

Agnes Baldwin Alexander, Hand of the Cause of God
Earl Redman and Duane Troxel
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A review by Sheridan A. Sims

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This review is rather long, but it is about a book of over 400 pages and a life of over 95 years. The reviewer is a member of the Bahá'í community of Japan.

Biographies can range widely in type. At one end of the literary spectrum there is the highly impressionistic or expressionistic pen-portrait that can leave readers scratching their heads just as viewers might in front of certain paintings; at the other end the just-the-facts chronology or wordy timeline graph. The present biography of Agnes Baldwin Alexander (1875–1971) fits in the latter half of the spectrum, though not near the extreme. Dorothy Freeman, author of the biography of Hand of the Cause Dorothy Baker, *From Copper to Gold*—issued by the same publisher, very different in style—allows in the introduction to that book, “Works that are limited to organizing documented information are highly valuable”: a ruffle through the thousand endnotes of the present biography will give an idea of the scale of the effort made by researcher-archivist Duane Troxel to amass the documented information, said to amount to over 12,000 files, that constitutes a substantial percentage of the book’s source material, and by author Earl Redman and his editor at publisher George Ronald to shape the mass of source material into a streamlined narrative. Agnes Alexander lived many years, went many places, met many people, did many things, and the biography does not stint on the facts of her life. Names, places, events, days/months/years whizz by, as if the reader is riding a literary bullet-train, yet it is a ride of discovery. There is a good deal to learn from this book’s pages, not only for those unfamiliar with Agnes’s life and service beyond snippets glimpsed while surfing websites and blogs, but also for those who knew Agnes personally. Considering the many-decades-long mortal and post-mortal spans involved, one can imagine what a formidable task this literary project was, but, despite the reservations specified below, this reviewer believes the book has successfully told its story.

There are sources that treat various portions of Agnes’s life in the Cause: her posthumously published histories, *Forty Years of the Baha’i Cause in Hawaii: 1902–1942* and *History of the Baha’i Faith in Japan 1914–1938* (the latter by far the single most prolific source for the biography; hereinafter *History*), articles she wrote for *Star of the West* magazine and other publications, and reports in news organs such as the U.S. *Bahá'í News*. The notes Agnes took during her pilgrimage in 1937, readily accessible online and well-circulated in the analog days, may be her best-known literary product. The biography consolidates this already available information and augments it with a large number of extracts from Agnes’s correspondence gathered by

the researcher, including letters written to her on behalf of Shoghi Effendi with his personal postscripts attached. Further content comprises an account by Agnes of the profound occasion of the first Conclave of the Hands of the Cause, held in the aftermath of Shoghi Effendi's passing, the transcript of heart-warming tape-recorded messages sent to Agnes by fellow Hands and others in the Holy Land during her extended hospitalization in Tokyo, photographs covering all periods of her life, a dramatic description of the immediate aftermath of her passing, and an appendix consisting of a superb tribute she paid to her spiritual mother May Maxwell.

*It's a wonderful subject to think about**

The biography affirms that Agnes was a “tireless letter-writer”; in fact her generation were so, as a reading of the biographies of Bahá'ís of those days will show—they are laced with extracts from the letters constantly exchanged among the “brothers” and “sisters” of the community. There are Bahá'ís in Japan who remember the typewriter Agnes lugged around, with which she conveyed her welcome to every pioneer arriving in Japan, followed up with domestic friends after seeing them at conventions and conferences and other events, kept overseas friends apprised of her activities, submitted reports to Bahá'í institutions and articles for publication, reworked her pilgrimage notes and her Japan *History*, and dashed off memos to herself and others.

Agnes's correspondence forms a subjective narrative complementary to the objective data that fill her biography's pages, often serving as a helpful commentary on the given facts, sometimes as a window on her heart and mind. This reviewer has read quite a few published memoirs, reminiscences, and letters of Bahá'ís, and there are instances in which they get a bit gossipy, grumbly, or self-psychoanalytic, but there is none of that in Agnes's writings, and no vulnerability and self-pity either. The biography states, in the context of her pilgrimage, that Agnes was more emotional in her letters than in her *History*, and that is generally true of her personal correspondence versus her publications, yet it seems that even in the private communications she does not reach the existentially affective pitch detectable in the letters of, say, Dorothy Baker. Agnes was ardent and dependent in her relationship with God—there are testimonies to that orientation in her letters—but, while she would confide in persons of her own generation with whom she corresponded, she was usually stolid and independent in her relationships with those around her at her pioneer post. Barbara Sims, a long-time pioneer in Japan, recalled to this reviewer that she once attempted to initiate a chat with Agnes by asking her if she was ever lonely during her many years in the pioneer field, to have Agnes dismiss the question with a curt “Never.” Agnes had a certain detachment about her, perhaps a reflection of the admonitions concerning detachment in the Bahá'í Writings, but should one wonder what churned beneath that composed, demure exterior, the following quotation provides an answer, originally from what the biography describes as a “pilgrim note fragment”. This reviewer cannot resist giving the whole three paragraphs here, with apologies to the biographer (quoted from pp. 273-4):

* The headings for sections are taken from quotations in those sections.

The Cause of God in Haifa is like a kettle boiling all the time! And by this I do not mean the Guardian, he and all of us are enmeshed in something whose power is irresistible. Of course it manifests itself through him, and through his decisions, but the atmosphere is like that. At first I felt like something under pressure but now I am getting so used to it that I am astounded at myself.

Shoghi Effendi says I have no right to call him a mystery! But I can say that at least to me he is a mystery and the result of my observations is that a Guardian is a touchstone applied to us all the time . . . There is no more dangerous maze for people to begin to wander in than the subject of the “personality” of either the Guardian, or the Master, or even the Manifestation. I do not doubt that Shoghi Effendi has his own personality and temperament, but I believe it is useless to say, “this is it, or this is not it,” because even his personality, I believe, is used in the grip of his station or the Will of God . . . to test us. In other words, even the personality is shaped to further the interests of the Cause. It’s a wonderful subject to think about.

