

# THE LIFE OF THOMAS BREAKWELL

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## INTRODUCTION

The dramatic birth of a new world religion and its rapid spread to every corner of the earth is a phenomenon sometimes best understood through the lives of its early followers. The story of the Baha'i Faith, and how the revolutionary teachings of the majestic figure of Baha'u'llah first reached the West, is still unknown to many. It is a story of inspiration, of the faith, vision and sacrifice of apparently ordinary people, who, when faced with the challenge of spreading a new gospel, proved themselves to be saintly and holy souls. Some paid with their lives at the hands of cruel and scheming oppressors, others gave up their substance, their homes, careers and social standing, and many dedicated themselves to lives of humble service in every part of the globe, laying down their bones as pioneers of a new and noble cause.

These first followers understood that they were witnesses to the dawn of a new age of enlightenment. They left a spiritual heritage from which all of us may draw strength and insight. Only as history unfolds will we truly begin to understand the significance of their lives and the power of the faith they espoused. United by a glorious vision of the coming of age of the human race, of the fulfilment of prophecy of all the great faiths, and the realization of the oneness of God, they each lit a torch which illuminates the path to lasting unity, and to the establishment of a just and peaceful world.

One such soul was Thomas Breakwell. His brief life may appear to have left no tangible legacy, but, as we shall learn through these pages, he was endowed with a truly remarkable station. Having become a Baha'i in the summer of 1901, Thomas Breakwell passed away barely a year later, aged only 30. His life is surrounded by an aura of mystery. Described by 'Abdu'l-Baha as 'a lamp amid the angels of high Heaven'<sup>[1]</sup> and by Shoghi Effendi as one of 'three luminaries'<sup>[2]</sup> shedding brilliant lustre on the annals of the Irish, English and Scottish Baha'i communities, Thomas Breakwell's life certainly invites deep contemplation. Set afire with the love of God, his deep devotion exemplifies that profound mystical relationship which unites the lover with his Beloved.

To those followers of Baha'u'llah who live in the West, the life of Thomas Breakwell offers an example of a true believer, an expression of loving obedience to the Will of God. Breakwell desired that his humble life would be accepted as a sacrifice for the spread of the divine teachings of love and universal brotherhood. His dedication challenges us all to burn away the veils of materialism and self which are the cause of so much human suffering, and to arise for the promotion of the well-being of humanity.

Thomas Breakwell died in relative obscurity, a victim of tuberculosis in a poor quarter of the city of Paris. His earthly remains now lie in the communal charnel house at the cemetery of Pantin. It was not until the summer of 1997 that a dignified but suitably modest monument to mark his resting place was finally unveiled to the world.

Throughout the United Kingdom, the significance of Thomas Breakwell's life is being commemorated in an increasing number of ways. In the 1980s a nation-wide system of Baha'i Sunday Schools was instituted and named in his honour. This

was followed by the establishment of the Thomas Breakwell College, a distance learning programme intended to provide moral and spiritual education to a new generation of young people who are striving, as Thomas Breakwell did, to see the whole world as one country and all people as its citizens. All over the world an expanding number of institutes, programmes and activities seek, in a variety of ways, to honour his life and foster his remembrance.

Thomas Breakwell's name will never be forgotten. His true gift to us lies in the sacred vision that he realized in his brief life. The brightness and purity of his faith will continue to illuminate the hopes of many future generations.

We are much indebted to Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain for preparing this valuable introduction to the life, rank and station of Thomas Breakwell. This has been ably translated from the original French by Olive McKinley. Our thanks also to Hugh McKinley and Sally Spears for their practical support in promoting its publication. Our hope is that this volume will serve to widen interest in and encourage study of this fascinating episode in the development of a world-embracing faith, which is today the source of inspiration for millions.

## THE CALL OF GOD

Thomas Breakwell was born on 31 May 1872 in the small market town of Woking in Surrey. His father, Edward, was an ironmonger and a herbalist who, at some point during the 1860s, had joined the nonconformist Christian sect known as the primitive Methodists and subsequently held evangelical meetings in the family home. Thomas, the youngest of five children, was educated at an ordinary state school before his family emigrated to the United States.<sup>[3]</sup>

There Thomas was able to take up a responsible position in a cotton mill in one of the southern states, from which he derived a considerable income. His comfortable financial position enabled him to pay regular visits to his relatives in England each summer, and to take long holidays on the Continent.

Thomas seems to have been of an open mind when it came to spiritual matters. He was very interested in religious doctrines and the Hermetic philosophies in general, and in particular that of the Theosophical Society, to which he may have belonged. This movement, founded in 1875 in the United States by Mme. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, was much in vogue among British and Indian seekers at the time. The interest this Society showed in the occult and the esoteric, with their particularly oriental approaches, may well have predisposed Thomas Breakwell to turn towards the mystical universe which lies at the heart of the Baha'i religion.

His sensitivity towards things of the spirit led him, while taking the steamer to France in the summer of 1901, to make the acquaintance of a certain Mrs Milner. The latter, although having no personal interest in religion, felt impelled, seeing Breakwell's passion for spiritual subjects, to speak to him of one of her friends in Paris, who had, she said, found a philosophy which had given meaning to her life. The young woman in question was none other than May Bolles, the future May Maxwell.

May Ellis Bolles had been among the first party of Western pilgrims to visit 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka, in 1898-9.<sup>[4]</sup> By that time she had been living in Paris for a number of years, during which time she had attended a convent school there, and where her brother, Randolph, had taken up a course of architectural studies at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Her mother had rented an apartment on the fashionable Quai d'Orsay; May and Randolph also lived there with her. 'Abdu'l-Baha

recommended that May remain in that city, and entrusted her with the special responsibility of establishing the first Baha'i centre in Europe there.

'Abdu'l-Baha once said of Himself, 'I have a Lamp in my hand and seas to find souls who can become heralds of the Cause.'<sup>[5]</sup> Surely May Bolles was one of those very souls whom 'Abdu'l-Baha sought – and found.

