



BRILL

ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY  
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM (2023) 1–27



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# Avalonian Bahaism

## *Esotericism, Orientalism, and the Search for Direction in Early Twentieth Century Britain*

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Received 15 October 2022 | Accepted 21 August 2023 |

Published online 1 November 2023

### Abstract

This article considers the thought of Wellesley Tudor Pole, one of Britain's most important modern religious teachers, and his particular take on the Bahá'í faith. Pole's 'Bahaism,' sought to present the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the other Bahá'í prophets as compatible with a constellation of different esoteric ideologies, which he felt would be at the centre of a world-wide spiritual revival. Pole also found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá an Eastern teacher who he believed confirmed this new spiritual period, and he worked hard to promote 'Abdu'l-Bahá and what he understood as being the Bahá'í faith, being for a time a major figure amongst nascent Bahá'ís in the West. His ideas were influential on the group of Esotericists around Glastonbury, known as the Avalonians, and his Chalice Well Trust is one of Britain's most important centres of tourism.

### Keywords

Celticism – Baha'i – British Israelism – twentieth-century Britain – Dion Fortune – Glastonbury

### 1 Introduction

'We can discern certain spiritual movements,' wrote Arnold Toynbee in 1948, 'which might conceivably become the embryos of new *higher* religions. The

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/15700593-TAT00015

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Bahai and Ahmadi (*sic*) movements ... will occur to the Western observer's mind.<sup>1</sup> Arnold Toynbee was not alone in seeing the "higher" possibilities of Bahaism,<sup>2</sup> though what was to be made of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) and his oldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921) was a matter for debate with some early "followers" of the movement. In the early reception of the Bahá'í faith in the West, before a more complete understanding of the faith was available, it was a source of inspiration for several important writers interested in esotericism, magic, and the Celtic revival. This article follows the unique and idiosyncratic interpretation of Bahaism as promoted by Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884–1968) and its cultural significance in esoteric and occult circles in early twentieth-century Britain. Pole's particular interpretation of the Bahá'í faith, presented the movement in terms compatible with the several systems of esoteric spirituality that were flourishing in the early twentieth century. The esoteric thinkers whom Tudor Pole influenced were quick to fold in what they understood about the Bahá'í faith into their own spiritual projects, and yet this unusual addition has as of yet, received scant attention amongst scholars of esotericism. This article seeks to do this by showing the importance that

1 Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, 204.

2 In this essay I kept the anachronistic term "Bahaism" for two reasons: 1) this term was the primary one used by the historical sources I am considering; 2) Because it serves as a marker for an early, distinct Western interpretation of the Bahá'í faith. In the earliest expansion of the Bahá'í movement in the West, before the translation of primary documents and an established connection between Western followers and the leaders of the faith, this term had a particular cache amongst Western spiritual seekers, and the term Bahaism is meant to demarcate this early engagement. Unlike the Bahá'í faith proper, persons interested in Bahaism often had a very loose interpretation of the message and associated it with other spiritual movements, like Spiritualism and Theosophy. They also would not have access to the foundational documents of the religion, as they were as yet untranslated, and their understanding was based on secondary sources. Bahaism as a particular valence of the Bahá'í message tended to emphasise the universalist message of the Bahá'í faith in terms of religious unity, and tended to downplay the claim that the Bahá'í faith was a separate religious movement. They also tended to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a guru figure and emphasised his spiritual power and personality in problematic ways. Bahaism as an interpretative category likewise played down claims of prophetic authority, for a vague 'spirituality' and thoroughly non-sectarian interpretation of the movement. However, though Bahaism would be superseded by a more complete understanding of the Bahá'í faith, many of the earliest Western promoters of the Bahá'í faith were thoroughly influenced by it, and this makes this early period so rich and important for study. It should also be noted that for those who resonated with Bahaism, as the subjects of this paper, they would not continue to follow the faith in its later development. When speaking about the later, more institutionalised period I use the term 'Bahá'í faith,' or more correctly just Bahá'í. I am grateful to the reviewer who suggested I address this complicated issue in the present article, and I am working on a current article which elaborates on this particular early history. See; Dell J. Rose, 'Mit Anderen Worten.'

Bahaism and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had in the imaginative world of several prominent esoterically-minded individuals in the twentieth-century. This article therefore does not seek to tell a strict history of the Bahá’í faith’s spread in the West as such, though given the high degree of intellectual cross-pollination,—these lines are not so easily distinguished.

Tudor Pole, (hereafter *WTP*) is our primary subject, as the primary developer of this open interpretation of Bahá’í, which has been termed Bahaism in this work (see note 1.). *WTP* engaged most of the prominent esoteric movements of the period, and was arguably one of the most prolific early proponents of Bahaism in Britain. He understood the Bahá’í movement as the “first-fruits” of a new spiritual order, one that would help Britain regain its spiritual vitality, reconnecting Britain with its lost Israelite and Avalonian heritages. As a believer in the British-Israelite tradition, which taught that the modern British were descended from the lost tribes of Israel, Pole wished for a way to reconnect with this lost Eastern heritage, seeing in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Bahá’í faith one possible link. As a student of Theosophy, *WTP* was acutely aware of the spiritual potential of the mystic East, and understanding *WTP*’s British Israelism adds an important nuance to the way that he frames the potential of Eastern and Western spiritual engagement, which was the cornerstone of his ‘Chalice mission.’ Bahaism, as this article will show, was an important element in this work.

Amongst these ‘Avalonian Bahá’ís’,<sup>3</sup> we count the very pinnacle of early twentieth-century esoteric thinkers including Alice Buckton (1867–1944), Robert Felkin (1853–1926), Neville Meakin (1876–1912), and Dion Fortune (1890–1946).<sup>4</sup> Each of the authors addressed in this article was deeply engaged with the traditions of Western esotericism and were at the same time interested in the spiritual interpretation of the Bahá’í faith, a point which has been under-considered in the study of the nascent Bahá’í faith in the West. Spiritualist and Theosophical networks were essential in the spread of the early Bahá’í message, and the esoteric legacy of early Bahaism is even felt in the Celtic Revival movement.<sup>5</sup> This article will explore some of these connections, and in the

3 Meaning here those thinkers who were drawn to Bahaism as presented by *WTP* and others, and also interested in the British spiritual traditions, referred to as “Avalonian.” Though, whether any one of the persons considered here would have ever referred to themselves as such would be doubtful.

4 I could not be more grateful for the scholarship of Lil Osborn in undertaking this project. She was one of the first to notice the connections between the nascent Bahá’í movement and Western esotericism. I have leaned extensively on her scholarship throughout this article, as well as on the recent scholarship of Brendan McNamara, who also filled in some important historical information.

5 Brendan McNamara, who also builds on Osborn’s scholarship, addresses the Celtic element

process, encourage other scholars to re-evaluate Baháism's role in twentieth-century esoteric networks.

