

Olivier Memorial Peace Lecture 2014, given by David Boulton

Conscientious Objection in World War I and Now. What lessons should we be learning from those who had the courage to resist the national call to arms a century ago?

Thank you for creating this opportunity to celebrate the peace work of Alfred and Mary Olivier, and for inviting me to give this year's Olivier Memorial Peace Lecture.

It may seem odd to focus on peacemakers of a century ago when the problems of peacemaking today are so difficult, confusing, and immediately pressing. But I hope to do two things tonight. First, I recognise that I was asked to give this lecture because I've just republished my book *Objection Overruled* to commemorate the peacemakers and war resisters of WW1. So the history is one important focus. But it wouldn't do, in present circumstances, to restrict ourselves to a history lesson. I want to go on to look at the legacy of the war, how it shaped the twentieth and twenty-first century world, our world and our times, and reflect on the lessons we who seek to be contemporary peacemakers might learn from the lions who refused to be led by donkeys a century ago.

Writing history is not just listing facts. It is always interpretive, and interpretation will always be influenced and shaped by the historian's own times and circumstances. The first edition of *Objection Overruled* was written fifty years ago in the context of the Cold War and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. They were dangerous times, but they were also days of hope. The new edition comes out in very different times. The Cold War has gone, replaced by the so-called War on Terror. Days of hope have turned into days of disillusionment.

So with today's problems in mind, what can we learn from the struggles, successes, failures, achievements, disagreements, tragedies and triumphs that make up the story of the war resisters of a hundred years ago?

The outbreak of war in August 1914 found the peace movement unprepared and in disarray. It was the threat of conscription that prompted the formation of the organisation which was to spearhead the conscientious objectors' movement. It was the idea of Lilla Brockway, the newly-married wife of Fenner Brockway, editor of the ILP paper the *Labour Leader*. Brockway wrote a letter to himself for publication in his paper on 12 November 1914. "Dear Sir", he addressed himself, "Although conscription may not be so imminent as the press suggests it would perhaps be well for men of enlistment age who are not prepared to take the part of a combatant in the war, whatever the penalty for refusing, to band themselves together so that we may know our strength." The return posts brought several hundred replies, and the No-Conscription Fellowship was in business. Brockway was appointed organising secretary, Clifford Allen chairman, and among the prominent opponents of the war who later joined the National Committee was Bertrand Russell. All three men were socialists – Russell a recent convert from Liberalism – and, more importantly, all were absolutists who called for resistance to compulsory military service "whatever the penalty for refusing".

A parallel movement was soon under way among the Quakers. A group of young Friends organised an unofficial referendum of some seven hundred Quakers of enlistment age, aiming to produce a register of Friends who would take an absolutist stand and refuse to be conscripted whatever the consequences. This was the genesis of the FSC, the Friends Service Committee, which was adopted in May by Yearly Meeting – the Quakers' annual

conference – as its official anti-conscription arm. It was at this 1916 Yearly Meeting that the Quaker movement, which had wavered under pressure, rediscovered and reaffirmed its historic testimony against all war, for whatever cause, and whatever the consequences. Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway invited the FSC to appoint representatives on the N-CF committee and this resulted in the formation in July of a Joint Advisory Committee, the JAC, comprising not only the N-CF and the FSC but also the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a newly-formed and growing alliance of religious pacifist groups. A potentially confusing and wasteful overlap of organisation and effort was thus avoided. From now on the JAC met frequently, often several times a week, and the three organisations in one, the peace movement's very own trinity, became the power-house of resistance to the war, militarism and conscription, documenting the experience of COs, exposing the brutality which many suffered in prison and army custody, publishing anti-war propaganda in defiance of the draconian Defence of the Realm Act, and preaching the gospel of peace. Russell, atheist as he was, summarised its work with a biblical text, Exodus 23:2 – "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil".

The first Military Service Act was passed in January 1916. It required all single men between 18 and 41 to register for army service, and a second Act followed a few months later extending conscription to married men. The Acts as originally drafted allowed exemption for some men in reserved occupations such as farming and other vital services, but under pressure from the N-CF and its allies a clause was inserted allowing exemption on conscientious grounds. This gave local tribunals the power to grant *absolute* exemption from any form of military service, or *conditional* exemption from combatant service, where the applicant would be required to enlist in newly-formed Non-Combatant Corps or accept alternative work of national importance in support of the war effort. In practice, absolute exemption was almost always refused, so that religious and political objectors with an absolute objection to any kind of military service were directed into the army's Non-Combatant Corps. When they refused to enlist they were arrested, handed over to the army and "deemed to be soldiers". Refusing to put on uniform, accept army pay, drill or salute their officers, they were court-martialled and sentenced to varying periods of hard labour in prison or military detention, where deliberate and calculated brutality was the order of the day.

