

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Thomas Breakwell (1872–1902): A Lamp Amid Angels By Gail Radley



By his 20s, Thomas Breakwell already had a successful career. Born in England, Thomas had moved with his family to the United States. There he found a job at a southern cotton mill that paid him well. He earned enough to travel often to Europe.

But Thomas's soul was hungry for something more. In the summer of 1901, while heading to France, Thomas talked about religion with another traveler, Mrs. Milner. She decided to introduce him to her friend in Paris, an American Bahá'í named May Bolles.*

May had been among the first westerners to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í leader. In Paris, she also started Europe's first Bahá'í group. When her family left the city for vacation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá insisted that she stay.

Mysterious Power

Soon Thomas arrived at May's door. She found him to be "graceful, with intense eyes and an indescribable charm." May talked with Thomas about spirituality, his work, and his travel plans. She never mentioned the Bahá'í Faith, but she remembered his "searching gaze." Thomas asked to return the next day.

He arrived full of joy. "When I was here yesterday," he explained, "I felt a power, an influence . . ." He said he'd felt this nearness to God and humanity before, through prayer. "When I left . . . a wind . . . whirled around me, and in that wind a voice said . . . 'Christ has come again!'" He asked May if she thought he was crazy.

"No," May assured him, "you are just becoming sane." Thomas didn't know that the Bahá'í teachings say the spirit of Christ (and other Messengers of God) has returned through the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

May told Thomas about the Faith and her pilgrimage to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá in what is now Israel. Thomas became the first man from England to embrace the Bahá'í Faith.



Thomas Breakwell (sitting at front and center) was the first Bahá'í man from England. He lived in Paris and shared the Bahá'í Faith.

He longed to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He canceled his other plans and wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá a note: "My Lord, I believe, forgive me, Thy servant Thomas Breakwell." Shortly after, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told May that she could now leave Paris.

Guiding Star

When he met with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Thomas told him about his work. Then he raised a problem: the mill that paid him so well relied on child labor. Though unjust, child labor was common at the time. Kids often worked long hours under harsh conditions for little pay, and they couldn't attend school. 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised him to resign.

Thomas quit immediately, his guilt melting away. At 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request, Thomas returned to Paris. He lived simply, in order to donate all he could to the Faith. He taught others the Faith that had so changed his life, becoming, May said, a "guiding star" to the Bahá'ís. Soon, he fell seriously ill with tuberculosis. He didn't complain about his illness, but said it drew him closer to God. He kept teaching the Faith.

On June 13, 1902, about a year after becoming a Bahá'í, Thomas Breakwell died at age 30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed a prayer in his honor, calling him "a lamp amid angels of high Heaven; a living spirit in the most exalted Kingdom . . ."