

Anglican Historical Society (NZ)

Te Rōpu Hītori te Hāhi Mihinare ki Aotearoa

Growing Up as a Pacifist in Christchurch during WW2

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(Part One)

A few days before the 1998 Annual Conference of the *Anglican Pacifist Fellowship*, I was asked to describe what it was like to be a pacifist during WW2.

A hurried response convinced me that more thought was needed.

In this I was fortunate in being able to draw on my father's diaries which explains, amongst other things, the precision in dating events. As the original statement expanded, the story divided into two.

The first part is focussed on my family. When war was declared in September 1939, I was almost fifteen years of age and so my story is inseparable from that of my family and my experience as a pacifist was more sheltered than most.

This is not a story of what I did for peace during the war, for I did no more than associate with pacifists and take part in their activities.

So, the **first part** of the story is about others did and, in particular, about what they did for me.

The **second part** is focussed on pacifism in wartime Christchurch.

My brother and I grew up in an Anglican churchgoing home. Our parents were involved in the lay parish activities typical of the time. I followed my brother into the church choir when I was eight and sang in choirs for the next twenty years. Regular church attendance became a valued habit.

My brother and I became pacifists because our parents were pacifists. When, and why, they became pacifists I do not know. Miscellaneous items of information suggest that the seeds of pacifism were sown in WW1 when they were both part of the same army establishment at Woolwich (South-East London, England). My mother was secretary to General Thacker, who commanded the Canadian forces in England. The young women in the office decided who would receive decorations. She had a brother killed at Passchendaele and was appalled by the knowledge that, although an end to hostilities had been agreed upon, soldiers were left in ignorance to go on killing and being killed until the agreed date and time for the cease-fire. My father's sisters both lost a fiancée, one serving in a British regiment and the other in a German

regiment. In 1928, when Maude Royden, suffragist, pacifist and preacher visited New Zealand, my parents attended her meeting in Wellington; my father was "on the door."

Roger Taylor, aged 23, joined our household on Sunday 24 February 1935, immediately after his ordination, and quickly became one of the family. The vicar of Saint Barnabas' church, Fendalton, had arranged for him to board with us. As far as I know, it was only after Roger moved in, that he found his views on war were also shared by us. By then, I had stated my intention to be ordained to the Anglican priesthood. Early in 1940, I acted as a subject for an impecunious student with interests in peace, but not religion, who was completing a vocational guidance requirement. As her tests on me didn't show that I had any particular aptitude for anything, she thought ordination for me was probably a good idea.

The new curate preached for the first time at Saint Barnabas' church on 3 March 1935. On Sunday 19 May, despite considerable uncertainty about how the congregation would respond, Roger preached his "pacifist" sermon. My father

described it as “very outspoken” and the daily papers gave it what he described as “prominent notice.” In that year Canon Dick Sheppard (one of the leaders of the burgeoning English pacifist movement during the 1930s) founded the *Peace Pledge Union* with its pledge: “I renounce war and I will never support or sanction another.”

The course of world events, and the addition of Roger to the family, made peace activists of my parents. Until then, much of their energy had been devoted to the struggle to educate their sons and make ends meet. Pushed by my mother and Roger, my father moved to establish a New Zealand branch of the *Peace Pledge Union*. The *Peace Pledge Union* held meetings from the beginning of 1938, and on 11 June, *The Press* reported its formation.

The War Years

Centrally placed, our flat became a meeting place for pacifists. When there was street speaking each Friday night in Victoria Square, folk walked the short distance back to the flat for supper. When street speaking stopped, the practice of dropping in for supper after late-night shopping continued. My parents were “at home” to pacifists each Friday night. Peace issues were discussed, advice was available, and company was congenial. This helped to counter the feeling of social isolation that some people found hard to bear. A convenient drop-in centre for supper, whenever there was a meeting and even when there wasn't, the flat was likened to a station platform with its constant coming and going.

The peace movement in Christchurch developed a certain style. It was not aggressive in its approach. It strove to be persuasive, persistent, and as open as circumstances permitted. In style it might today be thought rather Quakerly, though this was not the source. It had much in common with Evelyn Underhill's views in *Postscript* but predated this. Local pacifists certainly didn't need others to remind them that they were a small minority. Whatever the source,

the style reflected a consensus among Christchurch pacifists. It was also my parents' style, and I grew up with it in the home as well as in *Peace Pledge Union* policy and practice. Commentators seem to have found this style tame, and preferred the more militant stance of the North, with its street speaking and arrests. But this was not a divisive issue in Christchurch at the time, and benefits undoubtedly came with the style. In November 1939, Archie Barrington described Christchurch as a “cheering spot, a hotbed of pacifists of all kinds working together.” The clear statement of position and the avoidance of unnecessary provocation made it possible for some pacifists to talk and work together with non-pacifists on matters of common concern. If, in some accounts of the peace movement in the war years, my parents' role in the peace movement was in my view understated, or in the case of my mother, overlooked altogether, this goes with the style.

