

My Odyssey: A Conscientious Objector in the First World War

John Montgomerie

Introduction

John Montgomerie (1878–1957) was an evangelist with the ‘Vernalite’ division of the Churches of God, and during the First World War he was a conscientious objector (CO). He lived in the Parkhead district of Glasgow, in the city’s east end, and had been a painter and decorator. In February 1916, less than a month before conscription was introduced, Montgomerie had entered full-time Christian work as an evangelist, and as a minister of religion he believed himself to be exempt under the Military Services Act. However, he was called up, even though he was, at the time, 39 years-old. His case went to Glasgow Sheriff Court, one of the district courts service in Scotland, where it would appear Montgomerie identified himself as ‘Plymouth Brethren’. The decision went against him because it was deemed the Brethren did not have ministers but only laymen. He immediately lodged an appeal, which was allowed, to the Court of Session, Scotland’s supreme civil court. But on leaving the Sheriff Court, he was escorted by the military to the Glasgow recruiting office where he was enlisted, and at the city’s Maryhill Barracks was posted to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). However, he was given three days’ leave, which lengthened to several weeks when, on the private advice of some army officers, he avoided the police that were looking for him until his case should be heard at the Court of Session in Edinburgh. He lost his case there on the entirely spurious point that he could not dispense the Lord’s supper, when two judges, one a Presbyterian and the other an Episcopalian, gave judgement against him, although the third, a Roman Catholic, decided in his favour. Montgomerie returned home to Glasgow, and there the matter lay for some six weeks, until in

April 1918 he was arrested by the police and taken into custody. Eventually he was taken to Blandford Camp in Dorset where he realised that the RFC was ‘a scrap store of men’, unfit for the front for one reason or another. Nevertheless, on a point of principle Montgomery refused to obey any military orders, such as changing out of civilian clothes, and he refused to touch his military kit. This course of action would eventually lead to his incarceration in Wormwood Scrubs Prison in London (spelt with a double ‘b’ by Montgomery), and eventually H. M. Dartmoor Prison in Devon.

About 1929 Montgomery wrote an account of his experiences, entitled ‘My Odyssey’, consisting of some 28,000 words, at the request of his son, William Montgomery (1904–1994), later a noted Scottish folklorist and poet.¹ His son did not share his father’s faith, which he found restrictive, and it is evident that Montgomery is writing a secularized account of his war experience for his son’s eyes. But the reader familiar with the shape of Christian narratives will see that Montgomery interpreted his experiences within a providential framework. His manuscript was typed up by his son, with some minor alterations, and is now in the possession of William Montgomery’s daughter, Dian Montgomery Elvin, by whose kind permission this extract, which consists of chapters five and six of the full narrative, is given here.²

At the beginning of the extract Montgomery has returned to his tent at Blandford after again making it clear he refused to obey military orders. He emerges as a man of unyielding principle, but also one of sympathetic concern for others, as can be seen in the sudden change in his attitude to his kit bag.

Neil Dickson

1. ‘William Montgomery (1904–1994)’, <<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/william-montgomery>>, accessed 8 September 2014.

2. In addition, there is a photocopy of the typescript in the University Library of Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive (CBA, NDC, 2/33/1), which was made by the permission of William Montgomery’s wife, Norah Montgomery, and is held there by permission of Dian Montgomery Elvin.

Chapter 5

I was really glad to be in again. It was like a quiet harbour after storm, and I gave a sigh of relief when the door was shut on me, and I saw Harrison* smiling, glad to have me back, for Pat† had had him several times in the guardroom among the soldier prisoners, and he had great difficulty in getting out, having run short of palm oil.

Next morning I was taken before the Commanding Officer and charged with disobeying a military order. The Sergeant with his usual correctness for details was giving verbatim what he said and what I said when the Commanding Officer cut in sharply with, “Oh never mind the details, did he refuse to obey?” “Yes!” said the Sergeant. He then turned to me and said, “You are remanded for district courtmartial”.

I was then taken back to the guardroom, and, with other prisoners on remand, taken before the C. O. every morning to have the remand renewed.

He was extremely kind in all his dealings with me from first to last. He asked if I was having exercise and a bath regularly. I said “No!” so he gave orders that I had to have exercise every day and a bath occasionally.

