

# Opposition to the First World War: The Fate of Conscientious Objectors in Leicester

*by Malcolm Elliott*

The horrors of trench warfare and the deaths of millions of men have been the focus of most studies of the First World War. For the few who saw killing as a contradiction of their fundamental beliefs the start of conscription presented a crisis. In theory, they were allowed conscientious objection to military service. In practice, tribunals at local level rarely acknowledged the validity of their position. This paper examines the treatment of Conscientious Objectors in Leicester.

The outbreak of war in 1914 shattered the hopes of idealists of all political persuasions but particularly those steeped in the liberal tradition of belief in tolerance and universal progress. Humankind was not set on course for inevitable improvement either in material conditions or in moral character.

Aspirations of the brotherhood of man and the coming of an age of enlightenment were drowned in the thunder of gunfire and sunk in the mud of Flanders and the lights that went out all over Europe cast gloom and despondency especially on those accustomed to believe in the progress of humankind toward lasting universal peace.

Leicester had been strongly Liberal in sentiment since the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 and the party did not lose its control over the Council until 1909. The strength of the Liberals had been weakened locally and nationally by differences of opinion over Irish Home Rule and perhaps, more deeply, over reaction to the Boer War. Patriotism, pacifism and pro-Boer sympathies vied in causing deep rifts.<sup>1</sup>

Socialists were more ready to see the Boer conflict more simplistically as an example of British colonialism but the Great War could not be so readily dismissed. Socialism had grown strongly in Leicester in the decade before the war. Ramsay MacDonald was one of the town's MPs and Canon Donaldson of St Mark's church was a well-known champion of Christian Socialism. The presence of such vigorous opponents of war may explain some of the reluctance of Leicester's young males to enlist at the outbreak of war.

MacDonald exemplified the dilemma facing many pacifists. In peacetime he was adamant as to the immorality and stupidity of war, believing that Britain should have remained neutral, but, as soon as war was declared, his standpoint changed. He had reluctantly to support the war effort and to encourage young men to fight for their country:

<sup>1</sup> See Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* and P. Jones chapter on *Politics in Leicester in the Twentieth Century*, ed. D. Nash and D. Reeder, Alan Sutton, 1983.

History will in due time apportion praise and blame, but the young men of the country must, for the moment, settle the immediate issue of victory. Let them do it in the spirit of the brave men who have crowned our country with honour in the times that are gone.<sup>2</sup>

So wrote MacDonal in a letter read at a De Montfort Hall meeting on September 11th 1914. Later that month he addressed a meeting in the Corn Exchange asking, 'Can anyone imagine what the state of Europe will be if we are beaten? Can anyone imagine how heavy, how oppressive will be the shackles forged for the working classes of Europe?'<sup>3</sup>

Macdonald saw through the facile optimism of those who envisaged a quick war to end wars. 'As to the moral flamboyancies of those who tell us that this will be the last war, it is all moonshine, it is far more likely that this war is the beginning of a new military despotism in Europe'.<sup>4</sup> From the outset, he advocated a negotiated peace rather than total victory and he set out his views in a manifesto to the local papers:

If this war is not to be the beginning instead of the end of wars, it is necessary, now, to get a settled public opinion as to the conditions of peace; these must be determined, not by the military men, nor by the diplomatists, but by the people. . . . War never effects the purpose of the people who expect some good from it.<sup>5</sup>

Again on 1st March 1915 MacDonal addressed his constituents in Westcotes thus:

I have no love of war; but let there be no misunderstanding about the position, once war was declared and our brothers went out obedient to the call of duty they had got to be supported. If you had seen the men as I have seen them, going into the trenches and laying down their lives, you would have felt that the moment the declaration of war was made, controversies about its origin had to be put into the background.<sup>6</sup>

Canon Donaldson, by contrast, remained constant in his Christian pacifist position, and suffered a good deal of opprobrium from his wife as well as from his parishioners. In November 1914, he declared 'War betrays the innocent, crushes the weak, violates purity, destroys and devastates fair and noble cities and wrecks their habitations'.<sup>7</sup> He pleaded that 'the heroism and courage evoked cannot compensate for the terrible sins of war' and he declared his conviction that, 'the real sin of the church is not that she allows war, but that she tolerates the state of things that leads to war'.

