Emily Greene Balch

The Holy Fire

Emily Greene Balch (1866-1961) joined the Society of Friends in 1920 in Geneva. For many years she was on the foreign membership list of London Yearly Meeting, and in 1946 she transferred her membership to Friends Meeting at Cambridge, Massachusetts. That same year Emily received the Nobel Peace Prize. For more than forty years from its founding in 1919, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was the major focus of Emily's life. It is alive today with a national office in Philadelphia and an international office in Geneva. These excerpts from Mercedes M. Randall's biography of Emily Balch describe a lifetime marked by patience, courage, modesty, reconciliation, and originality, but infused with conviction. "War," Emily observed, "is as obsolete as chain armour."

Edited by Gay Robertson, member of the Wider Quaker Fellowship.

Emily Greene Balch began her life as a citizen of the world with roots planted deep in New England. A descendent of 17th century immigrants to the New World, she was born and raised in mid-19th century Boston, nurtured within the circle of a large, closely-knit Unitarian family.

Emily remembered her mother, Ellen Maria Noyes, as a woman who had

> not only humor but wit, and a gift for words . . . She did not spoil us but was as tonic as she was warmly devoted. A tumble was met not with sympathy but with "Jump and take another, dear."

Emily's father, Francis Vergnies Balch, was described by a colleague as "not an advocate and not a fighter. It was not in his nature to fight. It was his nature, however, to be and act the part of a peace-maker. . . ."

Mercedes M. Randall writes, "The New England mind formed the air she breathed. Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes were still living and writing while Emily was growing up, aptly quoted in every household." Emily herself remembered

> the whole atmosphere was permeated by what you might call Neo-Puritanism without its rigors, narrowness or introspection, but colored and controlled through and through by complete acceptance of the rule of conscience and by a warm and generous sense of the call to service.

As a child, Emily Balch attended Unitarian services with her family. Chief among her early influences was a Unitarian minister, Charles Fletcher Dole, whose

> warm faith in the force that makes for righteousness and the challenge of his whole conception of Right commanded my allegiance . . . He asked us to enlist . . . without limitations or any holdings back, in the service of goodness, and to determine, so far as in us lay, to meet the demands of this service whatever its

> cost. In accepting this self-pledge . . . I consciously dedicated myself as genuinely as a nun taking her vows. . . .

A distinguished student with a decided talent for languages, Emily chose to go to college at a time "when to do so was to feel oneself a marked character in the neighborhood. . . ." She planned with a close schoolmate to attend the Harvard Annex (Radcliffe), but her friend's father, a professor at Harvard, refused permission for his daughter to go "on the ground that he was not willing to have it known among his Cambridge friends that he was disgraced by having a daughter at college." He later consented to Bryn Mawr College, since it was further away.

Emily studied literature at Bryn Mawr but switched to economics in her senior year. She had decided that to devote herself to literature would be "pure self-indulgence . . . Social compunction was in the air . . . I felt that this was no time for 'idle singers of an empty day' but for efforts to study and better conditions."

She was awarded the first Bryn Mawr Fellowship for European Study (1889) and did a year of graduate work in France, studying social conditions and public charity. Pouring over statistics texts and charity rolls, she began to wonder if she wasn't wasting her time. "Should I be better employed," she wrote home, "studying . . . some theoretical question or something practical?"

Before the year was over, Emily decided upon the latter. Back in Boston, she immersed herself in some of the earliest attempts at organized social work. In 1892, she co-founded the Denison Settlement House. Through her work there, especially during the Panic of 1893, she gained her first intimate acquaintance with the focal point of her graduate work, the desperately poor.

In her late twenties, Emily Balch turned from field social work to college teaching.

> I gradually became dissatisfied with my philanthropic efforts and decided that the point of leverage was in teaching social-economic subjects . . . (I)f I could awaken the desire of women students to work for social betterment and could help them to find the best methods worked out at that time, my efforts however feeble would at least mean getting hold of the long arm of the lever.

A diary entry from that time reads,

> Now my path seems pretty well made out in so far as that it lies in the domain of study and teaching in the department of social science. All the questions of unfairly large consumption of world wealth, of dependence and of compromise still puzzle me.

In 1896, she took a position at Wellesley College and began a teaching career lasting more than twenty years.

Emily Balch taught economics and sociology, eventually heading her department at Wellesley. She represented a new type of college teacher. With her involvement in philanthropy, labor movements, and social reform, she was actually a part of what she was trying to teach. It was like taking a course in poetry not with a professor of English Literature but with an Auden, a Frost, or a C. Day Lewis.

Emily was in a certain sense not a good teacher. She herself knew that she was absent-minded and un-systematic. With a multiplicity of civic duties, with her college courses covering too wide and too various a field, she often overlooked some of the mechanical details of teaching.

> A former student recalls Professor Balch . . . dashing into the classroom at the last minute, loaded down with all sorts of papers . . . even heavy reference books. Often she would forget to return our examination papers, and the required reading in the reference books would also slip her mind.

Nevertheless, her teaching was valued for its "firsthand, non-academic quality which attracted and stimulated students."

