VITA

Edwin Ginn

Brief life of a peace activist: 1838-1914

by ROBERT I. ROTBERG

"THERE WILL BE NO NEED of great national armies," Edwin Ginn declaimed in 1901, once an international force controlled by a league of nations exists to put down aggressions. Nations would then be prepared to submit disputes to an international court, disarmament would follow, and peace prevail. Ginn admitted that such a force would be costly, but said, "[W]e spend hundreds of millions a year for war: can we afford to spend one million for peace?"

This "large-hearted, broad-minded" businessman was a self-made textbook publisher who emerged from hardscrabble Universalist-influenced surroundings in Downeast Maine to attend Tufts College and eventually become one of Boston's corporate stars and one of America's leading world-peace adherents. Ginn believed "expert, specialized knowledge—was somehow power," recalled his longtime friend George Lyman Kittredge, of Harvard's English department. "Think what it meant to scholars, big and little, to come into contact with...Ginn, who was not only full of life, but who believed in them, and could persuade them that their learning was no mere private pleasure..., but a possession of actual use to the community." When Ginn started out, Kittredge added, "he was not content to peddle out the books that he found in existence, [though he knew] he could make money enough in that way." Beginning in 1865, Ginn & Company published some of the first American primers and grammars in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, pioneered with texts in many math and science fields and in music at the secondary level, and largely introduced the Shakespearean canon into American higher education. By 1910 Ginn owned one of the three leading textbook publishing houses in the country.

With much the same energy and perspicacity, he attempted to mobilize the burgeoning fraternity of peace advocates throughout the United States. At first, an acquaintance wrote, he "infectiously" embraced international arbitration as a substitute for war. But as he gained experience, he understood that more elaborate methods of achieving peace were necessary. He tried to educate both opinion-makers and the general public, starting in 1903 when he began issuing several books and pamphlets a year by peace advocates, including Immanuel Kant, Leo Tolstoy, and Baroness Bertha von Suttner (who helped inspire, and won, the Nobel Peace Prize). He wanted to teach children that "true patriotism [did] not mean helping to support vast armies, but earnest work for the uplifting of mankind." Mothers, he wrote, should teach their children to revere life, and urge them to avoid warlike play, cruelty to animals, and aggressive instincts, including hunting. Even the "little harmless gun or toy rifle" encouraged the desire to see blood and death.

Ginn had been a comparatively staid, conventional entrepreneur throughout the first 30 years of his publishing career, and never explained why he turned against toy guns, killing animals for sport (and even for food), and war. His epiphany came in the 1890s, after his first wife died and he married a much younger, musically talented German immigrant, Francesa Grébe, who exposed him to many new ideas. Her beliefs may well have inclined him toward the peace movement, but he also developed a philosophical abhorrence of the folly of war. His practical and idealistic natures joined when he understood that war, simply, was a waste.

He was active in supporting the Hague Peace Conferences of 1897 and 1907, and in helping to fund and arrange others in Bern, Boston, and New York. Ginn argued lustily that Americans should stop wasting their hard-earned tax dollars on dreadnoughts and other instruments of mayhem. Nations that avoided war were more prosperous than those that armed heavily, he said, and their bond ratings better. Without the rush to war, there would be ample funds to improve schools and hospitals. Swamps would be drained and railways and highways constructed.

Along with Andrew Carnegie and, in time, President William Howard Taft, he sought to create, alongside an international police force, what he and many others called an assembly or league of nations to legislate on behalf of the world. An admirer labeled him an early world federalist: a product "of a patriotic American's admiration for the institutions of his country and a prosperous American's assurance that a proper combination of brains and money could overcome great obstacles and accomplish incredible results."

In 1910, a quiet desperation that peace was slipping from the world's grasp led Ginn, then 72, to use his fortune to establish the World Peace Foundation in Boston, to "advance the cause...through study, analysis, and wise action." (Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell numbered among its key trustees.) "Until now, men have organized to kill one another," he declared. "This organization...will aim to keep men from killing each other." Yet when he died early in 1914, World War I was on the horizon and his life's second mission was unfulfilled. The atrocities of war continue, and the world is no more peaceful than it was in his era. But Ginn lives on through a noble cause, and through the systematic research on understanding and reducing conflict that continues in his name.