Donaldson maintained his faith in the coming of the Kingdom in this world and looked toward 'a new movement among the people in opposition to military armaments and secret diplomacy', and he anticipated 'extending international laws which will bind all civilised nations'.<sup>8</sup> In 1918, he moved from Leicester to the village of Paston within Walton, near Peterborough. Six years later, in 1924, he was appointed a canon of Westminster Abbey where, in 1927, he became President of the London Council for the Prevention of War and from 1931 to 1940, Chairman of the League of Clergy for Peace. He died in 1953 aged 93.

Alderman Banton, a staunch member of the Independent Labour Party addressed a public meeting on August 2nd, two days before war was declared, posing the question:

<sup>2</sup> Armitage F.P., *Leicester 1914-1918: The Story of a Midland Town*, Edgar Backus, Leicester 1933, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 30.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 22

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* 23

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Leicester Mercury*, 27.11.1914.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*.

Is the body of the Archduke worth more than the body of a common ordinary soldier?  
 Are we to go to war with Germany, that advancing and progressive civilisation, that  
 people whom, in many ways, England is humbly following, to help Russia, who means  
 to stamp out those things which make for the liberty of the people?<sup>9</sup>

The Free Churches of Leicester also held a meeting and passed a resolution urging the Government to announce the neutrality of Britain in the impending conflict.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot say how much effect the anti-war views of prominent citizens had upon recruitment in Leicester but we do know that some young men were led to take a stand as conscientious objectors to military service, sometimes as Christian pacifists and sometimes for more broadly moral and political reasons. These philosophical doubts about the wisdom and morality of war may well have been in part responsible for the low level of recruitment in Leicester during the first months of the war. On March 30th 1915, Councillor Hincks moved a resolution in the Council deploring 'the scanty response of Leicester men to the recruiting appeals'. He illustrated this with the following statistics. 'At Newcastle, 18.5 % of the population have joined the colours, at Nottingham 18.5, at Swansea 10.5, at Wakefield 7.6, at Hull 7.1, at Manchester 6.7, at Sheffield 6.7, at Leeds 5.5, at Derby 5.2, at Bradford 4.1, at Oldham 4.0, at Leicester 2.6'.<sup>11</sup>

This reluctance to flock to the colours has generally been seen as something of a blot on the record of Leicester, a measure of lack of patriotism or perhaps of readiness to seize the opportunity to work in the town's expanding industries as war brought increased orders for shoes, socks and underwear for the troops. Hincks poured scorn on the town's motto, *Semper eadem*:

Business as usual, pleasure as usual, racing as usual, frivolity as usual, *Semper eadem*, always the same is a vicious programme. *Semper eadem* with the hordes of Germany almost knocking at our doors, is an insidious delusion and a hideous mockery. Our townspeople, I am confident, will welcome, if not enjoy, inconvenience if thereby the ranks of our gallant soldiers and sailors can be strengthened'.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the relative reluctance of young men to serve in the armed forces, public opinion in Leicester quickly adapted to the prevailing mood in which refusal to serve in the army was regarded as moral weakness or cowardice whereas in Huddersfield the mood throughout the war was much more sympathetic to those who stood out against the resort to arms. Pearce argues that conscientious objection retained the support of public opinion, 'Anti war sentiment not only dominated the Labour and Socialist movement, that movement, in turn, dominated all the other local agencies of opposition to the war. As the war continued that hegemony became more complete'.<sup>13</sup> Pearce argues that the local context played a crucial role in determining reaction to the war.