Emily was deeply disturbed by entrenched social conditions as well as events unfolding in the dawn of the twentieth century. An evening's discussion of Tolstoi's ideas led her to write in her journal,

> I felt the fire of . . . renunciation . . . burning in my spirit. For the moment it seemed to me that everything but the literal acceptance of absolute personal poverty was compromise, was refusal. But I see . . . that for us in this age this is not true . . . (I)t is not that we are called to do less, love less, or to less completely make our whole life and all its circumstances instruments of our love . . . Incapable of the hard simple literal renunciation, we are yet faced with the call to keep as resolute and fervent, as simple and direct in a voluntarily continued tangle and wealth of distractions.

She continues,

> There is, I well know it, no saint-hood for me – not on any conceivably approachable plane of my being, not for eons of spirit, but it is up to me now and . . . every day to keep on trying to see how I can be of use, how I can live nearer to God, nearer to other people, not in a puritanical self-discipline but trying honestly and hard to learn, to curb, and to spur, to feel after the light. . . .

Emily's words expressed her growing unity with the Quaker philosophy she first encountered at Bryn Mawr.

> She (had) attended Quaker meeting at neighboring Haverford and during the silences, as she listened to the sound of squirrels pattering on the roof, she thought deeply and felt herself drawn to the Quaker form of worship, its creedless faith, and its testimony for peace.

In 1920, she became a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Later she wrote, "I have found in my Quaker membership a constant rebuke and challenge and support."

Despite times of restlessness, Emily made a niche for herself at Wellesley. Her pioneering academic work in sociology and her support with students earned her great respect. "Had not 1914 burst on the world, (she) would doubtless have taught on at Wellesley, and in due course retired in the thirties, laden with academic honors and honorary degrees." Instead, her growing pacifist convictions led to the loss of her professorship at a time when academic freedom was drowning in a wave of patriotic fervor sweeping the United States.

She had taken a year's sabbatical and a second year's leave of absence without pay in order to work with peace organizations forming in New York City. She had come to feel that

> the most effective work for a better social and economic system was first to get rid of the overhanging threat of war, and that until this was out of the way no permanent or trustworthy progress could be made in human relations.

In 1918, Emily Balch's existing appointment at Wellesley expired and was not renewed. She wrote,

> Much as I grieved that the well-known liberality of Wellesley College should have been overstrained by me, I could not be surprised . . . This left me at fifty-two with my professional life cut short and no particular prospects.

As her increasing involvement in peace organizations led her inexorably towards this difficult rejection, Emily was unconsciously sowing the fertile seeds of her most significant life work. In April, 1915, she attended the first International Congress of Women out of which grew the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Through this organization, her accomplishments as a peace worker took shape.

The Hague Congress of Women brought together over a thousand women of many nationalities during the height of European hostilities. It was called by European suffrage leaders who felt that in time of war, women should meet to show solidarity and maintain friendship. The American delegation was headed by esteemed social worker Jane Addams. Forty delegates sailed to Holland on the ocean liner *Noordam,* which flew a fragile homemade banner bearing the word "Peace."

Here Emily began her close association with Jane Addams and cemented many important relationships with European as well as American peace workers. Most significantly, she found unity of purpose on an international scale. Of this experience she wrote,

> What stands out most strongly among all my impressions of those thrilling and strained days at the Hague is the sense of wonder at the beautiful spirit of the brave, self-controlled women who dared ridicule and every sort of difficulty to express a passionate human sympathy, not inconsistent with patriotism, but transcending it.

Emily Balch was elected by the International Congress as one of a small delegation visiting European capitals to attempt mediation. They formed

> a handful of women seeking peace, not in the name of governments, but as unofficial spokesmen for millions of deeply sorrowing men, women, and children. At a time when the foreign offices of the great belligerants were barred to each other . . . these women went from captial to capital conferring with the civil governments.

Emily recalled, "For one brief accidental episode of my life, I consorted with men in the seats of power."

The delegation returned to the United States and met with President Woodrow Wilson to communicate their experiences in Europe. In response to the delegation's proposal that the United States lead a conference of neutral countries in

immediate and continous mediation, Wilson was political: "My heart is with (the pacifists), but my mind has a contempt for them. I want peace, but I know how to get it, and they do not."

Emily Balch and her fellow peace workers continued their untiring efforts in the United States despite the strain of contempt and almost universal disapproval. Of this time, Emily wrote,

> It is a hard thing to stand against the surge of war feeling, against the endlessly reiterated suggestion of every printed word, of the carefully edited news, of posters, parades, songs, speeches, sermons.

She recalled an incident in which soldiers painted the office door yellow and drummed heels on the corrugated-iron roof of the hall where the women were trying to hear their speakers. The disapproval of her own family was the most difficult to bear. She read in a relative's letter: "Of course I don't know at all what you are doing. I live in uneasy suspense." Another wrote,

> I have felt so bitterly . . . about your activities that I just didn't dare write (before) . . . I have known all the time that you acted from the highest principle. It only seemed to me that you assume all the world is as good as yourself and that you are easily deceived. . . .