The Guardian is training both my character and my soul. With all the richness of my life, I have outlived it . . . and now here, in the presence of our own so dearly loved and long-beloved Guardian, he is training me with patience, with love, and yet with iron determination, and I have the assurance that he will make of me, if I will let him, what I should and can be. We get from Shoghi Effendi what we let come out! It is something in us that draws it out. It is a spiritual law. Just think, Bahá’u’lláh knew that hidden language and script all the time, even referred to it, but no one asked Him so He never gave it out.*

Agnes’s “training” was received by letter as well as in person, and Shoghi Effendi’s messages to her quoted in the biography are hortatory and advisory. She must have expressed deep emotions in her correspondence with him, because he and his secretary more than once advise her not to be discouraged; yet as sympathetic as Shoghi Effendi is, he also more than once counsels Agnes to persevere. Reading his sagacious messages, it has occurred to this reviewer that a selection of the Guardian’s postscripts appended to his secretary’s letters to various individuals and institutions

* The ellipses and underlines are in the biography. For all quotations herein diacritical marks have been added to Arabic/Persian proper nouns where they are omitted in the quoted text. Reference page numbers are given only for the quotations this reviewer has formatted. The above is the full text, but all other formatted quotations are excerpts.

It should be said that this text is not found in the two versions of Agnes’s pilgrimage notes posted side by side on the Bahá’í Library Online website, nor in a reworked version of the notes typed by Agnes in the 1950s in Japan to which this reviewer has access. Perhaps it was redacted by Agnes for later/other versions of the notes. (It is unclear what “fragment” means in this case.)

would make for a stimulating compilation, and this bio has good candidates.

Among the biography's other epistolary contents what stand out are several passages from letters of 'Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum to Agnes. One assumes they carried on a personal correspondence over decades, but the letters quoted in the bio are from the late 1930s to early '40s, a period during which, as necessitated by the onset of the Second World War, Agnes was away from Japan. The letters are instructive, even homiletic, in places (pp. 287, 291-2):

The Guardian says destiny and free will are subjects that must always be more or less a mystery, but one wonders why and how! Anyway the best way not to mark time wondering is to obey! . . . I realize my only remedy is to just do what Shoghi Effendi tells me to!

This last letter from him to the believers of the West is so marvelous, isn't it? It points out our virtues and our faults in no uncertain terms! I think we certainly need it don't you? And it gives us the charter of so much wonderful work to do.

The Guardian is an ocean, but the people don't fish in it enough. A very homely simile, but I mean we have no realization of the creative powers of the Guardian, we don't tap the Divine Inspiration ever ready to flow from him into the channels of the work of the Cause. . . . So you see I think we should tap the strength of the Guardian into as many departments of our Bahá'í life as possible—and to ask is to receive.

There is an intimation of *God Passes By* (p. 301):

All this [news of the activities of the Bahá'ís as the Centenary draws near] gladdens the Guardian's overburdened heart and makes it easier for him to go on carrying his very heavy load of care and work. He is engaged, and has been for over a year, on a wonderful piece of work for the Faith and hopes to get it off to the friends before the Centenary. It will simply thrill you when you read it!

Also impressive is the wisdom of May Maxwell, both quoted and paraphrased by Agnes in her appended tribute. Agnes felt May to be at moments a channel of inspiration, "like an empty reed through which the spirit spoke."

Hasten back to Japan

Agnes was a tireless traveler as well as writer. As the biography makes clear, she was continually on the move, all over Japan, in and out of Japan, in East Asia, in Hawaii, North America, Europe. The biography reflects her travels in its structure, constituting most of its chapters according to her location. Agnes's transit times must have added up to a fairly large number of weeks, or maybe it was a matter of months—

no riding the bullet-train and the jet-stream for all but the final few of her years. Perhaps Agnes was peripatetic in the classical sense, seeking experience, knowledge, enlightenment. She discovered the Bahá'í Faith while traveling as a young woman in Europe, and that experience might have engendered a life-long impulse, conscious or otherwise, to undertake transoceanic, transcontinental voyages.

There is a conspicuous contrast in the pattern of this itinerancy in the prewar phase of pioneering versus the postwar. Before the Second World War Agnes would leave Japan and stay out for years at a time: in the 23-year, four-month span from her first arrival in November 1914 to her last departure in March 1937, Agnes actually lived in Japan about 14 years. Postwar she resided in Japan from 1950 to 1967 and, although she regularly attended conclaves, conferences, and other Bahá'í functions overseas in her administrative capacity as initially Auxiliary Board Member and then Hand of the Cause, and made private visits to Hawaii and California and other places, for days or weeks or a few months at a time, she maintained her domicile in Kyoto until the decision was made after two years of hospitalization in Tokyo, following a fall, to return to Hawaii permanently to be in the care of her relatives.

Agnes was leaving her pioneer post in Japan behind when she headed out across the Pacific Ocean intermittently. One might ask how this affected the affairs of the Faith back at the post, a question not addressed in the biography. It is traditionally through the master or teacher that Japan's aesthetic and martial arts, mystical insights, and social or communal values and mores have been imparted. The attachment of the apprentice/disciple/student to the master/teacher can be intense. The Bahá'í community of Japan of the prewar years can be imagined as circular in form with Agnes its central figure—it would have been a great disruption to that circle to lose its center periodically. Agnes-sensei herself was confident in the capability of her spiritual students to carry on in her absence, as indicated in a letter to “Bahá'í friends” following her first departure from Japan, in July 1917 (p. 116):

I had perfect assurance that it was God's will that I should come [to Hawaii], and it was really best for the Japanese Bahá'ís, for now they must depend upon themselves more.

Is that what happened? Shoghi Effendi provides the answer in a postscript to a letter written on his behalf to Agnes, sent while she was sojourning in Hawaii after a subsequent departure from Japan (p. 199):

I cannot exaggerate the importance, nay the urgent necessity of your return to Japan. Your place there is vacant, and the opportunities are varied and brilliant. The few friends there have to be nursed and assisted to renew their activity and consolidate their work.

