The abolition of war

Keith Robbins. *The Abolition of War: the 'Peace Movement' in Britain, 1914-1919*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976. 255 pp. £5.00.

The major events of the First World War have long been part of the warp of history. The usual interval having elapsed, we are now at work on the detailed history of less central happenings; a time for theses and monographs, as materials become available. Effective synthesis cannot take place until this primary work has been meticulously done.

In *The Abolition of War* Professor Robbins gives us a skilful and coherent account of the opposition in Britain to the First World War, and the pressure of an early peace. He has broken new ground, consulting much material previously little used in published work. By going back to primary sources, he has controverted some of the myths that grew up while the topic awaited serious study. He provides, for example, a less simplistic account of the Quaker position in the No-Conscription Fellowship than is often to be found, although unfortunately, as we shall see, it is still far from complete or free from error.

As all historians must, Robbins conveys in his book a point of view. In the narrative chapters he establishes this less by analysis than by the interpolation of rather odd, cynical remarks which will undoubtedly appeal to some readers. His comments on the Bloomsbury group are enlivened by a certain wit (not greatly to my taste, I must confess, but not necessarily the worse for that): of Lytton Strachey it is said he was "secure in the knowledge that he had established the standard reply to a standard question asked by the Tribunals. He had done his bit" (p. 88), while Russell is described as differing from the others in that "at least initially ... he possessed ... vestigial backbone." There is little to be said for such heavy-handed comments as "The only consolation for pacifists was that though they remained divided, the Government seemed no nearer winning the war" (p. 136), but his assertions that "Peace itself is a negative concept" (p. 47) and that "pacifists did not really know what peace was" (p. 122), and his elaboration of the paradox of "fighting for peace" (p. 47 and elsewhere) must be taken seriously. Of course there is truth in them; the attempt to find alternatives to war always has been bedevilled by disagreement, pacifists being as human as their opponents. The ground is an easy one on which to attack, and the First World War, as Robbins makes abundantly clear, made strange bedfellows among those who wished to see it brought rapidly to an end--as it did among those who thought it must be fought to a finish. The title of the book is presumably intended to make the point that the pacifists were--as often they undeniably were--guilty of excessive idealism, which caused them to lose touch with reality; their reaction to the Russian revolution, which Robbins could with advantage have discussed at greater length, was the prime example. But from the perspective of the 1970s, I do not find less realism in the idea that a negotiated peace might have been a hopeful first step to a reduction of international hostility than in the concept that that war was being fought to end war. The pacifists failed and are therefore legitimate butts for cynicism: would that the more sophisticated politicians had succeeded where the pacifists failed.

Another pacifist weakness to which Robbins draws attention was the belief that the mass of the people desired peace; this is a complex question, not to be solved simply by reference to elections, but it is one Robbins does well to raise. It is legitimate to see belated realism in Catherine Marshall's remark after the 1918 election that if Lloyd George became more autocratic "we may yet have revolution by violence in this country. In any case the character of the new House of Commons is bound to turn more and more people's hopes towards direct action" (p. 178). But it goes beyond good sense or fair comment to extrapolate from this that such pacifists as Marshall turned at the end of the war to the view that "By using violence, pacifists might be able to persuade people to desire that peace which pacifists said they ought to desire!" Robbins' treatment of Marshall is an example of his failure to explore his subject deeply enough. Using her papers as a major source, he gives substantial credit to the part she played in the No-Conscription Fellowship. But he reveals a startling ignorance of the political background from which she came, describing both her (p. 77) and Helena Swanwick (p. 46) as having been suffragettes, a term which is not (and never has been) properly applied to members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, in which both were active before the war. This is no mere matter of terminology; their principles and political experience as non-militant suffragists informed the whole attitude of these women to the war.

