

THE COWLEY FATHERS AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by BRIAN TAYLOR

THREE SUNDAYS after the outbreak of war, Fr Congreve, aged nearly 79, preached in the society's church in Oxford, and gave a summary of professor J. B. Mozley's sermon on war, delivered during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, 'for the sake' he said, 'of those of us who do not know it'.¹ Fr Benson, the founder of the society, lived until 14 January 1915. At the age of 90 he kept abreast of the news, and was angered by the German bombardment of West Hartlepool and Bridlington; 'he spoke with scorn of this effort of the enemy, and again and again spoke of its uselessness from a military point of view.'²

The Superior General of the Society of St John the Evangelist, Fr Maxwell, realised that the war would cause a reduction in subscriptions. While no new work would be undertaken, he urged 'we are really anxious to impress upon our friends that by far the greater part of our work is not such as can be retrenched without causing much suffering, and without crippling our effort in the future'. For example, they had the care of young children in the missions, who could not wait for 'their next meal until after the war is over'.³

After this the *Cowley Evangelist* had few references to the war, apart from limited news of members of the community who were serving with the forces—news which became much more informative after Fr Bull became Superior General in 1916; even lay brothers were mentioned sometimes then. In March 1916 there was a sombre article on Lent by Fr Congreve. He referred to the crosses borne by the French, Belgians and Serbians, 'whose fields and cities are ravaged'. At home 'the war has roused a manly and serious temper among us, has chastened us by sacred suffering, quickened us to unselfish efforts. . . . Everyone is ready for self-

¹ [Cowley] E[ngel] September 1914 p 195.

² *Ibid* February 1915 pp 25–6.

³ *Ibid* October 1914 p 224.

denial today.' So, he concluded, a good Lent should be kept.⁴ Most of the pages continued to be filled with devotional articles, and news from Africa and India.

Fr Maxwell addressed the general chapter of the society a year after the declaration of war, sharing the views of most thoughtful patriots. 'The war dominates our thoughts. . . . The sacredness of the cause for which we are fighting; the conviction that if we are to fail in our duty the cause of freedom, and of right as against might, would be seriously imperilled; the fact that as the war develops it becomes more and more clear that we are fighting for our very existence as a free country and Empire; all this makes it less likely that the absorbing interest we take in the progress of the war will really hinder our life or destroy our Prayer. . . . It seemed to me right not only to increase the number of newspapers but to put them into the various common rooms earlier in the day. I have no doubt that at the end of the war it will be quite easy to return to our usual custom and rule in that matter.'⁵

But some members of the society were away with the troops. Fr P. N. Waggett was working in Cambridge when war was declared. Fr Congreve's nephew, General W. N. Congreve VC, was commanding the 18 Brigade, which soon arrived in Cambridge to camp on Midsomer Common. Fr Waggett discussed possible service with general Congreve, and early in September he was taken to France as an unofficial chaplain. He was soon serving under fire, and was mentioned in despatches for his bravery at the battle of Ypres, probably for help with evacuating the wounded. Waggett officially joined the RACHD on 17 December 1914. He was a vigorous and active man, well known in church and academic circles, and his service as a chaplain was busy, and he travelled much, and met influential people. After being mentioned twice more in despatches, he was brought back to England, and was senior chaplain at Tidworth from early in 1917 until May 1918, when he began two years as a political officer in Palestine.⁶

Even before Fr Waggett went to France, another member of the community had been gazetted as an army chaplain, on 20

⁴ *Ibid* March 1916 p 53.

⁵ SSJE Chapter Minutes, 3 August 1915, pp 192–4. I am grateful to the Superior General for making the minute book available to me.

⁶ An account of Waggett's war service is in John Nias, *Falme from an Oxford Cloister* (London 1961) pp 127–140.

