

# A Body Divided: British Quakers, Patriotism and War, 1899–1919

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## Abstract

Two-thirds of young Quaker men did not enlist during the First World War, an illustration of a wartime division within the British Society of Friends between the call of civic duty and adherence to historic peace principles. Those who chose to remain at home actively protested against the war and subsequently against implementation in 1916 of compulsory military service. Other Quakers were unable to decide which way to turn. Early on in the war, alternatives were made available to young Quaker men, such as the Friends' Ambulance Unit, but imprisoned Quaker absolutists became the saintly heroes of the wartime Society of Friends, following, as they did, in the steps of early Friends who suffered imprisonment for conscience' sake.

## Keywords

First World War, Friends' Ambulance Unit, Friends' Service Committee, No-Conscription Fellowship, peace testimony.

For 250 years after George Fox and other early Children of Light issued a 'Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People called Quakers', rejecting 'all wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons',<sup>1</sup> the Religious Society of Friends in the British Isles was widely recognised as a Peace Church. Plain spoken and plainly dressed, Quakers refused military service and some had property distrained for declining to join local militias. London Yearly Meeting of Friends, guided by its quaintly named Executive Committee—Meeting for Sufferings—maintained Quaker testimony against war and violence throughout

1 For the complete text, see Nickalls, J. L., (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, pp. 398–404.

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An admirable and even courageous testimony to be sure, though mitigated, it must be said, by Britain's historic resistance to the implementation of compulsory military service.

The first serious breach in the Quaker anti-war pledge occurred during South African Boer War, when a number of prominent Friends supported the British Empire's struggle against what they considered a brutal people.<sup>2</sup> The outraged reaction against this apparent apostasy, especially by younger, spiritually and socially committed Friends, was an aspect of what has been called the Quaker Renaissance of the late Victorian period. Certainly, the growth of a 'Young Friends' movement during the Edwardian years helped to revitalise devotion to the peace testimony as a central tenet of Quaker faith, something stronger and more vital than what one Friend called 'a perfunctory subscription' to some secular Peace Society.<sup>3</sup> This influence was reflected in a document entitled 'Our Testimony for Peace', accepted by London Yearly Meeting in 1912 as proof that rejection of war and violence followed 'from the foundation principle on which the Society... is built... our belief in and experience of the Light Within.' The idea that a Divine Light, available to all human beings, which made every life sacred in God's eyes, was the rock upon which twentieth-century Quaker war resistance was anchored as 'an organic outgrowth of our Faith as Christians'.<sup>4</sup> The peace principle was clearly stated: Friends should not fight with carnal weapons and should do all in their power to prevent violence between nations and individuals.

Two years later, in August 1914, Friends of every stripe were stunned by the sudden onslaught of what the leading Quaker journal *The Friend* called a 'ghoulish terror of darkness'.<sup>5</sup> More shocking was the declaration of a prominent member of Meeting for Sufferings, soon joined by other respected Friends, appealing to Quaker youth to join the struggle against the villainous Hun.<sup>6</sup> Surely, most disquieting was the fact that so many Friends answered the call to arms. In the first great rush of patriotic enthusiasm, more than two hundred young Quakers enlisted. Eventually, about one-third of male Friends of military age, nearly a

2 Prominent Friends who publicly supported the South African War included renowned historian Thomas Hodgkin, author of a multi-volume history of Italy and her invaders, Caroline Stephens, Victorian Quakerism's most famous convert and author of *Quaker Strongholds*, and publisher and lexicographer John Bellows.

3 For the Young Friends Movement, see Kennedy, T. C., *British Quakerism 1860–1920: the transformation of a religious community*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 285–311. The quote is from John W. Graham's article, 'Whence Comes Peace', *British Friend* (February 1896), pp. 27–29.

4 Minutes of London Yearly Meeting, 1912, pp. 107–08, 112–17 (hereafter *LYM*, with year). See also Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, pp. 308–09.

5 *The Friend* (7 August 1914), pp. 575–76.