On Monday 6th May I was taken to headquarters and told that the Courtmartial would sit on Wednesday 8th at 10 a.m. I was also told I would have to prepare my defence, and if I could have it on paper all the better; as the officer presiding would otherwise have put down all I said in long hand.

This occupied me all day on Tuesday; and on Wednesday I was taken to headquarters to stand my trial.

It was a very solemn affair indeed. Nothing was carried through carelessly or indifferently.

* Harrison was another religious CO, a member of Dr W. E. Orchard's church, King's Weigh House Congregational Church, in Mayfair, London. Orchard was a noted pacifist and later a Roman Catholic convert.

† ‘Pat’ (possibly an army nickname) was a northern Irish policeman charged with guarding the COs.

The Chairman or President was a Major, one of his companions was a Captain, and the other a Lieutenant. So I was told. The three formed the Court, and sitting round were various officials with writing material before them, and a few officers looking on.

I was brought in between two soldiers, a sergeant coming behind and standing back a few yards.

The Court was sworn in with hand on Bible, they promised to deal justly and without prejudice or partiality in this matter etc. etc. I don't remember all, but I did feel that these men realized they were dealing with a matter of grave importance and were determined to act conscientiously as before God. The charge was read, that I had on conscientious grounds refused to obey a military order while on active service.

The Presiding Officer, after having read the charge, looked up and asked me was I guilty or not guilty.

In answering him I made a step forward almost unconsciously and immediately a bellowing voice behind me shouted something at me. It was the Sergeant who had stood behind, full of excitement because I had dared to move an inch or two beyond the mark on the floor. I looked round at him sharply; with no doubt a certain amount of indignation showing itself on my face; and the President immediately spoke up saying, "Never mind the man, let him stand as he wishes to stand."

I said I did not know what he meant by the word guilty. If he meant by that word that I had done something wrong then I refused to acknowledge having done anything wrong.

If he meant by the word guilty that I had done what the Sergeant said I had done then I was guilty, but I would only say "Guilty" if the word conveyed that and no more.

This caused some debate among the three officers and they asked me, if I thought I was not to blame in anything, to plead not guilty.

I said that might be misleading them, and I did not wish to mislead them. I said, "All that the Sergeant and Corporal have stated is correct. I did say what he says I said. I did refuse to obey a military order, but if the word 'guilty' conveys the thought of having done

any wrong, I will not acknowledge the word, for I have done no wrong.”

There was again a debate together among the Court, and at last they accepted my statement that the charge was correct.

I then handed in my defence which was read by the President. He read it very slowly and sympathetically, and I could see they were deeply affected as the facts from first to last were unfolded. The two accompanying officers looked at me all the time the President read the statement.

When he had finished, he said, “The statement handed in is not for this Court, but for the Courts which had refused your appeal.” He said, “The Court will consider the evidence submitted and promulgate its finding in due course.”

I was taken back to the guardroom to await the decision of the Court, and Harrison was court-martialled next day.

Three days later, on Saturday 11th May, exactly three weeks from my arrest, I was in my cell with Harrison and, pulling back the little wooden shutter on the door, I looked out. We could see out of the window opposite on to the parade square, and, this morning, a large number of men, all new-comers in their civilian clothing, were being formed into a large square opposite the guardroom door. Sergeant Cook[‡] was having a job with them as the men had no knowledge of military formation and, of course, could not obey orders which they did not understand. The Sergeant was desperate, and I called Harrison to come and see what was going on. He came over to the door, looked out and said, “I know what it is. You are going to be sentenced this morning.”

He was right in his conjecture for, a few minutes later, the corporal of the guard came in and told me I was going out in a few minutes to receive my sentence.

He explained that I would be marched out from the guardroom between two soldiers, right into the middle of the square, and he asked as a special favour that I would conform to the arrangement

[‡] Sergeant Cook had been wounded in action and who was now in charge in new recruits at Blandford. Montgomerie felt he had ‘a kindly heart’.

made. I said certainly I would if at all able. So he explained that when I was marched out I would stand between the two soldiers. When the officer came forward to read the sentence he would, from behind me, say, "One step in advance!" and I would take off my hat, hand it back to him and step forward one step beyond the two men who were with me. When sentence had been read, he would say, "One step to the rear!" and I would step back between the two men and he would give me my hat. He would then say, "Right about turn!" and we would march back to the guardroom.