One of those who accepted the Baha'i Faith in Paris during this time wrote, 'In 1901 and 1902 the Paris group of Baha'is numbered between twenty-five and thirty people with May Boles as spiritual guide and teacher.'<sup>[6]</sup>

The Master had told May that she should 'on no account absent [herself] from Paris.' So she had remained there through the summer of 1901, despite her mother's wish that she should accompany her on holiday to Brittany. Mrs. Bolles rather resented her daughter's work for the Baha'i Cause, and had no hesitation in closing her apartment when she left the city, so May had to find accommodation with another believer, Edith Jackson. It was to this apartment that Mrs Milner brought Breakwell.'<sup>[7]</sup>

On a pleasant day that summer, May Bolles opened the door to Thomas Breakwell and Mrs Milner. As she entered, Mrs Milner said, smiling, 'He was a stranger and she took him in.' May's attention was immediately drawn to this young man, 'of medium height, slender, erect and graceful, with intense eyes and an indescribably charm.'<sup>[8]</sup>

May made no actual mention of the divine Revelation during their first meeting. Nor did Mrs Milner, she having, in May's words, 'closed her ears to its message.' The conversation mainly centred on Theosophy, the details of Thomas's work, and his projected trip through Europe. As it continued, May could discern that Thomas was 'a very rare person of high standing and culture, simple, natural, intensely real in his attitude toward life and his fellowmen.' She also became aware that Thomas was studying her most attentively.

As he was leaving, Thomas asked if he might call on her again the following day.

When he returned the next day, May was surprised. Thomas came to her 'in a strangely exalted mood, no veil of materiality covered this radiant soul – his eyes burned with a hidden fire'. He looked at her earnestly, and asked if she saw anything strange in him. May replied that he looked very happy. At once, unable to contain himself any longer, he told his new found friend what had caused this state of mind. May recalls Thomas's words as follows:

'When I was here yesterday,' he said, 'I felt a power, an influence that I had felt once before in my life, when for a period of three months I was continually in communion with God. I felt during that time like one moving in a rarefied atmosphere of light and beauty. My heart was on fire with love for the supreme Beloved. I felt at peace, at one with all my fellow-men. Yesterday when I left you I went alone down the Champs Elysees, the air was warm and heavy, not a leaf was stirring, when suddenly a wind struck me and whirled around me, and in that wind a voice said, with an indescribable sweetness and penetration, 'Christ has come again! Christ has come again!'

Afterwards Thomas looked at May with wide, startled eyes, and asked her if she thought he was going insane. With a smile, she replied: 'No, you are just becoming sane.' She then spoke to him of the Bab, His exalted Mission, His martyrdom, and the thousands of Babis who sacrificed their lives to establish the Faith; she then told him of the coming of Baha'u'llah, the Blessed Beauty, 'Who shone upon the world

as the Sun of eternity', and of His laws and teachings.

For three days, Thomas absorbed May's words. For the first, he accepted the Message without reservation, and eagerly received all the books which May had to give him. His enthusiasm grew even greater when she recounted her pilgrimage to 'Akka, where she had met the Master, 'Abdu'l-Baha. The experiences which May had in the presence of this holy Being so much impressed Breakwell that, sighing deeply, he decided there and then to break with his old life and cancel all his travel plans. From that moment on he had only one desire: to be received by 'Abdu'l-Baha, to contemplate the face of his Beloved.

On the third day, he decided to write to 'Abdu'l-Baha, to inform Him of his acceptance of the Baha'i Faith, and to seek His permission to make pilgrimage to 'Akka. It was a letter of only two lines:

'My Lord, I believe, forgive me,

Thy servant Thomas Breakwell.'

According to May's account, the simplicity of this request was typical of Thomas's concise and exalted mind. She was intrigued by his appeal for forgiveness, the significance of which, she said, only became apparent later.

Around that time, another young believer newly welcomed into the fold, Herbert Hopper, had obtained permission to go to 'Akka. Thomas promptly got in touch with him, and they planned to go together. All was set, and the only thing remaining was to secure the Master's authorization for Thomas's visit.

That day, May forwarded Thomas's message to 'Akka, along with one of her own, asking the Master to send His reply to Port Said, where the two young men planned to disembark. That very evening, when May returned to her apartment, to her great surprise she found in her letter box a blue cablegram from 'Abdu'l-Baha which said: 'You may leave Paris at any time!'

May drew her own conclusion from these most surprising events:

'Thus by implicit and unquestioning obedience in the face of all opposition the Master's Will had been fulfilled, and I had been the link in the chain of His mighty purpose.'

...

'How gratefully my heart dwells on the divine compassion of the Master, on the joy and wonder of my mother as I told her everything, and when she burst into tears and exclaimed, 'You have, indeed, a wonderful Master.'

Through this series of coincidences, this deployment of celestial forces, the Divine Being expressed His Will, and made it reality by bringing to May the soul for whom she had waited.

Marion Holley described 'the confirmation of that brightest of spirits, Thomas Breakwell' as 'Perhaps the most wondrous event of that fecund time'.<sup>[9]</sup> Thomas, it is certain, was a mature soul, because of his capacity to assimilate all the teachings of the Faith in a single moment. We might well think of him as a 'chosen' soul, because of the special manner of his conversion. Rather than being rationally convinced, by argument and proof, of the reality of the Manifestation of God, his spiritual confirmation was instantaneous and complete. Having accepted this great truth, he saw his life up to that point in a completely different perspective, and understood the nature of his future mission. A 'chosen' soul, too, in terms of his tremendous spiritual capacities and love for humanity, evident at such a young age. Nevertheless, he was not to

know the full extent of his destiny till he attained the presence of Him whom he humbly referred to as his Lord: 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Thomas Breakwell enjoys the unique distinction of being the first Englishman to make the journey to the Holy Land as a Baha'i pilgrim.