6 Henry Marriage Wallis was Quakerism's leading military recruiter. See Taylor, E. E., 'Diary, 1914' (17 August and 25 September 1914), Temp. Box 23/3, Library of the Society of Friends (LSF), London; Isichei, E. A., *Victorian Quakers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 201–02.

thousand, volunteered for Britain's armed services. Bewildered Quaker pacifists asked why the principles of these young men were not rooted in something 'deeper than mere tradition or inherited beliefs'.<sup>7</sup>

However, two-thirds of young Quaker men did not enlist, a clear illustration of a wartime division within the British Society of Friends between the call of civic duty and adherence to historic peace principles. Of course, those Friends who marched off to war had little influence on their Society's official wartime policies. These policies were determined by stay-at-home Friends, many of whom were young men, allied with female pacifists, who not only refused to serve, but also actively protested against the war and subsequently against implementation in 1916 of compulsory military service.<sup>8</sup> There were also other Quakers, young and older, who drifted, confused and demoralised, unable to decide which way to turn. While in the public sphere Rupert Brooke was calling for 'the red / Sweet wine of youth', pacifist leaders of the Society tried to speak to the condition of their wavering brethren and remind them that Friends' peace testimony was 'the candle that we must keep alight in England'.<sup>9</sup> 'No one', said Wilfrid Littleboy, Secretary to the Young Friends Home Mission and Extension Committee, 'can honestly take our Quaker stand against all war without being committed to a higher and more exacting service'.<sup>10</sup>

The nature of such service was not clearly defined, but, from early on, alternatives were made available to young Quaker men. The most prominent of these alternatives was the Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU) organised by Philip Noel-Baker (1889–1982), British Olympian and future Member of Parliament. Eventually, 1,500 men, less than half of them Quakers, served in this volunteer ambulance corps.<sup>11</sup> The FAU did yeoman service at the front, but, after the introduction of conscription, the Unit and its Director, Sir George Newman, a pioneer in public health, became the focus of serious inter-Quaker conflict because of what anti-war Friends believed was too friendly a relationship with military authorities.<sup>12</sup>

7 Howard, E. F., *Friends' Service in Wartime*, London: Friends Council for International Service, [1920], p. 11.

8 The 1916 Military Service Acts, passed in January and May, eventually established liability for military service on male residents of Great Britain (excluding Ireland) between the ages of 18 and 41, with exemptions for physical disability, employment in work of national importance and conscientious objection on religious grounds. The vitality of individual exemptions was to be determined by Tribunals of locally appointed civilians. In 1918, a third Military Service Act raised the age limitation to 51, with the possibility of it being raised to 56.

9 'Friends and Enlistment', *The Friend* (2 October 1914), p. 724.

10 'Our Peace Testimony and Some of its Implications', *The Friend* (2 October 1914).

11 See Tatham, M., and Miles, J. E., *The Friends Ambulance Unit, 1914–1919*, London: The Swarthmore Press Ltd, [1919].

12 For pacifist Friends' complaints about Newman's leading of the FAU into a virtual alliance with the British Army, see Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, pp. 331, 339–40.

Most significant for anti-war Quakers was Yearly Meeting's creation in May 1915 of the Friends' Service Committee (FSC) 'to strengthen the Peace testimony among Friends of military age'. Yearly Meeting also endorsed a minute recommending that any exemption given to Friends be equally applied to non-Quakers.<sup>13</sup> The FSC proved to be the most active and radical Quaker organisation during the Great War. Some of its leading members, including A. B. (Barry) Brown, Robert O. Mennell and Hubert Peet had also joined the No-Conscription Fellowship, an entirely secular, chiefly socialist anti-war, anti-conscription organisation. Female Friends like Edith Ellis, Edith J. Wilson and Dr Henrietta Thomas helped the FSC to chart the path to a radical interpretation of Friends' historic, if hitherto somewhat amorphous, peace testimony. Older, more cautious Friends sometimes proved reluctant to follow the FSC's hardline stance. One senior Friend who had no such qualms was Alfred Neave Brayshaw (1861–1940), who became a sort of father-confessor to the FSC, holding that 'the sole justification for the survival of Friends as a separate body was that it was doing work... not being done elsewhere... In accord with the best traditions of our Society'.<sup>14</sup>

Late in 1915, the Friends' Service Committee issued a 'Manifesto' declaring that their rejection of war and military service was based on 'belief in the sanctity of human personality, and... the principles of Jesus Christ... be the consequences what they may'.<sup>15</sup> It was a stirring declaration, but what did it actually entail? In early 1916, after the FSC embarked upon its apparently no-compromise course, one member of that Committee, Arnold S. Rowntree MP, was consulting with prominent Quaker lawyers W. C. Braithwaite and E. Richard Cross on the possibility of attaching a special conscience clause for Friends to any pending conscription measure.<sup>16</sup> (Bertrand Russell generally respected the Friends with whom he worked in the struggle against war and conscription, but he told Ottoline Morrell that 'if many Quakers are like Rowntree, I understand why they instituted silent meeting'.)<sup>17</sup> W. C. Braithwaite, the historian of early Quakerism, counselled co-operation with the Government because, as he told Arnold Rowntree, 'Young Friends ought to give good equivalent service... from which

13 *LYM, 1915* (22 May 1915). See also, FSC Minutes, Records Work and Documents Issued, 3 vols (June 1915–May 1920), LSF.

