

# "A burning, living faith"

*Excerpts from a play written by Jo Alberti*

*to mark the Centenary of Northern Friends Peace Board in 2013*

This shortened version includes the first part of the play which covers the period from 1914 to 1919. The full play, which continues the family's story, is available via our website or from the NFPB office – see the back page for these contact details.

---

## **Foreword**

The title of this play comes from a phrase used by Robert Long, in a leaflet published just after the outbreak of the First World War. Just one year earlier, he had been appointed to serve as the first full-time Secretary of the newly-formed Northern Friends Peace Board. The Friends (Quakers) who met for a peace conference in York in January 1913 decided that there should be:

*"a permanent Peace Board of the Northern Counties Quarterly Meetings... Its special duty is to be to advise and encourage Friends in the North, and through them their fellow Christians and citizens generally in the active promotion of peace in all its height and breadth. That, as the service of the Committee opens out before it, should any Friend with a concern offer to assist in this glorious cause, the Board be empowered to make such arrangements as seem right for a period of years. "*

Whether those Friends envisaged that the Board would still be in existence 100 years later is not known, but Quakers throughout the North have funded and served on the Board throughout that period. The activities of the Board have ranged from publishing materials – from leaflets and posters to DVD and a website more recently – to supporting conscientious objectors in two world wars, promoting international understanding and disarmament supporting peace work, witness and skills by local Quakers and others. Further information about our centenary and our current concerns can be found on our website, as well as from our office (see back page for contact details.)

Jo Alberti, a current member of the Board, has given us this play, having heard of our plans to produce resources and arrange activities to mark our centenary. She has drawn inspiration both from original documents in our archives, particularly during some of the earlier period of our

work, from other writings of the period of the First World War, and others' more contemporary experiences. The characters in the play are fictional, but other real people, past and present are referred to.

She and we offer it to Quaker Meetings and to any other groups who are interested in reflecting on the role that Quakers and others have played in taking a stand for peace over the years. We hope that groups will use it for play readings amongst themselves and maybe for small-scale performances. There is much food for thought in the words and experiences portrayed here and we imagine that this will provide material that can stimulate discussion and exploration of the issues. Further suggestions are included on page 11 of the accompanying booklet in the resource-pack

As we publish this, we are very aware that the centenary of the beginning of the first world war is also approaching. Whilst this play was not written specifically for that, we believe it will be an invaluable resource in enabling people of all ages gain a better understanding of the issues and challenges faced by those for whom war was not and is not an acceptable way of resolving conflict.

Finally, we would be very interested to hear from people have used this. Please do get in touch.

---

### ***Cast - in order of appearance***

*Richard, a young man*

*James, a Quaker, as a young man*

*Catherine, mother of James*

*Chairman of Tribunal for hearings on exemption from military service*

*Sergeant*

*Marian Ellis, a Quaker*

### ***Scene 1 [September 1914]***

*[James and Richard; the latter is wearing uniform. They are walking down a street and meet...]*

RICHARD James!

JAMES Richard.

RICHARD It's been a long time...how are you?

JAMES I am well, thank you. And you?

RICHARD Very well.

JAMES That's good. Goodbye then.

RICHARD No, wait, we cannot part so quickly after... will you take a cup of tea/a bottle of beer with me?

JAMES I am not sure...I'm...

RICHARD I won't keep you long –

JAMES Very well then.

*They sit at a table.*

RICHARD So – how are you? What are you doing?

JAMES I'm... not much. How about you? I see that you have joined up.

RICHARD Yes.

JAMES The last time I saw you, you were planning to go up to Oxford...

RICHARD Yes. But I found that I could not bring myself to endure a secluded life of scholastic vegetation. It would seem cowardly to shirk what seemed an obvious duty. In fact, joining the army has felt like the opportunity to do something that at present is the only thing that really counts.

JAMES You mean fighting this war.

ROLAND Yes. I feel I am meant to take some active part in this war – it fascinates me, somehow.

JAMES I think war is horrible...

RICHARD I know, it is horrible, but it is also ennobling and somehow... well, beautiful. It has an elemental reality that raises it above all cold reasoning.

I expect you see me as a militarist. And I expect you are right. But I just feel I can do no other...

JAMES No. I don't think I could ever think of you as a militarist. You always seemed to me to be ... well, a poet. Seeing you in that uniform. It was a shock.

