

# The Baha'i Faith and the Western Esoteric Tradition

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The palm and vine, the call from minaret,  
The oak and beech, the tones of Sabbath bells,  
These, East and West, seem separate, and yet  
The Voice benign their foreignness dispels!<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The Baha'i Faith claims to be the eight largest and second most widespread religion in the world, superficially it appears to be a fusion of Shiite millennialism, Western social radicalism and a benign globalist perspective. This paper seeks to reappraise a forgotten aspect of the introduction of the Baha'i Faith to the West, the importance of individuals steeped in the mystical, the occult and esoteric to the creation of the synthesis of modernity and mysticism which underpins the Baha'i perspective.

The drawing rooms of early twentieth century London and New York were second homes to many "wise old men of the East" who travelled to the West to promote their mystical and metaphysical musings to a receptive Western audience. Of these robed and bearded patriarchs perhaps none had quiet such a lasting effect than that of 'Abdu'l Baha, (name & dates) son of Baha'u'llah, (name & dates) the prophet, founder of the Baha'i Faith, whose role as "He whom God will make manifest" was foretold by the Bab (name & dates).

The teachings of the Bab were freighted with traditional Islamic magic, of talismans and magic squares, whilst Baha'ullah, in fulfilling the prophecies of the Bab, went further and revealed a new post Islamic, Universalist religion, however, His revelations placed less emphasis on the magical and esoteric. When His son Abdu'l Baha visited the West in 1911 and again in 1912/13, he met with those who counted themselves as his followers; amongst them were men and women who were immersed in the esoteric and occult, as well as those who saw the Baha'i ideals as the nucleus of a new, modern social order, akin to Christian Socialism. In some cases these were the same individuals, but it was this latter perspective which was emphasised in public, as well as being written about and published after the events.

At least three of those who identified as Baha'is, Robert Felkin, Neville Meakin and Andrew Cattanach were all members of the Stella Matutina Order; Meakin also claimed the hereditary Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round, he attempted to initiate both Felkin and another Baha'i, Wellesley Tudor Pole, into this Order shortly before his death. Felkin would go on to take the ideas of Stella Matutina and the Order of the Table Round to New Zealand, where he established what would become the last directly linked faction to the original Golden Dawn. Pole was already enmeshed in the neo Celtic world of John Goodchild and William Sharp; he had discovered an artefact in a well in Glastonbury which he and others believed to be of massive spiritual significance. He is, however, probably best remembered for his work with another Baha'i, Alice Buckton in the in the reestablishment of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre. It is this interest in Glastonbury, the Arthurian legends, Celtic mythology and what would now appear to be both a Christian and pre-Christian,

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<sup>1</sup> From "Werneth Low" in Poems by Edward Theodore Hall, undated and privately published

Celtic British site that is apparently at odds with interest in a post Islamic spiritual path, it is this apparent contradiction that I wish to consider here.

## Unity of East and West

The relationship between East and West was central to the Baha'i community from its inception. The visits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Europe and North America were not only symbolic of the vision of future unity but an opportunity for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to address his occidental followers on the "Unity of East and West". In one of His talks in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:—

In the past, as in the present, the Spiritual Sun of Truth has always shone from the horizon of the East. In the East Moses arose to lead and teach the people. On the Eastern horizon rose the Lord Christ. Muḥammad was sent to an Eastern nation. The Báb arose in the Eastern land of Persia. Bahá'u'lláh lived and taught in the East. All the great spiritual teachers arose in the Eastern world.

But although the Sun of Christ dawned in the East, the radiance thereof was apparent in the West, where the effulgence of its glory was more clearly seen. The divine light of His teaching shone with a greater force in the Western world, where it has made more rapid headway than in the land of its birth.

In these days the East is in need of material progress and the West is in need of a spiritual ideal. It would be well for the West to turn to the East for illumination, and to give in exchange its scientific knowledge. There must be this interchange of gifts. The East and the West must unite to give to each other what is lacking. This union will bring about true civilization where the spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material. Receiving thus, the one from the other, the greatest harmony will prevail, all people will be united, a state of great perfection will be attained, there will be a firm cementing, and this world will become a shining mirror for the reflection of the attributes of God.

We all, the Eastern and the Western nations, must strive day and night, with heart and soul, to achieve this high ideal, to cement the unity between all the nations of the earth. Every heart will then be refreshed, all eyes will be opened, the most wonderful power will be given, the happiness of humanity will be assured. ... This will be the Paradise which is to come on earth, when all mankind will be gathered together under the Tent of Unity in the Kingdom of Glory. (Baha, p. 147)

This passage suggests that religion is something that arises only in the East, but refers only to the Abrahamic traditions and this is a simplification, the Baha'i Writings acknowledge eight other named traditions as authentic religions Babi, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sabeian, Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, and recognise the possibility of others, now lost to history. In recent times the possibility of recognising Native American religious traditions<sup>2</sup>&<sup>3</sup> has been explored, of particular interest has been White Buffalo Calf Woman and her similarity to the Holy Maiden in Baha'i

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<sup>2</sup> Native Messengers of God in Canada? A Test Case for Bahá'í Universalism, by Christopher Buck, in *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 6 (1996). Explores the possibility of including other great religious figures in the Baha'i category of "Manifestations of God" using the Iroquois prophet Deganawida as an example.