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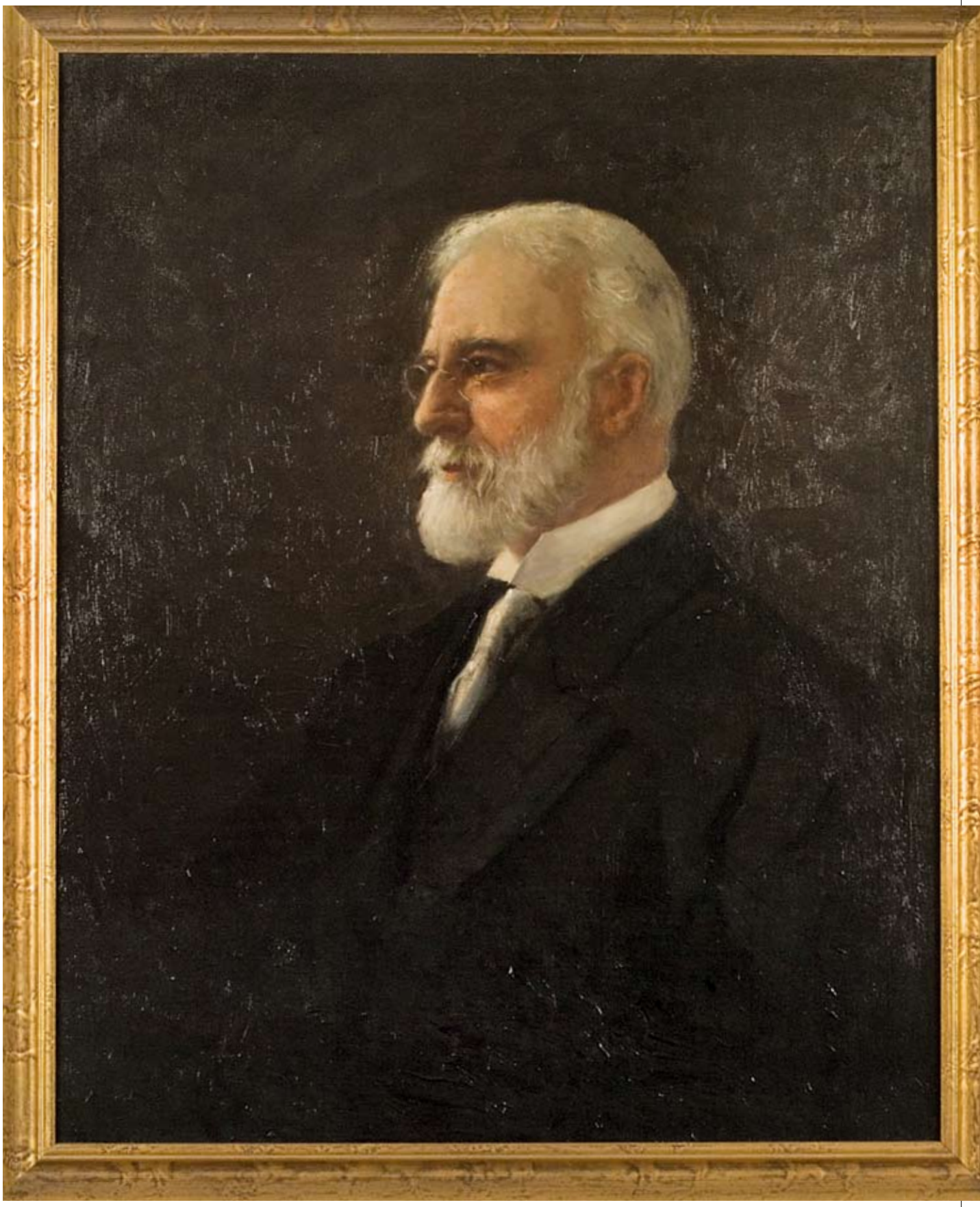
Opposite: An undated portrait (circa 1908) of Ginn by an unknown artist



Painting courtesy of the Kennedy School of Government's Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution