

## THE QUAKER PEACE TESTIMONY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE BRITISH PEACE MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts the first overview of the contribution of Quakerism to the British peace movement from its eighteenth-century origins to the present day. It emphasizes that the Society of Friends did much to make pacifism acceptable in Britain, and was the principal backer of the peace movement in the century following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It shows how Quakers, although divided by the First World War and eclipsed by an upsurge in non-Quaker activism, reaffirmed their pacifism and did as much for the peace movement during the inter-war years as any small religious body could have done. And it argues that, as the peace movement lost momentum after the Second World War, Quakers played an increasingly important role despite an increasing diversity in their interpretation of their peace testimony.

### KEYWORDS

Quakers, Society of Friends, peace movement, pacifism

Several studies have examined Quaker efforts to give expression to their peace testimony in Britain;<sup>1</sup> but none, so far as I know, has also evaluated the Quaker contribution to the totality of British peace activism. In offering some suggestions

\* This is a revised version of the introductory talk given at 'Witness against war: a conference on researching the Quaker peace testimony', convened by Helen Roberts, Yorkshire Quaker Heritage Project Archivist, at Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, on 31 March 2001.

1. For example, M.E. Hirst, *The Quakers in Peace and War: An Account of their Peace Principles and Practice* (London: Swarthmore Press, 1923); E.W. Orr, *The Quakers in Peace and War, 1920-1967* (London: W.J. Offord and Son, 1974); P. Brock, *The Quaker Peace Testimony 1660-1914* (York: William Sessions, 1990).

towards the filling of this gap, I shall begin by defining the peace movement, and giving a brief account of the emergence of the Society of Friends and of its testimony against war. I shall then survey British peace activism by dividing it into five phases—the French revolutionary wars, the century following those wars, the First World War, the inter-war years, and the Second World War and after—and, for each phase, analysing the part which the Quakers played and the way in which they interpreted their peace testimony.

Although the term ‘peace movement’ has been in common usage since the 1840s, its appropriateness as a concept is still contested by political opponents who claim to be no less committed to peace and to have a better way to prevent war. These opponents constitute a large majority: in almost all countries throughout the modern era most people have believed that the best method of war prevention is to maintain strong defences. Indeed, so much taken for granted is this majority viewpoint that we neither have a word for it nor recognize its ideological nature. I have therefore coined the term ‘defencism’ as a label for the view that states have not only the right to fight defensively, but also the duty to arm themselves in order to deter aggression.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that the ‘peace’ which defencists believe they can best assure is an armed truce rather than a state of harmony: in other words, they believe that, although international conflict can be deterred for long periods, it cannot be transcended. By contrast the peace movement believes that war not only can often be prevented, but also ultimately can be abolished. In other words, its name is justified by its aspiration to ‘peace’ of a more positive kind than defencists believe achievable.

The minority that believes in the possibility of abolishing war is a coalition of absolutists and reformists. The former believe that it is possible immediately and completely to repudiate military force through conscientious objection—an extreme viewpoint for which the word ‘pacifism’ will here be reserved. Pacifism originated in religious fundamentalism, as an aspect of the rejection by some Christian sects of the compromises with worldly society made by the Church in order to expand its influence.<sup>3</sup> Reformists believe that war will be abolished only as a result of structural reform either in the international system or in the states which compose it. Liberals, radicals, socialists, feminists, and others have had different conceptions of what the appropriate reform should be; but all have offered versions of the Enlightenment convic-

2. M. Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), ch. 5.

3. See P. Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

tion that humans can conduct their affairs with greater rationality. Reformists differ from pacifists in accepting that military force may be used when it assists the reform that will ultimately lead to the abolition of war, though they differ from crusaders in insisting that this use of military force must also be defensive, not aggressive. In accordance with a suggestion by the historian A.J.P. Taylor,<sup>4</sup> the reformist viewpoint will here be called ‘*pacifist*’, reflecting the fact that most peace activists are pacific in their approach to international relations without being pacifist in the full sense.

As a coalition, the peace movement has experienced constant, but on balance creative, tension between its pacifist and *pacifist* wings. Pacifists have disliked the element of coercion involved in many *pacifist* schemes, notably sanctions to enforce international law. Yet, with the exception of the religious quietists among them, they have not wished to withdraw altogether from the political realm unless this is unavoidable. And, since only rarely have they been able to convince themselves that non-violent resistance itself constitutes a practical, worldly policy, they have felt obliged to consider *pacifist* claims to offer a constructive means of war prevention. However, this has posed a dilemma, which was recognized, for example, by a gathering of members of the Friends’ Ambulance Unit at the end of the Second World War:

If there is no hope of converting a sufficient number of people in this country and abroad to a pacifist outlook within the foreseeable future, should pacifists support devices for preventing or limiting war, if necessary by forceful means? If they did, were pacifists committed to willing the means by which such devices could be made effective?

Unsurprisingly, this conference concluded, ‘The dilemma had no clear answer’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, most pacifists have been uneasy about the use of force contemplated by many *pacifist* schemes while also conceding that such schemes are a step in the right direction.

For their part, *pacifists* have sometimes felt tainted by association in the public mind with an unworldly pacifist minority that has no prospect of achieving political influence without their help. At other times, however, they have recognized that this pacifist minority, inspired as it is by an absolutist faith, has supplied a drive and determination which they, motivated by a variety of less compelling reformist impulses, have lacked. Indeed, history shows that *pacifists* have supplied the peace movement with a goodly proportion of its fair-weather supporters, whereas pacifists have supplied most of those with the dedication to see it through the storms.

4. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), p. 51 n. 5

5. *The Friend* (27 July 1945), pp. 495-96.

The contribution of the Society of Friends to the peace movement has been primarily to its pacifist core, because of an absolutist commitment entered into in 1661 which proved enduring despite having been entered into under particular circumstances. But because this absolutism was never doctrinally explicit but merely inferred from a core belief, and because a minority of Quakers has always drawn reformist inferences instead, the Society has also made both a minor contribution to *pacifism* and a major contribution to co-operation between the peace movement's two wings.

The Quakers were the first Christian perfectionists to make the transition from sectarian peculiarity to philosophical modernity. They appeared in the England of the 1650s where the overthrow of Crown and established Church had seemed to make almost anything possible in politics and religion. They developed rapidly from a small group of mystics inspired by the idea of an inner light into a mass radical-puritan movement with perhaps 60,000 members inspired by the desire to inaugurate the rule of saints. Initially, their attitude to the use of force was diverse: some preached non-resistance; but others exhibited a crusading impulse. In January 1661, however, they committed themselves to non-resistance in an attempt to reassure the newly restored monarch and Anglican Church as to their harmlessness at a time when other radical puritans, notably the Fifth Monarchy Men, were engaged unsuccessfully in rebellion. Although it ordinarily had little relevance to life in insular Britain,<sup>6</sup> this commitment was retained as the Quakers dwindled into a quietist, rule-bound sect, which in 1737 introduced formal membership on a birthright basis. Thus the Society of Friends instructed its members not to use ships with weapons on them; and when demands for militia service were made, they responded by not only refusing to serve personally but also, unlike the Mennonites, by refusing either to hire substitutes or to pay a fine in lieu.

The Society of Friends has always found it easy to rationalize its pacifism as an inescapable inference from the doctrine of the inner light. As one of its members was to put it in the last decade of the twentieth century: 'Supporting war means accepting the killing and mutilation of largely innocent human beings. Is that not a direct violation of the basic Quaker belief of that of God in every person?'<sup>7</sup> Yet a minority has always regarded the commitment of January 1661—which, we have seen, was made in the context of domestic rather than international politics—as too negative an application of Quaker principles to the problem of war. Some early Quakers, such as William Penn, produced

6. The peace testimony is not mentioned in A. Davies, *The Quakers in English Society 1655–1725* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

7. *The Friend* (7 May 1993), p. 598.

peace plans that were in the reformist rather than the absolutist tradition. And a number of recent thinkers have argued that from the outset the sect's world view had an engaged and constructive dimension: for example, Wolf Mendl has asserted that the peace testimony was always 'more than an ideology called pacifism'.<sup>8</sup> This dimension of its thinking has helped to make the Society of Friends more open than other pacifist sects to *pacifist* ideas.

Quakers have also been distinguished from other sectarians by a degree of economic success that eventually caused most of them to abandon their quietist phase and become involved in worldly affairs. From the late eighteenth century onwards, moreover, a number of Quakers fell under the influence of evangelicalism, which increased their social contacts with Anglicans and Nonconformists of a similar religious approach, and also provided them with a positive moral and social philosophy to supplement their inherited sectarian rules. (Of course, the overwhelming majority of Evangelicals were defencists, and saw a military victory as the principal sign of divine favour; but a small minority of them were pacifists, and believed that providence would assure the safety of a truly Christian and therefore non-resisting people.) During the 1780s the Quakers made their first disinterested contribution to public life by launching the anti-slave-trade movement, in conjunction with sympathetic Anglicans. Thus although declining in absolute numbers despite an expanding population—as a proportion of Englishmen they fell from 1 in 130 in the late seventeenth century to 1 in 470 in 1800 and 1 in 1100 in 1856<sup>9</sup>—they helped in two ways to pave the way for a peace movement. First, by refusing to hire substitute soldiers or pay a militia fine and by suffering distraint on their property as a result, they demonstrated that a refusal to bear arms could be more than a demand for personal exemption on the grounds that the elect or the élite should be spared the common chores of citizenship. Second, through a combination of social respectability and evangelical fellowship they had started to persuade at least some members of other denominations—for example, Thomas Clarkson, the celebrated Anglican campaigner against the slave trade—that their interpretation of the Christian position on war was one that all believers should take seriously.

The British peace movement emerged in the era of the French revolution. It was in 1789 that the secular-minded utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham

8. W. Mendl, *Prophets and Reconcilers: Reflections on the Quaker Peace Testimony* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1974), foreword. See also G. Hubbard, *Quaker by Conviction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 129–30, 133–34.

9. J.S. Rowntree, *Quakerism, Past and Present: Being an Inquiry into the Causes of its Decline in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1859), pp. 73–74, 76.

not only made the first recorded suggestion of a peace association, which he called a 'Pacific or Philharmonic Society',<sup>10</sup> but wrote *A Plan for a Universal and Perpetual Peace*, an essay which set out many of the arguments which nineteenth- and twentieth-century *pacifists* were to deploy, though both his suggestion and his essay were too far ahead of their time to see the light of day then. It was in reaction against Britain's war against revolutionary France, which lasted with only two short intervals from February 1793 to June 1815, that the first, albeit spasmodic, peace campaign was launched.<sup>11</sup> It began in 1795, with Unitarian manufacturers and radical followers of Thomas Paine—both in their different ways *pacifist* rather than *pacifist*, and *rationalist* rather than *evangelical*—playing an important part. The following year saw the appearance of the first *pacifist* texts to be written by non-Quakers, showing that at least in Britain and the United States (where one of these texts was also published) *pacifism* had made the crucial transition from being the idiosyncratic birthright of certain sectarians to being a political philosophy available to all Christians and in principle therefore to all people. The unexpected triumph in 1807 of the twenty-year campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, along with a growing war-weariness, resulted in the first public calls for an association for the abolition of war. However, peace activists were generally agreed that this would be impossible to establish in wartime, particularly after Britain became additionally embroiled in a conflict with the United States in 1812. Only after Britain's war with Napoleon appeared to be over in the spring of 1814 was a Quaker-organized meeting to plan a peace association held, on 7 June 1814. But no immediate action was taken; and because Napoleon returned to France in February 1815 to restart the fighting, whereas the Anglo-American war was terminated late in 1814, it was in the United States rather than Britain that the world's first three peace societies were established (in New York, in Warren County, Ohio, and in Massachusetts) during the second half of 1815.

During this first phase of peace activism the contribution of the Society of Friends was muted. At a time when anti-war campaigning could all too easily be thought seditious, its members were mostly too fearful for their respectability to throw themselves into a public campaign of the kind which Unitarians and Paineite radicals were prepared to lead. For example, in 1803 a prominent York Quaker, Lindley Murray, advised another, Henry Tuke, that a public protest against the conflict might 'raise or increase a spirit of resentment

10. S. Conway, 'Bentham on Peace and War', *Utilitas* 1 (1989), p. 93.

11. The principal study of this campaign is J.E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1792–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

against us'.<sup>12</sup> Only towards the end of the French wars did the Society of Friends become bolder: on 29 May 1812 it sent an anti-war address to the Prince Regent,<sup>13</sup> and from June 1814 onwards some of its members were waiting only for a definitive end to the fighting in Europe before launching a peace association. However, the Society's *pacifism* was unequivocal at this time. Those of its members who still maintained a quietist approach accepted the peace testimony as an integral aspect of its sectarian identity. Moreover, those who had embraced evangelicalism believed that it was a prescription which all Christians should follow, and had even begun to convert a few of them to the cause.

The second phase in the peace movement's history began soon after Napoleon was finally defeated in June 1815. Difficult economic conditions created a tense political climate in which funding a peace association and keeping it free of the taint of subversive politics were far from easy. On 20 March 1816 a London radical publisher of Unitarian views, Sir Richard Phillips, launched the Society for Abolishing War, an explicitly *pacifist* association which was critical of the Quakers and their *pacifism*; but it failed to establish itself, its brief existence being overlooked until the remarkable Dutch historian W.H. van der Linden rediscovered it in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> However, on 14 June 1816, two years after its initial planning meeting, the Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace was launched by a Quaker-led group. Known for short as the Peace Society, it was to dominate the peace movement for a century. During its two-year gestation period, its founders had agonized over whether it should cater for *pacifists* only (like the New York society) for *pacifists* only (like Phillips's association), or for both equally on a diversity-of-opinions basis (like the Massachusetts society), but had in the end chosen a fourth basis, which I have called top-tier *pacifism*. In principle, the Peace Society declared itself to be *pacifist*, and required the members of its national committee to reject all war, though oddly the word 'all' was omitted from its rules. But its ordinary members (and after 1818 also those who sat on the committees of its local affiliates) were allowed to be mere *pacifists*, apparently on the assumption that through participation in the society they would in due course be uplifted to 'higher ground', as the national committee described its absolutism.

12. Cited in S. Wright, *Friends in York: The Dynamics of Quaker Revival 1780–1860* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), p. 101.

13. Printed in *Monthly Repository* (July 1812), p. 470.

14. See W.H. van der Linden, *The International Peace Movement 1815–1874* (Amsterdam: Tilleul Publications, 1987), pp. 1–3.

Because the Peace Society never raised its number of subscribers much above 1,500, it faced frequent calls to drop this top-tier pacifism in order to attract more *pacifists*. It refused to do so; and in its defence it should be noted that the various associations that were founded during the nineteenth century on an explicitly *pacifist* basis proved to be even weaker than the Peace Society. The Society for Abolishing War of 1816 had been stillborn, as already noted; the Peace of Nations Society of 1847 and the Anti-Aggression League of 1882 flopped badly; and the International Arbitration and Peace Association of 1880 and the International Arbitration League of 1888 (the latter being the successor of a Workmen's Peace Association established in 1870) always struggled simply to survive. The only association temporarily to surpass the Peace Society, the League of Universal Brotherhood of 1846–57, which was run by the American artisan Elihu Burritt and capitalised on anti-militia sentiment among working men to the extent of securing 10,000 peace pledges in its early years, was also committed to pacifism. It was notable that Richard Cobden, the Liberal MP and free-trade campaigner who took up the *pacifist* cause in 1848, never attempted to launch a *pacifist* association to give him extra-parliamentary support. Instead, Cobden made do with the Peace Congress Committee, an umbrella organization set up on a diversity-of-opinions basis by the Peace Society and League of Universal Brotherhood to facilitate the first series of international peace congresses, held during 1848–51.

The Peace Society had started its life very cautiously: it emphasized its religious and quietist character, and for a decade and a half did little but publish carefully selected tracts that for the most part had been published already and so could not easily be accused of grinding contemporary political axes. Thereafter, with the British political system resuming its comparatively tolerant ways in the 1830s and 1840s, the Peace Society was able to extend its propaganda and discover allies in the emerging Liberal Party. Its campaigning reached a peak of confidence during 1848–51, when, in addition to the international congresses just mentioned, Cobden began calling for a foreign policy based on non-intervention, the reduction of military expenditure, and bilateral arbitration treaties. A Quaker commentator was among many who persuaded themselves at this time that, in respect of international relations, 'a moral revolution has been begun'.<sup>15</sup>

From the autumn of 1851, when the welcome given to the Hungarian patriot Kossuth revealed the strength of support among British liberals and radicals for a crusade against Russia to punish it for oppression of Hungary, the peace

15. *The Friend* (9th month, 1849), p. 175.

