

‘Won’t You Meet Us Half-Way?’: The New Zealand Military Service Boards and Conscientious Objectors

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Abstract

The treatment of conscientious objectors is one of the biggest blots on New Zealand’s First World War record. Many of these individuals were imprisoned and deprived of their civil rights, some were brutalised while confined in domestic army camps, and a few were even forcibly transported to the western front. Historians have identified the nine military service boards, established to determine appeals for exemption from conscription, as playing a significant enabling role in this persecution. Labelled as over-zealous and ignorant jingoists, the boards’ members are said to have been far more concerned with ridiculing conscientious objectors’ beliefs than with properly assessing their claims.

This article evaluates such assertions by reference to the exemption hearings that took place during 1917. Although conscription was first implemented in November 1916 and continued until the Armistice, 1917 was the year in which government policies towards conscientious objectors came to be defined, and in which the boards formulated the approach that would guide them throughout their operations.

While not denying the boards’ questioning of objectors could be provocative and unsavoury, this article suggests that matters were more nuanced than the historiography indicates. Despite the tightly worded provisions of the Military Service Act, the appeal bodies did at least try to keep many objectors out of prison by offering to recommend them for non-combatant service in the Medical Corps. Moreover, the boards focused the majority of their questioning not on delivering indignant tirades, but on implementing a measured approach that corresponded with their wider efforts to achieve an equality of sacrifice.

Keywords

Conscientious objectors; conscription; equality of sacrifice; exemption; Military Service Act; military service boards; New Zealand

Despite their relatively small numbers, conscientious objectors have dominated the historiography surrounding New Zealand’s 1916–1918 implementation of conscription. Archibald Baxter’s autobiography *We Will Not Cease* has become established in the literary canon, while the experiences of other objectors—particularly those who, like Baxter, were forcibly transported to the western front—have also been extensively documented.¹ The picture that emerges from these works is one

of hostility, prejudice, and brutalisation, with many objectors being subjected to harsh treatment by the civil and military authorities, and by society at large.

Historians have identified the nine military service boards, established to determine appeals for exemption from conscription, as playing a significant enabling role in this persecution. It has been generally acknowledged that the 1916 Military Service Act was intended to limit relief on conscientious grounds to only a handful of Christian

1 Archibald Baxter, *We Will Not Cease* (Whatamongo Bay: Cape Catley, 1983); David Grant, *Field Punishment No. 1: Archibald Baxter, Mark Briggs & New Zealand’s Anti-Militarist Tradition* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2008); Barry Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence: The Origins and Establishment of the New Zealand Labour Party, 1900–19* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1980), 108–119; P.S. O’Connor, ‘The Awkward Ones – Dealing with Conscience, 1916–1918’, *New Zealand Journal of History* 8, no. 2 (1974): 118–137; Christopher Pugsley, *On the Fringe of Hell: New Zealanders and Military Discipline in the First World War* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 225–235.

denominations.² However, P.S. O'Connor argues the boards further circumscribed the scope of the legislation by arbitrarily refusing to exempt additional Christian groups on the basis that they did not possess written articles against bearing arms.³ While Paul Baker differs in claiming that the appeal bodies pushed the boundaries of the Act by agreeing to recommend non-combatant service for some 'genuine' religious objectors, he maintains that other deserving individuals were denied such endorsements.⁴ Even stronger criticism has fastened around the boards' conduct during hearings. Gwen Parsons finds they were more concerned with abusing an objector's beliefs than with assessing his eligibility for exemption.⁵ Similarly, David Grant claims the boards likened conscientious scruples to 'a failure of citizenship', Ian McGibbon suggests 'humanitarian arguments against involvement in war cut no ice', and Graham Hucker maintains objectors were routinely 'treated with disdain'.⁶

This article contends that the boards' treatment of conscientious objectors was more liberal than the historiography indicates. The wording of the Act made it inevitable that only a few, small religious groups would stand a chance of exemption. Certainly, the boards placed considerable emphasis on a written constitution against bearing arms, yet the notion that they were wrong to dismiss appeals from denominations that did not possess such articles is highly questionable. Rather than curtailing the application of the Act, the boards' most important action was to facilitate its extension, by offering to recommend many religiously-motivated appellants for overseas non-combatant service. Undoubtedly, the questions directed at conscientious objectors were often harsh and sometimes distasteful. Yet the boards' overwhelming focus was on testing men's eligibility for exemption as part of a wider effort to achieve an equality of sacrifice.