<sup>3</sup> Bahai universalism and Native Prophets, by Christopher Buck, in *Reason and Revelation: Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions*, 13 (2002).

scriptures<sup>4</sup>. However, in the quotation above Western “materialism” and Eastern “spirituality” are juxtaposed, in a manner which might be considered offensively stereotypical by a modern reader, especially one whose belief system encompasses pre Christian British, English and European deities. That the Baha’is who were immersed in the Celtic Mysteries, Arthurian legends and re-establishment of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre, seem to have accepted these statements without murmur seems curious and indicates their perspective might be significantly different from that of a modern adherent to such ideas.

It is important to recognise that the people who identified as Baha’is prior to the 1930’s did not generally perceive the Baha’i Faith as a separate religion, indeed many of them remained active in their original religious community; in the West they described themselves as Baha’i Christians, Baha’is from Jewish and Zoroastrian backgrounds tended to marry others of the same background and many Baha’is including Abdu’l Baha attended Muslim Friday prayers. Equally most people involved in Western Esoteric practices did not identify this activity as a “religion”, consequently it was perfectly possible to be a Baha’i, an initiate of an occult order and a member of the Church of England simultaneously without any sense of a conflict of interest.

### **The Light of the West**

The concepts which may be described as underpinning the revival of the Celtic Mystery Tradition can be traced back to a rather mysterious figure, Dr John Arthur Goodchild (1851 – 1914) and his friend William Sharp, who also wrote as Fiona MacLeod. The lives of Sharpe and MacLeod have been examined in detail in *The Little Book of Great Enchantment* (Blamires, 2008), however, no biography of Goodchild has yet appeared and all the information in the following passage are from *The Avalonians* (Benham, 2006) Goodchild and Sharp wished to revive a Celtic mystery tradition, rooted in Celtic Christian and pre Christian practices and to renew worship of the Celtic Mother Goddess, based at Glastonbury.

Goodchild trained as a medical doctor and begun his foreign practice in Cannes, but the French authorities banned foreign doctors in 1877, and he transferred to Bordighera in Italy. For 30 years, Goodchild travelled each winter to work in his lucrative medical practice in Bordighera, spending each summer in his father’s home at 23 Thurlow Road, Hampstead. It is known that Goodchild attended the International Medical Congress in 1881.

In 1885, Goodchild claimed he found a ‘primitive’ glass bowl and platter in a shop in Bordighera marina, reputedly found bricked up in a wall of an old building in an early Christian settlement with a church dating back to the 4th century. On his return to London, Goodchild showed the vessel to Augustus Woolaston Franks, whose findings were inconclusive, so the items were locked away for some ten years, in the family home in Hampstead.

Goodchild wrote extensively outside the sphere of medicine, he referred in his writings to socialism, ancient history, religion, spirituality, the human condition, and he had contact with William Thomas Stead; Goodchild was also aware of Theosophy and The Golden Dawn, but his overwhelming

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<sup>4</sup> <http://bahaiteachings.org/return-of-white-buffalo-calf-woman>.

spiritual interest was in the re establishment of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition, which he outlined in his most famous book, *The Light of the West*, published in 1898, in which he details the Irish worship of Mor Rigan, who he believed was a historical character whose story had been distorted by Christianity. Goodchild believed that the lore surrounding Mor Rigan became attached to Bride, who in turn was also corrupted by Christianity into St. Bride, Goodchild wrote that the people of Bride had believed in the coming of a Christ long before Christianity, and that her mysteries were widespread across the ancient world, even as far as Palestine, which was one of the main reasons why Christianity reached British shores at such an early date after the crucifixion, and the main reason why it took such an early root here. Goodchild believed that these beliefs soon conjoined with Mor Rigan and Bride to emphasise the role of women, consequently Roman Christianity acted definitively to suppress it.

Goodchild used a chronological outline in *The Light of the West* in what appears to be careful research; however, his work does not form a platform for modern Celtic scholarship. He placed the arrival of Mor Rigan with the Tuatha de Danann, claiming that from her cult all of the Bardic and Druidic teaching of Britain arose. Goodchild details the deliberate distortion of Mor Rigan by the Roman Church over many centuries, resulting her recreation as “terror” or “phantom queen”, although she was originally a triple goddess, she was redefined as a black crow of war. Goodchild arguably recovered Mor Rigan from this Roman Christian distortion and exposed her teachings, disguised within the writing of Amergin, and treasured within the Celtic Church, where Goodchild’s close friend William Sharp, writing as Fiona MacLeod, took up her story in Scotland.

