



No Power on Earth

by Sue Reddish

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This play was commissioned by the Working Class Movement Library as part of its 2015-2016 World War I project To End All Wars, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project marked the centenary of the Military Service Act 1916 which brought conscription in for the first time. The play ran alongside an exhibition about Conscientious Objectors and others who worked for peace.

Based on the true story of Salford man, James Hudson, this monologue tells the story of an ordinary school teacher at the start of the First World War who finds himself at odds with the popular mood. The story celebrates his courage to stay true to his beliefs despite considerable pressure, and asks the audience to consider what they would do in such a circumstance.

This unique project, the Library's first theatrical commission, commissioned actor Joel Parry to undertake a short Theatre in Education tour around secondary schools in Salford and then perform the piece in the Library/at Salford Museum and Art Gallery a number of times for a public audience. We are happy to make the script available for others to use/perform under a Creative Commons licence – we simply ask for an acknowledgement of both the Working Class Movement Library and of scriptwriter Sue Reddish.

Character biography: James is 35 at the start of the play, a schoolteacher, a teetotaler and, externally anyway, a figure of mainstream life. But his political, moral and social beliefs bring him into conflict with the establishment. He becomes a Conscientious Objector at the start of the First World War, he campaigns for peace, is berated, ostracised and imprisoned, yet never wavers in his stance. The play charts his journey between 1914 and 1919 and explores the dilemmas and consequences he, and others like him, had to face.

This monologue requires the actor to switch between a number of other characters using physicality and voice alone.

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Thomson “State your name, age and profession”

Hudson (to audience) That’s the easy bit!

(to panel) James Hudson, age 35 years. Currently employed as a Geography Teacher at Salford Boys’ School, (to audience) although I wonder for how much longer...

Thomson “State reason for application”

Hudson (to audience) Swinton. November 1916. I’m in front of the Military Service Tribunal. The government have introduced compulsory conscription, which means at any time a man can be called up to the army. And if he is, the law says he must enlist. If, like me, they object to this, they can appeal for exemption. And that is why I am here.

Thomson “Reason for application to be exempt from Military Service?”

Hudson That’s the Chairman of the panel - Mr George Thomson - a local Conservative Councillor. Next to him, Mr James Sykes, local Bank Manager and Major F W Hirst, the Military Representative. I have taken advice, participated in all the appeal and tribunal processes and put my faith in, what I’m told is, the ‘independent judicial panel - composed of fair-minded citizens’. And why?, because there are times in one’s life when you have to stand up for what you believe in.

Thomson “Reason for application Mr Hudson?”.

Hudson All war is immoral(to audience) The Chairman raises an eyebrow at that. Perhaps he wanted something more specific?

Thomson “We are not here to discuss philosophical niceties, there is a war on and our government require you by law to become a soldier”.

Hudson (to panel) Though the law may deem me to be a soldier, no power on earth military or otherwise can make me into one.

Hudson (to audience)The Major’s moustache has begun to twitch.

Major “That, Mr Hudson, is for us to decide”.

Hudson (to panel) None of the processes of war can be made to harmonise with my faith in the Brotherhood of Man. It is my conviction that it would be wrong for me to advocate, or participate in, any act of war. This war is in particular a shameful betrayal of the common people of the world by their statesmen. I believe it to be my duty to stand firmly against it.

(to audience) I hear the Major mutter under his breath “Whose side are these bloody 'conchies' on anyway?”

‘Conchies’. That is the popular term for what I am, a Conscientious Objector. Well

'popular' isn't the right word, because we're not, at this moment in time, popular. Understandably given how people are suffering.

But the truth is, I cannot find it within me to excuse the war, nor support it. (To panel) I believe the best that I can give to England right now is to stand firmly for peace and against war. The Military Service Act gives me the right to absolute exemption, and I claim this.

There's been a growing number of us - men and women - Socialists, churchmen, ILP members - that's the Independent Labour Party - Liberals, activists in the women's suffrage movement, all of us working together to protest because we believe war is wrong, this war particularly, and that the Military Service Act and compulsory conscription is an impingement on an individual's human rights and civil liberties. But despite all our protests, in January 1916 the Military Service Act was brought in.

This Act applied to all single men aged between 18 and 41 years. At first. But then the killing continued and the Government decided it needed more men to fill the ranks so a further Act extended conscription to married and older men. Conscription was deeply unpopular, even pro-war supporters didn't like the idea of it.

