

Conscientious Objectors and the First World War

A Quaker Reflection

This story starts nearly 300 years ago, when the Bullard line of my family fled Holland by boat in the late 1730s. At that time across the Low Countries papists were hounding and persecuting Huguenots out of their homes and communities. My Dutch forbears were Huguenots. They fled to North Norfolk, landing at the tiny village of Burnham Overy Staithe, where they settled. My cousin has traced our roots on the male line to a gravestone in Burnham Overy Town. My name is David Bullard and in the next 30 minutes I will tell you about my family and why this starting point is significant in a story about Conscientious Objectors and the First World War 100 hundred years ago.

The Bullards prospered and spread from Norfolk to other parts of East Anglia. My branch of the family moved via Newport Pagnell to Stratford-upon-Avon, where they set up an auctioneering business. The family were members of the non-conformist Congregational Church in the town. My Great Grandfather Henry Holland Bullard lived in Chapel Street, Stratford-on-Avon with his large family, of whom his eldest son, Charles, was my grandfather. Henry Holland Bullard was a committed Christian and pacifist.

On 1st March 1900, towards the end of the Boer War, my grandfather Charles was a 14 year old teenager. Their house was besieged by a mob estimated to be of the order of 300 persons. The mob believed my great grandfather was in sympathy with the Dutch Boers. My great grandfather claimed that he had only said that the war was unjust and should never have been commenced. Only 1 policeman tried to stop the disturbance. The following evening on March the 2nd a much larger crowd of rioters gathered estimated to be around 1000 people. They wandered around the town of Stratford damaging properties of believed Boer sympathisers or Pacifists ending up at Chapel Street again, where they smashed windows and set fire to my great grandfather's home. Only 6 policemen were on duty in the town that evening and they could not hold back the rioters. The story told to me by my grandfather in his late 70s was that he escaped, with his sisters, from the back of the

house in his pyjamas. It had a great effect on him and like his father, he became a convinced pacifist. The chief constable of Warwickshire fearing greater trouble on the following evening, March 3rd, ordered a large detachment of police officers into the town. The rioters were less in number on that evening and the police were able to manage the situation. The riots in Stratford were international news in the spring of 1900.

We then move the hands of history forward 14 years to 1914. My grandfather was just married and working in the family auctioneering business in the town. He was both a staunch member of the Congregational Church in the town, along with being a committed pacifist. He opposed the war and refused the call up papers in early 1916, when the Wartime Government began the enlistment process of all men of military service age. I will continue his story shortly, but first of all it is important to get a sense of the various groups and factions that made up a coalition of men and women opposed to military conscription in the years 1914-15.

I will start with the Non-Conscription Fellowship, which was a very loose conglomeration of people with either a political or religious stance against the war. With names of people like Bertrand Russell, Clifford Allen, Fenner Brockway and Catherine Marshall at its core, only perhaps Bertrand Russell will be known to people today, but 100 years ago these were well known names, particularly Clifford Allen, the leader of the N-CF. The political wing of the N-CF was made up of socialists, who were following the writings and work of Karl Marx from about 65 years earlier. Their view was that national war was irrelevant and that much more important was class war. The N-CF was the chief force behind the scenes in the next 4 years that led to the acceptance of the right to object on grounds of conscience.

Kier Hardie, leader of the Scottish Labour party, established the Independent Labour Party in 1893. This group, which was part of a much broader group of left-wingers, were against war in the period 1912-14. They organised large demonstrations in London and all major cities and most large towns in England and Wales in early August 1914, calling on all socialists not to lift arms against fellow socialists in Germany and Austria. It is estimated over 100,000 people protested

on that day – Sunday the 2nd of August. The following day in Parliament, Ramsay Macdonald, the Labour Leader, told the House in response to the words of Sir Edward Grey that there “was an understanding with France to declare war with Germany”:

“I think the Government for which he speaks is wrong. I think the verdict of history will say that they were wrong... Whatever may happen and whatever may be said about us, whatever attacks are made on us, we will take the action that we will take of saying that this country ought to have remained neutral, because in the deepest parts of our hearts we believe that that was right and that alone was consistent with the honour of this country”.

