

Elihu Burritt's Nineteenth Century Peace Education Efforts.

Charles F. Howlett
Molloy College

A self-taught blacksmith by trade who developed some of the most innovative forms of peace education in the nineteenth century. Burritt's peace adventures took place in the arena of international affairs rather than the classroom. He wrote numerous peace pamphlets and delivered hundreds of speeches that focused on gaining the support of the working masses for world peace and goodwill. He was the founder of the most famous nonsectarian peace organization in the United States, the League of Universal Brotherhood.

Historians and peace educators have referred to Elihu Burritt as the hero of the anti-war movement of the nineteenth century. What made his peace education efforts so remarkable is that he distanced himself from the elitist, middle class bias of those involved in the establishment of an organized peace movement prior to the American Civil War. As noted by the eminent peace historian Merle Curti, the early leaders of the organized peace movement were notable citizens. Many were preachers, lawyers, merchants, and public servants. Personally conservative in both taste and politics, the vast majority were "Congregationalist and Unitarian gentlemen accustomed to social deference and committed to moral improvement through gradual enlightenment." Nevertheless, in placing their appeals for peace, not war, on persuasion and reason, their "middle-class prejudices and practicality...blinded them to many of the economic causes of war, which they seldom appreciated even in broad outline." (Curti, *Peace or War*, 34-35). It would take a more radically inclined pacifist, one not born into privilege or wealth, to challenge the status quo and use new propaganda techniques to educate the working classes as to the necessity of world peace. That person, appropriately labeled "The Learned Blacksmith" by Curti was Burritt.

Born on December 8, 1810, in New Britain, Connecticut, Burritt was the son of an eccentric shoemaker and farmer. Borrowing his mother's deep religious convictions, he learned the art of self-denial and wholehearted devotion to the ideal of service. Burritt was brilliant and precocious and he delighted in reading Biblical allegories and rereading the small number of religious books and historical studies in the parish church's library. It was a shame when his father's death curtailed his education, rudimentary as it was. Forced to find work to help his family, Burritt became an apprentice to the village's blacksmith. His love for learning was not to be deterred. While his arms were occupied with hammer and anvil at the forge, his eyes and mind were trained on memorizing Latin and Greek verbs. The Panic of 1837 practically wiped out his meager savings. Leaving his native village, he moved to Worcester, Massachusetts. For a time he worked as a blacksmith and then took some time off to pursue the study of additional languages. Before long, he mastered some thirty languages, including French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Hebrew, several from Asia, Chaldaic, Samaritan, and Ethiopic. Learning these languages broadened his understanding and appreciation for other cultures and convinced him that the crusade for world peace was his most challenging educational endeavor.

Although lacking formal learning, Burritt, nonetheless, anticipated many of the important goals shaping peace studies curriculums in the twentieth century. As noted by peace educator Monish Bajaj, the foundation of peace education "is rooted in the early nineteenth century" but "emerged primarily during the post-World War II era...." (Bajaj, 1). To a considerable extent, it was Burritt who popularized the following ideas well before the emergence of the discipline of peace education became accepted in the mid-twentieth century: (1) peace literature that appealed to the common people; (2) a focus on internationalism employing the goals of arbitration and mediation; (3) a peace education program pointing out how militarism and navalism was

counterproductive to the laboring masses and that patriotism and nationalism are used by those in government to justify positions of power; (4) building goodwill among peoples from other nations through letters, community exchanges, and visits; (5) emphasizing the positive effects of peace in terms of trade and prosperity while also stressing that wholesale bloodshed with ruinous to property and would lead to financial deficits like inflation, public debt, and excessive profits; and (6) making the general public aware that they can exercise their voting privileges to elect to high office those who support peace. Burritt was also one of the few men in the male-dominated peace movement who encouraged the participation of women. From temperance circles, he adopted the idea of a pledge of complete abstinence from every possible form of war that became the basis for his own nonsectarian peace organization, League of Universal Brotherhood. He helped organize women's peace societies in order to empower them in the cause and because he believed, they were well suited as teachers of the young. The Olive Leaf Circles he established witnessed women raising thousands of dollars for international peace work. Burritt expended his greatest energies urging the working classes in America and abroad to overthrow the yoke of war's burden on them despite "the romance of chivalry, and many martial songs of military glory...." Conscious of war's brutalizing effects, Burritt added that the "workingmen of Christendom" must use the written word and educate themselves and others in order to put an end to "such pretentious valuations upon their earthly possibilities as to believe they are worth more for producing food for man and beast, than for feeding with their own flesh and blood the hungry maws of mortar and *mitrailleuses* on fields of human slaughter" (Quoted in Weinberg, 344).

