

“The war was always there, but we did not go to it any more”: William Everson, William Stafford, and World War II Pacifist Literature

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These are the years of destruction. We offer against them the creative.

—William Everson

The film *Hacksaw Ridge*, released in 2016, is a biopic war film depicting the extraordinary true story of Desmond Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist and a conscientious objector who “fought” at the battle of Okinawa, as a medic without a weapon, and saved seventy-five men. Doss was the only American soldier in WWII to fight on the front lines without a weapon; he believed that while the war was justified, killing was nevertheless wrong. As an army medic, he single-handedly evacuated the wounded from behind enemy lines, braved fire while tending to soldiers, was wounded by a grenade and hit by snipers. Doss was the first conscientious objector to ever earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.

While the film mirrors other war stories in its representation of courage under fire against all odds, it also points to a faction often overlooked in war narrative: the influence of those who refused to fight and their unsung contributions to society. Though Doss traverses the battlefield as a medic/CO saving men’s lives under the most dire of conditions, most COs who chose not to fight were not on traditional battlefields. Nevertheless, they did fight on battlefields created by their own societies through their mistreatment and alienation. This paper will analyze the motives and creative output of those men who chose not to fight, establishing instead, through words, the groundwork that would become the pacifist movement of the Vietnam War, which led to the current long hiatus of major world conflicts. In particular, the paper will focus

on the driving forces of William Everson's and William Stafford's writing produced from their time serving in these work camps, and how this writing effectively served to change the mindset of modern warfare and the size of war's theatre.

Before understanding the motives of men drafted into WWII who chose not to obey their government, it is important first to look at the relationship between soldiers conscripted into World War I. The voice of opposition to this war, magnifying the horrors of past wars through the development of the Industrial Revolution, was put forth by soldiers who were both educated and proficient writers. As Paul Fussell makes clear in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, this was a product of the rise a learned public who began to read in the 19th century, during and after the Civil War. "By 1914," Fussell notes, "it was possible for soldiers to be not merely literate but vigorously literary" (170). This stemmed from an emphasis of the study of English and classical literature in educational institutions across the country. In fact, this focus of learning literature was extremely popular in its development of humanism in 19th century Western thought. The Great War was, as Fussell put it, "a most literary war" (171).

Central to this humanistic thought was the rise of anti-war poetry, primarily from soldiers fighting in the trenches, including Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Rupert Brooke, and Wilfred Owen, whose famous poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" highlighted the use of chlorine gas and whose publication after his death (he died in the last week of the war) would help influence the banning of chemical weapons. More importantly, the publication of this poetry highlighted, in a literary way, the horrors and senselessness of war that seeped into public consciousness, paving the way for the rise of conscientious objectors in World War II, the rise of the pacifist movement, and the anti-war movement against the Vietnam conflict in the 1960's. In fact, this cultural shift toward peace belies the negation of war as a trend and set into motion

introspection on why humans fight. As John Horgan notes, “the sudden emergence of war around 10,000 BCE and its recent decline suggest it’s primarily a cultural phenomenon and one that culture is now helping us to overcome” (Slate). In the article, Horgan emphasizes that no wars between major industrialized powers have occurred since the end of World War II. “Most conflicts,” he writes, “now consist of guerilla wars, insurgencies, and terrorism—or what the political scientist John Mueller of Ohio State University calls the ‘remnants of war.’” (Slate).

One could argue that the catalyst for this decline arrived during the horrors of the Great War, the literature reflecting that horror, a reading public that reacted to the conscription of World War II. Aware of the impending horrors what would no doubt continue the atrocities of the previous world war, men across all nations refused to fight and produced the rise of conscientious objectors. Many of these COs produced literature that became a creative parallel to the men who fought in The Great War, producing instead a body of anti-war literature from the work camps in which they were imprisoned.

The first lawful alternative to military service came in a provision included in the Conscription Act of 1940. This provision, perhaps anticipating that certain segments of the population would refuse to go to war, came a year before the U.S. entry into the Second World War, though the entry into this war, with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, had much clearer reasons and implications than the decision to enter into the Great War. World War II has been historically considered a “popular” war, mainly because of the rise of media. Newspapers and radio clarified an enemy in Hitler and the Third Reich as a force that threatened the sanctity of the free world. The images were clear as country after country in Europe was overtaken and put under Nazi control, and then the Japanese conquests in the Pacific bookended and endangered the American way of life from both coasts. War was inevitable and justified.

