



## ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Montreal’s Not-So-Yellow Press

By Caitlin Shyda Jones

Published: September 6, 2012 | Last modified: July 4, 2013

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/09/06/abdu-baha-in-montreals-not-so-yellow-press/>

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ HAD BEEN warned about Montreal. “The majority of the inhabitants are Catholics,” he had been told, who “are in the utmost fanaticism,” covered by “impenetrable clouds of superstitions. . .” Percy Woodcock, a Canadian who had traveled with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to North America aboard the SS *Cedric*, had advised him in these terms against traveling to Montreal. Yet the concerted response of the Montreal press to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during his stay in Canada’s largest city proved Percy Woodcock wrong.

Montreal’s newspaper industry was highly competitive by 1912. At least fourteen newspapers, in both English and French, were published daily. Another fourteen weekly magazines, which focused on smaller, special interest groups within Montreal, provided the city’s inhabitants with plenty to read. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited Montreal during Labor Day and the visit of Prime Minister Robert Borden. Still, as Will C. van den Hoonaard recorded in his book, *The Origins of the Baha’i Community of Canada, 1898-1948*, twenty-five English language articles, and nine French language articles were published, a substantial number for a nine-day stay.

It wasn’t only the quantity of the articles that distinguished them, but their content as well. The English language publications of Montreal lacked the sensationalism that characterized several major American newspapers of the time. Literacy rates in America had rapidly increased, meaning that newspapers no longer had to rely on a small, educated readership for revenue. They began to sell the masses stories of adultery and crime, often told in hyperbolic, charged language and intentionally controversial. This became known as the Yellow Press.

It was in this climate that journalists were challenged to write about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. On June 30, 1912, the *New York Times* published the article “Prophet’s Dash For Train,” about how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá nearly missed his train at Lackawanna Station in Montclair, NJ. It was dramatic. Nixola Greeley-Smith wrote a colorful article for Pulitzer’s *New York World*: “Of course nobody could be named Baha without having a beard,” she joked, admitting that she had tried to interrupt ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk “in the interest of those who seek lighter reading,” and was

consequently “squelched.” One headline simply reads, in a reductive pun, “Hopes to Convert U.S.”

Canadian newspapers were delayed in taking on the methods of the Yellow Press. In the days before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived in the city, detailed and accurate articles about his life, the Bahá’í faith, and his position in it were published. The *Montreal Daily Star* printed an article on August 24, 1912, six days before his arrival, and got most of its facts right. Of the religion it wrote: “It has no clergy and no ritual. It is not a cult. . .” “The one point insisted upon,” read the article, “is that the fundamentals of spiritual teaching shall be universally admitted and practically applied to the affairs of daily life and in the social, business and political life of nations.”

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did arrive, the content of his talks, rather than his identity as an Easterner, was the main focus of all the articles. The *Daily Star* published an account of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk at Coronation Hall. Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of an economic system based on mutual support and cooperation, but far from the oppressive rigidity of socialism, was described in full detail. Canadian newspapers called ‘Abdu’l-Bahá an “Oriental Seer,” a “Persian Preacher,” and an “Eastern Sage,” but rarely a prophet.

The French press coverage was of a different tone. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks had to be translated into French to be published. This could be one reason why they focused more on the impression ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s appearance made on them than on the content of his speeches. One article titled “Le Prestige de l’Exotisme,” (The Prestige of Exotic Things), published in *La Patrie*, according to van den Hoonard, “attributed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s success to the fact that he was an oriental, rather than to the ‘deep, but old truths’ he set forth.” *Le Canada* focused on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s economic teachings, summing them up as an “admixture of socialism and Christianity.” The most biting article was published in *Le Nationaliste*. “Caliban [the writer] explained how one must have an ‘unusual’ name like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” van den Hoonard wrote, “not an ordinary one, before he can call himself a ‘prophet.’”

“Many souls warned me not to travel to Montreal,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote several years after his journey. “But these stories did not have any effect on the resolution of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. [He] turned his face toward Montreal. When he entered that city he observed all the doors open, he found the hearts in the utmost receptivity...”

## How to Cite this Article

The formatting below is from the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th Edition. For other academic citation styles, please adapt accordingly. Since the **239 Days** site and its contents may be updated from time to time, we recommend you include a “last modified” date, which is provided at the top of both the web and PDF versions of this article.

### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

Caitlin Shayda Jones, “ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Montreal’s Not-So-Yellow Press,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, September 6, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/09/06/abdul-baha-in-montreals-not-so-yellow-press/>.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Jones, Caitlin Shayda. “ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Montreal’s Not-So-Yellow Press.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. September 6, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/09/06/abdul-baha-in-montreals-not-so-yellow-press/>.

### **HOW TO CITE THE *239 Days in America* WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

## Terms of Use

**239 Days in America**™ and the 239Days.com website is licensed under a Creative Commons 3.0 License as specified at this link: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. **This PDF file** is shared with you with the following additional terms:

YOU MAY quote from this PDF file with proper attribution. Your citation must include the author's name and the **239 Days in America** project's name. You may download and print this PDF file, and you may share individual PDF files in print or electronic form.

Although we want to make our work easy to share, we also wish to maintain the unity and integrity of **239 Days in America** as a whole. Therefore,

YOU MAY NOT republish or rebroadcast our PDF files in a public forum—such as by uploading them to a blog, app, or other web property, publishing them in print form, or distributing them widely using electronic means—without our prior written consent. We invite you to discuss such opportunities with us by contacting the Editor-In-Chief at [editor@239Days.com](mailto:editor@239Days.com). Otherwise, please share the permalinks displayed at the top of each file.

YOU MAY NOT extract pages from this file, recombine this PDF file with other documents, assemble its contents into any free or paid product, app, ebook, collection, compilation, or archive, nor remove this page of Terms. The **Adobe PDF**™ security features employed in this document have been selected to prevent such use. You may not circumvent these security features in any way.