May Maxwell describes that first visit of the two young western gentlemen to the city of 'Akka, and their arrival at the house of 'Abdu'llah Pasha,

'...they were ushered into a spacious room, at one end of which stood a group of men in oriental garb. Herbert Hopper's face became irradiated with the joy of instant recognition, but Breakwell discerned no one in particular among these men. Feeling suddenly ill and weak, he seated himself near a table, with a sense of crushing defeat. Wild and desperate thoughts rushed through his mind, his first great test, for without such tests the soul will never be unveiled.

'Sitting thus he bitterly lamented: Why had he come here? Why had he abandoned his projected journey and come to this remote prison, seeking – he knew not what?'<sup>[10]</sup>

May emphasizes this moment as one in which Thomas's soul was poised to rend asunder whatever veils still obscured the Sun of Reality. His despair tortured him, until, suddenly, a door opened and revealed the figure of the Master. Immediately, Thomas recognized his Lord.

In his interview with 'Abdu'l-Baha, Thomas explained how he enjoyed substantial remuneration from his work in the United States, but he also expressed a sudden conviction of sin when he added that these mills were run on child labour. The Master looked at him, gravely and silently, then said, 'Cable your resignation.'

May's account tells how Thomas obeyed 'Abdu'l-Baha at once. With one stroke he had cut all ties to his former life, and was relieved of his crushing burden. He now had only one desire, to please the Master. Although only moments earlier he had felt weak and full of doubt, he was now completely transformed.

Although his stay in 'Akka was short, Thomas made a lasting impression. Dr. Yunis Khan Afrukhtih, 'Abdu'l-Baha's secretary, relates the following: 'The fervour and the faith of this young man were so sublime in character that the blessed name of Breakwell shall ring throughout the centuries, and shall be remembered with deep affection in many chronicles. Verses from the Gospels which attest to the glories of the Kingdom were always on his lips. His sojourn in 'Akka was too short, but so intense was his love and so ardent his zeal that he touched the depths of the hearts of those who heard him. Whenever he was in the presence of our peerless Master, he was rapt in wonderment.'<sup>[11]</sup>

Thomas did not have time to meet all the Baha'i friends in 'Akka. Because of regulations imposed by the authorities, his visit was restricted to two days only. When the moment of departure finally arrived, 'Abdu'l-Baha asked him to settle permanently in Paris.

The Master then asked Yunis Khan to accompany Thomas to Haifa, from where his ship was to sail. The emotion of the occasion was intense. Breakwell left the Holy Land without knowing that he would never again see his beloved Master, but his soul had been so deeply touched by 'Abdu'l-Baha's divine love it would have lasted the longest lifetime.

Yunis Khan spent a few hours in Thomas's company at the home of one of the believers. He testifies to the young pilgrim's devotion:

'...we were in a room that looked towards 'Akka. There he would stand, every now and then, perfectly still, facing 'Akka in a state of communion. Whilst his eyes welled with tears, his tongue uttered words of supplication. All those who were there were greatly moved.'<sup>[12]</sup>

In this ecstatic state, Thomas asked Yunis Khan if he could correspond with him. Thomas expressed the desire that his letters would bring to him 'the fragrances of the effulgent city of 'Akka.'<sup>[13]</sup>

From then on, the correspondence with Yunis Khan would be the vital link that united the young Englishman with his beloved Master.

All those who were present wept as the time came to bid farewell to this devoted young pilgrim who had made such a lasting impression. Thomas followed his Master's bidding and returned to Paris.

## A STAR IN THE FIRMAMENT OF PARIS

Back in Paris, Thomas lost no time in sharing with others the wonderful spirit which the Master had released within him.

The firmness of his faith was apparent to all, as was his sincere wish to serve the Cause, and obey the Covenant. May writes of him in the following terms:

'Those days in the Prison of 'Akka, when the Master's all consuming love and perfect wisdom had produced that mystic change of heart and soul which enabled him to rapidly free himself from all earthly entanglement, and to passionately attach himself to the world of reality, brought great fruits to the Faith.'<sup>[14]</sup>

Although he had been used to living fairly comfortably, Thomas now completely changed his way of life. He returned to his studies, and went to live in an inexpensive neighbourhood, probably at No. 14, Rue Leonie, the place of residence entered on his death certificate. The same document, discovered in 1979, tells us that he was working as a stenographer before his death. Although Thomas lived a long way from the city centre, he used always to go on foot to the Baha'i meetings, in order to save his fare and make his contribution to the teaching work in Paris. He was the first Baha'i in the West to pay Huququ'llah, the Right of God. No care for the future ever oppressed his mind. He had but one concern: to serve humanity until his last breath.

So abandoned was he to the creative forces latent in the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, that he was moved spontaneously in the smallest actions of his daily life to pour out that spirit of love and oneness to all.

May records one incident which illustrates his truly kind-hearted nature:

'Well I remember the day we were crossing a bridge over the Seine on the top of a bus, when he spied an old woman labouriously pushing an apple-cart up an incline; excusing himself with a smile, he climbed down off the bus, joined the old woman, and in the most natural way put his hands on the bar and helped her over the bridge.'

She describes Thomas's exemplary courtesy in the following manner:

'The rock foundation on which the Baha'i Revelation rests, "the oneness of mankind", had penetrated his soul like an essence, taking on every form of human relationship, imbuing him with an insight and penetration into human needs, an intense sympathy and genuine love which made him a hope and refuge to all.'

She further relates:

'Although we were fellow Baha'is and devoted friends, with everything in common, yet when he came to our home he gave his whole loving attention to my beautiful Mother, with but a scant word for me, yet as he took my hand in farewell, he slipped a little folded note into my palm with words of cheer and comfort, usually Words of Baha'u'llah.'

Admiringly, May concludes:

'He knew the secret of imparting happiness and was the very embodiment of the Master's words, 'The star of happiness is in every heart. We must remove the veils so that it may shine forth radiantly.' Thomas not only excelled in his social relations, he had become a guiding light in the Paris community in all matters concerning the teaching of the Cause.'

