

ESSEX QUAKERS & THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Adrian Smith

The Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, is an historic peace church. In a well-known statement Quakers say:

- There is something sacred in all people
- All people are equal before God
- Religion is about the whole of life
- In stillness we find a deeper sense of God's presence
- True religion leads to respect for the earth and all life upon it
- Each person is unique, precious, a child of God

If, following John 1:9, you recognise a spark of the Divine in everyone you meet, you cannot go out and wage war on them.

Two prominent Quakers travelled to Russia in the 1850s to warn the Tsar that the policy he was following was likely to lead to war with Britain - as indeed it did, the Crimean War, 1854-6.

In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 Quakers involved in relief work set up what became the Friends Ambulance Unit, to provide non-combatant service for those who felt they could not stand aloof at a time of crisis but were unwilling to submit to army discipline which entailed handing over their consciences to the State.

In 1900 Yearly Meeting, the annual Quaker conference held in those days at Devonshire House near Liverpool Street Station in London, condemned the Boer War. Those who called for conciliation in South Africa were vilified as 'Pro Boer'. Quakers denounced the policy of burning the farms which provided bases for Boer resistance to British control. Quakers visited the concentration camps in which the Boer women and children were corralled; conditions were terrible, and a quarter of the children died.

Quaker publicity shocked many who thought of British rule as benign. Quakers did relief work with both Boer and English refugees. They also looked after treasured Boer family Bibles and returned them to their owners once the war was over.

US Quakers suffered in the American Civil War; the film "Friendly Persuasion" portrays the dilemma they faced.

Quakers opposed conscription and the military training of boys. At age eleven, when most of my contemporaries from junior school who go to grammar school went on to the prestigious King Edward VI School in Chelmsford, I went to a Quaker school instead - my parents did not want me to join the Cadet Corps at KEGS. In the early 1900s, the military training of boys was made compulsory in Australia and New Zealand, in NZ from the age of twelve. This was introduced in face of a perceived threat from Japan (which in the event, in the First World War sided with the Allies.) Most Quakers complied with the law, but registered their objections. A few British Quakers joined the Territorial Army, set up as a reserve force in 1910.

Proposals for a European peace conference from Tsar Nicholas II were generally scoffed at. English Quakers were surprised and appalled by the outbreak of war in August 1914. They protested about people 'being 'sucked into the vortex of military preparations'. On the outbreak of war the great uncle of a present day Quaker in Witham, Jonathan Hodgkin, stood on Bonn Station with his German friend, and each vowed that regardless of what their governments decided to do, their friendship would be unaffected.

The great-uncle then went on to found the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which was active in the inter-war years in working to try and prevent such a disaster from happening again.

Quakers generally reacted in three ways. Some did join up; these were mostly nominal Friends, whose names were still on the books although they did not attend Meeting for Worship or identify with Quaker values. The son of John Edward Walker, headmaster of the Quaker school at Saffron Walden, was killed while training to fly an aircraft.

Most Quakers remembered the words of George Fox who, when offered a commission in Cromwell's New Model Army, said he lived in that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars.' New Zealand Quakers issues a statement in 1915: 'War, which involves the wilful infliction of sorrow and suffering upon our fellows, is the very negation of Christ's spirit.

Many Quakers, while unwilling to fight, were prepared to do alternative service. Stanley Pumphrey, who taught me chemistry at Saffron Walden and spent forty years on the staff there, joined the FAU and served on an ambulance train in France. He said the carriages had a large red cross painted on the roof, and he was careful to keep the crosses well cleaned, so they were visible from the air and the train would not come under attack. He added that anyone who thought war was a glorious thing should try doing that kind of work, and they would soon think differently. In those more humane days medical people were not punished for helping the 'wrong victims' - FAU helped people in distress, regardless of which side of the conflict they were on. Twenty members of the FAU died in the war -- nine in actual warfare, eleven through illness. Meanwhile at home, Quaker meeting houses in London provided refuges for local Germans attacked in the streets after the sinking of the 'Lusitania'. The father of John Street, who in later years was a member of Chelmsford Friends Meeting, had a printer's business in Streatham, South London. He had his press smashed after he printed anti-war leaflets, and refused to submit them to the censor, as required by DORA (Defence of the Realm Act'.

