



Lecture 1920

William Penn

*Heros  
in  
Peace*

*John Haynes Holmes*

William Penn Lecture 1920

## Heroes in Peace

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by  
John Haynes Holmes

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The name of William Penn has been chosen because he was a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring “to live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed,” that these might become the laws and habits of the State.

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## Heroes in Peace

In an essay published some years ago on Thomas Carlyle's famous book, *Heroes and Hero Worship*, Prof. MacMechan, a well-known student of literature in England, makes the following observation: "In 1840, 'hero' meant, most probably, to nine Englishmen out of every ten, a general officer who had served in the Peninsula, or taken part in the last great fight with Napoleon, and who dined year after year with the Duke at Apsley House on the anniversary of Waterloo. To most people 'hero' means simply 'soldier,' and implies a human soul greatly daring and greatly enduring."

What Prof. MacMechan here tells us about the Englishman of 1840 is equally true of the Englishman of today—is true, indeed, of all peoples in all ages of history. Heroism has nearly always been taken to imply physical courage; physical courage has always found its most terrible and dramatic expression in warfare; and, therefore, by a natural association of ideas, the hero has come to be identified with the soldier. When we think of heroes, we almost instinctively find ourselves thinking of armored champions of Greece and Rome, who were helped to immortality by Plutarch, whom Emerson calls "the doctor and historian of heroism"; of King Arthur, and his knights of the Round Table; of Harold and his men of iron on the field of Hastings; of the Crusaders, who marched to the East with the sword in the one hand and the crucifix in the other, to wrest the holy city from the profaning clutch of the hated Moslem. Or, coming down to the more modern times, if we speak of heroism to the Frenchman, he thinks of the first Emperor and the old guard

which “dies but never surrenders”; to the Italian, he hails the names of Garibaldi and the Thousand; to the Englishman, he acclaims the “thin red line of heroes” who held the field of Waterloo, conquered India and Egypt, and recently defended the Empire from the onslaughts of the Germans. And the same thing holds true of the American! To you and to me, the word “hero” means George Washington and the ragged Continentals who starved and froze amid the snowdrifts of Valley Forge; Commodore Perry and the sailors who shattered the British fleet upon the waters of Lake Erie; General Grant and the boys in blue who fought and conquered General Lee and the equally heroic boys in gray. The national heroes of all countries are soldiers. Walk the streets of any city in any land, and everywhere you will see statues of military chieftains, as though these were the only heroes the world had ever produced who were worthy of commemorative monuments. “To most people,” as Prof. MacMechan has well said, “‘hero’ means simply soldier”; or, if we be enlightened enough now and then to extend this title to men who have achieved fame in other walks of life, it is because we see in them some analogy to the warrior. “It is to the military attitude of the soul,” says Emerson, “that we give the name of heroism.”

Now that the universal instinct of humanity to identify the hero and the soldier is sound and wholesome, to a large extent, we must all agree. I would be among the last, I trust, to deny to the soldier the possession of those heroic qualities which are so manifestly his. I must confess that I have both admiration and love for the men who march away to trench and battlefield, there to fling away their lives as little things

for the sake of some great cause which they hold to be supremely dear. “Every heroic act,” says Emerson again, in his essay on Heroism, “measures itself by its contempt of some external good”; and what man, I ask you, has more contempt for certain external goods, and therefore more heroism, than the loyal soldier?

Material comfort, physical security, the familiar sights and sounds of home, the love of friends and kindred, the laughter of little children, the dreams of quiet old age, the precious boon of life—these are some of the more elementary things which a man shows to us that he holds in contempt, as compared with the happiness and safety of his native land, when he voluntarily enlists for active service. There are some soldiers, of course, who are mere adventurers. There are some others to whom war is nothing more nor less than a trade. There are still others who see in war only an opportunity for the release of the brutish passions which are inconsistent with the ordered ways of peace. But even these men bear a certain aspect of heroism. “I naturally love a soldier,” says Sir Thomas Browne, in his *Religio Medica*, “and honor those tattered and contemptible regiments that will die at the command of a sergeant.” And when we come to the ordinary man who goes to the front in time of war, such as the farmer described by John Masefield in his elegy, August, 1914, who looks with fond eyes upon his furrowed fields, his barns, his hay-ricks, his “friendly horses”—

*“The rooks, the tilted stacks, the beasts in pen...  
The fields of home, the byres, the market towns”*

and then, with weary heart, leaves all these things behind to perish in “the misery of the soaking trench,” we find the sublimity of sacrifice.

