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Research Note

E.G. Browne and the Making of Iranian Studies: A Conference Summary and Reflection

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Abstract

On the 10th and 11th April 2026, the conference 'E.G. Browne and the Making of Iranian Studies' was held at Pembroke College, Cambridge, to commemorate the centenary of Edward Granville Browne's passing. The conference brought together leading scholars to present recent work on Browne's life and career. This research note attempts to summarise the conference talks, convey a sense of the atmosphere of the conference, and provide some brief reflections on how the study of E.G. Browne can be situated within the wider theme of the Bahá'í Faith and intellectual history.

Introduction

It was brilliant to attend the conference 'E.G. Browne and the Making of Iranian Studies' on the 10th and 11th of April 2026. The speakers demonstrated a deep interest and profound intellectual engagement with the subject – the life and work of Professor Edward Granville Browne, an academic who continues to shape scholarship in Iranian studies today. Unlike some academic events which can be rather unemotional affairs, this conference was fizzing with energy and excitement.

Edward Granville Browne's life-story reveals him to be a rather unique figure. He followed his father's wishes in studying the sciences, obtaining his medical qualifications in 1887. However, study of Arabic and Persian increasingly gained the young Browne's attention. An interest in Sufism then in turn led him to read an account of the religion of the Báb, a topic which would entrance Browne for many years to come, and one to which he devoted much academic study in the early part of his career. In later years, Browne would turn to focus on other topics in Iranian studies, particularly the Persian constitutional movement.

From a Bahá'í perspective, there are many reasons why E.G. Browne's life and work are significant, most notably the fact that he was the only Westerner to meet Bahá'u'lláh. As is well known, this meeting led Browne to write a vivid and detailed 'pen-portrait' of Bahá'u'lláh, which recorded their interview, leaving to posterity Bahá'u'lláh's striking words on the topic of global peace and justice:

> "That all nations shall become one in faith, and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and family".[1]

[1] Quoted in John E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006), p. 46.

As an interesting aside, this utterance held a special resonance for the renowned philosopher and man of letters Alain Locke. In his essay, 'The Gospel for the Twentieth Century', Locke singled out the quotation, introducing it in the following terms:

> The word of God is still insistent, and more emphatic as the human redemption delays and becomes more crucial, and we have what Dr. Esslemont rightly calls Bahá'u'lláh's "one great trumpet-call to humanity": "That all nations shall become one in faith, and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and family".[2]

In addition to Browne's momentous meeting with Bahá'u'lláh, he contributed much to the nascent field of Bábí-Bahá'í studies. His many endeavours in this field included translating 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *A Traveller's Narrative*[3] – an account of Bábí and Bahá'í history, writing a summary-translation of the Báb's lengthy *Persian Bayán* - a work which remains little-studied to this day, and recording his many encounters with Bábís and Bahá'ís in his ethnographic work *A Year Amongst the Persians.*[4] Browne also met with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, writing "About the greatness of this man and his power no one who had seen him could entertain a doubt."[5]

There has been much scholarship on Browne and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, including Hand of the Cause H.M. Balyuzi's book *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*,[6] Sholeh Quinn's chapter 'Babi-Baha'i Books and Believers in E.G. Browne's A Year Amongst the Persians',[7] which discusses Browne's quest to find Bahá'í books and to gain an understanding of Bahá'í beliefs, and Moojan Momen's edited volume *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne on the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions.*[8] While Browne was one of the earliest and most prolific scholars of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, he was not alone among the intellectuals of his time in this interest. The diplomat and orientalist A.L.M. Nicolas translated both the Persian and Arabic Bayán into French and wrote on Bábism and Shaykhism. The Russian orientalist and general Alexander Tumansky had a deep interest in the Bahá'í Faith and translated the Kitáb-i-Aqdas into Russian. This is not to mention Leo Tolstoy who read Bahá'í scripture, exchanged many letters with Bahá'ís and planned to write a book on the Bahá'í Faith.

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2 Alain Locke, 'Alain Locke in His Own Words: Three Essays', *World Order,* 36.3 (2005), pp. 39–42.

