

The Political Thought of Vera Brittain

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(Photo : Yevonde)

VERA BRITTAIN

Abstract

This thesis investigates the political thought of the well known British 20th Century political activist and writer Vera Brittain (1893-1970), who is acknowledged as one of the most important feminists and pacifists of her era. It was undertaken in response to the continuing success of her most widely known work, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, first published in 1933, and her increasing importance since her death to modern feminists, pacifists, and to the study of the First World War (1914-1918). It draws extensively on Vera Brittain's own writings, published and unpublished, and includes material never before used in previous research. It provides a comprehensive review of the secondary literature on Vera Brittain, showing that the power of her arguments has been undermined by studying each area of her life and literary work in isolation. Although Vera Brittain's work and life have been frequently cited for specific purposes, this thesis is the first to identify her political thought in its totality. In particular, this thesis identifies for the first time the importance in Vera Brittain's political thought of her Christian beliefs, particularly after 1940; and the way in which this related to her two other major political beliefs, her feminism which she adopted very early in her life, and her pacifism, which she adopted in 1937. The emphasis placed in previous secondary literature on *Testament of Youth* and Vera Brittain's role in the First World War has also obscured the importance of her later political thought, particularly during the Second World War (1939-1945), and in her role in the early years of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The argument

made in this thesis is that Vera Brittain's mature political thought was based on her faith in individuals, which acted like a 'thread' upon which the three 'pearls' or 'circles' of her political thought, those of Christianity, feminism and pacifism, were strung, each interacting with the other at various times, and finally joining to become the 'necklace' of her political thought. The thesis concludes that Vera Brittain's political thought did not constitute a coherent political *theory* of which she was herself aware; she developed a personal ideology or belief-system, but although she also held a world-view throughout most of her life, this was not original or unique to her. Her political writings and actions reflected the issues of her own time, including Equality Feminism, and the Christian Pacifist opposition to war. But she also drew on earlier political theories of the relationship between the state and the individual, such as those of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Locke. In her political thought, she also acknowledged the importance of the issues of race, class, gender and sexuality, which would later become central to Second Wave Feminism. In sum, this thesis describes the political thought of Vera Brittain, its importance in the history of political thought, and its continuing relevance for today.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate and describe the political thought of Vera Brittain (1893-1970), the well-known British feminist and pacifist writer and activist. Vera Brittain wrote extensively on a number of political and social matters, and her total writings reveal the nature of her political thought, although it will be argued that this never developed into a coherent political theory of which she was herself aware.

No previously published investigation into Vera Brittain and her many books, articles and lectures has attempted to identify and analyse her total political thought in this way. Indeed, despite a considerable secondary literature on her life and works, her complex and constantly developing political thought has been neglected in favour of analysis of specific aspects of her life and works. None of the secondary texts discuss Vera Brittain within a framework of political ideas or traditions. Nor have their authors perceived any political progression within her literary work, or even discussed her aims in writing on certain topics. By studying each area of Vera Brittain's life and literary work in isolation, the power of her arguments has been undermined. Historians and others have failed to see her political thought as a progressive process, producing at the end of her life a rational basis for her interests and political work.

Today Vera Brittain is famous because of the enormous and continuing success of *Testament of Youth – An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, published in 1933. Her son John Edward Jocelyn Brittain-Catlin wrote of his mother, 'I imagine that the majority will know of her because she wrote *Testament of Youth*'.¹ However this book's

very success and the literary myth which surrounds it have obscured the rest of her oeuvre. Between 1921 and 1968 she wrote 'well over a thousand articles, book reviews and open letters (including the two hundred "Letters to Peace Lovers" of the Second World War),' articles which were published around the world and reached a wide audience, together with 29 books.² These works contain a complex pattern of experiences and ideas which express Vera Brittain's political thought, belief system, historical perspective, and view of the world. Her total political thought deserves to be better known and understood, and I believe that its loss would be a great discredit to her life and memory.

Vera Brittain's literary output was considerable, and in part this explains the many books and articles on diverse subjects that make reference to her and to her writings. In 1921 she moved to London to start a career as a writer, working throughout her life (with varying degrees of success) as a poet, biographer, reviewer, editor, historian, critic and novelist. She was also a skilled lecturer, much in demand as a public speaker, and a very successful journalist who made strong social and political comments on topical issues of the day. She used her literary and political talents to speak for people whose voices were being ignored by wider society, and this constituency or community of voices was to change over time, dictated by her own experience and changing world events; however she always listened to her supporters and sought to learn from her detractors. For this reason I have included a detailed chronology of Vera Brittain's life, which also contains major political and social events that influenced her developing political thought, as part of this thesis (see Appendix A).

Vera Brittain was also a political activist of great importance and influence, particularly on issues such as feminism and pacifism, which she saw as intimately

connected. Joining the Peace Pledge Union in 1937, she wrote regularly for *Peace News* during the Second World War (1939-1945), and became a founder member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in 1958.

Despite her activism, it is possible that Vera Brittain conceived and developed her political thought largely unconsciously: her sense of duty, responsibility to others, and religious faith all had a direct effect on the topics she chose to write about and discuss. Her need to be of practical assistance was always of more importance to her than a theoretical analysis of events, although she was always aware of the historical and political background of major events in the world. She placed great stress on practice rather than on theory, and frequently used her own experiences and those of her friends and acquaintances to illustrate the political points which she made in her articles and novels; indeed she was much criticised for this practice in her lifetime, and even in her obituary in *The Times* of London.³ She was certainly aware of the fact that she was analysing and interpreting social and political events in her writings. As she wrote in 1925 to her future husband, the political scientist George Edward Gordon Catlin (known to her and to their friends as 'G.');

There is less division than you perhaps think between my literary and political work. The first – as my articles at least must make plain to you – is simply a popular interpretation of the second; a means of presenting my theories before people who would not understand or be interested in them if they were explained seriously.⁴

In particular, Vera Brittain used poetry to express not only her internal feelings but also to send a strong political message. Some of her poems include views that the social conventions and norms of her time made it impossible for her to express in prose.

Vera Brittain interrupted her studies at Oxford University in order to serve as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse in the First World War (1914-1918), and she wrote of her emotions and experiences in *Verses of a V. A. D.*, first published in 1918. In this short volume of poems she gave a voice to many women's feelings about the First World War. She wrote of her grief and great sorrow for her dead fiancé Roland Leighton in 'Perhaps – (To R.A.L. Died of Wounds in France December 23rd, 1915)' dated February 1916. In 'To My Brother (In Memory of July 1st, 1916)' she expressed how proud she was of the heroism of her brother Edward Brittain in winning the Military Cross on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. She wrote of nursing enemy prisoners in 'The German Ward', dated September 1917, and of the tender human mercy shown to both the dying and the dead by both German and British patients, together with the nursing staff. But perhaps her greatest anger and despair against the act of war was expressed in the poem entitled 'Vengeance is Mine' written about her experience of the German bombing raid on the military hospital at Etaples in April 1918, which includes the line 'Terror of night-time and blood-lust untameable,' and can be read as the start of her opposition to air warfare and the bombing of civilians (see Appendix B for the full poem). This poem's powerful imagery of helplessness and injustice was not matched even when she wrote of the death of her brother in 'Epitaph For Edward' dated 1919. This volume of poems is filled with bitterness and despair at the loss of her lover, brother and a further two friends, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, and is the most intimate of her many writings on the First World War; it contains an intense level of emotion which was never again present in her poems or any of her other writings on war and its consequences. Although her political thought had already begun to develop before 1914, particularly in respect of her feminism, 'Vengeance is Mine'

was the root and seed of her subsequent political thinking and actions. The First World War destroyed so much of her world and affected her deeply, at an emotional and intellectual level. The deaths in war of her fiancé, her brother, and her friends were dreadful and unimaginable for her, but they had at least all volunteered as men to fight. The terrifying memory of being a helpless victim of bombing never seems to have left her for the rest of her life, as an experience that she never wished anyone else to undergo; for her, war became the ultimate, unsurpassable evil. The experience of the First World War, from which she emerged with embryonic radical political beliefs, was the catalyst for her political thought.