The true soldier is indeed a hero. In this age, of all ages of human history, are we unable to give denial to this fact. Millions of men, on a dozen different battle-fronts, have recently taught us the heroisms which make war almost as glorious as it is hideous. Not a day passed during more than four terrible years, but what we read with tingling hearts how brave men suffered without complaint, and died without fear, for the countries that they loved. I remember, for example, reading on a certain day in 1916, in a single copy of an evening newspaper, of three young soldiers who were heroes. One was a German lad, unnamed, who was found stricken unto death by the side of a dead Englishman, whose wounds he had tried to staunch, and whose thirst he had quenched from the water of his own canteen—a second Sir Philip Sidney, nobler than the first, since he gave succor not to a friend but to an enemy. The second man was an Englishman, Capt. Alexander Seaton, who fell fighting bravely at the Dardanelles. A classical scholar of repute, a fellow in Pembroke College, Cambridge, devoted to his work as a tutor and lecturer in history, it was written of him, by one who knew and loved him, “Not a soldier by inclination, he left his peaceful life at Pembroke solely because he conceived that his duty lay that way, and that the hour had come for every man to strike a blow for his country.” The third man was a Frenchman, a poet, Ernest Psichari by name, who fell at Verdon, in Belgium. “His battery had been ordered to keep the enemy in check while

the army was falling back,” ran the story. “They were expected to hold their ground for a few hours, and they did so for a whole day; and when the last shell had been spent, officers and gunners were killed to a man on the guns they had taken care to render unusable.”

Such are the stories which came to us through the period of the Great War. All of them are eloquent of the fact, are they not, that the instinct of humanity is right in its ascription of heroism to the soldier? If this instinct has gone astray, it is only in the tendency which it has shown to ascribe heroism exclusively to the soldier. In attempting to do full justice to the man who has fought and died amid the terrors of the battlefield, it has been tempted again and again to do something less than justice to the man who has fought and died as gallantly in fields less dramatic but no less terrible than those of war. For whether we judge heroism as involving contempt of comfort, hazard of death, or the simple eager quest for fullness of life, we find it, I believe, even more truly, though less frequently, characteristic of the circumstances of peace than those of war.

It was upon this plain fact that William James sought to vindicate the possibility of what he called, in his famous essay of that title, “a moral equivalent of war.” He affirmed that “the war party is assuredly right in affirming and reaffirming that the martial virtues are absolute and permanent human goods.” But, he continues, “patriotic pride and ambition in their military form are, after all, only specifications of a more general competitive passion. They are its first form, but that is no reason for supposing them to be its last form”; nor, we may add, its only present form. “It



would be simply preposterous,” says James again, “if the only force that could work ideals of honor and standards of efficiency into English or American natures should be the fear of being killed by the Germans or Japanese. Great indeed is fear, but it is not, as our military enthusiasts believe and try to make us believe, the only stimulus known for awakening the higher ranges of men’s spiritual energy. Strenuous honor and disinterestedness abound everywhere. Priests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it. The only thing needed henceforward is to inflame the civic temper as past history has inflamed the military temper.” And it is here that James urges, as his “moral equivalent of war,” the conscription of our young men “to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, to the frames of sky-scrapers,” there to pay “their blood-tax—in the immemorial human warfare against nature.” All of which means, among other things, that those men and women today who are already mining coal, and washing dishes, and making tunnels, and stoking furnaces, and building sky-scrapers, are already heroes, trained like the soldier to “the military ideals of hardihood and discipline!”

There is a heroism of peace comparable in every way to the heroism of war. Nay, we would go further and say that there is a heroism of peace superior in many ways to the heroism of war. The true soldier, as we have seen, is necessarily a hero; but the true hero is by no means necessarily a soldier. On the contrary, there have been thousands of men who have ascended to heights of heroic endeavor and achievement, to

which the soldier from the very nature of his profession has never been able to attain. Emerson declares in his great essay that the heroism of war is heroism in "its rudest form." May we not also say, perhaps, that heroism of war is heroism in its easiest and therefore least extraordinary form? For there are certain circumstances surrounding the conduct of campaigns and the fighting of battles, which make heroism as simple and natural as, under other circumstances, it is difficult and unnatural. I am even tempted to go so far as to assert that a man can be a hero in war and still be a coward at heart. He can at least meet the test of heroism amid the fury of armed combat, with some degree of success, when he would crumple up before this test, like a rotten lance against a shield, under every other condition. Indeed, we have only to strip away the trappings, the artificial characteristics of militarism, in order to see how the heroism produced by war, even at its highest and best, is of an inferior type, as compared with the purer and nobler type of heroism produced by the ordinary and therefore more moral experience of peace. From this point of view, it seems to me that there are at least three circumstances, altogether peculiar to warfare, which make the heroism of the soldier to be easy, and therefore of a type distinctly lower than that manifested by men in other, more commonplace, less dramatic, but no less terrific crises of experience.