He had previously told her, during the same absence from Japan (p. 197):

I long to hear of your determination to return to Japan and pick up the thread of your unsparing efforts and activities for

the promotion of the Cause of God. I feel that your destiny lies in that faroff and promising country

Months later Agnes did return to Japan, and the Guardian had this to say (p. 202):

What a relief to learn that you are at last on your way to Japan

During another of Agnes's sojourns outside Japan Shoghi Effendi wrote (p. 245):

May the Beloved keep, bless, and protect you and enable you to resume in the not distant future your unforgettable pioneer services in Japan.

And more than a year later his secretary wrote on his behalf (p. 248):

The gratifying news of your projected trip to Japan has particularly strengthened his hopes for the future expansion of your labours in that country. . . .

The Guardian will fervently pray for the success of your teaching trip, and he hopes that its results will be such as to encourage you to prolong your stay in Japan until a strong, active and well-united community of believers has been duly established.

Shoghi Effendi was essentially repeating what 'Abdu'l-Bahá had earlier counseled. While Agnes was traveling in North America during her first absence from Japan, she received a tablet in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised (p. 125):

In accordance with the wish of the attracted maid servant of God to the love of God, Mrs. Maxwell, go thou to Canada and stay there for a time and then hasten back to Japan, for in Japan you will be assisted and exalted.

Months later Agnes did return to Japan, and the Master had this to say (p. 130):

The travel to Japan was in the utmost necessity. . . .
Thou didst well to travel to Japan, for the seed thou hast sown needs watering.

The message, patiently reiterated, is clear: You belong in Japan.

As the biography states, Agnes operated according to what she termed her "inspiration" or "guidance". The biography makes no issue of it, but if this reviewer may comment: Every so often Agnes would be inspired to leave Japan—or, if there was a specific, practical reason to leave Japan, to have an open-ended sojourn at her destination—and then inspired to further journey here and there and elsewhere, until many moons had passed since she left. Of course, human beings being fallible, there is no assurance that what is felt to be inspiration from on high always reflects the Will of God; however Agnes, once she concluded she had been guided, would proceed with unshakeable conviction. This modus operandi led to wonderful experiences—reuniting with family and relatives and childhood friends in Hawaii, joining Martha Root in China,

staying with May Maxwell in Montreal, speaking at the House of Worship in Wilmette, going to Green Acre and Geyserville, etc.—but meanwhile Agnes’s pioneer post remained “vacant”, as Shoghi Effendi described it, for very long stretches, until a final round of inspiration, more or less coinciding with some nudging from the Holy Land, returned her to Japan. This personal modality was a manifestation of a firmly independent nature. Pioneer Barbara Sims recalled to this reviewer that as secretary of the Spiritual Assembly of North East Asia she once contacted Agnes to coordinate on a matter, to have Agnes respond, “The Assembly can do whatever it decides, dearie. I have received my guidance and will act on that.” On another occasion, when Barbara Sims asked her about her inspiration, how she knew it was that, Agnes replied she felt a joy in her heart and this feeling was a confirmation to act. The Bahá’ís of Japan can only be thankful Agnes was invariably inspired and felt confirmed to return there.

The great joy

Agnes Alexander lived in Japan for a total of about 31 years. To this reviewer, Agnes’s years in Japan are the most significant of her story, and the early years the most interesting, as that nation was then undergoing a momentous transformation. What kind of place was Japan when Agnes first arrived there, in 1914? In what cultural, social, and intellectual milieus did she function? Who were her acquaintances, contacts? The biography does little stage-setting and contextualizing, and offers minimal information about some of Agnes’s notable acquaintances. Actually, Agnes herself does supply a limited stage-setting: the introduction to her *History* is a perspicuous essay, not referred to in the biography, that makes one wish she did more of this kind of writing and that makes proficient use of the words of eminent thinkers of early twentieth-century Japan to briefly relate the spiritual ambience of the place.

Agnes arrived in Japan during the Taisho Era (1912–1926), a period of literary, artistic, and philosophical ferment, just as the preceding Meiji Era (1868–1912) was a time of political, economic, and technological revolution. There was a thirst in Japan for new ideas and perspectives. Communism, anarchism, humanism, capitalism, and monotheism, among other philosophies, intrigued the intellectual seeker. Quite a few of the persons Agnes made contact with in those days were communists or anarchists, whereas others were pillars of the establishment; indeed, it is remarkable how wide Agnes’s range of acquaintances was, spanning the schoolgirls in her weekly Bahá’í class, including Yuriko Mochizuki, to “the father of Japanese capitalism” Eiichi Shibusawa, and many more such as Kikutaro Fukuta, Tokujiro Torii, Ichiko Kamichika, Umeko Tsuda, Daiun Inoue, Rokuichiro Masujima, Vasily Eroshenko, and Ujaku Akita.

As it should, the biography introduces all of the above-named but some in a cursory manner, and the reader might be curious who the individuals were behind the names. The bio states that Yuriko Mochizuki was the first Japanese woman to accept the Faith, but it does not state that in subsequent years she became a noted figure in the worlds of journalism and feminism: she is pictured on the cover of a book published in the early 2000s by a Japanese critic and is touted in its pages as one of the “Modern Girls” who embodied the progressive spirit of the Taisho Era.

