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The Peace Testimony of the Early Plymouth Brethren

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The Peace Testimony of the Early Plymouth Brethren

PETER BROCK

Among the many fruits of the evangelical piety within British Protestantism was the movement of renewal which crystallized around the end of the 1820s into the sect usually known as the Plymouth Brethren (or Christian Brethren as they now prefer). Brethren have “remained fairly small numerically ... but [with] a theological influence much larger than [their] membership would indicate.”¹ It is hard to say exactly when the group first appeared; its period of gestation lasted several years. At the outset “the founders ... had no programme, manifesto or creed.”² The sect originated among a group of earnest seekers centered first in Dublin and later in Plymouth, where at the beginning of the 1830s they began to take on the form of an organized movement. It soon had followers throughout the British Isles, and a few adherents were gathered in France, Germany, and Switzerland. Though eventually the Brethren became a predominantly lower middle-class body, the leaders of the first stage of the movement were drawn almost exclusively from the upper ranks of society: Anglican clergymen, Oxford dons, lawyers, doctors, sons of country families or wealthy merchants, and even a future peer of the realm. They were then all young men in their twenties or early thirties, nearly all of them well educated and several of them excellent classical or biblical scholars.

The founders of the sect felt profoundly dissatisfied with what they considered to be the arid and lifeless condition of both church establishment and dissent. This feeling provided the first impulse towards separation from the denominations to which they had belonged hitherto. For them the current state of the churches signified apostasy, a fatal falling away from primitive Christianity. Their restorationism led them to search the scriptures, especially the New Testament, in an attempt to discover the norms that should [31] regulate the life of Christian believers: Jesus, they believed, had ushered in a new, and higher, dispensation. *Sola scriptura* became their motto; but they went further than many others who had adopted this slogan by advocating radical separation from the world, which they regarded as the domain of Satan. They felt no need for a paid clergy, and, abandoning elaborate ritual, they instituted a simple form of service centering around the Lord’s Supper with the Breaking of the Bread. Though remaining strongly,

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1. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York, 1968), p. 147.
2. Peter L. Embley, “The Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren,” in Bryan R. Wilson, ed., *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organization and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London, 1967), p. 213. Embley’s doctoral thesis, “The Origins and Development of the Plymouth Brethren” (University of Cambridge, 1967), provides a useful outline of Brethren history from its beginnings to the schism of 1848. Their pacifism, however, is dealt with very briefly (see pp. 96–98).

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even fanatically, anti-Catholic, they desired a healing of the divisions among Protestants by uniting them under the banner of apostolic Christianity. However, their ecumenical aspirations remained unrealized, and schism rather than a harmonizing of confessional differences was to mark the Brethren's history. Their socioeconomic ethos bore the imprint of a latent radicalism, but it failed to surface because of the sect's withdrawal from politics. Simple living and a playing down of class distinctions marked both the early Brethren and their successors. From the beginning they also proclaimed a peace witness as firm as that of the Quakers, though more subdued.³

The first recorded discussion of war among the Brethren seems to have occurred in Exeter in 1827 during a conversation between Anthony Norris Groves, who was to play a major role in bringing the movement into being, and his friend, the schoolmaster William Hake. At the time Groves was practicing as a dentist in Exeter and simultaneously training for the Anglican ministry in Trinity College, Dublin. According to Groves's account Hake "asked ... if I did not hold war to be unlawful. I replied, 'Yes.' He then further asked, how I could subscribe that article which declares, 'It is lawful for Christian men to take up arms at the command of the civil magistrate.' It had, till that moment, never occurred to me. I read it; and replied, 'I never would sign it'; and thus ended my connection with the Church of England, as one about to be ordained in her communion."⁴

Clearly it was Groves's newly found pacifism that became the immediate issue leading him to break finally with the established church and to abandon his intention of becoming an Anglican clergyman. It also meant the issue of war was raised at a very early stage in the Brethren movement, in its prehistory as it were, for during periodic visits to Dublin in connection with {32} his studies, Groves had come into contact with other religious seekers there who were to form the core of early Brethren leadership. The leader of the group was John Nelson Darby, then a country curate. Due to Groves's dynamic personality the idea of rejecting war took hold of his colleagues and became a fixed tenet of the emerging sect.

We do not know the source of Hake's antiwar views. He may have derived them directly from the New Testament, which the early Brethren studied avidly and regarded as the touchstone of conduct. However, during the decades following the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars, the subject of peace was being widely discussed: the Peace Society was founded in London in 1816 and soon enlisted the support not only of Quakers but of a number of other evangelically minded Christians, including members of the Church of England.⁵ There was an active branch of the society in Exeter. Its leading figure until his

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3. The genesis and early development of the Brethren's peace testimony have received little attention. For brief accounts, see Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren, 1825–1850* (London, 1967), pp. 304, 305, 307; and Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, N.J., 1972), pp. 401–403, 535. Of a number of histories of the Brethren consulted, I found Rowdon's book the most useful for background.
 4. Anthony Norris Groves, *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves, containing Extracts from His Letters and Journals. Compiled by His Widow*, 2d ed., (London, 1857), p. 41. This passage is also quoted in F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement: Its Origins, Its Worldwide Development, and Its Significance for the Present Day* (Exeter, 1968), p. 22. In his autobiographical account from which these words are taken Groves remarks, "I was unable, subsequently, to enter the church at all, from not being able to subscribe the Articles, or rather that one relative to war" (*Memoir*, p. 42).
 5. The most comprehensive study of the early British peace movement is Eric William Sager, "Pacifism and the Victorians: A Social History of the English Peace Movement, 1816–1878" (Ph. D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975). See also idem, "The Social Origins of Victorian Pacifism," *Victorian Studies* 23 (1980): 211–236. Understandably, the Plymouth Brethren are not included in either the

premature death in 1828 was the Quaker Jonathan Dymond, whose extensive writings on peace became a mainstay of the Anglo-American peace movement into the twentieth century. Thus, Hake may well have been influenced, at least to some extent, by contacts with Dymond and his associates.