movement found itself working against the grain even of progressive opinion. Moreover, Britain's Crimean War of 1854–56 and America's Civil War of 1861–65 proved even more isolating experiences for those who could not endorse them. The movement survived, however, thanks largely to the steadfastness of Henry Richard, the Congregationalist minister who served as secretary of the Peace Society from 1848 to 1885 and also became a Liberal MP. It even enjoyed a measure of recovery after 1867, when the *pacifist* nostrums which Cobden had spent the last seventeen years of his life promoting began to enjoy increased public support, and when also, following Palmerston's death, Gladstone positioned the Liberals as an overtly *pacifist* party in response to Disraeli's positioning of the Conservatives as an overtly defencist one. But Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, an imperialist act which was all the more distressing to progressive opinion for being the work of a Gladstonian government, introduced a second period of adversity. Shaken by the hostility they incurred from their fellow Liberals for condemning Gladstone's Egyptian policy, all the peace associations gave serious thought to mergers in an effort to keep afloat financially. Admittedly, after 1898 a combination of the Tsar's rescript inviting the world to what became the first Hague Conference, the Boer War, and the developing confrontation with Germany raised the salience of the peace issue. And individual publicists such as W.T. Stead, J.A. Hobson and Norman Angell did much to compensate for the deficiencies of the various pacifist and *pacifist* associations. Even so, defencism was benefiting from the increased international tension more than peace sentiment was. Indeed, some defencists felt confident enough to campaign for the introduction of compulsory national service, previously a taboo subject in Britain.

After standing out against the occupation of Egypt, the Peace Society began to lose its absolutist impetus. The artful Disraeli had discovered that he could easily embarrass his Liberal opponents by accusing them of favouring 'peace at any price', when in fact their policy was *pacifist* and not pacifist; and some of these embarrassed Liberals reacted by urging the Peace Society to abandon its top-tier pacifism so as to deny Disraeli the opportunity to impute guilt by association. Although formally the society refused to make this concession, in practice it began diluting its absolutism. In contrast to its early literature, which had sometimes advanced the evangelical claim that a disarmed country could trust in divine providence,<sup>16</sup> it now presented pacifism as a practical policy only in some very remote future. Some of its members even began to advocate military force as an interim policy. For example, Thomas Snape, the

16. M. Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 127–28, 241–43.

president of the society's Liverpool affiliate, not only supported the Boer War but blocked attempts to expel his fellow Methodist, Hugh Price Hughes, from his vice-presidency of the Peace Society for doing the same. Snape justified his behaviour by claiming, 'There is a great deal of difference of opinion about this war; even the Peace Society itself has not been united in regard to it'.<sup>17</sup> A few years later, moreover, a prominent former headmaster reportedly became 'a member of the Peace Society and also of the National Service League, believing that the work of the latter was needed until the ideals of the former could be realized'.<sup>18</sup> It was thus evident some years before 1914 that the Peace Society had lost its way.

The Quakers made their greatest contribution to the British peace movement during this second phase, that of the Peace Society's century-long predominance. For example, the Exeter draper Jonathan Dymond was the Peace Society's most thoughtful intellectual, and the Birmingham corn merchant Joseph Sturge its most indomitable and creative activist. The Quakers were publicly acknowledged by Cobden as 'the main force' in the society; and the fact that 'the majority of the subscribers to the Peace Society are members of the Society of Friends'<sup>19</sup> was privately admitted by its national committee. Quakers were also the main source of the additional subventions that enabled the Peace Society to outperform its other peace associations most of the time; and fear of offending them must have been the main factor preventing the society from formally abandoning its top-tier pacifism. Indeed, so influential were its Quaker supporters that the Peace Society had to take care not to appear wholly controlled by them. It therefore ensured that its national committee never had a Quaker majority: for example, of the twelve who attended its first meeting on 14 June 1816, five were Quakers and one a Quaker-turned-Anglican; three were Anglicans; two were Congregationalists; and one was of unknown denomination but definitely not a member of the Society of Friends. And, with one exception, it chose non-Quaker secretaries. The exception, William Jones, served only from 1885 to 1888; and his appointment had been opposed by one influential member, himself a member of the Society of Friends, on the grounds that 'it was not desirable to give to the Peace Society too much the character of a Quaker society'.<sup>20</sup>

17. M. Ceadel, *Semi-detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 161.

18. G.G. Coulton, *A Victorian Schoolmaster: Henry Hart of Sedbergh* (London: G. Bell, 1923), pp. 174-75.

19. Minutes, Peace Society executive committee, 8 December 1884.

20. Minutes, Peace Society special general conference, 8 May 1885.

However, Quakers were to a considerable extent also responsible for the Peace Society's loss of absolutist impetus from the mid-1880s onwards, because some of them had begun to have doubts about pacifism. Tacit reservations could be detected as early as 1854-56, when in the words of the historian Elizabeth Isichei, 'No Friend publicly defended the Crimean War...but many held their views silently'.<sup>21</sup> Explicit dissent from it was evident within a few years. In 1859, for example, Samuel Fothergill claimed in a critical account of his co-religionists that 'the joint operation of birthright membership and the absence of efficient religious teaching' were causing Quakers not only to fail to disseminate their principles but even to lose belief in them: 'With regard to war, for instance, Christian feeling has been retrograde both within the world at large and in the Society of Friends. We have conversed with numbers of men who, while actively engaged in the affairs of the Society, justify war...'<sup>22</sup> And in the same year a Quaker periodical carried a letter complaining of the 'impracticality of Friends' views on the subject of peace', and asking rhetorically: 'What would become of England and her numerous dependencies if she were tomorrow to adopt the ultra-peace sentiments, and all at once to disband her army and navy?'<sup>23</sup>

Two decades later even Quakers active in the peace movement were questioning the relevance to contemporary international relations of their traditional views on war. For example, in 1880 Lewis Appleton, previously an employee of the Peace Society, helped to set up an explicitly *pacifist* competitor, the International Arbitration and Peace Association, and indeed became its secretary. He justified himself with the argument that the peace testimony applied 'only to Christian men and communities' and not 'in the international sense'. And he insisted that defensive force was needed because 'in the world's present degenerate state' the lion would not lie down with the lamb, as in Isaiah's prophecy: instead, 'the lamb would be inside the lion'.<sup>24</sup> Appleton was, as it happened, a crooked Quaker whose views were explained by self-interest. (He had been dismissed from the Peace Society for financial irregularities, and was soon to leave his post at the International Arbitration and Peace Association for the same reason, whereupon he set up another—and this time essentially bogus—organization, the British and Foreign Arbitration Association, in order to provide himself with a salary.) But in the 1880s

21. E. Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 150.

22. S. Fothergill, *Essay on the Society of Friends: Being an Inquiry into the Causes of their Diminished Influence and Numbers* (London: A.W. Bennett, 1859), p. 180.

