

Spiritual Assembly's publication *Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada* (1962) and volume one of Mahmud's Diary by Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání (trans. 1998) give the dates as August 30-September 9, 1912. The discrepancy is explained by the fact that *Abdu'l-Bahá's* departure, according to Zargání, occurred at 9:00 a.m. on September 9th. Mr. Balyuzi seems to have followed common sense in not counting September 9th as a full day. Even though *Abdu'l-Bahá* changed evening trains in Toronto on His way to Buffalo, New York, and walked along the platform of Union Station, the honour of being the only Canadian city that was blessed by a visit from *Abdu'l-Bahá* goes to Montreal. He was 68 years old at the time of His arrival in Montreal.

The "Pearl of Great Price": Mrs. May Bolles Maxwell

It was no doubt the presence of the Maxwell family, particularly the illustrious May Bolles Maxwell, that drew Him there. In one of the tablets, *Abdu'l-Bahá* had described Mrs. Maxwell as a "...pearl, a real Bahá'í pure in heart and attracted in soul." The second tablet to Canada contains this reference to this luminary of early western Bahá'í history: "One pearl is better than a thousand wildernesses of sand, especially this pearl of great price, which is endowed with divine blessing. Erelong thousands of other pearls will be born from it. When that pearl associates and becomes the intimate of the pebbles, they also all change into pearls." (February 21, 1917, Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 95).

The word "pearl" was no stranger to *Abdu'l-Bahá's* vocabulary. Sometimes it served as metonym for the Bahá'í Faith itself. Its most famous allusion was to Shoghi Effendi. But in the above passage, a more personal relationship is indicated: spiritual intimacy and transformation. In Montreal, May Maxwell was the magnet and catalyst for both. Her role and station in Bahá'í history are great for she has won all the following distinctions: praise in the Tablets of the Divine Plan ; the spiritual founder of the first Bahá'í centre in Europe in Paris, France at the bequest of *Abdu'l-Bahá*; laying the foundations of the Bahá'í Faith in the Dominion of Canada; "the priceless honor of a martyr's death" (Shoghi Effendi) at her passing in Buenos Aires (1940).

The Arrival: Under a Full August Moon

In her journal of the Master's stay in Montreal, May Maxwell wrote, in a poetic phrase, that *Abdu'l-Bahá* arrived at her home, on the flank of Mount Royal, under "the full brightness of a summer moon." He came on the train from Boston and arrived late. The Master was met eagerly at the Windsor train station on Peel Street at 8:00 p.m. by Sutherland Maxwell with two carriages. *Abdu'l-Bahá* was accompanied on this occasion by only two members from his retinue: Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, who chronicled the Master's visit to North America and his interpreter, Ahmad Sohrab, who later broke the covenant under Shoghi Effendi.

The Remarkable Press Coverage

The approximately fifteen believers and their friends living in Montreal had

well prepared the ground for the Master's arrival. In fact, their advanced preparation may be taken as an example of efficient media and public relations. When `Abdu'l-Bahá arrived at 716 Pine Avenue West (later 1548) on the evening of August 30th, He was met by a group of friends and reporters that included John Lewis, editor of the Montreal Daily Star. It is likely that editor Lewis was a Bahá'í because, in Amine De Mille's eye-witness account of the visit, he is included in the list of names of "first servants to arise through the teaching of Sutherland and May Maxwell" and mentioned among "these earliest friends of the Faith in Montreal."

No less than six English and five French language newspapers covered `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. Among others, reporters at The Gazette, the Montreal Daily Star, the Daily Witness and the ministers and members of the Church of the Messiah (Unitarian), and St. James Methodist Cathedral Church — now United — some socialist and labour activists, professors and societal friends of the Maxwells had been given advance notice of the imminent arrival of `Abdu'l-Bahá.

The Montreal Daily Star gave the widest coverage with ten articles and one editorial. The press had typed the persecuted, majestic and venerable figure with such majestic titles as the "the venerable Apostle of Peace," the "Eastern Sage" and the "Oriental Seer." Despite His best efforts to have the name withdrawn, journalists referred to `Abdu'l-Bahá as "the Persian Prophet." Having learned of `Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival, Turks and Arabs, in their splendid native dress, came to pay their respects to, adding colour and variety to the uniform group of Anglo-Saxons that attended the meetings at the Maxwell home and in the churches. Assembled in the meetings were Americans, French Canadians, Jews, Arabs, Turks, Persians and, of course, Canadians.

