

**‘THE IRREGULARITY OF KILLING PEOPLE’:
TASMANIAN BRETHREN RESPONSES
TO WORLD WAR I¹**

Elisabeth Wilson

On a May afternoon in 1917, in the Australian army camp at Durrington in Wiltshire, a tall (6 feet 2 inches), broad young Australian soldier refused to go on parade. First his sergeant, then his lieutenant, tried to make him change his mind, reminding him of the serious nature of his action. As he remained obdurate and made no move to go on parade, nor to state his intentions, he was placed under close arrest. The stand-off had clearly been in the wind, because the sergeant later stated that when he did not turn up on parade, ‘I suspected myself that he would be an absentee’. In the end his officers had no option but to charge him with ‘disobeying a lawful command given by his superior officer’, for which, of course, he was court-martialled.²

The young man was David (Dave) George Wigg from Marrawah in the far north west of Tasmania, and a first cousin of the author’s grandmother. The story came down through the family that, having enlisted for non-combatant service, he refused to carry a gun, and as a result of the court martial was sentenced to be shot, but was reprieved when the Prime Minister Billy Hughes intervened. Like many such stories, it had grown with the telling—Hughes was not even in England in May 1917 and the record shows no suggestion of shooting³—but Wigg was certainly court-martialled and the court

1. A longer version of this article, which incorporates material from the *BAHNR* articles listed in n.4 below, will appear in *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, vol. 14 (2009).

2. National Archives of Australia [henceforth NAA], A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742, Court martial of Private David George Wigg no. 4088, 1917.

3. Shooting was the penalty for desertion, but no Australians were shot during World War I, at the insistence of the Australian government despite pleas from Sir Douglas

record provides a fascinating glimpse of how he came to take this drastic step. How did he come to be in this position?

In previous articles in this journal I have discussed the Brethren attitudes to the authorities and to war and their response to the two world wars.⁴ This article draws on newly available material to look at the Tasmanian Brethren response in much closer detail. Evangelists from Britain had come to the island state of Tasmania in the 1870s and were particularly influential on the north-west coast. As a result of their meetings and conversations, many people were converted and formed into assemblies. The proportion of Brethren in the population is usually less than 0.1% even in countries where they are well-established.⁵ On the north-west coast of Tasmania the figure for the total population would be closer to 0.5%, and there were clusters of meetings in the Circular Head and Kentish areas. Some of these were large (100+) but restrictive fellowships at the time of the First World War. Wigg was brought up in this church circle at Montagu and then Marrawah.⁶

One window into Australian Brethren response to the war is the reaction to the pre-referendum call-up. A month before the first conscription referendum at the end of October 1916, Prime Minister Billy Hughes put into effect by proclamation a call-up of all 21-35

Haig. This may have been as a result of the execution of Morant and Handcock in the Boer War. See www.awm.gov.au/wartime/18/article.asp.

4. “‘Your citizenship is in heaven’”: Brethren attitudes to authority and government’, *BAHNR*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2003), pp.75-90, and “‘The eyes of the authorities are upon us’”: the Brethren and World War I’, *BAHNR*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (2004), pp.2-17.

5. It is about 0.1% in Australia, but because there are few nominal adherents in these figures, their proportion of churchgoers would be much higher. The most accurate figures I have seen are those for New Zealand in Peter Lineham, *There we found Brethren* (Palmerston North, NZ, 1977), p. 163. Humphreys and Ward, *Religious Bodies in Australia* (Melbourne, 1986), p. xi, give the percentage for Australia per the census as 0.15% in 1981. I believe that some Brethren would come under the headings Protestant (undefined) (1.51%), and Other Christian (1.72%).

6. Family information, John Wigg, Somerset, 2009. Montagu, Marrawah, and Smithton assemblies were all part of the Hopkins group of meetings which were evangelistic, but restrictive as to whom they accepted into communion.

year old single males or widowers without children, for home service. Not only was this of dubious legality,⁷ it was also, as Lloyd Robson observed, ‘not the cleverest of moves’ on the eve of the referendum, and the New South Wales premier thought it was probably one of ‘Hughes’ greatest blunders’,⁸ giving the nation a foretaste of what might be expected if conscription were approved.

