

Background to Quakers and Conscientious Objection in World War I & II

Quakers have long been identified with peace issues. The Peace Testimony which, like other Quaker testimonies is a call to action rather than a belief – calls Quakers to promote peace & oppose war – seeking other means to settle disputes between peoples and countries.

There have been many whose faith has lead them towards taking action in times of war – and this essay is written using letters, other contemporary papers plus written and oral testimony from two particular Quaker conscientious objectors. The first an accountant aged 30, Wilfrid Littleboy, who was called up in 1917 during WWI and the second, a young man of 21, Christopher Lake, who was called up in 1940 during WWII.

World War I

There was little to warn the ordinary people of Britain in 1914 that war was about to break out. Quakers, outside their local meetings, were very involved in domestic matters – for example with the Adult School movement in the UK. As there had been no European war for sometime, it was - according to Wilfrid Littleboy – “a shock to everybody, Friends included” when war broke out.

The prospect of Conscription loomed and Wilfrid records that he remembers saying “Oh well, I shall be going to prison”- taking that as a matter of course.

With the advent of war the Friends War Victims Relief Committee (set up in 1870 to help people whose lives had been ravaged by the Franco-Prussian War) was revived and many Quakers worked under its auspices in Europe. Other Friends, feeling that they “must be doing something” joined the Friends Ambulance Service which was started in 1914. The training for the FAS took place at Jordans in Buckinghamshire from where they were sent to serve at the Front.

Some Friends, however, felt that a total refusal to be involved in any work, that could be said to be part of the war effort, was necessary to truly testify and demonstrate the conviction of the Society of Friends’ that all war was un-Christian. Wilfrid Littleboy was one such “Absolutist”. He met others - via the No-Conscription Fellowship - who shared the same convictions and “learnt an awful lot” from other young people, some of whom came to pacifism from other religious backgrounds and others from political rather than religious convictions. He was desperately keen to stand up and be counted.

In 1915 members of the No-Conscription Fellowship successfully campaigned to secure 'the conscience clause' in the 1916 Conscription Act: the right to claim exemption from military service.

Over a million men had enlisted by January 1915; encouraged by the famous call-to-arms poster featuring Lord Kitchener's "Your Country Needs You" The poster that preceded the beginning of conscription on March 2nd 1916 said "Single Men! Will You March Too or Wait till March 2?"

Special military tribunals were set up for those wishing to claim exemption from military service. These tribunals could grant conditional or temporary exemptions - and more rarely also granted absolute exemption. Wilfrid and some of his Quaker friends were anxious that, with the long history of Quaker pacifism, exemption from military service could, perhaps, be almost automatic for Quakers. Wilfrid wanted to make his testimony publically to draw attention to his beliefs. There was no need for worry! There was no automatic exemption and Wilfrid went before a tribunal in Birmingham with Neville Chamberlin (then Lord Mayor of Birmingham) in the Chair.

Neville Chamberlin listened and was "within limits, entirely considerate" but showed a lack of understanding of Wilfrid's absolutist case by asking "You're an accountant; couldn't you go to a munitions factory into the office as an accountant? You'd be paid as an accountant?"

Upon reaching no agreement and demonstrating his complete lack of understanding – Chamberlin gave him a month in which to think it over. Wilfrid remained adamant – he would do nothing that supported the war. His testimony was unchanged.

The Chairman at the next tribunal was "more rigid". Wilfrid was allowed to go but was referred to the Non-Combatant Corps. Some time later he was arrested and taken under escort to the military barracks at Warwick. Wilfrid refused to put on the soldier's uniform that he had been given and ordered to wear, which led to his going before a court martial, where he was sentenced to 112 days in prison and sent to Wormwood Scrubs to serve it.

In this he was luckier, he believed, than many younger conscientious Objectors who were sent over to France and told that "if they disobeyed an order that were likely to be shot". More details of the experiences of other conscientious objectors can be found on the internet – for example on the Peace Pledge Union's web site.

Wilfrid was sent first to Wormwood Scrubs and found the regime there “fairly severe”. He says “One found one had to get used to being shouted at” – this often over an apparent breach of an unwritten rule. He was cheered by a glimpse of one of his cousins in a nearby cell and the “interesting people” that he met there. The regime there was harsh. The Silence Rule operated and on exercise prisoners were expected to march in line “watched by 4 wardens mounted on pedestals” who enforced the Silence Rule as far as they were able. Wilfrid details the prison routine in letters to his parents and also his scepticism about the usefulness of prison in the rehabilitation of ordinary prisoners.

He spent 3 months in the Scrubs. Interestingly – and typical of Wilfrid’s positive attitude, he says “For myself then, all I can say is that the past 3 months has been as happy as any 3 months I can remember, more than that I cannot say.”

Following this spell in prison he was to face 2 further courts martial for disobeying orders and was sentenced in total to 2 ½ years in prison – this time being sent to a small civil prison at Dorchester. This was a very different place to Wormwood Scrubs and held 30 or 40 conscientious objectors with only 12 or so other prisoners (as far as he could make out), apart from “one period, when something had gone wrong with a military regiment, and a whole troop of soldiers were brought in and filled up one floor for a few days”.

Wilfrid’s experiences in prison as recounted in letters to his parents and in an interview for the Imperial War Museum, reflect his buoyant nature and his determination to live by, and witness, the Peace Testimony. He considered himself to be very lucky – his excellent physical health, good appetite (however poor the food) and positive attitude saw him through the tedium of the daily prison grind and being separated from his family and friends. He was aware of others not so fortunate – men whose physical health was poor, some who became “very depressed with being cut-off from life in general” and one man with whom he occasionally took exercise, who found the lock-up and isolation from 4pm to 7am daily especially hard so that he became “very very low in his mind”. He goes on to say “that particular chap fought it out and came out on top; and I had a very great respect for it.” He tells of one prisoner who “went home on doctor’s orders and died very soon after.”