Groves, instead of entering the Anglican ministry, decided after some hesitation to become a missionary in the Brethren cause. He left for the East in June 1829. In the journal he kept during his early years away from home, there are several references to his belief in nonviolence. On his way to Baghdad through the wilds of Kurdistan, for instance, he recorded his experiences with the “ferocious” inhabitants of that country. He related how on one occasion a Kurd, “on seeing my belt without a dagger, at the foot of the mountain defile, seemed [to be] pressing on me the necessity of supplying myself with one; but I pointed to heaven as the source of my safety, which he seemed to understand.”⁶ Groves remained for some months in Baghdad, which was then in a state of turmoil due to an Arab rebellion against the Turkish government. From time to time the mob took control of the city and threatened the life and property of its inhabitants. For example, on 11 June 1831 Groves wrote in his journal, “The Lord has hitherto extended His sheltering wing over us, though without sword, pistol, gun, or powder in the house, ... but the Lord is our hope and our exceeding great reward.” The next day he noted, “The day dawned quietly, but our house has just been attacked by a band of lawless depredators, asking for powder and offensive weapons, but I told them I had none.” After accepting some money they departed peacefully. But exactly a month later, “some of the lawless (33) depredators came again into our house, and wanted arrack, but they went away quietly, and only talked about cutting off my head, ... all this is mere bravado. The Lord graciously takes care of us. They look on me as a sort of Dervish, because I do not drink arrack, nor use weapons of war, nor take men to guard my house.”⁷ In 1833 Groves moved on to India, where, apart from two visits home, he remained as a missionary until his final return to England in 1852. He died in 1853.⁸

On the first stage of his travels Groves was accompanied by John Vesey Parnell, a young evangelically minded aristocrat who as the second Baron Congleton later played an influential role among the Brethren. A year after Groves reached India, Parnell arrived there and missionized for several years among the British troops, becoming a close friend of some of the evangelical army officers. His biographer does not mention whether Parnell ever raised the question of war or expressed views similar to those held by his friend and mentor Groves.⁹ At the same time there is no evidence that he disagreed with Groves, who exerted a powerful influence on his religious life.

thesis or the article.

6. Groves, *Memoir*, p. 74 (30 November 1829).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 174 (11 June 1831, 12 June 1831, 12 July 1831).
8. Of course we do not know how Groves would have reacted to the Indian Mutiny. He believed God had sanctioned war in the Old Testament as well as the use of capital punishment by governments, ancient and modern. See G. H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves: Saint and Pioneer*, 2d ed. (London, 1949), p. 130. In all likelihood he would have conditionally approved the employment of force to suppress the revolt; but this is supposition.
9. Henry Groves, “*Not of the World*”: *Memoir of Lord Congleton* (London, 1884), pp. 48–56. Parnell’s reluctance, after completing his studies at the University of Edinburgh, to accept the army commission purchased for him by his father did not stem from pacifist scruples. He had not yet met the Brethren, and his hesitation derived from his belief even at that early date that his vocation lay in spreading the gospel.

The position is clearer in respect of another important member of the Groves circle, the German immigrant George Müller. After joining the Brethren, Müller was to achieve fame as the founder of the Bristol orphan homes. A Lutheran by birth and already a religious seeker, he had arrived in England just after Groves had left for the East, but Groves's spirituality exercised its effect on the young German, even at a distance. Moreover, in October 1830 Müller married Groves's sister Mary, whom he had first met while staying with William Hake. Müller's views on the question of peace crystallized during the first half of the 1830s: he first committed them to paper in 1836 when he began to compose his autobiography. Like other Brethren he based his pacifism squarely on the Sermon on the Mount and other parts of the New Testament which preach a message of non-resistance.

It may be said, surely those passages cannot be taken literally, for how then would the people of God be able to pass through the world. ... WHOSOEVER IS WILLING TO ACT OUT these commandments of the Lord LITERALLY, will, I believe, be led with me to see that, to take them LITERALLY, is the will of God. Those who do so take them will doubtless often be brought into difficulties, hard to the flesh to bear, but these will have a tendency to make them constantly to feel that they are [34] strangers and pilgrims here, that this world is not their home, and thus to throw them more upon God, who will assuredly help us through any difficulty into which we may be brought by seeking to act in obedience to His Word.¹⁰