As a corollary of the call-up, Exemption Courts were established. In Tasmania, they were held all over the state, and a survey of newspaper reports⁹ reveals that the vast majority of appellants were single sons or the only one left at home, medically unfit, or those who had business or farming interests that they felt could not be left. Many of this last group received short shrift from the magistrates or army officers attending. However, a handful of men claimed exemption as conscientious objectors: two Seventh Day Adventists, two members of the Church of Christ, one Christian Scientist, one Christian Israelite, one Quaker, one member of the Communist party,¹⁰ several of no stated religion, and at least seven or possibly nine Brethren.¹¹ Because of their aversion to a formal name Brethren are notoriously hard to identify. Some of those who stated that they were ‘followers of Christ’ or ‘Christians’ were probably Brethren.

These numbers, small as they are in total, show that in relation to other groups, and in indeed to their proportion of the population, Brethren were in higher numbers than might be expected. The highest

7. Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: Conscientious objectors to military service in Australia, 1911-1945* (Fremantle, 1997), p.33.

8. Lloyd Robson, *The First AIF* (Melbourne, 1970), p. 108.

9. Hobart: *Mercury*; Launceston: *Examiner*; Circular Head: *Circular Head Chronicle*; Scottsdale: *North-East Advertiser*; Devonport and Burnie: *Advocate*. The cases were reported in varying detail, although names, ages and occupations were generally given, to support the claim that the court process was open to scrutiny.

10. This was W. Baguley, a draughtsman on the Stanley-Trowutta railway, who said that ‘industrialism and capitalism cause all wars’ and that he objected on a ‘humanitarian basis’. His application was refused. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p.2.

11. The only comparison I have found is with Western Australia, where one of the five appellants to a higher court was Plymouth Brethren. He stated that he was prepared to do non-combatant service. Oliver, *Peacemongers*, p.36.

concentration of Brethren men was in the far north west—Dave Wigg’s territory—where the *Circular Head Chronicle* had earlier commented that ‘Sergeant Hardy has had an uphill fight with recruiting in the area’.¹² This may be partly because it was a dairy farming region, needing intensive and continuous labour, but also because there were several fairly conservative Brethren meetings in the area. Such was the perceived difference in community attitude that a great-uncle of the author moved to Marrawah from Melbourne during the war, because he had been subjected to so much harassment (including being presented with white feathers) for not enlisting.¹³

Reasons given for claiming exemption were various. They included membership of the Plymouth Brethren: V. L. Lucas of Burnie stated that, ‘being a member of the Plymouth Brethren congregation, he was opposed to bearing arms,’¹⁴ as did Oswald Wigg, of Marrawah.¹⁵ Another reason was that bearing arms was contrary to the teaching of the New Testament; and the fact that killing went against their conscience: Clive Morse of Sheffield said that he ‘would not feel justified in taking life under any circumstances’.¹⁶ He was ordered to join the ambulance corps. William Kay of Irishtown, almost certainly Brethren although not identified as such, said ‘I do not wish to take up arms’.¹⁷ Charles Kay, also of Irishtown, embodied the Brethren attempt to reconcile their duty to God and the lawful government: ‘I am willing to go, but not as a combatant.’¹⁸ Charles Ling, of Smithton, echoed the same idea: ‘I am willing to do my duty as long as it does not clash with these

12. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 27 September 1916, p. 2. It had also carried an article on a conscientious objectors’ camp in England (20 September 1916, p. 4), which stated that nearly all of the men there ‘are of the religious sect known as the Plymouth Brethren’.

13. Robert Harris Smith.

14. *Launceston Examiner*, 20 October 1916, p. 3.

15. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

16. *Launceston Examiner*, 31 October 1916, p. 3.

17. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

18. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

principles'.¹⁹ Interestingly, only one of those who said they were willing to take up non-combatant service appears to have ended up enlisting in any capacity.²⁰

The debate between the Police Magistrate and the appellant followed the predictable lines of these tribunals—what if the Germans attacked your sister, or invaded your farm, and have you ever been in a fight and reacted? Some men showed that they had not thought through their position very thoroughly: in Stanley, Oswald Wigg was told, 'You have some hazy ideas about conscience...'.²¹ W. Ferguson was asked if he could reconcile the teaching of the Old Testament with his beliefs. He answered, 'No, but I read the Bible every day. [And probably in answer to another question] I do not understand the Sermon on the Mount.'²² Herbert Ling quoted Scripture to back up his case,²³ and indeed, the Brethren reliance on the Bible is evident in the frequent mention of the teachings of the New Testament. Robert Charles H. Clayton of Evandale, who described himself only as a 'follower of Christ' and so cannot be definitely named as Brethren, said that he 'would not kill anyone.' In fact, he was not even prepared to do non-combatant duty, because the Lord had said to 'keep unspotted [from the world]'. He also 'refused to be sworn and give his thumb print'. The exasperated magistrate said he was liable to arrest.²⁴ His statements sound typical of Brethren teaching, but there has never been a Brethren assembly in Evandale, so he may have been connected with another small group, such as the Church of Christ, Christadelphians, or even Cooneyites,²⁵ all of which could use the same arguments.

19. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

20. Clement Alfred King of Wynyard.

21. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

22. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

23. Matthew 26:51 is cited in the newspaper account, but should almost certainly be 26:52. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

24. *Launceston Examiner*, 28 October 1916, p. 9

25. For these last, also known as the Go-preachers, see Doug and Helen Parker, *The Secret Sect* (Sydney, 1982).

The Exemption Courts sat for the two or three weeks either side of October 28, the date of the first conscription referendum, arguably one of the most bitter and divisive episodes in Australia's history. Considerable courage must therefore have been needed to take this stance at such a time, when feelings were running so high, and most newspapers were devoting more than half their pages to war coverage of some kind, including news from the front, referendum debates, casualty lists, and war support activities of every sort.

Reports in *Tidings* show that prayer meetings were held for world conditions and for young men affected by recruitment and the pre-referendum call-up: 'Realising the need of special waiting upon God in these solemn days, a week of prayer was arranged [in Brisbane], ... and on the day of the opening of the Military Court ... a meeting was held for prayer at 6.45 a.m., on behalf of the young men...'.²⁶ The Brisbane correspondent wrote, 'Up to the time of writing only one of our young men has been called upon to face his tribunal, but we are thankful to say that his case for partial exemption (non-combatant service) was considered genuine from the outset, and the magistrate granted what was asked for on conscientious grounds.'²⁷ Magistrates were often reluctant to grant total exemption on religious grounds; it seems they thought that this would encourage a rash of similar requests from malingerers, as the depth and sincerity of such convictions were notoriously hard to test.

The digitising of the World War I service records by the National Archives of Australia and their online availability has provided another window into the response of Tasmanian Brethren to the war. Tasmania's relatively stable population and the strong continuing affiliation to Brethren of many families over several generations enabled the identification of over 100 surnames.²⁸ Using the 'Find'

26. *Tidings*, November 1916, p. 869:

27. *Tidings*, December 1916, p. 884. Also p. 887: '... the eyes of the authorities are going to be upon us and our conscientious objectors.'

28. To elicit names I used personal knowledge from four generations of family involvement in the Brethren, information from elderly members, and books such as Alan F. Dyer, *God was their Rock The story of Christian Brethren pioneers in the*

option to then select by state made a painstaking task possible, but it was not a feasible method for those family names which had thousands of examples across Australia. The spelling of the word 'Brethren' on attestation papers reveals the lack of knowledge of the Brethren in the community: it is variously given by the army clerks as Breathen, Brethern, Bethren, Betheren, Brethern, Bretheren and Bretheran—in one instance Breth~ as a despairing scrawl ends the word!²⁹ The variety of appellations under which they went no doubt added to the confusion of officialdom: Brethren men variously gave Brethren, Christian Brethren, Plymouth Brethren, Protestant (Gospel Hall) and assembly of God as their denomination.

