

The Making of *Portraits of Some Bahá'í Women* by O.Z. Whitehead by Wendi Momen

O.Z. 'Zebby' Whitehead was an established author at George Ronald, Publisher, by the time I arrived as a part-time editor in 1984. His first book, *Some Early Bahá'ís of the West*, had been published in 1976 and *Some Bahá'ís to Remember* in 1983. His books were popular: people liked his easy, narrative style and the books sold well. They were not strictly scholarly, as Zebby drew largely on secondary sources for his information, but as many Bahá'ís did not have access to such materials as *Star of the West*, the American *Bahá'í News* or even the various volumes of *Bahá'í World*, his essays on early Bahá'ís were much appreciated, particularly by new Bahá'ís.

In 1984 the George Ronald offices were at High Street, Kidlington, Oxfordshire, and the business was run by Mark Hofman, the son of the late founder of GR, David Hofman. Among the various projects handed to me was the 'Zebby Whitehead box'. This was literally a cardboard box filled with typed notes, some handwritten materials I couldn't quite read, essays and various other bits and pieces. The box was full and I was asked to deal with it in due course.

Having much to do and being new to the publishing world, this box sat in the office for quite a time. *Some Bahá'ís to Remember* had only just been published, so there was no rush to publish another of Zebby's books – I was reminded that George Ronald was not a one-author publisher! Zebby called from time to time to enquire about the essays but no progress was made as we worked on other projects.

The essays and pieces in the box were unrelated to one another. Some were about Bahá'ís but some were not – the essay on the actress Lillian Gish is an example of this – and some were incomplete. Zebby had no overall theme in mind for a new book – he just wanted to make sure all that he *could* write he *did* write – and the box of articles was the result.

Time passed. Zebby sent a few more articles and essays for 'the box' and we talked now and then on the telephone. Whenever Zebby came to London he would take me to lunch at his club, always a rather grand event for me and a little daunting, as women were not allowed in every part of this men's club and we

had to meet elsewhere before going to the club, otherwise I could not be admitted. On one occasion we met at Brown's Hotel in its rather long corridor that runs between the two entrances. There sat Zebby talking to an elderly, highly made-up woman dramatically dressed in a leopard skin coat, a long-draped and flowing gown, a feather boa and a gigantic hat. Zebby introduced her to me, then went off to collect his coat. As I waited for his return, the woman asked me whether Zebby was my father – or perhaps grandfather? – and when I replied that I was his publisher, she looked relieved and said he had been talking and talking about some new religion and perhaps he was a little dotty? Dressed as she was in such a remarkable way in the middle of the morning, I was impressed that she could have formed such an opinion. Zebby later told me she had been a well-known actress in her day so perhaps this accounts for it.

At these luncheon meetings Zebby and I would talk about the essays and what might become of them. We tried to find a way to combine all the essays in one book but, really, no book emerged. Was there a link that would make these individual essays – written over a long period for different reasons – a book? As Zebby was very keen on the idea of having the word 'some' to begin the title, we even considered *Some Essays Written by O.Z. Whitehead!*

The 1980s became the 1990s. By this time, things had changed at George Ronald. May Hofman, Mark's sister, had taken over the business and Erica Leith was in charge of the office. Along with the long-time secretary, Wendy Manners, we realized that we were an all-women outfit. We were interviewed by a researcher doing work on publishers and this impressed her. We began to think about this unique situation. At one of our editorial meetings, we talked about the need for young Bahá'ís to have female role models from the West. In a casual conversation with a young Bahá'í, Robert Weinberg, in 1990, I mentioned this and said that George Ronald would be interested in publishing more books about female Bahá'ís, especially European ones. He took up the challenge immediately and began to research the life of Ethel Jenner Rosenberg, the first Englishwoman to become a Bahá'í.

At the same time, preparations were beginning to be made for the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995. Becoming involved in these arrangements, we began to think

how George Ronald might link the publication of its books with such an important event, as its contribution to the worldwide effort. We thought of all our outstanding projects: which of those might be suitable? Rob Weinberg's, if he could finish his research in time, but what others?

I remembered the Zebby Whitehead box and this time looked at the essays from the point of view of celebrating the lives of women. Yes, there were a few essays that could be worked up into a book. Were there enough? Were they long enough in themselves? Would Zebby accept a book focusing only on women? Would he be content to leave a number of the essays in the box, unpublished?

Zebby and I went to lunch again and this time I put it to him that perhaps we might extract from the box just those essays whose subject was a woman. He agreed and was quite excited about the idea – in fact, he loved it. Many of the essays in his earlier books had been about women or had woman at their core and the idea of having one just about women was intriguing. He asked the same questions: Were there enough essays? What was the link? Only women? Was that a strong enough connection?

We recalled that many of the early Bahá'ís were women, that they had been the pioneers, the path-beaters, the ones who had shown the way. Women had come into their own in the twentieth century. We had quite a good discussion around this theme.

We set some criteria for the book. It would be about the same length as Zebby's other books. The essays would be about Western women, but not only Americans. We would concentrate on women whose main contribution had been made in the twentieth century. We would look at the services of these women, rather than other accomplishments, such as artistic or scientific. We would not repeat any of the articles published in the other books Zebby had written. We would focus on women, not men or cities or uplifting themes. There would be a combination of well-known and little-known women. The book would contain photographs.

