Mayflowers in the *Ville Lumière*: the Dawning of Bahá'í History in the European Continent[1]

Julio Savi

Against the background of the Paris of the fin de siècle and of the Belle Époque, with its magnificent intellectual and artistic efflorescence, a young American lady becomes the catalyst for the spiritual awakening of a group of early God-intoxicated believers. The paper emphasizes their human characters and the mysterious ways through which they, lovingly steered by a subtle, omnipresent and all-guiding Will, came to recognize the dawn of the new era on the European continent and on the whole world.

The nineteenth century of the Christian era was drawing to a close when a young woman from the town of Englewood, New Jersey, on the outskirts of New York City, arrived in Paris, on the banks of the Seine. Her family name was Bolles and her name was Mary Ellis(1870–1940), but she was known as May, a name evoking the thought of advanced springtime, multicolored roses, mild breezes, refreshing showers.

Randolph, her brother, had decided to study architecture and his family had chosen for him the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. Therefore in 1892–93, May, Randolph and their mother Mary Martha moved to the French capital. A subtle, omnipresent and all-guiding Will had decreed that their choice would open to the young woman a road, which would lead her to a great destiny, comprising "the priceless honor of a martyr's death" in Argentina in 1940(Shoghí Effendí, qtd. in Holley, "May Ellis Maxwell" 642), if only she would understand the true meaning of events and seize her God-given

opportunities. And through her Paris, that ancient town of material and intellectual glories, would witness the earliest dawning of a new age of light—whose fruits only the future will reveal—for the old European continent.

Paris: a magical name that—in the people of Europe, so proud of their heritage of culture and history—still evokes mixed feelings of confident admiration and consuming longing. In the *Belle Époque*(1871–1914)— an echo of whose sounds may still be enjoyed in Jacques Offenbach's(1819–1880) most renowned melodies, like his *galop infernal* known as *Cancan*—the French capital well deserved to be called *la Ville Lumière*, the City of Lights, for the blaze of its nocturnal lamps and shining minds in a continent just entering a modern age, seemingly filled with infinite promises. After 1889 the *Tour Eiffel*, with its futuristic profile of iron pillars and girders stood above the Seine with its 320 meters, a promise of future achievements, unimaginable only a few decades before. With its two and half million people, renowned *boulevards*, *quays* and *places*, intense city traffic, industrious economic and commercial activities, brilliant society life and intellectual audacity, Paris was indeed the capital of an Europe, which was in those days more than ever convinced of its invincible supremacy over the world, a supremacy which no one would ever expect to be so soon undermined.

The meaning of those days is as yet not fully grasped, possibly because the extraordinary Power that, after 1844, is mysteriously shaping the course of human history is not yet sufficiently known and understood. Unknown is the real source of the Romantic ideas of a century that, after the cloying doltishness of Arcadia and Rococo, was obscurely craving after a perfect Ideal, a century that was eager to break with a recent past, perceived as narrow and empty, and was yearning after the Infinite with impetuous thrust and adolescent blindness. The greatest minds of those years felt an irrepressible

longing for a greatness that they themselves could not define. Their intense longing brought them to an outburst of passions, whose pulse can be perceived in their sculptures, paintings, novels, poems, melodies, sometimes in their ideals of life and in their open rebellion to a widespread, dull acquiescence to the dictates of a venerable tradition by that time divested of any meaning and truth.

This enthusiastic search, which had manifold expressions in the course of the nineteenth century, was manifest in the Paris of the *fin de siècle* more than anywhere else in the Western world. In that city, Claude Debussy(1862–1918), "*le gamin de Paris* [the Paris urchin]," as Nadejda von Meck(1831–1894), Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Egeria called him(qtd. in Brockway and Weinstock, *Men of music* 529), was expressing unusual sounds and harmonies, disregarding most of the canons of European musical tradition after Bach. Edouard Manet(1832–1883) had already completed his pictorial work under the banner of "a spontaneous and lively transcription of the first glance"(Daydí, "Éduard Manet" 218), openly defying the rhetoric triumphalism of the academic official painting style upheld by the powerful *Académie de Beaux Arts* and represented by such artists as Jean-Leon Gérôme(1824–1903) and Alexandre Cabanel(1823–1889). The Impressionists—Edgar Degas(1834–1917), Claude Monet(1840–1926) and Pierre Auguste Renoir(1841–1919)—had already finished their aesthetical revolution based upon the primacy of light. They had already transfigured physical beauty into a symbol which, as earthly as it was, spoke of a spiritual dimension, which nevertheless most of them ignored in their lives. Stéphane Mallarmé(1842–1898), Paul Verlaine(1844–1896), and Arthur Rimbaud(1854–1891) had already depicted, through their verses, a world wherefrom a remote scent of Eternity is wafting. It was the Eternity that they, atheistic and immersed in a sensuous, sometimes perverted, life as they were—described in the numerous Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's(1864–1901) canvases, watercolors, prints, posters and drawings—were unconsciously seeking. Their

sensuousness was aspiring to impossible heights of material perfection and beauty. And in every height a man is struggling to scale, he fancies that he will at long last discover his real self, i.e., that same Eternity he so often wants to deny. As a nineteen-year-old Rimbaud wrote in 1873 in his *Une Saison en Enfer*(A Season in Hell):

Finally, O reason, O happiness, I cleared from the sky the blue which is darkness, and I lived as a golden spark of this light Nature. In my delight, I made my face look as comic and as wild as I could:

> It is recovered.
> What?—Eternity.
> In the whirling light
> Of the sun in the sea.
> O my eternal soul,
> Hold fast to desire
> In spite of the night
> And the day on fire.
> You must set yourself free
> From the striving of Man
> And the applause of the World
> You must fly as you can...
> —No hope forever
> No orietur.
> Science and patience,
> The torment is sure.
> The fire within you,
> Soft silken embers,
> Is our whole duty
> But no one remembers.
> It is recovered.
> What? Eternity.
> In the whirling light
> Of the sun in the sea.(< www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/poesies/Alchemy.htm >)

In this town, where peaks of knowledge, refinement, beauty and art arose above abysses of moral and spiritual decay, our young American lady was waiting for an answer to many questions stirring her heart. What was that light which, a long time before in her home in Englewood, had shined so luminous in her dream as to leave her, an

eleven years old child, blinded for a whole day? And moreover, why had those angels brought her so far through space, showing, from those remote distances, the earth overflowing with light, and upon the earth an inscription, only two letters of which—B and H—she could read? What was the meaning of those letters, which—she was absolutely certain—had a world-transforming power? And, last but not least, who was the Man—clad in a loose Oriental robe, His face framed by flowing silvery hair and a long white beard, deep blue eyes, a kind, fatherly smile—Who was calling her to Himself beyond the shores of a cerulean sea? May could not explain those strange visions, which had left a mysterious feeling in her heart. Her life could not be described as wholly happy. She was surrounded by love. Her mother and brother were fond of her. But when she was about 20 years-old she fell ill of a strange ailment that no doctor could ever diagnose and that made her body very weak. And thus she was often bedridden, her days spent in rest were long, and at the same time her spirit was thirsty, she felt an incomprehensible, unappeased yearning within her heart.

But the subtle Will—Whose Love and Loving Kindness cradle each human being even before his human parents become the joyous instruments of his entry into this privileged level of creation—was mysteriously weaving the threads of her life, so that at the right time she could change from a chrysalis into a moth through her efforts blessed by the divine confirmations. Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst(1842–1919), the affluent American philanthropist, offered to Mrs. Mary Martha Bolles her apartment on the Quay d'Orsay in Paris, "in exchange for the minor inconvenience of assisting with the management of the suite when its mistress was absent"(Hogenson, *Lighting* 58).

It was the beginning of October 1898 when one fine day Mrs. Phoebe Hearst came to Paris, with a group of friends. They were bound—she said—for Egypt, where they intended to go up the Nile. But May

was so sensitive and so keen were the instruments of her insight, that she could not fail to perceive the reflection of a mysterious fire, hidden in those hearts, especially in that of the beautiful, brown-haired, blue-eyed, ivory-skinned Lua Moore Getsinger(1871–1916), later appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá' Himself as "the Herald of the Covenant."[2]

The details of their conversations are unknown. We only know that, through the words uttered by Lua, May could at long last understand the meaning of her visions. The longing that induced others—more renowned then her today in the world—to scale the heights of art and, in their ignorance of their real Moving Power, to lose themselves in alluring meanders of sensuous and intellectual dreams, that same longing led her to the one Object of her love and to the real self-realization. She discovered the path towards the Infinite in her service to the Glory of God that had just revealed Itself to the world.

The magnanimous Phoebe Hearst could not depart and leave May on the Seine. Her longing well deserved to be satisfied. Beyond the shores of the azure Mediterranean Sea the One Who could disclose the essence of that precious soul in all its beauty was waiting for her. And Phoebe, who intended to visit Him, brought May with her.

It was the 17th of February 1899 when, at long last appeased, May met her Master and understood, because she herself experienced them, the words of Christ: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God"(Bolles, *An Early Pilgrimage* 22).

Many years later, `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about her: "that maidservant of God is ablaze with the fire of the love of God. Whosoever meets her feels from her association the susceptibilities of the Kingdom. Her company uplifts and develops the soul"("Recent Tablets" 247).[3]

Edith MacKay

A middle-aged widow, Marie-Louise MacKay, and her young daughter, Edith(1878–1959) had been living in Paris for a few years. Edith who had a beautiful voice frequented Paris's *Conservatoire*, where she "began her singing career with Madame Marie Roge of the Opera"(de Bons, "Edith de Bons" 878) and was also instructed by the French Jules Massenet(1842–1912) and the Italian Ruggero Leoncavallo(1858–1919), the composer of the opera "Pagliacci [Players, or Clowns]".

The same subtle omnipresent Will that had lovingly guided the young May kindly watched over this brown-haired, sweetly singing, girl. This Will chose a solemn day, the day that Christian tradition has associated throughout the centuries with the birth of their Savior, Christmas Day, to guide her to her predestined goal. She was 21 years-old.

That day in the house of Edith's godfather there was a party, as in all other houses. She had been invited. She had meticulously prepared herself—we can well imagine—for that happy event. She had chosen an elegant and decent dress. She had carefully fixed her hair. The roads were busy. There was a great coming and going of happy people. The air was cold and pungent. There was a Christmas smell. Edith was captured by that sweet, merry atmosphere.

> As she entered the elegant hall, brightened by Christmas decorations and enlivened by a small crowd of merry guests, a glimpse was enough for her to identify, among all, a presence that immediately took on a special meaning in her eyes. That presence was a young lady, with soft brown hair, delicate features, clear blue eyes, and a mysterious inner flame, hidden from any other eye but Edith's. "She comes from the United States," they told her. "She is here with her mother and brother, a student at the School of Architecture.