RICHARD So you will not join up?

JAMES No. I cannot. Besides I am a Quaker.

RICHARD Oh, yes, I had forgotten.

JAMES It isn't easy, you know. Nearly everyone I know has joined.

And I had this letter from my uncle. I can quote it to you by heart. It went to my heart.

'Plainly Conscientious Objectors are, to my mind, cowards, or suffering from some brain lesion which has unhinged their minds. If the former, and if they can bring themselves, for fear of their own skin, to be content to let others lay down their lives in their defence and in that of the women and children of their country, then the death penalty is meet and just. If the latter, then they form a small and dangerous leaven which tends to danger, inasmuch as it attracts waverers, and increases the number of men who are really cowards at heart.

They are lunatics and should be kept apart from their fellow men until the end of the war.’

RICHARD Phew. Of course, I would never think of you as a coward – remembering you on the rugby pitch!

JAMES Thank you for that. But how can one be sure? And that terrible accusation of letting others defend you...

RICHARD Yes. I think that is why many of us are joining up.

## **Scene 2**

JAMES [*to the audience*] I was very shaken by my meeting with Richard. I had been horrified at the outbreak of war. I thought that the danger had receded, so it was a shock. I felt that we had failed. And I felt very alone.

Then I was given a copy of the Northern Friends Peace Board pamphlet of 6 August 1914 “What shall we do”

I found myself agreeing with the ideas, and feeling much stronger and more confident. I could see that the main problem with this war in particular, and perhaps all wars was that it had nothing to do with the people who would have to fight in it, whether they were Russian Peasants, or German workers or British bus drivers. It was a war started because of the ambitions of rulers and organised by military bureaucracies. It was a great crime, this war. A crime against both God and humanity.

I was eager to accept the urging to show “a burning, living faith”, and was determined to take “no part or lot in the war system because it is a denial of the Christian faith”. The writers of the pamphlet reminded us that Christ, the Prince of Peace, felt deserted on the cross.

I went to the NFPB conference in Leeds on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August and was moved by the Chairman’s declaration that we needed to recognise the self sacrifice which others were making and to be ready in our own way to give up for our country and for humanity. At the time it was not at all clear to me how I could do that. I heeded the advice that we should educate others about the criminality of the war, but found out very quickly that men of my age were not interested in my lectures and, even if they agreed, were going to sign up anyway. I tried to get signatures for the petition which was sent to the Prime Minister – I could see that it was our duty to make clear our views to the government – but I did not get many. Others must have done better – perhaps with older people – because I heard there were 13, 000 signatures.

## **Scene 3 [March 1916] [James and Catherine]**

JAMES [*to the audience*] My opportunity for some equivalent to the self sacrifice of my friends who were fighting in the trenches came when conscription was introduced in the spring of 1916. I had already had a tussle in my mind about whether I would refuse to do anything at all to help in the war effort – not even to drive an ambulance – in other words be what was called an ‘absolutist.’ Part of me really did want to drive an ambulance: I knew it would not be a safe thing to do – in fact that was part of the attraction. I just thought it would be good to help to save lives when so many were being lost. And my mother....

CATHERINE Have you made up your mind, James?

JAMES No. I am finding it hard. What do you think I should do? I don't want to feel safe while so many people are not safe – are out there in terrible conditions and dying. Why should I stay safe?

MOTHER I cannot advise you. It is your decision

JAMES But I would like to know what you think.

What would you do?

MOTHER *very quietly* I would do something, anything really, to avoid prison. I have been to prison for my beliefs, as you know. Prison is a terrible place.

**Scene 4 [ May 1916] [ Tribunal Chairman and young James]**

JAMES *[to the audience]* My mother had been to prison as a suffragette – more than once. Perhaps it was the fact that she said it was so terrible to be in prison that made me decide to be an absolutist. I suppose I wanted to suffer. I went to the office of the Northern Friends Peace Board to get advice. I think I secretly hoped to be persuaded to join the Non Combatant Force which was set up so that men with strong objections to combat could still be conscripted and serve in supporting roles, but not actually be forced to fight. But the Secretary, who was having private conversations with up to six men a day made no attempt to persuade me one way or the other. The principle was that “each man should be true to the divine spark within himself.”

