



Drinking Tea with “The Girl from Kansas”

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“THE CONVERSATION OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ did not stop,” the newswoman noted, “even as we drank our Persian tea together.” The pair sat near the window of his room at the Shirley Hotel in Denver, Colorado. He looked out at the “rain flecked leaves of a swaying tree,” she wrote, “and occasionally closed his eyes as though looking into the future for the realization of the message which he believes is finding material ground for fruition in America.”

Those who encountered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on America’s Western frontier were still grappling with their first impressions of him. Among them was Alice Rohe, a thirty-six-year-old reporter from Lawrence, Kansas. Her interview with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took place on September 24, 1912, and was published the next day in the *Daily News: Denver, Colorado*.

Alice Rohe had met with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for an hour at the Shirley Hotel. She described him as a “patriarch of old — his gray beard falling upon his breast, his white locks surmounted by a white turban, his erect figure draped in the flowing garments of Persia . . .” Yet, she added, “this statement refers only to the first fleeting impression.” When he speaks, she noted, “the keen dark eyes become afire with the words he utters — the first impression of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá becomes a superficial one.”

Alice Rohe was among the first generation of American women to attend university. She entered Kansas State University in 1892 at the age of sixteen. By the age of twenty-four she was in New York, working as a reporter for the *Evening World*. She was even given her own column — “The Girl From Kansas” — featuring stories of young, professional women navigating the big city. After five years of overwork, she contracted tuberculosis and moved to Colorado Springs to help with the recovery. It was here that she was inspired to travel to nearby Denver to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

“I was thrilled for an hour by the flow of sonorous words that rolled from the lips of this man of the Orient,” she wrote. Ms. Rohe spoke of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a “man of deep sympathies, who shrinks from the exploitation of his own personality, who wishes to get his message of brotherly love, of unity to all mankind. . . .”

Alice Rohe, who would later become an outspoken supporter of women's suffrage, was especially interested in what 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to say on gender equality. "The accomplishments of wonderful women in our own times," he told her, "gives us the keen anticipation of many extraordinary women in the future." Rohe wrote that 'Abdu'l-Bahá believed women, "having finer sensibilities, finer intuitive powers, are often man's superior."

After overcoming tuberculosis, Alice Rohe's career continued to take off. During World War I, she was the first woman to lead an overseas bureau for a large news agency, the United Press, in Rome. She interviewed the likes of Ezra Pound, the King of Greece, and Queen Marie of Romania. Her Italian connections enabled her to meet with Mussolini early on — she was among the first to predict the Italian leader's rise to power.

In addition to his words, the tea Alice shared with 'Abdu'l-Bahá left an impression on her. "For the benefit of the tea drinkers," she wrote, "until one has sipped this fragrant tea of Persia, served in small glasses poured over two lumps of sugar and stirred with a tiny spoon — on a plate of Persian design — one has never tasted tea."

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