

First World War and Adventists in the UK: Dr Brian P Phillips

These few pages are selected from a dissertation that Dr Brian P Phillips wrote over 20 years ago regarding the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Wales. This extract relates to what happened in principally Wales both during and after the First World War.

Throughout their history, Seventh-day Adventists have been advocates of civil and religious liberty. They believe in the authority of the laws of civil government and obey them as long as those laws do not conflict with the laws of God. In the United States during the Civil War, the non-combatant nature of the denomination was recognised by the government. However, in Britain during the First World War, attitudes towards Seventh-day Adventists were different. When the war began, few Welsh Seventh-day Adventists were really concerned. Many of the men who lived in the valleys of South Wales were miners, and as such, we needed to produce coal for the war effort. What many could not come to terms with, was the change in the character of the Welsh, who threw their past radical and peaceful tradition to the wind. "It was strange," said K.O. Morgan "To reconcile the spectacle of the Rev John Williams of Brynsiencyn, 'Lloyd-George's Chaplain' as he was called, preaching in the pulpit in full military uniform, with the gentle message of the Prince of Peace."

When the war began on 4 August 1914 the British Union Conference was in session in Battersea Town Hall, London. L. R. Conradi, the leader of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Europe, a German national, had to leave the rostrum and return to his homeland on that fateful day. When he arrived in Germany he was notified that the President of the East German Union and sent a letter to the Ministry of War in Berlin. The contents of that letter was to cause a great deal of suffering among German Seventh-day Adventists, and split the membership of some churches in the Welsh valleys after the war. The letter made the following declaration:

Most Honourable Lord General and Minister of War.

Since oftimes our point of view concerning our duty; and especially, since our refusal to serve, in times of peace, on Saturday (Sabbath) is regarded as fanatical, therefore I take the liberty, Your Excellency, to present to you in the following, the principles of German Seventh-day Adventists, especially just now in the present war situation.

While we stand on the fundamentals of the Holy Scriptures, and seek to fulfil the precepts of Christendom, keeping the Rest Day (Sabbath), that God established in the beginning, by endeavouring to put aside all work on that day, still in these times of stress, we have bound ourselves together in the defence of the "Fatherland", and under these circumstances we will also bear arms on Saturday (Sabbath). On this point we take our stand on the Scripture found in 1 Peter 2: 13 – 17.

(Signed) H.F.Schuberth, President.

Conradi endorsed the sending of this letter to the Ministry of War. As early as 1913 he had drawn attention to the fact that no provision to accommodate an individual's conscience, in the event of war, was to be found in the legislation of any European country. He had asked the General Conference Officers to advise him on his response, if war should break out in Europe. No advice was given before the war began, so Conradi made his way through much danger, to be present at the General Conference Autumn Council, in California, in 1915. The response of the Council to Conradi was "We grant every country in the world the full liberty to fit themselves into their fixed laws in the future as they have in the past." This advice was taken literally, and the leadership of the denomination in Germany began to disfellowship all members who disagreed with the letter sent to the War Ministry. Those disfellowshipped began to protest that the leadership in Germany was not following the traditional beliefs of the denomination, and that was it was an infringement of the individual's conscience, to say that they would bear arms. Many were thrown into prison and a large number of Seventh-day Adventists around Bremen began to work actively against the leadership in Germany.

When the General Conference Committee refused to remove the leadership of the denomination in Germany after the end of the war, a group called the German Reform Movement came into existence. It was to draw into its fold many who were dissatisfied with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and by 1924 it caused a split in the Bargoed and Blaenavon churches. Several individuals in other Welsh churches were also influenced by the writings of the 'Reform Movement'. A member of the Bargoed church, F. Charles, became the leader of the Movement in Britain. He moved to London for a short period, to head the work of the Reform Movement, but later returned to the Rhymney Valley. His work caused the disbanding of the Bargoed church for most of the interwar years. The main plank of the German Reform Movement has always been absolute opposition to war and non-cooperation with the civil authorities during time of war.