This search identified at least thirty-six Tasmanian Brethren men who enlisted.³⁰ It is not possible to use a religion as a search term, so this list is not exhaustive, relying as it does on my personal knowledge and the use of some historical sources. It was added to by browsing through the main 'Tasmanian' units in the Embarkation Rolls held by the War Memorial, which list the religion of the men. Sixteen went into the Medical Corps [AMC] or Field Ambulance and twenty into combatant units, one of whom was a driver and signaller. Twelve were discharged as medically unfit or because the end of the

Kentish District of Tasmania (Sheffield, Tas., 1974), Kerry Pink and Annette Ebdon, *Beyond the Ramparts: a bicentennial history of Circular Head* (Hobart, 1988), and Kenneth J. Evans, *To the Ends of the Earth: A Christian Pioneering Journey through Circular Head* (Smithton, Tas., 1988).

29. To be fair, the clerks had difficulty with Presbyterian also, and at least once spelled Baptist as 'Babtist'.

30. **Atkinson**, Reginald Charles; **Blackwell**, Walter Leonard; **Brough**, Elias Augustus 'Gus'; **Cumming**, Harold William and Renel or Reuel Douglas; **Cunningham**, Cyril John William and David John; **Cure**, Alfred and Oriel (whose brother Enoch said he was Roman Catholic!); **Deans**, Harold James; **Ferguson**, Cecil and Colin; **Haines**, Stanley; **Hay**, Roland Thomas Dudley; **Horton**, Claude and Lionel; **Hull**, Hubert Donald; **Hutchison**, Alexander James; **Kay**, Robert Latimer; **King**, Clement Alfred and Reuben; **Knowles**, George, George Stafford, and James Henry; **Ling**, Herbert; **McCormack**, Frederick; **McGinty**, Alexander Henry; **Medwin**, Lemuel; **Murfet**, Charles Joseph; **Parker**, Lyall Hadden; **Reeve**, David Charles; **Rogers**, Cecil Charles; **Shoobridge**, Max Giblin; **Smith**, Arthur Albert; **Wigg**, David George and James Leonard.

war came before they could be attached to a unit.³¹ One was discharged because his parents would not consent to him joining the general service. Some were quite definite about their intentions: on the attestation paper for David Reeve from Boat Harbour, his father wrote 'AMC or non-combatant service' underneath his signature for permission to enlist.³² On the form for Hubert Hull from Burnie, an officer has written 'This man was the one I wired to you about, re AMC and wants to join such.'³³ Cecil Ferguson's file contains a typed note to the Camp Commandant from the recruiting sergeant saying 'The bearer is one of the specially enlisted men for the A.M.C. I received instructions to notify you.'³⁴ Colin Ferguson had 'a conscientious objection to bearing arms but is willing to volunteer for service abroad if allotted to the A.M.C.'³⁵

Some sons of Brethren leaders, who listed themselves as Methodist or Baptist, also joined the Medical Corps.³⁶ A son of Allen Innes, a Brethren leader from Smithton, is listed as Presbyterian, and there is a hand-written note on file giving his father's permission for him to enlist: 'I am willing for my son Laurence Innes to go to the front.'³⁷ Stephen Reeve, of Wynyard, whose father was a leading Brethren speaker and elder and whose younger brother David is mentioned above, joined up in the 12th Battalion as an Anglican.³⁸ It is possible that some Brethren young men found it simpler to avoid the questions and incomprehension and gave a different

31. Four of these had been put down for the AMC.

32. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, David Charles Reeve.

33. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Hubert Hull.

34. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Cecil Herbert Ferguson.

35. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Colin Andrew Ferguson.

36. E.g. Elton Button (father C. E. Button of Launceston); Frederick Tuffin (father Josiah Tuffin of Launceston).

37. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Laurence Henry Innes. He survived Gallipoli, shell shock, and mumps, and returned to Australia.

38. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Stephen Alfred Reeve. He contracted gonorrhoea in Egypt.

denominational name, or that of their mother.³⁹ Others may have enlisted in a mood of rebellion against their upbringing.⁴⁰

Of the thirty-six identifiable Brethren men, only eight had been involved in previous service such as cadets or the pre-war national military training scheme. Nine stated that they were in an exempt area. As many of the men in this study came from an exempt area (the north-west coast), this may mean that the seven who said that they 'evaded service' meant that they were in an area where it was not possible to join.

