

An Italian Scientist Extols the Báb

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Among the apostles of modern science and liberty of thought, a prominent place belongs to Michele Lessona, an Italian, whose sincere and courageous words inspired and helped mold the character of at least two generations of Italians.

A scientist, a writer, a philosopher, and explorer and an educator, Professor Lessona stands out – with a stature that towers above that of many a well-known scientist – as one of the foremost thinkers of the nineteenth century.

He was born September 20, 1823, in Venaria Reale, a suburb of Turin. His father, Dr. Carlo Lessona, was at the time the director of the well-known veterinary school of Veneria, and this fact might explain the boy's early interest in scientific study. In 1846 Michele Lessona obtained a degree of medicine and surgery from the Royal University of Turin. Immediately after graduation he went to Egypt and, although rather young, was appointed Chief of the *Khán Kah* Hospital in Cairo.

In 1849 he returned to Italy and became an instructor in Natural History, first in Asti and then in Turin. In 1854, at the age of 31, he was appointed Professor of Mineralogy and Zoology at the Royal University of Genoa. In 1864, after his return from Persia, he taught first at the University of Bologna and then at the University of Turin. Here he occupied in 1865 the Chairs of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, becoming in 1877 the Rector of that University.

During his life Michele Lessona produced a variety of scientific and literary works. Among his classical publications are to be remembered an illustrated treatise on natural history, in several volumes; his masterpiece on ethics, *Power and Will; Confessions of a Rector; Memoirs of an Old Professor*; and the translation into Italian of the best known works of Darwin, Samuel Smiles, John Lubbock, and many others.

In 1892 King Humbert of Italy made him a Senator for life, a well-deserved recompense for his patriotism, leadership and learning. He passed away, amidst universal sorrow, on July 20, 1894, in his beloved Turin.

In 1862 Professor Lessona had been appointed physician to the diplomatic legation that went to Persia at that time to establish relations between the newly created Kingdom of Italy and the government of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh.

Immediately on his arrival in Tabríz, he met a Persian of high lineage, Dáúd Khán, who, having lived for many years in Italy, spoke Italian perfectly. From this gentleman Lessona learned of the Bábí movement, and he became fascinated with the life of the Báb and His heroic ministry. When opportunity permitted, he tried to visit places connected with the history of the Báb, and he had the opportunity to converse, many times and at length, with Count de Gobineau, the French ambassador to the court of the Sháh. When he returned to Italy Professor Lessona wrote a book *Hunting in Persia* and a precious little monograph of sixty-six pages entitled *I Babi*.

Fernando Morosi, a Bahá'í of Rome and a book dealer by profession, recently found a copy of this book, which was immediately dispatched to Haifa and is now in the custody of Shoghi Effendi. It represents one of the very first documentations, made by a European, of the episode of the Báb.

The little book was printed in 1881 by the Royal Typographer Vincenzo Bona of Turin and contains a good narrative of the life of the Báb and other personal considerations of the author concerning the Bábí movement.

Some of the episodes he relates differ slightly from the accounts in the well-known histories by Browne, de Gobineau, and Nabil-i-Zarandi.¹ There are, however, other parts of the book which I would like to bring to the attention of the reader.

After presenting his informant, Dáúd Khán, the author comments: “Religious discussions are of comfort to the misfortunate who are oppressed by tyranny and always stripped, of everything they own.”

¹ Edward G. Browne, translator and editor of *A Traveller's Narrative*; M. le Comte de Gobineau, author of *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*; and Muhammad-Zarandi, surnamed Nabil-i-A'zam, author of *The Dawn-Breakers*.

Presenting the figure of the Báb, he says:

“Forty years ago, in the city of Shíráz, there left childhood and entered puberty a youth that for his singular potency of intellect, for his extraordinary application to study, his profound religious tendencies, his loving nature, for his energy of character, grace of body and beauty of countenance, awakened admiration and affection in everyone who had occasion to deal with him, and captivated all the love of his teachers and relatives. The name of this youth was Mírzá ‘Alí-Muḥammad. It was said later that his family was of the high nobility, one of those descending from the Prophet by way of the Imám Husayn... It is certain that his family wealthy and that he was encouraged in every manner in his most ardent desire to learn. Mírzá ‘Alí-Muḥammad showed ardor similarly in religious practices...” “He would converse with the Rabbis of Shíráz. He would investigate the doctrine of the Gabras²... It is also certain that he studied the Gospels, a rather easy matter, thanks to the volumes of the Bible and the Gospel translated into the Persian language which the British disseminated in all of Persia... A bad translation in poor style, without the imagination of the floweriness of these sacred books.”

