

In Memoriam: Hugh McKinley¹

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Upon his thirteenth birthday, Hugh McKinley's mother devised a means to test empirically her knowledge of astrology: she cast a detailed and elaborate chart made up of arcane symbols, crescent moons and star-sign emblems, derived from the single fact of her son's birth in Oxford, England, at precisely 1:55 am Greenwich Meridian time, on the 18th of February, 1924. He weighed a full eight and a half pounds. A series of epigrammatic prognostications followed, predicting year by year Hugh McKinley's future till his 58th birthday, set down concisely in a small red notebook titled in neat script:

Natal and Progressed Horoscopes.
Hugh McKinley
cast by his mother
DATE: 1935

Thereafter at year's end, till her own very last, she faithfully inscribed below her divinations an equally brief survey of the most notable among his life's actual happenings. This allowed her - and us - to compare life's vicissitudes to the omens and augurations of the stars.

The portents intimated to Violet McKinley, mother, lifelong companion and co-sharer in the spiritual knighthood of her only son, that there awaited him an eventful and on the whole a trying life, with many episodes of illness, with accidents and financial misfortunes or stress, and two or three catastrophic years, punctuated by fewer years of spiritual abundance, deepening friendships and domestic happiness. While year by year the predictions varied in their accuracy from the startlingly correct to the humorously off course, the anticipated pattern proved itself on the whole accurate, and Hugh McKinley's life was indeed marked by an undertone of hardship, by serious accidents and periodic bouts of ill-health, by troubled relationships and consoling friendships, by financial stringencies and ever burgeoning spirituality. His years of ease, over his seven decades and four, were less than those of challenge, yet he was happy in the evening of his life, with a strong and loving marriage, a home in nature, and a spirit reconciled and peaceful, if ever active, ever struggling, ever visioning new possibilities and new friendships.

¹ See also Olive McKinley, [The Life of Hugh McKinley](#), Knight of Bahá'u'lláh, *Solas*, 2004, 4:59-71

Be that as it may, it was sometime after September 1923, when Violet was some half way through her pregnancy and David McKinley still engaged in his osteopath's practice, that an occasional visitor to the Oxford Theosophical Society placed in their hands a newly published copy of a book that revolutionised the labours of the Bahá'í community for decades to come: John Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*.²

"One night at the Theosophical Society in Oxford, one of the 'friends', as they were then referred to (and I've only ever met one believer in England who knew him) was called Robert somebody. I don't know his name. But Alice Phillips, who was an isolated believer in the late 1940s down in Arundel, knew his name and had met him. He left mother and father a copy of Dr. Esslemont's book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*."³

For the McKinleys, the book was a source of spiritual insomnia: "they sat up in bed all night and read that book from cover to cover." When they turned the last page, the night had gone Dawn breaking, they turned to each other, and exclaimed: "This is it!"⁴

We have rather precise notions regarding the physiological development of the embryo in its different phases, but know next to nothing about the nature of its inner life while in the uterus. In this respect, if life after death is a mysterious subject, life before birth is only marginally less so. What is no longer in doubt after much investigation is that the embryo is highly susceptible to the mother's environmental influences, her state of mind, her moods, in short, the mother's consciousness and experiences. If this be so, then it may not be unreasonable to suggest that the experience of that night, profound, thrilling and fundamentally life-changing, full mid-way or more through her pregnancy, may well have had some impact on the child within her womb whose first, if vicarious encounter with the "spirit of faith" may perhaps be said to have taken place before his consciousness was able to register it.

Nothing is known of the man that so fortuitously changed their lives forever and sealed the future of their child, except his first name, but his modest and potentially inconsequential act would in the fulness of time prove to have been the means of raising two knights of Bahá'u'lláh, Violet and her son Hugh. As so often happens, apparently small acts may have large impacts in seeming disproportion to their genesis. It is not clear what, if any, other contribution "Robert somebody" made to the growth of the Bahá'í community, but by one passing talk and the sharing of one book he changed a nation's destiny.

² The book was published in Spetember of 1923, which allows us to trace this event to the autumn or winter of that year.

³ Hugh McKinley, op.cit.

⁴ Ibid.

Hugh McKinley's path was neither smooth nor inevitable, and perhaps herein lies its luminosity. Most likely the spiritual honorific, Knight of Bahá'u'lláh, an accolade conferred by Shoghi Effendi upon those Bahá'ís who like Hugh McKinley settled across the world as part of the first global plan for the expansion of the Bahá'í Cause,⁵ will grow legendary with the rolling of the years. But, in Hugh McKinley's living witness, the glory behind the title lies not in a frozen tableau of beatific vision, nor a tale of morally unambiguous heroism (heroism seldom is), nor yet in an instructive story of triumph over adversity and success over vicissitudes. To outward seeming and to worldly eyes, indeed, the tale of Hugh McKinley was a tale of thwarted dreams, of unrealized potential, and recurrent penury. His old age was not that of a man reminiscing at his ease, but rather a constant, final struggle against illness and poverty; not contemplative rest but one final lap in a long distance race that demanded the impossible.