I was led into the guardroom and placed between the two soldiers and, with words, "Quick march!" we hurried out and, through an opening left in the square, we marched right into the middle of the square.

It was a great sight! The men who formed the square, as we have said, were in civilian clothing. They had just come in the day before from their homes. They were mostly men coming on for my own age, and what a startled look was on almost every face! Maybe some had visions of a firing party, and a quick interment; at any rate I smiled for their benefit, as much to remove their apprehension as anything else.

It all passed off very well from the Corporal's standpoint, though the officer who read the sentence of the court was very nervous. Indeed, as he repeated the words, "Private John Montgomerie, 161888 Royal Air Force, has been tried by District Court Martial, and found guilty of disobeying an order when on active service. The sentence of the court is that he be imprisoned for twelve months with hard labour."

I hear afterwards that they had great difficulty in finding an officer to read the sentence; they had all cleared out when they heard what was required of them. The one who did was in ignorance of the whole thing, and had been leisurely crossing the camp on some business when he was laid hold of and almost compelled to come. That may not have all been true, but at least I saw he was very young and very nervous.

I was put in beside Harrison again, but I learned it would only be for a few hours, as I could not now be kept with untried prisoners.

Having been sentenced, I would be removed to headquarters guardroom to await removal to prison.

After dinner I was informed that I was being removed, and by and by was taken into the guardroom and noticed that Corporal Smith[§] had been detailed to take charge of the escort. He was very officious and when we got outside I saw they had my kit-bag leaning up against the edge of the door.

Corporal Smith said to me, quite sharply, "Pick up that kit-bag!" I looked at him smilingly and said, "No!" He looked at me as if he would have liked to swallow me, commenced to threaten, and then bounced into the guardroom to charge me with insubordination or something.

The sergeant-in-charge of the guard used a long string of violent expletives, called him a fool of the first water, reminded him that I was already under sentence and could not be charged again. He would need to get someone else to carry the kit and get off at once. Out he came in very bad humour and, seeing a man crossing the square, called him over and ordered him to pick up the kit-bag. The man looked at him and said, "I am on my way to hospital. I could not carry it."

"Are you an old soldier?" asked the Corporal.

"Yes!" said the man.

"I thought so," said the Corporal, with a meaning twist at the corners of his mouth. A recent arrival at the camp was passing and he was hailed and ordered to lift the kit and carry it to the headquarters guardroom. The man did not know where it was, and was ordered to fall in behind and he would be shewn the way.

It was a long carry for such a big load, and we had to rest several times on the way. When we arrived at the guardroom, I saw that it was stronger than the one at the reception quarters. The windows were covered with barbed wire and wire netting. The policeman who received us was very surly and I felt in myself I was in for something new.

[§] One of the guards.

He ordered me to empty my pockets, and I did so of all the larger things, but one or two small things which were of no consequence in my judgement remained in the corners of my pockets. He went through my pockets and was very angry because I had not put everything out. I did not answer him at all, feeling humiliated at his suspecting me of trying to keep things, and the harshness of his language.

He put me into a cell and locked the door.

I walked up and down a bit wondering what would happen next. I had learned that I would not be taken to London that day, but would have to spend the week-end in the guardroom and be taken to London on the Monday.

I had noticed in the course of my journeying that the dreadful things never took place. Repeatedly, I was faced with things which made me fear a bit as to the outcome, but a little patience and the difficulty melted away.

I was at the moment worrying a bit as to what it would mean to spend a week-end in charge of this bully, when I heard a voice outside speaking to the man who had taken me in charge. I moved over so that I could see through the open shutter of the door and saw another man of the same build as the one who had searched me, and he was running his fingers down the page of the open ledger on the desk. The newcomer was taking over charge, and the other went away. The man remaining came over toward the door and I noticed a kindly twinkle in his eye. He said not a word, but putting his key in my cell door unlocked it and pushed it wide open. His action spoke more loudly than a long lecture.