There were clearly wide variations in Tasmanian Brethren responses to the war. The limited figures which have been obtained can only give an indication of trends and possible motivation. For example, it may be significant that only one man joined up in 1914, and four in 1915, but nineteen in 1916, mostly later in the year, when the pressure to enlist became intense with the 'Call to Arms' recruiting initiative, the losses of the Battle of the Somme, the preliminary call up and the Exemption Courts, and the approach of the conscription referendum. This may indicate an initial resistance to the war which was worn down, in some, by the prevailing patriotism and community mood. It is also interesting that all the men who enlisted in the AAMC did so in 1916 or 1917, possibly finally answering the insistent call to help their country in a way which squared with their consciences.

The absence of some names may also be an indication of Brethren response. The Ollingtons and Marthicks comprised large Brethren families around Smithton over several generations, but are totally unrepresented in the army records. It would be very surprising if there were no-one of military age at all at the time. The same argument from the negative applies to other names, which do appear in the

39. John Priddle, now of Claremont, Tasmania, says that his father told him to say 'CofE' rather than Brethren when he joined the Royal Navy in World War II, to avoid comment and ragging. Personal communication.

40. James Leonard (Len) Wigg enlisted as Church of England. Family information indicates that this may have been because he was disenchanted with, or out of fellowship with, the Brethren at this time. John Wigg, Somerset, 2009.

service records, but have no Tasmanian representation even though they are well-known local Brethren families.

One factor which may skew this lack of representation is the fact that Brethren adherence was strongest on the north-west coast. This meant that a large proportion of potential soldiers were farmers. This is a group that was much in evidence at the Exemption Courts, generally arguing that it was impossible to run their farms without enough manpower, and emphasising the importance of food production for the war effort.⁴¹ It is possible that there was some cross-over between their denominational adherence and their occupation, in their reluctance to enlist.

When the original research on this topic was undertaken, it was not possible to access the service records en masse, but based on anecdotal evidence, I hypothesised that in World War I a significant number of Brethren abstained from active involvement, and that as many as half of Brethren men involved in the war joined as non-combatants. The more detailed research now possible has confirmed that view. Those who abstained did so from separatist reasons, combined with a conscience about taking life. Over 40% of those who enlisted balanced these concerns with obedience to the government by opting for non-combatant service, and the rest responded to patriotic or community pressure to obey the powers that be. There was some correlation between the 'openness' of a fellowship and the likelihood of undertaking combatant service, but this was by no means a firm distinction.

So I return to Dave Wigg, whose case offers a final window into that world of complex choices. It is the more interesting because he had originally enlisted in 1916 for active service in the 12th Battalion. His two-page statement of mitigation to the court martial is in his handwriting, and painstakingly delineates the progress of his thinking. In the beginning he says he had no qualms about fighting and his

41. This stance also came through in many responses to the 'Call to Arms' in early 1916: Dr Bart Ziino, 'A Duty to "Look after Home Affairs": Resistance to Enlistment in Australia, 1914-18', paper presented to the School of History and Classics seminar, University of Tasmania, 3 July 2009.

‘first aim was to go up for promotion’, which was quite rapidly fulfilled as he became an acting corporal within four months of being in camp. However, after this he changed his views. His new rationale is clear, and typical of Brethren thinking as outlined earlier, but he does not say what made him change his mind.⁴²

His written explanation stated that he had disobeyed the Bible in swearing the oath and that he had gone against various passages of Scripture in promising to resist the King’s enemies. He quoted a number of passages, including those about not swearing an oath,⁴³ not taking vengeance⁴⁴ and Christ’s kingdom not being of this world.⁴⁵ He also listed in detail all his efforts over some months to transfer to the Medical Corps—at first being told it was possible, then being told a vacancy was unlikely. He was not cowed by the military machine:

I told him [the OIC D company] of my responsibilities toward God in this matter and ... that ... I would not carry on with this any longer.

