

GEORGE TOWNSHEND



To Bahá'u'lláh

Only beloved! With a heart on fire
And all my longings set in one desire
To make my soul a many-stringed lyre
 For Thy dear hand to play,
I bend beneath Thy mercy-seat and pray
That in the strength of perfect love I may
Tread with firm feet the red and mystic way
 Whereto my hopes aspire.

I have forgotten all for love of Thee
And ask no other joy from destiny
Than to be rapt within Thy unity
 And—whatso'er befall—

To hear no voice on earth but Thy sweet call,
To walk among Thy people as Thy thrall
And see Thy beauty breathing throughout all
Eternal ecstasy.

Lead me forth, Lord, amid the wide world's ways,
To bear to Thee my witness and to raise
The dawn song of the breaking day of days.

Make my whole life one flame
Of sacrificial deeds that shall proclaim
The new-born glory of Thy ancient name;
And let my death lift higher yet the same
Triumphal chant of praise!

George Townshend, circa 1924

No other words are worthy to describe, or indeed can convey an image of, the all-consuming, ever-burning fire of devotion that dominated, governed and so remarkably sustained my father's life. Driven always by a restless urge to seek, to study and later to proclaim the Day of God, he seems not to have known real contentment nor, despite the tributes paid to him, to have realised what he had done or been aware that his prayer was granted. His great humility blinded him to his achievements. He saw only unattainable goals ahead.

Born in Dublin, where his father was a well-known figure and had a large family, he won a scholarship to Uppingham School and two exhibitions to Hertford College, Oxford, where he was awarded his half-Blue for long distance running and was graduated in Classics in 1899. In 1903 he was called to the Irish Bar, having served for some time as leader writer on the staff of the *Irish Times*.

He was troubled, however, by a feeling of restlessness and dissatisfaction, and his father having offered to send him to any country of his choice, he arrived in Provo, Utah, in the Rocky Mountains in 1904. Here he worked as a missionary among the Mormons, initiating a movement for the building of a church, and was ordained a priest in 1906. Four years later he joined the staff of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, as Assistant-Director of the University Extension Department, and in 1912 was appointed Assistant-Professor of English.

In the summer of 1916, after he had experienced a strange conviction that he was going to leave America, all his holiday plans fell suddenly through and he decided to come home.

My father stood on deck on the early July morning to take in the scene as the boat, driving westward, approached the harbour in Dublin Bay. Before he reached home he had decided that America, whose nationality he had embraced and where his possessions remained, would claim him no more. In the autumn he undertook the duties of a curate at Booterstown, County Dublin.

The Hill of Howth, with its seagulls, the scene of earlier holidays, had symbolized Ireland in my father's mind while he had been away, and it was Howth he chose for his first holiday after his return. On one of his first days there — it was July again — there reached him, from a friend in America, one or two pamphlets containing some words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and as he himself expressed it, "When I looked at those, that was the beginning and the end with me."

*"To his honour Mr. George Townshend, Galway, Ireland;
Upon him be greeting and praise.*

He is God!

"O thou who art thirsty for the fountain of Truth!

"Thy letter was received and the account of thy life has been known. Praise be to God that thou hast ever, like unto the nightingale, sought the divine rose garden and like unto the verdure of the meadow yearned for the outpourings of the cloud of guidance. That is why thou hast been transferred from one condition to another until ultimately thou hast attained unto the fountain of Truth, hast illuminated thy sight, hast revived and animated thy heart, hast chanted verses of guidance and hast turned thy face toward the enkindled fire on the Mount of Sinai.

"At present, I pray on thy behalf . . . Upon thee be Bahá'u'l-Abhá.

(Signed)—'Abdu'l-Baha 'Abbas" July 24, 1919.

Translated by Shoghi Rabbani

To 'Abdu'l-Baha *

Hail to Thee, Scion of Glory. . .

