of people whose paths crossed the One known as "The Mystery of God," I was struck

both by a sense of the significance of all of the interchanges in that time and by the idea that someone of *our* time would spend such effort to research and present them to the world today. As I have discovered, the person and travels of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are ceaselessly interesting to an ever a wider and more diverse audience, never becoming stale or dated. In fact, as we exhume and consume more details about the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we stand both to increase our mental perceptions and to experience stirrings of our hearts, no doubt becoming closer to One who exemplified a unique earthly and celestial presence. This timeless connection cannot be adequately documented, contained, or reflected in any book, film, or other record of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels, but perhaps we can trace it more fully in the larger, eternal journey of spirit—freed from time, space, ink on paper, pixels, sound and moving image projections, and the limitations of our own selves. In the meantime, such guides as Jasion's are invaluable on our quest to align our own "travels" with those of the 'Abdu'l-Bahá's.

WORKS CITED

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