3 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bab*, ed. and trans. by E.G. Browne, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891).

4 E.G. Browne, *A Year Amongst the Persians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1893).

5 E.G. Browne, 'Introduction', in Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bab,* ed. and trans. by E.G. Browne (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2004), p. xxxvi.

6 H.M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1970).

7 Sholeh A. Quinn, 'Babi-Baha'i Books and Believers in E.G. Browne's A Year Amongst the Persians', in *The Báb and the Bábí Community of Iran,* ed. by Fereydun Vahman (London: Oneworld Academic, 2020), Ch. 10

8 *Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, ed. by Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987).

Centenary Conference

The conference on the life and work of E.G. Browne was held at Pembroke College, Cambridge. It was proposed by Sholeh Quinn, University of California Merced, and organised by Assef Ashraf of Cambridge University, a specialist in the social and political history of Qajar Iran. The occasion commemorated 100 years since his passing. The conference covered many facets of Browne's life and work. Several of the conference speakers were Bahá'ís and the topic of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths inevitably reappeared many times throughout the conference. Three or so presentations were on specifically Bábí-Bahá'í themes.

Assef Ashraf began the talks with a fantastic overview of E.G. Browne's life and work. Among the many points he noted in his detailed account was that Browne was one of only two or three students in his year who studied the Indian Languages Tripos at Cambridge (which included Persian); that Browne only ever visited Iran once in his life – over the course of a year, which resulted in his famous work *A Year Amongst the Persians*; and that Browne published a total of 55 works on Iranian history and literature. Ashraf made a point of emphasising that throughout his work, Browne was interested in and sympathetic with the heterodox, the rebellious and – as Browne himself put it – 'the underdog'. This motif of Browne's intellectual attraction to the marginalised 'losing side' was a recurring theme throughout many of the presentations in the conference.

Following this introductory talk, there was a presentation on Browne's 'many selves' by Joanna de Groot of York University, exploring Browne's social relationships and positionality in various social roles, including the role of cultural interpreter/mediator. Over the course of the conference, De Groot posed many thought-provoking questions to the speakers in the Q&A sections. Next, Anne-Sophie Gull's paper looked at the use of the concept of 'Oriental Despotism' in the works of Browne and Curzon – the purported association between the East and despotic rule, a racialised concept that has a long history in Western political thought. The talk took us through a detailed analysis of the ways this concept had been used by different authors from Aristotle to Al-Afghani, and inquired into the striking contrasts between Browne and Curzon's usage of this same concept. In the Q&A following these two talks, there was a stimulating discussion regarding whether Browne should be described as conventionally 'orientalist' and to what extent he subverted that category.

Gabrielle van den Berg then offered a presentation on 'The Correspondence between EG Browne and the Dutch Orientalists Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and Michael Jan de Goeje', which was followed by Saghar Sadeghian's paper on 'EG Browne and Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney: Correspondence and the study of the Babi-Baha'i Faiths'. Both talks uncovered new primary sources and brought to light significant intellectual connections and relationships. Sadeghian highlighted how the French lawyer Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney was 'disappointed with the West and had hope for the East', a striking statement that appears to suggest a deeper conviction in the East beyond a mere condescending interest in the study of the exotic. Perhaps Browne would have shared this sentiment.

Dominic Brookshaw and Shaahin Pishbin gave presentations on Browne's writing on Persian literature – discussing his approach to understanding Hafiz and his attitude to 'post-classical Persian literature', respectively. These talks deconstructed the approach Browne took to writing his famous *Literary History of Persia,*[9] addressing themes such as his synthesis of different Persian

[9] E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia,* 4 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

sources, the extent to which we can call Browne a literary critic and the influence of his personal literary tastes on how the literary history was framed.

The first day of the conference ended with Hugh Kennedy's keynote talk, which explored Browne's famous *A Year Amongst the Persians*, in particular focusing on how it can be read as a work of travel literature. This generated a rich discussion on how Browne's work compared to other works by Westerners on Iran from the same period, as well as how Browne was intensely interested in people – people of all social strata and especially religious minorities, such as the Bábís/Bahá'ís.

