

A Patchwork of Dissent

Conscientious Objectors in Lancashire during World War 1

The past few years has seen the publication of numerous books on the First World War aimed at both a popular and a scholarly audience. Some of the literature revisits the perennial question of whether British troops were ‘lions led by donkeys’, cannon-fodder condemned to destruction by generals who had little concern with the human cost of modern warfare. More common, at least among books aimed at a popular audience, has been a focus on the experience of soldiers caught up in the horrors of the Somme or Passchendaele. A striking number of books focusing on the Home Front have also appeared. Although zeppelin raids killed more than a thousand civilians during the First World War, the separation of the battlefield from the Home Front was far sharper in 1914-18 than in 1939-45, often creating a sense of disorientation for soldiers who could in the space of a day be transported home on leave from the trenches to a world where life seemed to continue much as usual. Yet that sense of normality was itself something of an illusion. Much recent work has examined how the conflict affected particular towns and cities, exploring everything from the changing character of the workforce through to the impact of the massive loss of life abroad on families and communities back home.¹ In doing so they illustrate the First World War’s ‘glocal’ character – to use an unattractive if voguish word – showing how a global conflict had profound impacts on local communities around the world.²

One theme in some of this new literature on the Home Front has been the focus on the development of anti-war sentiment in Britain, including the motivations and experiences of the 18,000 or so men who became Conscientious Objectors after the introduction of conscription at the start of 1916.³ Some of these men were ready to accept service in the Non-Combatant Corps that was established in March 1916. A number joined the Royal Army Medical Corps or the Friends Ambulance Unit. Thousands more ‘alternativists’ agreed to work in areas such as forestry or agriculture where they were not under military control. Yet several thousand ‘absolutists’ refused to carry out any form of alternative service and were sentenced to long prison sentences for their stand. Many were ill-treated and a number died. The image of the ‘Conchie’ – widely derided at the time – has long been rehabilitated in popular memory (there is a memorial to the COs of all wars in London’s Tavistock Square). The treatment of conscientious objectors in recent books, both scholarly and academic, has also typically been sympathetic, avoiding a moral discourse of bravery and cowardice in favour of one that

explores the social and political significance of conscientious objection to military service both in itself and as part of a bigger narrative of war resistance.⁴

Cyril Pearce, who has in recent years done more than anyone else to further our understanding of this subject, rightly points out that the position of conscientious objectors in the First World War cannot be understood without reference to wider patterns of social and political change.⁵ The development of the anti-war movement after 1914 was shaped in part by a radical ideology that saw the conflict as a war which pitted worker against worker. A significant number of COs were members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) whose leaders generally – although not invariably – opposed the war. The other organisations that became most significant in campaigning both for the rights of individual conscience and for greater popular control over foreign policy – the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) – attracted many members of the ILP including a large number of women who were active in the female suffrage movement.⁶ Yet Pearce, like many other scholars, rightly notes that the radicalism of many ‘war resisters’ was often founded on religious conviction rather than a more secular understanding of socialism (scholars have for many years debated whether ‘religion’ or ‘politics’ was the primary motivation of most COs – a debate that is necessarily complex given the role played by Nonconformity in shaping radical politics in Britain during in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).⁷ It is certainly true that the opposition to the First World War in Britain was composed of many strands, and that the men who refused conscription did so for many different reasons, behaving in various ways when they received their call-up papers. A study of developments at a local level can shape a more nuanced understanding of why thousands of men refused military service, focusing on how the motivations and experiences of individuals differed markedly from place to place.

The rest of this article examines the development of the anti-war movement in Lancashire with a particular focus on the 2,000 or so men who became conscientious objectors following the passing of the Military Service Act in 1916. It begins with a discussion of ‘war enthusiasm’ in Lancashire during the weeks following the outbreak of war in August 1914, showing how eligible men were more inclined to ‘join up’ than in neighbouring Yorkshire, while also suggesting that the pattern may have varied within the county. It then examines the distribution of conscientious objectors within Lancashire during the years 1916-1919, focusing on variations from town to town, using both statistical material and individual case-studies to illustrate the pattern (including possible correlations to the earlier pattern of war enthusiasm and protest). The article draws on extensive material held in national and local archives as well

as the 1911 census and the invaluable *Pearce Register of British First World War Conscientious Objectors*. It also makes use of the local press and a range of radical publications. The evidence suggests that there were certain ‘hotspots’ in Lancashire where men were particularly likely to refuse military service after the introduction of conscription at the start of 1916. This pattern can sometimes be tentatively linked to certain local factors, such as the strength of the ILP or sustained dissent against the dominant culture of war enthusiasm, but just as often the causes remain uncertain, a reminder perhaps that historical complexity is often stubbornly resistant to simple generalisations.

War Enthusiasm and Military Recruitment in Lancashire

It has long been recognised that popular reaction in Britain to the outbreak of the First World War was more muted than once imagined.⁸ The scenes of celebration that took place on the streets of London and some other large cities only represented one aspect of popular opinion (there were many opposition rallies as well). The response tended to be particularly cautious in some northern industrial towns, like Huddersfield, a pattern that was typically fuelled by a distinctive mix of radical liberalism, socialism and Nonconformity. In other towns like Lancaster the mood was rather one of grim determination, characterised by a widespread patriotic acceptance of the legitimacy of Britain’s cause, combined with a recognition that the war might well *not* be ‘over by Christmas’.⁹ It is impossible to reduce the level of ‘war enthusiasm’ to a single metric – the phenomenon is far too complex – but some insight can be obtained by looking at the recruitment figures during the first few weeks of the war. The factors that encouraged young (and not-so-young) men to join up were complex and often very personal – but it is reasonable to assume that variations between particular areas were at least in part shaped by local attitudes towards the conflict – attitudes which in turn reflected specific patterns of religious and political culture.