But there was a "conscientious clause" hidden away in the Act. Pacifists had campaigned to secure the right of an individual to claim exemption from conscription due to 'conscientious objection'. Britain was unusual in allowing this opt-out clause. But to be considered for the exemption you had to attend a tribunal.

Sykes "Let's get on with it, shall we, Mr Hudson? State precisely on what grounds you base your objections to combatant service".

Hudson Where do I start? Because killing is wrong? Because this war is not our war but a mistake?....a...

Sykes "Your answer Mr Hudson?"

Hudson Mr Sykes is looking at his watch. But I'm in no hurry. Who knows what lies in store for me? Their impatience is understandable, these tribunals are always busy, all men who don't want to enlist have to stand before one. And there are many reasons men hope to be exempt - men who have family members to look after, or those who are needed at work - sometimes employers reluctant to lose skilled staff come to make a case on an employee's behalf. And yes, some men try to use the exemption clause to avoid fighting out of fear and, though I cannot blame them, I have to say they do nothing to help the real Conscientious Objectors, as they confirm for some the belief that we are all cowards!

By 'real Conscientious Objectors' I mean those whose objections are based on moral, religious or political grounds - men whose faith tells them it is wrong to fight or those who hold strong political convictions. Men and women who believe in the solidarity of the human race. As I explain to the panel:

(to panel) A man who takes part in combatant service deliberately aims at the killing of man. I am deeply convinced that the men of the enemy nations are as one with me in the Universal Brotherhood of Man. To strengthen that Brotherhood is my main purpose in life. It would be an outrage to my moral convictions for me to kill those who are

compelled by their governments to fight in a quarrel which is no more theirs than mine. I am claiming exemption on political grounds.

(to audience) I can tell by their faces they've heard it all before— hardly surprising, they must have heard everything. In June '16 alone, the tribunals received claims from almost 750,000 men, all looking for exemption for any number of reasons. But the percentage that were Conscientious Objectors was relatively small. During the entire course of the war, we numbered only about 16,000, less than 1% of the tribunal's total workload – though we were certainly the most controversial.

Thomson “Mr Hudson, we see you object also to non-combatant service, why?”

Hudson (to audience) Non-combatant service refers to someone who is in the armed forces, who wears a uniform but doesn't actually fight. An army chaplain. Or doctor or a clerk... and yes, he's right, I do object.

Hudson (to panel) It seems to me a poor sort of conviction that would lead a man to object to doing the work of killing for himself, yet would permit him to contribute directly to enable others to do the killing.

Hudson (to audience) That's upset them, they must have thought I'd take this option. Major Hirst is shaking his head disapprovingly.

You see, not all Conscientious Objectors feel as I do about this. About 3,400 COs accepted call-up into the Non-Combatant Corps - the NCC. The papers nicknamed the NCC the 'No-Courage Corps'. I knew I would be given that option. But in my view, whether you pull the trigger or lay the train track that takes the men to the front, it is all part of the same barbaric war and leads to the same end.

The Major wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead with a hanky – he's looking irritated. Angry even. He obviously feels his views as strongly as I feel mine.

Major “Do you object to participating in the use of arms in any dispute - whatever the circumstances and how just, in your opinion, the cause?”

Hudson (to audience) I've been expecting this. The 'what would you do if your mother was being attacked?' question, the 'if you won't fight for your country what will you fight for?' question, the 'I bet if I made you angry enough you'd hit me' question. It's a valid one, we all have to consider under what circumstances we might justify violence, retaliation. I'm only human; I can't promise that I wouldn't be pushed to hit out in anger or fear or to save someone I loved. But I hope I could rationally think it through. And how much more important is it for a country and a government to do so?, it cannot and should not act violently out of anger, for monetary gain or to save face.

I smile at the Major, he doesn't smile back.

(to panel) Very emphatically, no cause can justify the taking up of arms; not even in the justest of causes, that of the workers in the great class war.

(to audience) It is strange to find yourself on the wrong side of the law. It is the law, not me, that has changed. My grandfather was a Chartist, my father campaigned for peace in the Boer War, and my mother and wife Nancy continue to work for women's emancipation. Fairness and justice are cornerstones of our beliefs. Conscription meant

I had to make a choice – do I remain true to my conscience, or do I obey the law? How far do you think you might go to hold fast to your views? Go to prison for them? Die for them? Or do you think you might find yourself questioning if it is your views that are wrong?

On a very practical level, on receiving call-up papers, as a Conscientious Objector, you have four choices – (actor locates 4 individuals in the audience to represent...) Accept, Appeal, Refuse or Run.