Those words made Ramsey Macdonald sound like a Pacifist to the press.

His words were lost in the jingoism of the day that followed when this country declared war on Germany. Ramsey Macdonald resigned 2 days later and within weeks the Labour Party had suspended its “class war” and was fully behind the Government in endorsing action against Germany who by this time had invaded neutral Belgium.

On the religious side things were no different in those hectic summer months of 1914. Quakers who for over 250 years had taken a stance on moral grounds that war was wrong found themselves divided into 3 separate sections of believers. In 1660 Quakers had written and presented their Peace Testimony to King Charles II. George Fox the founder of the Quakers wrote:

“I told (The Commonwealth Commissioners) I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars... I told them I was come into the covenant of peace, which was before wars and strife were.”

In 1914 nearly a third of male Quakers of military age enlisted and served during the war. Another third were organised into an organisation called the FAU or Friends Ambulance Unit. One of these was my other grandfather, a Bristol Quaker..., but that is another story. The final third, like my grandfather the Congregationalist, refused the draft.

Other religious groups were also strongly opposed to the War including Jehovah's Witnesses, Plymouth Brethren, Christadelphians and Seventh Day Adventists. Their loyalty was to a heavenly kingdom, which took precedence over earthly powers. There were also a number of non-conformist Methodists/Baptists and Congregationalists, who refused the draft along with smaller numbers of Anglicans and Roman Catholics. They became Conscientious Objectors or COs, or Conchies as they were known at that time. Initially in the *Times* newspaper they were correctly called Pacifists until Lord Northcliffe (the owner) forbade his editor to print the word, sternly warning that "advertising pacifism is the best way to promote it".

In total we now believe that somewhere over 15,000 men were COs who refused to fight, many of their stories will forever go unheard and untold. It is estimated that around a third of these were war resisters, who objected on religious grounds, whilst the bulk of COs were objecting on political grounds, with a smaller number motivated by neither conscience nor politics.

I have not got the precise date when my grandfather received the brown envelope containing his call up papers, instructing him that he was:

"required to join the colours and that if he failed to comply he would be dealt with as a wartime deserter."

If he did not present himself for duty he had to submit an exemption form which would be considered by a Local Tribunal.

This he did in the Spring of 1916 and the Tribunal turned down his request for exemption. He then went before an Appeal Tribunal. The records and stories from these tribunals make for sobering reading, as they showed no consistency and were often confusing and random in their outcomes. For instance at Brentford the Tribunal refused exemption to COs, but granted it to members of the local Brewery Company and at Market Bosworth all the men employed by the local hunt were granted exemption, but not COs.

After appearing in front of these 2 Tribunals, COs were sent to either an army base or one of the 3 prisons identified for COs – Dartmoor, Wakefield or Wormwood Scrubs. In my grandfather's case it was

Wakefield, where, from the postcards my grandmother received, he remained for the next 3 years until early 1919. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for my grandmother in those 3 years. She will have discovered she was pregnant sometime around the time the draft was issued. Much of the time she was pregnant she will have been on her own and not knowing what was happening to her husband in gaol. My father was born in October 1916 and will have grown up for the first 2½ years of his life with a father in prison and with the stigma in the local community of his father being a CO.

Life in prison was extremely harsh – 23 hours in solitary confinement – a daily routine of stitching mail bags – meagre rations of food – thin porridge, coarse brown bread washed down with weak tea. In these circumstances it was no surprise that some COs died whilst in prison. Whilst in prison my grandfather met several Quaker COs. He got to know them very well. One in particular, Joe Artiss from Southampton, became a close friend. It was this friendship, which led my grandfather to become a Quaker by conviction a few years later in the mid 1920s. In the last year of the war our postcards report that my grandfather had become friendly with the Prison Governor, who was impressed by the moral argument against war and often walked the grounds of the gaol with him.