The statistics for the ‘old’ county of Lancashire – that is including the major industrial centres like Liverpool and Manchester as well as the area ‘north of the sands’ – suggest that the level of enlistment in the first few weeks of war was significantly higher than in neighbouring Yorkshire. Statistics compiled from the various recruitment centres in the county suggest that around 19,000 men signed up by the end of the month.¹⁰ The figure for the three Yorkshire Ridings was around 12,300. The census data for 1911 shows that there were in Lancashire some 980,000 males aged between 15 and 39 (that is the cohort from which most

recruits in 1914 would have come). The figure for Yorkshire was 817,000. Taken together it seems that the rate of volunteering in Lancashire during the first few weeks of war was around twenty-five percent higher than for Yorkshire.

The pattern appears to persist when focusing on some of the major cities in the two counties, although the statistics need to be treated with more caution here. The various recruiting districts did not correspond neatly to the local administrative structure, making it unclear, for example, whether men reported as enlisting in Liverpool or Sheffield actually came from one of those cities. The reporting process was also haphazard (Bradford figures were, for example, returned under Halifax which was home to the Duke of Wellington's Regiment). Nevertheless, when making reasonable adjustments based on estimates of the local population in an area for which recruiting returns are available, it seems clear that many industrial cities in Yorkshire like Leeds (in particular) and Sheffield had lower rates of volunteering in August 1914 than Lancashire cities such as Manchester and Liverpool (by contrast the rates in cities in the North East like Newcastle and Sunderland were, if anything, rather *higher* than for their Lancashire counterparts). The reasons for the difference remain unclear. Edward Spiers has rightly noted that neither Leeds nor Sheffield hosted a major regiment – unlike Liverpool or Manchester – which may perhaps have made the military seem more 'remote' and joining up less natural (recruitment was more buoyant in areas of Yorkshire like Halifax and Pontefract which were home to a large military presence).¹¹ The low rate of recruitment in the Leeds area in particular helps to account for a significant part of the difference in recruitment between Lancashire and Yorkshire in the first few weeks of the war. There may also have been more contingent factors (Spiers rightly points out that there was no counterpart in any Yorkshire city to the role played by Lord Derby in promoting recruitment in Liverpool).¹² And perhaps – more intriguingly – it may have been that anti-war feeling, or at least indifference, was for some reason stronger in Yorkshire than in Lancashire. Miners in Yorkshire were certainly slower to enlist early in the war than their counterparts in Durham, while some towns like Huddersfield became a focus point for anti-war sentiment, even though its pre-war politics had not been notably radical in character.

The pattern of recruitment *within* Lancashire following the declaration of war also shows some interesting variations (although once again the nature of the statistics makes it difficult to be precise). Recruiting in Liverpool was particularly buoyant in August, though by the end of the month Manchester was recruiting at a similar rate. Recruiting in Lancaster was also high, almost certainly reflecting the fact that the town was home to the King's Own Royal Regiment,

which had for many years been an important presence there. Recruitment in Preston was also very high, on some days exceeding that of Manchester, despite the radically different sizes of the two conurbations and their respective hinterlands. In the east of the county, a whole battalion was famously raised in Accrington in the first few days of the war (although a majority of the men actually came from neighbouring towns like Chorley and Burnley). The level of recruitment in Blackburn also seems to have been reasonably buoyant,¹³ although there was significant opposition to the war in the town, which prompted the local authorities to go to considerable lengths to undermine peace protests.¹⁴ A similar pattern was visible in Nelson – a town which like Blackburn subsequently produced a disproportionately large number of COs – where there were several protests against the war, including one organised by the local churches on the day following the British declaration of war on Germany.¹⁵

The level of recruitment is, as noted earlier, far from a perfect proxy for war enthusiasm. The figures themselves are also distorted by their failure to capture all local recruitment. Nor was strong recruitment in a particular town necessarily incompatible with significant anti-war sentiment. Yet the patterns of variation both between Yorkshire and Lancashire, and to a degree within Lancashire itself, are striking enough to indicate that some of the reasons influencing the decision by men to ‘join up’ were local in character. In a similar way, the extent of anti-war protests in a particular town was often shaped by local factors. In some cases it is comparatively easy to identify these. The tradition of radical politics in Nelson – where the ILP was strong – doubtless helps to explain the low level of war enthusiasm in some quarters (although there is only limited evidence to suggest that overall recruitment was particularly sluggish in the heady days of August 1914).¹⁶ Lancaster’s status as a garrison town was certainly a factor in the high level of recruitment in the days after war broke out. The same was true of Preston where the Fulwood barracks was home to the Loyal North Lancashire and East Lancashire Regiments (which meant that a large number of territorials with myriad local connections lived in the area). The town also had a comparatively small Nonconformist population – perhaps of significance given that much opposition to the war came from those of a Nonconformist background (although it also had a large Irish Catholic population that in general produced a lower rate of recruits than other parts of the population). The next section looks at the distribution of conscientious objectors in Lancashire, both to see the different pattern of distribution across the county and identify possible reasons for its existence, including any possible correlation to the pattern of ‘war enthusiasm’ and ‘war protests’ evident in August 1914.

Conscientious Objectors in Lancashire

The release of the *Pearce Register* has provided historians with a mine of information that was not previously available. The *Register* contains some 18,000 names of men who became conscientious objectors between 1916 and 1919, including valuable, if inevitably incomplete, information about their home address and their motivation in refusing to fight. Many entries also contain material that casts light on the progress of their case through the complex system of tribunals and (in some cases) magistrates' courts and court martials. When combined with the census data from 1911, it is possible to identify 'hot-spots' and 'cold-spots' for COs, that is their distribution within the wider population.¹⁷ There were in Lancashire some 1,950 COs by the end of hostilities in November 1918. The figure for the three Yorkshire Ridings was 1,851. When compared with the total population of each county, as recorded in the 1911 census, the figures suggest that Lancashire had around 10% fewer conscientious objectors than the national average (and Yorkshire very slightly more). By comparing the number of COs with the census statistics for 1911 – this time taking males aged from 10-39 to allow for the fact that boys who were 10 in 1911 would be 18 by 1918 – the pattern seems broadly consistent: Lancashire had some twelve percent fewer conscientious objectors in relation to this population group than Yorkshire. The differences are significant enough to be notable but not so great as to suggest huge differences between the two counties. Yorkshire's somewhat muted 'war enthusiasm', as measured by recruitment in parts of the county in August 1914, does seem to have a correlation with the number of men who subsequently claimed CO status (itself a rough proxy for opposition to the war). Lancashire's more buoyant recruitment in 1914 similarly correlates with a somewhat lower rate of COs from 1916. The differences are nevertheless comparatively marginal and, while worth noting, the data cannot support any clear distinction between 'patriotic' Lancashire' and 'war-resisting' Yorkshire.