Like other Quakers I requested exemption from conscription:

TRIBUNAL CHAIRMAN Are you a member of any religious body?

JAMES I would prefer not to shelter behind any religious body.

CHAIRMAN Give us an answer. Don't waste our time.

JAMES I am a member of the Society of Friends.

CHAIRMAN Are you willing to do non-combatant work

JAMES No.

CHAIRMAN But a considerable number of Friends are doing ambulance work.

JAMES I cannot be governed by the convictions of others, only by my own. I cannot kill nor give support to those who are killing.

CHAIRMAN Would you kill wild beasts?

JAMES The Germans are not wild beasts!

\* \* \*

*[Chairman leaves; Sergeant enters]*

JAMES [*to the audience*] I was given non-combatant service, which I refused to do. I was then arrested and taken under escort to the military barracks at Warwick.

SERGEANT Put on that uniform, soldier.

JAMES I apologise for seeming to be rude, but I am not a soldier and I will not put on that uniform.

SERGEANT Well, you may be a shirker but at least you are polite about it. You will have to go before a court martial, sonny, which is no fun. So I would advise you just to put on the uniform and be done with it.

JAMES I can only say again, I am sorry, but no, I will not.

### ***Scene 5 [1916] [James, Mother]***

JAMES [*to the audience*] I was sentenced to 112 days in prison and sent to Richmond Castle. The regime there was unpleasant to say the least. I got used to being shouted at – this often over an apparent breach of an unwritten rule. The Silence Rule operated and on exercise prisoners were expected to march in line watched by 4 wardens mounted on pedestals who enforced the Silence Rule as far as they were able. I found the lock-up and isolation from 4pm to 7am daily especially hard.

The effect of prison on my mind has been to deprive me entirely of the power of mentally concentrating on any subject for any length of time. Sometimes I felt as though the scalp of my head were about to fall off. I had a perpetual feeling of falling headlong into space.

I so longed for one good walk in the hills to lay in a stock of fresh air and memories of sea and sky before going back to Richmond. We were treated like animals without minds or personality. One day I saw a few blades of grass growing between two slabs of stone in the exercise yards. Young and green, they excited me like wine. I feasted my eyes on them each day. But then a working party scoured the yard and the grass had gone. I remember I wept.

There was one component of my cell that gave me strength. I have said that it was dark in there, so it took me a while to find...I wrote to my mother about it:

Dear Mother,

I have made an extraordinary discovery in my cell. It took me a while to make them out because it is so dark in here, but there is writing on the wall. It must have been done by a prisoner here before me: it says "If you take a sword and use it to run a fellow through then God will send you the bill!" One of our guards told me that it was probably written by one of the COs who were sent to France earlier this year. They were condemned to death – and then immediately had their sentences commuted to prison sentences. What a horrible thing to do! But apparently the threat of death made no difference to their refusal to fight or to join the Non Combatant Corps. I found it inspiring to hear the story – and somehow comforting to have the reminder of the presence of one of those men in my cell with me.

So - you must not worry about me. I am learning to live each day at a time. I get up early, you will be surprised to hear. It's a habit I have developed so that I can also fall asleep early and have less time to think . But each night before I go to sleep I say to myself: "Another day nearer the end of the war and the relief peace will bring to thousands; another day nearer to release, to freedom." After this experience of prison, I shall never cease to cherish freedom for the rest of my life.

Your loving son, James.

*MOTHER sits down and writes, reading as she does so:*

Dear James,

I am so relieved that you seem to have ceased striving and searching or chasing ideas that elude you, and that you are letting your mind lie quiet and receptive. It is the still pool and not the restless tide that reflects the stars. Try to think of your prison cell as giving you solitude, not as depriving you of freedom. I know that solitude can feel threatening when it is enforced, but nothing in the world can deprive you of freedom of spirit which is the only real freedom. I miss you desperately, in a hundred ways, every hour of every day.

**Scene 6 [1917] [James and Richard]**

JAMES Richard! How good to see you. I gather you are on leave?

RICHARD Yes, long leave. I was wounded – not very badly. I am due to go back quite soon.

JAMES What is it...How is it ...out there.