Attempting to discover Leicester's record on conscientious objection is made difficult by the absence of official records. In 1921 the Ministry of Health decided that all papers relating to individual exemption from National Service, including those on grounds of conscientious objection, should be destroyed along with every tribunal minute book except those of the Central Tribunal.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Armitage, *Leicester 1914-18*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 84.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Pearce C, *Comrades in Conscience: The Story of an English Community, Opposition to a Great War*, Francis Boutle, 2001, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Public Records Office leaflet, *First world War: Conscientious Objectors and Exemptions from Service*.

All together some 16,000 conscientious objectors obtained exemption certificates through the Military Service Tribunals. Of these, 6,312 had been arrested, and 5,970 court-martialled (521 of them three times, 50 five times and three six times), 819 men had spent over two years in prison, much of that time on bread and water and in solitary confinement.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of objectors took up non-combatant duties as medical orderlies, serving in the catering corps or working in labour camps run by the Home Office.<sup>16</sup> Those whose appeals were refused were 'handed over to the military authorities'. Fifty of them were sent to fight in France thirty of whom were sentenced to be shot for refusing to accept military discipline. The sentences were commuted at the last moment after intensive lobbying led by the No-Conscription Fellowship.<sup>17</sup>

A study of the local papers reveals very little information on the identity of conscientious objectors or of the numbers who claimed exemption on such grounds. There was far more publicity given to the many employers who sought exemption for their key workers on grounds of damage to their business than to cases of individual refusal to fight. It is impossible to make any sort of statistical analysis from the scanty references made to conscientious objection in the *Leicester Mercury* but the very partial nature of the reports indicates something about prevailing attitudes.

The great majority of those appearing before Tribunals were those who sought exemption because of the nature of their work, either as being work of national importance or because their absence would bring exceptional hardship to their families and others. Many of these were given temporary exemption whilst their employers made other arrangements. At Hinckley, Captain Bedingfield seems to have taken a consistently hard line. A clicker who said he supported each of his grandparents with 2/6d a week and had a wife who was almost blind, was told 'there must be hundreds of thousands of men in the army whose case was as hard, but all had to put up with some little hardship in these days'.<sup>18</sup> He was given 14 days to make arrangements. Another man, a tailor, argued that it was in the national interest that he remain. Bedingfield asked if there were no women who could undertake his work. The tailor asked him how he would like to be measured for a pair of trousers by a woman, to which the Captain replied amid laughter; 'that would be in the national interest'.<sup>19</sup>

Those who worked in agriculture were more likely to receive a sympathetic hearing. It was the perpetual plea of farmers that 'the bed-rock had been reached' and no more men could be spared for the front.<sup>20</sup> This bias toward agricultural and rural occupations is exemplified in the case of a stableman and second horseman in the employ of Captain Forrester, Master of the Quorn Hunt. The man was given exemption on the grounds that his services were necessary to preserve the hunt as a business 'because it had a direct influence on the breeding of light horses' and anything which retarded this 'would jeopardise the supply needed for the army'.<sup>21</sup>

The reports of cases concerning men who claimed conscientious objection almost always end with the words 'appeal dismissed' or 'defendant handed over to the military authorities'. It is likely that most of these men remained in prison for the duration of the

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Moorhead, *Troublesome People: Enemies of War 1916-1986*, London, 1987, 79.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* 47-53

<sup>18</sup> *Leicester Mercury*, 5.4.1916.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* 16.1.1917.

war. Some may have been sent to France perhaps later to be shot as deserters. We do not know but charges of ill-treatment by the army authorities were officially denied.<sup>22</sup> Colonel Yates, speaking in the House of Commons, castigated such charges as libel, he said 'the British Army was the one army in the world where there was no such thing as the ill-treatment of the men by their officers'.<sup>23</sup>

Those with strong affiliation to known peace churches were far more likely to be given exemption, such as, for example, a member of the Plymouth Brethren<sup>24</sup> but it was far more difficult for the individual to convince the authorities of his personal moral objection. Thus a Hinckley man, with no religion, but a member of the Adult School, made a strong case as a conscientious objector but the chairman told him, 'These are mere opinions, Sir, not conscientious convictions. I think this man should be sent to combatant service'.<sup>25</sup>