In the first place, let me point out that there is a pageantry about war, which makes even the meanest heart to beat with a deeper throb and thus feel a loftier courage than is its wont. There are the uniforms in which the soldiers are clad, the gleaming swords and rifles which they carry, the brilliant

flags which flutter over their heads, the crashing music which marks the time for their marching feet. Everywhere, in camp, on the march, on the battlefield, there is color, glitter, glory, beauty of sight and sound, the whole paraphernalia of “pomp and circumstance.” And all this has the inevitable effect of making it easy for the ordinary man to forget his fears and throw himself like a hero into the stress and strain of combat. Even those who hate war the worst and are therefore subject the least to its artificial glamor are swept away in spite of themselves. Richard Le Gallienne has written of this very experience in his famous poem, *The Illusion of War*. He starts out by confessing that he abhors war. “And yet,” he says, “How sweet

*“The sound along, the marching street of drum and fife”...*

And he continues—

*“...even my peace-abiding feet  
Go marching with the marching street,  
For yonder, yonder, goes the fife,  
And what care I for human life!  
The tears fill my astonished eyes  
And my full heart is like to break.”*

And then, recovering himself again, he points out how wicked it is to clothe such a monstrous thing as war in pageantry:

*“...like a queen  
That in a garden of glory walks”;*

and brings against art the charge of “infamy” for hiding in music this “hideous grinning thing,”

*“Till good men love the thing they loathe.”*

Now if all this tinsel glory of war has this effect on the mind of such a pacifist as Mr. Le Gallienne, what shall we say to its effect on the minds of men who have no particular convictions upon the subject? The fact of the matter is, there is no accident about all the artificial splendor which has been thrown about the conditions of warfare from time immemorial. The flags, the uniforms, the marching, the “heady music,” have all attached themselves to war for the good and sufficient psychological reason that they exercise a transforming influence upon the human heart. Napoleon understood this when he issued his famous bulletins to his soldiers before going into battle. General Hancock understood this at Gettysburg when, in the fateful moments just preceding Pickett’s charge, he rode along the crest of Cemetery Ridge clad in his dress uniform and mounted on a white horse with golden trappings. The Germans understood this when they sent their men into the conflict with the music of military bands and with the choral chants of Luther on their lips. Every humblest subaltern officer in any army understands this when he places the flag at the head of the moving regiment. Such appeals to the senses change men on the instant—make the best of them into saints and the worst of them into momentary heroes. They become stimulated as by some strange intoxicant, transformed as by some mystic conversion of the soul. They forget the horrors of the

struggle, the peril of disaster, the chances of life and death. They are conscious only of glory and delight. Their eyes gleam, their hearts throb, the earth changes to beauty, the heavens break into song. And straightway deeds of valor become easy, heroism commonplace, and sacrifice the order of the day.

*“Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife,  
To all the sensual world proclaim,  
One crowded hour of glorious life  
Is worth an age without a name.”*

Now heroism, which is performed under circumstances such as these, is heroism still. But I want to lay down the principle that such heroism is of a type inferior to that performed under the drab, uninspiring, familiar circumstances of daily life. The soldier who goes marching into battle with the flag before his eyes and wild music in his ears, is a brave man—but the sailor who leaps into the foaming sea, the miner who descends into the flaming pit, the locomotive engineer who dies at his post of duty, without so much as a single human voice, perhaps, to give him cheer, is a braver man. I always recall in this connection, as a type and symbol of what we may term the heroism of common life, a story which I read some years ago in the newspapers. It concerned two laborers, William Phelps and James Stansbury, who were one day cleaning out the inside of a large boiler at the Cerealine mills in Indianapolis. By the error of another workman, live steam was turned into the boiler before the cleaners had left it. Instantly, by a common impulse, the two men jumped for the single ladder which led to safety. Phelps got there first, but

no sooner had his foot touched the rounds than he stepped aside, seized his companion and boosted him up. "You first, Jim," was his gasping cry, "you first." Pushed and thrust by his friend, Stansbury escaped, but Phelps was rescued only to die two hours later in dreadful agony. And when told, just before he died, that Jim was all right, he said, "That's good—nobody'll miss me, but Jim had the wife and the kids." It was a wise reporter who put the story on the wire, for he closed it with the words, "No soldier in the siege of Peking or the battle of Santiago ever proved himself a greater hero."

