



## ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Says Farewell to America

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‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ STEPPED OUT of his cabin and set off down the corridor toward the ship’s bow. He and his party swept through the main foyer—bustling with passengers preparing for departure—up a flight of stairs to the Boat Deck and into the first-class lounge on the top of the ship.<sup>1</sup> It was already overflowing when he reached it.<sup>2</sup> About 100 people had boarded the liner on this Thursday morning, December 5, 1912, to capture a final moment with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá before he set sail for Liverpool.<sup>3</sup>

The SS *Celtic*, a 21,000-ton steamship of the White Star Line, lay moored along her port side at her pier on the Hudson River near West 18<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>4</sup> She was 700 feet long—identical to her sister, the *Cedric*, which had delivered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to New York 238 days earlier.<sup>5</sup> Two buff-colored funnels rose amidships, capped in black, and the *Celtic*’s dark iron hull reached down beneath the pier out of sight to the cold December waters below.<sup>6</sup>

Someone handed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a large bunch of red American Beauty roses when he entered the lounge at eleven o’clock.<sup>7</sup> This light and cheery space, forty feet wide and

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<sup>1</sup> I am assuming that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s cabin was on the Upper Promenade Deck, following Juliet Thompson who writes that her party “followed Him up to his cabin,” (presumably from the Promenade Deck, the ship’s main deck) then went upstairs to the large sitting room, which Mahmúd-i-Zarqání identifies as the first-class lounge. This would place his cabin one flight of stairs below the lounge, which was on the Boat Deck (the top deck of the ship). Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983), 321; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary: The Diary of Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Journey to America* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), 429.

<sup>2</sup> Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 429. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání writes that the lounge could not contain the crowd, and some had to stand outside.

<sup>3</sup> “Abdul Baha Sails Away,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> The White Star Line piers were opposite West 18<sup>th</sup> Street. That the ship was docked along its port side is deduced from statements in Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 432; and Thompson, *Diary*, 393. For a detailed discussion, see note 15 below.

<sup>5</sup> Sources agree that the *Celtic* was 700 or 701 feet long. They differ on the length of the *Cedric*. I have followed a White Star Line brochure of its Big Four steamships from about 1913, which, from internal evidence, appears to have been incorrectly dated on the website. This brochure says that both ships were 700 feet long. White Star Line, *The Famous Big 4 of the New York–Liverpool Service*, Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.gjenvick.com/HistoricalBrochures/Steamships-OceanLiners/WhiteStarLine/1909-04-16-Brochure-TheFamousBig4-NewYork-Liverpool.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Numerous postcard images of the SS *Celtic* available online depict its buff-colored funnels.

<sup>7</sup> “Abdul Baha Sails Away,” *New York Times*; Ahmad Sohrab, “On Board S.S. Celtic. December 5th. 1912,” in “Daily Account of the Life of Abdul Baha as Recorded in the Diary of Mirza Ahmad Sohrab” (unpublished typescript, Ahmad Sohrab Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL.)

almost as long, was the ship's primary indoor gathering place for its wealthy, first-class passengers. Visitors filled the three-sided nooks along the walls, which were formed by dark leather seats built in securely under the windows. Others perched on the soft barrel-shaped chairs in the middle of the room; they were upholstered in tapestry and set around heavy, ornately carved tables where passengers might play cards or enjoy an after-dinner cup of coffee during their long overseas voyages.<sup>8</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá moved among the tables, speaking a few final words to this person and then to that, offering to some of them a rose.<sup>9</sup> As the top of the hour approached he stood, and, pacing back and forth across the room, began to speak in his deep resonant Persian, the sentences translated into English, one by one, as he intoned them.<sup>10</sup>

"The earth is one native land, one home; and all mankind are the children of one Father," he said. "God has created them, and they are the recipients of His compassion. Therefore, if anyone offends another, he offends God. It is the wish of our heavenly Father that every heart should rejoice and be filled with happiness, that we should live together in felicity and joy. The obstacle to human happiness is racial or religious prejudice, the competitive struggle for existence and inhumanity toward each other."<sup>11</sup>

Soft sounds of sobbing unsettled the surrounding silence.<sup>12</sup>

"Until man reaches this high station," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "the world of humanity shall not find rest, and eternal felicity shall not be attained. But if man lives up to these divine commandments, this world of earth shall be transformed into the world of heaven, and this material sphere shall be converted into a paradise of glory. It is my hope that you may become successful in this high calling so that like brilliant lamps you may cast light upon the world of humanity and quicken and stir the body of existence like unto a spirit of life. This is eternal glory. This is everlasting felicity. This is immortal life. This is heavenly attainment. This is being created in the image and

