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Opposition to the Great War in North-east Wales

This study assesses the extent to which there was opposition to the Great War in north-east Wales, and how it was expressed through political movements such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and pacifist movements such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR). It analyses the most obvious manifestation of the anti-war movement, namely the conscientious objectors (COs) from the region, whose stance provoked bitter criticism and condemnation, but also admiration and respect.

In common with the rest of Britain during the Great War, north-east Wales was converted to the requirements of total war. Large numbers of women were employed for the first time, and thousands of men volunteered to join the armed forces, including approximately twenty thousand from the six counties of north Wales.¹ Many of those men who chose not to serve in the armed forces worked in factories producing armaments, or remained on the land to sustain agricultural production.

However, a small minority of men resisted all attempts to be coerced into supporting the war effort and became conscientious objectors. One of their number, Walter Leslie Roberts, a young architect brought up in Hawarden in Flintshire, and living in Bredbury near Stockport in Lancashire, became the first conscientious objector to die as a result of his treatment in captivity by the prison authorities.

The militarisation of Denbighshire and Flintshire during the Great War happened quickly and dramatically. The area's main recruiting centre was Wrexham, and before

¹ Clive Hughes, *I'r Fyddin Fechgyn Gwalia!: Recriwtio I'r Fyddin yng Ngogledd-Orllewin Cymru 1914-1916* (Llanrwst, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2014), 42.

the war, it had already included strong companies of the Royal Welch Fusiliers in Mold, Flint, Connah's Quay, Holywell and Rhyl.² A campaign for a County Territorial battalion was inaugurated in 1914,³ and the largest Army camp in Wales was established in Kinnel Park, near Rhyl, in February 1915 which initially held between fifteen and eighteen thousand soldiers.⁴ Another large camp was built in Park Hall near Oswestry, and a military prison was brought into use in Mold.

North-east Wales became a centre for munitions production, and Government run Shell factories were initially set up in seven centres throughout Wales, including Wrexham, and an explosives works in Queensferry, where 2,500 women were employed.⁵ Eighty per cent of their operatives were women, and as the war increased in intensity, more munitions factories were opened in Wrexham, Trevor, Wynnstay and Acrefair.⁶ Due to the numbers of miners who were recruited to the Army in the early stages of the war, coal production decreased markedly.

At the height of voluntary recruiting, between August 1914 and March 1915, approximately 14.4% of Denbighshire coalminers, or 2,676 joined the Army. This compares with the 19.5 per cent of miners who joined from the south Wales coalfield.⁷ This suggests a substantial degree of support for the war, but the initial recruiting enlistments in the Wrexham area peaked at 2,768 as early as September 1914, and declined to 1,332 and 1,150 in January and February 1915 respectively.⁸

² Ivor Nicholson and Lloyd Williams, *Wales and its part in the War* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 27.

³ *ibid*, 31.

⁴ *The Story of Kinnel Park Military Camp 1914-1918* (Llanrwst, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2014), 28.

⁵ Robin Barlow, *Wales and World War One*, (Llandysul, Gomer Press, 2014), 20a1.

⁶ Nicholson and Williams, *Wales and its part in the War*, 112.

⁷ *Transactions of the Denbighshire Historical Society*, 50 (2001), 118,129.

⁸ *ibid*, 125.

This lack of enthusiasm led local newspapers to decry the men of Rhosllannerchrugog of being content to 'walk the streets and smoke cigarettes'.⁹ Enlistments in Wrexham fell to 509 by August 1915 and military recruiting in the Denbighshire coalfield totalled 2,700 from a workforce of 13,000 by March 1916.¹⁰

Chapels and churches were expected to be amongst those institutions who pressed for young men to join up, but a number were often averse to preaching in favour of the war. The *North Wales Guardian* reported that the minister of Penybryn Congegational Church in Wrexham, who said that 'whilst he believed wholeheartedly in our cause', as a Christian minister he could not 'feel impelled by the dictates of my conscience, much less by those of the Town Council, to act as a recruiting sergeant'.¹¹

Trade union leaders joined with their fellow councillors and business leaders in the recruiting campaign, and Edward Hughes, the veteran General Secretary and agent of the North Wales Miners' Association (NWMA), facilitated recruitment and became a conscientious member of the Wrexham Rural District Tribunal. However, his opponents' ire was excited by his hypocrisy in exhorting miners to enlist at the same time as he successfully secured exemption for his son, Hugh Hughes, who became his deputy and financial secretary of the NWMA.