Thy words are to me as fragrance born from the garden of heaven,
Beams of a lamp that is hid in the height of a holier world . . . Lo, Thou hast breathed on my sorrows the sweetness of faith and of hope,

Thou hast chanted high paeans of joy that my heart's echoes ever repeat,
And the path to the knowledge of God begins to glimmer and ope before my faltering feet.
George Townshend

* The entire poem appears in *The Mission of Bahá'u'lláh*, published by George Ronald, 1952.

*"His honour the Rev. George Townshend, Ireland.
Unto him be Bahá'u'lláh-el Abhá!*

He is God!

"O Thou illumined soul and revered personage in the kingdom!

" Your letter has been received. Every word indicated the progress and upliftment of thy spirit and conscience. These heavenly susceptibilities of yours form a magnet which attracts the confirmation of the Kingdom of God; and so the doors of the realities and meanings will be open unto you, and the confirmations of the Kingdom of God will envelop you...

"It is my hope that your church will come under the Heavenly Jerusalem. ...

"Unto thee be the glory of Abhá!
(Signed)—'Abdu'l-Baha 'Abbás."

Dec. 19, 1920.

Translated by Lutfulláh S. Hakim

In January, 1919, within a year of his marriage, my father had taken up residence as Rector of Ahascragh (ford of the sandhills), County Galway, a country parish in the west of Ireland where a large Georgian-built rectory looked out over a lawn surrounded by beech trees. Soon after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá he wrote: "While I see in bold outline the forces and methods at work and constantly forecast how the attack — onrush — and victory of the upwelling and descending powers will be achieved, I am drawn to wonder how in particular these legions of the Unseen will make their activity manifest in Ireland and also in this Church (as in others). I consider what may be my part, as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Baha. . ." At present, it seemed to him, the preparation lay in working among the people entrusted to him, and he continued to be a loyal servant of the Church.

He was elected, one of eight of all Ireland, a Canon of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, by his fellow clergy, by some of whom he came to be regarded as the best preacher in the Church of Ireland. After he became Archdeacon of Clonfert (also in 1933) the honour of a bishopric was twice suggested to him, but he declined to let his name go forward.

Meantime, after nine years' study of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, he published in 1926 a book of prayers and meditations entitled *The Altar on the Hearth* and sent a copy to the Guardian who wrote: "The enclosures you have sent me I will treasure, particularly the little book which I conceive as an exquisite expression of lofty thoughts impregnated throughout with the Baha'i Spirit." Some of the contents reappeared in *The Mission of Bahá'u'lláh*, a miscellany of his writings published in 1952.

Ten years later, after publicly identifying himself with the Faith — a decision inadvertently thrust on him at short notice — at the World Congress of Faiths in London, he declared to the Guardian his eagerness to leave the Church and devote his energies to the service of Bahá'u'lláh. Eleven restless years, however, were to pass before this wish was fulfilled.

Before long my father became absorbed in his next book *The Heart of the Gospel* (1939), *The Promise of All Ages* having appeared under a pseudonym in 1934, and would speak of it in enthusiastic terms in reply to my inquiries on my return from school.

While Germany over-ran Europe in 1940 he concluded a sermon on world perplexities by saying that he personally had found no answer to the problems of the modern world except that given by Bahá'u'lláh, the sound of Whose Name I can still hear as it was uttered by my father's voice that day amid the echoes of the great cathedral of the pioneer of Christianity in Ireland.

The following is recorded in his own hand: "Tuesday eveg. Nov. 3rd. 1942 at 8.30 [in a room at the Rectory] Nancy, Una and I conjointly presented the Message to. ..., a total party of nine. The Message was well received and all went away taking Baha'i literature and promising to come next week and bring friends."

When it is remembered that my father, who for years wrote for the Church of Ireland *Gazette*, had also formed a Clerical Union in which the local clergy would meet informally each month in a hotel in Ballinasloe and each in turn prepare and read a paper on a topic of interest, it is clear that while he remained in it he did all he could do to bring his church "under the heavenly Jerusalem."