Accept. This is the law of the land and we are at war. Recruits are needed to fight. So you turn up for your medical and enlist. Put on the uniform, fight for your country, do your civic duty. Many brave men who did not agree with the war did this. But as you probably realise by now, it's not for me

Appeal. To our military services tribunal for exemption. This, after all, is within the law. It was what the clause in the Military Service Act was created for. What the pacifists had argued for. It also provided an opportunity to put one's case plainly - to appeal to reason in the panel members. At least, that's what I'm hoping.

Refuse. Some people refused to collaborate with the system at all. They didn't appeal, ignored warnings. They simply waited to be arrested and court martialed. I don't know how many people, it was not something that gets officially recorded. But, at this stage at least, it was not for me.

Run. Some decided to reject the system and go underground, on the run. Forced to live as a fugitive, supported by a network of helpers they attempted to evade imprisonment. Salford lads Frank Elder and George Berresford successfully avoided arrest after their tribunals by cycling around the country giving anti-war talks at socialist clubs. They did tremendous work, but this way was not for me.

The choices each of us made showed the differences within our movement. COs who took advantage of the concessions made by government were called Conformists. Those who could not, rejecting any collaboration with the war effort whatsoever, these were called Rejectionists or Absolutists. I am an Absolutist and I'm here before this tribunal to convince the panel of the validity of this stance..... but I don't think they're getting it.

Major “Would you be willing to join some branch of military service engaged not in the destruction but in the saving of life?”

Hudson (to panel) No.

(to audience) This sounds harsh, I know. But think about it. The fact that 'the service' is military means the 'saving of human life' is not the humanitarian task it sounds. Or that it may be in peacetime. What is the point of saving a man's life just to put him back on the front line? I do not say this lightly. My own brother was terribly injured in the Mesopotamian campaign and treated in a field hospital. Of course I am glad that his life was saved. But for what? To send him back out into that madness? Surely rather than collaborate in this cruelty, it is better to stand in protest against the whole idea of the war. To hope that, ultimately, rather than patching up a soldier, we are stopping him becoming injured in the first place.

For this reason I refuse to participate in any military service, even that part which is called 'saving life'.

Of course not all pacifists feel as I do. There's a group of young Quakers, trained in first aid, who have set up a humanitarian project in France, the Friends Ambulance Unit. 1,200 of them. I'm sure they will save many soldiers' lives and relieve suffering and I am grateful that they could reconcile that action in their hearts.

Thomson "Are you a member of a religious body?"

Hudson (to audience) They're all looking at me expectantly. The Chairman actually smiled then. I suppose if I say yes, it will help them make sense of me. Seem less threatening somehow. Religion not politics.

(to panel) My faith is irrelevant.

That wiped the smile off their faces.

(to audience) I am a Christian, but it is my politics not my faith that brings me here. Perhaps the two can never be entirely separated, but I want this panel to hear my arguments as the rational, political beliefs they are. I want to set a precedent, to have them give me complete exemption from military service because of my political views – my belief in socialism, in an international brotherhood, in the futility of war. If that is acknowledged, considered grounds for exemption, then I am sure many more objectors will follow my example.

Major "Are you a member of any other body, whose principles include objection to all forms of military service?"

Hudson (to panel) I have been a member of the Independent Labour Party for more than 10 years. Which has always been anti-war, and supports an extreme pacifist position. I also helped to found the No-Conscription Fellowship in 1914.

(to audience) I remember the start of it. A man called Fenner Brockway published a letter in the Labour Leader newspaper. It called for us to band together 'that they might know our strength against any talk of war'. Fenner was urging the leaders to stop the ridiculous brinkmanship. His headline, THE WAR MUST BE STOPPED, caught my eye immediately.

I was one of the first to reply to Fenner's article and from there the No-Conscription Fellowship was born. Fenner, now editor of the Labour Leader, and his wife Lilla set up the organisation and ran it out of their house in Marple. I formally joined the NCF executive committee in November 1915.

We came from all walks of life and we took a pledge: 'All of us, however we may have come to this conviction, believe in the value and sacredness of human personality, and are prepared to sacrifice as much in the cause of the world's peace as our fellows are sacrificing in the cause of the nation's war'.

In the early days we felt optimistic in spite of the situation in Europe. We hoped – no, believed - that humanity would prevail.

