AN OPEN LETTER TO SOME WOULD-BE FRIENDS OF THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

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[Occasionally new writings by Bertrand Russell come to light too late to be included in their proper place in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell.* Such was the case with his memorandum circulated to the governors of Newnham College in 1909, discovered after the publication of *Papers* 12, and the case with a manuscript in which he answered a request of a Stockholm newspaper, discovered after the publication of *Papers* 13.[1] The discovery below would also have gone into *Papers* 13. Such discoveries are facilitated by the *Collected Papers* and its *Bibliography,* and the Russell Editorial Project welcomes them for the catch-up volume planned at the end.—Ed.]

PREFATORY NOTE

I am writing a biography of Catherine Marshall, who worked closely with Russell in the No-Conscription Fellowship ("NCF") during the First World War, and am currently reworking the documentation I used for *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (1980), and other material collected since. Because my many photocopies are filed in chronological order, the unsigned but dated "Open Letter" came to rest next to a postcard from Russell to Clifford Allen (postmarked "JUN 27", and also able to be dated by context); Russell's postscript reads in part, "At C.E.M's [Catherine

[1] The former, edited by Sheila Turcon, was published in "Russell at Newnham: an Unpublished Paper on Staff Remuneration", *Russell,* n.s. 7 (1987): 141–6. The latter was reprinted in the original English under the title "The Reconstruction of Intellectual Internationalism after the War", *Russell,* n.s. 18 (1998): 141–3, and edited by K. Blackwell.

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Marshall's] request I have just drafted an open letter to our friends." I had reason to believe that Russell's authorship had not previously been established, so sent an account of my finding to the Russell Archives, where Kenneth Blackwell and Carl Spadoni agreed that the evidence is now ample. Both the content, including the repetition of illustrations Russell used elsewhere, and style are Russellian.[2] Particularly because of the last sentence, Blackwell believes that the open letter was directed towards a audience comprised chiefly of members of the Society of Friends.

INTRODUCTION

Russell was furiously busy in June 1916 with his work for the No-Conscription Fellowship, where he and Clifford Allen were in effect serving an apprenticeship to Catherine Marshall in the art of political agitation. The NCF embodied a remarkable combination of socialist and religious objectors, and although the different roots would lead to a great deal of controversy within the organization, respect for each other's conscience on the whole remained firm.

Russell's personal contribution throughout included the writing of short articles as required, a skill which he now developed for the first time and never lost. So profligate was he with his pen that this article makes a total of four written between 23 and 29 June 1916 which seem to have gone to waste, available if needed but, to the best of our knowledge, never published until three appeared in Volume 13 of his *Collected Papers*[3] and the fourth only now. Not surprisingly, the quality varies. At just this time, too, Russell was dealing with the aftermath of his Mansion House trial, considering whether to challenge the Foreign Office's decision to deny him a passport to go to the USA, and preparing to leave on an extended speaking tour in Wales—and incidentally was learning what it meant to work for a voluntary organization which lacked the resources to relieve him of all the details of planning.

The Military Service Act had been passed in January 1916, and its provisions extended in May. Under them, all men of military age were deemed to have enlisted and were called to the army, unless they obtained some form of exemption through an appeal to a tribunal. The Acts were liberal for their

[2] The original document (filed at RA1 535.073316) is an unsigned, four-page mimeographed typescript and is dated "28/6/16". Two copies of it are to be found in the section on conscientious objection in World War I. They came to McMaster with the original Russell Archives and are grouped with other unsigned documents on the subject. The original post card was purchased in 1968 with several other letters that Russell wrote to Clifford Allen (RA3 Rec. Acq. 16). It is not known why Russell's name is not on the typescript. In the p.s. to Allen he continued: "Having done it, I think it should go in *my* name. I will argue the point when I see you."

