

Early Friends' Testimony against Carnal Weapons

IT has become fashionable of recent years to assert that the earliest Friends were not pacifists. Various utterances by seventeenth-century leaders can be cited, tending to indicate that in their view warlike acts by a civil authority might, under certain circumstances, be justified, or even laudable. Against these can be set some quite positive statements, such as the famous 1661 Declaration, totally condemning war. The modern reader may thus be left with the impression that early Friends had no consistent testimony in the matter at all.

The discussion has always seemed to me to be somewhat misconceived. Pacifism as such is a modern conception: it is in essence the belief that anything is better than war, a proposition which under modern conditions it is increasingly difficult to dispute. But 300 years ago conditions were not the same. War might then, not unreasonably, be regarded by some as, in itself, a lesser evil than certain other things, for example, the dominance of the Roman Catholic church. Under these circumstances the basis for what we should consider an absolute pacifist philosophy did not exist.

But this is not to say that early Friends had no consistent *personal* testimony in the matter. On the contrary, as with other matters, their testimony was all the more impressive because it was based, not on *a priori* reasoning, but on a spiritual compulsion arising out of their conception of the purpose of God, and the impact of this on their lives. They had been brought, they said, into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were. Therefore, and thenceforth, their weapons were to be not carnal but spiritual, and this meant that war and warlike preparations were not for them, and they were proscribed from taking any part in them. This was their testimony to the whole world.

It is sometimes supposed that this non-participation in war and preparations for war did not in fact amount to very much, in the conditions of the seventeenth century, except under quite abnormal circumstances, such as in Barbados.

But this also is a misconception. It is true that the volume of suffering for this cause, in England, is not to be compared with the suffering on account of the refusal to pay tithes, or to take the oath of allegiance, the two other special testimonies that brought early Friends particularly into conflict with the law. In his summary of the causes of Friends' suffering, Besse¹ puts right at the end of his list: "Their testimony against wars and fighting." But nevertheless the actual number of cases recorded by Besse is quite large, and these, as we shall see, can only have been samples. Before we turn to them it will be convenient to recall just what were the statutory provisions under which the seventeenth century sufferings arose. These were in connection with the raising of the militia.

THE MILITIA ACTS

Something like a militia, that is, a non-professional army recruited locally for temporary training or service, had existed in England for centuries, raised under what was first called the commission of array, and later the commission of lieutenancy. The name "militia" had come into use to describe similar recruitments during the Civil War, but it was only after the Restoration that the force was regularly raised, under statutory authority, the regulation of it being made the prerogative of the Crown.

Detailed rules governing the raising of the militia, or, as it was sometimes called, the trained bands, were laid down in two Acts of the first years of the Restoration.² The procedure was that the King appointed a lieutenant in each county (a relic of the old lieutenancy) and empowered him to require all but the smallest property-owners to contribute to the cost of providing soldiers, and equipment, for training periods of a few days at a time. The Acts laid down in detail what the pay of the soldiers should be, and what were to be their arms and equipment; these included the embellishments, like drums and banners, which are referred to in the Quaker records under the term "trophy money".

A precise assessment, graded according to means, was

¹ *Sufferings*, I, p. 2.

² 13-14 Car. II, cap. iii, and 15 Car. II, cap. iv. See D. Ogg, *England in the Reign of Charles II*, Chapter VII, "The Fighting Services", and *Encyclopaedia of the Laws of England*, 1908, ed. s.v. Militia.

made on each property-owner, and some of these were very small: for instance, in the Cornish cases, to be referred to later, whereas Loveday Hambly was ordered "to provide and send forth two arms in the trained bands", the demand on John Tregelles was limited to "the eighth part of an arms". In the Kent records of sufferings also, some odd fractions occur. The amounts assessed, in default of payment, were made recoverable by distraint.

Under the old commission of array power was given, or assumed, to "elect", that is, impress, men into service; but under the Militia Acts no such power existed prior to the Act of 1757, when a system of balloting was introduced.¹ Until then the property-owner summoned to serve had always the alternative of paying a fixed rate per day, in discharge of his obligations. It is true that in the Quaker records there are references to distresses "for refusing to bear arms". But this appears to be, strictly speaking, incorrect, and the reason for the penalty is more usually, and more accurately, given as "for refusing to bear arms or to contribute to the charge of the county militia", or in some such phrase as "for refusing to defray the charges of the militia" alone.