Our small organisation grew, largely thanks to DoRA - the 'Defence of the Realm Act' - a

law which was passed to give the government powers to suppress published criticism. Basically, the power to stop you saying anything they didn't want you to say and, if you did, to punish you in a court of law. Not that DoRA was all bad, the Act also restricted opening hours for public houses, which as a committed teetotaler I was very encouraged by. Though it didn't make the government any more popular!

Of course we fell foul of DoRA straight away, we produced a leaflet called "Repeal the Act", which explained why we felt conscription was wrong and as soon as it was published, we were treated as criminals, a dangerous threat to the war effort. I am a very ordinary person, a school teacher. I have certainly never thought of myself as a threat to our society, but the government was starting to believe that everyone who supported NCF was exactly that.

Our offices were raided by the police and 6 NCF members including Fenner were prosecuted. That leaflet was said to be "injurious to recruitment", meaning it was harming the war effort by encouraging people not to join the army and this was considered a crime.

When the six were sent to court, it became national news. The leaflet had been popular enough, thousands of copies had been printed, but after the arrest and prosecution of the writers, its popularity exploded. Anti-conscription groups around the country ordered many more and the leaflet, far from being suppressed by DORA, became well known around Britain. We gained a lot of free publicity! The arrests showed that we could and would be prosecuted for our ideas which just made us more determined to make our voices heard.

Major "What did you say your job was Hudson? A teacher?"

Hudson The Major makes that sound like an accusation. Then he leans in to whisper to the Chairman next to him, but I know I'm meant to hear it. "I would not trust the training of the city's children to a Conscientious Objector... It is a fact, is it not, that boys taught by cowards compare unfavourably with boys taught by patriotic men".

I am a good teacher. Yes, I have political beliefs, but I never speak of them in school, I have always kept my views separate from my work. My job is to teach Geography, not educated them in my politics, so I have never done so. Ever. Though when I hear of boys who have passed through my care being sent to the front - I wonder if I should have said more? Take Brown. The day he turned 18, William Brown joined up as a volunteer, the first battalion of the Salford Pals. It was August 1914, he walked into Salford Boys Club a lad - and walked out a soldier.

I had taught Brown throughout his school career, a boy of significant intellect, a troublesome curiosity, always asking questions and always more interested in his rugby. His constant questioning had made him a little unpopular with staff. But I, I have to admit, I enjoyed his spirited interventions almost as much as the other pupils.

"Why sir?" I'd hear.

"But why sir?"

"Why do we need to know the names of all the Empire's capital cities?" "Why indeed Brown", I thought to myself but never said.

“But why?”

He seems nervous and excited when, by chance, I run into him. He looks younger than his 18 years despite his uniform. “Hello Brown, I see your beloved Salford finally won the Rugby Football League Championship this year”.

“Yes sir, smashed Huddersfield”.

“I bet you can’t wait for next season to start”.

“I doubt we’ll do so well sir, there’ll be no team to speak of, about 30 players have already enlisted.” And then he looks at me, awkward... still a boy full of questions, just different types of questions now...

“Sir, why aren’t you in uniform? Why haven’t you enlisted?”

How do I explain to this child, no this young man, for a man he must be that is prepared to fight for his country. How can I explain to him that I hold that all war is wrong?

“Are you a coward sir?” he asks directly.... which hurts, but I’ve had worse, at least he doesn’t spit at me or jeer.

We are equal citizens now, myself and Brown, not school master and pupil any longer, so I am free to speak my mind. “This is not a moral war, this fight is for the few who have power, to keep it for themselves. But men of every nation are the same - are there not German lads like you Brown?, German teachers like me? How can it be right to kill others? This could be settled non-violently, we could talk...”.

Brown looks disappointed in me. He has been well schooled by our government and newspapers - always the good student. “The Germans don’t want to talk Sir, and we must meet might with might. There is no other way Sir, that’s just how it is”. And it is my turn to ask, “But why?”

I can see his mind is made up. I shake his hand, wish him well and tell him I look forward to his speedy and safe return. “By Christmas they reckon, Sir, I’ll be back eating me Christmas pudding with my mother – all done and dusted. She’s already started knitting me a new red scarf for the rugby next season”.

“Sounds like you might be playing for them if they’re short of lads”.

He laughs with delight at the thought – and I glimpse the child in him again. All idealism and curiosity.

“Goodbye Brown”. I watch him walk away. Whilst I do not agree with the conflict, I do not judge those who feel compelled to fight. Each man must look into his own heart and act accordingly to their principles. And those that choose to enlist... well... I acknowledge their courage and sacrifice.

