

A M E R I C A N   U N I V E R S I T Y   S T U D I E S



# Life Histories of Bahá'í Women in Canada

Constructing Religious Identity  
in the Twentieth Century

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## INTRODUCTION

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We may never have known about Edith Magee if a middle-aged sociologist in New Brunswick had not been especially determined to find her. Rummaging through an ordinary collection of correspondence, he first came across her name—there in a letter from 1917 nestled undisturbed amongst others. His curiosity was heightened when, serendipitously, he received a “mysterious communication” from a man (Joseph Frost, cousin of Robert Frost), who indicated he had two boxes of papers and photographs belonging to her family.<sup>1</sup> Our sociologist excitedly drove straight to Eliot, Maine and went to the house. When the door opened, he announced, “Here I am!”, and Joseph replied, “There *they are!*” And so he was rewarded with an archive of great historical value, including 350 sepia photographs of the virtually unknown Miss Magee and her family. He rescued beautiful Edith from oblivion and devotedly recorded her story to set the record straight.<sup>2</sup>

Those dusty boxes were a treasure trove and we now know that, in 1898, Edith, an eighteen-year-old woman of Irish Methodist background, took a leap of faith and became the first Bahá’í in Canada. Those papers reveal that she learned of the Bahá’í teachings at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Shortly thereafter, her mother, younger sister, and two aunts became Bahá’ís also and, with Edith, formed the first Bahá’í group in London, Ontario. Unfortunately, no person in that era documented the significance of her declaration of belief or personal statements of her experience. We can only use the fragments of her family records to piece together her life. What we do know is that, from her time forward, women were in the vanguard of building the Canadian Bahá’í Community.

Edith has long since passed away, and in the centenary decade of the religion in Canada (1990s) there were just a few women and men still living who had become Bahá’ís in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The seminal book about the social history of the religion was published in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Yet there was still no academic book that provided accounts of women’s personal experiences, and in-depth analysis of their social interactions. The purpose

of this book is to pick up this trail of historical inquiry and fill in the lacuna. It is a sociological presentation of the construction of religious identity of women in the Canadian Bahá'í Community through the years 1938–1960.

Why should a readership be interested in the subject of women in the Bahá'í Faith, you may wonder, and what is distinctive about this religion with respect to its teachings and its views of the status and roles of women? The teachings of the Bahá'í religion are remarkably forward looking. One of the foundational teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the religion's founder, is the oneness of humanity, and an integral part of this oneness is the equality of women with men. So important is this principle of equality that the Bahá'í teachings regard it as a prerequisite for the establishment of world peace. This book explores, then, not only questions about theology but also about how a sampling of Canadian women—some native-born converts to the new religion, others immigrants from various countries—took up the challenges and joys of living a Bahá'í life.

I began my research with the simple question, “How did these women make meaning of the Bahá'í Faith and translate that meaning into action?” Other more complex questions evolved as I gathered the data: How did the community take shape from those early years and what was the range of activity women could assume in the development of this new religious movement? What were their personal experiences and how did they live a life of religiosity? What were the challenges and influences from the outer society and the processes of community life? I decided it would be useful to examine what questions feminist scholars raise concerning women and religion, and then to consider the Bahá'í religion in light of those queries. As I engaged in this process, it became apparent that a key concern in feminist literature is the promotion and maintenance of women's leadership in religious community. I also adopted this as a primary orientation.

My interest in the question of leadership and agency<sup>4</sup> of women in the public realm, and what supports or limits their activity, has naturally led me to focus on the roles that women have taken *outside* family life and the domestic domain. Consequently I have explored the ways in which women have found their sense of spiritual self in this milieu. I recognize, however, the vital importance of women's role within the home and family as keepers and transmitters of culture and religiosity, and I hope that scholars in the near future will take up this area of research.<sup>5</sup> My orientation concentrates on Bahá'í women's religious community life and theology while taking into ac-

count the wider society's secular and religious gender imaging and relations. I also explore what external resources are available to assist and support women in their endeavours as they strive to develop and maintain agency and equality.

In this book I focus on storytelling as a means to understand people's experiences, and I look at both process and product. To this end, I present many types of stories, both informal and formal, that are drawn from historical and contemporary resources. In addition I explore, in some cases, *how* the stories are told. The narratives, rich in reflection and feeling, offer the reader a privileged glimpse into the lives and actions of these Bahá'í women. They also provide a compelling perspective of the many facets of individual sacralization, as well as the processes and interactional dimensions of Bahá'í group life.

## The Participants

The nucleus of the narrative accounts presented here are taken from life-history interviews I conducted with Bahá'ís over the course of three years (1993–1996). This cohort of participants is comprised of twenty individuals—eleven women and nine men—from across Canada who were from sixty-five to ninety-three years of age at the time they were interviewed. The main criterion for the choice of participants was their longevity as members of the religion. During the three decades (1938–1960), the majority of women in my study were between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age (see Appendix 1 for further details on my methodology and the background of the participants).