This interpretation, although it fits perfectly with a close analysis of Vera Brittain's behaviour and attitudes, her writings, and her political thought as it evolved throughout her life, also includes an element of conjecture. She never reflected in public about her political motivations and thought processes, far less upon her own emotional responses, even towards events as traumatic as the First World War. As Roger Smither has commented, Vera Brittain's generation 'grew up in a culture that dealt with involvement in traumatic or even merely unpleasant events by "moving on" and by expecting survivors – or by survivors themselves expecting – "not to talk about it"'.⁵ The Australian John Laffin, writing in 1967, also commented on the nursing sisters and VADs of the First World War in the following terms:

I have only one complaint about Service sisters, they are too reticent about what they have seen. I wish some of the more literary minded of them had written about the human wrecks they had nursed. Some of the VADs attached to hospitals during World War 1 broke under the strain of what they saw: amputated limbs in their dozens in buckets in hospital corridors during a flood of emergency operations; stinking flesh;

eyeless faces and gassed faces; bodies with skin burned off. My own mother, who served in Egypt, France and Lemnos, saw every imaginable horror brought from Gallipoli, only a few miles from Lemnos, but spoke about them with great reluctance. Such reticence seems typical of the breed.⁶

Certain themes – or circles as I choose to call them – are repeated again and again in Vera Brittain's writings: her Christian belief, feminism, pacifism, and contained within each of these circles her view of the relationship between the state and the individual. Her concern for each of these areas developed over time, and they varied in importance at different times in her life. Also, while each of these 'circles' of political thought was complete in itself for Vera Brittain, a common thread of faith in people and hope for the future also connected each one to the other. As her daughter [Baroness] Shirley Williams has confirmed in her foreword to a recent republication of two of Vera Brittain's most important short works, *Humiliation with Honour* (1942) and *Seed of Chaos* (1944) under the title *One Voice*, 'human beings, in her opinion, are basically good'.⁷ Like a necklace upon which pearls have been strung, each of these circles of belief was separate and unique for Vera Brittain, but also reflected the colour and light of its neighbour.

Throughout Vera Brittain's political life, this interlinking of circles allowed people who were otherwise diametrically opposed to each other, with very different political or social views, to join together to support her on a single issue. Perhaps the most famous example of this is that during the Second World War the well-known military theorist and writer Basil Liddell Hart (1895-1970), who was very far from being a pacifist, found common cause with her in their condemnation of the British government's area bombing policy.⁸ Vera Brittain was also inspired by individuals rather more than by ideologies and

political movements. Just as the circles of her political thought influenced each other, so people who were important influences upon her life feature in more than one chapter of this thesis. The novelist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), whom she never met but whose life and works have a significant parallel with her own, was an inspiration to Vera Brittain's views of feminism and her understanding of the proper relationship between the state and the individual; while the Rev Canon Dick Sheppard (1880-1937) was an inspiration to her pacifism, as well as both of them being an inspiration to her ideas of Christianity.

This multi-layered approach was a very distinctive feature of Vera Brittain's political thought, and was the reason why she attracted many supporters of various political viewpoints. After 1924 she was very much 'the socialist Vera Brittain' (as a recent popular book has characterised her), as well as being the feminist and later the pacifist Vera Brittain.⁹ She was also always very much an activist, and early in her professional life she had significant if loosely felt political aspirations, as she told her future husband in 1925:

Two alternative things I aim at in politics, either to be a Member of Parliament or to be England's woman representative at the Assembly of the L[eague] of N[ations]. Of the two I almost think that I should prefer the latter... But these are mere ambitions, not definite prospects. Success in politics is a pure hypothesis, and it depends as much on circumstances as ability.¹⁰

As her political thinking developed and matured she was to come to the belief that politics as practised within the traditional British party system was no longer effective. She considered forming her own Women's Party in 1948, but the political mood of the time was wrong for such a radical move.¹¹ In the last two decades of her life she came to the conclusion that Christianity, feminism and pacifism, rather than collective party politics,

could best protect and uphold the rights of individuals. Her view of human nature was that it was essentially good, and that humanity had the innate potential to develop for the better.

Vera Brittain's political thought developed, as a result of the First and Second World Wars, into a belief that Christianity, feminism and pacifism in combination could alone break the cycle of international violence that she had seen during her lifetime. The prevention of war became her ultimate objective. This view of a cycle of international violence constituted a world-view from which she never deviated throughout her life, but it was not original to her.

This term 'world-view' requires explanation, as it is used both by philosophers and by political and social scientists, and is fundamental to the issue of whether or not Vera Brittain's political thought constituted a coherent theory. As might be expected, definitions of the term 'world-view' vary slightly between academic disciplines. The recent *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* provides a definition related to groups rather than individuals, as a 'set of beliefs constituting an outlook on the world characteristic of a particular social group, be it social class, generation or religious sect'.¹² However, (and as discussed below), for the purposes of this thesis I have adopted the definition of 'world-view' advanced as part of a wider definition of 'ideology' by the political scientist Mike Hawkins, which is:

A world view, then, consists of a relatively abstract set of background assumptions which supply overall coherence to the ideology. Often these assumptions are implicit, becoming manifest only when needed to substantiate specific propositions.... The world view underpinning a particular ideology is not usually

itself subjected to explicit discussion (although this sometimes occurs) but is nevertheless fundamental to the overall theoretical enterprise.¹³

I argue in this thesis that Vera Brittain belonged to the established middle-classes of the early 20th Century, who perceived the world as being civilised and ordered, in which they expected that organic progress would take place but without revolutionary turmoil. However, her generation then experienced the First World War in all its destructive violence, which caused economic, political, and social change. She always identified herself as a member of the generation that suffered and lost much during the First World War. It was also during this war that she lost her religious faith, only to regain it when seeking to prevent another war, the Second World War, two decades later.

Vera Brittain appears to have adopted her world-view as a result of the courses that she took in Modern History with international relations at Oxford University after the First World War, which she studied in a desire to understand the war and its causes and consequences. This theory saw the history of the relationship between states as essentially cyclical, with war as its unavoidable consequence: personal and political antagonisms provoked bad relationships between states, which provoked war, which provoked a punitive and unjust peace, which provoked personal and political antagonisms, and so on. This cycle functioned effectively independently of the actions of the political leaders of states, since they had to work in peacetime from a position of lack of trust resulting from the popular passions which they had invoked in order to start and fight wars. Vera Brittain perceived events during the span of her own adult life as following this cycle of violence and retribution, with the passions unleashed by the First World War leading to an unjust peace at Versailles, and this lack of justice provoking a German sense of outrage leading to the

rise of Hitler and to the Second World War. She saw this cycle not as inevitable, but as something to be fought against. In *Testament of Youth* she wrote of her return to Oxford to study history:

I had begun, I thought, [in 1914] by feeling exasperated about the War, and I went on by ignoring it; then I had to accept it as a fact, and at last was forced to take part in it, to endure the fear and sorrow and fatigue that it brought me, and to witness in impotent anguish the deaths, not only of those who had made my personal life, but of the many brave, uncomplaining men whom I had nursed and could not save. But even that isn't enough. It's my job now to find out all about it, and try to prevent it, in so far as one person can, from happening to other people in the days to come.

Perhaps the careful study of man's past will explain to me much that seems inexplicable in his disconcerting present. Perhaps the means of salvation are already there, implicit in history, unadvertised, carefully concealed by the war-mongers, only awaiting rediscovery to be acknowledged with enthusiasm by all thinking men and women.¹⁴

This view that the Second World War was a direct result of the injustices of the Peace of Versailles was increasingly held by some British politicians and intellectuals during the inter-war years. It has remained a common and respectable theory, known to historians as the 'thirty years' war hypothesis', although it is not the only possible view.¹⁵ Vera Brittain further interpreted the onset of the Cold War as part of the cycle of violence and retribution following the horrors of the Second World War and the unconditional surrender imposed on Germany, and on a number of occasions she predicted a nuclear Third World War in consequence. At her most optimistic, she saw the success of the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament (CND) movement in the 1950s and early 1960s as evidence that some progress had been made towards deflecting this historical process.

Testament of Youth

Vera Brittain's sixth book *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933, contained her memoirs of being a VAD nurse in London, Malta and France during the First World War, of which she wrote, 'I wanted to make my story as truthful as history, but as readable as fiction'.¹⁶ In 1934 she described the book, 'as a vehement protest against war, and a passionate plea for peace'.¹⁷ In 1945, she added that 'It is not, and was never intended to be, propaganda, and I was not a pacifist in the present sense when I wrote it'.¹⁸ The book was an immense success and established her as a famous writer, and as a social and political commentator; when she expressed doubts about *Testament of Youth*, her friend Winifred Holtby replied, 'What other woman writing has both your experience and your political training?'.¹⁹ There were only a very few other accounts of the war by VADs, none of them reaching the literary standard or popularity of *Testament of Youth*. The novelised memoir by Helena Zena Smith (the pen-name of Evadne Price), *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of the War*, which appeared in 1930, was self-consciously a woman's version of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Appearing in 1932, *Come to the Cookhouse Door! A VAD in Salonika* by Juliet De Key Whitsed, written as a series of letters between June 1917 and June 1919, is dull, and fails to engage the reader's imagination; we never learn her motives for volunteering as a VAD, or how the experience has altered her view of the world. Whitsed's account details the problems of nursing in Greece and the complex ethnic and historical issues of the region, but she remains aloof and untouched by the events of which she writes.²⁰ This is in

contrast to *Testament of Youth*, which contains graphic details of medical procedures and life on active service, and which educates its readers without seeking to shock them:

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war and the orators who talk so much about going on no matter how long the war lasts and what it may mean, could see a case – to say nothing of ten cases – of mustard gas in its early stages – could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes – sometimes temporally, sometimes permanently – all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke. The only thing one can say is that such severe cases don't last long; either they die soon or else improve – usually the former.²¹

The success of *Testament of Youth* fuelled both the development of Vera Brittain's political thought, and her ambition to affect politics and to prevent war. Part of its popularity came from its depiction of the author as possessing a human spirit that refused to be destroyed by death and tragedy; she was that rare thing, a survivor of horror who learned from events over which she had no control.