[3] See Papers 58–60, grouped as "Three Tributes to the Conscientious Objectors".

time in including conscientious objection as one of the grounds for exemption, and even more so in that such exemption was not limited to those whose convictions were based on religion. But they lacked clarity, and the tribunals in general interpreted them narrowly.

Many COs were denied exemption altogether or given exemption only from combatant service; these two groups found themselves respectively in regular army units or in the Non-Combatant Corps. The latter was acceptable to some biblical literalists, but not to members of the NCF, who consistently refused to obey orders. The army dealt with its recalcitrant CO soldiers in a variety of ways, some of which Russell mentions in this article. A major advance had been made with Army Order X, promulgated on 26 May; under it men giving conscience as the ground for refusal to obey were to be court-martialled at once, and sentenced to serve in a civil prison. But it was months before this was generally observed and some cases of non-compliance with it by a few officers continued throughout the war.

Russell was particularly sensitive to what seemed to him the ultimate horror of the destruction of a man's integrity by intolerable brutality or prolonged dehumanizing mistreatment. Although remarkably few COs are on record as having yielded under the severe punishment that a significant number received, Russell believed that few emerged unscathed. That he did not particularly like C. H. Norman (a belligerent pacifist, if ever there was one) did not lessen his abhorrence of the torture and degradation to which Norman had recently been subject at the hands of Colonel Brooke at Wandsworth; the episode of a captor spitting in the face of a bound prisoner mentioned in this article and in others written by Russell at this time is drawn from Norman's experience.

Stories of such ill-treatment did not sit well with a section of public opinion in Britain. Among the would-be friends to whom Russell addressed this piece were those who, while supporting the war effort, could not stomach the brutality, or who had respect for action based on conscience even where they disagreed with the stand taken. Included were a number of more or less public figures, politicians and leading ministers of religion, anxious to find a solution.

The government, too, wanted to solve the problem of the CO, which was not only disruptive of discipline in the army but (thanks in large part to the successful agitation mounted by the NCF) was taking up a wholly disproportionate amount of time both in Parliament and at the War Office.

Unfortunately, most suggested solutions were far from satisfactory to the leaders of the NCF. Although they too wanted change, the last thing they wanted was to make the Military Service Act work more smoothly. The first flush of their hope had been that the resistance of the COs would be so numerically strong and would draw so much public support that it would force the repeal of the MSA and even disable the whole war machine, leading

rapidly to a negotiated peace. While this was no longer a realistic hope, the NCF members saw their resistance as a continuing witness against militarism. Many proposals and some government measures involved some variation of alternative service. The concept of "equality of sacrifice" on which Russell pours such scorn was an impractical attempt to meet the needs of the COS and yet placate those who inevitably compared the relative safety enjoyed by recognized COS with the appalling conditions endured by the men at the front. But Russell's own sense of outrage intrudes here; some among the COS, keen to avoid the appearance of complaining, would not have been pleased with his catalogue of the abuses a relative few were suffering. He was on surer ground with the COS in identifying them as standing for liberty of conscience.

Russell does not address the dilemma of how conscience can be tested without abuse. Later in the war when the "absolutist" COS had rejected schemes of civil employment and had proved themselves by enduring longer and more severe terms of imprisonment at hard labour than any criminal was subjected to,[4] then indeed it could be said that their consciences had been tested—in a process which did no credit to the nation. Whether Russell's article would have clarified matters in any way, or whether it would simply have confused and alienated the "would-be friends" and possibly some COS is a moot point. The thinking of the COS was complex and never homogeneous, especially on the question of alternative service.

However little success the NCF had in effecting major change during the First World War, it helped ensure that juster and less wasteful processes would be implemented during the Second World War.

The No-Conscription Fellowship, in the course of its stormy career, has found itself in disagreement with the bulk of the nation, not only on the one issue of Conscription and participation in warfare, but on a far wider question, which lies at the very basis of ethics. Can a man's view as to his own duty be determined for him by authority, or must it spring from his own conscience?

