

Working for Peace in a Time of War: Canadian Friends in World War II

*Tamara Fleming*¹

World War II was a difficult time for pacifists in Canada. When the Canadian government entered the war, pacifists of varying persuasions were faced anew with the challenge of how to uphold their peace convictions in a nation at war. Members of the Religious Society of Friends in Canada (Quakers) responded to this challenge by working on a variety of issues throughout the war period. Their peace activities spanned four areas of concern: conscientious objection; relief work; support for internees and refugees; and peace education and advocacy.

These activities were informed by the central Quaker testimonies to simplicity, truth, equality and peace. One of the earliest expressions of the Quaker peace testimony can be found in the opening lines of the 1660 Declaration addressed to Charles II of England: "Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world."² At the beginning of World War II, Fred Haslam,

General Secretary of Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC), offered a mid-twentieth century interpretation of the Quaker peace testimony in his 1939 report to the Yearly Meetings.³ He wrote: "The testimony

of Friends in Canada regarding war has been re-affirmed several times in recent years, but there is in evidence now a stronger feeling than ever before that a refusal to take part in war is not sufficient, and that it must have a constructive counterpart in building and working for peace."⁴ This paper offers a broad outline of the ways in which Canadian Friends worked for peace by engaging with problems arising from the war.

Conscientious Objection

While it is not known exactly how many Friends became conscientious objectors during the war, the numbers were very small in comparison to the total number of Canadian COs.⁵ In August 1943, three years after conscription, *The Canadian Friend* listed the names of seven young men who had taken the CO stand, with a request for other names to be brought forward.⁶ J.A. Toews, in his book *Alternative Service in Canada during World War II* listed the number of Quaker COs at 8 for the mobilization districts of Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina and Edmonton; but no mention was made of other areas where there were active Friends.⁷

Notwithstanding the low numbers of Quaker conscientious objectors, Friends played a critical role in the struggle to assert the rights of COs and to negotiate an alternative service program with the Canadian government. Since the early 1800s, Quakers in Canada, along with Mennonites and the Brethren in Christ, had been exempted from

compulsory military service measures on the basis of their pacifist religious beliefs. However, when the Canadian Government passed the National Resources Mobilization Act in 1940, the Religious Society of Friends was not named as one of the pacifist denominations to be exempted from military service, even though the Society's position with regard to war had been clearly set out in previous years. At the outbreak of war in 1939, the Executive of the Canadian Friends Service Committee again affirmed Friends' commitment to the peace testimony in a letter delivered to Prime Minister King. In this letter they affirmed the peace testimony while offering to be of service in any way consistent with that testimony.⁸

The passing of the 1940 Act, and the omission of Friends from it, caused much discussion among Friends' meetings in Canada. Many welcomed the omission, and saw it as an opportunity to argue for the rights of all conscientious objectors, not just those with membership in particular pacifist religious organizations. Accordingly on July 31, 1940, the CFSC, working on behalf of Friends, sent a letter to the Prime Minister proposing a program of alternative service for all those who could not participate in military training for reasons of conscience. This letter received a sympathetic reply from the PM who referred it to the Minister of National War Services and the Minister of Defence for further discussion. CFSC then contacted Mennonite and Brethren Churches about their proposal to the Canadian Government. The Conference of Historic Peace Churches accepted in principle the proposal put forward by Friends, and invited them to join the Conference in its second meeting in September 1940 in Waterloo, Ontario. Fred Haslam as General Secretary of CFSC represented

Quakers on the Executive and the Military Problems Committees of that body. The Military Problems Committee immediately began negotiating with the Department of National War Services in Ottawa to clear the way for an alternative service program for conscientious objectors. Haslam's reflections on the period describe the negotiations with Ottawa as "difficult", but that the committee was eventually successful in ensuring that alternative service was kept under civilian control, and preventing COs from having to wear a uniform. Later in the war, the Committee was able to negotiate provisions for many COs to return to their former occupations, with a portion of their salaries going to the Canadian Red Cross. Haslam played a key role in these negotiations, and made particular efforts to ensure that liberty of conscience was protected for all objectors, not just those belonging to particular religious organizations. These efforts bore fruit: when the regulations concerning the handling of COs were issued in an Order in Council on March 18, 1941, a section covering this concern was included.⁹ Haslam, working with the Conference of Historic Peace Churches, also undertook advocacy work in Ottawa on behalf of the Mennonite young men imprisoned for refusing military training.¹⁰