Opposition to the Great War in Wales was most marked in the south Wales coalfield, where the Independent Labour Party was most influential and where the syndicalists or 'advanced' men within the South Wales Miners' Federation distrusted the

⁹ *Wrexham Advertiser*, 31 July, 1915.

¹⁰ Eric Griffiths, 'Denbighshire Coalminers and their Agent during the Great War, 1914-1918, *Transactions of the Denbighshire Historical Society* Vol. 50 (2001), 129.

¹¹ *North Wales Guardian*, 15, 21 May 1915.

mineowners and Government to such an extent that they saw 'in the coal owners and the Government that supported them a nearer enemy than the Kaiser.'¹² In north Wales, the opposition to the war was mainly on religious grounds and restricted to a small but active minority of pacifist ministers of religion. Their leader was the Principal Thomas Rees, of Bala-Bangor Theological College in Bangor, whose students included over twenty-five conscientious objectors, and who voiced the earliest opposition to the war in the pages of the Congregationalist newspaper, *Y Tyst*. His letter on 30 September 1914 appealed to the Congregationalists' heroes and to its tradition of peace:

Mae gennym fel enwad draddodiadau Henry Richard, S.R. a Gwilym Hiraethog i'w cadw'n lan. Mae gennym Efengyl y Groes a'r cariad i'w phregethu; a bydd yn union fwy o angen nag erioed am bregethu tangnefedd. Ond nid hawdd fydd pregethu tangnefedd yn fuan ar ol gyrru pobl i ryfela.¹³

(We have as a denomination, the tradition of Henry Richard, S.R., and Gwilym Hiraethog to uphold, we have the gospel of the Cross and Love to preach, and there is greater need today than ever before to preach peace. It will not be easy to preach peace after driving people to war.)

The opposition to the war was led by the conscientious objectors who refused to cooperate with the Government's decision in January 1916 to introduce military conscription for men between 18 and 41. Although the records of conscientious

¹² Arthur Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 9.

¹³ *Y Tyst*, 30 September 1914.

objectors and the military tribunals were ordered to be destroyed in 1921,¹⁴ recent research conducted by the historian Cyril Pearce has identified a total of over seventeen thousand anti-war activists throughout Britain,¹⁵ and in collaboration with the author has identified approximately nine hundred conscientious objectors (COs) in Wales,¹⁶ representing 5.45 per cent of the total of approximately 16,500 conscientious objectors throughout Britain, roughly equating to its proportion of the male population of recruiting age. In Flintshire and Denbighshire, 47 conscientious objectors who appeared before local tribunals have been identified, which provides the opportunity to consider the nature of these men's opposition to the war, and the extent to which they were part of a wider anti-war movement.

The first evidence of an organised anti-war movement in north-east Wales was the formation of a branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in June 1915. Its leadership had close links with north Wales since its first general secretary Richard Roberts was from Blaenau Ffestiniog. When he left to take up a pastorate in New York in December 1915, the FoR's membership had reached two thousand and was growing at two hundred a month, and was to grow to an organisation of approximately five thousand members distributed amongst one hundred and sixty five branches and groups in Britain by the end of the war.¹⁷

His assistant was George M. Ll. Davies, who had been a bank manager in Wrexham in 1908, where he took a commission in the Royal Welch Fusiliers

¹⁴ John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 259.

¹⁵ Cyril Pearce, *Pearce Register of Anti-War Activists in Wales* (<http://www.wcia.org.uk/wfp/pearceregister.html>, Wales for Peace, 2016).

¹⁶ Aled Eirug, 'Opposition to the First World War in Wales 1914-1918' (Ph.D, Cardiff University, 2017).

¹⁷ Jill Wallis, *Valiant for Peace* (Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1991), 12.

(Territorials) . He gave up his work in 1913 in order to become the secretary of the Welsh Town Planning and Housing Trust and about this time he resigned his commission. In September 1915 he took up his role as unpaid assistant secretary of the Fellowship, and £10 in expenses. He had already rejected an offer of a post from the Trust's President, the influential David Davies, by then a Colonel with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and would become Lloyd George's parliamentary private secretary, to become editor of the prestigious monthly magazine *Welsh Outlook*.¹⁸ Based in the FoR's office in Red Lion Square in London, he travelled around the country, establishing branches, writing leaflets, articles and propaganda. A frequent public speaker throughout Wales, he addressed large scale anti-war meetings throughout the coalfield with thousands present in the latter half of 1915.¹⁹ With Roberts's departure, George M.Ll.Davies became General Secretary of the Fellowship until December 1915. He became a CO in May 1916, and he professed to his tribunal that 'I cannot take part in either combatant or non-combatant war service, as all war services are to me a negation of the plain teaching of Jesus Christ , help and that we should forgive, help and love even our enemies.'²⁰

As a conscientious objector he was initially allowed to undertake work on the land but his constant propagandising in the Llyn peninsula against the war contravened the terms of his sentence, and led to his imprisonment and confinement to the Home Office work schemes until August 1919.