The names of individual applicants are not usually given in the press reports but the issue for May 24th 1916 contained a report which named 'twenty more' conscientious objectors who had neglected to report to the barracks at South Wigston. Whether this was an attempt to 'name and shame' or simply good practice is not clear. The newspaper reported that on arrival at the court the objectors were hooted at 'by a crowd of civilians and wounded soldiers, several of the last mentioned expressing their contempt in forcible if not polite' manner.<sup>26</sup>

Two of the conscientious objectors had given themselves up at a police station 'while affirming their intention of not accepting military control'. Most of the men were in their early twenties, two were 19, six were 21 and the oldest was 34. They included Henry Johnson, a cabinet maker, the brothers Thomas Hudson, a carpenter and Benjamin Hudson, a draughtsman, three clerks, Edgar Eagle, George Hefford and Kenneth Banton, two labourers, Charles Grant and Ronald Eagle and four warehousemen: Sidney Burrows, Sidney Collins, Samuel Drinkwater and Walter Chapman, as well as Horace Ballard, a gardener, two workers in the shoe trade, Alec Drinkwater (brother of Samuel) and John Hickman and two printers, William Rogers and Horace Smith, a tailor, Charles Briars, and a hosiery counterpane, William Mason and John Smith, a waterman.

For the most part they said little in the dock. One stated that he could not accept non-combatant service in place of active service at the front as he 'could not alter his convictions and therefore could not go to Wigston'. Several applied for an adjournment to be legally represented but were told by the Magistrates' Clerk that there was no possible defence. The result was the same for each one of them, a fine of 40 shillings and handed over to the military authorities.<sup>27</sup>

Those who took an absolutist stand, refusing to perform any kind of service, not surprisingly met with little support. Alan Shoults, a tomato grower from Blaby, had been passed for non-combatant service but refused, saying, 'I am a conscientious objector under the Military Service Act. They have refused to exempt me and it now remains for me to prove by my body that I will not take part in military service'. Asked if he would object to assisting a wounded soldier he replied, 'Yes, under military law'. It was not, he argued, a situation like that of the Gospel story of the Samaritan, 'It is a question of patching up a wounded man and sending him back to the front, and I will

<sup>22</sup> *ibid* 4.4.1916 & 20.6.1916.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid* 27.5.1916.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* 15.3.1917.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 20.5.1916.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 24.5.1916.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*.

not do that'. He was fined £2 and ordered to be handed over to the military authorities.<sup>28</sup>

Another man with no religious affiliation had been offered non-combatant work but refused as it was 'war-related'. He told the Tribunal that 'he did not believe in slaughtering men as he recognised all men as equals. If all men held these views,' he said, 'wars would automatically cease.' The Chairman told him his views were not a matter of conscience and 'ordered that he be called up for combatant service.'<sup>29</sup>

In April 1916, seven young men belonging to the Church of Christ sought total exemption and were supported in this by Amos Mann. Mann was the President of the Leicester Anchor Boot and Shoe Production Society, a workers' co-operative with socialist aspirations that had led to the establishment of the Humberstone Garden Suburb.<sup>30</sup> He had been a member of the Church of Christ community for 40 years and was on the governing executive of the Mother Church in Leicester (Crafton Street). He maintained that:

When he was a young man, if a member joined the forces, he would have been dealt with by the Church . . . almost every preacher and teacher amongst us has declared war to be contrary to the teaching of Christ, and . . . many of our churches have even separated young men from their fellowship for joining the military forces.<sup>31</sup>

Mann's defence of Christian pacifism was contested by Henry Langton, who described himself as secretary to the District Committee. The position of most members of the Churches of Christ was 'more rightly interpreted by his Worship the Mayor, Alderman North, whom we are honoured in having as one of our esteemed leaders'. Langton went on to state that out of a total membership of between 1,200 and 1,300 in Leicester and Wigston, 125 young men had enlisted.<sup>32</sup>