If it was perhaps Groves who exercised the strongest personal influence on the early Brethren leaders, it was undoubtedly J. N. Darby who made the most lasting impact on the new movement. He helped to shape both its organization and its doctrines and is rightly regarded as the key figure among the early Brethren, a place he occupied at least until the division between Open and Exclusive Brethren in 1848. Darby was an enormously prolific writer; but unfortunately his voluminous *Collected Writings* shed little light on his opinions on peace and war.¹¹ Like the "anabaptist vision" of the sixteenth century, Darby's view of the Christian life was one of earthly suffering and heavenly reward. "The Christian," he wrote, "cannot do as the world does. ... The Christian cannot resist evil, nor assert his rights, nor maintain his place in the world."¹² His must be an exact – and exacting – discipleship deriving its inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount.¹³ It is clear that Darby supported a rigid separation of the Brethren from all worldly activities, including civil government and – at least by implication – war. He sharply condemned what he called meddling in politics. "God governs, and governs with a view to the glory of Christ, and ... He will infallibly bring about His purposes." For a Christian to serve as magistrate would be to attempt to serve two masters, Satan as well as Christ. "In the millennium it will not be so. Then we shall rule." But in the world as

10. George Müller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller, written by himself*, 7th ed., 2 vols. in 4 pts. (London, 1869–1873), 1:65, 66. The work was first published in 1837. Before he left Prussia, Müller had been called up to do his army service but was exempted on medical grounds. He did not want to serve as he was intending to emigrate to England; his reluctance, however, was not due to conscientious scruples.

11. J. N. Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, 34 vols. (London, [1867–1900]). It is regrettable that the individual items are not usually dated.

12. Darby, "Grace and Government. 2 Peter I," in *Collected Writings*, 28: 297.

13. "The sermon on the mount characterizes the Lord's teaching." In it "He ... gives positive directions for the government of [his followers'] conduct." Darby, "Notes on Scripture: The Sermon on the Mount," in *ibid.*, 13: 57.

presently constituted “the magistrate is the resister of evil,” while “the duty ... of the saints is submission.” “I would rather have what is acceptable to God than all the civil rights in the world,” Darby stated firmly. “I cannot seek a good object in a bad way. The object must be God’s, and the way God’s.” True, it is God’s ordinance that the civil magistrate should govern; he may abuse his authority, or be himself a wicked man, or even an infidel, and yet he remains a lawful ruler. But the duty of the true Christian is quite different: a follower of Christ must live peaceably and avoid disobeying any of God’s commandments.¹⁴

{35} A direct repudiation of war and military service comes from Darby’s pen only at a late date, and then it is couched in cautious, though unambiguous, terms. It occurs in a letter he wrote to Brethren in France in December 1870, just after the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War. Darby, who by then was leader only of the Exclusives, had worked among the French Brethren earlier. Their situation was delicate, because military conscription was strictly enforced in France. Though alarmed at the growing spirit of nationalism among the French Brethren, Darby seems to have appreciated their difficulties over the issue of conscription.

It is clear to me that a Christian, free to do as he will, could never be a soldier, unless he were at the very bottom of the scale, and ignorant of the Christian position. It is another thing when one is forced to it. In such a case the question is this: is the conscience so strongly implicated on the negative side of the question, that one could not be a soldier without violating that which is the rule for conscience – the word of God? In that case we bear the consequences; we must be faithful.

What pains me is the manner in which the idea of one’s country has taken possession of the hearts of some brethren. I quite understand that the sentiment of patriotism may be strong in the heart of a man. I do not think that the heart is capable of *affection* towards the whole world. At bottom, human affection must have a centre. ... One would sacrifice one’s life – everything ... for one’s country, one’s friends. But ... the Christian, if consistent, declares plainly that he seeks a country – a better, that is to say, a heavenly country. His affections, his ties, his citizenship, are above. He withdraws into the shade in this world. ... The Lord is a sanctuary.

That a Christian should hesitate whether he ought to obey or not, I understand: I respect his conscience; but that he should allow himself to be carried away by what is called patriotism – that is what is not of heaven. ... As a man I would have fought obstinately for my country, and would never have given way, God knows; but as a Christian I believe and feel myself to be outside all; these things move me no more. The hand of God is in them; I recognize it; He has ordered all beforehand. I bow my head before that will. If England were to be invaded to-morrow, I should trust in Him. It would be a chastisement upon this people who have never seen war, but I would bend before His will.

At the conclusion of his letter Darby refers to well-intentioned persons engaged in post-war relief work in France; he was probably thinking of the British Quakers. “All this does

14. Darby, “Progress of Democratic Power, and Its Effect on the Moral State of England,” in *ibid.*, 32: 506; Darby, “The Olive, the Vine, and the Fig-Tree,” in *ibid.*, 32: 400, 401 (the {35} thesis Darby states in the latter work appears to be essentially the same as Aldous Huxley, for instance, was to elaborate in more secular terms in *Ends and Means* [London, 1937]); Darby, “A Glance at Various Ecclesiastical Principles ...,” in *ibid.*, 4: 61. Without the magistracy, writes Darby, “this world would be a kind of pandemonium.” “The Christian is to be subject to such authority – the Queen of England or a Turk, wherever it is.” But for Darby as for his fellow Brethren, “My business is to walk as a Christian, and to shew the character of Christ, not to set the world right; when Christ comes He will do that, for He will take it into His hand.” Darby, “The Life of Christ in the Believer. Colossians III.18 – IV,” in *ibid.*, 34: 745.

not attract me,” he commented. There was enough to do elsewhere spreading the gospel message among the poor of the {36} cities. “We are not of this world, but we are the representatives of Christ in the midst of the world. May God graciously keep His own.”¹⁵

Though Darby’s letter was written in 1870, there are no grounds for thinking that his general position was substantially different four decades earlier. In the letter he expresses admirably the separatist position of the early Brethren, eschewing war not so much from humanitarian considerations as from an obligation to shun the world and observe strictly – or at any rate with as much strictness as each individual was capable of – the divine commandment: “Resist not evil.” Voluntary soldiering Darby condemned outright; and in countries where conscription was law, conscientious objection to military service, if not mandatory, clearly appeared to him to be the preferred course for the Brethren.

