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# **RIPA ISLAND**

## **A Lesson for Conscriptionists**

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## RIPA ISLAND.

### A LESSON FOR CONSCRIPTIONISTS.

[AUTHORITIES.—The narrative of events on Ripa Island is given in the words of the boys themselves, but has been compiled from four sources, viz : (1) Article by Reg. Williams, in *The Repeal* (the organ of the Passive Resisters' Union), August, 1913 ; (2) Letter to the Labour Congress, signed "on behalf of the thirteen prisoners," by Williams, Hooper and Worrall, dated July 2nd, and published in *The Dominion*, July 5th ; (3) Letter from John McTaggart to the Mayor of Runanga, dated July 2nd, and endorsed by the other twelve lads ; (4) Private letters of J. K. Worrall to his parents, July 1st and 2nd. The account of the proceedings before the magistrate in the fort agrees substantially with the report of the *Christchurch Evening News*, July 2nd. Citations of Parliamentary and other official proceedings are chiefly from *The Dominion* newspaper. —S.V.B.]

NEW ZEALAND seems to be regarded by the National Service League as its own little experimental farm. There is, nevertheless, ground for believing that in efficiency, in discipline, in marksmanship, in regularity of attendance on parade, in everything but numbers, the New Zealand army of youthful conscripts is inferior to the volunteers of a few years ago ; and even in point of numbers official figures show that it has not come up to expectations. But perhaps the chief value of this experimental farm of the National Service League lies in its testing of the methods of compulsion. If a lad does not want to drill how shall he be made to do it ? That is a question on which the League is perfectly silent. When it was asked in a newspaper, the Secretary of the League replied that it did not come within the scope of his organisation. And yet the only new thing which the League proposes is compulsion. The sole essential innovation which it demands is that something shall be done to the

lads to make them drill. Something—but what? We turn to the experimental farm.

Everybody who was living in New Zealand at the time must remember the surprise and indignation which were expressed in all parts of the Dominion when the first few boys who refused to register or take the military oath were put in gaol. They were decent, well-behaved lads. Nobody knew anything against them. Yet because they refused to be trained as soldiers they were sent to prison, and some of them were herded with common criminals, forced to have their finger-prints taken and set to pick oakum. Even the people who held that every boy ought to be a soldier were not prepared for that. They thought they believed in universal training, but they did not like the name—and still less the reality—of compulsory training. They wanted their omelet, but the idea that eggs must be broken had never occurred to them. A general election was drawing near, so the Government stopped the prosecutions, let some of the boys out of gaol, and promised to try a new method of punishment instead of imprisonment.

The promise was kept by the succeeding Government, but the new punishments, instead of being milder, were more severe than the old. As the law now stands, the so-called "shirker," the passive resister, or conscientious objector, is fined. If he does not pay (and he very often does not), the money may be docked from his wages and collected from his employer. If that is impossible (and he is apt to make it so by stopping work), he is handed over to the military authorities and confined in a fortress for any period up to twenty-eight days. There the officers are supposed to make him drill, and if he refuses, he may be sentenced to a further term of twenty-eight

days, and after that to another, and so on, until either he gives in, or the officers let him go. Legally they may, instead of letting him go, ask a magistrate to send him to gaol.

In addition to imposing a fine at the beginning of this process, the magistrate may, and frequently does, declare the offender, for any period up to ten years, ineligible to be employed in the public service, or to vote at a Parliamentary election. The Education Department also takes a hand, and deprives the boy who has not done his drills of any scholarship which he may have won.

#### THE DILEMMA OF THE COERCIONISTS.

The authorities doubtless thought that with this elaborate armoury of coercion—fine, attachment of wages, military detention, imprisonment, deprivation of civil rights, loss of educational advantages—they would be able to subdue even the most obstinate stripling. But, as one of their victims has said, they did not know that lads under twenty-one have consciences. Now, it has happened in all ages that people have faced death itself rather than be false to a principle. The early Christians faced it, and some of them suffered it, rather than serve in the Roman legions. There are in New Zealand to-day hundreds—perhaps thousands—of lads who would make the same choice. It follows that those who would thoroughly enforce conscription must devise, if they can, some penalty more terrible than death. But a difficulty arises. Even if the military were prepared to go so far as that, public opinion would not let them. Indeed, as we have seen, the public of New Zealand could not even endure to see the passive resister subjected to ordinary imprisonment.

Dimly conscious of their dilemma, those responsible for the military occupation of New Zealand tried to shield their scheme from public criticism by keeping awkward facts and hostile comment out of the newspapers, denying to anti-militarists the right of meeting in customary out-door places, and transferring some of the power of inflicting penalties from the open law courts to the comparative secrecy of the barracks. The dearest rights and liberties of Englishmen must be destroyed if conscription is to have a chance of success.