Remarkably, in December 1923 he was elected to Parliament as the Christian

¹⁸ E.H. Griffiths, *Heddychwyr Mawr Cymru* (Caernarfon, 1967), 51.

¹⁹ Jen Llywelyn, *Pilgrim of Peace: A Life of George M. Ll. Davies* (Talybont, Y Lolfa, 2016), 85.

²⁰ Jen Llywelyn, *Pilgrim of Peace*, 90.

Pacifist candidate, with the support of the Labour party for the University of Wales.²¹

In Wales the growth of the FoR took on a strikingly distinctive and less quietist character than in England, and was developed primarily by key individuals, mostly Welsh-speaking, Nonconformist ministers of religion and concentrated in north Wales. The founding meeting of the FoR in Wales was held in Bangor on 31 May and 1 June 1915, and was addressed by the Fellowship's administrator, the Rev. Richard Roberts. A service was held in the English language Presbyterian church in Princes Road, addressed by Rev. Hywel Harris Hughes, minister of the local Tabernacle chapel, and Principal Thomas Rees, both of whom became key figures in the development of the opposition movement. The congregation included scores of students, and many of those theological students present would become conscientious objectors. In a subsequent meeting at Thomas Rees's home, it was decided to create an organisational division for Caernarvonshire, and four branches were created - Bangor/Bethesda; Caernarfon/Penygroes, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Pwllheli.²² The second regional division was created in the Wrexham area on 2 June, when a group mostly of ministers of religion met and held a number of peace meetings in Ponciau and Rhosllannerchrugog, which were addressed by G.M.Ll. Davies, Herbert Dunnico, general secretary of the Peace Society based in London, the Revs. D. Wyre Lewis and E.K. Jones, a Baptist Minister of Cefnmawr, near Wrexham. A number of other smaller branches were then established in the locality, but the membership was small. The Rev. Tegla

²¹ *ibid*, 180.

²² D. Ben Rees, *Dal i Herio'r Byd* (Liverpool, Cyhoeddiadau Modern Cymreig, 1983), 116.

Davies's small branch in Oswestry was ineffectual and received little public sympathy:

Pan gychwynasom ar y gwaith, caem groeso i ystafell bur dymunol, ond pan ddaeth chwaon o amheuaeth heibio ynghylch ein hamcanion, gwthiwyd ni i ystafell fwy dirwyiedig, ac felly ymlaen nes o'r diwedd gyrraedd y seler.²³

(when we started on our work, we were welcomed to a quite desirable room, but when our aims caused draughts of doubt, we were pushed to a more unsuitable room, and then onwards until we reached the cellar.)

By January 1918, the FoR's branches in north Wales were clustered near Bangor, Caernarfon and Penygroes, in the Nantlle Valley, and the Wrexham area, with branches in Corwen and Oswestry.²⁴ In March 1916, the conference 'to consider the FoR's approach to the 'peculiar social and religious problems of Wales and to consider the creation of a newspaper to advocate pacifist views' was held at Hendre Hall, Bont Ddu near Dolgellau and its convening circular was signed by the FoR's chairman, Dr. Richard Roberts, and its general secretary, George M. Ll. Davies together with the leadership of the FoR in Wales including the Bala-Bangor Theological College Principal, Dr. Thomas Rees. They informed the invitees that:

²³ E. Tegla Davies, 'Yr Eglwys Fethodistaidd', in Jones and Evans, *Ffordd Tangnefedd* (Llandysul, Gwasg Gomer, 1943), 22.

²⁴ *The News Sheet of the FoR* (Peace Pledge Union, 1918).

In view of the extreme seriousness of the present political situation, and the need for expression of the growing dissatisfaction in Wales with the existing order in the political and religious world, it is felt that the Conference may be an event of very great significance.