According to Benham, Goodchild ‘was no stranger’ to psychic experiences, on his return to Bordighera, he reported an unusual psychic experience, instructing him to take the glass platter to Bride’s Well, located in the Women’s quarter in Glastonbury, where it should be placed under the care of a woman. In the spring on 1898, Goodchild heard that his father had died, and he asked his sister to bring him both the platter and the bowl to him in Italy. The bowl now became referred to as the Cup, and Goodchild sent the platter to a ‘prominent Italian family’, possibly the Garibaldi family. When *The Light of the West* appeared in print, Goodchild returned to Britain, heading straight for Glastonbury. Within days, he had hidden the Cup in Bride’s Well, and he returned to Glastonbury every year on pilgrimage from 1899 until 1906 to see if the bowl was still in place.

In Britain, the Celtic Revival was in full swing. In 1900 Goodchild sent a copy of *The Light of the West*, to Fiona MacLeod, unaware that she was actually William Sharp. The two soon became friends, though at this point they had not met, and Goodchild did not discover Fiona MacLeod’s ‘secret’ until 1901, when William Sharp stayed with Goodchild in Bordighera, eventually visiting Glastonbury with Goodchild in 1904, when Goodchild revealed the secret of the cup to him.

By 1907, Goodchild was in touch with Wellesley Tudor Pole and his sister Katharine Tudor Pole, and soon afterwards Katharine Tudor Pole, Janet Bevill Allen and Christine Allen recovered the Glastonbury Cup from Bride’s Well. How Goodchild knew the Poles is not clear, their father, Thomas Pole knew Sir Patrick Geddes, who was Sharp’s publisher, through the Garden City Movement but this seems a rather distant connection. The finding of the Glastonbury Cup was a life changing experience for Wellesley Tudor Pole; amongst other things it was the catalyst that caused him to

encounter the Baha'i Faith. Whether or not Goodchild ever heard of the Baha'is is unknown, as is so much about him, however, what is certain is that he was a massive influence on Pole.

## **The Major and the Prophet**

Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884 - 1968) is the key figure in the relationship between the Baha'is and the esoteric, for it is he who is the pivot around which the others turn. It was Pole who found the Blue Bowl, it was Pole who was deemed a suitable initiate to lead the Order of the Table Round and ultimately Pole who set up the Chalice Well Trust which runs the immensely successful tourist attraction that the Well has become today. Pole first encountered the Baha'i Faith in Constantinople, in 1908; it was not part of the quest he had already embarked upon but apparently a new and unrelated concept. It was through him that Alice Buckton became aware of the Baha'i Teachings and, there being no other likely candidate, he was probably the point of contact for Felkin, Meakin and Cattanch.

When Pole met the American Baha'i, Stanwood Cobb in Constantinople in 1908, he was engaged in a quest to locate the Library of Justinian, which would, he believed would reveal the origins of the Blue Bowl. Pole was convinced that a new spiritual epoch was about to dawn, the appearance of the Bowl was the harbinger of great spiritual events. This apparently random meeting with a Baha'i close to the site of his search would have had immense significance for Pole and he lost no time in seeking out Abdu'l Baha. Pole visited Abdu'l Baha in 1910:

Saturday, Dec. 31st, (1910) at 10 Cheniston Gardens, Kensington High St., W., a meeting was called for Mr. Tudor-Pole to speak of his visit to Abdul-Baha in Egypt and "The Glory of God as Revealed in Persia." It was the largest meeting we have had in London and the seed sown is already bearing fruit. In the opinion of the speaker, "the year 1911 is undoubtedly to be one of very great importance, and London will be the focus point for great events." He expressed the hope that among the numerous congresses, conferences, and Imperial gatherings to be held here, there would be a Bahai Congress, attended by delegates from all parts of the world. He thought the time had come for an international residential and social club, open to all comers without distinction of race, creed, or sex, and urged his hearers to do all in their power to work together in harmony and joy for the great ideal of universal unity and peace.

When Abdu'l Baha visited the British Isles Pole played an important role, introducing Abdu'l Baha in public meetings, reading his addresses in English and hosting his stay in Bristol. The Pole family ran a guest house in the Clifton area of Bristol, the attic of which had been transformed into an oratory in which the Blue Bowl was kept. Abdu'l Baha blessed the Bowl, perhaps significantly, in silence; interestingly the incident is only referred to obliquely in *Abdu'l Baha in London* the "official" account of his stay and not at all in newspaper reports of the time. It seems, that even at this time, a link with the esoteric was not the public face the Baha'is wanted to show.

