

Archibald Baxter

A Conscientious Objector

BY KEVIN P. CLEMENTS

Archibald Baxter was a thirty-three-year-old New Zealand farm labourer who, when faced with the ethical question of whether or not to fight in the First World War, bravely followed his conscience and resisted the patriotic fervour of the time. He became a conscientious objector who would ‘undertake no service in the army, either at home or abroad’. He, Mark Briggs and the fourteen other NZ conscientious objectors (who were sent from NZ to England and then the front lines in France) focused national and international attention on the rights of an individual citizen to say no to the state when it was asking them to kill on its behalf. As such they were pioneers in pitting conscience against obedience to the state, thereby creating an enlarged space for civil liberties and human rights.

In 1915, Archie had already decided he would have no part in industrial-level slaughter and defied the government’s conscription plans. His justifications were Christian, socialist and humanitarian. Because he was a persuasive advocate for pacifism, he was considered a major local obstacle to the war effort, so in November 1916 when Baxter was balloted, he was immediately arrested. He sought exemption as a conscientious objector, but it was refused because he was not a member of an historic peace church and his socialist and humanitarian arguments were considered seditious and subversive.

He was imprisoned – without trial – and, like others who objected to military service, was moved from jail to jail within New Zealand as the war progressed. He was humiliated, beaten and treated badly in each one. From 1917 he was held in a prison attached to Trentham Military Camp, where he and others were constantly pressured to wear military uniform. When they refused, they were brutally punished.

The public mood was unsympathetic to conscientious objectors (COs), who were viewed as shirkers and cowards. The ministries of Defence, Police and Corrections therefore saw it as their mission to break the will of COs so they would submit to military command. As one said to Baxter, ‘It’s your submission we want, Baxter, not your service.’

By the end of 1917 there were over 100 objectors in prisons and prison camps around the country. The Minister of Defence, James Allen, ordered that all objectors be sent to war. The Trentham camp commander, Colonel H.R. Potter, responded by sending fourteen objectors, including Baxter and two of his brothers, Alexander and John, on the troopship *Waitemata* to Britain, bound for the front line in France.

In the 21st century we are accustomed to thinking of the state and government as protectors of the rights and wellbeing of individual citizens. This was not the case



A scene from the 2014 film *Field Punishment No 1*, which told the story of New Zealand World War 1 conscientious objectors, including Archibald Baxter.

during the First World War: state authority was considered absolute and citizens who did not submit to its demands were punished. There is absolutely no doubt that what was done to Baxter and others, would be considered cruel and unusual punishment – and torture – under legislation today. He and Mark Briggs were regularly stripped of their clothes, abused, and humiliated on the SS *Waitemata* en route to the UK. He was systematically threatened and beaten up by guards in Britain, and when sent to France he was subject to systematic psychological torture and finally given the barbaric ‘Field Punishment No. 1’, known to the troops as ‘crucifixion’.

This punishment involved being tied tightly to a post that was inclined slightly forward, with hands tied tightly behind the back. The feet were tightly bound as well. After a few minutes the pain in the arms and shoulder muscles was excruciating and blood flowed to the feet, making them swell and almost impossible to walk on when the punishment was completed. Baxter endured this punishment for more than four hours daily, and for many more days than was authorised by the military. He was tied up in snow and bad weather without warm clothing. On one occasion, the army forgot he was there and left him strung up for eight hours.

Archie endured this punishment along with two other New Zealand COs, Lawrence Kirwin and Mark Briggs. At the end of the punishment all three still refused to wear military uniform or do anything to contribute to the war effort, so they were ordered to the front line and marched – or, in Briggs’ case, pulled – across duckboards and through trenches full of Allied soldiers.

Baxter survived this but was beaten again, deprived of rations and sent to a more active part of the front that was under heavy shelling. He nearly died in a flooded bomb crater, surviving only with the assistance of two British soldiers, who pulled him through and shared their rations with him.

Neither Baxter nor Briggs succumbed, but both were scarred for life. On 1 April 1918, physically incapacitated and suffering from post-traumatic stress and disorientation, Archie Baxter was taken to hospital in Boulogne, where he was diagnosed with ‘mental weakness and confusional insanity’ for his unwillingness to fight. A few weeks later, however, Baxter found himself talking to an empathetic British psychiatrist who felt that he had suffered enough. He issued a diagnosis of insanity so Archie could not be court-martialled or executed by the New Zealand army. He was taken to a British hospital for mentally disturbed soldiers and sent home a broken man in August 1918.

This was not the end of his suffering. He, like all other COs, was constantly harassed by the police and government on their return to New Zealand. They lost their civil and political rights for ten years and were frequently subject to taunts and discrimination from returned services personnel and other citizens.

Baxter believed that what he had endured was not much

worse than what everyone in the military went through during the war. He was always careful to thank those soldiers who treated him with respect and compassion – who gave him food when he was starving or succour when he’d been beaten. For us Quakers he was a pacifist hero who should be recognised and admired for his courage, strength and sacrifice.

Baxter loved humanity and had the courage, hopefulness and a willingness to sacrifice for others to that end. His story persuaded the first Labour government to treat conscientious objectors more compassionately. Detention camps were still harsh but, relatively speaking, humane. No COs were sent to the front and none were tortured, although CO tribunals were unsympathetic to most who applied for exemption and rejected many.

In honour of his life, The Baxter Memorial Trust, of which I am Chairman, raised funds for and has now completed the development of the *Archibald Baxter Peace Garden* in Dunedin. It has been designated a national monument to all NZ’s conscientious objectors. This is the first and only monument to COs in the country. It celebrates all those who had the courage to say “No!” to war and violence. It will be opened on the 25th September 2021 by the Hon Grant Robertson, Deputy Prime Minister. The sculpture – a representation of Field punishment number 1 – is intended to remind us that dissent is costly, love and grace are costly, and that there will be no end to war and violence until we are willing to embrace the costs of nonviolence and live according to the dictates of loving conscience. Baxter continues to teach us that there is no way to peace – peace is the way.