14 Brayshaw, A. N., *Friends and the Inner Light*, London: Headley Bros, 1915, pp. 70–72 and 'Address to Members of the Friends' Guild of Teachers' (13 January 1915), Box T 1/3, LSF.

15 'To Our Fellow Members of Military Age of the Society of Friends', FSC, printed documents, Temp. Box 31, LSF.

16 W. C. Braithwaite to A. S. Rowntree (19 November 1915) and E. Richard Cross to Rowntree (21 November 1915), A. S. Rowntree Papers (ASRP), Temp. MSS 558, 310/S/2, LSF.

17 Russell to Ottoline Morrell (11 August 1914), T. 1069, Ottoline Morrell Papers, University of Texas Library, Austin.

we cannot separate ourselves, and which are part of the relations of life which are to be discharged in fear of God.’<sup>18</sup>

Thus, while no important leader of the Friends who had shaped the Quaker Renaissance during the 1890s and Edwardian period openly supported the war or conscription, many of that generation believed arrangements could be made with the State to ensure young Quaker men could be both patriotic citizens and faithful Friends. A relevant case involved John W. Graham, a leading light for Quaker reform since the 1880s, and his son, Richard. Graham told his son he believed the Government had a right to impose compulsory service, but if Friends could convince the State to relieve them of ‘actual fighting’, it ‘would not be too great a concession... to natural and patriotic feeling’.<sup>19</sup> As the first Military Service Act loomed in late January 1916, Graham let Richard in on ‘very private’ information from Lord Derby, Director of Recruiting, via Arnold Rowntree. The Government, he noted, was willing to accommodate religious conscientious objectors, but would never accept the sort of ‘political objectors’ who made up the bulk of the No-Conscription Fellowship.

By the end of 1915, it was becoming clear that the views of most Friends of military age who had not enlisted differed from those of their elders who wished to make accommodation with the wartime State. A poll of over 1,000 male Friends conducted by the FSC revealed that 900 of those who responded expressed refusal to enlist, to make munitions or do any work requiring a military oath.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, FSC Secretary Robert Mennell stated in a letter to *The Times* that because the Service Committee objected ‘to the whole organisation for war’, members would not accept alternative service associated with prosecuting the conflict. At the end of February 1916, an Adjourned Yearly Meeting endorsed the Service Committee’s stand with a minute affirming that ‘where our members are brought into difficulty or suffering through obedience to conscience, we take our stand beside them, and assure them of our loving sympathy and support’.<sup>21</sup> In practice, then, the FSC had effectively replaced the official Friends’ Peace Committee, largely staffed by older men, in designing a war-resistance policy for the British Society of Friends.

When the first Military Service Act was passed in late January 1916, Quaker MPs (including Rowntree) managed to insert an amendment offering exemption to all ‘genuine’ conscientious objectors willing to accept civilian work of national importance and apparently even allowing for the sort of ‘absolute’ exemption acceptable to FSC hardline pacifists. However, tribunals made of local worthies

18 W. C. Braithwaite to A. S. Rowntree (19 November 1915), ASRP, Temp. MSS 558, 310/S/2, LSF.

19 J. W. Graham to Richard Graham (16 October 1915), J. W. Graham Papers, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

20 R. O. Mennell and H. W. Peet to *The Friend* (17 December 1915), LSF.

21 *LYM*, Held in Adjournment the 28th to 30th of First Month 1916, Minutes, concerning the Military Service (No. 2) Act (printed copy in LSF).

and charged with hearing pleas for all types of exemption, inevitably construed 'absolute' exemption very differently from the Friends' Service Committee.

Older Friends, including John W. Graham, bristled at the idea of radical 'outsiders' like Robert Mennell leading young men like Graham's son Richard toward decisions that might have 'large practical consequences' when they appeared before local tribunals.<sup>22</sup> In the end, to his father's immense relief, Richard Graham, like most Quaker COs, chose civilian alternative service, but 145 Friends of military age determined to go to prison rather than compromise with the wartime State. They were joined by over a thousand other absolutists, most of whom were socialists from the No-Conscription Fellowship.<sup>23</sup> Eventually, FSC purists seriously divided with the NCF over the question of seeking redress for imprisoned objectors. But that was another story.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the protests of many weighty Friends counselling compromise, Meeting for Sufferings and London Yearly Meeting continued to support FSC absolutists. This affirmation included endorsing the FSC's position of not seeking relief for absolutists who were being sentenced and, upon release, being re-sentenced up to four times. Serious questions arose as to the legality of repeatedly imprisoning absolutist objectors for the same offence. Still, the FSC persisted in the view that it was 'not the function of any pacifist body to agitate for the release of conscientious objectors until public opinion desires it'.<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, despite a Yearly Meeting 'Appeal to the Conscience of the Nation',<sup>26</sup> public sympathy for 'conchies' was not in the offering.