Many men who have wished to befriend the No-Conscription Fellowship have failed to understand the importance, to us, of this fundamental question, and in consequence their efforts to help us have not infrequently had exactly the opposite effect. They have emphasized points which to us were inessential; they have proposed solutions no

[4] "Hard labour" differed from "penal servitude" and had been designed to involve such severe dietary, physical and social deprivation that the maximum sentence was two years.

less repugnant to our principles than the Military Service Acts; they have endeavoured to distinguish between Socialist and Christian objections to war, though this distinction has never been found of any importance in our intimate daily cooperation. While we are grateful for their efforts, we cannot but feel that some among them would have done more to further freedom of conscience if they had taken more pains to discover, from personal intercourse, that this is the deepest and most vital of our beliefs.

One of the questions which have gravely obscured the issue is the question of alternative civil employment, which has been linked to the supposed principle of "equality of sacrifice". Among the conscientious objectors, there are some who can conscientiously accept alternative civil employment, and there are some who cannot. Those who cannot are of opinion that the best service they can render to the Community at this time is to strive to make it conscious of the evils of war and the desirability of peace. They hold that the organization of the nation's resources for war is organization for an evil purpose, and that the more it is perfected, the greater is the harm that is done. Such men are bound, at this time, to place themselves in opposition to the State; they cannot conscientiously undertake even purely civil work when they believe that its purpose is to subject other men to the operation of conscription, or to produce commodities which are indirectly necessary to the prosecution of the war. And many of them have already found the work for which they believe they have a vocation: it is this work, and no other that they feel called upon to perform, and they cannot change it at the bidding of the State, any more than a man could change his wife in obedience to the principle of "equality of sacrifice". This applies in an especial degree to those who are working for Peace.

The principle of "equality of sacrifice" is one of the strangest and most impossible that have ever been devised. Some men have sacrificed their lives in the trenches: should therefore all be killed? Those who are of Military age are exposed to greater sacrifices than those who are not: should every man over 40 lose his left arm in order that the principle may be carried out? Yet such applications would hardly be more absurd than the practice of the Pelham Committee,[5] which

[5] [Appointed in March 1916, the task of the Pelham Committee was to find alterna-

holds that, for the sake of sacrifice, a man who comes before it must always be made to abandon his previous work, at which he personally has some skill, and compelled to undertake different work at which he is a novice. The man who has been teaching Physics must be made to hoe potatoes; the man who has been hoeing potatoes must be set to teach Physics. Potatoes and Physics both cease to be produced by this arrangement; but both men suffer, so all is well.

If our friends in Parliament and elsewhere, who speak of equality of sacrifice with such enthusiasm, are really in earnest in their advocacy of this principle, we would suggest that they should disguise themselves as conscientious objectors, and endure for 24 hours the contumely and persecution which is the habitual lot of our Members on their arrival in camp or barracks. When our eminent friends have submitted to being stripped and bound by order of the Commanding Officer, while he spits in their faces and hurls insulting words at them; when they have been scrubbed with a scrubbing brush until their skin has come off; when they have endured universal execration as cowards and shirkers; when they have suffered irons and solitary confinement: then we shall listen with respect to their opinions on equality of sacrifice.

We are commonly told that the genuine conscientious objector deserves all consideration, but that we are to blame for this "organizing of conscience". Those who speak thus show the most extraordinary lack of imagination and understanding. We conscientious objectors have to face the fierce hostility of the bulk of the nation; how can we do otherwise than seek the society of those who think as we do. Isolation among those who think ill of us is, to us, as to all men, exceedingly painful, and a profound instinct urges human beings to seek out those who are not unfriendly.

