

A Costly but Influential Counterculture: A Review of Four Works on War-time Pacifism

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My father was a conscientious objector. He washed floors and watched for forest fires in Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park. He never wrote his memoirs, but in this generation a number of books, articles and films on conscientious objection to the twentieth century's wars have appeared.¹ Some conscientious objector (CO) memoirs reflect a personalized view that idealizes the conscientious objection position and/or focuses on the conscientious objector experience to the exclusion of larger social, political and intellectual movements. The four works discussed in this essay were chosen for their variety, their representative character, and their critical engagement with the broader social, political and intellectual context. Thomas Socknat's *Witness against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945*² presents a broad study of Canadian pacifism against which to understand Canadian conscientious objectors. *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It*³ is a film that offers a concise overview of the American conscientious objector story. Rachel Waltner Goosen's *Women Against the Good War* looks more specifically at American conscientious objection through the eyes of women.⁴ Finally, in *'These Strange Criminals': An Anthology of Prison Memoirs by Conscientious Objectors from the Great War to the Cold War*, edited by Peter Brock,⁵ imprisoned conscientious objectors speak for themselves. All four works demonstrate that although conscientious objection is difficult and costly, it leaves an important and vital legacy and makes an invaluable contribution to society.

With solid research and a broad perspective, Socknat's *Witness against War* traces the development of the peace movement and the pacifist idea in Canada from 1900 to the end of World War II.⁶ The book includes the experience of conscientious objectors, but Socknat's greater contribution is providing the broader context. Socknat starts by offering definitions of two kinds of pacifists: "separational pacifists" and "integrational pacifists." "Separational pacifists" believe that

war is “always wrong” and hold to “non-participation in the worldly state.” Integrational pacifists, who seek to reform society in a more peaceful direction, believe “that war, though sometimes necessary, is ... inhumane and irrational and should be prevented.”⁷ Socknat’s brush strokes may be too broad, and so it may be better to distinguish four categories rather than two. The book combines absolutist pacifists with separational pacifists, and pragmatic pacifists with integrational pacifists. These combinations do not always hold. Integrational pacifists may also be absolutist, as many Quakers have been. And separational pacifists may be pragmatic rather than principled. Further, not all Mennonites were or are separational, as Socknat seems to assume. In theology and practice, Mennonites have also emphasized embracing the world in love and doing good to those who do evil.

Second, Socknat shows the roots of pacifism and conscientious objection in Canada. He names six early strands: 1) the Mennonite immigrations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 2) the Society of Friends or Quaker community, 3) the social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 4) the progressive movement that hailed arbitration as the solution for international conflicts, 5) suffragists and feminist women’s groups, and 6) labor movements that condemned war as a capitalist ploy. Most of the conscientious objectors came from the first two strands: the Mennonites and the Quakers.⁸

Third, Socknat shows the connections of Canadian pacifism to campaigns for disarmament, international harmony and social and economic reorganization. Disarmament campaigns argued against conscription, armament increases and nuclear weaponry. But war was not the only violence. Poverty, racism and sexism are also forms of violence. And so began the movement toward social radicalism and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party led by J. S. Woodsworth, and many liberal pacifists moved leftward politically. Pacifist means of non-violence and the radical ends of social justice merged into one broad movement that between the wars led the way in Canadian social action.

Fourth, the book shows how liberals lost their pacifist backbone. When World War I broke out they were not prepared. Most gave up pacifist convictions to side with the British cause against the Axis nations. Then, with the rise of fascism and Nazism, liberals and social radicals rallied to the armed defense of Western democracies, and left the peace movement weakened. In a way, integrational pacifists abandoned pacifism for justice against fascism, while separational pacifists forsook the fight against fascism to uphold their pacifism.

Fifth, we are told that conscientious objectors included not only Mennonites, Hutterites and Quakers, but also Christadelphians,

Doukhobors, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moravians, Seventh-Day Adventists, Tunkers and others, not to mention individuals from mainline churches and some from no church at all. For those whose denomination had no historic agreement with the government, a conscientious objector claim was very different. The Jehovah's Witnesses proved to be the most unbending in their resistance to war-related duties, and they received the worst treatment of all. Mennonites were the most numerous, but Quakers, with their historic peace church credentials, their reforming, activist outlook, and their familiarity with mainline churches and with government negotiations, emerged as leaders for both the government and for separational pacifists.⁹

Finally, this excellent book identifies the lasting value for Canada of the alternative service program. It helped unify the various peace sects, and by offering pacifists a vital role in wartime society, alternative service helped legitimize conscientious objection as a positive choice when Canadians face war.¹⁰

The United States also allowed for conscientious objection in World War II. The film entitled *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It* tells this story. According to this film, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, 17 million Americans registered for combat, while 42,000 conscientious objectors refused to serve. A dozen of them appear in interviews in the film.

