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Judy Whipps  
Grand Valley State University, Whippsj@gvsu.edu

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# The Feminist Pacifism of Emily Greene Balch, Nobel Peace Laureate

JUDY D. WHIPPS

*Emily Greene Balch (1867–1961) was an international peace activist and social reformer who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 for a lifetime of continuous work, primarily with women’s organizations, for the cause of justice. Balch was a founding member of the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom and worked in an unofficial capacity with both the League of Nations and the United Nations. This essay brings Balch’s work as a feminist peace activist into dialogue with contemporary issues, illustrating that the women of the early twentieth century faced many of the same issues that feminist peace activists continue to face today.*

**Keywords:** Balch / feminism / pragmatism / pacifism / World War I / WILPF / anti-imperialism / Woman’s Peace Party

[In] a very real sense [the present war] . . . is a conflict between two conceptions of national policy. The catchwords “democracy” and “imperialism” may be used briefly to indicate the opposing ideas. In every country both are represented . . . and there is strife between them.

—Balch, “The Time to Make Peace,” 1915

We must remember that nothing can be woven out of threads that all run the same way . . . differences as well as likenesses are inevitable, essential, and desirable. An *unchallenged* belief or idea is on the way to death and meaninglessness.

—Balch, Nobel Address, 1948

In 1946, Emily Greene Balch (1867–1961) became the second American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, following in the footsteps of her colleague Jane Addams. Balch received the prize for a lifetime of continuous work for the cause of peace, particularly in her leadership of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), but her reform activism encompassed more than political peace. For Balch, working for peace meant a commitment to gender justice, as well as international economic justice and racial justice. Throughout her long life, Balch pursued a broad spectrum of social reform in three innovative careers, as a founder of a settlement house (1892–1894), as an academic (1896–1918), and as an international advocate for peace working with the League of Nations and the United Nations (work that she began in 1915 and continued until the end of her life in 1961). Many Americans were puzzled when Balch received the

Nobel Prize, not sure who she was or what work she had done to win the award, and today she remains virtually unknown even to feminist thinkers. Yet her work continues to hold an important standard for us as women and as global citizens, particularly in this era of American imperialism.

Balch was a member of the first graduating class of Bryn Mawr in 1889. After graduation, she received a one-year fellowship from Bryn Mawr in 1890 to study economics in France under Emile Levasseur. Her first career was short-lived: in 1892 she co-founded the Denison House, a settlement house in Boston, and served as its first headworker. She returned to academic study in 1894, believing that this was an area where she could be more useful than in settlement work. She studied sociology with Albion W. Small at the University of Chicago and took classes at the Harvard Annex (Radcliff). She returned to Europe in 1895 to study economics for one year in Berlin. During the years studying in France and later in Berlin, she established relationships that would become important in her later international work.

In 1896, Balch was appointed to the faculty at Wellesley College, where she eventually became a professor and chair of economics and social science. In her courses, students studied socialism, labor problems, and immigration issues. For Balch, teaching the young women at Wellesley was part of her commitment to progressive social change, and throughout her teaching career, she continued to work both as an activist and a researcher on community and international issues. She pioneered college-level service-oriented coursework in ways that anticipated Deweyan experiential learning, asking her students to study poverty and slum conditions by going to actual locations or by volunteering at places like Denison House. Much of her research and course offerings centered on issues affecting women and children. As a political economist, she advocated socialist reforms. She considered "the real business of the times" to be "the realization of a more satisfactory economic order. To that problem I had given myself unreservedly from my undergraduate days" (Balch 1972, 77). Although Balch taught Marxist philosophy at Wellesley, she did not consider herself a Marxist, and ceased calling herself a socialist when the term became synonymous with Marxism.

Peace activism for Balch had long been part of her ideal of progress toward social justice, and was a much larger project than just the prevention of war. Throughout their economic and social reform work, Balch and other reformers, such as Jane Addams, understood that militarism and war were antithetical to their goals. Since war threatened the ethic of social cooperation that was the foundation of reform, Balch believed that "no permanent or trustworthy progress could be made in human relations" (Balch 1933, 12) while war loomed as a possibility.