23. *British Friend* (2nd month, 1859), pp. 47-48.

24. *British Friend* (2nd month, 1881), p. 45.

reputable Quakers were also thinking along the same lines. This was particularly true of those reacting against evangelicalism and embracing liberal theological ideas. For example, William Pollard, one of three Quakers who were to publish an influential book urging their co-religionists to embrace 'a faith at once scriptural and reasonable',<sup>25</sup> claimed controversially that the Peace Society, which employed him as a local organizer, regarded its pacifism as a 'counsel of perfection' which 'governments only nominally Christian', such as Britain's, could not be expected to follow.<sup>26</sup> And while he was a Cambridge undergraduate, J.W. Graham, later a weighty member of the Society of Friends and the first historian of Britain's conscientious objectors to the First World War, responded to the occupation of Egypt by disputing the proposition 'that for any Christian government to make war is a sin', though he reaffirmed his personal commitment as a Quaker to the peace testimony.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Kennedy is thus right to note in his authoritative recent study, 'By the mid-1880s... Quakers seemed to be in some disarray as regards the extent and meaning of their witness for peace'.<sup>28</sup>

Had Appleton, Pollard, Graham, and others who thought that the peace testimony was binding only on Quakers like themselves, ceased to be true pacifists? The crucial issue is whether they genuinely wanted all their fellow citizens, including politicians, to become Christians in the full, Quaker, and therefore pacifist, sense. If so, they were true pacifists. But if they wished to retain sufficient non-pacifists for their country to be defended, they were what I call 'exemptionists', because what they were seeking for themselves was a personal exemption from the military duties which they expected others to carry out. Some Quakers undoubtedly succumbed to exemptionism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example in 1890, Caroline Stephen, who joined the Society of Friends despite an inability to abandon her longstanding conviction that in worldly terms 'certain wars appear to be not only inevitable but justifiable', argued that the peace testimony was binding only on 'thoroughgoing Christians', such as the Quakers, who in consequence should accept that their role was 'mainly to leaven, not to govern, the world'.<sup>29</sup> In other words, she wanted the nation's defences to be

25. Three Friends, *A Reasonable Faith: Short Essays for the Times* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), p. 3.

26. *Fraser's Magazine* (October 1880), pp. 492, 496.

27. *The Friend* (12th month, 1882), p. 304.

28. T. Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 247.

29. C.E. Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1890), pp. 129–31, 138–40.

maintained, though not by Quakers. Similarly, at least according to the much later testimony of a Quaker friend, J.W. Graham came privately to admit that he thought it 'a good thing that there were not too many pacifists',<sup>30</sup> because otherwise the country would be defenceless. Such slides into exemptionism elicited protests from other Quakers. For example, Thomas Hodgkin insisted that it was deceitful 'to profess to wish our rulers to disarm, while in our inmost heart we are hoping that they will do nothing of the kind';<sup>31</sup> and his son Robin, a future Provost of Queen's College, Oxford, agreed so emphatically that, finding himself in support of the Boer War, he enlisted in the army and eventually left the Society of Friends.<sup>32</sup>

The creation of a Friends' Peace Committee in 1888 and a Northern Friends' Peace Board in 1913 were thus at least in part recognitions that a commitment to the peace testimony, which could once have been taken for granted within the Society of Friends, now needed actively to be nurtured there. Admittedly, some Quakers needed no encouragement to promote pacifism, most notably the dynamic Priscilla Peckover, whose local peace association in the small fenland town of Wisbech claimed no fewer than 4,000 members and whose Ladies Peace Association, the national women's auxiliary of the Peace Society, professed to have than 9,000 members—in each case many more than the parent body.<sup>33</sup> And backsliding from the peace testimony was partially offset both by an end-of-century Quaker 'renaissance', in which fundamental values were revived by a ginger group, and by the emergence within the Society of Friends of an energetic socialist minority. However, many Quakers were, if not abandoning pacifism altogether, pushing it very deep into a private sphere.

There was a paradox about this partial Quaker retreat from pacifism: it was occurring at the very moment when that pacifism was becoming the most identifiable Quaker characteristic. Thus whereas John Stephenson Rowntree had made no reference to the peace testimony in a well-known study of the Society of Friends published in 1859, he acknowledged in a similar work written four decades later that Quakers had 'succeeded in impressing the public mind with a knowledge of their abhorrence of war';<sup>34</sup> and it became an

30. Cited in Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, p. 327.

31. L. Creighton, *Life and Letters of Thomas Hodgkin* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), pp. 239, 241–43.

32. H.H. Hewison, *Hedge of Wild Almonds: South Africa, the 'Pro-Boers' and the Quaker Conscience* (London: Heinemann, 1989), pp. 129–30.

33. Ceadel, *Semi-detached Idealists*, p. 127.

34. Rowntree, *Quakerism Past and Present*. J.S. Rowntree, *The Society of Friends: Its Faith and Practice* (London: Headley Brothers, 1901), p. 32.

enduring commonplace of Quaker literature to observe, 'Friends are known for their peace testimony perhaps more than for any other single reason'.<sup>35</sup> The major reason why the Society's pacifism became salient during the second half of the nineteenth century was that the peculiarities for which it had been best-known—its dress, speech, and marriage rules—were abandoned during the late 1850s and early 1860s. Making these changes helped it arrest its numerical decline: membership bottomed out at 13,755 in 1864,<sup>36</sup> and thereafter began a modest recovery. But they left the peace testimony as the sect's principal remaining peculiarity just as a significant proportion of its members were growing uneasy with it.

