

# One Hundredth Anniversary of First Public Mention of the Faith in the West

*[The following was written at the request of the National Assembly to remind us of this important anniversary in our, and the world's, Bahá'í History.]*

by Dr M Momen

Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By* (p. 256), refers to the brief mention that was made of the Bahá'í Faith at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Many Bahá'ís have taken to calling this the first public mention of the Faith in the West. Although it may well have been the first public mention of the Faith in North America, the first public mention of the Faith in the West was in Britain in 1889.

The religion of the Báb was brought to prominence by the Comte de Gobineau in his book *Religions et Philosophies dans l'Asie centrale*, which was published in 1865. At least one public reference to the religion of the Báb was made as a consequence of this book. The famous writer and critic, Matthew Arnold, made a brief reference to the Faith in an address that he gave to the Birmingham and Midland Institute on 16 October 1871 (See M. Momen, *Bábi and Bahá'í Religions*, p. 25). However, the great interest caused by Gobineau's book makes it certain that if we were to search hard, other more extensive references based on Gobineau could be found. This however, only relates to the religion of the Báb.

The fact that the religion of the Báb had transformed itself into the Bahá'í Faith was somewhat slow in reaching the West. The person to bring this to the attention of the people of the West was Professor Edward Granville Browne of Cambridge University. Browne spent almost a year in Iran in 1887-8. On his return to England in September 1888, he began to organize the information that he had collected about the Faith. Then in early 1889, he began to write up his findings regarding the Bahá'í Faith for an academic paper.

During the Easter vacation that year, he returned to his family home in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There on 29 March 1889, he gave a presentation on the Faith before the Essay Society. Later the same year, he presented two papers to consecutive meetings of the Royal Asiatic Society in London on 15 April and 17 June, 1889. The two papers were entitled "The Bábis of Persia. I. Sketch of their History, and Personal Experience amongst them" and "The Bábis of Persia II. Their Literature and Doctrines." These two papers were published in the *Journal of the Society* in July and October of the same year. (See *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne on the Bábi*

Therefore we are this year celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the first public references to the Faith in the West. These papers were also the first substantial translation of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh into English. The second paper contains parts of the *Lawh-i-Nasir*, *Suratu'l-Haykal* (including extracts from the Tablets to the Shah, the Pope, Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, the Russian Emperor, and the *Suriy-i-Ra'is*), and the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. The very first translations that the present author is aware of are the few words of the Tablet to the Pope translated by Rev. Bruce in 1874 (see *Studies in Bábi and Bahá'í History* (ed. M. Momen), vol. 1, p.63-4. The year given there is an error) Baron Victor Rosen had also published a translation of a few words of the *Suratu'l-Haykal* into French in 1877 without being aware of the identity of the Author (*Collection: Scientifiques de L'Institut des Langues Orientales; vol. 1; Les Manuscrits Arabes*, pp 198, 199).

*[The Bahá'ís of Newcastle celebrated this centenary by holding a meeting in Newcastle's Civic Centre on 24 June. In attendance were the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Councillor Terence Coney and Lady Mayoress, Councillor Isobel Coone, who were presented with two Bahá'í books: "A Crown of Beauty" and "The Promise of World Peace".*

*Dr Moman, the speaker for the evening, reviewed the life of Browne reminding the gathering that Browne's family lived in Newcastle and he, himself, is buried in Newcastle Elswick Cemetery. Dr Moman mentioned in particular the meeting Browne had with Bahá'u'lláh in 1890. Browne wrote moving of this meeting and the words spoken by Bahá'u'lláh to him are often quoted:*

*"We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of all nations; Yet they deem Us a stirrer up of strife and seditious worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religions should cease, and differences of race be annulled - What harm is there in this? Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come..."*

*The Newcastle Bahá'í community is also honoured by the fact that their city is twinned with the city of Haifa and some of the Lord Mayors of Newcastle have been to the Holy Land and visited the Shrines.]*

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XX