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PACIFISM, INFECTION, AND ‘SOMATIC CITIZENSHIP’ IN WARTIME BRITAIN, 1940–1943*

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores how marginalized groups navigated the everyday politics of citizenship in Britain during the Second World War through a case-study of the Sorby Research Institute in Sheffield, a site in which pacifists and conscientious objectors participated in medical experiments as an alternative to military service. Examining the experiences of volunteers who were infested with parasites in a study of infectious disease transmission, this article traces the emergence of ‘somatic citizenship’ at the SRI: a distinctive kind of wartime service that was rooted in the everyday sensations, routines, and practices of the body. Ultimately, this article argues that the somatic labours of medical research offered a way of partially reconciling the conflicting demands of pacifism and national duty, allowing volunteers to reposition themselves as heroic wartime citizens. However, this was not a straightforward path to social rehabilitation, with various political, moral, and hygienic anxieties disrupting the pursuit of community acceptance. While contributing to ongoing work on citizenship, subjectivity, and emotion in wartime Britain, these findings also demonstrate how unconventional sources – in this case, medicalized descriptions of the body – can be redeployed to illuminate the politically saturated nature of everyday life under the conditions of total war.*

In the cold winter months of early 1941, a nightly ritual took place within the walls of 18 Oakholme Road, a derelict Victorian villa in the Sheffield suburb of Broomhill. In the early hours of the morning, the quiet house would suddenly come alive with activity, as a group of men rose from their beds and wandered through the rooms and hallways naked, cooling their bodies in the night

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air. Soon, this ‘nightly naked prowl’, as one participant would later describe it, had its intended effect. Suitably soothed, the men would return to their beds and the house would once again fall silent.¹ While bearing little resemblance to the more conventional kinds of national labour rendered on the battlefield, farmland, and factory floor, these unusual nocturnal activities were nonetheless seen as vital contributions to the British war effort. All of the men involved were pacifist volunteers of the Sorby Research Institute (SRI), a makeshift laboratory of human experimentation founded by entomologist Kenneth Mellanby in December 1940 to provide conscientious objectors (COs) with a radical alternative to military service. Over the next six years, the SRI provided opportunities for volunteers to prove their humanitarian credentials by participating in a series of medical trials, involving everything from simulated shipwrecks to experimental stab wounds to bouts of malaria and scurvy.²

However, the SRI’s first major project – and the cause of the volunteers’ nightly discomfort – was a series of experiments focused on the transmission and treatment of scabies, an infectious skin disease caused by the parasitic mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. After burrowing into the outer layer of the skin, particularly around the hands, wrists, and elbows, the *Sarcoptes* lays its eggs and multiplies, causing intense itching and a plethora of secondary infections.³ While scabies was considered a relatively minor threat to public hygiene for most of the 1930s, rates of infection nearly quadrupled during the first two years of the war, provoking significant anxieties about the condition as both an impediment to military and industrial activity as well as a symbol of social and moral disruption.⁴ As such, between January 1941 and April 1943, volunteers at the SRI endured repeated infestations with the parasite as part of a scientific battle to purge the disease from both civilian and military populations.

By providing a group of political outsiders with an opportunity to safeguard national health through unpleasant acts of experimental suffering, the SRI appeared to exemplify the core promise of citizenship in wartime Britain, as constructed in government propaganda, political oratory, and national press campaigns: that an individual, regardless of their pre-war circumstances, could access a transcendent sense of community spirit in return for performances of hard work, self-sacrifice, and cheerful endurance.⁵ However, a closer examination of the SRI’s history disrupts this more straightforward

¹ Kenneth Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (London, 1945), pp. 57–8; Norman Proctor, in Alice Collins, ‘Commentary: guinea-pigs’ private war’, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35 (2006), pp. 558–60, at p. 559; Sorby newsletter no. 1, Apr. 1946, University of Sheffield Special Collections and Archives (USSCA), Krebs papers, B.38.

² For an overview of the SRI’s research, see Kenneth Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (London, 1973).

³ Kenneth Mellanby, *Scabies* (London, 1943), pp. 1–2, 29–32.

⁴ ‘Scabies’, 1943, London, The National Archives (TNA), INF 6/522.

⁵ See Sonya O. Rose, *Which people’s war? National identity and citizenship in Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 14–20; Sián Nicholas, ‘From John Bull to John Citizen: images of national identity and citizenship in the wartime BBC’, in Richard Weight and Abigail Beach, eds., *The*

interpretation of the volunteers' labours. Rather than facilitating a simple trade of physical suffering for social acceptance, participation in the scabies experiments instead required the SRI's pacifist subjects to navigate constantly between the competing demands of political ideology, scientific expediency, and national duty. Experimental encounters between the pacifist and the scabies mite were therefore capable of generating a diverse and at times contradictory range of social meanings in wartime Britain.

By closely examining the experiences of the SRI's pacifist volunteers, this article draws inspiration from, and contributes to, a new wave of revisionist histories of the Second World War which have emerged over the past twenty years. These studies have been profoundly influenced by the work of Sonya Rose, who has highlighted the ways in which seemingly homogeneous concepts of wartime identity were fractured by class, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and locality.⁶ Subsequent histories have produced increasingly diverse and textured visions of the British home front by considering the improvised routes through which marginalized communities – men in civilian occupations, refugees, queer soldiers – navigated the complex and fiercely contested terrain of wartime citizenship.⁷ A similar impetus has also informed recent interventions in the history of conscientious objection, with Linsey Robb and Richard Overy investigating the 'lived experience' of COs engaged in non-combatant and civil defence duties. This focus on everyday practices of conformity, compromise, and resistance among rank-and-file pacifists has provided a necessary correction to previous histories which have overwhelmingly focused on the movement's intellectual and literary elite.⁸

In recent years, a number of historians have investigated these acts of wartime navigation at an even more intimate level by utilizing approaches from the history of emotions. Influenced by theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Monique Scheer – who conceptualize emotions as purposeful practices that are embedded within, and have the capacity to remake, the social systems in which they are expressed – proponents of this approach have argued that a focus on emotional responses to war allows for the idiosyncratic experiences of the individual to be fully contextualized within their local, national, and international frames of reference.⁹ The value of these methodologies in preserving

right to belong: citizenship and national identity in Britain, 1930–1960 (London, 1998), pp. 36–58, at pp. 39–46.

⁶ Rose, *Which people's war?*

⁷ See Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor, and Linsey Robb, *Men in reserve: British civilian masculinities in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2017); Wendy Webster, *Mixing it: diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford, 2018); Emma Vickers, 'Queer sex in the metropolis? Place, subjectivity and the Second World War', *Feminist Review*, 96 (2010), pp. 58–73.

⁸ Linsey Robb, 'The "conchie corps": conflict, compromise, and conscientious objection in the British Army, 1940–1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), pp. 411–34, at pp. 413–14, 427–34; Richard Overy, 'Pacifism and the blitz, 1940–1941', *Past & Present*, 219 (2013), pp. 201–36, at pp. 202, 212–18.