There were men not prepared to take any part in the war at all, the so-called 'Absolutists'. The problem of conscientious objection came to the fore once the number of willing volunteers dwindled, and conscription was introduced in 1916. There were two issues at stake: some people simply objected to being sent to kill other human beings, while others saw this as part of a wider issue, of whether the State has the right to command people to serve it. By taking orders from someone else, you are surrendering your conscience to them. Quakers have never been happy about doing that, seeing the Spirit of the Living Christ as revealed amid the worshipping group as the ultimate authority.

The No-Conscription Fellowship (chairman, Horace Alexander, later prominent in the campaign for Indian independence) was set up to resist the 1916 Act. Its committee was prosecuted for publishing subversive literature, and two Quakers went to prison.

Men who resisted conscription were summoned to appear before a tribunal. In theory, the Act allowed for conscientious objection but in practice the attitude of tribunals varied. One man who said "I have been taught from my mother's knee that to hate and kill is contrary to the teaching of Christ" was overruled, because if this became accepted as a reason for people not to fight, it would undermine the whole moral basis of the war. Many tribunals were reluctant to accept COs as genuine, and wanted to dismiss them as 'cowards' or 'shirkers' It is all very well for Jeremy Paxman, a formerly respected television commentator, to write off the COs as 'cranks' - when that word was directed at Stanley King Beer, a master at Saffron Walden Friend School, he pointed out to the tribunal that it is the business of cranks to make revolutions. The only newspaper to stand up for the COs was "The Manchester Guardian". Harwich Redoubt was used to imprison COs, who were kept in irons on bread and water, in worse conditions than ordinary criminals. Some were actually sent to France 'to be shot', though the sentence was commuted at the last moment to imprisonment. Some were 'deemed to be soldiers in spite of themselves', and punished for such offences as refusal to don uniform, and subjected to such humiliations as 'Field Punishment No. I' which entailed being shackled for hours to an immovable object, such as a field gun, in an uncomfortable position. Quakers were better treated than socialists, who saw the war as being fought to defend capitalism, and hoped initially that working men across Europe would unite in refusing to go out and kill brother workers. Many Quakers were nevertheless humiliated. A child at the time remembered in later years seeing Robert Mennell, a

respected member of the Croydon Friends Meeting, being led through the town on foot in handcuffs after refusing to register under the 1916 Act.

A member of Chelmsford Meeting, Terence Lane (1893-1982) became a Quaker partly because of his experiences in the First World War. Terence learned Esperanto and joined the No-Conscription Fellowship. He, like others on the political Left, believed that in time the Co-operative Movement would make war impossible.

After refusing to be conscripted, Terence was arrested and given twenty-eight days' detention he was then 'deemed' to have joined the Royal Fusiliers, and court-martialled 'for disobeying orders'. As an unusual punishment, he was confined to a tent pitched in an exposed place with the flaps tied back. He later did time in Lewes Prison, the Scrubbs and the Moor. There was then a Home Office scheme under which COs were to be released from jail to do 'work of national importance'. This meant quarrying, road making, forestry or just sewing mailbags in prison, the usual occupation for inmates at that time. The 'Alternative works' was deliberately chosen to be unskilled and earning less than a living wage. Many small businesses were wrecked and dependents left without support, and farms went derelict, at a time when marauding U-Boats were creating an increasingly severe food shortage. The labour the men provided only raised a quarter of the cost of keeping them. Conditions in the stone quarries at Dyce, near Aberdeen, were so bad that some men preferred to return to prison. The first CO to die was Walter Roberts, aged 20, at Dyce. 71 COs died altogether, as they were in such a weak state they had no resistance to infection. 31 went insane, thanks to the solitary confinement inflicted on them in jail. Inquests were rigged, but conditions were then made easier. Men were allowed to walk in groups of two or three on exercise, and talk to each other. They were also allowed books, but not writing materials.

Terence Lane went for a time to a camp near Newhaven in Sussex. He was transferred to a lime works near Buxton, where conditions were so bad he would not accept them. He returned to prison. He was court-martialled again after the Armistice, and awarded one year's hard labour, though in the event he served less than half that. In later years, he became a Quaker Prison Minister, and had street cred with the inmates at Chelmsford Gaol, having done time himself.

Another local CO was George Dutch, in later years a member of the Billericay Friends Meeting. He was born in Surrey, one of seven children, left school at thirteen and worked in grocery. He was a Christian Socialist and a member of the Independent Labour Party, the one political party that opposed the war.