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August. Fr M. W. T. Conran was a very different kind of man. On his death in 1945 he was described as 'a man of simple faith, passionately desirous for the conversion of souls',⁷ and his letters told of his efforts to bring men to a deep devotion and a reasonable understanding of the Christian faith. He issued a simplified version of his *Two Chaplets of Prayer*, and distributed it to 'those who would undertake to [say the prayers] twice a week—and so grow in devotion and religious habit, not just formal adhesion to the Church'.⁸ Bishop A. F. Winnington-Ingram commended this way of prayer: 'Soldiers can learn it by heart, and repeat it (as has been found by experience) even in the heat and excitement of a great charge.'⁹ Conran served with the 25 Field Ambulance in France. He was mentioned in despatches in January 1916, and was awarded the MC in the same month, but the *London Gazette* gave no citation.¹⁰ Conran then appears to have fallen sick, or to have been wounded, and he resigned his commission in June 1916.¹¹

In April 1917, Fr Bull, the Superior General, wrote, 'Several of our Lay Brothers volunteered early in the war for military service, before it was compulsory, and are faithfully at work on the Western Front at the moment.'¹² In that same month the society suffered its only death by enemy action, when novice brother Walter Frederick was killed in France. In 1915 he had wanted to enlist in the RAMC, but was not successful, so he joined up for active service. After six months in France, and with the rank of lance-sergeant in the Royal Fusiliers, he was taking part in the attack on the Arras-Cambrai road on 23 April 1917. His arm was shattered by a piece of a shell, and no-one had time to dress it and save his life. The brother is commemorated in the society's former church in Oxford, where the second of the E.A. Fellowes Prynne stations of the cross is his memorial.¹³ Two other brothers, William John and Maxwell John, served with the RAMC until the end of the war.¹⁴

⁷ CE December 1945 p 99.

⁸ *Ibid* February 1915 pp 33–4.

⁹ Preface to M. W. T. Conran, *The National Mission* (London 1916) p 5.

¹⁰ 14 January 1916. Information about Fr Conran, and also Frs Peacey, Strong and Wigram has been kindly supplied by Major R. Gresty, Defence Services.

¹¹ CE July 1916 p 167.

¹² *Ibid* April 1917 p 77.

¹³ *Ibid* April 1917 p 77; July 1917 p 149; October 1917 p 224; July 1918 171. D. M. Hope to the author, 6 January 1982.

¹⁴ SSJE Chapter Minutes, 2 August 1916 p 259; August 1918 p 334.

The Congress of USA declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917—Good Friday, and SSJE in America permitted several novices to volunteer for service. In November 1918 it was reported that ‘several of the American Novitiate are in France in the American army, and Mr Ballard we hope by this time is in Mesopotamia’.¹⁵ Arthur Lee Ballard was an Englishman, ordained in Canada, who became a novice in America in 1917. He travelled to England in 1918 hoping to obtain an army chaplaincy. He was unsuccessful, but was accepted as a YMCA secretary, ‘but for the purpose of doing priestly work with the British troops [in Mesopotamia]. He is to assist an Army Chaplain, a good Catholic priest, who reserves the Blessed Sacrament in his tent.’¹⁶ Ballard was fit when he set out on the long journey to Mesopotamia, through Calcutta, and was ‘able practically to do chaplain’s work . . . till the close of the war’. His health failed, and ‘several of his teeth dropped out from lack of proper food’. He returned to America a sick man, and died on 8 February 1920 ‘of influenza pneumonia . . . caught while nursing others in the community.’¹⁷

The other six American novices who went to the war were laymen. Only two of them were subsequently professed in the society, and both were ordained, brother Walter James, as Fr Morse, and brother Raymond as Fr McDonald. Brother Walter James ‘seems to have spent the greater part of his time in the army at the Artillery unit at Camp Jackson, South Carolina, and was released as a sergeant major’.¹⁸ Brother Raymond was also at Camp Jackson, but then went to Camp Merritt, New Jersey, for embarkation for France in July 1918. Brother Edwin was in France by May 1918, and enjoyed attending mass and other devotions in the village church, as well as the Corpus Christi procession, for which an American regimental band played. No record has been found of the others—brothers Leonard, Richard and Francis. The brief reports are given in a style of moral earnestness, illustrated by a quotation from Henry Suso. An angel ‘drew near to the Servitor, and clothed him in a coat of mail, and said to him, “O!