However, World War II also followed on the heels of the horrors and apparent pointlessness of The Great War, and within this fresh memory thousands in the United States refused to fight. Among the estimated 50,000 who refused to take up arms were 12,000 conscientious objectors who spent time in Civilian Public Service Camps (True 76). During the Second World War, the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 exempted from military service those who "by reason of religious training and belief" opposed war and mandated alternative service in work of "national importance." Objectors who accepted alternative service worked in civilian public service camps on conservation projects, staffed mental hospitals, or volunteered to be human guinea pigs in government-sponsored experiments on diet, endurance, and the transmission and control of malaria, hookworm, typhus, and infectious hepatitis. Objectors received no pay or benefits and had to rely upon families and churches for support. Those who refused to register for the draft, opposed compulsory service, or failed the test for religious conviction were sentenced to prison. Most imprisoned objectors were Jehovah's Witnesses, but roughly a thousand were radical pacifists affiliated with the War Resisters League, the Catholic Worker movement, or the Socialist party (Wallach 16).

Much of the art and writing that sprung from pacifism toward the Second World War came out of the Civilian Public Service camps imposed by President Roosevelt. The grueling conditions of these work camps, in many respects, fostered a strong alliance and an atmosphere of creativity among the interned. William Everson had already become a prominent poet after his publication of *We Are the Ravens* in 1935. During World War II, Everson declared himself a conscientious objector and was placed in a series of work camps in the Pacific Northwest, where he first learned the art of handset printing and where he also completed *The Residual Years*, which brought him national attention. During his stay at this work camp, Everson wrote a

number of poems dealing with his experience as a conscientious objector, including War Elegy

XI:

War Elegy XI

(The Internment, Waldport, Oregon, January, 1943)

To sunder the rock that is our elegy
In the weak light
Under high fractured cliffs,
We turn with our hands the raw granite;
We break with iron.
Under that edge it suffers reduction.
Harsh, dense, and resistant,
The obdurate portions flow and divide.

We wait suspended in time
Locked out of our lives we abide, we endure
Our temporal grievance diminished and slight
In the total awareness of what obtains,
Outside, in the bone-broken world.
Confronting encroachment the mind toughens and grows.
From this exigency both purpose and faith achieve coherence:
Such is our gain.

We achieve our place in the terrible pattern,
And temper with pity the fierce gall,
Hearing the sadness, the loss and the utter desolation,
Howl at the heart of the world.

—William Everson

The strength in the poem lies in his use of voice and use of “we.” In his suspension of time, he becomes “locked out” of the world of America and war, yet Everson finds the strength

of unity, the “we” of his poem, to confront the machinery of government and war, to “toughen and grow.” Indeed, this growth is something that goes well beyond the end of his own internment and the end of the war itself. It is being part of a collective refusal to serve in the war that served as the catalyst to his creative success.

While the true legacy of pacifism and, more specifically, conscientious objection, quite often gets its attention within the parameters of political action and social reform, it is the creative action undertaken by artists and writers such as Everson that also endures and incurs social change. This is especially true during World War II, where artists came together and made significant contributions to the arts by refusing to go to war. Of all of the Americans who declared themselves conscientious objectors during this war, a number of them went on to make significant contributions that affected the culture and history of the United States. William Everson (later known as Brother Antoninus, the Beat Friar), William Stafford (teacher and poet laureate of Oregon) and Robert Lowell (later appointed poet laureate of the United States) were among the prominent poets who refused to fight the Second World War.

Many of these artists and writers became inspired by their treatment as draft resisters. In particular was the Fine Arts Camp that developed during World War II on the rugged Oregon coast. Founded by William Everson, the internment camp for C.O.'s brought together artists and writers from many disciplines, including actors and theatre workers, printers, woodworkers, ceramic and silk screen artists, photographers, fine art printers and architects, all of whom transferred to the camp from across the United States. Together they developed a dynamic program in the arts in their free time, mostly after long sixty- hour weeks of hard labor reforesting the depleted area of the Oregon coast (Wallach 16).

During their tenure at the camp, the interned prisoners planted a million and a half trees, and five men lost their lives in the grueling work. After hours, they indulged in the creative, performing plays by Chekhov, reading the works of famous poets, and even staging a humorous version of the popular operetta *The Mikado*. This creative force bought an old printing press, and William Everson taught one of the interned, Adrian Wilson, the craft of letter set printing and typography from what his father had taught him. After his release, Wilson went on to become one of the pre-eminent book designers of the 20th century. At Waldport, they created and produced two magazines, *The Illiterati* and *The Compass*, in addition to a number of poetry books (Wallach 18).

While these artists and writers were interned at Waldport, their wives and friends rented tourist cabins at the beach and performed in the staged theatre productions at the camp. Following the war, the men in the camp, along with some of their wives and friends, founded the Interplayers League in San Francisco. Joining them were other prominent pacifist writers from across the nation, including Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, and Henry Miller, who, as Wallach notes, “joined the new arrivals from Waldport and birthed the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’ in the arts which evolved into the ‘Beat Movement’ of the 1950’s” (18).