In 1919, Emily Balch was elected International Secretary-Treasurer of the WILPF. In this and other leadership capacities, she travelled throughout Europe and the United States as a committed internationlist. She worked with constant dedication through the uneasy decades of peace, through the Second World War, and well into the 1950s, her ninth decade of life. She devoted her fine mind

> to reorganizing international society and to working out ways of eliminating specific and remediable evils

> in the international and social order . . . educating large numbers of Americans, notably women, to this point of view.

* * *

As she appeared during these active years, Emily Greene Balch was

> tall, unstooped, angular, with a fragility that denied her wiry tenacity . . . Her gaze was calm, direct, her grey-blue eyes keen, observant, quizzical, kindly. She had the impersonal air, the gracious aloofness, the dignity of a woman immersed in great affairs.

Emily recalled that her ideal was to dress in such a style as to be free from any differentiation of social class. A sister claimed that she wanted to dress so that anyone might suppose she was the cook. "At one period when she was tempted to engage in 'dress reform' she decided that since she was already a pacifist, she had better 'economize on queerness.' "

Emily struggled to balance her many commitments with the rest and introspection she needed in order to fulfill them. "It does seem such bad management of one's life," she wrote, "to work along not quite fit, never at one's best – as it were running a little way and then sitting down – and then running a little further." She sometimes suffered periods of depression. "It would be nice to know what causes these states . . . but at any rate I need not give way to them."

Her sense of unity with the world, embracing nature as well as human life, helped sustain her. Diary excerpts from these years read,

> I saw something amazing the other day. It was a leaf. I could not understand it at all but I could wonder at it. I never stop being surprised.

> The haze of spring. The frogs' pipings like a peal of small bells in the distance. The strange, sweet, vague, intolerable language of the spring woods, asking one knows not what.

> I tried today to interrupt my occupiedness, my sense of duties and busyness, to free and open myself – such a creaking and dust choked door to open – I have not succeeded, yet it is something to be beginning once more to try to live not only in the ordinary dimensions but also, in however a degree, in that other dimension which we call God.

Her spirituality found expression and support in the Quaker faith. A letter written to Jane Addams stated,

> What is central to Friends is central to me – the wish to listen as it were, to understand and receive as much as we can and to try to live out as far as we can, all that one has of enlightenment. . . .

When World War II broke out, Emily struggled to reconcile her pacifist beliefs with her inability to see an alternative to armed conflict.

> Hitlerism seemed to her a kind of menace which must be stopped . . . She felt it was such a threat to every human value, that is was imperative to stop it even if there was absolutely no other way possible than by a weapon so hideous as war.

Emily wrote in 1939,

> I went through a long and painful struggle, and never felt that I had reached a clear and consistent conclusion . . . I thus lost the respect of my many 'absolutist' pacifist friends. That of the military-minded I neither had nor desired.

Later, she added,

> I do not claim that I am consistent. I do not know how to be in the face of irresistable motives pulling in opposite directions. I have no ill will to anyone. War seems to me as bad as it has always seemed. I live largely in thoughts of the world after the war for which preparation must begin now.

So Emily Balch continued her work. When the atomic bombs were dropped in Japan, she "realized imaginatively what the consequences of this act were to be day after day, year

after year, minute after minute, for every man, woman, child, and nation in the world." She grieved, but she did not despair. A letter to a friend advised, "One must not multiply pain by being too good a *conductor* of it."

After 1945, she worked ever more diligently towards realization of true international cooperation. "I have not the feeling that our efforts have been unreasonable," she wrote. "On the contrary . . . the trend of development runs obviously and unmistakably toward the end that we have sought – a planetary civilization."

> The Nobel Peace Prize of 1946 was an unexpected honor. There was much curiosity and interest, much pleasure and in some quarters wonderment . . . In honoring people like Emily Balch . . . the Nobel Committee was giving recognition to . . . all the unofficial and voluntary workers for peace throughout the world.

The Chair of the Nobel Committee articulated Emily's greatest gift to the peace movement: "She has shown us . . . that one does not become exhausted and that defeat gives new courage to those who have within them the holy fire."

Emily Balch's later years were devoted to continuing work with WILPF and to her role as mentor for a new generation of women working for peace. She recognized that

> there are long years yet ahead and fresh generations may grow up undistressed by preparations for fighting and therefore freer to develop a juster, more reasonable and kinder world than we have known.

Her advice contained pragmatism as well as hope:

> I do not want to be a Pollyanna or refuse to face squarely all the realities – as well as the hobgoblin fears – but I do feel a great hope that world history is passing a critical point: that the age-old dream of a world peace, instead of proving an irridescent Utopia is beginning to be seen as the hardest kind of com-

mon sense, both practicable and an absolute necessity.

Shortly before her death in 1961, Emily Greene Balch wrote

> I am bringing my days to a close in a world still hag-ridden by the thought of war, and it is not given to us in this atomic world to know how things will turn out. But when I reflect on the enormous changes that I have seen myself and the amazing resiliency and resourcefulness of mankind, how can I fail to be of good courage?

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