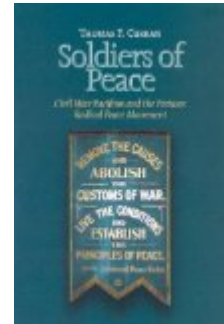


# H-Net Reviews

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Thomas F. Curran. *Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. xv + 228 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2210-0.

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## Dilemmas of a Perfectionist

### Dilemmas of a Perfectionist

Thomas Curran's monograph originated in a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Notre Dame but it has been much revised since. The book's clearly written and well-constructed narrative revolves around the person of an obscure package woolen commission merchant from Philadelphia named Alfred Henry Love (1830-1913), a radical pacifist activist who was also a Quaker in all but formal membership. Love is the key figure in the book, binding Curran's chapters together into a cohesive whole. And Love's papers, and particularly his unpublished "Journal," which are located at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, form the author's most important primary source: in fact, he uses no other manuscript collections, although, as the endnotes and bibliography show, he is well read in the published primary and secondary materials, including work on the general background of both the Civil War era and nineteenth-century pacifism. Curran has indeed rescued Love himself from near oblivion; there is little else on him apart from an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Robert W. Doherty (University of Pennsylvania, 1962). Curran deftly links the activities of Love and his associates during the Civil War with the postwar performance of the Universal Peace Union (UPU), which Love eventually brought into being in 1868 to embody the ideals of "perfectionist pacifism" in the new postwar era.

The book is divided roughly into two parts, the earlier chapters dealing with wartime perfectionist pacifism and

its antecedents, and the later chapters with the post-1865 period down to Love's death in 1913. Curran's chronological apportionment of space seems to me to be appropriate. It is the earlier chapters, though, that make the most interesting reading since they highlight most clearly the dilemmas encountered by "agitators for moral reform" (p. xv) like Love: the same type of quandaries that *mutatis mutandis* Gandhi faced in his South African and Indian settings.[1]

The Civil War had confronted pacifists with a difficult choice: either to support the Unionist cause that eventually came to include the abolition of slavery or to preserve the purity of their nonviolent credo, even if that meant challenging the obligations of citizenship as envisaged by state and society alike. In an interesting, if perhaps overlong, chapter entitled "Perils of Perfectionism," Curran points out the problems all pacifists then encountered in distinguishing themselves in the eyes of the public from the racist Peace Democrats (known as "Copperheads"), particularly as the latter sometimes cloaked their proslavery views with Christian pacifist arguments and called for the exemption of those—as they put it—sincerely opposed to "this war" (p. 92). This was indeed an early attempt to gain CO status for political objectors and selective objection. In his journal, though, Love recorded his "utter abhorrence [of] the pretended, the partizan & deceitful pleas for peace," with the Peace Democrats using "this sublime virtue for the basest purposes" (p. 90). True, both Peace Democrats and perfectionist pacifists wanted a speedy end to the war by negotiation. But

Love, and colleagues like Joshua Blanchard and Ezra H. Heywood, carefully differentiated their schemes for “disunion” from the Peace Democrats’ proposals for ending hostilities. Many Northerners, however, failed to make this distinction, and the press sometimes accused Love and his associates of treason.

The outbreak of the Civil War acted as a catalyst for Love’s pacifism. Though brought up as a Quaker, Love, according to Curran, on “reaching maturity, [had] displayed a fascination with and awe for war and militarism” (p. 42). In his journal for April 21, 1861, however, he recorded a decisively different message for his fellow Quakers: “I am so clear & firm, that we ought not to contend with arms but should carry out *now* in the day of temptation, the great truth of Friends” (p. 43). Henceforward, peace became Love’s life mission: it led him first to refuse military service when drafted for the Union army and then to unceasing peace activism in postbellum America. Since he was not formally a member of the Society of Friends, Love’s refusal to serve might likely have led to his imprisonment as he was unwilling to take advantage of either of the two ways out of compulsory service open to all able-bodied conscripts for most of the war—payment of commutation money or hiring a substitute. Fortunately for Love, mandatory eye examinations uncovered defective sight and earned him release from service on medical grounds. In Curran’s view, “he rationalized that perhaps God had bestowed upon him his optic infirmity in order to protect him from the penalty for noncompliance with the Enrollment Act, even though he himself never used his eye problem to gain exemption” (p. 63).

Love’s stance as a conscientious objector was a reflection of perfectionist pacifism. But who exactly were these wartime perfectionist pacifists who formed the nucleus of “the postwar radical peace movement,” presided over by Love? (For the book’s scope includes less than the broadly defined “civil war pacifism” of the subtitle.) Not the Quakers, Curran explains, nor the Mennonites and Brethren—nor William Lloyd Garrison and the nonresistant abolitionists of the 1840s, who had almost all gone over to a prowar position. Instead, the core of wartime perfectionist pacifism is presented as a nonresistant remnant consisting of “young, second generation Garrisonians,” including Ezra Heywood, Francis and Wendell Phillips Garrison (William Lloyd Garrison’s sons), Alfred Love, and the CO John Wesley Pratt.[2] Apart from this select handful, Curran points to the members of Adin Ballow’s Hopedale community and the communitarian Shakers, already in decline, as well as to the tiny Rogerene

sect and the Bible Christians’ church in Philadelphia and to a few dissident Quakers in constant trouble with their meetings, like Lucretia Mott. But I am not convinced that these people alone did form a really cohesive group. At times Curran appears to include within the group Quakers like Cyrus Pringle, whom he defines as a nonresistant, and the Rev. Judson D. Benedict, an ardently pacifist “fifty-five-year-old minister of an unspecified church,” whose anti-warism Curran has uncovered (pp. 69-70).