The First World War, the third phase in the history of the British peace movement, was a major watershed. Virtually all previous peace associations became moribund and were superseded during 1914–15 by more vigorous ones. The Peace Society was in effect supplanted by the Fellowship of Reconciliation as the main voice of Christian pacifism, while the No-Conscription Fellowship mobilised a new breed of socialist pacifist found mainly in the Independent Labour Party. The arbitration associations established in the 1880s were pushed aside by the Union of Democratic Control and the League of Nations Union, which catered for radical and liberal *pacifists* respectively. And the National Peace Council, created in 1904 and institutionalized four years later as a co-ordinating body for the peace movement, came close to collapse. A further stimulus to peace activism occurred in 1916 when conscription was introduced for the first time. It was accompanied by a legislative provision for conscientious objection that was remarkably generous in two respects: it allowed non-religious objections (rather than only Christian ones or, even more narrowly, only Christian-sectarian ones); and it recognized the possibility of an unconditional exemption (rather than one which required some kind of alternative service). However, failings on the part both of the military-service tribunals which applied this conscience clause and of the objectors who sought to avail themselves of it meant that about a third of the 16,500 objectors felt ill-used by the decisions they received. Almost ten per cent of objectors refused to accept these decisions. In many cases they were imprisoned, and their suffering gave unprecedented publicity to the pacifist cause.

The Society of Friends made a mixed contribution to the peace movement during the First World War. Its consistent stand against militia service in the

35. R. Dale et al., *The Quaker Peace Testimony Today—Some Present Day Interpretations* (No place of publication given: Northern Friends Peace Board, 2nd edn, 1980), p. 6.

36. J.W. Graham, *The Faith of a Quaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 419.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was undoubtedly a factor in persuading the government to offer comparatively generous recognition of conscientious objection. Moreover, the Society's 'renaissance' of the previous two decades and the emergence within it of a socialist minority both helped it supply some of the most intransigent opponents of the war. In particular, the newly created Friends' Service Committee not only urged all conscientious objectors to reject alternative service but took a more defiant line than other peace associations against the government's censorship rules. And a number of influential pacifists who were dissatisfied by the pro-war opinions of their existing churches joined the Society because of its historical reputation as the quintessential peace sect.

Yet the Society of Friends lost its special position in the peace movement. This was largely because of an influx of non-Quaker activists. *Pacifist* associations proved unprecedentedly successful, thanks to the popularity of democratic control and a league of nations as peace ideas; and Quakers played only a minor role in these. Even the movement's pacifist wing attracted non-Quaker leaders and organizers such as Clifford Allen, Fenner Brockway, Catherine Marshall, and Bertrand Russell. But Quakers also lost influence because of their own divisions. A substantial proportion of them supported the war effort. As many as 45 per cent of war-related letters to the *Friend* during the first year of fighting did so; only 38 per cent opposed it; and the remaining 17 per cent expressed no opinion either way.<sup>37</sup> As many as 33.6 per cent of Quaker males of appropriate age undertook military service, while as few as 44.5 per cent became conscientious objectors.<sup>38</sup> And some Quakers unhelpfully claimed still to be pacifists while indulging in chauvinistic behaviour. For example, Herbert Sefton-Jones became chairman of the Peace Society's committee in November 1914, yet soon published a pamphlet calling for the execution of 'not only the Kaiser himself and his sons, but also the assassins through which his will has been carried out', and insisting that the Sermon on the Mount was applicable only to individuals and not to 'the Rulers of States to whose peoples they stand in a fiduciary relationship'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the Society of Friends was revealed to have both ultra-pacifist and pro-war wings, as well as a troubled mainstream pursuing a middle way in the form of relief and ambulance work.

37. D. Rubinstein, *York Friends and the Great War* (Borthwick Paper no. 96; York, 1999), p. 3.

38. J. Rae, *Conscience and Politics: the British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service 1916–1919* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 73.

39. H. Sefton-Jones, *German Crimes and Our Civil Remedy* (London: John Lane, 1916), p. 8, 16–18.



During its fourth phase, the inter-war years, the British peace movement reached its peak of activism. In the first half of the 1920s the Union of Democratic Control enjoyed considerable influence, mainly through its close links to the rising Labour Party, which was led by one of its four co-founders, Ramsay MacDonald. In the second half of that decade, as the League of Nations grew in authority, the League of Nations Union, led by the maverick Conservative politician Lord Robert Cecil, developed into the world's largest peace association, peaking at over 400,000 subscribing members in 1931. Thereafter, as confidence in the League of Nations ebbed away in the face of the challenge from Japan, Italy, and Germany, the peace movement and defencists alike became increasingly divided on the issue of whether to contain or to accommodate these revisionist powers. By the late 1930s containment was being advocated by Churchillian defencists, who favoured rearmament, and within the peace movement by those liberal *pacifists* who favoured collective security and by those socialist *pacifists* who favoured a peace front against fascism. And accommodation was being advocated by Chamberlainite defencists, who favoured appeasement, and, within the peace movement, by those liberal and socialist *pacifists* who favoured a policy of peaceful change (in other words the convening of a new international peace conference to revise the Versailles Treaty of 1919), whose principal mouthpiece was the National Peace Council, which enjoyed a period of unwonted influence, and by pacifists, who after 1936 were mainly represented by the Peace Pledge Union, an unprecedentedly strong absolutist association whose membership soon reached six figures. At first the accommodationists had the upper hand; but Hitler's seizure of the non-German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 tipped the balance of opinion decisively towards containment, and also marked the effective end of the inter-war period.

