

# *Anglican Historical Society (NZ)*

## *Te Rōpu Hītori te Hāhi Mihinare ki Aotearoa*

### *Growing Up as a Pacifist in Wartime Christchurch*

**Richard Thompson (1924-2006)**

(Part Two)

In the first months of the WW2, pacifist organisations continued, very much as before, except that everything was infused with greater intensity and urgency. In private meetings and in the October 1939 conferences of the *Christian Pacifist Society* and the *Peace Pledge Union* in Wellington, the peace organisations sought to come to terms with the new situation and its implications and how to respond appropriately. It took time for the Government to respond to the new circumstances, formulate the conditions that would constrain pacifist activity and for public opinion to take shape.

#### **Public Meetings**

In the first months of the war, pacifist public meetings organised by the *Peace Pledge Union* still continued to draw worth-while but diminishing audiences. The charismatic Ormond Burton spoke to a gathering of some 400 in the Choral Hall. Later Archie Barrington and Alun Richards spoke to an audience of 180 at the Trades Hall. Though opinion was more conservative outside the main centres, Thurlow Thompson spoke to a meeting of 80 in Timaru. But these figures bore no comparison to the numbers attending the *Peace and Anti-Conscription Council* rallies of January and February. Drawing on strong Trade Union support, they attracted enthusiastic audiences of more than 1000. Pacifists did no more than provide the occasional speaker and help swell the audience. These meetings were an echo of earlier protests made before the WW1 against the New Zealand Defence Act 1909 that imposed conscription on all boys fourteen and twenty

years of age. This time a Labour Government moved quickly; it brought its socialist left to heel, and the *Peace and Anti-Conscription Council* faded from the scene.

A permit for street meetings in Victoria Square was granted by the City Council. On a wild and windy Friday night on the 5th of October, Roger Taylor, 'excellent, logical and friendly and humorous,' was one of two speakers to get the meetings under way. Although the weather always seemed miserable on street-meeting nights, the meetings continued with a range of speakers, men and women, without any serious incident until the break for Christmas.

In the New Year, organised disruption by the RSA ensured that speakers would not be given a hearing and this effectively ended the usefulness of the street meetings. At the first meetings in January 1940, a recruiting procession halted at the meeting site and drowned out the speakers. The third ended in disorder as RSA members and some Air Force personnel broke up the meeting and promised to throw speakers in the river. The disruption continued at the fourth meeting and came close to a riot when members of the Coastal Batteries and the RSA were joined by a group of soldiers who incited the crowd and threatened and resisted the police. The Chief Inspector asked the organisers to close the meeting, as the police could no longer be responsible for maintaining order. No action was taken against those causing the disturbance. While pacifist speakers at street meetings in the North Island were being stopped by police, in Christchurch the meetings were authorised by a

City Council permit. It was organised demonstrations by the RSA with the help of armed forces personnel who happened to be on leave, that ensured that speakers at these meetings would not get a hearing. The RSA applied to the City Council to have the permit for the meetings withdrawn. After a hearing on the 29th of January, the City Council agreed to the application.

No attempt was made to revive the street meetings in Christchurch. They had brought a few new sympathisers, but it became impossible to present a constructive argument and the noise level made it impossible for speakers to be heard. Nor was it considered appropriate for a peace meeting to be the cause of a riot.

In Wellington, during the first half of 1941, a number of pacifists followed the example of Ormond Burton and spoke at open-air meetings. They were arrested, 'usually after reciting a few verses from the Bible,' and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Michael Young, the Wellington-appointed dominion organiser for the *Peace Pledge Union*, later spoke in Christchurch's Cathedral Square; he was arrested and imprisoned. But while Christchurch pacifists respected his sincerity and courage, they were not inclined to follow his example. It was felt that the speed of arrest made it impossible to say anything meaningful; and that it was more likely to generate public antagonism than win supporters; and that it resulted in the imprisonment of people whose services could have been used more constructively.

Public tolerance declined rapidly. Five months into the war, Labour Prime Minister Savage described pacifists as 'traitors to democracy.' By this time, public meetings were held indoors and limited to special occasions, such as a visit to Christchurch by Ormond Burton. This phase of pacifist activity in the city had effectively come to an end.

## **Maintaining the Peace Movement**

Public meetings now gave way to activities designed to maintain the peace movement and to support its members in their role as outsiders in a society at war. If public meetings were rare, private meetings were frequent. It could be said that pacifists turned inwards at this point. But there was work to be done if the peace movement was to hold together and maintain its witness in the face of public pressure. There were organisational tasks needing attention and the welfare of individual pacifists to be considered.