## 2 Baháism and Esotericism

Bahá'í, in terms of its teachings on cyclical revelation and perennialism is squarely based on Islamic esotericism.<sup>6</sup> Though an entire introduction (let alone history) would be outside the scope of this article, the faith draws inspiration from the Bábi movement, which Bahá'ís today see as the forerunner of their religion. Bábism, in turn, has its foundations in Shaykhism, a mystical movement of Twelver Shi'ism.<sup>7</sup> These traditions shared the doctrine of perpetual revelation, a distinctly mystical hermeneutic with letterist overtones, and a dislike for the limitations of traditional Islam.<sup>8</sup> Of central importance to both the Bábi and Bahá'í faiths were the manifestations of God (مظهر ظهور).<sup>9</sup> These prophets would progressively steer humanity back on the "straight path," and knowledge of the one true God as part of a movement toward a universal, spiritual faith.<sup>10</sup> Unlike its contemporary Theosophy, however, a movement that has always received attention from scholars of Western esotericism, WTP's Baháism or the Bahá'í faith more generally have only been passingly considered. This is unusual because both Theosophy and Bahá'í played with orientalist notions of the "mystic" East, shared remarkably similar teleological visions of an enlightened future, as well as many individual converts, and the overlap in early presentation of the two groups is of importance to this present study.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was certainly aware of the Theosophical Society, as well as Spiritualism and other esoteric movements, as we know WTP informed him about several groups during his time with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, and 'Abdu'l-

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in his most recent book. See McNamara, *The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain*, 79–100. For more on the early Celtic revival, see Curley, *Samuel Johnson*, 123–190. For the nineteenth century movement (Scotland specifically), see Shaw, *The Fin-de-Siècle Scottish Revival*, 143–227.

6 Mark Sedgewick's work on Traditionalism was really important for this project as he addresses the notion of perennialism and its importance to the Sufi milieu surrounding René Guénon, and the notion was very much in vogue in nineteenth century Iran, see: Sedgewick, *Against the Modern World*, 39–55. For more on Iran in the nineteenth century, see: Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, 1–38, 52–87.

7 MacEoin, 'From Shaykhism to Bábism,' 114–150.

8 Berger, 'Motif messianique,' 93–107.

9 The most important book of the Bábis, *The Bayan*, has not been translated in its entirety into English, the citation is for the Persian version, see: Shīrāzi (Bāb), *کتاب بیان*, 1863.

10 Bahá'u'lláh & 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Lights of Guidance*, 501–505.

Bahá addressed branches of the Theosophical Society in London and Chicago. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw Theosophists as a ‘people hungry for the truth,’ but misled fundamentally by the lack of awareness of the continual revelations of God.<sup>11</sup> However, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grandson and successor, pushed strongly for the rationality of Bahá’í teachings, and in many cases played down the perennialist and esoteric elements in the tradition, especially the influence of the early Bábí movement in Iran.<sup>12</sup> Shoghi Effendi wanted to push Bahá’í as an independent religious faith and not as a non-sectarian spiritual movement, an issue that would eventually discourage people like WTP, who objected to Shoghi Effendi’s exclusivism.<sup>13</sup> Shoghi Effendi rejected the claims of other movements, like the Theosophical Society, and encouraged Bahá’ís to avoid reading non-Bahá’í periodicals or celebrate the holidays of their previous religious traditions. Instead, he encouraged Bahá’í converts to focus on Bahá’í celebrations, like Nawruz.<sup>14</sup> Shoghi Effendi’s mission to present Bahaiism as a singular tradition, and certainly not an esoteric one, would be phenomenally successful. Without it, the Bahá’í faith’s international profile would almost certainly not exist. Though Shoghi Effendi would be one of the leading voices in the turn toward Bahá’í religious rationalism, in the early days of the movement’s Western expansion, esoteric thinking was still a significant component as WTP’s Bahaiism and his influence will show.

### 3 Avalonianism and Bahaism<sup>15</sup>

Wellesley Tudor Pole, the esotericist most well-known today for finding a “holy grail,” and his founding of the Chalice Well Trust in Glastonbury England was illustrative of the intellectual milieu that surrounded some of the first Western converts to Bahaiism. Our present concern wishes to understand how Bahaiism would be integrated by WTP into a new esoteric vision of twentieth-century

11 For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s 1911 London address to the Theosophical Society, where he was invited by Annie Besant no less, see: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Abdul ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, 27–30. For his 1912 Chicago address, see: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘An Address to the Theosophical Society,’ 153–159.

12 Several books address the early history of Bahaiism and its previous movement Bábism, and touch on the perennialist tradition of the movement, see: Ioannissyan, *The Development of the Bábí/ Bahá’í Communities*, 1–70; Lawson, ‘Interpretation as Revelation,’ 10–26; Alcan, *Dissent and Heterodoxy in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 35–86.

13 Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, 38.

14 Ibid.

15 “Avalonian,” was the term used by Patrick Benham to refer to the esoteric intellectual networks in Glastonbury, see: Benham, *The Avalonians*, 1–10.

Britain, and show the importance of Baháism to other Avalonians. WTP was raised in a household that was deeply engaged in many of the esoteric currents of the late nineteenth century, and from a very young age, he and his family were open to communication with spirits.<sup>16</sup> WTP would continue this early engagement with mediumship and spiritualism throughout his life, and though he challenged what he saw as the “artificial” methods of some Spiritualists,<sup>17</sup> he was also well known for his mediumistic abilities. His book, *Private Dowding: The Personal Story of a Soldier Killed in Battle*, was perhaps the most popular work of channelled literature in the first half of the twentieth century. The book was originally published in 1917 and was part of the surge in spiritualistic literature after the Great War, and was indeed written shortly after WTP’s own tour of service.<sup>18</sup> WTP, who was eventually awarded the Order of the British Empire, was also an essential organiser of the “Silent Minute” campaign. This national movement held a moment of silence at 9 o’clock every night to pray for the health and success of British soldiers in the Second War. The movement was enthusiastically received throughout Britain and was supported by King George VI, and by Winston Churchill.<sup>19</sup> However, though we will reference WTP’s later life, this article concerns the early development of his thought and focuses roughly on the period of his life between 1900 to 1930.

What makes WTP’s “Avalonian Baháism” so interesting is that it resituates the religious innovations being undertaken by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, combining his limited understanding of the Bahá’í movement with Spiritualism, Theosophy, Orientalism, and Celticism. Though the other three elements so essential to WTP’s approach to Baháism have been thoroughly addressed in the study of Western esotericism, there is still much more work to be done to understand the esoteric dimensions of Celticism as a distinct interpretive tradition.