⁹ See Claire Langhamer, Lucy Noakes, and Claudia Siebrecht, 'Introduction', in Claire Langhamer, Lucy Noakes, and Claudia Siebrecht, eds., *Total war: an emotional history*

both the texture and broader coherence of individual experience has been subsequently demonstrated by Lucy Noakes's work on the policing of wartime grief and Alison Twells's investigation into sex, romance, and emotional self-regulation in the diaries of wartime schoolgirls.¹⁰

While these studies have injected a much-needed sense of diversity, conflict, and individuality into visions of the British home front, the vast majority have been constructed using conventional ego documents, such as oral histories, diaries, and letters. Where does this leave experiences that are not so well represented within these kinds of sources? The SRI is certainly one such case. Relatively few sources produced by the volunteers survive; out of the forty-three individuals who participated in experiments between 1941 and 1946, only two gave extended accounts of their experiences, and both of these were collected some forty years after the fact.¹¹ In the comparative absence of volunteer testimony, it is the voice of Mellanby which instead dominates the historical record, whether through his wartime memoir *Human guinea pigs* (1945) or his published reports in the *British Medical Journal*. As a result of his experimental objectives, much of this commentary is heavily medicalized, focusing on the external appearances and observable behaviours of his volunteers' bodies rather than demonstrating any sustained interest in their subjective interpretations of the SRI's work.

One route beyond this constrained perspective, this article proposes, is to lean into the 'skin deep' focus of the SRI's records and consider how medical and scientific observations of the body might be conceptualized as a useful mediating space between political discourse and everyday practices of social navigation. In doing so, this article traces the emergence of 'somatic citizenship' at the SRI – here defined as a mode of engagement with ideas of wartime service that transcended formal political discussions about rights, duties, and privileges and was instead shaped by the everyday sensations, routines, and practices of the body enrolled in medical research. This understanding of citizenship as a dynamic and mutable practice, rather than a fixed legislative category, has a long genealogy within political histories of twentieth-century Britain. Early iterations of the concept can be seen in the writings of post-war welfare theorists such

(Oxford, 2020), pp. 1–20, at pp. 1–4, 13–14; Sara Ahmed, 'Collective feelings: or, the impressions left by others', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2004), pp. 25–42, at pp. 25–34; Monique Scheer, 'Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion', *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), pp. 193–220, at pp. 204–9.

¹⁰ Lucy Noakes, *Dying for the nation: death, grief and bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester, 2020), pp. 193–223; Alison Twells, "'Went into raptures": reading emotion in the ordinary wartime diary, 1941–1946', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), pp. 143–60, at pp. 150–6.

¹¹ Walter Bartley, interview with Peter Banks, 1989, Biochemical Society video interviews, www.biochemistry.org/about-us/video-interviews/, created Apr. 2019; Bernard Henry Hicken, interview with Felicity Goodall and Susan Roberts, 1992, London, Imperial War Museum (IWM), Sound Archive, Catalogue Number 13166.

as T. H. Marshall and Richard Titmuss who, despite advancing contractual and materialistic visions of the relationship between citizens and the state, nonetheless acknowledged that access to social services was predicated on the performance of 'socially approved behaviour' in the public realm.¹² Such ideas have recently been revived and expanded in the works of Matthew Grant and others.¹³ However, the critical role of the body in sustaining and disrupting these civic practices has, for the most part, been underappreciated by historians interested in citizenship.¹⁴ Such questions have instead largely been left to sociologists and anthropologists, with scholars such as Adriana Petryna, Nikolas Rose, and Carlos Novas investigating the ways in which modern citizens actively engage with the biological capacities of their bodies in pursuit of self-knowledge and community acceptance.¹⁵ Examining the SRI, however, provides a valuable opportunity to apply these insights to a historical case-study. From this perspective, the dominance of bodily observations in the SRI's archive no longer functions as an obstacle to investigations of subjective experience; rather, these records provide a way of examining how everyday somatic practices reconstituted the political terrain of wartime citizenship.

While the unusual experiences of this small group of pacifist volunteers were not, of course, representative of the population as a whole, this article argues that the SRI's experiments can nonetheless be read as a *symptomatic* expression of broader patterns of political, social, and medical change on the British home front.¹⁶ Under the conditions of total war, every aspect of the citizen's somatic existence – their hygienic routines, their physical exertions, their intimate encounters – was implicated within complex calculations of national survival and civic duty. As such, while the volunteers' experimental tasks – wearing contaminated clothing, sharing beds with strangers, covering their bodies with experimental chemicals – may have seemed peculiar to many of their peers, these activities were nonetheless shaped by and embedded within wider concerns about the impact of infectious disease, the performance of physical labour, and the fulfilment of national duty. As such, by immersing the SRI

¹² T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and social class: and other essays* (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 43–4; Richard M. Titmuss, *Essays on the welfare state* (Bristol, 2018), pp. 51–3.

¹³ See Matthew Grant, 'Historicizing citizenship in post-war Britain', *Historical Journal*, 59 (2016), pp. 1187–206, at pp. 1189–92.

¹⁴ Notable exceptions include Nicoletta F. Gullace, *'The blood of our sons': men, women, and the renegotiation of British citizenship during the Great War* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 73–97; Rhodri Hayward, 'Busman's stomach and the embodiment of modernity', *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), pp. 1–23, at pp. 7–13.

¹⁵ Adriana Petryna, *Life exposed: biological citizens after Chernobyl* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), pp. 6–15, 115–38; Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas, 'Biological citizenship', in Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, eds., *Global assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems* (Malden, MA, 2005), pp. 439–63, at pp. 440–2, 445–8.

¹⁶ For this distinction between 'representative' and 'symptomatic' experience, see Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of tricksters: the incredible true story of Netley Lucas, gentleman crook* (Chicago, IL, 2016), pp. 15–20, 216–19.

within its deepest possible wartime context, it is possible to gain a broader insight into the ways in which citizens came to understand and experience the intimate workings of their bodies as directly tied to the fortunes of the national war effort.

This article builds an analysis of somatic citizenship at the SRI in three stages: first, by exploring the cultural meanings attached to the scabies mite and the pacifist body in debates about wartime citizenship; secondly, by examining how these concerns shaped the experimental labours of Mellanby's scabies study; and, finally, by investigating how these activities altered perceptions of the volunteers in different constituencies of the British home front. Ultimately, it will be argued that the bodily sacrifices of scabies research provided a way of reconciling, albeit temporarily, the conflicting demands of pacifism and national duty, allowing the volunteers to reposition themselves as admirable wartime citizens. However, somatic citizenship did not always provide a straightforward route to social redemption. Significant obstacles remained: concerns that participating in medical research signified an act of complicity in the horrors of war, the transgressive connotations of the infested body, lingering suspicions that the objectives of pacifism and citizenship could never truly be reconciled. Thus, while the experiments generated social and political capital for the volunteers in the short term, the transitory experiences of medical research appeared to be an unstable platform for securing permanent transformations in their post-war lives.

I

On the morning of Wednesday 18 March 1942, police discovered the body of twenty-seven-year-old Norwich City footballer Frank Manders floating in Powell's Pool, a large man-made lake adjacent to the Sutton Municipal Golf Course in Birmingham. At an inquest held the following week, the Sutton Coldfield Coroner's Court heard how Manders, who had been serving in the Royal Air Force since the outbreak of war, had been recently hospitalized for depression after contracting an infectious skin disease: scabies. The footballer-turned-airman 'had always been a clean man', the coroner concluded, and the shame he had felt upon learning of his infested state led him to abscond from a nearby psychiatric ward and drown himself some fifty feet from the fairway.¹⁷ Such a ruling provides a critical insight into the anxiety and paranoia that surrounded scabies on the British home front during the first half of the Second World War. In this climate, the *Sarcoptes* was transformed from a relatively minor parasitic nuisance into something far more troubling: a harbinger of physical, social, and moral decay under the destabilizing conditions of total war. That scabies could bring about the destruction of someone

¹⁷ 'Sutton suicide of footballer-airman worried by illness', *Evening Dispatch*, 23 Mar. 1942, p. 3; 'Worried by scabies: took his own life', *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 24 Mar. 1942, p. 3.

like Manders, whose pre-war athleticism and wartime service marked him out as an exemplar of healthy, virile masculinity, only served to underscore the condition's fearsome power.

