## H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Lois S. Bibbings.** *Telling Tales about Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service during the First World War.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009. x + 259 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-6922-2.

Reviewed by Zachary Smith (University of Georgia) Published on H-War (December, 2012) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



In her 2009 book *Telling Tales about Men*, Lois S. Bibbings takes a novel approach to historical writing that offers several interesting and contradictory views and interpretations of conscientious objectors (COs) in Great Britain during the First World War. Instead of explaining how British society viewed the CO and how the objector viewed himself through a traditional narrative, Bibbings, a senior lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Bristol, writes seven different "histories" of the CO. She loosely ties the "tales" together by examining contemporary views of the CO through the lens of gender or, more specifically, competing notions of masculinity. While her arguments on masculinity during wartime and critique of the standard method of writing history are much needed, the full potential of this argument is not met.

Bibbings divides her book into three parts. The first includes her introduction, which attempts to justify her postmodern approach and the book's place in the historiography of the British objector. The second part, by far the longest, is composed of a prologue and six thematic chapters. The prologue sketches a brief chronological summary of the social, cultural, and political world that the CO faced from 1914 to 1918 in order to provide a framework for the thematic tales to follow. These semiindependent narratives cover a number of different and often competing views of the objector. The first four chapters show that the CO was viewed with scorn and seen as cowardly, degenerate, criminal, and generally unmanly and unpatriotic. The final two narratives analyze positive portrayals of the objector, as a man of principle, courage, and patriotism. Finally, in the third part of the book, Bibbings reiterates her defense of postmodernism and explains how her father's experiences as an objector in the late 1940s had an impact on their family and inspired her to write *Telling Tales about Men*.

The meat of the book is her thematic narratives, which are based in an impressive array of primary sources. According to Bibbings, the chapters are bound together by gender analysis of attitudes toward the CO. More specifically, Bibbings argues that the differing opinions about the CO in British society reveal competing notions of masculinity. Her point is the most clear when comparing chapters 2 and 3 (on the CO as a cowardly "unman" and degenerate) with chapters 5 and 6 (on COs as the epitome of manly self-discipline, principle, and dutiful patriotism). Bibbings argues in chapters 2 and 3 that those who supported the British war effort and, consequently, believed the CO was a coward and shirker contrasted the objector with an idealized vision of the soldier as chivalrous and dutiful. The CO either could not or refused to try to live up to this ideal and, thus, was believed to be feminized or even sexually confused. This view contrasted sharply with that of their supporters. Bibbings shows in chapters 5 and 6 that to some Brits the CO obliterated the image of the heroic and chivalrous soldier because the objector chose to stand by his principles while the majority conscript was forced to sacrifice for a cause he may or may not support. At the same time, Bibbings maintains that shell shock cases and the "enforced passivity" of trench life feminized the British soldier while the CO showed himself to be man of action in his active opposition (p. 217).

Sociocultural and gender analyses are much needed in the field of military history and "war and society" history, and Bibbings's argument about competing masculinities is an interesting method of analysis. Yet she does not consistently apply her gender argument, even in the chapters cited above. Bibbings frequently discusses such issues as criminality, insanity, and violence against COs, which, although important, have little to do with masculinity. If this theme of competing masculinities had been consistently maintained throughout, *Telling Tales about Men* as a whole would have offered a great deal more to the historian of the First World War, objection, or gender.

The most common thread in Telling Tales about Men is implied. For Bibbings, the CO filled one of two roles during the First World War-the misunderstood martyr or the heroic epitome of principled manhood. Those who directed their hateful words or actions onto the CO, she implies, could not comprehend the objector's stance because they were misguided or hoodwinked into supporting the war. In the final two chapters of the book, these same people lack the moral compass, masculinity, or principles COs. Yet at no point does Bibbings examine views of the CO from a perspective sympathetic to those who opposed the objector. Many individuals who had a family member fighting on the western front or had died in combat-regardless of the extent of their support for the war-would have had a legitimate argument against the CO's refusal to sacrifice his own time or life. This is not to say that Bibbings is wrong to portray the objector as she does. Many British war supporters did not understand or refused to legitimize the CO's religious or political scruples. At the same time, one cannot legitimately deny the courage of many who chose derision or prison in the face of social, legal, and physical pressures. If her postmodern approach is meant to provide a fuller accounting of the wide range of attitudes toward the CO, then it seems natural that the analysis of the genuine grievances of the pro-war, anti-CO crowd would be equally valuable as the viewpoints from which she analyzes her subject. This perspective would have added some interesting complications to her argument on masculinity.

Bibbings's primary goal is to force readers to question the traditional approach to historical writing. She maintains that the weakness of previous works on British COs, and presumably most historical works in general, is "that they are based upon one organising story and an argument which is linear ... and often broadly chronological" (p. 6). Consequently, the narrowness of the traditional narrative precludes authors from adequately accounting for the variety of contemporary perspectives of the objec-

tor during the First World War. Bibbings contends that her "unusual multiple narrative structure" highlights, instead of hides, this diversity of opinion (p. 9). In making this point, Bibbings provides an important lesson on the limitations of the traditional narrative. Yet, although it is important that scholars continue to point out these limitations, for professional historians the fact that multiple perceptions or understandings of a historical moment preclude the writing of a "true" history of a subject is not new. The test of *Telling Tales about Men* is whether it offers a successful alternative.

The results are mixed. One problem is that the postmodern approach saves Bibbings from having to take a definitive stand on the key issues surrounding the views and treatment of COs. One example is her treatment of early British enthusiasm and continued support for the war. In the first four chapters, where she depicts the CO as a misunderstood victim, Bibbings operates under the premise that the majority of the British population was not only supportive of the war but also enthusiastic about it and the social benefits war could bring. Yet in her final two chapters, where she portrays the CO as a masculine and principled hero, Bibbings grounds her analysis on the assumption that support for the war was not widespread early and waned as the conflict dragged on. Presumably one of these premises has to be mistaken. While by taking both sides of a historical debate Bibbings forces the reader to confront the relativity of perspective in history, this approach limits the useful conclusions that can be made about her subject. To argue that one's view of the CO was inversely related to one's support for the war is not new, as her own review of the historiography indicates.

Yet, at the same time, Bibbings's methodology allows her to draw her most valuable and interesting conclusions on the differing gendered perceptions of the CO. This argument would have come across as clear without her postmodern approach. The inconsistent application of gender analysis and the exclusion of what I believe to be a critical view of the CO, though, weakens the book as a whole. While the chapters are interesting and, individually or grouped together, can be applicable to the classroom (in upper-level courses on the First World War, war and society, and gender history), the full potential of Bibbings's historical argument is unrealized. Despite my issues with her work, Bibbings's contribution to the scholarship on conscientious objection and masculinity should garner much deserved attention.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Zachary Smith. Review of Bibbings, Lois S., *Telling Tales about Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service during the First World War.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35436



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.