Also that I considered it better to obey God in the matter, whatever the circumstances may be.⁴⁶

Finally, as a last resort he had taken the step of refusing to go on parade. He showed that this was the last in a series of steps and that he could see no other avenue of appeal. He was emphatic that he was not trying to ‘shirk my responsibilities to the Australian Government and to my people ... I would be too ashamed of myself to ever look my mates in the face again.’ It was just that his ‘responsibility [was] toward God whom I trust, not only to save my soul for Eternity, but also to guard and protect my loved ones while here on this earth, where every Christian is as a stranger and a pilgrim...’⁴⁷

42. Family information is that he was not as committed to his faith when he enlisted, but in the ensuing months he came back to a deeper commitment. Grandson John Wigg, Somerset, Tasmania, 2009.

43. NAA, A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742. ‘I saw that I had made a great mistake (firstly) that in swearing by the Scripture ... I had disobeyed God’s Word’. He then quotes James 5:12.

44. NAA, A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742. Romans 12:19.

45. NAA, A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742. John 18:36.

46. NAA, A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742.

47. NAA, A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742.

There is no record of what the military court thought of this extraordinary two-page manifesto, but not surprisingly, no matter how thoughtful his argument, he was found guilty as charged, and was given sixty days' detention. This was remitted to thirty days, twenty-three of which he had already served, but he forfeited fifty-three-days' pay. After this the probably exasperated AIF authorities managed to transfer him to the AAMC. Late in 1917, in France, he received four days' detention for neglecting to obey an order 'in that he neglected to fall in when ordered to do so'. One wonders at the story behind this incident, but there are no details on the file. He returned to Australia in 1919, being admitted to the ship's hospital during the voyage with 'PUO' (pyrexia of unknown origin).

It is always difficult to stand out against the norms of society. A study of conscientious objectors in Melbourne in 1939-1945 goes so far as to call it deviancy, and identifies the key questions as 'how the deviant conceives the world around him, what motivates him to reject societal mainstreams, and how ... he overcome[s] the pressures of non-conformity.'⁴⁸ It is clear that the Brethren had a definite conception of the world around them as being under God's judgement; that they were motivated to reject 'societal mainstreams', when they did, by the thought that they were 'aliens' in their country and world; and that their strong family and church links and Biblically-based teaching enabled some of them to withstand the 'pressures of non-conformity'. Dave Wigg's case is an example of a Brethren soldier applying the principles he had imbibed with steady courage and logic.

Of the Tasmanian Brethren men identified above, only one was killed.⁴⁹ To my knowledge, no Gospel Halls erected boards of honour to members who had served. Like much of the rest of society, their lives in the interwar years seemed to indicate that they hoped against

48. I. M. Macdonald, 'Deviency [*sic*]: The experience of the Conscientious Objector in Melbourne, 1939-45', *La Trobe Historical Studies*, vol. 4, August 1974, p. 13.

49. Harold Deans of Boat Harbour died of wounds in 1917. His personal effects included cigarettes, a Testament, and his YMCA membership card. A probable Brethren man, Lemuel Medwin of Stanley, died of bronchitis.

hope that the Great War had been a tragic aberration, until the events of the 1930s threatened complacency.

The seeds for this paper were planted over thirty years ago, when I interviewed my grandfather about his life. Discussing the First World War, he said that he would have been a conscientious objector if conscription had been introduced, on the grounds that ‘our citizenship was in heaven’⁵⁰ and because of ‘the irregularity of killing people’.⁵¹ His answer epitomised the Brethren response to that conflict.

50. Philippians 3:20.

51. Elisabeth Wilson, Gordon family history note book. My grandfather, Thomas Robert Gordon (1891-1979), came from a Scottish Brethren family and was in fellowship with the Hopkins group of meetings until the reconciliation in 1961, and then Open meetings for the rest of his life; for the Hopkins meetings, see Ian McDowell, ‘Rice Thomas Hopkins 1842–1916: An Open Brother’, *BAHNR*, Vol.1, No.1 (1997), pp.24-30.