A particularly interesting chapter in the history of Friends' involvement with alternative service in World War II was the organization of a Canadian contingent of COs and pacifist volunteers to the China Convoy of the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU). The Friends Ambulance Unit was organized by British Friends at the beginning of the war, and became a form of alternative service for many, mainly British Quaker, COs. The Unit was involved in medical relief and the transport of medical supplies in war-torn locations in

Europe, West Asia, and China. The work of the China Convoy, begun in the summer of 1941, became the single largest project of the Unit, with 200 members serving over 5 years. The FAU teams operated under the auspices of the Chinese Red Cross and thus were officially attached to the Chinese armies of Chiang Kai-shek, although most of their work was medical and civilian, not military.¹¹ In 1943, CFSC began to coordinate a team of 20 Canadians, mostly COs with some pacifist volunteers, to join the China Convoy of the FAU. They negotiated with the Canadian government to permit the FAU work to be considered as alternative service for the COs involved. The Canadian recruits were drawn from a variety of religious traditions; six were Quaker, and the rest came from other denominations, including the United Church, Anglican, and the Church of the Disciples. The group was comprised of 18 men and 2 women. Funding for the Canadian contingent came from the Chinese War Relief Fund, while the Canadian Red Cross Society made substantial contributions in the form of supplies and equipment for the Unit.¹² A large part of the work of the Canadian contingent involved transport of medical supplies. In 1945 the CFSC reported that the FAU in China was responsible for transporting a large proportion of all medical supplies that reached the interior of "White China."¹³ Stories abound of the many difficult journeys made by FAU personnel as they drove their charcoal-burning trucks loaded with supplies to remote locations. Members of the Unit also worked in medical teams that helped staff city hospitals, worked near fighting fronts, and assisted with anti-epidemic campaigns.¹⁴ For the last two years of the war, support for this project was a significant focus of Canadian Friends.

Relief Work

Canadian Friends worked to relieve the suffering arising from the war in a number of different ways. The Canadian contribution to the China Convoy constituted one aspect of this relief work, but it was not the only one.

In the first year of the war, Canadian Friends set up a new subcommittee within CFSC to undertake war-related relief projects. This committee, named the Canadian War Victims Relief Committee, became the clearinghouse for projects ranging from coordination of overseas relief to work with refugees and internees.¹⁵ One of the first projects undertaken by the War Vics Committee, as it came to be called, was the provision of wool for knitting articles of clothing to Monthly Meeting work groups.

The committee collected clothing and blankets produced by Friends' work groups, as well as donations from individuals and other groups, and arranged to have them delivered overseas to the Friends' Service Council in London, England for distribution in needy areas. In this work, the Toronto-based committee worked closely with the Elizabeth Fry Sisterhood, which took on the task of shipping the Committee's goods overseas along with their own donations.¹⁶ In addition to the clothing donations, the Committee established the Canadian Friends War Victims Relief Fund in 1940 as means to channel financial donations from Canadian Friends to the relief work of Friends Relief Service in London, England. When the war ended, the Committee received approval from the Department of National War Services to make public appeals for funds to support the relief work of the Friends Relief Service and the American Friends Service Committee in Europe.¹⁷ With the funds collected, the Ca-

nadian Friends War Victims Relief Committee sent shipments of food, blankets and medicines to British and American Friends' projects in a variety of countries, including Austria, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, and Poland. As well, several Canadian Friends—Barbara Walker, Naomi Jackson, and Paul Zavitz—served with Quaker relief teams in Europe during the post-war period.¹⁸ This work of reconstruction and rehabilitation eventually resulted in the British and American Quaker relief agencies accepting the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of all Friends for this work.

Throughout the war the CFSC cooperated with several other Canadian relief organizations, including Canadian Church Relief Abroad, which represented many of the larger denominations, and the Ontario Committee for Relief in Japan.¹⁹ By far the most significant cooperative venture was CFSC's work with the Canadian Save the Children Fund. The two organizations issued joint appeals for donations to help children in war-torn areas in Europe, Egypt and China, and formed a partnership that involved shared financial and administrative duties. Eventually the work of Save the Children grew to the extent that the joint committee structure was laid down, and Save the Children continued with CFSC representatives staying on as members of the Executive. By the end of the war, the Canadian Save the Children Fund was receiving \$15,000 dollars every month in donations for relief.²⁰

