

## Subversive Peacemakers, War Resistance 1914–1918: An Anglican Perspective

**Review Number:** 1927

**Publish date:** Thursday, 28 April, 2016

**Author:** Clive Barrett

**ISBN:** 9780718893675

**Date of Publication:** 2014

**Price:** £20.00

**Pages:** 314pp.

**Publisher:** Lutterworth Press

**Publisher url:** [http://www.lutterworth.com/product\\_info.php/products\\_id/2260](http://www.lutterworth.com/product_info.php/products_id/2260)

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** James G. R. Cronin

A dimension that has been either obscured or silenced in discussions of the First World War is that of the networks of intellectuals and activists who protested against this global conflagration. Attitudes towards these war resisters in the popular consciousness remain obscured by ambiguities such as those visualised in Arthur Wilson Gay's painting *The Conchie* from 1931, currently exhibited at the Peace Museum in Bradford, chosen to illustrate Clive Barrett's *Subversive Peacemakers: War Resistance 1914-1918, An Anglican Perspective*. Gay's war resister is bathed in a golden light in contrast to his guards who are shrouded in the dusky gloom of the claustrophobic carriage containing all three young men. The juxtaposition of light against dark infuses Gay's subject with heroic qualities, but a neat reading is complicated by the painting's title, which became a term of insult for conscientious objectors after 1916, the year that marked the legislative passage of the military draft in Britain. For historian A. J. P. Taylor, who reassessed the legacy of the First World War through the lens of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament during the 1960s (1), the introduction of the word 'conchie' to the English language brought home for the first time to the British public that it was possible to object to the war on high moral grounds.(2) The legislative framing of war resistance as conscientious objection opened a debate on the reasons why the war was fought that continues to resonate during these years of the war's centenary.

This review will specifically focus on the formation of anti-war community networks supporting individual war resisters during the First World War in Britain. *Subversive Peacemakers* narrates how opposition to the war was sustained from peace groups to poets, from politicians to preachers, from suffragettes to working-class men – all of whom struggled to uphold ideas of pacifism and non-violence in an increasingly militarised society as the war dragged on. Clive Barrett's study is an analysis of how war resisters learned to become conscientious objectors, despite his work's subtitle that underscores the author's unique Anglican Christian perspective. Barrett, an Anglican priest working with West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council and a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds, seeks to expose shades of war resistance, from religious absolutists who withdrew support for the state's machinery of militarism, to voluntarists who objected to the mandate of conscription rather than to war. Although war resisters were ethically informed by their individual consciences they were collectively supported by community networks of political and pastoral solidarity. Most war resisters focused their ideological protests

either through a liberal internationalist conceptual lens or by means of personal moral convictions. In response to threats to civil liberties from state authorities during times of crisis these conceptual frameworks overlapped and boundaries between them became quite fluid. This would become a recurring theme of anti-war movements. Activists like Sir Bertrand Russell and networks such as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Friends' Service Committee, forged in the crucible of the Great War, continued to inform liquid resistance against war throughout the 20th century.

Antecedents of modern war resistance are traced by Clive Barrett to traditions of non-conformist religion, most notably the Religious Society of Friends or Quakers rather than from the magisterial churches of the national state such as Anglicanism in Great Britain that aligned itself with a militarist policy of national self defence at the nation's entry into war in August 1914. Yet Anglicanism was not an institutional monolith, as Barrett convincingly argues with reference to intellectual dissent by individual clerics.

A notable dissident, introduced early on in Barrett's narrative, was Arthur J. Waldron, Curate of St. Luke Camberwell in South London, who in 1901 at the height Britain's conflict with the Boer republics in South Africa proposed that war resistance was the responsibility of individual consciences. Pacifist resistance to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) had led to the setting up of the Stop the War Committee by the investigative journalist William Thomas Stead. The movement attracted the support of future prime minister David Lloyd George and Scottish labour leader Keir Hardie, who is best remembered for his attempt to mobilise the masses through his addresses to anti-war demonstrations in London's Trafalgar Square in 1914. (3) Waldron addressed in 1901 the position that was to become the defining issue for pacifism during 1914–18, principally, the responsibility of the individual (p. 21).

Opposition to the outbreak of war reveals the fragility in fin de siècle internationalism when faced with the surge in European nationalism (pp. 22–5). By 1914, the principal opposition to war emanated from socialists and advocates of international social justice. The Second International Congress of socialists held during 1912 in Basle, Switzerland, declared a war on war by urging members to use industrial action in a future state crisis so as to prevent war and to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule. On 29 July 1914 tens of thousands of workers congregated at meetings across Europe to demonstrate opposition to war. The French anti-militarist Jean Jaurès, following a meeting with Keir Hardie, the German revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg and other European socialists, had advocated general strikes across France and Germany (p. 32). The assassination of Jaurès in Paris on 31 July 1914 by a nationalist seeking revenge over Germany for a French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1) symbolised the ending of collective hopes for a coherent grass-roots opposition to war. In England, peace movements formed during the Edwardian era were unable to mobilise coherent war resistance following the nation's declaration of war on 4 August 1914.