If we look to the final chapter, entitled "The Peace Movement in Perspective", for a more overtly analytical approach, we find it disappointingly adds little to our understanding either of the peace movement or of Robbins' perspective. I had hoped to find here some pulling-together of the threads of his discontent, perhaps a reasoned refutation of the logic of the peace people, or an exposition of what was positive about the policies of those who opposed them. Instead, we have a superficial survey of the inter-war careers of the people and organizations whose wartime activities have been the subject of the book, with the addition of any others who came to confess that their aim was to promote peace. The pacifist dilemma of the 'thirties is not to be explained by reference to attitudes to the first war divorced from the complex background of international events.

What is grossly true of the final chapter, which covers twenty years in as many pages, is more subtly true of the whole book. Robbins' difficulty is that his subject lends itself to the writing of neither reliable micro-history nor effective macro-history. The scope of the work is too wide for the former, the time too soon for the latter. Robbins' overview covers the whole of what he calls the "Peace Movement"

(the quotation marks are his) during the First World War. Since detailed studies of many of his themes are not yet available, he has written his synthesis direct from primary sources, with only minimal help from the work of other scholars, even where this exists. His narrative skill cannot prevent us from questioning whether all the different streams of opposition to war, of planning for peace, of urging negotiations, of outright pacifism, which run through the four years of the war, can naturally flow in the same bed, or whether Robbins has had to dig an over-wide artificial channel to bring them together. (In order, perhaps, that he may then complain that the waters did not mix smoothly.) If we accept the width of his terms of reference, then we must be surprised at certain omissions: we look in vain, for example, for a full discussion of the work of the Women's International League, and find not even a mention of the proposals for continuous mediation made by the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace.

The selection of a topic far too wide to be adequately researched by one scholar from primary sources results not only in omissions but in unevenness of treatment and many inaccuracies. For instance, while the discussion of the Quaker dilemma over the rights and wrongs of the use of force by a projected League of Nations is valuable, it is incorrect to describe the conference on International Sanctions which took place on 11 and 12 October 1916 (Bertrand Russell was present) as a "Quaker conference"; the meeting was *arranged* by Friends as a forum for the airing of different views. Further, what Robbins describes as "a statement issued at its conclusion" (p. 108) was no such thing; the passage quoted comes, as his own reference shows, from the manuscript Minutes of the Friends' Peace Committee's regular private meeting almost two weeks later, and has little if anything directly to do with the conference. On the No-Conscription Fellowship, too, Robbins gives us a good deal of detail which has previously been available, if at all, only in unpublished work, but he has selected almost arbitrarily and paints at best an incomplete picture of a fascinating and complex organization. His handling of sources is again not impeccable.

By following a theme of interest to readers of *Russell*--namely, the wartime career of Bertrand Russell--I hope to illustrate both the contribution of Robbins' work and its grave limitations. The occasional error of fact is apt to creep into the most carefully written book, but here are too many (and I give you only those relating to Bertrand Russell). Russell was not a member of the National Committee of the No-Conscription Fellowship in 1915 (p. 78). He did not become Acting Chairman when Clifford Allen went to prison (p. 86) in August 1916, but in January 1917, after Fenner Brockway and Dr. Salter had both served (the latter

as a stopgap after Brockway's arrest, until an election could be held). Russell was convicted in June 1916 for writing the Everett leaflet, *Two Years' Hard Labour for Refusing to Disobey the Dictates of Conscience*, not for *Repeal the Act* (p. 89), which put members of the National Committee in jail in July 1916. Again, it is misleading to speak of an "embargo" on Russell's lectures on politics (p. 89). The lectures referred to were the series on "The World As It Can Be Made" (later published as *Political Ideals*). Russell was unable to give them in Glasgow because of the War Office order banning him from coastal areas. True, much negotiation with War Office officials turned on the proposed content of the lectures, but he was not prevented from delivering the same lectures in Birmingham and Manchester, and of course the story is well known of how the first one was read for him in Glasgow by Robert Smillie, with impunity. The initial purpose of the order had simply been to oblige the Home Office by keeping Russell away from one of the work centres for objectors released from prison, where it was erroneously thought he planned to stir up disaffection and encourage the men to shirk.[1]

