

## THE VOICES OF CONSCIENCE

a short playscript based on the experiences of conscientious objectors at Military Service Tribunals in 1916

The script can be read or acted by a group of any manageable size: the parts of tribunal members, applicants claiming exemption from military service, and the public can be divided between them. Other speakers can be added by the group and there are opportunities for improvisation. The (fictional) names given below can be changed if the actors wish.

### The cast:

- Members of the Oldtown Tribunal. All are men over 50 (and therefore not eligible for call-up themselves)

James Hadleigh: Chairman of the Tribunal. A retired civil servant

Raymond Gordon: the statutory Military Representative. A retired colonel

Harold Hartley: a member of the Liberal party. A department store owner

William North: a member of the Conservative party. A retired police chief

Owen Sedley: a member of the Socialist party. A former chief clerk in a textile factory

John Fielding: Clerk to the Tribunal (no vote). A retired clerk for the railway

Others:

[NOTE: *Tribunals were appointed by local councils and could have any number of members from 3 to about 15. Political parties were meant to be represented in proportion to the numbers of their local supporters, so any Socialists would usually be outnumbered by the main parties. High-ranking persons, such as the Mayor, could take part by virtue of their office. So if the group of performers is large enough, parts can be written in for these people too.*]

- Men from the industrial Borough of Oldtown applying for exemption from military service 'on grounds of conscience':

Arthur Watt (aged 39): a packer in a factory

Joseph Sykes (aged 27): a skilled textile worker

David Sharpe (aged 32): a teacher of primary school age children

Alan Saville (aged 30): a solicitor's clerk

Edward Draper (aged 27): a skilled textile worker

[NOTE: *The above are all COs, but most of the thousands of applicants for exemption seen by the UK's more than 2,000 Military Tribunals were men with physical disabilities, chronic illness, heavily dependent families, or occupations regarded as necessary to support the war effort (including the local hunts, whose members were all exempt from military service by order of the War Office). Groups performing the script may like to improvise the cases of some of these before the CO cases are dealt with.*]

- The public - men and women supporting the candidates for exemption

**The setting:** A large conference room in Oldtown Town Hall

**The time:** A Monday in March 1916

### SCENE ONE

[The members of the Tribunal arrive]

**HADLEIGH** (the CHAIRMAN): Good morning, gentlemen. I trust you have passed a pleasant and refreshing Sunday. I had the opportunity to reflect that this panel has so far heard the cases of 557 men, and there are many more than that ahead of us. Speed is what we need.

**GORDON** (the MILITARY REPRESENTATIVE, a retired Colonel): It looks as though there may be rather more than we thought: I believe that conscription is to be introduced for married men as well as single ones before the summer.

**HARTLEY** (the LIBERAL store-owner): It's a long time since 1914 and 'The war will be over by Christmas'.

**GORDON:** I hope you aren't blaming the army for that prediction.

**SEDLEY** (the SOCIALIST white-collar worker): Well, Colonel, there wasn't much sign that the military disagreed.

**NORTH** (the CONSERVATIVE ex-police officer): Morale needed to be kept up.

**HADLEIGH:** It still does. So, Mr Fielding, what have we got today?

**FIELDING** (CLERK to the Tribunal): 24 cases of disability. 11 with long-term illnesses. 5 men, two of them widowers, who are the sole providers for immediate relatives. 3 who claim that their occupations require them to remain in their present employment.

**HADLEIGH:** 43. Well, at five minutes each, there's a chance we will finish by luncheon. Good. I have an important -

**FIELDING:** And 5 objectors on grounds of conscience, sir. They have been called for this afternoon.

**HADLEIGH:** Oh dear. Well, we ought to be able to despatch them fast enough, as long as we don't let them argue. Mr Sedley, I know you have some sympathy with these men: I hope you won't allow that to slow up the proceedings.

**SEDLEY:** Their written statements are quite short and clear, at least, Mr Chairman.

**HADLEIGH:** Then it hangs on what they say to support their statements, doesn't it.

**GORDON:** Men like that are nothing but cowards and humbugs, to my mind. Insolent, some of them, too.

**NORTH:** If you ask me, they ought to be shot.

**GORDON:** Certainly one way and another I see only one reason for giving them full exemption: their death!

**NORTH** (to the Chairman): And if I may say so, James, you ought not to let the public take notes during the proceedings - poisonous ideas should not be allowed to spread. In fact, we should meet in private - they do in Hull and Doncaster, I know.