By early May 1916 102 N-CF members were in the hands of the military. Catherine Marshall, the Fellowship's hugely energetic and resourceful political and propaganda director, fed details to the ILP MP Philip Snowden who described in the House of Commons how a group of Lancashire COs at Preston barracks had been forcibly stripped and frog-marched naked round the barracks square with one arm and a leg tied above their heads. The men had been indecently assaulted, beaten with sticks and kicked around the square.

Many more such cases are recorded in my book. One of the worst was that of a young solicitor's clerk from Manchester, James Brightmore, who, having served eight months of a 12 month sentence, was given 28 days solitary confinement for continually refusing to obey orders. But no cell was available and the commanding officer at Shore Camp, Cleethorpes, ordered a pit to be dug on open ground beside the guardroom. Brightmore was told he would be sent to France where, it was claimed, many of his comrades had been shot, and was then left to spend a week in the pit, open to the skies, which became water-logged in heavy rain. Eventually his plight attracted the sympathy of some soldiers who pulled him out and got him to a marquee for a night's sleep. Their "disloyalty" was discovered by their officers and they were severely reprimanded, while Brightmore was returned to his pit. This

time one of the soldiers managed to pass down to him an empty cigarette packet and pencil and he wrote a desperate message to his family: "I am not afraid to die, but this suspense, this ignorance linked up with the torture of this pit, have plunged me into misery, despair, madness, almost insanity".

The soldier who had supplied the cigarette packet sent the message to Brightmore's family who forwarded it to the *Manchester Guardian*. Within minutes of the paper reaching the camp the order was given to release Brightmore from the pit and get it filled in. But the soldier who had got the message out testified against his officers, two of whom were subsequently removed from their posts. James Brightmore resumed his resistance, but at least he now had a roof over his head.

Cases like this were taken up by Catherine Marshall and her voluntary staff at the N-CF's office. Most of her helpers were women, who increasingly took over the work as the men went to prison. Sympathetic MPs and newspapers were supplied with well-researched facts, and Marshall herself made useful contacts within the War Office. Bertrand Russell, who would take over the N-CF's chairmanship when Clifford Allen went to prison, enthused that his comrades were "vigorous courageous men, full of real religion. Their aim is to bring the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, nothing less". Not bad for a notorious atheist, who was soon to go to jail himself for his anti-war writings in the N-CF's paper, ironically named *The Tribunal*.

The campaign was not without its lighter moments. When members of the NCF were prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act the prosecutor was a Mr (later Sir) Archibald Bodkin. In a moment of irritation Bodkin complained loudly that "war would become impossible if all men were to have the view that war was wrong". The N-CF congratulated him on so neat and concise a statement of its own views, and produced posters quoting Bodkin's words, prominently credited to the State prosecutor. This provoked the Government to prosecute the posters, whereupon the N-CF demanded the arrest of Mr Bodkin as author of the subversive words. *The Tribunal* proposed that it was Mr Bodkin's patriotic duty to prosecute himself, and generously offered that, in the event of a conviction, the N-CF would maintain his wife and children while he was in jail. The authorities retired hurt.

By April it had become commonplace for officers and non-commissioned officers to hold over resisters the threat of being sent to France and put before a firing squad if they refused to fight. Bertrand Russell raised the question in a letter to the *Daily Herald* on May 6, headed 'Will They Be Shot?' The rights of conscience had supposedly been recognised in the Act, he wrote, but the law offered no protection for objectors who had not obtained an exemption they could conscientiously accept, and who could legally be taken to France, court-martialled and executed to discourage the others.

Russell's timing was perfect. The next few days following publication of his letter proved a time of perfect storm as a theoretical problem at home suddenly sea-changed into potential catastrophe at the front. Even as the *Herald* asked 'Will They Be Shot?' a squad of absolutist objectors forcibly conscripted into the Eastern Non-Combatant Corps and held on a bread and water diet at Landguard Fort, Harwich, was told by a visiting officer that they would be sent to France the following morning, where 'your friends in Parliament and elsewhere won't be able to do anything for you'. The prisoners, along with the rest of the NCC men, were packed into a train on 7 May and arrived in France on 8 May.