The political and social importance of *Testament of Youth* has continued to the present day, together with a debate over its significance. Deborah Gorham has called it 'an important early twentieth-century example of feminist political autobiography,' while Gerard DeGroot has dismissed it as a reflection of 'Brittain's turbulent world [that] existed only in her mind and the minds of those unrepresentative elites to whom far too much attention has been paid'.²² I have discussed the importance of *Testament of Youth* to the literary canon of the First World War, and the antagonism that it has provoked, in an

electronically published research paper entitled *Vera Brittain - The Militant Pacifist: Misconceptions of Her Importance in Military History*, (electronically published on the Birmingham University website in March 2005, but first presented to the War and Society seminar at the University of Birmingham in 2002: see Appendix F). *Testament of Youth* has been on the history syllabus of the English and Welsh National School Curriculum since its introduction in 1990, and for many young people it may be the only book they read about the First World War. A quotation from *Testament of Youth* also features on the website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as part of an 'educational resource for upper primary and secondary schools'.²³

While it is vital that the reader of this thesis realises the significance of the First World War and *Testament of Youth* to Vera Brittain's political thought, I do not want discussion of either the war or the book to distort a wider study or to overshadow her whole life and work. This has often occurred in the secondary literature, and has produced a very limited analysis of her other books and how all of them contribute to her political thought. For this reason, I will discuss *Testament of Youth* in detail at this point in the thesis, before moving on to Vera Brittain's wider significance.

It has already been noted that Vera Brittain's world-view, ripening political consciousness, and intellectual development were rooted in her experiences of the First World War. As Victoria Stewart asserts in her wide-ranging discussion of women, trauma and war (drawing on earlier work by Linda Anderson), a process that 'can be seen writ large across the body of Brittain's work' is that of 'otherness' or detachment and isolation from her pre-war self.²⁴ It was her experiences of the First World War that led Vera

Brittain to question all that the family from which she came had once taken for granted. As she wrote in *Testament of Youth*:

It may be that our generation will go down in history as the first to understand that not a single man or woman can live in disregarding isolation from his or her world. I don't know yet what I can do... but at least I can begin by trying to understand where humanity failed and civilization went wrong. If only a few other people succeed in this, it may be worth while that our lives have been lived; it may even be worth while that the lives of the others have been laid down. Perhaps that's really why, when they died, I was left behind.²⁵

Testament of Youth also shows that the separation between the public and private spheres did not exist for Vera Brittain. This merging of her various identities as feminist, novelist, journalist, lecturer and wife would be a constant theme for the rest of her life. Her strong sense of duty and desire to be of service to others may in part have also come from a desire to atone for the guilt that she felt for surviving the First World War.

Vera Brittain grew up within the conventions and traditions of a pre-1914 northern English middle-class bourgeois family, which accepted the norms and values of 'liberalism' and 'liberal individualism', not as a political ideology but as a social and economic philosophy. The characteristics of this liberal philosophy were free-trade, limited State intervention and legislation in business and employment practices, and the protection of individuals' rights. Correlli Barnett has characterised the manufacturing industry of this time as 'led by the sons or grandsons of its ruthless founders – too often fatly complacent men, constipated with inherited wealth,' a very accurate description of Vera Brittain's own father Arthur, who was the grandson of the founder of Brittain's Paper Mills on which the

family fortune was based, and for which he had worked since the age of 18.²⁶ Vera Brittain wrote in *Testament of Youth* of these times, 'In those days my father, who even now regards my membership of the Labour Party as a strange highbrow foible, used often to boast to chance visitors that his firm, "had never had a Trade Union man on the place"'.²⁷ Within the respectable pre-1914 niche of Buxton society, to which the Brittain family had aspired and as part of which it fiercely protected its social position, politics and religious faith were combined and practised not as an expression of personal belief but as a social obligation, in which obedience to established form was paramount, and questions on matters of ideology or Christian doctrine were not encouraged.

Testament of Youth not only records personal tragedy, but the exposure of Vera Brittain and women of her class and background to the broader implications of modern industrialised warfare, including the bombing of civilians from the air and the use of poison gas. Vera Brittain was convinced that the only result of such warfare 'must be the long reaping in sorrow of that which was sown in pride'.²⁸ After the war she used her abilities as a writer to educate and inform her readers about its causes and its true costs, in particular to women. John Bourne has emphasised this point:

Vera Brittain may have found the University of Oxford more welcoming to women when she went up to Somerville after the war, but the 'price' she paid for this was the loss of her sweetheart, her brother and all her close male friends.²⁹

In addition to its immediate importance to Vera Brittain in coming to terms with her experience of the First World War, *Testament of Youth* was an important influence on other British women writers. Mark Bostridge (in his introduction to the 2004 edition), refers to its influence on Virginia Woolf, for whom on first reading, it 'lit up' for her the connection

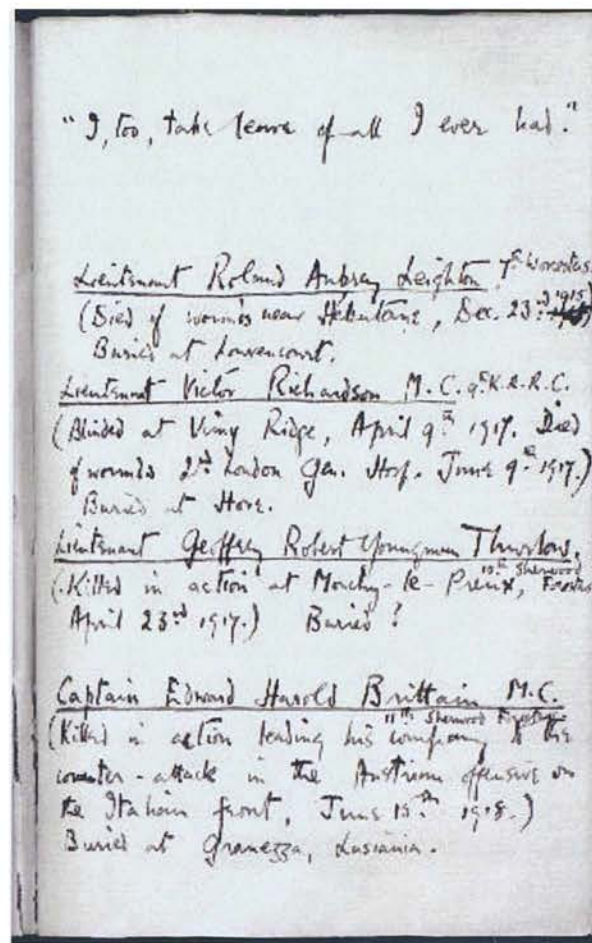
between feminism and pacifism, both themes that she would develop and expand in her novels *The Years* (1937) and *The Three Guineas* (1938). Bostridge also quotes Rebecca West's comment that 'a little more than a third of *Testament of Youth* is concerned with Brittain's account of her wartime experiences,' and her conclusion that the text is social history.³⁰

Testament of Youth has also continued to be an important text in the modern study of the First World War. As George Robb has written, 'Many of the men and women who sought to de-mythologize the Great War were part of a younger generation of artists and writers, like Robert Graves and Vera Brittain, whose work still influences modern perceptions of war'.³¹ A whole new generation of British schoolchildren is now reading *Testament of Youth* as part of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, and the book's theme of war and women's experience of it forms part of what the National Curriculum calls the 'essential information for the study of Twentieth Century history, and of women in the armed services of the First World War'.³²

Vera Brittain's whole adult public and private life was lived as a testament to her active political concerns and interests. *Testament of Youth* will always remain her most famous text, and it is important that it should continue to be read and understood. But it should not be seen as her only statement on the social and political consequences of war, or as a definitive summary of her political thought.



Vera Brittain in VAD uniform in 1917
William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections
McMaster University website



A page from Vera Brittain's diary, on which *Testament of Youth* was based, 1917
 William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections Archive
 McMaster University website

Research Methodology

The basis of my research methodology has been to read and analyse Vera Brittain's own writings, both published and unpublished, and to allow her to speak in her own words, by quoting at length from them. She was a professional writer, who constructed her arguments in a complex manner and at some length, and it has sometimes proved impossible to edit her words in quotation without losing her meaning. Given Vera Brittain's failure to

summarise her political thought in any brief and coherent manner, I have had to extract the themes or circles of her political thought from the very large and complex body of her writings. This has required an interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from politics, history, sociology, literature and cultural studies, and drawing in particular on the analytical tools of historical archival research and literary textual analysis.

