

BOOK REVIEWS

***A Few Small Candles:
War Resisters of World War II Tell Their Stories.***

Edited by Larry Gara and Lena Mae Gara.

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Reviewed by Peter Brock

In the United States during World War II, after the introduction of conscription, around 60,000 men were jailed as conscientious objectors to military service (COs) with sentences—sometimes repeated—stretching from a few months to five years. In contrast, the authorities assigned nearly 12,000 COs to Civilian Public Service projects of various kinds (IV-E) and well over 25,000 to noncombatant service in the armed forces (I-A-O).

Actually, seventy-five percent of the COs who were sent to prison belonged to the Jehovah's Witnesses; they claimed exemption from the draft, not as pacifists, but as ministers of religion. Such claims, however, were usually rejected. The remaining twenty-five percent, belonging to a variety of churches or none, found themselves in jail for a variety of reasons. Some had had their applications for CO status dismissed by their local draft boards and had failed on appeal; others, given I-A-O status, had been unwilling to become noncombatant soldiers. There were those, too, who had walked out of Civilian Public Service camps after becoming convinced they represented a sell-out to the military. Finally, there were the radicals who had refused from the outset to register for the draft.

Most of the contributors, including Larry Gara himself, fall into this category. And they all share a strong concern for social justice as well as a pacifist activism that was by no means a characteristic of the more otherworldly sections of the CO community. Larry, for instance, after serving two wartime prison sentences and a further eighteen months in 1949 for allegedly "counseling and aiding evasion of the draft," has combined his professional career as an academic historian with work for the War Resisters League (backed in his activism by his co-editor, and wife, Lena Mae). George Houser, one of the Union Eight (i.e., the eight Union Theological Seminary students who refused to register for the draft in October 1940) went on to become a pioneer of the civil rights movement, while his fellow nonregistrant,

David Dellinger, later figured as a defendant in the Chicago Eight trial during the Vietnam War.

“Was our protest and our witness of any benefit to society?” asks William P. Roberts. “We flapped our butterfly wings in prison. Who can know their effect in our interconnected world?” (pp. 172–173). The writers of these ten prison memoirs were already in their late seventies or early eighties when they finally prepared them for print. (Some of them, of course, possessed letters or earlier notes on which they could base their accounts.) The vividness with which they present their recollections and the sharp contours of the best of the narratives testify to the deep impression made on them by the years spent in jail as young men over half a century ago. As one of them put it: “Prison opened up a world to me that I would never have known without becoming a part of it” (George Houser, p. 150).

To quote Bill Roberts again: “Larry and I,” he writes, “had remarkably similar prison experiences and much the same circuit of prisons: Mill Point in West Virginia to Marlinton County Jail to Ashland, Kentucky, and eventually to the Federal Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania” (p. 152). Yet there are significant differences between the prison experiences recorded here. Roberts, for example, shifts his emphasis to “the internal aspects of the experience” in contrast to Gara’s more factual account, and produces one of the most fascinating—and finely nuanced—essays in the volume. Nevertheless, instead of discussing each essay separately I will confine myself merely to highlighting several shared experiences that may help to illuminate North American prison life.

We should perhaps note that the authors are in no way typical either of the World War II American CO community—inside prison or out—or the convict population of which they became temporarily a part. Three of the ten became college professors after the war, three became nonviolent activists, one became—for a time—a Trappist monk, and one became the executive secretary of the American Quakers’ service organization, while one was a Japanese American who had been faced during the war with the threat of internment because of his ethnic origin. But, surely, this cannot detract from the value of their observations?

From the beginning, our authors had had to grapple with the question: should they be “good boys” and obey the rules, or become non-cooperators with the penal system? “There was no party line for COs, no set clear principles.” Arthur Dole, for instance, decided—“other things being equal”—

“to follow reasonable orders, keep my cell clean, and accept my work assignments” (p. 64). He would be polite to the prison staff and helpful to his fellow prisoners. After all, as a pacifist he believed in the essential goodness of human beings. But of course “other things” might not always remain “equal.” Both John Griffith and Lawrence Templin, who had initially shared Dole’s viewpoint, soon discovered this: they each ended by doing a considerable portion of their time in the hole, a similar fate to that of the twenty-one-year-old unconditional non-cooperator, Ralph Pulliam, at Ashland. “When a prison official [had] shouted, ‘Pulliam, why don’t you clean up your cell?’ he quietly replied, ‘This is your prison, not mine. You clean up your prison’” (p. 199).

The hole figures prominently in several of the memoirs. “There was much of interest in this experience,” writes Templin (p. 191)—a masterly understatement indeed! At Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, Dellinger and four other COs went on hunger strike in an effort to abolish the hole. But, Dellinger tells us, “feeling that the issue of the Hole had reached a fairly wide audience on the outside through prison visitors and progressive publicity, we stopped the strike on the sixty-fifth day (after a month of forced feeding)” (p. 35). Griffith’s humiliating experience in the federal prison at Petersburg, Virginia led him to re-evaluate his original decision to be a model prisoner (he knew this was what Mahatma Gandhi had wished his nonviolent followers to be). Confinement in the hole—“the ultimate form of prison punishment,” described here by Griffith in detail—followed his now uncooperative stance. Many prisoners, thus punished, suffered nervous breakdowns. Of himself, Griffith writes: “I was blessed by a temperament that handled the solitary confinement experience with a minimum of mental anxiety. The physical aspect was a bit more stressful” (p. 116).

In federal prisons where COs were located in comparatively large numbers and “a sense of solidarity” existed, social radicals among them succeeded more than once in organizing protests against the racial segregation then practiced in all American jails. The most memorable of these protests took place at the Federal Correctional Institutions at Danbury Connecticut—“a magnificent location on a hilltop ... a clean prison, utterly soulless” (p. 185)—and at Ashland, Kentucky.

The volume also throws light on the deplorable conditions existing in most county jails where federal convicts were usually confined for a few weeks before being transferred to federal prisons. Several of the contributors

comment on the monotony, lack of privacy, and almost incessant noise, and the burdensome restrictiveness of prison life in general—the same then as now. “Living only with persons of the same gender makes thinking and talking about sex a major preoccupation,” comments Gara (p. 86). Whether it was a question of frustrated sex or boredom or harsh discipline or arbitrary officialdom, the carceral fact experienced by the prisoner of conscience did not differ from the one experienced by his fellow prisoners. But what makes these memoirs a significant contribution to prison literature is the angle from which the authors view their experience and the sensitive articulation of what they perceived during their time in jail.

A vision of the kind reflected in the book emerges from the poem “Prison Dawn” by Malcolm (Max) Parker, 2501-SS Sandstone Prison, Minnesota, an ex-CO who died before the Garas prepared their collection of essays. Max wrote:

The gently colored streamers of the skies
Eagerly rush forth
To tell the world of the new-discovered day
Their ever changing shapes and hues
Sharply emphasize
The harsh immutability
Of walls concrete—cold and grey,
And yet ...
Memory’s obscuring mist
Reshapes their drab disparity
Into rugged mountain height
Colored by another dawn
Of long ago—
And for an instant I am free.

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