The operation was supposed to be secret – but some of the COs involved had found a way of alerting the N-CF office, which went into battle with all its pacifist guns blazing! Three days later on 11 May Russell and a deputation including the ILP's Philip Snowden, Liberal MP Philip Morrell and the N-CF's Catherine Marshall met with Asquith who again gave assurances that the Government did not intend the COs to become liable to the death penalty. Russell was encouraged: the Prime Minister, he wrote to Philip Morrell's wife Ottoline (who happened to be Russell's lover at the time) 'was very sympathetic and talked almost as if he were one of us'. Historian Jo Vellacott has commented that 'It may have been a very fortunate coincidence that Russell and Philip Morrell served on the deputation... However hostile Asquith knew them to be to his policies, they were of the class that he aspired to and among his acquaintance. It is possibly not irrelevant that he too had loved the same woman they both loved'. (Ottoline Morrell was very generous with her favours.) Despite the Prime Minister's assurances, perhaps given in ignorance of what the army commanders were up to, three more batches of absolutists, attached against their will to the Non-Combatant Corps, were sent to France before the end of the month, sixteen from Richmond castle on 28 May, eight from Kinmel Park, Abergele on 29 May and nine from Seaford the same day. Even as they were embarking, the embattled Under-Secretary of War (or under-informed Secretary of War), Harold Tennant, was again reassuring anti-conscriptionist MPs that the Government had no intention of sending more COs to France, either to be shot or forced to fight. The very next day he had to eat his words. Confronted by Quaker MP Arnold Rowntree with the hard evidence gathered by the N-CF, Tennant could only confess that although he had sent telegrams to the three army commanders ordering them to 'take steps to ensure that [the COs] do not go to France, but remain [in Britain] to undergo their sentences', the telegrams had not arrived until the men were already at sea. 'It is not easy to rescue them', he added limply.

In France, still refusing to obey orders or acknowledge their status as soldiers, some of the men were softened up by the imposition of Field Punishment No. 1, known as "crucifixion" because it involved their being handcuffed to a post or the cross beams of a gun carriage, arms outstretched and legs tied in a bizarre caricature of Calvary.

As a brief digression, let me tell you that back in the 1970s Ken Loach made a wonderful drama series called *Days of Hope*, episodes of which were based on *Objection Overruled*, including scenes of COs being "crucified". There was an outcry. Such things could never have happened in the British army! It was all the invention of anti-war Lefties! The headmaster of Westminster School, John Rea, who was himself writing a book on World War I conscientious objectors which was more sympathetic to the Government's point of view, wrote to *The Times* to say that in all his researches he had found no evidence to support such stories. I wrote back to acquaint him with the evidence he had missed, namely the detailed account by Quaker CO Cornelius Barritt of his own harrowing experience of Field Punishment No. 1, before this particular barbarity punishment was removed from the Army Manual of Discipline as a result of public outrage.

Back to the narrative. The series of courts martial began at Boulogne on 2 June. First to be arraigned were the men selected as ringleaders of the Harwich contingent, including Howard Marten, a 31-year-old Quaker from Harrow; John Foister, 22, a socialist and Methodist from Cambridge; John Ring, 24, a socialist from East Barnet; and Harry Scullard, 26, a Congregationalist and Fellowship of Reconciliation member from Sutton. The trials of the Richmond and Seaford men followed on 7 June. The army was determined to make a show of the sentences. Several hundred troops were lined up on the Boulogne parade ground on

the afternoon of 15 June as the prisoners were marched out. By his own account, Howard Marten was the first to hear his fate. 'An officer... read a long statement of my crimes and then announced the sentence of the court – "To suffer death by being shot"... However, in a few moments it was evident that the whole had not been said, and the officer went on to tell (after a pause) that "this sentence had been confirmed by the Commander-in-Chief (another long pause), but afterwards commuted by him to one of penal servitude for ten years".

Altogether thirty-five COs were put through the same theatrical performance. The N-CF had every reason to claim that their determined agitation had saved the thirty-five from the firing squad. The men were returned to Britain to begin their ten-year sentence – though all were eventually released after the war.

By now, the Government, gearing up for the fateful Battle of the Somme, was desperate to fix the CO nuisance, not least because a second Military Service Act extending conscription to married men looked likely to swamp the prisons with a new flood of objectors. Their answer was to transfer serving COs from prison and military detention into work camps run not by the military but by the Home Office. The N-CF leadership opposed the scheme, holding fast to their absolutist position opposing any compromise with the machinery of conscription, and pointing out that while the camps would be administered by the Home Office, the COs were still "deemed to be soldiers" by virtue of the fact that they were to be enrolled in the Army Reserve and could therefore be recalled to active service at the army's will.

But this was a battle too far for the N-CF leadership. Its absolutist stand had been weakened when more than 3,000 COs, against its advice, had accepted enlistment in the Non-Combatant Corps. Now there were many more defections (as the absolutists saw it) as men bruised by prison and army brutality accepted the Home Office scheme. For a time there was internal conflict and some bitterness, but the Fellowship held together. While its leaders never abandoned their absolutism, and went to jail themselves for it, they came to recognise that their members had to be free to decide for themselves what form their resistance should take. After all, that is what the rights of conscience were all about.