Darby had been a principal contributor to the first periodical put out by the Brethren. The *Christian Witness* was published quarterly from January 1834 to January 1841, appearing in Plymouth as the organ of that closely knit group of Brethren whose location there was to give its name to the whole sect.¹⁶ The paper’s first editor was a former Anglican clergyman, Henry Borlase, who died in November 1835. His place was taken by James Lampden Harris, another ex-Anglican clergyman. Under Harris’s guidance and with the assistance of Benjamin Wills Newton, who, like Harris, had been both a clergyman of the Church of England and a fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, Brethren nonresistance was expounded inter alia in the pages of the journal. In 1829 Harris had married the daughter of a prominent evangelical writer, the Anglican Rev. Legh Richmond, who before his death in 1827 had publicly espoused the cause of Christian pacifism, while Newton, though an Anglican by upbringing, came of Quaker stock and retained many links with his Quaker relatives.¹⁷ Thus, both Harris and Newton were conditioned early to accept the pacifist position which other Brethren had reached from different starting points.

At the center of the Brethren vision of discipleship lay the conviction that “the saints” belong to no nationality: they are “heavenly men on earth.” Thus, they must live “in separation from the world,” leaving it to the Lord to avenge wrongs done either to themselves or to others, while at the same time obeying the civil magistrates, “irrespective of their character and of circum- {37} stances,” in all things that are not contrary to the divine law. Though indeed government is ordained of God, the Brethren cannot themselves be rulers or politicians, for “the system of the world is the resistance of evil: to this end are all the energies and wisdom of man, whether individually or collectively, directed.” A real Christian, on the other hand, must be humble and mild, patient and merciful. It would be different “if he could go to the seat of authority with his bible in his hand, and drawing all the principles of his conduct from the New Testament, act simply as the servant of Christ.” Then indeed “a magistrate might retain his dignity and be a faithful disciple still.”

15. J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.*, 3 vols (Kingston-on-Thames, n. d.), 2: 110, 111. The letter is published in a translation from the French. This edition of Darby’s letters was published by the Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot.

16. *The Christian Witness: Chiefly on Subjects connected with the Present State of the Church*. I have used the 8 volumes-in-7 edition in Knox College Library, Toronto. Volumes 3 and 4 of this set were published in London, the rest in Plymouth; volume 2 (1835) is a “second edition” published in 1838. The numbering of the issues is erratic. Although articles are unsigned, the list of contents in this set contains initials beside many of the articles, thereby making identification of the author easy. The set used by Rowdon seems to have included further identifications.

17. See Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*, pp. 531, 532; and Rowdon, p. 172.

But in fact the code of law which magistrates must administer and the methods they must use to enforce it nullify the precepts of Christ as enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount. “Where is any nation to be found which dreams of receiving the laws of Christ as their directory? There may be in the midst of nations many *individuals* who [are] children of faith ... but where can we find one nation, which in its collective capacity in its laws and social regulations, has esteemed the reproach of Christ?” What nation, when smitten on one cheek, would turn the other to an aggressor?

Where is the nation whose laws are not rather based upon principles of retaliation and revenge? whose fleets, and armies, and institutions, do not witness, that, as a nation, it is not subject to the laws of Him who by and bye shall be manifested as the Prince of peace? When ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’; and if this will be the result of His legislation then, who can doubt that it would be the consequence of its acceptance now? Can a believer then when once he sees that the measures of nations are from the highest to the lowest departments of their control, regulated by other principles than those of Christ, assist in promoting their plans? Christ did not, neither His Apostles. They rendered to the powers that were, custom, obedience, honour; but they neither held or sought to hold authority in the world, and were therefore free from having entailed upon them through the use of it, the necessity of acquiescing in the world’s principles and habits.

God in his mercy has provided for government of the world by “the Gentiles.” Their rule will cease only “at Armageddon” when “the wine of the earth will be cast in the wine-press of the wrath of God” and the millennial rule of the saints will begin.¹⁸

At the center of Brethren nonresistance, as expounded by the movement’s early leaders, lay the Law of Love. “Resist not evil” and “Blessed are the peacemakers” were their key texts. Jesus had introduced new principles for his followers which superseded those God had delivered to the Jews under the {38} Old Covenant. These principles were meant “for our imitation” in every detail, even though nominal Christians passed them over “in silence.” The saints constituted “a *new* and singular people [formed] unto a *new* and marvellous end.” They had been transformed “into the Divine Likeness ... in order that they may exhibit on Earth the holiness and goodness and grace of God, and obtain in Heaven the vision and fruition of God.” They were “a people elected, separated, made peculiar” by the fact that they wished to apply literally what Christ had said in the Sermon on the Mount. To the world, nonresistance inevitably appeared “astonishing, novel, extreme, ultra.” To the saints, the doctrine formed an essential element of Christian living.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there was, perhaps from the beginning, always some ambiguity about the Brethren’s attitude toward serving soldiers. Newton, for instance, thought they definitely should leave the army, despite the example of the centurion Cornelius.