The distribution of conscientious objectors within Lancashire was perhaps more striking than the comparison with Yorkshire (once again undermining any clear narrative of war enthusiasm and war resistance). By using census data and material in the *Pearce Register*, which identifies the home address of most COs, it is possible once again to identify 'hot-spots' and 'cold-spots'. There was a surprising consistency across most towns and cities. In Lancaster there was one CO for every 662 men likely to be of military age in the years 1916-1919 (that is men aged 10-39 in the 1911 census). The figure for Burnley was one CO for every 637 men

and for Salford one CO for every 753 men. Yet there are some striking exceptions from this norm. In Preston, where it was seen earlier that recruitment in the first few weeks of August 1914 was unusually high, there was one CO for every 1,089 men. In Accrington there seem to have been just four COs among 11,500 men of military age. And yet in Nelson, just ten miles away, there was one CO for every 110 men of potential military age.

The material contained in the *Pearce Register* includes some material about the motivations of individual COs, typically derived from reports in the press and publications like *The Friend* and *The Tribunal*, although the references are necessarily quite sketchy and imprecise. The ‘motivations’ listed range from ‘Trade Unionist’ and ‘National Peace Council’ to ‘ILP’ and ‘Quaker’. More than one ‘motivation’ is often listed against a name (eg ‘Quaker’ and ‘ILP’). No material relating to motivations is listed for around half the entries. It was noted earlier that deciding whether ‘religious’ or ‘political’ motivations were most prominent among COs is extremely difficult, and although the issue has caused considerable scholarly debate, the problem of establishing a clear binary between the two makes the discussion somewhat unreal. Nevertheless, and even taking into account all these caveats, the database can provide some useful insights into the motivations of COs in a number of Lancashire towns as well as the county as a whole.

Some 318 Lancashire COs had ‘Quaker’ listed against their name in the ‘motivation’ column of the *Pearce Register*. The entries for 79 men include the word ‘Methodist’ and another 69 include the word ‘Wesleyan’ (without the word ‘Methodist’); 33 of those listed as ‘Methodist’ were Primitive Methodists.¹⁸ 27 have ‘Baptist’ recorded in the relevant column of the database and 24 contain the word ‘Congregationalist’. There were 75 Christadelphians and 42 members of the Plymouth Brethren, both Protestant sects whose members generally responded to conscription by refusing to bear arms, while accepting alternative service such as agricultural work or recruitment into the Non-Combatant Corps.¹⁹ Just two entries for Lancashire COs include the words ‘Church of England’ under the motivation column – one other man is listed as an ‘Anglican’ – doubtless reflecting the fact that the established Church’s strong support for the justice of Britain’s cause meant that few men would cite their specifically ‘Anglican’ identity as the foundation of a refusal to accept military service. Many of these religious identities were in practice fluid. The ‘Quaker’ identity was particularly porous, not least because some of those who opposed the war for broadly ‘religious’ reasons began to identify themselves as ‘Quakers’, using the term as a loose label rather than signifying definite membership of the Society of Friends. In some Methodist publications the term ‘Quaker-

Methodist' was even used to describe members of the various Methodist connexions who opposed the war rather than as definite evidence of any dual confessional identity. And many Primitive Methodists – a denomination that had traditionally been sharply critical of 'militarism' – left their connexion and began to attend Quaker meetings when they judged the leadership of their own Church was too inclined to support the war effort.²⁰

A number of biographical examples can illustrate this phenomenon. Frederick Shirley, a factory manager from Manchester, described himself as a Unitarian and 'Quaker sympathiser'. George Nedderman, a schoolmaster from Rochdale, was a Wesleyan and 'Quaker sympathiser'. The same was true of Harold Wild, an insurance clerk from Manchester, who was arrested in the summer of 1916 in a police raid on an NCF office (Wild was in fact subsequently found medically unfit for military service).²¹ The cross-questioning faced by many men in their tribunal hearing often made it difficult for them to articulate their opposition to war in religious terms. Quakers were widely known for their anti-war stance, and generally better treated than men from other religious backgrounds, though less so if they sought absolutist status. Anglicans and Wesleyans were by contrast often sharply cross-questioned on the grounds that the majority of their co-religionists supported the war effort. Norman Hoyle, a Wesleyan bank clerk from Lancaster, was asked by the local tribunal in March 1916 why he 'set himself above' his co-religionists.²² Another man who appeared before the Lancaster tribunal had his case for exemption refused as soon as he noted that he was an Anglican. A member of the Church of England from Colne, who appeared before the appeal tribunal at Preston, had his case dismissed when he was judged not to have given a convincing answer as to why he did not accept the authority of the thirty seventh of the Thirty Nine Articles ('It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars').²³ Most of those who refused to serve on religious grounds did so less in terms of their formal religious affiliation and more on the basis that they could not reconcile participation in a military conflict with their understanding of the Gospel. But many men reacted with confusion when tribunal members countered their claim to be following the Biblical injunction to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' with other scriptural passages such as Christ's words 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I come not to send peace but a sword'. A large number of COs lacked much education or experience of public speaking, and although often accompanied by a minister or representative from the NCF, they struggled to defend the coherence of their position in the face of hostile questioning.

