

## Conscience and Conscription

### The story of a Shirker and a Skunk: two Sussex men in the First World War.

By Alan Lygo-Baker

“War develops a certain hysteria of self-destruction...We have to stand against this... and make others realise that Life, not Death (however heroic) is the source of all good.” Bertrand Russell.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The outbreak of war produced much opposition especially whenever conscription was mentioned. France and Germany had conscript armies but in Britain conscription remained unpopular. Attempts to pass legislation before 1914 had failed. The Dean of Chichester voiced the general view at a recruiting meeting in November, 1914, saying one volunteer was worth five pressed men. The influential No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) was set up by Fenner Brockway and Clifford Allen. The Independent Labour Party and the Women Suffragists led demonstrations and in December 1914 the Union of Democratic Control was established by Liberals and Socialists to seek a negotiated peace. The Society of Friends (Quakers) founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) as well as the Friends Service Committee and a Joint Advisory Council to coordinate the work of all opposition bodies.

The jingoistic enthusiasm for war suggested conscription would not be needed. The Church has rarely been less equivocal in its support for conflict. The Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons claimed it was a divine service to kill Germans and the Bishop of London believed we were fighting the anti-Christ. For many soldiers, there was also eagerness. Julian Grenfell of the Royal Dragoons thought the war great fun, likening it to a big picnic.<sup>2</sup> Recent research, however, has suggested such passion did not run deep. The Great Powers and their Masters seem to have acted more like “sleepwalkers” than principled strategists.<sup>3</sup> The rush to self-destruction resembled an almost ‘millenarian hysteria.’<sup>4</sup> The previous Imperial Wars had been fought in far off lands and generally in small numbers. The length of this war, the unremitting toll of the dead and the singular waste of resources could not yet be considered. Yet, whilst Pinker<sup>5</sup> quotes a General extolling the sacrifice of men willing to be wiped out by machinegun fire recalling Sassoon’s General,<sup>6</sup> a Sergeant explained the reality of the soldiers’ choice- obey orders, go over the top and be shot or refuse, be court-martialled and then get shot. The surge of volunteers soon peaked.

A peacetime pacifist is seen as someone harmless but, in times of war, this view often converts into hatred. Both the Government and the Army wanted harsh treatment for objectors as useful persuasion. A group was dispatched to France in 1916 so that they could be court-martialled and executed.<sup>7</sup> A campaign by the Daily Mail achieved disfranchisement for objectors. This loss of the vote lasted for 5 years after the war, increasing further discrimination in employment. At a trial in March 1917, Mrs. Alice Wheeldon, her daughter and son-in-law were convicted on trumped up charges of conspiring to kill Lloyd George when their only crime was sheltering deserters and objectors.<sup>8</sup> Major General Childs who was responsible for the treatment of objectors complained that much of his time was spent in securing justice for those whose main object was ‘the desertion of their country’ and that the organizers of the NCF should be dealt with under the Incitement to Mutiny Act.<sup>9</sup>

Conscientious Objectors were seen as unmanly, criminal, treacherous or mentally defective. Wilfred Owen, however, noted that shirkers and resisters also existed amongst soldiers. There also existed sympathy for objectors in the

military. Commander Wedgewood spoke in the House of Commons; "I think I am prouder of my country than I was before...it has produced people who have sufficient scruples to enable them to face...imprisonment rather than upset their consciences."<sup>10</sup>

Searching for the traditional hero amongst the ranks of conscientious objectors may not be profitable. But the men described below were men of undoubted courage: a shirker and a skunk. At the Chichester Army barracks in June 1916, one refused to sign his army papers and was dubbed by the Recruiting Officer a 'bloody shirker'. This was Frederick Charles Greenfield. The other was handed a white feather by a girl, who suggested to her soldier friend to give the 'pro-German skunk' a good hiding. The soldier refused but the skunk was George Baker.<sup>11</sup>

Frederick and George were both Sussex men, Frederick (b.1889) from Portslade and George (b.1895) from Bury, near Arundel. Frederick's father was a market gardener and Frederick worked with him in Hove. George moved to West Blatchington when his father took work with a local undertaker. The basement flat they lived in seemed appropriate! The two men had different responses to religious thinking. Frederick's faith grew from an early age into a confirmed belief. He joined the Dependent Brethren, a society of Christians based at Loxwood, near Billingshurst. The Society wrote to Prime Minister Asquith in 1916 declaring that participation in the war would violate their principles. Frederick's position could not have been clearer.