Clifford Allen recognised this when he addressed the Fellowship's last National Convention in November 1919:

It matters not whether we were in the Non-Combatant Corps refusing to bear arms, whether we took alternative service, whether we became part of the Home Office Scheme, or whether we were absolutist and remained in prison – all of us shattered the infallibility of militarism. That to me is a mighty achievement, and I am not willing to allow any false sense of humility to prevent my glorying in it.

More than seventy COs had died in prison or as a result of their treatment. Many more were mentally or physically scarred for life. This, of course was as nothing compared with the death toll at the front, and Allen, whose own health was permanently damaged by prison life, was quick to acknowledge this. He told the Convention:

Every one of us must be only too conscious of how terrible is the comparison between the anguish of those who have died and been mutilated in the war and the test to which we have been subjected... Not one of us would dare to compare our

suffering with that of the men who were actually engaged in warfare. Many of them are dead, but we still have the opportunities of life before us. Our lives are forfeit.

It was left to Bertrand Russell to pronounce the N-CF's epitaph at the Fellowship's final meeting on 30 November. He told the 2,000-strong audience of war resisters:

The N-CF has been completely victorious in its stand for freedom not to kill or to take part in killing. The whole power of the State has not been able to compel members of the N-CF to kill or help in killing. In winning this victory you have won an even greater victory; you have won a victory for the sense of human worth, for the realisation of the value of each individual human soul. It is that, above all, that we must assert and put before the world, that sense that each human soul, each individual growing and living, has within him something sacred, something that must not be warped and destroyed by the imposition of outside forces.

What, then was the legacy of this war, and what the legacy of its peacemakers? There's the stuff we are all too familiar with: the Treaty of Versailles – squeezing the Germans “till the pips squeak”, with its inevitable consequence of humiliation, starvation and attempted revolution, producing a national psychosis that led to Hitler and a second world war. And of course there was revolution in Russia, the Cold War, and a nuclear arms race from which we have not yet found an escape.

But there's another less well understood legacy, arguably even more catastrophic. It started as early as 1915 with the Allies' defeat in Gallipoli, Churchill's disastrous adventure in the Middle East. Britain concluded that its interest would not be safeguarded without a final victory over not only the German Empire but the Ottoman Empire too. So Britain, France and Italy made secret plans to break up the Ottoman Empire and divide it among themselves.

The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 was the first of a series of treaties which transformed what were then called the Central Powers and we now call the Middle East. The terms of these so-called treaties, which were really diktats, were far more severe than those imposed on Germany at Versailles. Britain occupied Mesopotamia, the fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates, and began to remodel this ancient land where the Gilgamesh epic preceded the Bible by a thousand years, and where writing was invented. On the advice of a British agent, T E Lawrence, and under Churchill as Colonial Secretary, Britain appointed a puppet monarch, Faisal I. Born in what is now Saudi Arabia, Faisal had never set foot in Iraq, and spoke none of the Iraqi dialects. His only qualifications were an Arabic name and a sycophantic willingness to do Britain's every bidding.

The western allies' next move was redrawing the borders to include three ancient rival groups, Sunni Arabs, Shi'ite Arabs and Sunni Kurds. The prize for Britain: establishment of the British-run Iraqi Petroleum Company which granted the British Government all the territory's oil concessions for 75 years.

Britain also secured for itself the Palestine mandate. With the full support of puppet King Faisal in Iraq the promise was made to create what was described as a national home for the Jewish people. The plan was to encourage Jewish immigration from Europe to create a forward base against Arab revolt and a pro-Western enclave in the new Middle East. It took another war before it happened, but it happened.

France meanwhile occupied and secured the mandate for Syria and Lebanon.

Not surprisingly, the Arabs didn't take all this lying down. They revolted against French rule in Syria, the Turks attacked the British in Mosul in Northern Iraq, and the Arabs mutinied in Baghdad. Palestinians rebelled against the plans to create Israel, and the Israeli Stern Gang resorted to terrorist tactics to force Britain's hand.

These revolts were put down with a ferocity that had been learnt in the Great War. The seeds were sown for hatreds which festered for the rest of the century, culminating in this century's so-called "liberal interventionism" which turned resentment and a thirst for revenge into the barbaric extremism of ISIS, now redrawing the borders once again in a last-gasp attempt to restore the Ottoman caliphate which their Christian enemies had dismembered after World War I.

We can view World War I as the *end* of an era, the culmination of power struggles and arms races fuelled by new technologies. But I suggest we would do better to view it as the beginning of what is not yet ended, the first round in a continuing global power struggle of which we are eye-witnesses every time we turn on the television, and not just eye-witnesses but unwitting participants.

World War I is not just history, because World War I isn't over yet!

*David Boulton
Hobsons Farm, Dent, Cumbria LA10 5RF
dboultondent@btinternet.com*