It is equally hard to make a clear distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘political’ motives among men who refused military service. This phenomenon becomes clear when looking at the 280 Lancashire COs who had ‘NCF’ listed against their names in the motivations column (once again this figure does not capture the fact that many thousands of COs were supported by the organisation, nor account for the fact that thousands of men have no motivation listed against their name in the *Pearce Database*). The NCF acted as a kind of umbrella organisation for all COs, publishing *The Tribune*, and acting as a source of support and advice for those who refused to fight. The anti-war views of many of its leading figures – like Fenner Brockway – were shaped both by their political radicalism and their religious outlook (the NCF offered support to all COs whatever the basis of their position). The same was true of many men whose names have long faded into obscurity. Once again a number of short biographies can illustrate the point. John Blackie from Manchester cited both his Quaker attendance and his support for the NCF to justify his position. James Ashworth from Rawtenstall emphasised his trade unionism and socialism, along with his support for the NCF, as the explanation for his refusal to serve. And, strikingly, many men like Thomas Benson and Keith Brownlow from Manchester cited their Quaker faith *and* their membership of the ILP when they sought to articulate the basis of their stand. Any attempt to delineate the motives of COs by reference to a well-defined set of religious or political values, or institutional affiliation, once again seems doomed to failure. The best that can be concluded about the Lancashire COs was that they had a variety of motivations.

The same caveats apply to any attempt to look at the motivations of COs in particular towns and cities in Lancashire, although there are still some patterns worth noting. In Lancaster, a town with a strong military heritage, there were 10 Quakers, 2 Wesleyans and 1 Congregationalist among the 16 COs with addresses in the area (nothing is recorded for three men). Although Lancaster had a strong Quaker presence, it tended to be politically quiescent, and the biographies of the Lancaster Quakers that can be traced do not suggest that their faith had any pronounced radical edge. The motivations of Barrow COs were more mixed. There were five Christadelphians, though only one Quaker attender, as well as a significant number of individuals whose motivations seem to have been primarily political (a number were members of the local ILP branch, whose secretary Bram Longstaff was in September 1916 charged with ‘attempting to cause disaffection among the civil population’).²⁴ The comparatively small number of COs from Preston – at least relative to the town’s population – included a large number of Quakers along with at least three Plymouth Brethren, and a number

of other men who cited their opposition to war on some kind of religious grounds ('spiritualist' etc). Few of them – at least to judge from press reports and other material – held strong political views. Among the 270 or so COs from Liverpool, around 70 had an association with the Quakers, a higher proportion than for Lancashire as a whole. The information for men from Liverpool contained in the *Pearce Database* is particularly sketchy, but there is a paucity of entries indicating a radical political position (comparatively few ILP members, etc). A review of cases reported in the local press confirms this surprising impression. This may in part have reflected the fact that men who objected to military service on grounds of conscience knew that applicants who based their case on 'religious' rather than 'political' views were more likely to prove successful. Comparatively few Liverpool COs used their appearance before the tribunal to claim, as one young applicant from Wigan did, that 'The people were gulled by the capitalist class, who were making money out of the war' (his words attracted laughter when the military representative pointed out that his father owned six shops and a factory).²⁵ Such political quiescence seems strange in a city that had just a few years earlier, in 1911, been the scene of such serious strikes that 3,500 police and troops had to be sent to restore order. The radical press certainly reported frequently on anti-war and anti-conscription protests in Liverpool,²⁶ a reminder that the number and motivation of COs from a particular town or city cannot be taken as unproblematic evidence of wider local sentiment towards the war.

The figures for the 80 or so COs in Salford show a similar pattern. Around 30 expressed motives that were clearly 'religious' in character. 18 men were Quakers and, strikingly, nothing is listed against the names of these men in the *Pearce Register* to suggest that their Quakerism took a radical form. Only three men out of the 80 or so COs have membership of the ILP recorded against their names. One Walter Stewart, an accounts clerk, did however make it clear that he believed war could be prevented by overthrowing capitalism. Another man said that as a socialist he could not swear the military oath or attend Church (objections that the tribunal members ignored).²⁷ More than 20 men have nothing recorded against their name – making it hard to draw precise conclusions – though as noted above it seems likely that men who had strong religious convictions tended to declare them at tribunals or in later court hearings. A number of men certainly used the language of 'just war', but in a way that makes it unclear whether they were using the term in a religious sense or as not.²⁸

The situation in Manchester seems to have echoed the one in Salford (though the town was home to a very active NCF branch). At least a fifth of COs from the city had some association with the Quakers (some, like Harold Howard, an administrator in a dye factory, had definite

radical political sympathies although once again such cases seem to have been in the minority). There were also a number of Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists. 18 Manchester COs are recorded in the *Pearce Register* as being members of (or having associations with) the ILP; eight cited their ‘socialism’ as a factor in shaping their view; and a similar number cited their involvement in trade union activity (a proxy for political activism). There is once again no data for a significant proportion of the men. The incomplete and uncertain nature of the material makes it impossible to express too definite a conclusion, but the evidence does tend to militate against the idea that large numbers of COs in the major cities of Lancashire were motivated by opposition to the war on the radical-socialist grounds that it was an imperialist conflict that waged worker against worker. More common was a radicalism prompted by a ‘religious’ or broadly-based ‘ethical’ instinct that fostered a critical attitude towards the social and political *status quo*. And a large proportion of COs in cities like Manchester, Liverpool and Salford seem above all to have taken a ‘quietist’ stance, refusing to fight because they believed participation in war was contrary to their faith, and that the rights of private conscience should *in extremis* trump the citizen’s loyalty to the state.