The options for conscientious objectors in World War II were to fight, go to jail, or claim conscientious objector status. The historic peace churches – Mennonites, Quakers, and Church of the Brethren – had negotiated an alternative for their members in something called Civilian Public Service. The men worked, the churches paid, and the government called the shots. Twelve thousand conscientious objectors accepted this arrangement. The Civilian Public Service brought together a kaleidoscope of men whose only commonality was that they believed killing was wrong. Long discussions among them helped many define more exactly why they opposed the war. When the issue was framed as democracy versus fascism and they were asked, “Do you like Hitler?” they found an answer very difficult. Thus, World War II was harder to oppose than the Vietnam War. The hardest accusation to answer was that they were parasites who lacked gratitude and love for the people and country that had nurtured them. As a result, many competed for dangerous jobs such as firefighting. Others volunteered to be medical guinea pigs. Some endured starving experiments, others walked the treadmill endlessly, and still others volunteered to be infected with diseases.

Most of these conscientious objectors, however, worked in work camps. The work was often meaningless, such as to dig a trench and then fill it up again. From 1942 onwards, some 3,000 volunteered

to work in mental hospitals. Many wives and other women also volunteered. What they found was brutal care under harsh conditions, often with patients naked and subject to frequent beatings. The conscientious objectors documented the abuses, contacted the press to expose the maltreatment, and carried cases of abuse to court. These actions led to a large reform movement in mental health care.

Although Hollywood propaganda supported the war, one famous actor, Lew Ayres, took an opposing position. He played a leading role in the antiwar film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Eventually, the government allowed him to serve as an army medic in the South Pacific. This opened the door for 25,000 conscientious objectors to serve as noncombatants.

Seven thousand conscientious objectors were jailed, some because they refused to register and others because they refused to serve as noncombatants or in the Civilian Public Service. In New York's Union Theological Seminary eight students refused to register. They met with enormous hostility from fellow Americans and served prison sentences. The film features some of these men: George Houser, Dave Dellinger and Don Benedict. At the time prisons were racially segregated. A number, including Houser, Benedict, and Bill Sutherland, an African American, led a strike against racial segregation and landed in solitary confinement. Eventually, the prison officials released them all in order to let Benedict pitch and win a championship softball game. Such strikes spread to other prisons. According to prison authorities, the most difficult prisoners were those who resisted war for philosophical and political reasons. These did not fit the normal stereotype of a prisoner and were often persons of high moral character.

The end of the war was bittersweet for conscientious objectors. The nuclear bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki dampened any joy they might have felt. Soldiers came home as heroes, but conscientious objectors went home with no public welcome. After the war thousands of conscientious objectors went to Europe, partly to negate charges of ungrateful irresponsibility, and partly to help repair the damage of war. To its credit, in 1947 the Quaker Relief Service won the Nobel Prize for Peace.

American conscientious objectors left a lasting legacy. Many became involved in the American civil rights movement in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. In 1947 George Houser participated in the first Freedom Rides for racially integrated interstate bus service. In the 1960s and 1970s Dave Dellinger and others joined in the anti-Vietnam war movement. In the 1970s and 1980s George Houser and Bill Sutherland worked in the anti-apartheid movement that led to the release of Nelson Mandela. Lew Ayres returned to acting and continued as a

peace activist. The Amish Sam Yoder became a college professor, and his two sons registered as conscientious objectors in the Vietnam war.

This fine one-hour film leaves us with food for thought: “Every great expansion of human freedom began with small beginnings.” Small actions of conscientious objectors set in motion new attitudes worldwide towards war and peace.

Rachel Waltner Goosen’s *Women Against the Good War* examines conscientious objection and gender in the United States during World War II. Her focus is women who joined their conscientious objector husbands, fiancés or sons in Civilian Public Service. Based on interviews, letters and diaries of 180 women from 18 denominations, Goosen tells the story of 2,000 women who followed their loved ones to Civilian Public Service camps in 151 locations: 101, or 61%, were Mennonite, 17 were Church of the Brethren, 9 were Quaker, and 8 were Methodist.¹¹ Goosen explores the degree to which these women’s convictions marginalized them in American society, and the ways their experience changed their lives and outlook. She asks: How did Civilian Public Service women fare? Did they feel marginalized? Did they resent being overlooked while men were recognized as heroes?

