

## Lil Osborn Independent Scholar

Of the people who counted themselves as Baha'is in Britain during the early decades of the last century, perhaps the one most well known to the public at the time was Alice Mary Buckton (1867 – 1944). Buckton was already a published poet and playwright by the time she encountered the Baha'i teachings presumably around 1908 through Wellesley Tudor Pole. However, despite being in some respects high profile, her life is not easy to piece together, this is in part because her papers and records are not available, and because she appears to have been involved in very many different activities often falling out with her co workers before moving on to her next project. This paper looks at her involvement with the Baha'i Movement and attempts to evaluate perceptions of her role from inside the Movement.

## Background

Alice Buckton was born on the ninth day of March 1867, in Haselmere, Surrey. She seems to have kept close links with the county while she worked in London, prior to her move to Glastonbury. Her early life has been pieced together by Tracy Cutting in the short biography *Beneath the Silent Tor*. Alice Buckton was the eldest of the seven children of George Bowder Buckton and Mary Ann Olding. George Buckton was a gentleman scholar, interested in astronomy, and later in natural history. He published a number of works on aphids and flies, his work was beautifully illustrated and Cutting speculates his daughters may have assisted in the colouring of these pictures (Cutting, 2004, p. 8).

One brother, George Merrick Bell Buckton, born in 1876, died only three years later, however, the rest of Alice's siblings, Jessie May (10<sup>th</sup> May 1868), Maud Elizabeth (10<sup>th</sup> September 1869) Florence Emily (27<sup>th</sup> August 1870) Eveleen (30<sup>th</sup> April 1872) and William Woodyer Buckton (6<sup>th</sup> March 1875) all lived into adulthood. Little is known about them, it seems they were educated at home, there is evidence that both William and Florence got married (Cutting, 2004, p. 10), but there is no information about the other siblings apart from Alice's youngest sister Eveleen.

Eveleen Buckton RA (1872 – 1962), was an artist in a number of mediums; according to the British Council website:

Eveleen Buckton was a pupil of Frank Short. Her works were mainly landscapes and she exhibited with the New English Art Club and the Royal Academy. Her etchings are much in the style of Short. <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artist/5/17735>

Eveleen, like Alice never married and appears to have been quiet a prolific producer of water colour landscapes, she had a studio in Hampstead and a cottage near Salisbury. It is possible that she and Alice, as the sisters involved in the arts may have remained close there is no evidence to support such conjecture. Eveleen died in Hampstead aged ninety.

The area where the Buckton family lived was a centre of literary activity, in his book *The Hilltop Writers* Bob Trotter lists a colony of no less than sixty five writers living in the Surrey Hills in the later decades of the nineteenth century. These include the folklorist Rev. Sabine Bearing-Gould (1834 – 1924), whose novel *The Broomshire* was set in the area, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) but most importantly Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1885) (Trotter, 2003).

That Alice Buckton was acquainted with Tennyson has been acknowledged by every author who has written about her, but curiously the importance of this relationship is seemingly overlooked. Tennyson was the person who singlehandedly repackaged King Arthur for a late Victorian and Edwardian audience. Central to his reinvention of the Arthurian Legends were the stories around the quest for the Holy Grail. Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*, published between 1859 and 1885, is a cycle of twelve narrative poems which retell the legend of King Arthur, his knights, his love for Guinevere and her tragic betrayal of him, and the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. The whole work recounts Arthur's attempt and failure to lift up mankind and create a perfect kingdom, from his coming to power to his death at the hands of the traitor [Mordred](#). Individual poems detail the deeds of various knights, including Lancelot, Geraint, Galahad, and [Balin](#) and [Balan](#), and also Merlin and the Lady of the Lake. There is little transition between Idylls, but the central figure of Arthur links all the stories. Through Tennyson Buckton was steeped in the Arthurian world long before she encountered Tudor Pole and the Blue Bowl he had recovered from the well in Glastonbury.

Tennyson's influence remained on Buckton throughout her life; the Manchester Guardian printed a story about a gathering of Tennyson admirers visiting the poet's home in Surrey in 1925:

### TENNYSON AT ALDWORTH.

The Manchester Guardian gives the following picturesque description of the recent visit of many of Tennyson's admirers to Aldworth: —

'On the bowling green where Tennyson loved to sit the visitors yesterday gathered to listen to reminiscences of him and to readings— rather too copious—of his poems. Mr. W. F. Rawnsley, who was actually present at Tennyson's wedding in 1810, and who often visited him at Aldworth, gave us some glimpses of the great man among his friends.'<sup>1</sup>

The article goes on to assure readers that both Mr Rawnsley and “Miss Alys Buckton who also reminisced” pointed out that Tennyson was neither “gruff nor difficult”, that Buckton was still involved with Tennyson activities over a quarter of a century after his death, is a clear indication of the importance of his influence in her life.