Haifa, July 7, 1947,

"Dear and valued co-worker:

I am thrilled by the news of your resignation — a truly remarkable and historic step. Your past and notable services, . . . your bold and challenging act at present in dissociating yourself from the Church and its creed, to accomplish better the purpose of that Church, and your subsequent resolve to pioneer in Dublin and help in establishing the administrative basis of the Baha'i New World Order in Ireland are deeds that history will record and for which future generations will be deeply grateful and will extol and admire. ..

Your true and grateful brother, Shoghi."

My father's first experience of taking part in Baha'i teaching and administrative activities came after thirty years of purely academic study and contributed greatly, as he said, to the development of his thought.

A statement which, under the title "The Old Churches and the New World Faith," he now addressed to all Christian people on the relationship of the Baha'i Faith to Christianity, was circulated to 10,000 leaders of thought in the British Isles. A copy was sent to the Bishop of Utah, where he was ordained, with a letter relinquishing his American Orders:

". .. My motive is to be loyal to Christ as I know Him and to give to His Church the best service which in the special circumstances I have to offer. It is my settled conviction that the Glad Tidings brought by the Prophet of Persia, Bahá'u'lláh, represent the promised return of Christ; that Christ is and has ever been through all our difficulties in our midst though we have recognised Him not; that the Christian Churches in recent years have missed their way, and have lost their hold on human

hearts because they are out of touch with their Lord; and that the path back to Him and to His Father lies wide open before them though they have not chosen to walk in it. I feel I must make any sacrifice in order to be free to help in transmitting to my fellow-Christians a Message which presents the one and only hope of respiritualising mankind and rebuilding the social order. . ."

Archdeacon Bulkley replied:

"Dear Townshend,

Bishop Moulton has just turned over to me as Secretary of the Convocation of Utah two of your letters asking for deposition. . . As an old fellow-worker with you in Utah I wish to state my confidence in you and your conscientious withdrawal from our Church to accomplish better the purpose of that Church. God be with you and bring you happiness in success."

At the same time he produced a compilation for the Wisdom of the East Series, *The Glad Tidings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Booklets, articles and contributions made over many years to Baha'i publications remain to be collected and enumerated. His witness to Bahá'u'lláh seemed indeed to have travelled through the wide world, where many who had never met him, and even whom he did not know, felt a sense of personal gratitude towards him and would speak of him with the greatest tenderness and affection. Some fulfilled a wish and came to see him, greatly treasuring the memory of their visit. "There radiated from him such a penetrating love," says a letter that has come from Bermuda, "that one was immediately at ease. He seemed to understand so much so quickly. His love seemed to see into one's inmost spirit. He was unforgettable in the extreme." Fresh signs of the believers' regard for him were continually appearing, and it became clear that in the hearts of more than a few he was already numbered among those — how many? — who can truly say, and by their lives proclaim, "I have forgotten all for love of Thee."

He suffered more and more from a sense of loneliness, and as this feeling found no adequate solace, inhibitions and infirmities began to grow upon him, though when it was possible to make him happy they could almost disappear.

He was one of the first to be appointed a Hand of the Cause during his lifetime, in December, 1951, and his presence at national gatherings, which included five summer schools, came to be greatly valued. He would hold a well-attended study class and help with the program of morning lectures, as well as take a full part in the life of the school. His last attendance was the Intercontinental Conference at Stockholm in July, 1953. Thereafter, while he always hoped for recovery, he continued to inspire the friends, as he had always done in individual letters, by messages addressed to the various conferences and schools.

He was past his seventy-eighth birthday when he began a version of his last great work, *Christ and Bahá'u'lláh*, which his continually developing illness did not later compel him to abandon. By this time, however, he could speak and write only with difficulty, and this difficulty

increased as the months went by. Near the end he seemed to be retaining and working out in his head whole portions of the book, or even the whole book, and then condensing it in his head into lengths he would be able to dictate, which he then, it was clear, memorised, fighting all the time a battle against his steadily failing strength. Without this great determination of my father's to give it to mankind, this highly valued work would not be ours to-day.

