

The Extraordinary Life and Work of Wellesley Tudor Pole - Baha'i Seer

Abstract for ABS Seminar Newcastle Weekend 27/28th July 2013

This paper seeks to evaluate the role of Wellesley Tudor Pole in the Baha'i Movement and examine the place of Baha'ism in the wider context of The Quest which dominated Pole's spiritual life for several decades. Recent research has brought to light further information surrounding Pole's beliefs about the bowl he discovered in Glastonbury and its links to a lost library in Constantinople, his spirit guides and their role in conflicts in different spheres.

Pole's relationship with the Baha'is raises a number of questions, where did it fit with Pole's wider belief system? Why he was such a dominant figure in the Baha'i Movement and what was his legacy when he ultimately rejected the Baha'i Faith?

Pole remains a significant figure in the alternative spirituality milieu and arguably the single most influential individual in the re-emergence of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre, he was undoubtedly the saviour of Abdul Baha from the advancing Turkish army – but was he a Baha'i?

Wellesley Tudor Pole, recorded a saying among West Somerset country people, that Jesus once walked the line from St Michael's Mount to Glastonbury, and that one day he will pass that way again. The time and form of his next appearance are unknown, but he must be made welcome, and every traveller should therefore be given hospitality.

Introduction

In 1911 another great British mystic and religious revolutionary, Aleister Crowley wrote a book called *Liber Thisarb*, Crowley always keen to demonstrate his intellect and knowledge explained Thisarb is *Berashith* transliterated backwards. *Berashith*, meaning "In the beginning..." the opening words of the Bible. In his book Crowley demonstrated a technique for training what he called Magickal Memory, which involved memorising events in reverse chronological order, rather like replaying a video in rewind. I have taken the liberty of using Mr Crowley's method in writing this paper as I believe it exposes better the rhythms and themes of Pole's life both in this world and in the mystical realms where he seems to have been more at home.

Death and Afterwards 1944 to 1968

On the 13th September, 1968 Wellesley Pole made his final withdrawal from this plane of existence, he did not accept the concept of death "as life cannot be extinguished we speak a falsehood whenever we refer to a person's death". Shortly before his passing in the same year, his book "Writing on the Ground" was published. In this book Pole evaluates and reflects upon his relationship with the Baha'i Faith, it may be significant that he returned to this subject so near the end, on the other hand it may simply have been as he says in the book in response to requests from Baha'i friends. About a third of the volume is concerned with Pole's reminiscences of 'Abdu'l Baha and the recounting of anecdotes about the Baha'is he had met, what is particularly significant is that after a lifetime of reflection Pole clearly states:

At that time over half a century ago, it did not seem to me that 'Abdu'l-Bahá envisaged the establishment of a new separate 'Religion'. All the stress of his teaching was laid on

the leavening effect of the Bahá'í message on the religions already in existence and which were themselves in such urgent need of spiritual regeneration from within. The Master made it clear that to create an entirely new and separate religious organisation at that time should be resisted vigorously. (Pole W. T., 1968, p. 147)

Clearly, Pole never wavered from his refusal to accept the Baha'i Faith as a separate and independent religion, rather than an auxiliary religious movement requiring no severance from pre existing religious beliefs and their attendant organisational structures¹.

Pole had, however, been deeply committed to a spiritual path which he had sought to present to the public, at least in part, in two earlier publications. In 1965 Pole had published 'A Man Seen Afar' in which he offered far-memories of Jesus. This book was obviously controversial claiming as it did to throw new light on the last days of Jesus from the standpoint of a contemporary observer. Pole claimed to receive such memories from the Akashic Records, the sum of all human experience (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 9). The source and accuracy of these memories does not reflect on Pole's relationship to the Baha'i Faith and is therefore outside of the scope of this paper, however, the nature of his memories does perhaps shed some light on his understanding of the Baha'i Teachings.

A story which is of interest is that of the cloak (Pole W. T., 1965, pp. 75 - 77), in this passage Pole recounts how he remembers giving Jesus a warm camel-hair cloak, he then recalls:

There is a strange sequel, nearly nineteen hundred years later, to this story. In the winter of 1919, when I was walking with Abdul-Baha Abbas on Mount Carmel, he noticed I was suffering from the cold. Immediately he took off his camel-hair cloak and threw it around my shoulders.

At that time I had forgotten the incidents recorded in these notes, and therefore could not understand what the wind seemed to be whispering in my ears: *Restitution after many days* (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 77)

Pole appears to be equating Abdu'l Baha with Jesus and in the same book he writes "Followers of Abdul-Baha regard his spiritual status equal to that of Jesus" (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 53) however this is not the Baha'i Teaching, which describes both Jesus and Baha'u'llah as Manifestations of God, while Abdu'l Baha is a perfect exemplar but not a prophet. This is not a technicality of style but a fundamental misunderstanding (one made by many early Western Baha'is it must be said²) and one which may have impacted on Pole's failure to grasp the full import of the Baha'i Message. Pole's dedication to Jesus and his belief that Jesus was the most important of messengers was consistent throughout his life.

Pole had produced 'The Silent Road' in 1960; this book contains a selection of anecdotes and ideas, recounts meetings with extraordinary men such as Padre Pio and Abdu'l Baha, stressing in particular their healing powers, he also tells of meetings with characters not

¹ I have discussed the distinction between the inclusive Baha'i Movement and the exclusive Baha'i Faith at length elsewhere (Osborn, Religion and Relevance - the Baha'is in Britain 1899 to 1930, 2020) it suffices here to point out that most of those who identified as Baha'is in the British Isles prior to 1930 had multiple religious identities and generally would not have perceived the Baha'i Teachings as the declaration of a new independent religion.

