

BROCK, Peter (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), pp. xv + 505. ISBN 0-802-8707-8, Cloth £48.00, \$75; Pbk £28.00, \$45.00.

Peter Brock, a distinguished and prolific peace historian, undertook this nearly 500 page compilation of prison diaries, memoirs and interviews as an ‘an ethnographic study of the prison and prison(er) culture’ as well as a effort to add the recollections and insights of imprisoned conscientious objectors, *strange criminals* indeed, ‘to the literary genre of prison writing’ (p. ix). Except for a brief final reflection by 1980s East German draft resister Michael Frenzel, the thirty or so ‘conchies’ (Brock himself included) chronicled in this book are English-speaking, ranging across the world from Great Britain to America to Australasia and across the spectrum of resistance from saintly Quakers and pious evangelicals to defiant anarchists. Drawing upon his unmatched grasp of the literature of pacifism and draft resistance, Brock offers historical introductions to each of the periods under consideration – the Great War, the ‘Good War’ and Cold War America – and provides brief sketches of the lives and times of each of the writers or interviewees, adding the scholarly apparatus of footnotes to furnish clarification and additional information. The literary ability of the diverse assortment of conscientious objectors (hereafter COs) included in this anthology is predictably uneven as are their inevitably disparate personality traits, not all of which are necessarily sympathetic or attractive. Still, Brock’s discussion of each individual prisoner of conscience is characteristically gentle and tolerant, although even his disappointment with uncharitable or combative commentary shows through from time to time.

The war and draft resisters whose tales of incarceration are recounted in this collection might be accorded a rough tripartite classification as Gentle Souls, Self-Assured Moralists or Angry and Resentful Militants. Given the limited space available, a brief discussion of examples from each of the above categories may provide potential readers with some sense of the nature of the rich materials available herein. One must, like Brock, begin with the excerpt from *An English Prison From Within* (1919) by Stephen Hobhouse, the gentlest of Gentle Souls.

Hobhouse, a convinced British Friend who, prior to 1914, had renounced his comfortable inheritance for a life of selfless service to the less fortunate, took an ‘absolutist’ stand against conscription in 1916 and spent most of 1917 at ‘hard labour’. Hobhouse’s essay, later significantly expanded in collaboration with ex-CO Fenner Brockway into a ground-breaking account of *English Prisons Today* (1922), is largely concerned with the soul-destroying aspects of life in what one CO called the ‘human dog-kennels’ (p. 17) which were English prisons in the early twentieth century. The atmosphere of mistrust and fear in the Third Division, the harshest regime to which an English prisoner could be subjected and the one into which conscientious objectors were invariably placed, was such that any act of kindness toward a fellow prisoner was looked upon as a criminal enterprise. Hobhouse and fellow Quaker Hubert Peet provide graphic descriptions of the abysmal daily prison routine which, in Peet’s words, amounted to ‘calculated, scientific, soulless cruelty’ (p. 46) robbing prisoners of any segment of personal dignity. For most, the cruelest cut of all was the silence system, forbidding prisoners any form of human communication. For Friends like Hobhouse and Peet, there was considerable irony in the fact that this most hated of all English prison rules had been championed by nineteenth century Quaker prisoner reformers John Howard and Elizabeth Fry. Because the deadening and debilitating silence rule was regularly broken by every prisoner, Hobhouse’s Quaker scrupulosity made him feel increasing guilty for violating Friends’ devotion to Truth-telling and honesty. This led to his declaring open revolt against the silence system, causing him to be placed in complete solitary confinement for the last four months of a sentence which brought him close to death before his release on grounds of ill-health.

Not all English war resisters, even religious ones, were, like Hobhouse, prepared to suffer in silence. One who was not was Robert Price, surely the angriest of seventy-seven members of the Churches of Christ imprisoned as COs. Brutally abused in a military prison in France before being returned to a civil institution in England, Price’s account is a thoroughgoing indictment of the Government, the Army, the prison system and, for good measure, the Church of England. And while he was friendly with the Quakers he met in prison and spoke at their meetings, in the end, he noted, they did not appreciate his militant ‘New Testament stand’ (p. 85) against the mammon of wickedness.

Still, however angry, Price was but a pale shadow compared to the most articulate, and most resentful, CO chronicler, the English public school boy turned New Zealand sheep farmer and humanitarian pacifist, Ian Hamilton. In an exceptionally bitter account the intensely political and consistently caustic Hamilton rails against the ‘cold-blooded, sadistic horror’ (p. 264) of imprisoning any human being. Along the way he provides, *inter alia*, a riveting and insightful description of the terrors of solitary confinement that most other writers can only hint at.

Perhaps the best example of COs as Self-Assured Moralists is the collaboration of radical Catholic pacifist David Miller and former US Army doctor Howard Levy. Miller, convicted of draft card burning, and Levy, jailed for refusing on ethical grounds to train Special Forces men, joined forces to produce *Going to Jail* (1970), a primer for Vietnam-era draft resisters. Their advice is mainly practical: how to avoid violent confrontations and jailhouse 'snitches', etc., but the bulk of Miller's excerpt is, depressingly, given over to the necessity of protecting oneself against aggressive and predatory homosexuals who preyed on younger, weaker and naive fellow prisoners. Indeed, the matter of homosexual rape, scarcely mentioned in earlier narratives, seems to be a distinct and frightening feature of post-WWII American prisons. Miller, a dedicated pacifist, felt this danger so acutely that he counseled violent resistance as a last resort.

Some general and comparative comments seem apropos. It is of more than passing interest to note that Brock's collection includes the recollections of two British female prisoners of conscience, including the distinguished Quaker scientist, Kathleen Lonsdale. Also worth noting is the serendipitous nature of circumstances through which individuals who clearly satisfied the legal requirements for non-military service in their respective countries were nonetheless delivered into the hands of military or civil authorities. One unsurprising revelation is the generally harsher physical abuse of COs by military authorities which, in the American context, also meant savage sentences of 25 years to life for disobeying an order to perform some menial task (all such sentences seem to have eventually been rescinded). Finally, in light of the recent Abu Ghraib scandal, it may be of interest to note that as early as December 1918 the American Secretary of War issued an order forbidding the chaining of military prisoners to the bars of their cells.

In his brief Foreword to this anthology, Canadian criminologist Robert Gaucher calls the essays Brock has gathered 'accounts of the resistance of the righteous, whose moral position and insights, educated and articulate voices, stand in condemnation of the prison and the society that imprisons' (p. xii). Certainly, students of both penology and peace history, whether they find the material inspiring, fascinating or disturbing, will discover considerable food for thought within these pages.

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