**HADLEIGH:** I like to think we have nothing to hide, Bill. We'll leave things as they are. Right, Mr Fielding: call the first applicant.

## SCENE TWO:

[The afternoon. Crowds of people have occupied the public seats, and more are still trying to get into the conference room.]

**HADLEIGH:** Who the devil are all these people? There was only a handful in the public seats this morning. Fielding!

**FIELDING:** There has been some publicity concerning the conscientious objectors, Mr Chairman. The applicant Edward Draper, in particular, is a very popular man.

**HADLEIGH:** Well, they know they should be silent. They had better behave themselves. Call the first applicant.

**FIELDING:** Arthur Watt: 39 years of age; worker in a factory packing department; address, 23 Hepton Street, Oldtown.

**HADLEIGH** (to Watt): Have you anything to add to your statement?

**WATT:** I would like to state publicly that I believe in the brotherhood of man, and that Socialism is my religion. I am convinced that all war is wrong, and therefore -

**NORTH:** You are wearing spectacles with one lens blacked out. Why?

**WATT:** I lost that eye in an accident.

**HADLEIGH:** Then why aren't you applying for exemption on the grounds of physical handicap?

**WATT:** The grounds that matter to me are moral ones, sir.

**HADLEIGH:** You are wasting our time. You are granted exemption on account of your handicap. We shall recommend that you do civilian service working on the land to support the war effort.

**WATT:** Yes, I'm prepared to work under a civilian authority -

**NORTH:** What do you mean, prepared? The Chairman is giving you an order, not making you a proposition.

**WATT:** I will do any kind of civilian labour of which I'm capable. I'd be a dustman if necessary - Lord knows they're needed in this borough.

**HADLEIGH:** Such remarks don't improve your standing with us. Leave this room. Next applicant, Mr Fielding. Quickly.

**FIELDING:** Joseph Sykes, aged 27, skilled textile worker, 15 Shepherd's Terrace, Streamside, Oldtown..

**HADLEIGH** (to Sykes): Where are you employed?

**SYKES:** At Murdoch's, sir.

**HARTLEY:** Mr Chairman, Murdoch's Textiles are now manufacturing materials used for military uniforms and fibre-based military equipment.

**HADLEIGH:** Yes, I know that: Mr Murdoch has told me so himself. Sykes, has anyone been found to replace you?

**SYKES:** No, sir.

**HADLEIGH:** You are exempted from military service for two months, then, to allow for that to be done. Make sure your manager knows he has to find an older man to do your work. You will receive a summons to attend at the barracks eight weeks from today.

**SYKES:** But sir, you can see from my statement that I have applied for full exemption on grounds of conscience.

**GORDON:** To save your skin, no doubt. Be thankful for the two months grace you've been given. You'd better pray for the war to end before they are up!

**HADLEIGH:** We do not need to deal with the matter of your conscience here, Sykes. If it is still giving you trouble when you are called up, you will have to re-apply, or take the consequences: either way, you will be under military authority in two months.

**NORTH:** Pray that your manager hasn't been able to replace you! The army doesn't want dishonourable fellows like you in its ranks.

**SYKES:** Sir, I have indeed asked that the armed forces should not be burdened with me, and yet you refuse to consider my moral objection to war.

**GORDON:** As I said, these men are intolerably insolent.

**HADLEIGH:** There is no more to be said, Mr Sykes, or certainly not by you. The next applicant, Mr Fielding, please.

**FIELDING:** David Sharpe: 32 years of age; elementary school teacher; address 11 St Anne's Villas, Heddon Road, Oldtown.

**HADLEIGH** (to Sharpe): I see that you belong to a Christian sect which requires its members not to carry or use weapons. Is that your only reason for applying for exemption?

**SHARPE:** I have held these beliefs for 7 years now, and to abandon them now would brand me a hypocrite, which I could not tolerate. It's a matter of deep importance to me, and I would like to explain -

**HADLEIGH:** I asked you, have you anything else to say?

**SHARPE:** Yes, I do.

**HADLEIGH:** Then why is it not in your written statement?

**SHARPE:** I expected to be able to bear witness to it here. My conscience, my beliefs -

**NORTH:** What would you do if an enemy soldier was attempting to rape your sister?

**SHARPE:** What has that to do with my moral objection to war? I am totally opposed to war, and that is why I stand here. I also remind you that war breeds the kind of atrocity you refer to, when men have been brutalised by fighting. The rape of women by soldiers in warfare has been documented by historians of all societies down the ages. War is indeed an evil, and there is no moral justification for -

**GORDON:** Mr Chairman, we resolved to hear no speeches, no arguments!

**HADLEIGH** (to Sharpe): I repeat, do you have any other objection to military service?

**SHARPE:** What is more terrible than to kill another human being? What greater objection could there be to -

**GORDON:** God help our wives and daughters if the enemy invade! They'd get no protection from you. Frankly, you appal me.

