

**Jane Mattisson Ekstam, Kristianstad University, Sweden**

[jane.mattisson@hkr.se](mailto:jane.mattisson@hkr.se)

**Pacifism in literature on World War One:**

**The case of *A Crimson Dawn***

Literature has a special power to describe the complexity of the position of the individual in time of war. My paper focuses on the situation of conscientious objectors in World War One and how it is portrayed in modern literature. When patriotic fervour was at its height in 1914, pacifism was regarded by many as both disloyal and cowardly. Two important questions are addressed in my paper: What can novels tell us about conscientious objectors? And why do we continue to be fascinated by their stories? One novel is singled out for special attention, Janet MacLeod Trotter's *A Crimson Dawn*. Trotter's novel shows clearly how opposing attitudes to whether it was one's duty to enlist or to refuse to help the war effort could split families and communities. By bringing the tragedy down to the level of the individual, and the individual's relations to his or her community, and by stimulating the reader's imagination, *A Crimson Dawn* tells the tragic story of conscientious objection in one community and two families who are united by marriage but tragically separated in their attitudes to war. It is a story that encompasses the most important features of pacifism, its ideals and its consequences. It is also a story that resonates particularly powerfully in the modern world, where war is omnipresent.

There were approximately, 16 000 conscientious objectors at the beginning of World War One. They were largely ignored because they were numerically insignificant and because the hostilities were expected to be over by Christmas. By 1915, the growing resentment towards conscientious objectors due to heavy battle losses combined with the realisation that the War would last longer than expected rendered pacifism increasingly problematical and controversial. With the introduction of conscription in 1916 and the enlistment of many conscientious objectors in the Non-Combatant Corps (where they served as stretcher bearers, ambulance drivers, canteen workers and road makers), pacifism became increasingly identified with cowardice, as exemplified in the nickname "No-Courage Corps".

One hundred years later, at the centenary of the outbreak of the war, there has been a concern among pacifist sympathisers that the events of 1914-1918 will be glorified as a part of the British national heritage and that they will be presented as inevitable. Indeed, historians such as Hew Strachan have warned that there is a real danger that the centenary celebrations will merely become “Remembrance Sunday Writ Large”. A number of prominent British actors have taken a stand for pacifism. Roger Lloyd Pack, for example, known for his roles in *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Only Fools and Horses*, was a signatory to the “No Glory” campaign, an organisation that has campaigned to provide an alternative view of the war. Pack was worried that the official celebrations will be a continuation of the glorification of war. Britain’s oldest pacifist group, the Peace Pledge Union, has been granted £95,800 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to increase awareness of pacifist views and actions during the war. And Bradford Peace Museum has designed an alternative commemorative World War One education project called ‘Choices’, which presents the decisions people made between 1914 and 1919 and compares these with modern-day choices for children and young people in response to such events as 9/11 and 7/7. Special conferences have also been held, and are indeed still being held, on the role of pacifism during the war. These include Dr Jo Vellacot’s talk at Senate House, London on ‘The War Work of an Anti-War Activist: Catherine Marshall, 1914-1918’ on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014, and the conference ‘Objections to War: pacifism, anti-interventionism and conscientious objection in literature, theatre and art, 1830-1918’ at Hull University, 7-9<sup>th</sup> September, 2014. The Hull conference considered the content, form and cultural significance of protest against war and military intervention in the years leading up to 1918.

Art in general, and literature in particular, has a special ability to demonstrate different views of war and to highlight the complexities of pacifism in World War One. Recent studies such as R.S. White’s *Pacifism and English Literature: Minstrels of Peace* (2008) bear witness to the power of literature to critique the principle that armed combat is the best way to resolve conflicts. Tracing pacifist writing back to the Middle Ages, White demonstrates that literature stimulates the imagination, enabling the reader to empathise with characters and thereby gain a more nuanced view of pacifism. The increased mechanisation of warfare has resulted in adversaries no longer perceiving at close range the effects of their weapons on individual human bodies, making it all the more important, argues White, to record and explore the effects on the individual in time of war.