THE INITIAL GROUNDS FOR EXEMPTION

The majority of New Zealand's MPs would accept only a limited provision for appeals on conscientious grounds. Whereas Britain's Military Service Act had recognised 'conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service' as a permissible basis for exemption, the New Zealand Bill initially contained no such allowance, even for religious objectors.⁷ However, the minister of defence, James Allen, subsequently concluded that obtaining the widest possible support for conscription required a concession to be made.⁸ He therefore introduced an amendment to the House of Representatives that would permit appeals from a man who 'objects in good faith to military service on the ground that such service is contrary to his religious belief'.⁹ Several MPs had already insisted it would be 'monstrous' if the views of Christian pacifists were not provided for.¹⁰ However, most were thinking only of the Quakers, and emphasised that any provision must be tightly worded to prevent 'shirkers' from benefitting.¹¹ Such misgivings prompted these MPs to join with the opponents of any exemption on religious grounds in defeating Allen's proposal.¹²

The government then introduced a modified amendment in Parliament's appointed upper chamber, the Legislative Council. On the condition of agreeing to perform non-military work in New Zealand, this would exempt men who, since the outbreak of war, had been members of a religious body, the tenets and doctrines of which declared military service to be 'contrary to divine revelation'.¹³ Some councillors lamented that this wording was far more restrictive than the original. It would disqualify all individually held objections, alongside men who belonged to the many denominations that were not opposed to military service.¹⁴ That exemption would definitely be confined to only two or

2 Paul Baker, *King and Country Call: New Zealanders, Conscription and the Great War* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1988), 172–174; Stevan Eldred-Grigg, *The Great Wrong War: New Zealand Society in WWI* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2010), 326–327; David Grant, *Out in the Cold: Pacifists and Conscientious Objectors in New Zealand during World War II* (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986), 18; Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), 302; Elsie Locke, *Peace People: A History of Peace Activities in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 1992), 59; Steven Loveridge, *Calls to Arms: New Zealand Society and Commitment to the Great War* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014), 164; O'Connor, 'Awkward Ones', 132–133.

3 O'Connor, 'Awkward Ones', 132–133.

4 Baker, *King and Country Call*, 176.

5 Gwen A. Parsons, "'The Many Derelicts of the War'?: Repatriation and Great War Veterans in Dunedin and Ashburton, 1918 to 1928' (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2008), 37.

6 Grant, *Field Punishment No. 1*, 44; Ian McGibbon, 'The Price of Empire, 1897–1918', in *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Hachette Livre NZ, 2005), 239; Graham Hucker, 'The Rural Home Front: A New Zealand Region and the Great War, 1914–1926' (PhD thesis, Massey University, 2006), 169–70.

7 British Military Service Act, 1916, 5 & 6 Geo. 5, c. 104, sec. 2(1)(d).

8 Allen, 175 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 334.

9 175 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 694.

10 T.A.H. Field, 175 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 563.

11 Isitt, 175 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 541; Hudson, 546; T.A.H. Field, 563.

12 *Evening Post* (Wellington), 10 June 1916, 4.

13 176 NZ Parl. Deb., L.C. (1916), 238.

14 Paul, 176 NZ Parl. Deb., L.C. (1916), 353.

'three small bodies' convinced a majority of councillors to vote in favour, as it would guarantee 'shirkers' could not escape.¹⁵ Yet even this proved too liberal for the elected House, and a compromise had to be produced stating the alternative service would be non-combatant rather than non-military, could include the Army Service or Medical Corps, and could be 'in or beyond New Zealand'.¹⁶ MPs clearly recognised the additional limits these stipulations would impose. One proponent of exemption on religious grounds complained they 'practically left very little provision at all', while other members labelled the modified amendment pointless, as the few denominations it was intended to benefit would refuse non-combatant service in the military.¹⁷ This perceived irrelevance persuaded many opponents of an allowance for religious objectors to vote for the amendment, as it finally passed by 44 votes to 17.¹⁸