¹⁵ *CE* November 1918 p 239.

¹⁶ *The Messenger* (the magazine of St John the Evangelist Bowdoin Street, Boston, in which SSJE American news also appeared) August 1918. Cuttings from *The Messenger* were supplied by Fr David Allen SSJE.

¹⁷ *CE* July 1918 p 160.

¹⁸ D. Allen to the author, 5 February 1982.

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Knight! hitherto thou hast been but a Squire; but now it is God's will that thou be raised to knighthood." And the Servitor gazed at the spurs and said with much amazement in his heart, "Alas, what has befallen me? Must I indeed become a Knight? I had rather remain in peace." ¹⁹

In the meanwhile, as the war entered its fourth winter, the supply of military chaplains was insufficient, and archbishop Davidson called for more volunteers.²⁰ There was a generous response from the society in England. 'In view of the new call on the nation's manhood, . . . the Home Chapter of the Society has decided to give all whom it can spare, and who are fitted for it, to work in the Army. Father Strong, Father Wigram, and of our Novices Mr. Peacey, Mr. Balcomb, and Mr. Ballard will volunteer for work as Chaplains, or in the R.A.M.C.'²¹ Of these novices, only Fr Peacey was subsequently professed in the community. He had been a regular soldier as a young man, and had served as a trooper in the South African War. He volunteered as a chaplain, and was gazetted on 9 September 1914. In 1915, however, it was discovered that he was teaching the soldiers how to go to confession, and he was cashiered by Bishop Taylor Smith. Now he joined the YMCA, and was sent first to France and then to Belgium, and returned to Cowley in 1919.²²

Ballard's service has already been mentioned. A. J. Balcomb was only briefly in the novitiate. He was accepted by the YMCA in 1918 and, like Ballard, set off for Mesopotamia by way of India. From Calcutta he was sent to Simla. He quickly formed a conviction that he should work in India, and for a while was a probationer with the Oxford Mission to Calcutta. Later he served with SPG in the villages south of the city.²³

L. T. Strong joined the RChD on 17 May 1918. His obituary notice described him as 'a vigorous and forceful missionary, with a special gift for uncultured people. He was of an ardent and impulsive nature, and had a great love of souls'.²⁴ He was sent straight away to Salonica where he was stationed at the 43 General

¹⁹ *The Messenger* August, September and November 1918.

²⁰ G. K. A. Bell, *Randall Davidson* (3 ed London 1952) pp 848–50.

²¹ *CE* May 1918 p 118.

²² *Ibid* June 1918 p 139; November 1952 pp 133–4.

²³ *Ibid* November 1918 p 239; *A Hundred Years in Bengal* (Delhi 1979) p 151.

²⁴ *CE* October 1959 p 145.

Hospital. There had not been a chaplain there before, and at first he had very small numbers of communicants. He reserved the sacrament in the church tent. He was astonished at the ignorance of the Christian faith among the soldiers, but persevered in befriending them. His speciality was long walks on Mondays, which helped the men to get to know him better. When the war ended, the Roman Catholic chaplain had exposition of the sacrament all day, so Strong said that he would keep watch before the reserved sacrament all night, and a few soldiers joined him for part of it. In the morning there were two well attended celebrations of the eucharist, at which he 'used the Collect for Victory at Sea adapted'. He reported a good Christmas, with one hundred and sixty-four communicants at seven celebrations of the eucharist. He carried on as a chaplain into 1919, with responsibility for a wider area. He wrote that many lads 'come here and make themselves coffee and find smokes, and a real work of evangelization is going on'. He had some men for confession on Good Friday, and communicants were increasing. In the middle of the year he was transferred to Constantinople, and while there he was asked by a naval chaplain to conduct a mission on HMS *India* during exercises in the Black Sea. Strong arrived back in Cowley on Christmas Day 1919.²⁵

