

Statement to Conscientious Objectors' Tribunal. May 1940

Copy of Applicant's Statement. BENTINCK, Count Henry Noel. Case No. L 4102 102/8.

When I submitted my reason for being a Conscientious Objector, the one just read, I did so understanding it to be imperative that this registration should be made with the least possible delay. I knew nothing of the advisability of making my statement short or long. I have since learned that a longer more thorough outlay of my principles would lead to a more immediate understanding of my viewpoint and with the help of the extra clarity gained in writing, would enable me to make my argument more readily appreciated.

During the period of waiting I have given a very great deal of time and thought to the following statement and believe it to be an honest and incontrovertible basis for any questions you may ask me, and for any fresh arguments which these questions may elicit from me.

At all of the tribunals that I have attended, in all the conversations relating to Conscientious Objection, and in all the many criticisms bitter and otherwise that have been levelled at me, it has become clear that objections are held to begin with the assertion - "I can't", or "I won't" be a party to this war, and for the most part they do. To the word war are added a number of fitting epithets. Although in my case this is also true, it is not enough. This adamant refusal with no alternative, does not seem to justify itself. The justification, in my eyes, and the consequent reason for my objection begin with the words "I can" "I must" "I shall". What it is I feel myself able, conscientiously obliged, and morally determined to do, I now propose to outline to you in the following statement.

In the first place, I believe that throughout all forms of existence there is an underlying spiritual unity, which, for the want of a better simile, might be compared in the physical world to the atom as being the underlying physical unity. The relation between the physical world and this spiritual unity is, to use Spinoza's metaphor, as the relation between a bridge and its design. It is the existence in concept, or in a non-three-dimensional world, of everything that there is in the world. Whatever mediums there may be connecting these two correlative existences, the only expressive one is man's intellect. Now in this respect, because he is able to express and record his experiences, and to benefit by the findings of

others, he is apart from all other types of existence as far as we know. He lives therefore in a slightly different plane from anything else and is consciously aware, or I should say it is in his power to be consciously aware, of the unity of his spiritual existence. Thus mankind, as I said, is primarily and fundamentally a whole, with the potentiality of harmonious unification. Of the potency and importance of this former fact I am essentially and fundamentally aware.

When I am born, I am, by unchangeable biological laws, a man. No power on earth can change that. I am at once a man and a part of the whole of mankind. I become at the dictate of the varying laws of different countries, a member of this or that state. This is entirely circumstantial and can be altered by the foresight of my parents, or later by my own determination.

Since however I am saddled with a nationality, and am to live in a certain country, I derive benefits from this life. I am supplied with a home, food and education, not to mention other public services. For these I am told later I am indebted to my country and must, out of gratitude, and when I am told it has become necessary, sacrifice not only myself, but also any beliefs or ideals that I myself have evolved or adopted, and which I hold to be as important as my very life, which indeed they are, for were I dead I could never fulfil them. Here however, I differ, I maintain that the benefits I have received at the incidental hands of my particular country are the outcome of the progression of mankind's civilisation. It is unnecessary to enumerate them, but it is at once apparent that all the benefits I derive from being an Englishman were not invented, manufactured and supplied by Englishmen, they are the product of civilization the world over. So I have benefited primarily by the thoughts and deeds of mankind because I am a part of his whole, therefore my duty is to mankind, to his efforts and his welfare, and in the protection of his civilisation.

We learn that primitive man only survived in the face of the difficulties and dangers which confronted him by adopting an efficient form of mutual protection. All through history there has been a tendency to unite. Under the Pax Romana Europe was more prosperous than ever before. Later the states of Europe enjoyed a greater measure of wealth and material happiness under Charlemagne than was their lot as a result of the inter-state jealousies to which they had become a prey after

the fall of Rome. France finally achieved solidarity in becoming a kingdom. Later England and Scotland, the States of Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the USA became united in one way or another. Each has proved that escape through unity from the wars and bitter inter-state competition which sapped the energy and productiveness of the people, has led to internal happiness, wealth and a more widespread culture.

At the end of this war a peace must be made that will bring unity and prosperity to Europe and the world. In order to achieve this end it will be necessary for the people to be prepared to make great sacrifices in their feelings towards nationality and national prestige. In these days where a war is totalitarian it is essential that the morals and war effort at home should be kept at a very high pitch. The easiest way to unite a people in such a common endeavour is not only to give them an abstract patriotism for which they may "burn with enthusiasm", but also to give them something to hate. When through great losses the masses again begin to understand bereavement and see ghastly suffering at first hand, and when bombs and perhaps gas fall upon their own soil or on their capital, then indeed they will be filled with rage, fear and a thirst for vengeance. This will build up a psychological background from which it will be impossible to draw anything but a desire for the destruction of the enemy, and the disruption of his country. Such a policy could never be completely fulfilled and in failing it would again be disastrous. I feel it is my duty therefore to try to counteract such feelings. By this I do not mean in such a way as to hinder the war effort for that is a purely negative plan, but just to keep jogging at people's outlook steadily and consistently, telling them to look ahead. Pointing out that when a time comes for the settlement of a peace of Europe they must not be blinded by emotion and jingoism. To try to instil into them the necessity of upholding a constructive unprejudiced plan for European unity likely on academic grounds to be successful and mutually beneficent. For it seems to me unlikely that anything other than a repetition of Versailles and its derivatives can come of this war unless public opinion is prepared during the war.

My objection as I said at the beginning of this statement begins with the determination - "I must" - that which I have described above is what I must do. I must help to prepare for a permanent peace through the only feasible channel - European unity.

Finally, insofar as I object to being forced to kill a stranger whom I wish to treat as a friend, for a cause in which I see that all the principles which I hold and all the ideals which I hope to bring to fruition, will be lost in a welter of self-destruction, my conscience does object. Furthermore insofar as a conscientious objection can be based upon the fact that what I am being asked to do is the one form of action that will work most directly and most powerfully against all of which my conscience most vehemently approves, then perhaps my objection is more easily seen.