Dealing with the outbreak and early phase of the war, Elsie Locke in *Peace People* (1992) said: '*The firm pacifists had no dilemmas. Their consciences, their certainty that war was no way to solve the problems of humanity, and for some their Christian beliefs, dictated their course of action. They opposed this war as they did all others.*' (p.102) Elsie Locke, a Communist during the war, clearly did not understand the pacifist's position. Pacifism had social and political implications and did not come dilemma-free. Ruling out the military option did not resolve the problem of what response was to be made. Pacifists felt indebted to the society that supported them and had to reconcile opposition to war with loyalties and obligations to both country and humanity. Not for nothing did Maud Royden, in 1914, speak of '*the agony of pacifism.*' Pacifists had constantly to renegotiate their faith and position in the light of events.

## **Problems of Organisation**

Christchurch had been the centre of opposition to the conscription imposed in the years before WW1. Pacifists were still drawn either from a socialist and its anti-militarist tradition or from religious groups - Quakers in particular. But time had taken its toll of veteran campaigners like Sarah Page and her sister. When the *Peace Pledge Union* branch was formed in the city, the *National Peace Council* and *No More War Movement* still existed, but in little more than

name. Charles Mackie was still great in spirit but now too fragile physically to be very active. Norman Bell was brilliant but rather eccentric; not an organisation man. Then there was Lincoln Efford. To me, he embodied the idealism of the socialist tradition and early Labour movement. But when the Labour Party abandoned its early loyalties, he was left politically and socially stranded. The formation of the *Peace Pledge Union* ended Lincoln's isolation and provided the base and support he needed. While a *Combined Committee* was set up briefly to co-ordinate the existing peace committees, this was more a gesture of respect for the past than an organisational need. Coordination wasn't really a problem. After the formation of the *Peace Pledge Union* and the effective retirement of Charles Mackie, for example, all the members of the *National Peace Council* executive were also members of the *Peace Pledge Union*.

The formation of the *Peace Pledge Union* in Christchurch was an Anglican initiative. Anglican pacifists particularly were attracted to the *Peace Pledge Union* through the appeal exerted by its London founder, Canon Dick Sheppard, famous as the vicar of *Saint Martin's in the Fields*. But its pledge simply renounced war without specifying the grounds for doing so and was thus open to all war resisters. Relations with the Methodist-based *Christian Pacifist Society* in the city were mutually supportive. There were some negotiations in Wellington between the *Peace Pledge Union* and the *Christian Pacifist Society* with a view to forming a national organisation. While the authorities might have such an arrangement convenient, the specifically religious basis of the *Christian Pacifist Society* presented an obstacle. In any case there were no resources to operate nationally. Pacifists were generally impecunious. Most had barely emerged from the struggle of the depression years and financial problems became even more acute as wage earners were imprisoned or detained. Some who remained in the community

had to find new employment, and that usually meant in unskilled and low-paid work. Wartime pacifism had no wealthy sponsors.

There were opportunities for joint action with non-pacifists. In the early months of the war, such activities found a common base in the *Peace and Anti-Conscription Council* where Winston Rhodes, a socialist highly respected by pacifists for his integrity, made himself available as both speaker and fund-raiser. However, there were limits to joint action. Members of pacifist groups were typically liberal in outlook and viewed communists with suspicion. Elsie Locke gave the impression that pacifists and communists were all 'peace people' together. This was not the case. They did share some short-term objectives such as the objection to conscription and they shared public disapproval. In the public mind pacifists were lumped together with communists and, it was sometimes alleged, were financed by 'Moscow gold.' But pacifists and communists did not share common ideas of peace. They were divided by irreconcilable differences. Pacifists did not accept that the ends justified the means; they did not accept the idea of a centrally controlled society and economy, and they were committed to the rule of law rather than the rule of the party. When in June 1941 the Germans invaded the USSR, the Communist Party gave its support to the war effort and achieved a grudging acceptance in the community. Peace was left to the pacifists. But in so far as communism popularly still stood for everything objectionable, the association between pacifists and communists lingered on in the public mind.

### **Problems of Welfare**

To be a pacifist in a country at war was to have problems. Individual circumstances varied and some faced more acute problems than others. It was important for the peace movement to minimise the social isolation of its members as far as possible by keeping them in touch with each other. This was easier in the cities where

people could come together and attend the occasional social gatherings, meetings or services. Pacifists in rural areas felt their isolation keenly. Bulletins and Newsletters provided some news of what was happening to the peace movement in New Zealand and Britain. But even this posed problems. Material acceptable in Britain was on occasion considered seditious in this country.