The case of the seven young men who took their stand as conscientious objectors illustrates the dilemma faced by Christian theologians of all denominations. As Amos Mann said to the Tribunal, 'war was absolutely wrong. The teaching of Christ said not merely "Love one another", but "Love your enemies"'. This made it impossible for anyone who was imbued with that teaching conscientiously to engage in any military service'. The appeal was dismissed.<sup>33</sup>

Members of the Society of Friends, Quakers, were seen as a special case. Their historic espousal of non-violence and the so-called Peace Testimony of 1662, in which they sought to assure Charles II of their renunciation of all 'fighting with outward weapons whatsoever', seems to have fixed in the minds of the general public a notion that Quakers had a special claim to their indulgence. Thus Colonel Yates spoke in Parliament against allowing conscientious objectors to perform non-combatant services but he made an exception of Quakers, whom 'they all recognised to be conscientious objectors but those men who were not Quakers had no right to shirk their duty to their country, and he hoped when the next Registration Bill was proposed they would take care that every one of these men should be disfranchised'.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 22.15.16.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 15.3.17.

<sup>30</sup> Martin G.C., 'Twentieth Century Leicester: garden suburb and council estate' in *The Growth of Leicester*, ed. A.E. Brown, 1970, 79.

<sup>31</sup> *Leicester Mercury* 21.4.1916.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 20.4.1916.

<sup>33</sup> *Leicester Mercury* 13.4.1916.

<sup>34</sup> *Leicester Mercury* 31.5.1916.

For most Quakers the idea of some kind of preferential treatment separating them from other objectors was utterly abhorrent. Friends Service Committee, the body set up to assist Quakers who refused to undertake military service, condemned any such special treatment as a violation of the spirit of Friends 'to unite ourselves to the fullest extent with all conscientious objectors'.<sup>35</sup> As one Friend put it in 1915, 'If they offer us exemption from conscription as Quakers, unless all those who agree with us from conscientious motives are exempted too, the position will be intolerable. We may have to leave the Society in order to fight it out with them as men'.<sup>36</sup>

There is no doubt that the Government wished to make some kind of exception for members of the Society. To have given immunity to Quakers while refusing to tolerate any 'political objection' would have enabled the authorities to counter accusations of religious persecution whilst avoiding any loophole for the far more numerous and largely socialist objectors. The strategy failed because leaders of the Friends Service Council were also socialists and determined to make common cause with the No Conscription Fellowship.<sup>37</sup>

As soon as war was declared the Quakers had set up their own organisation for the relief of wounded men, acting as stretcher bearers and administering first aid. The Friends' Ambulance Unit offered a practical course of action to those who wanted to share the hardships and danger of their countrymen without engaging in the actual process of killing their fellow-men.<sup>38</sup> The Unit was set up by several Quakers including Philip J. Baker who was its first commandant until July 1915. He took the name Noel-Baker on marriage to Irene, the daughter of a British landowner in Greece, Frank Noel. The Chairman was Sir George Newman, the Chief Medical Officer of Health and eminent authority on infant mortality.<sup>39</sup> A Leicester man, Arthur Gravely, had been a member of the St John's Ambulance Brigade all his life and so was well equipped to become a training officer for the Friends' Ambulance Unit at its headquarters, Jordans in Buckinghamshire.<sup>40</sup> Later in May 1916, the clerk of the local meeting, Henry G. Thompson, also joined the FAU.<sup>41</sup>

A meeting in Birmingham at which the work of Friends' War Relief Committee and the Friends Ambulance Unit was described was told that, 'both committees appear to be rendering great help to non-combatants and wounded troops in France and have won the complete confidence of the French authorities.'<sup>42</sup> By the end of the war the Friends' Ambulance Unit had contained upwards of 1,800 members. It had been responsible for working over a dozen hospitals at home and abroad. Its two hospital ships transported 24,000 cases and its ambulances carried 245,000 sick and wounded soldiers, while four ambulance trains conveyed 520,000 cases.<sup>43</sup>

One senses from the minutes of local Quaker business meetings a certain reluctance among Leicester Friends to be too politically active. A letter from the war sub-committee of the Peace Committee in London was read concerning a petition to the Government urging a negotiated settlement of the war, but it was not received with enthusiasm, 'It is

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, Thomas, *British Quakerism 1860-1920*, Oxford, 2001, 331.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* 329.