The most important single source for this thesis has been Vera Brittain's own archive, which she voluntarily left behind on her death in 1970, precisely for future generations to examine her life, works and beliefs. This vast archive of papers includes diaries, pamphlets, private letters, newspaper and journal articles together with unpublished manuscripts and other documents, and is now at The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections of the McMaster University Library in Hamilton, Canada. Having closely examined this archive for four weeks during November 1999, I am quite sure that it has in no sense been deliberately filleted or censored, either by Vera Brittain or her literary executors. In order to trace the evolution of Vera Brittain's political thought I have systematically read, in date order, all her published and unpublished articles, books, lecture notes and general correspondence dating from 1923 onwards. Further, while a literary evaluation of Vera Brittain's oeuvre is not directly germane to my research, a detailed reading and analysis has helped me to organize her vast output and place it within a political and social theoretical framework. To that end, over a period of ten years I have read all Vera Brittain's published books, including novels and factual books, and any contributions that she made to books edited by others, including introductions that she wrote to others' books. I believe that I may have read every surviving word written by Vera Brittain, or at least come very close.

Since Vera Brittain's political thought changed over time, an examination of its chronological progress is vital in grasping how the different circles of Christianity, feminism and pacifism interlinked with each other. In order to place Vera Brittain and her political thought in a wider context I have studied contemporary political theories and their development, in particular feminism and pacifism. I have also studied the social history of the period of Vera Brittain's life, in order to evaluate her life and works within a sociological and cultural framework, and used a comparative approach with the political views of contemporaries who influenced her at various stages in her life.

In order to have an insight into Vera Brittain's literary impetus and mindset, I have researched and read widely among the works of contemporary authors who inspired her early efforts as a professional writer. In addition to the influence of Olive Schreiner mentioned above, Rose Macaulay (1881-1958) was of particular importance in encouraging Vera Brittain's first efforts as a novelist.³³ Many of these authors became her friends and colleagues on the feminist magazine *Tide and Time* in the 1920s, including Phyllis Bently (1894-1977), Winifred Holtby (1898-1935), Margaret Storm Jameson (1891-1986), and Rebecca West (1892-1983), and they shared many political views, in particular on feminism and pacifism, which they often expressed in their novels, short stories and poetry.

In the course of my research I have made extensive use of the following archives and libraries: The British Library, London; Cambridge University Library, Cambridge; The Archive of the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London; The Fawcett Library, London; The Galton Institute For the Study of Biology and Society, London; The Central Library, Kingston Upon Hull; The Imperial War Museum, London; The National Archives (Public Record Office), Kew, London; The Library of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst; The

Museum of London; The Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College, London; Kingston University Library, Kingston Upon Thames; The Library of Somerville College, Oxford University; The Wellcome Institute For the History of Medicine Library, London; and The Fabian Society Archive, The London School of Economics.

I have conducted interviews with people who knew Vera Brittain well: these have included her daughter [Baroness] Shirley Williams; her friend and literary executor Paul Berry, and his co-author of her official biography Mark Bostridge (see Bibliography). I have also attended numerous conferences related to my areas of research (see Appendix G).

A fundamental part of the methodology of this thesis has been its assessment of whether or not Vera Brittain's political thought amounted to a coherent political theory of which she was herself aware. I have concluded that it did not, but that she drew on a number of established political theories, including liberalism early in her life, and later feminism and socialism. Within each chapter I have included a section which discusses her view of the 'state and the individual' and how it relates to her Christianity, feminism and pacifism.

In order to make this assessment I have employed the definition of what constitutes a political theory advanced by Mike Hawkins, which is that a political theory consists of two component parts: a world-view and an ideology.³⁴ As already discussed, in this definition the world-view consists of a set of background assumptions about time, nature, and human nature, concerned with essential features of human psychology and how these features relate to nature and to the passage of history; and the ideology consists of the theorist's views on specific political, social and economic issues: how society and government are organized, and how they should be organized; thus containing both critical

and normative (i.e. ethical) components. I have concluded in this thesis that Vera Brittain's political thought falls short of this definition of a political theory. Her ideology as it had developed later in her life had both clear critical and normative components. But the issues described above regarding the nature of her writings and her preference for actions over theorizing makes it impossible to demonstrate beyond doubt that she held any clear world-view, and if so what it was. Her writings on this issue are few and ambiguous, for example her brief statement in *Testament of Youth* that at Oxford 'I had already started on the road which was ultimately to lead me to association with the group that accepted internationalism as a creed,' but no more.³⁵ In her planned last book, provisionally titled either *Citadel of Time* or *Testament of Faith*, she may have been on the verge of expressing a coherent political theory based on the lifetime's development of her political thought. In a newspaper interview in July 1960 she said that it would be the fourth in the series begun by *Testament of Youth*, and that although called *Testament of Faith* 'its theme will not be entirely religious'.³⁶ In another interview in November 1965, when she had still made no further progress on the book, she said that it would contain 'the perspective that life has taught me'.³⁷ But she fell ill and died before commencing the book, and only a few pages of notes for it exist.

My research and writing in seeking to understand the political theory of Vera Brittain have been much assisted by certain themes and concepts from the German-American political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), in particular her book *The Human Condition* (1958) and its discussion of active politics in the public sphere.³⁸ While there is no evidence that Vera Brittain ever read anything by Hannah Arendt, or was familiar with the central tenets of her philosophy, nevertheless they were contemporaries

struggling with some of the same issues, who had their political views shaped very much by the two world wars. Much of the subject matter of Arendt's later books, *On Violence*, *Crisis of the Republic*, *Men in Dark Times* and *On Revolution*, all published in the 1970s, is concerned with political protest by individuals in a world where traditional norms such as 'scholarship or politics or ethics' have disappeared, and long-standing social institutions such as class deference and organised religion are being severely challenged.³⁹ George McKenna has discussed what Arendt called her 'thinking without bannisters,' meaning without such certainties, as being rooted in her experiences of the First and Second World Wars.⁴⁰

Arendt's biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has written that she was 'catastrophe-minded' and that what she had witnessed in Nazi Germany and occupied France 1933-1941 was ever present in her intellectual thought processes.⁴¹ While freedom to carry out political action is central to her political philosophy, she also believed that violence would always destroy freedom and so must not be used as a means of political protest. Her freedom to act politically was rooted in ethics, what she called 'community sense,' and a desire to resist evil. These concerns are particularly evident in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in which she saw little evidence of such individual actions, although recent historical research has questioned her analysis of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany.⁴² In contrast, in a much later book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), she detailed many acts of courage and defiance by individuals who refused to carry out the instructions for the Final Solution issued by the Third Reich.⁴³

The relationship of Arendt's political philosophy to Vera Brittain's political thought and action will become evident in the course of this thesis. One area of difference was that

Arendt had no beliefs in religion or an afterlife, and for her politics was the ultimate expression of human accomplishment; while Vera Brittain, although she largely lost her religious beliefs as a result of the First World War, developed a deep-seated Christian faith in later life. In brief, Arendt's theory in *The Human Condition* is about the active and practical engagement of the individual with the world, an engagement which she argues consists of the three elements of 'Labour', 'Work' and 'Action'. Each element had a very specific place and meaning within Arendt's political philosophy. For her, 'Labour' is the means by which the biological needs of human life are manufactured and maintained, although the tasks are repetitive and nothing permanent is produced. 'Work' is the means by which the individual expresses and interacts with the environmental world around them, producing items which have an existence and identity separate from the individual who created them: for example, writing. 'Action' for Arendt is the means by which individuals interact with each other, using reason and speech in the public realm to effect change, so creating politics. For Arendt each of these elements is autonomous, but they are also interdependent, and the most important is 'Action,' since the politics that it creates is a vital part of civilisation; 'For if no other test but experience of being active, no other measures but extent of sheer activity were to be applied to various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all'.⁴⁴

As a further aid to understanding Vera Britain's ideas and actions, I have also drawn on the sociological concepts of the Marxist sociologist Raymond Williams (1921-1988), whose analysis of culture and society are appropriate to my inter-disciplinary approach. His seminal text *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1963) has been invaluable in focusing my understanding of what a society regards as valuable about itself and what could be

destroyed both physically and intellectually during war.⁴⁵ The loss of civilisation and culture (art, architecture, literature and music, together with patterns of social behaviour and relationships) were of deep concern to Vera Brittain, who wrote at length about these issues during and after the Second World War. She was also interested in individuals who share a common political or social concern, so creating communities to effect change. I regard Williams's ideas as being particularly appropriate to an analysis of Vera Brittain's political thought, since his political ideology was also influenced by his own experiences during the Second World War, in battle in Normandy in 1944. He wrote of this time:

It was appalling, I don't think anyone really ever gets over it. First there is the guilt about moments of cowardice, but also about moments of pure aggression and brutality. It is easy enough to feel guilty when you feel frightened but much worse is the guilt once you have started recovering your full human perspective, which is radically reduced by the whole experience of fighting. Then you realise some of the things you've done.⁴⁶

These sentiments of guilt and grief are very similar to those expressed by Vera Brittain about what she had felt and witnessed during the First World War. In *Testament of Youth* she wrote of her feelings after breaking her VAD contract in late April 1918, in response to her father's insistence that she return home from France to nurse her mother:

I went on grieving for the friendly, exhausting, peril-threatened existence that I had left behind at Étaples. To my last day I shall not forget the aching bitterness, the conscience-stricken resentment, with which during that hot, weary June, when every day brought gloomier news from France, I read Press paragraphs stating that more and more V.A.D.s were wanted, or passed the challenging posters in Trafalgar

Square, proclaiming that my King and Country needed me to join the W.A.A.C., or the W.R.N.S., or the W.R.A.F.⁴⁷

Although they were from different generations, and held different political views particularly on feminism, Raymond Williams and Vera Brittain were both founder members of CND, and Williams' career as a writer was in some ways similar to hers.