The numerous articles written about `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Montreal provided the best newspaper coverage of His western tour. He ordered copies to be sent back to the Middle East. It was fortunate that the Montreal Bahá'ís were well connected to the press. They were assisted by three of their own: editor John Lewis and Mr. Archibald "Archie" Eddington, a Montreal Daily Star reporter, and his wife " who played such an active part in securing the most outstanding newspaper publicity of `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America." Amine De Mille's journal includes the Eddingtons among "these earliest friends of the Faith in Montreal." Mr. Archie Eddington also took stenographic notes of the oral translations of `Abdu'l-Bahá's talks. The headline of John Lewis's editorial from the Montreal Daily Star of September 11, 1912 read: "War Must Precede Universal Peace". It must have dismayed readers that `Abdu'l-Bahá had predicated the great war that was to come. He was quoted as saying: "A great war in Europe is a certainty before permanent peace can be established. International peace can only be reached by an international agreement entered into by all nations."

The considerable publicity and the magnetic, irresistible personality of `Abdu'l-Bahá brought such a flow of inquirers to 716 Pine Avenue West that the Maxwell home could not accommodate them all. Zarqání recorded that

Abdu'l-Bahá, on Monday, September 2nd rented a suite on the 7th floor — room unknown — of the prestigious Windsor Hotel on downtown Peel Street, looking majestically continental on one corner of Dominion Square.

Public Addresses, Informal Talks and Private Interviews

Abdu'l-Bahá gave eight public addresses and seven informal presentations, totalling fifteen, for which six transcripts are extant. This does not include newspaper articles, private interviews and the "pilgrim's notes" recorded in Mahmúd's Diary. Three talks were given in the Maxwell home and two in the churches; one public address was enthusiastically received by the Socialists and labour activists of the day. Of these talks, three were given the same day (September 1st), two of them in the Maxwell home; third was delivered in the Unitarian Church of the Messiah. His considerable energies were fully engaged during the entire visit. To have Abdu'l-Bahá speak at the Church of the Messiah must have been a singularly happy event for architect William Sutherland Maxwell for he designed the Unitarian church which had opened its doors just seven years earlier in 1905.

The presiding minister at the Church of the Messiah, who introduced `Abdu'l-Bahá with eloquence, solemnity and deference, was the Reverend F.R. Griffin. The minister drew the congregation's attention to `Abdu'l-Bahá's complete naturalness. One reads between the lines, despite his oriental provenance — and the purity of His child-like outlook on life, despite His prolonged and severe incarceration. Reverend Griffin went on to say that although `Abdu'l-Bahá has been "...disciplined by long years in prison, his spirit has never yet been crucified by pain."

These six talks contain some of the great principles and tenets that are familiar to Bahá'ís as their fundamental teachings. The vital necessity for a Christ-taught "rebirth" and the exemplification of "virtues divine" to fulfil the human being's potentially high spiritual station was emphasized in His opening address at the Maxwell home. Other basic teachings are found throughout these talks: the oneness of God the Father, the divine "Shepherd" of the flock of humanity; the necessity to recognize the unity of the human family; the oneness of the prophets and religion; that religion must be a "remedy" and not aggravate the disease of disunity; that the prophets are the divine educators, "the gardeners of humanity"; the unity of the Orient and Occident; that materialist philosophies are "hopelessly bankrupt and of no benefit to the human race." (As reported by the Montreal Daily Star, September 3, 1912)

Other basic teachings, once included in fireside talks among "the twelve principles" are presented, particularly in His addresses of September 1st at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah and the St. James Methodist Church on September 5th. Proofs for immortality were presented in the second talk at the Maxwell's during the evening of September 1st. It was during this address that `Abdu'l-Bahá was so transported by His theme that His turban fell to the ground and lay there for an half-hour while He finished the talk. At the St. James Methodist Cathedral Church, `Abdu'l-Bahá was voted thanks by a lay

person, Mr. Recorder Weir, who reckoned Him among the "long line of prophets" that some believed had become extinct. (Despite the Master's distaste for the term "prophet", it kept reappearing). But such was the impression created by the Centre of the Covenant. One reporter described Him as "a serene, majestic figure, calm, commanding, austere and wise."