Yet there were as ever exceptions to this pattern. One of the most interesting cases concerns Nelson. In his biography of Wilfred Wellock – the future Labour MP and admirer of Gandhi, who was imprisoned as a CO in the First World War – Andrew Rigby notes that many of people he interviewed during his research told him that Nelson had one of the highest numbers of COs of any British town (Wellock was born and brought up there).²⁹ More than a third of the men who sought exemption from military service in Nelson were associated with the ILP (a rate many times higher than in cities like Preston or Manchester). Only seven out of 97 COs had an association with the Quakers – and four of those who did also had associations with the ILP. Around a dozen men were members of one of the various Methodist connexions. The conscientious objectors from Nelson were undoubtedly more ‘political’ in motivation than in most other parts of Lancashire. Socialist Sunday Schools and Cooperative Societies had for many years been numerous in the town. The ILP Branch there was formed in 1893 and became one of the biggest in the country (a large new building was erected in 1908 to house the ILP complete with stained-glass windows proclaiming ‘Socialism Our Hope’). Even in Nelson, though, the boundary between political and religious motivations was not always clear. The stained glass windows were perhaps themselves a pointer to the similarities between the iconography of Nonconformity and socialism in early twentieth-century Britain. The town was often famously described as a place with a chapel on every corner. Wellock himself was raised

an Independent Methodist, although his opposition to the war owed less to John Wesley's notion of Christian Perfection, and more to an emotional sense that military conflict was contrary to Christian ethics and the consequence of a socially and economically unfair society. The *New Crusader* which Wellock began to produce early in 1916 was very much focused on the *Christian* foundations of pacifism, and reflected both his long-standing concern about the spiritual deficiencies of capitalism, *and* his scepticism that simply transforming the ownership of the means of production would bring about substantial change in the ethical character of domestic and international politics. It was an outlook shared by many nationally prominent critics of the war, like the ILP leader Keir Hardie, whose socialism and pacifism were rooted as much in a radical moral vision as in a narrow economic critique of modern capitalism.

A large majority of Nelson's COs were cotton weavers. The fact that Nelson was a comparatively small town, dominated by a single industry, probably helped to explain the development of a culture of political radicalism. Close networks based on religion and work fostered the spread of a shared set of values among a large section of the local population. Some of these patterns were echoed in the town of Rawtenstall, fifteen miles to the south, which based on figures drawn from the 1911 census had a male population of around 7,600 men of military age in 1916-18, and was home to 65 conscientious objectors (a concentration very similar to that of Nelson). The occupations of COs from Rawtenstall were, though, rather more diverse than in Nelson. Many worked in the clothing and shoe-manufacturing industry, but others had occupations ranging from grocer's assistant and painter to baker and warehouse clerk. The record of 'motivation' for Rawtenstall is less complete than for Nelson, but the evidence suggests that although a considerable number of men still had 'political' motives ('ILP', 'socialist', etc), a greater proportion than in Nelson cited their religious faith as a reason for their stand. The similarities and differences between the two towns show the difficulty of developing a neat numerical analysis of the reasons that prompted men to seek exemption from military service on grounds of conscience. Nelson and Rawtenstall were of a broadly similar size (in 1911 the former had a population of around 40,000 and the latter around 30,000). The figures for the 1921 census – the best available source – show a marked similarity in their economic structure (textiles and clothing were dominant in both). Both were East Lancashire towns with a close-knit community and a strong Nonconformist presence. Yet there was a marked difference in both the occupational profile of the men who refused to fight as well as a difference in the emphasis they placed on 'political' as opposed to 'religious' reasons.

One other comparison can further illustrate the challenges involved in understanding the uneven distribution of COs across Lancashire: a comparison between Burnley and Blackburn. The town of Blackburn, situated roughly half-way between Burnley and Preston, had a population of around 106,000 in 1911 (and around 32,000 men in the age-bracket 10-39). Preston as noted earlier had around one CO for each 1,100 men of an age to be eligible for military service. Burnley had a population almost identical to that of Blackburn and was home to 42 COs, giving it a concentration of one CO per 637 of men eligible for military service (close to the average rate for Lancashire as a whole). Yet Blackburn was home to 142 conscientious objectors, meaning there was 1 CO for every 228 men of military service age (that is five times higher than the rate in Preston and almost three times higher than the rate for Burnley). Most of the COs in Burnley for whom evidence exists cited religious reasons when seeking exemption. Blackburn had a higher proportion of Quakers than Burnley but also a higher proportion of men belonging to the ILP (or at least citing their membership of the Party when making their case for exemption). It appears that the COs in Blackburn tended to be more 'political' than in Burnley (even though the latter was geographically much closer to Nelson with its high number of COs and strong ILP presence).

The press reports covering tribunal hearings in the two towns bear out these impressions. The local tribunal in Burnley acquired a reputation for taking a hard line with all potential COs, and especially with men who sought exemption on political grounds, even though they were small in number. When one opponent of conscription expressed his position in terms of sympathy for 'the Labour and Socialist movement', he was shocked to find that the tribunal chair did not even bother to consult his fellow members before rejecting the case, leading to loud protests in the Court Room.³⁰ The tough line of the Burnley tribunal continued in the following months (the Chairman noting acidly on one occasion that he and his colleagues were exercising their freedom of conscience in refusing the application for exemption from some of the men who appeared before them).³¹ Some of those who appeared before the Blackburn tribunal similarly believed that its members were 'biased (*sic*) against all socialists'.³² There was doubtless some truth in the claim. David Boulton has noted in *Objection Overruled* that most tribunals showed 'a baffled suspicion of all dissenters, total ignorance of the psychology of religious and political idealism, and a class-bred, bitter hostility to Socialism',³³ although more recent research suggests that many tribunals tried to behave fairly, and were often hamstrung by the contradictory advice contained in the circulars sent to them by central government advising them how to conduct their proceedings.³⁴ The Blackburn tribunal vigorously cross-

questioned many applicants who cited their socialism and membership of the ILP as the foundation of their claim, but this was not surprising given that a significant number of men who appeared before them took such a line. It would indeed be wrong to assume that the ‘firmness’ or ‘fairness’ of a particular tribunal was an important factor determining how many men claimed CO status in a specific area. The fact that Blackburn produced many more COs than Burnley was apparently above all a reflection of local factors ranging from the strength of the ILP in the town through to the existence of personal networks of mutual influence and support that remain difficult to interrogate.