Stories of this kind might be multiplied indefinitely, but I can sum up all that I would say upon this point by describing a strange little building which I chanced to discover in an out-of-the-way corner of London some years ago. For many weeks I had been looking upon cathedrals and public buildings and city squares, where monuments to soldiers were as common as daisies in a summer field. Suddenly, on a certain morning, I came upon a little plot of grass and trees, near the great post office in St. Botolph's, Aldergate, which is called the "Postman's Park," and at one end of it saw the little open gallery, erected in 1887 by the great painter, George F. Watts, with its forty-eight tablets placed in commemoration of certain heroes and heroines who died unknown in the endeavor to save the lives of others. Here was name after name which meant nothing, but story after story which meant everything.

Tablet 1 was in memory of Tom Griffin, aged 21, a steamfitter, who on April 12, 1899, was scalded to death while trying to save his "mate" from an exploded boiler;

Tablet 3, in memory of Mary Rogers, stewardess of the steamship Stella, who on March 30, 1899, went down with her ship after embarking into life boats all the women passengers committed to her care; Tablet 5, in memory of Elizabeth Boxall, aged 17, who on January 20, 1888, died from injuries received in trying to rescue a little child from being run over; Tablet 8, in memory of Dr. Samuel Rabbath, officer of the Royal Free Hospital, who died on October 20, 1884, from diphtheria contracted by sucking through a glass tube into his mouth the infected membrane from the throat of a strangling child; Tablet 10, in memory of William Goodrum, aged 60, a railway flagman, who on February 28, 1880, stepped in front of a flying train to rescue a fellow-laborer, and was instantly killed; Tablet 16, in memory of Ella Donovan, a woman of the slums, who on July 28, 1873, entered a burning tenement to rescue little children, not her own; Tablet 23, in memory of Henry Bristow, a boy of 8, who on January 5, 1891, died from injuries received in trying to save his little sister, aged 3, from being burned to death. And so the tablets tell their pathetic tales! You read one after another until your eyes are dimmed with tears and you can read no more. And then you seat yourself for a moment in the quiet park, with all London roaring in your ears, and you think of these humble men and obscure women who, without the blare of any music or the flashing colors of any flag or the thrilling excitement of charge and countercharge, "laid down their lives for their friends." "Is my face cut?" said William Peart, a locomotive driver commemorated on Tablet 2, as he was pulled from out the wreckage of his exploded engine. He was told that it was. "Never mind," he replied, with his last breath, "I stopped the train." Here is heroism of

a new type—dull, commonplace, everyday, without one trace of color or romance. But for this very reason do I believe it to be heroism of a higher type than that of the soldier.

But there is a second circumstance peculiar to the life of the soldier, which makes martial heroism to be of an easier and therefore inferior type. I refer to the fact that the soldier performs his deeds of valor not only under the stimulus of “pomp and circumstance,” but also under the sweet influences of companionship. The soldier is always one of a company or regiment. Except on occasional scout or sentry duty, he is always moving with the collective motion of a great host of his fellowmen. He is never working, fighting, suffering alone, and is therefore never left to the heart-breaking task of bearing his burden in solitude. On the contrary, as he walks, he keeps step with thousands of marching feet; as he advances into battle, he rubs shoulders with his “mates”; as he falls headlong in the trenches, he is picked up and ministered to by the hands of those he loves. And out of this solace of companionship, out of this inspiration of collective life, there comes creeping into his heart a sense of uplift, a contagion of spirit, which makes heroism inevitable.

