

A Pacifist Not at War

Michael Mears

Michael Mears is an actor and playwright who works predominantly in the theatre for companies such as the RSC and the National Theatre, as well as many regional theatres. His plays include the award-winning SOUP, about homelessness, and seven plays for BBC Radio 4.

‘My dear mother and sister, I am now confined in a pit which started at the surface at three feet by two, and tapers off to two feet six inches by fifteen. Water was struck, but they continued digging until it was ten feet deep. The bottom is full of water, and I have to stand on two strips of wood all day long just above the waterline. There is no room to walk about and sitting is impossible. The sun beats down and through the long day there are only the walls of clay to look at ...’

A letter written from someone languishing in Guantanamo Bay? Or in a cell in Saudi Arabia? No. This particular incarceration occurred at Cleethorpes on Humberside, one hundred years ago. The victim was James Brightmore, a solicitor’s clerk from Manchester, and a conscientious objector.

When I read this, and other accounts of brutality inflicted by the British Army on those young British men whose consciences would not permit them to take part in the First World War, I felt moved, as an actor and playwright, to tell their story in some shape or form.

Thanks to a number of excellent books on the subject, including David Boulton’s *Objection Overruled*, Jo Vellacott’s *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists*, (now reprinted by Spokesman under the title *Conscientious Objection*), John W. Graham’s *Conscription and Conscience*, and more recently, Cyril Pearce’s *Comrades In Conscience*, I was made aware of the extraordinary resistance that was put up to the introduction of military conscription, and the harsh challenges facing those men who refused to answer the summons to barracks. I learnt of the intricate

network of helpers and supporters in places high and low, and the organisations that helped them in their struggle, pre-eminent amongst them, surely, the No-Conscription Fellowship, founded by Fenner Brockway in late 1914. And I was filled with admiration for the tireless efforts of those supporters, one of whom, of course, was Bertrand Russell.

In addition to his well-documented letters, articles and correspondence (see the excellent collection of his letters *A Pacifist At War*, edited by Nicholas Griffin), there is also Russell's *Autobiography*. While I found that the sections relating to the First World War paint a vivid overall picture of his journey through these enormous events, there were some incidents he touches on that left me hungry for more detail: tantalising glimpses of scenes which are not recorded or documented, but which cause a playwright to salivate at the prospect of what might have taken place.

For example, his description of bathing in the pond at Garsington, where he was staying at the house of his friends, the liberal MP Philip Morrell and his wife, Ottoline (lover and long-time friend and confidant of Russell) – then stepping out of the pond stark naked to find Henry Asquith on the bank. All Russell says is, 'The quality of dignity that should have characterized a meeting between the Prime Minister and a pacifist was somewhat lacking on this occasion.' A wonderfully droll comment, but what actually was said between them? I tried to imagine the subsequent discussion and possibly heated debate – hinting that it may have been Russell who planted in the PM's mind the idea of a 'conscience clause' to be included in the ominously imminent Military Service Act.

Many other heroes and heroines played their role in these epic events, too numerous to list here, but the remarkable Catherine Marshall must be mentioned, for her untiring, meticulous and ingenious work for the NCF. She became Russell's prime associate in the organisation as the war progressed. Another is Clifford Allen, the agnostic socialist and quietly charismatic chairman of the NCF, who Russell replaced when it became Allen's turn to be arrested for refusing to report to barracks. And, of course, the 16,000 plus COs, who endured endless indignities, contempt and harsh treatment at the hands of the military.

Some accounts of COs being grilled and investigated by their Local Tribunals, to assess whether their conscientious objection was genuine and whether therefore they might be exempted from military service, would provoke laughter and derision, were they not true. An 18 year old CO denied exemption because he was considered too young to have a conscience; a declared atheist told he couldn't *possibly* have a conscience; a CO who was a piano tuner by trade denied exemption because how could

he know what use the pianos he tuned might be put to? They might be used to play patriotic songs or military marches, so how could he possibly claim to be a conscientious objector? And so it went on.