According to Goosen, conscientious objector women and men received much hostility and pro-war social pressure from mainstream Americans (Chapter 2). Unlike military families, who received financial support, many of these women, burdened with hostility, family disruptions, financial worries and repeated moves, found life in wartime America very difficult (Chapter 3). In Civilian Public Service units short-staffed nurses and dieticians had to cope with food shortages and difficulties with male superiors (Chapter 4). Some women served as badly needed psychiatric aides in state mental hospitals (Chapter 5). After the war’s end, male pacifist leaders took part in discussions about conscientious objection and refugees, but most Civilian Public Service women stayed home and were ignored. Not until after the Vietnam war 30 years later did they share their stories and perceptions (Chapter 6).

So what is the legacy of these women and the meaning of gender in this context? Unlike the pacifist women of World War I, who also campaigned for women’s suffrage, and pacifist women of the Vietnam War, who also pressed for political and economic equality, most Civilian Public Service women did not connect their pacifist stance with a feminist issue. They remained within traditional gender roles as supporters of husband and family. Yet, in the church these pacifist women “challenged patriarchal ... structures and experimented with new ways to meet family obligations, contribute to the labor force, and provide volunteer services.”¹² Further, Civilian Public Service work and travel broadened their social contacts and sparked wider interest

in racial justice, gender equality, antiwar activism, and other causes. Paradoxically, many women from sectarian and separatist traditions left Civilian Public Service more open to the world. Even though these women felt that they might not have sufficiently defended the country that nurtured them, their choices to oppose the war, to question government dictums and to defy societal expectations set them apart. Like the men in the film, these women's legacy lies in children who resisted the Vietnam war, in the questioning of dominant social values, in the pacifist subculture that persists 60 years after World War II, and in the ongoing "debates about the status of women and men in a democratic, militarized society."¹³

With this thoroughly documented and clearly written book, Goosen has opened many doors for further research. Scholars need to study the women of conscientious objectors of World War I, of the Korean War and the Vietnam War, not to mention those who went to prison, and those who chose noncombatant service. Throughout the history of conscientious objection in America, and indeed the world, the interplay of feminism and peace has many unexplored threads.

Finally, *These Strange Criminals': An Anthology of Prison Memoirs by Conscientious Objectors from the Great War to the Cold War* offers us the actual words of conscientious objectors who went to prison. This book gathers together prison memoirs of 29 conscientious objectors from six countries over a span of 70 years. In brilliant fashion it "introduces a spirited group of political dissidents, their view of the prison and the societies that created them."¹⁴ The book falls into three parts: World War I, World War II and the Cold War, which includes the Korean war and the Vietnam war. The conscientious objectors hail from Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States and East Germany. Twelve of the 29 writers are Quakers. The narrators are nearly all men, for few women conscientious objectors were jailed. Convinced, however, that women's perspectives are invaluable, Brock includes the memoirs of two women in Second World War Britain who had joined the military but objected to certain tasks, and were jailed on the basis of conscience. The chronological order of prison memoirs provides a sense of flow, and the wide range of writers ensures diversity. Fortunately, the extracts are long enough to offer a real sense of both the prison and the mind of the prisoner.

The editor Peter Brock, himself a British World War II conscientious objector, aims at two kinds of readers: students of penology and students of peace history. Penologists, or students of prison life and prison writing, he says, should notice that the unique perspective of conscientious objectors is very different from the writing of so-called common criminals. Similarly, students of peace history may glean new insights into the experience of pacifism in wartime. These memoirs

cast light on important questions: Why does one willingly give up one's freedom? When should one compromise one's principles? When is holding to one's principles no longer worth it? What good is it to be absolutely faithful to one's ideals? In a society or world run by violence, what contribution does principled pacifism make? Questions also arise about the writers: Are they bitter or do they have an inner peace? Has anger skewed their vision?¹⁵

Educated, politically aware and articulate, these writers record their own responses to incarceration. George Ewan of England maintains a happy disposition (pp. 62-80). Archibald Baxter of New Zealand writes with quiet dignity (pp. 103-124). Kathleen Wigham of England expresses shock at penal justice (pp. 243-259). Stephen Hobhouse of England denounces with righteous rage (pp. 15-27). David Miller of the United States outlines strategies to resist (pp. 464-487). Ian Hamilton of New Zealand shows contempt with bitter humour (263-296).