The peace movement regrouped, leading to the re-emergence of new agencies and political lobby groups that sought to reinvigorate internationalist links for a negotiated end to war (p. 35). The most visible cluster of activists emerged under the umbrella of the Union of Democratic Control, a lobby founded by Charles Trevelyan, great-nephew of Whig historian Lord Macaulay, who resigned his ministerial post at the Board of Education in protest against Britain's declaration of war. (4) The No-Conscription Fellowship, a more successful grass-roots movement than the Union of Democratic Control, was founded by Archibald Fenner Brockway, subsequently imprisoned by the government in 1916 as a conscientious objector (p. 152). The International Fellowship of Reconciliation, an ecumenical Christian pacifist movement still in existence, has its roots in the pre-war international ecclesiastical concern for the issue of peace (p. 28). Significantly, all three movements were founded in the closing months of 1914. Despite the Christmas Truce that brought a brief respite to the Western Front, the Germans and French were still embroiled in what they perceived of as a war of national survival. (5) By contrast, diverse strands of the peace movement renewed their commitment to fostering and sustaining international connections throughout the duration of the war (p. 167).

Efforts by British anti-war activists to organise internationally were compromised by greater controls of international communication by the government, using the hidden hand of state censorship and official propaganda. The British government took the pacifist threat seriously. The Cambridge philosopher Bertrand

Russell, a member of Union of Democratic Control, was refused a passport to travel to the United States of America and was imprisoned by the government for prejudicing Britain's relations with its American ally. Official harassment of pacifists was commonplace throughout the war, not only because of a misguided belief that movements like the Fellowship of Reconciliation were pro-German, but as a result of assumptions that pacifism, anti-conscription and revolution were inextricably bound together. The Russian Revolution of 1917 produced a mixed response from British pacifists, many of whom could appreciate the aims of the revolution, but few of whom would sanction the notion of a revolution by force (pp. 167–8). Indeed, the Fellowship of Reconciliation sent a resolution in 1918 to the revolutionary Russian government, 'recognising the service which the Russian nation had done in the cause of humanity and of reconciliation' (p. 168). As the war progressed, the ideas of the pacifists were deliberately targeted by state authorities. An amendment to the Defence of the Realm Act, 1914, Regulation 27c (on censorship) sought to close down all criticism to government policy. Edmund Dene Morel, acting secretary of the Union of Democratic Control, was imprisoned in 1917 for a technical breach of the Act. Morel's crime was to have sent a copy of his pamphlet *Tsardom's Part in the War* to the essayist Romain Rolland in Switzerland.<sup>(6)</sup> By the end of 1917, pacifist meetings had largely been closed down and leaders of the movement had been harassed and imprisoned.

A political opportunity that opened up as a consequence of the retreat from Gallipoli in 1915 was that the British government passed compulsory conscription through legislation. This was a tremendous breach with tradition, and the Liberal party was expected to split over the question, but the Military Services Bill was passed in January 1916 with opposition limited to parliamentarians affiliated to the Union of Democratic Control, Independent Labour Party or Quaker members (p. 114). The Bill made conscription compulsory, initially for single men, later extended to married men and to men aged up to 51 years in 1918. Ironically, the act also established a fundamental legal basis for conscientious objection. It fell to 1,800 local tribunals across Britain to decide the precise workings of the act. Objections were based as significantly on the belief that conscription was a breach of civil liberties as it was on personal opposition to war (p. 118). Yet, fundamentally, the stand of a conscientious objector was inevitably a personal commitment, even when supported by a political campaign group or by a sympathetic faith community (p. 122).

Anti-war activists began consolidating their resources through networked agencies as a response to the government's introduction of compulsory conscription. It became clear to war resisters that there would now be a cost to being a pacifist that many individuals would have to pay. Yet community networks provided vital support to individual war resisters. The Fellowship of Reconciliation saw its membership peak at 4,000 members at the same time as compulsory conscription was passed (p. 147). The fellowship set up a conscription committee that worked closely together with the No-Conscription Fellowship and the Friends' Service Committee, a Quaker pacifist organisation, as part of the Joint Advisory Council to lobby Asquith's government. The Fellowship of Reconciliation Conscription Committee maintained personal contacts with individual conscientious objectors and set up an emergency fund to offer relief for them and their families. Individual conscientious objectors who lost their jobs were assisted by the Fellowship of Reconciliation Employment Bureau, established to assist men granted conditional exemption find work (p. 148). Prior to arrest, conscientious objectors were given legal assistance by the National Council Against Conscription, a responsibility assumed by the No-Conscription Fellowship subsequent to arrest. The effectiveness of these networks is illustrated by the personal circumstances of individual war resisters. Bert Brocklesbury, one of the 'Richmond Sixteen', 16 absolutist conscientious objectors detained in Richmond Castle in Yorkshire, tipped off the No-Conscription Fellowship through a postcard that he and his fellow conchies were being transported to France to face court-martial. It was the prompt action of the No-Conscription Fellowship and the Friends' Service Committee that helped to convince the authorities that no executions could be undertaken without causing a public outcry and it may very well have contributed to the conscientious objectors' ultimate survival (p. 147).