'In the meetings, he spoke with a simplicity and eloquence which won the hearts and quickened the souls, and the secret of his potent influence lay in his supreme recognition of the Manifestation of God in the Bab and in Baha'u'llah, and of the sublime Centre of the Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Baha.

The potential which, from their first meeting, May had seen in this young man, was now manifest in its full splendour.

The effects which this spiritual growth produced were then so remarkable, that May went so far as to comment:

'He had become the guiding star of our group, his calmness and strength, his intense fervour, his immediate and all-penetrating grasp of the vast import to mankind in this age of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, released among us forces which constituted a new epoch in the Cause in France.'

These words are especially poignant when one thinks of Thomas's young age, of the influence he demonstrated both during his life and after his death. For, truly, he was unlike anyone else. The spiritual maturity he evinced was that of a much older person.

Thomas continued a fortnightly correspondence with Dr Yunis Khan, who shared all his letters with 'Abdu'l-Baha. He would inform Him of Thomas's situation and of his desire to do the Master's will. In one of his letters, Thomas asked whether the Master would permit him to leave Paris for a few days for England, should one of his parents become ill or die. Then, upon reflection, he thought it was not necessary to trouble 'Abdu'l-Baha with this question, since He would certainly reply as Christ had already replied, that he must 'Let the dead bury their dead'. Dr. Khan read the message to 'Abdu'l-Baha, Who smiled and told him to reply that, today, 'the living must bury the dead'.<sup>[15]</sup>

In one of Thomas's later letters to 'Akka, he said that he now understood what he must do, but was still hoping to please the Master more, to suffer more for his Beloved. No one yet knew what this suffering was of which he spoke. Matters became more complex when Thomas's parents arrived in Paris, seeking to persuade him to return at once to England, to convalesce from his increasingly poor health. But Thomas steadfastly refused to leave Paris.

He asked 'Abdu'l-Baha to pray for his parents, so that they might become Baha'is. The Master replied that Thomas should not worry over that matter, and, only a fortnight later, Thomas informed 'Abdu'l-Baha that his father, who had previously disowned him for rejecting Primitive Methodism, had embraced the Baha'i Faith. Edward Breakwell even went so far as to write his own letter of supplication to the Master. 'Abdu'l-Baha revealed a Tablet in his honour.

Thomas wrote to the Master, happily saying that, if he were Persian, he would have chosen to be a martyr. He had been admitted to hospital, and was in the tuberculosis ward. But news from the young man continued to reach 'Akka, conveying an ever-increasing joy, despite his suffering.

Sometimes, when Dr. Khan read Thomas's letters to 'Abdu'l-Baha, the Master would remain silent. Dr. Khan knew that the 'mysterious communion between the lover and the Beloved had no need of the spoken word.'<sup>[16]</sup> At other times, the Master would ask his secretary simply to convey His greetings. Although Thomas could have asked for healing, he never did, but prayed always for greater suffering. The more his illness consumed him, the greater his joy became.

Hippolyte Dreyfus, who was able to visit Thomas in hospital, relates how the young Englishman spoke to the other patients enthusiastically about the Baha'i Faith. Some of his listeners were upset by his message, others criticized it. But Thomas, unperturbed, maintained his tranquillity and told them that he was not going to die, but was merely departing for the Kingdom of God, and that he would pray for them in heaven.

Writing of his pain, he said:

'Suffering is a heady wine; I am prepared to receive that bounty which is the greatest of all; torments of the flesh have enabled me to draw much nearer to my Lord. All agony notwithstanding, I wish life to endure longer, so that I may taste more of pain. That which I desire is the good-pleasure of my Lord; mention me in His presence.'<sup>[17]</sup>

Thomas Breakwell breathed his last at seven p.m., on 13 June 1902, at No. 200, rue Faubourg Saint Denis. He was 30 years of age; he had been a Baha'i for hardly one year. But from that moment on, he possessed all eternity to live and proclaim his Faith.

The mysterious nature of the unspoken communion between the lover and the Beloved can be seen in the way in which Yunis Khan learned of Thomas's death.

'I was accompanying the Master in the evening from the house where He received His visitors to His home by the seaside. All of a sudden He turned to me and said: 'Have you heard?' 'No, Master,' I replied, and He said: 'Breakwell has passed away. I am grieved, very grieved. I have revealed a prayer of visitation for him. It is very moving, so moving that twice I could not withhold my tears when I was writing it. You must translate it well, so that whoever reads it will weep.' I never knew who had given the Master the news of Breakwell's death. If anyone had written or cabled either in English or French, that communication would have passed through my hands. Two days later the prayer of visitation was given to me. It wrung one's heart, and I could not hold back my tears. I translated it into French, and later, with the help of Lua Getsinger, into English.'<sup>[18]</sup>

Yunis Khan recounts the following story regarding the Master's continuing attachment to Thomas, after his passing from this earthly plane:

'Abdu'l-Baha called me one day to His presence, to give me letters to translate. There were many envelopes sent from various places. While examining them still sealed, He, all of a sudden, picked out one and said: "How pleasing is the fragrance that emanates from this envelope. Make haste, open it and see where it comes from. Make Haste."... In it there was a postcard ... the postcard was coloured a beautiful shade, and attached to it was a solitary flower – a violet. Written in letters of gold were these words: "He is not dead. He lives on in the Kingdom of God." Further, there was this sentence: 'This flower was picked from Breakwell's grave.'



