

TRIBUTE

John Bassett Moore (1860–1947)*

The University of Virginia Law School has named its Society of International Law in honor of John Bassett Moore, who took his degree from the University in 1880. The Society is well named, for it has been said that during his life, John Bassett Moore won a deserved place beside Hugo Grotius, the great Dutch jurist of the 17th Century, sometimes described as the “Father of International Law.”

John Bassett Moore was born on December 3, 1860, in Smyrna, Delaware. After taking his degree from the University, he studied law in Wilmington and was admitted to the bar in 1883. He became a law clerk in the Department of State in 1885, where he started his first “Digest of International Law” at the age of twenty-five. In his introduction to the digest, he defined international law as “A body of rules common to all civilized nations, equally binding upon all and impartially governing their mutual intercourses.” This monumental digest of international adjudications, ancient and modern, was to become his life work, and he published the first six volumes in 1898.

In 1886 at the age of twenty-six he was made Assistant Secretary of State and continued his intensive study of international law in that position until 1891, when he became Professor of International Law and Diplomacy at Columbia University. During his 33-year professorship he remained extremely active in international affairs. During his various leaves of absence, he was counselor to the Spanish-American Peace Commission to conclude the war of 1898; he represented the United States in the Dominican Arbitration of 1904 and in the Buenos Aires International Conference of 1910. He was made a Justice of the Permanent Court of International Arbitration at The Hague in 1912. He was vice chairman of the International High Commission organized by the Pan-American Financial Congress of 1915; Ambassador Extraordinary of the United

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States, delegate and president of the International Conference at The Hague in 1923 on rules for aircraft and radio in time of war.

After the creation of the League of Nations, he was one of the first to be made Judge of the Permanent Court of International Justice (the World Court) organized in 1921. He resigned from this position in 1928 in order to continue his endeavors with his digest of international law.

Beside his digest, he published authoritative volumes on extradition, on the conflict of laws and diplomacy, and on the works of James Buchanan.

In the light of his own practical experience and as a scholar who had retraced the history of more international settlements than any other one man, he found folly and confusion running through all the "new" ideology after the first World War. In 1933, in an "appeal to reason," he sought recognition that the principle of national sovereignty had not yet been repealed, or even questioned, in the world. He counseled a return to the old system of frank nationalism regulated by the accumulated experience represented in international law. His argument was essentially simple: that the "new" internationalism, in its efforts to guarantee peace, really did no more than guarantee that any future war would be a world war. He held that if you start out forcibly to maintain peace you will have to spend your blood and treasure on the job; and if you are not willing to do that, then you must mind your own business and maintain your own neutrality in every war that does not immediately concern you.

He received honorary degrees of Doctor of Laws from ten universities. In 1927 he was awarded the Roosevelt Distinguished Service Medal. His international honors ranged from the Grand Cross Royal Order of Isabel the Catholic (Spain) awarded to him in 1921 to the White Grand Cordon with Red Borders of the Order of the Jade of China awarded to him in 1938.

He served on the executive committee of the Equitable Life Assurance Society; was a member of several learned societies in France, Spain, Brazil, the Netherlands and other countries; was one of the incorporators of the American Red Cross, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

John Bassett Moore died in 1947 at the age of eighty-six. For more than half a century he devoted his life to the subject of international law. He was recognized as its outstanding authority more than any man of his time in this country.