Burritt's efforts at promoting peace coincided with the expanding system of education in antebellum America. In a newly established democratic, progressive nation, an educated populace was considered essential. Education was useful in an emerging industrial society—a vital instrument for arousing the hopes of the poor and allaying the fears of the well-to-do. To social reformers, like Burritt, education offered the hope that learned people would adopt their ideas for change. To the underprivileged, it meant the chance to rise while also precluding prospects for violent revolution. In Burritt's case, the best clientele to reach out to in order to secure world peace was the working classes. He once told the noted poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that he preferred "to stand in the ranks of the workingmen of New England, and beckon them onward and upward...to the full stature of intellectual men" (Quoted in Curti, *The Learned Blacksmith*, 5). He was the first American peace reformer to directly link labor with efforts to end war. He realized that "there was something to live for besides the mere gratification of a desire to learn—that here were words to be spoken with the living tongue and earnest heart for great principles of truth and righteousness" (Curti, *The Learned Blacksmith*, 7). Those "great principles of truth and righteousness" were necessary for pointing out the economic injustices leading to war and oppression. If education addressed matters of peace and war, Burritt insisted, than the elite composition of the early nineteenth century peace societies would be forced to recognize the economic causes of war rather than the age-old simple reliance on society's moral shortcomings.

Burritt was steadfast in his complete rejection of war. He was also universal in his organizing and public education attempts to bridge class lines by reaching out to the working class as well as the literate members of the middle class. He railed against war on both economic and religious lines. His first attempt to educate the public regarding world peace was in the form of a newspaper. Though never sure where his next dollar would come from, Burritt founded a weekly newspaper, the *Christian Citizen*, in 1844 at Worcester. His newspaper was devoted to explaining how to awaken the Christian conscience through readings on world peace and economic justice. War is the "sin of sins" and true social reform would not be feasible until Christianity abolished its "unnatural, ungodly wedlock with...the fiendish spirit of War." (Quoted in DeBenedetti, 48). His economic arguments were also compelling. If industrialism threatened American workers with regimentation, slums, and depravity, weekly columns opined, then it was even more alarming to

witness business owners, the courts, and even state militias resisting worker attempt to organize—all under the ruse of law and order. His weekly also inspired British laborites and pacifists to send across the Atlantic their views in the interests of peace and justice. However, his foray into international pacifist publishing eventually dragged him deeply into debt before he was forced to abandon it in 1851.

During the same period he financed his own weekly, Burritt also served as editor of the American Peace Society's organ *Advocate of Peace and Universal Brotherhood*. In this capacity, he constantly barraged the U.S. Congress with peace propaganda during the Oregon Boundary dispute between Great Britain and the United States. Fear of another war with England prompted Burritt to undertake one of the most innovative educational programs of that time. Cooperating with members of the Society of Friends and other peace activists in England, Burritt initiated an exchange of "Friendly Addresses" between British and American cities—pairing up "sister cities"—merchants, ministers, laborers, and women. It resulted in one of the most striking responses from the British Association for Promoting the Political and Social Improvement of the People. The response called upon the American working class not to be "seduced" into a war, which would enrich the "aristocracy, our enemies and yours." (Quoted in Curti, *Peace or War*, 38). Burritt, himself, carried two "Friendly Addresses"—with impressive lists of signatures—one from Edinburgh, Scotland and another from women of Exeter, England to Washington, D.C. Former vice president and South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun, along with other U.S. senators, applauded this "popular handshaking" across the Atlantic. In addition, as a means of furthering peace education and international goodwill Burritt established an exchange program whereby people from both England and the U.S. could live in each other's country for a period. It predated many of the current student exchange programs currently in existence.

The establishment of the League of Universal Brotherhood was Burritt most notable contribution to peace education. While encouraging schools and educators to teach children the importance of international peace rather than the glories of militarization, Burritt took his message to the masses, especially the laboring class lacking formal educational training. "I must again refer to an aspect of this universal education of the masses which is too generally overlooked..." he noted. "If the common labouring men of the country should by dint of self-cultivation, reach...the level of intelligence on which the middle class stand to-day, what must happen? Why, this, almost inevitably—the two classes would fuse into one...[and] they would stand on the same footing of knowledge and virtue" (Burritt, *Lectures and Speeches*, 296). The League became the largest and most uncompromising nonsectarian peace education organization yet known to Western peace advocates. By 1850, this world peace education society had close to seventy thousand British and American signatures to its pledge of complete disavowal of war. The League's pledge was ambitious and went beyond the call to abolish war forever: "Long after nations shall have been taught to war no more, long after the mere iron fetters shall have been stricken from the limbs of every last slave, and every visible yoke shall have been broken, and every formal bastille of oppression leveled with the ground, there will be work for the League." (Quoted in Cooney & Michalowski, eds, 28). The League also condemned slavery and promoted human solidarity among people of all races and classes.