Kikutaro Fukuta, the first person to become a Bahá'í in Japan, and Daiun Inoue, a Buddhist priest who embraced the Faith, along with Vasily Eroshenko and Tokujiro Torii, both blind, both Esperantists, and the latter a Bahá'í, are adequately treated in the biography, although it should be emphasized that Torii was a leading member of several domestic and international organizations of the blind and that he was the recipient of a number of honors including national awards. It might be added that the last two men, together with Agnes, Ichiko Kamichika, and Ujaku Akita (on whom more below), attended the Nakamura-ya Salon, a recurring gathering of literati and artists hosted by husband-and-wife restaurateurs Aizo and Kokko Soma. The Somas were patrons of Vasily Eroshenko, who had two separate stays in Japan, his second concurrent with Agnes's second term there, though he is discussed in Agnes's *History* and thus in the biography only in regard to his first stay, likely because his views and activities became increasingly ideological and political. Eroshenko was deported from Japan in 1921, and Agnes gives a terse epilogue: "In later years he joined the Communists and lost the inspiration he received through the Bahá'í teachings."*

Eiichi Shibusawa, identified in the biography simply as a "Japanese minister", was the first Western-style capitalist in Japan, a founding member of the Concordia Association[°] advocating amity among nations and religions, the subject of a year-long drama broadcast in 2021 on the government-owned NHK television network, a visitor to the United States, meeting with Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, and will have his visage featured on the redesigned 10,000-yen banknote (the highest denomination) to be circulated beginning in 2024. When one considers the fact that Japan, despite its relatively small size and meager natural resources and its many-centuries-long closed-door policy, modernized with such rapidity as to earn the praise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* and rose to become the second-largest economy in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century, and that he laid much of the financial foundation for that success, Eiichi Shibusawa is arguably one of the ten or twelve most important persons in modern history in the spheres of finance and commerce. He was impressed enough with Agnes to produce in his own hand a commendatory letter of introduction (shown in the book *Traces that Remain*, p. 62) addressed to a Japanese bank official in Korea (then under Japan's rule), writing her name and the word

* This reviewer doubts there is a country in which the Bahá'í message spread as early and quickly among the blind as in Japan, particularly among persons both blind and Esperantist. Agnes knew Esperanto, and learned its Braille version with the help of Vasily Eroshenko.

The book *Traces that Remain*, issued by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of Japan, states that in 1966 Tokujiro Torii was awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon (*Traces* uses an older designation); Japanese-language Wikipedia, sourcing the Kyoto City website, adds the Medal of Honor, Blue Ribbon in 1950, and the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon in 1970, the year of his death. The decorations chronologically ascend in rank.

[°] A co-founder was Jinzo Naruse, who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London in 1912 while traveling in Europe to promote Concordia. Naruse was also the founder of Japan Women's University, where Agnes spoke. (This Concordia is not to be confused with a political party in 1930s Japanese-occupied Manchuria known as the Concordia Association. The two organizations' names are different in the original Japanese but rendered identically in English.)

“Baháism” in both Japanese and English. Agnes was planning her first teaching trip to Korea, in 1921.*

And Eiichi Shibusawa is not the only of Agnes’s acquaintances to appear on a Japanese banknote. Agnes recalls in her *History*, repeated in the biography, how her interest in Japan was piqued upon hearing a talk given by Umeko Tsuda in Hawaii. Tsuda, in contrast to the school she established, is otherwise unmentioned in the biography, and it should be pointed out that she is remembered in Japan as a pioneer in women’s education: she was one of the first Japanese women to be educated abroad, having completed secondary school in the United States and on a subsequent stay graduated from Bryn Mawr College, was the first Japanese woman to have a paper published in a Western scientific journal (co-author, “The Orientation of the Frog’s Egg”, *Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science*, 1894), was a tutor in English and piano in the household of the soon-to-be first prime minister of Japan, was an instructor in a school for children of Japanese nobility, and was the founder of the private Women’s English-studies School in Tokyo, where Martha Root spoke and some of whose students participated in Agnes’s Bahá’í class. Umeko Tsuda, who too was the subject of a television drama, will grace the redesigned 5,000-yen bill.°

Ichiko Kamichika, who was a graduate of the Tsuda School, receives a brief section and elsewhere a brief mention in the biography. As it states, she interviewed Agnes and was responsible for the first publication of a photograph of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a Japanese newspaper. Kamichika is said in the biography to have attended “a few Bahá’í meetings”, which is probably an understatement, and further to have been “imprisoned for unknown reasons”, which is definitely an untrue statement. The reason is well known in Japan (and is referred to in the English-language Wikipedia entry for her):

* In the introduction letter, translated in Agnes’s *History*, Eiichi Shibusawa writes that he is a friend of Agnes’s cousin Wallace McKinney Alexander, who was the president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and associated with, among other organizations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Institute of Pacific Relations, and the Japan Society. Agnes says in *History* that she was put in touch with Shibusawa for the Korea trip by “Y. Bryan Yamashita”. This was Yashichiro “Bryan” Yamashita, a noted promoter of Japan-U.S. relations (who lived with the family of William Jennings Bryan while studying in the U.S.). Agnes stayed in touch: a Shibusawa archive records that in 1930, the year before he died, she was present at a farewell dinner in Tokyo for U.S. Ambassador to Japan William Richards Castle Jr. The Castles were a distinguished family in Hawaii, and Agnes is described in the archive entry as a friend of William from their school days. The event was held under the auspices of the Committee on Japan-U.S. Relations, established by Shibusawa in 1916.

° Agnes does not write of direct contact with Umeko Tsuda in her *History*. However, given the connections in this paragraph, and further that Agnes lived in a building where faculty of the Tsuda School were quartered and held meetings there on the Faith, including one with Martha Root as speaker (in 1915, a photograph of which was taken, concerning which more below), and also that Howard Struven and C.M. Remey were hosted for tea by Tsuda on the Japan leg of their round-the-world proclamation tour 1909–10, it is very difficult to believe Agnes would not have called on her, and more than once, bearing in mind how careful Agnes was to nurture cordial relationships in the interests of the Cause. (A speculation as to why Agnes does not mention direct contact, if it occurred, is that Tsuda was a devout Christian and might not have been amenable to learning anything about the Bahá’í Faith beyond what she heard from Struven and Remey and thus Agnes might not have felt their conversations to be substantive enough to write of in *History*.)