Pole was the most prominent member of the Baha'i community; he developed a close relationship with Abdu'l Baha and other members of the Holy Family in particular his grandson Shoghi Effendi. During the First World War Pole was posted to Palestine and is credited with saving the life of Abdu'l Baha, when he was personally threatened with crucifixion by a Turkish commander who was advancing on the villages housing the Baha'i community (Maude, 1998). Pole withdrew in the 1930's when the Bahai Faith became organised under its unique Administrative System but remained a supporter into the 1940's. Writing shortly before his death Pole was still supportive but still insisting Abdu'l Baha had not wanted the community organised.

A story which is of interest is that of the cloak (Pole W. T., 1965, pp. 75 - 77), in this passage Pole, who believed he had been involved with Jesus and his followers in a past life, recounts how he remembers giving Jesus a warm camel-hair cloak, he then recalls:

There is a strange sequel, nearly nineteen hundred years later, to this story. In the winter of 1919, when I was walking with Abdul-Baha Abbas on Mount Carmel, he noticed I was suffering from the cold. Immediately he took off his camel-hair cloak and threw it around my shoulders.

At that time I had forgotten the incidents recorded in these notes, and therefore could not understand what the wind seemed to be whispering in my ears:  
*Restitution after many days ....* (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 77)

Pole appears to be equating Abdu'l Baha with Jesus and in the same book he writes "Followers of Abdul-Baha regard his spiritual status equal to that of Jesus" (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 53) however this is not the Baha'i Teaching, which describes both Jesus and Baha'u'llah as Manifestations of God, while Abdu'l Baha is a perfect exemplar but not a prophet. This is not a technicality of style but a fundamental misunderstanding (one made by many early Western Baha'is it must be said<sup>5</sup>) and one which may have impacted on Pole's failure to grasp the full import of the Baha'i Message. Pole's dedication to Jesus and his belief that Jesus was the most important of messengers was consistent throughout his life.

## The Sons of Arthur

Robert William Felkin (March 13, 1853 - December 28, 1926) was a medical doctor specialising in nervous diseases and gynaecology, at the same time being consulting physician to various companies with tropical interests. He was born in Nottinghamshire but spent much of his professional life in Africa and Scotland.

1896 the Felkins moved to London the move might have been precipitated by Felkin's involvement in the Golden Dawn, because in December of the same year he became a 5=6 member of the second order, taking the motto *Aur Mem Meearab* "Light, Water, West", unusually a Hebrew rather than the usual Latin motto.

By 1900 the tensions which would eventually tear the Golden Dawn apart were coming to a head. Within the Order was a group founded by Florence Farr called the Sphere Group, this seems to have represented a mystical rather than magical current. In a long and detailed document entitled 'Instruction issued by S.S.D.D. to Members of the Sphere Group. March 1901' Farr explains a complex process of visualisation involving astral travel through an expanding sequence of spheres, the purpose of this was to 'transmute evil into good'. She explained that there was:

no connection with any Egyptian Adept ... We are to consider the axis of our globe as consisting of the following symbols: The Cup of the Stolistes<sup>6</sup> containing a burning heart. This emblem is to be considered as occupying the central axis and the intermediate spaces of the globe between the axis and the surface.

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<sup>5</sup> For a clear refutation from Shoghi Effendi in conversation with Western Baha'is convinced of 'Abdu'l Baha's prophethood see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/diglib/MSS/P-T/ransom.htm>

<sup>6</sup> A symbol of importance in the Golden Dawn system, in particular relating to the Practicus 3=8 grade, in which members were advised to meditate on this symbol, which is similar to the Ace of Cups, cups being the Tarot equivalent of hearts. The cup is a symbol of spiritual receptiveness and the aim of the meditation is to become like the cup, open to being filled.

It will be seen in practice that when the operation of gradual enlargement is being carried out, each Sephiroth widens out like a ray from a central Tiphareth for, in a sense, all operations are commenced from the Sephirothic globe of Tiphareth or the absolute Centre – the centre of the Heart<sup>7</sup>.

Farr went on to outline the way in which each globe should be formulated, the first sphere was to be 'formed astrally over the Headquarters of the Order', while successive spheres were to be nine miles, 2,700 miles, 8,100 and so on until the solar system itself is visualised. The motifs of cups, hearts and the heart centre would be important for Felkin and his colleagues in the work they would later undertake.

In 1903 when the Golden Dawn finally tore itself apart, Felkin was amongst those who formed the *Ordo Stella Matutina*. The choice of the name of the order was important and symbolic as Richardson and Hughes point out:

The Stella Matutina is, of course, the Morning Star, or Venus, which happens to be both a morning and evening star. When it precedes the Sun before the dawn it is known as Lucifer, the Lightbearer; when it follows the Sun at dusk, it is known as Hesperus. Either way it brackets the impulse of the original Golden Dawn and can be glimpsed above the horizon when the Sun itself can no longer be seen.<sup>8</sup>

The Sun would also be a motif in Felkin's work; for now he was in contact with entities he called the Sun Masters. One of these was known as teacher Ara Ben Shemesh (abbreviated as A.B.S.), the "Arab Teacher", again we see the repeated motif of a spiritual teacher from the east. In fact Felkin's guides take on a particularly Eastern and Solar aspect from this point onwards. He was not however content with meeting higher beings on the Astral and yearned to meet them in the flesh. Between 1906 and 1914 became increasingly occupied with meeting the Secret Chiefs and travelled Europe looking for them.