Fr Wigram became an army chaplain on 28 May 1918, and served with the 1/9 Battalion Highland Light Infantry Territorial Force in France. He reported that he was not getting much response, but after a few months he had heard one soldier's confession, and eight were being prepared for confirmation. He encountered brother Maxwell John, and so was able to celebrate the eucharist daily. On 12 October he was wounded in the face during an engagement near le Cateau while helping to bring back wounded soldiers. He was awarded the MC, and the citation read, 'His fine example of coolness and absolute disregard of danger was a great encouragement to the stretcher-bearers and helped to save many lives.' After a short time for recovery in England, Wigram was back in France in time for Christmas, when he was disappointed at having only four communicants, even though the second mass was a parade service. An officer said of the men, 'It

²⁵ *Ibid* June 1918 p 139; August 1918 pp 175–6; September 1918 p 192; October 1918 p 212; November 1918 p 235; January 1919 pp 12–13; March 1919 p 53; July 1919 p 134; September 1919 p 173; December 1919 p 231; January 1920 p 19.

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isn't that they don't want to, but they have to be terribly strong-minded.'²⁶

War work of a completely different kind was undertaken by brother Michael, who had been at St Edward's House, Westminster since 1908. Soon after the outbreak of war two soldiers asked him for crucifixes. He gave them, and very soon there were further requests. By the end of the war about six thousand service-men had received crucifixes, and had been enrolled in the 'Knights of the Crucifix', described by archbishop Davidson as a 'simple association . . . for banding together a great company, prepared to testify quietly & simply to their loyalty to Our Lord'.²⁷ There were no rules—only the promises made at baptism. Many soldiers and sailors called at St Edward's House, and links with as many of the 'knights' as possible were kept up with letters and booklets which the brother wrote. He met many more soldiers while helping the military chaplains in the 5 London (City of London) General Hospital, which was established at St Thomas' from 1915 to 1919.²⁸

When the war ended, in November 1918, Fr Congreve had been dead for seven months, so his observations were not available. The main article in the December *Cowley Evangelist* had no reference to the armistice, but in January the Superior General wrote on 'The achievement of peace', and discussed the demands of the future. The society's experience of war had been parallel to that of many families and streets. As far as possible normal work and responsibilities were maintained. Some enlisted, either as chaplains or as combatants, at the first opportunity, while others responded later to the archbishop's urgent call for volunteers. Honours were won. There was experience of wounds and sickness, and one death in battle. When we have information about the wartime service of members of the society, it is consistent with what we know of them from other sources, or remember of them. Fr Waggett moved in high circles, as always, and was given work that his gifts enabled him to do. Fr Conran and Fr Peacey continued the

²⁶ *Ibid* June 1918 p 139; September 1918 pp 193–5; November 1918 p 239; February 1919 p 33; *London Gazette* 30 July 1919.

²⁷ R. T. Davidson to brother Michael, 19 March 1920.

²⁸ B. Taylor, *Brother Michael* (Gloucester 1965) pp 12–17; E. M. McInnes, *St Thomas's Hospital* (London 1963) pp 160–1. Some wards had been in use for wounded service-men since September 1914.

personal pastoral ministry in which they excelled. Fr Strong's direct manner and methods found an evangelistic opportunity for which he was well suited. For some, like Balcomb, the war provided a suggestion for other work in the future. On the other hand, the wartime freedom from the normal discipline of community life was a factor in unsettling both Fr Strong and brother Michael, who soon were separated from the society, and perhaps it partly explains why most of the American novices did not return when they were demobilised.

There was a great confidence in the rightness of the allied cause, and president Woodrow Wilson was quoted with approval when he spoke of 'force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous force which shall make right the law of the world and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust'.²⁹

Guildford

²⁹ *The Messenger* November 1918.