Usually, police dealt with my father at his office. On one occasion two detectives turned up to see if he could help them with their enquiries. These related to a complaint about a pamphlet put out by a group wanting to abolish circumcision. While he'd never heard of such a group, he was amused and suitably chastened to find that in the minds of his visitors, pacifists were just another minority, all of a kind and all of them batty.

In his book, *Out in the Cold*, David Grant referred to the “well-organised and cohesive pacifist movement in Christchurch.” This was perhaps the distinctive feature of my parents' joint contribution to the peace movement during the war years. They both did all the usual things like speaking at meetings and chairing them, writing letters, making submissions, typing bulletins and the rest. My father used his advertising copywriting and lay-out skills to produce a variety of leaflets. But their main achievement was, I suspect, to keep the diverse group of rugged individualists in the peace movement

working harmoniously and outward-looking. The *Anglican Pacifist Fellowship* and *Peace Pledge Union* in Christchurch were mutually supportive. Meetings, social gatherings, and religious services were, as I remember them, effectively joint occasions. In the *Peace Pledge Union*, humanist and socialist pacifists worked comfortably alongside those with religious affiliations whose relations with sympathetic clergy and ministers outside provided a bridge into the wider community.

Moving between incompatible social worlds had its hazards. On one of the occasions the flat was searched, two detectives were looking for a printing device or evidence that literature was distributed. My mother laughed at the detectives' faces when they saw my father's study; she'd often felt the same way herself. They spent an hour and a half searching through his papers and took away a miscellaneous collection of duplicated material with them. When it turned out that the more senior of the detectives had come out from England in 1926 on the same voyage of the *S.S. Athenic* as we had ourselves, the evening ended amicably in reminiscences of England over supper. This was a near-miss with social disaster. The previous evening there had been a gathering at the flat of members of the Saint Barnabas' church congregation. They came to farewell Roger Taylor who was about to leave Christchurch to become vicar of Kumara on the West Coast.

School Years

When war was declared, my brother Heath was at Medical School in Dunedin; I was in my second year at Christ's College. Cadets were a standard part of school activities. I took part in cadets with everyone else and played a tenor horn in the band.

In the war years, pacifists had to accept their unacceptability. My parents inevitably experienced some unpleasantness. They were dropped by some, and greetings sometimes

passed unnoticed. I recall only one such incident outside school that involved me. I delivered a message to the police station one Friday night about the permit for one of the street meetings and was jeered at by a group of policemen in the watch-house. I had no idea what to do or say. I said nothing and removed myself.

My parents were more anxious about the school climate than I was. My views on the war were no secret at school but were not to my knowledge a matter of deep concern to other boys; we studied and played together in the various sports teams happily enough. It would have been surprising if there had not been hostility in some quarters, but it very rarely surfaced. I once had pepper thrown into my eyes at a House dinner. I was in a milling group and did not see who was responsible – or anything else, for some time. Shortly before I left school, after I'd made a comment critical of the Boer War, in the course of some discussion, a master told me what he thought of people like myself in front of a group of other boys. This sparked a later confrontation with one of them, that I could have done without. But considering the volatile climate of a boy's school at such a time, it says much for the school and particularly its headmaster that I was accepted with so little evidence of resentment.

The 1942 school year began as usual with three days of "barracks". I told my parents that I felt I could no longer take part in cadets. I also commented that the atmosphere at school seemed to have become more militant. My father consulted the headmaster, R.J. Richards who hoped I would continue with the present arrangement, but indicated that if I couldn't, I must leave. I thought about it and a few days later told the headmaster I could no longer take part in cadets. He confirmed that if that was the case, I must leave. I returned my books to the book exchange, received a friendly parting comment from one staff member, an unfriendly one from the housemaster and was home for

lunch. That evening we went down to the station to greet conscientious objectors on their way from Paparoa Prison to detention camp in the North Island.