Wilfrid was able to restart his business when finally discharged from prison, and again, he recognised his good fortune in being able to do so – many conscientious objectors who were not self-employed, found it very difficult to get employment after the war.

Being part of a Quaker family also meant their acceptance and support regarding his decision as a conscientious objector. Wilfrid recognised that for his father, who as the bank manager in a small country town, where it was known that none of his four sons were in the army, there was inevitably some social ostracism and coldness.

Wilfrid said “I realised when I came home that they’d probably had a much stiffer time than I had”...

WWII

The advent of WWII did not come as a surprise to the British people.

Christopher Lake was 20 when called upon to register for military service in April 1940. He was a convinced Christian and had been brought up in the Church of England and although he became aware of pacifism in 1935, did not consider that his views “were sufficiently definite to register as a conscientious objector” at that time. Christopher’s parents were very keen that he should join the army. He had, however, read some Quaker literature and, the day following his registration for military service, he attended his first Friends Meeting. Christopher continued to attend Quaker meetings and by the time he was called up in June 1940 found himself “in almost complete agreement with Friends”.

He put his name down as a Quaker and asked to be employed in a non-combatant capacity. He had clerical skills and was given a job in the Company Office before the completion of his military training. He was given permission to attend Quaker Meeting on a Sunday and was admitted to membership in early 1941. At this time Christopher asked to be transferred to the Medical Corps but despite “a rather stormy interview with the Colonel” who actually recommended the transfer saying that “he did not want any _____ conscientious objectors in his battalion” and some correspondence, this was ultimately refused.

He was, however, assured that as long as he remained in the battalion, he would only be employed on non-combatant duties. On refusing to have a rifle

or a bayonet, his Company Commander gave him a chit saying that the rifle and bayonet “had been withdrawn”.

By July 1941 Christopher had reached the conclusion that “to be faithful to what I believed to be the true conception of the Christian way of life I should not continue to serve in the Army in any capacity whatsoever.” His Colonel told him “to go away and be sensible”.

Christopher’s difficulty became, not so much one of being hounded for his conscientious objection, but one of difficulty with kindly officers who, liking him personally, tried to help - not understanding his deep conviction that the army and his religious conviction were incompatible.

He asked a friend who outranked him to give him an order to refuse. “This being done, I was placed in close arrest.” He then had an interview with the Colonel, who “merely admonished” him. Finally Christopher was told to give it six weeks careful thought and, if his views were still the same, the Colonel said that he’s see what could be done. Christopher was sent off for a “change of air” and given what he describes as “a very good job with the Regimental Police at Battalion Headquarters”.

When he returned with views unchanged he found that there was a new Colonel who agreed to do what he could to obtain his discharge. The Adjutant was instructed to send Christopher” to be medically re-examined and on no account is he to be A1!” The Medical Officer, however, could only pronounce Christopher to be medically fit – but added the rider that he was “delicate mentally”. He was then taken to see the psychiatrist and Christopher reports that he “was satisfied, I gather, that I was all right”.

Soon after this Christopher was informed that, as he had been found to be physically and mentally fit, the only option left to him was to obtain three months imprisonment.

At the end of his next leave he went absent without leave, though writing a letter to his Commanding Officer explaining what he was doing – and thanking him for the help and consideration that he had been given and apologising for having to take this step.

This led, on his return, to being put under close arrest and subsequently to trial by General Court Martial. Christopher requested this court martial rather than judgement by the Colonel, who he knew could not give him a sufficiently heavy sentence.

He recalls with gentle humour that his was possibly the only trial by court martial where the prisoner was asked how long a sentence he wanted! Christopher asked for the necessary sentence of at least three months and was sent to Leicester Goal.

Life in gaol was hard – the regime was strict and he found that conscientious objectors were regarded as far worse than ordinary prisoners. The Silence Rule was in force and on exercise – as was Wilfrid Littleboy’s experience in WWI - prisoners were made to walk spaced out in a circle to discourage conversation. Christopher records that friendly prison officers sometimes allowed them to reduce the gaps which meant that conversations were occasionally possible.

He had to sew mailbags, three to be completed each twenty-four hours with regulation eight stitches to the inch. This task had to be done in his cell. Each day he spent a little time in the prison workshop stencilling onto these bags.

Christopher records that they were fortunate in having “an excellent Quaker chaplain who made us feel that we were all suffering like George Fox in the 17th century”, which was a great boost to morale.

After serving two months of his three month sentence (reduced by a third for good behaviour) and having lost two stone in weight due, no doubt, to the poor prison diet, Christopher was released and sent back to his unit. He recalls the friendly welcome that he was given by fellow soldiers, some of whom applauded his courage and expressed the wish that they could do the same. From there he was sent to appear in front of the Appellate Tribunal who gave him his discharge from the army on condition that he did either medical or agricultural work.

Christopher’s father found his son’s conduct difficult to come to terms with – and refused to speak to him for 14 years. He also had to run the gauntlet of villagers from his home village most of whom looked down or turned away when he walked down the village street, which must have been very hard for a young man who was generally on good terms with everyone.

Christopher worked in various agricultural establishments during the war and went on post-war to have a very varied and fascinating life in England and also abroad in Greece, Turkey and on Cyprus where his work and activities gave further testament to his Quaker beliefs.

Details of Christopher Lake’s conscientious objection can be found in his oral testimony, in an article that he wrote for the Friend in the 22 January 1943 and in a copy of the letter to his commanding officer re his absence without leave.

Details of Wilfrid Littleboy’s conscientious objection can be found in letters to his parents and in an interview for The Imperial War Museum.