Pacifist convictions complicated personal relationships in the community, the workplace and the family. Families were sometimes divided on the acceptability of conscientious objection and its stigma; loss of employment meant financial hardship for the family. Community obligations set out in the government's *Emergency Regulations* and the compulsory *Emergency Precautions Scheme* had to be understood and responded to appropriately. In response to pacifist submissions, the government made it clear that it would not countenance the formation of a civilian service unit as an alternative to military service.

Conscientious objection to military service brought a variety of serious problems and any assistance with these had to come from fellow pacifists. A lot hinged on the outcome of appeals and objectors were unfamiliar with court procedure and cross-examination and welcomed the chance to discuss this and their proposed statements. There were Conscientious Objectors to be visited while serving the initial prison sentence before being sent to one of the camps where access was both difficult and expensive. In the prisons and camps, authorities had almost complete control over the lives of detainees who were at the mercy of unsympathetic and often hostile officers and visiting officials. In these circumstances, safeguards for prisoner welfare were ineffective and abuses remained uncorrected. Representations drew attention to individual cases as well as to the position of

detainees as a whole, but typically these carried little or no weight with the authorities.

While a number of people were involved with the welfare of Conscientious Objectors and their dependants, this became the special concern of Lincoln Efford who became secretary of the local branch of the *Fellowship of Conscientious Objectors*. Prevented from working by physical disability, his face deeply lined by pain, Lincoln was free to attend most hearings in both the Appeal Board and Magistrate's Court. While sitting in on a case on 27 November 1941, Lincoln found himself charged with contempt of court. While a point of law was being argued which could perhaps go to appeal, Lincoln thought the Magistrate's words would be important. He took a scrap of paper from his pocket, put it on his knee and jotted down the key points with a view to reconstructing the notes immediately on reaching home. He was seen to do this by a police officer and charged with contempt of court. Lincoln spent the next day in court as defendant instead of observer. He conducted his own defence brilliantly. The newly appointed Magistrate expressed his strong dislike of pacifists and of all they represented, but found himself out of his depth in an unexpectedly lengthy and testing hearing. The case ended when Lincoln offered the Magistrate a qualified apology; if he had been guilty of offending, he apologised. The Magistrate then dismissed the information on which the charge was based.

The need to review the cases of those whose appeals as Conscientious Objectors had been turned down and the indeterminate nature of sentences tied to 'the duration of the war', were taken up with Members of Parliament or Ministers. This meant a great deal of letter-writing together with an occasional deputation to the Government or appropriate Ministers or an appeal to the National Council of Churches for support. There was little to suggest that appeals to the Government made much difference.

Pacifists didn't have the numbers to command political attention. But Ministers were made aware that the situation was being watched: that there were Conscientious Objectors in the camps and prisons whose sincerity was beyond question and that the treatment of Conscientious Objectors in this country differed markedly from their treatment in other countries, Britain in particular.

### **Maintaining the Peace Witness**

Pacifist activity was not so inwardly directed that it was confined to the necessary tasks of organisation maintenance and the welfare of members. Pacifists did what they could to uphold in the community an alternative version of reality. The gentler virtues of mercy, compassion and kindness, were easily lost sight of in a society at war. Vera Brittain commented that if Lord Ponsonby was right in saying that truth was the first casualty of war, the power to feel was certainly the second. The awful succession of tragedies had a numbing effect on human sensibilities. The possibilities of witness on peace issues were explored within the legal restraints of the time. A steady flow of letters was sent to Cabinet Ministers and to the editors of daily newspapers and church papers on a variety of peace issues such as the establishment of a Ministry of Peace, the admission of refugees into New Zealand from war-stricken countries and so on. Letters to papers were not always published but it was a legitimate and demanding outlet.

Pacifists were not alone in their concern with 'peace issues' in wartime. There were others in the Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches in particular, who shared some of these concerns which could on occasion be raised in the various conferences, assemblies and synods. Pacifists had strong and obvious support from Quakers and their peace testimony. In the latter stages of the war, the question of a negotiated peace arose and individual pacifists participated in church discussion groups on post-war

reconstruction and on the nature of the 'new world order.'

The *Famine Relief Committee* illustrates the way possibilities of peaceful and constructive action were explored and developed across the boundary dividing pacifist and non-pacifist. The British blockade on Europe had caused starvation in occupied Europe and a high mortality rate particularly amongst children. Starvation became so bad that in 1942 six British Quakers met in the Oxford Meeting House determined to get help to the starving people in Greece. They succeeded and started *Oxfam*. The British Government allowed the importation into Greece of some wheat, vitamins and dried milk for nursing mothers, children and invalids to be administered by the International and Swedish *Red Cross*. The scheme worked successfully.