## 1. History and Literature

As historian and literary critic Hayden White has shown, both historical and literary writing rely heavily on narrative to create meaning. There is no such thing as objective history. Narrative, argues White, translates *knowing* into *telling* (White 1980, 5). Writing about history is a narrative, a metacode, ‘a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted’ (ibid., 6). ‘Real’ events, according to White, need to be ‘narrativised’; they do not, however, offer themselves as stories with a beginning, middle and end. Facts do not make a story; they must be interpreted and arranged in a comprehensible and effective manner. White argues that the function of storytelling in historiography is to explain historical events. Narrative accounts, he suggests, explain real events ‘by representing them as possessing the coherence of generic plot-types – epic, comic, tragic, farcical and so on’ (White 2010, 280). The story of conflict between individual groups, be they social or ideological (as in the case of pacifism), is linked to the more general or even global story of whether it is right to take up arms or to be a pacifist.

While real events and phenomena may terminate, White points out, they do not have “closure”, i.e. a proper conclusion that may or may not make clear the ultimate fate of the protagonists but provides a satisfactory solution. For the reader to perceive a story as “true” or “real”, it must have closure; it cannot simply terminate. The reader desires ‘coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary (White 1980, 27). The real world is only understandable when it is presented as a story that carries moral authority. The question of pacificism is deeply moral in nature. With respect to World War One, one of the critical moral questions was ‘is it one’s moral duty to take arms or, as a pacifist, should one obey one’s conscience and resist the pressure to enlist?’

Well-known novels such as Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1991), Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (1993), Mackenzie Ford’s *Gifts of War* (2008), Anne Perry’s *At Some Disputed Barricade* (2006) and *We Shall Not Sleep* (2007), and Chris Ryan’s *One Good Turn* (2008) illustrate the attitudes of different social groups towards pacifism. Janet MacLeod Trotter’s *A Crimson Dawn* (2006) has been singled out for special attention here because it shows particularly clearly what happens when members of a family and a community are separated by different views on war and peace. These views are embodied in the protagonists: Rab MacCrae, who is arrested as a conscientious objector

and barely survives his harsh treatment in prison, and Emmie Kelso, who is married to a patriot who volunteers in 1914 but who is both a pacifist and ardent defender of women's rights.

Two important questions are addressed in the following discussion: What can novels tell us about conscientious objectors? And why do we continue to be fascinated by their stories? First, however, a few words about *A Crimson Dawn*.

## 2. *A Crimson Dawn*

*A Crimson Dawn* was inspired by the author's work as a peace activist who had protested against America's involvement in Iraq. On her website, MacLeod Trotter writes:

At the time when I was going on peace protests to try and stop our country invading Iraq, I was researching the First World War. I wondered what had happened to the widespread women's movement for emancipation that was stopped abruptly by the outbreak of the Great War.

What I discovered was that many of the groups did not disband, despite their leadership telling them it was their patriotic duty to get behind the war effort. Many brave women, against the jingoism whipped up by the government, stood out against war and kept in touch with their fellow campaigners in the "enemy" countries. They saw it as an imperialist war that was all about grabbing colonies and resources. Ordinary people on both sides were being asked to do the fighting to support a system in which they were the victims.

Amazingly, some of these women held a peace conference in 1915 to try and bring a negotiated peace to Europe. If they had been listened to, millions of lives would have been saved.

The more I delved into this fascinating, over-looked piece of history, the more my admiration grew for these long ago peace campaigners — socialists, pacifists, Non-Conformists, Quakers and suffragists — whose ideals are still so relevant today.

Each month, I help organise a peace vigil in my home town of Morpeth, to remind people that peace is something for which we have to strive and work towards every day, not just on the eve of invasion. Big governments put huge effort and resources into planning and carrying out war. We look for the day when they'll put as much effort into planning for peace.