Burritt's league was an educational exercise in "people diplomacy." A modern communicator, Burritt and the league sponsored "The Olive Leaf Mission," through which educational peace messages were inserted in forty continental newspapers as well as presses in the United States. While lobbying for adoption of a one cent postage as a cheap way for maintaining and fostering transoceanic goodwill, Burritt insisted that the "mission" was "the cheapest and most effective agency that could be possibly adopted, not only for disseminating most widely among, but for impressing most deeply those ideas upon, the masses of the people..." (Burritt, 310). Through the enlistment of noted writers and educators, the "Olive Leaves" included compelling peace statements that reached some one million readers monthly between 1850 and 1856.

As a self-taught, practical peace educator, Burritt also set up a workingman's parliament. The strength of Burritt's peace education proposals lay in his ability to garner the attention of the working classes. After organizing the Brussels Peace Congress in 1848, which inaugurated a series of meetings held in following years at Paris, Frankfurt, London, Manchester, and Edinburgh, focusing on educational awareness to creating a Court of Nations and disarmament, Burritt called upon workers to organize behind the banner of peace. Although he received considerable praise from many middle class humanitarians and social reformers, Burritt appreciated far more than others in the peace movement, the crucial importance workers could play in the anti-war movement. He often pointed out the financial burdens workers suffered from militarism and navalism. In his 1847 pamphlet, *A Way-Word to the Working Men of Christendom*, he implored American workingmen to band together and elect officials supporting the cause of peace: "Working men of the United States! Voters of a Young republic! What example will you set at the polls to the hardworking myriads of your brethren in the Old World who lack your right of suffrage to enthrone the sanguinary monster, War!" Then he added, "Shall your great officers of the nation 'be peace,' and your exactors, righteousness? Or shall garments rolled in blood, and fiendish feats of human butchery, qualify your candidate for the highest honor within the nation's gift?" (Quoted in Curti, *Learned Blacksmith*, 37).

For Burritt his "parliament" was the classroom where workers from both sides of the Atlantic could exchange views and ideas related to industrial wealth and military armaments. It was through this "parliament" that Burritt first initiated plans calling for an organized strike against a threatened war. Radical for its time, his idea was promoted before Marx and Engels published their famous *Communist Manifesto*.

Until his death on March 6, 1879, Burritt was the most popular peace hero in nineteenth century America. During the Civil War, he urged the utilization of the public domain for compensated emancipation to stop the bloodshed while supporting the emancipation of slaves. A steadfast international peace educator and worker, Burritt developed many innovative propaganda techniques as teaching measures to counteract the martial spirit. The "Friendly Addresses," promotion of "sister cities" and community exchanges, the "Olives Leaf Missions," League of Universal Brotherhood, a workingman's parliament, and his numerous pamphlets and speeches are some of the best examples or the origins of peace education the nineteenth century world had witnessed.

Works Cited:

- Bajaj, Monisha, ed. (2008). *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Burritt, Elihu. (1869). *Lectures and Speeches*. London: Sampson, Low, Son & Marston.
- Curti, Merle. (1937). *The Learned Blacksmith: Te Letters and Journals of Elihu Burritt*. New York: Wilson-Erickson.
- _____. (1936). *Peace or War: The American Struggle, 1636-1936*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Cooney, Robert and Michalowski, Helen, eds. (1987). *The Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- DeBenedetti, Charles. (1980). *The Peace Reform in American History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Weinberg, Arthur and Leila, eds. (1963). *Instead of Violence*. Boston: Beacon Press.

References:

- Allen, Devere. (1930). *The Fight for Peace*. New York: Macmillan & Co.

- Beales, A.F.C. (1931). *The History of Peace*. New York: Dial Press.
- Brock, Peter. (1968). *Pacifism in the United States from the Colonial Era to the First World War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chatfield, Charles. (1992). *The American peace Movement: Ideals and Activism*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Cortright, David. (2008). *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Curti, Merle. (1929). *The American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860*. Durham, NC: Duke University press.
- Ekirch, Arthur A., Jr. (1956). *The Civilian and the Military*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Howlett, Charles F. and Lieberman, Robbie. (2008). *A History of the American Peace Movement from Colonial Times to the Present*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Tolis, Peter. (1968). *Elihu Burritt: Crusader for Brotherhood*. Hamden, Conn: Shoestring Press.
- Zeigler, Valerie. (1992). *The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.