Celticism, as defined by Joep Leersson, is ‘not a study of the Celts and their history, but rather a study of their reputation and the meanings and connotations ascribed to the term “Celtic.”’<sup>20</sup> WTP’s Celticism is also unique in that

16 Osborn, ‘The Extraordinary Life,’ 14–15. See also Fenge, *The Two Worlds of Wellesley Tudor Pole*, 25–38. For a more general introduction to late Victorian esotericism and occultism, see Franklin, *Spirit Matters*, 141–211.

17 Pole, *The Silent Road*, 7–9.

18 Pole, *Private Dowding*, 1917. I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article who informed me that J.M. Watkins was also the publisher of Sydney Sprague’s *The Story of the Bahai Movement*, which was one of the earliest sources of information on the faith, and was perhaps an early source of information for Felkin and Meakin. For more on Sprague’s significance, see Whitehead, *Some Early Baha’is of the West*, 55–64.

19 Pole, *Writing on the Ground*, 12–13.

20 Leerssen, *Celticism*, 6.

it combined a fervent belief in the existence of a primeval, “spiritual,” Christianity that was once centred around Glastonbury with the tradition of British-Israelism, the belief that the descendants of the British Isles had been ancient Israelites.<sup>21</sup> This last point was important, as Lil Osborn rightly points out, because it provided a new valence on how WTP understood the “Eastern” nature of the Bahá’í movement, not as solely a meeting of the “other,” but rather, and bizarrely, the coming together of two eastern civilisations.<sup>22</sup>

This tradition of seeing the British as an “Eastern civilization,” as Isaac Lubelsky’s work has shown, was a component in pro-imperial discourse. Following the linguistic analysis of Max Müller, imperial apologists argued that the British, as an *Aryan people*, were not in truth a *foreign* power, but a returning one, coming back to rule their ancestral lands.<sup>23</sup> Celticism also allowed WTP to reconstitute Britishness by focusing on the early Israelite origin of the British people, before their conquest by other “foreign” tribes. Thus, by conflating the British as an Israelite, ‘Eastern’ people, who have suffered under their own history of conquest, he saw many points of comparison with the Bahá’í faith, whose leaders were often in political peril.<sup>24</sup> The desire to re-characterize the British as an Eastern people has a long history in eighteenth and nineteenth-century nationalism, though of course, much work is still to be done. The following sections will expand on these traditions, and it is hoped this will open a larger conversation about the role esotericism has played in developing this discourse.

It should also be noted that although Celticism and British-Israelism were a significant force in WTP’s conception of the sacredness of the British Isles and the destiny of the British people, they were not the only element. His thought was also coloured by a wide plethora of influences and by contemporary debates within British Protestantism. This is borne out by his engaging

21 Scholarly works dealing with British-Israelism are relatively few. A good overview was published in 2021 by Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, though it focuses on modern groups and does not address some of the sub-movements of the tradition, see; Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, *Israelism in Modern Britain*, 1–81. Dell J. Rose, ‘House of David,’ forthcoming.

22 Osborn, ‘The Bahá’í Faith and the Western Esoteric Tradition,’ 1–14.

23 Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 39–76. I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for introducing me to Lubelsky’s work.

24 WTP’s early interest in British folk customs is very telling here. In WTP’s *Circular* he often discussed English folk customs in terms of their supposed Eastern origin. The ‘argument from folklore’ was also used by other writers within the Christian Israelite tradition, particularly John Wilson (1799–1870), the Scottish “founder” of the British-Israel movement. Wilson also uses a form of Celticism in referring to Scottish and Welsh customs, like hospitality which tended to emphasise their eastern origin, see Wilson, *Our Israelitish Origin*, 46–128.

with the teachings of R.J. Campbell, another important thinker who wanted to rejuvenate the religious life of post-war Britain and promoted a distinctly British Christianity.<sup>25</sup> However, WTP's background faith in the British-Israelite theory provided a way for deeper identifications with the East, which would ultimately ground his enthusiasm for the early Bahá'í message.

#### 4 Celtic Israelites and the Esotericism of Origin

Scholars of Romantic nationalism are acutely aware of the importance that mythical origin narratives played in the development of national consciousness.<sup>26</sup> It furthermore seems that most European nations had at least one major cultural movement that claimed their origin in either a postdiluvian ancestor (as is the case in Sweden with Gothicism) or with the mythical "Lost Tribes" of Israel.<sup>27</sup> Oftentimes these divine origin stories were combined with a messianic role for the nation in a coming moment of divine reckoning. A lesser known example (at least to the non-Dutch population) might be Willem Bilderdijk and the messianic destiny of the Netherlands, an important element in establishing the House of Orange.<sup>28</sup> So given the proliferation of similar views on the continent, it is not surprising that this particular phenomenon would have a following in Britain as well, and indeed there are several historical branches of this movement which had existed in England since the sixteenth century.<sup>29</sup> However, before moving onto the Israelite traditions which influenced WTP, a brief word on the significance of "mythical aetiology" significance for the study of esotericism.

Though there is no standard academic term for what is being called here "mythical aetiology", i.e. the attribution of divine or mythical significant origin for political entities, countries, or ethnic identities, these movements had significant contributions from thinkers engaged in Western esotericism. Hanegraaff's description of Western esotericism as a tradition of "rejected knowledge" comes closest to addressing this particular interpretative tradition.<sup>30</sup>

25 McNamara, 'Eliding the Esoteric: R.J. Campbell and Early Twentieth Century Protestant Discourse in Britain,' 522–525.

26 I am thinking of the Brill series edited by Joep Leerson, *National Cultivation of Culture*, in particular; see also Hosking & Schöpflin, *Myths & Nationhood*.

27 Sikeborg, 'Baggars söner och Halvgudar,' 1–103. See also: Åkerman, *Rose Cross over the Baltic*, 29–67.

28 Eijnatten, *Hogere Sferen*, 601–647. And; Eijnatten, 'Oranje en Nederland zijn één,' 4–24.

29 Cottrell-Boyce, *Israelism in Modern Britain*, 1–10.

30 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 152–253.



Most movements practising mythical aetiology had their high-point of cultural influence from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the exception being British-Israelism. In their prime, these traditions were completely embraced by the political powers of their time, and were grafted into legal principles, and traditions of legitimation. However, in terms of cultural influence, “strict” mythological aetiologies which promoted ideas of direct descent were modified over time, and seem to follow some of the patterns of rejection which Hanegraaff identifies.<sup>31</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of these traditions of mythical aetiology were reformulated through the lens of scientific racism, as with Guido List and Ariosophy.<sup>32</sup> However, the scientisation of mythical aetiology was also resisted, and many esoteric thinkers used mythical aetiology as a cultural well to draw inspiration, and avoided a strong racist identification. Thinking about these disparate teachings as part of a single European interpretative phenomenon is very useful because it provides a common framework by which to understand these movements (especially as so many groups borrowed from one another), and esoteric scholarship would have a great deal to offer in this discussion. In their methodologies, many of these traditions are strikingly similar, particularly in their use of linguistic analysis, which was almost always accompanied by strongly esoteric elements.