*Subversive Peacemakers* is threaded with stories of peacemakers who subverted popular consensus opinion on British foreign policy. Maude Royden carried pre-war suffrage into her roles as secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and vice-president of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom,

established at the women's peace congress in The Hague during 1915. To Royden, Britain was not without culpability in the origins of the war. Britain's arms race had encouraged German fears of a British attack, and the belief of many Germans that they were fighting a defensive war. Without such fears, Royden conjectured, socialists in the German Reichstag would not have supported the war votes, and a high proportion of the German army would have refused to march. Neutral nations could have been called upon to refuse aid to the aggressor, who would be left with 'the appalling responsibility of marching against an absolutely non-resistant people' (p. 74). Tom Attlee, member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation General Committee and its Social Services Committee, in his address to the fellowship's summer conference in 1916, argued that Britain's threat of retaliation on Germany actually contributed to the German decision to invade Belgium, as it could be used to justify the military action of the German people by saying that it had been taken under external threat (p. 159). When peace came, Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, known as the 'war guilt clause', demanded that Germany and her allies accept responsibility for all war damages. The key demand of the Union of Democratic Control for an equitable distribution of responsibility for the war had been ignored.

*Subversive Peacemakers* integrates a sweeping narrative with vivid cameos of individual war resisters, but Barrett's flow is disrupted at times by the sheer number of personalities cramming his narrative. His account amplifies Adam Hochschild's thesis that the First World War divided those who passionately believed it was worth fighting from the much smaller minority opposing it who were patronisingly dismissed as either cranks or traitors.<sup>(7)</sup> Charlotte Despard, a character illustrative of the ideological divisions threading Hochschild's argument, appears momentarily in Barrett's story (p. 167). Charlotte, a committed pacifist and suffragette, was the older sister of field marshal, Sir John French, commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force during the first two years of the war. Barrett offers a similar sibling pairing in the career of Tom Attlee, older brother of the future prime minister Clement Attlee, that would have benefited from a fuller treatment (p. 157). The war caused an ideological rift between the brothers as Clement joined the army and saw service in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and the Western Front while Tom, a conscientious objector, was imprisoned for his commitment to war resistance (p. 159). The organisation of anti-war protesters during the First World War would cast a long shadow across the century. The fate of Bertrand Russell, an important figure in the narrative, could have been rounded off. Russell served out his prison sentence at the end of the First World War and in later life while at the forefront of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament would return to prison, aged 89 years, for inciting the public to commit a breach of the peace during the anti-nuclear arms protests of the 1960s. The part played by the Union of Democratic Control after the war could also have been developed by Barrett, as this agency endured as a think-tank for both the British Labour Party and for anti-colonial agitation. Yet, despite minor lacunae, Barrett's argument complements a recent reassessment of the war's cultural legacy by David Reynolds, who highlights that the discourse on human rights that came to dominate international relations during the late 20th century owes much to the actions of subversive peacemakers during the First World War.<sup>(8)</sup>

As difficult as it may be to adopt an unpopular stance against war today, it was a greater act of principled determination and independent thinking to have done so a century ago. Over 16,000 men made the claim to be conscientious objectors during the First World War in Britain. Clive Barrett makes a valuable scholarly contribution to the war's hidden history by documenting the stories of its half-forgotten subversive peacemakers who placed conscience before country, who saw through the illusions of jingoistic recruitment posters and who defended the common cause of humanity against national hatred. A century on, the anti-war movement remains peripheral to the history of the First World War, thereby, underscoring the truism that peace is harder than war.

## Notes

1. Mark Bostridge, 'Charlotte and Jack: the pacifist campaigner and her brother, the commander-in-chief: how families and friendships were split by the First World War', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5648 (1 July 2011), 3–4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alan John Percivale Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History*. (London, 1981, originally

- 1963), p. 114.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Angus Mitchell, '1914-18 and the war on peace', *History Ireland*, 22, 4 (July/August, 2014), 46–9. [Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*. (London, 2011, originally 1978), p. 2.[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. Peter Hart, 'Christmas Truce', *Military History* (January 2015), 70.[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. Mitchell, p. 48.[Back to \(6\)](#)
  7. Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: How the First World War divided Britain*. (London, 2011).[Back to \(7\)](#)
  8. David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*. (London, 2013).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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