

**A GREAT PRIVATE
CITIZEN, HENRY
LEE HIGGINSON.**

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A Great Private Citizen, Henry Lee Higginson. by M. A. De Wolfe Howe

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M. A. DEWOLFE HOWE



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I

HENRY LEE HIGGINSON, who died in Boston on November 14, 1919, personified to an extraordinary degree a quality in American citizenship for which the need was never greater than at the present moment. This was the quality of a patriot's idealism evoked in time of war and sustained to the very end of a long life. He was the embodied refutation of the doctrine, now proclaimed on many sides, that the war-time spirit of idealism is all very fine, but that it cannot be expected to endure. In him it did endure — in him and a few others, scattered throughout the country, who offered their lives in the physical struggle of the Civil War, yet found in it also a great spiritual adventure, from which they returned spiritually quickened for the rest of their days. The rigid realists can point to their tens of thousands, not so quickened, but rather hardened to make the most of every material opportunity that reared its head

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once war was put aside; and none can deny that such there were, in disheartening numbers. Such no doubt there will be again, in the new period on which we have entered. But a life like that of Major Higginson, ending on the threshold of this period, has something to say both of the past and of the future. What it meant to the young men of successive generations for whom he was an inspiring visible presence, his memory may still mean to the multitude of his countrymen who have now laid down their arms after the greatest of wars, and are confronted with the immediate danger of losing that generous spirit of idealism which it nourished in them. He did not lose this spirit — nor need they.

If Major Higginson, in respect of his sustained idealism, represented an exception to the general rule, he embodied also several obvious contradictions. His very title of 'Major' was one of them; he was in reality brevetted Lieutenant-Colonel, U.S.V., before the end of the war 'for gallant and meritorious services,' and might naturally have gone through life 'Colonel

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Higginson.' He was commonly designated 'the first citizen of Boston'—and so justly that no second citizen has stepped at once into his vacant place; but, not even a native of New England, he was born in New York, November 18, 1834. He was a preëminent son of Harvard, but studied at the University for less than a single year, the freshman year of the class of 1855. He was best known throughout the country as a patron of music and education, as the 'founder and sustainer' of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a liberal benefactor of Harvard; he was a Puritan at heart, and in his daily life a hard-working, hard-headed man of affairs, deeply immersed in intensely practical matters, a member of an important financial firm, a director of powerful corporations. For approximately forty years he held a conspicuous place in the public eye; but he never held public office. It was as a private citizen, a great private citizen, that he did his far-reaching work for his community and his country.

Major Higginson was forty-seven years old when, in 1881, he established, out of