It was in 1910 Felkin met Rudolf Steiner and was genuinely impressed by him, he perceived Steiner as the link to the German Rosicrucian orders and consequently confirming Felkin's beliefs about the Secret Chiefs of the Third Order. In late 1910 Felkin, not being able to personally attend the instruction of Steiner, consulted A.B.S. about his choice of representative - Nevill Meakin. Meakin, was approved by A.B.S. and soon was sent to Berlin as Felkin's emissary. Prior to his departure he was conferred the Grade of Adeptus Minor, in a Ceremony where A.E. Waite himself acted as Chief Adept.

Neville Gauntlett Tudor Meakin (c. 1876 - 1912), was a member of the Stella Matutina, he had met the Felkins in 1909, through a mutual friend According to Bentham, when he was twenty-one Meakin's step father, a Rev. Meakin, told him that his real name was Tudor and gave him some family papers, which showed him to be the rightful heir to the Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round<sup>9</sup>. This order had, according to Meakin, been in existence since the time of King Arthur and had passed through generations of his family, admittedly with a break of three hundred years; it was then revived by Meakin's grandfather

On 18 June 1910 Meakin met Wellesley Tudor Pole, Meakin feared he would die without an heir, for he was suffering from tuberculosis, and was actively seeking a possible replacement for the Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round. Finding Wellesley Tudor Pole was the fulfilment of his best hopes, for Pole not only also claimed Welsh royal blood, but also was intimately linked with the

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, R.A. (1997) Farr's letter quoted p.144

<sup>8</sup> Richardson, Alan & Hughes, Geoff, (1989) p. 15

<sup>9</sup> Bentham, 1993, page 101

grail legends through his discovery of the Glastonbury bowl. The bowl and the well would resonate with Felkin as the cup and water motif from the Sphere group, while the heart motif would chime with Pole and Goodchild's heart centres of the British Isles. Meakin was drawn into Pole's circle and incorporated some of his ideas about the reopening of the Celtic sites into his Arthurian scheme within his Order. Meakin visited the Oratory in September 1910 and soon after began to initiate Pole into the Order of the Table Round.

In the meantime, Meakin had other interests, Edward Waite commented in his notebook:

*March 16, 1911:* EOL gone to Cairo, largely on Bahai business, but has had 3rd Order papers on Tree of Life. These to be transcribed and shown to SR.<sup>10</sup>

What Baha'i business might Meakin have been on in Cairo? Abdu'l Baha was due to visit the British Isles later that year and it seems reasonable to suppose that Meakin was finalising travel arrangements. It would seem that 'Abdu'l Baha was impressed with Meakin, as Louis Gregory records in his pilgrim's notes:

Pleasure was expressed at seeing 'Abdu'l-Baha look so well. He replied that He felt well. I am glad that you overlook my shortcomings and receive me so cordially. His beautiful face became illumined by a smile and He answered: "You are welcome, very welcome! I have waited for your coming and (indicating Mr. Meakin) have a special guide to take you around."<sup>11</sup>

So what relevance were Felkin and his circle inferring in the Baha'i Teachings? Felkin's Astral guides were now Solar and this is reflected in the mottoes of Meakin, *Ex Oriente Lux* (The light from the East) (E.O.L.) and of Andrew Cattanach, *Esto Sol Testis*, (Be a witness to the Sun) (E.S.T). There is Solar imagery in the in the Baha'i Writings, indeed, Baha'u'llah refers to himself as the "Sun of the Iqan" (shams al-Iqan). However, there may be a simpler inference, 'Abdu'l Baha may have been supposed by Felkin to be one of the elusive Secret Chiefs, perhaps an earthly embodiment of Ara Ben Shemesh. Certainly the Baha'i Teachings would on the unity of East and West would have resonated with *Aur Mem Meearab* and *Ex Oriente Lux*, underpinned by Pole and his Grail quest, with all the symbolism that entailed.

In September 1911 Felkin met 'Abdu'l Baha in London at the home of Lady Blomfield<sup>12</sup>, in the course of his meeting with 'Abdu'l Baha, Felkin was given two rings, he would later pass these on to Maurice Chambers, one was lost in Egypt but the other was passed to a Baha'i family in New Zealand. No record of the meeting remains, however, a letter exists written to Maurice Chambers from 'Abdu'l Baha when Chambers was in Egypt at the end of the First World War waiting to go home, but trying also to get to Palestine to see Abdu'l Baha. In this letter Abdu'l Baha remarks on Maurice's "teacher" mentioning that he had met him "the honoured Dr. Felkin" in London.

A third person, Andrew Cattanach who was a Baha'i from at least 1913<sup>13</sup> and appears on voting lists into the 1920's, was also a member of Stella Matutina, little is known about him.

## **Goddess Mother**

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 –

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/waite/A.E.\\_Waite\\_-\\_Ordo\\_RR\\_et\\_AC.pdf](http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/waite/A.E._Waite_-_Ordo_RR_et_AC.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <http://bahai-library.com/pilgrims/louis.html>

<sup>12</sup> chosen highway

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.northill.demon.co.uk/relstud/uk.htm#scot>



1944). Buckton was already a published poet and playwright by the time she encountered the Baha'i teachings.

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.

Buckton seems to have thrown herself wholeheartedly into the Baha'i community when Pole introduced her to them, she visited Abdu'l Baha in 1910 and like Pole played an important role in his visits to the British Isles. Like Pole she had the honour of welcoming Abdu'l Baha into her home. She and her partner Anet Schepel seem to have worked closely with Pole, they ran Baha'i public meetings at the Passmore Edwards Settlement, separate from the larger gatherings in Kensington.

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.

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*.

Buckton seems to have remained in contact with the Baha'is for many years; however, her isolation in Glastonbury meant that she was unable to play an active part in the community. Her primary interest seems to have been the feminine divine and her training college for women may be viewed as an attempt to recreate a female monastic community centred on arts and crafts. She seems to have little to do with Pole after her relocation to Somerset, dedicating herself to her writing. Buckton's role in the development of the Goddess Movement cannot be underestimated, she was a major force in feminising the spiritual practices that accompanied the re-emergence of Glastonbury.

### **East, West and Zion**

There is another strand of belief which is not always apparent in the accounts of alternative religious activity in early twentieth century Britain but which was nonetheless significant and directly related to the relationship between East and West, this was the British Israel Theory. There seem to have been a number of versions of the theory but they all concur that "the British Empire and the Kingdom or House of Israel are identical" (Aldersmith, 1932 (14th Edition)). The basis of the theory is that the British are the lost tribes of Israel:

There are evidences that, fleeing Assyrian aggression against Israel in Palestine, refugees in considerable numbers reached the British Isles and bore to the religious leaders, messages from the home land. More than a century later refugees from Judah fled to the British Islands from the iron had of Nebuchadnezzar. Thus it will be seen that the ancient British colony were of Israel stock, planted in the appointed place, and prepared to be to be the Kingdom of the House of David as foreshadowed in 2 Samuel vii. To this colony the House of David came, and exercised rule in these islands a thousand years before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons and the migrations associated with them. (Aldersmith, 1932 (14th Edition))

This theory may seem absurd to the point of being comical today but at the height of the British Empire it was influential, how many people believed it in its entirety or simply accepted the might of Empire was such it must be in some vague way God given is impossible to ascertain, however one notable support was John Arthur Goodchild. In 1897 Goodchild published *The Book of Tephî* a long verse epic that describes how the lineage of British and Irish royalty is directly descended from that of ancient Israel. Goodchild's poem tells of the flight from Palestine to Ireland and mixes Irish pseudo history with Biblical references:

So also the Heremon<sup>14</sup> liveth, though under his stones he lie  
On the Loughcrew Hills<sup>15</sup>, o'er the lake, his glory and honour shall never die  
Of bard and champion and teacher and lifter of burdens sore,  
Which against the might of his word the hands of his sons restore;  
Till Firbolgs<sup>16</sup> toil, as in Egypt our fathers were wont to toil<sup>17</sup>,  
On the tombs they build by Boyne, filling their pouches with soil (Goodchild, 1897)

Goodchild's work attempt to revive a Celtic mystery tradition was based upon the premise that it was actually Jewish in origin, the desire to rebuild Jerusalem was more literal that might be expected from William Blake's hymn, this begins to explain why adherents of Celtic mysticism did not perceive a Middle Eastern expression of spirituality as being in anyway contradictory.

That Wellesley Tudor Pole was an adherent of the British Israel Theory was not something that he hid nor did he particularly advertise it, however it was obvious in his writing without being explicitly stated for example, he wrote to Rosamond Lehmann:

My forebear Owen, enraged at the conquest of Wales, enticed King Henry's widow in to his bed in revenge. Ultimately marrying her and starting the Tudor dynasty. ... Although my present work is mainly international, I am still part of England and proud of it. Owen Tudor of course was descended from the line of the King Arthurs and back from there to the Royal line of Israel and behind that to Assyria. (Pole, 1979, pp. 7-8)

Clearly, he accepted not just that Britain was in some vague way "special" but the whole theory of the British royal family being descended from the same blood as the Jewish Royal House of David, and through King Arthur and via the Tudors into his own family. This might explain his apparent naivety in accepting Meakin's claims of being a hereditary master of the Order of the Table Round and a direct descendant of King Arthur. Pole's sometime business partner Ronald Heaver was heavily involved in the British Israel Movement. In 1934 he buried a thaumaturgic talisman in the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem (Stewart, 2012, p. 68) and some years later, the re-charged talisman made its way back to Heaver through a number of magical means requiring intense spiritual discipline (Stewart, 2012, p. 79). Coupled with his belief that he had known Jesus in a past life and that Abdu'l Baha was in some way the return of Christ, Pole was convinced of his own role in the grail quest and the integration of the Baha'i Faith with the Glastonbury legends was complete.