This 'scabies phobia', as it was termed by dermatologist F. A. E. Silcock in February 1941, formed part of a broader culture of hypervigilance towards infectious disease in wartime Britain.¹⁸ Eager to avoid the disruptive and deadly impact of the 'trench diseases' of the First World War and the influenza pandemic of 1918, government departments rapidly established new systems for tracing and suppressing contagious threats following the declaration of war in September 1939.¹⁹ These initiatives ranged from the establishment of a network of public health laboratories to investigate disease outbreaks to the introduction of more stringent medical examinations for immigrants, refugees, and foreign labourers at the country's ports.²⁰ However, reducing the transmission of infection was also seen to depend on individual acts of hygienic discipline. As such, public health campaigns, which energized long-standing associations between cleanliness, civic duty, and good moral character, encouraged citizens to view even the most involuntary of bodily functions with a sense of social responsibility.²¹ According to investigations conducted by the Wartime Social Survey, exposure to these messages – most notably the 'coughs and sneezes spread diseases' campaign, launched in the autumn of 1941 – made citizens increasingly vigilant in the policing of their own bodies as well as more likely to seek distance from those who appeared visibly unwell.²²

Amidst this increasing paranoia about infectious disease, reports of a rise in scabies cases across the country – with one study of 10,000 hospital patients in England indicating a fourfold increase in infections between 1939 and 1941 – provoked significant alarm among politicians, physicians, and the press about the potential impact of this new 'epidemic' of parasitic activity.²³

¹⁸ 'Discussion on prevention and treatment of parasitic diseases: some recent work on the louse', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 34 (1941), pp. 193–204, at p. 200.

¹⁹ For the impact of disease on the First World War, see Robert L. Atenstaedt, *The medical response to trench diseases in World War One* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011), pp. 145–59; Niall Johnson, *Britain and the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic: a dark epilogue* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 64–115.

²⁰ Committee of Privy Council for Medical Research, *Medical research in war: report of the Medical Research Council for the years 1939–1945* (London, 1947), pp. 164–75; 'Typhus breaks out in Eire', *Sunday Post*, 22 Nov. 1942, p. 1; 'Typhus: British watch on boats from Eire', *Northern Whig*, 24 Nov. 1942, p. 3.

²¹ For longer-term associations between cleanliness and moral character, see Victoria Kelley, 'The virtues of a drop of cleansing water': domestic work and cleanliness in the British working classes, 1880–1914', *Women's History Review*, 18 (2009), pp. 719–35, at pp. 722–6; Tom Crook, 'Putting matter in its right place: dirt, time and regeneration in mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), pp. 200–22, at pp. 213–15.

²² Wartime Social Survey, 'Public attitudes to health and the Autumn Health Campaign', 1942, TNA, RG 23/24; 'Coughs and sneezes spread diseases', n.d., IWM, Art and Design Collection, ArtIWM PST 14136.

²³ 'Scabies', 1943, TNA, INF 6/522; Hansard, HC Deb, 8 July 1942, vol. 381, cc. 789–90.

However, given that experts were quick to stress that the condition, unpleasant as it was, posed no significant threat to life, why did the *Sarcoptes* command so much attention in wartime Britain? On the surface, this was due to the perception of scabies as a ‘time-wasting disease’. Due to the incessant itching caused by the burrowing mites, the condition had the potential to disrupt sleeping patterns and work routines, with a knock-on effect for Britain’s military and industrial capacities. As a Ministry of Information film warned, ‘for the individual the itch...may be no more serious than discomfort: but for the nation the loss of efficiency is serious when multiplied by many tens of thousands’.²⁴

However, as well as these more pragmatic concerns, wartime discourse on scabies drew from deeper cultural anxieties about the disruption of British society under the conditions of total war. As Daniel Todman has argued, the unprecedented scale of economic mobilization meant that millions of British citizens became directly integrated into the machinery of the wartime state, requiring the suspension and dissolution of many taken-for-granted structures of community life. This disruption was seen most dramatically in efforts to divide, rationalize, and redistribute the population in line with strategic objectives, from the relocation of industrial workers to the internment of foreigners.²⁵ While post-war narratives frequently presented these disruptions as a force for cross-class solidarity, at the time these changes provoked widespread discomfort about the prospect of living in strange places among unfamiliar people.²⁶ Concerns about how to navigate a ‘society of strangers’ were, of course, nothing new; as James Vernon and Simeon Koole have explored, the growing size and mobility of the British population from the mid-nineteenth century onwards increasingly compelled citizens to construct new understandings of proximity, intimacy, and personal space while traversing the public domain.²⁷ What was novel, however, was the scale and pace of these changes. One need only consider the first wave of evacuation, taking place between 1 and 4 September 1939, in which 1,062,900 women, children, and disabled people fled urban centres, with hundreds of thousands migrating back and forth over the following months in response to shifting evaluations of danger.²⁸ Such movements generated significant tensions on both sides of the demographic exchange. As social investigators reported during this period, anxieties about the disruptive impact of new arrivals prompted some host communities to make – somewhat exaggerated – complaints of anti-social

²⁴ ‘Scabies’, 1943, TNA, INF 6/522.

²⁵ Daniel Todman, *Britain’s war: into battle, 1937–1941* (London, 2016), pp. 588–97, 614–31.

²⁶ For an example of these post-war accounts, see Peter Conway, *Living tapestry* (London, 1946), pp. 60–1.

²⁷ James Vernon, *Distant strangers: how Britain became modern* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), pp. 127–30; Simeon Koole, ‘How we came to mind the gap: time, tactility, and the tube’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), pp. 524–54, at pp. 547–51.

²⁸ Ministry of Health, *Summary report by the Ministry of Health for the period from 1st April, 1939 to 31st March, 1941* (London, 1942), pp. 30–6.

behaviour, bedwetting, and, most prominently of all, verminousness among evacuated children.²⁹

Among these various 'symptoms' of demographic upheaval, public health officials identified scabies as a particularly potent symbol of the chaos unleashed by social mixing. For example, T. Morrison Clayton, the deputy medical officer of health for Coventry, argued that the rising incidence of scabies was the direct result of the 'exceptional movement and mixing of the population' and the subsequent 'abnormal contacts' between previously disparate communities. In peacetime, Clayton proposed, scabies was effectively quarantined within the bodies of unhygienic 'carriers' – heavily implied to be, but never explicitly identified as, the urban working classes. However, the 'social earthquake' of wartime mobilization had collapsed these boundaries, exposing fastidious citizens to their unclean peers in workplaces, social venues, and, through the imposition of evacuation and billeting, their own homes. An 'explosion' of scabies cases was the inevitable result, with the only solution being the return to 'a relatively normal domiciliary and workaday existence': that is, through the restoration of class boundaries in public and domestic life.³⁰ By presenting social mixing as a threat to national health, Clayton's warnings unsettled visions of wartime citizenship which emphasized the power of shared experience as a social leveller and instead encouraged citizens to view their interactions with strangers as a source of danger and contamination.

