



‘Abdu’l-Bahá Arrives in America

By Jonathan Menon

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THE LADDER THEY DROPPED was made from a thick cable of twisted hemp, with hard wooden slats for rungs.

Wendell Phillips Dodge clung to it for dear life, twenty-five feet above the frigid waters of the bay. Beneath him a small steamship, a revenue cutter of the United States Treasury, rose and fell with the waves.¹ Above him the sky surrendered to the black iron hull of a 21,000-ton oceangoing passenger liner, the *Cedric* of the White Star Line,² which lay at anchor off Staten Island after steaming for sixteen days from Alexandria, Egypt.³ Its cargo: thousands of men, women, and children bound for New York.

Years from now he would be the press agent for David Belasco, America’s leading theatrical producer.⁴ But today Dodge was just a reporter, twenty-eight years old last August.⁵ He had hopped an early cutter at the ship news office in the Battery on this sparkling morning—April 11, 1912—so he could get to the quarantine station on Staten Island before the *Cedric* passed the Narrows about 8 a.m.⁶ But typhoid fever and smallpox in the steerage had delayed the ship for

¹ “Bringing a Big Ship into New York Harbor,” *Popular Mechanics Magazine* 22, No. 2 (August 1914): 183–186. The article explains the procedure for receiving incoming steamships in New York Harbor. Journalists boarded the ship with customs officials by ladder from the Treasury Department’s revenue cutter on the starboard side.

² Specifications for the SS *Cedric* are from “S/S *Cedric*, White Star Line,” Norway Heritage Project, accessed July 2, 2013, http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_ship.asp?sh=cedri.

³ Wendell Phillips Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival in America,” *Star of the West* 3, no. 3 (April 28, 1912): 3–5; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary: The Diary of Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Journey to America*, trans. Mohi Sobhani (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 13. The *Cedric* departed Alexandria on May 25, 1912.

⁴ “New Theatrical Managers Announce Elaborate Drama,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 10, 1919. This article announces Dodge’s resignation as Belasco’s press representative. According to the *Constitution*, he had served in that role for five years.

⁵ “U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918,” database on-line, *Ancestry.com*, <http://www.ancestry.com>, accessed January 23, 2012, New York County, New York, Roll 1766139, Draft Board 120, Wendell Phillips Dodge entry. Dodge was born August 12, 1883.

⁶ Jack Lawrence, *When the Ships Came In* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940), 21. Lawrence, in his memoir about reporting ship news for the *New York Evening Mail* beginning in 1912, explains that the Treasury cutters left from a dock next to the ship news office at the Battery. The first cutter left the office at 6:30 a.m., so Dodge, who didn’t have to reach the *Cedric* until about 8 a.m., would probably have departed later on an early cutter, not the early cutter; “The morning was crystal clear, sparkling.” Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983), 229; Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 3, 5. The timestamp “about 8 a.m.” is deduced from an estimated twenty-five minute trip from the Staten Island to the White Star Line piers (see note 30

three-and-a-half hours, while health inspectors offloaded 200 third-class passengers to the hospital on Hoffman Island and fumigated the ship.⁷ Now, just before noon, as he climbed the forty-seven feet to the *Cedric's* main deck, Dodge could see dozens of tugs, barges, and ferries plying the harbor's expanse.⁸ The great skyscrapers—some of them more than twenty stories high—had been reduced to a shadow rising half an inch above the northern horizon.⁹ He scrambled aboard, made his way through the passengers milling on deck, and set off to find his subject.

Dodge found the visitor standing on the deep forward balcony of the *Cedric's* upper deck behind the pilothouse, surveying the panorama of the bay.¹⁰ He wore a long black cloak covering a robe of light tan: the colors identical to the *Cedric's* massive twin funnels that towered above the ship behind him.¹¹ His iron-grey head, capped with a white turban, was thrown back atop his shoulders like the rising steam.¹² A cool wind came off the water and whipped around 'Abdu'l-Bahá.¹³ To one side stood a short Persian man wearing intense dark eyes, a thick handlebar moustache and a black fez, waiting for him to speak. He was Dr. Ameen Fareed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's translator.¹⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá was already a well-known voice in the international peace movement. One reason he had crossed the ocean was to speak at the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in May.¹⁵ He greeted the reporters and then invited them to join him in his stateroom. They crammed in,

below) combined with Dodge's statements that the reporters had been kept waiting at quarantine for three-and-a-half hours, and that the ship arrived at the pier shortly after noon.

⁷ Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3.