The Quaker contribution to the peace movement declined further during this fourth phase. This was mainly because the non-Quaker input increased even more substantially during the inter-war years than during the First World War. Thus although individual Quakers—for example, Harold J. Morland and Maurice Rowntree, who served as treasurers of the No More War Movement (the successor to the No-Conscription Fellowship) and the Peace Pledge Union respectively—made substantial contributions to the pacifist movement, none could match the influence of Arthur Ponsonby, whose Peace Letter petition was the most important pacifist initiative of the 1920s; George Lansbury, who led the Parliamentary Labour Party in the early 1930s; Dick Sheppard, the Anglican canon who founded the Peace Pledge Union; or even writers and intellectuals such as Vera Brittain, Aldous Huxley, John Middleton

Murry, and Bertrand Russell, who produced the most significant pacifist writing of the mid-to-late 1930s.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the fact that a significant minority of its members had supported the national military effort in 1914–18 and could be expected to do so in any future conflict, the Society of Friends reaffirmed its pacifism at an 'All-Friends Conference' in 1920. Thomas Kennedy sees this as 'an historic turning point for British Quakerism' in that its absolutist position on war was entrenched as its defining ideal despite an awareness that not all members lived up to it:

Although not every Briton who claimed to be a Friend adhered absolutely to this fundamental basis, the world at large defines Quakerism chiefly in pacifist terms, and the Society of Friends in Britain could scarcely survive as a separate religious body if it were to disavow or seriously weaken its peace testimony.<sup>41</sup>

It is likely that although this reaffirmation discouraged some potential recruits, it encouraged others: particularly in respect of the pacifist heyday of the late 1930s and early 1940s, it seems, in Alastair Heron's words, 'reasonable to infer that the Quaker peace testimony had drawn in many'.<sup>42</sup>

Even so, Quakers were unsure how to apply their reaffirmed pacifism to the League of Nations, which, although empowered to impose economic and military sanctions, was widely regarded as the best hope for peace. The pacifist associations were strongly anti-League: the socialist pacifists of the No More War Movement dismissed it as an organization of capitalist victors; and the Peace Pledge Union condemned collective security through the League as a euphemism for world war. But, because of the constructive dimension of their peace testimony, Quakers felt unable to be so negative, their attitude being summed up in J.W. Graham's call of 1927 for 'constructive work on the half-built League of Nations'.<sup>43</sup> Yet they found it hard to specify whether this constructive work should go as far as support for economic and even military sanctions; and their message was thus less clear-cut than that of other inter-war pacifists.

The fifth phase of peace activism began with the Prague crisis of March 1939, which made it clear to most Britons that a war with Hitler was unavoidable. For just over a year the peace movement held its own. Many of those who had become disillusioned with the League of Nations or appeasement

40. See M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914–1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

41. Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, pp. 413–14.

42. A. Heron, *Quakers in Britain: A Century of Change 1895–1995* (Kelso: Curlew Graphics, 1995), p. 45.

43. J.W. Graham, *The Divinity in Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 267.

transferred their hopes to a new peace association, Federal Union, whose campaign for federation of democratic states aroused considerable enthusiasm. The Peace Pledge Union continued to grow, reaching a peak of 136,000 members in April 1940. And when conscription was re-introduced, the initial level of conscientious objection, at 2 per cent of those called up, was notably higher than the 0.33 per cent which has been calculated to be the equivalent figure (when pre-conscription volunteering is taken into account) for the First World War,<sup>44</sup> though it was still too low to trouble the government. From the fall of France in June 1940, however, peace activism of all kinds went into decline. The conscientious-objection rate slid steeply downward, ending the war at a mere 0.2 per cent; and the 60,000 objectors of 1939–45 became painfully aware of achieving but a fraction of the public impact of their counterparts in the previous world war. Hitler had discredited pacifism, other than as an unworldly faith, so that, although the Peace Pledge Union survived, it had dwindled to 1,100 members by the end of the twentieth century.

By the late 1940s, moreover, the Cold War had done much to dent the hopes of 1945 that the formation of the United Nations would inaugurate a more harmonious era of international relations, with the result that as a pressure group the United Nations Association was never more than a pale shadow of the League of Nations Union. At the end of the 1950s, moreover, the abolition of national service denied the peace movement the chance to exploit youthful resentments against this disruption to their lives. Admittedly, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament enjoyed significant levels of support from its foundation in 1958 until 1964 and again from 1979 to 1983; but most of its supporters were protesting against the deployment of a particular weapon of mass destruction rather than putting forward an alternative to defencism. *Pacifism* was at a very low ebb in the second half of the twentieth century, despite the development of feminist and ecologist varieties and the emergence of peace studies as a sympathetic academic discipline. Since the end of the Cold War, moreover, progressive opinion has been attracted more to crusading, particularly against Serbia, than to either pacifism or *pacifism*. As the twenty-first century begins, the peace movement is as weak as at any time since its inception.

As peace activism declined during this fifth phase, so the relative contribution made by the Society of Friends increased. For example, they played significant roles in two small forerunners of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Tests,

44. Rae, *Conscience and Politics*, p. 71.

and the Emergency Committee for Direct Action Against Nuclear War.<sup>45</sup> And a study of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's first period of mass activism found that, of the 41 per cent of supporters sampled who declared a religious faith, as many as 28 per cent were Quakers, placing them second only to Anglicans (who constituted 35 per cent of believers)<sup>46</sup>—a remarkable achievement in view of their much smaller aggregate numbers. In addition, Quakers have contributed significantly to peace studies, as symbolised by Adam Curle's appointment by Bradford University to Britain's first chair in the subject.