These past eighteen months - between that August 1914 encounter with Brown and now, I’ve been kept busy, teaching during the day and, in the evenings, attending NCF meetings and rallies across the country – speaking or writing and distributing leaflets. It felt like I was doing something constructive and real against the war. But with more activism comes more attention. There were whispers that I was ‘going around the

country doing my best to prevent recruiting for his majesty's army'. The Headmaster was not comfortable with my activities and after about a year and a half of being scrutinised my name came before the education committee, their task – to decide if I should be removed from my job, if I was fit to teach.

That time the committee supported me – Sir William Stephens, a Salford councilor on the committee even suggested that other councilors had gone out of their way to hound me and persecute me for my beliefs. I was told I would be allowed to keep teaching and working for the NCF. I cannot tell you how relieved I was. But that seems a long time ago now. And here I am in front of another panel who are gathered to decide my fate.

Thomson “Next question, Mr Hudson. Assuming that your conscientious objections were established would you be willing to undertake some form of national service? To continue teaching perhaps?”

Hudson The Major tuts.

(to panel) No, I am unwilling to take any form of alternative service offered to me as a bargain to get out of taking military service. I have given my best as a teacher in a public school. I love teaching, but I cannot hide behind it. I cannot fight and I will not teach for your war, everyone has to make sacrifices for their principles, don't they?

Sykes “But are you willing to undertake any kind of work of national importance as a condition of being exempted from military service?”

(to audience) I confess, I'm getting irritated now...Have I not made my feelings clear?

(to panel) No, I am not prepared to take on or continue what is called work of national importance merely 'as a condition of being exempted'. When a man holds such beliefs as mine, he must be prepared to suffer for them until he can get the law of the land and the majority of his fellows to accept the validity of his beliefs. The law has allowed that my convictions are worthy of complete respect, even in wartime, and I claim the complete exemption the Military Service Act permits.

Though the law may deem me to be a soldier, no power on earth, military or other, can make me into one; I am an absolutist. I will not partake in any aspect of war, I will not enlist, and I will not undertake non-combat duties or any work of national importance.

And now silence.

What will their judgment be? The panel members look at each other...

Thomson “Refused. Enrol or face the consequences”.

(The actor turns slowly from the panel – it's over. Transition to show passage of time)

Hudson I was informed I must serve in a Non-Combatant Corps. Made to be a soldier against my will. But I am not a soldier. I am a civilian.

“Put that uniform on, that's an order soldier” – “Salute the superior officer, that's an order, soldier”. If I refuse, I am breaking the law. But now I cannot be tried in a magistrate's court under civilian law anymore. I will be brought before a military tribunal, court martialed.

The next weeks are lived in a kind of loop. I explain that I do not recognise the authority of the orders I am given, I am not a soldier. So I am charged with disobeying a lawful command whilst on active service. I refuse a command, get court martialled, receive punishment and then get sent back to the battalion, where I refuse a command, get court martialled and more punishment. Eventually I am given a prison sentence, to be served in a civilian prison. First I'm sent to Wormwood Scrubs and now I am here. Strangeways, back in Manchester.

Who would have thought it, your geography teacher locked up in Strangeways? I've spent almost three years in prison altogether. Ironic that I have shared cells with murderers, yet I am here because I refuse to murder.

Prison is a harsh environment, any minor breach of the rules incurs punishment. The No.1 punishment diet - which I have often had to endure - is bread and water only. I have lost over three stone in weight - just a bag of bones now. But the hardest thing to endure is the isolation. As Conscientious Objectors we are allowed only one book, the Esperanto Bible - a joke perhaps at the expense of the internationalists and faith-based COs? We were allowed no letters from home for the first months and only very limited visits. We endured solitary confinement and the silence rule. It brought me great comfort to hear the women who supported us singing outside the prison gates, we were not alone.

The truth is, I don't think the authorities ever really knew what to do with us. Back in 1916 conscription was new to the country and the military had no experience of dealing with so many new conscripts at all, never mind conscripts who refused to fight. As the war continued our resistance began to become an embarrassment for the government. More than 6,000 conscientious objectors were arrested; most of them court-martialled and sent to prison.

But some had a worse fate in store.

In May 1916 about 50 COs held at Harwich, Seaford and Richmond Castle were sent to France. This made no sense, surely their prison sentences were best served in Britain like the rest of us? But it turns out the plan was to make an example of them. Disobeying orders on the front line carried the death sentence. These Conscientious Objectors were being taken to France to be executed.