However daunting and impossible the task may seem, I take courage from our forebears who thought nothing of being vilified or imprisoned during the First World War for their determination to put a stop to the carnage.

<http://www.janetmacleodtrotter.com/a-crimson-dawn.htm>

On her blog (<http://janetmacleodtrotter.wordpress.com/>) Trotter describes the extensive archival work that forms the basis of all her historical novels, including *A Crimson*

*Dawn*. Her favourite setting is north east England, and Tyneside in particular. This is the setting of *A Crimson Dawn*.

*A Crimson Dawn* shows the attitudes of different social groups to combat on the one hand, and pacifism on the other. Emmie's family is divided: while her husband enlists in 1914, the family by whom she is brought up (her father and mother died when she was very young) are ardent pacifists and socialists. The eldest son, Rab McCrae, follows in the family tradition. He and Emmie are also deeply in love — a significant complication in the development of the story. Emmie learns early on from her adopted father, Jonas MacCrae that 'all war waged by governments is imperialist' (27). Pacifism in the MacCrae family is about politics (the MacCraes are ardent socialists) rather than religion. The MacCraes do not attend church. Despite heated debates among the members of the MacCrae family, the atmosphere in the home is both loving and warm. In Emmie's future husband's home, on the other hand, the situation is very different: Tom Curran lives in fear of being beaten by his father — and a harsh piousness (the Currans are regular chapel goers) prevails in the home.

Religion and pacifism have a complicated relationship in *A Crimson Dawn*. Emmie mourns what she calls the 'narrow-minded religion' of the chapel goers who damn and even punish pacifists (271). Quakerism, on the other hand, is held up as a good example of how religion and pacifism may work hand-in-hand to produce a better, more tolerant world. Indeed, pacifism is first mentioned in the novel in relation to Quakerism. Rab MacCrae, who wishes to start a pacifist newsletter, is inspired by the Quakers' opposition to the Boer War. He uses his trial which follows his refusal to enlist after the introduction of conscription to elaborate on his pacifist philosophy in detail:

I will have no part in a war that kills and maims my fellow comrades – men who are working for a better world for all humanity, no matter what their nationality. I belong to an international brotherhood and do not accept the boundaries that the imperialist rulers of Europe impose on us. (230-231)

When war is declared, Rab speaks at a peace rally in his home town, Crawdene; he is accompanied by his Quaker friend, Charles Oliphant. Emmie surreptitiously contributes to Rab's newsletter, urging women to attend the peace rally. She risks her marriage because she knows that if she is identified as the anonymous writer of the pacifist articles in the newsletter, she can expect no mercy from her in-laws, the Currans. Both

Rab and Emmie know that the press is carefully watched and when the newsletter runs a feature on the Government concealing the true casualty figures at the front, they are not surprised that the police make a raid. They are not, however, prepared for the brutality of the raid.

As more and more men enlist, the pacifists become increasingly isolated in Crawdene. As they preach that ‘words can be more effective in bringing peace and restoring sanity’ (173), it becomes patently clear that the MacCraes are not only isolated but have also become targets, their windows even being smashed on one occasion. As the narrator comments:

The consensus in Crawdene opposing war evaporated like the morning dew. Within days the patriotic frenzy of London was being reported in the newspapers and spreading around the country. Recruiting offices were swiftly set up to cope with the numbers volunteering to fight. Posters went up and the national press was filled with vitriol about the terrible Hun. (177)

The War divides even the closest and most harmonious families: Charles Oliphant, for example, is disowned by his father for his pacifist activities and is not invited to his sister’s wedding. Even children of pacifists are attacked by other children; Emmie’s son, Barny, for example, is harshly beaten by the children of so-called ‘patriotic families’ (300).