Kamichika was in what might be termed a free relationship with a literary man of similar ideological leanings, but after supporting him financially yet repeatedly finding him in the close company of another woman she decided he was behaving too freely and assaulted and stabbed him; he survived, she was sentenced to four years and served two. The incident has been the subject of essays, dissertations, dramas, and documentaries. Ichiko Kamichika was a journalist, ideological polemicist, social critic, and later in her life a member of the Diet, the national legislature. She is in the first photograph taken of a Bahá'í-related meeting in Japan, on the occasion of Martha Root's first visit, in 1915 (the year before the incident), appearing on the far left (appropriately enough).*

Ujaku Akita, who is also in the 1915 photo, helped Agnes publish articles on the Bahá'í Faith and was himself the author of newspaper and journal pieces about the Faith.[°] Akita was a playwright, novelist, Fabian, a fellow-Esperantist friend of the above-mentioned Vasily Eroshenko and editor of an anthology of his works, a visitor to Russia in 1927, reportedly as a state guest, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, and later a founder of a “proletarian Esperantist” group that was a member of an umbrella organization called the Japan Militant Atheists' Alliance (he seems not to have entirely agreed with the teachings of the Faith). Two references in Akita's journal to Agnes's activities were provided for the biography by Bahá'í Michitoshi Zenimoto (on whom more below).

Rokuichiro Masujima first heard of the Bahá'í Faith in the United States, and was an international lawyer (member of Middle Temple), founder of a law school that developed into one of Japan's oldest private universities, and facilitator of two contacts the Bahá'ís had with the Imperial Household Ministry and therefore indirectly with the emperor. A number of Bahá'í-related meetings were held in his law library and garden, and Shoghi Effendi expressed gratitude for Masujima's friendship (p. 257):

The Guardian feels also deeply appreciative of Dr. Masajima's [*sic*] kind offer in presenting his library for use by the Bahá'ís. He hopes and fervently prays that this eminent friend of the Cause may become one day a confirmed and devoted believer and that through his services the Faith may rapidly spread throughout Japan.

What was it that attracted the above-mentioned and others to Agnes and the message she delivered? The biography does not examine this question, but one can surmise that the sight and sound of a single, middle-aged Western woman fervently espousing a whole set of progressive social principles, including equality of the sexes, universal education, accord of science and religion, elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, independent investigation of truth, and oneness of humankind, must have been fascinating, even charismatic. Nevertheless, few of Agnes's contacts among the

* The photo is in the biography but its caption has incorrect identifications, as explained below.

[°] For example, an essay on Ṭáhirih whose title translates to “The Murdered Bahá'í Poetess”, in a journal whose title translates to *Tolstoy Research* or *Tolstoy Studies*.

intelligentsia/literati/*hoi oligoi* embraced the Bahá'í Faith. A conjecture as to why is that these persons, despite their agreement with the social principles (which were advocated by diverse groups and organizations, if not as comprehensively), could not or would not grasp the theological verities of the Faith—the reality of the Divinity, the Manifestation, the Revelation, the Dispensation (and the ultimately divine origin of the social principles)—even as they assisted Agnes's proclamation activities by translating Bahá'í literature, having her or their own articles on the Faith published in newspapers and journals, arranging or hosting her talks, and in other ways. Agnes's observation in *History*, repeated in the biography, specifically concerning Vasily Eroshenko, summarizes the matter generally (p. 103):

Although he had love for the Bahá'í teachings, he did not experience the great joy which comes through acknowledging and turning to the Center of the Manifest Light.

Watching over

A contextual word should be added here. The Meiji and Taisho eras were a time when variegated ideologies and political theories were absorbed across the intellectual spectrum in Japan, among those an authoritarian statism which originated in the West and which was then superimposed on an endemic ethnocentrism. The bulk of Japan's political and military elite were formerly of, or descended from, the warrior class that had run the nation for centuries before the Meiji Restoration, and as the country underwent modernization that process predictably included the development of armed forces and a security apparatus modeled, like so many other institutions, on those of the West; it was thence inevitable that the military and security forces would emerge as the epitomizers and enforcers of an ascendant authoritarian state nationalism.

The growth of this authoritarianism occurred for the duration of Agnes's pre-Second World War residency in Japan; indeed, it culminated in that war. To its credit, the biography takes note of this phenomenon, though not thematically but episodically, briefly exemplifying it in an instance of insurrection in 1936 involving hardline military units in Tokyo, commented on by Agnes in a letter. The problem of authoritarian nationalism is pertinent to Agnes's story because some of her acquaintances were communists or anarchists and there can thus be little doubt the state authorities accumulated a hefty dossier on her. The biography quotes Agnes writing in her *History* that she attracted the attention of the police in 1928 because the couple in whose home a monthly Esperantist meeting she had been participating in was held were (unknown to her, she avers) communists. When Martha Root visited Japan in 1923, as Agnes's bio, sourcing the Root bio *Lioness at the Threshold*, asserts, she (Martha) attracted the attention of the police when she made what was apparently a passing reference to (Communist) Russia in a talk at an Esperantist meeting. It is noteworthy that Agnes in *History* says nothing about this episode, which resulted in overblown newspaper accounts in Japan and the United States. There was a pronounced reactionary, nationalist bent to certain newspapers in Japan, and it seems one such paper's report

was picked up and transmitted overseas by a wire service.

It is obvious the authorities had a dossier on Vasily Eroshenko, because he was expelled from Japan. Whatever inclination they might have had to consider Agnes as unwelcome and deport her, too, would have been more than counterbalanced by two reassuring facts: Agnes stuck to religious and social discourse and avoided ideological controversies—there is no indication in any available source that Agnes partook in philosophical or political polemics, regardless of the penchant of some of her acquaintances—and she had connections to the establishment paragons Eiichi Shibusawa and Rokuichiro Masujima. Notwithstanding one forthright passage in her *History*, remarking on the 1928 matter and repeated in the biography, in which she writes that she was “striving to eliminate the cause of Communism by the power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings”, Agnes was not a combatant on the ideological battlefield; the belief-system she espoused did not fight man-made dogmas, transcending them instead. Still, it was not inconceivable she would suffer the effects of collateral damage from errant fire. The man who had the above-mentioned relationship with Ichiko Kamichika, and was a prominent Esperantist, was several years later murdered by an officer of the military police who disapproved of his anarchism. This happened very soon after an earthquake and consequent fire ravaged Tokyo. Agnes was in Tokyo at the time, was safe, and was clearly the beneficiary of the ultimate protection: Shoghi Effendi once wrote to Agnes that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was “watching over” her.