“The present Sháh, Násiri’d-Dín, sometimes during his luncheon requests the reading of the Bible in Persian and sometimes he laughs, and then the courtiers burst into a clamorous laughter and for a few days they speak only of that verse, or word, which has provoked the hilarity of the sovereign.”

Speaking of the clergy, Lessona observes:

“The clergy of Persia is extremely corrupt; at the same time it administers religion and justice – the first badly, the second worse; it falsifies wills, defrauds of possessions, sells justice, practices usury and indulges in debauchery... The powerful ones are in fear of it, the lowly scoff at it, the masses despise and exploit it, ready to deride and ridicule it or to rise up at its call to revolt. Every mosque has a larger or smaller number of beggars who live off scant charity and become instruments of violence, plunder and death in the hands of the priests.”

² *Gabr* (or *guebre*), a term used contemptuously to designate the Zoroastrian priesthood (see *A Traveller’s Narrative*, page 34, footnote 1).

Professor Lessona then speaks of Dr. Polak³ who, at the time, was physician to the Sháh and who wrote books of medicine in Persian. Relating in detail the history of the Bábís, he mentions the eighteen Letters of the Living⁴ of one of whom, Mullá Husayn, he writes: “He was a very learned man, both in religion and in jurisprudence: daring, austere and fiery.”

Returning to the beginning of the ministry of the Báb, he says:

“... His style was imaginative and sublime, not like anything human; thus to his quality of a most eloquent orator he added that of an inimitable writer. And while he preached, discussed and taught in the mosques, in the colleges, in the streets, in his house, everywhere they were reading aloud his verses, often interrupting with cries of the most ardent admiration. In all of Shíráz they did not speak of anything else but the Báb, everyone was filled with enthusiasm for him... The house of the Báb was crowded, night and day, with new converts to his faith; to him came men rich in possessions, men of intellect and energy, and among the very first many mullás enrolled under his banner.”

The author speaks of Qurratu’l-‘Ayn⁵ and the siege of Tabarsí,⁶ and, having visited Zanján,⁷ he states: “I visited that city ten years after the happenings I have related, and I still found frightening traces of the devastation which had taken place.”

Referring to the difficulty of securing more information on the Bábí movement, he adds:

“...In Persia it is impossible to speak of the Bábís or to learn something about their affairs. The terror which this name awakens is such that no one

³ Dr. J. E. Polak, author of *Persien. Das Land und seine Bewohner* (1865), was also professor at the Medical College of Tíhrán (*A Traveller’s Narrative*, Note A, p. 203).

⁴ “The Báb’s chosen disciples” (*God Passes By*, by Shoghi Effendi, p. 5); their names are listed in *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 80-81)

⁵ Qurratu’l-‘Ayn, “the only woman enrolled by the Báb as one of the Letters of the Living” (*God Passes By*, p. 73), given the title Táhirih (the Pure One) by Bahá’u’lláh, “the lovely but ill-fated poetess of Qasvín” (Curzon) became well known throughout Europe for her efforts in behalf of the education of the women of Persia.

⁶ For an account of the eleven months’ siege of 313 followers of the Báb at the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí, a few miles south of Bárfurúsh, by the army of the Shah, see *God Passes By*, pp. 38-42, and *Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 343-429. It was during this siege that Mullá Husayn and Quddús were killed.