Literature Review

I have divided my detailed Literature Review into six broad themes: Biography, Historical Perspective, Literary Criticism, Feminism, Pacifism, and the State and the Individual, listing the books described in date order of publication. This should assist the reader to grasp the very deep and wide interest which the life and work of Vera Brittain has generated, and to appreciate her influence on a number of current areas of academic study and research. Vera Brittain is frequently given a passing mention in historical studies of the First World War or literary or cultural studies of its aftermath, as an example of commonly held views or attitudes of that time, and more rarely those of the Second World War as well. Most of the secondary literature dedicated to Vera Brittain herself is concerned with her feminism or her pacifism. There is very little secondary literature on her view of the state and the individual, and effectively none on her view of Christianity, which is remarkable given the extent of her own writings on the topic. The only significant allusion to Vera Brittain's Christian beliefs is by Berry and Bostridge in their biography, which mentions how her beliefs changed and developed after the death of Winifred Holtby in 1935, becoming very strong during and after the Second World War, but even this book does not explore her Christianity in any depth.

Biography

Bailey, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth*, concentrates on the years surrounding the production of *Testament of Youth*, 1929-1933, providing a brief description of Vera Brittain's visit to Nazi Germany in 1936 and her impression of the atmosphere at one of only two cafés which Jews could use in Frankfurt: 'a collective sense of humiliation among the patrons – or prisoners of war – or exiles in a foreign country'.⁴⁸ Her book ends in 1942 with Vera Brittain's work with a Quaker team in the East End of London during the Blitz. Catlin's biography of his family contains some interesting information about his father 'G' and does provide a fresh insight into the relationship between Winifred Holtby and her childhood friend Harry Pearson. The chapters in which he discusses his mother are bitter and resentful, which reflects their troubled relationship. The most positive remark Catlin makes about his mother is 'She had a very clear idea of what she stood for and a tremendous capacity to present complex issues in a way which made them seem simple. And, although she was a great believer in moral values, she was never priggish'.⁴⁹ The most comprehensive biography is that by Berry and Bostridge, which is invaluable as an academic research tool. It has an excellent index and notes, but it does suffer from a lack of a clear chronology, which is a vital omission given that Vera Brittain's political thought was formed and influenced chronologically by world and national events. Their book presents the many facets of Vera Brittain's life and interests in a clear narrative manner over 523 pages, but it skims over her life from 1957 onwards in just its last 33 pages, when as will be argued in this thesis, the period after that was perhaps the most active and radical time since the Second World War in her political career. None of these biographies place Vera Brittain's writings within any social context,

or attempt an analysis of the political aims of her life and work. Fattinger, *Vera Brittain (1893-1970): Growth of a Pacifist*, has produced a somewhat limited biography only 127 pages long, which is under-researched in the area of pacifism. It adds little to the existing literature other than providing some interesting insights in its literary analysis of Vera Brittain's many books and articles. Her most useful idea is her conclusion, which is that Vera Brittain's own personality and faith in people was the driving force behind all her interests, including in particular her pacifism.

Historical Perspective

Elshtain, *Women and War*, locates Vera Brittain's writings within the modern debate on 'Women and Warfare', writing that 'Vera Brittain's voice is lodged securely in the ranks of women pacifists and anti-militarists, and she has become a heroine to contemporary feminist anti-war activists and thinkers – not, however, without some ambiguity'.⁵⁰ This uncertainty about Vera Brittain's pacifist credentials is based on her war diary *Chronicle of Youth* (published posthumously in 1981), which ends in May 1917 and in which she clearly supports Allied war aims. As will be shown in this thesis, Vera Brittain's evolution into a pacifist was a slow, step-by-step process which began with her experiences of the First World War and her return to Oxford in 1919; she did not become a declared pacifist until 1937, but a close reading of all her published works from 1923 onwards does reveal her latent pacifist beliefs. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* places Vera Brittain within a historical and social context in his discussion of the First World War. However other military historians have been very antagonistic towards Vera Brittain, in particular DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War*, who makes no attempt to

place *Testament of Youth* within the context of Vera Brittain's other writings, or the literary tradition of the First World War. The passages from *Testament of Youth* that he quotes as evidence for Vera Brittain's attitudes were written when she was still suffering from the combined effects of grief and the strain of her own war service, and DeGroot in his description of her as an 'egotist, elitist, mistress of self-pity and principal spokeswoman for the Lost Generation' seems to be denying her as a woman the right to hold her opinion of the war and its aftermath.⁵¹ Farrar, *News From the Front*, his account of war correspondents of the First World War, uses Vera Brittain's deep concern with the true cost of war in terms of human life and suffering, quoting at length from her diary, letters and *Testament of Youth*, in particular her response to the reporting of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, cites Vera Brittain as an example of middle-class attitudes towards the First World War; Vera Brittain never claimed to be other than middle-class, and the success of *Testament of Youth* reflects the fact that she was typical, the very embodiment of many young women who served as VADs. Cecil, in a contribution to his and Liddle's *Facing Armageddon*, places Vera Brittain's writings within the literary context of the more than 400 novels, plays and short stories or thrillers which were published in Great Britain about the First World War between 1918 and 1939. Sharpe, *Women's Work*, places Vera Brittain's war experiences within the social context of women and employment from 1914 onwards. Beckett, *The Great War*, questions Vera Brittain's objectivity when writing *Testament of Youth* and her perceptions of the war. Van Creveld in his controversial book, *Men, Women & War*, refers to Vera Brittain as an enthusiastic supporter of the outbreak of the First World War, but he is in fact quoting Vera Brittain's thoughts and writings out of context to support some of his own more controversial modern

opinions on women and warfare. Indeed, Layton in Higonnet, *Behind the Lines*, uses the exact same quote to support her view of Vera Brittain's ambivalence towards the war and her frustration as a feminist in a sexist society. Bourne, *Who's Who in World War I*, gives a brief but much more accurate version of Vera Brittain's actual behaviour and beliefs within the social context of the day. Persico, *11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour: Armistice*, has nine references to Vera Brittain, quoting often and at length from her diaries and *Testament of Youth*. Writing from an American perspective, he uses her words to illustrate the final day of the First World War, and also cites her brother Edward Brittain and fiancé Roland Leighton in his discussion. He does refer to Vera Brittain's post-war career, but makes a major error in claiming she was a faculty member of Oxford University. A criticism of all these texts is that they discuss Vera Brittain in isolation from both the major political events affecting Great Britain 1914-1918, and from how these events would have shaped her own political world-view.

Literary Criticism

Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cites Vera Brittain in support of his own thesis on the cultural impact of the First World War, that for many 'the war was such that their main use of literature could not be artistic or ironic – only consolatory'.⁵² Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth* and *Chronicle of Friendship*, and Bishop and Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, as editors of Vera Brittain's diaries, explain in their introductions the appeal of these diaries and of her *Testament* books; while Berry and Bishop, *Testament of a Generation*, discuss her work as a journalist. Layton, once more in Higonnet, *Behind the Lines*, is concerned with the 'gendering of history' and uses the *Testament* books, novels

and Second World War pamphlets as a case study; she follows the complex literary path which Vera Brittain took from 1914 to 1950 in order to ‘uncover a relation between women and war’.⁵³ This approach is continued by Stewart, Franz and Layton, *The Changing Self*, who seek a psychological explanation of Vera Brittain’s First World War private correspondence, diary and *Testament of Youth*, using Erikson’s theory and the psychological research method of ‘triple bookkeeping’ to analyse certain developing themes in her writings.⁵⁴ Their research reveals the importance of identity and the death of Roland Leighton to Vera Brittain’s psychological development.

Kennard, *Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership*, attempts a study of the relationship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby through a detailed analysis of the novels that they both wrote, using a feminist psychological approach to the literature. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, discusses Vera Brittain as one of the glittering Somerville novelists, analyzing her treatment of ‘educated’ women in her novels *The Dark Tide* (1923), *Not Without Honour* (1924), and *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition* (1936). Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, uses Vera Brittain’s correspondence from the First World War to illustrate the cultural norms of the times. Hynes, *A War Imagined*, examines the influence of the poetry of Rupert Brooke on Vera Brittain. Plain, *Great Expectations: Rehabilitating the Recalcitrant War Poets*, cites Vera Brittain as one of the first women to openly discuss the repercussions for women of the First World War, and to speak on behalf of the ‘Lost Generation’. Berry and Bostridge, in their introduction to the reprinted edition of Vera Brittain’s *Verses of a V. A. D.*, describe her poetry.