² For a clear refutation from Shoghi Effendi in conversation with Western Baha'is convinced of 'Abdu'l Baha's prophethood see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/diglib/MSS/P-T/ransom.htm>

strictly of this world such as Brother Brighill, a chirpy sixteenth century monk and resident of Tintern Abbey who Pole encountered along with an unnamed friend over several days in June 1925. The monk was able to explain many mysteries and even outline a spectacularly accurate prophesy about the twentieth century foretold by a Friar John. Pole's life seems to have been peppered with encounters with such people, usually imparting wisdom or on several occasions saving him from danger. These encounters do not impact directly on his relationship with the Baha'i Teachings or community; however, his acceptance of paranormal activity was significant in his relaxed response to Abdu'l Baha's healing and associated miraculous events, such as the apparently random encounter with the man Abdu'l Baha had sent him to meet in Paris (Pole W. T., *The Silent Road*, 1960, p. 78) or the reappearance of a lost Baha'i ring, a gift from Abdu'l Baha, which had fallen in the Nile (Pole W. T., *The Silent Road*, 1960, p. 26). Indeed, Pole is the source of many of these accounts which have become part of the folklore of the Baha'i community.

It was in 1959 that Pole succeeded in what was perhaps to be his most lasting legacy, the purchase of the Chalice Well at Glastonbury for the nation. This was not without some rancour and a major falling out with his former business partner Ronald Heaver. The feud as it is referred to between Heaver and Pole is alluded to in R J Stewart's biography of Heaver. Whilst the details of the disagreement are not relevant, they were basically over the sale of the Tor School property and the nature of the damage that compromised the safety of the building leading to its demolition, Stewart presents an interesting insight into Pole's spiritual and religious stance. Stewart is clearly unfamiliar with the Baha'i Faith as he writes "The interests of WTP, such as his years of deep commitment within the Baha'i faith, in essence a further development of Islam (albeit heretical)" (Stewart, 2012, p. 134) his is however deeply immersed in the esoteric traditions surrounding Glastonbury and it is in this context he describes the feud. Stewart argues that the spiritual currents which flow through Glastonbury polarise and have been symbolised as the Red and White Dragons of Bardic tradition (more usually used to represent Wales and England) and are physically embodied in the Red and White Springs of Glastonbury (Stewart, 2012, p. 135). Glastonbury is claimed to be the site of the first Christian church in England, founded by Joseph of Arimathea, this Ancient British Church or Arimathean Christianity was gradually displaced by the Roman Catholic version of Christianity in England after the Synod of Whitby in 644CE. When Henry VIII³ founded his own church in defiance of the Pope he claimed he was re-establishing an ancient English form of Christianity based on the Arimathean tradition. Stewart argues that Heaver "according to his own statements, was an initiate into the hidden esoteric lineages of the Arimathean and Essene spiritual streams, while Wellesley Tudor-Pole (sic) in addition to his Baha'i beliefs and long career of spiritualism and esotericism, was in his youth under the mentorship of Cardinal Gasquet" (Stewart, 2012, p. 139) Pole then, represented the Roman tradition in the ancient conflict between Rome and Arimathea/Jerusalem over the spiritually significant site of Glastonbury, a site whose importance predated both churches. The spiritual conflict is outside the scope of this paper but Stewart is correct in pointing out Pole's flirtation with the Roman church, in particular with its monastic orders and this may be significant in analysing his relationship with the Baha'is.

³ Henry's father, Henry VII had worn the red rose of Lancaster in the Cousins War and fought under the Red Dragon standard of the Tudors, all of this can be written off as Tudor propaganda, but the symbolism is none the less fascinating.

- 1953: dramatic and mysterious finale to the Istanbul Quest.

The final mention of Pole in Shoghi Effendi's published communications to the British national Assembly is somewhat cryptic; it is a telegram, dated 19th July 1949, which reads:

Advise show utmost consideration Tudor-Pole (sic) invite him summer school participation other activities. Shoghi (NSA UK, 1981)p. 230

This appears to be a response to a question of how the Baha'i community should relate to Pole. Shoghi Effendi's answer is unequivocal and unsurprising, what is curious is why the question should have been raised. In 1944 Pole had been present at the opening of the Baha'i Centenary Celebrations in London. A telegram dated 25th November 1943 instructs the British NSA:

Advise contact Herbert Samuel Ronald Storrs Tudor-Pole and other sympathisers which National Assembly may suggest vigorous action necessary safeguard interests faith insure success celebration Shoghi Rabbani (NSA UK, 1981) p. 162

The three men named in the telegram were all connected to Palestine, Herbert Samuel (1870 – 1963) was a Liberal politician and a Zionist Jew, he had served as High Commissioner of Palestine from July 1920 to June 1925, his appointment was, understandably, controversial. Ronald Storrs (1881 – 1955) in 1917 Storrs became, as he said, "the first military governor of Jerusalem since Pontius Pilate" for which purpose he was given the army rank of colonel. In 1921 he became Civil Governor of Jerusalem and Judea. In both positions he attempted to support Zionism while protecting the rights of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. Pole had also served in Palestine and he would have been well known to Samuel and Storrs, the invitation to two of the most prominent Zionists in Britain cannot have been incidental but rather an attempt to "safeguard interests faith" in Palestine.

The Centenary Celebration took place on the 20th May 1944 at the Alliance Hall, Palmer Street, London SW1 and the exhibition was opened by Sir Ronald Storrs, Storrs introduced himself by stating "It is a high honour for an Anglican Englishman to have been chosen to open the Centenary of a World Faith" he then went on to claim three qualifications – "I am an MA of the same university, Cambridge, and a scholar of the same college, Pembroke, as Edward Browne, ... secondly, because I had the honour of Abbas Effendi's friendship from 1909 until his death; thirdly, I am latest from that Front – of Haifa, Akka, Baghdad, Tihran, Isphahan and Shiraz" (NSA UK, 1944) Storrs then went on to outline the story of the Bab and His death a century before.