Irritating as these factual errors are, other half-truths and misunderstandings are still more regrettable, if only because they are harder to correct. The N.C.F. "associates", of whom Russell and Catherine Marshall were the most important, eventually stepped into positions of responsibility within the organization, and became full members of the National Committee, but an important point is lost if the special status that was theirs initially is not recognized. The character and much of the strength of the No-Conscription Fellowship came originally from the limitation of full membership to men of military age, not merely, as Robbins suggests (p. 77), young men who wished to be free of the restraint of their elders in the Independent Labour Party. Russell and Marshall first threw themselves into the work as members of the Associates' Political Committee. They saw their function as auxiliary to that of the main body, and saw themselves also as part of the "shadow organization", ready to take over when the leaders went to jail. During Russell's spring vacation from Cambridge in 1916 events moved fast for the conscientious objectors, and those of the associates who had time to spare were swept into fulltime activity, with no change of status. But Russell anticipated that by the time he was free of Cambridge again in mid-June, the immediate crisis of the first arrests would be over, and he thought his part would be to work for a stop-the-war campaign, taking and welcoming whatever risks were

[1]See Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/ Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), pp. 297-304.

necessary in the process. To this period must belong the undated memorandum[2] assigned by Robbins to late 1917 (p. 145), the tone and content of which accord with letters written to Ottoline Morrell in May 1916, and are quite foreign, as we shall see, to Russell's attitude in late 1917. Russell's speaking tour in South Wales in July 1916, undertaken with the sponsorship of the N.C.F., was the implementation of his plan, although he did indeed find that crisis succeeded crisis for the objectors, and within the National Committee, where he and Marshall now began to play a full part. Robbins mentions the Welsh tour briefly (p. 89), and yet claims inconsistently that "despite Miss Marshall's prominent association with the Peace Negotiations Committee, the N.C.F. was preoccupied with its immediate concerns ... it was only by the end of 1916 that agitation for peace gained high priority" (p. 99).

Robbins says of Russell (p. 86) that "he delighted in telling Quakers that he thought many wars in history had been justified and in telling Socialists that he dreaded the tyranny of the state." The quotation is almost verbatim[3] except that Russell, rather than claiming to have delighted in these differences, mentions them with reference to the "desolate solitude" caused by his unbiddable sceptical intellect. Robbins' gloss changes the spirit of the passage entirely, although I must confess that in this instance I am almost as uncomfortable with Russell's version as with Robbins', since contemporary evidence indicates that 1916 brought one of the brief periods when total identification with a cause and, even more, with those working for it, enabled Russell to forget for awhile his lifelong "pain of loneliness." Although he was known not to be an absolute pacifist, he was not "regarded with a certain suspicion by the committed" (p. 87), nor is it true that his "status as prophet and oracle did not help him when he came to tackle the internal problems of the N.C.F." (p. 90). He enjoyed a remarkable position in the Fellowship for many months, involving himself in daily chores but greatly respected for the fairmindedness he brought to internal disputes. He was far from evincing the Cambridge-Bloomsbury "fastidiousness" of which Robbins convicts him (p. 88).

Robbins has much to say that is new and interesting on the subject of alternative service. It would be unreasonable to expect a complete picture in a work that casts its net so wide, but unfortunately he dives into detail with an enthusiasm that leads the reader to suppose

[2]I greatly appreciate Professor Robbins' courtesy in sending me a transcript of part of this document, of which I have not seen the original.

