

## The Case of William Batkin

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**T**HE story of William Dyne, who was convinced of peace principles while in the Marines in 1839, and of his consequent sufferings, is well known,<sup>1</sup> but similar experiences about the same time of other "conscientious objectors" have not received the notice given to William Dyne's case.

Less than two years after the attention of Friends had been called to William Dyne, Rochester Friends made the acquaintance of another soldier stationed at Chatham, William Batkin, by name. A sheaf of letters, lent by Gilbert Gilkes, has been before us and from these letters and other sources we have drawn up the following narrative.

William Batkin enlisted at Liverpool as a private in the third regiment of infantry, Buffs, under Colonel Weare. Most of the regiment had been despatched to India, he and a few others only remaining at Chatham. His intimacy with Friends arose through his acquaintance with Benjamin Bishop, of Rochester, a blind Friend, and gradually he became convinced of the peace principles Friends professed, and could not any longer live the life of a soldier. Friends of Rochester and district—Benjamin Bishop, Richard and Ann Marsh, Frederick Wheeler and Ann Rickman the schoolmistress—did not venture to suggest the action he should take, but advised him to do what he felt to be right. In a full account of the case, written by B. Bishop and sent to John Hodgkin (then Junior), of London, we read :

I lent him Barclay's Apology, but not without first feeling my way clear to do so, for I have not forgotten all I had to wade through on the laying down of the arms of H. N. & W. D.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For William Dyne (1818-1896) see *The Changed Warfare*, second series.

<sup>2</sup> That is, Henry Newton and William Dyne. After having been bought out of the army, Newton married Abigail, daughter of Benjamin Bishop, of Strood, the blind Minister, 4 vii. 1844,—“the prim daughter Abby” of Charles Tylor's narrative. (THE JOURNAL, xvii. 3.) Little is known of Newton's later life. He had a considerable family.

In an interview between W. Batkin and Colonel Warre,<sup>3</sup> the commandant of the Chatham garrison, reported to his friends by the prisoner, the commandant stated, did I think that he could look over my crime, or was I aware what punishment he could inflict on me. I answered "According to the army rule, he could shoot me." He said: "Very true, my man, We wont shoot you we will give you a good flogging."

Col. Warre also said to the prisoner: "These people that made you do this will not come and receive any of your punishment." Batkin denied that they had told him to give up soldiering.

In a later interview with F. Wheeler and R. Marsh, Col. Warre reminded them that the way out of the difficulty was the payment of £20 for his release, and added:

I think you ought to be exceedingly careful how you *tamper* with the army. But a *little* more evidence (or information) was wanted and I should have considered it my duty at once to have commenced a prosecution against you.

The refusal of Batkin to mount guard was followed by his trial at a district court martial, which was attended by F. Wheeler and B. Bishop, who considered the trial a very fair one. The proceedings, as reported in notes taken by the Friends present, were as follows:

Proceedings of a District Court Martial in the case of private William Batkin of the 3rd Infantry, 22nd of 1 mo. 1841.

President, Lieutenant Col. Wm. Ferguson (6 other officers on the Court).

President: "Wm Batkin, have you any objection to make to any of the Officers whose names have been now read."

Prisoner: "No."

The Court was Sworn.

The Charges were read as follows:

1st For having on or about the 8th instant refused to go on guard at Upnor when repeatedly ordered to do so by Lieutenant Fosse and saying that he would not be a Soldier any longer.

2nd For subsequently persisting in the same disobedience before Colonel Sir Wm. Warre.

President: "Are you guilty or not guilty?"

Prisoner: "Guilty."

<sup>3</sup> Colonel Warre (1784-1853), afterwards Sir William Warre, was in command at Chatham from 1837 to 1841. See *D.N.B.*

Lance Ser<sup>gent</sup> Moore, Sworn : “ I was orderly ser<sup>gent</sup> on the 7<sup>th</sup> and warned the Prisoner for guard on the 8<sup>th</sup> he made no objection at that time.”

The Prisoner had no questions to ask.

Ser<sup>gent</sup> Damon Derrick, Sworn : “ I was orderly Ser<sup>gent</sup> on the 8<sup>th</sup> at Upnor and when on Parade I found the Prisoner in fatigue dress. I asked him the cause he replied—he gave me no answer or satisfaction but said he would not go on guard. I then ordered him immediately to be confined and reported him to Lieutenant Fosse, the Officer commanding the detachment.”

Lieutenant C. B. Fosse (Sworn) : “ On the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> instant it was reported to me by the orderly Ser<sup>gent</sup> that the Prisoner refused to mount guard. On being brought before me he stated he did not wish to be a soldier any longer. I explained to him that he could not obtain his object by that means and he would most probably be tried by Court Martial. He still persisted in refusing to mount guard. I then ordered him back to confinement, to be brought to head quarters. I am Commander of the detachment at Upnor.”

Lieutenant Henry Jackson, Sworn : “ I was present at the garrison office on the 14<sup>th</sup> instant when the Prisoner was admonished by Sir W<sup>m</sup> Warre on the impropriety of his conduct in refusing to go on guard and to obey the orders of his superior officers. The Commandant at the same time clearly pointed out to him the consequences that must inevitably follow his persisting therein. The Prisoner said he was perfectly aware of the consequences but that he could not make up his mind to take the life of any man and therefore would not do his duty as a soldier any longer.”