The move to university was entirely happy. My horizons expanded. At my first lecture I sat next to a friendly young man in military uniform. I asked how he was able to attend classes. He admitted in embarrassment that he was stationed at Christ's College, but that this was supposed to be secret. The military had long since taken over the gymnasium; an immense radio mast had been erected on "Upper" and was visible from Hagley Park and the Botanical Gardens, and army trucks drove in and out of the school gates. Visible from all directions, secrecy was even more unlikely than the secret emergency headquarters to be set up in the Art Gallery basement and announced in school assembly. In an emergency I think we were to deliver despatches by bicycle.

Anglicans in Wartime

The family involvement with the Anglican Church continued. Pacifism was an integral part of our religious belief. My father edited the diocesan monthly magazine, *Church News*, I sang in the choir of Avonside's Holy Trinity church where Roger Taylor was assistant priest, and my brother attended the parish church adjacent to Selwyn College in Dunedin. My mother attended *Meeting for Worship* with the Quakers; my father accompanied her, and I tagged along when I could.

While at school and in my undergraduate years, I would attend portions of the diocesan synod in the old Provincial Council Chamber and listen to debates on peace issues. Archdeacon F.N. Taylor, a patriarchal figure with a booming bass voice, seemed to me to tower above the rest. When he rose to speak, even his opponents settled back in their seats in pleasurable anticipation. They can rarely have been disappointed. 'Peace' resolutions were proposed in synod by Roger

Taylor, and later by his brother David. These didn't get much support outside the Taylor family, and debates usually seemed to end by passing onto the next business. But sometimes this couldn't be done without leaving an unfortunate impression. The resolution would then be amended, so as to become pointless. On one memorable occasion the peace resolution was amended to such an extent that those who proposed the motion were the only ones to vote against it.

In 1942, I joined the Cathedral choir and sang in it for the next ten years, with the exception of 1946 when I attended the Dunedin Quaker Meeting for Worship. The quality of music at the Cathedral was not noticeably affected by the war, the liturgy provided a secure base for the services, but the preaching was not in general very good. Preaching was never the Archbishop's strongest suit. It wasn't noticeably anyone else's either. But deficiencies in preaching were sometimes made up for by patriotic fervour. We had sermons about the Christian qualities of our military and political leaders. We had *Days of Prayer* on which the Lord was briefed on current events. We commemorated the "Old Contemptibles" and Trafalgar Day with a church parade by a contingent from the appropriate branch of the armed services. Rather meanly, I used to enjoy the annual Trafalgar Day sermon on Lord Nelson. For most people, Nelson meant Trafalgar and Lady Hamilton and it wasn't easy for the unfortunate preacher to present Nelson as a totally satisfactory Christian role model. "Of course, none of us are perfect" would be offered to cover the situation, with what seemed to me more hope than confidence. Not markedly tolerant, I usually found that at sermon time it was better to snooze than seethe.

After the war the services gradually returned to normal. Lord Nelson was retired, and military and political leaders turned in their haloes. Martin Sullivan became Cathedral Dean and Willie

Orange the Precentor. I looked forward to the sermons and to what these very different preachers had to say.

Appeals Against Military Service

Appeals against military service before the Tribunal were a part of the normal social scene for pacifist families. In 1941, Heath was called up under the ballot. His appeal was heard in Dunedin and allowed. The Dean of the Medical School told Heath that the faculty would do all it could to get rid of him. But nothing came of the threat. In 1942, my father appealed successfully against service in the *Home Guard* in a court presided over by Ernie Lee S.M. At Christmas after my 18th birthday, my parents gave me presents suitable for study in either university or detention camp. I'd attended a few hearings of the tribunal and not been favourably impressed. The Crown representative acted as prosecutor though he was supposed merely to advise the Board on legal matters.

On one occasion I listened to Dr Haslam, Rhodes scholar, Doctor of Laws, and future judge, cross-examining a Christadelphian farm worker. He posed a hypothetical case. The appellant was on a liner packed with women and children in the middle of the ocean. He was the only man on board. A German submarine surfaced and was about to sink the liner so that all the women and children would be drowned. But the liner had a gun on it, and he had a choice: he could fire the gun, sink the submarine, kill the crew and save the women and children, or not fire the gun and let all the women and children drown? The appellant had to choose one of the two options in the knowledge that either choice would be regarded as evidence of insincerity. In such fashion was conscience put to the test.

Late in 1943 I turned 18 and was called up. The question was: to appeal and go along with an absurd procedure that had committed so many good people to prison and detention, or to ignore the call-up, do my three months at Paparoa

prison and go on to detention? Rightly or wrongly, and ignorant of the surprise in store, I decided to appeal. By this time the Government apparently preferred not to add to the number of Conscientious Objectors detained if it could be avoided. When my case was heard in 1944, I found that the make-up of the tribunal had changed, certainly for the better. Ronald Cuthbert now chaired the tribunal. Solicitor and family friend, he admired Norman Angell's writing and understood something of the pacifist position. He had at one time been interested in H.G. Wells's *Little Wars*, whereby you fought wars with toy soldiers instead of real ones. His son and I had many times played out such wars in his sitting room, using various sized cotton reels as soldiers, on occasion under his direction. My appeal was allowed.