There is no record of Herbert Samuel attending; however, Pole was a speaker at another centenary meeting held on the 23rd May 1944 at Denison House, Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1. The meeting was chaired by Mary Basil Hall and addressed by well known Spiritualists Shaw Desmond, Hannen Swaffer, academic Sir William Hornell, the Rev. Walter Winn, a spiritualist non conformist minister and Dr Harold Moody the first Black British medical doctor, as well as Pole. Pole recounted his memories of Abdul Baha, in particular the events which brought them together during the First World War, he recalled

conversations, apparently verbatim, about the fulfilment of the Lord's Prayer and quotes Abdul Baha as saying "The Baha'i teaching does not ask a man to desert the Faith of his forefathers but to live it in unity and fellowship with all men irrespective of their colour, caste, or creed, for we are all leaves of one tree." (NSA UK, 1944). In this statement Pole was significantly "off message", for Shoghi Effendi had been insisting Baha'is relinquished membership of religious organisations other than the Baha'i Faith since the early 1930's and written numerous letters to that effect:

"... we as Baha'is, must not have any affiliations with churches or political parties"
(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Baha'is of Vienna, June 24, 1947) (Hornby, 1988)

".... No Baha'i can any longer dissimulate his faith and practise the laws and ordinances of a previous Dispensation and call himself at the same time a believer. No compromise, no vacillation can any longer be tolerated. We must have the courage of our convictions and preserve the integrity of our glorious Cause ..."
(Postscript to a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, May 21, 1933) (Hornby, 1988)

"As regards the celebration of Christian Holidays by the believers; it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing such holidays as Christmas and New Year, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw Ruz"
(From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, March 19, 1938) (Hornby, 1988, p. 302)

It was this withdrawal from other religions and development of an exclusive religion as distinct from and auxiliary religious movement that Pole would never accept, however, it does not seem to bother Shoghi Effendi, who wrote in a telegram dated 27th January, 1945 to the British NSA:

Kindly cable address Tudor-Pole mail three copies every photograph taken centenary. Shoghi Rabbani (NSA UK, 1981, p. 171)

It would seem that Pole's assertion that he could assist the Cause as a non member was not simply a polite exit strategy, but a genuine intention. In a postscript to a letter to David Hoffman, dated 17th May, 1938 says "Shoghi Effendi has just received your letter of May 16th and wishes your Assembly to make strenuous efforts in connection with the incorporation of the NSA. He would advise you to approach Lady Blomfield, Major Tudor-Pole and Lord Lamington". (NSA UK, 1981) It would seem Pole was an active supporter, prepared to publically associate himself with the Baha'is until the late 1940's when the 1949 correspondence cited above suggests some Baha'is became unsure of working with him, whilst Shoghi Effendi was keen to encourage further participation by Pole his absence from further public meetings might be a reflection of concerns he might not be entirely reliable in presenting the same version of the Baha'i teachings as the official members.

The Second World War and the Silent Minute 1935 to 1944

Perhaps the activity which brought Pole the most public attention was his Silent Minute contribution to the war effort. According to Walter Lang in the introduction to Pole's *Writing on the Ground* the

idea of the Silent Minute was first raised in a conversation between Pole and a brother officer in Palestine in 1917. The other man knew that his death in battle was imminent and he told Pole, "I shan't come through this struggle and like millions of others; it will be my destiny to go on. You will survive and live to see a greater and more vital conflict fought out in every continent and ocean and in the air. When that time comes, remember us. We shall long to play our part. Give us the opportunity to do so, for that war will be a righteous war. We shall not then be able to fight with material weapons, but we will be able to help you if you will let us. We shall be an unseen but mighty army. You will still have "time" as your servant. *Lend us a moment of it each day and through your silence give us our opportunity*" (Pole W. T., 1968, p. 12). Whilst this sounds rather like a method of harnessing occult power for Allied victory, it was developed into a prayer for peace at nine o'clock each evening. Pole got the support of both HM King George VI and the Prime Minister Winston Churchill and on 10th November 1940 the chimes of Big Ben were broadcast at 9pm by the BBC's Home and Imperial Services. Two years later the BBC estimated millions were observing the Silent Minute across the world.

An anecdote emphasizes the profound power of the group meditation of the Silent Minute. In 1945 a British intelligence officer was interrogating a high Nazi official. He asked him why he thought Germany lost the war. His reply was, "During the war, you had a secret weapon for which we could find no counter measure, which we did not understand, but it was very powerful. It was associated with the striking of the Big Ben each evening. I believe you called it the 'Silent Minute.' (Pole W. T., 1968, p. 13)

The Silent Minute went on to become the "Lamplighter Movement", which is still in existence; members light a lamp and say a prayer for peace at nine p.m. each night, another direct derivative of Pole's Silent Minute is the Two Minute Silence on Armistice Sunday. Interestingly, as yet no specific Baha'i response to the Silent Minute has come to light.

Between the Wars 1919 to 1935

In December 1919 Pole established his own firm, W. Tudor Pole & Co, of 61, St. James's Street, London SW1. His first venture was an attempt to utilise his contacts in the Middle East and set up a news reporting agency, like so many of his business ideas it failed because it was before its time. His business was essentially that of a commission agent, he specialised in negotiating direct trade, particularly in tea, to Russia and Eastern Europe. Difficulties in trading direct with the new Soviet government in Russia involved the setting up of an Anglo-Dutch Trading group which facilitated trade through Holland, thus removing the problems of direct trade with the United Kingdom. The company was represented in New York, Paris, Amsterdam, Constantinople, Alexandria and Haifa; in what would today be referred to as "logistics" activities included selling clothes and paper to Holland, as well as publicity and publishing agencies. Paper was a major part of the business and in 1924 Pole helped set up the esparto grass companies in Algeria to supply Scottish paper mills. Two years later he introduced British capital to Italian land reclamation scheme at Gargano; and enlisted Padre Pio's blessing on the project. Pole's relationship with this other great healer and mystic has yet to be fully explored. In 1936 he formed Wellesley Holdings Ltd to transform town waste into organic fertiliser; a company later sold to Harold Macmillan M.P. In the late 1940's Pole and Ronald Heaver had set up an alternative healthcare project called Emion Ltd., in 1948 Pole and Heaver would as joint company directors of Emion Ltd attempt to bring natural products into a market dominated by synthetic drugs. Sadly this venture did not prosper and the bankruptcy notices for Emion Ltd, Research Chemists, in the names of Wellesley Tudor Pole, and that of Ronald Heaver, filed separately, are both within the same

time frame, and both are legally listed at the same address, 22, Great Smith Street, London SW1 (Stewart, 2012, p. 132). Pole's businesses were both visionary and ethical, however, he failed to become financially secure and money worries often beset him. It is interesting that he kept his business life entirely separate from his spiritual life and few who met him in that sphere would have guessed he was anything but a rather dull and worldly tradesman.