> Her name is May Ellis Bolles." A mysterious power guided Edith to the presence of the young woman. Almost unaware, Edith looked for a long time at May's crystal-clear eyes that revealed unknown depths of feelings and inner awareness, and whispered: "I believe that you have something to tell me!" "Yes," May answered in a breath. And slowly, over the course of three days, she revealed to Edith, with measured wisdom, the extraordinary secret enshrined in her heart.

Edith soon believed—the second one in Paris, after May. She did not take a long time to offer that priceless gift to her mother as well, and, together, in 1901 they themselves went to the Holy Land and sat at the feet of their newly discovered Master(see de Bons, "Edith de Bons" 878–81).

Laura Clifford Barney

Laura Clifford Barney(1879–1974) was among those children of American "good families" who came from the United States to Paris to refine their culture, attending the renowned Sorbonne University, the *École des Beaux Arts* or the *Conservatoire*, listening to concerts, visiting museums and, last but not least, frequenting the Parisian high society. Thus she and her sister Natalie(1876–1972) moved from the United States to live in a college at Fontainebleau, aux Ruches. Natalie later became playwright, novelist, poet, memoirist and epigrammatist, as well as a muse and inspiration of other writers, like her good friend, the famous French novelist Colette(1873–1954).

Laura came from a family of scholars and artists—her mother was Alice Pike Barney(1857–1931), the famous American painter, poet, writer and architect, some of whose paintings are hanging in the National Museum of Washington D.C. Gifted with a "keen

intelligence, [a] logical mind and [an] investigating nature"(Giachery, "Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney" 535), she was barely in her twenties when, about 1900, she also met the young May Ellis Bolles. Unfortunately her precious, detailed diaries, which she jealously guarded "in a mahogany secretaire" in her home in 74, rue Raynouard in Paris, were confiscated by the Gestapo during the Nazi occupation of Paris(Giachery, "Laura Dreyfus-Barney" 12). And thus we do not know her intimate experiences of those days. We can, however, imagine that her ideals of world peace, the brotherhood of man and the oneness of humankind that she—"a true pioneer in this field… at a time when the world was still geographically and politically divided and quite insensible to the call of spiritual unity"(Giachery, "Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney" 535)—strongly felt in her mind and heart even as a teen-ager, had found at last a clear expression. And after an early visit to the Master she enrolled in the new Faith. Her repeated visits to the Master "became the centre of… [her] life and inspiration" and, whenever she related their many details, "an expression of rapture and wonderment"(Giachery, "Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney" 535) appeared on her face.

We owe to her spiritual and intellectual curiosity the famous collection of utterances by `Abdu'l-Bahá known as *Some Answered Questions*. Between 1904 and 1906, during repeated visits to 'Akká, at table, in the dining room of `Abdu'lláh Pásh<u>á</u>'s House, where `Abdu'l-Bahá had transferred His residence in October 1896, the Master kindly and thoughtfully answered, in His "tired moments," as He Himself told her(quoted in Dreyfus Barney, "Introduction" v),the manifold questions which the young American lady asked on such deep topics as the origin and nature of man, his material, intellectual and spiritual powers, the origin of creation, its relationship with its Creator and many others. She carefully recorded His answers. And since she believed that what had been "so valuable" to her might "be of use to others, since all men, notwithstanding their difference, are united in their search for reality"(Dreyfus

Barney, "Introduction" vi), she later presented her notes to Him for His approval. She finally had them published in London in 1908, leaving to posterity a book "unique" in the "entire field" of "religious history"(MUH J63 282). Humankind will never be grateful enough to her for this gift, which Shoghí Effendí defined as her "imperishable service"(GPB 260). In that book the fundamental tenets of the divine philosophy of `Abdu'l-Bahá are expounded, a philosophy which will be the basis of any future philosophy in the entire world(see Giachery, "Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney" 536–7).

However, her accomplishments also included a focus on "humanitarian and social activities in her work for world peace", that she pursued with "undaunted zeal"(Giachery, "Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney" 535). As early as 23 July 1925, she was appointed *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* and in 1937 she was elevated to the rank of *Officier de la Légion d'Honneur*. Mona Khademi comments upon the life of this precious lady as follows:

> proper recognition has eluded Laura Dreyfus Barney both within the Bahá'í community as well as the world. One reason may be the lack of her diaries or memoirs. Another factor may be that she still stands in the shadow of her prominent and accomplished spouse, Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney. Yet another might be that she divided her time between two countries, which was uncommon in those days. Therefore her heroism has been lost in unexamined history.("Glimpse" 73–4)

Thomas Breakwell

Having a lucrative job in a cotton mill in the south of the United States, Thomas Breakwell(1872–1902), a cultured, refined English-born man, could afford to visit every summer his country and to take long vacations in the old Europe(see Lakshiman-Lepain, *Life of*

Thomas Breakwell). That year, 1901, he had come to Europe for other reasons, as well:

> His conscience tormented him because his employment afforded numerous opportunities to witness at first hand abuse of workers—especially the child labourers… Troubled, he had taken a leave of absence from his work and headed for Europe hoping to forget the injustices that gnawed him, by visiting his British family and touring that continent. Perhaps another more ominous reason for the journey was to seek treatment for his recurring tuberculosis.(Hogenson, *Lighting* 185)

While crossing the Channel on a boat bound to France, he met a certain Mrs. Milner. Mrs. Milner, so clever, passionate and charming for her interest in the most unusual aspects of human life, was considered by the young Thomas as a most pleasant interlocutor. Among many other things, they also discussed theosophy, the new spiritual science which for many people was only fashion, while for others it was a way of nourishing a longing for the Infinite that they could not otherwise express. The more familiar Mrs. Milner became with the young man, the more convinced she was that she should arrange a meeting for him with that young Bahá'í American lady, who lived in Paris and was so deep in her knowledge of spiritual topics, Miss May Ellis Bolles. Yes, in Paris she would arrange a meeting for them. And the unaware Thomas did not yet realize that in the French capital that young American lady would clarify certain precious feelings he had been concealing in his heart. Not so long ago, for three consecutive months, he had felt as though he was soaring through a rarefied atmosphere of love and harmony, while his heart was burning in its love for an unknown and mysterious Supreme Beauty, in peace, in perfect unity with all humankind.