When the hostilities started in Europe in 1914, Balch became involved in the national peace movement, first through round-table meetings with

a small group of Progressive reformers (which led to the formation of the ACLU) and then through the Woman's Peace Party (WPP). Emily Balch was one of 48 American women who attended the 1915 International Congress of Women at The Hague; she went as the representative of the Wellesley branch of the WPP and the Women's Trade Union League of Boston. This conference was truly a ground-breaking moment in women's history. The year before, many of the women had convened to plan a congress on women's suffrage, but in 1915 they came together, in some instances defying the rules of their own warring countries, to discuss ways to end the developing war. Their proposals called for neutral countries like Sweden, Holland, and the United States to sponsor sessions of continuous mediation that could resolve the issues at the heart of the war. These proposals were taken seriously by presidents and prime ministers and were incorporated into President Wilson's famous Fourteen Points speech (1918).

Balch played a key role in the 1915 Congress. She was one of six women who traveled from The Hague Congress to visit the chief statesmen of the warring and neutral countries in Europe, asking for their cooperation in proposed mediation measures. She also edited the proceedings of the Congress in French, German, and English. After returning to the United States, she and Jane Addams consulted with President Wilson several times, delivering the resolutions of the International Congress, and urging Wilson to lead the mediation efforts. Balch, Addams, and Alice Hamilton wrote *Women at The Hague* in an effort to publicize the story of the Congress and to appeal for the support of the U.S public. Balch addressed women specifically: "Never again must women dare to believe that they are without responsibility because they are without power. Public opinion is power; strong and reasonable feeling is power; determination, which is the twin sister of faith or vision, is power" (1915/2003, 47).

Balch advocated international dialogue and negotiation as a member of the unofficial Neutral Conference for Continuous Mediation in Stockholm (1916) after which she returned to the United States and met with President Wilson in an attempt to persuade him to adopt the resolutions of this conference. Later, Balch gathered together various proposals for peace into her 1918 book, *Approaches to the Great Settlement*. Returning to the United States from Europe, she joined the American Union Against Militarism, and became a member of the younger American Neutral Conference Committee. The war radicalized Emily Greene Balch, as she moved into leadership positions in more radical and feminist organizations. She was a founding member of the radical pacifist organization, People's Council of America, and a publisher of *Four Lights: An Adventure in Internationalism*, a publication of the New York City WPP, which saw two of its issues barred from the mail by the U.S. Post Office. Even when America's entry into the war looked imminent after President Wilson broke off all

diplomatic relations with Germany, Balch and her colleagues kept working for peace in a newly formed Emergency Peace Federation. About 50 women, led by Balch, Frances Witherspoon, Mary McDowell, and Elizabeth Glendower Evans took the train to Washington to hold a peace parade and meet, when possible, with the members of congress. A letter from Balch was inserted in the congressional record on 5 April, calling this a "war urged by the President on a reluctant Congress upon the grounds of the most disinterested idealism" (1917/1964). Balch was sitting in the gallery of Congress at about 3 A.M. when they voted for war on 6 April 1917.

Balch's association with the radical peace movement eventually led to the end of her academic career. Although she had taught at Wellesley for nearly twenty years, and was the chair of the Department of Economics and Sociology, in 1918 the board of trustees voted to "postpone" her reappointment, due to her peace activism. In 1919, six months after the war ended, the board voted to terminate her contract, and she found herself at 52 with no means of support. For a short time, in 1918, Balch joined the staff of *The Nation* before heading back to Europe to begin a third career by co-founding the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom.

The women's peace movement was in most cases a feminist movement, explicitly connecting oppressions due to gender, class, and race to militarism and imperialism, and coming under added criticism for making those connections. Balch's brother Francis wrote to her in 1915 that it was "an intensely selfish thing, to inject the women's suffrage issue into the peace question" (Francis Balch 1915), but for Emily Balch women's rights and social justice were inextricably connected through the issue of peace. The media attacks on women who were peace activists were often connected with anti-suffrage opposition. A 1915 letter to the editor of the Rochester, New York, *Post Express* typifies the fervent antifeminism which connected all women's reform work with the "anti-patriotic" peace movement. "The suffrage movement with which Miss Addams has identified herself is closely allied with Feminism and Socialism, both of which stand for doing away with marriage, for absolving the father from all responsibility for the child, for placing the whole burden upon the mother or for putting children in asylums" (Bryant n.d.). Perhaps more damaging to the women's reform work were the concerted attacks by other women, particularly the pro-militaristic Daughters of the American Revolution.