And yet in many ways the most lingering, the most remarkable, the most worthy of his achievements, to me at least, was his reaction to his own infirmities and, particularly during his last years, the influence one felt from his presence on entering his room. While he sat there, he was conscious, from his deeper understanding, that he had much of unique value and real urgency to proclaim, for which eager hearts were waiting; and, though burning with desire to serve mankind, he was denied, without hope expressed of his recovery, all means of adequate communication of his thoughts. Yet he shed around him a gentle, benign radiance which conveyed comfort and cheer and affected all about him. Surely his soul was now a lyre on which the hand of the Almighty played. A Persian student, the last stranger to visit him, has said he will never forget how my father, from his bed, waved, and waved again, as the younger man withdrew, reluctantly, through the door. And while his presence made this unforgettable impression, elsewhere, in the words of the Bermuda correspondent, "His name mentioned at a convention immediately caused a cathedral stillness."

As I look back on this time now and ponder his obvious, though not physical, sufferings, I am made to think of some of the words Bahá'u'lláh has written:

"O Son of being! Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. . ."

"O Son of Man! For everything there is a sign. The sign of love is fortitude under My decree and patience under My trials."

"O Son of Man! Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink of light upon the tablet of thy spirit. . ."

On hearing of the passing, on March 25, 1957, of George Townshend, Hand of the Cause of God, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith telegraphed:

"Deeply mourn passing dearly loved, much admired, greatly gifted, outstanding Hand Cause George Townshend. His death morrow publication his crowning achievement robs British followers Bahá'u'lláh their most distinguished collaborator and Faith itself one of its stoutest defenders. His sterling qualities, his scholarship, his challenging writings, his high ecclesiastical position unrivalled any Baha'i Western world, entitle him rank with Thomas Breakwell, Dr. Esslemont, one of three luminaries shedding brilliant lustre annals Irish, English, Scottish Baha'i communities. His fearless championship Cause he loved so dearly, served so valiantly, constitutes significant landmark British Baha'i history. So enviable position calls for national tribute his memory by assembled delegates, visitors, forthcoming British Baha'i Convention. Assure relatives deepest loving sympathy

grievous loss. Confident his reward inestimable Abhá Kingdom."

His fellow Hands of the Cause have paid their tributes:

"The passing of our dear revered great friend has deeply moved my heart. Let us endeavor to feel and see merely his radiant soul, his lofty station, his splendid example, his everlasting love."

"I shall never forget him and he will always rank among my most intimate dear ones."

"Dear George Townshend's sweet smiles and kindness will remain in my heart for all my life."

These words testify, along with the others, to an imperishable quality of his pure, kindly and radiant heart.

Close to Ireland's capital a gently rising hill dominates the city and the landlocked bay. Across the water lies the Hill of Howth. On its northeast side a tree-lined avenue, where my father held his first appointment in the Church of Ireland, runs in a straight line to the sea. Near the summit, to the northwest, stands the bungalow where he spent his years of unfettered service to the Cause; where, on his desk, the assembled friends signed the declaration of the first Spiritual Assembly in the land. Away to the south rises the dignified outline of Slieve Cualin, the most distinguishable peak alike from sea and land, standing over the village (Enniskerry — the rugged ford), where my father was welcomed on his return from across the Atlantic. Now, beneath this mountain, my father lies buried, while in the churchyard around him continue sounds of nature which he knew while he lived in the West.

The burial service, attended, at short notice, by seventeen persons, was conducted through church precincts, according to the requirements of the Baha'i Faith, blending the customs of the followers, not yet united, of Christ and Bahá'u'lláh. Memorial meetings were held in local communities and in the London Hazíratu'l-Quds, and his former parishioners in County Galway gathered to hold a memorial service in the Church where he had ministered, when a worthy tribute to him was paid.

His body proved, unexpectedly for him, unable to retain a little longer a soul eager for further service on earth to Bahá'u'lláh — a disquieting event of this strange and not easily forgotten springtime, when the daffodils bloomed in the garden along with the last of the earlier season's roses and the may came out in March.

Brian Townshend