<sup>38</sup> *The Friend*, October 16th and 30th; November 6th, 13th and 27th; December 4th 1914.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, 315 and 331.

<sup>40</sup> Gravely Donovan, *Of meeting, Meeting, Friends, Family and Friendships*, Leicester Monthly Meeting Bulletin, July 2002, 31

<sup>41</sup> Minute of Leicester Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends 18.5.1916.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* 27.1.1915.

<sup>43</sup> *The Friend*, 21.3.1919.

decided to lay copies on the table for any Friend to sign who wishes to do so'.<sup>44</sup> When they were urged to support a public meeting in support of the petition they declined, 'We do not feel that any good purpose would be served by such a meeting at the present time'.<sup>45</sup>

Three members were, however, asked to confer with the organisers of the public meeting on possible future action and as a result Marion Ellis urged Friends to attend and agreed to collect money in its support.<sup>46</sup> Attendances were not large and about 60 heard Edward Grubb, editor of 'The British Friend' and a leading figure in the Society, speak on a very wet evening.<sup>47</sup>

What was said by Grubb on that occasion we do not know but his views were expressed in an article in 'The Friend'.<sup>48</sup> In it he wrote that most Friends would wholly agree that war is wrong but that 'this war has been forced on us by circumstances and we do not see how our country's share in it could have been avoided'. He went on to blame the system of alliances to preserve 'the balance of power' as the principal cause of the war and then outlined the principles on which a just peace settlement might be achieved, including 'the utmost liberty for weak peoples and oppressed nationalities'. The 'most vital and indispensable guarantee for future peace' was, he said, 'the substitution of mutual trust for mutual suspicion and fear' and he urged that nations should bind themselves to 'unlimited arbitration with one another in every case of dispute that may arise'.<sup>49</sup>

Such idealism, however, if shared by the younger generation, was not enough to deter many of them from enlisting and about one third of Quaker males followed their compatriots into the army and navy. This effectively removed them from the scene of official Quaker policy-making at home, leaving the field clear for Quaker pacifists and absolutists to speak in the name of the Society as a whole. Fewer than 5% ultimately took the extreme position of refusal to undertake any kind of co-operation with the military authorities but as a recent writer puts it, 'absolutists within the Society of Friends established a moral influence that far outweighed the paucity of their numbers'.<sup>50</sup>

The relative absence of individual Quaker conscientious objectors in Leicester is a reflection of the small size of the Quaker meeting. Throughout the nineteenth century it had been composed largely of members of two local families, the Ellises and the Burgesses. In 1835 there were 94 members listed in Leicester of whom 28 were Burgesses and 24 Ellises. The membership list for 1868 shows a heavy shift in the balance of the two families but still a preponderance of both in the meeting as a whole: 19 Burgesses, 57 Ellises and 45 others. By 1914, these families had produced relatively few male heirs and several of their number had left the Society.

With the coming of conscription, Friends who remained at home became actively involved in supporting those who objected to military service. The minutes of Leicester Quakers record a joint meeting with the Fellowship of Reconciliation on February 20th 1916 at which those 'who came within the scope of the military service act took the principal part in the conference'.<sup>51</sup> The Fellowship of Reconciliation had itself been founded in part by Quakers and was widely supported by them.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Monthly Meeting, 15.4.1915.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* 20.5.1915.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* 20.6.1915.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 20.8.1915.

<sup>48</sup> *The Friend*, 4.9.1914.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, 351.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes of Leicester Monthly Meeting, 16.3.1916.



