H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Brock, ed. *These Strange Criminals: An Anthology of Prison Memoirs by Conscientious Objectors from the Great War to the Cold War.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. ix + 505 pp. $79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-8707-2; $47.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8661-7.

Reviewed by Scott H. Bennett (Department of History, Georgian Court University)
Published on H-Peace (January, 2006)

Wars Will Cease When Men and Women Refuse to Fight

Disillusioned by the killing fields of the First World War, British poet Wilfred Owen, in the war's most memorable antiwar passage, mockingly declared: "Dulce et decorum est pro patra mori ("it is sweet and seemly to die for one's country"). Writing a half-century later, Jeffrey Porteous, a Vietnam War conscientious objector (CO), quoted this line by Owen in his memoir (p. 427). Owen's verse could serve as the theme of this anthology of prison writing by COs.

Peter Brock, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, brings a unique perspective to this anthology. Among the world's pre-eminent historians of pacifism, Brock was a World War II CO who spent four months in two London prisons. In this volume, Brock addresses two audiences: peace historians (interested in COs) and penologists (for whom CO prison literature supplements that written by common criminals).

Brock borrows his title from E. W. Barnes, the pacifist Bishop of Birmingham. In 1941, Barnes dubbed prison COs "strange criminals" in order to distinguish these prisoners of conscience from "common criminals." Brock includes prison accounts written by thirty English-speaking COs–from the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada–jailed for war resistance during the "Great War," the "Good War," and the "Cold War."[1] These memoirs, which represent a broad range of comparative pacifist and antiwar thought and experience, include accounts from both religious and secular COs with various religious, political, philosophical, and humanitarian perspectives. Notably, many were Quakers and/or socialists. None were draft dodgers, those who sought to evade conscription through legal means (exemptions and deferments) and illegal means (fleeing); all were war resisters, who openly defied the draft and accepted the consequences of their principled antiwar stand.

Brock provides valuable introductions to each of the book's three sections and headnotes to each memoir. His decision to assemble longer narratives–excerpted from published and unpublished memoirs, prison letters, periodicals, pamphlets, personal papers, and oral histories–enables readers to understand the experiences of prison COs. Scholars will be grateful that Brock chose to include previously unpublished memoirs, even though in some cases already published memoirs (such as Evan Thomas's account of CO strikes at Fort Leavenworth during World War I) provide a more compelling account than those by Arthur Dunham and Albert Voth included in this volume.

During the twentieth century, Britain and the United States progressively liberalized the right of conscientious objection. While the human cost of becoming a CO declined between0 World War I and the Vietnam War, objectors were still imprisoned. In addition, provisions for conscientious objection were more generous in Britain than in the United States–as well as most other nations. France, for instance, did not recognize conscientious objection until the 1960s.

During World I, in Britain, the Military Service Act of 1916 authorized tribunals to grant religious and secular COs complete exemption from military service, or to assign them to alternative civilian service or to noncombatant military service. In the United States, the Selective Service Act of 1917 effectively limited CO status to members of the historic peace churches (Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren). In New Zealand, the government limited CO status to pacifist sects. There were nearly 6,000 imprisoned COs in Britain, 450 in the United States, and 800 in New Zealand.

During World War II, Britain and the United States liberalized provisions for conscientious objection. In the National Service Act of 1939, Britain continued to grant religious and secular COs either exemption or assignment to civilian service or noncombatant military ser-

vice; in addition, "selective objectors" were recognized and tribunals were more sympathetic toward claims for CO status. In the United States, the Selective Service Act of 1940 broadened the religious test and permitted COs to choose non-combatant military service or "work of national importance under civilian direction." Still, 4,500 COs were imprisoned in Britain and 6,000 in the United States.

During the Vietnam War, the major conflict of the Cold War, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. Seeger* (1965) and *Welsh v. United States* (1970), extended the right of conscientious objection to secular objectors (who base their objection on non-religious grounds), but not selective objectors (who oppose a particular conflict but not all wars). Between 1965 and 1972, some 4,000 COs were jailed in America.

Even though prison conditions improved during the twentieth century, these memoirs recount the universal humiliation, degradation, dehumanization, and poor, often harsh, conditions endured by COs (and common criminals) in Anglo-American prisons. Inmates suffered poor food, inadequate medical attention, overcrowding, spiritual deprivation, the loss of autonomy and privacy, mail censorship, insufficient reading and writing materials, petty regulations, solitary confinement, hard labor, and abusive guards. During World War I, for instance, some British COs were beaten and subjected to "brute force" (p. 85); John Evans, a Canadian CO (in a British military prison) who refused to march in a military parade, was beaten, whipped, shoved down stairs, and placed in solitary confinement; and non-cooperative American COs at Fort Leavenworth and other military prisons were handcuffed to their cell bars for eight hours a day. During World War II, conditions improved and guards seldom inflicted violence on COs. Malcolm Parker, an American CO who waged work and hunger strikes at Sandstone prison, recalled that the staff showed "unbelievable tolerance and restraint" in the face of "extreme provocation" by rebellious COs (p. 337).