The agenda for the two days reflected a combination of religious devotion and practical politics, and included discussions on a Welsh journal and the role of the FoR in Wales. The prominent poet T. Gwynn Jones led a discussion on 'national affairs' and the Flintshire minister and prominent ILPer, Revd. D. Gwynfryn Jones, led on international affairs.²⁵ He was editor of the Wesleyan monthly magazine *Y Gwylidydd Newydd* and became secretary of the North Wales Free Church Council, a magistrate, a member of Flint county council, president of the North Wales Socialist Alliance and parliamentary candidate for Flintshire in 1922 and 1924.²⁶ The twenty-eight people present were mostly ministers of religion and a sole woman, Eluned Morgan, a well-known literary figure from the Welsh colony of Patagonia, Argentina. The party included the Revd. J. Puleston Jones, Pwllheli, a number of Bala-Bangor students, the Students Christian Movement secretary, and three of the most prominent Welsh-language literary figures of the day, the Revd. Tegla Davies, T. Gwynn Jones and T.H. Parry Williams.²⁷ The journal became the link for the Christian pacifist movement throughout Wales, although its geographical reach and its Welsh language content also marked its limitations.

²⁵ Bangor University Archive, E.K. Jones Papers, Box 39, circular from H. Harris Hughes, February 1916.

²⁶ Gwilym Tilsley, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (National Library of Wales, 2001).

²⁷ Griffith, *Heddychwr Mawr Cymru*, 61.

This monthly journal, *Y Deyrnas*, published its first edition in October 1916 and had a circulation extending throughout Wales of three thousand until the end of the War, although after the Armistice it dropped to two thousand six hundred, and suffered a small financial loss on the last editions published. The chairman and editor of its board of management was Principal Thomas Rees, the ‘dynamic power behind this crusade.’²⁸ In its first edition, Rees stated that the magazine would examine the relevance of the principles of Christ to every department of human life, including religion, politics, commerce and labour, and explained that the journal’s mission arose from a sense of shame at Christianity’s failure:

am na fu Cristnogaeth Ewrob yn wrthglawdd digonol yn erbyn y rhyferthwy dinistriol. Ond o ystyried, gwelwn mai un yn unig o effeithiau ysbryd Anghrist yw y gyflafan hon; i’r un achos y rhaid olrhain drygau cymdeithasol, cenedlaethol a rhyng-genedlaethol ein hoes. Yn wyneb hyn oll, rhaid fod rhywbeth i’w dystiolaethu yn enw Teyrnas Dduw.²⁹

(Christian Europe had not been a sufficient bulwark against the destructive flood. But we see now that the present disaster is only one of the effects of the Spirit of Anti-Christ; all social, national and international evils of the age must be traced to the same cause. In the face of all this, there must be some message to be delivered in the name of the Kingdom of God.)

²⁸ Thomas Eirug Davies, *Prifathro Thomas Rees*, (Llandysul, Gwasg Gomer, 1939), 143.

²⁹ *Y Deyrnas*, October 1916.

Rees wrote a third of its content and other ministers of religion wrote the bulk of the articles, while a monthly column on conscientious objectors by Rev. E.K. Jones exposed their ill-treatment. A number of the younger and most prominent poets T. Gwynn Jones and T.H. Parry Williams, both recently crowned bards, published poetry in *Y Deyrnas* as well as prominent writers such as T.E. Nicholas and David Thomas, Talysarn, also the north Wales organiser of the ILP and member of the FoR.

Three Liberal Members of Parliament who were opposed to conscription and fell out with Lloyd George, also contributed individual articles to the magazine, namely Ellis Davies, the Member for Eifionnydd, E.T. John, East Denbighshire and W. Llewelyn Williams, Carmarthen Boroughs. E.T. John was the only Member of Parliament in north-east Wales who was opposed to the war. He was a Welsh Nationalist and Pacifist and served as a Liberal MP (1910–18) until the seat was abolished. In 1914 he opposed Britain's entry into World War One and along with a number of other pacifist Liberal and Labour MPs he joined the pressure group the Union of Democratic Control in 1914. In 1918 he decided to contest the new seat of Denbighshire under the colours of the Labour Party and was heavily defeated.³⁰ The three MPs focussed on the dangers of increasing militarism and sympathised with the plight of COs, and both Davies and John were ready to be used by the Fellowship to put down parliamentary questions about the ill-treatment of conscientious objectors and the prospects of an early

³⁰ Beti Jones, *Parliamentary Elections in Wales 1900-75* (Y Lolfa, 1977), 54. John was defeated in the 1918 General Election by the National Coalition candidate who received 83.3% of the vote.

peace settlement by the summer of 1917.³¹ Most of the other contributors however, were undoubtedly ‘out and out’ pacifists.