In 1899 Alice was present at a memorial service for Tennyson in her family's parish church in Surrey; there she would recall “His voice above everything remains with me. I have never heard such a wonderful voice, and it was as rich and melodic a month before he died as it ever was”, she spoke of holding a candle for him as he read and walking through the fields with him. Years later she still wore a cloak Tennyson had given her (Chalice Well Trust, 2009, p. 28).

The main event of the service was the unveiling of a memorial window by the Bishop of Ripon. A number of sources describe a memorial window as being by Edward Burne-Jones, and indeed it does appear to be based upon his tapestry “The Attainment” which depicts Sir Galahad and the Grail, but according to the “Buckton Family Website”:

“Eveleen also designed a Stained Glass Window for Haslemere Church, as part of the Tennyson Memorial there. The window was unveiled on 8th August 1899, and depicts the Holy Grail.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929), Saturday 17 October 1925, page 4

<http://bucktonfamily.co.uk/interesting-bucktons/eveleen-buckton>

However an advertisement for a "Tennyson Weekend, Part of the Haslemere Festival 22nd - 24th May 2009 A celebration of the life of Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his Surrey home of Haslemere" ascribes the design of the window to John Henry Dearle:

"In 1899 a Memorial Window by J.H.Dearle, after the Grail Tapestry by Burne-Jones, was placed in St Bartholomew's Church, Haslemere."

<http://www.haslemere.com/tennyson/booking.pdf>

Dearle is the most likely designer of the window as following Morris's death in 1896, he was appointed Art Director of the Morris & Co, and became its principal stained glass designer on the death of Burne-Jones in 1898. It is quite possible that Eveleen Buckton may have been involved in the commissioning and procurement of the window, certainly the Buckton family were represented at the memorial service and as a leading local family would have contributed financially (probably substantially) to the memorial. The choice of subject the window depicts suggests the Grail legends were a subject of interest in the Buckton family long before Alice went to Glastonbury.

## Sesame House

It was also in 1899 that the Sesame Child Garden opened with Buckton, then aged thirty two as vice principal and her partner Annette Schepel as the senior mistress, teaching the child garden pupils. It is known that Alice Buckton worked for a time with Octavia Hill in her work amongst the poor of London, what her role was and the dates of her involvement are not recorded. However, it seems her interest moved on from direct settlement work to education and in particular the ideas of Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel (Fröbel) (1782 – 1852) who pioneered the concept of early years education and "child gardens" where children's creativity could grow. Buckton's interest in Frobelian educational theory is addressed in Stephanie Mathivet's *Alice Buckton (1867 – 1944): The Legacy of a Frobelian in the Landscape of Glastonbury*, which examines the influence of Froebel on Buckton's work in Glastonbury (Mathivet, March 2006).

The Sesame Child Garden was the project of the Sesame League, the institution was not simply a nursery school or playgroup, the child garden was only part of its function. The underlying purpose was the training of women in the kind of skills they would need for the changing role of women in modern life. The role of women in both the spiritual and mundane spheres was something that interested Buckton throughout her life.

The Sesame Club provided a platform for various forms of progressive education ... By 1899 the Sesame Club had nine hundred members, but there were associated with it people who were interested in its educational aims but did not want to belong to a social club: they formed the Sesame League, and resolved to open a house for Home Life Training on the lines of Pestalozzi Froebel Haus in Berlin, and persuaded Fraulein Schepel, ... to come over from Berlin to become its first Principal<sup>2</sup>.

<http://www.friedrichfroebel.com/sesame.html>

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<sup>2</sup> This may not be entirely accurate as the prospectus for the school names Miss Emily Last as the principal and Schepel as a "certified mistress" <http://studentzone.roehampton.ac.uk/library/digital-collection/froebel-archive/froebel-extracts/Extract%207.pdf>

It may be significant that Professor Geddes and his wife were both on the committee of the school; Geddes was the publisher of Fiona Macleod, the female alter-ego of William Sharpe, he was also acquainted with Thomas Pole, the father of Wellesley Pole through the Garden City Movement. Geddes would later play an important role in the visit of Abdul Baha to Edinburgh.