In Paris May was waiting for him, albeit she was not aware. At the beginning of that summer, when Mary Martha Bolles was going to leave for the French coast of Brittany, as she did every year, for a vacation with her children, `Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had suggested that May should not follow her, that she should not leave Paris until a word came from Him. Mary Martha was so disappointed, maybe even disturbed: May was so frail, she needed sunshine and sea-air. Paris was too warm and muggy in the summer for her health. Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, the Persian believer later designated by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith as one of the nineteen "Apostles of Bahá'u'lláh," sent by `Abdu'l-Bahá to Europe so that he may deepen that early handful of believers, wrote to the Master about Mrs. Bolles's apprehensions for her daughter. But He did not change His mind. And May was inflexible in her determination to comply with His wish. Mary Martha had to give up. And Mrs. Edith Tewksbury Jackson, a wealthy American lady that had known and accepted the Faith through May, gave May hospitality in a flat connected to her luxurious residence, so that she should not remain alone. The apartment in 100 Rue du Bac, not far from the Bon Marché department store, where the Bolles had moved in June of 1899, was closed.

It was a bright summer's day. When May welcomed her newly arrived guests, she was pleasantly surprised to see Mrs. Milner, who "knew nothing of the Bahá'í teaching and had closed her ears to its message"(Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 707), accompanied by a young man, "of medium height, slender, erect and graceful, with intense eyes and an indescribable charm"(Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 707). His deep dark eyes reminded her of a "veiled light"(Maxwell, "Letter" 298). That ardent and thirsty soul was still enfolded in "the veil which is over every soul until it is rent asunder by the power of God in this day," the veils of its ignorance of God(Maxwell, "Letter" 298). They talked for a long time, touching many topics of common interest, theosophy, spirituality. And during their conversation, she studied him

with great attention, coming to consider him "a very rare person of standing and culture, simple, natural, intensely real in his attitude toward life and his fellowmen"(Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 707). May was not surprised when, saying goodbye, he asked permission to meet her again.

The day after, when Thomas came to her, his face was glowing, his voice was vibrant. His radiant soul was now unveiled, a new light shone from him. May made him comfortable. And immediately he told her of the mysterious experience he had the evening before. When he had left May's house, he had gone to the *Champs Élysées*. "The air was warm and heavy, not a leaf was stirring." And yet all of a sudden he had been invested by a gust of wind, which for a long time had continued to whirl around his body. A very sweet voice emerged from that whirl: "Christ has come again! Christ has come again!" Then the wind had died down. And a sweet peace had pervaded his heart as well. He stared at her, "with wide startled eyes"(Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 707), and asked her whether she thought he was crazy. No, it was not craziness; it was the beginning of a new wisdom. And May kindly and patiently disclosed to him the doors through which he could at long last reach that Truth that had always been in wait for him. In three days the young Thomas got rid of all previous shackles. His soul, at long last freed, dived into the boundless ocean of the Faith of God. His "veiled light" shone now in its meridian splendor. Although his life was very short, he passed away in June 1902 at the age of 30, Shoghí Effendí mentioned him, with George Townshend and John Ebenezer Esslemont, as one of "three luminaries shedding brilliant luster on annals of Irish, English and Scottish Bahá'í communities"(MBW 173). Soon a cable arrived from the Master, "You may leave Paris at any time"(Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 709). The following morning May joined her anxious mother in her vacation in Brittany(see Maxwell, "A Brief Account" 707–11).

Edith Sanderson

Edith Sanderson(1870–1955) too had come to Paris by the end of the nineteenth century. She had arrived in the French capital soon after the death of her father, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of California, together with her mother and three sisters. One of her sisters, Sybil(1864–1903), a girl of unusual beauty, was endowed with a voice of an extraordinary range(from low G to contre sol) and thus the family wanted her to study at the Paris' *Conservatoire*. In 1887 Sybil met Massenet and became his favored soprano and one of the most famous operatic sopranos during the Parisian *Belle Époque*. She debuted in Massenet's *Manon* and had enormous success in his *Thaïs* in 1894. Massenet had written for her the title role. The French composer also dedicated to her two of his celebrated *Mélodies* [Songs], "Pensée d'automne [Autumn Thought]" after a poem by Armand Silvestre(1887) and "Beaux yeux que j'aime [Beautiful eyes which I love]" after a poem by Thérèse Maquet(1891).