⁸ As ships dropped anchor off Staten Island, Lower Manhattan and the harbor traffic could be viewed to starboard, the side from which journalists boarded the ship.

⁹ This description of the appearance of the Manhattan towers is based on recent photographs of New York Harbor taken from Staten Island. The *Cedric* dropped anchor about five miles south of the Battery.

¹⁰ Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3; White Star Line, *Plan of Cabin Accommodation, Twin-Screw Steamer Baltic*, brochure, 1928, Mark Chirnside's Reception Room, accessed July 5, 2013, http://www.markchirnside.co.uk/Baltic_CabinClass_1928.htm. Dodge writes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood on the "upper deck," in a location where he could see the pilot. According to the plans of the Big Four steamships, which include the *Cedric*, they had three decks above the hull: the Promenade Deck (the main deck of the ship), the Upper Promenade Deck (also called the Upper Deck), and the Boat Deck which was on top of the ship. Photographs of the *Cedric* show that the wide forward balconies directly behind the pilothouse were the only locations on the Upper Promenade Deck where a passenger could view the pilot; "His face was light itself as he scanned the harbor. . . ." Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3.

¹¹ Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3. Numerous postcard images of the SS *Cedric* available online depict its buff-colored funnels, capped in black.

¹² Dodge describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's head "thrown back and splendidly poised upon his broad, square shoulders, most of the time." Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3.

¹³ Dodge: ". . . his long, flowing oriental robe flapping in the breeze." Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3.

¹⁴ " 'Abdu'l-Bahá with His Translators on the Grounds of the MacNutt Home in Brooklyn," photograph, Special Event Film Co., June 17, 1912, National Bahá'í Archives, Evanston, IL, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://centenary.bahai.us/photo/abdul-baha-his-translators-grounds-macnutt-home-brooklyn>. Ameen Fareed stands second from right. This image is a still from a motion picture. Numerous other images of Ameen Fareed are available in National Bahá'í Archives, Evanston, IL.

¹⁵ Dodge, "Abdul-Baha's Arrival," 3.

then peppered him with questions. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá finished each sentence he waited for Fared to interpret before moving on to the next one.¹⁶

“Is it not possible that peace can become the means of trouble and war the means of progress?” one of the reporters asked.¹⁷

“No,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied. “It is war which is today the cause of all trouble. If all would lay down their arms, they would be freed from all difficulties and every misery would be changed into relief.” “What the people earn through hard labor is extorted from them by the governments and spent for purposes of war.”¹⁸

The reporters in dark coats and derby hats jostled for space in the small first-class suite: it was a tiny space for a press conference.¹⁹ White wood paneling covered the upper walls of the sitting room, contrasting with dark wainscoting below. Through the door, in the sleeping cabin, a painted chrome bed frame occupied a quarter of the space, supporting a long narrow mattress. A small writing desk and chair stood next to it along the back wall, beside a tall, skinny armoire topped with a rectangular mirror. Along the opposite wall a long low sofa tucked itself under the window. An oriental rug covered the few remaining square feet of floor.²⁰

“What is your attitude toward woman suffrage?” another reporter asked. Emmeline Pankhurst’s hunger strike in London was all over the news.²¹

¹⁶ Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 4; Robert H. Stockman, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2012), 15. Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá usually spoke through a translator, he also spoke some English. Dodge states that Fared acted as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpreter on board the *Cedric*. But an account of the press conference by a reporter from the *New-York Tribune* indicates that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answered some questions in English: “I am here,” Abdul Baha said in his gentle, foreign English, ‘to unify the religions of the world. . . .’ “Persian Prophet Here: Abdul Baha Abbas Comes to Preach Universal Peace,” *New-York Tribune*, April 12, 1912, 13.

¹⁷ Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The description of the reporters’ dress is based on a photograph of reporters meeting *Titanic* survivors off the *Carpathia* a few days later. “Survivors of the sinking of the RMS Titanic are interviewed by reporters as they come off the RMS Carpathia in New York on April 18, 1912,” photograph, in “Photos: The Sinking of the R.M.S. Titanic,” *From the Archive* (blog), *Denver Post*, April 12, 2012, accessed July 3, 2013, <http://blogs.denverpost.com/captured/2012/04/12/photos-sinking-rms-titanic/5667/#photo37>; Sources indicate that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s suite aboard the *Cedric* consisted of a single-berth sleeping room and a sitting room where he invited up to nine friends for tea on more than one occasion on the voyage from Naples. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 23–24; “If the people were ‘en suite’ they would usually have a small sitting area in the cabin.” Borge Solem, *Heritage-Ships.com*, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2012.