The report on the first year of the school's work states:

This training college, which is planned on the lines of the Pestalozzi Froebel Haus in Berlin was opened in July 1899 by the Marchioness of Ripon, under the auspices of the Sesame Club, Piccadilly. The aims of the training at Sesame House have been fully explained elsewhere. Suffice it here to say that its general purpose is to fit girls and women more fully for the woman's life – a life whose natural character has been somewhat outweighed in these days by an excessive attention to intellectual accomplishment, and whose real charm and power lies in other as important things.  
<http://studentzone.roehampton.ac.uk/library/digital-collection/froebel-archive/froebel-extracts/Extract%204.pdf>

The skills taught were supposed to be those of a German farmer's wife, although the syllabus suggests that rather more was actually taught, the mornings were devoted to cookery, needlework, house management and gardening. The afternoons concentrated on psychology, botany, zoology, singing, elocution, geometry and the work of educational reformers, as well as walks in London and Epping Forest (Chalice Well Trust, 2009, p. 29).

The school part of the enterprise seems to have been successful, as it was deemed "efficient" some four years after it's founding:

SESAME HOUSE Acacia Road. Listed in 1903 by the London School Board as an efficient elementary school.  
<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/workspace/assets/publications/Schools-in-Marylebone-Paddington-1243691873.pdf>

The school closed in 1916, three years after Buckton and Schepel departed for Somerset, this may have been due to a general distrust of anything with German antecedents at that time or simply that many young women would have been involved in war work.

The importance of Sesame House is that it was in some senses the forerunner of the establishment that Buckton and Schepel would set up in Glastonbury. It signifies the apex of Buckton's involvement with the Frobelian educational movement.

How much time Buckton actually spent working at Sesame House is unclear, as it is also the period in which she was most productive as a writer. In 1901 she published her first book of poems, *Through Human Eyes*. She must also have been working on her most famous play, *Eager Heart*, around this time, as it was first produced in 1904. It was also in 1904 that her *The Burden of Engela: A Ballad-epic* was published, this was a narrative verse sequence about the Boer war, which took place from October 1899 to November 1902. The central characters are Engela and Piet de Waal, her husband and their son Geert, whose death at the hands of the

British is central to an eponymous poem in the sequence. It is an indication of both Buckton's independence of thought and courage that she published a pro-Boer poem at a time when such sentiments would have been deeply unpopular. The same year *Masques and Dances* was published, followed a year later by the *Pastor of Wydon Fell* another ballad sequence.

A letter dated 24<sup>th</sup> January 1906 addressed to Lucy Broadwood, a collector of folk songs from Alice Buckton at Sesame House, 43A Acacia Road, St John's Wood, is listed in the Broadwood Archive. In it, Buckton reintroduces herself to Lucy, recalling the latter's performance of 'When the Thorn is White with Blossom' in the old assembly rooms at Haslemere. She goes on to say that she has written a sacred play cast in an old form for which Gustav von Holst is preparing the music and she hopes Lucy will attend the play reading to take place shortly and participate in the discussion afterwards.<sup>3</sup> This letter is significant for a number of reasons; it shows Buckton was still active in cultural events in Surrey and that she was aware of but not involved with the folk music and song revival at this time.

## A Fateful Meeting

In July 1907 a meeting took place which had life changing consequences for Alice Buckton, she was one a large gathering at the home of Basil Wilberforce who heard Wellesley Tudor Pole explain the finding of the bowl in the well at Glastonbury. How she knew Wilberforce is not apparent, but he was a well known figure in numerous radical movements and their paths could have crossed in a number of ways. There is no record of Buckton's reaction to the presentation by Pole but her interest in Arthurian legends and feminism would seem to have made the grail and it's triad of maidens irresistible as on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September she visited Glastonbury for the first time.

In 1908 Pole encountered the Baha'i teachings on his first visit to Constantinople; he must have shared them with Buckton and Schepel on his return. What they made of them can only be guessed at, clearly they all accepted them in so far as the information they had allowed and it seems to have left them thirsting for further information. The period between being introduced to the Baha'i teachings and the first visit of Abul Baha to the British Isles appears to have been one on intense activity for Buckton. In 1908 she published *Songs of Joy*. Sometime in 1909 an article by Buckton appeared in the Havelock Journal "The Forerunner". Havelock North was the town in which another Baha'i with esoteric interest, Robert Felkin would settle.

The 1910 June *Star of the West* reports on Buckton and Shepel's visit to the Holy Land, which suggests the visit, took place in early 1910.