For George, there was an evolution of belief. The Infant School God of Authority taught children to be content with their station in life but, even as a young boy, George was aware of society's inequalities. The New Theology which saw God in Nature espoused by his father seemed a truer egalitarian faith for a while but when he read Philip Snowden's Christian Commonwealth of Socialism, a form of Christian Socialism became his guiding principle.<sup>12</sup> He met inequality again when he won a scholarship to the Grammar School in 1907. Scholarship boys were poor, their families unable to pay the fees. George had hoped to become a journalist and he was offered a position but the low pay meant he decided to join the London, County and Westminster Bank instead in 1912 and moved to Kent. He worked there until his summary discharge in May, 1916 after his refusal to enlist.

Neither man joined the NCF or the FOR. They had differing ways of coping. Frederick relied on his Brethren for support, George quoting Dr. Stockman in Ibsen's play, 'Enemy of the People', claimed, "He is strongest who stands most alone." For him, Snowden's maxims were sufficient. Their resolve, however, was about to be tested.

It had been assumed that enough men would enlist voluntarily. 33,204 had volunteered in one September day in 1914 but a year later the number had dwindled to less than 32,000 a month. Lord Derby's scheme of voluntary attestation for service had produced by January 1916 only a fraction of the men needed. Despite all the blandishments of war fever, white feathers and Lord Kitchener's poster campaign, most men of military age had stayed at home. If the war's man-eating appetite was to be appeased, conscription had become inevitable. The Military Service Act 1916 allowed for exemptions on application to a local (as well as a Central) tribunal. Staffed largely by the untrained and with a military presence, these tribunals often faced up to 40 or more cases a

day. Their decisions were, therefore, often hurried and biased. The need for men remained paramount.<sup>13</sup>

The experiences of Frederick and George often ran in parallel. Frederick had been granted absolute exemption being in a 'certified occupation'. The military representative lodged an appeal and Frederick was given a non-combatant certificate. He asked leave for his case to go to the Central Tribunal but this was denied. His protests were shouted down and he was summarily dismissed. As well as his white feather, George saw crude graffiti naming him and was physically attacked. He stated at his tribunal that he was a pacifist but accepted he had little right of exemption under the Act. He, too, was given his certificate. Both men were now deemed to be soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

Two recruiting officers attended George on the same day, 26<sup>th</sup> April, one telling him to report to Herne Bay, the other to Whitstable. He was prepared to go to prison but knew that his family would be deeply ashamed, especially after they had sacrificed much for his education. He fled to Hollingbourne Hill, technically a deserter, with the vague ambition of starving himself to death. His resolution lasted three days until he, accompanied by his father, went to Canterbury where he joined the Non-Combatant Corps.<sup>15</sup>

Frederick was to report to the Brighton Recruiting Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> May but did not go. The local police warned him he could be arrested and, on Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, he was detained and escorted to Chichester Barracks. He refused to sign his army papers and was abused and threatened. That night he was given no food. The next morning he was left to stand in the gutter of the parade ground, sworn at and ridiculed. Interviewed by the Colonel, Frederick said that men of faith like himself should not kill. The Colonel was furious, demanding to know if Frederick considered him to be a lesser Christian because he saw war as his duty. He told Frederick he would be taken to France and could be shot for cowardice. Frederick stood his ground refusing his medical and was, thus, deemed fit for service. He refused to sign for his army pay or wear a uniform. He was taken to Seaford Camp. When he refused an order to clean a table, he was dispatched to the Guard Room. He was court-martialled on 19<sup>th</sup> June and sentenced to 84 days hard labour.