Since Burnley and Blackburn had broadly similar economic and social structures, while having different densities of COs, it seems that ‘class’ and ‘occupation’ were not key variables in explaining the difference. A more general review of the occupational and class background of Lancashire COs – at least to the extent that it can be gleaned from the available data – confirms that most were from a working-class background (though there was also a smaller number of ‘clerks’ and ‘secretaries’ and ‘schoolmasters’). Of the 19 COs from Preston whose occupation is known, all but two were in obviously working class occupations. The same was true of the 16 COs with home addresses in the Lancaster area, with the exception of an engineer, a schoolmaster and a ‘student-teacher’. There were also three sets of brothers among the Lancaster COs, a reminder that opposition to military services often ‘ran in families’. In other towns like Burnley and Blackburn, the large majority of COs were again from working-class backgrounds, along with a smattering of teachers and book-keepers and students. The same was true in the large urban centres centred on Manchester and Liverpool. The best-known figures in organisations such as the No-Conscription Fellowship, like Fenner Brockway, John Bruce Glasier and Clifford Allen, were usually from middle-class backgrounds and worked in such occupations as journalism (albeit on radical papers such as the *Labour Leader*). But most ‘ordinary’ COs were typically men with few resources and limited education. It took both courage and deep conviction to take the stand they took when refusing military service after the introduction of conscription at the start of 1916.

The treatment of Lancashire Conscientious Objectors

The harsh treatment faced by many COs for refusing to fight was a subject of controversy even at the time, despite the lack of widespread public support, and ILP MPs like Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald repeatedly raised the plight of the men in Parliament. The pressure

sometimes paid off, perhaps most notably in helping to secure the reprieve of a group of COs who were forcibly sent to France in the spring of 1916, where they were theatrically condemned to death for refusing to obey military orders.³⁵ A number of leading figures in the Nonconformist denominations, traditionally defensive of the rights of individual conscience, loudly demanded that the tribunals should respect the rights of men who refused to fight because it was contrary to their faith (though many in their congregations were less generous).³⁶ And, despite the reputation of many senior Church of England figures for taking a bellicose line during the First World War, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, demanded that misguided COs should be treated with respect even though he had no sympathy for their position.³⁷ Yet despite such publicity, many men were treated harshly (and above all those absolutists who refused any form of alternative service). The conscientious objectors from Lancashire were no exception in this respect.

The figures as ever need to be treated with caution, not least because of the incomplete data, but the material in the *Pearce Registry* can once again provide some valuable insights. Many COs from Lancashire were arrested either for refusing to respond to their call-up papers or for refusing to abide by the tribunal's judgement when it rejected their claim for exemption. More than 500 Lancashire COs were at some point imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubs. Over 100 passed through Walton Prison in Liverpool. At least 20 went on hunger strike while in prison and some, like Emanuel Ribiero from Manchester, were only kept alive by force-feeding (eight Lancashire COs either died while in prison or shortly afterwards).³⁸ Hundreds of men were court-martialled when they refused to obey orders once they had been handed over to the military (many of these cases concerned men who had been refused 'absolute' status and ordered to serve in the Non-Combatant Corps). Some 200 Quakers (and a number of non-Quakers) from Lancashire were given exemption from military service by the tribunals as long as they agreed to serve with the Friends Ambulance Unit (the incomplete information once again means that the real figure may have been higher). Hundreds more Lancashire COs accepted alternative service in agriculture or medical work, or were enrolled on one of the work schemes administered by the Home Office, set up in 1916 in an effort to reduce the numbers in prison. Some 180 COs from Lancashire for whom records exist were sent to Princetown Work Centre on Dartmoor where most worked on the land (the *Daily Mail* predictably referred to them as 'Coddled Conscience Men' who enjoyed 'a care-free holiday while their betters are fighting in France').³⁹ Many more were sent to Dyce Work Camp near Aberdeen (where one man, Walter Roberts from Manchester, died as a result of pneumonia).⁴⁰

A few incidents drawn from the biographies of Lancashire conscientious objectors can put a human face to the statistics. It has already been seen that many COs faced cross-questioning at the tribunals that was predicated on the assumption that their claims to be acting on principle were bogus. In the first few months after the introduction of conscription, a large number of COs were confronted with the kind of attitude expressed by the impatient chairman of the Lunesdale tribunal, who told one applicant 'How a man can talk this rubbish you conscientious objectors put before us I don't know'.⁴¹ Many tribunals asked applicants how they would respond if a German threatened their mother or sister. The behaviour of the tribunals has been recently defended by one scholar who has looked at the records for Northamptonshire, and argued that many of their members were in effect doing their best in difficult conditions, when the scope of the authority and the correct basis for their judgements was uncertain.⁴² As so often when dealing with the experience of conscientious objectors in the First World War, the pattern was varied, with some tribunals acquiring a reputation for a lack of sympathy for COs and others for being more even-handed. The case of Burnley has already been cited. Some tribunal members in Oldham also took a tough line declaring that they were 'ashamed' that men from their town were refusing to fight.⁴³ The situation in Nelson was rather different, at least if the case of Wilfred Wellock is at all representative, since he was treated with considerable respect by the tribunal (Wellock could have gained exemption on the grounds that he was an Independent Methodist minister although he declined to do so).⁴⁴ Most tribunals typically stood somewhere between Burnley and Nelson. In towns like Lancaster, men seeking exemption from military service were usually treated with a good deal of disdain, but were normally granted exemption if they agreed to some kind of alternative service. The harshest conditions were experienced by the absolutists who refused to agree to such a condition.