Edith met May in 1901 and soon accepted the Faith. From that moment on she devoted all her qualities to the diffusion of the Bahá'í message. The Master used to call her "My daughter." Although "fragile in appearance," she had an exceptional willpower. She studied the Writings in depth and, in her love for the holy Word, she became conversant in Persian. Her spiritual sensitivity, her love for nature—flowers, trees, the sea, the beauty of the clouds—the "rarified atmosphere" that surrounded her made of her a point of attraction for many seekers of truth. She was in touch with famous personalities of her time, like the French scholar Louis Alphonse Daniel Nicolas(1864–1939), an authority on the Bábí movement, the Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin(1881–1955) and Simone Weil(1909–1943), the French philosopher and mystic, and "groups who were interested in social and spiritual questions"(Dreyfus Barney, "Edith Sanderson" 889).

Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney

The Sandersons were the instruments through which that same Will, Who was lovingly taking care of those early Bahá'í lights in the old European continent, presented Hippolyte Isidore Dreyfus(1873–1928) with the opportunity of fulfilling his high spiritual destiny: "kindling the torch which is destined to shed eternal illumination upon his native land and its people"(Shoghí Effendí, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney" 210). They were women of great charm: beautiful, clever, cultured, refined and gifted with a rare spirituality. Hippolyte Dreyfus was "strong in appreciation of life and all that it has to offer… a well balanced and independent person"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"), who "combined a rare sweetness of nature with great firmness and strength"(Maxwell, "Hippolyte Dreyfus Barney" 27) and inspired "confidence with his frankness"(Natalie Clifford Barney, qtd. in *Hippolyte Dreyfus*, sec. 7). An "agnostic"(Maxwell, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney" 26) in those days, when he was still preparing himself for his future life, he was gifted with a "questing mind" that "led him onward to ever-vaster horizons," with a "generous heart" that enabled him to "understand the difficulties of human life and to be close to people"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney") and with the "rare quality of being more interested in others than in himself"(ibid.). Thus he also felt in the depth of his heart that something else exists beyond material life. And, like many others of his generation, this feeling initially drew him towards occult sciences; however, occult sciences disappointed him.[4]

Hippolyte met the Sandersons in the summer of 1900 in the salon of his mother, Lea Marie Sophie Inés Cardozo Meyer(1848–1913), who "used to give musicales frequented by people of taste, including many artists"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"). At that time Sybil Sanderson was a well-known singer of Paris' Opera. The Sandersons and Hippolyte, we can well imagine, felt an immediate and reciprocal attraction. Thus the American ladies could not refrain

from introducing him to the person whom they, like the entire group of their "Parisian" friends in love with the new Faith, considered as their "spiritual guide, who started the Baha'i group in France"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"), May Ellis Bolles.

Born into a well-known French Jewish family—his father Georges Arthur Lucien(1840–1911) was a wealthy stock-broker—Hippolyte "had all the advantages that could be obtained from a happy home and from an intellectual and artistic center such as Paris at the height of its culture"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"). He "liked both thought and action. He could sit at his desk and translate and read all day and late into the night. Or he could go for a swim or horseback ride with friends or alone"(ibid.). His sister-in-law Natalie Clifford Barney said about him: "He loved good eating… He liked riding through the woods of St. Cloud or St. Cucupha. He could make tractable, even gentle, the worst horse. He was a marvelous swimmer"(qtd. in *Hippolyte Dreyfus*, sec. 7). Surrounded by "the whirl of a Parisian life" as he was, his sincere altruism and love for his fellow-human beings lead him to found, together with a friend, "a welfare society for home visiting," the *Société des Visiteurs*, and to be "untiring in his support of those who had so little of that of which he had so much"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"). Thus, the words which the ardent May told him could but immediately attract him. Hippolyte used to speak little of himself and of the past. Therefore we do not know the details of their conversation. The only thing we know is that very soon he accepted that Faith, which he had already met through the writings of such distinguished French scholars, as Huart Clément, Count Joseph Arture de Gobineau, Louis Alphonse Daniel Nicolas and Joseph Ernest Renan(see Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"). Now he finally also met, on the one hand, its soul-transforming power and, on the other, its revolutionizing principles, first among them oneness in its threefold expression: "There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one"(ABL 19). The young Hippolyte took at once the

opportunity that a generous Destiny was offering to him. And in that group of American expatriates he became the first French Bahá'í. As May Bolles wrote about him: "Although he had never believed in any force transcending nature, nor had he received intimations of the possible existence of a Supreme Being, yet after hearing of the advent of Baha'u'llah his inner susceptibilities became unfolded"("Hippolyte Dreyfus Barney" 26). About ten years later, in London, at the end of "a remarkable cosmopolitan gathering… [that] filled the large ball at the Westminster Palace Hotel, Friday evening, December 20th [1912], to listen to an address by Abdul Baha"(Fraser, "Abdul Baha in London" 5) on the topic of peace, he himself said as part of his concise closing remarks:

> everything in the world manifests God to a greater or less degree. We can find the divine in the beautiful melodies that are sung by the birds in the forests, the divine in nature, but we find it specially in man, who is at the summit of creation, and especially in those supreme beings who are called the prophets. It is in understanding their teaching that we can reach the knowledge of God.(qtd. in Fraser, "Abdul Baha in London" 10)

After May had acquainted him with the Bahá'í message, he straight away addressed a letter to `Abdu'l-Bahá: he was determined to devote his whole life and his talents to the achievement of the ideal his newly-found Faith had revealed to him. Soon after, in 1902, he left together with his friend Sydney Sprague(1875–1943) for Haifa to meet the Master. And after a second visit to `Abdu'l-Bahá in 1903 he "gave up his legal career"(Bilani, "Hippolyte Dreyfus"), as "the secretary of one of the most prominent barristers in France"(Dreyfus-Barney, "Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney"), and decided "to devote himself to oriental studies, enrolling in the religious-studies section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, where he studied Arabic and Persian with Hartwig Derenbourg and Clément Huart"(Bilani,

"Hippolyte Dreyfus"). It was thus that he became "the only Western Bahai of his generation who received such formal training"(ibid.).