I don’t think the objection lies in the fact of the army being a worldly affair, but the army is no place for Christians. It is not a question of the right or the wrong of, for instance, earthly governments, but whether Christians can get into them or being there can keep in them, and that because of what they have to do and assent to. And the question concerns many other

18. J. L. Harris, “The Secret of God,” *Christian Witness* 1 (October 1834): 456–459; idem “Heavenly-mindedness,” *ibid.* 2 (October 1835): 321, 323; idem, “Caesar and God. – Matt. XXII. 16–22,” *ibid.* 7 (July 1840): 233. B. W. Newton, “Is the Exercise of Worldly Authority Consistent with Discipleship?” *ibid.* 4 (July 1837): 251–265; idem, “Letter to a Friend on the Study of Prophecy,” *ibid.* 2 (October 1835): 347–350. Most Brethren did not vote. However, when Lord Congleton succeeded to his title, he decided to take his seat in the House of Lords while remaining independent of party. See H. Groves, p. 90.

19. J. Molesworth, “A Solemn Word to the Saints of God,” *Christian Witness* 4 (January 1837): 53–62.

things besides the army and the navy, the House of Commons for example. [Neither] Christ, nor the Apostles, would ever abolish Pilate's seat, nor interfere with it, but submit to it and own it, yet never sit in it.

“Separation on the ground of discipleship” was the correct position for the Christian with respect to all those institutions.²⁰ On the other hand, the future Lord Congleton missionized among British soldiers, apparently without ever discussing the proper Christian attitude to war. When the rural evangelist Robert Cleaver Chapman visited Ireland in 1848, he recorded in his journal on one occasion that he was to preach “in the barracks [at Mal-low], by permission of the commanding officer, who is seeking Christ.” Later, on a missionary visit to France in the spring of 1871 he preached “the Gospel of Christ” both to French soldiers and to German prisoners of war. It would seem that the pacifist issue was not raised in either case, in spite of the emphasis placed on nonresistance by so many eminent Brethren of the first generation.²¹ Nevertheless, it long remained “a usual thing for army and navy [39] officers to resign their commissions upon conversion.”²² Although the need for the saints to separate as far as possible from the world was undoubtedly one of the reasons for resigning, the Brethren's peace testimony surely provided an even more important motive for this sacrifice of career and social status.

This was certainly the case with Commander Percy Hall, R. N., the first of a series of army and navy officers who resigned their commissions upon joining the Brethren. Newton, who knew him well at the time, later described his resignation from the Royal Navy in or around 1830 as “a great sacrifice indeed, for everything was open to him in the Navy”; “he stood very well in the Navy and could have got any promotion” on account of his family's influence (Hall's father held high office in the Church of England, and his family was well connected).²³ To justify his unusual behavior Hall proceeded to compose a tract entitled *Discipleship*, the only work by a Brethren to be devoted exclusively to the question of nonresistance. Its 106 pages, which altogether contain “between two and three hundred Biblical texts,” make heavy reading today.²⁴ Hall's argument follows the

20. The Fry MS. book, pp. 308, 309. This book contains copies made by Alfred C. Fry of materials relating to Newton and formerly belonging to the latter's friend and assistant, Frederick W. Wyatt. I must thank its present owner, Mr. C. E. Fry, Newport, Isle of Wight, for granting me access to manuscripts in his possession. The passage quoted belongs, it is true, to the later part of Newton's life, when he was no longer a member of the Brethren movement, but there is no reason to think he did not hold the viewpoint expressed here while still attached to the Brethren.

21. *Letters of the Late Robert Cleaver Chapman* (London, [1903]), pp. 117, 150, 152. Compare the similar stance of the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody during the Civil War, [39] discussed in my *Pacifism in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the First World War* (Princeton, N. J., 1968), pp. 822, 823.

22. Lang, p. 130. Henry Pickering, *Chief Men among the Brethren*, 2d ed. (London, 1931), cites a number of examples, including that of Captain the Honorable William Henry George Wellesley, nephew of the Iron Duke, who resigned his commission at the beginning of the 1840s; see pp. 19–21, 40, 41, 55, 56, 74, 198, 199, 208. Towards the end of the century, however, the custom of new officer-converts resigning ceased to be followed in many instances.

