



‘Abdu’l-Bahá Scales “The Gunks”

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THE TRAIN PUFFED BLACK smoke through the towns north of New York City. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was on his way to the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in New Paltz, New York. A four-hour train ride would take him up the Hudson River into the countryside.¹ Soon the view outside his window was wrapped in greenery. The peace conference was designed to be far from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his party arrived at the station in New Paltz a landau waited to drive them the last seven miles to Lake Mohonk.² For an hour they rode in the open air through the rising rocks and wooded hills of the Shawangunk Mountains—the locals call them The Gunks. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, exhilarated by the fresh wilderness around him, suddenly began to sing and told the others to join in. Dr. Fareed, his translator, couldn’t remember this ever having happened before.³ At last the red rooftops of the Lake Mohonk Mountain House appeared through the trees.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá would stay in the magnificent Victorian castle for the next three days. Albert Smiley, its owner, had hosted the peace conference each year since 1895.⁴ It takes place in a grand parlor overlooking the lake, a room Mr. Smiley built especially for this purpose.⁵

Anybody who was anybody in the peace movement would be participating, including several Canadian leaders:⁶ Rabbi Joseph Silverman ran America’s leading Reform Judaism congregation at New York’s Temple Emanu-El. The Honorable William Lyon Mackenzie King had been Canada’s Minister of Labor until the previous

¹ 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), 100.

² Ahmad Sohrab to Agnes Parsons, 15 May 1912, Agnes Parsons Papers, National Baha’i Archives, Wilmette, IL. Mahmud-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 100 A landau is a four-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage with a collapsible top and seats facing each other, with an external raised seat for the driver.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Historic New York State Resort,” Mohonk Mountain House, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.mohonk.com/mohonk-mountain-house/history>.

⁵ Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 101; *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, May 15th, 16th and 17th, 1912* (Mohonk Lake, NY: Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, 1912), 4, <http://www.archive.org/details/reportstdannual09unkngoog/>.

⁶ See *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 5–7.

October when the Tories defeated his Liberal party in the Canadian Federal Election. Another attendee, Henri Bourassa of Montreal, was one of the men responsible. He had campaigned against Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier's plan to create a Canadian navy under British imperial control, and weakened Laurier enough in Quebec to cost him the election.⁷ John Lewis was the editor of the *Toronto Daily Star*. Benjamin Franklin Trueblood was a famous Quaker who had proposed a single world state in his 1899 book, *The Federation of the World*.⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá already knew some of the attendees, such as the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who hosted him at the Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago nine days earlier.⁹

The conference got underway the next morning with opening remarks by Albert Smiley.¹⁰ It was a sobering beginning. "I know that events since the last Conference have caused disappointment and even discouragement to many persons interested in the international peace movement," he said. The most recent setback had been in the U.S. Senate, where arbitration treaties with Britain and France had been gutted of the provisions that gave them teeth. By a majority of two votes the Senate, seeking to preserve America's right to do as it pleased, struck out a paragraph in Article III that would give a Joint Commission of Inquiry final authority to send a dispute between two countries to mandatory arbitration.¹¹

Both Mr. Smiley and the keynote speaker, Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of Columbia University, tried to put a good face on it, but the bad news couldn't be finessed. Things had seemed promising at last year's conference, Butler said, but sixty days later France and Germany had gotten into a spat over Morocco. France took control of the small nation, and Germany deployed a gunboat to the region to assert itself. Although conflict was avoided, Butler remarked on how quickly the incident had generated a panic:¹²

Two of the greatest, most powerful, and most enlightened nations known to history were widely believed to be on the verge of armed conflict about something which nobody was able to understand or to explain. The newspaper press of the world was filled with the most terrifying alarms. Charges and countercharges, suspicions and countersuspicions, were heralded all round the globe and the hearts of the lovers of peace with justice sank within them. All at once modern civilization seemed bankrupt, and the western world suddenly appeared as if approaching a cataclysm.¹³

⁷ Réal Bélanger, "Bourassa, Henri," in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 18, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/bourassa_henri_18E.html.