RICHARD Unspeakable. I lost my idealistic view of war rather quickly. Trench warfare...well, there is nothing glorious about it. It is all moving forward by inches, and then being forced back again waiting and waiting– and those who can wait longest win. The line just moves backward and forward – we move back into dugouts which have nearly all been blown in, the wire entanglements are a wreck, and in among this chaos of twisted iron and splintered timber and shapeless earth are the fleshless blackened bones of simple men who poured out their blood for nothing more tangible than Honour or their Country's Glory or another's lust for power.

And then there is heavy shell fire...When you hear it in the distance you cannot help feeling relieved that someone is getting hell and it's not you. Not a generous thought.

I cannot shake free from horrible memories.

JAMES You don't have to go on....

RICHARD I remember finding the body of a dead British soldier hidden in the undergrowth by the path I was taking through a wood. He must have been shot there in the early part of the war and lain there forgotten ever since. The ground was marshy and the body had sunk down so that only the toes of his boots appeared above the surface of the ground. His cap and equipment were by his side, rotting away.

And I shall never forget the first of my men to be killed. He was shot through the left temple while firing over the parapet. I found him lying very still at the bottom of the trench with a tiny stream of red trickling down his cheek onto his coat. I had been talking to him only few minutes before.

Let him who thinks that War is a glorious thing but look at a little pile of sodden grey rags that cover half a skull and a shin bone and what might have been its ribs, or at this skeleton lying on its side, resting half crouching as it fell, supported by one arm, perfect but that it is headless and with the tattered clothing still draped round it; and let him realize how grand and glorious a thing it is to have distilled all Youth and Joy and Life into a foetid heap of hideous putrescence.

JAMES *is silenced by this passion* And yet....you are going back to the front?!

RICHARD Yes

JAMES But why? Why go back when you feel so passionately about the war? Why not stay at home, surely that would be possible?

RICHARD I am not sure. Home...back home. I think home for me has become back in the trenches. I don't feel at home here. I feel out of place.

JAMES But at least you are safe here.

RICHARD That is part of the problem. I cannot stay comfortably in safe seclusion while my friends – those who are left – are enduring all those horrors. Why should I be protected from the risk of being killed?

Besides, I don't think I could get out of the army unless I am declared unfit, and since I am now fit again physically, I would have to be declared mentally unfit. Not in my right mind. Insane. And I know I am sane. Desperately unhappy, but not insane.

JAMES I think you are totally sane – unlike the men who are conducting this war, whether the politicians or the generals.

RICHARD So, it seems we are in agreement, despite our different choices.

JAMES Some Quakers believe that fundamentally we all believe that war is wrong. This is the first time I have strongly felt it, talking to you.

RICHARD But what has happened to you? You look a good deal thinner than when I last saw you.

JAMES I have been in prison. I am likely to have to return there soon...

RICHARD What's it like, prison?

JAMES I think it depends on your personality. There are people who cope wonderfully. But I get very low in mind, but it is nothing compared to what you have been through. And what you are going back to...

**Scene 7 [1917] [James, Marian Ellis]**

JAMES *[to the audience]* Soon after meeting Richard I attended the meeting of the Northern Friends Peace Board at the home of Marion and Edith Ellis in Scalby in Yorkshire in June of 1917. The aim was to gather strength from spiritual roots and to look for new light. I found this very hard to do.

I found it hard to hear what Maurice Rowntree had written from Wormwood Scrubs that “Life is not always easy” but he that he thanked God “that I am being built up by this good food from Thee”. And that in prison “times of wonderful joy and gladness have been given to me. I feel more than ever convinced that it is my duty to hold out for the liberty to do the work which I sincerely believe that God and the true welfare of my countrymen and of humanity have called me”.

I felt very feeble in comparison. Carl Heath, the invited speaker, declared that the “aim of life was the development of personality and service was our means of expressing personality.” I had no sense that I had any personality. And could not see how I could serve in any way. Going to prison was not to me a convincing service.

The Board declared afterwards that “The Scalby Conference will surely live in the memories of all.....the beauty of the surroundings, the living times of worship, the vision of infinite possibility opening before us ..... all combined towards a perfect combination of human happiness, mental stimulus and spiritual apprehension”. For me the beauty of the surroundings only provided a painful contrast to the landscape Richard and a million others were experiencing. Mud, mud, mud.

Moreover, discussion about the possible Peace Settlement which would punish Germany, and the proposed League of Nations depressed me further.