23. William Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London, 1901), p. 52; Fry MS. book, pp. 256, 255.

24. Percy Francis Hall, *Discipleship! or Reasons for Resigning His Naval Rank and Pay* (Plymouth, 1833). A second edition appeared in 1835, likewise in Plymouth; and a third edition in 1848, published (according to the British Library catalogue) in London. I have consulted the first and third editions, but all references are to the first edition. Rowdon, p. 75. Hall has been described as “a man of peculiarly inde-

pattern of other Brethren expositions of nonresistance, only at somewhat tedious length. Magistracy and war are contrary to “the Spirit of Jesus,” whose mission it was “to bind up the broken heart and to preach peace.” He forbade the sword even when used in self-defense. While Hall considered as misguided those who refused to pay taxes “because the tribute money is spent in war,” he thought Christians certainly should refrain from all positive actions that violated the principle of nonresistance. “How then,” he asked, “can [I] retain a commission of authority” which so clearly contravenes this principle?²⁵

Among those who were shocked by Hall’s behavior was Edward Irving, founder of the Catholic Apostolic Church and an object of Hall’s admiration. Newton relates in his manuscript reminiscences how Hall went to London {40} soon after resigning his commission and

had the pleasure of an invitation to breakfast with Irving. This recent step of Hall’s was one of the topics of conversation. Irving strongly condemned it. He said Hall should have served Christ in the world, in the army. ... The dispute ran high for Hall warmly defended his step and his views, and at last Irving said ‘Sir I forbid your saying any more of such things; I will not have the ears of my family listen to it,’ and Hall parted with him in great anger. It quite cured him of Irvingism.²⁶

Still, for all his individualism and his conviction that he had acted rightly, Hall obviously disliked the ideas of severing ties with former comrades, of appearing to “cast discredit upon the service and discipleship of many now living for whom I ... feel the truest respect and affection,” and “of sitting in judgment upon the almost universally accredited standard of Christian practice.” “I expect but little,” he concluded, “from the many who call themselves by the precious name of Jesus, except opprobrium, or the charge of fanaticism.”²⁷

Another who felt the same way was Sir Charles Brenton, Bart., the learned and titled Anglican clergyman who also had joined the Brethren in the early thirties. His father, his grandfather, and his uncle, as well as his wife’s father and grandfather, were all admirals; and other close relatives were in the armed forces. Moreover, he had been brought up in a conventionally pious evangelical home in a spirit of ardent British patriotism. Yet, despite the many ties that continued to link him with his family and its traditions even after his break with the established church, Brenton firmly upheld the Brethren’s peace testimony. Like Groves a little earlier, he experienced difficulties with the Anglican church’s Article 37: its rejection marked his adoption of a new creed.²⁸

The evangelical Quakers who left the Society of Friends to join the Brethren as a result of the Beaconite controversy of 1835–1836 did not have to struggle, like Hall or Brenton, with a military past or a family service tradition, for they came out of a society which had maintained a strict pacifist witness almost from its inception in the Common-

pendent inclinations accounted by some as eccentricities” (David J. Beattie, *Brethren: The Story of a Great Recovery* [Kilmarnock, 1940], p. 22).

25. Hall, pp. 41, 50, 74, 75; see also pp. 31ff., 52–56.

26. Fry MS. book, p. 255.

27. Hall, p. 3.

28. Sir L. Charles L. Brenton, Bart., ed., *Memoir of Vice Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton, Baronet, K. C. B.*, 2d ed. (London and Ryde, 1855), preface, pp. x, xlviii–lx, lxviii, cxxiii. In a letter dated 18 November 1846 (and printed on p. xvi) Brenton refers to his “*conscientious objection* to war under any circumstances.” Is this perhaps the first use in such a context of the words I have italicized?

wealth era.²⁹ There is no evidence that men like Isaac Crewdson or Robert and John Eliot Howard did not share the Quaker peace testimony, even if they deplored what they considered the society's religious liberalism. The staunchly pacifist Newton, [41] with his Quaker family connections, had "played an important part in influencing some of the more evangelically-minded to withdraw from the Society of Friends."³⁰ Though this Quaker influx into the ranks of the Brethren did not generate the Brethren's peace testimony (for it existed already), it must have reinforced it during the following decades.

In the 1840s, however, the Brethren remained largely silent on the peace issue. There are several possible reasons for this. First, the *Christian Witness* ceased publication early in 1841, leaving the Brethren for some years without a press organ of their own. Also, during the 1840s the sect underwent its first, and most momentous, schism. The division between Open and Exclusive Brethren was consummated [sic] in 1848.

In the next decade Britain became involved in an armed conflict. The Crimean War of 1854–1856 witnessed the birth of a vigorous antiwar movement led by the Peace Society and the Society of Friends.³¹ Among the peace activists, however, we do not find any of the Brethren. They did not abandon their nonresistant principles, but they lived as a people apart, separated from earthly concerns and eschewing all forms of active protest even against the evils of the world. Since the government refrained from imposing conscription for either army or navy service, and since the militia draft, though formally abolished only in 1860, was in practice already moribund, Brethren of military age had not the occasion, as they would have in the two world wars of the next century, to demonstrate their objection to military service. As a result, I have been able to find information concerning the wartime stand of only three Brethren: Sir Charles Brenton and Philip Gosse and his wife Emily.

Brenton, now middle-aged, was willing to stand up and be counted among those who opposed the conflict. "I am no member of the Society of Friends," he remarked, "nor of any other 'Peace Society,' save that one true Peace Society, the Church of God, but I believe all war to be unjustifiable." These words were written and published in 1855, at the height of the war.³² A year [42] earlier, while preparing a brief memoir of his brother-in-law, Colonel Chester, who had been killed at the battle of the Alma, he had already contemplated taking a public stand in favor of pacifism but evidently thought better of it.

