



Nightingales in  
Terra Nova.

The Immigration Experiences  
of Iranian Baha'is in Sydney  
and Canberra, Australia.

From 1960 to 1995

**NIGHTINGALES IN TERRA NOVA**

**A study of the Immigration  
Experiences of Iranian Baha'is in Sydney and  
Canberra from 1960 to 1998.**

**Thesis submitted by**

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**In November 2005**

**For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
In the School of Humanities  
James Cook University, Cairns.**

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## Iranian Bahá'ís and their Immigration Experiences in Sydney and Canberra

1960 -1998

### ABSTRACT

When the 'White Australia' immigration policy was finally dismantled in 1973 a door of opportunity opened for migrants from the Middle East seeking a refuge from war and social chaos. Among these migrants were several thousand Iranian Bahá'ís, members of a persecuted minority forced by the Islamic regime, established after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, to leave their homes. Some of these migrants or their relatives spent time in prison, suffered torture and saw their homes torched. The largest number became refugees forced to hire people smugglers to escape from Iran. These migrants were highly motivated to become effective settlers elsewhere because they could not return home. The changes in immigration policies, which occurred in Australia in the 1970s and early 1980s, developed a safe haven for the Iranian Bahá'ís. A special program established in the 1980s to assist refugees to migrate to Australia hastened their arrival and facilitated their settlement.

The data for this oral history was obtained through interviews with eighty three Iranian Baha'ís in 2003. The intention was to record the immigration experiences of the Iranian Bahá'ís from their perspective while the first generation was still alive. It also aimed to examine the reasons why they rapidly became successful settlers given that their country of origin had a very different culture to that of Australia. The study found that the central core of their faith, that humanity is one and the world is one country, helped them to achieve successful long-term settlement. The other factor that assisted their settlement process was the presence of a well-established Bahá'í community in Australia. There was a small number of Iranian Bahá'ís already in Australia, before 1979, and they provided the links that began a chain migration of skilled migrants. However the refugee assistance program enabled many more migrants than would have been expected through the traditional channels of chain migration. The Bahá'í community provided the migrants with a social network and an acceptable identity in their host society. The immigration process was furthered by the family reunion policy and migrants who had family with them made the smoothest transition to Australian society. Women in the group with the opportunity of individual autonomy Australian society provided took maximum advantage of the freedoms it offered such as freedom to work outside the home and to seek further education. They were also free to craft an individual life style that included issues such as clothing and



gender relationships. Problems encountered in Australia were non-recognition of professional qualifications and some discrimination based on language or colour. The study focused on settlement at an individual and community level and measured settlement success through issues such as employment levels and location. The findings of the study demonstrated that a multicultural policy enables migrants to feel valued in their host society. A humanitarian immigration policy is beneficial to a host society because it facilitates settlement for people driven out of their homes by war and persecution and pulls migrants who have the strongest motivation to become successful settlers because they cannot go home. The study also demonstrated that a migrant group with a dual identity, that is both a religious and ethnic identity, and one not considered mainstream in Australia, are not necessarily the harbingers of social disorder and can be an asset to their host society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review	22
Chapter Three: An overview of the history of immigration of ethnic groups in Australia from 1788 to the 1990s.	46
Chapter Four: A brief view of the history of Iranian Bahá'ís in their country of origin.	72
Chapter Five: The push factors that caused the Iranian Bahá'ís to leave Iran.	95
Chapter Six: Migration.	110
Chapter Seven: The pull factors that caused the Iranian Bahá'ís to choose Australia as their host society.	123
Chapter Eight: Individual Settlement	136
Chapter Nine: Group Settlement	170
Chapter Ten: Gender and Intergenerational Issues	198
Chapter Eleven: Conclusion	218
<b>Bibliography</b>	232
<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1. Birthplace of groups that arrived in Australia after 1975	246
Appendix 2. Information on Interviewees at point of departure from Iran.	247
Appendix 3. Migration Pull Factors and Travel Factors.	250
Appendix 4. Settlement Factors: Employment and Housing.	252
Appendix 5. Numbers of all Iranians in Sydney from 1976 to 1986	254
Appendix 6. Questionnaire	256

## Figures

Figure 1. Cartoon – Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell leading migrants to Australia – ‘The Promised Land’.	60
Figure 2. Chart showing how Baha’is arrived in Australia	134
Figure 3. Graph showing how all settlers in Australia arrived 1981-1977	134

## Maps

Map 1. Map of Iran showing localities where Baha’is were executed in Iran between 1979 and 1983	89
Map 2. Map of Iran showing routes taken by refugees into Pakistan and Turkey	122
Map 3. Map of Sydney suburbs showing clustering of Baha’i communities	196

## Illustrations

Photo 1. German Family and their cottage in Handorf - 1890	49
Photo 2. Italian Family in Victoria Circa - 1890	51
Photo 3. Greek Family in Silkwood - 1987	52
Photo 4. Greek Refugee Family in Palestine circa - 1945	53
Photo 5. Chinese Temple, Breakfast Creek, Brisbane - 1886	56
Photo 6. Muhammad Shah – 1844	74
Photo 7. Nasridin-Shah - 1890	75
Photo 8. Shrine of Baha’u’llah in Haifa, Israel.	76
Photo 9. Shrine of the Bab in Haifa, Israel.	76
Photo 10. A Baha’i martyr in Iran surrounded by fellow believers	77
Photo 11. A Baha’i family killed by a mob in Iran	77
Photo 12. Baha’i Centre Teheran – circa 1950	84
Photo 13. Mulla Falsafi – demolition of the Baha’i Centre 1955	84
Photo 14. Military Officer – demolition of the Baha’i Centre 1955	84

Photo 15. Prominent Baha'is Executed in Iran in 1981	88
Photo 16. Temple Dedication in Sydney 1961	174
Photo 17. The Baha'i Temple in Sydney 2003	184
Photo 18. The Temple in Ishqabad U. S.S.R. 1908	184
Photo 19. A Baha'i Girls School Teheran, Circa 1930	203