The Minister for Defence has admitted in Parliament that "a good many" youths who have ignored the law have not been prosecuted, and that "many of them" have gone away and cannot be found. Nevertheless, according to the latest official return, there had been up to June 30th, 1913, a period of two years, 3,108 convictions; 241 lads had been convicted twice, and 43 three times—for so long as a lad stays away from drill he must be punished again and again. One youth was punished eight times in eighteen months for refusing to comply with the Defence Act, and several times for street speaking and similar "offences."

The "Repeal," the organ of the Passive Resisters' Union, for October, 1913, states that nearly 100 boys have been imprisoned for non-compliance and about the same number sent to military detention—200 in all. The population of New Zealand is only one million, so that, at this rate, if the National Service League had its way in this country, we should have to reckon upon sending some 9,000 British and Irish boys to gaol in little more than two years.

One of the officers, speaking of military detention, said that, when they got the boys into

the forts, they would make them drill or break their hearts. They tried.

#### THE PRISONERS OF RIPA ISLAND.

There was trouble in various places, but it reached a climax at Fort Jervis, on Ripa Island, Lyttelton Harbour. To this fortress thirteen youths from the city of Christchurch and the West Coast were committed during the month of June, 1913, to undergo military detention. Their names were: Reginald Williams, J. E. Nuttall, Robert McTaggart, Walter J. Hooper, H. Guthardt, James K. Worrall, H. W. Thackwell, Edward Hannam, William George Robson, John McTaggart, J. Coppersmith, Thomas Nuttall and Edward Edwards. They all refused to drill, and for some days no great efforts were made to induce them to do so. Their parents and a few other people were allowed to visit them, and they could receive and send letters.

"We were living excellently," writes Williams, "and enjoying ourselves. The food was good and there was plenty of it. We all lived in the barrack room, and a very happy family we were. . . . The work that we did consisted for the most part of cleaning and sweeping our quarters, wash-house, yards, lavatories, etc."

Ordered to help in the dismounting of a gun and to unload some coal, the boys struck, but after two days on half-rations, during which they were confined two in a cell, they were allowed to go back to the old conditions in the barrack room. They agreed to work, and the lieutenant in charge told them, according to Williams, that he would not give them work that was against their principles. The events of the next few days can best be told in the words of the boys themselves, written in the barracks under all the stress and

excitement of the actual collision between persecution and resistance.

"On Saturday morning, June 21st, we were mustered into the barrack room, and the lieutenant addressed us. Having explained that there was not a great deal of ordinary work to do on the island, he stated that when that ended he would want us to clean guns, etc., but he would not compel us to do this if it was against our principles, as he wished to treat us like men, and he also said, 'Of course, I shall not be so mean as to put you on short rations when the work runs out, but will have to lock you up in the barrack room during working hours if you do not care to clean armaments.' Little knowing what was to follow, these remarks pleased us immensely.

"For a week everything went on smoothly. Shortly after 1 o'clock on Monday, June 30th, the door of the barrack room was unlocked, and Bombardier Moir, who was the senior officer on the island at the time, came in, accompanied by three soldiers. He explained that the work had run out, and now he must ask us to clean the guns. We were asked individually if we were prepared to do this work, and for answer he received an emphatic 'No.' The man, who was evidently acting under telephoned instructions from Lieutenant Macdonald on the other side of the harbour, pleaded hard with us, and left the room saying, 'Well, boys, I can't help it.'

#### HUNGER STRIKE AND SICKNESS.

"We knew now that the crisis had arrived, and we discussed hurriedly what course was best to take. A hunger strike was suggested, and put to the vote; eight voted for it, four against, and one did not vote. This decided the matter.

"At about 3.15 p.m., Bombardier Moir and the other soldiers again came in, and this time we were asked if we would drill and learn semaphore signalling. Again a negative answer was given. An attempt was going to be made to force us to drill, but we were determined that it should fail. Force would have no more effect upon us than coaxing had previously. We had been offered a forty-eight hours holiday in Christchurch if we would drill. We had refused. Now we were going to be slowly starved into submission on half rations, but we would beat them; we would starve ourselves, and so bring about a climax quickly.

"As there were only seven separate cells in which to confine us, two were put in each of six of them, and Williams was put alone in the seventh. Hooper and Robson were

confined in the next compartment, and they were able to talk through the wall.

"That night at tea-time, ten out of our party of thirteen refused the miserable half-rations that were brought to us. It was bitterly cold, and our bedding was not brought to us until about seven o'clock, and was taken away next morning.

