

Topic 2

The Conchie

Every picture tells a story!

The Conchie is an oil painting by Arthur Gay; if you look closely you will see a young man with an open book in his hand and two soldiers holding rifles. It looks like they are on a train, but it is not clear where they are going or why, or is it?



The Conchie.

Arthur W. Gay, b. 1901
d.1958, The Conchie, 1931.
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There is a clue in the title. The word Conchie is a nickname, an insult really. It is short for Conscientious Objector. Conchies were also called COs. A Conchie was someone who refused to fight in World War I. They were always male as only men fought in the armed forces then. A lot of people thought they were cowards for not fighting.

Some Conchies refused to do anything at all that might support the war. They were often arrested and imprisoned. Take another look at the painting. What do you think is happening? Where are the people in the picture going? Why?

Brothers at War

'God bless him, I'm right proud of him' – a soldier wrote to his parents from the trenches before the Battle of the Somme. He was talking about his brother Bert Brocklesby, who had been put in prison for refusing to be a soldier. Both Bert and Phil made very different choices in World War I.

Bert and Phil were on a cycling holiday when they saw a newspaper headline which said

“Britain declares war on Germany.”

Their lives were about to change for ever. The newspaper reported that thousands of men were volunteering to join the army. But Bert knew that he wouldn't 'join up'. He said he believed that:

“God had not put me on earth to go destroying his own children.”

Later the same day Phil and Bert were stopped by a policeman who thought they might be German spies! They decided it was time to head for home.

Bert and Phil were two of four brothers, who all decided to take different action when war was declared. They lived in Connisborough in South Yorkshire, with their parents. The Brocklesby family were all Methodist Christians and were well known locally.

George the eldest of the four brothers was not well enough to join the army, so he became the local recruiting officer. His job was to get young men to join the army.

Bert was the second eldest, a trained teacher and a musician and a firm believer in the line from the Bible that says 'You shall not kill'. He did not like the idea that churches and priests were encouraging people to fight and kill in the name of religion. One priest said:

“To kill Germans is to do divine service!”

This means to kill Germans is to do what God wants. Fortunately many priests didn't agree and Bert definitely didn't! He didn't join the army and refused to hide his views. As a result he was treated very badly by many people, who said he was scared to fight.

Phil the third brother was not sure what choice to make to begin with and carried on working as a chemist while he thought things through. Eventually he joined the army.

The youngest brother Harold joined the army immediately. He too had been brought up a Methodist and yet he had a strong sense of duty to his country and his choice was to fight in the army. He asked his eldest brother for an enlistment form. The form was signed by George as recruiting officer, his father a local Justice of the Peace and Phil as the volunteer.

A year later the Government introduced conscription, a law which said ALL men had to join the armed forces; the law allowed Conscientious Objectors (COs) the right to appear before a group of people, a tribunal, to say why they didn't want to fight. Bert's request not to fight because of his religious beliefs was one of the first to be heard in South Yorkshire. He was asked at the tribunal:

“Supposing you were in a corner with your back to the wall and six men were before you with open sword or fixed bayonet, would you not do something if you had a revolver in your hand?”

Bert replied:

“The Sixth Commandment says ‘Thou shalt not kill’. I take it is better to be killed than kill anyone else.”

The tribunal decided that he had to join the army's Non-Combatant (non-fighting) Corps, which was often called the No Courage Corps. They didn't carry guns, but wore a uniform, had to obey orders and did work that might help the war. For Bert, this was just the army with another name and he refused to join.

A policeman came to the Brocklesby's home to arrest him. It was a hard time for Bert's family; his mother was sent a white feather – a badge of cowardice – through the post. Neighbours told his father that he should throw Bert out of the house and that he should try to get his son to change his mind. Mr Brocklesby replied

"I would rather Bert be shot for his beliefs than abandon them."

Bert was taken first to Pontefract Barracks and then to Richmond Castle in North Yorkshire, where with 15 other Conscientious Objectors who refused orders, he was locked in a cell while the army decided what to do with him.

On his cell wall he wrote sentences from the bible and drew a picture of his fiancée Annie. Eventually the army decided to send Bert and the other 15 to France, where they would be treated as soldiers and so could be shot for refusing orders. They travelled by train (like the Conchie in the painting) and some of them dropped notes out of the window. They wanted people to know what was happening to them.

From France Bert managed to send his parents a postcard with a message in a secret code, telling them that he was being held in Boulogne. Phil was being sent to fight in France and he promised them that if he had the chance he would try to find Bert.

When Phil arrived in Boulogne he managed to slip away unnoticed from his fellow soldiers. After trailing from one army camp to another, he finally found Bert at Henriville.

"At about 4pm some forty men came marching up the hill and I saw Bert in the centre ranks. I shall never forget how his face lighted up when he saw me."

Phil was allowed to meet his brother. He learned that 35 Conchies had been tried by a court martial (army court). He was there when Bert's sentence was read out.

"Tried by court martial and found guilty. Sentenced to death by shooting, this sentence has been confirmed by the Commander in Chief, but afterwards commuted by him to one of penal (prison) servitude for 10 years."

Phil left Bert and went on to fight on the Somme. In the last letter he wrote to his parents before the battle he wrote:

"God bless him, I'm right proud of him. I shall be glad when we can all be together again."

Phil was very fortunate to survive the Somme and two weeks later he wrote home again, this time to his Aunty:

"LOVE WAR? Not I after these experiences. Long horrible wars like this one are one of the strongest arguments for Conscientious Objectors."

Bert was imprisoned for the rest of the war. He had a visit in December 1917, from Phil and Harold, who had both been wounded. Phil was on his way back to France and they arrived at prison in their army uniforms. The man in charge of the prison asked Phil if he would like to take Bert with him to France. Phil

asked him if he would like to go too, he didn't say "Yes!" so apparently not!

Bert did not see his family again until 1919, when all COs were set free. The army wanted no more to do with them. When he arrived home his father stood at the doorway and said "Welcome home Bert". This was his answer to the people who said he should throw Bert out of the house.

Bert did not come home to an easy life. If anything, people were nastier to Conchies after the war, when the full extent of the horrors of the trenches and the number of deaths became known, than during it. Nearly every family had lost loved-ones. The people in the town and even in church insulted him.

Bert decided to go to Germany to help feed the children who were still suffering because of the war. His fiancée's brother had been killed and Annie couldn't understand why he wanted to help the Germans; they split up as a result. Bert went on to work in Africa, before coming back to teach in England. He remained opposed to war and a Conchie for the rest of his life.

George, Bert, Phil and Harold and indeed the whole Brocklesby family always remained close. They proved that people can make different choices, hold different opinions, but still respect and care for each other, even though it may not always be possible to agree!

Look again at the painting of the Conchie. Can you imagine being one of the people in the painting and how you might feel?

What choices might you have made?

What might happen next?



**Key
Questions**



Choices