⁷ The uprising against the followers of the Báb at Zanján is described in *God Passes By*, pp. 44-46, and in chapter 24 of *The Dawn-Breakers*.

dares to speak, or even think, of it. The Italians whom I found in Tihrán, and who proved extremely kind in every way, wanted to tell me little or nothing about the Bábís, or were unable to do so; the same was true of Europeans of other nationalities in Tihrán, Tabríz or Rasht. Nicolas,⁸ with whom I made the long journey from Tihrán to St. Petersburg, started to speak to me about them only after we passed the Persian frontier ... Count de Gobineau, in the village of Gezer near Tihrán would narrate to me episodes about this sect, making the hours of the evening pass as lightning while he wrote its history and read to me some chapters ... Gathering material for the history of the Báb, which he was doing at the time, was fraught with danger in the heart of Persia, even for a Minister of the French Emperor...”

Referring to Vámbéry’s critical comments on the episode of Shaykh Tabarsí,⁹ Lessona states: “... this judgment is entirely unjust and a thousand miles from the truth, if we want to apply it to the precepts of the Báb... These precepts are in a symbolic language and, amidst mystic formulas, we found the sweet doctrines of the Báb, respectful of the past but made to contrast with formalism and to make the spirit of goodness prevail... The Báb and Qurratu’l-’Ayn were purified from any thought of violence and their lives were filled with love for their fellow men and with enthusiasm for the Faith...”

In relating the atrocious tortures inflicted on the Bábís, Lessona relates:

“...The Sháh and the Sadr-i-A’zam (Prime Minister) feared a revolution, seeing conspirators all around them; they thought therefore to devise some scheme that would involve the largest number of persons. The Sháh then schemed to deliver the Bábís to the various civil and military employees, charging them to put said Bábís to death. From the type of torture inflicted on the victims, from the most heinous manner in which they would be put to death, he could judge their zeal... Those who had not enough imagination to find new tortures went to the Kalantar who knew how to suggest others... That Kalantar then acquired many titles to the Shah’s benevolence...”¹⁰ “From that day,” the author continues, “eighteen years have passed and in Persia the same

⁸ Monsieur J. B. Nicolas, Interpreter of the Imperial French Embassy in Tihrán and father of A. L. M. Nicolas, author of *Siyid ‘Alí-Muhammad dit le Báb*, Paris, Dujariac & Co., 1905.

⁹ Hermann Vámbéry, author of *Meine Wanderungen und Erlebnisse in Persien* (1867), writes concerning the siege of Shaykh Tabarsí pp. 286-303), according to Browne, in *A Traveller’s Narrative*, Note A, p. 206; see also pp. 37-39.

¹⁰ This system of persecution is attested also by Nabil, op. cit., p. 612, footnote 2, and by Browne, op. cit., Note T, p. 328.

sovereign, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, reigns, always diffident, always suspecting, always in fear of the Bábís. From time to time they arrest some one, condemn him very often to despoliation for the reason that he is a Bábí but more often using this as an excuse. The governors of the provinces thus have an easy method of taking all the possessions of a poor victim who has put something aside. The government says that Bábísm is extinguished, but it operates as if it were alive...”

“A new Báb, successor to the first, lives in Baghdád, outside the government of the Sháh. From there he is in touch with all Persia and has disseminated Bábísm in all those provinces and even in the Indies of the Orient.”

This correspondent was thrilled in reading these words, because of all the early European historians of the Faith Michele Lessona makes a direct and unmistakable reference to Bahá'u'lláh, Who the following year in Baghdad made His Declaration in the Ridván.

The author ends his monograph by putting before the reader the question whether the Bábí doctrine would survive and propagate. Wisely he answers it himself by quoting one of Manzoni's verses:

“To posterity the arduous judgment!”

The great friendship born in Persia between Lessona and Count de Gobineau had its strange epilogue in Turin. After the fall of the French Empire, de Gobineau, exiled from his native France, spent part of the year in Italy and part in Germany.

On the evening of October 12, 1882, a distinguished looking and elegantly dressed gentleman, on his way to Pisa, became ill in a hotel bus in Turin. He was taken to the Hotel Liguria and there this traveler died, the early morning of October 13, attended by the hotel owner and some of the servants. The hand of fate made it possible Count Arthur Joseph de Gobineau to sleep forever in Italian soil and in the same town where Michele Lessona lived and where Lessona himself, twelve years later was laid to rest.

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