WTP’s own engagement with British-Israelism was thoroughly coloured by his engagement with Celticism and Celtic revival writers. Oftentimes, that which was truly “British” to WTP’s mind was also Celtic, though he is somewhat inconsistent in this latter point. Some Celticist writers argued that Celtic peoples were descendants of ancient Israelites and used linguistic and mythological (including Arthurian traditions) analysis, as well as archaeology to argue for this perspective. At stake, from the perspective of these Israelite Celticists, was the recovery of a lost British spirituality that was personal, embracing of the feminine, intuitive, and connected to the earth.<sup>33</sup> This original Celtic spirituality had been lost in the various rounds of imperialisation, first with the Roman Empire and then with the Roman Catholic church. However, traces of it remained in the language and myths of the Celtic people, who had mythologised historical events, and lost their true meaning. One of the first documents, in a Celtic language, to claim Israelite descent was Theophilus Evan’s 1716 *Drych y Prif Oesoedd*, and it was a remarkable success being not only one of the first

31 Ibid.

32 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 17–106.

33 Gemie, ‘Visions of Albion,’ 327–345.

books to introduce the theory of Israelite origins but also one of the most successful books on Welsh history ever written.<sup>34</sup>

Those promoting British Israelitism were also actively involved in conducting amateur archaeological excavations, one of the most intriguing being the British Israelite excavation of the Hill of Tara in Ireland which brought the movement into conflict with Maud Gonne and W.B. Yeats. The group were looking for the ark of the covenant, which they believed was placed in Tara by the ancient Israelites.<sup>35</sup> The Royal Family, as Walter Milner would teach in his pamphlet *Tara Invicta* (1903), also received their right to rule based on their descent through the lineage of the Israelite King David.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, even King Arthur likewise became an Israelite King! WTP needed the British Israelite background to ground his other claim that there was a sizable Israelite community in England, one that would have made it possible for Joseph of Arimathea to visit the British Isles and bring with him the holy grail. Unlike the British Israel society in Tara and their search for the ark of the covenant, however, WTP did indeed find an object which he claimed of Israelite origin, owned no less than by Jesus himself.

It cannot be said that WTP called his chalice the "Holy Grail;" in fact he says quite the opposite. But he does play with this tradition, especially given the cup's Glastonbury origin and the long association with the town and the holy grail, to make another claim, that the chalice is the symbol of a new universal Spiritual message, one that will unite the teachings of the East and the West. This perspective on the chalice/grail story aligns quite closely with how WTP understood the prophetic role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as a prophet of universal redemption.<sup>37</sup> The spiritual legacy of the ancient Israelite Britons, WTP taught, was something that might be discovered by those sensitive individuals who were open and awake enough to realise it. They were an Eastern people shorn of their Eastern legacy, and Abdu'l-Bahá was a way to relink this chain. WTP likewise considered it his quest to reunite the British people with their lost spiritual legacy.<sup>38</sup>

WTP synthesised all of these elements into a new esoteric perspective on British history, which fully supported both the divine mission of the British along with their suppressed or lost Eastern Culture. This unique approach to

34 For the statement about the book's popularity, see: Donahaye, 'By Whom Shall She Arise?', 161–182.

35 Carew, *Tara and the Ark of the Covenant*, 6–120.

36 Milner, *Tara Invicta*, 1–20.

37 Osborn (Abdo), 'Religion and Relevance,' 103.

38 Pole, 'Preparing the Way for a New Age,' 26–27.

British Israelism, which firmly engaged and built upon discourse from Celticism, was attractive to several members of various religious and magical orders, who shared for a time both WTP's enthusiasm for the grail as well as the divine renewal that was being undertaken from the Bahá'í movement. Though his Avalonian Bahá'ís, and indeed WTP himself, would not take the step of formal conversion to Bahaism, they would reinterpret the movement as a sign of a coming spiritual age, which would see the rebirth of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre.

Undoubtedly, as has been suggested, WTP's embrace of the "Eastern" nature of the Celts also comes from a critique of what he felt was the materialistic nature of British imperialism, especially as it was practised in India. He tended to side with other spiritually inclined positions, like that of Annie Besant (1847–1933),<sup>39</sup> who often combined anti-imperialist critiques with an appreciation of Eastern spirituality, and he felt both societies would be improved by cooperation and cultural respect. This is all the more important, at least from WTP's perspective given the Eastern origin of the British. More work is needed to fully expound WTP's critiques of imperialism, however this is beyond the scope of the current article. As for another writer who saw explicit connections between Glastonbury and the New Jerusalem, John Michell (1933–2009), he may have been directly inspired by WTP's thought. Michell's most popular work *City of Revelation*, draws on the mystical dimensions of Jerusalem from Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation and likewise overlays them on Glastonbury.<sup>40</sup>

## 5 The Chalice and the Prophet

As was mentioned in the beginning of this article, WTP gained a considerable amount of celebrity from his finding of the Glastonbury chalice, and it was in his search for the origins of this sacred cup in Istanbul where he would come into contact for the first time with members of the Bahá'í movement. In this section, we hope to trace how WTP's initial engagement with Bahaism was made to fit within his Celticist mystical perspective. The orientalist nature of some of his views will furthermore be discussed in the last portion of this section.

WTP first arrived in the town of Glastonbury in 1902, after he had an extremely vivid dream experience where he learned that he had formerly been

39 See Mortimer, 'Annie Besant in India, 1913–1917,' 61–78.

40 Michell, *City of Revelation*, 35–91.

a monk at Glastonbury abbey.<sup>41</sup> He took this as a sign that Glastonbury was to be his true spiritual home. His extensive reading in Arthurian legend, and his belief that Joseph of Arimathea had travelled to Glastonbury with the holy grail (which for WTP was a spiritual presence or object), were important background motivation for his eventual move to Glastonbury, and his belief that he was to find the holy cup. Befitting the proto-feminist elements of the Celtic revival, WTP along with three “maidens,” began to search for the cup in late 1905 and would eventually find the chalice in 1906.<sup>42</sup> His discovery of the chalice was something of an event. In Westminster, there was a public ceremony to display the chalice, and it was directed by no less than the chaplain to the House of Commons, Basil Wilberforce (1841–1916), where it was inspected by Viscount Halifax, and several other notables.<sup>43</sup> Even Annie Bessant would be one of those who would visit WTP to inspect the sacred chalice. Indeed, as McNamara points out, several persons involved were uncomfortable with the level of public attention they were receiving.<sup>44</sup>

The backstory behind the chalice itself is equally fascinating and involves one of the most assertive feminists of the Celtic revival writers, John A. Goodchild (1851–1914); however, due to present constraints, we cannot delve more deeply into that story here.<sup>45</sup> It should suffice to say that Goodchild, through a visionary experience, became convinced that he needed to deposit the sacred chalice, which WTP and his three maidens would later find, in 1897. The chalice would also become the centrepiece of a small chapel in the Pole household in Bristol, where Christian rites with Celtic flavouring would be performed with the chalice. Since the rituals were only open to maidens, this would seem to show some of Goodchild’s proto-feminism, if indeed he did provide some direction for the ceremonies.<sup>46</sup> As we will see with WTP’s relationship with Felkin,