The second day of the conference began with Deborah Tor's presentation, offering a sustained critique of Browne's account of early Seljuq-Abbasid relations. After this, Sholeh Quinn's talk on Browne and the Safavids examined Browne's historiographical approach. Quinn brought to the fore Browne's laborious work in cataloguing and indexing hundreds of Persian manuscripts, laying the groundwork for future scholars. Quinn also noted a tendency in Browne's history-writing towards a focus on the lives of ordinary people, moving away from traditional emphases on architectural or military history.

Noonik Darbinian gave a fascinating talk, which closely analysed how Armenians were presented in the writings of EG Browne. She spoke of her own first encounter with Browne's works and explored the several different social roles Armenians played in his writing. Anja Pistor-Hatam then examined to what extent it is possible to identify the religious beliefs of certain prominent figures in the early twentieth-century Iranian constitutional movement, who were recorded by some as Bábís.

Following this, Moojan Momen in his presentation argued that Browne's *A Year Amongst the Persians* provides us with an incredibly valuable source in order to understand the extent to which Bahá'í teachings and principles were internalised and practised by ordinary Bahá'ís in their day-to-day lives in the late 19th century, a topic for which there is otherwise very little primary source-material. In the subsequent talk we also heard about Browne's scholarship on religious law, particularly in relation to the Usuli clergy.

Fitzroy Morrissey offered an interesting reading of Browne's ideas on religion in a broader context, noting his openness to interreligious harmony, his drawing on Sufi ideas and the absence of conventional Christian piety in his life and work. This paper stimulated questions in my mind regarding how Browne was impacted by Bábí-Bahá'í writings on themes of the oneness of religion. I also wondered whether Browne's prior attraction to a non-conventional, freethought approach to religious questions predisposed Browne to his interest in the unifying ideas of the Bábí Faith and Sufism to begin with. Interestingly, both Alain Locke and E.G. Browne seemed to have had a background in the Ethical Culture movement before their interest in the Bahá'í Faith – the philosophy of the Ethical Culture movement centred around an emphasis on moral deeds over specific religious dogmas.

To end the conference, Abbas Amanat, author of *Resurrection and Renewal*[10] and *Iran: A Modern History*,[11] offered a keynote talk, which covered many facets of Browne's life and legacy. Amanat emphasised how Browne's *A Year Amongst the Persians* is largely an account of dissenters and the marginalised – it deliberately ignores urban notables. Amanat highlighted how Browne's interest in the Bábí Faith may have been influenced by his uncle's membership of the 'Plymouth Brethren' who believed Christ would return in 1844. Amanat also raised many other interesting topics,

[10] Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[11] Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

including Browne's passion for political reform, critique of imperial powers, involvement in the Constitutional Revolution, and finally the impact of Browne's work on Iranian intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s.

Over the course of the conference, an increasingly detailed picture of Professor Browne started to build in one's mind as one gradually developed a sense of his personality and the 'kind of man' he was. All of the talks were fantastic at bringing his lively, inquisitive and socially and politically unorthodox personality to the fore. As a student of history, I was so grateful to attend and to have had the opportunity to listen to some of the leading figures in Iranian history, literature and Bábí and Bahá'í studies. Everyone at the conference chatted with each other in the breaks in a most friendly atmosphere.

The Q&A sections of the conference were particularly remarkable – everyone enthusiastically chipped in with their ideas and knowledge drawn from their unique academic perspectives, creating a rich texture and atmosphere to the discussion in which one felt that the group was collectively advancing together from the combined force of the ideas of everyone in the room. There were a few other students in attendance. I spoke with two students who were fascinated by everything to do with Middle Eastern history, culture and religion – we spoke about subjects ranging from 14th-century Letterist mysticism to Muslim Spain to magic in the Maghreb. One philosophy and theology student was enthralled by the story of the martyrdom of the Báb and the concept of progressive revelation.

It is highly significant that more than one hundred years after the publication of Browne's scholarship, his work is still being praised and discussed today. Indeed, it is testament to the importance of Browne's work that in the fast-evolving world of the contemporary humanities, a scholar retains such a pivotal place in the field.

Author biography

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