THE ACT'S RESTRICTIONS IN PRACTICE

After the boards had heard several cases, it emerged that only two denominations definitely qualified for exemption: the Society of Friends and Christadelphians. These groups possessed long-standing traditions of refusing military service and had been officially recognised as *bona fide* religious objectors in Britain.¹⁹ Whenever a member of either denomination came up for hearing, he was offered relief upon demonstrating that his affiliation dated back to 4 August 1914.²⁰ However, the Quakers and Christadelphians were relatively small groups, with only five of the former and eight of the latter making appeals before April 1917.

As MPs had foreseen, the fact an appellant was deemed eligible for exemption was not the end of the matter, as he still had to sign the undertaking to perform non-combatant service. The Society of Friends held that non-combatant roles were incompatible with their principles, as they entailed 'supporting and becoming part of the vast military machine'.²¹ Likewise, the Christadelphians informed Allen that while they were

prepared to 'do ANY CIVIL DUTY', their determination to avoid being yoked within an earthly body meant 'we cannot enter any Branch of Military Service'.²² So, despite the boards' willingness to exempt Quakers and Christadelphians, New Zealand's first religious exemption provision was virtually a dead letter.

In conjunction with the boards, the Defence Department therefore endeavoured to make the conditions of exemption more acceptable. On 24 April 1917, modifications to the undertaking eligible objectors were required to sign removed any mention of the Medical Corps or Army Service Corps, and stipulated that the men would not be compelled to wear military uniform.²³ Informally, the Defence Department went even further, promising work on the state farm at Levin.²⁴ In addition to making exemption more attractive to future appellants, objectors who had previously refused to sign the undertaking had their cases reheard to give them the chance to accept the revised version.²⁵ These measures proved successful for the Christadelphians, with those individuals who had rejected the old undertaking being willing to sign the new one, and all but one member who was subsequently deemed eligible for relief also choosing to accept it.²⁶

Another important rehearing involved David Jackson, a Seventh-day Adventist. Members of this denomination had previously been refused exemption, as they did not possess a written constitution against bearing arms and 'as a body had not objected to being called up'.²⁷ This position changed in June 1917, when documentary evidence arrived from the United States proving the Adventists' creed was opposed to combatant service.²⁸ Jackson was granted, and accepted, exemption at his rehearing, an outcome that was repeated whenever members of this denomination appealed subsequently.²⁹

The situation regarding the Quakers was somewhat different. While they continued to be offered exemption in every instance, members of this denomination proved less well disposed towards the amended undertaking. The Society's officials were suspicious that agricultural

15 Barr, 176 NZ Parl. Deb., L.C. (1916), 347–349; Carson, 363.

16 176 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 519; 177, NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 331.

17 Isitt, 177 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 335; McCombs, 336; Hornsby, 337; Herries, 337–338; Rhodes, 339; Sykes, 340.

18 177 NZ Parl. Deb., H.R. (1916), 341–342.

19 John Rae, *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service, 1916–1919* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 72–74.

20 *Otago Daily Times*, 18 January 1917, 6; *Press* (Christchurch), 13 March 1917, 2.

21 Statement to Auckland Military Service Board, January 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington (ANZ).

22 Such to Allen, 10 September 1916, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ (emphasis in original).

23 *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, 1399.

24 Gray to Military Service Board Chairmen, 24 May 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ.

25 Tate to Director of Recruiting, 11 June 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ.

26 *Otago Daily Times*, 16 May 1917, 6; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 19 July 1917, 6; *Evening Post*, 23 August 1917, 3.

27 *Press*, 20 February 1917, 3; *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 28 February 1917, 5.