"On the morning of July 1st, the Lieutenant came to the island and interviewed each of us. He said that he was going to make us clean the guns, and furthermore, 'he was not going to be satisfied with work alone, but was going to get drill out of us as well this time.' This decided us. We would stick to our principles to the last.

"We refused dinner when it was brought round, and it was shortly after this that Robson collapsed in his cell. He was soon vomiting, bringing up bile and blood. Hooper and Williams banged on their doors until help arrived. Robson could hardly stand, and had to be supported by two soldiers. He shook hands with Hooper before he went, saying, 'Stick to your principles, Wally.' J. and R. McTaggart also fell sick. The three were taken to the office in front of a fire, while the officers rang up for a doctor. While they were in the office, W. Robson was shaking, groaning and spitting blood. Bob McTaggart was suffering from the intense cold, having nothing to sit down or lie upon except the iron bedstead with which his cell was fitted. The doctor prescribed for Robson, and declared that he was suffering from chill and bronchitis. The doctor also condemned the cells, as there was no ventilation, all the windows being barred or screwed tight down. At his orders the bars were removed and all the windows opened. The cells were about eight feet by eight.

"After spending a restless and painful night, we refused breakfast again on Wednesday morning, July 2nd. By this time most of the boys were down, and Robson was in a semi-conscious state, and the groans of agony and pangs of hunger were enough to make a person cry.

#### A STRANGE LAW COURT.

"At about 11.30 the launch arrived, and we were surprised at the passengers it disgorged. Besides one or two soldiers, there was Lieut. Macdonald, a sergeant of police, T. A. B. Bailey, stipendiary magistrate, two doctors, a Court clerk, and two reporters. Weak, haggard, and looking considerably worse for our forty-eight hours fast in this cold place, twelve of us were filed into the room. Sergeant-Major Conley

asked if Robson was to be brought in. 'Yes,' replied Macdonald. 'But he can't walk,' protested the sergeant-major. At this moment the lieutenant lost his temper, and said, 'Bring him in! Use any force you like!' A few minutes later Robson was carried in unconscious between two soldiers. Almost before he was inside the door, Dr. Newell jumped to his feet and yelled, 'That man is malingering your Worship!' This was more than we could stand, and exclamations of 'Shame!' 'Tyranny!' etc., filled the air, in spite of the cries of 'Silence!' from the policemen. One of our comrades shouted out, 'Do you call this justice? You can put me in hell!'

"All the soldiers and the two who were supporting Robson were nearly breaking down to see the poor chap kept there all the time the court sat. His head was all on one side, and he was as white as a sheet. He said after he came round in the afternoon that he did not remember anything that occurred in the Court.

"We had to face a magistrate and answer a charge of failing to drill and clean guns, without even a quarter of an hour's notice that we were to be tried. In order that we might say all that we wanted to, we pleaded not guilty. Worrall demanded an adjournment of the case, so that we could get a lawyer, but this request was refused, and we were told that we had no case. Bombardier Moir and three other soldiers gave evidence that we had been requested to drill and had refused. — had to give evidence that we had refused to drill, and while he was giving it, his knees nearly broke under him. We could see the tears in his eyes. Still, we decided to ask him no questions, as he has treated us splendidly, so far as is in his power. We left all our questions for the lieutenant, and he found out to his cost that we were not conscripts who did not think. We called him everything. Tom Nuttall asked him if he remembered his promise concerning drill, etc., and he denied it. Worrall threw back at Macdonald the text from which he had preached to some of us on the previous Sunday morning, 'Honour thy father and mother,' and added that we were treated like dogs for doing so. The magistrate interjected that he thought that text meant that we should honour and obey all persons set in authority over us. Williams replied that he was twisting the Bible just as he was twisting the law.

"In the midst of this, we were each sentenced to seven days' extra detention, except Robson, whose case was adjourned for seven days.

"Once outside the chamber of horrors, we again got going, and gave three hearty cheers for Bill Robson, who was being carried back to his bunk in the barrack room. Then came three more cheers for the Passive Resisters' Union, followed by three blood-curdling hoots for the benefit of Lieutenant Donald Macdonald, R.N.Z.A. A similar honour was bestowed on T. A. B. Bailey, S.M.

"A substantial dinner had been prepared, and was offered to the hunger strikers. Seven of the ten decided to feed after forty-eight hours starvation, on condition that it was served in the barrack room. Williams, Hooper and Worrall desired further concessions, demanding among other things that they should be given their bedding in their cells during the day. Not satisfied with the answers to these demands, they refused the tempting dinner that was brought to their cells. Later in the day, they were assured that they would be allowed to have their blankets during the next day, that the rations would be increased, and that we should all be allowed to have our meals together in the barrack room. That evening, the three last hunger strikers, after a fast of fifty-eight hours, had tea with their comrades in the barrack room. During Thursday afternoon we were each asked twice if we would drill and clean armaments, but all hands refused as usual."