There was much concern within the Leicester Quaker Meeting over the case of Edward Severn who appeared before the Tribunal at Blaby. After 'a fair hearing' he was granted exemption 'but on the following day it was learned that exemption had been refused apparently on the assumption that our Friend would appeal and that exemption would be granted by the Higher Tribunal'.<sup>52</sup> Letters of protest were sent to the Blaby Tribunal and to T. Edmund Harvey and Arnold Rowntree, Quaker MPs who were actively involved in such matters. No reply came from the Tribunal but Edmund Harvey wrote 'that the matter will be brought before the Local Government Board'.<sup>53</sup>

It is probable that Edward Severn is the Quaker referred to in the local press report of 14th March 1916. He told the Tribunal that he was prepared to join the Friends Ambulance Unit adding, perhaps unwisely, that his 'conscience was the highest Tribunal'. The chairman of the Tribunal remarked, 'I hope you are not drilling the children in your faith', a suggestion which, of course, was denied by the applicant but he was refused the necessary conditional exemption.

Another schoolmaster, a Christadelphian from Kirby Muxloe, was said to have previously applied for a commission. He explained that this was done 'under pressure', the school having given him notice and that he had merely spoken to his headmaster who 'spoke to Mr Brockington about me'. His application was refused as 'frivolous'.<sup>54</sup>

A quarryman from Enderby was also refused. Like many other Christian objectors he quoted the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' and was answered by the chairman with the text, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his brother'. However, a plumber who said he was willing to join the FAU, was allowed to do so.<sup>55</sup>

Whilst Quakers were concerned to support their young men in their stand against war, they also expressed support for those who had gone into the services. A meeting in August 1916 agreed to send a letter to 'our members who are absent owing to the war', telling them 'how often you who are giving yourselves at this time of your Country's need are in our thoughts, not only when we miss you from your places in Meeting on Sundays, but as we think of you day by day'.<sup>56</sup> One of those who was in their minds must have been Oliver Ellis, brother of the historian Colin Ellis, who was at school when war broke out and who died whilst flying in 1917.<sup>57</sup>

Documentary evidence of conscientious objection among Leicester Quakers is hard to find, there is a reference in the business meeting of February 1918 to a statistical return sent to the Home Office concerning Leicester Friends Meeting. It is not clear to what exactly this referred but it listed ten names, six members and four attenders, of the meeting. Presumably this list included both conscientious objectors and those who had joined the FAU before the advent of conscription and it may have also concerned men in the force, whatever its precise import, it does suggest that the number of men connected to the local Quaker Meeting falling within the scope of the military service acts was very small.<sup>58</sup>

If the Leicester Meeting produced few men ready to suffer as conscientious objectors it was generous in its support of work in the relief of suffering. A list of donations to the Friends Ambulance Unit published in 'The Friend' in 1916 shows Leicester as giving a

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 20.4.1916.

<sup>54</sup> *Leicester Mercury*, 14.3.1916, 4.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Minutes of Leicester Monthly Meeting, 20.8.1916.

<sup>57</sup> Friends Register of Burials, Leicestershire Record Office, 12 D 39.

<sup>58</sup> Leicester Monthly Meeting, 17.2.1918.

total of £77/7/5d which was more than any other meeting listed – Nottingham raised £22/7/0d and York £14/0/10d.<sup>59</sup>

In fact it was not the young men of Leicester Friends' Meeting who bore most striking witness to the historic peace testimony of Quakers, but one of its women members, Edith Ellis, a daughter of John Edward Ellis, a Quaker MP and one-time Under Secretary for India. Edith Ellis took over as the organizing genius of the Friends' Service Council on the imprisonment of its previous secretary in 1916. She thus held a pivotal position in the Society as its most influential communicator and spokesperson in the last years of the war. She personally subscribed to the more extreme view among pacifists with regard to participation in the war effort, and 'not only insisted that true conscientious objectors should refuse any form of alternative to military service and accept imprisonment as the logical result of their stand but also rejected any attempts to mitigate the sufferings of those, non-Quaker as well as Quaker, who had been imprisoned'.<sup>60</sup>

In May 1918, Edith Ellis and two other members of the Friends' Service Council were prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act for publishing a pamphlet entitled *A Challenge to Militarism* without submitting it to the official censor. 'We feel,' said the defendants, 'that the declaration of peace and goodwill is the duty of all Christians and ought not to be dependent upon the permission of any Government Official. We therefore intend to continue the publication of such leaflets as we feel it our duty to put forth, without submitting them to the Censor.'<sup>61</sup> Edith Ellis served a three month sentence after refusing to pay fines of £250.