In addition, I recorded interviews with thirteen other people of varying ages and backgrounds. For example, I decided that a younger Bahá'í perspective (middle-aged people) might be useful, and because the circumstances were serendipitous, I was able to record a number of supplementary full life stories and additional interviews.<sup>6</sup> While I do not quote those stories in this book, they gave me a valuable contrastive perspective to the stories of the older Bahá'ís.

I was not able to include any First Nations women in my initial study because those women who were early Bahá'ís in Ontario and Saskatchewan (1960s) were no longer alive. However, later (2003–2004) I undertook a research project in the Yukon with Aboriginal people, and that data will contribute to future work on First Nations and the Bahá'í Faith.

Although the focus of this book is women's experiences, I have included excerpts from men's stories because they are friends, fellow Bahá'ís, and family members living closely with these women, and as such they provide essential contributions to an understanding of women's agency in Bahá'í community life. We will also come to appreciate several other important aspects of Bahá'í life, such as how women's activity has affected the religiosity and identity building of men, and the fact that men have been given mandates in the Bahá'í writings to advance women's status. Therefore, introducing men's perspectives on this process adds further depth to the text.

I chose the women because of their advanced age, not according to their achievements in the religion or in society. I knew that a few had the reputation of being outstanding, in one way or another, for their contributions to Canada in social and economic development, or to the service of the religion, in general. It did not become apparent until later, however, that all these women were intensely involved in the Bahá'í community and the public activities of the religion.

### **The Life–History Method: Process and Product**

I embarked on this research through the life–history method along with certain aims of the oral historian. The goal of the sociological life history is to understand how people construct and make sense of their lives at certain moments in time (Plummer 1983). The oral–history perspective seeks to allow for a multiplicity of standpoints about the past to gain a wider historical view (Thompson 1992). The people who narrate their life stories provide a resource of rich description and perspective that not only can describe the historical context through which they live, but can also illuminate their personal and joint courses of action within that context. My work was to analyze the lay accounts, and then to go beyond the narratives of experience to create sociological explanations of social processes within the community.

A fortuitous aspect of conducting life histories and working with qualitative data is the fact that I am able to privilege my participants' accounts by presenting their language, theories, and explanations, as well as my own. For example, the part of this book that discusses processes arises directly from the major strands/themes of service my participants conveyed as being important in their lives. I was able to weave in the metaphors they provided about “types” of Bahá'ís and exactly how they were involved with the religion. Individual histories about religious identity are the repositories of the

expression of the larger spiritual meaning system, and they are informed through fellow members' lives and stories. My participants' astute observations enabled me to gain and convey a sense of the historical context of an infant Canadian religious community.

What about my position as a researcher and as an author of this work? Researchers write themselves into their text in the way they represent the account of the life history, whether it be through the way that they contextually frame the study, or by direct reference to their own life experience and background, and/or the particulars and relations of the interview process, itself. My forty–seven years of acquired knowledge of Bahá'í community life as an insider means that I know, generally, the features of Bahá'í group life, the practices Bahá'ís assume, the shared language, “a vocabulary of understanding”(Adler and Adler 1987, 82), the structure of Bahá'í institutions, and the rhythm of community life. Indeed, in my interaction with the life–history participants, there was a tacit recognition that we shared a collective identity—a foundation of beliefs about theology, history, and teachings. They did not have to tell me their basic beliefs or educate me about principles and practices.

Assuming the position of interviewer/student with my cohort was easy in many ways because I was in the setting to learn about their particular experiences, of which they are the expert practitioners. However, I was more than an “apprentice–participant”, a person who begins the study as a student and assumes full membership in time (Forrest 1986), a “peripheral member” who joins but is not actually functional in the group, or an “active member” who takes part for the sake of the study and leaves the field thereafter (Adler and Adler 1987). I am a researcher who is a long–term member that sociological theory calls a “committed member”. I am also the “phenomenon under study” (Shaffir, Dietz, Prus 1994). I hold both a natural and a theoretic stance.

My responsibility as a researcher/author, then, is to come to terms with these multifaceted perspectives and find a way to unify them. This necessitates learning new ways to observe and present familiar settings. My findings must satisfy diverse audiences: the academic scholars who will expect that this book, among many things, presents an objective academic viewpoint and not a hagiography or apologetics; the community under study who will desire facts about early history, and who will seek a perspective that resonates with their understandings, while at the same time sheds new light on everyday ac-

tivities of their community life; or the Bahá'í scholars who will hope for new findings that illuminate Bahá'í social history and the overall topic of gender. And then there is myself. I want to present a work that is recognizably academic, using theoretical frameworks and methodology current in my field, while acknowledging there is a spiritual dimension in the world and affirming and enabling the life–history participant's right to express that experience. How well I have harmonized these differing perspectives and fulfilled my responsibility to address and convey them is for the reader to decide, and my explanation about process is given in detail in the methodology section (see Appendix 1).<sup>7</sup>