When I told the Master what the message of the postcard was, He at once rose up from His seat, took the card, put it on His blessed brow, and tears flowed down His cheeks.'<sup>[19]</sup>

In a letter, enclosed with the card, Edward Breakwell wrote, 'Praise be to the Lord that my son left this world for the next with the recognition and love of 'Abdu'l-Baha.'<sup>[20]</sup>

Thomas Breakwell's grave was leased for five years, after which time, as no surviving members of his family kept up the payments on the plot, his bones were disinterred, cleaned, bundled and numbered, and as is the custom, placed in the cemetery's charnel house. The section where Breakwell's bones are stacked has long since been sealed and other sections built against it, which in turn have been filled.'<sup>[21]</sup>

Since the time when Thomas's bones were removed, two other people had been buried in this grave. When it became known to the Baha'is in Paris that the gravesite was once again vacant, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of France applied for permission to erect a permanent monument to Thomas on the site. A competition was announced, and a number of Baha'i architects submitted a variety of designs. Cemetery officials were reluctant to give approval for an elaborate monument, and the National Assembly had to settle for a simple but dignified stone.

Now that stone is in place, and has already become a focal point of pilgrimage. The Universal House of Justice has encouraged the French Baha'i community to continue its efforts to retrieve Thomas's remains from the charnel house and have them returned to their original grave.

In a Tablet to Ethel Rosenberg, another outstanding early British believer, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that,

'Holy places are undoubtedly centres of the outpouring of Divine grace, because on entering the illumined sites associated with martyrs and holy souls, and by observing reverence, both physical and spiritual, one's heart is moved with great tenderness. ...it is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God if a person desires to draw nigh unto Him by visiting them...'<sup>[22]</sup>

On 14 June 1997, 95 years to the day since the mortal remains of Thomas Breakwell were laid to rest, a diverse group of Baha'is, representing the inheritors of that glorious legacy of faith which Thomas left to the world, gathered at the Pantin Cemetery in Paris, to honour his memory at the dedication of the newly erected memorial, and to participate in a celebration of Thomas's life and legacy.'<sup>[23]</sup>

## **TABLET REVEALED BY 'Abdu'l-Baha**

Grieve thou not over the ascension of my beloved Breakwell, for he hath risen unto a rose garden of splendours within the Abha Paradise, sheltered by the mercy of his mighty Lord, and he is crying at the top of his voice: 'O that my people could know how graciously my Lord hath forgiven me, and made me to be of those who have attained His Presence!'

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Where now is thy fair face? Where is thy fluent tongue? Where thy clear brow? Where thy bright comeliness?

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Where is thy fire, blazing with God's love? Where is thy rapture at His holy breaths? Where are thy praises, lifted unto Him? Where is thy rising up to serve His Cause?

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Where are thy beauteous eyes? Thy smiling lips? The princely cheek? The graceful form?

O Breakwell, O my dear one!

Thou hast quit this earthly world and risen upward to the Kingdom, thou hast reached unto the grace of the invisible realm, and offered thyself at the threshold of its Lord.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thou hast left the lamp that was thy body here, the glass that was thy human form, thy earthly elements, thy way of life below.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thou hast lit a flame within the lamp of the Company on high, thou hast set foot in the Abha Paradise, thou hast found a shelter in the shadow of the Blessed Tree, thou hast attained His meeting in the haven of Heaven.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thou art now a bird of Heaven, thou hast quit thine earthly nest, and soared away to a garden of holiness in the kingdom of thy Lord. Thou hast risen to a station filled with light.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thy song is even as birdsong now, thou pourest forth verses as to the mercy of thy Lord; of Him Who forgiveth ever, thou wert a thankful servant, wherefore hast thou entered into exceeding bliss.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thy Lord hath verily singled thee out for His love, and hath led thee into His precincts of holiness, and made thee to enter the garden of those who are His close companions, and hath blessed thee with beholding His beauty.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thou hast won eternal life, and the bounty that faileth never, and a life to please thee well, and plenteous grace.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
Thou art become a star in the supernal sky, and a lamp amid the angels of high Heaven; a living spirit in the most exalted Kingdom, throned in eternity.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
I ask of God to draw thee ever closer, hold thee ever faster; to rejoice thy heart with nearness to His presence, to fill thee with light and still more light, to grant thee still more beauty, and to bestow upon thee power and great glory.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!  
At all times do I call thee to mind. I shall never forget thee. I pray for thee by day, by night; I see thee plain before me, as if in open day.

O Breakwell, O my dear one!<sup>[24]</sup>

This sublime Tablet not only moves the reader, as 'Abdu'l-Baha wished, but also prompts one to ponder the unique character of Thomas Breakwell, that he should have attained such a station, should have become 'a star in the supernal sky, and a lamp amid the angels of high Heaven', 'like unto the birds chanting the verses of thy Lord, the Forgiving', should have been blessed with 'beholding His Beauty'.

The terms used by 'Abdu'l-Baha are moving and significant. Yet, Thomas was a believer for a very short period of his life. One may also be surprised to read Shoghi Effendi, on the occasion of the passing of George Townshend, state that he merited a place beside Thomas Breakwell and John Esslemont as one of 'three luminaries shedding brilliant lustre'<sup>[25]</sup> on the annals of the Irish, English and Scottish Baha'i communities. Shoghi Effendi paid tribute to George Townshend's 'sterling qualities his scholarship his challenging writings high ecclesiastical position unrivalled any Baha'i western world';<sup>[26]</sup> John Esslemont was the author of a book which won singular praise from the Guardian, who said that it would 'inspire

generations yet unborn to tread the path of truth and service as steadfastly and as unostentatiously as was trodden by its beloved author.<sup>[27]</sup> Both John Esslemont and George Townshend were designated Hands of the Cause of God by the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith: the former posthumously,<sup>[28]</sup> the latter during his own lifetime.<sup>[29]</sup> That honour was never bestowed upon Thomas. Neither was he included among that group of twenty-one distinguished early western believers whom Shoghi Effendi designated 'the Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Baha', and 'Heralds of the Covenant'.<sup>[30]</sup>

Compared to the lasting achievements of Esslemont and Townshend, the significance of Thomas Breakwell's life and death seems a mystery indeed. By all accounts he left no tangible legacy for posterity. He was a Baha'i for less than a year. Until recently, even his final resting place was left unmarked. One can but wonder why it was that 'Abdu'l-Baha should have written about him in such glowing terms; and why Shoghi Effendi should have named him one of these 'three luminaries', and ranked him as co-equal in such exalted company.

