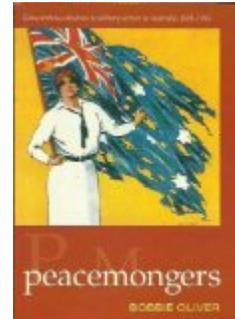


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Bobbie Oliver.** *Peacemongers: Conscientious Objectors to Military Service in Australia, 1911-1945.* South Fremantle, W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997. 191 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86368-184-1.

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This book deals with conscientious objection to conscription for overseas service and to compulsory military training schemes in peacetime from the introduction of the first such scheme, arising out of revisions to the Defence Act in 1909, to the end of the Second World War. The author is at pains to stress two things in her brief introduction: that conscientious objection was not an easy option and called for considerable courage and commitment on the part of the small numbers who took such a stand, and that the whole subject has been ignored by historians. This book, she states, a little melo-dramatically, 'ends the silence.'

With the first of her propositions there can be little argument. She shows ably and well the contempt, abuse, official harassment, fines and jailings which were the lot of many of those who chose to take a public stand for what they believed. Most were members of smaller Christian sects, with some members of the mainstream denominations and a few whose motivation was other than religious, and it was mostly their religious faith which sustained their opposition. With her second contention I initially had a little more difficulty. At first glance it would appear to ignore the considerable literature on opposition to conscription in 1916-17, on the workings and failings of the compulsory military service schemes before the outbreak of the First World War, and on the national service scheme which operated between 1964-72. But what Oliver has chosen to focus on is religious or philosophical pacifism, and if one accepts the necessary distinction to be drawn between that and more generalised opposition to compulsion in a particular circumstance, then her claim has greater merit. It quickly becomes clear on reading the book that her main concern is with the period after 1919 in any case, and mainly

with the Second World War. This certainly is a neglected period of study in this area.

There is a lot of very interesting material in here. Oliver has worked her way through the records of individuals and groups opposed to war and militarism during the inter-war years, and demonstrates as well the response on the part of government to such activities. She deploys some particularly useful statistical material throughout the book detailing rates of applications for exemption, rates of success, prosecutions etc. She is concerned wherever possible to allow these people to speak for themselves, and to show the ways in which the experiences of conscientious objectors in 1914-18 were built upon between 1939-45, especially in widening the basis for claiming conscientious objector status and receiving some level of exemption. But the Second World War poses some problems for the student of pacifism, as the author is well aware. Whatever the merits of conscription in the context of the First World War (and neither case is utterly persuasive), surely the war against fascism and the evil of the Hitler state was just and necessary and deserving of support even by those who opposed military service in 'normal' circumstances? Oliver points here to the numbers of people, especially in the Labor Party, who had opposed conscription in 1916-17 but who took a different view in the Second World War, and she does not try to hide the absurdities to which a rigid and unconditional opposition could lead some individuals, like Joan Chadwick, Federal Travelling Secretary of the Federal Pacifist Council, who stated in 1943 that the Japanese were 'a simple, kindly people, themselves not wanting this war any more than we do, but forced to follow the ruling class.' Or Kenneth Rivett, whose non-religious pacifism led him to the conclusion that 'it is bet-

ter for a country to be annexed than expose its people to the horrors of war.' In the context of the war of 1939-45, this position was simply untenable, fatuous, even tragic (which is not to say that Rivett himself should not have been granted exemption as an individual).

The book's last chapter provides an interesting attempt to assess the impact of individual conscientious objection, and to grapple with a few of the larger moral issues presented by each side of the argument. Oliver demonstrates that harsh penalties did little to change the position of individual objectors, and that the existence of provisions for exemption did not undermine recruiting for the armed forces –by the end of 1943 only 0.3 percent of those eligible for military service had applied for exemption. She is also passionate about the importance of preserving civil liberties in wartime, although here I think that she could do a little more to show that those who took a contrary view were motivated by something other than venality or moral turpitude. Her book stops short of considering the national service schemes of the postwar era, which is a pity because they would have provided some interesting contrasts to the experience in the first half of the century, but to be fair they are a different era, different circumstances, and probably a different book.

The final point to make about this interesting, well-written, well-researched and passionate book is the extent to which individual conscientious objection to military service is now a purely historical phenomenon in Australia. Although the national service act is in suspension, some years ago the Labor government modified the legislation to permit conscientious objection to service in specific wars, a response most obviously to the Vietnam experience. But with the changes in the nature of war, especially the current 'revolution in military affairs,' and with the increasing emphasis in western armies on smaller, long service, professional volunteer forces—the all-volunteer military—it seems to this reviewer increasingly unlikely that an Australian government would again seek to conscript for service, especially overseas. The tradition of left-liberal activism against conscription in Australia may thus prove to be a purely twentieth century phenomenon.

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