Collectively, these CO memoirs criticize the emphasis in prison on punishment rather than rehabilitation. Several memoirs include recommendations to reform prison with an eye towards rehabilitation. Recommendations included abolishing mistreatment, petty regulations, neglect, racism, and censorship; allowing more letters, books, and visits by family, friends, and religious leaders; and implementing other policies designed to meet the inmates' social, spiritual, psychological, and educational needs.

War and peace are gendered spheres. Both men and women have been conscientious objectors, but, in general, only men were subjected to conscription and thus only men were (in the narrow sense) COs. There were exceptions, and Brock makes the most of these. During World War II, British women were conscripted for industrial work and civil defense, including fire-watching duties against incendiary bombs from German planes; those who refused on pacifist grounds were convicted and jailed. Brock includes accounts from two such women, Quakers Kathleen Lonsdale and Kathleen Wigham. A distinguished scientist, Lonsdale spent a month in London's Holloway Prison for Women, where she was appalled by the poor sanitation. Like many other COs, her experience prompted her to promote prison reform; to this end, her memoirs were published by the Prison Medical Reform Council. Wighan, a working class pacifist, was fined for rejecting industrial conscription and "work which will relieve anyone else to do military service" (p. 242). Refusing both to remit the fine and to allow others to remit it for her, Wigham was sentenced to jail.

The section on Cold War America, unlike the sections on World War I and World War II, includes prison writing from American COs only. Despite its title, this section, with one exception, focuses exclusively on the Vietnam War. In order to capture the voice of less literate COs, Brock culled two of the Cold War accounts from published oral histories. Even though prison conditions in the 1960s were an improvement over the First World War, COs still had to endure a deadening routine, strict discipline, lack of privacy, and, in a negative development, increased sexual violence. In addition, prisons still failed to deter crime and rehabilitate criminals.

Displaying great courage and indomitable spirit, the COs represented in this anthology resisted and sometimes rebelled against militarism, conscription, and prison conditions. Unlike common criminals, most COs were literate, were motivated by religious, political, and ethical principles, and were unburdened by guilt, since, in their view, conscientious objection was no crime. All of this enabled them, in prison, to maintain their convictions, spirit, and moral purpose. Despite near-certain punishment, many prison COs waged individual protests and practiced non-cooperation. During the First World War, COs refused to wear military uniforms in military prisons; refused to work in military prisons and on military-related projects; waged work and hunger strikes to protest conscription, poor treatment, and prison conditions; and refused to obey the odious rule, in British jails, to remain silent and not talk with other inmates. During World War II, American COs staged nonviolent protests, including work and hunger strikes, to protest

the racism, censorship, poor food, parole policies, and dehumanizing regulations that they faced in prison.

Despite the overall excellence of Brock's astute selections, two areas might have been more fully addressed. First, although the excerpted memoirs brilliantly capture the COs' prison experience, they offer little on the reasons–religious, political, philosophical, and humanitarian–that led these COs to take their radical stand. The readings are mainly silent on the religious, political, and pacifist organizations that influenced, enrolled, and sustained many prison COs; in addition to churches, such groups included the Labour Party, the Socialist Party of America, the No-Conscription Fellowship, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resisters League. In his introductions and headnotes, Brock does reference such groups, but CO voices on the influence of antiwar and pacifist groups on their antiwar dissent would be interesting. Of course, it is possible that the memoirists did not address this topic.

Second, this anthology emphasizes personal resistance and individual non-cooperation to prison policies, militarism, and conscription. In general, Brock devotes less attention to social and collective activism by prison COs, though he does includes examples of this tradition, most notably in the memoirs of American World War II COs Lowell Naeve, who participated in a successful 135-day work strike against Jim Crow in Danbury prison; Donald Benedict, an expert softball pitcher who refused to play against a visiting prison team until the warden (who wanted to win) released COs from administrative segregation, where they had been placed after going on a work strike to celebrate the anniversary of "International Student Peace Day" (which originated in the mid-1930s with the student strike for peace); and Malcolm Parker (mentioned above). Brock's treatment of the World War I CO work and hunger strikes at Fort Leavenworth illustrate his emphasis on personal rather than social and collective CO protest. In 1918 and 1919, COs at Fort Leavenworth waged work and hunger strikes to protest prison conditions and conscription. Brock references these strikes in his introduction (p. 8) and headnotes (pp. 128-129), but they are not sufficiently discussed in the memoirs of Leavenworth COs Arthur Dunham, Albert Voth, and Philip Grosser. However, these are minor caveats, not criticisms.

In summary, Peter Brock has edited an outstanding collection of memoirs by prison COs. This exciting anthology, which includes his own elegant prison memoir, will enrich and interest not only Brock's expressed audience of peace historians and penologists, but scholars (and students) in other disciplines as well. World War I spurred the creation of several pacifist organizations that opposed all wars and championed conscientious objection, including the War Resisters League, the U.S. affiliate of the War Resisters' International. The male and female prison COs in *These Strange Criminals* give human expression of the WRL slogan that "Wars Will Cease When Men Refuse to Fight."

Note

[1]. For another comparative work, see Charles C. Moskos and John W. Chambers, ed., *The New Conscientious Objection: From Sacred to Secular Resistance* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Scott H. Bennett. Review of Brock, Peter, ed., *These Strange Criminals: An Anthology of Prison Memoirs by Conscientious Objectors from the Great War to the Cold War.* H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11380

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.