**HADLEIGH** (to Sharpe): You are recommended for non-combatant service. No, not another word! Stand down.

**GORDON:** If our men took the line he does, we'd be an occupied country now! And another thing - he's not a fit person to be teaching children. The coming generation needs -

**HADLEIGH:** No arguments or speeches, as we agreed, Colonel Gordon! Next man in, please, Mr Fielding.

**FIELDING:** Alan Saville: 30 years of age; solicitor's clerk; address The Corner House, Priory Lane, Oldtown.

**HADLEIGH** (to Saville): What have you to add to your written statement?

**SAVILLE:** I am a Socialist and believe that the life of every human being is sacred. To me, war is murder, and war will end when that view is held by many more who, like me, refuse to take part in warfare of any kind. I am not afraid of hardship as a result of my views.

**HADLEIGH:** My fellow Tribunal member, Mr Sedley here, is a Socialist too, and he will agree with me when I tell you that many Socialists have become soldiers in this war. Will you not, Mr Sedley?

**SEDLEY** (to Saville): It is not easy for many Socialists to take so fundamental a position, Mr Saville. It may not even, at this point in time, be right. People move only gradually towards radical change.

**SAVILLE:** I am justified in interpreting my Socialist faith according to my lights. Whatever you say, there are more and more Socialists who oppose all war, including the Independent Labour Party of which I'm a member, and I'm proud to be among them. Perhaps you too will think again, after you have heard us.

**NORTH:** Do you belong to any religious sect?

**SAVILLE:** No. My position is founded on moral grounds.

**NORTH:** Moral! Political you mean.

**GORDON:** Do you think it right, on these moral grounds of yours, to allow a foreign foe to invade these shores?

**SAVILLE:** I have no desire to see this country occupied. But even in that event I would never carry weapons or use them. It is being armed that provokes the use of arms. No civilised country would think of attacking another if that country was not armed.

**GORDON:** Do you really mean to say that if this country had no weapons, no army or navy, we would not be attacked?

**SAVILLE:** Yes. When a country is unarmed there is far less danger of attack. Countries invade each other through fear.

**GORDON:** We've had enough of this, Mr Chairman. This case should be stopped.

**NORTH:** Saville: do you smoke?

**SAVILLE:** Yes.

**NORTH:** Do you realise that every cigarette you buy provides tax money which pays for the war? If your conscience is so important to you, you should give them up.

**SAVILLE:** It's impossible to do anything without helping the war. If I eat I help the war, if I travel I help the war. If I neither smoked, ate nor travelled, and my money sat in the bank, it would still be used to pay for the war. So my energies are spent in one aim alone: working to promote peace. That's why I'm here now.

**HADLEIGH:** Your claim for exemption is disallowed.

**SAVILLE:** Why?

**HADLEIGH:** You have not made an adequate case for it. This is not a place for political debate. Make way for the next applicant immediately. Mr Fielding?

**FIELDING:** Edward Draper -

**THE PUBLIC** (who have been becoming increasingly restive) cheer, applaud and call out words of support

**FIELDING:** - 27 years of age, skilled textile worker, 18 Palmerston Road, Oldtown.

**THE PUBLIC:** We know who he is! You listen to him! [Etc]

**GORDON:** Mr Chairman, the room must be cleared of these people! This is clearly an orchestrated disruption of the Tribunal. It's outrageous.

**HARTLEY:** We shall have to hear this case in private.

**NORTH:** The police have been sent for. I got a message to the Chief Constable earlier.

**THE PUBLIC:** A trial in private is not a fair trial! Free speech! Free speech! As citizens we have a right to hear. And to speak if we have to! [Etc]

**SEDLEY:** It is quite likely that Mr Draper has no connection with these people. Perhaps we should let him state his position.