The print run of *Y Deyrnas* varied from two and a half thousand in December 1916, to three thousand in November 1917, before declining to two thousand, seven hundred and fifty by September 1918. This impressive level of sales was similar to the FoR’s magazine *The Venturer*, but which circulated throughout Britain, and at the height of the war, was distributed openly to two hundred and nineteen outlets, mainly in north Wales, Carmarthenshire and Glamorgan. A total of 381 was sold in Denbighshire and Flintshire, with another 278 in Merionethshire, 71 in Anglesey and 371 in Caernarfonshire. The circulation in Denbighshire and Flintshire was naturally dominated by Wrexham (68) and its nearby villages Ponciau (17) and Ruabon (21), Holywell (50), and Mold (48), and with copies sold in Prestatyn (18), Corwen (25) and Oswestry (19).³²

Whilst most religious leaders in south Wales supported the war, in north Wales, the pacifists, although in a minority, were said to be ‘powerful and influential in the {Nonconformist} churches’.³³ The Welsh Baptists was one of the largest denominations with over one hundred and fifty thousand adherents, and faced the war with ‘no settled point of view’³⁴ but its attitude to war now was that when ‘the horizon was clear, it tended to emphasise the pacific message of

³¹ Bangor University Archive, Bala-Bangor Papers, MSS 234, letter from Ellis Davies M.P. to Rev. J Morgan Jones, Bangor 6 July 1917.

³² Bangor University Archive, Bala-Bangor Papers MSS 258, circulation of *Y Deyrnas*.

³³ *Pioneer*, 4 March 1916.

³⁴ Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London, SPCK, 1978) 30.

Christianity but when the clouds of war gathered, it spoke with many voices.’³⁵

The war seems to have taken the denomination by surprise and official explanations for its outbreak were accepted. In the autumn of 1914, Welsh Baptists refuted Anglican claims that most of the recruits were coming from the established Church and pointed proudly to the numbers of Nonconformists who were enlisting. The editor of the denomination’s newspaper *Seren Gomer*, Revd. D. Wyre Lewis, the minister at Penuel, Rhosllannerchrugog, provided a platform for pacifism and pleaded against fomenting hatred against the German people.

In preparation for anti-militarist conferences held in north Wales in the summer of 1918, a list of the ‘anti-war religious leaders’ in north Wales, had been sent by its Welsh organiser, the National Council for Civil Liberties’s (NCCL) Ivor Thomas to Ethel Snowden in June 1918, but was seized by MI5 officers during a raid of the NCCL’s London offices. Many of these were associated with the group of activists involved with *Y Deyrnas*. Of the nineteen listed, eight were founders or involved in producing the journal, and also included J. Huw Williams, the influential editor of the Caernarfon labour paper *Y Dinesydd*, the editor of the Congregationalist theological magazine, *Y Dysgedydd*, Rev. Parri Huws, and a prominent local schoolteacher and ILP leader from the quarrying Nantlle Valley, J.E.Thomas. Of the 24 names, 13 were from Denbighshire and Flintshire.³⁶

*Rev J.H. Howard, Presbyterian minister, Colwyn Bay

³⁵ T.M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists* (Swansea, Ty Ilston, 1977), 386.

³⁶ National Archives, Security Service Papers, KV2/666, NCCL documents and note from Major Mathews, 6 June 1918.

*Rev R. Bell The Highlands, Hillside Road, Colwyn Bay

*Rev Cernyw Williams, President, North Wales Federation Free Churches Corwen,

*Rev H. Parri-Roberts, Baptist minister Fforddlas, Glan Conwy,

* Frederic Pane, The Hoolies, Glan Conwy,

Rev D. Gwynfryn Jones, Secretary, North Wales Federation Free Churches (Flint Mountain)

Rev. E. Tegla Davies, Llanrhaeadr

Rev. E. K. Jones, Acrefair, Ruabon

Rev. Charles Jones, Votty, Wrexham,

Rev. Peter Price, DD Rhos, Wrexham

Rev. Wyre Lewis, Rhos, Wrexham

Rev Evan Howells, B.A., B.D., Rhos Wrexham,

T.A. Leonard, Bryn Corach, Conwy.