Many of the other COs were not so lucky. In particular those COs who were sent to army bases. These are just a few of the stories that emerged during and after the war. This first is about James Brightmore of Manchester who was sent to the Shore Camp at Cleethorpes. On arrival no cell was available for him and so a pit was dug outside the guardroom... but let me tell his own story in his words...

[...]

Even more serious was the death of a young Quaker CO by the name of Ernest England. He was called up in 1917 despite having been turned down as medically unfit. On his first night in Wormwood Scrubs he was taken ill. He was refused a chamber pot by the warder on duty. After much suffering he used the floor. Then the same warder proceeded to bury his face in the excrement. As a result Ernest was seriously ill for several weeks. He was eventually transferred to Dartmoor, where

despite his very frail condition was put to work outdoors shovelling snow. His daily diet was one slice of bread and margarine and a cup of tea given to him after his full day of work. After the war ended in 1918 he remained in gaol in Princetown and was made to go on working in a desperately emaciated condition. He died before he was released early in March 1919.

Events like these so stirred up the general population that change came quickly after the war. However there is one final story from 1916 to relate, which shows certain sections and people in the army in a very poor light. This concerns the 34 or maybe 35 men, who having been treated appallingly in England were taken to France. They were deemed to be hard-core objectors and were from 3 different locations in England. 12 from Harwich were kept in darkness and in leg irons at Landguard Fort, with very meagre rations of just bread and water. The 16 from Richmond, Yorkshire were told, as they were taken from the camp, that they were being taken to France to be shot for disobedience, whereas the 7 from Seaford in Sussex were sent to Southampton under escort, before being shipped to France. Eventually all 3 groups of men were put together in a military camp in Boulogne. Back in England a network of family and N-CF friends put pressure on MPs, who asked questions in the House. The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, became involved. Assurances were made that the army was under the control of Parliament. Despite all this happening in England, on June 15th the 4 deemed ringleaders were taken out of the army camp to the top of a hill, where they could see the white cliffs of Dover. They were surrounded on 3 sides by soldiers with loaded rifles and sentenced to death... and after a significant pause told: " but commuted to 10 years hard labour". This process did not just happen once, but was repeated daily with different groups of men for 10 days. The Under-Secretary for War denied this was happening on the 22nd of June, but had to return to the House to admit that it had happened 4 days later. On June the 29th Asquith made a pledge to the House that this would NEVER happen again.

There are many more stories out there of courage and belief by ordinary men. The Government introduced the right of Conscientious Objection with civilian not military oversight in 1917, with options of alternative service. There were some COs like my grandfather who took the

absolutist stance and remained in Wakefield Goal for the rest of the war. Other countries in Europe followed suit over the next 10 years until conscientious objection was accepted Europe wide.

After my grandfather left prison in 1919, he went on to have 3 more children in the 1920s. When war broke out in 1939, my father Bob took the Quaker absolutist stance and spent time in Stafford and Winson Green goals. His brother Ted took the alternative service route of working on the land, whereas his 2 daughters chose the non-Quaker military route, joining the WAF and the WRENS. My Aunt Jane, now 89, talks in very general terms about the top-secret work she did in Bletchley Park.

I have been a Quaker Pacifist all my life and have never had to stand up and be counted in the ways my father, grandfather and great grandfather had to. We have rights and privileges never dreamt of back in 1900, that were achieved at great cost by a few of the people of those years. Throughout my 20s, 30s & 40s, I often wondered what I would do if war on a global scale ever broke out again. I will end this talk with the words that early Quakers said to Charles II.

“Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world... 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' ”

Much of the more general information in this talk was drawn from the book “Objection Overruled” by David Boulton, 2014 Edition.

Dave Bullard November 2014