As a result of this potent combination of parasitic infection and social anxiety, the act of contracting scabies became heavily moralized in both the medical and popular press. This much is evident in the scrutiny applied to young working-class women who, supposedly 'liberated' by the economic independence of factory work and the absence of enlisted husbands, were frequently identified as culprits in the transmission of the disease. These stereotypes can be seen clearly in newspaper coverage of child neglect trials during the war. For example, in July 1943, a twenty-six-year-old mother of two from Boston, Lincolnshire, was sentenced to six months' hard labour for abandoning her children to go 'pub-crawling with Servicemen' while her own husband was serving abroad. The defendant's dereliction of maternal and marital duty was only discovered when her children, left to fend for themselves within the 'dirt and squalor' of the house, contracted scabies and were hospitalized for treatment.³¹ In such cases, the scabietic body of the neglected child, much like that of Frank Manders in Powell's *Pool*, signified more than an isolated hygienic failing; rather, it revealed the degenerative effect of wartime disruption on the very moral fabric of society. Therefore, it would be the duty of good wartime

²⁹ *Our wartime guests – opportunity or menace? A psychological approach to evacuation* (London, 1940), pp. 5–9, 17–23; A. D. K. Owen, 'The Great Evacuation', *Political Quarterly*, 11 (1940), pp. 30–44, at pp. 38–9.

³⁰ T. Morrison Clayton, 'On the incidence of scabies', *Public Health*, 59 (1944–5), pp. 29–35.

³¹ 'Boston mothers sentenced: one house "more like a crewyard"', *Boston Guardian*, 3 July 1943, p. 4.

citizens to police vigilantly the boundaries of their bodies and repel the parasitic invader at all costs.

II

It was the early stirrings of ‘scabies phobia’ that first inspired Kenneth Mellanby to propose the establishment of an institute for human experimentation in the summer of 1940. For Mellanby, a researcher of insect physiology and Sorby Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield, the fear of scabies was rooted in a lack of basic knowledge about the condition, particularly regarding how the *Sarcoptes* moved from body to body. As such, he approached the Ministry of Health with a plan to counter this dearth of reliable information: he would recruit a group of willing volunteers, move them into an abandoned house, and repeatedly infest them with parasites under controlled conditions. It is perhaps a testament to the epidemiological anxieties of the period that the Ministry had few concerns about the project and approved funding in November 1940.³²

Given their humanitarianism and freedom from conscription, Mellanby identified conscientious objectors as a promising source of experimental labour for his study. He therefore reached out to the Pacifist Service Bureau (PSB), an organization that paired COs with community projects that satisfied both their ideological commitments to peace as well as the legal requirements of their exemptions from military duty.³³ Through the efforts of the PSB, as well as Mellanby’s own approaches to local pacifist groups, nineteen volunteers were recruited for the experiments.³⁴ Who were these volunteers? While relatively little information survives about individual recruits, a basic profile can nonetheless be constructed. First, the group was exclusively male and dominated by young, middle-class, white-collar workers, mirroring the broader composition of the British pacifist movement.³⁵ The average volunteer was just twenty-five years old, and of those whose pre-war occupations were recorded, over half worked in office environments, most commonly as clerks in finance and local government.³⁶ Secondly, by virtue of their connections to the PSB, most volunteers would have been associated with its parent organization: the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). As Martin Ceadel has argued, the PPU became Britain’s largest pacifist movement – boasting 136,000 members by April 1940 – largely through its ‘doctrinal permissiveness’, with no formal

³² Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 16–21.

³³ ‘Plans for pacifist service outside the war machine’, *Peace News*, 29 Sept. 1939, p. 5.

³⁴ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 21–2.

³⁵ See Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914–1945: the defining of a faith* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 232–6.

³⁶ See E. M. Hume and H. A. Krebs, *Vitamin A requirement of human adults* (London, 1953), p. 75; W. Bartley, H. A. Krebs, and J. R. P. O’Brien, *Vitamin C requirement of human adults* (London, 1953), p. 57.

membership requirements beyond signing a pledge to 'renounce war...and never support or sanction another'.³⁷ This diversity of belief was reflected within the ranks of the SRI, which housed Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, socialists, and those who rejected denominational labels entirely.³⁸

Given the range of ideologies at play within the SRI, it would seem reductive to describe the volunteers' participation as guided by a general, non-specific 'humanitarian outlook'.³⁹ At the same time, there is little to suggest that the volunteers were coerced into taking part by the threat of military conscription; most had already secured exemptions, and some even risked imprisonment to continue working at the SRI when tribunals issued alternative directions for non-combatant service.⁴⁰ Ultimately, these binary categories – unfettered moral actor, exploited victim – are ill-fitting when considering the experiences of COs in wartime Britain. Unlike their embattled predecessors in the First World War, whose well-publicized brutalization secured them cultural influence disproportionate to their small numbers, COs in 1939 occupied a political terrain shaped by the development of 'a broad pacifistic consensus' in the interwar period.⁴¹ Despite the collapse of popular support for pacifism during the successive international crises of the late 1930s, this growth in mainstream acceptability translated into a more tolerant approach towards COs by the wartime government. Tribunals, now placed under civilian jurisdiction, were encouraged to consider a wider range of moral inspirations and alternative services, and episodes of cruelty and abuse tended to be localized rather than endemic. However, this comparative lack of hostility generated its own set of problems for the British pacifist movement, with many COs left desperately searching for a sense of collective purpose and identity in the absence of any unifying kind of social exclusion.⁴²

One response to this uncertain social position, which might provide some insight into the decision to participate in medical experiments, was the turn to the *body* as a tool of community service and pacifist activism. This was, in many ways, a continuation of broader trends in the fitness cultures of middle-class, white-collar men during the 1920s and 1930s, whose domesticated and sedentary lifestyles became targets of critique in everything from weight loss literature to novels about the interwar suburbs. Such texts presented self-discipline in diet and exercise as a vital moral imperative, one that had the power to kickstart processes of both personal and national

³⁷ Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain*, pp. 222–31.

³⁸ Jim Le Noury, "'Itch dien' – and after", *Quaker Monthly*, 55 (1976), pp. 34–5.

³⁹ See Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 94–5.

⁴⁰ Kenneth Mellanby, 'Answers', 8 May 1942, TNA, FD 1/6673; G. Tomlinson to R. W. Sorensen, 5 Dec. 1944, TNA, FD 1/146.

⁴¹ James Hinton, *Protests and visions: peace politics in 20th century Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 75–99.

⁴² Ann Kramer, *Conscientious objectors of the Second World War: refusing to fight* (Barnsley, 2013), pp. 61–72, 112–15.

rejuvenation.⁴³ Similar ideas circulated within British pacifism during this period, with figures from very different constituencies of the movement foregrounding their anti-war critiques in the materiality of the body. This much can be seen in the emphasis placed upon the physicality of suffering in the writings of A. A. Milne, the promotion of Gandhian *satyagraha* practices in the works of Richard Gregg, and the call for ‘skilled discipline’ in matters of diet, sex, and meditation in the spiritual manifestos of Gerald Heard.⁴⁴ Following the outbreak of war, these calls for the mobilization of pacifist bodies became increasingly urgent, particularly among young adherents dissatisfied with more traditional, ‘intellectual’ forms of protest. As twenty-seven-year-old Hedley Gore decried in the PPU’s magazine *Peace News* in November 1939, a preoccupation with reading groups, woodland crafts, and Esperanto lessons made COs look like ‘mugs, not martyrs’.⁴⁵

In response to these criticisms, many young pacifists converged upon physical labour as a potential route to social acceptance. This can be seen, for example, in the memoirs of journalist Edward Blishen, who was directed to undertake agricultural labour in 1941 as a condition of his CO status. In descriptions of this work, Blishen focused on the power of physical labour to reshape the very contours of his body. ‘In the mornings I woke with fingers crooked in the shape they’d taken round the bagging-hook or spade the day before’, he wrote: ‘[M]y whole skeleton would ache. I could feel the ice in every bone, a pain ready to shape itself to every posture.’ As the months passed, Blishen observed that his labours produced, on the one hand, the physical transformation of his body from that of a ‘weedy, intellectual type’ into the muscular form of an experienced manual worker, and, on the other hand, an organic sense of purpose that had been missing from his previous white-collar lifestyle. ‘During the autumn I felt I’d almost been accepted...by the earth and its fruits’, Blishen noted: ‘I belonged, a little: with eyes that were never quite free of sawdust, with stiff, scratched hands!’⁴⁶

However, while accounts such as Blishen’s reconciled pacifism with conventional ideals of health, fitness, and masculinity, it is necessary to consider the peculiarity of the medical experiment as a form of physical labour. Rather than building up their strength and resilience, Mellanby’s volunteers were instead required to engage in a purposeful breaking down of their bodies, leaving them weakened and vulnerable to infection. One benefit of this wilful

⁴³ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the body: beauty, health, and fitness in Britain, 1880–1939* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 215–35.