Imprisoned Quaker absolutists became the saintly heroes of the wartime Society of Friends, following, as they did, in the steps of early Friends who suffered imprisonment for conscience' sake. One of the most impressive of these men was Wilfrid E. Littleboy (1885–1979), chartered accountant from Birmingham and future Clerk of London Yearly Meeting, who remained in prison from January 1917 to mid-1919. Littleboy's letters during his confinement are particularly admirable and moving. From his first to last day in a prison cell, Littleboy never wavered in the view that he and fellow absolutists were 'in the right place' from which they would not stir 'except on absolutely unrestricted conditions'.<sup>27</sup> Through months of repeated sentences of hard labour and solitary confinement, Littleboy came to

22 J. W. Graham to Richard Graham (1 and 3 May 1916), JWGP. In fact, 'outsider' Mennell's Quaker heritage went back to the time of George Fox and the first Friends.

23 For a discussion of the anti-war movement's response to the imprisonment of COs, see Kennedy, T. C., 'Fighting about Peace: the No-Conscription Fellowship and the British Friends Service Committee 1915–1919', *Quaker History* 69 (1980), pp. 3–22.

24 See Kennedy, 'Fighting about Peace', pp. 9–20.

25 Edward Grubb to Edith Ellis (14, 17 and 22 March 1917) and E[ster] Bright Clothier to Edith Ellis (26 March 1917), FSC Minutes, II, 48, LSF.

26 *An Appeal to the Conscience of the Nation*, London Yearly Meeting, May 1918, signed by John H. Barlow, Clerk. Copy in LSF.

27 Wilfrid Littleboy to his parents (18 January 1917), Wilfrid Littleboy Papers (WLP) in possession of his daughter Margaret E. Nash.

believe that Friends, in their struggle with the State ‘must keep our “unmitigated no” in our testimony’:

I am quite content in the thought that God will not let my time here be wasted but will continue to lead me on ‘to see greater things than these’: & whether it be weeks, months or longer, this stage will end when I can serve His purposes better elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

Littleboy believed that acceptance of a personal Cross was ‘a piece of ... growth toward the establishment of His will on earth’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, his stand, and that of his fellow Quaker COs, became the measure by which subsequent pacifist war-resistance would be assessed.<sup>30</sup> But what of mature Friends who declared that their sense of the Inner Light of Christ moved them to support the war, to recruit men for soldiers or personally to join the ranks of His Majesty’s forces?

Perhaps the best example of such a Friend was Walter Trevelyan Thomson, a successful Middlesborough iron-monger and a birthright Friend of sterling character. After the war began, W. T. Thomson’s Monthly Meeting took a strong stand against the war as ‘contrary to the spirit of Christ’.<sup>31</sup> In response, Thomson felt constrained to submit his resignation, noting that if the Society of Friends maintained its belief that ‘testimony against war is an essential part of the Society’s principles’, he could not remain in membership although he agreed with all other Quaker tenets.<sup>32</sup> Thomson was subsequently disowned by Darlington Meeting because members believed that while actual military service might be forgiven as an honest personal conviction, recruiting men to join the forces went beyond acceptable limits.<sup>33</sup>

After his disownment, Thomson dug in his heels and appealed to Durham Quarterly Meeting to reverse Darlington’s decision. While his appeal was pending, Thomson spoke to the Old Scholars of Ackworth Quaker School, stressing the conflict between his obligations to God as a Quaker and his country as a citizen. He concluded that his only choice was to follow George Fox’s advice to let every person determine God’s will for them. He then proceeded to provide a summary ‘of all the arguments against an absolute peace testimony’.<sup>34</sup>

In the meantime, Darlington Monthly Meeting issued a letter to members who had joined the forces, noting that while patriotism should not lead ‘to actions

28 W. E. Littleboy to Alfred (12 September 1918) and to his parents (13 March 1919 and 18 June 1918), WLP.

29 W. E. Littleboy, ‘Guardroom notes, 25 April 1918’, WLP.

30 See Ceadel, M., *Pacifism in Britain, 1914–1945: the defining of a faith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 60.