Seventh-day Adventists have always been conscientious co-operators rather than absolute objectors to the country's conduct in war. The British government also made this distinction in the speech of Lloyd George, when Secretary for War, in the House of Commons on 26 July 1916. Lloyd-George said that he had 'no sympathy whatsoever' with absolutists and that he would 'consider the best means of making the path of that class as hard as possible'. As one writer wryly commented, "to think that these words could be spoken by the man who was first risen from obscurity as the champion of Welsh Nonconformist conscience concerning burials." Of those who objected to the shedding of blood; Lloyd-George said that it was 'the traditional policy of the country to respect this view'. In review of the subsequent policies of the British government the words now seem hollow.

Following the introduction of conscription in 1916, there were 'countless instances of injustice' to Seventh-day Adventists and cases of cruelty which are now a matter of public record. Several of those who later served as ministers in Wales, suffered while in the hands of the military police. The Military Service Act (2), the first conscription bill, was introduced by Mr Asquith on 5 January 1916. It declared that all unmarried men between 18 and 41 were transferred to the Army reserve. Tribunals were to be set up to examine appeals for exemption. Local tribunals examined appellants in each registration district. Those who appealed against the judgement of the Local Tribunal took their objections to an Appeal Tribunal which covered a larger geographical area. Only if the Appeal Tribunal give permission, could the case be taken to the Central Tribunal in London. If both Tribunals

refused to give an exemption certificate to an objector to Military Service, he was taken to a recruiting office, and then to a police cell for the night. On the following morning he was brought before a magistrate, fined £2, and then handed over to the military to be placed in a Guardroom. Refusal to obey orders inevitably ended in a Court Martial.

It soon became clear, early in 1916, that the Seventh-day Adventists were only a very small proportion of those claiming exemption on grounds of conscience. By May, over 10,000 applied for exemption from combatant duty. The Government set up the Non-combatant Corps, to regulate entrance into the military machine. By October 1916, 2014 had been court-martialled and given prison sentences. In February 1916, the British Union Conference issued certificates to every Seventh-day Adventist likely to be brought before a tribunal. The status of the denominations ministers came into question when F. L. Chapman was summoned to appear before the Police Court, in Exeter, on 24th of May 1917, for failing to report from military service. Chapman was a licensed minister, who was, as is the custom among Seventh-day Adventists, on probation before being ordained to the ministry. Evidence from S. G. Haughey showed that Chapman was a minister of religion and the Bench exempted him from military service. The case was a test case and benefited the ministers of all denominations. Soon afterwards the Seventh-day Adventists registered the names of all their ministers at the War office. Students at the Missionary Training College in Watford were given exemption until they finished their course in 1960.

The denomination had advised its members not to volunteer for the Royal Army Medical Corps because it had always been a combatant force, but to enter the Non-combatant Corps. Sixteen of the former students at the Training College entered the 3rd Eastern

N. C. C. At Bedford Barracks on 23 May 1916, and soon after, fourteen was sent to France

J. W. Graham takes up the story: "For about 18 months they worked in a non-combatant corps in France and were excused work during the Sabbath. Then some military genius decided that this testimony should be outraged, and they were ordered to work on the Sabbath Day. For refusing, they were sentenced to six months' hard labour.

On 23 November 1917, they began their sentence at the No.3 Military Prison in Le Havre. Among those sentence was H. W. Lowe, later to become a superintendent of the Welsh Mission, A.F. Bird, who became an evangelist in Wales, and W.W. Armstrong, who soon after the Second World War became the leader of the Seventh-day Adventists denomination in Britain

The treatment of this group of Seventh-day Adventists in France has drawn the attention of many noted historians. In particular the treatment of W. W. Armstrong. He was mistakenly considered by the authorities to be the ring-leader of the group. Twelve of the group wrote an account of their experiences in the clandestine, **The Tribunal** of 4th of April 1918. In the same paper W. W. Armstrong wrote an account of his punishment, which was published anonymously:

In the cell passage the sergeants agreed that I was the ringleader, probably because I was the tallest. The smallest pair of 'figure eights' was brought and screwed down upon my wrists. So small was the pair that to get them on, my flesh was ripped and cut in several places. The circulation was practically cut off, leaving

my hands dead. I was then pushed into a cell, and pinned against a wall by one sergeant, whilst the others in a most passionate rage struck me continually about the head and in the stomach. Then one burly NCO lifted me up bodily, and with his knee and threw me backward to the other inside. The contact with the iron Wall caused the irons to cut more, and sent acute pain to all my nerves. This kind of treatment continued until I dropped to the floor. I was picked up, but then collapsed again, whereupon I was kicked several times in the middle of the back. Finally, I became unconscious. I had made no opposition by force, or even uttered a word which had given the slightest offence.

About 10 AM I was taken out of my cell, and two cement blocks weighing about 35lbs each were roped around 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 for about an hour. When I came to, I was placed in the sale again until the afternoon, when the governor visited me and gave permission for me to have my blankets. At 4 PM, I was given six ounces of bread – the first food for 24 hours

Armstrong remained in his cell at night until 12 noon the next day, without medical attention. Later in life the effects of the punishment were to cause a great deal of suffering to Armstrong. A. F. Bird was to die prematurely. Such ill-treatment could not remain a secret. Soon church leaders, like the Baptist F.B. Meyer, leading Quakers, and members of the Non-conscription Fellowship, made sure that the British Government was aware of the cruelty. Within a month the fourteen were sent back to be lodged in Wormwood Scrubbs. After a hearing at the Central Tribunal, they were sent, under the Home Office Scheme, to Knutsford Work Centre. The British Union Conference made a protest to the War Office and in consequence, the men were allowed to return to civilian life in July 1918. From that time Seventh-day Adventists in Britain have generally been allowed a choice of occupation of national importance in time of War.

A group of seventeen Seventh-day Adventists were sent to the bleak prison in Dartmoor. In March 1917, the prison had been turned into a work centre. Among this group were several from Wales: B. Davies, D. Davies, J Rutherford (a Hereford Butcher who later became the elder of the church in his hometown), and J. M. Howard (who became the president of the Welsh mission after the Second World War). Howard had the distinction of being both a prisoner (during the First World War) and, after the Second World War, a visiting chaplain at Wormwood Scrubbs. Charles Meredith, son of W. H. Meredith, an electrician and maintenance engineer, rewired the alarm system Dartmoor prison during his incarceration. Hector Bull another of the group was housed in the same cell in which Joseph Bates, one of the co-founders of Seventh-day Adventism, had been held as a prisoner of war in 1812. Bull became Minister of the denomination's church in Cardiff in the 1950s.

Dartmoor took less than one third of the men were to work under the Home Office Scheme, which had been explained to the House of Commons on 28 June 1916. Although the scheme appeared at first to be a solution to the problem of those who would not be conscripted, it was soon realised that in practice its purpose was penal rather than for the production of any useful work. The subject was debated in the House of Lords on 30 April 1918. Lord

Parmoor moved a resolution which stated that the non-combatant work of conscientious objectors, should be service of national value and not merely of a penal character. He described, during the debate, the work at Dartmoor, which consisted of men building a wall only to be followed by another group of men taking the wall down. Under pressure, the government modified the scheme and allowed the men who had served a sentence of a year to be used by private employers, on condition that each individual was at least 25 miles from his home.

It is clear today, that when the government introduced conscription in 1916, they were in a state of panic, which was exacerbated by the large numbers of those who objected. Seventh-day Adventists came out of the war experience, having stood up for their position as conscientious co-operators. After the protests against the treatment of their members in Military Prisons, had been made, the House of Commons instituted an enquiry. Brigadier-General Childs issued a statement to W. T. Bartlett, secretary of the British Union Conference on behalf of the War Office and said that those responsible for the ill-treatment of those in the Prison at Le Havre and been reprimanded, reduced to the ranks, or transferred. Since that time the rights of British Seventh-day Adventists have been respected by the government whenever conscription has been in force. From the experience of wartime persecution, Adventism survived, only to see the potential of growth in numbers eroded by the fickle political climate of the post-war era.