Many intriguing issues arise when one ponders such questions as: Why did Thomas long for death so? Why did he wish for more suffering? How did he know that he would please God by drinking from the cup of sorrow, when, in any case he could not escape it? Were not his qualities of more benefit to humanity when he was living rather than dead?

How can one explain all this deployment of mysterious forces which led him to come into contact with the Baha'i Faith, then live for such a short time after that? Is there some kind of hidden meaning to his life?

Perhaps 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself may lift the veil a little for us. In the last talk He gave in Paris, on 1 December 1911, nine years after the death of Thomas Breakwell, 'Abdu'l-Baha said:

'When I arrived in Paris some time ago for the first time, I looked around me with much interest, and in my mind I likened this beautiful city to a large garden.

'With loving care and much thought I examined the soil, and found it to be very good and full of possibility for steadfast faith and firm belief, for a seed of God's love has been cast into the ground.'<sup>[31]</sup>

It is tempting to conclude that Thomas Breakwell was chosen to be the seed of the love of God of which 'Abdu'l-Baha speaks here. Planted by the hand of the Master Himself, it was helped to grow and flourish, and to produce fresh seedlings whose maturation would signal a decisive stage in the history of the Faith in this capital city. Such was his destiny! Is this why Thomas Breakwell was so on fire, and so urgently wished to give his life, to drink the cup of suffering, because he knew that he would serve the Cause better this way, since God had bestowed tremendous hidden powers on him?

Thomas's sacrifice recalls that of Mirza Mihdi, Baha'u'llah's youngest son, whose death released such forces as to throw open the doors of the prison which hid the Manifestation of God from the eyes of the world.

What similar forces were released by the sacrifice of Thomas Breakwell?

If May Bolles, even at that time, thought that he had liberated forces in the Parisian Baha'i community, the appearance of which launched a new epoch in the Cause, if she claimed that the spirit of Thomas Breakwell continues to live, 'not alone in the hearts and memories of the Baha'is, but is also welded into the very structure of the World Order', what can be said today, now that almost a hundred years separates us from the

time of Thomas's passing?

## SPIRITUAL RANK AND STATION

It is probably impossible for most of us to truly comprehend the spiritual station of the great souls of religious history. Thankfully, however, the Baha'i Writings do cast light on some aspects of the glorious rank which Thomas Breakwell appears to have attained.

The Seven Valleys by Baha'u'llah and the prayer of visitation revealed by 'Abdu'l-Baha in honour of Thomas Breakwell are two texts which offer distinct but complementary approaches to understanding spiritual reality. One revealing the process of evolution that every soul must undergo, and the other, the heights to which it may aspire.

## BREAKWELL'S MYSTICAL JOURNEY

Baha'u'llah's Seven Valleys traces the mystical journey of the spiritual seeker, and the joys and sorrows to be encountered along that pathway. The life of Thomas Breakwell takes on a deeper meaning when considered in the light of that mystical work.

The spiritual odyssey of Thomas Breakwell could be described imaginatively here, and may, in turn, set an example by which to approach The Seven Valleys itself. The concordance of incidents from what we know of Thomas's inner and outer life, with Baha'u'llah's descriptions of the tests and triumphs of spiritual advancement, may be said to be striking indeed.

Thomas Breakwell's progress towards God could be said to take him through each of the Seven Valleys. This young man was first attracted to Theosophy and the fashionable spiritualist theories of this day. In this condition, he travels through the Valley of Search and seeks for the 'Beauty of the Friend'<sup>[32]</sup> with the fervour of a mystic lover. 'How many a Jacob will he see, hunting after his Joseph', and how many lovers, 'hasting to seek the Beloved', before being guided to May Bolles?

Did not the 'aid from the Invisible Realm' guide his steps when, walking through the streets of Paris, he heard a voice announcing the return of Christ to him, and did not the 'heat of his search' 'grow' as soon as he, in a state of exaltation, returned to see his friend May and tell her of his strange experience? 'And if, by the help of God,' as Baha'u'llah describes it, 'he findeth on this journey a trace of the traceless Friend', and 'inhaleth the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger, he shall straightway step into the Valley of Love and be dissolved in the fire of love.'

Did he not feel, from that moment, the ultimate longing to see his Beloved -- 'Abdu'l-Baha -- as soon as he had declared his faith? Thomas was now 'unaware of himself, and of aught else besides himself.' He saw 'neither ignorance nor knowledge, neither doubt nor certitude'. He abandoned all his former plans and set sail for 'Akka. But the seeker had not yet acquired the certitude of the True Believer, for in the Valley of Love, 'if there be no pain this journey will never end.'

Having actually reached the prison city of 'Akka, Thomas was seized by fear while awaiting the arrival of the Master. Doubts assailed him. He wondered why he had come so far to that remote prison? He did not know that 'until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward being; and until thou burn with the fire of love, thou shalt never commune with the Lover of Longing.' It appears at this stage that Thomas remained attached to the material world, and so was unable to experience the same joy as his travelling companion, Herbert Hopper. It was not until, seated by the Master's side, that the veil was suddenly lifted.

'Abdu'l-Baha's loving presence touched his soul, revealing to him at once, the real nature of life's vanities and injustices.

Thomas was not one of those many souls who choose to remain deprived of the spirit of life by wrapping themselves in veils of materialism. He possessed 'great qualities' which enabled him to know 'the fire of love'. Soon the overwhelming sense of solitude and despair which had first enveloped him became dissolved through the intense flame of his pure-hearted devotion. Instead, he was seized by transports of delight through meeting at last his beloved Master. His ego and all its attachments was forgotten. He thus entered the Valley of Knowledge, where he came 'out of doubt into certitude', and 'from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God'.

Thomas could now leave 'Akka satisfied, and begin to 'privily converse with his Beloved' when, as he was departing, he turned one last time to pay homage to that holy place. 'With inward and outward eyes he witnesseth', from then onwards, 'the mysteries of resurrection in the realms of creation and the souls of men.'