28 Meyers to Osburne-Lilly, 11 July 1917, AD 1 734 10/407/2, ANZ.

29 *Auckland Star*, 9 July 1917, 2; *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 10 August 1917, 3; *Waikato Times*, 4 May 1918, 4.

work had been mooted, but not guaranteed, and concerned that exempted men would still come under military authority.³⁰ These issues were raised by Edward Dowsett, whose appeal had to be disallowed after he voiced an unshakable refusal to obey military orders.³¹

While these groups were eventually given the opportunity to benefit from the exemption provision, its restrictions meant two large categories of appellants never had any prospect of doing so. The first consisted of individuals who belonged to a religious denomination, but one whose principles were manifestly not opposed to performing combatant duties. In terms of the major denominations, the First Wellington Board refused Robert Jones, who admitted there was nothing in the Church of England's tenets that prohibited military service, while the Second Auckland Board described Robert Watson as a 'perfect humbug' for suggesting bearing arms was contrary to the teachings of Catholicism.³² Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians met with the same rebuttal, as did members of a plethora of smaller sects, such as the Auckland Central Mission, Church of Christ, and International Bible Students' Association.³³

A second category of clearly ineligible men was those who did not belong to a religious body. This included some whose objections were based solely on a literal reading of the Bible. Hugh King was rejected by the Second Wellington Board once he admitted to being guided 'purely by the teaching of the Holy Gospel', while several appellants who referenced the commandment 'thou shalt not kill' also received short shrift.³⁴ A much larger proportion of the second category was made up of men who advanced political arguments. David Williams was turned down after asserting conscription was contrary to the interests of the working classes, and Hugh Gray fared no better by stating that he objected to killing his German comrades at the behest of a capitalist elite.³⁵ A different kind of argument, but the same result, occurred in the appeal of Thomas Spillane. When he advanced a refusal to protect Britain while its troops were oppressing his Irish homeland, Spillane was informed he had 'no ground for appeal – nothing to sustain it at all'.³⁶

The boards also had to deal with cases that were less straightforward. The Brethren, Testimony of Jesus, and Richmond Mission are the three denominations O'Connor identifies as having fallen foul of an 'arbitrary' insistence that a written constitution prohibiting military service was essential for exemption.³⁷ The lack of such a document certainly played a role in the boards' decisions. One chairman exclaimed that 'even a football club has something printed', while another responded to an appellant's admission that the Brethren had nothing to show they were against fighting by charging 'well, how are you going to prove it?'.³⁸ As the Act did not specify that a written constitution was necessary, O'Connor is somewhat justified in criticising the boards for allocating it so much importance.

However, this was far from the boards' only reason for deciding the Brethren did not qualify for exemption. They also considered the testimony given by its members, which cast significant doubt on whether the denomination was opposed to performing combatant service. Whereas one reservist told the First Otago Board it was contrary to the teachings of the group to join the infantry, another admitted to the First Wellington Board that although 'some members' adhered to the principle of not bearing arms, 'others do not'.³⁹ The President of the Auckland Brethren Bible Class Union renounced claims it was against their doctrine to fight, while even the New Zealand head of the denomination stated the question of enlisting had been left to each individual's conscience.⁴⁰ Another consideration was the disconnect between the Brethren's alleged opposition to combatant service and the fact several of its members had volunteered. Questioning on this matter again produced ambiguous replies. Gordon Rose maintained that all members believed it was wrong to enlist, but when asked 'how is it some of them have joined', he simply answered 'I don't know'. Rose went on to assert these men withdrew from the Brethren, but another appellant would only concede the issue had caused 'a lot of trouble'.⁴¹

The boards used the same multifaceted tests to reject appeals from members of the Testimony of Jesus and Richmond Mission. One preacher of the former

30 Gill to Tate, 11 July 1917, AD 1 734 10/407/2, ANZ.

31 *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), 3 October 1917, 6.

32 *Evening Post*, 13 December 1916, 3; *New Zealand Herald*, 22 April 1918, 6.

33 Baughan to Allen, 17 January 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ; *Evening Post*, 13 December 1916, 3; *Wairarapa Daily Times*, 11 January 1917, 3; *New Zealand Herald*, 22 February 1917, 8 and 14 August 1917, 6; *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 7 November 1917, 3.

34 *Evening Post*, 20 April 1917, 8; *Auckland Star*, 4 May 1917, 6.

35 *New Zealand Herald*, 21 February 1917, 8 and 22 September 1917, 6.

36 *Hawke's Bay Tribune*, 11 May 1917, 6.

