



## Thomas Edmund Harvey (1875-1955)

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*"We are prepared, if need be, I believe, to lay down life itself in the cause of our fellow countrymen, but we cannot take life, even at the call of the State"*

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For five years before the war, Thomas Edmund Harvey had been the warden of Toynbee Hall, the social reform centre in east London and from 1910 he was the Liberal MP for West Leeds. He came to prominence, however, during the war as the Member of Parliament who was largely responsible for ensuring that the so-called 'conscience clause' was enacted in the Military Service Act 1916.

He was 41 and married when the Act was initially passed and so it did not apply to him directly - but his own personal safety was not his primary motivation. Even more than a politician, 'TEH', as he was known, was a Quaker first and foremost. From a prominent Leeds Quaker family, he was an avowed pacifist and on the eve of Britain's entry into war, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914, he pleaded with Asquith in the House:

*"I am convinced that this war, for the great masses of the countries of Europe, and not for our own country alone, is no people's war. It is a war that has been made – I am not referring to our leaders here – by men in high places, by diplomatists working in secret, by bureaucrats who are out of touch with the peoples of the world, who are the remnant of an older evil civilisation which is disappearing by gradual and peaceful methods. I want to make an appeal on behalf of the people, who are voiceless except in this House, that there should be a supreme effort made to save this terrible wreckage of human life"*

But war came and the Quakers – or to give them their correct name, the Society of Friends – were swift to act. They formed an emergency committee in that first week and the Friends' Ambulance Unit three weeks later. Then, just a few days after that, the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee was set up.

TEH was to play a significant role on the Committee and was president of its French Mission. Still a Member of Parliament, he was part of the Friends' first expedition which left England in November 1914 to provide relief to the thousands of refugees who flooded northern France:

*"Those who have not seen for themselves the destruction caused by bombardment and fire, when all other considerations have been subordinated to military necessity, or the determination to inflict signal punishment on the population of a hostile nation, can have only a dim idea of the condition of scores of villages and little towns in north-eastern France today"*

Their immediate task was to build huts for the local inhabitants as their homes had been destroyed in the fighting at Sommeilles. His wife would later speak of their immersion in the relief work: "Mr Harvey and myself could drive nails and saw off pieces of planks". Their next task was to help them feed themselves. And this was not a small task. In his reports back to the Quakers, TEH described the total war of another age:

*"We have seen the charred bones of sheep and oxen lying in the stalls of the farmyard which had been burnt over them. All the harvest, which had just been garnered in, was burnt in village after village. Threshers and reaping machines, or other agricultural implements, stand still amid the ruins, twisted and charred by the flames. Even the dunghills were not spared, and paraffin was poured upon them to burn up the manure which was needed for the land"*

He was to continue with this work well into 1920, but at the same time, another aspect of the war was to begin dominating his life. The 1915 'shell crisis' (when it became clear that not enough munitions were being produced) was not the only resourcing problem to face the Asquith government. Even with restrictions on the press under the Defence of the Realm Act, news of the

scale of casualties on the Western Front could not be suppressed and fighting men were in increasingly short supply. This led the government to move reluctantly towards conscription as the only way of guaranteeing sufficient numbers of soldiers.

When Asquith made his appeal to unmarried men to enlist in December 1915, Harvey spoke passionately in the Commons about the fact that the Prime Minister's words made:

*"no exception for religious conviction, for conscientious conviction, however profound, and I do appeal to the Prime Minister that he will make clear his position to the country as a whole on this point without delay. It is of the very greatest importance . . . I believe that it is possible for citizens to serve the State without transgressing the higher claims in which they believe conscientiously. When religion and conscience tell a man that he must not take human life I believe the State ought to recognise that and ought to allow him freedom to find other forms of service which may be of the truest value to the community"*

TEH's Quaker pacifism meant that he could not sit back and allow other men who shared his convictions to be forced to fight. Alongside other Quaker colleagues (such as Arnold Rowntree, Joseph Rowntree's nephew) he lobbied for 'conscientious objection' to be explicitly recognised in the 1916 Military Service Act as a condition for exemption from military service.

There was considerable resistance to this in the House during the Second Reading of the Bill in January 1916. The Conservative MP George Lane-Fox commented:

*"If we were all conscientious objectors, if as a nation we were conscientious objectors, it would only be a matter of time in the ordinary play of the forces of the world when that nation would be exterminated. These men are entirely wrong-headed. I respect their consciences, though I do not respect their heads so much".*

However, by the end of January, the Bill was passed along with the 'conscience clause' intact – one of only four grounds of exemption.

Under the Act, men could be exempted on grounds of conscience if a Military Service Tribunal found in their favour, in which case they had to take up work of 'national importance' either in the Non-Combatant Corps or, for instance, in munitions factories. If they were refused exemption, they could appeal, all the way up to the Central Tribunal in London but if a conscientious objector's appeals were rejected, he could end up in a cycle of arrest, military court-martial and imprisonment.

TEH would later call the Act "clumsy, ill-conceived and harshly administered" but he would also accept that the mere act of recognising conscience was an important breakthrough:

*"The Military Service Act was passed at a time of bitter national need . . . It was a great thing that at such a moment the government and parliament should have resolved to make, as they intended to do, provision to protect the conscience of a small minority and a very unpopular minority, who seemed to most men to be reaping the privileges of citizenship without sharing its risks . . . In spite of all the pitiable failure that followed, the Military Service Act's recognition of the rights of conscience was a great achievement"*

With millions of men conscripted into the military over the next two and a half years, the number of conscientious objectors was relatively small – around 16,000. But some of them were to face enormous hardship solely on account of their beliefs. A personal statement from a Seventh Day

Adventist who was court-martialled in France for refusing to work on his Sabbath was published by the Conscientious Objectors Information Bureau in November 1917:

*"I was taken out of my cell and two cement blocks weighing about 35 lbs each were roped round my neck, one hanging upon my chest, the other upon my back. With my wrists still in irons behind my back I was made to pace the passage at a quick march. At last, from exhaustion, I sank beneath the strain and remained in a fit about an hour"*

Another letter in TEH's papers talks of the case of one James Brightmore in June 1917:

*"This is the most brutal and inhuman of the whole lot. After serving two sentences in prison, one of five and another of three months, he was sent back to his unit at Cleethorpes. For refusing to obey military orders he was sentenced to 28 days solitary confinement – to be given raw rations to cook himself. The solitary confinement was in a hole dug in the earth – 3ft by 2ft and 10ft deep – containing 2ft of water, a strip of wood was given him to stand upon. He was in this hole 11 days and nights"*

When news of Brightmore's ordeal was published in the Manchester Guardian, questions were asked in Parliament about his treatment, with a War Minister declaring, "There is no intention of sending Brightmore to France". Stephen Gwynn, one of six Irish nationalist MPs who enlisted in the army, asked in frustration, "Could the hon. Gentleman explain how on earth it is impossible for him to ascertain whether a specific punishment was inflicted upon a specific man in a known camp after at least a week has elapsed since his attention was first drawn to it?"

TEH would work diligently to ensure that conscientious objectors were treated more humanely than Brightmore, and served on the Pelham Committee which oversaw the work of 'national importance', which most 'COs' undertook. He stood down from Parliament in the 1918 general election – but was back five years later, even presenting a petition to Parliament in 1924 signed by nearly 20,000 people which urged the abolition of the death penalty. In 1937 he was elected for the Combined English Universities seat as an Independent Progressive candidate. He continued to serve in this seat throughout the Second World War and died peacefully at his home in Leeds in 1955.

### **Bibliography**

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