

Jan Teofil Jasion. *Never Be Afraid to Dare: The Story of 'General Jack'.* Oxford: George Ronald, 2001. xv + 352 pp. £12.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-85398-449-8.



Reviewed by Lil Abdo

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Never be Afraid to Dare tells the story of Marion Jack and it raises the question, why is such a well written, well researched book, about an interesting subject, such a dull read? I believe the answer is the very concept of biography in relation to Baha'i subjects. As I seem to have cornered the market in reviewing Baha'i historical biography I feel emboldened to make some observations on this strange little subgenre. Biography seems a curious choice for Baha'is as it infers a style of leadership and concept of fame alien to the Baha'i Faith. In biography the individual becomes the context rather than the community they belonged to or the beliefs they espoused.

I believe the problem starts with a cursory read of *Star of the West* or early Baha'i Yearbooks which reveal numerous individuals whose service to the Faith literally cries out for them to be made the subject of a fascinating biography. However, a number of issues immediately arise, not least the Baha'i Faith itself, in that it does not promote an individualist concept of leadership, but rather that of collective responsibility. Thus whilst we are spared members of the National Spiritual Assembly photographed in the pages of *Hello!* magazine, there are no in-depth interviews recording the favorite colors or breakfast preferences of lat-

ter-day "prominent believers." The material that is at first so inspiring is usually only an obituary which can be enhanced with diligent research to include meetings attended and perhaps a pamphlet or two by the subject. Jack's life was undoubtedly fascinating and well documented; however, even in her case there does not appear to be a great wealth of personal information.

The next area of attack is correspondence. The subjects of these biographies were, I suspect, far too self-effacing to indulge in self analysis. Interestingly they rarely write about what they believe and of course they have developed the "sin covering eye" to such a level they never resort to gossip; thus much of their correspondence is somewhat arid. Unfortunately some of their biographers decide to "let the subject speak for themselves" which seems to result in the reproduction of tedious correspondence with little analysis or context. Jasion is lucky in this respect because Jack could write an amusing letter; her battles with the bed bugs (p. 180) and her descriptions of some of the Bulgarian Baha'is ("One has turned Communist, one has a very unfortunate sickness, one a sad weakness, one [a] ... hopeless love affair....") (p. 163) are priceless. The next problem is that so many of the heroes of the Heroic Age were

in fact heroines. Whilst this adds to their fascination for the modern reader it reduces the availability of research material. Until relatively recently women led fairly invisible lives; they did not attend school or university, join regiments or attain rank, they related to each other through informal networks and consequently left few traces of their lives. Whilst Baha'is wrote to each other and recorded their doings, there is often little information about their relationships with non-Baha'is or their working lives. Jack's work as an artist is examined and I found myself wondering how Jack could be viewed through the context of her art. The reproductions of her work and descriptions of her exhibitions were tantalizing; there is a whole area of research on the relationship between the Baha'i Faith and art waiting to be explored.

Modern biography seeks to help the reader understand the motives of the subject. It asks "What made them tick?" Well, in the case of Marion Jack, the Baha'i Faith did. But how many copies of *Hidden Words* were published in the local language and how many people attended a meeting in an obscure town on a wet night half a century ago may be excellent research but it does not really answer the question. What did Jack understand by the Baha'i teachings that inspired her so much? I felt that her attitudes were rather different from those of some of her contemporaries, especially in relation to the Church in Bulgaria, but this was never fully explored.

Never be Afraid to Dare is tightly written and chronological in arrangement. Beginning with Jack's ancestry and acknowledgement of her Scottish roots, it follows Jack's life from her childhood in Canada and her early travels in Europe as an art student and later as an artist. Shortly after her acceptance of the Baha'i teachings she spent a period in the household of 'Abdu'l-Baha teaching his daughters English. Jack's later travels and eventual stay in England, and her friendship with Elizabeth Herrick, with whom she shared a flat in Lon-

don, are explored in some detail, as is Herrick's feminism and prison sojourn (Herrick is a prime candidate for one of these biographies). It is interesting to note that Marion Jack and Isabel Frazer seem to have remained in Scotland holding public meetings after the visit of 'Abdu'l-Baha; however, neither of them appear to have become involved with the Celtic mystical tradition which was central to the spiritual life of many other Baha'is of the time. It is Jack's service in Bulgaria which forms the main part of the book and is perhaps the aspect for which she is most famous. I found this book oddly frustrating; for all its excellent research and faultless appendixes and footnotes it never really answered the question it raised in its preface, "What prompted this lady to leave her comfortable, middle-class, tranquil and well ordered life in Saint John for ... an area synonymous with violence and anarchy?" I also wanted to know more about the situation of Baha'is in Bulgaria today and what legacy Marion Jack actually left or how she would fit into a community history of the Baha'is of Bulgaria. Overall it is an interesting, well-crafted book, which makes a useful contribution to the growing body of literature on the history of the Baha'i Faith. Its limitations are based in the genre of biography rather than inadequacy of content or competency of the author.

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