37 O'Connor, 'Awkward Ones', 127.

38 *Evening Post*, 25 July 1917, 8 and 14 December 1916, 3.

39 M.J. Kelly, *Military Board Appeals: Otago Witness, Dec 1916 to Feb 1917* (Auckland: Old News Publications, 1993), 13; *Taranaki Herald*, 30 January 1917, 7.

40 *Auckland Star*, 1 December 1916, 6; Compton to Allen, 9 February 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ.

41 *Evening Post*, 14 December 1916, 3 and 10 February 1917, 5.

denomination told the First Canterbury Board there was no definite doctrine on military service, while another informed Allen they had no leader or headquarters, and had only adopted a name for administrative convenience.⁴² Then, on 25 July 1917, sixteen men from the Testimony of Jesus whose appeals had been dismissed were granted a rehearing to determine finally their eligibility for exemption. The Third Wellington Board's questioning centred on whether the denomination was opposed to combatant service. In reply, one appellant claimed this policy had only been agreed at a conference in 1915, prompting a furious response from their solicitor, who knew this was not enough to satisfy the Act. Another reservist then further muddied the waters by stating the conference had not achieved a resolution and that the Testimony of Jesus possessed no definite creed.⁴³ A similar impasse occurred surrounding the Richmond Mission, whose members were at least consistent in verbally opposing combatant service. However, they were unable to supply proof that their sect was actually a 'religious body', or that they had any 'constitution or tenets' against joining the army's frontline units.⁴⁴

PUSHING THE ACT'S BOUNDARIES

While the boards ruled that only three denominations were entitled to exemption, they were prepared to offer a form of relief to other objectors. From January 1917, they began questioning men who fell outside the Act's scope, but whose scruples they considered to be based on a 'genuine' religious faith, about their willingness to perform overseas non-combatant service. Although an amenable objector still had his appeal dismissed, this was accompanied by a recommendation he be assigned to the Medical Corps.⁴⁵ The main proponent of this initiative was again the Defence Department, which chose to proceed despite the Solicitor-General's assertion it amounted to a dangerous step that contradicted the spirit of the Act.⁴⁶ The fact all nine boards were prepared to make recommendations indicates their willingness to

satisfy the scruples of many religious objectors, even if this meant pushing the boundaries of the legislation.

The extent of the boards' willingness to afford at least some relief can also be illustrated statistically. Of the 501 men who were reported in the newspapers as appealing due to conscientious objections, 73 were exempted on religious grounds: 36 Christadelphians, 7 Quakers, and 30 Seventh-day Adventists. Another 391 were deemed to fall outside the scope of the Act and had their claims rejected, while the remaining 37 were granted exemption on the grounds of 'undue hardship' or 'public interest'.⁴⁷ Significantly, of the 391 objectors who had their appeals dismissed, 149 accepted a recommendation for overseas non-combatant service, while another 62 refused the offer after being questioned on their attitude towards it. Therefore, the boards either exempted or offered non-combatant service to 321 out of 501 conscientious objectors; a striking 64.1 percent.⁴⁸

A MEASURED AND HOLISTIC APPROACH

The boards were undoubtedly critical of the beliefs many conscientious objectors espoused. One individual was informed that 'unpatriotic people like you don't deserve to belong to the nation', and a second that his religious ideals were nothing short of 'madness'.⁴⁹ Likewise, John Olley, assistant school master of Hastings, was advised that 'it is a disgrace to the community that a man holding such views should be teaching our young'.⁵⁰ Further appellants were lambasted for a perceived willingness to enjoy New Zealand's freedom and prosperity while others fought on their behalf. The First Wellington Board told one objector 'you get all the benefits and good of this earth, but will take no share in the work', while the First Otago Board charged Jesse Morris with being 'prepared to take all the benefits and stand by and let others bear the brunt of the fighting'.⁵¹ If the boards' tactics could be brutal, then some of their questions were simply unsavoury. Perhaps the worst was put to Eric Badger, who was asked 'if the Germans came here

42 *Press*, 4 January 1917, 8; Holtham to Allen, 23 May 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ.

43 *Evening Post*, 25 July 1917, 8 and 26 July 1917, 7.