It was in his office in St James's Street that Shoghi Effendi learned of the death of his grandfather Abdul Baha. In the morning of Tuesday 29th November 1921 a cablegram was delivered to Pole's office, it had been sent the previous day in Haifa and read "His Holiness Abdul Baha ascended to the Kingdom of Abha. Please inform friends. (Signed) Greatest Holy Leaf". It is a clear indication of the trust the Holy Family had in Pole that he was the first to receive this news and charged with disseminating it to believers and supports throughout the country. Pole immediately set about informing the Baha'i community and sent for Shoghi Effendi to come from Oxford without revealing the cause of the summons. Shoghi Effendi arrived at Pole's office and was shown in while Pole himself was in another room. When Pole entered his office he found his visitor collapsed on the floor, it transpired that he had glanced at the desk and inadvertently read the cable on Pole's desk. (Weinberg, Ethel Jenner Rosenberg, 1995)p.189

In the period immediately following the death of Abdul Baha, Pole played an important role in the consultations around the future of the Baha'i cause. He never revealed what took place; however, the decisions taken to set up formal Baha'i organisations must have seemed to him at best a mistake at worst a betrayal, on his return to England he declined inclusion on the ballot for the election of the London Spiritual Assembly, Weinberg describes his actions thus:

One person conspicuous by his absence in the nascent Baha'i administration was Wellesley Tudor Pole. On returning from the consultations in Haifa, he more or less distanced himself completely from the Baha'i community, claiming that after discussion with Shoghi Effendi, he had reached the decision that he would be more effective as a non-member, which would give him added credibility should he be needed to defend the Faith in diplomatic circles. (Weinberg, Lady Blomfield, her life and times, 2012, p. 252)

This is a rather harsh assessment; the word "claimed" suggests this was simply a polite exit strategy. As we have noted above Pole did indeed aid the Faith until at least the late 1940's, when it would seem the Baha'is became more wary of working with him than the other way around. Furthermore, Pole was not alone in rejecting the new direction the Faith was taking.

An American woman called Ruth White had put forward the notion that the will of Abdu'l Baha was a forgery. White argued that independent expert opinion, namely that of Charles Ainsworth Mitchell (1869-1948) of the British Museum, had concluded, when she had presented him with a copy of the will, that it was not written throughout by the same person and that no part of the will had the characteristics of the writing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as shown in the authenticated specimens. The main objection, raised by White, was the institution of the "Guardianship" and its organisational consequences for Bahaism. Whilst in retrospect, the idea that the will was forged seems utterly absurd, at the time White's claims had some potential appeal. There had never been any mention of this role in any utterance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá prior to the will, although succession of leadership after 'Abdu'l-

Bahá had been anticipated in the Will of Bahá'u'lláh. Pole, however, made no attempt to influence the opinion of others, doubtless, had he been vindictive, his dominant role in the community, enhanced by his reputation as a war hero and saviour of Abdu'l Baha would have made him far more dangerous than White to the unity of the Baha'is. Pole, however, never criticised the will, the role of Guardian or the man who was the holder of that role, he had other interesting things to do.

In 1922 Pole set up the Appeal for the Russian Clergy, who were being persecuted by the Communist regime in Russia; remains honorary treasurer for the next twelve years. In the same year he returned as he would over the course of his life to The Quest, he widened his Istanbul Quest at this time to seek the lost library of the Emperor Justinian.

In 1928 his interest in the role of St Michael caused him to initiate pilgrim group activity to revive sacred sites in Britain and Europe, with special reference to St Michael, this was a development of his interest in the Heart centres of the British Isles and after the Second World War would develop further as is outlined below:

English esotericist Wellesley Tudor Pole is today probably most well known for his development of Glastonbury's Chalice Well Gardens in 1959. An advocate for Steiner's theories about the role of Michael in the spiritual life of Britain, Tudor Pole made the connection between Glastonbury and Tintagel as sites which had links with both Arthur and Michael. However, in the post WWII period, Tudor Pole wished to rejuvenate Britain's sacred sites by advocating a new era of pilgrimage, which he felt could help speed up earthly evolution, and help secure Britain's place as a spiritual world leader. He called for an emphasis on sites that had been dedicated to St. Michael and suggested that pilgrims begin with St. Michael's Mount near Penzance and then travel through Tintagel to Glastonbury Tor, also dedicated to St. Michael. Wellesley Tudor Pole's spiritual vision certainly had nativist overtones. In addition to his interest in Arthur and the Joseph of Aramathea legends about bringing the Holy Grail to Britain, he also considered St George as a manifestation of the Archangel Michael, reinforcing England's position as a potential spiritual beacon which would help to rejuvenate a deflated and war torn Europe. (Hale, 2004)

In 1930 Pole revised his original destination for the westernmost spiritual centre of the British Isles to Devenish Island in Lough Erne, this not only contains one of the finest monastic sites but was by 1930 still within the United Kingdom unlike some of the other sites Pole may have considered for the original Irish site of a heart centre.

In 1931 Pole began to put his Quest in Istanbul on an archaeological footing via his friend Sir Davis Russell and the Walker Trust of St Andrews University.

The First World War 1914 to 1919

The outbreak of war was a turning point for Wellesley Tudor Pole, he saw a spiritual significance in the hostilities and despite being in a "reserve occupation" he volunteered for the army. During the war period, he published a number of small books he called "The Deeper Issues Series." These uniformly bound little volumes included *The Great War: Some Deeper Issues* in which he outlined his understanding of spiritual conflicts being enacted in the physical realm. This was not surprising since Pole was convinced of the mystical importance of Britain, so any conflict was of major spiritual significance. He also produced "The Passing of Major P." and *Private Dowding*, both works claiming to be the work of

soldiers already killed in the conflict. Published in 1917 *Private Dowding* is a small classic of disincarnate literature, in it the nature of the coming spiritual epoch and the Baha'i revelation is discussed by entities communicating with Pole:

They were afar off. They nearly blinded me. The Messenger told me many things concerning the manifestations of God to man. He said a prophet of the Most High was in charge of each of the gateways to those Reservoirs of Light. When darkness and ignorance grew apace among men, the 'Word' was uttered. Then the prophet, whose turn it was to descend among men, made deep obeisance and opened wide his own gateway to the Reservoirs of Light. He descended to earthly regions that he might guide the spreading of the new illumination. The Messenger told me that one of these holy prophets fulfilled his divine mission during the last century. He said the illumination then released was about to spread through East and West. The prophet has returned to heavenly spheres - his work accomplished. His work would become manifest when the war was over. The war itself was an outward manifestation of the powers of evil in their attempt to obstruct the inflow of light. It was very interesting, but beyond me. He said a spiritual revival was destined to take place within all the great world faiths. He said that unity would become established, that universal peace would become an accomplished fact. He seemed to imply that the golden era was at hand-, nearer indeed than we could realise. (Pole W. T., *Private Dowding*, 1984, p. 36)

It should be noted that the prophet is one of many that open gateways to the light and that the prophet's work will cause a revival within all the great world faiths. He is part of a much larger plan. These words are spoken by Pole's spirit friend Private Dowding, Pole goes on to explain their meaning in relation to Bahá'u'lláh:

It is true that great spiritual movements were initiated last century. One of the most remarkable of these has centred in the East round the Persian prophet Baha'u'llah. This Messenger of God has returned to his own high place, but his message of brotherhood and love begins to stir the hearts of men. Many of his prophecies have already been fulfilled. The ideals of unity and brotherhood for which he stood are spreading widely, despite the war. His Book of Laws remains to be made known to the world, but the inspiration which called it forth is certainly divine in origin. Baha'u'llah's son, the explainer of the message, whose name is Abdul Baha Abbas (servant of God), still dwells among men, controlling and directing the promulgation of a spiritual movement that seems likely to encircle the globe with the great ideal of unity. And in the West many movements of a spiritual and progressive order are now developing. (Pole W. T., *Private Dowding*, 1984, pp. 45 -6)

In 1917 Pole was serving in Palestine, it was there he had the conversation which would inspire the Silent Minute, the day before his friend was killed and Pole was badly injured. His posting to Palestine allowed Pole to render his most important service to the Baha'i cause.

Throughout the war the Baha'is were in some danger, particularly during the period that Jamal Pasha commanded the Turkish 4th Army Corps. His mission was to drive the British out of Egypt. Throughout 1915 and 1916 Palestine was under his martial law. He declared he would crucify 'Abdu'l-Bahá on his triumphal return from Egypt. As it turned out, his return was in full flight, having been routed by the British, and he was unable to enact his threat. That Pole saw a spiritual significance in the war has already been noted. However, the

Bahá'ís would later see a spiritual significance in Pole's role in the war. Pole was wounded during an attack on Jerusalem in 1917. After this, he was transferred to Military Intelligence, first in Cairo and later at Ludd, Jaffa and Jerusalem. In 1918 he received news that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was again in danger. Through chance Pole was able to get a message through to the Foreign Office in London. Through his Bahá'í contacts in London Pole was also able to alert senior government figures. Lord Balfour (1848-1930) and Lord Curzon (1859-1925) were advised of the situation, and Pole names Lord Lamington as being of particular help. The Foreign Office sent a despatch to General Edmund Henry Allenby (1861-1936) instructing him to ensure the safety of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his family, a

demand for information concerning 'Abdu'l-Bahá was circulated through British Intelligence in the Middle East. This, eventually, ended up on the desk of Major Pole who was able to furnish General Allenby with details of the life and teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (Pole W. T., 1968, p. 152) A detailed account of Pole's role in saving Abdu'l Baha can be found in *The Servant, The General and Armageddon* (Maude, 1998), this work recounts the story of Allenby's campaign in Palestine, heading most chapters with a quotation from Revelations, chapter 16, since the authors argue that the Biblical prophecies were fulfilled at this time. This perception of Britain having a role to play in world affairs which had a spiritual significance was common at the time of the First World War; it's most vociferous exponents were the members of the British Israel Movement, who believed the British were the lost tribes of Israel. Although this was an extreme view the idea that British Imperialism was fulfilling a divine destiny in relation to the return of the Jews to Palestine was fairly widespread and Edward Hall's poem "The Isles Unveiled" (Hall, Undated) echoes this sentiment and demonstrates that it was at least familiar to some members of the Baha'i Movement.

Both Allenby and Ronald Storrs (1881-1951), British governor of Jerusalem, placed a great deal of trust in the Bahá'í leader. Storrs, who had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, asked for help in finding reliable people to fill administrative posts and, consequently, a number of Bahá'ís found themselves in 'positions of confidence' in the British administration of Palestine. Allenby settled in Haifa for a while and paid a number of visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In May 1919 Pole left the army with the rank of major, the following June he was awarded an OBE in the Birthday Honours. On 7 August 1919 Allenby forwarded a recommendation that 'Abdu'l-Bahá be awarded a knighthood (KBE) for the help and advice given to the civil administration of Palestine. The Bahá'í leader accepted the offer as "a gift from a just king" but never used the title.²⁸

The Quest Begins 1902 to 1914

In 1902 Wellesley Tudor Pole experienced a dream which was to have a profound effect on him. Pole dreamt that he was a monk at Glastonbury Abbey. So powerful was the experience he felt compelled to travel to Glastonbury, he claimed he found the town just as he had seen it in his dream. Pole became convinced that Glastonbury was his spiritual home and that something awaited him to discover it there. He also received an impression that he would need a "triad of

maidens" to find the relic.⁸ In September 1906, Wellesley with his sister Katherine and her friends Janet Allen and Christine Duncan (née Allen) discovered an artefact in St. Bride's Well in Glastonbury. Their find was a curious blue glass bowl. Dr. John Arthur Goodchild (b. 1851) would later claim that he had placed the bowl in the well in 1899. Goodchild was an English medical practitioner. He spent the winters in Bordighera, [Italy] treating the many English tuberculosis patients resident there. His summers were spent either in Hampstead or Bath. In February 1885 he purchased the glass bowl and platter in a tailor's shop in Bordighera. The vendor claimed these items had been found bricked up in the walls of an old monastery building which was being demolished in Albegna, a village between Bordighera and Genoa.⁹ Goodchild took the items back to London. He showed his find to Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897), Keeper of the British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum. Franks' findings were inconclusive. The bowl was unlike any other known example. He thought it was probably ancient and could not explain the process of its manufacture. The bowl and dish were locked away in a cupboard in the Goodchild home in Hampstead, where they remained for the next ten years.