After the war, the women who had met at The Hague reconvened, in an unsuccessful effort to influence the Peace Treaty negotiation. At that Congress in 1919 Balch was appointed the International Secretary-Treasurer of WILPF, responsible for setting up the Geneva headquarters, and establishing relations with the League of Nations after it moved to Geneva. Addams had been elected "Honorary International President" for life after she resigned from active work as the International President. In 1937, two years after Addams's death, WILPF bestowed a similar honor on

Emily Balch, electing her "Honorary International President" for life. She continued her international peace work throughout her long life, actively working to influence the United Nations, and writing and speaking in opposition to McCarthyism and the Cold War.

## **Creating a Woman's Space for Activism and Philosophy**

In the early twentieth century, peace activism in general and WILPF in particular provided what historian Blanche Wiesen Cook called "a women's space" for social justice activism (quoted in Alonso 1993, 262). Prior to World War I, before the recognition of women's right to vote, peace activists devoted their energies to creating ways to exercise international influence. For Emily Balch and other women like her, a women-led peace movement was the natural outcome of lifelong involvement in women-centered organizations.

Balch was a theorist as well as an activist. She envisioned an international process of dialogue between nations within the framework of respect for and understanding of differences. Her deep understanding of pluralism and of the necessity of understanding alternative views grew out her settlement-house work and matured, with peace work, into a global vision. As with many Progressive liberals of her era, she upheld individual freedom in the midst of interdependent community life, and she struggled with the dogmatic and jingoistic post-World War I attitudes prevalent in the United States and Europe. In the decade before World War II, she was critical of the "unthinking obedience" to ideologies that she saw in Europe and even in the United States. She feared the abandonment of liberal individual freedoms for a sense of nationalistic belonging. Fascism was an example, she thought, of the desire for the "happiness of merging self in the community" (quoted in Randall 1964, 326) but was achieved in a way which pushed for conformity and made diversity appear dangerous.

Like Jane Addams, Balch advocated a flexible internationalism that went beyond narrow, divisive nationalism. She believed that people "defined themselves largely through changing relationships with others" (Herman 1973, 173) and that peace could come, not from abstract principles or from legal means, but through shared constructive work on specific international projects. "Cooperation in practical, technical tasks is one of the best ways of learning the indispensable art of getting along with one another" (Balch 1947/1964). Concrete and functional joint efforts diminished the threat of war; to be effective, such efforts must include the diverse voices from the affected groups.

Both Addams and Balch were strong advocates of democracy as a social theory as well as a political strategy. From their settlement days, they understood that social improvement was never done "for" an affected

population, but instead always “with” those in need. Extending the settlement slogan of “With, not For” to international work meant that one country cannot decide what is “good” for another country—all sides must come to the table and contribute toward planning. Carefully listening to multiple perspectives and working with others is the essence of a democratic social ethic, and the basis for international peace. Hegemonic relations, whether they be political, economic, or cultural are at the core of imperialism and are in opposition to democracy. Balch would have found it absurd to enter another country by force in order to install democracy in the way that the United States has done in Iraq. Instead, she would have advocated “a timely and generous renunciation of privilege” for the sake of creating change through “peaceful channels” (Randall 1972, xix).

Balch was ahead of her contemporaries in recognizing the dangers of American policies and business practices. In a 1926 article titled “Economic Imperialism with Special Reference to the United States,” she warned against policies that fostered a “free field for profit makers” in less powerful but “nominally independent peoples” (1972, 142). She said that Americans were “complacently unaware of what is done in our name in inconspicuous but effective ways” (143) in business practices, particularly in Latin American, Samoa, and the Philippines. To counter economic imperialism, she argued for the regulation of trade through international agreements to protect against any one country controlling the assets of another.