44 *Press*, 6 February 1917, 4.

45 *Evening Post*, 26 January 1917, 8; *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13 March, 1917, 2.

46 Tate to Gray, 5 May 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ; Salmond to Tate, 22 May 1917, AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ.

47 In addition to tightly defined religious objections, the Military Service Act specified four other grounds for exemption. Appellants were permitted to cite any number or combination of these in support of their claims. The first two grounds pertained to the fact a man had been called up incorrectly by virtue of his age, nationality, or marital status. The third was that 'by reason of his occupation his calling-up for military service is contrary to the public interest', and the fourth that 'by reason of his domestic circumstances or for any other reason his calling-up for military service will be a cause of undue hardship to himself or others'. New Zealand Military Service Act, 1916, 7 Geo. 5, no. 8, sec. 18(1).

48 David Littlewood, *Military Service Tribunals and Boards in the Great War: Determining the Fate of Britain's and New Zealand's Conscripts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 141.

49 *Evening Post*, 23 August 1917, 3; *Press*, 6 February 1917, 4.

50 *Hawke's Bay Tribune*, 20 June 1917, 2.

51 *Wanganui Chronicle*, 19 July 1917, 6; *Otago Daily Times*, 29 September 1917, 5.

and attempted to violate your women, kill children and destroy the country, would you attempt to stop them?’⁵²

Nevertheless, the overwhelming impression derived from the boards’ operations is of a measured approach. Their primary concern was always to determine a man’s eligibility for relief. Each hearing began with an assessment of the objector’s claim to come within the Act, during which he was allowed to state his beliefs, press his arguments, and call witnesses.⁵³ If this segment of the appeal was inevitably brief when the objector did not belong to a Christian denomination, or was the member of a church that countenanced military service, the extensive investigations into the Brethren, Testimony of Jesus, and Richmond Mission demonstrate the boards did endeavour to reach informed decisions.

When the appeal could not be allowed, the second concern was whether the objections were sufficiently ‘genuine’ to warrant a recommendation for non-combatant service. It was here that questions about responses to the rape of womenfolk and the killing of infants were usually employed. However, any judgement of the boards must take into account the circumstances under which they operated. Sittings were busy, even hectic, occasions, with large numbers of cases up for hearing.⁵⁴ Under these pressures, the boards simply did not have time to conduct a detailed investigation of every objector’s sincerity. Instead, they had to rely on crude tests of his consistency. Asking what an appellant would do if his wife was attacked was a means of determining whether he was opposed to force in every circumstance. In a similar vein, farmer objectors were asked if they had ‘not been helping the war by growing oats and wheat’, with others being challenged to explain parts of the Bible that seemed to promote military service.⁵⁵ Those appellants who explained any apparent inconsistencies by reference to their religious faith were usually offered a recommendation for the Medical Corps, those who floundered, or who relied on political precepts—whether socialist, internationalist, or Irish nationalist—were invariably denied one.

Moreover, the frequency with which the boards criticised the beliefs held by objectors has been overstated. In many cases it was not reported to have taken place at all, with the sole focus being the appellant’s eligibility for relief.⁵⁶ When ridicule did occur, it constituted a short part of the proceedings, and usually only came after the objector had refused service in the Medical Corps. The boards could not comprehend the reluctance of Christian

men to help those in distress, with one chairman at a loss to ‘understand how succouring the wounded can be regarded as contrary to the teachings of the Bible’.⁵⁷

The boards’ attitudes towards conscientious objectors were also compatible with their wider efforts to promote an equality of sacrifice. What the appeal bodies always set out to discover was how much a man could reasonably be expected to do to help the war effort, and whether he was prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. If an objector demonstrated that he came within the scope of the Act then he was entitled to exemption, but must be prepared to do agricultural work. If he had personal religious scruples then he should be excused from combatant service, but must be amenable to treating the wounded. If he did not have ‘genuine’ religious objections then the best place for him was the front line. When viewed as part of the boards’ overall methodology, it becomes apparent that this means of assessing conscientious objectors was largely the same as that used for men who appealed on the other available grounds. Any individual who demonstrated a need to look after his family, or to continue in his occupation, was awarded the appropriate form of relief, whereas one who exaggerated his circumstances or was unwilling to do his bit was dispatched to camp. The attacks made on certain conscientious objectors were not fundamentally different from the comments levelled at other individuals whom the boards perceived as ‘shirking’. Families who were unrepresented at the front were berated for letting others make the sacrifices, miners were criticised for going on strike, and employers who argued their staff could not be replaced were accused of a selfish dereliction of duty.⁵⁸ While objectors were challenged on their beliefs rather than their actions, they were not singled out especially.