Goodchild was not merely a physician. He wrote books of poetry and prose but he was also engaged on a much higher quest: to seek out the true roots of spiritual life in the West.¹⁰ Whilst much mystical seeking at this time was directed towards the East, there was also a movement to rediscover the Western mystical tradition. Much of the emphasis of this movement cantered on the pre-Christian Celtic culture of the British Isles. Goodchild believed that a high culture had existed in Ireland prior to the coming of Christianity. He began to write up his theories in a work that would eventually bear the title *The Light of the West*. In *The Light of the West* Goodchild outlined a history of Ireland, which he claimed was a matriarchal, goddess worshipping society. Central to this scenario is the figure of Saint Bride [Brigit] (453-523), whose traditional role as the foster mother of Christ is recounted to integrate both the pagan and Christian aspects of Celtic culture. Goodchild's understanding of Celtic religion was intensely feminist. He argued for the restoration of the feminine in all aspects of life. Goodchild summed it up:

The Light of the West is the beauty of womanhood. It inculcates the hatred of warfare, and of empires established by the greed of nations or rulers. It preaches woman's desire for the empire of love.¹¹

In 1897, shortly before the publication of his book, Dr. Goodchild was staying in Paris on his way back to Italy. He claimed he experienced an intense psychic experience in his hotel room. He heard a voice telling him that Jesus once carried the bowl in the house in Hampstead. It was also to be important in the century to come. The voice told Goodchild to hide the bowl in St. Bride's Well, Glastonbury, where a woman would find it. The bowl was to be cared for by a woman. Goodchild was a very close friend of William Sharpe (1855-1905), a man who wrote novels about the Celtic past under the name of Fiona McLeod. Sharpe claimed the spirit of this Highland woman possessed him when he wrote. The nature of Fiona was a secret even from Goodchild,

⁸ p. 56.

⁹ Ibid., p. .6

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ John Arthur Goodchild quoted in *ibid.*, p. 19.

whose friendship with Sharpe began with a correspondence with his non-existent "cousin" Fiona. Ms McLeod's publisher was none other than Thomas Pole's friend in the Garden City Movement, Sir Patrick Geddes. Sharpe was also friends with W. B. Yeats whose connections with both the Golden Dawn and the politics of the Celtic Revival are well known. Yeats refers to Sharpe's work on several occasions.

Pole does not seem to have been entirely convinced of Goodchild's explanation which he only heard after he had found the bowl. He later wrote that no objective proof of Goodchild's story had ever been discovered, Pole and a friend had visited the town where the doctor had practised but had found no trace of the monastery where the bowl had apparently been found. Through the visions of a medium called Helena Humphreys, Pole became convinced that not only had the bowl been important in relation to Christ but that it had been in a "Church somewhere on the Continent", Pole believed this church to be the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and it was this which set him off on a lifelong quest.

In July 1907 the story of the finding of the bowl was made public in a meeting at Dean's Yard hosted by Basil Wilberforce who would work closely with Pole in the Baha'i Movement, also present was Alice Buckton who would, along with Pole be central in the regeneration of Glastonbury as a spiritual centre. At the meeting Pole explained how through the work of Humphreys and another medium called Leslie Moore, he had become convinced that something vital to the regeneration of religion was hidden in Constantinople. In August 1907 Pole boarded the Orient Express and made his way to Constantinople for the first time. "For TP it was a visionary adventure. If he could prove the Cup's history, then its influence might spread to the whole world". Pole also prophesied at the meeting that a great religious teacher would visit England in 1911, this teacher he said would be female and wear a seven pointed star, Fenge concurred that he got it half right, but Abdul Baha wasn't a woman and did wear a star, Alan Royce pointed out in a private letter that if it was the Maid of Heaven overlooking Abdul Baha he saw, he got it all right. (Fenge, 2011)

Pole decided that the place he sought was in the Seraglio Palace, a part of the royal palace complex where the wives of the Sultan were housed. He eventually managed to bribe his way into the garden and found a tunnel leading into the honeycomb of passages beneath the palace. He was unable to access the tunnel because it was blocked with a marble slab, he felt sure the records he sought were close by. He later wrote "Perhaps my state of consciousness was not quite normal at this moment. In any case I felt a strange spiritual ecstasy as if the light of the Sun had suddenly become intensified ten times as if a brilliant illumination were ascending from the ground at my feet, an illumination which seemed to spread across the world. It was then for the first time that I realised that far more wonderful records lay buried in that I had imagined hitherto and that probably the remains of Justinian's library was also to be found". (Fenge, 2011)

It was while he was in Constantinople looking for something which would renew world religion Pole came across the Baha'is:

"I first heard of the movement when on a visit to Constantinople prior to the Turkish revolution in 1908, and I was very much impressed by the fact that Abdul-Baha could exert such an influence from within prison walls. When I returned to London I found that very little was known of the movement, and I determined to visit Abdul-Baha,

known to the outside world by the name of 'Abbas Effendi,' on the first available opportunity and discover for myself the secret of his power".

So who did he meet in Constantinople? The American Baha'i Stanwood Cobb was teaching at the Robert College in Constantinople and it was from him that Pole first heard of the Baha'i teachings. Cobb's romantic novel, *Ayesha of the Bosphorus* which outlines both the inclusive nature of the Baha'i Movement as well as the use it could be put in smoothing the way for Anglo-Turkish romance.

Pole returned to England in September having had a series of adventures involving the Roman Catholic Church and Ottoman spies. In order to make it difficult for the Turkish authorities to trace him when Pole returned to Constantinople in December 1910, he did so in disguise. The second visit proved more difficult than the first; unable to get into the palace grounds Pole spent a lot of time looking for other entrances along the coast. Pole became interested in a ruin called "the House of Justinian" or the "Boukoleon", he thought that there were hidden chambers beneath the house. Pole returned to England early in 1908 convinced he was close to finding spiritual treasure.

