



‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Modern American History

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DURING THE AMERICAN BICENTENNIAL year in 1976, the Smithsonian Institution mounted a special exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery titled *Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation, 1776–1914*.¹ The exhibit, comprised of large portraits accompanied by short essays, profiled more than fifty of the most noteworthy visitors to the United States during the nation’s first century and a half.

Some of them, such as José Martí of Cuba, or Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore of India, had lodged their places in history as intellectual leaders of anti-colonial political struggles. Others became known as national political leaders: Georges Clemençeau of France, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento of Argentina, and the first Japanese delegation to America. Still others were popular literary or artistic figures: Charles Dickens, Antonín Dvořák, Giacomo Puccini, John Butler Yeats. Some became noteworthy authors, such as Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville and the Scot James Bryce, whose books *Democracy in America* and *The American Commonwealth*, respectively, have become seminal works in American political science.² Others were entertaining because of their disparaging opinions of the country, sometimes to the point of comedy, such as Harriet Martineau and Frances Trollope.

With the exception of Bryce, who served as Britain’s Ambassador to the United States from 1907 to 1913, none of these foreigners who traveled in America, I believe, have left more documentation about their visits than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Yet in 1976 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s portrait did not appear in the Smithsonian’s exhibition. Similarly, studies of the early decades of the twentieth century in America show virtually no trace of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in spite of the obvious relevance of his discourse to the most important issues of the period and the undisputed esteem with which his views were received by a broad range of audiences in addition to many of the most powerful and influential Americans of the era. American historians appear to have left ‘Abdu’l-Bahá out.

¹ Marc Pachter, ed., *Abroad In America: Visitors to the New Nation, 1776–1914*, 1st ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1976).

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: George Dearborn & Co., 1838); James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 3 Vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888).

Why?

I believe the reasons have to do partly with the way historians approach their craft and partly with the way ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s story has been told across the decades.

Historians of the Progressive Era have always been hard pressed to decide which figures during that watershed period in American history were worth examining. “This may seem to be a strange topic of debate,” Arthur Link and Richard McCormick wrote in 1983, “but really it is not. Progressivism engaged many different groups of Americans, and each group of progressives naturally considered themselves to be the key reformers and thought that their own programs were the most important ones.” Historians, likewise, “have succeeded in identifying *their* reformers only by defining progressivism narrowly, by excluding other reformers and reforms when they do not fall within some specific definition. . . .”³

The lenses American historians have trained on the Progressive Era have not been calibrated to perceive a figure like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: a foreign traveler who related to so many contemporary American concerns, but who avoided entanglement with the customary themes of traditional history—political, military, and financial affairs. Even as he addressed consequential American social, economic, religious, and diplomatic issues, he never engaged in political controversies. Although he articulated a challenging concept of world order, he never became associated with nationalistic movements, which rewrote their own national histories to place their thinkers and leaders at the center of historical action. When historians like Benjamin Parke DeWitt, Richard Hofstadter, Robert Wiebe, John Higham, and Arthur Link sifted through the vast historical record from 1912, they simply never saw him.⁴

We can see, I believe, an inverted process at work among authors who have chosen to write in connection with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Since the early years of the twentieth century they have almost all been Bahá’ís, whose main priority was to tell stories designed to edify the faith of other Bahá’ís, not to position ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a recognizable participant in a mainstream American narrative.⁵ Over the last three decades this has begun to change, in the work of authors like

³ Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1983), 3. Italics in original.

⁴ Benjamin Parke De Witt, *The Progressive Movement: A Non-Partisan Comprehensive Discussion of Current Tendencies in American Politics* (New York: MacMillan, 1915); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955); Link and McCormick, *Progressivism*.

⁵ See Ramona Allen Brown, *Memories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Recollections of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Faith in California* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980); Roy Wilhelm, Stanwood Cobb, and Genevieve Lenore Coy, *In His Presence: Visits to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1989); H. M. Balyuzi, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Centre of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1971).

Robert Stockman and Gayle Morrison.⁶ An additional challenge has been that virtually all of the work written about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has been printed by Bahá’í publishing organizations, whose distribution outside of Bahá’í circles is small, instead of mainstream, commercial publishing houses.

During the last eight months, we have attempted to establish a narrative about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, crafted in language accessible to a broad audience, that embeds him in the rich fabric of American life in 1912. We’ve tried to present him as an original voice, one who engaged Americans of all kinds in conversations about the way they understood themselves and their place in the world, rather than primarily as a religious figure in a particular community. We have found that this approach reveals ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s American discourse to have been more nuanced and complex than we imagined. Paradoxically, to try to understand how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá interacted with the particular concerns of people living in the United States in 1912, and to situate him within a detailed context of time and place, is to make him more relevant—not less—to the challenges America faces today.

⁶ See Robert M. Stockman, *The Bahá’í Faith in America*, vol. 1, *Origins, 1892–1900* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985); Robert M. Stockman, *The Bahá’í Faith in America*, vol. 2, *Early Expansion, 1900–1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995); Robert M. Stockman, *Thornton Chase: First American Bahá’í* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2002); Robert M. Stockman, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2012); Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982).

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

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