I have never seen this aspect of military experience more wonderfully expressed than by Prof. Perry, of Harvard, in an article in the *New Republic*, in which he describes his impressions as a Plattsburgh “rookie.” “Soldierly experiences,” he says, “are common experiences, and are hallowed by that fact. You are asked to do no more than hundreds of others... do with you. If you rinse your greasy



mess-kit in a tub of greasier water, you are one of many gathered like thirsty birds about a road-side puddle. If you fill your lungs and the pores of your sweaty skin with dust, fellows in adversity are all about you, looking grimier than you feel; and your very complaints uttered in chorus partake of the quality of defiant song. To walk is one thing, to march albeit with sore feet and aching back is another and more triumphant. It is 'Hail! Hail! the gang's all here'—it matters not what the words signify, provided they have a rhythmic swing, and impart a choral sense of collective unity.... Every late afternoon," he continues, "the flag is lowered, and the band plays 'The Star Spangled Banner.' Men in ranks are ordered to attention. Men and officers out of ranks stand at attention where they are, facing a flag, and saluting as the music ceases. Thus to stand at attention toward sundown, listening to solemn music sounding faintly in the distance, to see and to feel that every fellow-soldier is standing also rigid and intent, to experience this reverent and collective silence ... is at once to understand and to dedicate that day's work."

Now all this is very beautiful. But its very beauty is what makes the heroism of the soldier as easy as the heroism of others is oftentimes difficult. Compare, for example, the courage of even the most gallant soldier with the courage of the pioneer, who goes alone into vast and unfamiliar solitudes, and there amid killing labors and strange perils, hews out a path to life, with never the face of a comrade or the voice of a woman to give him cheer. I think that I never knew the meaning of loneliness, and never understood therefore the sublime heroism of the pioneer until I journeyed through the prairies of Kansas, the deserts of

Arizona and the pasture lands of Idaho and Montana. Those of you who have traveled through the great west will recognize the sensation that came over me as, hour after hour, I gazed upon those uninhabited wastes and saw only at rarest intervals the traces of human beings. I remember looking out upon the prairies late one afternoon and watching the slow fading of the day. For three hours, from four until seven o'clock, I saw on the passing landscape one horseman, as lonely as a solitary sail at sea, one prairie wagon with three men gathered about the evening camp fire, and two houses on the far horizon. From seven to eight o'clock came on the darkness, and soon we were riding through impenetrable night; and twice, perhaps three times, at intervals of an hour or more, I saw a single light twinkling in the distance, marking where some man or perhaps some family, was living in the solitudes. And I dreamed that night of the men, and the women, too, who first came out into these vast spaces, leaving home, friends, companionship behind to make a trail, build a home, prepare the way for the coming of civilization. The very road over which my train was moving was the old trail of the Santa Fe, which had been trod by the feet of thousands of lonely and intrepid souls, who dared the wilderness and the desert as the forerunners of the nation's life. These men, and the women also who were with them, to rear their homes and bear their children, were heroes of a type sublime—heroes who never knew the joy of comradeship, the consolation of co-operation, but lived and toiled and died alone, with only a dream of the future in their hearts to give them courage.

It was fitting, and yet how sadly belated recognition which was given them in the noble monuments at the World's Fair in Chicago, which bore these inscriptions from the pen of President Eliot:

*“To the Brave Settlers  
Who Leveled Forests  
Cleared Fields  
Made Paths by  
Land and Water  
And Planted  
Commonwealths.”*

*“To the Brave Women  
Who in Solitudes  
Amid Strange Dangers and  
Heavy Toils  
Reared Families  
And Made Homes.”*

Such is the heroism of solitude! But not yet have we reached its purest and noblest form. These men and women were lonely, it is true; but they were sustained, after all, by a great hope of the future, by dreams of prosperity and happiness to come as the fruit of toil, by ambitions for the children who would survive to better and fuller days.

Braver even than these are the men who have faced loneliness without hope—who have looked not merely on solitude, but on solitude ending in defeat and death—and still have lived as those who had no fear. The classic example of this great heroism has been given to the world by

our own age, in the story of Captain Scott. Whenever my own faint heart begins to fail under the strain of burdens absurdly light, I take up a copy of Captain Scott's Journals, as I would take up a copy of holy scripture, and I read as long as my tear-filled eyes can see the page the items that he jotted down in his diary on those last terrible days before he died. Here he is in the midst of the vast solitudes of the arctic wastes, struggling along with his two half-dead companions, his feet frozen, food gone, fuel gone, and a hurricane beating him helpless to the ground. He knows he cannot get through to his goal, he knows there is no living soul within hundreds of miles to bring him succor. On March 19th he speaks of their "forlorn hope"; on the 22nd he confesses that "he must be near the end"; on the 29th he speaks of death and says flatly, "I do not think we can hope for any better things now.... We are getting weaker, and the end cannot be far." But never once, for all his anguish and solitude, does he give way. "We shall stick it out to the end," is his word. He can even joke at one time in a grim and terrible sort of way. "No human being could face (this) storm," he writes on March 18th, "and we are nearly worn out. My right foot is gone—two days ago I was the proud possessor of the best feet. These are the steps of my downfall." And then there come the last hours. His two companions lie dead, one on either side of him. Outside of his little snow hut is the raging storm. He is alone with death. And as calmly as though he were writing a report in the naval offices in London, he scrawls with frozen fingers those immortal letters, first to Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Bowers, the mothers of the two men whose bodies are beside him, then to his own mother and his wife, then to his friends, Sir James M. Barrie and Vice-Admiral