⁸ Benjamin F. Trueblood, *The Federation of the World* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1899).

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¹⁰ *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 11–14.

¹¹ "Treaties, Shorn, Pass Senate, 76 to 3," *New York Times*, March 8, 1912, <http://nyti.ms/1AvrUDH>; *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 225.

¹² "France May Send Warship to Agadir," *New York Times*, July 4, 1911, <http://nyti.ms/17ZrTjw>.

¹³ *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 14.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá had traveled over 6,000 miles to be here. At 8 p.m., the beginning of the evening session, he delivered a twenty-minute talk to nearly 300 people.¹⁴ His presentation, “The Oneness of the Reality of Human Kind,” was a departure from the other speeches on the conference program, which addressed subjects like diplomacy, legislation, arbitration treaties, and reviews of the peace activities of various councils, committees, and constituencies. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, sought to broaden the range of issues the conference normally associated with peace and arbitration.¹⁵

The speech followed a pattern he would use frequently in the United States.

The first had to do with religion. Many conflicts came down to disagreements over religious belief. But Bahá’u’lláh’s point had been that if one investigated the fundamentals of the world’s religions impartially, one would discover that they had an underlying unity. “It is incumbent on all nations,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “to investigate truth.”

“The second principle of Bahá’u’lláh is the oneness of human kind. All humanity belongs to one family, inhabiting the same globe.”

Third: “If a religious question be not in accordance with science, it is imagination.”

Fourth: “If religion should be productive of strife and division, if it should cause bloodshed and war and rapine, irreligion is preferable to religion. Religion was meant to be a bond of love among mankind.”

The fifth principle dealt with prejudice. “All the wars which have taken place since the inception of human history,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “have emanated either from religious prejudice, racial prejudice, patriotic bias or political greed and interest. As long as these prejudices last, so long will the foundations of humanity tremble.”

Sixth: “The difference which now exists between man and woman is only a difference of education. . . . Until perfect strength shall obtain in both, and woman shall attain equality with man, the happiness of humanity will not be insured.”

Seventh: “The rich now enjoy the greatest luxury, whereas the poor are in abject misery. Certain laws must be made whereby the rich cannot become over-rich and the poor shall not starve, both rich and poor enjoying the comforts according to their respective deserts.”

Finally, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whom many in the audience saw as a philosopher, dismissed philosophical thought as a generator of lasting change.

¹⁴ *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 41, 11, 206–210. Mr. Smiley adjourned the morning session until 8 p.m. “Nearly three hundred persons” attended the morning session and 285 people were registered for the conference; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 101. The length of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk is reported by Mahmúd.

¹⁵ All quotations from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s speech are from *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference*, 42–44.

Philosophy sufficeth not and is not conducive to the absolute happiness of mankind.” Great philosophers had proven capable of educating a few who followed them, but not the broad masses of mankind. You cannot make the susceptibilities of all humanity one except through the common channel of the Holy Spirit.

After a long applause, the audience recalled ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the stage, but he was far too tired to continue. He apologized, and, with a gesture of his hand, expressed appreciation. Mr. Smiley thanked him and Mrs. Smiley presented him with a special pendant designed for the conference. Members of the audience lined up at the platform to embrace him shake his hand.¹⁶

Two weeks later, the Reverend Frederick Lynch of the Federal Council of Churches commented on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk at Lake Mohonk: “The address of the evening was full of this one thing, the unity of mankind. We are in this world,—one. When you get beneath the different languages, different nationalities, different races, different colors, different temperaments, after all, we are one.” It was, he said, “the most remarkable address I have ever listened to.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary*, 101.

¹⁷ Rev. Frederick Lynch, quoted in “Address at Metropolitan Temple Reception, Seventh Avenue and 14th Street, New York City, May 28, 1912,” *Star of the West* 3, no. 7 (July 13, 1912): 15.

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