In 1945, I was summoned to attend the "one man tribunal." The Government Commissioner, Terence Gresson, would decide whether I should be directed to approved employment and surrender part of my earnings. I was finishing a Master's degree and also working in a market-garden trenching glasshouses at ten shillings for an eight hour day. The meeting was brief, friendly, and dismissive; I was to continue as I was.

An Unexpected Turn of Events

Roger Taylor was my model of an Anglican priest, but for years I had watched the diocese knocking him back. Just after Roger's appointment to Kumara, a friendly Archdeacon laughingly told a speaker who had been a little outspoken in synod to be careful lest he be "banished to Kumara." The prospect of becoming vicar in perpetuity of a parish on some remote island off the coast did not appeal greatly to me, and I was chary of rushing into theological training. College House had little to offer. The basic reading requirement seemed to be Bicknell's *Thirty-Nine Articles*. No doubt a worthy study, but not inspirational reading. David Taylor had yet to start a library at

College House and the University College Library had no section on religious studies. I waited.

I finished my Master's degree at the end of 1945 and was preparing ground to grow produce for the market when I received a telegram offering me an assistant lectureship at the University of Otago. Such a possibility had never crossed my mind. But the university was faced with an influx of ex-servicemen, and they needed people to take classes, and especially to take the new Government-funded tutorials. The department had a choice - appoint me or leave the position vacant. I found myself in Dunedin teaching psychology in the Philosophy Department.

I was slow to appreciate my good fortune in falling into the position most likely to tolerate me and to offer me scope to pursue my interests. My mother was ill, and I moved back to a similar position at Canterbury College at the beginning of 1947. This involved a delay. The College had a rule banning Conscientious Objectors from appointment. Professor Sinclair had tried unsuccessfully to have this ban removed in 1944, so as to appoint Laurence Baigent to his department. So, it was not until March 1947 when, pushed by Dr Helen Simpson and the need for staff, the College Council rescinded the ban. Laurence Baigent [English] was then appointed together with other Conscientious Objectors, Ken Robinson [Geography], Denis Oxnam and Graham Miller [Economics] and me [Philosophy].

Pacifism and War Relief

Believing that the prevention of war was an essential part of pacifism, my father followed closely the work of church conferences and groups here and abroad that explored the needs of justice and peace in the "new world order" that was to be. Moving from the central city flat, my parents' new home, *Glenmore*, provided a good setting for pacifist gatherings and welcomed speakers such as Archie Barrington, Hubert Holdaway and Ormond Burton. When hostilities ended, my father continued to work to

have ex-detainees freed from punitive restrictions, to help organise and chair the pacifist conference in Christchurch in 1946, and to ensure New Zealand representation at the *World Pacifist Conference* in India in 1947. My mother produced statements on peace matters for the *Society of Friends* and in 1948 made submissions before a Parliamentary Select Committee on the restoration of civil rights for teachers who were Conscientious Objectors.

With the end of hostilities came opportunities to bring relief to war-devastated countries. Many pacifists did what they could, and some spent the rest of their working lives with relief agencies in parts of the world torn by conflict. The aim was not only to provide help in the form of food and clothing but also, through the evidence of friendship and concern, to create peace and restore hope that there could be a world without war. My brother and his wife served with the *Friends Ambulance Unit* in China. Even my mother and I were involved. She collected funds for the *Friends Service Committee* and for two years I was New Zealand secretary for the *International Student Service* and *World Student Relief* raising funds through student workdays and similar ventures. At the end of 1947, my father became secretary of *CORSO* in the absence of Colin Morrison in China, and my parents moved to Wellington. My mother's struggle with cancer began in 1945 and ended with her death in 1951.

Looking back over the war years, and the people I was privileged to know, I realise how much I was shaped by them and by the circumstances of the time. From this experience I learned lessons not formally taught in class but for which I have had cause to be grateful. My principal teachers were older friends, both pacifist and non-pacifist, people whose lives and writing I admired from a distance, and above all my parents. But even those who viewed my position with bewilderment, disapproval or hostility

contributed to my education. By the time I left school I had acquired a general outlook and approach to life that the future would test, elaborate, and refine.

See **Part Two**