Further, why does Curran not include William Lloyd Garrison within this group? He remained a (personal) pacifist throughout the war and gave Love and his associates free access to the columns of the *Liberator*, even while not agreeing with all they wrote. Indeed, I do not find Curran’s treatment of Garrison’s finely nuanced wartime position entirely satisfactory. The latter’s stance was certainly far closer to that of Love’s group than was the position of the erstwhile nonresistant Henry Clarke Wright, whose pamphlet entitled *The Self-Abnegationist* (1863), despite its plea for love of enemies and forgiveness of wrongs, is, if regarded as a plea for nonviolence, “packed with inconsistencies.”[3] Curran, while admitting that Wright “wavered somewhat because of his desire to see slavery end” (p. 23), underestimates the inconsistencies that historian Lewis Perry has pointed to.

After the war, however, Wright joined Love and Ballow in promoting the work of the UPU, which continued the prewar tradition of pacifist perfectionism and now included not only peace but also social reform on its agenda. In this way, Curran argues that the UPU “laid the groundwork for the modern peace movement, one that combined the quest for a war-free world with a commitment to attaining social justice for all” (p. xiv). In successive chapters the author describes the “forging” of a radical peace organization in the immediate postbellum era, analyzes the UPU’s program with regard to both domestic policy and international relations, and concludes with an assessment of its significance and shortcomings.

About a third of the UPU’s total membership (several thousands at its height) consisted of women: a result of its consistent advocacy of women’s rights. The protection of native American rights and culture and those of blacks also figured prominently in its program, along with prison reform and the abolition of capital punishment. The UPU was concerned with labor relations, too, although its conciliationist stance led eventually to the resignation of Heywood, whose anarchism had become increasingly militant.

The UPU’s peace program, centering on universal

disarmament, arbitration of disputes, and an international court, was not particularly novel. Love's tolerant stance led to the acceptance into membership of non-pacifists like Julia Ward Howe, author of the wartime "Battle Hymn of the Republic," provided they gave general assent to the UPU's aims, while his penchant for big names led to the bestowal of honorary membership on eminent politicians like Ulysses S. Grant, Elihu Root, and William Howard Taft. Memorializing and petitioning Washington were the UPU's main practical activities. But, as Curran observes, the organization "had little impact" and few "tangible successes"; its accomplishments were "minimal" (pp. 195-196). Of course the UPU staunchly opposed the Spanish-American War of 1898, earning thereby abuse from the prowar press. But by this date the membership consisted almost entirely of elderly persons. Love's death in 1913 brought its activities to an end, though it lingered on until 1920.

Curran emphasizes that the UPU, unlike the nineteenth-century American Peace Society, was a multi-issue society. It was essentially the vehicle for Love's vision of peace. He and his associates "envisioned a future in which all national governments reconciled their laws with the government of God, thus subordinating themselves to the higher government" (p. 121). This had been the view of the Garrisonian nonresistants in the antebellum era before most of them succumbed to the rising war fever. For them, as for Love, humankind ought to obey God's commandments even when they conflicted with man-made law. The "higher righteousness" must prevail.

Finally, two corrections. Curran is, I think, mistaken when he accepts at their face value protests at what Love called "cowardly conversions" of shirkers and proslavery men to one of the peace churches after these churches' members had been explicitly granted exemption from military service by the act of February 24, 1864 (p. 93). For section 17 of that act contained the provision that, to

gain exemption, an applicant must supply "satisfactory evidence that his deportment has been uniformly consistent with [his CO] declaration." Understandably, Love and his associates were anxious not to have the purity of their stance sullied by unconscientious objectors. But their fears in this case appear to have been groundless. Again, Curran presents the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends as petitioning President Andrew Johnson in June 1865 "at least to allow Quakers to take an oath" which did not mention any defense requirements (p. 98). In fact, such an oath was a recommendation of the state governor, since, of course, Quakers were as opposed to oath-taking as they were to fighting. They always insisted on making an affirmation in place of swearing.[4]

A few shortcomings notwithstanding, Curran's study represents a valuable addition to the literature on both the nineteenth-century American peace movement and American religious culture of that time. Above all, it shows how the peace perfectionism of the antebellum era survived the shock of the Civil War.

#### Notes

[1]. See Manfred Steger, *Gandhi's Dilemma: Nonviolent Principles and Nationalist Power* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[2]. See Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart, "Ambivalence, Ambiguity, and Contradiction: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Nonviolence," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 6 (Summer/Fall 1982): p. 223.

[3]. See Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 278-281.

[4]. See Paul H. Bergeron, LeRoy P. Graf, and Ralph W. Haskins, ed., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 8 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 260 n. 2.

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