Very soon Hippolyte's father and mother, his sister, Yvonne Mayer-May, and his brother-in-law, Paul Meyer-May, also joined the Cause. Laura Dreyfus-Barney writes that "their gracious home was a center for inquirers and followers. Their summer house, 'Daru'l-Salam' on Mont Pelèrin, Switzerland, was also open wide to people of many lands and many beliefs"("Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney").

Thus began the unique spiritual adventure of the first French Bahá'í, who, in Shoghí Effendí's words, "by his brilliant gifts of mind and heart as well as by the divers achievements of his life, has truly enriched the annals of God's immortal Faith"("Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney" 210). Active in the defense of the Faith in its earliest days—in 1902 he met, together with Lua Getsinger, the Shah of Persia to plead the cause of the persecuted Bahá'ís in Iran—a travel teacher in Burma and India with his friend Sidney Sprague as early as 1904(see Sprague, *Year*), he was among the first translators in a Western language of the Bahá'í Writings, such as the Aqdas, the Íqán, the Súrih of the Temple, the Súratu'l-Bayán(not yet wholly authoritatively translated), the Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá, and the celebrated *Leçons de St Jean d'Acre*(known in English as *Some Answered Questions*). It was while translating this latter book into French together with Laura Clifford Barney that the two, who had been close friends for several years, discovered their reciprocal love. In 1910 they married and he added her surname to his own, changing it into "Dreyfus-Barney."

As early as 26 October 1903, just at the beginning of Hippolyte's Bahá'í career, `Abdu'l-Bahá had written about him:

> As to Dreyfus, in truth he is a bird among the birds of Paradise. Very soon such melodies shall appear from him as the

> souls will be amazed and God will make him a propagator of His breezes in those regions.(qtd. in *Hippolyte Dreyfus*, sec. 12)

And on 21 December 1928, shortly after his passing Shoghí Effendí penned the following words in a private letter to Laura Dreyfus-Barney, Hippolyte's his widow:

> None, I can confidently assert, among the Bahá'ís of the East and of the West, combined to the extent that he did the qualities of genial and enlivening fellowship, of intimate acquaintance with the manifold aspects of the Cause, of sound judgment and distinctive ability, of close familiarity with the problems and conditions of the world—all of which made him such a lovable, esteemed and useful collaborator and friend.(21 December 1928, to Laura Khanum)

On the same day Shoghí Effendí wrote to the Bahá'í world:

> His gifts of unfailing sympathy and penetrating insight, his wide knowledge and mature experience, all of which he utilized for the glory and propagation of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, will be gratefully remembered by future generations who, as the days go by, will better estimate the abiding value of the responsibilities he shouldered for the introduction and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith in the Western world.("Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney" 210)

Agnes Baldwin Alexander

Although this spring flower of the Faith did not bloom in Paris, she deserves to be mentioned here because of the close friendship that bound her to that Parisian group of God-intoxicated believers. Agnes

Baldwin Alexander(1875–1971) was born in the Hawaii Islands on the 21st of July 1875, from a family of deep faith who in 1831 went to those remote Pacific islands as Christian missionaries and was 25 years old when she left the country where she was born bound for the old European continent. In autumn 1900, in Rome, where she had gone to visit an aunt who had married an Italian gentleman, the benign, omnipresent Will had prepared for her an opportunity, which, if but she would seize it, as she did, would completely change the course of her earthly and spiritual life.

When she arrived in Rome, she settled in a *pensione* at 57 Via Sistina, just a stone's throw from *Trinità dei Monti*, where she met an American lady, with her two daughters. She immediately felt a strange fascination for that unknown lady. Grown up as she had on a remote island, very far from the European continent, Agnes was very shy. However, so strong was the attraction she felt toward that lady, that she managed to overcome her own bashfulness and to approach her, so that she may come to know her better. She herself said about that meeting with that American lady and her two daughters:

> Across the long table in the dining-room I saw them. They seemed to have a radiance and happiness different from others and I could hardly take my eyes from them. A few days later as I sat in the parlor I overheard the mother in conversation with a lady who had heard in Paris of the Baha'i Message from Mr. Mason Remey. Little did I comprehend what it was they were talking about, but my heart was stirred and the realization came to me that it was the Truth.(Linard, *Autobiographical Materials*, see also Alexander, "Comment je devins baha'i")

The opportunity to talk to her arose when Agnes met them in the elevator. Agnes took the hand of the unknown lady in hers and told her: "You hide a secret, share it with me." The lady, not at all

surprised by her words, answered that they could meet after dinner, in the back parlor.

She told Agnes that her name was Charlotte Emily Brittingham Dixon(1852–1920 c.). She did not mention that she was a descendant from one of the oldest families of European settlers in New England and had accepted the Bahá'í Faith in 1897. For the whole evening she pleasantly entertained Agnes, touching on several arguments. While saying goodbye, Mrs. Dixon gave her a small sheet of paper, with a short hand-written prayer. When Agnes was alone in her room, she eagerly read it. "It answered all the longings of my heart," she said later, speaking of that script. They had arranged to meet the evening of the day after. Agnes went to the meeting-place in great expectation. But the secret was not yet revealed. Nothing happened for three subsequent evenings. Every night, Agnes retired to her room, a prey of such emotions that made her sleepless. It was the night of the 26th of November 1900, when, unable to rest in her anxiety, she suddenly felt within herself the certitude that Mrs. Dixon's mystery was that Christ had returned to earth.