Egerton, then the statement to the public with its closing words, "I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another and meet death with as great fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last. But had we lived I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman." Eight months later his body was found, sitting erect, his arms extended to his dead companions on either side as though his lonely soul sought at the end the comfort of even their frozen bodies, and on his face a smile as beautiful as that of a child just fallen into slumber.

Heroism! my friends! What is the heroism of even the bravest soldier compared to heroism such as this? I would not disparage the men who have suffered and died on the fields of Flanders and Galicia. But is it not true, after all, that we can do much if only we have the dear friends to bear us company, and that the real test comes when we stand "alone, alone, all, all alone," with the universe and God. To work alone, like the pioneer, with never a hand to clasp and help his own; to die alone, like Captain Scott, with wife, child, mother, friends thousands of miles away, all ignorant of his fate, and "still to do the best to the last"—this is heroism. The soldier as a soldier for all his courage cannot match it.

But there is still a third aspect of the soldier's life which touches very vitally upon this question of heroism. I refer to the fact that the soldier, in the vast majority of cases, is

engaged in a business which has the enthusiastic endorsement of his fellowmen. He is distinctly on the right side. He is doing the popular thing. The eyes of the people are upon him. He marches away to the waving of flags and the applause of multitudes. Children cheer him, women embrace him, old men bless him. If he is wounded, he is tenderly cared for by the nation. If he performs some gallant deed, he is rewarded by orders of merit, and perhaps by the gift of the Victoria Cross. If he dies, he is buried amid sounding eulogies and commemorated by statues and inscriptions. "Victory, or Westminster Abbey," cried Lord Nelson as he sailed into the battle of Trafalgar. And similar, to the degree of humble deserts, is the cry of every soldier or sailor who takes up arms for his country. For the moment he is the symbol of the nation. He embodies within his own single person the hopes and praises of an entire people. He lives, and, if he dies, he dies in the good opinion of mankind. And I can tell you that nothing makes life so smooth and death so comparatively simple as this good opinion of which I speak. The hardest suffering seems easy, and the most untimely death not altogether unwelcome, if only we can know that all men are our friends, and we live or die with their blessings upon our heads. "A good name," says the preacher, "is better than precious ointment"; and again he declares, "A good name is better than riches." By which he means, I take it, that there is nothing in the outer world, however desirable in itself, which can give us compensation for the loss of favor of mankind.

Now we begin to get just a glimpse, at least, of a nobler and rarer type of heroism than that of the soldier, when we look

upon the man who, in obedience to some inner impulse of the soul, deliberately alienates himself from the sympathy and the applause of his fellows. Such a man must be regarded as a kind of pioneer or explorer, who goes into the solitudes not of the physical but of the spiritual realm, there to blaze new trails, and, perhaps like Captain Scott, to die alone. A striking example of heroism of this kind, presented in exact antithesis to the ordinary heroism of the soldier, may be found in John Galsworthy's play, *The Mob*. At first accepted only as a brilliant piece of imagination, the drama becomes charged with real significance when we learn that its action is a more or less exact reproduction of the situation which was precipitated in England during the Boer War by Lloyd-George and his famous "Stop-the-War party." The story of the play, and to a large extent of English history in 1899, is that of a Cabinet Minister, Stephen More by name, who opposes from his seat in the House of Commons a war threatened by England against a weaker nation, and continues his opposition after the war has been declared and an English army has been slaughtered. Resigning his office, he stumps the country in a campaign for peace, alienates his wife, who is outraged by his attitude, faces persistently the attacks of angry mobs, and at last is murdered and thus made a martyr to his cause. The spiritual, if not the dramatic, climax of the play comes in the second scene of the last act, where Stephen More, in answer to his wife and his father-in-law, who are appealing to him for the last time to abandon his mad purpose, contrasts his deeds with those of the soldiers at the front. "Our men," answers More, "are dying out there for the faith that's in them. I believe my faith the higher, the better for mankind. Am I now to shrink away?"