#### LABOUR CONGRESS TO THE RESCUE.

On Friday, July 4th, a letter from the boys on Ripa Island was read at the Labour Congress then sitting at Wellington. The Congress, comprising delegates from nearly all the Trades Unions in New Zealand, resolved, on the motion of Mr. McCullough, the Workers' Representative on the bench of the Industrial Arbitration Court:

"That this Congress strenuously protests against the wicked and barbarous method of imposing solitary confinement on the boys now incarcerated on Ripa Island for refusing military service, and calls upon the Government in the interests of humanity to immediately release these boys."

That evening, the members of the Congress, to the number of 400, marched in a body to Parliament Buildings. Twenty were admitted to interview the Prime Minister (Mr. Massey) and the

Minister of Defence (Mr. James Allen). The rest waited outside. The Prime Minister promised the deputation that he would summon the Cabinet to meet next day, and that the Minister of Defence would "institute the most searching inquiry."

On the following Monday the Congress received a written reply from the Cabinet. In this document the Ministers promised that an investigation should immediately be made; that the boys should have sufficient food and no solitary confinement, and (most important and remarkable of all) that military duties would not be insisted on.

The Congress voted the reply unsatisfactory, and a meeting at Wellington, at which a thousand persons were present, demanded the abolition of conscription, expressed its high appreciation of the courage of those suffering imprisonment and military detention, and protested against military tyranny in New Zealand.

#### A "SEARCHING" ENQUIRY.

On that same Monday (July 7th), Adjutant-General Lieutenant-Colonel R. J. Collins, accompanied by Colonel Smythe, officer commanding the district, visited the island. His mission, according to the New Zealand Press Association, was "to ascertain from personal observation whether there was any basis to justify the Minister in ordering a public enquiry." It appears that the only witnesses examined were Lieutenant Macdonald, Sergeant-Major Conley and Bombardier Moir, and that the prisoners were neither present nor represented. Colonel Collins sent them a message that he would hear any or all of them singly and alone. The boys, however, insisted that they should all be in the room together; they wanted a public enquiry. Neither party would yield, and

consequently the report which Colonel Collins presented next day to the Minister conveyed only one side of the case. It whitewashed the officers and minimised the complaints of the boys. It stated, citing medical authority, that the reduced rations were sufficient when the boys were not working, that only one youth was reported sick, and that he was "suffering from biliousness." In other respects, none of its statements as to facts were materially inconsistent with the story as told by the boys. This was the sequel to the Premier's promise of "a most searching enquiry." No other was held. With the report before him, and noting that Lieutenant Macdonald had "held services and presented them with two Bibles and two hymn books," and that one or more of them had been very disrespectful to the Adjutant-General-Lieutenant-Colonel and those who sent him, the Minister concluded that the boys were only "out for misrule."

#### THE BOYS' MANIFESTO.

They were, of course, sometimes noisy and even disorderly, but they threatened their persecutors with nothing worse than publicity. The great fact is that they steadily refused to do what they believed to be wrong. They proved in the only possible way that the manifesto which they sent to their comrades outside was something far finer than mere bravado. Here it is:

"To the Passive Resisters of New Zealand.—'We, the undersigned prisoners on Ripa Island wish to take this opportunity of sending out a word of encouragement to our comrades still at liberty. We are winning and winning well. Our captors have failed to make us fall into their devilish traps. Threats, solitary confinement and reduced rations have been tried and have proved useless; hoaxing and bribery have met with the same fate. We are determined and united; we are pledged to uphold to our last breath the

honour of our cause. What our ultimate fate will be we do not know; but this we do know—that traitors and coercionists are up against a problem that nothing but death can solve. To you, our comrades, we say, Stand firm; believe no lies and faked reports that may be circulated with the purpose of weakening the stand that we are making, or with the purpose of causing dissension in the ranks of the fighters for freedom and justice.

This was signed by the thirteen. They had resolved to be faithful even unto death. They went hand in hand as near to death as military persecution was able and willing to bring them. And to them was given the victory.

They were helped throughout not only by the Labour Congress, but also by the personal services and public appeals of devoted men and women who had long stood by them, had taken turns with them at speaking in the streets, watched their cases in the courts, visited them when permitted in prison or barracks, and rejoiced with them on their release. On Sunday, July 30th, a meeting which the "Repeal" described as "the largest, most enthusiastic and most orderly ever held in Christchurch" welcomed some of the boys back from the island.