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<sup>14</sup> Heremon or Eremon, King of Ireland c 1698 b.c.

<sup>15</sup> Loughcrew Hills also called Sliabh na Caillighe (The Hill of the Witch)

<sup>16</sup> In medieval Irish Christian pseudo-history, the **Fir Bolg** (also spelt **Firbolg** and **Fir Bholg**) are one of the races that inhabited ancient Ireland, they were reputedly overthrown by the invading [Tuatha Dé Danann](#), they were forced to leave Ireland and later return

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 6:6

Thus the question of why adherents of what they perceived as a Celtic mystical tradition would be happy to embrace a Middle Eastern spiritual path is explained – they believed the British peoples to be the lost tribes of Israel, they linked Arthur to the Kings of Israel, Glastonbury to Jerusalem and perceived the Baha'i Revelation as a way of syncretising these phenomena. Another Baha'i, Edward Hall wrote a poem "The Isles Unveiled," presumably thus entitled as a pun on Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*. The poem is a peon of praise to the civilising mission of the British Isles in world history. However, it is in no way simply a tribute to British imperialism, it clearly connects Britain to Palestine and relates the roles of Abdu'l Baha and General Allenby to the return of Jews to Palestine and the spiritual significance of such an event.

At length the hour, the darkest she had known—  
The harvest-hour of ill the world had sown—  
Heaped woe on woe; and facing thunderous hate,  
She warred her way towards her destined fate  
To be a servant of the Will Divine  
In building up a prosperous Palestine.  
Search through the world and nothing stands so clear  
As this event foreseen by sage and seer.  
Indeed, through war the Holy Land was freed  
By British hand from negligence and greed,  
And one who dwelt serene on Carmel's height  
Proclaimed the day as of Prophetic Light,  
The Persian sage and British general met  
For one brief hour that none should e'er forget,  
For he, the Servant of the Lord was sign  
Of that great day that marked the Will Divine,  
How strange! The Jews—those exiles of the world  
Like loosened leaves the eddying winds have swirled  
By these strong Isles are granted friendly aid  
To now return where none need be afraid.  
If Zion smiles, if Bethlehem gives praise,  
Say 'tis of God—and great are all His ways:  
These Western Isles from nothingness grew great  
To serve the Lord in opening wide his gate. (Hall., undated)

Palestine was of great significance to the Baha'is, it was where Baha'u'llah had been imprisoned, where He had died and where he was buried. A small community around the Holy Family, comprising mainly of Persians had formed a "Baha'i colony" in Haifa, but most importantly Mount Carmel was the site that Baha'u'llah had prophesied He would "pitch his tent", it was to be the site of the Baha'i World Centre.

The importance of Palestine to the Baha'is is demonstrated by the attendees at the opening of the Baha'i Centenary Celebrations in London. A telegram dated 25th November 1943 instructs the British NSA:

Advise contact Herbert Samuel Ronald Storrs Tudor-Pole and other sympathisers which National Assembly may suggest vigorous action necessary safeguard interests faith insure success celebration Shoghi Rabbani (NSA UK, 1981) p. 162

The three men named in the telegram were all connected to Palestine, Herbert Samuel (1870 – 1963) was a Liberal politician and a Zionist Jew, he had served as High Commissioner of Palestine from July 1920 to June 1925, his appointment was, understandably, controversial. Ronald Storrs (1881 – 1955) in 1917 Storrs became, as he said, "the first military governor of Jerusalem since Pontius Pilate" for which purpose he was given the army rank of colonel. In 1921 he became Civil Governor of Jerusalem and Judea. In both positions he attempted to support Zionism while protecting the rights of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. Pole had also served in Palestine and he would have been well known to Samuel and Storrs, the invitation to two of the most prominent Zionists in Britain cannot have been incidental but rather an attempt to "safeguard interests faith" in Palestine.

This relationship with Zionists deserves some attention because, whilst attacks on Baha'is in Muslim majority countries have traditionally been on the grounds of apostasy, this is increasingly hard to sustain as a diminishing proportion of Baha'is have a Muslim heritage, yet alone being converts from Islam themselves, consequently a new justification has been devised. Obviously, the Baha'i presence in Palestine predates the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948; however, an apolitical stance is a core Baha'i belief:

We see therefore that we must do two things - Shun politics like the plague, and be obedient to the Government in power in the place where we reside... We must obey in all cases except where a spiritual principle is involved, such as denying our Faith. For these spiritual principles we must be willing to die. (ShoghiEffendi, p. 57)

This coupled with the obedience to government and the international funding of the huge shrines and gardens in Haifa has led to accusations of support for Zionism, which is demonstrably not the case, as the Baha'is a merely quietist in their approach to any political movement.