31 Minutes, Darlington Monthly Meeting (17 September 1914), p. 438; (8 October 1914), pp. 441–42.

32 W. T. Thomson to Clerk, Darlington Monthly Meeting (7 December 1914), copy in Minutes, Darlington Monthly Meeting (14 January 1915), p. 463.

33 Minutes, Darlington Monthly Meeting (11 February and 13 March 1915).

34 Malcolm Thomas to John Lockett (copy) (31 July 1995).

incompatible with higher service under the Prince of Peace', the Meeting had decided not to take disciplinary action against men who had enlisted.<sup>35</sup> Responding, no doubt, to this conciliatory gesture, Durham Quarterly Meeting rescinded Walter T. Thomson's disownment and restored his membership. Darlington Meeting, while expressing regret over the Quarterly Meeting's findings, agreed to pursue the matter no further. Walter Thomson was having none of that. Declaring that most of Darlington Friends 'regard my association with them as a thing to be deplored', he resigned unconditionally from the Society of Friends and enlisted in the Royal Engineers. However, deplored by Friends, Thomson's war-time service culminated in December 1918 with his election as Liberal Member of Parliament for West Middlesbrough, a position he retained until his early death in 1928 at the age of 52. So, while Thomson left Friends and raised his worldly status by embracing the forces of Mammon, Wilfrid Littleboy remained in gaol until the middle of 1919, six months after the end of the war in which he refused to fight or otherwise assist. Honoured among faithful Friends, the former convict Littleboy thereafter sat in Meeting for Sufferings for half a century (1922–72) and acted as Clerk of London Yearly Meeting from 1934 until 1942. The question lingers as to whether Walter Thomson or Wilfrid Littleboy was best rewarded for wartime service.

As for Friends, disputes about proper service for Quakers in war and after the peace continued. In May 1918, with the German Spring Offensive threatening Allied survival on the Western Front, Herbert Sefton-Jones, a weighty patent attorney, spoke in Yearly Meeting against the re-appointment of the Friends Service Committee, most of whose members were in gaol or alternative service, correctly asserting that the FSC was engaged in political activities of which many Friends did not approve. Yearly Meeting's response was to place the FSC directly under its auspices, freeing the Service Committee from supervision by any other Quaker body. At the same gathering, war-Friends like Sefton-Jones and J. B. Braithwaite Jr. sought to obtain Yearly Meeting's endorsement of President Woodrow Wilson's plan to establish a League of Nations as an international body for enforcing peace, by military means, if necessary. Again, pro-war Friends were stymied by the pacifist Quaker assertion that as a religious body working 'to bring back the Churches to uncompromising loyalty to Jesus Christ', Friends could only support 'a real League of Nations of which brotherhood would be the key'.<sup>36</sup>

Shortly after the war ended, a Friends League of Nations Committee (FLNC) was formed, chiefly composed of weighty pro-war Quakers. Prominent members of this body even managed an interview with Woodrow Wilson on his way to the Versailles Conference. But considerable consternation arose from pacifist Friends about implications in the press that the FLNC was acting as officially representing

35 Minutes, Darlington Monthly Meeting (13 March 1915), p. 474.

36 See *The Friend* (31 May 1918), pp. 346–47 for discussion of the FSC and the proposed League of Nations.



the entire Society of Friends.<sup>37</sup> The embarrassed Meeting for Sufferings appointed an ad hoc committee to reconcile differing views with Quaker supporters of the League, but attempts at reconciliation smashed upon the rock of military force. The committee reported:

it would be nothing short of a calamity if, as almost the only religious body which stands for a practical belief in... the Gospel message of good-will to all men through Jesus Christ, we should... now publicly affirm that military force is, on certain occasions, the ultimate remedy for wrong.<sup>38</sup>

The end of the Great War did not eliminate internal struggles among British Friends with various theological, social and political views. What the war did successfully establish in London (now British) Yearly Meeting was the importance of the peace testimony as a central tenet of British Quakerism. As expressed by Clerk of Yearly Meeting Wilfrid Littleboy, in his message to gathered Friends in 1942 amidst the second global conflict of the blood-soaked twentieth century:

The whole world is drawn into common suffering. Is there no way out of its evils but by waging war yet more ruthlessly? War is evil and wrong; military victory will not bring true peace. Cannot common suffering make us aware of our common brotherhood?... The way of friendship can overcome evil... For us as children of a common Father it is time to follow His lead.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See *The Times* (30 December 1918), p. 4 and *The Friend* (10 January 1919), pp. 14–16 for the debate over the FLNC's attempts to act as officially representing the British Society of Friends.

<sup>38</sup> See *LYM 1919*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>39</sup> Hodgson, L., *Christian Faith and Practice*, London: Epworth Press, 1963, para. 612.