Among the cases cited by Besse there are a few where the defaulters suffered imprisonment, for varying terms, but this seems to have been quite exceptional: imprisonment did not produce the contribution that was the object of the exercise, and far the more normal procedure was recovery by way of distraint. In one at least of Besse's prison cases, that of Richard Snead of Bristol,² the imprisonment, though resulting from a refusal under the Militia Acts, was actually occasioned by the justices tendering the Oath of Allegiance to him when he appeared before them, a device often adopted by a malevolent Bench.

HOW MANY CASES OF SUFFERING WERE THERE?

The instances given by Besse, though coming from many parts of the country, and widely dispersed also in point of date, seem clearly to be samples only; though in the case of

¹ Under this and subsequent Acts, Quakers were specifically exempted from service. As, however, they were distrained on for equivalent monetary contributions, as before, there was little difference in their position, though it was a satisfaction to them to have their conscientious scruples recognized by statute.

² Besse, i, p. 53.

London, where there is a record of 72 distresses during the years 1679 to 1687, he may have incorporated a more comprehensive list. But in Kent, where he records only six instances in all, a search by Margaret Hirst¹ in the Quarterly Meeting Minute Books disclosed a large number more, of which there is no hint in Besse. Similarly, he only records six examples in Cornwall (all in 1688), whereas the "Record of the Sufferings of Quakers in Cornwall, 1655-1686", published in 1928 as a *Journal* supplement, shows that there were many others. It seems reasonable therefore to conclude that the total volume of suffering was very considerable. The fact that it nearly always took the form of distraint, and that therefore the chief hardship, though an irksome one, lay in the frequent loss of goods to an amount out of all proportion to the amount of the charge, meant that there was little of a spectacularly oppressive nature to which Friends could direct the attention of sympathizers. Local opinion would indeed in most cases approve the distraints, on the basis that without them an additional charge would have to be met by others. There was no question of Friends being plundered by rascally informers, as under the Second Conventicle Act, or of languishing for years in prison for failure to pay tithes, or to take an unnecessary oath of allegiance.

Consequently, Friends were inclined to make comparatively little of this particular class of suffering; and there seems to have been some doubt at one stage whether the cases were worth including at all in the returns from the counties, although this was, eventually, done. But there is no doubt that all Friends were expected to maintain the testimony against "carnal weapons" as faithfully, and in the same way, as the testimonies against tithes and against the taking of oaths. Perhaps this is shown most clearly in two passages in *The First Publishers of Truth* (1907), that collection of early Quaker records which are particularly revealing because they convey the outlook, not of the Society's leaders, but of the ordinary members of the local communities of Friends.

In writing of Richard Robinson of Countersett, the record² states:

¹ *The Quakers in Peace and War*, 1923, p. 75.

² p. 314. He is to be distinguished from Richard Robinson of Brigflatts, as has not always been done.

"He likewise bare a faithful testimony against the payment of tithes, and bearing or finding a man to the militia, for he was all along charged with finding a man, but always kept very clear and never after his conviction would pay anything directly or indirectly, but suffered for the same by fines and distresses, frequently encouraging other Friends to stand faithful in their testimony for truth."

And, on the other hand, with reference to Thomas Ayrey of Grayrigg it is said:²

"Could suffer nothing for truth, for when like to suffer for keeping Christ's command in not swearing, he truckled under, and took an oath; when like to suffer for truth's testimony against fighting and bearing outward arms, he consented to take the arms."

These records express exactly the attitude of Friends towards this testimony: it was one of the testimonies that all Friends, just because they had accepted the duties and privileges of Friends, ought to bear witness to. They must not pay tithes; they must not take oaths; and they must have nothing to do with the weapons of carnal warfare.

And if, in the course of history, we have come to feel that our testimony against war is of supreme significance, and the other two testimonies are of comparatively little importance, this does not mean we are justified in criticizing those who, under the circumstances of the seventeenth century, regarded them as all of equal value. Still less are we justified in suggesting that this distinctive personal testimony of Friends was not, from the very early days of the Society, consistently and faithfully carried out.

ALFRED W. BRAITHWAITE

² p. 266. This was the Friend who in 1654 abandoned his companion John Audland in the middle of their mission to the South-West, "like another Mark" (*Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 158).