29. See especially Timothy C. F. Stunt, *Early Brethren and the Society of Friends* (Pinner [Middlesex], 1970). This was published as Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Paper no. 3. However, some of these dissident Friends joined the Baptists or the Church of England.

30. Rowdon, p. 172; Coad, pp. 76–78.

31. The best account is by Stephen Frick, "Joseph Sturge, Henry Richard, and the *Herald of Peace*: Pacifist Response to the Crimean War" (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1971). Among the staunchest pacifists of this period were a handful of clergymen of the Church of England, the church from which most of the early Brethren leaders derived. Alfred Bowen Evans, the curate of St. Andrew's, Enfield, for instance, published "by request" his "discourse, delivered in the church of St. Andrew, Marylebone, on the fifth Wednesday in Lent, 1855: the day appointed for a national fast and humiliation," under the title *War: Its Theology; Its Anomalies; Its Incidents and Its Humiliations* (London, 1855). From the Christian point of view, he argued, "war is utterly indefensible" (p. 12). Like Groves and Brenton, Evans also had trouble with Article 37 (see p. 5). Unlike Groves or Congleton, as a Christian pacifist he publicly condemned British rule in India. In the Mutiny year we find him stating boldly, "The truth is, we have no business in India. ... The very expression British India, is a solecism and a snare." Alfred Bowen Evans, *India. Two Discourses delivered in the Church of St. Andrew, Wells Street* (London and Enfield, [1857]), pp. 10, 14.

32. Brenton, *Memoir*, p. x.

He wrote somewhat cryptically towards the end of the pamphlet, “I had entertained thoughts of adding a few lines on the subject of war, and my views of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of it. But nothing is farther from my intention or desire at present than to engage in controversy. ... And to engage in a keen strife of words about the evil of a strife of swords would argue anything but a pacific spirit.”³³ However, he continued to be troubled by the question – “the very Sebastopol of controversial difficulty,” as he termed it – until he finally came out in print against war. The vehicle he chose was curious: the preface to a new edition of the memoir of his father, Admiral Jahleel Brenton. His rejection of war was unequivocal, his tone gentle but firm. His discussion indeed was not intended for “a past generation – “old admirals and generals, the grey-haired veterans of a former war – nor for the families of those mourning the loss of “near and dear relatives in the Crimea.”

The parties ... whom I *do* wish to influence are more especially parents and guardians who have some scruples as to the lawfulness of war. If ... my preface should be, as I desire and pray, the means under God of arresting one hand about to consign a child to the inhuman trade of war, should rescue one human being from the bloody death, and what in many cases is far worse, the bloody *life* of a warrior – I shall be thankful.

In particular, he strongly condemned the British navy’s practice of taking into active service young boys, some of them no more than twelve years old, children incapable of thinking out the rights and wrongs of war yet forced “to become the slaughterers of their species.”³⁴

In contrast to the forthright, though otherworldly, antimilitarism of Brenton, the Gosses’ stand on war was ambiguous. The naturalist Philip Gosse, though a Plymouth Brother, was truly “an unusual one,” not so much because of his eminence as a scientist as on account of the fanatical intensity with which he, along with his wife, pursued the implications of biblical prophecy.³⁵ Belief in a battle of Armageddon which would usher in the millennium, however, had become increasingly common among the Brethren {43} as time passed, and the noise of millennial conflict sometimes, as in Gosse’s case, tended to drown out the summons to establish the Law of Love on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁶

Gosse, who had joined the Brethren at Hackney in 1847, certainly believed, at least in theory, in the Christian’s duty not to resist evil. His son has told of two instances when his father put into practice in his personal life the preaching of his sect on this issue: on one occasion he refused to prosecute a boy who had picked his pocket of a silk hander-

33. Brenton, *Alas, My Brother: A Letter to the Friends of Harry George Chester, Late Lieut.-Col. of the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, who fell at the Battle of the Alma, Sept. 20, 1854* (London and Ryde, [1854]), pp. 43, 44.

34. Brenton, *Memoir*, pp. xlvi, xlix, li, lxi–lxiii. Compare the contemporary pamphlet by “A Clergyman of the Church of England” entitled *The Soldier and the Christian. Addressed to all willing to hear Both Sides; but especially to Parents about to choose a Profession for Their Sons* (London, 1855), which puts forward arguments somewhat similar to Brenton’s in the course of an imaginary dialogue between a “soldier ... going to the Crimea ... in the steamer *Mars*” (p. 5) and a convinced Christian pacifist, who eventually persuades the soldier to abandon his profession on grounds of conscience.

35. Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2 vols. (London, 1966–1970), 1: 446.

36. An example of the millennial attitude can be found in W. H. Bennet, *Robert Cleaver Chapman of Barnstable* [sic] (Glasgow and London, [1902]), pp. 66, 67. “Any thought of *universal* peace throughout the world will not bear the test of scripture,” wrote Chapman. “That the nations will learn war no more will be true only of those who learn ... to love God.”

chief {sic}, and on another he acted in like fashion when a thief broke into his house while the family was attending Sunday morning service.³⁷

The outbreak of the Crimean War, however, aroused the Gosses' latent patriotism and at the same time marshaled their prophetic fantasies behind the war effort against Russia. The battle of the Alma, which first aroused Brenton to publish a spirited defense of nonresistance, evoked quite a different response in the Gosses. Their son Edmund remembered clearly how his parents received news of the battle, for that day happened to be his fifth birthday.