Bahá'í Economics for Socialists, Strikers, Marxists and Labour Leaders

In one sense, the most original talk was "Bahá'í Economics" delivered to an audience of 500 Socialists, labour leaders, strikers and Marxists, some of whom were members of the Jewish community. The talk took place at Coronation Hall, 204 St. Lawrence Street, now 1074 St. Laurent Boulevard. `Abdu'l-Bahá's public speaking strategy is noteworthy: the topic was well-suited to the audience. He did not expound abstruse theological or religious themes to this group of practically minded, this-worldly socialists who were concerned with what is called today "social justice." He spoke to them on their own terms. But `Abdu'l-Bahá did not refrain from mentioning God and "His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh."

`Abdu'l-Bahá outlined the Bahá'í plan to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty, a plan that necessarily excluded "sedition," i.e. the overthrow of government and the use of armed force. Rather, as `Abdu'l-Bahá expounded it, Bahá'u'lláh's "solution" provided "...the greatest happiness, welfare and comfort without any harm or injury attacking the general order of things." It was "practical politics," as the Gazette called it, for the equitable distribution of the surplus wealth of a nation. It was based on the primacy of the agricultural class as the foundation of the system, and set out tiered levels of "revenues" or graduated taxation, in both cash and kind, that would fill a "general storehouse" or community chest for the village and the nation.

The funds from this central bank would ensure that all members of the community would be delivered from hunger and poverty and guaranteed "the utmost welfare and well-being." The poor, the orphans, the old, the blind, the deaf and the handicapped would all be amply provided for in such a system. In addition to the specifics of graduated taxation and the management of surplus wealth, `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the necessity for concerning oneself with the well-being of others, for self-sacrifice and the recognition of the interdependence and solidarity of the human family. `Abdu'l-Bahá's innovative, genial presentation, and the noble sentiments it evoked, struck a strongly responsive chord in this largely working-class audience. Both the talk and the question period were punctuated with spontaneous and enthusiastic applause, "so intense that the walls of the building seemed to vibrate to the foundation."

A Puzzle: The Healing of Nine Year Old Geraldine Birks

`Abdu'l-Bahá's historic visit, like all His visits, contains a number of touching anecdotes. The most moving of them was the healing of the nine year old girl who lived in the impressive home across the street at 715 Pine Avenue. Little Geraldine Birks was the grand-daughter of Henry Birks, the merchant who in 1879 founded in downtown Montreal the first of the Birks successful chain of

39 jewellery stores (2007). Her father John Henry Birks (1870-1949) had succeeded his father and had at the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit expanded the business to six stores. It was in the first Birks jewellers that `Abdu'l-Bahá purchased a number of rings and watches to distribute as gifts.

However, I agree with Will van den Hoonard's endnote comment in *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community in Canada: 1898-1948* that there is something "puzzling" about this story. The puzzle lies in the strange lack of coherence between May Maxwell's written account, which devotes roughly a quarter of its content to the healing, and the recollections of Geraldine Birks herself when asked about it some 79 years later in 1991.

May Maxwell describes Geraldine as a "sick child." Both the young girl and her mother, Annie MacNeill Birks, are referred to as "invalid"; hereditary transmission probably figured into Geraldine's illness. According to Mrs. Maxwell's account, the mother entreated `Abdu'l-Bahá to come and visit them because they were unable to do so; when the Master offered to heal the child, "the reply was an ardent appeal." `Abdu'l-Bahá's instruction to the parents countermanded the doctor's orders. He urged the parents to allow Geraldine to go out of doors in the middle of the day. Nine months later, according to May's account, in the early springtime, "this beautiful child came out of her prison house and walked upon the ground, gradually becoming perfectly healthy, strong and well." However, when interviewed about the healing at the age of 88 years, Geraldine Birks could not recall the incident. Surprisingly, she did not remember `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit at all, although she did recollect being "sick" — not invalid. She did recall her family saying that Mrs. Maxwell "had invited a guru from India" to visit.

What can one make of this discrepancy? We cannot know with certainty, but the simplest explanation would be that Geraldine simply suffered from the defective memory that sometimes affects the elderly. However, another clue may be taken from the filmed interview of `Amatu'l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Khanúm. When asked about this incident — and this is my impression recalled from having seen the film years ago — Ruhíyyih Khanúm expressed disappointment that her cousin did not seem to appreciate the significance of either the greatness of her visitor or the divine healing that had been bestowed upon her.

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