With amazing consistency these writers agree on prison's essential character. We read of physical trials, but the writers place much more focus on the psychological hardship and the effects of incarceration upon the prisoner's spiritual, mental, and social health. They write of unrelenting surveillance, the loss of self-determination, the demoralization of solitary confinement, the strip searches and other humiliations, the poor diet and lack of medical attention, and the pressure to accept a convict identity. The worst, perhaps, are the prison staff or "screws," a major source of this degradation. With insight the writers analyze the prisoner-screw relationship and spotlight the personal and institutional power imbalances. Across great temporal and geographical distances the writers uniformly point to the universal character of the prison experience: a spirit-breaking loss of freedom and autonomy to absolute, dominating power. The scars are deep and lasting. Some narrators write while in prison; others write up to 60 years after being imprisoned. Either way resentment remains.¹⁶

These memoirs are unique because these prisoners refused to let their identity be reshaped into that of the convicted criminal. Unlike most criminals, they take the moral and intellectual high ground. From there they hurl condemnation upon the staff, the prison system, and the society that imprisons. The lack of remorse or guilt is clear. Says J. K. Osborne: "Four years of my life for refusing to kill?"¹⁷ Adds Peter Brock: "I was rather proud of my status."¹⁸

What contributions do these memoirs make? According to criminologist Robert Gaucher, first, they offer much information. Second, they engender new research questions for scholars. Third, they offer relevant political and moral commentary for our age of mass imprisonment. Fourth, they reaffirm the indictment of prison as a tool of dehumanization. The concepts they articulate are often 50 years ahead

of their time. For example, the argument that prison is a proven failure became established only in the 1970s. But already in 1917 Stephen Hobhouse concluded that prison “succeeds only in creating the delinquent, hardening criminality and ensuring recidivism.”¹⁹ Finally, these memoirs bear witness to the vitality of the human spirit.

This book is superb. The excerpts are well chosen and the introductions and additional notes are scholarly and restrained. But between the lines, fed by the content of the memoirs themselves, the book oozes passion. Says Gaucher, “Brock rescues these voices from the dustbin of history and gives them new life.”²⁰

From these four works I would like to offer three concluding observations and point to two themes the works hold in common. The first observation is the importance of principled conviction. Before World War I and between the wars, the social gospel, progressive, suffragist, and labor movements all condemned war and sought to reform society in a more peaceful direction. Yet, when World War I broke out most gave up their pacifist convictions to side with the British. Similarly, with the rise of fascism and Nazism, most abandoned their pacifism for justice against fascism and rallied to the armed defense of Western democracies. Those who withstood the pressure to enlist were the absolute pacifists – Mennonites, Quakers and Jehovah’s Witnesses. In the face of war frenzy, principled conviction deeper than pragmatism was needed to maintain a pacifist stance.

Second is the importance of historic tradition in a community. The conscientious objectors firmest in the face of war pressure were the Jehovah’s Witnesses and those from the historic peace churches, that is, those undergirded by a caring community steeped in pacifist practice. Although liberal pacifists abhorred war, their communities were historically steeped in just-war thinking rather than pacifist thought. When World War I and World War II broke out and they abandoned their pacifism, liberal would-be pacifists were left without community support. Had it not been for the foundational strength of their historic communities, who remembered centuries of peace witness even during war, many individual Mennonites and Quakers might also have yielded in the face of war pressure.

A third observation is the leading role of the Society of Friends. In Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, Quakers articulated pacifist principles to people in power and negotiated alternatives other than prison. In *These Strange Criminals* twelve of the 29 writers, imprisoned in England and the United States, in both world wars and the Korean war, were Quakers. In Canada in World War I, government policy granted conscientious objector status only to those from historic peace churches, and those from other churches had few conscientious objector options. Mennonites were divided and often

poorly equipped to negotiate with governments. So Quakers played a leading and bridging role for both the government and for pacifists. As a historic peace church, Quakers stood firm with sectarian groups such as the Mennonites. As a reforming community with an activist outlook, they were familiar with the mainline churches and with government negotiations. In World War II, Quakers, with colleagues from mainline and sectarian churches, led a successful drive for wider pacifist consideration in two main ways: 1) the right of any individual, regardless of background or denomination, to object on the basis of conscience and 2) the establishment of some form of alternative service in the national interest. Henceforth, in Canada, “the individual’s conscientious beliefs [became] the sole ground for exemption.”²¹ After the war, Quakers and other pacifists worked to overcome wartime tensions through refugee and relief work in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. As noted above, in 1947 the Quaker Peace Service won the Nobel Peace prize for its work in war relief and reparations. Although Mennonites were the most numerous of conscientious objectors, the Society of Friends led the way.