Bishop and Bostridge’s anthology of letters between Vera Brittain, her brother, and their three friends, *Letters From a Lost Generation*, confirms her status within the literary

canon: 'Few collections of First World War letters span the duration of the conflict, or present both sides of the correspondence. Fewer still contain both male and female perspectives'.⁵⁵ Holt and Holt, *Violets From Overseas*, include Vera Brittain as the only woman contributor in their anthology of First World War poetry. Cardinal, Goldman and Hattaway, *Women's Writing on the First World War*, place Vera Brittain's writings on Roland Leighton's death, 'so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of ...heroic limelight' within the context of other women writers who wrote about the realities of the war around them, including Margot Asquith, Maude Gonne, Radclyffe Hall, Sylvia Pankhurst, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf, and other women from Great Britain and Ireland, the United States, Germany, France and Belgium.⁵⁶ This anthology of shared memories provides an important insight into the mindset of women who like Vera Brittain could articulate what they witnessed 'of the sheer incongruity of the war, either in the way it erupted on to the home front or in the startling coexistence of civilian and military regimes when they were in the war zone'.⁵⁷ This book not only challenges the images and myths of the established male literary canon, but aids a deeper understanding of Vera Brittain's own considerable contribution to the seminal texts of the First World War.

Smith, *The Second Battlefield*, seeks the 'intrinsic links between warfare and literary development,' using as examples women such as Vera Brittain who first used private letters, journals or diaries as sources for published accounts either as fact or fiction, 'those women who push the boundaries of convention a little further, creating a different kind of female language for literary representation of the war'.⁵⁸ Pastoral themes, physical details and the use of colloquialisms and clichés feature in much of this 'second battlefield' writing of nurses fighting disease, infection and the mutilations of their patients' bodies;

however Vera Brittain's own private letters were always of a detailed and descriptive nature, and Smith considers *Testament of Youth* to be 'ground-breaking in the way it located a woman in the male arena of the war'. She also discusses the process of private to public readership which Vera Brittain and others undertook to ensure that the thing they most feared did not happen, 'that historical perceptions of the war would subordinate women's experience, no matter how diverse'.⁵⁹ This is the only text which attempts to place Vera Brittain as a writer within the wider literary culture of the inter-war years.

Robb, *British Culture and the First World War*, repeatedly stresses the importance of Vera Brittain within the popular literary culture of the First World War between the years 1928 and 1933. Stewart in her *Women's Autobiography – War and Trauma*, analyses *Testament of Youth* as an autobiographical account of memory and mourning; she believes that *Testament of Youth* was written as a result of a post-traumatic shock, echoes of which she has identified in Vera Brittain's writings from 1923 to 1957. She closely discusses Vera Brittain's first two novels, *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Not Without Honour* (1924 – given as 1925 by Stewart, who is not always accurate on details), her feminist novel *The Honourable Estate* (1936), her only Second World War novel *Account Rendered* (1945 – given as 1944 by Stewart), her professional guide entitled *Becoming A Writer* (1947), her pacifist novel *Born 1925* (1948), and her third and final volume of autobiography *Testament of Experience* (1957), describing the cathartic process of trauma and testimony and provides a fresh and valuable insight into the connection between psychoanalysis and autobiography. Bishop has since 1997 been researching a book on Vera Brittain as a writer which would provide a full examination of her literary style and influences, however this still awaits publication.⁶⁰

None of these studies use Vera Brittain's literary output as a source of information for her political thought. Very little research has also been done into Vera Brittain's fiction in terms of critical analysis, which would allow a direct comparison with other authors, in particular those of the Second World War.

Feminism

Every writer on Vera Brittain's feminism uses the same basic historical information; however they each focus in a narrow and restricted way on either a certain text or fixed period of dates. All interpret Vera Brittain's feminism in isolation from any other political ideas which would have influenced her feminist or wider political development.

Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, highlights Vera Brittain's practical expression of Equality Feminism by her founding and vigorous promotion of baby-clubs, while Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, links Vera Brittain's feminism with women's economic position after the First World War. Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical*, discusses the growing links between Vera Brittain and Sylvia Pankhurst. Light, *For Ever England*, focuses on Vera Brittain's feminist writings for the weekly magazine *Time and Tide*. Humm, in *Feminisms: A Reader*, argues that Vera Brittain's chief goal for feminist action of the time was for women to be treated as responsible human beings, hence her very active support for the aims of the Six Point Group.⁶¹ In contradiction to this, Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1959*, believes that Vera Brittain's chief ambition from her earliest days at Oxford University was to be a conventional wife and mother. D'Cruze in Purvis, *Women's History*, discusses Vera Brittain's view of marriage. Joannou, *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows*, attempts a Socialist-Feminist critique of Vera

Brittain's work, arguing that *Testament of Youth* fails to address areas central to women's diversity and identity such as age, class, nation, race and sexual orientation.

Purvis, *Women's History: Britain 1850-1945*, compares Vera Brittain's middle-class values with her stated aims as an Equality Feminist. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, explores Vera Brittain's development as an Equality Feminist as three separate stages within her life, making extensive use of original juvenilia material held at the McMaster University archive, in particular letters and diaries. However, her analysis of Vera Brittain's feminism stops with the publication in 1940 of *Testament of Friendship*. Zangen, *A Life of Her Own: Feminism in Vera Brittain's Theory, Fiction, and Biography*, has constructed an interesting interpretation of Vera Brittain's feminism as it is reflected in her female fictional characters, and also makes extensive use of Vera Brittain's newspaper articles from 1926 onwards, her most prolific and radical output being 1927-1929. While I agree with much that Zangen has written, and she does redress the narrowness of other writers on Vera Brittain's feminism, she still fails to place her within a wider political framework of post-First World War British society. The main thesis of Zangen's book also stops with the publication of *Testament of Youth* in 1933.

Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, is interested in Vera Brittain's use of irony within her own diaries and the problem she has of her maintaining a consistent objective position within her writing on war. Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980*, places Vera Brittain firmly within the wider debate on citizenship, feminism and the Second World War. Klein, *Beyond the Home Front*, puts Vera Brittain's autobiographical writings on both the World Wars in direct comparison with her contemporaries, showing how relevant and indeed typical her writings were compared to

the women of her time. Rowbotham, *A Century of Women*, places Vera Brittain within a historical framework of British and American feminism, which is useful in understanding why Vera Brittain was so popular in the United States between the wars. Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography*, discusses Vera Brittain's analysis of post-First World War feminism 'as a move from the political to the economic'.⁶²

None of the above writers, however, trace Vera Brittain's development as a feminist throughout the whole of her life.

Pacifism

Aleksandra Bennett has written a well-researched doctoral thesis, *Testament of a Minority in Wartime – The Peace Pledge Union and Vera Brittain 1939-1945*. However, she studies Vera Brittain's 'principled pacifism' in isolation and not in a political context; Vera Brittain's support of both conscientious objectors and non-religious pacifists receives little attention, and neither of the important pacifist publications *Peace Letters* and *Peace News* and their related subject matter is discussed.

Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, examines Vera Brittain's pacifism within the tradition of anti-militarism and feminism. This wider approach is also reflected by Danchev's *Alechemist of War*, a biography of Basil Liddell Hart, who supported Vera Brittain's opposition to Allied area bombing of German cities, and later to nuclear weapons. Vera Brittain's opinions on war and how it affects women have been included by Hartley in her collections of women's writings of the Second World War, *Hearts Undeafed* and *Millions Like Us*. Garrett's *Ethics and Airpower in World War II*, a study of the Allied area bombing of German cities, extensively refers to Vera Brittain's published

writings on the subject. Alexandra Bennett in her introduction to *One Voice*, the reprint of two of Vera Brittain's most important pacifist publications of the Second World War, places them in context in a way that has not been done before.

However none of the above writers explicitly link Vera Brittain's pacifism to her feminism and her experiences of the First World War. Nor do they discuss Vera Brittain's political aims for pacifism, or her hopes for a changed attitude towards armed conflict.

Vera Brittain's work as a leading member of the British peace movement continued after the end of the Second World War. This is illustrated by Noakes in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, in which she discusses the march through London in 1957 of 2,000 women wearing black sashes in protest against nuclear testing and the dangers of radiation poisoning in particular for unborn children; Vera Brittain addressed this march in Trafalgar Square, and many marchers and speakers went on to become the founder members of CND the next year.

Much of this literature claims to express and quote Vera Brittain's political ideas and thoughts, however no specific research into her wider political ideas, as opposed to her feminism or pacifism, has ever been published.