Some conscientious objectors handed over to the military were treated extremely badly. There was apparently no CO from Lancaster among the group shipped to France in the spring of 1916, where they were threatened with death for refusing to obey orders, but many were still treated brutally. George Beardsworth from Blackburn sought exemption from military service as a socialist and ILP member, but was refused absolute status, and sent instead to the barracks of the 3rd Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment in Birkenhead.⁴⁵ When he refused to obey orders he was told that hundreds of 'conchies' had been broken there. He was punched in the face on the Parade Ground in Birkenhead Park to make him turn 'eyes right', and hurled over the horse by four men when he refused orders to take part in gymnastics. The abuse took place in public view and four soldiers were court-martialled over the incident. Beardsworth refused to give

evidence, apparently as a statement that it was the whole system of recruitment that was to blame rather than individuals, and no one was found guilty. Beardsworth's case was sufficiently serious to attract considerable publicity in the press.⁴⁶ It was also raised in Parliament.⁴⁷ The case serves as testimony to the harsh treatment faced by conscientious objectors – but it perhaps also shows how the network of activists opposed to such abuses could bring them into the public domain and make them a source of debate and disquiet.

James Landers, a lathe operator from Salford who opposed fighting on grounds of religion, had a rather different experience.⁴⁸ As a member of the Christian Brethren, who later became close to members of the Plymouth Brethren, Landers' attitude towards military service was essentially one of 'quietist' resistance. He agreed to join the Non-Combattant Corps since it would ensure that his widowed mother received financial support. His treatment at NCC barracks in north Wales was generally good even though he refused to follow orders on occasion (a number of COs in this position even presented an album to the guards in appreciation of their kindness). When moved to another barracks, where he was put on guard duty, Landers refused to issue the standard 'friend or foe' challenge on the grounds that no man should be considered an enemy. He also tried to persuade soldiers in the camp that military service was immoral. In early 1918, when the rules were changed to allow payment to the family of soldiers even when they were facing disciplinary charges, Landers began to refuse to obey any orders and was court-martialled and sent to Wormwood Scrubs. Although sentenced to heavy labour he was successful in winning the trust of the Governor who gave him routine maintenance jobs around the prison. Landers' experiences were certainly difficult, but his treatment was far better than that experienced by Beardsworth, for reasons that remain unclear. Landers' quietist religious stance – albeit one that prompted him to proselytise on the virtues of non-violence – may have been less offensive to those in positions of authority than Beardsworth's militant socialism. Or it may simply reflect once more the impossibility of generalising about the experience of Lancashire COs both in their own communities, when they first sought exemption from military service, and later on when they were in prison or undertaking some form of approved alternative service.

Conclusions

The material presented in the previous paragraphs suggests that some towns and cities in Lancashire had a 'concentration' of COs ten times higher than in other places just a few miles

away (though it is worth recalling that in Lancashire, as across Britain, the number of conscientious objectors never formed more than a very small percentage of the population). It is possible to speculate about the reasons for these differences – the local presence of a regiment, a tradition of radical politics – but such explanations must for now remain tentative. The sharp differences between pairs of towns that appeared to have marked similarities – Nelson and Rawtenstall, Burnley and Blackburn – certainly militates against any simple socio-economic explanation for something as complex as an individual’s decision to refuse military service. Nor is it easy to ‘reverse engineer’ the problem in order to see whether a high or low proportion of COs in a particular area reflects local attitudes to war in the locality. Some insight can be drawn from the result of a by-election in Rossendale early in 1917 – the constituency included the town of Rawtenstall as well as Bacup and Haslingden – which was contested by a local CO named Albert Taylor who stood on a peace ticket. Taylor’s arrest shortly before the poll caused a great deal of local protest. In the event he won about a quarter of the vote – no mean feat given that universal suffrage had not yet been introduced – and as a snapshot in time it confirms the impression that parts of east and south-east Lancashire had a culture that was more sympathetic to COs and less supportive of the war than many other areas of Britain. A useful contrast to Rossendale is provided by the by-election held at Stockton-on-Tees a few weeks later, where the local Quaker dignitary Edward Backhouse stood on a peace ticket and obtained just 7% of the vote. The number of COs from the area was low.

It is important to stress that the material presented here does not necessarily undermine claims about the strength of the war resistance movement in Britain during 1914-18. Even the most cursory reading of publications like *Labour Leader* and *The Tribune* provides ample details about the many meetings which were held opposing conscription and demanding peace. Nor does it undermine the copious evidence that COs were able to find help and support from a network of sympathizers. What it does do – even allowing for all the uncertainties and incompleteness of the evidence base – is suggest that the motives of many men who refused military service were based on a personal decision that they could not reconcile their religious faith with the demands of the state. And, while many more cited motives that combined a mix of political and religious promptings, comparatively few men refused to fight on the grounds that the war was a capitalist conflict fought on the backs of the workers. Conscientious objectors can certainly be considered as part of a broader movement of war resistance, as long as that movement is recognized as something fluid and eclectic, and not as an homogenous political grouping coalesced around a definite socialist ideology committed to radical social

and economic reform. Yet what the previous pages show above all is that even within Lancashire there is a need for more granular studies designed to capture the nuances of why there was a higher concentration of COs in some towns and cities than in others. The evidence suggests that counties are of limited value as a unit of analysis when trying to understand patterns of conscientious objection to military service in Britain during the First World War.

¹ For books on Lancashire towns and cities see, for example, Ian Gregory *et al*, *Great War Britain Lancaster: Remembering 1914-1918* (History Press, 2017); Stephen McGreal, *Liverpool in the Great War*, (Pen & Sword, 2014); Andrew Simpson, *Great War Britain Manchester: Remembering Britain 1914-1918* (History Press, 2017).