Arrests followed, COs were forcibly escorted to barracks, orders given to put on uniform, do drill, carry out other tasks, all of which, politely refused, would result in punishments, bread and water diets, solitary confinement, or worse – such as entombment in a ten foot deep pit, as James Brightmore was, on the pretext that no cell was available for him. Another CO, Jack Gray, was subjected to a regime of cruelty culminating in a rope tied around his stomach and being pushed into a pond eight or nine times, and dragged out each time by the rope. The pond contained sewage.

At least COs couldn't face the ultimate threat – execution – as they were not in the war zone, and therefore not deemed to be on active service. Until, that is, the Army began sending them across to France, which meant they now found themselves in the most precarious situation: 35 COs in particular, who were hauled before a Field General Court Martial – the maximum penalty, if found guilty, was death.

And here there is another intriguing glimpse in Russell's *Autobiography* of an unrecorded scene – a deputation to Downing Street to avert this crisis, to inform the Prime Minister what the Army was up to, seemingly without the government's knowledge or approval. Russell says, 'Although he [Asquith] was just starting for Dublin, he listened to us courteously, and took the necessary action.' Again, it was tempting as a playwright to try and flesh out this scene – Russell biding his time, perhaps, while Catherine Marshall spoke, or Philip Snowden, the Independent Labour Party MP – until Russell could hold off no longer, perhaps erupting in a passionate appeal to the Prime Minister: 'The point is will they be shot? Because if these COs are executed, simply because their consciences would not permit them to take up arms against a fellow human being, it will be the greatest stain imaginable on our nation's reputation!'

The 35 were indeed sentenced to death, but had their sentences commuted to ten years penal servitude in a civil prison back in England. Surely Russell's role in this outcome cannot be denied? In time they were joined by Russell himself who, in 1918, was sentenced by a somewhat vindictive judge to six months in Brixton Prison – on account of one mildly provocative sentence in an article he'd written, about the likelihood of American soldiers being used in this country as strike-breakers.

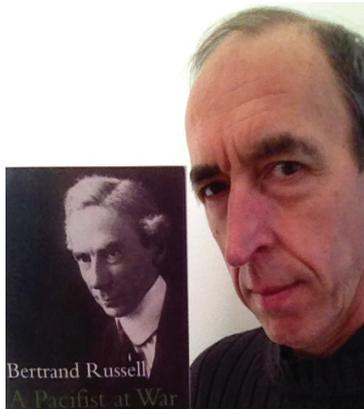
When the Armistice finally came, Russell was out of prison, observing the revelling crowds in the Tottenham Court Road. As he says in his *Autobiography*:

‘I felt strangely solitary amid the rejoicings, like a ghost dropped by accident from another planet. True, I rejoiced also, but I could find nothing in common between my rejoicing and that of the crowd.’

More than 16,500 young men refused to act against their consciences. 31 of those lost their sanity, and 73 died due to illness or mistreatment while in the hands of the military. It’s a tiny number compared to the 19,240 British soldiers who lost their lives on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. But with so much emphasis during these anniversary years on the men who fought in the trenches, there is a pressing need for the other side of the story to be told, for it to be repeatedly told, to redress the balance: the story of the young men who showed a different kind of courage, *refusing* to fight, whatever punishments were thrown at them, passionately believing that this was the best, indeed the only way to truly serve the cause of peace.

Russell was a pacifist at war; I am a pacifist *not* at war – someone who hasn’t had his pacifism truly tested. And the question that has been haunting me is this: how would I have responded if I’d been a young man in 1914? Would I have had the courage to endure the bullying, the abuse, the solitary confinement, the imprisonment in a ten-foot deep pit, the very real threat of execution? I fervently hope that I would have had the courage – but there’s no way of knowing, is there?

At Conway Hall, London, at 7.30pm on 25 May 2016, one hundred years since the very day that military conscription was extended to include married men aged 18 to 41, we will commemorate and celebrate the courage of these COs through drama, song, and with talks by Cyril Pearce, Lois S. Bibbings (author of Telling Tales About Men), and Ben Copsy from the Peace Pledge Union. Please join us if you can.



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