The BAHAI NEWS comes to us with refreshing tidings of progress in all lands. Our hearts have been made glad with the supremest joy in hearing the verbal messages brought us by Miss Buckton and Miss Schepel who have spent a few weeks at Acca. Miss Buckton is a strong club woman here and her return has been the means of spreading the "Glad-tidings" among many who otherwise would have waited long for this Message. 1-6-13

Pole visited Abdul Baha in 1910, during the winter of that year, probably to finalise arrangements for Abdul Baha's visit to the United Kingdom. Buckton visited the United States early in 1911,

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<sup>3</sup> Alice M Buckton, to Lucy Broadwood; **2185/LEB/1/318** 24 Jan 1906

the main reason for her visit was to promote her play *Eager Heart*, and for example she is reported in the Harvard Crimson of 26<sup>th</sup> January 1911:

Miss Buckton of England, will read her mystery-play, "Eager Heart," under the auspices of the Dramatic Club in Emerson A this afternoon at 4.30 o'clock. The play, which has met with great success in England, is to be given a trial performance under the auspices of a committee of Boston men and women on February 11. Miss Buckton wishes to obtain the aid of Harvard men in acting it. The reading will be open to the public. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1911/1/26/miss-buckton-to-read-eager-heart/>

She took the opportunity to meet the American Baha'is and further spread the words of Abdul Baha. The 1911 March *Star of the West* reported her visit:

BOSTON, MASS.--During the recent visit to Boston of Miss Alice Mary Buckton, of London, England, the Bahai teachings were presented to hundreds of eager listeners. God's blessings have been manifest on every hand and in His power alone will be the "increase" to the seeds thus sown.

A question that Abdul-Baha asked Miss Buckton during her stay in Acca is one that might well be asked of every Bahai. He said: "Do you not say in the West that this is the 'Day of the Comforter?'" To which she replied in the affirmative. He then said: "Are you comforting? Are you doing the work of the Comforter?" - SW, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 7

It was also in 1911 that the First Universal Races Congress was held at the University of London from July 26 to 29. This was an important event and it was hoped that Abdul Baha would attend. In the event that proved impossible, however, a letter from Abdul Baha was read out by Tudor Pole. Many Baha'is attended the Conference, including Louise Waite, an American who had written a number of Baha'i hymns and published them.

Waite later recounted her experience with Buckton:

When I was in London in 1911 at the Races Congress, Miss B-was very anxious for me to make changes in our hymns, that they might be "universally used" and also sell generally and bring in more money for the Temple. She took one of the hymn books and some of her blue pencil changes were: "Songs of Peace and Praise", not "Bahai Hymns of Peace and Praise". The hymn of the "Greatest Name" was left out entirely (after such a wonderful Tablet about it). Then, "Tell the Wondrous story, tell it far and near of the loving Father, holy Name so dear" not "of Baha'u'l-lah". Also, in "Softly His Voice Is Calling" not "Abdul Baha we turn to Thee", etc., but "Love is the power which giveth life, Love is the perfect way." There were many other changes writ-ten in, but these were the most important. I told her I would pray over it.

I returned to America and prayed and thought deeply over it, but it seemed as if my heart would be hurt to change those hymns, written to the Beloved Himself. Yet I wanted to cooperate in every way possible with Miss B.

When 'Abdu'l-Baha was in Chicago, Waite had an interview with him on 5 May 1912. She showed him the copy of Bahai Hymns of Peace and Praise that Buckton had marked and asked him what she should do. He asked who had requested such changes. When Waite replied that it was Buckton, he explained that she was very "young" in the Faith and that

Waite should only make changes if he told her to do so. (Armstrong-Ingram, 1987, p. 91/92)

This is a really interesting insight; it is rare to come across evaluations of individuals by their peers yet alone by Abdu'l Baha. Buckton, it seems was trying to be helpful and she wanted to maximise sales of Waite's book by playing down the Baha'i references and making it more all encompassing. It would appear this was not simply a casual suggestion but a full edit making significant changes, one gets the impression that Buckton lacked a certain subtlety in dealing with others. This incident demonstrates her attitude to and understanding of Bahaism, for her it was subsidiary to unity; contrast her attitude to that of Waite for whom the most important thing was that the Baha'i teachings shone through the pages of her book. I have written elsewhere about the Baha'i Movement being a supplementary religious movement and compared it to the modern Baha'i Faith which is an independent religion and argued that the degree to which the individual found relevance in the Baha'i message was the factor which determined whether or not they internalised the message and the Baha'i Faith became their religion. Here we have a good example of these tensions; Waite perceives Baha'i as her dominant belief system, while for Buckton it is merely an addition to her other interests and one which she is prepared to subsume for the sake of a wider audience. Waite was somewhat discombobulated; she desperately wanted to do the "right Baha'i thing" but the force of Buckton as an individual of prominence both inside and outside of the Baha'i Movement intimidated her enough to cause her to question her own poetry and how it should be presented. Waite asked Abdu'l Baha for advice; by 1912 he would have met Buckton on numerous occasions on his visit to the British Isles as well as the two pilgrimages she had made to Egypt, so his evaluation was based on sound knowledge, despite her high profile as a public speaker for the Baha'i Movement and the respect she commanded, Abdu'l Baha describes her as "young in the Faith", it suggests he saw something in her that was not apparent to everyone, what that was will be discussed later.