41 Fenge, *The Two Worlds of Wellesley Tudor Pole*, 34–40.

42 Fenge, *The Two Worlds of Wellesley Tudor Pole*, 47–50.

43 McNamara, ‘The ‘Celtic’ dimension of pre-first World War religious discourse in Britain,’ 90–104.

44 Ibid.

45 Fenge addresses the background of the chalice in his biography of WTP as does McNamara, but to my knowledge there is not at present any major study of Goodchild, though he is mentioned in connection with his much more famous friend William Sharp also known as Fiona McLeod (1855–1905). Goodchild and Sharp worked very closely on centring the feminine in Avalonian spirituality, and the Poles may have had some contact with either Sharp or Goodchild, or at the very least access to written works, though Sharp’s publisher Sir Patrick Geddes, who was a friend of WTP’s father Thomas, see: Benham, *The Avalonians*, 53–70. For more on Sharp and Geddes, see; Shaw, *The Fin-de-Siècle Scottish Revival*, 143–187.

46 Benham, *The Avalonians*, 43.

who was both a member of the Golden Dawn and the establisher of the Order of the Table Round, WTP recognized from the outset that his discoveries would have profound magical implications, and he embraced these as part of a relatively straightforward if eclectic Anglicanism.

Goodchild and WTP claimed that they did not collaborate on the finding of the chalice, though as McNamara points out, they did know one another and had corresponded, perhaps through WTP's family connections.<sup>47</sup> Whether or not the two men worked together to publicise the chalice's finding, the chalice became central in an emerging constellation of religious ideas which posited that the "secret" of the chalice lay in the East, specifically Istanbul, and that it would be key in a new spiritual manifestation which would bring together the primary intellectual passions of WTP's life, Celticism, Spiritualism, ritual magic, British Israelism, along with a new element, his belief in the coming of a great teacher from the East. Over time, and with the aid of two spiritualist mediums, WTP would become fixated with the notion that the key to the history and importance of the Glastonbury chalice lay in Istanbul, and so in 1907 he embarked on a quest to go and discover what he could about the chalice's history, and perhaps also the identity of this unknown prophet. This was also what he believed was the spiritual destiny of the Glastonbury Chalice.

Although WTP played with the image of the Holy Grail, he emphatically denied that the Grail was a physical object. Rather, in this "Hebrew" cup, and again he takes this literally, we have the beginning of a new spiritual revelation that will unite both the East and the West in a period of spiritual renewal. He writes in a published letter to *The Christian Commonwealth* on 17 October 1910, that this chalice rather brings 'into sympathetic touch one with another the followers of all great religious teachers in the East and West.'<sup>48</sup> And his latter journey to find the origins of the cup along with his eventual meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá would be the literalisation of this dream for spiritual renewal.

It is unclear which Bahá'ís WTP met on his first trip to Istanbul, but a major contender seems to be Stanwood Cobb (1881–1982). Cobb was working as a teacher in the prestigious American School in Istanbul, Robert College, and was like WTP a spiritual seeker. Before learning about Bahá'í, Cobb had been involved in several Spiritualist groups, and was for some time affiliated with the Theosophical Society in Boston. What both he and WTP shared was the notion that there was something grand happening in the spiritual life of the planet, and like WTP, he believed in the religious openness and ecumenism that was

47 On WTP's family connection, see note 39. For McNamara's brief statement on the collaboration between Goodchild and WTP, see: McNamara, 'The 'Celtic' dimension' 96.

48 Osborn (Abdo), 'Religion and Relevance', 103.

promoted by the Bahá'í movement. Unlike WTP however, Cobb would remain firmly within the Bahá'í throughout his life. Cobb also wrote a novel that seems to have had some impact on WTP, in which he describes an allegorical religious movement whose central tenets seem to be a perennialist form of revelation through a line of prophets. Like WTP, Cobb's stylized depiction of the Bahá'í movement was distinctly non-sectarian, with strongly mystical overtones.<sup>49</sup>

There is no doubt that part of the appeal of Baháism for WTP came from the fact that the movement was distinctly "Eastern," a factor that also was thoroughly embraced by Cobb and is amplified in light of WTP's Israelitism.<sup>50</sup> Osborn comes to a similar conclusion, and I think she understands what was at stake for WTP and his claim of British Israelism.<sup>51</sup> What was "lost" for WTP in British Spirituality, but which was continued in glimmers in Celtic culture, was the ancient Eastern origin of the British, and in some sense in trying to make contact with Baháism as an eastern tradition, there is also an attempt to recover an Eastern portion of the British soul.<sup>52</sup> The entire journey becomes a symbolic reworking of this desire to reconnect with the East, which according to his British-Israelite beliefs, was a matter of historical reality. The significance of the fact that he would eventually find himself with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Israel was also not lost on WTP, a point which he returned to several times in his life.

One criticism of British Israelism is that it is essentially a form of cultural appropriation, and that it comes from an innate anti-Semitism. While this is true for many groups which claim an Israelite identity, this was not the case in WTP's formulation of British Israelism.<sup>53</sup> For WTP he was not seeking hidden wisdom from an Eastern movement, rather he was learning from a fellow Eastern movement, one that was more in touch with its Eastern roots than the Israelites of Britain, but was nonetheless a fellow community. The connotations for this latter position create an important distinction in both intent and effect, and must be taken into account when discussing WTP and his influence.

As a point of clarity, it should not be read here that WTP's belief in British-Israelism was the sole grounds for his engagement and interest with the teachings of the mystic East, but that it had a decisive role in organising his own relationship with how he conceived of the importance of Eastern religion. WTP had a lifelong fascination with gurus and mystical healings, and was influ-

49 For the novel, see; Cobb, *Ayesha of the Bosphorus*, 1913.

50 McNamara, *The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain*. For more on 'Celtic Orientalism' as a tradition, see; Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 3–56, 203–213.

51 Osborn, 'The Bahá'í Faith and the Western Esoteric Tradition,' 7–14.

52 Ibid. 10–13.

53 Cottrell-Boyce, *Israelism in Modern Britain*, 82–109.

enced by the Theosophical Society's articulations of the mystic East, and these undoubtedly played a role in colouring his understanding of Bahá'í and the broader category of Eastern religion. However, his belief in the Israelite origin of the British played a role in his arguing for the applicability of Eastern traditions for British spiritual revival, a point that he comes back to time and again in his writings. As Eastern people cut off from their true spiritual roots, by returning to the East the British would return to their primal spiritual origins and bring about a world-wide spiritual revival, which was his greatest goal. Without this Eastern origin, every form of engagement with Eastern spirituality becomes a form of colonisation, or an othering which WTP wished to push against.