Colour Ser<sup>gent</sup> John Mansfield, Sworn : “ I conducted the Prisoner to the Commandant on the 14<sup>th</sup> instant when there Sir W<sup>m</sup> Warre reasoned with him on the impropriety of his conduct and wished him to return to his duty. He still persisted in his disobedience and said he was aware that he was liable to the punishment of death for his crime.”

Here the prosecution closed and the Prisoner was put on his defence.

President : “ What have you to say in your defence ? You must confine yourself to the Charges and recollect the solemn oath that you have taken to serve the Queen.”

The Prisoner asked for a few moments to think—and then said :

“ My reason for not taking up arms is because I am afraid of offending my God. The oath which I took on entering the service, my belief is now that I did wrong in taking that oath and let the consequences be what they may I intend with God’s help to stand to it—viz., the not taking up arms.”

President : “ Have you anyone to speak to your character ? ”

Prisoner : “ Yes. Ser<sup>gent</sup> Mansfield.”

Colour Ser<sup>gent</sup> Mansfield : “ The Prisoner’s character was always very good up to the present Charges.”

The Court was cleared.

On its being re-opened—

Garrison Adjutant Jackson. Sworn: "The prisoner's general character is very good—his age is about 19 y<sup>rs</sup> & 3 mo<sup>s</sup>. and he has been in the service 1 y<sup>r</sup> 3 mo<sup>s</sup>."

The Prisoner declined questioning any of the Witnesses saying that it was all true.

On hearing of the trial, John Hodgkin, though much pressed with other work, went down to Rochester to consult with local Friends and quickly returned with F. Wheeler to interview Sir George Gray<sup>4</sup>, the Judge Advocate (the chief law-officer at the Horse Guards). Writing to Peter Bedford, J.H. recorded the interview :

We found him and Lady Gray at tea. He, or rather they, entered with interest into the subject. He told us that he thought there was no danger whatever of flogging and promised to enquire fully into the business at the Horse Guards. The ultimate difficulty is the great thing—how is he to be discharged. This assumes the shape with Sir George Gray which Dyne's discharge did with Dr. Lushington.

Sir G. Gray informed J.H. next day that Batkin was sentenced to one year's imprisonment at the Milbank Penitentiary.

John Hodgkin, writing to Sir George Gray, on the 26th of January, acknowledged his letter, and added :

Neither the young man himself nor those who have taken an interest in his case, have, I believe, any desire to prevent his giving that proof of sincerity which the cheerful and patient endurance of suffering may afford.

Two points, however, much press upon my thoughts—the one is the question of his eventual discharge and the other the great importance (considering his youth and as we believe his present tenderness of conscience) of his being as little exposed to contaminating association as possible. Surely something may be done in this respect.

William Tweedy, of Truro, now appeared on the scene in a letter to J. Hodgkin, stating that he had written to Lord Hill<sup>5</sup> on the prisoner's behalf.

<sup>4</sup> Sir George Gray (1799-1882) married Anna Sophia, daughter of Henry Ryder, bishop of Litchfield. His mother was a warm friend of Wilberforce. Sir George and Lady Gray were both religious characters. *D.N.B.*

<sup>5</sup> Rowland Hill (1772-1842), first Viscount, had a long and distinguished military career. He died unmarried and left large property to his eleven nephews.

Learning that Batkin had been removed from Milbank and taken on board ship, Friends sought an interview with Lord Hill, thus depicted in the handwriting in pencil of the blind Friend :

Our dear friend Richard Marsh, overlooking his family difficulties went off by the night coach with the intelligence to J. H., whose house he reached by 7, and J. H. with G. S. [? George Stacey] entered very feelingly into the subject, and after the morning meeting, accompanied by W. Forster, they three with R. M. went to Westminster and first called at the Penitentiary to see the Governor to learn if he could confirm the report, but he being at their place of worship, they were detained some time. . . They did not see W. B. but made the best of their time. . . They called on one and on another but none were at home.

At length by half-past six they got to Lord Hills. They were informed his l.p. would be at home by 7 to dine, but his private secretary manifested no inclination to introduce them, but whilst friends were waiting, his carriage drew up and J. H. introduced himself and his friends by, shall I say, very politely assisting him out and opening to him the object of their visit. L. H. received them respectfully but treated the subject in a soldierly manner, saying if B. went to sea it would cure him of his fancies. However, he promised friends that he would receive a memorial from them of the case, on 2nd day at twelve o'clock with the minutes of the Court Martial.

R. M. returned home on 2nd day post [?] and before he left Gravesend gave a waterman something to go to the ship and enquire if W. B. was on board and send him word.

Being told that W.B. was on board, R. Marsh and F. Wheeler went off at once and found ready access to Batkin, with whom they had a satisfactory conversation.

R. Marsh reported to Peter Bedford :

Orders have been received at the Barracks from Lord Hill that Wm. Batkin is to be removed from on board the ship and brought to Chatham Depot and another man sent in his stead, a Seargent has been sent for him but the ship has sailed. Further orders are now forwarded to Portsmouth or Plymouth to stop him there.

Susanna Corder, Thomas Christy, William Allen and Priscilla Rickman were also active on Batkin's behalf.

Thus far the MSS. The conclusion of the matter is not given, and at present we have no knowledge of how the case ended. Above is interesting as it shows the self-denying activities of Friends on behalf of sufferers for conscience sake.