Around this time Buckton and Schepel were deeply immersed in Baha'i activities in London, their work seems to have centred on the Passmore Edwards Settlement, quiet what their connection was with this institution is unclear. The settlement was linked originally to the Non Conformist University College of the University of London, two men who wrote about the Baha'i Faith; J. Estlin Carpenter and Phillip Wicksteed who were both connected to the Settlement through Manchester New College, Oxford. The Settlement was important for a host of reasons, one of which was that it was home to the *Esperance Morris Team*, an all female Morris dance team that was led by Mary Neal, one of the most influential people in the revival of English folk dance. According to an article entitled *The Baha'i Message* by Harrold Johnson in *The Christian Commonwealth*, of September 6, 1911 it seems that Baha'is had started meeting there during the Universal Races Congress, which was held in the nearby University of London and were building on interest generated by the conference to run regular study meetings, it is noteworthy that Annet Schepel is given as the secretary and contact:

Last Friday, at 37, Tavistock Place, W. C., the Bahá'í Community of London opened a new centre and reading-room, which will be open daily from 11 a. m. to 6 p. m. The friends present at the gathering hailed from Egypt, Syria, West Africa, United States, Mexico, Holland, etc. The opening of this centre is the direct outcome of the series of public meetings held at the Passmore Edwards Settlement and at Caxton Hall, at the time of the first Universal Races Congress. A study-circle is held every Friday at 4.45 p. m.

All information may be had of the hon. sec. Miss Annet Hamminck Schepel.

The meetings were doubtless used to develop interest immediately prior to the visit to the British isles of Abdu'l Baha. He arrived on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 1911 and stayed until the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, during this time he addressed numerous meetings, both large formal public events and informal "at home" style gatherings in the homes of supporters. On the 9<sup>th</sup> September he visited Vanners, the country home of Buckton and Shepel (Hammond, 1912, p. p.84). The story of Abdu'l Baha's visits to the West has been recounted many times and thus only the role of Buckton in relation to these visits will be touched upon here. She is visible in photographs taken at the Pole family guest house in Clifton, Bristol, where Abdu'l Baha stayed between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> and where he encountered both the Blue Bowl and the women who along with Tudor Pole had found the vessel. (Hammond, 1912) (1911) (CC 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 1911& SW Vol. 2, No 12 p.7,8-11). At the end of the month on 28<sup>th</sup> September Abdu'l Baha returned to Byfleet to again enjoy Buckton's hospitality and mix informally with the people of the village.

That Buckton and her concerns remained with Abdu'l Baha after he returned to the Middle East is evidenced by the pilgrim notes of Harriet M. Wise who visited between 9<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1912. These note form part of a collection of four hundred and seventy eight translated tablets and other English documents from the library of American collector Dwight Barstow. Notes numbered 351-B(3) and 356 refer to Alice Buckton:

Date, Jul. 9-21, 1912, 6 pp Words (pilgrim notes) to Harriet M. Wise, Cooper & Goodall-- notes by Wise

3) 351-B: He told Miss Buckton to not tamper with the psychic forces in this world. It hampers & retards the condition of the body, both in this world & especially the world to come. Same as 356

Clearly, Abdul Baha was so concerned about what he perceived as Buckton's tampering with psychic forces, whatever that may mean, and the danger it posed, that months after seeing her he felt compelled to send a warning through a third party. This may explain his rather cryptic remark to Louise Waite describing Buckton as "young in the faith".

Abdu'l Baha made a second visit to Britain from the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1912 to January 21<sup>st</sup> 1913; this visit took place after a long sojourn in the United States. The second visit was different in style from the first, with more emphasis on meetings with officials and rather less press coverage.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> December 'Abdu'l Baha addressed his first major public meeting of his second visit in London, Alice Buckton was prominent, she addressed the hall; she read from the *Hidden Words* and described the circumstances of their revelation. She talked about peace and a recent peace conference and then "emphasised the fact that this was no new religion, it sought the unity of all religions, shutting out none of them, but finding a common meeting place for all. She likened it to a garden of flowers where vast variety did away with monotony and made an interesting unity." The next speaker was Charlotte Despard, president of the Woman's Freedom League, she and Buckton seem to have been closely associated. Mrs. Despard spoke of 'The Master' and the message he was bringing the world. Despard referred to the unrest in the world but concluded it was a healthy symptom of change and that the "mighty movements—the women's movement,

the religious movement, the spiritual movement” were all part of a unifying force for change. It is clear that for Despard ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is relevant as “one of the great Masters,” in other words, not unique, and the leader of one of the great movements. Another interesting point she made was to refer to “the presence here in our western isle of this eastern Master,” a reference to the revival of the Western magical traditions in which she and Alice Buckton were steeped. SW Vol. 3, 19,4