And yet, the morning of the 28th of May, 1992, found Hugh McKinley, a mere seven years before his death, within the precincts of a garden of unusual beauty, face to face with the harvest of his life. Seldom does a person see, in his lifetime, even a glimmer of the true significance of the actions and deeds performed in years and decades past, but to Hugh McKinley, on this occasion, was granted the sight. For anyone receptive to what Rudolf Otto called the "Idea of the Holy"⁶ the occasion would be fraught with significance. For a Bahá'í for whom a sense of spirituality was the motivating force of life, the event, in a region four religions coincide in designating as the Holy Land, was positively numinous.⁷

Hugh McKinley stood that day with one hundred and twelve companions watching an illuminated scroll bearing his name and theirs being placed, for centuries to come, in a chamber at the entrance door of the inner sanctuary of the holiest Shrine of the Bahá'í world, guarding the mortal remains of Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith - and the One for Whose sake Hugh McKinley had given up his career, his reputation, his worldly prosperity and, little by little, it may be considered, his life. The scroll was a Roll of Honour, registering for posterity the names of all the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh. This spiritual knighthood was intended "to signify their acts of daring and devotion as teachers of the Faith",⁸ and bear witness that by their exploits they had "realized the actual establishment of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh as a world religion."⁹

⁵ A campaign known in Bahá'í literature as the Ten Year Plan (1953-1963)

⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. Trans. John W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press, 1948.

⁷ An idea of the intensity of this innate spirituality may be gathered from a telling event in his youth, long, long before the day of his harvesting arrived. Having had a terrible motorcycle accident provoking a grave head injury that threw him into a coma with little hope of recovery, he abruptly came back to consciousness under his mother's prayers after many days in a vegetative state, pronouncing a single sentence as if from another realm drawn: "alláh'u'abhá".

⁸ The Universal House of Justice, May 29, 1992, *Centenary Tribute to Baha'u'llah*, p. 3

⁹ *Ibid.*

The meaning of the scroll, the significance of the Bahá'í knighthood bestowed upon him, Hugh McKinley heard expounded in an ardent supplication addressed on that day by the Universal House of Justice, the body entrusted with the guidance and direction of the world Bahá'í community, to Bahá'u'lláh:

“This is both a symbol and a promise -- a symbol registering the reality of a clear response, at a critical time, to the duty laid upon us by the Lord of Hosts to diffuse His teachings among all peoples; a promise that the commitment so dazzlingly displayed by these intrepid pioneers will be reaffirmed by generations of their successors, ensuring that the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, "shining in all its power and glory, will have suffused and enveloped the entire planet."

“This is also a mark of recognition of the power of the Hand of Omnipotence to turn gnats into eagles. His bounties embolden us. Broken-winged birds are we; yet, with His assurances resounding in our souls, we soar to ever greater heights in His service. "I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty!" He declares, benevolently adding: "I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.""¹⁰

In these words - which Hugh McKinley heard read out before the assembled knights of Bahá'u'lláh on that solemn anniversary - is an intimation that, the reality of their heroic response notwithstanding, the birds that journeyed into victory had injured wings, and the eagle flights were flown by individuals who nevertheless partook of the quality of the gnat.

It should come as no surprise then, that to discern the implausible flight path implied in these assertions of irreconcilable qualities (gnathood/eaglehood) calls for an unusual point of view. Thus the mighty title, Knight of Bahá'u'lláh - which, were all else forgotten, would remain - was won in Cyprus by Hugh McKinley in the course of what was probably the hardest and apparently least fruitful period of his life. In attracting souls to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh Hugh McKinley had been more successful in Britain than he would ever be in Cyprus. In building a vibrant Bahá'í community life the interpersonal barriers proved more intractable in Cyprus than was the case before or subsequently. In artistic self-expression, no period was less productive than this one. In his personal life, no time was more challenging than the time of his investiture as Knight of Bahá'u'lláh. At the end of his pioneering services in Cyprus, Hugh McKinley and the handful of fellow-Knights in that isle, had indeed sown the seed of a future national community, but at the moment of departure, after years of effort, the seeds left behind altogether uncertain, and not one soul had been moved to join the Bahá'í community.¹¹ By the same token, it is safe to say that no other

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 240

¹¹The first Cypriot believers declared not long after in a letter to Hugh in Greece, through whose efforts, together with his mother, they had been attracted to the Faith.

time demanded such heroism, evoked such self-sacrifice, required such inner fortitude, or called for such self-abnegation in Hugh McKinley as his time in Cyprus.

The words of the House of Justice, then, present us not with a sweet simile but a challenging and even painful paradox, of broken-winged birds setting out to imitate the falcon's aerial prowess, or mosquitoes embarking on seemingly fatuous, even self-destructive odysseys to emulate the eagle. To grasp the liberating, the fulfilling, the ever-cherished aspects of this journey, one must be prepared to see that above and beyond material circumstances or outward markers of success, at the heart of this paradox, was a spiritual process; an expression of communion, a search for faithfulness to an experience of truth that made the journey more than bearable - worth it. One must know, else guess the experience captured in poetic language by Bahá'u'lláh as the unpredicted madness of a taste, which Hugh McKinley – those that knew him will agree – tasted early on:

“By My life, O friend, wert thou to taste of these fruits... yearning would seize the reins of patience and reserve from out thy hand, and make thy soul to shake with the flashing light”¹²

Thus did yearning take over his life, that without reserve, he threw himself into seemingly quixotic ventures, abandoning a promising career in opera, to live an intranquil, trying life in frequently alien environments, struggling with poverty, illness, separation, loss, and cultural isolation, for the sake of a social vision, and spiritual calling, that energised and galvanised him and brought him more than contentment: joy.