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<sup>8</sup> This description of the first-class lounge on the *Celtic* is based on the White Star Line brochure of its Big Four steamships (see note 5 above). The brochure describes the space and includes a photograph of the lounge. The *Celtic*, *Cedric*, *Baltic*, and *Adriatic*, although differing in size, were all built to the same basic design, and I have assumed that the *Celtic*'s lounge employed the same décor and upholstery as its sister ships, and matched the photo in the brochure. I have estimated the size of the room based on a deck plan of the *Cedric*, and ship specifications available online. The *Celtic* was 75.4 feet wide at its widest point. White Star Line, *The Famous Big 4 of the New York–Liverpool Service*, Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.gjenvick.com/HistoricalBrochures/Steamships-OceanLiners/WhiteStarLine/1909-04-16-Brochure-TheFamousBig4-NewYork-Liverpool.html>; "White Star Line S. S. Cedric Plan of First Class Accommodation," Worthpoint Corporation, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/1909-white-star-line-ss-cedric-1st-class-cabin/>; "Celtic (2)," Norway Heritage, [http://www.norwayheritage.com/p\\_ship.asp?sh=celt2](http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_ship.asp?sh=celt2).

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Diary*, 393; "Abdul Baha Sails Away," *New York Times*.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Diary*, 391; Sohrab, "On Board S.S. Celtic."

<sup>11</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 468.

<sup>12</sup> "The sobs and lamentations of both the young and the old could be heard from afar." Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary*, 429; Sohrab, "On Board S.S. Celtic."

likeness of God.”<sup>13</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then took a seat in the corner of the room, and the guests gathered round, continuing to converse until the moment finally came for them to disembark.<sup>14</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá walked out along the port side of the Boat Deck.<sup>15</sup> He leaned on the railing with his right arm and looked down at the crowd gazing back at him.<sup>16</sup> When the clock struck noon, the *Celtic*’s engines began to hum.<sup>17</sup> The great ship began to move slowly astern, the crowd on the pier tracking ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s white turban as the vessel pulled slowly backward into the flowing waters of the Hudson. Once the ship had cleared the dock, the pilot turned his wheel to the right, then reversed the engines and steamed south with the current, past the rising skyscrapers of downtown.<sup>18</sup>

Back on April 11, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had first steamed up the Hudson, he had called the towers of lower Manhattan “the minarets of Western World commerce and industry.”<sup>19</sup> Now, as the crowd on the dock faded into the distance, he could see that the new Woolworth Building, still under construction at Park Place and Broadway, had superseded them all, climbing sixty stories to top out at 792 feet.<sup>20</sup> A few minutes later the ship skirted the immigrant landing station at Ellis Island, and steamed past the green copper cladding of the massive torch-bearing statue that stood guard over the bay.

Within thirty minutes the SS *Celtic* had traversed the upper bay, slipped the three-mile route of the Narrows, passed the breakwater at the southern tip of Long Island, and pushed out over a smooth sea, bound for Liverpool and the Old World.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 470.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, *Diary*, 393.

<sup>15</sup> I have reasoned that the *Celtic* was docked along its port side, and that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá therefore walked out along that side of the ship, based on comments by Mahmúd-i-Zarqání and Juliet Thompson, who describe the line of sight that enabled him to watch the crowd disappear into the distance, and vice versa, as the ship sailed off down the Hudson. For that to have been possible as the ship sailed south, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must have been standing on the port side, and the ship must have been docked along its port side. Ships at the White Star Line piers docked perpendicular to the river’s current with their noses pointing east, toward the shore. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 432; Thompson, *Diary*, 393.

<sup>16</sup> “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Leaving America on the *Celtic* from New York City,” photograph, in Thompson, *Diary*, 392.

<sup>17</sup> “Shipping and Mails,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1912, 20. The *Celtic* was scheduled to depart at noon.

<sup>18</sup> I have reconstructed the departure of the *Celtic* on the basis explained in note 15 above.

<sup>19</sup> Wendell Phillips Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival in America,” *Star of the West* 3, No. 3 (April 28, 1912): 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> “Woolworth Building, New York City,” photograph, Detroit Publishing Company, c[etween 1910 and 1920], Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*, accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994018309/PP/>. This image of the Woolworth Building, taken late in 1912, shows it as it appeared on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s departure. Compare a photograph taken on February 2, 1912, during the early stages of construction. Irving Underhill, photographer, “Woolworth Bldg.,” photograph, c1912, Library of Congress, accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92515072/>.

<sup>21</sup> Today the Staten Island Ferry takes about twenty-five minutes to traverse the bay from the island to the Battery; “The sea is smooth.” Ahmad Sohrab to Harriet Magee, 5 December 1912, Ahmad Sohrab Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL.

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Jonathan Menon, “ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Says Farewell To America,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, December 5, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/12/05/abdu-baha-says-farewell-to-america/>.

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