The relationship between British Israelism and Zionism is little researched and outside the content of this paper, it suffices to acknowledge that there was some relationship and some overlapping of interests. The British Israel theory has been totally disproved by DNA, if common sense was not enough to dismiss it in its entirety and apart from a couple of websites on the Internet has ceased to exist, its importance to the development of the New Age is greatly overlooked, perhaps out of embarrassment. However, contrary to the argument of Edward Said and Rana Kabbani that Europeans were dismissive and arrogant in their approach to Middle Eastern religion and culture it would appear that for many a Middle Eastern origin was a necessary requirement for the validation of a spiritual path, and thus the British Israel Theory was used to give a veneer of oriental authenticity to Celtic culture.

Another pattern which can be picked out is that of the "Secundadeian Angels" theme, in *Signs and Secrets of the Glastonbury Zodiac* (Leitch, 2013) Alan Royce points out how this theme unites the Blue Bowl enactment, Bligh Bond's work at Chilton Priory and the development of the Chalice Well in his essay "Bligh Bond's Stone Rose Vigil" (Royce, 2013). Royce identifies two threads, firstly the archangelic handover in 1879/80 when lunar, nocturnal, secretive Gabriel gave way to solar, diurnal, open Michael. This was first outlined by the Abbot Trithemius Pole, Felkin and Meakin would have been very aware of this if only from Stiener's exposition of his work. This change meant that secrets would now be revealed and that mysteries would be opened, Goodchild seems to have decided that the best way to expose secrets without breaking oaths was to show them to women, hence the need for a triad of maidens to find the Blue Bowl. This dovetails with the Baha'i belief that the revelation of

Baha'u'llah would be open to all, symbolised by the unveiling of the Persian poet and scholar Fatimah Baraghani (1814 or 1817 –1852) known as Táhirih and Qurratu l-'Ayn.

The second thread outlined by Royce is that of the constellation Krater or Crater, the name means “cup” and its conjunction with the Sun was connected in some astral lore with the story of Joseph of Arimathea collecting the blood and water from the wounds of Christ. This imagery of “heart's blood” and the “Cup of Stolistes” of Florence Farr's Sphere Group would have been familiar to Felkin, which refers to the place of the cup (Crater) below Leo, ruled by the Sun and representing the heart in the human body.

## **Conclusion**

Pole, Felkin and Buckton were all important figures in the development of the eclectic milieu that would become the New Age Movement, Neo Paganism, as well as playing a role in the development of the Baha'i Faith. The reality of the resurgence of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre and pilgrimage destination would surpass Pole and Buckton's wildest dreams. Were they to walk down the High Street in 2015, they might however be surprised at the number of shops selling what purport to be traditional witchcraft artefacts. The conversation which sparked Margaret Murray's interest in witchcraft and the publication of her thesis that the “Witch Cult” was a survival of pre Christian religion took place in Glastonbury, but there is no reason to suppose either she, or her hostess Alice Buckton considered the possibility that anyone would try to revive the religion from which the “Witch Cult” was derived. Murray would later write the forward to a book in which Gerald Gardiner would claim to have met practitioners of this lost religion in the New Forest. Gardiner's work reunited magick and religion and for the first time in millennia practitioners could acknowledge magick as their principle belief system and work with deities that are entirely local in origin. The decline of organised Christianity and the growth of secularism have allowed individuals to identify their religious orientation or lack of it in more specific and narrow ways. Whereas at the turn of the Nineteenth Century it was possible to have multiple identities, generally based on a tribal loyalty to the Church of England and enriched with membership of auxiliary religious, spiritual and occult orders or movements, ironically the growth of secularism and the event of multi culturalism has led to more rigid distinctions between religions. Pole, Felkin and Buckton all identified as Anglican Christians, as well as Baha'is, this would not be possible today as the Baha'i Faith is an independent religion which requires adherents to break formal membership with other religions. They were all involved in some way with the esoteric and magickal, today they might choose to label such activities as Pagan, however, at the time that option was not available. The emergence of the umbrella term “Pagan” which covers a number of spiritual paths, some of which claim to be in some way revivals of pre Christian European religions, the historical validity of such claims is not the subject of this paper, however, this desire to revive indigenous European religion, without a need to wrap it in Oriental trappings might be seen a maturing of confidence in their own spirituality by Europeans after two millennia of Christianity. The gradual acceptance of the inclusion of indigenous beliefs into the Baha'i world view may yet see an interface with this form of spirituality.