This strong legacy of conscientious objectors in the arts after the war had ended was not limited to this one camp in Waldport, Oregon; there began a flowering of dissent at government action and public apathy toward these actions in many areas across the country. Lewis Hill, a draft resister, had been interned at a camp in Coleville, California, and after the war, he and several other C.O.’s founded the Pacifica Network, followed by KPFA radio in Berkeley, the world’s first listener-sponsored radio station. KPFA hosted many controversial programs, stretching the Cold War limits of free speech, lectures on Zen Buddhism by Alan Watts, and

poetry readings by Brother Antoninus [William Everson], Laurence Ferlinghetti, and Alan Ginsberg (Wallach 19). This network pioneered the merging of art and politics as no other station had done. Further, the influence of the conscientious objectors and pacifists of World War II still endures, for "the station that C.C. Lew Hill envisioned remains the flagship of free speech listener-sponsored, non-commercial radio in the United States today" (Wallach 18).

William Everson had already established himself as a successful poet before his refusal to enter the Second World War, but his true involvement in the arts sprung out of his treatment as a conscientious objector in the work camps in Waldport, Oregon. Through his pacifist ideals, he recognized the value of the arts as a universal experience that transcended the politics of any particular war. It was through this universal experience, he stated, that "the intellectual element of any society is always profoundly swayed by the caliber and manifestation of the art product within it" (Wallach 18). Further and more importantly, he stated, "what the powerful artist believer espouses, the world will hear." In this regard, his involvement in developing the arts in the work camp in Waldport came with an agenda: "It is because of the inherent sympathy between the purposes of pacifism and the purposes of art that a pacifist artistic movement seems capable of wide influence....given the articulation and of an earnest and serious artistic movement, a movement that could make whole and poignant the longing of the people, what might not be accomplished?" (Wallach 19).

As mentioned earlier, the memory of World War I through the reading public's illumination of the horror of war served to question the legitimacy of armed conflicts. Perhaps the poet whom The Great War affected most was William Stafford. Born in Kansas shortly before that war began, he grew up reading the poetry and hearing horrific stories of the war from the elders, teachers, relatives, and neighbors who remembered it, so that even before the outbreak

of World War II, his pacifist ideals had been cemented. Moreover, this was not simply an individual decision. The Great War had created many of such a mindset, who inevitably came together by government force to ally their concerns, and the obligation for conscientious objection to be an active, communal force. As Stafford noted about this communal thinking in the work camps, "Down in our hearts we found it [community of C.O.'s] and wanted to protect and promote it as something more important than—something prerequisite to—any geographical kinship or national loyalty" (Down 8). To be sure, this movement was against the very idea of nationalism, and by consequence, a nationalistic fervor taking place across the globe served to effectively demonize COs and their collective cause.

"Being a war resister," Stafford notes in *Every War Has Two Losers*, "deliberately taking on the role of being different, permeated my life with an outside attitude" (137). Stafford makes this stance clear in "Objector," when even the rudimentary activity like eating illustrates his cause to break free of military lock- step with this "outside attitude": "In line at lunch I cross my fork and spoon/to ward off complicity—the ordered life/our leaders have offered us..." (*The Darkness* 116), pitted against the larger numbers of those with nationalistic mind-sets who went to the war, where "somewhere other citizens more fearfully bow/ in a place terrorized by their kind of oppressive state" (116). Surrounding himself with those who felt the same way was crucial for Stafford, who noted "I cherish the esteem of those around me, and voice my protest in such a way as to reconcile rather than to offend..." (*Every War* 137).

When Stafford was drafted, just a week or so after Pearl Harbor, he was well into the Master's in English program at the University of Kansas. After four years in camps, he was able to finish the program thanks to the manuscript he had written about his captivity, *Down in My Heart*. As Stafford makes clear in *Down in My Heart*, "Those of us who objected openly found

our country conquered overnight—convinced by aliens who could shout on any corner or in any building and bring down on us wrath and hate more intense than any foreigner. The country we had known was gone..." (7).

C.O's classified as 4-E were eligible to do work of national importance under civilian direction, which included Walport, Oregon, where Everson was placed, but also just one of 150 such camps scattered across the country for the Civilian Public Service program (CPS). This program was part of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which the government defined as "alternative service" by reason of their religious training or being conscientiously opposed to war. As Stafford notes, "I was not a member of any church, which gave my draft board a few fits. All sorts of people finally filtered into the camps" (*Every War* 150).