MARIAN *[to the audience]* The peace Settlement that is being proposed means that punishment will fall on the innocent Germans, not their rulers. The military view is turning the idea of a League of Nations into a League of Anglo Saxon Nations. What we need is a People’s League, which might work alongside the League of Nations, with a common language and brotherhood.

JAMES *[to the audience]* Shortly after that conference, I heard that Richard had been killed. I nearly gave up my faith in anything then. I know that millions died in that war, but the death of Richard seemed to me to contain the whole tragedy. It was as if I felt the death of those millions in this one death. And what had I achieved by refusing to participate? Nothing. I had saved not a single life.

I was rescued by a woman. No, not in the way you are probably thinking. Although I did marry soon afterwards.

**Scene 8 [1919] [James, Marian Ellis, Catherine]**

JAMES *[to the audience]* My mother met Marian Ellis at meetings of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. It was she who pulled me out of the slough of despond. At first I just saw her as an energetic middle aged woman – although in fact she was

only in her late thirties – who, like my mother, was admirable, but a little alarming. Then one day soon after I got out of prison for the last time after the end of the war, she came to spend the night with us. A friend of theirs, Barbara Ayrton Gould, was being prosecuted for posting bills protesting against the blockade of Europe which was causing starvation. The three of them were involved in The Fight the Famine Council set up just before the war ended. While we were eating supper I made some crude and silly remark about using that word ‘fight’ when we were all three of us pacifists. Marian just smiled and said:

MARIAN You’re quite right, of course. But I don’t put much weight on titles.

MOTHER *laughing* Well, well. What will you do when you marry, Marian dear? You see, James, Marian is going to marry Lord Parmoor.

JAMES Goodness!

MOTHER James!

MARIAN Leave him be, Catherine. I am not offended. I am well past the age at which women are accustomed to marry.

\* \* \*

JAMES [*to the audience*] Later that evening, after my mother had retired to bed, I found Marian reading some papers in front of the fire.

Oh, I beg your pardon, I did not mean to disturb you.

MARIAN No, no, come in. I am nearly finished and besides, this is your house, not mine.

Your mother tells me that you are very unhappy at present. And that you found your prison terms hard to bear.

JAMES Yes. But I wish she would not tell people. It does not help me.

MARIAN I think she needed to tell someone, to talk about how hopeless she felt, that she cannot help you. I am sorry if it felt like a breaking of trust to you.

JAMES *slowly* I had not thought that my mother would need...yes, of course.

That just shows how selfish I am.

MARIAN You are feeling very low about yourself. That is a hard place to be.

What are you doing at present?

JAMES Nothing.

MARIAN You feel that you are good for nothing?

JAMES Yes.

MARIAN Sometimes we need to wait for such moods to pass. At other times it is best to act – to do something even if it seems pointless and you feel unworthy.

I think perhaps the time of waiting for you may be over. Why don't you come to Vienna with us.

JAMES Who is us?

MARIAN Members of the Fight the Famine Council. The situation in Europe caused by the blockade is terrible. Children are starving. Catherine and I are going to see for ourselves.

\* \* \*

JAMES [*to the audience*] Somehow I trusted her judgment. Although I found my mother's obvious relief and delight difficult, I let them make the necessary arrangements.

I don't think it was any dramatic incident that brought me back to life. Partly it was the companionship of others who thought as I did – as I now allowed myself to think. It was also, of course, seeing the people of Vienna, especially the children, who were suffering so terribly. I went to Germany after that. And then to Russia after the Civil War. I was in a Quaker relief Centre, Buzuluk, in the middle of the famine area. People were dying at the rate of one hundred a day, many of the bodies piling up in the streets, unburied. I was told I would get used to seeing people drop dead. But I knew that it was that fatal propensity to 'get used' to things that non-one should see unmoved that causes most of the cruelty in the world to carry on.

I became aware of what I wanted to do with my life: I wanted to change the world, and the way – as the Board always emphasized – to do this was to bring up children to think about and be aware of the horrors of war, and of their connection with other people – all over the world. So I became a teacher. And I met Eleanor. We married early in the twenties. We had one son, Ben.

**Published by in 2013 by**

**Northern Friends Peace Board  
Victoria Hall  
Knowsley Street  
Bolton BL1 2AS**

**<http://nfpb.org.uk>  
01204 382330**

Charity: SC 024632