Pole attempted to get to Constantinople for a third time but he decided to visit Abdu'l Baha in Egypt on his way, Abdu'l Baha told Pole to return to England by way of Paris and asked him to find a Persian Baha'i in that city. Pole did not want to abort his third attempt at the quest but felt compelled to, the account of his search for the man and his subsequent healing by 'Abdul Baha is recounted in *Writing on the Ground*.

News of Pole's visit to Abdu'l Baha was eagerly awaited by the Baha'is in London and he addressed a meeting shortly after his return in which he repeated the prediction he had voiced in the meeting at Dean's Yard, that 1911 would be a year of great spiritual significance. As preparations were already in hand for Abdu'l Baha's first visit to the West it was a reasonable certainty that his audience would concur.

Saturday, Dec. 31st, (1910) at 10 Cheniston Gardens, Kensington High St., W., a meeting was called for Mr. Tudor-Pole to speak of his visit to Abdul-Baha in Egypt and "The Glory of God as Revealed in Persia." It was the largest meeting we have had in London and the seed sown is already bearing fruit. In the opinion of the speaker, "the year 1911 is undoubtedly to be one of very great importance, and London will be the focus point for great events." He expressed the hope that among the numerous congresses, conferences, and Imperial gatherings to be held here, there would be a Bahai Congress, attended by delegates from all parts of the world. He thought the time had come for an international residential and social club, open to all comers without distinction of race, creed, or sex, and urged his hearers to do all in their power to work together in harmony and joy for the great ideal of universal unity and peace.

Prior to the arrival of Abdu'l Baha another significant event took place on June 18th 1910, when Pole first met Neville Gauntlet Tudor Meakin, (Benham, 1993, p. 101) the relationship between Pole, Meakin and Robert Felkin and their membership of the Baha'i community has been discussed elsewhere. (Osborn, *The Extraordinary Life of Robert Felkin, Baha'i Mage*, 2014)

The events of journeys to the West of Abdu'l Baha in 1911 and 1913 have been recounted elsewhere, so this paper will deal only with the very significant contribution of Pole to the

visits. Abdu'l Baha arrived in England on Monday 4th September 1911, his first public appearance was the following Sunday at the City Temple Church, a translation of his speech was read out by Pole, a role that suggests a high level of visibility and trust. On Saturday 23rd Abdu'l Baha left London for Bristol to stay at the guest house run by Pole's parents.

The guest house in Clifton was regularly advertised in the *Christian Commonwealth*. The Poles did not simply offer bed and breakfast; they seem to have pioneered the concept of themed weekend breaks. Their advertisements point out the delights of the countryside, and add the promise of thought-provoking meetings and interesting company. In fact, each weekend a different speaker was booked to be the highlight of the weekend guests' stay. Less publicised but, doubtless, not the least part of the weekend was a visit to the Oratory, a room at the top of the building where the vessel, found by Wellesley and Kitty Pole, and their two companions, was housed. According to Benham³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the Oratory and blessed the vessel, apparently, and perhaps significantly, in silence. His visit caused the women of the triad to compose prayers for him, which are preserved in the Oratory service book in the Chalice Well Trust archive. It is, therefore, interesting that no mention of this event is made in any Bahá'í publication. The account of the visit to Bristol recorded in *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, signed by Thomas Pole, may hold a clue to this matter.³⁶ Pole mentions that, on the third day of his stay in Bristol, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was joined for breakfast by "a Canon of the Anglican Church." This presumably was Basil Wilberforce, who was a firm supporter of the Oratory and seems to have believed the Vessel was the actual Holy Grail. Two things, which may be entirely coincidental but deserve consideration, emerge. The first is that there was a deliberate policy of silence concerning the visit to the Oratory; the second is that this coincided with the disappearance of Wilberforce, for there is no further mention of him on this visit or the next. The "general reception" attended by about ninety people took place on the Saturday evening. On the following day there driving and walking on the Downs, then 'Abdu'l-Bahá "went over the Guest house and blessed it as a centre for pilgrims from every part of the world, and said it would become indeed a House of Rest."³⁷ This is clearly a reference to the Oratory and the Vessel, although, for anyone unaware of their existence, it would be cryptic and possibly passed off as a rather over-enthusiastic endorsement of a bed and breakfast establishment.

Background 1884 to 1902

Wellesley Pole was born on St. George's Day 1884, in Weston – Super – Mare. He was one of the five children of Thomas Pole and Kate Wansborough. Thomas Pole was an unconventional man involved in Fabian socialism, theosophy and the Garden Cities movement. (Bentham 1993 p53)¹² This latter interest was shared by Sir Patrick Geddes, who would play an important role in the Bahá'í activities in Edinburgh. The children were Mary, Dorothy (who died as a child), Katherine, Wellesley and Alexander. The Pole family were all involved with Spiritualism, all the Poles seem to have been sensitive, but Wellesley and his sister Mary Bruce Wallace were particularly so. The entire Pole family were all heavily involved in communication with spirits; his sister Mary Bruce Wallace got whole books from a family friend "AB," while Wellesley had been aware of his ability to "see prayers" since childhood and would throughout his life be driven by messages from spirits and disincarnate entities.

The Poles were outwardly a respectable middle class family, their esoteric interests were not obvious and they derived their income from the family firm, Chamberlain Pole & Company, Flour, Grain and Cereal Merchants. This ability to compartmentalise their interests and appear stolid members of the strata of society disparagingly referred to as "trade" was something that Wellesley would continue, few who met him in his role as a grain merchant would have dreamt

¹² Ibid., p. 53

he was a visionary, The Pole's only claim to anything other than bourgeois respectability was Kate Wansborough's assertion that she was a descendant of the Welsh royal house of Tudor, in acknowledgment some of her children were christened with the middle name "Tudor", those that weren't later added it to their names. This connection with the blood royal does not seem to have impacted much on Wellesley; however, it did seem to impress Neville Meakin (Osborn, *The Extraordinary Life of Robert Felkin, Baha'i Mage*, 2014) who claimed an even more prestigious royal lineage, when they discussed the Order of the Table Round.