Next morning, as soon as she got up, she immediately went to Mrs. Dixon to share her new insight with her. Mrs. Dixon then felt finally free to speak openly of Bahá'u'lláh, of `Abdu'l-Bahá, of the Bahá'í Faith—she had just arrived from the Holy Land where she had met the Master. And Agnes immediately promised her enduring allegiance to that Faith.

When Mrs. Dixon left Rome, Agnes remained alone. No one was willing to share her enthusiasm for the Faith she had just discovered. She often met indifference, sometimes indignation and even hostility. Mrs. Dixon had given her the address of an American believer who lived in Paris. Agnes wrote to this person. The letter she received in answer said among other things: "Please God we may soon welcome you in our midst in Paris and that you may then receive the

full Revelation, and much help and instruction"(quoted in Linard, *Autobiographical Materials*, see also Alexander, "Comment je devins baha'i"). In March 1901 Agnes went to the French capital, where in 100 Rue du Bac she finally met that long-awaited friend, May Ellis Bolles, who appeared to her as an angel of light "filled with a consuming love which the Master said was divine"(ibid.)

May introduced her into the hall where the Bahá'í friends in Paris—Laura Barney, Thomas Breakwell, Hippolyte Dreyfus, Emogene Hoagg, Herbert Hopper, Marion Jack, Edith MacKay, Edith Sanderson, Sidney Sprague and others, most of them expatriates—gathered for their meetings. She saw faces beaming with peace and light and light was everywhere in that blessed hall. She said: "Such an atmosphere of pure light pervaded… that one was transported, as it were, from the world of man to that of God"(*Personal Recollections* 8). Later on `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about those friends: "All men are asleep; you are awake. All eyes are blind; yours are seeing. All ears are deaf; your hearing is clear. All tongues are mute; you are eloquent. All humanity is dead; and you are full of life, vigor and force through the benefits of the Holy Spirit"(qtd. in de Bons, "Edith de Bons" 878–79, see Marsella, "Agnes Baldwin Alexander" 423–30).

In June 1901 she received in Paris a Tablet from `Abdu'l-Bahá. It said:

> Be… a divine bird, proceed to thy native country, spread the wings of sanctity over those spots and sing and chant and celebrate the Name of thy Lord, that thou mayest gladden the Supreme Concourse and make the seeking souls hasten unto thee as the moths hasten to the lamp, and thus illumine that distant country by the Light of God.(quoted in Linard, *Autobiographical Materials*, see also Alexander, "Comment je devins baha'i")

Responsive to His call, on the 26th of December 1901 she returned home to Hawaii. Her life had been completely changed. That shy girl had already become a great teacher of this modern message of oneness and peace, a person whom the Guardian would choose, on the 27th of March 1957, as one of the Hands of the Cause of God.

***

It was late 1902 when May, married now to the Canadian architect William Sutherland Maxwell(1874–1951)—who later was honored with seeing his project for the marble superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel realized—left Paris and moved to Montreal, Canada.[5]

Today—as to its spiritual life—Paris is still as the Master described it, *"silent… exceedingly dispirited and is in a state of torpor"*(SWAB 102–3). As `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, *"although the French nation is an active and lively one… the world of nature hath fully stretched its pavilion over Paris and hath done away with religious sentiments"*(SWAB 102–3). And yet, as He wrote, a day will come when the *"power of the Covenant shall heat every freezing soul, shall bestow light upon everything that is dark and shall secure for the captive in the hand of nature the true freedom of the Kingdom"*(SWAB 102–3). On that day the deep meaning of these short stories will become manifest. And the European continent—

> which has been the cradle of a civilization to some of whose beneficent features the pen of Bahá'u'lláh has paid significant tribute; on whose soil both the Greek and Roman civilizations were born and flourished; which has contributed so richly to the unfoldment of American civilization; the fountainhead of American culture; the mother of Christendom, and the scene of the greatest exploits of the followers of Jesus

> Christ; in some of whose outlying territories have been won some of the most resplendent victories which ushered in the Golden Age of Islam; which sustained, in its very heart, the violent impact of the onrushing hosts of that Faith, intent on the subjugation of its cities, but which refused to bend the knee to its invaders, and succeeded in the end in repulsing their assault(CF 26)

—this continent will be able to bequest the most precious legacy of his ancient civilization to the whole world. It is not the materialistic and unspiritual civilization, that seems today on the point of invading the whole world, but the fruit of the spiritual vivification of its unquenchable and fearless spirit of search that has always characterized it from the time when the legendary Ulysses crossed the Pillars of Hercules.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

`Abdu'l-Bahá.

`Abdu'l-Bahá in London. Addresses and notes of Conversations. Rpt. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.

"Recent Tablets from Abdul Baha to American Bahais," *Star of the West* 10.13 [4 November 1919]:247).

Selections from the Writings(Roma: Casa Editrice Bahá'í, 1985)

Some Answered Questions. Collected and Translated from the Persian of `Abdu'l-Bahá by Laura Clifford Barney. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 4th ed. 1954.

The Bahá'í World. An International Record(Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust).

Alexander Baldwin, Agnes.