## 6 WTP and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

WTP met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Alexandria, Egypt in 1908, on what would have been his third trip to Istanbul to discover the history of the chalice.<sup>54</sup> The meeting seemed to have made a strong impression on WTP, and he felt as though his prophecy of the emergence of an Eastern teacher was clearly being manifested. It was also significant because it would mark a turning point in WTP's intellectual world, where his focus shifted from proving the sacred history of Goodchild's chalice toward assisting his new spiritual teacher 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Pole referred to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as most all the other Bahá'ís did, as "the Master," and wrote about the amount of spiritual energy that flowed from him.<sup>55</sup> This spiritual presence manifested itself in remarkable manifestations of healing, foresight, and past-life memories.<sup>56</sup> These events are significant because they show the role that the miraculous and the supernatural had in the initial transmission of Bahaiism in the West.<sup>57</sup> However, under Shoghi Effendi's leadership, the narrative would shift from these sorts of personal encounters to the more ecumenical openness which has become the most noticeable element in the Bahá'í faith today.

WTP personally experienced the healing power of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during their meeting in 1908, and this was one of the reasons that he would adopt 'Abdu'l-

54 Osborn, 'The Extraordinary Life'; McNamara, 'The 'Celtic' dimension,' 90–104.

55 Pole, *Writing on the Ground*, 156–160.

56 *Ibid.*, 147–148.

57 WTP continuously highlighted the magical in his public discussions, especially with the Theosophical Society, and he worked toward synthesising all magical aspects in a single theory of reality.

Bahá as his spiritual master.<sup>58</sup> Healing was an irrefutable proof for WTP of a spiritual leader's divine election, and he sets the miracles of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the context of other spiritual teachers in his book *Writing on the Ground*. Undoubtedly, much of WTP's fascination for the spiritual abilities of Eastern "gurus" was heavily influenced by his background in the Theosophical Society; this would be another area where additional information would be important, but is outside the scope of the present article. After WTP's experience with 'Abdu'l-Bahá he was convinced that he had found what he was after, and at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's bequest he would scrap his third chalice source-seeking venture in Istanbul to seek out a Bahá'í 'Abdu'l-Bahá had told him about who lived in Paris. However, WTP always insisted that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's legacy was to regenerate the world's religions themselves rather than establishing a new superseding religious faith.

At that time, now over half a century ago, it did not seem to me that 'Abdu'l-Bahá envisaged the establishment of a new and separate "Religion". All the stress of his teaching was laid on the leavening effect of the Bahá'í message on the religions already in existence and which were themselves in such urgent need of spiritual regeneration from within. The Master made it clear that to create an entirely new and separate religious organisation at that time should be resisted vigorously.<sup>59</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá's closeness with WTP is significant in many ways, because it seems to suggest that in the early days of the Bahá'í movement in the West there was relative openness to concepts like reincarnation, a staple of Western notions of Eastern religion, which were gradually replaced as the sources of the Bahá'í faith became more available.<sup>60</sup> One of the most famous examples of this was the transference of the cloak. WTP's account of his memories from the time of Jesus in the book, *A Man Seen From Afar*, with the main character of the story 'I', who seems to be WTP himself, or perhaps another spiritual vignette that came to him but was not a past experience of his own soul (this claim was made by Walter Lang who tried to downplay the elements of reincarnation though this does not seem to be as likely),<sup>61</sup> gives his new camel hair cloak to Jesus because

58 Pole, *Writing on the Ground*, 147–148.

59 Ibid.

60 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1991.

61 Walter Lang in his introduction to the chapter 'On the Bahá'í Faith,' gives an elaborate reading which would counteract the "facile" claims of reincarnation, see Lang's comments in Pole, *Writing on the Ground*, 135–139.



he had given his to a shepherd boy.<sup>62</sup> Later when WTP was walking with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on Mount Carmel in Haifa,<sup>63</sup> and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave the shivering WTP his own cloak, WTP was overcome by the thought, ‘restitution after many days.’<sup>64</sup>

The story seems to convey WTP’s belief in reincarnation, though of course it must be acknowledged that there was also a counter interpretation as Lang shows in his notes to Pole’s writings, and along with that suggestion the idea that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was *in some way* a manifestation of Christ. This would be the message that WTP would bring in his introduction of the Bahá’í message in Britain in 1911, when he was lecturing to the Theosophical Society in Derbyshire at their annual summer school.<sup>65</sup> Of these public addresses, as it seems there was at least two more before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arrival in Britain in 1911, WTP states that he had ‘never before seen such interest and enthusiasm aroused.’ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Marseille at the time, was also enthusiastic in his telegraph response: ‘Hope Godly power will raise the tent of unity for the material and spiritual rest of mankind.’<sup>66</sup> WTP, in cooperation with other admirers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, used his extensive contacts within the Theosophical Society, as well as networks from the Spiritualist movement, to facilitate his tours around Britain. Announcements for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s lectures were most often printed by Spiritualist and Theosophical periodicals and newspapers and it seems doubtful that without WTP’s access to these networks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s trip to Britain would have been noticed at all by the British public.

## 7 WTP and His Influence: The Outer Circle

WTP’s unique take on the Bahá’í faith, as well as his idea that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a new spiritual master was well received by the small group of spiritual writers and thinkers around Glastonbury. We know from letters and from his published work that WTP was concerned in this period, roughly from 1912–1922, and again in 1928, with understanding the role that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would play in his spiritual “system” and the development of the chalice message. He also worked to firmly submit this message with his engagement with Celti-

62 Ibid., pp. 136–137.

63 Haifa is the world headquarters of the Bahá’í faith, and is very important to Bahá’í history in Israel. For more on the faith’s relationship to Israeli history, see; Geller, ‘The Bahá’í Minority,’ 403–418, see also; Cole, *Modernity & Millennium*, 1–80.

64 Pole, *Writing on the Ground*, 137.

65 Cuthbert, *Star of the West*, 7.

66 Ibid.

cism, British Israelism, and the importance of Glastonbury, and it is from this period that WTP's Baháism would take on significance for the other Avalonians. Lil Osborn and Brendan McNamara have already introduced the three most prominent individuals who were attracted to WTP's Avalonian Baháism, namely Robert Felkin (1853–1926), Alice Buckton (1867–1944) and to a lesser extent Dion Fortune (1890–1946).<sup>67</sup> Each of these individuals, it is argued, took inspiration in WTP's vision of a worldwide religious rejuvenation, and in WTP's understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that would later be resisted by Shoghi Effendi and what might be called the "rationalisation" of the Bahá'í faith.