²⁰ “A spacious single-bed stateroom,” photograph, in White Star Line, *The Famous Big 4 of the New York–Liverpool Service*, brochure, 1909, Gjenvick-Gjenvick Archives, accessed July 3, 2013, <http://www.gjenvick.com/HistoricalBrochures/Steamships-OceanLiners/WhiteStarLine/1909-04-16-Brochure-TheFamousBig4-NewYork-Liverpool.html>. The brochure appears to be dated incorrectly on the website as it depicts the Woolworth Building, which wasn’t completed until 1913.

²¹ Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 4; “Mrs. Pankhurst Out Condition Is Grave,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1912, accessed July 5, 2013, <https://nytimes.com/>; “Mrs. Pankhurst Freed,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1912, accessed July 5, 2013, <https://nytimes.com/>; “Mrs. Belmont Gets a Death Threat by Mail,” *New York Sun*, April 6, 1912, from Library of Congress, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1912-04-06/ed-1/seq-1/>.

“The modern suffragette is fighting for what must be,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answered. “If women were given the same advantages as men, their capacity being the same, the result would be the same.”²²

Only the sound of scratching pencils interrupted the stream of words.

“The chief cause of the mental and physical inequalities of the sexes is due to custom and training, which for ages past have molded woman into the ideal of the weaker vessel.”²³

The *Cedric* started her engines for the final cruise up the bay. As she steamed north the city rose to meet her.

Back out on deck ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reached out toward the gigantic statue that now stood off to port, robed in green weathered copper, clutching a torch, and wearing a pointed crown. “Here is the new world’s symbol of liberty and freedom,” he said.²⁴

“After being forty years a prisoner I can tell you that freedom is not a matter of place. It is a condition. . . . When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed a release.”²⁵

As the ship steamed up the Hudson, the journalists watched ‘Abdu’l-Bahá turn to starboard.²⁶ He directed their attention to the cluster of towers in Lower Manhattan ruled by the Singer Sewing Machine Building, the second-tallest building in the world.²⁷ “These are the minarets of Western World commerce and industry,” he said. “The bricks make the house, and if the bricks are bad the house will not stand, as these do.”²⁸

Wendell Dodge scribbled away, taking down ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concluding words for his story:

“It is necessary for individuals to become as good bricks, to eradicate from themselves race and religious hatred, greed and a limited patriotism, so that, whether they find themselves guiding the government or founding a home, the result of their efforts may be peace and prosperity, love and happiness.”²⁹

²² Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Maḥmúd’s Diary*, 35. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání writes that two enormous buildings loomed into view as the ship approached the wharf at West 23rd Street. The Singer Building was the tallest building in Lower Manhattan in April 1912. The world’s tallest building was the Metropolitan Life tower in Midtown, which was also visible from ships steaming up the Hudson.

²⁸ Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 4–5.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

After a trip of twenty-five minutes or so, the *Cedric* reached Pier 59 at the end of West 18th Street on the north edge of Greenwich Village, where several hundred people awaited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.³⁰ Wendell Dodge left to file his story. It was syndicated by the *Associated Press* and wired, in shortened form, to news outlets across the country. When readers the next day picked up the *New York Times* or *Tribune*, the *Detroit Herald*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Chicago Post*, the *Los Angeles Herald*, or any one of dozens of other newspapers, they became among the first Americans to learn that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was here.³¹

³⁰ According to John P. Eaton, the *Titanic* scholar, *Cedric* docked at Pier 59: “On 15 April, while in seclusion in the doctor’s cabin on *Carpathia*, Bruce Ismay sent a wireless message to the White Star Line’s New York office, requesting that *Cedric*, now at Pier 59 in New York, be held until *Carpathia*’s arrival so it could transport *Titanic*’s surviving officers and crew back to England.” “*Cedric*,” *Titanic Inquiry Project*, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/ships/cedric.php>; Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival,” 5; The trip duration of twenty-five minutes is an estimate based on times reported in various sources. Today the Staten Island Ferry takes about twenty-five minutes to reach the Battery.

³¹ Stockman, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America*, 48. According to Stockman, Dodge’s story appeared in various shortened versions in at least 23 newspapers. Articles from these newspapers excerpting portions of Dodge’s *Associated Press* dispatch are available in National Bahá’í Archives, Evanston, IL.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

Jonathan Menon, “Abdu’l-Bahá Arrives in America,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, April 11, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/04/11/abdul-baha-arrives-in-america/>.

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