The COs were transported in secret by night to Southampton, but by some miracle, a note reached the NCF, telling of their plight. The COs remained defiant, despite the intimidation and brutal treatment, but after a month, they were marched on to that parade ground in Boulogne.

Three sides of the square were lined with ranks of 600 troops, called to witness the fate of these traitors. These Conscientious Objectors. It was clear the authorities wished to make an example of them, send a message home. Each man was called forward to hear the charge: disobeying orders, and the sentence: death by shooting. The COs were prepared to die for their convictions and braced themselves for the gunshots. The Officer declared that General Haig had been informed of the sentences - the rifles clacked as the firing squad prepared - there was a silence as all waited for the command to shoot. But...the Officer spoke again. General Haig had commuted the

death sentence to ten years of hard labour. The COs were to be sent back to prison in England. They could breathe again – but what exactly had happened? Had Haig been petitioned? Had the NCF managed to get the sentence commuted? Perhaps there was a fear that shooting these COs may make them martyrs for peace? We shall never know for certain.

The whole event was a scandal, and there were other stories, about the Objectors who had died in prison. William Burns, a colleague of mine in the Manchester NCF died in Hull prison. He was on hunger strike, the only power he felt he had left on earth, to protest against the brutality he had experienced. After not eating for five days, they began force feeding him. He died ten days later. They were putting milk & cocoa down the tube and he choked. He was the first prisoner at Hull to be force-fed. The tube they used was too short. Over 130 COs were forcibly fed, like the suffragettes were before the war.

I think we COs were becoming even more of an embarrassment. There was a growing uncomfortable feeling across the country that perhaps some men had unjustly been denied exemption from military service. In response, and to try to limit the bad publicity, the Home Office set up an alternative work scheme – the Brace Scheme. The idea was that these resisting men should make an "equal sacrifice" to the men at the front. Two prisons, Dartmoor and Wakefield, were adapted as "work centres" and some COs were released from prison on agreeing to accept places.

Did I accept a place? No, I refused. It felt no different than the other work I had been offered. They had chosen to make me a criminal for my beliefs, so prison is where I belonged. 1,330 'absolutists' like me refused to do any kind of alternative war work, and never won exemption of any kind.

So here I wait. The Armistice has been called but nobody wants us released until the last surviving soldier is brought back from the front. And when I am released, what will I return too? We are all changed by this war, how can we not be? And yet my beliefs remain constant.

Remember Brown? William Brown, like so many Salford Pals, from his, the 15th Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers had fallen at the Somme. I went to offer my condolences to his mother.

Mrs Brown looked at me with anger at first, a burning resentment that I was standing here before her, while her son had died all those miles away on some muddy, bloodied field. She turned to walk away, but then turned back. She had decided she wanted me to know every detail. To understand what her boy had sacrificed.

Brown had been in A Company, which formed the right hand side of the first line of attack, with B in support. C Company were on the left with D behind. The order was to march in a straight line, in an upright fashion with no firing, and no flanking or defensive manoeuvres over 300 yards of uphill, smooth terrain. It was a march straight into land held by the German forces for almost two years, long enough for them to improve their defences, though the Major General who gave the order somehow decided the land would be deserted. In fact he was heard to shout, "My God, all we'll find in Thiepval is the caretaker and his dog". They walked into the total barrage of gun

fire. Of the Battalion's attacking force of 642 men, there were 470 casualties, the majority within the first 15 minutes.

The thought of her boy marching undefended towards his violent fate clearly haunts Brown's mother. Was he one of the first to fall? Or did he watch those ahead torn apart by the guns and explosions and realise his fate?

I understand her anger, and why it is directed at me and the men and women who think like me. What are ideas to a woman who has lost her son - to everyone who has lost a son, a brother, a husband? The justifications of 'men of conscience' will not comfort them. I represent an unbearable idea - a conviction that Brown and the thousands like him have died to shore up militarism. If she accepts my belief as true, then it means her son died in vain. And if she rejects my argument, then to her I simply weakened the ranks, failed to stand beside her son to try to help him win this war. It is easier for her, perhaps, to think of me simply as a coward.

Some 432,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded at the Somme alone. The French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans half a million. So much bloodshed in that one place. The blood of nations mingled, no drop distinguishable from another. For me there, soaked into those fields, lies proof of my conviction that we are a Brotherhood. One and the same.

I felt I had no choice; I had to do what I in all conscience believed to be right - take a stand, act according to my beliefs. I believe that I am a citizen of humanity, part of a Brotherhood. That I am a civilian and that no power on earth can make me a soldier.

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