² For details of the major project seeking to globalise and localise the First World War, see <http://greatwar.history.ox.ac.uk/>

³ For some books dedicated to this subject see, for example, Philip Adams, *Not in Our Name: War Dissent in a Welsh Town* (Briton Ferry Books, 2015); Karyn Burnham, *The Courage of Cowards: The Untold Stories of the First World War* (Pen and Sword, 2014); Ann Kramer, *Conscientious Objectors of the First World War: A Determined Resistance* (Pen and Sword, 2013); Stephen Wade, *No More Soldiering: Conscientious Objectors in the First World War* (Amberley Publishing, 2014)

⁴ In addition to the books cited above, see, for example, Cyril Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience: The Story of an English Community's Opposition to the Great War* (Francis Boutle, 2001); Lois Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service during the First World War* (Manchester University Press, 2009). For two excellent examples of projects by local groups in Lancashire researching the history of COs in their communities, see the Global Link 'Documenting Dissent' project in Lancaster (<http://www.documentingdissent.org.uk/objectors/#readmore>) and the *In Situ* project in Burnley and its environs (<http://www.in-situ.org.uk/courage-of-conviction>). I owe a particular debt to the organisers and volunteers of Documenting Dissent for help and information.

⁵ Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience*; Cyril Pearce and Helen Dunham, 'Patterns of Dissent in Britain during the First World War' *War and Society*, vol. 34 (2015) 140-59. Like many others I owe a huge debt to Cyril Pearce both for his pioneering work and for generously supplying me with a copy of the database of conscientious objectors he has built up over many years of painstaking research. It goes without saying that the analysis here is my own

⁶ On the NCF see Thomas Kennedy, *Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship* (University of Arkansas Press (1981); on the UDC see Martin Schwarz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Clarendon Press, 1971)

⁷ For different views on this issue, see John Rae, *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service* (OUP 1970) and David Boulton, *Objection Overruled: Conscription and Conscience in the First World War* (MacGibbon and Kee, 1967)

⁸ For a recent discussion, see Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

⁹ Gregory *et al*, *Great War Lancaster* 35-6

¹⁰ The calculations in the following paragraphs are based on the recruitment figures given in National Archives NATS 1/398. All the calculations based on this data are those of the author

¹¹ Edward M. Spiers, 'Voluntary Recruiting in Yorkshire, 1914-1915, *Northern History*, vol. 52 (2015) 296.

¹² Spiers, 'Voluntary Recruiting', 297

¹³ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 13 August 1914

¹⁴ *Manchester Evening News*, 3 August 1914; *Burnley Express*, 8 August 1914

¹⁵ *Burnley Gazette*, 5 August 1914

¹⁶ http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/4577598.1_368_names_collected_for_Nelson_war_memorial/

¹⁷ For a study along these lines see Pearce and Dunham, 'Patterns of Dissent', though I have avoided producing anything as formal as a CO index, preferring to use the statistics to illustrate a general pattern. The statistics in the rest of this article are compiled by the author from the 1911 census and the Pearce database.

¹⁸ On Methodist COs, see Michael Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict: Methodism, Peace and War in the Twentieth Century* (Epworth) 57-70

¹⁹ On the Christadelphians, see F.G. Jannaway, *The Christadelphians during the Great War* (Published by the author, 1929).

²⁰ Michael Hughes, 'Dilemmas of the Nonconformist Conscience: Attitudes towards War and Peace within Primitive Methodism', vol. 5 (2013) 75-96

²¹ On the raid, see *Manchester Evening News*, 24 June 1916

²² *Lancaster Observer and Morecambe Chronicle*, 17 March 1916

²³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 5 May 1916

²⁴ *Labour Leader*, 21 September 1916

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- ²⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 April 1916
- ²⁶ See, for example, *Labour Leader*, 20 January 1916
- ²⁷ *Manchester Evening News*, 1 April 2016
- ²⁸ *Manchester Evening News*, 24 March 2016
- ²⁹ Andrew Rigby, *A Life in Peace. A Biography of Wilfrid Wellock* (Prism Press, 1988)
- ³⁰ *Burnley News*, 18 March 1916
- ³¹ *Burnley News*, 19 July 1916
- ³² *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 April 1916
- ³³ Boulton, *Objection Overruled*, 124. For an early critique of the tribunals, though one which recognised there were differences from place to place, see John W. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience: A History, 1916-1919* (George Allen & Unwin, 1922) 68-109
- ³⁴ James McDermott, *British Military Service Tribunals, 1916-1918: A Very Much Abused Body of Men* (Manchester University Press, 2011)
- ³⁵ Will Ellsworth-Jones, *We Will Not Fight: The Untold Story of World War One's Conscientious Objectors* (Aurum, 2007)
- ³⁶ See, for example, the articles by the Primitive Methodist Bible scholar A.S. Peake collected in *Prisoners of Hope: The Problem of the Conscientious Objector* (Allen and Unwin, 1918)
- ³⁷ Michael Hughes, *Archbishop Randall Davidson* (Routledge, 2018) 93-4
- ³⁸ For details of Ribiero's case and the response of his supporters, see *Manchester Evening News*, 26 October 1917; *Daily Herald*, 12 October 1918
- ³⁹ On Princetown, see Simon Dell, *The Dartmoor Conchies* (Dartmoor Company, 2017)
- ⁴⁰ On Dyce, see Joyce Walker, *A Cloak of Conscience: Dyce Work Camp, Conscientious Objectors and the Public of N.E. Scotland* (Unknown publisher, 2011)
- ⁴¹ *Lancaster Observer and Morecambe Chronicle*, 10 March 1916
- ⁴² McDermott, *British Military Service Tribunals*
- ⁴³ *Labour Leader*, 16 March 1916
- ⁴⁴ See, too, the case before the Nelson tribunal reported in the *Lancashire Daily Post*, 14 July 1916. For a somewhat different view of the Nelson tribunal in action, see the case detailed in *Lancashire Evening Post*, 2 March 1916.
- ⁴⁵ For a discussion of Beardsworth's case see Karyn Burnham, *The Courage of Cowards: The Untold Stories of the First World War Conscientious Objectors* (Pen and Sword, 2014)
- ⁴⁶ *Labour Leader*, 7 September 1916, 19 October 1916
- ⁴⁷ *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 14 August, 18 October, 31 October 1916.
- ⁴⁸ For a discussion of Landers' case, see Burnham, *Courage of Cowards*. Landers own memoirs can be found in his papers held in the Liddle Collection, Leeds University Library Special Collections, Liddle/WW1/CO/053.