On July 23rd, the boys scored a legal success. Another Court was held, not on the island this time, but in the Courthouse at Lyttelton. The boys were represented by counsel, the senior magistrate, Mr. Bishop, was on the bench, and the Court was crowded with spectators. The adjourned case against Robson and fresh charges against the other lads were heard. Mr. Cassidy, for the defendants, argued that the regulations on which Lieutenant Macdonald had acted had never been gazetted, and there was no proof that they had the approval of the Minister. Further, they were contradicted in essential features by the recent decisions of the Cabinet

which had been signed by the Premier and the Defence Minister. The magistrate upheld the contention and dismissed all the charges.

It follows that the sentences imposed by the other magistrate in the officers' kitchen were illegal.

Even before Mr. Bishop's decision it had become apparent to the public that the boys were winning. The *Lyttelton Times*, a conscriptionist paper, but a comparatively fair one, wrote as far back as July 4th:

"The salient fact is that military detention is serving no good purpose. The resisters are not drilling, and there is no reason to anticipate that they will drill, while it is obvious that they cannot be kept at the fort indefinitely. The situation, in fact, is becoming absurd."

Revised regulations issued early in August ignored the signed promise of the Cabinet and prescribed for offenders in military detention a daily routine comprising sand-polishing armaments, squad drill and semaphore drill. On October 1st, three youths who had refused to do military work on the island received nominal sentences, the magistrate, Mr. Bishop, remarking (as reported in the *Worker*) that "he was sick of the whole business, as everyone concerned was."

#### THE BANKRUPTCY OF COERCION.

Military detention had failed, and the Minister for Defence did not know what to do next. He said in Parliament on August 19th, that he was "very sorry" the boys were on Ripa Island, and he "wished to goodness they would comply with the law and so get rid of this trouble." He meant—get him out of his troubles. But there is only one way out, and he or his successors will have to realise that conscription in a modern British community simply cannot be enforced.

A while ago the Minister hoped to escape from his difficulties by setting up a system of "alternative service" for conscientious objectors. The Defence Amendment Act of 1912 provides that a youth who can satisfy a magistrate that he objects to bearing arms on the ground that it is contrary to his religious belief may be granted exemption on condition that he undertakes to perform some non-military "alternative service," to be arranged by the Government. The Minister thought these privileged lads might be put to tree-planting or road-making. A very few lads obtained the exemption, but the alternative service has not yet been arranged. He refused in 1912 to place the "conscientious objector" on the same footing, because it is obviously open to every objector to claim to be acting on grounds of conscience. But the events of 1913 forced the Minister to reconsider this decision, and he went so far as to ask some of the passive resisters if they would be willing to perform alternative service. They refused, because they saw that their consent would have rendered it easier to administer the Act, and thus they would have become co-operators with the authorities in administering conscription. The Quakers and anti-militarists upheld them in their refusal. The Minister told the House on July 12th that "it seemed almost hopeless to attempt to solve the problem of providing an acceptable equivalent service." Thus the administrator of a system of compulsion was brought to the point of bewailing his inability to provide something "acceptable" to those whom it was his special function to coerce, and the offer which was at first withheld because everybody would jump at it was at length laid aside because nobody would look at it.

In this open bankruptcy of coercion, the

Minister obtained as little help from his friends as he did from his opponents. He moved on July 17th to set up a committee of both Houses of Parliament "to consider the amendments made in the defence legislation by the Act of 1912 in relation to military custody, punishment, alternative service and such other matters as the Minister of Defence may refer to it." The Committee was duly appointed and was directed to report within twenty-one days, but seven weeks later, on September 3rd, the Minister mentioned that it had not yet sat. Newspapers up to the middle of October contain no further news of it. Perhaps its members felt that conscription (which all of them had supported) was not in a condition to stand investigation. Private advices show that it began at length to take evidence, but no report is yet available.

The end is not yet. The October "Repeal" tells of a new outbreak of prosecutions. Doubtless the Government, under military guidance, will try every possible resource of coercion before they admit defeat, for, as Lord Roberts wrote to Colonel Allen Bell, of New Zealand, "If you fail there, it will mean we shall not get it here." The Passive Resisters of New Zealand are fighting consciously for the freedom of their own country, but they are fighting also for the freedom of ours. A handful of lads—mostly working lads—out there, on the other side of the world, are daring, enduring, suffering, in order that English boys may still be free. It is not too much to hope that their final victory will come in time to help destroy that base and foolish conspiracy which would rob England too of her birthright of liberty.

S. V. BRACHER.

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