(Mine's) a forlorn hope—not to help let die a fire—a fire that's sacred—not only now in this country, but in all countries for all time.” And in this spirit, with the execrations of his family and of an entire people on his head, he goes alone to a cruel death.

What we see in this drama of Mr. Galsworthy is only what we see again and again after all in the infinitely greater drama of humanity. The noblest testimony to the quality of men's souls that we have anywhere, is that which has been given to us by the “noble company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs,” who, refusing to take the easy road of popularity, have deliberately chosen the thorny path of insult, ignominy, destruction, for the faith that glowed within their souls. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Socrates, St. Paul, Wycliff, Huss, Savonarola, Martin Luther, John Knox, George Fox, John Wesley, Joseph Priestly, Theodore Parker—how the names multiply, all as sweet as honey to our lips, of those who refused to barter their souls even for the good will of men.

And first among them all, of course, is Jesus, the Nazarene. The noblest thing that was ever said of the Carpenter-Prophet was this—that “he made himself of no reputation.” The noblest and also the most pathetic thing that He ever said of Himself was this—that “the birds have nests and the foxes holes, but the son of man hath nowhere to lay his head.” The noblest thing He ever did was this—to walk from the house of Pilate to the crest of Calvary, with the cross upon His back and the railing mob behind Him and before, and never once to falter and complain. Hated and hooted by the multitudes who at one time followed Him gladly, deserted even by the



twelve who had pledged to Him their lives, misunderstood, despised, condemned, spat upon—a stranger even to His mother and His brethren—what a fate was this! And what consummate heroism was needed to meet it unafraid!

In the face of such a supreme spectacle of sacrifice as this, how foolish, how unjust to identify the hero, to any degree of exclusiveness with the soldier. The soldier is a hero, without doubt, but greater than he is the hero who bears not arms but a cross, wears not a crown of laurel but a crown of thorns, and dies not on the field of battle but on “the field of the skull.” “He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; one from whom men hid their faces;... he was oppressed, stricken, smitten of God... yet when he was afflicted he opened not his mouth”—of whom such things as this may be truly said, He is the noblest hero of them all. James Russell Lowell has set forth this abiding truth in his Present Crisis:

*Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes—they were souls  
who stood alone,  
While the men they agonized for, hurled the contumelious  
stone,  
Stood serene, and down the future saw the golden beam  
incline,  
To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith  
divine,  
By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's  
supreme design.*

Such are the types of heroism which I have thought it well to bring to your attention this afternoon. Accepting the soldier

as the traditional and not unworthy standard of all heroic types, I have nevertheless tried to show that there are other men who meet all the hazards of suffering and death which he encounters, and yet are denied the aids and comforts which are his. I have contrasted the utter commonplaces of the obscure heroisms of daily life with the pomp and pageantry of martial life. I have contrasted the awful solitude of the men who made new paths and faced unfamiliar perils on prairie, desert and arctic sea, with the cheerful comradeship which hallows the experience of the soldier. And I have contrasted the popular acclaim which is the very breath of the warrior's nostrils with the popular odium and hatred which kill the prophets of the new and better day. Thus have I moved from what I believe to be, from its very nature, the lowest, or "rudest," grade of heroism, to those which I believe to be the higher and finer grades.

And it must have long since become evident to you, that every step that I have taken in the progress of my argument has been away from what we may well call the more physical expression of heroic endeavor, to those which are more moral, or spiritual. That the true soldier is possessed of something more than mere brute courage, I would be among the very last, I trust, to deny. But however fine and pure may be the valor of his soul, it still must be admitted, in the last analysis, that the soldier never rids himself of the material accessories and trappings of the world. The flag that greets his eye and the music that beats upon his ear, the personal contact of his fellows upon the march and in the trenches, the medals and monuments that embody a nation's applause and gratitude—all these things, with however high an admixture

of spiritual elements, are still fundamentally “of the earth, earthy.” And so essential are they to the soldier’s life, that we cannot think of that life without them.