Two days later, after spending the afternoon walking in the park with some of his followers, which included Buckton and in the evening ‘Abdu’l Baha attended a performance of Buckton’s play *Eager Heart*. There are several accounts of ‘Abdu’l Baha’s reaction to the play and the discussion about it amongst his friends and followers. The play was based on medieval mystery plays, Buckton had laid down strict conditions for its performance, for example the names of the actors were not to be revealed and the ownership of the play was put in the hands of a committee which met annually to discuss its progress. The plot was simple; it concerns Eager Heart and her sisters Eager Fame and Eager Sense and their reactions to their meeting with the Christ Child. This play is the only one of Buckton’s numerous works which she controlled in this way; she seems to have believed it was uniquely powerful and possibly perceived its performance as a ritual. She would have been delighted with and seen much significance in ‘Abdu’l Baha’s positive reaction to the performance.

The longest period Abdu’l-Bahá spent outside of London was the week he spent in Edinburgh, from Friday, 3 January to Friday, 10 January. Whilst he was in Scotland he met Professor Geddes who had been involved with the Sesame House activities of Buckton as well as being known to the Pole family. According to Ahmad Sohrab’s diary and interesting conversation took place on the train back to London:

Since his return to London he is anxious that teachers may go to Edinburgh and yesterday the name of Miss Buckton]was mentioned in the train; that is she knows how to speak with Church people, she is certainly the one to go there for awhile and try to teach and water the seeds that the Master has sown; for there were many people who have expressed their desire to join the Bahai movement. Therefore this morning when Miss Chapel and Miss Buckton came in, the Master called them in and after greeting them and inquiring about their health said {to the latter}, Thou must go to Scotland. The people are immensely interested. Edinburgh has great capability. There are many people who are interested.

Sorab’s Diary 11<sup>th</sup> January 1913

[http://bahai-library.com/sohrab\\_diary\\_edinburgh\\_1913](http://bahai-library.com/sohrab_diary_edinburgh_1913)

Thus we have another insight into the perceptions of the Baha’is and Abdu’l Baha of Alice Buckton, she is acknowledged as someone who can “speak with Church people”, clearly an organiser and public speaker, despite being “young” in the Faith and over fond of psychic forces. She is, like Pole a public face, however, she does not seem to have the same intimacy with Abdu’l Baha and his family that Pole had even before his service in the war.

It should be noted that Buckton often spoke on subjects close to her own interests, mainly the role of women. On the 11<sup>th</sup> January Abdu’l Baha addressed a large public meeting at Caxton

Hall, Buckton also spoke. 'Abdu'l-Bahá made another trip to the Clifton Guest House in Bristol, leaving London on Thursday, 16 January; Buckton was part of his entourage. He addressed a meeting of about one hundred and fifty persons that evening and returned to London the following day.

## Glastonbury

Buckton had great plans for her new venture in Glastonbury; but she was not alone in choosing to relocate there, Glastonbury had become a centre for artistic and spiritual

It is unclear exactly when it was that Alice Buckton bought Tor House and with it the Chalice Well, some sources say 1912 others early 1913, there is anecdotal evidence that 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged her to make the purchase. There is nothing to substantiate this, however, it was the period in which Buckton was most deeply involved with the Baha'is and when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, if not actually in England would have been easily contactable in Europe when news the property was on the market reached Buckton. It would seem unlikely she would have made such an important decision without consulting 'Abdu'l-Bahá and impossible for her to go ahead unless he had been supportive. According to her biographer, Buckton's bid was unlikely to succeed as a wealthy American and an industrialist were both keen to acquire the site, providentially the American was delayed and against the odds Buckton's bid was accepted (Cutting, 2004, pp. 20-21). It is noticeable that Pole does not seem to be involved in this venture, many years later he wrote:

The Belgian Order of the Sacred Heart sold the Chalice Well property as a whole in 1909, after it had been empty for a while, Alice Buckton bought it and ruled there for many years. Results were mixed and ultimately the good lady became deranged and eccentric to a degree. (Pole, 1979, p. 138)

Pole points out that the de-consecration of the site by the departing Roman Catholic Order led to a spiritual void and implies that this was at least in part, the cause of Buckton's eccentricity. Clearly, at least in retrospect, he was not supportive of her venture, although he purchased the site himself in 1959, when presumably the spiritual void had been dealt with. It is suggestive that Pole and Buckton, although publically working together for the Baha'i Cause, had started to diverge in their respective understandings of Glastonbury.