Support for Refugees and Internees

While Canadian Friends got involved with relief work overseas, issues at home did not go unnoticed. Support for refugees and internees became a major Quaker focus during

the war. Before and during the war, G. Raymond Booth and later Louise R. Rorke represented Canadian Friends on the Canadian National Committee for Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution, a group that worked to bring the plight of German refugees to the attention of the public and to pressure the Canadian government to lift its restrictions on allowing refugees to come to Canada.²¹ Later in the war, Canadian Friends took up a concern with the approximately 2400 refugees who had been living in Britain and had been interned and then transferred by the English government to internment camps in Canada. The fact that these refugees, mostly young men, were initially held in the same camps as the German prisoners of war was the cause of some concern. Eventually, the refugees were separated from the POWs and held in different camps. CFSC negotiated with the government to get permission for Friends to visit the refugee camps. Eventually the Canadian government allowed refugees under 21 to be released to complete their studies if they could secure sponsorship in Canada.²² The Canadian Friends War Victims Relief Committee cooperated with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to sponsor one young man, Fred D. Hoeniger.²³ He and several fellow internees had started one of the two Quaker meetings held in the Refugee Internment Camps in Canada.²⁴ Friends also made efforts to assist many internees to find work in Canada in order that they could be released.²⁵

The concern for the welfare of Japanese Canadians during their internment by the Canadian government in 1942 was also a cause that inspired action among Friends, particularly those living on the west coast. Friends in British Columbia, among them Irene Web-

ster Smith and Daisy Priestman, were active in providing supplies and consulting with the Japanese Canadian communities during their internment. As well, they performed quiet acts of advocacy, such as securing police protection for the Japanese Consul in British Columbia after the outbreak of war with Japan in December 1941, securing cars for use by Japanese doctors when Japanese cars were confiscated and a curfew instituted, and protesting the dismissal of Japanese nurses-in-training at the Vancouver General Hospital. The War Victims Relief Committee appealed to Canadian Friends to donate money to help with this work.²⁶ Meanwhile, in Toronto, contacts with Japanese Canadians were maintained, and the Japanese Canadian community was invited to use the Toronto Meeting House as a gathering place. In 1943 the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians was formed by a number of pacifist groups that included the Society of Friends; Fred Haslam represented Friends on its executive committee. The committee initially was formed to assist with the resettlement of Japanese Canadians, but it soon expanded to become a vehicle for challenging the Canadian government's discriminatory policies, in particular the threat of forced repatriation of Japanese Canadians. After the government backed down on the repatriation scheme in the post-war period, the committee worked to remove all restrictions and to secure compensation for Japanese Canadians.²⁷

Peace Education and Advocacy

Even in the midst of war, Quaker efforts to advocate on peace concerns continued. Advocacy for the civil liberties of Japanese Canadians constituted one major part of this work. Friends were also members of the

Toronto Pacifist Council, an alliance of twelve groups including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, United Church Youth, and Christian Commonwealth Youth Movement. The group assisted German aliens in Toronto, supported the No-Conscription League, and lobbied to amend the Defence of Canada Act to protect pacifist rights.²⁸ On the educational side, a number of Friends in Toronto continued to be involved with the work of the Toronto Peace Library, located in the Toronto Friends' Meeting House, which made peace related literature available to the broader public and sent out book parcels to rural clubs and associations.²⁹ Friends also organized public lectures on themes related to peace, such as the 1942 lecture series on the Atlantic Charter and problems of peacemaking sponsored by the CFSC.³⁰

Canadian Friends maintained links with a variety of Quaker bodies. They sent representatives to various conferences, such as the one sponsored by the Friends' World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), held in 1942 at Richmond, Indiana. At this conference, issues of participation in alternative service, assistance to internees, and problems of preparing for a durable peace were considered by representatives of Friends' Yearly Meetings in Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Cuba and Jamaica.³¹

This portrait of the activities of Canadian Friends during the war period is, of course, by no means complete. However, it does offer a general picture of how the Religious Society of Friends in Canada attempted to live out the testimony to peace in a world that was experiencing tremendous upheaval and suffering. Efforts in the areas of conscientious objection, overseas relief, support to internees and

refugees, and peace education and advocacy were all part of this holistic effort to ease the suffering arising from the war while working for justice and peace.

Endnotes:

¹ I would like to thank Jane Zavitz Bond, Archivist of The Quaker Archives and Library of Canada, for her valuable assistance. I am grateful to Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, for inviting me to present this paper at the “War and the Conscientious Objector” Conference held at the University of Winnipeg in October 2006, and for helping to fund this research. Thanks to Richard McCutcheon for providing helpful feedback.

² “Declaration to Charles II, 1660,” in *Quaker faith and practice: the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2005 (1995)), 24.04.

³ In 1939 there were three Yearly Meetings in Canada: Genesee Yearly Meeting, Canada Yearly Meeting (Orthodox), and Canada Yearly Meeting (Conservative). At a historic Meeting in 1955 these three Meetings were united into one Canadian Yearly Meeting.