**DRAPER:** I am as surprised as you are by this demonstration. But I think I can explain it. One of the reasons I'm widely known at my place of work and throughout Oldtown is that I've expressed a strong anti-war attitude in peacetime as well as war, indeed since I was fourteen years old. Perhaps if you allowed me to speak to these people -

**GORDON:** They won't listen to you!

**THE PUBLIC:** Yes we will. We think highly of Draper, you know. Yes, more than we do of this Tribunal! [Etc]

**SEDLEY** (to the crowd): You aren't making it any easier for Mr Draper with these remarks. He'll tell you himself.

**DRAPER** (to the crowd): Women and men, I appeal to you to make no further demonstrations while my case is heard. If I get no justice, it doesn't matter - I'm just one man, representing the pacifist beliefs of many men as well as myself. I want fair play and no favours. Will you help? It's important that I'm heard in public.

**THE PUBLIC:** murmurs of agreement

**HADLEIGH** (to the public): Be warned. The slightest disturbance and the police outside will remove you. (To Draper) Now, Mr Draper, can you prove that you have been, as you put it in your written statement, 'opposed to militarism' for more than a few convenient months?

**DRAPER:** Yes. I can call on a number of women and men who have heard me express that view, and my belief in the sacredness of human life, for more than a decade.

**HARTLEY:** Doesn't it trouble you that by refusing to fight you are sheltering behind the brave men who are fighting for your country?

**DRAPER:** In that sense I have no country. My country is the community of workers, wherever they are. I work for the economic and moral betterment of humanity, anywhere.

**NORTH:** Including Germany?

**DRAPER:** Yes.

**GORDON:** Well, you'd better go there, then.

**DRAPER:** I would be no worse off there than I am here. Wherever I am, I work to persuade the people that war is never the way to settle disputes.

**NORTH:** Oh, they might pretend to go along with you in time of peace, but when their blood is up, only force will do.

**DRAPER:** You can never defeat militarism with militarism. Meanwhile, the interests of the workers of England and the workers of Germany are the same, and I will not march against the workers anywhere.

**HARTLEY:** Non-combatant service, then.

**DRAPER:** Certainly not. Non-combatant service is still military service. I object not only to killing but also to manufacturing the ammunition and weapons to do it.

**GORDON:** But in heaven's name, man, the Germans are fighting against England!

**DRAPER:** They are not fighting against me.

**HARTLEY:** You're an Englishman - of course they are!

**DRAPER:** I don't think my name has been mentioned in the German Parliament.

**THE PUBLIC :** laughter and applause

**SCENE THREE:**

[The Tribunal, instead of a rapid whispering at the table to determine the vote, have withdrawn to discuss Edward Draper's case.]

**SEDLEY:** I think he has made out a good case.

**NORTH:** Oh, he talks well, but his ideas are alien and crackpot. They could never work in practice. Any fool can see that.

**SEDLEY:** He would say they can work when enough people believe in them.

**HADLEIGH:** Well, one way and another he has taken up a good deal more of our time than we normally allow. I think we have a majority vote that in the light of his evident sincerity we grant a two month temporary exemption?

**HARTLEY:** Yes, I support that.

**NORTH:** I suppose so - two months isn't long. He would have made an excellent officer, don't you think?, Colonel Gordon? It's a dreadful waste of a good man. Still, in two months he will come under military control. He might be licked into shape yet.

**SEDLEY:** Of course not. He won't fight, and he won't accept non-combatant status.

**GORDON:** These men are really quite insane. Doesn't he realise what he's passing up? As a non-combatant he could have an army rank, army pay, and government allowance for any dependants. And on top of that the coward's dream: the knowledge that he would never be asked to fight on the front line.

**SEDLEY:** I think, Colonel, he is fighting on a front line of his own, and I for one respect that.

**HADLEIGH:** In a way it is we who are taking the coward's way out. We are granting him a temporary exemption, and he will appeal against it in favour of the absolute exemption we have refused. The Appeals Tribunal will turn him down and give him enforced non-combatant status. He will reject that too, and face military discipline and prison. He knows it. We know it. And what help is all this to the war?

**SEDLEY:** I remember another objector saying that non-combatant service was like trying to stop a boat sinking by baling the water out instead of plugging the hole that was letting it in. 'The only way to save life,' he said, 'is to stop the war.' It has a certain logic, don't you think? I believe Edward Draper when he speaks of working for the interests of humanity.

**GORDON:** The whole war is in the interests of humanity!

**HADLEIGH:** We can scarcely disagree, however, that interests of humanity are best served by peace. It so happens that most of us believe that to preserve peace we must be prepared for war. Draper does not. But it is peace we want, and I am now going out to tell him that and wish him luck. Which of you will support me in that?