The ending of hostilities did not result in the immediate end to the imprisonment of conscientious objectors. They continued to face court martials during 1919 but, in June of that year the War Office decided to commute the sentences of those still in prison so that at most they would only serve another nine months.<sup>62</sup>

One result of the imprisonment of Quakers for their peace activities was a greater awareness of conditions in prisons which contributed to the work of subsequent prison reform. Thus a minute of Leicester Friends Meeting in October 1918 notes that, 'Edith M Ellis upon her recent experiences in Holloway Prison points out that much of the crime which is so serious among girls of 18 is the result of their social environment and suggests that there may be a call to Friends in particular to devote themselves to improving these conditions'.<sup>63</sup> The principal response to this appeal seems to have been to advocate the appointment of women policemen.

The Military Service Acts did allow men to claim exemption on grounds of conscience, but those who did so faced a 'Catch 22' situation. They were not allowed to claim such exemption because of their adherence to a church that professed pacifism since conscience must always be a matter of individual conviction, but, at the same time, appeals on the grounds of individual conscience were dismissed as mere opinion.

War has always presented a problem to thinking men and women. It is essentially a resort to barbarism in which all the normal restraints upon human behaviour are removed. What in peacetime is seen as the most heinous of crimes suddenly becomes the badge of heroism. The more destructive our actions in war the greater the honour and esteem. Even the most terrible acts of genocide such as the bombing of Hiroshima and

<sup>59</sup> *The Friend*, 17.11.1916.

<sup>60</sup> Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, 367.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid* 357.

<sup>62</sup> *The Friend*, 6.6.1919.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 20.10.1918.

Nagasaki are officially justified in the interests of national survival. However that may be, for most men and women, the argument becomes irrelevant once war has been entered into. To stand aside while others risk their lives in combat is seen as cowardly and unpatriotic.

The age-old dilemma is still with us in the 21st century for we have not yet abandoned the notion that war is the ultimate instrument of diplomacy. A century that has seen two world wars and the proliferation of unimaginable violence in conflicts all across the globe has perhaps blunted the edge of our moral revulsion at killing our fellow human beings; the generation that saw the outbreak of war in 1914 was less brutalised. In that sudden exposure to man's inhumanity to man, it was not just that one generation alone but humankind as a whole that lost its innocence.

### Personal details

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World War One was going badly and had not even reached its halfway point. But some men refused to fight. The BBC's special correspondent Allan Little considers the fate of the conscientious objectors - in particular, a bank clerk from Pinner in Greater London who was prepared to die for his beliefs. 22 Mar 2016. [Share this with Facebook](#). [Share this with Messenger](#). [Share this with Twitter](#). [Share this with Email](#). [Share this with Facebook](#). Conscientious Objectors during the First World War. A Conscientious objector is somebody who refused to join the army because of their religious or moral opposition to fighting. This group of people included those such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Quakers who objected due to religious beliefs and others who were pacifists (people who don't want to do any harm to other people, whatever the circumstances). Many conscientious objectors were willing to undertake non combat roles within the forces. This could include jobs such as working in military hospitals, as stretcher bearers or as a messenger. O A conscientious objector is an "individual who has claimed the right to refuse to perform military service" on the grounds of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion. In some countries, conscientious objectors are assigned to an alternative civilian service as a substitute for conscription or military service. Some conscientious objectors consider themselves pacifist, non-interventionist, non-resistant, non-aggressionist, anti-imperialist, antimilitarist or philosophically stateless