As the United States entered the Cold War in the 1950s, she criticized the cultural and mostly unconscious type of imperialism that the United States was then practicing, and the intention to “see to it that the American way of life makes the tour of the globe.” Balch understood that cultural imperialism went along with the effort to “try to force international arrangements that will be profitable for American business.” In 1949 she wrote, “Perhaps America is all the more to be feared because our urge to spread our creed is so largely quite unconscious as well as uncritical” (Balch 1972, 183). Americans, in the 1950s, seemed to Balch to be naive, so sure that the expansion of our values would be good for the world. Balch’s views are applicable to our time no less than to hers.

Balch’s early work in Haiti is an example of her careful and pluralistic international work. Although she had resigned from her post as International Secretary-Treasurer of WILPF in 1922, she continued to travel, write, and organize on WILPF’s behalf, and occasionally took on special research projects. Haiti was one such project. In 1915, the United States signed a treaty with Haiti that gave the United States control over Haiti’s finances and politics for ten years. Two years later, the United States assumed complete military rule over the country and extended the treaty by another ten years. In the mid-1920s Haitian women asked WILPF to investigate the situation there, and African American peace advocates

recommended a commission be appointed to undertake that work. In 1926, the WILPF sent a six-person investigative team headed by Balch that included prominent African American peace activists, Addie Hunton and Charlotte Atwood. The team visit to Haiti was supplemented by intensive study both before and after the visit. The results of this investigation were published in *Occupied Haiti* (1927) edited and mostly written by Balch, with chapters by Hunton and Atwood.

Balch, Hunton, and Atwood were able to look at the situation through the eyes of the Haitians who thought the United States occupation was an "unmixed curse." They came to see how the United States was an occupying force that robbed Haitians of the responsibility of self-government, regardless of the "good" that the Americans thought they were bringing to Haiti in the form of bridges, hospitals and stability (1927/1972). When they returned from Haiti, Balch met with President Coolidge. The memorandum she submitted to the official Hoover Commission was incisive in its critique of racism on the part of Americans in Haiti, particularly on the part of the U.S. military. She insisted on the absolute necessity of understanding and respecting Haiti's heritage and culture. As Balch said, "there are more ways of helping a neighbor who is in trouble than knocking him down and taking possession of his property and family" (1972, 147). The subsequent U.S. policy toward Haiti recommended by Hoover adopted many of the proposals of the WILPF team. Balch also criticized as "irresponsible" what she called "strategic imperialism" represented by the growing network of U.S. strategic military bases, particularly in the Pacific after World War II. She argued that all military bases should be under United Nations international control, and that military processes should take serious account of local civilian functions (Balch 1972, 154). Balch emphasized the interweaving of the concern for peace and the concern for social justice: "I see no chance of social progress apart from fundamental changes on both the economic and the political side, replacing national anarchy by organized cooperation of all peoples to further their common interest, and replacing economic anarchy, based on the search for personal profit, by a great development of the cooperative spirit. Peace is too small a word for this" (quoted in Pois 2004, 233). This early understanding of peace as much more than the elimination of war is echoed in contemporary philosophies of "positive peace" and "just peace."

As she grew older, Balch continued to advocate for pluralistic values, not just in terms of cultural diversity, but also in terms of listening to diverse opinions. During the Cold War, she cautioned Americans against fear and cynicism. She understood that the military buildup in the United States and in the Soviet Union produced fear and suspicion that corroded goodwill and prevented careful thinking and rational judgment. Despairing of many Americans' urge for conformity and their unwillingness to change, she challenged them to continue to think critically about national



policies. She was “taken by surprise . . . most of all by the *hostility to thought* lest it lead to change” (Randall 1964, 432, italics added). She continued to emphasize the importance of education and dialogue, asking Americans to look beyond their national boundaries to understand other countries and other positions. She challenged: “How many of us read papers in a foreign language, or published in other places, or even paper[s] that are organs of other ways than our own? How critically do we react to what is fed to us” (Randall 1964, 378)? Her Nobel lecture in Oslo, urged everyone to “remember that nothing can be woven out of threads that all run the same way. An *unchallenged* belief or idea is on the way to death and meaninglessness” (1948, italics in original).