⁴ “Eighth Annual Report of the Canadian Friends Service Committee, 1938 – 1939,” p. 55, in Minutes of Genesee and Canada Yearly Meetings held at Pickering College, Newmarket, Ontario, 1939. Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.

⁵ I have not yet come across a record of the number of Quakers classified as COs. Approximately 10,800 Canadian men were classified as COs by the end of the war. Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 255-6.

⁶ “To the ‘Conscientious Objectors’ in our Meetings,” *The Canadian Friend* 40, no.3 (August 1943): 10.

⁷ J.A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada during World War II* (Winnipeg: Publication Committee of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1959).

⁸ Fred Haslam, *A record of experience with Canadian Friends (Quakers) and the Canadian ecumenical movement, 1921 – 1967* (Toronto: privately printed, 1968), 56.

⁹ Haslam, *A record of experience with Canadian Friends*, 59-60.

¹⁰ “Canadian Friends Service Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (March 1942): 5.

¹¹ John Ormerod Greenwood, “The Friends Ambulance Unit in the Second World War,” in *Quaker Encounters, Volume 1: Friends and Relief* (York, England: William Sessions Limited, The Ebor Press, 1975), 290-8.

¹² Haslam, *A record of experience with Canadian Friends*, 61-3. See also Memo to Members of the Executive Committee of Canadian Friends Service Committee from Fred Haslam (1944), in CFSC Executive Committee file for 1944, Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.

¹³ “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Canadian Friends Service Committee,” p.37, in Minutes of the Yearly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends in Canada, held at Pickering College, Newmarket, Ontario, 1945. Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.

¹⁴ Edwin and Vivien Abbott, interview with author, 17 September 2006. See also letters from Canadian members of the China Convoy, Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.

¹⁵ “War Victims’ Relief—Central Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (January 1942): 13; Fred Haslam and Scott Montgomery, “To You—From the War Victims’ Relief Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (January 1943): 6-7.

¹⁶ “Statement of Work of the Canadian Friends’ Service Committee,” p.1, in CFSC Executive Committee file for 1944, Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.

- ¹⁷ “Canadian Friends War Victims Relief Fund, March 1946,” CFSC Executive Committee file for 1946, Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives.
- ¹⁸ Haslam, *A record of experience with Canadian Friends*, 66.
- ¹⁹ Haslam, *A record of experience with Canadian Friends*, 67.
- ²⁰ Meghan E. Cameron, “‘How the Dominion Heard the Cry’: The Early History of the Canadian Save the Children Fund, 1922-1946” (M.A. diss., University of Guelph, 2001), 48-9.
- ²¹ G. Raymond Booth, “Working in Canada for European Refugees,” *The Canadian Friend* (August 1939): 13-4; “Canadian Friends’ Service Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (March 1942): 5.
- ²² C.E. Silcox, “Young Refugees Interned in Canada,” *The Canadian Friend* (January 1942): 8-10.
- ²³ “War Victims Relief,” *The Canadian Friend* (February 1942): 12.. For a detailed account of the situation of the internees and CFSC’s involvement see Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 262-67.
- ²⁴ Fred D. Hoeniger, “A New Friends’ Meeting in Canada,” *The Canadian Friend* (June 1942): 12-13; “Canadian Friends Service Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (March 1942): 5.
- ²⁵ “A Letter to Rural Readers,” *The Canadian Friend* (April 1942): 10; “War Victims’ Relief,” *The Canadian Friend* (April 1942): 13.
- ²⁶ Daisy Priestman, “Vancouver Friends’ Work for the Japanese,” *The Canadian Friend* (October 1942): 6-7; “The Japanese in Western Canada,” *The Canadian Friend* (November 1942): 8-10.
- ²⁷ Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 276-9. See also Dorothy Muma, “Fred Haslam: ‘Mr. Canadian Friend’” in *Living in the Light: Some Quaker Pioneers of the 20th Century, Volume II—In the Wider World*, ed. Leonard S. Kenworthy (Kennett Square, PA: Friends General Conference and Quaker Publications, 1985), 79.
- ²⁸ Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 219.
- ²⁹ Louise Richardson Rorke, “The Work of the Toronto Peace Library,” *The Canadian Friend* (May 1939): 7-9.
- ³⁰ “Canadian Friends’ Service Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (March 1942): 6; “Canadian Friends’ Service Committee,” *The Canadian Friend* (June 1942): 16.
- ³¹ “The Coming All-American Friends’ Conference,” *The Canadian Friend* (March 1942): 12-14.