I knew I had a friend.

Chapter 6

Sent Away

On the Monday morning, while walking up and down my cell, the door being open, a young soldier came in. I saw he was a Corporal, and yet he had quite a row of various ribbons on his breast, shewing he had been in several wars before the present one.

The policeman in charge was busy with an officer and his servant who were taking stock of all the material in the guardroom. I could hear the officer barking and growling as he found fault with several items. The policeman in charge had my sympathy. I was listening to the row, when the young man slipped into the cell. He smiled and said, "Are you the man who is going to London?" I said, "I don't know whether it is London or not I am going to." He said, "Yes! You are going to Wormwood Scrubbs."

Then he said, "Is that your kit at the door?" I said, "No!" and then, to clear his mind, I said, "They say it is mine, but I have never acknowledged it."

"Well," he said, "it has to go with you to London."

"Well," I said, "be very clear in your mind, I'm not taking it to London."

"Oh," he said, "the private who goes with us can carry it."

By this time the policeman had got free from his stock-taking tormentor, and came along to hand me over to the escort.

Outside, in the lobby, the private was standing. He was a big man, but was not at all pleased at the idea of carrying my kit-bag. Again I was worried slightly as I thought on the long journey to London with a man unsympathetic. The trains would be busy, and the least suspicion as to who I was might cause trouble.

We left the guardroom and went to the office at headquarters to get passes and papers for travelling to London. While standing outside in the rain waiting on the Corporal coming out, the Commanding Officer passed with a Sergeant Major. When he saw me he halted and enquired why we were standing in the rain. I said the Corporal was in getting papers. He turned to the private and said, "Take him inside out of the rain!"

We went inside and, while standing inside, an officer came forward and said to my companion, "Who arranged for you to go to London?" He said the Sergeant of his company had told him he had to go. The officer said, "Well, there's been a mistake somewhere. There was another man arranged for to go. You go back and report to your Sergeant that another man is going!"

He said, "All right, sir!" and moved away. As he moved off another man moved into his place. I looked at him and he was all smiles. He said, "That was wangled well!" I said, "How?"

"Oh," he said, "that man was going right enough, but I got word this morning that my wife in London is not very well, and I saw the officer-in-charge of our section and told him I had heard an escort was going to London, and if I could get with it I would be so thankful. He did the rest and here I am."

I said, "You have a soldier's kit to carry, mind." He said, "I would carry three kits to get to London to-day."

And so my worry again vanished completely when it seemed to be clinging to my mind like an old man of the sea. We got a run down to the station in a motor wagon and after a long run found ourselves in London. The compartment was crowded but the escort made no sign of knowing me at all.

The Corporal in charge was a boisterous lad. He had been in India, and Egypt, and South America. He had lost his wife and child there. They were murdered during an attack on the British Consulate in Mexico. His wife's mother was also murdered. He found them lying dead when he got home, after fighting all day to resist an attack on the Consulate. The Consul had advised them to bring their wives and children to the Consulate but they had thought there was no danger and didn't trouble. He said, when he lost his wife and child he determined to devote the rest of his life to the army. He had been careless and had got into trouble now and again which was the reason he was only of the rank of Corporal.

In the compartment he took out the manacles which he carried with him and which, no doubt, were meant for me, He put them on himself, and knocking them sharply against his heel they dropped off. Several times he did this, then he put them on his companion who could not, after much trying, get them off. All this was carried on to the general amusement of the passengers.

When we reached London, we went down to a soldiers' buffet and had a cup of tea and a cake ere getting on the underground railway for the nearest station to Wormwood Scrubbs. When we got off at the station they wanted to have a drink. I said I would like to get a few

picture postcards and send them home, so they helped me find a place where these things were sold, and when I had written them and posted them, I said I would go and get a haircut and shave before going into Scrubbs, and if I was out before them I would wait for them, but if they were out before me they would wait for me.

Had those in authority known how careless they were with their prisoners, they would have had an apoplectic seizure.

We took a car** for Scrubbs and the people on the car no doubt were aware of our destination. Some looked at me sympathetically while others looked with gloomy brows, but I was not exciting myself about them. I was wondering what would happen next.