We selected a number of essays that might go into the book. Zebby began to rewrite them with a view to recasting them to emphasize the overall theme. We were still a little doubtful about the strength of the essays. Zebby very much wanted to include the essay on Lillian Gish, but it was hard to see how she fitted in with

the article about the Philadelphia Bahá'ís. Zebby edited the Philadelphia article to focus on the Revell sisters. The Lillian Gish article was edited, too, but it was still very different from the others. Most of the essays now centred on Bahá'í women. Could Zebby find a link with the Lillian Gish article? Reluctantly, we decided he could not and we abandoned her.

Now we had a cast of characters for the book: Emogene Hoagg, Claudia Coles, Anna Kunz, Amelia Collins, Kate Dwyer, Ella Bailey, Ella Quant and the Revell sisters. As Zebby worked on the essays, we also tried to find suitable photographs. We had lots of Lillian Gish to choose from, had we included her – studio shots, publicity shots, snapshots – but very few of some of the Bahá'í women. We decided to limit the number of photographs to one of each woman. We found studio portraits of some of the women while of others we had only blurry snapshots. The only one we could locate of Ella Bailey by herself had her standing rather oddly behind a flowering bush so that only her head could be seen. Neither of the photographs of Kate Dwyer was very good so we decided to use both of them so that at least something of her features could be made out. We were delighted to be given a photograph that showed two of the women, Anna Kunz and Ella Bailey, at a going-away party given for Marion Holley in 1945 – especially interesting to us was Marion leaving the United States for England, where she would marry the founder of George Ronald. Marion herself had been the editor and manager of the business for a number of years. Zebby and I could not resist including this photo!

As 1995 drew closer, we realized we would not be ready to publish Zebby's book in time for the Fourth World Conference on Women. The material on the Revells was very sketchy – Zebby had originally written about the development of the Philadelphia community, not the Revell sisters, and so had more research to do. Bouts of illness prevented him from doing this at any great speed. Rob Weinberg finished his book, however, so we pulled it forward and published it in the summer of 1995, just before the World Conference, and scheduled Zebby's book for the next spring.

But we still did not have a title. One idea was to call it simply *Bahá'í Women*. Somehow that was not quite right – the book wasn't about Bahá'í women in general but about *some* Bahá'í women. In any case Zebby wanted to have the title begin with the

word 'some' to link up with his other books, but the title *Some Bahá'í Women* was also very odd-sounding. We tried *Some Bahá'í Women: Essays*; *Some Bahá'í Women: Stories*; *Some Bahá'í Women: Glimpses*; *Some Bahá'í Women of Interest (of Note, to Remember)* but none of these worked. I asked Zebby to abandon the idea of using 'some' to begin the title and instead suggested we consider titles around the idea of the essays being thumbnail sketches of these women. We thought how these essays were about looking into the lives of these women. We couldn't use *Glimpses into the Lives of Some Bahá'í Women*, as we were using the word 'glimpses' as part of a subtitle for a book by Barron Harper on the Hands of Cause (finding a title for this book was another major drama – we finally decided on *Lights of Fortitude*). But we worked around this general area. As we were doing the pictures at the same time, we hit on the idea of 'portraits'. I liked the idea; Zebby wasn't sure. He still wanted 'some' to start the title. One idea was *Some Bahá'í Women: Portraits*. This was better but did not really appeal to me.

The GR promotional leaflets tell the story. By September 1995, when we sent the leaflet off for printing, the title was *Portraits*, which was as far as we could agree. After much discussion, including with others in office, we all agreed that *Portraits of Some Bahá'í Women* had a good ring to it, described the book well AND had the word 'some' in the title.

Time sped up, as it does when a deadline looms. The book had a title and was edited and typeset. But when we came to look at the typeset version of the essay on the Revell sisters, we realized there was just not sufficient material there. Zebby agreed that the essay was too thin and did not compare well with his other work. Reluctantly, we agreed that it would go the way of the Lillian Gish article, leaving us with only seven essays but of a very high standard.

And so the book *Portraits of Some Bahá'í Women* was published in April 1996 – a tribute to Zebby's careful research and his commitment to the principle of the equality of women and men found in the Bahá'í Faith he so loved.

Postscript: The following review by Edwin McCloughan appeared in the 'Reader's Choice' in *The Irish Times* of Tuesday, 8 October 1996:

Actor, arts patron, raconteur, O.Z. Whitehead is also the author of three books, the latest of which, *Portraits: Of Some Bahá'í Women* (George Ronald, £9.95), was published recently. As with his previous books, this is a collection of seven essays about prominent or distinguished members of the Bahá'í Faith, the youngest of the world's independent religions, this time focusing on women believers, the hitherto unsung stars of virtually every faith-system. This is a superbly written book for anyone – not alone Bahá'ís – who enjoys reading about women in a short, compelling space.

Two days later, he received a letter from Zebby, part of which reads as follows: 'Dear Edwin, I was thrilled yesterday to read your ... review of *Portraits of Some Bahai Women* in *The Irish Times*. I cannot adequately express the happiness that I felt when I read what I know you honestly felt ... Thank you again for your warm and generous act. I will never forget it. Forever your friend, Zebby.'

After a long illness, Zebby died at the age of 87 on 29 July 1998 at New Lodge Bloomfields Nursing Home, Donnybrook, Dublin, and was interred at Mount Jerome Cemetery Chapel.