A final consideration is that the boards’ approach towards conscientious objectors was probably more lenient than most of the public would have wished. While there were individuals and organisations—largely among the major Christian denominations and on the political left—who spoke up in support of objectors, most New Zealanders regarded their arguments and behaviour with disdain.⁵⁹ How, it was frequently asked, could there ever be an equality of sacrifice if some men were allowed to decide they simply had no wish to fight, particularly when so many others were giving up their businesses and leaving their families behind in order to do so. Religious and moral critiques of warfare were often seen as a cover for ‘shirking’ or outright

52 *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 13 January 1917, 7.

53 *Evening Post*, 25 July 1917, 8 and 26 July 1917, 7.

54 Assistant Adjutant-General to Moorhouse, 6 March 1917, AD 82 1 1/5, ANZ; *Evening Post*, 5 October 1917, 6.

55 *Wairarapa Daily Times*, 9 January 1917, 2 and 11 January 1917, 3.

56 *Evening Post*, 13 December 1916, 3, 26 January 1917, 8 and 24 April 1917, 7; *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 7 November 1917, 3.

57 *Evening Post*, 31 January 1917, 8.

58 Littlewood, *Tribunals and Boards*, 117–123.

59 See the correspondence in AD 1 733 10/407/1, ANZ; Gustafson, *Labour’s Path*, 115.

cowardice, with a significant number of individuals who lodged appeals on those grounds being ostracised by their communities, forced out of their jobs, or even subjected to violence.⁶⁰ This means that if the boards had carried out their work in line with public opinion, they certainly would not have recommended non-combatant service for so many men who fell outside the Act, and might well have refused exemption even to those who were covered by its provisions. Instead, all nine appeal bodies adopted a more nuanced conception of equality of sacrifice – one that saw them follow the letter of the Act regarding exemption, and work in concert with the Defence Department to try and keep most religiously-motivated objectors out of prison.

CONCLUSIONS

When a conscientious objector appeared before the Second Auckland Board in August 1917, he signalled his willingness to serve the state in a civil capacity, but refused to wear military uniform or perform non-combatant duties. In dismissing the appeal, the board chairman remarked: 'I respect every man's religious principles, no matter how foolish and futile;

but surely you must realise what a foolish stand you are taking. Every fit man is called upon to serve his King and country, and ... it would be a Christian duty to look after wounded men.'⁶¹ This statement encapsulates the key elements of the boards' approach towards conscientious objectors. On the one hand, it demonstrates bafflement that New Zealanders might refuse to fight, and scorn for individuals who would not 'meet us half-way' by accepting non-combatant service. On the other hand, it acknowledges that some men could have 'genuine' religious reasons for refusing to bear arms, and indicates a willingness to push the boundaries of the Act by offering the compromise of ambulance work. The reference to every man being called upon to serve also showcases how the boards assessed the appeals of conscientious objectors as part of a wider effort to ensure an equality of sacrifice.

It seems, therefore, that historians have been altogether too harsh in their judgements of the military service boards. Whether the same can be said for those individuals who were responsible for hearing appeals during New Zealand's second major experience of conscription between 1940 and 1945 is another matter requiring further assessment.⁶²

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60 Baker, *King and Country Call*, 173, 176; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 27 June 1916, 4; *Taranaki Herald*, 14 October 1916, 2; *New Zealand Herald*, 14 March 1917, 4.

61 *Waikato Times*, 24 August 1917, 4.

62 David Littlewood, Marsden Fast-Start Research Project, MAU-1602, "'A Union of Hearts and Wills'? Second World War Conscription and New Zealand Society'.