But how different is the situation when we turn to these other types of heroism of which I have made mention! How do the earthly foundations seem to disappear, and those foundations which are only spiritual take their place! These unknown heroes, whose names and deeds are recorded on the tablets in the Postman’s Park—what stirred them to action save the spontaneous promptings of their own hearts? Those “brave settlers,” and “brave women” who “cleared fields” and “made homes” in solitary places—Captain Scott who faced death all alone in terrifying storms of the Antarctic—what sustained them but the secret counsel of their inward spirits? And Jesus of Nazareth as he hung upon the cross—upon what did he rely, if not upon God and his own soul? The heroism of the soldier, even at its best, is more or less a fleshy, worldly thing. The heroism of these others is more and more a spiritual unworldly thing, until, at the topmost grade of all, we meet the prophet, the saint, the martyr, who matches his naked soul against the world, and gladly loses the one that he may save the other.

It is when we attain to this viewpoint, that we begin to understand the mistake of ordinary opinion in identifying the hero with the soldier. Especially in this age of waxing militarism, it is well for us to note the fallacy which is involved in this primeval superstition. Heroism, at its truest and best, is spiritual. It is “an obedience,” says Emerson, “to a secret impulse of an individual’s character.” It needs no other stimulus, hides in no gorgeous trappings, craves no

companionship in suffering, accepts no rewards of merit or applause. Contemptuous of “external good,” it seeks its own counsel and obeys the mandates of its own spirit. Heroism of this kind flourishes in times of war as in all times of terror.

But so essentially brutal, hideous, cruel is every circumstance of war, that even the noblest heroism is degraded and defiled by it. It is only when the arms of the flesh are broken and cast aside, and the soul stands naked before its Maker, that heroism becomes transcendent in obscurity, loneliness, persecution; when all things that the world can give have failed and dropped away it reveals itself, like a star at midnight, shining to the glory of Almighty God. Emerson has summed it all up, in his introductory lines to his essay on Heroism—

*“Ruby wine is drunk by knaves,  
Sugar spends to fatten slaves,  
Rose and vine-leaf deck buffoons;  
Thunder clouds are Jove’s festoons,  
Drooping oft in wreaths of dread  
Lightning-knotted round his head;  
The hero is not fed on sweets  
Daily his own soul he eats.”*

## About the Author

John Haynes Holmes (November 29, 1879 – April 3, 1964) was a prominent Unitarian minister, pacifist, and co-founder of the NAACP and the ACLU. He is noted for his anti-war activism.

In 1907 he was called to the Church of the Messiah (Unitarian) in New York City and served as its Senior Minister until 1918, when he left the American Unitarian Association (AUA) because of differences over its policy towards World War I, but continued to preach there. Shortly after that, his church became non-denominational and renamed itself the "Community Church of New York".

On May 25, 1919, Holmes was one of the speakers at a rally held in Madison Square Gardens, which demanded the end of US government support for the White forces against the Red forces in Russia.

He engaged in interfaith efforts, working closely with Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise of New York. The book *Rabbi and Minister* details this friendship and their working relationship on social, religious and political causes. Holmes was also among the leading American Christian supporters of Zionism in the 1930s. He also publicized the work of Gandhi, from his pulpit, and describes his meetings and interactions with the Mahatma in his book *My Gandhi*. Later, He was a recipient of the Gandhi Peace Award.

Although primarily a minister, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920, serving as its chairman from 1940 to 1950, after the resignation of Harry F. Ward.

His varied pursuits included authoring several books, hymns, and a play, *If This Be Treason*, which had a brief run on Broadway. He was also a popular lecturer and debater. For example, Holmes argued in favor of Prohibition in a public debate with Clarence Darrow.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Haynes\\_Holmes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Haynes_Holmes)

## About the Lectures

The William Penn Lectures started as a ministry of the Young Friends' Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In the beginning of the last century, "Young Friends" was the community of young adults from both the Hicksite and the Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which reunited in 1955. The Young Friends Movement began the lecture series "for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work through the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on Earth." The name of William Penn was chosen because the Young Friends Movement found Penn to be "a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring 'To live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed; and that these might become the laws and habits of the State.'"

The first run of William Penn Lectures were given between 1916 and 1966, and are warmly remembered by Friends who attended them as occasions to look forward to for fellowship with our community, inspiration, and a challenge to live into our faith. The lectures were published by the Book Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has granted Pendle Hill and Quaker Heron Press permission to reproduce the lectures as free ebooks.

Although it was [announced](#) in 1960 that the series would be discontinued several lectures were published in the early '60s. It appears that the lectures given between 1923 and 1931 were never published. If we come upon manuscripts of these lectures, we hope to publish them in future.