When Thomas made his way back from 'Akka to Paris, where, at the Master's wish, he was going to settle, the spiritual journey of his soul was continuing. 'He beholdeth justice in injustice, an din justice, grace. In ignorance he findeth many a knowledge hidden, and in knowledge a myriad of wisdoms manifest.' In Paris, Thomas devoted himself to teaching the Cause and displayed great solicitude to everyone, as May Bolles noted: 'If he meeteth with injustice he shall have patience and if he cometh upon wrath, he shall manifest love.' Is not this how Thomas reacted when he became aware that he himself was doomed in this mortal world? His illness was consuming him; he knew he could not escape it. Before the injustice of this enemy which had attacked him while still so young, did he not manifest courage and gratitude to God?

'Those who journey in the garden-land of knowledge,' explains Baha'u'llah, 'because they see the end in the beginning, see peace in war and friendliness in anger.'

'After passing through the Valley of Knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of Unity and drinketh from the cup of the Absolute, and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness.'

May Bolles said of Thomas Breakwell that he had so well understood the spirit of unity inherent in the religion of Baha'u'llah that his very essence was impregnated with it. Thomas entered into a mystic union with God, upon Whom he continually called in prayer. 'He burned with such a fire of love that his frail body seemed to be gradually consumed.' He seemed to be passing through the Valley of Contentment: 'From sorrow he turneth to bliss, from anguish to joy. His grief and mourning yield to delight and rapture... The wayfarer in this Valley may dwell upon the dust, yet inwardly they are throned in the heights of mystic meaning; they eat of the endless bounties of inner significance, and drink of the delicate wines of the spirit.'

Thomas Breakwell, poor, alone, weak and emaciated by his illness, nevertheless felt intensely what it was to traverse this Valley: 'and thou wilt loose thyself from all things else, and bind thyself to Him, and throw thy life down in His path, and cast thy soul away.' Was not this very sacrifice what Thomas was in fact seeking when he wrote to 'Abdu'l-Baha, expressing his wish to be a martyr? Did he not see his impending death as just such a sacrificial act? Can one imagine a more fervent lover than this young man who, by now in the grip of an incurable illness, thanked his Lord for his condition, and asked to be allowed to drink more deeply of the wine of suffering?

The Valley of Wonderment is also one of perplexity where the True Believer 'seeth the shape of wealth as poverty itself, and the essence of freedom as sheer impotence. Now he is struck dumb with the beauty of the All-Glorious; again he is wearied out with his own life. How many a mystic tree hath this whirlwind of wonderment snatched by the roots', asks Baha'u'llah, and 'how many a soul hath it exhausted?' But Thomas remained firm.

Hippolyte Dreyfus, who visited Thomas in hospital, was astonished by his indomitable spirit. 'After scaling the high summits of wonderment the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. This station is the dying from self and the living in God ... being poor in the things of the created world, rich in the things of God's world. For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils... Yea, all that he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.'

Thomas Breakwell departed this life a poor man, with not even enough to purchase a plot of earth for the repose of his earthly remains. Though his body may be lost in a common grave in this world, his soul nevertheless shines on high, and tastes the glory and joy of those who have 'attained the Presence of God'. Such was his life, and such could be that of all true believers,<sup>[33]</sup> of whom Thomas Breakwell is surely an illustrious example.

## **BREAKWELL'S LUMINOUS STATION**

Thomas Breakwell possessed great spiritual capacity, and was courageous in the way he manifested it. These two factors determine the spiritual rank and station which each soul occupies.

Yet there is, it would seem, a very important difference. One's spiritual station is conferred by God, and is entirely dependent on His grace. One may lose it, but one cannot 'earn' it. Rank is a degree of spiritual development which the individual acquires by his or her own efforts, and which distinguishes him or her from any other believer.

Thomas Breakwell's rank is much less of a mystery to us than his station. Consider how baffling it may at first seem when we read that Shoghi Effendi describes George Townshend, John Esslemont and Thomas Breakwell as being equal in rank. On the other hand, Thomas Breakwell appears to have been endowed by God with an exceptional station, higher than that of any other Western believer.

What is the spiritual nature of this station? A close study of the prayer of visitation revealed by 'Abdu'l-Baha in honour of Thomas Breakwell perhaps allows us a glimpse of its greatness.

When we refer to the original Arabic language of this Tablet, and consider some of the precise terminology which the Master employs, we see that Thomas Breakwell was one of those rare souls who was able to attain the ultimate goal of his life (fa'izin). The greatness of this goal is clearly revealed in the Arabic version, though it is perhaps not so apparent in either the French or English translations, as neither of those languages contains words or phrases which can convey the equivalent meanings and allusions of the Arabic. 'Abdu'l-Baha writes, literally: 'Thou hast forsaken the world of Nasut and ascended to that of Malakut, and by the grace of God thou hast attained to Lahut and reached the threshold (atabat) of the Lord of Jabarut!'<sup>[34]</sup>

The world of Lahut may be described as the realm of the Divine Will or Logos where the divine names and attributes of



God are first revealed. Here the divine Manifestations exist in a condition of complete union with the Essence of god. In Baha'i terminology this is sometimes referred to as 'The Heavenly Court', or the 'All-Glorious Horizon'. The realm of Jabarut is where these manifestations of God's Will acquire their individual existence, the form in which they become known among us, revealing God's actions and decrees in each dispensation.

Then comes the realm of Malakut, which is the world of the soul. In the Baha'i scriptures this is also known as the Kingdom of Abha, where, beyond physical death, the human soul pursues spiritual development on the infinite journey toward God. The world of Malakut is arranged in a hierarchy according to the spiritual development of the souls and their station.

According to this hierarchy of the worlds of God, we may describe the spiritual journey of Thomas Breakwell as having left the world of Nasut (the plane of the human condition), to rise, first of all, to the world of Malakut, the world of the soul, and by a special grace, reach the world of Lahut, the world of Divinity where he attained the sacred Threshold of the Lord of Jabarut.