[3]*Autobiography*, II (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 38; *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), pp. 38-9.

he is reading the result of thorough research. The disparity between the views of the N.C.F. leaders and many of their followers to which he is one of the first writers to draw attention was real and is important. We should perhaps fault Catherine Marshall more than Robbins for Russell's misfortune in appearing guilty of duplicity rather than of naivety over the issue in the days immediately following the N.C.F. Convention of 8-9 April 1916, for it was she who later wrote the wrong date (11 April) on a letter she had received from him, in which he said he believed many of the N.C.F. would become willing to accept work of national importance, and would not hold to what they had voted in the Convention (p. 84). Other evidence[4] now shows this letter to belong almost certainly to 25 April. Thus Russell wrote it after the euphoria of the Convention had faded for him and for the N.C.F. rank and file, and not concurrently with his letter to Gilbert Murray (quoted on the same page), in which he declares that those working for schemes of alternative service do not represent the wishes of the C.O.s; there is an even stronger rejection of compromise in a letter from Russell published in the *Nation* on 15 April. Although Russell was proved wrong within a few weeks, there was some justification for his irritation with Edmund Harvey, the Quaker most active in working for alternative service, in that Russell knew that the official support of the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends had been given to the absolutist stand of the young Quaker leaders in the Friends Service Committee and the N.C.F., rather than to the alternativists (though the latter were never rejected by the Society, which indeed did not disown even the many members who served with the armed forces).

Russell, continuing to believe the absolutist stand to be morally and politically the better, yet extended understanding and support to the alternativists and took on special responsibility for the men who accepted service in the work centres set up by the Home Office. In this connection, a more inexcusable injustice is done to Russell and the N.C.F. National Committee when Robbins comes to relate events at Dartmoor in the summer of 1917. The story is worth telling and is told for the first time in print here (pp. 124-6). Robbins uses it, appropriately, as an example of the tensions within the Fellowship, but it is misleading to build the account up in detail to the height of the dispute and then fail to make any mention of the resolution of the conflict, which was accomplished remarkably successfully by a personal visit from Russell on 9 May 1917. The evidence is in Marshall's papers, from

[4]For my reasons for dating this letter 25 April, see my "Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists during the First World War" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 1975), p. 168 n. 21.

which the rest of Robbins' account is taken.

The treatment of Russell's retirement from the N.C.F. and his imprisonment in 1918 is again either questionable or careless. Taken singly, the inaccuracies and omissions are minor; taken together they falsify Russell's position or at best fail to make any sense of it. The use of the memorandum of mid-1916 wrongly assigned to late 1917 (p. 145, and see above) sets the stage by suggesting that Russell was then still courting a jail sentence as a worthwhile contribution to the cause of peace, whereas plenty of evidence shows him to have been convinced that the time for this was now past, and his plan to return to philosophy is also fully documented. Set against this, the remark (p. 164) that, after his conviction, "Russell ... was rather anxious to arrange for his release so that he could settle down to a book on modern logic" leaves the impression (and seems to be intended to do so), that Russell was making excuses to wriggle out of what he had only recently declared to be a useful martyrdom. Although Robbins concedes that Russell's "own opinion was that he had been prosecuted because it was known that he intended to withdraw from N.C.F. work", the damning confusion is deepened by his failure to mention that Russell had in fact completed his resignation (and begun his return to philosophy with two series of philosophical lectures) before the prosecution began, and by his complete misstatement (p. 163) that "throughout 1918 ... the responsibility for formulating N.C.F. policy fell upon Bertrand Russell".

My justification for making such detailed criticism of a small area of Professor Robbins' work is that, unfortunately, I am using Russell's career only as an example of an approach to sources that I could document again and again throughout the book, wherever its subject matter falls within the limited area of my competence. If the points I raise seem to be minor ones, turning on the order of occurrences, the dating of a document, the inclusion of just one more piece of evidence, it is because such things are inescapably the responsibility of the historian working from primary sources. The faults and omissions are in no way deliberate falsiffcation; that most of them do tend to strengthen Robbins' case that the peace people did not know what they were doing is an interesting example of the unconscious effect of bias in history. I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that Robbins feels so out of sympathy with his subject that he simply does not expect to understand the motives or ideas of the people he writes about, and so is led to skim through the detailed evidence which would bring him closer to them. The book concludes on a negative note, and Robbins' message eludes me. One wonders whether there may not be a more constructive and rational philosophic approach somewhere between the ex-

cessive idealism Robbins finds in the pacifists, and the cynicism he seems to manifest.

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