Balch advocated for the administration of international concerns to be handled by trustees, not by politicians. She proposed the establishment of international work camps to help in reconstruction after the World War II, where young people could work together to restore communities while learning cultural communication. Balch’s idea, in some ways, resembles that behind the John F. Kennedy Peace Corp but with one crucial difference—her insistence that the group be international: “plans put forth by Americans are likely to be too much from an American point of view” (1972, 178) and were often not developed together by those who would be involved in the work.

It is important to see that for all of their philosophies of inclusion, Balch, Addams, and the WILPF have not always lived up to those ideals in terms of racial inclusion. *No Peace Without Freedom: Race and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom*, Joyce Blackwell’s on the history of WILPF, is critical of the League’s failure to integrate African American women and its lack of awareness and concern regarding race issues (2004). At the same time, she notes that the leaders “expended a great deal of energy combating incidents of racial injustice within WILPF,” and that “after a rocky beginning, black and white women developed a relatively amicable working relationship” (2004, 8–9) in the organization, due, in large measure, to the commitment and determination of the black women activists.

## Implications for Contemporary Feminist Peace Work

In recent years, particularly through the work of Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996), these Progressive era women have been reinstated as major figures in the development of classical American pragmatist philosophy. These early progressive feminists understood the individual as radically integrated in community, providing a powerful communitarian critique of the ideal of liberal individualism that posits individuals in competition with each other for their freedoms. Such competitive individualism sets

the stage for militarism; whereas understanding the interdependent nature of the self personally and globally establishes the ground for peace work.

For feminists working in the pragmatist tradition, the reliance on diverse experiences for developing truths and the importance of understanding pluralistic perspectives underscores individual and cultural dependence on relationships with others for meaningful public life. Establishing the conditions that promote these relationships and that lead to a just society, is the basis of a lasting peace.

Pragmatist philosophy assumes a world in the making, a world in process in time, and thus shifts from the static, the complete, and the self-sufficient to the possible and participatory, requiring multiple perspectives. This pluralistic view of reality complements the common-sense practicality of other aspects of pragmatism, and provides a theoretical framework for feminist activism in peace work as well as in social reform work. As early peace workers often pointed out, without moving toward equality, peace is not possible. The ideal of "aspirational democracy" (Minnich 2001) as a social movement was understood by Balch to necessitate the inclusion of many diverse views in nonhierarchical dialogue. As an economist as well as a social scientist, she understood and articulated the need for economic systems that provided the means to equalize not just political power but "equality of actual achievement" (1972, 35) to create the conditions for peace. From the pragmatist perspective of social democracy, Balch and Addams saw the absurdity of President Wilson's claim that it is necessary to engage in war "to make the world safe for democracy." Today, they would point out that the war in Iraq is inimical to the cause of "freedom," "liberty," and "democracy" in the Middle East. As Addams once asked, "was not war in the interest of democracy for the salvation of civilization a contradiction of terms, whoever said it or however often it was repeated?" (Addams 1917/2002, 361).

In 1927 Emily Greene Balch wrote, "How many Americans not only believe, but openly maintain . . . that unthinking obedience is better than action based on individual conscience and thought, that patriotism is synonymous with nationalism . . . that peace is a dream, and not even a beautiful dream" (Randall 1964, 326). Balch's life work was motivated by the desire to make the "dream" of peace into reality through slow, careful international collaboration. She pushed people to think beyond nationalism, to build international communities, to find common ground for mediation, and to work toward equality and representation for all people.

As 21st-century women, we are standing on the shoulders of another generation of female peace activists, often without knowing or acknowledging their influence. Balch's progressive belief in the possibility of moving beyond war is difficult to affirm after a century of war. Yet, faith in the "continual readjusting" that results from empathy, dialogue, and interactive mediation can still be affirmed as a philosophic base for peace work in a time of war.

**Judy D. Whipps** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Liberal Studies Department at Grand Valley State University. Her specialty is feminism and American pragmatism, as well as philosophy of education. She is the co-editor, with Marilyn Fischer, of the four-volume set, *Jane Addams's Writings on Peace*. Send correspondence to WhippsJ@gvsu.edu.

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