⁴⁴ A. A. Milne, *Peace with honour: an enquiry into war convention* (London, 1936); Richard B. Gregg, *The power of non-violence* (Ahmedabad, 1938); Gerald Heard, *Pain, sex and time: a new hypothesis of evolution* (London, 1939).

⁴⁵ ‘We are mugs, not martyrs’, *Peace News*, 24 Nov. 1939, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Edward Blishen, *A cack-handed war* (St Albans, 1974), pp. 24, 115–16. I first encountered Blishen’s memoir in Felicity Goodall, *We will not go to war: conscientious objection during the world wars* (Stroud, 2010).

embrace of suffering was that it provided young COs with an opportunity to emulate the martyrdom of their pacifist predecessors. As volunteer Bernard Hicken recalled:

[I was] prepared for anything, because my only *experience of*—well, not experience of, but *understanding of* what happened to COs was from the previous war... [Some] were taken to the front line and—I have heard, I don't know if this is true or not, but I have heard that some were actually crucified by being...fastened to the wheels of the gun carriage.⁴⁷

For Hicken, these stories of bodily destruction, which blurred the lines between truth and myth, personal experience and second-hand testimony, functioned as a source of intergenerational fellowship between pacifists and a call to continue an honourable tradition of self-sacrifice.

Yet what meanings were attached to the specific kind of bodily suffering offered by Mellanby's scabies experiments—that of parasitic infestation? Here, insights can be gained from fellow PPU member Vera Brittain's collection of wartime essays, *Humiliation with honour* (1942). For Brittain, undertaking unpleasant acts of social service—scrubbing the floors of air-raid shelters, disinfecting bedsheets, bathing homeless people—was vital if privileged, middle-class activists were to gain true empathy for those 'victims of power' for whom they claimed to advocate. The hygienic consequences of this kind of service, such as having one's body 'infested with vermin', only served to extend these insights into the realm of direct, visceral experience.⁴⁸ Viewed through the lens of this distinctively 'somatic' vision of pacifism, in which bodily sacrifices assisted COs in building commonality with their fellow citizens while also reducing feelings of guilt about the privilege of exemption, the decision to offer up one's body for medical science no longer appears as an act of pure altruism or desperation. Rather, experimental labour appeared to offer a route to political acceptance, social rehabilitation, and personal fulfilment at a time of extreme uncertainty. This potent combination of motivations would profoundly shape the volunteers' everyday experiences at the SRI, imbuing the somatic realities of infestation with a critical significance for their statuses as both pacifists and wartime citizens.

III

Blankets, boxing gloves, banknotes, toilet seats, handshakes, playground games, brothel visits: these were just some of the potential sources of scabies infection identified by wartime physicians.⁴⁹ Given the wide-ranging nature of these suspected threats, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mellanby made transmission the

⁴⁷ Hicken, interview, 13166-3-1, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Vera Brittain, *Humiliation with honour* (London, 1942), pp. 45–69, 83–7.

⁴⁹ War Office, 'Notes on the prevention and treatment of scabies, 1941', 28 May 1941, TNA, FD 1/6672; Mellanby, *Scabies*, pp. 37–8; 'Scabies outbreak in Belfast: danger of spreading in

central focus of his scabies experiments when work formally began at the SRI in January 1941. Starting with the most commonly held theory at the time – that scabies was primarily contracted through shared bedding and clothing – Mellanby secured a shipment of experimental materials from scabietic soldiers stationed in the local area: dirty vests, pants, and shirts, unwashed khaki uniforms, soiled bedding made ‘bloody and scabby’ from the previous occupant’s nocturnal scratchings. It would be the volunteer’s job to test the infectious power of these items, wearing the uniforms throughout the day and at night sleeping naked between their second-hand bedsheets.⁵⁰

This initial task immediately established the peculiar and potentially transgressive nature of experimental labour as a form of wartime service. At a time in which citizens were repeatedly informed by public health campaigns that it was ‘tantamount to an act of sabotage not to keep clean’, the decision to expose one’s body purposefully to infection not only disrupted long-standing associations between hygienic vigilance and good moral character; it was an act that seemingly bordered on treachery.⁵¹ The fact that the source of contamination was a military uniform only deepened this sense of moral conflict for the SRI’s pacifist volunteers. Uniforms were a highly contentious issue for PPU members during the war, with *Peace News* frequently carrying stories about COs who had been court-martialled, imprisoned, and sentenced to hard labour for refusing to wear khaki while carrying out non-combatant duties.⁵² Indeed, volunteer Eric Farley had just been released from Lewes Prison for this very act of resistance following his forced recruitment into the military earlier that year. Intriguingly, Farley left the SRI just a few months later due to his belief that Mellanby’s research was too ‘militaristic’ for pacifists to participate in, a suspicion that the constant sight of military uniforms presumably did little to dispel.⁵³ Despite this, Mellanby observed that the majority of volunteers took to the task with ‘good grace’, suggesting that most were able to reconcile, or at least suppress, their discomfort regarding this symbolic act of complicity.⁵⁴

With his volunteers suitably attired, Mellanby initially predicted that infections would occur within a matter of days. He was surprised and dismayed, then, when months passed without a single positive transmission. The volunteers shared Mellanby’s frustrations and, in the absence of the pain and discomfort they had been promised, began to question the moral and social value of their labours. ‘They began to feel a bit fraudulent’, Mellanby reported, ‘and

province’, *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 Oct. 1941, p. 3; J. Johnson Mason, ‘Scabies and subnormal intelligence’, *British Medical Journal*, 22 Mar. 1941, p. 457.

⁵⁰ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 34–5; Bartley, interview; Proctor, in Collins, ‘Commentary’, p. 559.

⁵¹ See ‘Keep clean for victory’, *Stirling Observer*, 20 Mar. 1941, p. 2.

⁵² ‘May objectors be forcibly dressed in uniform? Officer questioned at court-martial’, *Peace News*, 21 June 1940, p. 4; ‘Nine months for refusing to wear uniform’, *Peace News*, 28 June 1940, p. 4.

⁵³ Kramer, *Conscientious objectors*, pp. 129–32, 140–3.