We got off the car at the prison road end, and walked along to the large gate. The Corporal rang the bell and the small gate was opened by a small man who looked to me old and bowed. He had a purely prison warder's face. The Corporal told his business and the gatekeeper said, "Come in!" We went in. He asked who was in charge, and when told pointed to a waiting room and ordered the private to wait there. He then ordered me to pick up the kitbag which I did. I did not wish to have any trouble now that I was in prison, and it might have meant the Corporal carrying the kit which I did not wish to have him do. We were taken about a hundred yards, then we were handed over to an officer who received us. He got the papers, signed the Corporal's paper, who then shook hands with me and, bidding me best of luck, departed.

The officer, who was not so cuttingly abrupt as the one at the gate, told me to lift my kit and we moved on towards the reception quarters of the prison. I was done out†† by the time I reached the place, and I was put into a cell to await developments.

I was not long in when the door opened and a warder handed me in a pint of porridge and a small cob of bread, then a small tin with a bit of cheese and a bit of margarine in it. I could not eat; I had no appetite whatever. When going out he said, "You are not staying here, you know."

** Scots for 'tramcar'.

†† Scots for 'tired out'.

I had been wondering, as the cell was empty except for the stool and the small fixed table at the door.

About an hour after being put in the cell, I was taken out and marched along to the reception office and found some others sitting on a form in the lobby outside the office. One of the prisoners had khaki on.

After sitting here for another half hour, the office door opened and one of the men's names was called. He rose and went into the office and the door shut behind him. One by one, they rose and went in, but none came back out, at which I wondered very much. My own turn came and the problem was solved.

When I went into the office, I found three officials busy. The one who took note of our belongings was a young man and he was very sarcastic. He should have felt ashamed even to lift his head and shew his youth in my presence, instead of being brutally supercilious in his behaviour. He spoke to me as he would have spoken to a dog.

He ordered me in behind a screen to remove my clothes and push them through the open bottom of the screen. I went behind the screen where I was kept under observation by one of the staff. He was supposed to be writing but I saw he was watching my every movement. A piece of blanket was thrown over the screen and with that wrapped round me I was ordered to go through a doorway on the opposite side from that which I entered.

When I went through the doorway, I found myself in a lobby with bathrooms along one side. The bathrooms had only half doors, a bottom half. The top was open. I was ordered into one of the bathrooms by a warder who was walking up and down.

While I was having a bath, some prisoner attendants came along and hung over the top of this half-door my prison clothes.

When I began to pull them on I discovered that the flannel semmit^{‡‡} was several sizes too big. This would not have been so inconvenient, had the shirt also been big, but the shirt which was of cotton was several sizes too small, and how to get a small shirt on the top of a large semmit was a problem which took some solving. After much manoeuvring, I managed to get it on. Then I found the trousers

^{‡‡} Scots for a vest (UK English) or an undershirt (US English).

given me were for a short man; I am six feet in height. The vest was not so bad, but the jacket was also too small and when I tried the cap on it was also too small, and one has an idea how ridiculous a person can look with a cap too small or too large. I had no mirror, but I had an idea I must have been a sight when I stepped outside the bathroom.

The socks were darned with the thin twine used in bag-making, and had gathered in a lump on the heel. I learned later that it was expected that the sock would be put on with the heel on the top of the foot.

Everything was done to make us look ridiculous, to make us a laughing-stock. When I came out of the bathroom, I discovered the other men, who had been in before me, lined up with their backs against the wall and one of them, a short chap, had a suit on too big for him. The sleeves of his jacket were turned up about six inches and his trousers the same distance, shewing the white lining. His cap was too big and was held in place by his ears. He was a sight, and I must have been the same to him.

Our jacket, trousers and cap were covered with white broad arrows to shew we were government property.

When we were all ready for transportation, we were taken by a side door back to where we had sat before going into the office.

My porridge mug and cob of bread and little tin of cheese and margarine were awaiting my return to take possession, and we were marched away through interminable corridors, and across spacious yards and also side galleries, till I thought we would never come to an end of it. Then we came to a large building and the attendant warder opened a large iron gate. We entered a spacious hall, with iron galleries rising up three or four storeys. This was the famous A hall, entirely given over to C.O.'s.