This increased relative contribution to peace activism has occurred at a time when the Society's commitment to pacifism, though secure from formal repudiation, was being interpreted in an increasingly latitudinarian manner. Intellectually, the Society's divisions over war in 1939–45 were no less serious than in 1914–18, but they caused less friction because the public mood was calmer and the demands of military recruitment less urgent. Almost half (47 per cent) of all Quaker males of military age were declared unfit, had their call-up deferred, or were left undisturbed by the authorities. In consequence, fewer of them needed to take a stand either for or against the conflict: only 16 per cent joined the armed forces or the home guard during the Second World War (compared with the 33.6 per cent who, as already noted, had undertaken military service during the First); and only 33.5 per cent (compared with 44.5 per cent) declared themselves conscientious objectors.<sup>47</sup>

These intellectual divisions continued into the post-1945 period, with even less friction as Quakers grew more tolerant of dissent within their ranks. In an account of the Society of Friends published in 1958, John Sykes acknowledged its 'tendency towards still greater leniency' towards those unable to accept the peace testimony, attributing this to the fact that 'the great majority are strong in their witness, upholding the Quaker face to the world'.<sup>48</sup> It seems likely that there has been both an increase in the size of the non-pacifist minority and a decline in the self-assurance of the pacifist majority since Sykes made this judgement. A study of the peace testimony produced by the Northern Friends' Peace Board in 1978 acknowledged particular 'division among

45. See R. Taylor, *Against the Bomb: The British Peace Movement, 1958–1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

46. R. Taylor and C. Pritchard, *The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958–1965 Twenty Years On* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980), pp. 23.

47. D. Rubinstein, *Faithful to Ourselves and the Outside World: York Quakers during the Twentieth Century* (York: William Sessions, 2001), p. 78.

48. J. Sykes, *The Quakers: A New Look at their Place in Society* (London: A. Wingate, 1958), p. 83.

Quakers' as to whether they could endorse United Nations peacekeeping operations.<sup>49</sup> The Gulf War of 1991 produced 'deep searching amongst Friends'.<sup>50</sup> Some felt happy to proclaim their 'belief that there is that of God in Saddam Hussein'.<sup>51</sup> But others reaffirmed their pacifism only with unease: 'Now, I ask myself, "Am I in agreement with the peace testimony?" Yes, I think I am. But in the light of recent events it is no longer quite that simple for me.'<sup>52</sup> And a vocal minority supported the war, one of them observing that while 'a majority in the Society still holds to the traditional peace testimony, there is a substantial number who do not'.<sup>53</sup> The non-pacifist element grew even more substantial during the Bosnian conflict of 1992–95 when others concluded that they 'could no longer be a pacifist'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, particularly after birthright membership was abolished in 1959, all those joining the Society of Friends were voluntarily identifying with a religious body that officially stood for pacifism. This may help to explain why the number of recorded attenders (currently more than 9,000) has risen whereas the number of full members (currently fewer than 18,000) has not. Indeed, a 1992 study of why only 3 per cent of regular attenders proceed to full membership noted that 14.1 per cent of them gave disagreement with the peace testimony as their reason for not joining.<sup>55</sup> However, a number have either joined the Society or remained in it despite such disagreement. Some of these have done so on the grounds that the 'cornerstone of Quakerism is the direct experience of God, not the peace testimony'.<sup>56</sup> Others have accepted the peace testimony as a cornerstone yet interpreted it in a non-pacifist way. In 1993 Pink Dandelion observed, 'Nobody suggests scrapping it, but we all mean different things by it'.<sup>57</sup> And three years later, having completed a detailed sociological study, he reported that only 60 per cent of his sample of Quakers claimed to be pacifists, and that many of them were inclined 'to

49. R. Dale, J. McCarthy, F. Moorhouse, A. South, *Quaker Peace Testimony Today: Some Present Day Interpretations* (Leeds: Northern Friends Peace Board, 1978), p. 18.

50. *The Friend* (15 February 1991), p. 221.

51. *The Friend* (1 February 1991), p. 149.

52. *The Friend* (22 March 1991), p. 382.

53. *The Friend* (10 May 1991), p. 606.

54. *The Friend* (11 August 1991), p. 1023.

55. 22.1 per cent were put off by uncertainty about the obligations of membership; 15.1 per cent claimed not to feel worthy enough to join; and 12.1 per cent objected to excessive doctrinal diversity: see A. Heron, *Caring, Conviction, Commitment: Dilemmas of Quaker Membership Today* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1992), pp. 7, 27, 60.

56. *The Friend* (30 April 1993), p. 551.

57. *The Friend* (19 November 1993), pp. 1493–94.

perceive the group as pacifist but interpret the peace testimony in a variety of ways (including its dismissal) at the individual level'.<sup>58</sup> This acceptance of pacifism as the defining belief of the religious society to which one belongs while rejecting it for oneself is characteristic of modern Quakers, whom Alastair Heron has characterized as 'a people who have accepted a near-infinite spectrum of diversity'.<sup>59</sup> It should be noted, however, that this increasingly individualistic interpretation of the peace testimony has not troubled the peace movement. Indeed, it has freed more Quakers to participate in overtly *pacifist* work, notably in support of the United Nations.

The Society of Friends did much to achieve general acceptance of pacifism as more than a sectarian peculiarity or an excuse for avoiding dangerous citizenly duties. Once it overcame the fear of political action that had inhibited it during the French revolutionary wars, it provided the backbone of the peace movement for a century. Although divided by the First World War and eclipsed by the upsurge of non-Quaker peace activism then and during the inter-war period, it reaffirmed its pacifism and did as much for the cause as any small religious society could be expected to. As the peace movement has lost momentum since the Second World War, its relative contribution has increased, despite increasing diversity in its interpretation of the peace testimony.

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58. P. Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 121, 122, 191.

59. Heron, *Caring, Conviction, Commitment*, p. 60.