"Comment je devins baha'i. Mes séjour à Paris. Exposé rédigé par Main de La Cause Agnes-Baldwin Alexander à la requête de Madame L. Dreyfus-Barney. 1958," in Journal Bahá'í 2.17(April 1959): 9–10 and *Journal Bahá'í* 2.18(April 1959): 8–9.

Personal Recollections of a Baha'i Life in the Hawaiian Islands. Honolulu: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the Hawaiian Islands, 1974.

Bilani, Ravian. "Hippolyte Dreyfus." In *Iranian.Com*, < http://www.iranian.com/main/blog/ravian-bilani/hippolyte-dreyfus >.

Brockway, Wallace & Herbert Weinstock. *Men of music; their lives, times, and achievements*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950. Ninth printing revised and enlarged edition, Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.

Daydí, Marçal Olivar. "Éduard Manet," in *Storia dell'arte* 8: 205–225.

de Bons, Mona Haenni. "Edith de Bons, 1878–1959, and Joseph de Bons, 1871–1959," in *Bahá'í World* 13 [1954–1963]:878.

Dreyfus Barney, Laura.

"Edith Sanderson," in *Bahá'í World* 13 [1954–1963]:889.

"Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney. Article for *The Baha'i World*." Unpublished. < http://bahai-library.com/essays/barney.html >.

"Introduction to first edition," in `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* v–vi.

Fraser, Isabel. "Abdul Baha in London." *Star of the West* 3.17(19 January 1913): 5–10.

Giachery, Ugo R.

"Laura Clifford Dreyfus-Barney," in *Bahá'í World* 16 [1973–1976]:535.

"Laura Dreyfus-Barney." Unpublished. National Archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of France.

Hippolyte Dreyfus, apôtre d`Abdu'l-Bahá. Premier bahá'í français. Sa vie, son oeuvre. Publié par l'Assemblée Spirituelle Nationale des Bahá'ís de France. Rédigé par le comité pour l'histoire de la foi bahá'íe en France. Armindo PEDRO, Pascale et Eric Louvet. < http://www.bahai-biblio.org/centre-doc/ouvrage/dreyfus/dreyfus_sommaire.htm >.

Hogeson, Kathryn Jewett. Lighting the Western Sky. The Hearst Pilgrimage and the Establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the West. Oxford: George Ronald, 2010.

Holley, Marion. "May Ellis Maxwell," in *Bahá'í World* 8 [1938–1940]:631–42.

Journal Bahá'í. Publié par l'Assemblée Spirituelle Nationale des Bahá'ís de France. Destiné uniquement aux Bahais. Paris: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of France, 1958–.

Khademi, Mona. "A Glimpse into the Life of Laura Dreyfus-Barney," in Lights of ''Irfán 10(2009): 72–105.

Maxwell, May(Bolles).

An Early Pilgrimage. Oxford: George Ronald, 1953.

"A Brief Account of Thomas Breakwell," in *Bahá'í World* 7 [1936–1938]:707–11.

"Hippolyte Dreyfus Barney. The Passing of a Baha'i Scholar and Lecturer" *Star of the West* 20.1(29 April 1929): 26–7.

"Letter from Mrs. May Maxwell to Mr. Charles Mason Remey," in *Star of the West* 5.19 [2 March 1915]: 298.

Lakshiman-Lepain, Rajwantee. *The Life of Thomas Breakwell*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1998.

Linard, Thomas. Ed. *Autobiographical Materials of Agnes Alexander*(http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/notes/alexand.htm).

Marsella, Elena Maria. "Agnes Baldwin Alexander: 1875–1971," in Bahá'í World 15 [1968–1973]:423–30 [BWC 1976].

Rimbaud, Arthur. "Finally, O reason, O happiness. . . ," as translated by Paul Schmidt, and published in 1976 by Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row(Arthur Rimbaud. *Complete Works*. Translated by Paul Schmidt. Scranton, Pennsylvania: Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, 1976). Document resulting from the site Arthur Rimbaud-Mag4.net: Biography and Poetry, at < www. mag4.net/Rimbaud >.

Shoghí Effendí.

Bahá'í Administration. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publihing Committe, 1953.

Citadel of Faith. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970.

God Passes By. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957.

"Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney. An Appreciation." *The Bahá'í World* 1928–1830. Vol. 3(Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1930) 210, 214. See also *Bahá'í Administration* 157–9.

Messages to America. Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America 1932–1946. Wilmette, Illinois, USA, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947.

Messages to the Bahá'í World: 1950–1957. Wilmette, Illinois, USA, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971.

21 December 1928, to Laura Khanum. Unpublished. French National Archives.

Sprague, Sidney. *A Year with the Bahais in India and Burma*. London: The Priory Press, 1908.

Star of the West. An early Bahá'í magazine. Oxford: George Ronald, 1978, reprint.

Storia dell'arte. Novara: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1978.

Thompson, Juliet. *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983.

Universal House of Justice, *The. Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986: the Third Epoch of the Formative Age*. Compiled by Geoffry W. Marks. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986.

NOTES

1 The author thanks Ms. Leïla Mesbah Sabéran and Ms. Parivash Ardei-Amini, archivist of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of France, for their precious assistance in finding documents relating to Hippolyte and Laura Dreyfus Barney and Agnes Baldwin Alexander.

2 See Shoghí Effendí, *Messages to America* 58 and Thompson, Diary 313.

3 See Holley, "May Ellis Maxwell" 631–42.

4 See Jean Lefranc, "Le Temps" 3 November 1911, qtd. in *Hippolyte Dreyfus*, sec. 3

5 See Holley "May Ellis Maxwell" 631–42.