Indeed, if a keynote could be discerned in Hugh McKinley's life, it is the demonstration that there is more to happiness than happy circumstances (for Hugh McKinley was an essentially happy person, albeit schooled in grief and loss), that one's inner world can well exceed one's outward one, and that to understand Hugh McKinley one must shake the inertia of superficial judgements and criteria and touch the depths that motivated him and made him be and become who he was and who he is.

And if, as Ernest Becker held, the greatest form of heroism is the ability to contain the maximum paradox, then Hugh McKinley was heroic in the most palpable manner. This was the man whose voice was deemed to call for cultivation and consecration to the muse by the great Dino Borgioli and who studied under him in 1952 while singers waited a decade before being allowed to leave their countries and be trained by him – working as a farm labourer until he began his musical apprenticeship.¹³

¹² Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p.4

¹³ Borgioli, (1891 – 1960) was launched in La Scala by Toscanini himself, becoming one of opera's best-loved tenors in the 1930's, and in the 1950's one of the world's foremost opera teachers. The Australian soprano June Bronhill, OBE, changed her surname from Gough to Bronhill after the residents of the eponymous

The beginnings of a professional and promising career in opera were not won without sacrifice, and the same year, in a positive and confident tone, Violet McKinley, Hugh's mother, wrote in her record of the year: "our money nearly gone, we must earn some somehow".¹⁴ This was the man who, a complete autodidact with an interrupted and abandoned schooling, became nonetheless the cultured critic who corresponded with Erich Fromm and led him to review his treatment of religion; interviewed Arnold Toynbee, last great exponent of cyclical history; became a lasting friend of his contemporary and fellow poet (a world authority on Blake) Kathleen Raine, and likewise built most lasting ties with the famed poets Helen Shaw of New Zealand and the American May Sarton, best known perhaps for her novels. He would converse with varying ease in English, Greek, Persian, and French, yet never reached secondary school.

This was the man in whom the lore of ancient Celts and ancient Greeks and Romans combined with the exquisite appreciation of nature and its colours and a repertoire of memorised French, Italian and German arias that played in his mind and occasionally found outlet in his sonorous bass. This was also the man who, in the end, physically frail and past his seventies, was left to earn the necessities of life each day anew not by his pen or by his art or by his calling, but selling cleaning materials door to door to make ends meet, following a professional path that took him from farm labouring to book-keeping, to gardening, to selling double-glazing and insurance and eventually domestic products to neighbours and acquaintances on a commission-only basis.

Such contrasting journeys were the product of circumstance, but primarily of choice, of decisions made for love, sometimes swiftly, never lightly, and always hard to understand from the perspective of the perennial human search, and even need, for material stability and comfort.

"How well is it said: Live free of love, for its very peace is anguish; its beginning is pain, its end is death."¹⁵

We stand, then, not before a creature of air but before a man, of flesh and bone and blood and longing who, when I knew him in the evening of his life, just into his seventies, glinted and smiled at once mischievously and miraculously amidst the difficulties that beset him and that he wore so lightly, as he proclaimed to a touched twenty year old passer-by who had approached the Bahá'í stall that we were manning together in the paved indifference of Felixtowe:

town raised a considerable sum of money to enable her to leave Australia to study under Borgioli. She was his pupil in the same year as Hugh McKinley, and may give an indication of what could have been - Hugh's potential professional trajectory.

¹⁴ Violette McKinley, "Astrological Diary of Hugh McKinley, with additional notes by Hugh and by Deborah McKinley" (henceforth referred to as *Astrological Diary*), entry for 28 years old.

¹⁵ Cf. Bahá'ulláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p.41

“I am a revolutionary!”

And proffered to him, urgently yet gracefully, not the *Socialist Worker*, but an invitation to spiritual transformation and an end to discordant conflict.

The little note which, in her 90th year, the great Kathleen Raine wrote upon hearing of Hugh McKinley’s passing captures, perhaps best of all, the meaning of Hugh McKinley’s life, and his relevance:

“I don’t know how many years ago I first knew (by letter) Hugh who at that time was living on his Greek Island with his cats and writing for a little paper... all these years he has been a friend I have valued as one of the loveliest human beings I have known – ‘one of the pure in heart’ who ‘sees God’”.¹⁶

One is reminded of the words by Blake which that same poet wished could be said of her after her death:

“That in time of trouble, I kept the divine vision”.

These ten words are, to me, the most transparent evocation of Hugh McKinley’s life.

¹⁶ Kathleen Raine to Deborah McKinley, February 9^t, 1999, in Hugh McKinley archives.