Pole was privately educated at Blundell's in Devon, to say he hated school would be a massive understatement, he would describe it thus "I have gone through many hells, but nothing in comparison with my experiences at school in a dormitory presided over by a brute and a beast and a bully". (Fenge, 2011) Due to problems with finances he did not attend a university, he was required instead to work in the family business and in 1904 at the age of only twenty he became becomes managing director of the family firm, Chamberlain Pole & Co, flour, grain and cereal merchants. His lack of higher education troubled him and thirty years later he wrote:

Whatever happens I do want my children to go out into the world better equipped than I was; for my education (so called) came to an abrupt end when I was seventeen and I was in business before eighteen; and managing director at Bristol at twenty. (Fenge, 2011)

Money would always be an issue for Pole, his business seems to have at least kept him and his family in the style appropriate for their class, but it would seem that on occasions it was a close thing. Pole resented his family's refusal to allow him to be adopted by a rich family friend:

At fourteen, my parents told me that when I was eleven, Robert McVitie had offered to adopt me, educate me in Edinburgh and make me his heir. I knew nothing of this at the time, or I would have cleared off to Edinburgh on my own. A millionaire foster father should not have been discounted. (Fenge, 2011) Letter to Rosamond Lehmann 10.11.66

It is interesting to speculate what he might have achieved as the scion of the McVitie biscuit fortune, had it freed him from the need to work for a living.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper several questions were raised in respect of Pole's relationship with the Baha'i Faith, where did it fit with Pole's wider belief system? Why he was such a dominant figure in the Baha'i Movement and what was his legacy when he ultimately rejected the Baha'i Faith?

The Baha'i Teaching of Progressive Revelation fitted broadly into Pole's belief in teachers from cosmic realms:

I believe that at what may seem to us to be irregular intervals in human time, Saviours and Messengers from cosmic realms descend into our midst to found and inspire what for our level of consciousness appear to be new religions, philosophies and ethical systems of belief and conduct.

Of these great Messengers I believe Jesus, whilst overshadowed by the Being we call the Christ, brought down into human consciousness a larger measure of inspiration and truth than any of his predecessors. (Pole W. T., 1965, p. 20)

Thus Pole clearly states his belief in the primacy of Jesus as a messenger of God, refers only to his predecessors, making no reference to Mohammed, The Bab or Baha'u'llah, all of whom had ministries after Jesus. Pole remained a Christian; however, he was also a committed Baha'i within the context of the Baha'i Movement which he understood to be fully compatible with membership of other religions. What he did not share with those who would go on to join the Baha'i Faith was their understanding of the status of Baha'u'llah as the universal Messenger of God for the Age. He respected and revered both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha but he understood them to be part of a wider spiritual awakening.

The Baha'i Movement fitted perfectly with his pre-existing beliefs, he had discovered the Baha'i Teachings through his Quest, not the other way round. Pole's understanding of the Baha'i teachings as part of a wider resurgence of spirituality meant that he saw no need for any social construction around it consequently he saw no need to join the Baha'i Faith with its Administration and rejection of multiple religious identities.

It is significant that he was not a man who joined organisations, apart from his military commitments he seems to have preferred to be a free agent. He does not seem to have had any strong political affiliations, he actively disliked esoteric orders, although he flirted with The Order of the Table Round, he never joined, he never attempted to develop anything more organised than the Silent Minute, which was something you did rather than joined. There are a few hints that he was uncomfortable with some aspects of the Baha'i community he objected to the "lionising of Abdul Baha" on His visits to the West, he affirms his belief in the importance of Baha'u'llah but insists he is "not a fanatic" implying there are others who might fit such a description.

Until the close of his life he held that Abdu'l Baha was opposed to the development of a new religion, in this he was diametrically opposed to the stance of both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. What is astonishing is that although he never wavered in his belief in Baha'u'llah and Abdul Baha as important spiritual figures or his "conviction that the Baha'i movement has an important part to play in the religious regeneration of the world, and especially the Eastern world." (Pole W. T., 1968) He never made any public criticism of the Baha'i Faith, its leadership or its direction. This must have required a considerable measure of self control, even for Pole who was adept at compartmentalising his life. In his writings he never mentions developments in Baha'i circles after the death of Abdu'l Baha, he recounts his memories of meetings with Abdu'l Baha but always minimises his own role in events and simply offers the address of the Baha'i National Centre as a source of further information.

Pole was indeed held in high esteem by the Baha'i community both in the British Isles and in Haifa. He had been Wilberforce's emissary, Abdu'l Baha's guide in London and host in Bristol, he had been instrumental in saving Abdu'l Baha from the Turks, and he had been given the responsibility of looking after Abdu'l Baha's beloved grandson and of informing him and others of the death of Abdu'l Baha. Pole was totally and unequivocally trusted by Abdu'l Baha and his family, and Pole was fully aware of that trust. Why Pole was so highly regarded may have been derived from his dominant role in the British community which in turn may have arisen from the fact that he was male and considerably younger than most of the predominantly elderly

female community, this, along with his tales of Glastonbury and Constantinople would have made him appear dashing and dynamic; despite his tradesman's background and lack of university education. Pole's war record and OBE would have further enhanced his reputation; however, he does seem to have had contacts and influence beyond that which might be expected from someone of his social class, this might indicate as yet undiscovered connections or simply be the result of his personality.

It is possible that the level of trust, coupled with Pole's Western conception of truth and knowledge of esoteric and Masonic orders which may have been instrumental in his failure to recognise the full implications of the Baha'i teachings or join the Baha'i Faith. For Pole was convinced Abdu'l Baha had been clear, the Baha'i teachings were not meant to start a new religion, in which case, either Shoghi Effendi had got it wrong or Abdu'l Baha had always had a hidden agenda, a big secret. Familiar with concepts such as "hidden knowledge", revealed only when an adept had reached a certain level of development, Pole would not have been shocked if Abdu'l Baha had whispered that he intended to start a new religion at some future time, although he would presumably have rejected it earlier for the same reasons he ultimately rejected it - it did not fit his world view. He would have expected to have been told – because he was in a position of trust. The point was, there was no "Big Secret", that Baha'u'llah was the "Promised One of All Ages", "He Whom God shall make Manifest" was clearly stated by Abdu'l Baha, whilst he was using a technique of gradualism in respect to the organisational implications of a new revelation from God.

Pole's legacy within the Baha'i tradition

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