⁵⁴ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), p. 47.

all became excessively keen to develop and suffer from the disease.'⁵⁵ Scouring the existing literature for alternative theories of transmission, Mellanby identified one possible lead in the works of French entomologists, who proposed that scabies might be more profitably conceptualized as a venereal disease. Testing this out at the SRI, however, would require some creative thinking. As Mellanby recalled, 'we discussed whether we should try to find some accommodating young woman with scabies to use as a source of infection. My volunteers became, I gather, a bit worried that they would be asked to commit adultery in the interests of science.'⁵⁶ For the SRI's pacifist volunteers, the proposition that sex with strangers might soon be added to their experimental duties had uncertain ramifications for their pursuit of social acceptance. On the one hand, a perceived increase in rates of venereal disease in the early years of the war – with one widely quoted study reporting a 50 per cent rise in civilian syphilis cases between 1939 and 1941 – led to numerous campaigns by public health departments, newspapers, and social purity groups which framed promiscuity as antithetical to good wartime citizenship.⁵⁷ Yet, at the same time, Mellanby's proposal disrupted persistent associations made between pacifism and queerness in the more vitriolic wings of the tabloid press, where COs were frequently depicted as 'pansies', 'cissies', and closeted homosexuals. By framing unabashed performances of heterosexuality as critical to the success of the study, the venereal experiment rejected this queering of conscientious objection and the double exclusion from Britishness that it implied.⁵⁸ Instead, volunteers were offered access to a culture of tolerance towards the sexual misadventures of men in wartime, analogous to the 'blind eye' approach taken towards soliciting, masturbation, and same-sex encounters in the wartime barracks.⁵⁹ Thus, the framing of sex as experimental labour had ambiguous consequences for the volunteers' attempts to navigate the contested terrain of wartime citizenship: on the one hand, such acts risked further estrangement from the moral community of the nation; on the other hand, the venereal experiment provided an entry point into cultures of masculinity normally off limits to the average CO.

Ultimately, this moral handwringing proved unnecessary. While the venereal experiment was being debated, two infections occurred through the direct transfer of 'still warm' underwear from scabietic soldiers to healthy volunteers.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

⁵⁷ See Geoffrey G. Field, *Blood, sweat, and toil: remaking the British working class, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 202–3; Sonya O. Rose, 'Sex, citizenship and the nation in World War II Britain', *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), pp. 1147–76, at pp. 1167–73; Adrian Bingham, 'The British popular press and venereal disease during the Second World War', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 1055–76, at pp. 1063–8.

⁵⁸ See Rose, *Which people's war?*, pp. 174–7. For relations between Britishness and queerness, see Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, IL, 2005), pp. 221–32.

⁵⁹ See Vickers, 'Queer sex in the metropolis?', pp. 68–9.

Plans to bring in an ‘accommodating young woman’ were subsequently abandoned.⁶⁰ However, this indication that intimate, but not necessarily sexual, contact was key to the transmission of scabies led Mellanby to request a different kind of unusual behaviour from his volunteers: that they share beds with one another to see if the disease would spread under the warmth of the bedsheets. The results were immediately promising, with three out of four bed-sharing trials resulting in the transfer of the *Sarcoptes*.⁶¹ These findings offered a far more domesticated vision of scabies than that seen in most wartime discussions about the condition. By shifting the blame away from illicit sexual acts and abnormal social mixing, and instead highlighting the dangers of prolonged domestic intimacy, Mellanby argued that these results revealed scabies to be a ‘disease of families’, most likely spread through everyday interactions between husbands, wives, and children within the home.⁶² As such, through their transgressions of sexual morality and personal space, the SRI’s pacifist volunteers helped to rehabilitate the reputations of their infested peers.

Following these successes, the volunteers’ experiences of infestation were significantly intensified, as Mellanby asked them to submit to prolonged periods of parasitic colonization before subjecting them to a barrage of chemical treatments.⁶³ The resultant itching, pain, and discomfort radically altered the volunteers’ perceptions of their own bodies in everyday life. The men spoke of rubbing their limbs with rough brushes to relieve the irritation, waking to find their pyjamas torn to shreds from their unconscious scratching, and, most memorably of all, wandering through the house naked on cold nights to soothe their inflamed skin.⁶⁴ While the different treatments had the potential to relieve the men of their parasites, these remedies came with their own physical hardships, from the generalized irritation produced by rotenone emulsion to the scrotal dermatitis caused by intimate applications of the derris root. These experiments eventually led to the identification of benzyl benzoate as the most effective course of treatment, with Mellanby’s description of the chemical as ‘comparatively painless’ gesturing towards these silent acts of suffering.⁶⁵

However, despite these useful outcomes, the bodily transformations of chronic infestation introduced new tensions between the volunteers and their local communities. While the increasingly visible wounds of their experimental service – scratches, sores, patches of irritation – functioned as badges of honour within the SRI, in the outside world, where parasitic disease continued to be met with fear and disgust, the infested body could instead generate feelings of

⁶⁰ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 36–7.

⁶¹ Kenneth Mellanby, ‘The transmission of scabies’, *British Medical Journal*, 20 Sept. 1941, pp. 405–6.

⁶² Mellanby, *Scabies*, pp. 38–9, 51–2.

⁶³ Kenneth Mellanby to Edward Mellanby, 9 Nov. 1942, TNA, FD 1/6672.

⁶⁴ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 57–8; Proctor, in Collins, ‘Commentary’, p. 559.

⁶⁵ Mellanby, *Scabies*, pp. 56–60.

distance and alienation. Bernard Hicken, for example, recalled his horror after dislodging a migrating parasite one day during a church service. 'I don't know whether the person behind saw it or not, but if they did, they'd wonder... what kind of person had come to church that morning, with lice crawling around', he noted.⁶⁶ As Hicken's feelings of shame suggested, the infested body could not always function as a vehicle for community acceptance in a wartime society that greeted hygienic failure with harsh moral judgement.

However, while experimental labour could disrupt the volunteers' relationship with the outside world, it conversely helped to foster a strong sense of fellowship, solidarity, and community spirit within the SRI. This much can be seen in the volunteers' development of an insular sense of humour which traded off both the intensity and absurdity of their everyday experiences as research subjects. For example, after completing their experimental duties one afternoon, the group decided to design a coat of arms for the SRI's common room. As Jessica Hammett has demonstrated, this was a common activity among civil defence volunteers during this period, with the creation of such symbols giving their quasi-military duties a sense of tradition, honour, and precedent.⁶⁷ The volunteers' agreed design featured a *Sarcoptes* with a yellow streak – 'to draw attention to their pacifist leanings' – above the inscription '*Itch dien*', a play on '*Ich dien*' ('I serve'), the motto which adorned the crest of the prince of Wales.⁶⁸ In many ways, this image spoke to the volunteers' continuing efforts to navigate between the competing demands placed upon them as pacifists, research subjects, and wartime citizens. While acknowledging both the peculiarity of their labours and the continuing stigma of their pacifist ideologies, the volunteers' design attempted to transcend these differences through its expression of a prized British 'virtue': a self-deprecating sense of humour that stood in gleeful defiance of the humourless inhumanity of fascism.⁶⁹ Yet despite these best efforts, tensions between the volunteers' multiple roles could never truly be eliminated, as the diverse responses of 'outsiders' to the SRI's scabies study would soon reveal.

IV

As news of their experimental labours spread, the SRI's volunteers encountered a variety of responses from different constituencies of the British home front.

⁶⁶ Hicken, interview, 13166-3-1.

⁶⁷ Jessica Hammett, "'The invisible chain by which all are bound to each other': civil defence magazines and the development of community during the Second World War', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 11 (2018), pp. 117–35, at pp. 122–4.

⁶⁸ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), p. 33.