We were seated at breakfast, at our small round table drawn close up to the window, my Father with his back to the light. Suddenly, he gave a sort of cry, and read out the opening sentences from the *Times* announcing a battle in the valley of the Alma. No doubt the strain of national anxiety had been very great, for both he and my Mother seemed deeply excited. He broke off his reading when the fact of the decisive victory was assured, and he and my Mother sank simultaneously on their knees in front of their tea and bread-and-butter, while in a loud voice my Father gave thanks to the God of Battles. This patriotism was the more remarkable, in that he had schooled himself, as he believed, to put his "heavenly citizenship" above all earthly duties. To those who said: "Because you are a Christian, surely you are not less an Englishman?" he would reply by shaking his head, and by saying: "I am a citizen of no earthly State." He did not realize that, in reality, and to use a cant phrase not yet coined in 1854, there existed in Great Britain no more thorough "Jingo" than he.³⁸

Emily Gosse was a talented writer of religious tracts, which she and other devoted gospellers helped to distribute to all who would take them. One of her most popular efforts was a small tract entitled *The Young Guardsman of the Alma*. It was first issued in the autumn of 1855, and at least half a million {44} copies are said to have been printed. The subject of the tract, a young man whom Emily had recently converted (though not to nonresistance), was killed in the midst of battle.³⁹ Of Christian soldiering she wrote shortly thereafter, "It is a very difficult thing for a soldier to be a Christian, but it is not impossible. The late war has produced many glorious examples of true religion, both in soldiers and their officers; and the New Testament gives many striking examples of the power of faith in Jesus over the hearts of the heathen soldiers in old times." All they needed now for salvation was to be "washed in the blood of Jesus."⁴⁰

The Gosses have taken us a long way from the New Testament centered nonresistance of men like Groves, Hall, or Brenton. Indeed, we have moved into a new era of Brethren history. Although Darby lived on until 1882, lord of his Exclusive domain, death was gradually removing from the scene the men who had guided the sect during its pioneering years. All of them had assented to the peace testimony – at least none openly dissented from it. How deeply these ideas penetrated among the rank-and-file Brethren is a ques-

37. Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse F. R. S.* (London, 1890), pp. 213, 214. Brenton adopted much the same stance with respect to personal nonresistance; see Rowdon, p. 305.

38. [Edmund Gosse], *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (London, 1907), pp. 34, 35. This first edition was published anonymously. Of course the younger Gosse was not an impartial witness, but there is, I think, no reason to doubt the essential accuracy of his account.

39. Gosse, *Life*, p. 260. See also idem, *Father and Son*, pp. 33, 34.

40. Mrs. P. H. [Emily] Gosse, *The Christian Soldier*, in *Narrative Tracts by Mr. and Mrs. P. H. Gosse*, no. 5, (London, [186?]), especially pp. 1, 4. The publisher of the copy I used in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, was Morgan and Chase. The series was commonly known as "Gosse's Gospel Tracts." Since Mrs. Gosse died in 1857, the tract must have been written immediately after the war.

tion that cannot be answered with complete assurance. The high percentage of Brethren conscientious objectors in World War I in relation to the sect's numbers indicates, however, that nonresistance indeed had become generally accepted.⁴¹

The peace testimony of the Plymouth Brethren, as it emerged in the 1830s, was an almost exact replica of the doctrine of nonresistance among the Anabaptists and Mennonites on the Continent. It differed considerably from Quaker pacifism, for Friends' attitude to government and society is on the whole positive, whereas nonresistance posits their rejection. Like Mennonites, the Plymouth Brethren have striven to live as a strictly separated people, obeying the powers that be but not participating in worldly activities. Like [45] Anabaptist-Mennonite nonresistance, the peace testimony of the Plymouth Brethren is legalistic, with Christ's Law of Love and the commandment "Resist not evil" as the core of the code which the saints must follow even if this brings them into collision with man-made laws. Such a witness is necessarily centered on the New Testament, and in particular on the Sermon on the Mount, for only there can one find Christ's law. However, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition does not appear to have exercised influence on the emergence or development of the Brethren's peace testimony, which originated nearer home in intensive study of the gospels. That investigation was prompted not so much by the impact of Quaker views on war and by the propaganda of the contemporary peace movement as by the evangelical thirst for a restoration of primitive Christian living.

41. For Brethren conscientious objectors in World War I, see John Rae, *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service, 1916–1919* (London, 1970), pp. 74–77. In both world wars, however, some Brethren bore arms. I know of no early Brethren conscientious objectors to the old militia draft before its final abolition in 1860. Though there were Quaker draft objectors during the period the Brethren were in existence, conscription for the militia was by this time only sporadically enforced. A case or two may have passed unchronicled where Brethren eligible for militia service paid commutation money (which Quakers on principle refused to do) and thus escaped the draft; but this is mere supposition. We may contrast this situation with the harsh treatment meted out by the military in Hungary and Serbia to the Nazarenes, a pacifist sect which originated around 1840. See Peter Brock, "The Nonresistance of the Hungarian Nazarenes to 1914," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (1980): 53–63, and idem, "Some Materials on Nazarene Conscientious Objectors in Nineteenth-Century Hungary," *ibid.* 57 (1983): 64–72.