George took on the task of digging holes on the South Downs and then filling them in. Frustrated, he offered to join a combatant regiment on condition he could bear only stretchers, not arms. The Major promised he would consider it but the promise came to nothing. George was now prepared to go to prison despite his family's view and, when he was told he was to go to Newhaven docks, he thought his chance had come. But it turned out he was loading food not the expected military weaponry. Here, however, a docker George refers to as 'Fat Fred' said he should see through his beliefs or enlist properly. At Larkhill on Salisbury Plain where he was sent next, he met a German Prisoner of War who repeated what 'Fat Fred' had told him at Newhaven. So, George refused an order to put an envelope into the waste bin and, for this, he was court-martialled and sentenced to prison for a year.<sup>16</sup>

The paths of George and Frederick now began to overlap. Frederick was taken to Maidstone Prison and was subjected to regular threats of being shot. The situation worsened when he was transferred to Wormwood Scrubs. The cells, recently occupied by Revolutionary Irish Sinn Feiners, were dirty and damp. George also visited the Scrubs, having been sent there directly after his court-martial. Frederick's firm Christian faith and George's friendship with the Quaker, John Fletcher, helped them come to terms with their imprisonment. Prison meant their manhood was degraded, in George's words, with

'namelessness and numberdom'. There was the perpetual state of half-hunger and the paralysis of long periods of silence and solitude.

On 15<sup>th</sup> August Frederick returned to Maidstone, committed to do work of national importance on pain of being recalled to military service. On 22<sup>nd</sup> August he was told he would be going to Dyce Camp, near Aberdeen, having been given a conditional pardon.<sup>17</sup> He worked in a granite quarry in terrible conditions, living in tents. In September one of the party died of pneumonia and, after a Home Office inspection, the men were rehoused in barns. Like George, he was befriended by a Quaker, John Mitchell. The job at Dyce ended in October and he went to the Wakefield Work Centre in Yorkshire, working much more happily in the gardens. Eventually he was granted a transfer to Newhaven's Denton Camp where he helped making a road. From here he could visit his home and fellow Brethren until his final discharge on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1918.

At this time George was still in prison but in March he was sent to Bulford Army Camp in Wiltshire. He again refused an order, was court-martialled and sentenced to 18 months hard labour in Winchester Prison.<sup>18</sup> It was not until 8<sup>th</sup> April 1919 that he was finally released and able to return home. Unlike Frederick's, it was not an altogether happy reunion. He knew his parents were ashamed but he had not been aware of the depth of that shame. No family friends or relations knew of his prison sentences. His father, despite his poor health, had joined the Home Defence Force to alleviate the family's disgrace. The relationship with his father was never again a close one and George always felt some responsibility for his mother's early death in October.

Both Frederick and George married after the War. When George became a father in November, 1921, he felt he had finally shrugged off the false skin of the Skunk. They were the men, he wrote, who fought for Peace.

"I am a pacifist. I am, also, a patriot. I love my country and its heroic poor... who are the salt of its English earth. I served not only my Class: I obeyed not only my troubled conscience. I did my bit for this England which I love."<sup>19</sup>

### Epilogue

The Great War changed English society radically. It did achieve military victory but at a huge loss of life. It was entered into by the "Sleepwalkers" and it inflicted, in Sassoon's words, "the world's worst wound".<sup>20</sup> Frederick and George should not be forgotten. They stood for the principle of liberty of conscience. Ironically, perhaps the most positive result of the war was that the individual's right to say NO to the Crown, Government and the might of the Army had become enshrined in law. That is what they tried to achieve and it is their lasting legacy.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> W.Ellsworth-Jones, *We will not fight; the untold story of World War One's Conscientious Objectors* (Aurum Press, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Ellsworth-Jones, *We will not fight*, p45. Grenfell was killed in May, 1915.

<sup>3</sup> C.Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914* (Penguin 1913 [Allen Lane 2012])

<sup>4</sup> See N.Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (Allen Lane 1998) for a detailed analysis.

<sup>5</sup> S.Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: a History of violence and humanity* (Penguin 2012) p.246

<sup>6</sup> "He's a cheery old card', grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack  
But he did for them both by his plan of attack."

from *The General* by Siegfried Sassoon in E.L.Black (ed), *1914-1918 in Poetry* (University of London Press, 1970)

<sup>7</sup> It was only by the lobbying of Prime Minister Asquith by Lady Morrell that Asquith agreed to meet her husband, Philip, together with another MP, Philip Snowden, Bertrand Russell and Catherine Marshall of the NCF. It was to be a critical meeting. Asquith agreed that the objectors should be brought back to England with the further promise that no conscientious objector would in future face the death penalty. His condition was that this agreement would not be made public until after the date by which objectors needed to register. Too many, he believed, might apply. Such secrecy would be very unlikely in today's technological world! The Army did execute men for disobedience but only 5 out of 306, all of whom were pardoned in 2006.