Emmie struggles to remain strong, drawing on her belief in women’s rights to give her extra strength. The very foundations of Emmie’s pacifist beliefs are summarised in a letter she receives from a missionary and ardent feminist:

(...) women get no benefit from the war. Whatever is of glory, it is for men. The fascination of war, its pomp and pride of uniforms, gold lace, medals and pensions are for men . . . The Church colludes in war, yet two-thirds of its members are women. We must appeal to the church to work hand in hand with the mothers of mankind in this crusade against the war. Christianity demands of women this crusade of peace. Mothers, wives, daughters, sisters! Go forward – God wills it. (184)

Emmie becomes even more determined when she learns that familial pressure from the Curran side of the family has resulted in Sam MacCrae, Rab’s younger brother, enlisting (Sam, like his brother, is a pacifist). When she hears what Sam tells his wife, Louise Curran, namely ‘I’m doing this ‘cos I want you to be proud of me, Lou. I don’t want to be second best to your da anymore’ (191) it is not only Louise who is

distraught. As both Louise and Emmie fear, Sam is killed. His death is depicted as pointless, tragic and a betrayal of ideals.

Emmie has little peace as she is constantly bullied by her husband Tom. She is not permitted to air her pacifist views at home, which Tom describes as treasonous, shameful and disloyal to the principles of his family. By this stage, Emmie knows that she loves Rab and is forced to recognise that she married the wrong man. Her misery is compounded when the police confiscate Rab's pacifist newsletter, thereby removing her only means of expressing her pacifist and feminist convictions. When Rab is badly beaten up for distributing anti-war leaflets she is determined to be strong not just for herself but also for Rab. She sees that his bravery and sacrifices for his beliefs far exceed anything that her husband has achieved and or is indeed likely to achieve at the front. Tom does not, the narrator makes clear, enlist for patriotic reasons but out of shame: when he catches his wife handing out anti-war leaflets at the mine where he works he tells Emmie that '(i)t's the only way I can hold me head up round here anymore, after what you've done' (219). Tom is depicted as a coward. Rab and Emmie, on the other hand, are prepared to pay the ultimate price for their pacifist views and both serve harsh prison sentences without complaint or retraction.

The narrator of *A Crimson Dawn* notes that even after the War, pacifists continue to pay a high price for their views. He describes, for example, how Laurie, Crawdene's postman before the War, cannot return to his job and cannot find any other employment. No one wishes to employ him. The narrator also reminds the reader that pacifists were denied the vote for a period of five years after the end of the War.

The stories of Emmie and Rab reveal the full force of the position of the pacifist on the outbreak of World War One, throughout the war years and into the post-war period. The struggles and conflicts are particularly poignant because the reader identifies with the characters, understands the reasons for their different views on combat and peace, and realises that reconciliation is impossible. Pacifists and combatants alike are victims of a situation that could neither be anticipated nor understood. Both sides of the story are tragic. By bringing the tragedy down to the level of the individual, and the individual's relations to his or her community, and by stimulating the reader's imagination, *A Crimson Dawn* tells the complex story of pacifism in a way that the reader can understand. It is a story that encompasses the most significant features of the movement, its ideals and its consequences. It touches some of the most important qualities of a human-being: compassion, love and conviction and

places these in a context of crisis which tests the individual to the limits of his or her endurance. It is also a story that resonates particularly powerfully in our modern world, where war is omnipresent and where the voice of peace continues to struggle to be heard.

## **Bibliography**

Janet MacLeod Trotter Official Website. <http://www.janetmacleodtrotter.com/a-crimson-dawn.htm>. Accessed 31 August 2014.

Janet MacLeod Trotter Blog. <http://janetmacleodtrotter.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 27 June 2014

Trotter, Janet MacLeod (2005). *A Crimson Dawn*. London: Headline.

White, Hayden (2010). *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory. 1957-2007*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

White, Hayden (1980). 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality'. *Critical Inquiry* 7:1, 5-27.