Her project of "The Chalice Well Training College for Women and Pilgrims' Hostel" which opened its doors in May 1913 was in many ways a continuation of the work begun at Sesame House; its curriculum included "gardening, bee-keeping, book binding, weaving, and needlework, combined with the study of heraldry, elocution and legendary drama, however it could also be seen as a Baha'i inspired venture. Baha'is prioritise the education and training of women, there is also a strong tradition of hospitality, both of which were present in Buckton's vision of her college.

The following year 1914 saw the first Glastonbury festival, as well as another venture by Buckton which may have been inspired by contact with the Baha'is, this was a play entitled "*The Meeting in the Gate: A Christmas interlude*" first published in *The Challenge*<sup>4</sup> magazine, it concerns a conversation between Muslims and Christians during the First Crusade, the title is a pun on the title of the forerunner of Baha'u'llah, whose title - The Bab, means "The Gate" in Arabic. In that summer of that year war broke out and Europe would be engulfed in conflict for several years.

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<sup>4</sup> Christmas number, December 24th, 1915."p.11

Buckton's college concept would have struggled in favourable circumstances, Glastonbury, although it had a railway station at that time, was still remote from most large urban centres, and what had worked well in St John's Wood was less attractive in remote Somerset. With the disruption of the War and many potential trainees entering war work, the likelihood of the college being a financial success was severely diminished. Buckton gradually dropped the training college aspect and the property became a guest house, she continued to purchase other properties as they came on the market until financial constraints caused her to sell off her portfolio, the reasons for this will be discussed later.

During the First World War Buckton was resident in Glastonbury, while the conflict may have impacted negatively on her attempts to set up a training college for women and hostel for pilgrims, one very significant visitor to her establishment in 1915 was the archaeologist Margaret Murray. Murray wrote that she chose to go to Glastonbury because she knew nobody there (Murray, 1963, p. 104), however, Buckton was the god mother of one of Finders Petrie's two children and Petrie was Murray's mentor in the Archaeology Department of University College London, it is likely that it was through Petrie that Murray was introduced to Alice Buckton. In her autobiography Murray commented:

One cannot stay in Glastonbury without becoming interested in Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail. As soon as I got back to London I did a careful piece of research, which resulted in a paper on *Egyptian Elements in the Grail Romance*. (Murray, 1963, p. 104)

Murray goes on to explain that most of her research for *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* was done during the war, she claims to have forgotten who it was who first piqued her interest in witches but as she had written nothing on the subject before the war, it is very possible that conversations which took place in Glastonbury were the spark which caused her to turn her attention to witches after she had explored the Grail legends in the context of Ancient Egypt.

Murray was not the only important figure in the resurgence of magick to stay with Alice. In 1921 Dion Fortune (1890-1946) stayed at Alice Buckton's community guest house in Glastonbury, before purchasing her own property in the town. Fortune, who was arguably the most important figure in the revival of occultism in Britain, wrote extensively about Buckton in her book about Glastonbury, *Avalon of the Heart*.

Although based mainly in Glastonbury, both Buckton and Schepel appear on the voting list of the London electors of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom, unlike Pole it seems they chose to remain within the Baha'i community when it began to organise. In my opinion Pole's decision to remain outside demonstrates a deeper understanding than that of Buckton and Schepel, who I would argue chose to be included because they did not grasp the full significance of the development. They certainly cease to be involved in Baha'i activities from this point on and dedicate themselves to their work in Glastonbury.

### **Pageant and pilgrimage , cinema and radio**

Notwithstanding her interest in ancient forms of drama, she was also instrumental in making a film, *The History of Glastonbury*, for which she wrote a scenario presenting the town's development by means of pageant. Though the film proved technically inadequate, it is interesting to see her then turning her creative energies to the new technology of radio, creating

the first Arthurian play designed for the medium. Her scheme was ambitious and employed music specially written by Warwick Braithwaite, the conductor of the Cardiff Station Orchestra (and later conductor of the National Orchestra of Wales). The play was called *Arthurian Legends 1. The Wooing of Guinevere* (c 28<sup>th</sup> June 1925), and was performed by the 5WA Radio Players and the station SO conducted by Braithwaite. ....