Those marked with an asterisk were thought by MI5 officers to be ‘very active’ but it is a poor reflection of the security services’ grasp of the nature of the movement that David Thomas, the ILP organiser for north Wales, for example, were not included.³⁷

The military authorities’s concern for the likelihood that many theological students would become conscientious objectors explains why the Army leadership in north Wales felt the need to create an alternative opportunity for those young men. In January 1916, a company of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) was formed, in connection with the Welsh Army Division, by the Army’s chief recruiting officer in

³⁷ *ibid.*

north Wales, the Congregationalist Brigadier Owen Thomas, in Rhyl, and consecrated by the Rev. John Williams, Brynsiencyn. The company was nicknamed ‘God’s Own’ and initially comprised of one hundred and eighty seven men, drawn mainly from the Welsh theological colleges.³⁸ The circular sent to prospective recruits informed them that the War Office had consented to the formation of a RAMC unit, connected to the Welsh Army Division.³⁹ Its members’ understanding was that the company had been specifically created in order to accommodate those who might otherwise have become conscientious objectors. One of its members, the poet Rev. A.E.Jones (Cynan), explained the character of the new company:

cwmni o efrydwyr Cymreig oeddem, yn wir cwmni o efrydwyr yn siarad
Cymraeg gan mwyaf, ar wahan i ychydig athrawon, rhai myfyrwyr Wesleyaidd
o Golegau Handsworth a Didsbury ac eraill. Ag eithrio nifer bychan iawn a
oedd eisoes yn ordeiniedig, ymgeiswyr ar gyfer y weinidogaeth gyda gwahanol
enwadau Cymru oedd y rhelyw mawr ohonom, ac ar gyfer gwyr ifainc o’r fath
y llwyddodd Prif Gaplan y Milwyr Cymreig, y Dr. John Williams ,
Brynsiencyn, gael gan y Swyddfa Ryfel gyuno i ffurfio’r cwmni arbennig hwn
o’r RAMC. **Rhan o’r cytundeb sylfaenol oedd na throsglwyddid yr un
aelod o’r cwmni tan unrhyw amgylchiadau o’r RAMC i unrhyw adran
ymladdol o’r fyddin** (my emphasis).

(we were a company of Welsh students, mostly Welsh speaking, apart
from a number of teachers, some Wesleyan students from

³⁸ R.R.Williams, *Breuddwyd Milwr mewn Dillad Benthyc* (Liverpool, Gwasg y Brython, 1964), vii.

³⁹ Williams, *Breuddwyd Milwr mewn Dillad Benthyc*, 2.

Handsworth and Didsbury Colleges and others. Apart from a small number who had already been ordained in a number of Wales's denominations, the majority of us were candidates for the ministry, and it was for such young men that the main Chaplain of the Welsh Army, Dr. John Williams, Brynsiencyn, won an agreement with the War Office to form a special company of the RAMC. **Part of the fundamental agreement was that not one member of the company would in any circumstances be transferred from the RAMC to any fighting unit of the Army** (my emphasis).⁴⁰

A measure of its success was that it drew in two hundred and five recruits into this company of the RAMC, including fourteen men from Denbighshire and Flintshire.

The main political opposition to the war was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), whose presence in north-east Wales was mainly confined to the Wrexham industrial districts. Its unpopular anti-war stance meant that it did not have an impact until after 1917, when the first branches of the ILP since the beginning of the war were registered. For the year 1917-1918, four branches were active, in Coed Poeth, Wrexham, Rhosllannerchrugog and Colwyn Bay, and four additional branches were created by 1920 in Deeside, Prestatyn, Rhyl and Newmarket, near St. Asaph. The party's attraction to those who had opposed the war led to a number of the conscientious objectors becoming active in the ILP after the war, and in villages surrounding Wrexham, there was a

⁴⁰ Williams, *Breuddwyd Milwr mewn Dillad Bentyg*, vii.

close correlation between those chapels whose ministers were anti-war, and local COs who subsequently supported the ILP.

