

A Pacifist at War: Military Memoirs of a Conscientious Objector in Palestine 1917-1918

Donald McNair (ed. Philip McNair)

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Fascinating for what it reveals and frustrating for what it does not, this beautifully produced little book clearly illustrates the dilemma of the Brethren conscientious objector in time of war. Donald McNair was a member of the Exclusive Brethren meeting in Tiverton, Devon, with both scholarly and military men among his recent forebears. He was newly married to Janie Jourdan, and working for her father as a manager in his prosperous tyre repair products business, when conscription was introduced in 1916.

McNair's application for exemption from service was originally granted, then disallowed. Readers of this journal would probably like much more detail about his thought process, which is not spelled out. His son and editor states that the principle of separation from an ungodly organisation was the basis of his stance, which is certainly in line with the findings of my research on this topic. Nevertheless McNair seems to have accepted being forced into the army rather than refuse this and be imprisoned as hundreds of Brethren men were. However, when despite his protests he was sent to Palestine on active service, he quietly insisted at appropriate opportunities that he would not fight if it came to actual combat, and would face a Court Martial rather than give in. This seems to imply that there was a strong element of pacifism involved as well.

The editor's foreword and McNair's own preface give just enough background to elucidate the seven letters which Donald McNair selected for retention and binding out of the hundred or so he sent home, and a travelogue of the journey from England to Alexandria.

They relate to the campaign around Gaza in 1917 and life in the army in the desert. Nearly forty illustrations—photographs, facsimiles of some key documents, sketches by McNair in the field—enrich the text, and the good index is an unusual bonus in a book of this sort.

The letters preserved in this book reveal a thoughtful, observant man, quietly witty, home-loving and imbued in the Scriptures, and absolutely firm as to his principles. McNair's wry comments on army existence bring it vividly to life. The quantity of the food is a constant theme—'our alleged breakfast', 'so slight it is practically in theory only', 'I was quite limp with lack of food', and so on—and also the disparity between the food given to officers and men—'the Officers had a sumptuous dinner... while we still starved', '...the British Constitution wonders why so much socialism breeds.' Without undue censoriousness and with some humour he mentions the blasphemous and obscene language to which he had never before been exposed, while the discomforts of camping in the desert remind him constantly of the Israelites' experiences. This Australian reviewer is interested to see her countrymen mentioned, alas as inveterate gamblers and absentees without leave, although the Scots are also in the latter category as well as being thieves!

McNair's faith in God's protection, which obviously gave him strength to make a most uncomfortable stand against the military authorities helped him remain at peace during bombardments, runs through the letters. One would love to know more about how he arrived at what his son calls 'inherited but sincere convictions', and to know more about the rest of his long life as a 'Plymouth Brother'. How did he fare in the troubles of the 1960s, for instance? But as it stands, this book is an absorbing glimpse into his wartime experience.

Elisabeth Wilson