The first of these individuals, Robert Felkin, whom Osborn has called 'the Bahá'í Muse,' has been well-established in the history of twentieth-century British magic.<sup>68</sup> As with WTP, Felkin was interested in almost all of the esoteric organisations of the early twentieth century, from Anthroposophy to fringe masonry, high magic, and Rosicrucianism. He imbued his Avalonian spirituality with inspiration taken from "the East," as imagined by the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn, as filtered through the latter's Victorian Egyptomania.<sup>69</sup> Like WTP, Felkin was convinced that there was a uniform current that connected the mystical East with the British Isles and seems to have accepted, at least for a time, WTP's British Israelism.

In an incredibly interesting event, and one that cannot be addressed thoroughly within this article, Felkin would come to meet WTP through Neville Meakin, whom Felkin had met through his affiliation with Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).<sup>70</sup> Meakin had been appointed as one of the chief representatives of Steiner's philosophy in Britain and was like Felkin and WTP a person with eclectic esoteric interests as well as a member of both the Order of the Golden Dawn and its successor Stella Matutina. He was also, as had already been mentioned, a member, if not founder, of The Order of the Table Round, which Meakin claimed had been in continuous operation since the time of King Arthur.<sup>71</sup>

Meakin initiated both Felkin and WTP into his order, and he hoped that WTP would be the one to take over for him, as he was then suffering from

67 Although WTP knew Fortune, and she knew him well enough to reference him in her work on Glastonbury, it does not seem that Fortune continued to work with his ideas throughout her life.

68 Osborn, 'Felkin,' 1–3.

69 For more on Victorian Egyptomania and its esoteric connections see; Magus, *Rider Haggard*, 1–60. For a general overview of the phenomenon in terms of cultural history see, Dobson and Tonks, *Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination*, 1–45.

70 Osborn, 'Felkin', 6.

71 Osborn, 'Felkin', 4.

tuberculosis.<sup>72</sup> Felkin also made his way to visit the Chalice oratory in WTP's home in Bristol, and was presumably instructed on the significance of the rituals and the Avalonian mysteries that were being practised there, specifically that the Chapel was to be the centre of a new 'brotherhood of man.'<sup>73</sup> After Meakin's death, WTP and Felkin would still communicate for a short period before Felkin's move to New Zealand, but gradually drifted apart. However, it seems that much earlier WTP would also introduce both men into his unique understanding of Bahaiism, especially his belief in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's role as a world teacher, and both Felkin and Meakin would make significant contributions to the movement, all while interpreting the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a distinctly esoteric manner.

WTP's interactions with Felkin and Meakin revolved around defining the mystery of the Glastonbury Chalice with the new prophetic dispensation being enacted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In WTP's mind, the chalice became a symbol of unification, both East and West, as well as Britain with its spiritual heritage, and was intimately linked to the type of prophetic message he understood 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be propagating, one that would reject dogma for a new universal faith, where: 'should be possible for such focus points to be established all over the world without in any way interfering with the work and influences of the churches, mosques, and temples belonging to the different world religions.'<sup>74</sup> This was also the same way that he understood 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophetic message, and it would be the essential position found in all of his Glastonbury followers.

WTP's unique interpretation of Bahaiism, allowed for the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be included in a larger esoteric vision, which included Avalonianism, Celticism, and magic, and it seems to be his articulations of Bahaiism which both Felkin and Meakin would continue to articulate. Furthermore, given the timeline, with WTP's early encounter with Bahaiism in 1908 and considering that both Felkin and Meakin developed a belief in Bahaiism after their meeting with WTP, and it is almost certain that WTP was the person to initially stir their interest in the Bahá'í message.<sup>75</sup> Though there are of course other possibilities, Andrew Petri Cattanach being one. However they may have first encountered Bahaiism, what was remarkable for both men was that they immediately chose to fit the appearance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as confirmation of their own interest in ceremonial magic and the occult. For Felkin and Meakin, both of whom would continue to speak of their devotion to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the

72 Ibid., 7.

73 Osborn (Abdo), 'Religion and Relevance,' 103.

74 Ibid.

75 Osborn, 'Felkin,' 5–8.

remainder of their lives, the Bahá'í movement was confirmation of the coming spiritual age and perhaps they would have a role to play in bringing it about.

Meakin began working for the movement shortly after meeting with WTP, and Felkin would follow suit after meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London in 1912, however, their personal esoteric interpretations of the Bahá'í founder seemed to have remained with them. Meakin died still conducting rituals for his Order of the Table Round, and after Felkin moved to New Zealand he continued to pursue a rigorous campaign of magical instruction in the community of Havelock North, giving courses in trance mediumship, scrying, and teaching the highly complex ritual magic that he had learned in his early association with the Golden Dawn.<sup>76</sup> It could be questioned what exactly was the nature of Meakin and Felkin's Bahá'í faith, of course acknowledging its unorthodox characteristics. Osborn suggests that Felkin could have believed 'Abdu'l-Bahá was one of the "secret chiefs," that were so important to the direction of the Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>77</sup> However, without more information, we will never be certain. Nor can we be certain about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own awareness of the esoteric bent of some of his British followers. If WTP is to be believed, it does seem that perhaps for some time 'Abdu'l-Bahá was comfortable with the idea of a non-specific religious revival, and perhaps he played up certain cultural expectations of what was expected of a Guru (giving symbolic gifts, demanding followers go on extended journeys with little expectations, miracles). Though it is beyond the scope of this article, more research is needed to understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own participation in these currents.

## 8 WTP and His Influence: The Glastonbury Circle and Beyond

In Glastonbury, WTP's own eclectic blend of esotericism, British-Israelism, and Bahaism were very well received, and this section focuses on WTP's influence on the poet, playwright, and feminist Alice Buckton, as well as his influence on Dion Fortune—easily one of the most important writers of the English occult revival. Both women would follow Pole in keeping 'Abdu'l-Bahá first and foremost as a religious teacher, whose goal was to rejuvenate the entire spiritual world, but not necessarily to follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá into a new religious tradition. Both women continued to pursue their eclectic spiritual interest, however remaining faithful to the Church of England. WTP, it is argued here, brought

76 Worrad, 'A Cure for Disenchantment,' 267–298. See also; Ellwood, *Islands of the Dawn*, 156–185.

77 Osborn, 'Felkin,' 1–2, 7.

awareness of the Bahá'í movement to both writers, as well as his more spiritual interpretation of the Bahá'í movement.