According to a preview in the *Western Mail*, Buckton had planned a series of six works on this theme to be given at monthly intervals. No trace is extant of these intended sequels. (Simpson, 2008, pp. 17 -18)

### The Final Years

The last reference I can find to Buckton in a Baha'i context is a mention of her in Balyuzi's biography of 'Abdu'l Baha:

The present writer met both Mrs Whyte and Alice Buckton sometime in the early thirties, at the home of Lady Blomfield, 8, Burgess Hill, London NW2. Both were then noticeably aged. Mrs Whyte had moved to London and lived very quietly at 22, Church Row, Hampstead. Alice Buckton was still active, particularly for the Chalice Well, Glastonbury. (Balyuzi, 1971, p. 355n)

It is purely speculation but two possibilities occur from Balyuzi's reminiscence, firstly that it is possible that Buckton was visiting her sister Eveleen, who was also a resident of Hampstead and secondly, that the death of Buckton's long time partner, Annette Schepel in 1931 may have been significant in her drifting away from the Baha'is. Little is known of Schepel, no writings in English exist, although, she may have been writing in her native German. She certainly accompanied Buckton in her work for the Baha'i cause and it is possible that she was the more deeply committed of the two and that after her death Buckton's interest waned. A list of "isolated believers" published in the February 1938 *Baha'i Journal* does not include Alice Buckton, I can find no obituary in any Baha'i publication, this suggests that for some years prior to her death she had not been active in the Baha'i community.

In the final years of her life Buckton was facing financial difficulties and wrestling with the problem of the future of her work in Glastonbury after her death. She expended a great deal of energy attempting to set up a limited company that would safeguard her work financially, with the hope that it would preserve the well and the properties she had acquired as single unit. After her death in December 1944, the estate was gradually broken up and her work would have appeared to be doomed to oblivion, however, the Chalice Well aspect at least was revived by her sometime friend and fellow Baha'i Wellesley Tudor Pole who established the Chalice Well Trust in 1959 and purchased the Well and some of the land around it, enabling it to be turned into the present garden and visitor centre.

Buckton's funeral service was held in Wells Cathedral and a few days later a memorial service took place at St John's church in Glastonbury, an indication she remained at least technically loyal to the Anglican Church until the end of her life. Cutting gives a list of people who attended, the funeral and although it might not be complete, it does not include any known Baha'is, another indication she had drifted away. A memorial to her exists within the church, her ashes were scattered on the Tor. Perhaps the last word should be to the Rev Lionel Lewis, the Vicar of St. John's whose eulogy, spoken at her funeral was printed in the parish magazine:

There passed away early in the morning of Sunday, Dec.13<sup>th</sup>, a great soul, a great mind, and a great heart, Alys Mary Buckton. She was a genius, a most remarkable personality. Her mind was as wide as her heart. Gifted also with musical voice, a strong will, the keenest intelligence, an extraordinary critical judgment, and an extraordinary capacity for forgiveness, an unflinching enthusiasm. She managed to accomplish things where other people would have been daunted. Twenty years ago it would have been a waste of time to have told Glastonbury, which she loved so dearly, what she had done for Glastonbury. But men come and go, so the writer, who had the privilege of being her parish priest, for nearly the last quarter century of her life (a period to be looked back upon without one ruffled thought) would fain bear one tiny testimony. When he came here, he found Chalice Well and Miss Buckton, a centre of art, music, drama, crafts and lofty thought, to which she had attracted the most intelligent and good-living youth of the place.

That good work continued until increasing years made her give up her hostel. But her influence lives on in the hearts and minds of her pupils whom she illumined. Her whole outlook on life was great, and here was an ever-ready sympathy. It is needless to speak of her years of work for the poor in the slums under Miss Octavia Hill, and her unflinching passion for education, or of her powers as a dramatist. The authoress of 'Eager Heart' is world-famed. Being so great she had the power of attracting great minds.

[http://www.chalicewell.org.uk/index.cfm/glastonbury/HistoricalArchive.Article/article\\_id/1](http://www.chalicewell.org.uk/index.cfm/glastonbury/HistoricalArchive.Article/article_id/1)

## Conclusions

Buckton remains something of an enigma, although she wrote and published a great deal, much of her thinking and beliefs remain obscure. I have addressed

- What was her connection with Finders Petrie?
- What was she doing at the Passmore Edwards Settlement?
- Who and what was behind the move to Glastonbury?
- When did she and WTP drift apart?
- Why did she end up so isolated?
- What happened to distance her from the Baha'is?