So dear friends I will have to depend on you for much

In addition to the lack of stage-setting and contextualizing referred to above, a second level of what can be called insufficient engagement with Japan in the biography is the comparative paucity of personal recollections of its subject. It is certain that not all the persons who knew Agnes in Japan were contacted for the biography: this is not to imply there were a great many such persons alive when this book was being written—presumably, within the past few years, and over a half-century since Agnes left Japan permanently—and that is all the more reason to have reached out to all of them. And beyond, for the archives of deceased persons might hold informative accounts of Agnes.

In a letter to friends quoted in the biography, Agnes asks for stories of the Faith in Hawaii, to be incorporated in the history she was writing, and says, “So dear friends I will have to depend on you for much.” In contrast, her biography is rather independent: this reviewer has the biographies of Dorothy Baker, Leroy Loas, Raḥmatu’lláh Muhájir, and Martha Root* handy at the moment, and compared to these there is a dearth of recollections of its subject in Agnes’s bio, which is regrettable as there are stories and

* Very much tangentially, a tendency in Martha Root’s biography *Lioness at the Threshold* is for the author to impute highly emotional states to the Guardian: e.g., “Shoghi Effendi was stunned . . .”; “Shoghi Effendi was crushed . . .”; “Shoghi Effendi continued to be amazed . . .” The staid style of Agnes’s biography precludes such presumptions, and it is better for that. Surely it is wiser to rely on the Guardian himself, or on his secretary, to reveal his deep feelings. (If the Guardian actually said he was “stunned”, “crushed” etc., the comments should have been put in quotes and sourced.)

anecdotes from the Japan years that would have enriched it.

Related to this point is the fact that the biography passes over or skims over persons who were prominent in Agnes's life in Japan. An example is the Tsunemis, a couple with whom Agnes was close and lived for a period, who make a solitary appearance in a photograph. Assuredly more examples could be given: Agnes in her later years in Japan was part of a much bigger community of Bahá'ís, Japanese and pioneer, than in her early years, had more relationships, and as part of those relationships came to rely on others considerably despite her strong sense of independence and self-reliance. The only way to have learned about those relationships, if not from her available archived correspondence, is to have inquired about them with the Bahá'í community of Japan and determined if there were sources, living or written, that tell of them.

Although it suffers from a comparative scarcity of recollections, when the biography does engage with persons who knew Agnes in Japan the result is rewarding. Particularly precious are the memories of two who were close to her: a section recounts, partly in his own words, how Michitoshi Zenimoto, whose family lived in Hiroshima at the time of its atomic bombing, became one of Agnes's spiritual students;* an invaluable reminiscence comes courtesy of Ruth Suzuki, a long-time pioneer in Japan, who served as Agnes's private nurse and assistant during her two-year hospitalization and who writes warmly of Agnes's "purity" and "humility".

Miss Tanaka

A third level of insufficient engagement with Japan is the not few mistakes in the biography that anyone familiar with Japan and its Bahá'í history would have easily caught, if asked. The biography's author or publisher could have requested one or two persons with relevant knowledge to do a fact-check of the Japan-related text before publication, but there is no suggestion in the front matter of the book that this was attempted.[°] To be sure, just about any first-edition book will have faults, such as incorrect info, typos, editing and printing miscues: these were found in *Japan Will Turn Ablaze!* and *Traces that Remain: A Pictorial History of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Faith Among the Japanese*, to name two issued by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of Japan. It was foreseeable that a biography which was to be produced by a team—author, researcher, editor—unfamiliar (evidently) with the setting of much of its content would be at risk of mistakes, yet no precaution seems to have been taken against that likelihood. This is a significant lapse on the part of the publisher.

Some informal corrigenda follow. Among the photographs between pages 180 and

* Besides being elected in 1957 to the first Regional Spiritual Assembly of North East Asia and accompanying Agnes on some of her travels, stated in the biography, Michitoshi Zenimoto was a teller at the first International Convention in Haifa in 1963 and a member of the Asian Board of Counselors 1985–90.

[°] The assumption, based on circumstantial evidence, is that the persons credited in the front matter with having "reviewed all or parts of the manuscript at various stages" were concerned with other aspects of the work.

181 (the photo-pages are not numbered), in the picture of Martha Root et al. on her 1915 visit, an individual whose name is not known is misidentified as Tokujiro Torii, and Ichiko Kamichika is misidentified as Torii's wife Ito. Pages 324-5, re the photo of the Naw-Rúz party at the home of "Mrs. Masako": "Masako" is a given name, and the full name is Masako Urushi. Pages 356-7, the names of Hiroyasu Takano (the only Japanese Bahá'í other than Saichiro Fujita to meet Shoghi Effendi) and Ikuo Mizuno (translator of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*) are switched in the two photos they appear together, including one of the 1962–63 Regional Spiritual Assembly of North East Asia, and Ataollah Moghbel is misidentified as Abbas Katirai and Ruhollah Momtazi is misidentified as his father Nureddin in that Assembly photo. (Were these IDs guesses?) Pages 372-3, the photo is definitely of Agnes "sitting outside", but not near "the Tokyo Bahá'í Center". Where the biography relies on the book *Traces that Remain* for photo identifications, such as of the 1957–58 North East Asia Spiritual Assembly, it is accurate; however, in the Kamichika case it ignores the same photo with correct identifications in *Traces that Remain*—which book, though plainly a source for the biography, is not listed in its bibliography.*