<sup>8</sup> They received sentences of ten, five and seven years respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Ellsworth-Jones, *We will not fight*, pps199-200. The harsh treatment sometimes worked. After constant abuse, John Gray, 19, was broken and became a soldier. Ellsworth-Jones, *We will not fight*, p231.

<sup>10</sup> Hansard, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1917.

<sup>11</sup> The Organisation of the White Feather was established in 1914 by Admiral Charles Penrose-Fitzgerald. It was inspired by A.E.W.Mason's novel, 'The Four Feathers', 1902.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Snowden, MP for Blackburn and a member of the NCF.

<sup>13</sup> There were approximately 16,300 conscientious objectors. They came from all walks of life but the majority had no formal education beyond the elementary level. Of this total, 6000 absolutists went to prison. These numbers do not include those who volunteered to work with the Friends' Ambulance Units established in 1914.

<sup>14</sup> The local tribunals were recorded in their local paper, the Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder. Some examples are:

8<sup>th</sup> March, 1916: Nelson Sargent of Walberton, a builder and undertaker, claimed combatant service would be repugnant... Mr.Harris of the tribunal interjected that it seemed Sargent objected to killing but not to burying! His exemption was refused.

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20th July: A 34 year old auctioneer's clerk was given a conditional exemption but applied to appeal to make it absolute. This was his legal right. However, he was told, "It is not what we can do but what we are disposed to do," and his appeal was dismissed.

8<sup>th</sup> August: Exemption was refused for a tinsmith from West Street, Chichester, who had worked for the Royal Naval Ordnance in Portsmouth. It was deemed, if he could do that, he could continue military service.

January-March, 1917: Some claimants did not help the tribunals. A cycle repairer who was medically unfit was eventually granted absolute exemption but it took four appearances, achieving conditional exemptions, before he submitted to a medical.

The system was heavily criticised. For many, conscience was sufficient reason. Dr. John Clifford of the NCF said: "The Military Act...was a fraud. The Tribunals are a disgrace to our name. We are fighting for the most precious possession of the British People. Conscience is the best asset a nation can possess." A Marwick, *The Deluge* (MacMillan 1965) p.83.

<sup>15</sup> About 3,000 men were accepted into the Non-Combatant Corps. It was nicknamed the 'No-courage corps'! Indeed, one Sergeant-Major produced a coat of arms with its motto, 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all.' The Corps frustrated the Army since it could not impose its discipline and was disliked by the men for the poor conditions and meaningless tasks.

<sup>16</sup> Army Order X stated that, after court-martial, the objector was to be handed over to the civilian authorities for imprisonment. Ten objectors died in prison but some like Clifford Allen of the NCF were released because of serious illness for fear of making influential objectors martyrs. Others, like the Quaker, Robert Mennell, became habitués, serving four prison sentences.

<sup>17</sup> Duncan Grant and David Garnett, members of the Bloomsbury Group and, thus, with influential friends, were given only light farm work and allowed to live in a local house.

<sup>18</sup> George had come to agree with Clifford Allen when he said, "We conscientious objectors must somehow make it clear to our fellow countrymen that it was our very love of country that made us choose prison rather than see her bound be conscription." M. Gilbert, *Plough My Own Furrow. The story of Lord Allen of Hurtwood.* (Longman 1965) p.105.

<sup>19</sup> G. Baker, *Soul of a Skunk*, (London, Scholastic Press 1930) p.X

<sup>20</sup> From, "On entering the New Menin Gate." E.L. Black, (ed), p.122. See note 6 above.

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### Acknowledgements.

I am indebted to Bill McMellon for his interest and initial help; also, the staff of the West Sussex Library Service and the West Sussex Record Office, as well as the staff both at Friends' House and the British Library in London for their knowledge, forbearance and assistance.