This suggests that Thomas Breakwell attained the presence of the divine Manifestation (Baha'u'llah), in that station of splendour and power, distinct from His station in the world of Malakut. For the world of Jabarut is, at the same time, the world of the Divine Will and also the World of the Manifestation.

So Thomas Breakwell, without having entered into the heart of the world of the divine Manifestation, attained that point which marks its frontier, the Tree of Tuba (as it is in the original Arabic), also called the Sadratu'l-Muntaha (the name given to the last tree of an oasis before the desert begins), beyond which he caught sight of the world of the Manifestation of God and the Face of God, as is promised in the Qur'an. This is the highest station to which a human being can attain.

In a Tablet which Baha'u'llah devotes to the qualities and station of the 'true believer', this meeting is described in the following manner: 'Such a man hath attained the knowledge of the station of Him Who is "at the distance of two bows", Who standeth beyond the Sadratu'l-Muntaha.'<sup>[35]</sup>

In the Qur'an, the Sadratu'l-Muntaha refers to the point which marks the inaccessibility of God.

This Tablet also furnishes details of the conditions of life in the next world, the life of those souls who have attained the highest level of spiritual being. They are entrusted with a special service which plunges them into such extremes of joy that they sing the praises of God and chant verses which rain down upon the whole of creation. Their sustenance is the contemplation of the Beauty of the Manifestation.

Thus it was that Thomas Breakwell received the grace of God, Who granted him, above and beyond the spiritual rank achieved through his own efforts, the exalted station of one of 'His close companions'.<sup>[36]</sup> In final tribute, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha Who wrote so definitively of Thomas, 'Thy Lord hath verily singled thee out for His love.'<sup>[37]</sup>

## NOTES

[1 'Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. a committee at the Baha'i World Centre and by Marzieh Gail, 1st pocket size ed. (Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1997), 158.12, p. 198.]

[2 Shoghi Effendi, from a cablegram to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the British Isles, 27 March 1957, Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith to the Baha'i Community of the British

Isles (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 377.]

[3 This paragraph is from Robert Weinberg, Ethel Jenner Rosenberg: The Life and Times of England's Outstanding Baha'i Pioneer Worker (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995), p. 42.]

[4 For an account of that historic visit, see May Maxwell, An Early Pilgrimage (Oxford: George Ronald Publisher, 1976 ed.)]

[5 'Abdu'l-Baha, 'The Most Important Work', Star of the West, vol. IV, no 15, p. 256 (bound vol. 3). (Oxford: George Ronald, 1978).]

[6 Charles Mason Remey, cited in Marion Holley, 'May Ellis Maxwell', The Baha'i World: A Biennial International Record, prepared under the supervision of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada with the approval of Shoghi Effendi, vol. VII (95 and 96 of the Baha'i Era, 1938-1940 A.D.), (Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1942), p. 634.]

[7 This paragraph is adapted from Weinberg, p. 43.]

[8 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this section are taken from May Maxwell, 'A Brief Account of Thomas Breakwell', The Baha'i World, vol. VII (93 and 94 of the Baha'i Era, April 1936-1938 AD), (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1939), pp. 707-11.]

[9 Marion Holley, op. cit., p. 635.]

[10 May Maxwell, 'A Brief Account of Thomas Breakwell', p. 709.]

[11 Yunis Khan Afrukhtih, cited in H. M. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Baha: The Centre of the Covenant of Baha'u'llah (Oxford: George Ronald, 1971), p. 77.]

[12 Ibid.]

[13 Ibid.]

[14 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this section are taken from May Maxwell, 'A Brief Account of Thomas Breakwell'.]

[15 A. Q. Faizi, 'A Precious Gift', Baha'i Journal, Nov. 1969.]

[16 Yunis Khan, cited in Balyuzi, p. 78.]

[17 Thomas Breakwell, cited ibid.]

[18 Ibid., pp. 79-9.]

[19 Ibid., p. 80.]

[20 Cited in Weinberg, p. 46.]

[21 Ibid., pp. 46-7.]

[22 'Abdu'l-Baha, cited in Universal House of Justice, A Synopsis and Codification of The Kitab-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1973), p. 61.]

[23 For more information, see Rob Weinberg, 'The Commemoration of Thomas Breakwell', Baha'i Journal, September 1997, pp. 12-13.]

[24 'Abdu'l-Baha, Selections, 185.1-15, pp. 196-9.]

[25 Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 377.]

[26 Ibid.]

[27 Shoghi Effendi, from a message 'To the beloved of God and the handmaids of the Merciful in the East and in the West', 30 November 1925, ibid., p. 43.]

[28 Ibid.]

[29 See Shoghi Effendi, cablegram 24 December 1951, Messages to the Baha'i World 1950-1957 (Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1995 reprint), p. 20.]

[30 See The Baha'i World, vol. III, pp. 84-5. Also, The Baha'i World, vol. IV, pp. 118-19.]

[31 'Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1911, 12th rev. ed. (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1995), 53.1-2, pp. 178-8. Emphasis added.]

[32 Unless otherwise stated, all quotation in this section are from Baha'u'llah, The Seven Valleys, trans. Ali Kuli Khan and Marzieh Gail London: Nightingale Books, 1992.)]

[33 For a discussion of the attributes and station of the true believer, see Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, Volume One: Baghdad 1853-63, rev. ed. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976), pp. 238-9, 243.]

[34 See Baha'u'llah, op cit., pp. 63-4. For a discussion of the hierarchy of the worlds of God, see Moojan Momen, 'Relativism: A Basis for Baha'i metaphysics', in Moojan Momen (ed), Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions, vol. 5: Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988), pp. 185-217.]

[35 Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, comp. and trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978), XXIX, p. 70.]

[36 'Abdu'l-Baha, Selections, 158.10, p. 198.]

[37 Ibid.]