Most of these camps were remote, as if to negate their presence in society...or, as Steve McQuiddy points out, "with the aim to keep contact between unpopular COs and the general public at a minimum" (3). Like the prison narratives of Thoreau and Malcolm X, Stafford finds the experience of captivity highly liberating. This is evident in the poem "In Camp," where "...All I know is/my degree of leaning in this wind/where—once the mind springs free--/ every cause has reason/but reason has no law" (*The Darkness* 121). This is the state of mind that frees Stafford, as it did with Malcolm X and Thoreau, in which their captivity becomes liberating force. "In camps like that, if I should go again," Stafford concludes, "I'd still study the Gospel and play the accordion" (*The Darkness* 121).

Unlike Thoreau and Malcolm X's prison narratives, however, Stafford's prison was surrounded by nature and removed from the society of man. This location, a world away from world war, fuels his pacifist sentiments. In "At The Un-National Monument Along The Canadian Border," he exalts the monument of nature, a place remote and beautiful:

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky (*The Darkness* 117).

Here, in a place devoid of human history, of the battles between men and of General's names on man-made monuments that populate cities, where "No people killed—or were killed—on this/ ground/hallowed by neglect and an air so tame/that people celebrate it by forgetting its name" (*The Darkness* 117), Stafford is able to access his freedom of mind and find the peace he seeks in wartime.

In the work camps, as he noted in *Down in My Heart*, "it is commonplace now to appeal to an inner conscience of mankind for salvation from terrible new weapons....and it was how we, in camp, homeless in our own society, who followed with sympathy the discussion of inner experience" (37). In his poem "Meditation," Stafford makes the conflict between these inner and outer lives clear, when "Animals full of light/walk through the forest/toward someone aiming a gun/loaded with darkness" (123). He is spirit-animal in this sense, forming a bond with the natural world that could never be achieved on the lines of battle. His confinement to a work camp, thus, has made him more free.

For Stafford and for all of those whose integrity preceded their decisions to reject war, this conflict is ongoing, and vigilance is an obligation. In "Watching the Jet Planes Dive," he emphasizes this obligation to keep up the fight against fighting:

We must go back with noses and the palms of our hands,
and climb over the map in far places, everywhere,

and lie down whenever there is doubt and sleep there.

If roads are unconnected we must make a path,

no matter how far it is, or how lowly we arrive (*The Darkness* 109).

Writing anti-war poetry as an activist long after the end of World War II, there is a great sense of optimism from Stafford that this obligation will continue to be met, that future COs will continue making paths if “roads are unconnected.” In *Down in My Heart*, he states of his prison experience, “Back then—and now—one group stays apart from the usual ways of facing war. They exist now—and they did then—in all countries. Those who refuse the steps along the way are a small group, and their small role is a footnote in the big histories” (4).

More than a footnote, the writing of William Stafford and the pacifist movement evolved, in the powerful legacy of the arts in the work camps, into the artistic revolt of the Beat Generation, which of course begat the massive social rebellion of the 1960’s. Part of this campaign of change also found its roots from some of the C.O.’s who had not spent time at Waldport, and who went on to start KPFA-FM in San Francisco, a radio station with a politically aware and active format. The radio, as an important medium, supporting Everson’s contention that for those involved in “an earnest and serious artistic movement,” the widest possible audience must be sought. Then the poetry, primarily through the work of Bob Dylan, found its place in the musical canon and led to the mass protests across the country over the Vietnam War, the end of conscription, and an awareness that all armed conflicts must be questioned and, if necessary, resisted.

While the story of the Beat Generation and its effects on society have been well documented in many historical studies of the sixties, as McQuiddy makes clear in *Here on the Edge*, “Very little attention has been given....to the role conscientious objectors played in

preparing the ground for these changes to occur. When [the COs] chose art over war, chose creation over destruction, they set into motion a chain of events that no one could have predicted" (249).

Stafford concurs, reflecting on his own creative process. "We always felt that our stand then helped lead toward the later protests that caught the world's attention" (*Every War* 137). As Horgan makes clear, "The surer we are that the world is irredeemably violent, the more likely we are to support hawkish leaders and policies, making our belief self-fulfilling. Our first step toward ending war is to believe that we can end it." Armed with the power of words, of poetry that rails against the horrors of conflict from the trenches of the Great War that found its way through the work camps of World War II and into the protest music of the sixties that would ultimately help to reduce world conflicts, conscription, and mass horror, it is clear that rebellion is a necessary force to end all wars, including the "remnants of war" that continue to be fought in the 21st century. Stafford emphasized that COs were not just restricted to American soil, stating "it's important to remember there were COs everywhere...the percentage of COs in England was greater than here in the US, and it's strange because they were getting bombed. There were COs in Germany, everywhere" (*Every War* 154). Indeed, without the contribution of these COs to a culture and humanism that has helped re-shape human consciousness, the world might be a more violent place than the more peaceful one it has become.

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