According to Osborn, WTP had told Buckton about the Bahá'í movement in 1908<sup>78</sup> and she seems to have received the information with a great deal of enthusiasm, visiting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1910.<sup>79</sup> Of course Buckton already knew WTP, and was one of the attendees of Wilberforce's 1907 grail meeting. The 1910 *Star of the West* records that Buckton would be bringing many people news about the Bahá'í faith 'who otherwise would have waited long for this message.'<sup>80</sup> Buckton became a frequent presence amongst the early Bahá'í followers in England, and her reputation as a successful playwright was also undoubtedly of importance. Buckton had spent a good deal of her life promoting the educational teachings of Friedrich Fröbel, along with her involvement in the suffrage movement.<sup>81</sup> However, like all other Avalonians, and Buckton did write Arthurian fiction, she never lost her belief in the specialness of the British people and their own unique spiritual contribution. It also seems like, considering she attended services at WTP's chalice shrine, that his spiritual feminism would have really appealed to her. She attended the first Universal Races Conference as a delegate in 1911, however her enthusiasm for Baháism and for WTP seemed to wane after 1912, after her return to Glastonbury, where she and her partner Annette Schepel bought the chalice well and established a hotel for pilgrims.<sup>82</sup>

Pilgrimage had been one of the primary activities which WTP encouraged, and indeed he saw pilgrimage as one of the central activities that must be undertaken to re-establish Britain with its spiritual roots, though we cannot say with any certainty that this influenced Buckton's idea for a hotel at all.<sup>83</sup> In her later years Buckton was often referred to as "eccentric," and this was acknowledged even by WTP. She gradually cut herself off from the rest of Glastonbury society until her death in 1944.<sup>84</sup> After her passing in 1944, her fellow Avalonian WTP would buy Buckton's 'Chalice Well Training College for Women and Pilgrims' Hostel,' and turn it into the headquarters of his Chalice Well Trust. However, it was because of this hotel that we are able to speak of the last, and perhaps most famous, thinker to engage with this Avalonian Baháism, Dion Fortune.

78 Osborn, 'Alice Buckton,' 1–2.

79 Ibid, 5.

80 Ibid.

81 For more on Buckton's life and work see: Cutting, *Beneath the Silent Tor*, 38–71.

82 Osborn, 'Alice Buckton,' 10.

83 Pole, 'Preparing the Way for a New Age,' 10.

84 Cutting, *Beneath the Silent Tor*, 220–228.

The main outlines of Fortune's life have been well-established by other scholars, and we will not repeat them here.<sup>85</sup> Fortune in her book *Glastonbury: Avalon of the Heart*, gives us a look into the intellectual world of Glastonbury in the early twentieth century, and she shows real familiarity with both WTP and with Buckton, whom she met during her stay at her pilgrim's hostel.<sup>86</sup> Fortune was greatly impressed with both of her new Glastonbury acquaintances and she includes a recount of WTP's discovery of the chalice, though she does say that he was only attended by his cousin, while WTP mentions there being 'a triad of maidens.'<sup>87</sup> It can also be safely suggested that it was from WTP and Buckton that Fortune would have heard of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Baháism.

Like WTP and Buckton, Fortune would be attracted to the message of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for what his prophetic work meant in terms of the reintegration or flowering of British spirituality, and she would follow WTP in both Christianising and downplaying the overt claims to the distinctness of the Bahá'í revelation, if indeed these distinctions were of great importance to the early days of the Bahá'í movement. Fortune, like Lang, relies on a Neoplatonic framework for understanding 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his work, as she writes:

Each Christos who comes into the world has a special mission to fulfil in relation to the evolution of humanity. Osiris taught his people the arts of civilization, Krishna taught them philosophy, Buddha taught the way to escape from the bondage of matter, Abdul Baha (*sic*) taught social morality.<sup>88</sup>

In acknowledging 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a Christos, yet keeping her commitment to Celtic Christianity, Fortune follows the path of the other Avalonian Bahá'ís. They were open to all of the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá but refused to recognize him as the supreme authority, and adhered to their own understanding of the Bahá'í movement. It is the contention here that this open interpretation of Baháism was conducive to the spiritual pursuits of the persons considered.

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85 Brendan McNamara, 'The "Celtic" dimension of pre-first World War religious discourse in Britain,' 96. Given Dion Fortune's significance to Western magical traditions, she is yet to be the subject of a major scholarly biography, though several popular biographies partially fill this lack, see; Knight, *Dion Fortune*, and Richardson, *Priestess*.

86 Dion Fortune, *Glastonbury*, 77.

87 *Ibid.*, 76–79.

88 Fortune, *Aspects of Occultism*, 24. Quoted from Osborn 'The Bahá'í Faith and Wicca,' 9–10.

## 9 Conclusion

There are, arguably, two ways of reading a historical article: either as a “show” article—one that recounts a particular history; or a “go” article—one that centres the need for additional scholarly attention or gaps in existing methodology or focus. This article, the author hopes, is a mixture of both. The seemingly bizarre constellation of ideologies and teachings which have been addressed here only scratch the surface of the type of eclectic theorising that was prevalent in the early days of the twentieth century, and there is ample room for insight from scholars familiar with esoteric discourse. Celticism could be seen in connection with British Israelism, and the more disparate the connection, the greater its esoteric reward. In considering this tiny history of Glastonbury’s esoteric authors and their engagement with Bahá’i, however they understood it, we gain more insight into an intellectual world brimming with enthusiasm for the possible and the exotic, and it shows the deep need for people living in the period to re-mystify the everyday. Especially after the Great War, people wanted to understand their *Origins* in a desperate attempt to restore their humanity. They wished to go back to the sacred past, or forward into a bright new age, either was freely welcome. And though the great war was far from the only influence on WTP’s grand spiritual project, it surely must have quickened it. Going East, back to his Israelitish roots, had to hold more appeal than the terror that was so clearly remembered in the West, in the terror of the Somme. Furthermore, though the East of our subjects was deeply problematic, it showed a willingness to embrace and identify with the cultural other in a period where such identification was anything but encouraged, and this must be said. WTP and his idiosyncratic Bahaiism, are perfect examples of the grand eclecticism of the period, and undoubtedly without him several persons would have been completely unaware of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Bahá’i faith. Using the symbol of his famous chalice, WTP sought to thread the revelations and teachings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with several esoteric traditions and although it was of a distinctly personal interpretation, it was very inspiring.

WTP, the master synthesiser, felt that the Bahá’í movement was the beginning of a worldwide spiritual revival that would reposition Britain’s Celtic traditions in the centre of a great spiritual age. The finding of the chalice promised, as had ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a future brotherhood of man. In his engagement with Bahaiism, WTP saw a way forward to bring the British people back into contact with their spiritual roots, and he felt that this would bring about a seismic and prophetic shift in the consciousness of the peoples of the earth. In reference to William Blake’s hopeful prophecy, to build Jerusalem ‘in England’s

green and pleasant land,' WTP would offer his own quixotic Bahaism, as a way forward, or perhaps backward, to the spiritual vitality that he felt lay dormant in Britain.

If our land is destined to contain within itself the New Jerusalem, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of Blake, is it too much to believe a Holy One of God may already be on its way to our shores from Heavenly realms?<sup>89</sup>

For WTP it was a certainty that the Holy One of God was on his way, and though he did not follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá into the forging of a new faith, he was able to introduce Bahaism into a unique cultural niche that we are only beginning to understand.

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