Of the 51 conscientious objectors identified in north-east Wales,⁴¹ twenty came from Wrexham or the surrounding area, and of the twenty-two who identified themselves as COs on religious grounds, seven COs identified themselves as Quakers, six did so as members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and four as Baptists. A third of them identified themselves as COs who had joined the Army in the Non-Combatant Corps (compared to the average in 22 per cent in Wales). Most of these COs accepted some alternative to imprisonment, and only approximately eight per cent were 'absolutist' and refused to compromise with the options offered to them, which by the summer of 1916 was work on Home Office schemes in agriculture or construction work. But the system had been harshly administered initially, and COs such as the absolutist Ithel Davies, from Mallwyd, was beaten up and given a broken nose when he was placed in Mold Military Prison in May 1916. Such was the political furore that he was transferred to a civilian prison and the military ceased to place COs in military prisons from June 1916 onwards.⁴²

David Thomas, the ILP's organiser in north Wales, is one of the most notable of the area's conscientious objectors. He was a teacher from Talysarn near Caernarfon, and a condition of being released by the local tribunal was that he was forced to find work over 50 miles from his home. In December 1916 he

⁴¹ Appendix of Conscientious Objectors in Flintshire and Denbighshire (see below)

⁴² Ithel Davies, *Bwrlwm Byw* (Gwasg Gomer, 1984), 65-67.

eventually found work as a farm labourer in Bersham, near Wrexham and remarkably continued his organisational work for the ILP. By the summer of 1917, he also became the secretary of the Wrexham branch of the National Union of Farmworkers and was still active within the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the ILP.

He received a letter from the secretary of the ILP branch in Wrexham:

I have often wondered whether you have offered yourself to serve in the Army in view of such terrible pressure and often times despicable methods.⁴³

He helped local branches of the ILP and worked to gain council seats in Rhostyllen, addressing branches in Rhosllannerchrugog and Coedpoeth on education policy and remained organiser of the North Wales Labour Council.⁴⁴

Thomas William Jones was a Christian pacifist and a member of the Scotch Baptist church in Ponciau in Rhosllannerchrugog. He began work as a coalminer at the Bersham colliery at fourteen years of age, following in the footsteps of his father. He became a pupil-teacher in August 1914 and under the influence of his uncle, the Revd. Llewellyn Bowyer, he became a pacifist and joined the Wrexham branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In his appearance before the local tribunal, he was accompanied by the Revd. E.K. Jones and Rev. D. Wyre Lewis, he agreed to join the

⁴³ Angharad Tomos, *Hiraeth am Yfory: David Thomas a Mudiad Llafur Gogledd Cymru* (Llandysul, Gwasg Gomer, 2002), 80.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 88.

Non-Combatant Corps and was called up in May 1917 and sent to Park Hall near Oswestry. However, in December 1917, about a dozen COs in the NCC, including Jones, were taken to Hinford camp where they refused an order to prepare and dig a trench used for bomb throwing practice. They were thus court-martialled and imprisoned for six months' hard labour. Jones was then taken to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison for six weeks and then appeared before the Home Office's Central Tribunal which sent him to a work camp in Knutsford, Cheshire and subsequently to a similar work camp in Dartmoor before he completed his sentence in Penderyn, near Aberdare in south Wales.⁴⁵ It was his experience as a CO that led him into the ILP, which in his view combined Socialism and Pacifism.⁴⁶

His experience was echoed by four of the COs from Rhos, who were imprisoned together in Park Hall in May 1918, when Fred Bowyer wrote that he, together with Idwal Roberts, and the brothers Meyrick and William Charles shared a hut and they spoke often of their home village:

Yr ydym ein pedwar gyda'n gilydd yn yr un hut, ac yr ydym yn cael ymgom am yr hen ardal yn aml iawn. Teimla yn ddiolchgar am y fraint o gael fy magu yn yr hen ardal grefyddol y Rhos - neu'r Ponciau, am yr ysgol Sul a'r gwahanol oedfaon y rhai fu a a fydd eto yn y dyfodol yn gymorth i mi.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lord Maelor, *Fel Hyn y Bu* (Denbigh, Gwasg Gee, 1970), 58-87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁷ National Library of Wales, E.K. Jones Papers Box 2, letter from Fred Bowyer to E.K. Jones, 27 May 1918.

(We felt grateful for being brought up in the religious community of old Rhos - or Ponciau, for the Sunday School and the different religious services which had been and would be a support for them in the future.)