He contracted TB in prison and was released. After the Armistice he joined the War Victims Relief Service, worked in France and then in Poland. In later years he served on Essex County Council and as a magistrate on the Romford Bench, the very authority, which had sent him to prison. In 1975, near the end of his life, the Imperial War Museum interviewed him and made a tape recording of his reminiscences for their archives. (Before my first visit, I was reluctant to enter the museum, thinking it existed to glorify war.. It does nothing of the sort, and sends you away thoughtful.

George lived 1894 -1983.

A better-known Quaker objector was Corder Catchpool (1883 1952). In the early days of the war he served in the FAU; he then realised his service was freeing someone else to take part in the fighting, so he returned home to face a tribunal. It is worth noting that he got on well with soldiers. He did time at the Scrubbs, then in Exeter Gaol, and finally eighteen months in Ipswich. He found the loneliness, the idleness and the silence as hard to bear as the physical privations, such as lack of exercise. His peace message was rejected by people who said "You go and tell that to the Germans". So in the 1920s he did exactly that, taking his family to live in Germany and working for a better understanding between nations, till the rise of the Nazis made his position impossible.

Quartus Smith, in later years a member of the Bardfield Friends Meeting, went straight from the Quaker school at Sidcot at the age of 17 into the FAU. He returned from the war shell-shocked and never spoke about his experiences. He became a respected member of his local community, and, like George Dutch was appointed magistrate. Brightwen Rowntree, a prominent Quaker at Saffron Walden and later the town's mayor, helped young men who wanted to register as COs. There was a camp for

intending COs at Debden nearby, supported by local Quakers, where men could learn agricultural work. Devonshire House in London maintained a central fund to help the families of COs many of whom were left destitute.

The Friends Meeting House in Chelmsford the present Ann Knight Building opposite the railway station was requisitioned for use as a social centre for soldiers billeted in the town. Some, from the Gloucestershire Regiment, were billeted on my grandmother Jessie Smith, in Jubilee Terrace. In the Friends' archives is a visitors' book with pages of signatures of young shepherds, ploughboys, and factory workers from the Stroud Valley. My father once told me, "After they left, the next thing you heard was that they had been killed. It broke my mother's heart." This helps to explain how my father, George Smith, came to register as a CO when the second war came along, and how he and my mother became Quakers.

Quakers saw their role as more than a refusal to fight -they looked for active steps they could take to relieve distress and bring about reconciliation to make future wars less likely.

Douglas Bevington Smith, of the Maldon Friends Meeting, went twice across the mine-infested waters of the Channel to deliver seeds to Normandy so that farmers could resume planting crops. This was in 1917. After the war, Quakers sent 2000 cows to Vienna. They were involved in relief work in France and Belgium, and after the war additionally in countries which had formed the Central Power block - Germany Austria, Hungary and Turkey. The American Relief Mission fed starving children throughout Germany and in areas of Russia stricken with famine after the Revolution. They maintained a seaside holiday home in the Netherlands for underfed German children. The goodwill generated by these conciliatory gestures were remembered a generation later by Konrad Adenauer, Mayor of Köln and leader of the West Germans after the second war.

Fortunately now forgotten is the episode of the red beans. Inexperienced Quaker cooks forgot to soak the beans overnight before cooking them, with the result that the German children who were being fed were taken ill. There was an outcry "The wicked Quakers are trying to poison our children."

Some of those imprisoned got involved in prison reform after the war - the same thing happened in the 1960s, when CND activists were jailed. The archives of tribunals were mostly destroyed. The Imperial War Museum destroyed photographs of mutilated bodies, to try and perpetuate the idea that soldiers 'died cleanly'. The stone breaking camp near Haverhill which provided 'Work of national importance' was discontinued.

It is worth noting that many who registered as COs were not professional, middle-class people but artisans - educated, often in fact self-educated people who in earlier centuries would have become Lollards before the Reformation, joined the early nonconformist churches around the time of the English Civil war, and called for parliamentary reform in 1832.

There will be a ceremony in London, on 15 May 2014, to remember the witness of the conscientious objectors in the First World War. I remember a familiar Quaker banner:

QUAKERS SAY NO TO ALL WAR.

SOURCES

Penelope Cummings (Saffron Walden Meeting)

Jonathan Hodgkin (Maldon Meeting)

Angela Howard (Bardfield Meeting)

Margaret Smith (Maldon Meeting)

The late George Smith and other Chelmsford Friends

J.W.Graham - Conscriptio & Conscience (1922)

M.E.Hirst -- Quakers in Peace & War (1923)

W.R.Hughes -- Indomitable Friend (1956)

Testimonies to the Grace of God in the lives of Terence Lane and George Dutch