⁶⁹ Hammett, 'Invisible chain', pp. 125–6; Corinna Peniston-Bird and Penny Summerfield, "'Hey, you're dead!": the multiple uses of humour in representations of British national defence in the Second World War', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), pp. 413–35, at pp. 418–24.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most supportive comments came from their fellow pacifists. With knowledge of the study initially spreading via word-of-mouth, by the time the SRI received its first mention in *Peace News* in May 1941, it was assumed that readers would already be familiar with its existence.⁷⁰ By 1943, the SRI had become so well-known and admired among PPU members that Jack Carruthers, head of the PSB, could confidently declare that ‘nearly everyone in the pacifist movement will know of the excellent work which has been done...by COs working on medical experiments in Sheffield’.⁷¹ However, not all pacifists were so supportive. Earlier that year, *Peace News* carried a number of letters critical of pacifist involvement in medical science from an alliance of vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, and anti-vaccination activists. For example, Frank Maitland, a pacifist from Newcastle, argued that ‘the whole business [of human experimentation] from a pacifist point of view is condemned’, upholding the ‘fallacious’ belief that scientific progress, rather than the elimination of poverty and war, could alone combat the ravages of disease.⁷² Responses such as Maitland’s underscored the inherent difficulties involved in navigating between national duty and pacifist ideology in wartime Britain. With the sheer diversity of political, religious, and moral beliefs circulating within the peace movement, even acts of physical sacrifice to protect the population from disease were vulnerable to criticism.

Another, more surprising, supporter of the SRI’s work was the British Army. In December 1941, for example, the War Office’s director of hygiene D. T. Richardson praised the SRI for substantially reducing the number of manpower days lost to scabies infections, while also saving the military thousands of pounds in ineffective treatment regimes.⁷³ This perception of the SRI as a military asset was compounded by the opening, at Mellanby’s suggestion, of a nearby treatment centre for scabietic soldiers, offering therapies informed by the latest experimental results and performed by the pacifist volunteers themselves.⁷⁴ While this intimate contact with military personnel caused some discomfort among the group, the treatment centre also provided volunteers with a site in which conventional hierarchies of masculinity and wartime citizenship could be temporarily inverted. With their prolonged somatic experience of scabies, the volunteers were given an ‘edge’ over many of their patients, who often found the harsh treatment regime – being submerged in a piping hot bath, scrubbed hard enough to draw blood, and smothered in thick ointment – beyond their powers of endurance. As Mellanby observed, the volunteers became ‘very adept...at catching the patients when they fainted, which many

⁷⁰ ‘Group notes: machine v. spirit’, *Peace News*, 9 May 1941, p. 3.

⁷¹ ‘P.S.B. notes’, *Peace News*, 26 Nov. 1943, p. 3.

⁷² ‘Guinea pigs’, *Peace News*, 12 Feb. 1943, p. 4.

⁷³ D. T. Richardson to Wilson Jameson, 18 Dec. 1941, TNA, FD 1/6673.

⁷⁴ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 46–51; Kenneth Mellanby, ‘Form of application for a research grant’, 13 Jan. 1942, TNA, FD 1/6673.

“tough” soldiers did’.⁷⁵ These performances of superior strength and knowledge helped the volunteers to secure a grudging respect from some patients. As Norman Proctor recalled, soldiers were horrified to learn that their pacifist orderlies had volunteered to endure the physical discomfort they were currently experiencing, with many saying that ‘they’d rather be in the army than do what we were doing’.⁷⁶ As such, while working alongside soldiers forced the volunteers to reckon with the military applications of their labours, this work also provided an opportunity to construct, however briefly, a more flexible understanding of masculine heroism and wartime citizenship.

On the national stage, praise for the volunteers was less forthcoming. Most newspaper articles on the SRI merely quoted key findings without editorial comment, while those few politicians who made public reference to the project did so in a relatively subdued manner.⁷⁷ For example, when the minister of health, Ernest Brown, was asked about the volunteers’ labours in the House of Commons in May 1942, he noted that the men had ‘suffered discomfort rather than danger’, revealing a lingering unease about aligning the sacrifices of pacifists with those made by more conventional ‘heroes’ of the British war effort.⁷⁸ Responses in Sheffield, however, were more enthusiastic. Sometimes, this local support manifested in subtle and private ways, as in the case of the volunteer who, having been shunned by his future mother-in-law for his pacifist views, found himself ‘accepted...into the bosom of the family’ after she read about his sacrifices in a local newspaper.⁷⁹ Elsewhere, this played out in a more dramatic and public fashion. For example, when volunteer Richard Wodeman was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment in May 1942 for refusing to register formally as a CO, pressure exerted by the local press and Sheffield MP Cecil Wilson contributed to his early release a few weeks later.⁸⁰ These victories – both big and small, personal and political – gave the volunteers renewed optimism about the extent to which experimental labour could transform their social standing, at least within the local community. As volunteer Henry Bloomfield confidently declared soon after Wodeman’s release, ‘to be a pacifist here has almost ceased to be a stigma’.⁸¹

The most committed advocate for the volunteers, however, was Mellanby himself. Prior to the experiments, Mellanby freely admitted to less-than-

⁷⁵ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 47–8; Kenneth Mellanby, C. G. Johnson, and W. C. Bartley, ‘The treatment of scabies’, *British Medical Journal*, 4 July 1942, pp. 1–4, at p. 1.

⁷⁶ Proctor, in Collins, ‘Commentary’, p. 559.

⁷⁷ See, for example, ‘Pacifists’ aid in scabies investigations’, *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 19 Sept. 1941, p. 4.

⁷⁸ ‘Extract from Hansard’, 14 May 1942, TNA, FD 1/6673.

⁷⁹ Kenneth Mellanby to Edward Mellanby, 1 July 1944, TNA, FD 1/131.

⁸⁰ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 60–1.

⁸¹ Henry Bloomfield, ‘British pacifists in action: pacifist service units’, *Fellowship*, 8 (1942), p. 43. I first learned of Bloomfield’s letter in Alison S. Bateman-House, ‘Compelled to volunteer: American conscientious objectors to World War II as subjects of medical research’ (Ph.D. thesis, New York, NY, 2014), pp. 184–5.

charitable feelings towards pacifists, thinking them ‘impossibly opinionated, pig-headedly obstinate and incurably ignorant’. He was surprised, then, to discover that his volunteers were intelligent, hard-working, and in possession of a well-developed sense of humour, and to find himself increasingly invested in their post-war fortunes.⁸² Indeed, one of his main motivations for writing his wartime memoir, *Human guinea pigs*, was to secure the men ‘a good “press” [so] that it may ensure their fair treatment after the war’.⁸³ As such, in contrast to the reticence shown by politicians, Mellanby went to great lengths to emphasize his volunteers’ powers of stoic endurance, comparing them favourably to the ‘browned off’ soldier using injury to avoid his drills or the lazy industrial worker ‘lauded to the skies for his patriotism, while he slack[s] at his bench’.⁸⁴ Yet while these somatic labours did much to challenge Mellanby’s perceptions of his volunteers as individuals, his views on pacifism remained relatively unchanged. As a result, expressions of praise were frequently tempered by more biting comments:

They have rather nebulous ideas about establishing a world on more or less Christian and Communist ideals, and they hold innumerable little meetings to save the world on these lines...I cannot help hearing a lot of what seems nonsense coming from people who are at the same time so sensible about their experimental work.⁸⁵

For Mellanby, then, the volunteers’ experimental performances demonstrated their capacity to make valuable contributions to both the war effort and the protection of national health. However, despite these bodily sacrifices, the group’s pacifist ideologies continued to mark them as ‘other’ and would therefore remain an obstacle to any permanent form of social rehabilitation in the years to come. Following the conclusion of the scabies study, some of the volunteers would learn this lesson first-hand.