Other conscientious objectors who came from north-east included the secretary of the NCF in Wales, Ieuan P. Hughes, whose office was in Cardiff but who was arrested as a conscientious objector in February 1918, and became one of the leaders of over seven hundred COs in Dartmoor. He led the protest strike against the medical mistreatment and subsequent death of a conscientious objector, Harry Firth, and he was taken out of the prison and imprisoned elsewhere.⁴⁸

Another CO, whose family came from Flintshire but who appeared before his local tribunal in Stockport was Walter Roberts, who became the first CO to die during the war as a result of his treatment. In September 1916, he was one of a party of 250 COs released from prison to work under the Home Office at a camp near Dyce, near Aberdeen. The conditions of the camp, situated on a windswept hillside were grim and the men lived in tents that had been condemned as unfit for soldiers and which leaked in the rain, They worked for ten hours a day smashing granite for road building in the nearby quarry, and on 6 September 1916, he wrote to his mother stating that 'As I anticipated, it has only been a matter of time for the damp conditions to get the better of me. Bartie Wild is now writing to my dictation because I am now too weak to handle a pen myself. I don't want you to worry yourself because the doctor says I have only got a severe chill so there is no reason why I should not be strong in

⁴⁸ National Library of Wales, E.K. Jones Papers Box 2, letter from Percy Ogwen Jones to E.K. Jones. 24 February 1918.

a day or two...’ During the night, he fell out of his bed and lay on the wet ground for two hours, and on the following day, he died, at only twenty years of age. Following his death the other inmates at the camp complained about the conditions and following a visit by a delegation of MPs, the camp was closed, and conditions in other camps were improved.

Roberts was buried in Hawarden churchyard, and the inscription on his grave read:

The young hands have carried His standard

Right on to the end of the day

And we know that the nations will follow

Where thou hast trod the way⁴⁹

At the end of the war, the Christian pacifist E.K. Jones idealised the experiences of the conscientious objectors as a ‘golden chapter’ in his recollection of three years of persecution:

The prayer meeting in that locked cell: the spiritual talk (or chat), the verses of scripture written upon that wall of iron: the sorrow over that fine soldier that had been sacrificed in vain, the gentle conduct of our men at the Court Martial, the courage shown in the face of collapsed health and when reason was failing, and the cheerful readiness to die for the faith. It was delightful to witness the tenderness of many ordinary soldiers and of officers and doctors towards the prisoners. It

⁴⁹ Siw Wood, Walter Roberts Family private papers.

is true that we were brought face to face with incredible cases of malice and utterly uncalled for cruelty. May God forgive these ignorant and hard-hearted men.⁵⁰

His view of the experience of the conscientious objectors as a hard and shameful episode was reflected in the Government's legislation in 1939 that gave more appropriate attention to COs. When the Government prepared its legislation for conscription at the beginning of the Second World War, the claim for exemption on conscientious grounds was included, but the tribunals in the Second World War were made appointed semi-professional bodies and dealt exclusively with applications from conscientious objectors. The legislation also provided for more categories of exemption on grounds of conscientious objection, as it was regarded, in the words of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, as an 'useless and exasperating waste of time and effort'⁵¹ to persuade absolutists to behave in a manner that was contrary to their principles, whilst they had no objection to doing work that was non-military in nature. The spectre of repeated prison sentences imposed on the absolutists was prevented by the Government's acceptance of civilian legal machinery to discharge from the army a soldier who had committed an offence for conscientious reasons. These provisions were placed in the Military Training Act, 1940, and as Rae states, they 'enabled those affected by the Act to exercise freedom of conscience to a degree unequalled in any other country.'⁵² Many of the COs of 1916-1919 went to undertake

⁵⁰ *Y Deyrnas*, April 1919 (E.K. Jones's own translation).

⁵¹ Parliamentary Debates, 5 HC, col. 2097-8, 4 May 1940, cited in John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 242.

⁵² Rae, *Conscience and Politics*, 245.

illustrious roles as Members of Parliament, prominent trade unionists and gave valuable service to society, but many also experienced deep unpopularity and criticism within their own communities. As T.W. Jones attested, whilst their stance led to the untimely death of over seventy COs, the scale of the losses of men in the Great War made even this number pale into comparative insignificance.⁵³

Appendix of Conscientious Objectors in Flintshire and Denbighshire⁵⁴

This list details the location of COs, their political and religious allegiances if stated, and where they served.

(Abbreviations: NCC - Non-Combatant Corps; FAU - Friends' Ambulance Unit; RAMC - Royal Army Medical Corps.)

⁵³ Lord Maelor, *Fel Hyn y Bu* (Denbigh, Gwasg Gee, 1970), 88.

⁵⁴ Cyril Pearce, *Pearce Register of Anti-War Activists in Wales* (<http://www.wcia.org.uk/wfp/pearceregister.html>, Wales for Peace, 2016).