Balch, Emily Greene (1867–1961)

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Feminist pragmatist, social settlement leader, and Nobel laureate, Emily Greene Balch was a world leader with an innovative intellectual and political legacy. She is one of the most important female sociologists of the early years of the discipline. From 1897 to 1919, she taught sociology at Wellesley College and devoted the rest of her life to world peace.

Balch was born in 1867, in Boston, a descendant of distinguished American ancestors. Her father, Francis Vernies Balch, was a notable lawyer, and her mother, Ellen Maria Noyes, came from an affectionate, large family. Emily’s mother died when she was 17, and she then turned primarily to her father. Balch graduated in 1889 from Bryn Mawr College in its first matriculated class and received its highest academic honor, the Bryn Mawr Fellowship for European Study. Balch began a close friendship with Jane Addams in 1892 at the Summer School of Applied Ethics at Plymouth, Massachusetts. With Helena Dudley, a college classmate, Balch cofounded a social settlement in Boston, Denison House, in 1892.

Balch joined the faculty at Wellesley College in 1897 and taught courses in socialism, statistics, social economics, labor, and sociology. She became a feminist pragmatist, advocating democracy and education to help form an articulate citizenry with equal rights and opportunities for all. Her most significant book was Our Slavic Fellow Citizen, the first major sociological analysis of immigration, based on her rigorous field studies. She spent 1905 studying emigration in Austria-Hungary and a year visiting Slavic colonies across the United States. She compared the lives of people in Europe with those of immigrants in the United States. This provided excellent preparation for working with different ethnic groups during and after World War I.

In 1915, Balch, Addams, and Alice Hamilton led a worldwide delegation of women to organize for peace through the International Congress of Women (ICW). Following a wartime meeting with almost 2,000 women, they published Women at The Hague. They also met with heads of state, including war nations, to plead for peace.

From 1916 to 1917, Balch took a sabbatical from Wellesley and extended it the following year, while her pacifism and employability were debated at the college. In 1918, she published a pacifist volume, Approaches to the Great Settlement. Balch increasingly became the target of virulent attacks after the armistice in November 1918. In 1919, Balch was fired for her radical politics and pacifism: After 20 years
of exemplary teaching and scholarship, at 52 years of age, her academic career was over.

A “Red Scare” in 1919 decreed that Addams and Balch were the “two most dangerous people in America,” and their names topped a long list of government “conspirators.” They were ostracized into the late 1920s, a financially harsh period for Balch.

The ICW met again in 1919 and formed the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Balch became its international secretary-treasurer and dedicated the rest of her life to its message of peace. She edited the organization's congress reports for 1919, 1921, and 1924. In 1927, as the leader of a delegation selected by WILPF, she edited and largely wrote Occupied Haiti. Its forceful, reasonable arguments led to their adoption by President Herbert Hoover in 1930, including the withdrawal of American military forces from Haiti. Balch was elected cochair of WILPF in 1929.

Balch worked closely with the League of Nations as well as its subsequent organization, the United Nations, as a citizen and WILPF representative. Many of her writings on peace were compiled in Beyond Nationalism, but their contextual, organizational networks were never analyzed. Balch lived intermittently in Geneva, Switzerland, from 1920 to 1939, where she labored on behalf of all these organizations. In July 1937, Balch succeeded Addams as honorary international president of WILPF, and her work was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. She died peacefully on January 9, 1961, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

See also
Addams, Jane; Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

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