Several more. It was not Nureddin Momtazi but Ruhollah who taught the Faith among the indigenous Ainu on the northern island of Hokkaido. Anent Ainu: they are termed a "tribe" in the text and the index, but they are a people, not a tribe.^o The city of Kanazawa is not "at the north end of Honshu Island" but is on the Sea of Japan side of Honshu. The first newspaper reporter to interview Agnes was not "Miss Tanaka" but Shigeko Takenaka, a pioneering female journalist—this mistake is, er, originally in Agnes's *History* and is faithfully repeated in the biography. Further, Tokujiro Torii is said in the bio, referencing *History*, to have married a woman from his home village of Ejiri in Shizuoka Prefecture, although what Agnes writes is that Torii married a woman from his home village and moved to Ejiri to teach at a school for the blind; Torii's home village was in Kyoto Prefecture and Agnes does not say it was in Shizuoka Pref. Also, Agnes in *History* quotes from a diary entry she wrote on "July 21 [1915]", which was a Wednesday, that Martha Root had arrived in Japan on Friday, which would have been July 16, but the biographer interpreted that to mean Martha Root arrived on "Friday 21 July 1915".

The preceding does not exhaust the errors. This reviewer trusts no one thinks these are minor details whose correction is trivial. The details contained in any biography must be reckoned as important per se—if they are not important why are they there?—and irrespective of whether the book is set in the Holy Land, Iran, the United States, Britain, Japan, or anywhere else. Kanazawa is no more at the north end of Honshu Island than Wilmette is at the north end of Lake Michigan or Oxford is at the North Sea

* The biography in several of its photo-captions quotes portions of captions from *Traces that Remain*. It does so for the schoolgirls' Bahá'í class and children's Christmas party photographs (pp. 180-1) without attribution. Those are instances in which the biography's photo is apparently a reproduction of a photo in *Traces*; a credit line has been placed by each photo, but the bio's Acknowledgements does not state whether permission to reproduce the photos was requested.

^o The expression "Ainu tribe", meaning the people, is also found in *Traces that Remain*.

end of the Thames River. And getting the identities of four of the members of the Regional Spiritual Assembly of North East Asia wrong in a photo-caption cannot be acceptable. (Would that have happened with a photo of the contemporary U.S. or British Isles N.S.A.?) It would be duly diligent of the major Western publishers of Bahá'í volumes, when preparing a work that deals substantially with the history of the Faith in a country not located in a part of the world where their publications are very often set—viz., the Near East, the English-speaking West—to engage one or two persons well-versed in that country's Bahá'í history, and general history and geography and language, to look over the manuscript, certainly in a case those responsible for the book are unversed therein.

Miroku

A couple more quibbles. In places the biography's details are correct but a modicum more effort could have been expended to more satisfactorily give explanation. For instance, Agnes is quoted from *History* writing of a Japanese man who read a newspaper article on the Faith and became convinced that Bahá'u'lláh was "Miroku", whom the biography dutifully describes in editorial brackets as "the 'return' of Buddha", but it might be interesting to the reader to know more specifically that Miroku is Maitreya Buddha, named by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* as one of the eschatological figures.

And the biography gives much less attention to the post-Second World War years than to the prewar. Agnes actually lived in Japan a longer time postwar than prewar (albeit over a shorter span of years), during which she served as a Regional Spiritual Assembly member, an Auxiliary Board member, and Hand of the Cause. There being no postwar history written by Agnes, the biography relies heavily on U.S. *Bahá'í News* issues and on her correspondence gathered by the researcher to report her activities, and this probably accounts for the following sentence: "In December [1961], Agnes visited Hong Kong and the Philippines." That is that about Agnes on that visit; one assumes there was nothing in her available letters and the *Bahá'í News* issues about what she did in Hong Kong and the Philippines on that occasion. And while there is more detail given of other visits and events, the biography contains little analysis of Agnes's multifarious administrative activities.*

Collect as much material as possible

Ideally, a biography will be composed of a variety of finely interwoven elements, including basic narrative facts, context and background, subject's illustrative writings, others' remarks or recollections, and author's commentary comprising observation, insight, and analysis. Extensive extracts from the personal writings of the subject, such

* The biography of Leroy Loas, which was put out by the same publisher and also has "Hand of the Cause of God" in its title, and which this reviewer re-read after reading the present book, fairly rigorously discusses its subject's administrative activities. Granted, his family were Bahá'ís (his daughter wrote his bio) and his main arenas of service were the United States and the Holy Land, and thus it would not be surprising if a fuller record exists of his activities than of Agnes's.

as correspondence, are an easy and effective means of enlivening and enlightening the narrative, but ultimately it is the content that addresses the subject in the third-person that distinguishes a biography. The present book abounds in plain facts—this occasion with those people at that place, that day/month/year—and in quotations from Agnes’s writings, but it is spare on other elements. Perhaps this is attributable to a lack of certain kinds of sources on its subject, a lack of personal familiarity with the subject, and to stylistic constraint.

As important as it is, source material is not the only factor in any biographical equation. Insight and style are among the factors that can boost the biographical product well beyond the factual sum of its sources. Leaving aside its style, which can be described as matter-of-fact (and utilitarian as such), this biography has no commentary that accomplishes the intuitive leap to insight but it is not without interesting observations on its subject. The first chapter, promisingly entitled “Who is Agnes Alexander?”, offers several from the author and in a quoted letter of a former pioneer in Japan—yet much of Chapter 1, which is quite short, consists of the sort of information that can be read on Wikipedia pages, and the parts where the author writes about himself and the researcher would have been more properly placed in a preface, which the book does not have but should. Actually, the last section of the last chapter, just over a page long, is closer to being an attempt to answer the question, and it is a quotation from the Tablets of the Divine Plan that redeems Chapter 1’s title. Maybe the totality of what-where-and-when facts collected in the book was meant to answer the who-question, although that is not clear because there is no statement from the author on what the book was meant to be or do—i.e., on aims or purposes—other than one sentence in Chapter 1: “It became a challenge to see if I could write a book about a Hand of the Cause.” Put like that, the purpose sounds somewhat solipsistic. What kind of book, how was it a challenge? The author might have elaborated.