V

On 30 June 1942, Ernest Brown stood in the House of Commons and declared an imminent victory over the *Sarcoptes scabiei*. As a result of improved medical knowledge, more efficient treatment regimes, and expanded powers for local authorities, Brown argued, ‘the increase [in scabies] has been checked’.⁸⁶ While somewhat premature – the Ministry of Health would continue to receive alarming reports of high incidence rates for at least another year – Brown’s announcement nonetheless spoke to an increasing confidence in public health circles that the condition was finally being brought under

⁸² Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 32–3.

⁸³ Kenneth Mellanby to Edward Mellanby, 1 July 1944, TNA, FD 1/131.

⁸⁴ Mellanby, *Human guinea pigs* (1945 edn), pp. 83–4, 94.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸⁶ Hansard, HC Deb, 30 June 1942, vol. 381, cc. 56–64.

control.⁸⁷ Mellanby and his volunteers could claim no small part in fostering this optimism. In the weeks leading up to Brown's speech, the Ministry had issued a revised memorandum on scabies which directly cited the SRI's findings, from the emphasis on close personal contact as the primary mode of transmission to the recommendation of benzyl benzoate as the most effective treatment.⁸⁸ Some of the volunteers were able to observe the effects of this new guidance directly. Jim Le Noury, for example, who left the SRI that summer to work at a scabies treatment centre in the Derbyshire mining village of Poolsbrook, found that Mellanby's methods were so effective that the disease had been essentially eradicated from the community by 1947. When his centre was finally shut down due to a lack of cases, Le Noury sent a solemn notice to his former colleagues at the SRI:

The death has occurred of *Sarcoptes Scabiei* after a long, lingering illness.

Sarcoptes Scabiei will long be remembered as a benefactor and friend of indigent conscientious objectors...He had influence with judges and ministers, and local authorities set up fine buildings in his honour.

Sarcoptes, however, was not without malice and his enemies number more than his friends. Thus few will grieve his passing, which makes it all the more necessary for his faithful followers to remember him with gratitude and a little kindness.

If at times he was a little severe he could also inspire the comic muse. Few who were present will ever forget his midnight jests in draughty corridors...or the acrobatic convulsions to which his followers were reduced when he was in one of his grimmer moods.

He dies...and yet though soon to become an anachronism, his memory will remain; a reminder perhaps of days that were happier, of life that was gayer, and of a humour that has gone.

R.I.P.⁸⁹

Le Noury's obituary for the *Sarcoptes* reveals a great deal about the nature of somatic citizenship at the SRI. As he observed, few beyond their group would 'grieve' for the parasite, which since the outbreak of war had compelled citizens to view their own bodies, and the bodies of their peers, with fear and suspicion, highlighting with painful clarity the fractious and disrupted nature of life on the British home front. Yet despite these negative connotations, the *Sarcoptes* provided a vital lifeline for the SRI's pacifist volunteers. By allowing the mite to colonize the surface of their bodies, these individuals engaged in a distinctive form of somatic labour that could be reconciled with their pacifist ideologies while

⁸⁷ See T. Nuttall to Ministry of Health, 6 July 1943, TNA, MH 55/2151.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Health, 'Memorandum on scabies and how to deal with it', June 1942, TNA, FD 1/6672.

⁸⁹ Sorby newsletter no. 5, Apr. 1947, USSCA, Krebs papers, B.39.

also demonstrating to judges, ministers, and estranged mothers-in-law that their objections to conflict were based upon humanitarianism rather than cowardice. At the same time, the intense experiences of chronic infestation – from the relentless itching to those ‘midnight jests in draughty corridors’ – generated comforting bonds of community, identity, and collective purpose between the volunteers themselves.

However, scabies research could not always provide a straightforward route towards social acceptance. Rather, as the volunteers attempted to navigate between the competing demands of their roles as pacifists, research subjects, and wartime citizens, numerous obstacles lay in their path: unresolved anxieties about the place of the SRI within the broader war effort, the transgressive connotations of their experimental duties, the uncomfortable presence of their infested bodies in public spaces, the lingering suspicion – held by even their most committed supporters – that the objectives of pacifism and national duty could never truly be reconciled. Thus, as Le Noury’s closing comments on the lost happiness of the war years suggest, somatic citizenship appeared to be an unreliable platform for securing lasting kinds of social rehabilitation. While relatively little information survives about the volunteers’ post-war fortunes, this can certainly be seen in the experiences of two of Mellanby’s most enthusiastic participants. Bernard Hicken, for example, spent a number of years battling a persistent bout of tuberculosis that he attributed to the SRI’s spartan living conditions. After several hospitalizations and periods of absence from work, experimental labour increasingly appeared as a route to physical and financial precarity, rather than a noble continuation of pacifist sacrifice.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Henry Bloomfield, who had once been so optimistic about the ability of medical research to banish the stigma of conscientious objection, instead ‘saw the futility of [his] pacifist views’ while participating in a later nutritional experiment and decided to abandon his CO status and join the Merchant Navy.⁹¹ A sense of belonging and purpose built upon passing bodily experiences, it seemed, could only last for so long.

Given the peculiar nature of Mellanby’s scabies study, and the uneven impact that it had on the post-war trajectories of his volunteers, what can the SRI tell us about life in wartime Britain more broadly? First, the experiences of these pacifist volunteers highlight the critical power of the unremarkable, the insignificant, and the ‘everyday’ in the construction and maintenance of wartime identity. By exploring the political implications of these individuals’ most basic bodily practices – itching, scratching, bleeding, bathing, sleeping – this article has sought to demonstrate how discourses of citizenship are shaped not just in the realm of formal politics but also at the level of the intimate and the mundane. While the ubiquitous nature of this somatic citizenship in many ways precluded it from facilitating more permanent kinds of change in

⁹⁰ Hicken, interview, 13166-3.

⁹¹ ‘Pacifists as “guinea pigs”’, *Courier-Mail*, 18 June 1945, p. 1.

the volunteers' lives, analyses of these practices nonetheless underscore the creative and experimental power of everyday acts of social navigation.

However, this focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual experience need not require the abandonment of more ambitious and wide-ranging narratives of wartime life. Rather, by immersing unique acts of social navigation within their fullest political, social, and cultural contexts – in this case, by contextualizing scabies research within more widely shared anxieties about infectious disease, physical labour, and civic duty – it is possible to glimpse the broader conditions of possibility in which citizens attempted to make sense of their bodies, identities, and desires during a period of unprecedented crisis. Thus, as Claire Langhamer, Lucy Noakes, and Claudia Siebrecht have argued, by tracing the interplay between the intimacy of small-scale experience and the abstraction of large-scale patterns, 'we see the forces of history at play'.⁹² Ultimately, methodological approaches such as this article's deployment of somatic citizenship, in which the focal points of an incomplete archive are exploited and redirected to generate new perspectives on wartime life, are not simply productive exercises; they are increasingly necessary. With surviving adult participants of the war now constituting less than 1 per cent of the UK population, opportunities to generate new ego documents that can sustain dissenting points of view are rapidly diminishing.⁹³ Historians therefore need to engage in their own experiments if work on the diverse experiences of the Second World War, and other events which sit uncomfortably on the boundaries of living memory and history, is to continue.

⁹² Langhamer, Noakes, and Siebrecht, 'Introduction', p. 20.

⁹³ Office of National Statistics, 'Estimates of the very old, including centenarians, UK: 2002 to 2018', www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/bulletins/estimatesoftheveryoldincludingcentenarians/2002to2018, created 25 Sept. 2019.