One theme common to all four works is that of a costly countercultural posture. The Canadian integrational and separational pacifists in Socknat’s work, the American pacifists who refused to fight “The Good War” in the film, the American women who supported and accompanied their loved ones in Civilian Public Service, and the imprisoned men and women in Brock’s edited work all criticized the violence of war, the prison system, and the societies that engendered them. All faced hostility from mainstream culture in their societies. Their stand against the military, political, social and economic violence of their day cost them their freedom and public esteem.

A second theme is the ongoing influence of these wartime nonconformists. In Canada, the United States and elsewhere, in alternative service programs pacifists helped legitimize conscientious objection as a positive choice when their nations faced war. Pacifist women and men left a legacy of involvement in mental health and prison reform movements, anti-racist activity, civil rights movements, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the anti-apartheid movement and human rights concerns. They propelled ongoing debates about dominant social values and developed a pacifist subculture that persists 60 years after World War II.

Together, these works argue that conscientious objection is difficult, costly and demanding of enormous commitment, which individuals may achieve on their own but which is strengthened with the support of a deeply rooted pacifist community. Further, despite their alienation and losses, conscientious objectors made an invaluable contribution to their society. In exposing abuse in mental hospitals, in prisons, and among minorities in society; in sparking debates about the dominant

values in democratic, militarized societies; in joining movements against racism, sexism and other forms of social violence; and in refusing to kill, even when pressed to do so by governments in war, conscientious objectors held high the freedom of conscience, the sanctity and dignity of life, and the vision of a world free from violence.

Notes

- ¹ Other full length published works include Richard C. Anderson, *Peace was in Their Hearts: Conscientious Objectors in World War II* (Scottsdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1994); Ronald Friesen, *When Canada Called: Manitoba Mennonites and World War II* (Steinbach, MB: Ronald Friesen, 2006); William Janzen and Frances Greaser, *Sam Martin Went to Prison: The Story of Conscientious Objection and Canadian Military Service* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990); A. J. Klassen, *Alternative Service for Peace* (Abbotsford, B.C.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1998); Laurence Klippenstein, ed., *That There Be Peace: Mennonites in Canada and World War II* (Winnipeg: The Manitoba CO Reunion Committee, 1979); Melanie Springer Mock, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors* (Kitchener: Pandora, 2003); *The Different Path: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in World War II*, Videorecording, Rogers Cable Television and Mennonite Central Committee, 1990; *The Pacifist Who Went to War*, Video recording directed by David Neufeld, 2002, National Film Board of Canada, 2006; J. A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada during WWII* (Winnipeg: Conference of M. B. Churches, 1959).
- ² Thomas Socknat, *Witness against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
- ³ *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It*, a film produced and written by Judith Ehrlich and Rick Tejada-Flores, Prairie Public Television, 60 minutes.
- ⁴ Rachel Waltner Goosen, *Women Against the Good War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- ⁵ Peter Brock, ed., *'These Strange Criminals': An Anthology of Prison Memoirs by Conscientious Objectors from the Great War to the Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- ⁶ Pacifism in this paper is defined broadly as a commitment to peacemaking and a peaceable handling of conflict that applies to individuals, groups and nations. Conscientious objection is one expression of this.
- ⁷ Socknat, 7.
- ⁸ Socknat, 11-42.
- ⁹ Socknat, 74-78, 88-89, 227-58.
- ¹⁰ Socknat, 257.
- ¹¹ Goosen, 42.
- ¹² Goosen, 131.
- ¹³ Goosen, 10.
- ¹⁴ Brock, ix.
- ¹⁵ Brock, xiii.
- ¹⁶ Brock, xi-xii, 432.
- ¹⁷ Brock, 449.
- ¹⁸ Brock, 201-202.
- ¹⁹ Brock, x, xiii.
- ²⁰ Brock, xii.
- ²¹ Socknat, 235.