It seems to be held, by those who believe that the No-Conscription Fellowship manufactures consciences, that conscience is in no degree a matter of thought, and cannot be clarified by discussion among friends. Those who can adopt such views must be wholly destitute of spontaneous moral life, wholly traditional in their views of right and

tive civilian service for COs in work of national importance. The Pelham Committee dealt only with the small number whose exemption was conditional on being employed in such work.]

wrong. We believe, rightly or wrongly, that we are, for the moment, the guardians of an important ethical principle—by no means new, since it is stated with the clearest emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount, but not popular at this moment in nominally Christian countries. The application of this principle—that it is useless to meet violence with violence, or to hope to destroy force by force—is a matter requiring thought: its implications may not be at once evident to every man who holds the principle. When a conscientious man feels in doubt on such a matter, he naturally seeks to discuss it with others who share his general stand-point. To regard such discussion as a sinister attempt at "manufacturing consciences" is to betray a complete ignorance of all active ethical thought.

Some of our friends seem to be of opinion that all would be well if conscientious objectors came before differently constituted Tribunals, say Tribunals of Non-Conformist Ministers. No doubt Tribunals might easily have been devised which would have made fewer mistakes than the existing Tribunals have made. But however they had been devised, they would have had the essential defect inherent in the very conception of a Tribunal to judge conscience. Every such body will regard its own conscience as normal and reasonable and will find it almost impossible to believe in the genuineness of a conscience differing from its own. It will feel angry with those whose consciences forbid what it thinks right, and its anger will translate itself into severity. And to every man who has a conscience, to every man who is capable of guiding his action by ethical motives, the idea of submitting his conscience to the judgment of a Tribunal is intolerable. If the Tribunal happens to judge rightly, well and good; but if it judges wrongly, his duty is not thereby changed, and he is morally compelled to become a law-breaker. This is one reason why the law ought carefully to avoid the attempt to coerce men into performing acts contrary to their conscience, however obviously right such acts may appear to the legislator.

We find among too many of our would-be friends a tendency to substitute themselves as the Tribunal in place of those set up by the law. We would respectfully suggest that, in drawing up schemes which they believe capable of meeting the difficulty, they should endeavour to ascertain the views and feelings of the men actually concerned, the conscientious objectors themselves—the more so as they are often

falsely supposed to be speaking for us. It is not safe to assume that what seems satisfactory to those who do not really understand our point of view must necessarily seem satisfactory to us; and there is a danger lest, amid the multiplicity of schemes, the conscientious objectors should in the end be left without relief.

No scheme is satisfactory which does not free *all* conscientious objectors from persecution. If a few men who are not genuine manage to slip through, the evil is not comparable to the evil of persecuting sincere men on account of profoundly held convictions. Before the war we used to think it better that 99 guilty men should escape than that one innocent man should be punished. But war, as we know, is a moral purifier: we now think it better that 99 innocent men should be punished than that one guilty man should escape. This is the whole basis of the persecution; yet it is hardly ever questioned.

We of the No-Conscription Fellowship are primarily a body of men, each of whom is opposed to war. But we have become, through the action of the Government, the guardians of a principle which, until lately, was universally acknowledged: the principle of liberty of conscience. Those in whom conscience is dominant *cannot* be coerced into actions which they believe to be wrong. The Members of the No-Conscription Fellowship cannot be turned into soldiers. It is possible to imprison them, to torture them, to break down their health, to drive some of them insane, to shoot them even; but this will not turn them into soldiers, or bring you one step nearer to winning the war. It will not further the end for which it is nominally undertaken; but it will saddle the nation with a great crime, and rob it, in the critical period of reconstruction, of just those men whose moral power and independence of mind might be invaluable. It is in the conscientious objectors and their outlook that the seeds of future good to the nation and to mankind are to be found. If, through impatience and anger, you crush them now by individual torture, you destroy what is best in the Community, and you diminish immeasurably the hope of progress. We appeal to you once more to recognize the value of the ethical conviction which has made the conscientious objectors stand firm, and to restore that liberty of conscience for which, in other days, many of your own ancestors suffered such persecution as you are now allowing to continue.