Thurlow Thompson first met the problems of embargo and famine while on the Anglican liberal weekly, *The Challenge*, after WW1. Now he ran articles on the famine conditions in Greece in *Church News*. Reginald Hughes, Clerk of Christchurch's Quaker Meeting, chaired a public meeting addressed by Thompson and Tom Ewer on famine relief. A provisional *Famine Relief Committee* was formed to raise public awareness about the plight of vulnerable civilians in occupied countries, to promote schemes for their relief and to open a *Relief Fund* to provide food and medical aid to the affected women and children. These efforts culminated in the organisation of a public meeting in the Civic Theatre at the end of March 1944 chaired by Sir Heaton Rhodes. M. Armand Nihotte, Consul-General for Belgium, Elsie Andrews of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association and the Very Rev Lawson Robinson, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church addressed an audience of 300. This was a humanitarian cause that appealed to non-pacifists and pacifists alike. Archdeacon F.N. Taylor moved the resolution urging the Government to use its influence with

the British Government to grant navicerts 'for the passage of dried milk, medicines and vitamins to Greece and Belgium, for distribution by the *Red Cross* under proper control, to children, nursing and expectant mothers and invalids.' The resolution was carried unanimously. The meeting was interested, supportive, and copies of an information leaflet prepared for the occasion were in demand.

But unlike Oxford, the *New Zealand Patriotic Purposes Emergency Regulations 1939* permitted only the *National Patriotic Fund Board* to collect for any purpose arising from the war including 'the relief of distress overseas.' When the Board opposed the *Famine Committee's* proposals and denied it permission to raise funds for relief purposes, the Famine Relief Committee was disbanded. Even the formation of *CORSO* had to be delayed until belated permission to solicit relief funds from the public was at last received from the *Patriotic Fund Board* in December 1945.

Lincoln Efford's venture into politics also illustrated the legitimate pacifist action possible within the constraints of the time. On the face of it of course, it was no more successful than the *Famine Relief Committee*. Early in 1943 the *Peace Pledge Union* and Quakers supported Lincoln Efford as a Peace Candidate to contest the Christchurch East by-election. For the duration of the election campaign, it was possible to raise peace issues in a series of public meetings using a variety of speakers and attracting initially some 150 to 120 people. Attendance at later meetings varied between 50 and 30. Press coverage was meagre. Three leaflets were designed and approved by the *Paper Controller and Chief Censor*, Mr J.T. Paul. These were distributed in the electorate together with a copy of a speech given in the House of Commons by the British Quaker M.P. Dr Alfred Salter expressing his opposition to the war and everything connected with it. On election night, Lincoln spoke to the

crowd for 10 to 15 minutes and spoke briefly but well on the radio.

All this was repeated when Lincoln stood for the Christchurch South seat in the October general election. Three other peace candidates also stood for election in the North Island. This time six leaflets were distributed in Lincoln's electorate. A student candidate drew off some support, but his vote increased to a modest 250. It was an intense and exhausting exercise. But it did make it possible to bring issues such as a negotiated peace, civil liberties and the position of defaulters to public attention even if briefly and in limited fashion.

### **The Aftermath of the War**

The war over, the Government wanted the detention camps closed. Attempts by the *RSA* to persuade the Government to extend the confinement of Conscientious Objectors for a further ten years were unsuccessful and the last Conscientious Objectors was released in May 1946. Those returning from detention camps were anxious to get on with life after the years of imprisonment but there was no smooth path to normality. Manpower restrictions and direction limited the options available. Firms were often unwilling to employ Conscientious Objectors. Regulations banned Conscientious Objectors from employment in the Public Service. Teachers who appealed as Conscientious Objectors had been dismissed. Work was needed to secure the removal of the various restrictions laid on Conscientious Objectors. It was not until the end of 1947 that a teacher shortage caused regulations excluding Conscientious Objectors from teaching to be revoked. But for some Conscientious Objectors it was a further seventeen years before teaching was open to them again. It took years of pushing to secure the restoration of civil rights to some Conscientious Objectors who were ineligible to vote in a general election until the late 1960's. After the war the *Peace Pledge Union* and the organised pacifist

movement generally went into decline. The core of leadership dispersed and took on new duties in educational and peace-related spheres of activity, often out of the city or even abroad. The *Peace Pledge Union* dropped the pledge and became the *New Zealand Peace Union* in the hope that this might make it more widely acceptable - it didn't. But from 1947 the *Peace Pledge Union* did take a lead in organising *Hiroshima Day* marches until the organisation collapsed in the early 1950s. When the next defining peace issues arose, pacifists were no longer isolated but participants in new, broadly based movements focussed on issues such as Nuclear Disarmament, sporting competition with apartheid South Africa and the Vietnam War.