As far as sources are concerned, living or documentary, paper or digitized, published or unpublished, personal or institutional, English-language or otherwise, those that enable detailed or nuanced treatments of the issues, episodes, themes, activities, aspects, periods, or personality of a life may or may not exist, and the only way to learn if they do exist is to vigorously search for them in every plausible place. In two letters quoted in the biography Agnes recounts that during her pilgrimage Shoghi Effendi, speaking about the Japan and Hawaii Bahá’í histories she was to write, urged her, “Collect as much material as possible before starting writing.” Which raises the question: Much material was collected for Agnes’s biography, but was it as much as possible? In the front matter Acknowledgements it is asserted that the book relies for sources mostly on Agnes’s two published histories and on material gathered by the researcher from the U.S. and Hawaii Bahá’í archives. No reference is made there to archives in Japan or any other country or the World Center. Three individuals living in Japan are acknowledged for their assistance: one for providing introductions to the other two as well as the cover photograph, the other two for contributing reminiscences of Agnes. No mention is made of any further engagement with the Bahá’í community of Japan regarding the biography. In the book’s endnotes a 2019 World Center Research

Department “memorandum” on Agnes’s correspondence with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi is referenced as are letters of Shoghi Effendi to Agnes from the National Bahá’í Archives of Japan, several times each. There is no date given for contact with the Japan Archives, and copies of those letters may have been obtained many years ago.* If an effort was made during the writing of this biography to survey and to access personal and institutional Bahá’í archives in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia—or anywhere outside the mainland United States (i.e., the U.S. Bahá’í National Archives) and Hawaii (i.e., the National Bahá’í Archives of Hawaii)—an explanation thereof in a preface would have been historiographically helpful. If no such effort was made, a clarification why would have been appropriate.

But even if a greater variety of sources had been sought, consulted where available, and delivering more context and more reminiscences and more analysis feasible, was there space for it after the innumerable what-where-and-when facts were packed into the biography? Presumably, editorial lines had to be drawn in framing Agnes’s very full life. How best to have drawn them, though? One thing certain is that the book would have benefited from a more thorough engagement with Japan in the ways discussed above.

Re-awakening

Reservations specified, this reviewer believes that a biography of Agnes Alexander was long overdue and that the Bahá’í community must be grateful to the author and the researcher for the labor that went into this vital book. It is about a person ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to twice in the Tablets of the Divine Plan—only Muḥammad and Christ are mentioned a greater number of times—and in terms of empires and everlasting glories. The record of Agnes’s long and venerable life of service to the Cause, the total commitment to the Faith suffusing her bountifully quoted letters, the loving sentiments flowing from her correspondents’ letters, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s and Shoghi Effendi’s praise and encouragement of her yield ample nourishment for the reader.

The publication of this biography serves as a reminder that there has never been a methodical, in-depth study done of Agnes’s 30 years in Japan. Such an endeavor, obviously beyond the scope of the present book, would entail seeking sundry non-Bahá’í archives, some possibly stuck in moldy boxes or dusty bookcases or preserved in clean vaults or sitting on remote library shelves, some possibly digitized and accessible online, some possibly lost in the devastation of the Second World War, some possibly discarded by uninterested third-parties. There has been hunting in the past for this sort of source to an extent, and useful information uncovered, though not

* A source quoted a few places in the latter pages of the biography is what is identified in the endnotes as the “personal log book” of Barbara Sims. She was this reviewer’s mother, but he did not supply the log to the author and pages from it likely were among the material amassed by the researcher. Perhaps the log entries, and other items such as letters and photographs, or their photocopies, were made available as part of an exchange of archival material many years back when she and researcher Duane Troxel were Bahá’í Archivist respectively in Japan and Hawaii. Whatever the provenance of the log entries, they are a valuable addition, affording a third-person, first-hand perspective much-needed generally in the biography.

substantial enough to amount to a publishable volume. There may be little else to find, but that is not now known.

Japan is assigned a prominent part to play in the affairs of the Bahá'í Faith: in his first letter to the Bahá'ís of that country, 26 January 1922—originally cited by Agnes in her *History*, p. 44—the Guardian writes, quoting 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not only that “Japan will turn ablaze!” but moreover that

Japan is endowed with a most remarkable capacity for the spread of the Cause of God! Japan with (another country whose name He stated but bade us conceal it for the present) will take the lead in the spiritual re-awakening of peoples and nations that the world shall soon witness!

This is an extraordinary statement. No time period is specified, and no one can presume that the opportunity has been lost, that it is a dead letter; nor should the statement be shrugged off as pertaining to the indeterminate future, a matter for a later generation to occupy itself with. Both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi wrote of the seeds Agnes sowed in Japan. What were those seeds she sowed in her decades in that global-spiritual-leader-to-be of a country? If the seeds have not germinated why might that be? What husbandry can the Bahá'ís undertake to “reap an abundant harvest”, an eventuality Shoghi Effendi promised in a postscript to a letter written on his behalf? Answers or at least clues could be gained in an endeavor to elucidate as fully as practicable what is not known, and concomitantly to reexamine what is known, of Agnes's life and service in that country.

Lastly, exquisite contributions from the Bahá'ís of Japan adorn the biography's beginning and end: Ruth Suzuki furnishes a lambent denouement to Agnes's life-story, and another long-time pioneer in Japan, John Schwerin, provides a perfectly taken photograph of Agnes for the cover. When this reviewer pictures Agnes in his mind, it is very much as she appears in the photo: senior citizen, perched eyeglasses, serene expression. It is the countenance of one remembered by the Universal House of Justice as a “shining example all followers Faith.” The light of Agnes's apartment casts shadows from above, but surely she was surrounded by the shadowless glorious Light of the Kingdom.