The State and the Individual

I have only identified a very few clear references in the secondary literature touching upon Vera Brittain's view of the state and the individual. In Thebaud, *A History of Women in the West*, Vera Brittain is cited in three separate chapters which discuss the theme of women and cultural identity in Western Europe in the Twentieth Century. Thebaud links for the first time Vera Brittain's Christian faith, her feminism and her view of the state and the

individual in relation to women. Thebaud sees this process starting with *Testament of Youth* which she calls ‘an antiwar manifesto and declaration of her conversion to a Christian pacifism based on a belief in the pacific nature of women’.⁶³ Another brief mention comes in Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, the second volume of her biography: the two women met in December 1937 at a literary lunch at the White House, where Vera Brittain was introduced to President Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR) who questioned her at some length about her experiences in the United States and ‘her travels through the Middle West and her opinion of isolationist sentiments’.⁶⁴

Christianity

There is virtually no secondary literature on Vera Brittain’s Christian belief, its place within her life, or the effect that experiencing Two World Wars had on her faith in God or the Christian Church and hierarchy. This has been of particular note given that she wrote extensively on the subject after 1936, but no other researcher on Vera Brittain has discussed this very significant element of her public and private life. The very few and brief references which I have discovered are contained within the chapter in which I explore Vera Brittain’s Christianity.

Structure of This Thesis

Following this Introduction, in Chapter 2, ‘The Christian Circle’, I consider Vera Brittain’s religious beliefs and their development in chronological order, from their beginnings in 1911 until their evolution into a very deep and devout belief in God in 1945, and how this influenced the rest of the life as a political activist.

In Chapter 3, 'The Feminist Circle', I discuss Vera Brittain's feminism, and in particular the three women who most influenced her development as a feminist: Olive Schreiner, Winifred Holtby and [Viscountess] Margaret Rhondda. I also explore the topics which framed her feminist interests and actions: education, career and training, and marriage and children.

In Chapter 4, 'The Pacifist Circle', I define Vera Brittain's Christian Pacifism and the role played by Dick Sheppard in its development, together with her practical action for peace both during and after the Second World War.

In each of these chapters I include a section on how Vera Brittain's views on the main topic of each chapter related to her wider view of 'the state and the individual'.

In the Conclusion, 'The Circles Join', I bring together all these circles to show how they are combined, connected and entwined with each other after 1945, and how together they comprise her political thought.

NOTES

1. John Catlin, *Family Quartet: Vera Brittain and her Family* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987) p.1.
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3. *The Times*, 30 March 1970.
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5. Roger Smither 'Why is So Much Television History about War?' in David Cannadine (ed.), *History and the Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 63.
6. John Laffin, *Women in Battle* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), p.62.
7. Shirley Williams, Foreword to Vera Brittain, *One Voice: Pacifist Writings from the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2005) p. x.
8. Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), p. 442; see also Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), p. 214; Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart:*

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9. Kate Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p. 154. The book as published makes the error of giving her surname as 'Brittan'.
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16. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 241.
 17. Vera Brittain, 'Why Not a Real Peace Crusade?' *Quarterly News*, 1934. Also produced as a pamphlet *The Lighter Side of Peacemaking*. G482 VBA.
 18. Vera Brittain, 'German Prisoners of War,' *Plan*, May 1945. G609 VBA.
 19. Winifred Holtby to Vera Brittain [hereafter: VB], 27 Aug.1932. The Winifred Holtby Collection, Central Library, Hull (hereafter: WH).
 20. Helena Smith, 'Not So Quiet...' *Stepdaughters of War* (Albert E. George Newnes, London: 1930); Julet de Key Whitsed, *Come To The Cookhouse Door! A V.A.D. in Salonika* (London: Herbert Joseph, 1932).
 21. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 395.
 22. Deborah Gorham, *Vera Brittain A Feminist Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 224-235; Gerard DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War*

(London: Longman, 1996), p. 310.

23. Commonwealth War Graves Commission website 'Remember Me' Educational Resource for Upper Primary and Secondary Schools,' quoting *Testament of Youth* on the effects of mustard gas. <http://www.cwgc.org/education/seeing.htm> (visited 23 April 2005).
24. Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography – War and Trauma* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Chapter 1, 'Vera Brittain and the Lost Generation,' p. 32.
25. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 472.
26. Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Gloucester: Sutton, 1987), p. 97.
27. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 19.
28. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 635.
29. John Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), p. 198.
30. Mark Bostridge, Introduction to Vera Brittain *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Virago, 2004), pp. ix-xx.

31. George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 129.
32. 'National Curriculum July 1990: Proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science History for ages 5 to 16, Britain and the Great War: 1914 to 1918,' pp. 74-5.
33. Sarah LeFanu, *Rose Macaulay* (London: Virago, 2003), pp. 159-61. Jane Emery, *Rose Macaulay – A Writers Life* (London: John Murray, 1991), p. 4 defines Macaulay as 'a novelist of ideas and social surfaces'. This phrase could also be applied to the novels of Vera Brittain, who was, however, less skilful and successful in both characterisation and plot development. See also Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 595-96.
34. Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860-1945*, pp. 21-4.
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55. Alan Bishop & Mark Bostridge (eds.), *Letters from a Lost Generation - First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (London: Little Brown & Company, 1998), p. 1.
56. Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman, Judith Hattaway (eds.), *Women's Writing on the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 181.
57. Cardinal, Goldman, Hattaway, *Women's Writing*, p. 6.
58. Angela Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.
59. Smith, *The Second Battlefield*, p. 47.
60. Letter from Alan Bishop to Phylomena Badsey, 3 March, 1997.
61. Vera Brittain was a supporter of the Six Point Group founded in 1921 whose original aims were: 1. pensions for widows; 2. equal right of guardianship for

married parents of their children; 3. better laws to protect children in particular from sexual assault; 4. improvements in social provision and the legal status of unmarried mothers; 5. equal pay for teachers; 6. equal opportunities for both men and women in the Civil Service.

62. June Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 317.
63. Francoise Thebaud (ed.), *A History of Women in the West – Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts: 1994), p. 57.
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The Christian Circle

Introduction

Vera Britain's interest in religious matters provided the ethical and moral framework upon which she arranged her life's experiences; and even for the period 1918-1936 when she lost all belief in God and in formal church structures, she never lost her faith in people to show compassion and charity in the world and help those less fortunate than themselves. This is a vital point in following and understanding the process by which her Christianity developed and how her religious beliefs directed and formed her political actions. Her faith in people, both named individuals and ordinary people with whom she lived and worked, was always a great source of spiritual inspiration and renewal.

Vera Brittain was a Christian who was brought up in the Anglican faith, accepting the doctrines of original sin and of redemption, and throughout most of her life drew comfort and moral courage from her religious beliefs. Her Christianity was not expressed solely or even largely through theological teachings, but through the practice of good works. Because of her view of the importance of good works she never troubled, in all her public or private writings, to make a detailed statement of her religious beliefs in theological terms. As she herself wrote in about 1948, perhaps a little sarcastically, in an address to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 'I cannot pretend to any theological knowledge'.¹ She rejected both the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, perceiving Jesus Christ, 'as a contemporary personality' who should not be worshiped simply 'as a half-mythical symbol adopted by the Establishment of many centuries and countries for the promotion of their own religious and political ends'.² From about 1936 onwards, she saw the teachings of

Christ as described in the Anglican version of the Bible, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular with its list of Beatitudes, as providing the practical and theoretical framework for her moral and political conduct. She told her friend and later literary executor Paul Berry, as he wrote in her official biography, that in 1936:

[She] interpreted Christian pacifism, as espoused by [Canon Dick] Sheppard and his followers, as a state of mind, offering a 'revolutionary principle' ultimately rooted in Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a constructive policy which could provide an alternative to war.³

But within a year she had partly changed her mind on this, seeing the values of Christian Pacifism as offering a practical political code of conduct within a religious framework. As she wrote in 1937 in *Testament of Experience*, developing the idea:

For what [Canon] Dick Sheppard and his friends offered was not, in the last resort, a policy but a principle – the revolutionary principle put forward, and still rejected by the majority of mankind, in the Sermon on the Mount. It was a simple idea which derived its validity not from political calculation, but from the prophetic challenge of an inner compulsion; it was the belief, for which Christ died, in the ultimate transcendence of love over power.⁴

A further example of Vera Brittain using the Sermon on the Mount as a moral reference point for her political thought is her response to the 1938 Munich Crisis, 'Many times since the crisis, I have re-read the Sermon on the Mount'.⁵ In *Humiliation with Honour* (1942) Vera Brittain wrote of the way in which reading the Bible could provide comfort and inspiration for her, that 'Verses which have become, through familiarity, a mere sequence of hackneyed phrases, leap from the page with a sudden relevance which

illuminates one's consciousness like a flame'.⁶ In 1947 in a lecture given in the British Occupied Zone of western Germany, she spoke of the present economic and social crisis in Europe:

Christianity itself is based upon respect for the individual as the possessor of an immortal soul more valuable, in the eyes of God, than any material ambition of competitive governments. Let us Europeans turn to each other for cooperation in rebuilding the spiritual values which have been destroyed. In that immortal soul which each one of us possesses, lie reserves of strength sufficient to build a new Europe, freed from the competition for power, which will again give moral and cultural leadership to the human race that so sorely needs it. I believe that, in spite of all your miseries, these reserves lie in you.⁷

Even in *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933 at a time when she professed agnosticism, she continued to use images and associations from Christianity, writing that 'It seems to me that the War will make a big division of "before" and "after" in the history of the world, almost if not quite as big as the "B.C." and "A.D." division made by the birth of Christ'.⁸

Paul Berry has argued that Vera Brittain in her later writings may have retrospectively exaggerated the importance of her religious beliefs in her conversion to pacifism in 1937.⁹ It is also true that Vera Brittain's descriptions of some key events in her life as being religious epiphanies occur only in her later writings rather than in any contemporary accounts. Equally, Deborah Gorham has argued in *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* that Vera Brittain's claim to have adopted agnosticism as early as 1911 was a later exaggeration.¹⁰ But throughout her life she frequently re-evaluated her political and religious views, and towards the end of her life, while she came to question the value and

importance of international politics, writing in 1964 that it represented ‘usually the executive expression of human immaturity,’ on the same page she reaffirmed her Christianity and its importance:

In such a period of moral decadence, the Christian who looks for inspiration to the Cross where love was crucified but not destroyed represents the revolutionary element in his own community, which at periods of maximum strain denounces him as a traitor, and in less dramatic intervals deprives him, with all the ingenuity in its power, of opportunities to bear witness to his faith.¹¹

Vera Brittain’s early life shows that religion and Christianity were always an important part of her world-view, and helped to direct and refine her political thought. This is an aspect of Vera Brittain’s political thought that has been overlooked, a neglect which has led to accusations of Vera Brittain being sentimental or unworldly when in fact she was attempting to carry out the teachings of Christ as she understood them.

Given that Vera Brittain’s position on religious issues changed at various points in her life, I have chosen to quote directly and at some length from her own published and unpublished writings on religious matters. As already explained, this practice will also be followed in the other chapters, to permit Vera Brittain to speak for herself, and for her political thought to be projected through her own very extensive writings.

Early Life and Beliefs

Vera Brittain’s religious beliefs did not always interpret her own moral position in terms of Christianity. However, it is important to understand how her early religious education affected her later beliefs and practices. In 1911, while 18 years old and still at school, she

read and was influenced by Mrs [Mary] Humphry Ward's religious novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), which was very popular at the time but regarded as sensational and unsuitable reading for young girls; indeed it was placed on an Index of forbidden books by some schools.¹² As this book is now out of print and difficult to obtain, I have made a brief précis of the text for this thesis (see Appendix E). Vera Brittain later claimed in *Testament of Youth* that 'her book converted me from an unquestioning if somewhat indifferent church-goer into an anxiously interrogative agnostic'.¹³ In the novel the teachings of Jesus Christ, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, is at the very the centre of the religious community and belief system which is established by Elsmere's followers, called the Brotherhood. This stress on the Sermon on the Mount provided a code for living and standards of human behaviour and justice which could be carried out in the real world.

A little while ago scores of these men either hated the very name Christianity or were entirely indifferent to it. To scores of them now the name of the teacher of Nazareth, the victim of Jerusalem, is dear and sacred; his life, his death, his words, are becoming once more a constant source of moral effort and spiritual hope.¹⁴

This view of human-nature contained within the text of *Robert Elsmere* that people could be trusted to do good and seek to co-operate and help others, was greatly admired by Vera Brittain, and the maxim of the eponymous hero's mentor at Oxford, that 'Conviction is the Conscience of the Mind,' resonate throughout all Vera Brittain's literary and political work.¹⁵ She continued to be touched by religious matters after she left school in 1912; in her diary for 19th January 1913 she wrote of her dissatisfaction with the local version of Anglicanism, which for her lacked spiritual interest, 'Felt the usual sleepiness in Church – I may say boredom – in Church. Oh! "Church of England", "where is the *King*, that I may

worship him?”” She believed that religious teachings should be inspirational, and that they should provide a framework or guidance for living a good life of usefulness and purpose for herself and for those around her. She expressed private doubts about Anglican teachings on the nature of Christ’s divinity and humanity, ‘though greater in degree & realisation’ which would have been regarded as dangerous thinking by her family and the middle-class society of Buxton of the time.¹⁶

This was the start of Vera Britain’s long and complex journey in attempting to reconcile her Anglicanism with her wider faith in humanity and the teachings of Christ. She was inspired by seeing one of the first films of the life of Jesus Christ, writing in her diary on Saturday 8th March 1913, ‘What a strange combination of mythology, travesty & history that great story seems to be’.¹⁷ The novel *Robert Elsmere* still exerted a powerful influence on her religious views, and she was surprised to find a real life example upon which to focus her religious interests, in the person of the Rev Joseph H. Ward, recently appointed to the parish of St. Peters in Fairfield in the Buxton area. On Saturday 15th November 1913 she discussed at some length in her diary a number of letters which had been published in *The Buxton Advertiser* on the opinions of this radical Anglican curate, who had upset his congregation by challenging orthodox Anglican teachings on the 39 Articles, describing him as ‘a sort of Robert Elsmere’.¹⁸ Some letters supported the Rev Ward, others did not; and she wrote of her parents’ reactions, in particular of her father’s hostility to her own expressed support. She also recorded in her diary for the following week, Friday 21st November 1913, a conversation with an elderly family friend, writing that ‘I don’t think one ought to *force* one’s convictions on other people, but I do firmly believe that they ought to be aroused to think things out for themselves and come to a

conclusion which would be of value because of their own making'.¹⁹ This discussion of local theological matters reflects Vera Brittain's frustration with the limits of Buxton intellectual life, but also her desire for freedom of religious debate and expression, and her right to her own opinions and identity.

The only direct personal statement that Vera Brittain made of her own religious beliefs comes from quite late in her life. This is an unpublished typescript article five pages long in her collected papers, entitled 'The Kind of God I Believe In,' which from internal evidence dates from sometime in the 1950s. In this article, which has never been cited or quoted by any previous published researcher into Vera Brittain's life and thought, she summarised her religious development, describing her early beliefs as follows:

As a schoolgirl adversely impressed by conventional Sunday observances and the pharisaical behaviour of Anglican clerics in the small provincial town where I lived, I responded with enthusiasm to the rationalism of Olive Schreiner, Havelock Ellis, and W. E. Henley ('I am the Captain of my Fate, I am the Master of my Soul').²⁰

Vera Brittain was a great admirer of the feminist writer Olive Schreiner, having read her political work, *Women and Labour* (1911) while still at school.²¹ She found particular inspiration in Schreiner's novel *The Story of An African Farm* (1883) which she first read in April 1914. This book contains strong anti-racist and anti-imperialist themes, which are wound around the central character's feminist ideas, which in the novel conflict with the duty and religious norms expected from a young woman of the time. Vera Brittain embraced feminism from an early age with a passion, exuberance, and fervour that can only be described as religious zeal.

There are also significant parallels between Olive Schreiner and Vera Brittain in their lives and writings. Each suffered a crisis of religious faith caused by the death of loved ones.²² Each put her conscience and religious convictions above her expected duty to the state, and each as a good citizen and Christian chose by peaceful means to protest against the violent actions of the state. They both read the Bible in times of emotional need, and found comfort and inspiration in its pages. Avrech Berkman defined this aspect of Schreiner's religious development and life as 'In self-perception, too, she not only derived comfort from the Bible's portraits of divine and human compassion but gained hope from its many narratives of heroic deeds'.²³ Ruth First and Ann Scott went further, writing that Schreiner 'found inspiration in the Sermon on the Mount as well: it made sense of her experience of punishment, but also gave her a way of dealing with it'.²⁴ All this was also true of Vera Brittain. In her early religious experiences, Vera Brittain rebelled against the unsatisfactory nature of the version of Anglicanism that was taught and practised in Buxton. Her parents would have prevented any outright break with the Established church, and her visits to Fairfield to hear the sermons of Rev Joseph Ward were within the social context of the era a rebellious act. She wrote of him:

Not a movement or cough was to be heard in all the big congregation. Everyone was absolutely still with their eyes fixed on him, & his Fairfield men gazed at him as upon a kind of prophet. When I get away from the sound of his voice I still remain with the magic circle of his predominating individuality.²⁵

The young and impressionable Vera Brittain was seeking guidance for her future life and found it in the words of the Rev Ward, writing in June 1914:

He preached a splendid sermon about will-power; the keynote of the whole was that there is no such thing as an unintentional sin, but that all wrong-doing depends on the deliberate choice of the will for evil.²⁶

It was the passion of this man's religious faith, giving inspiration and solace to his congregation in their everyday lives, which was lacking from the more conventional and dull Anglicanism which Vera Brittain sat through every Sunday morning.

The First World War

Religious faith and concerns were never far from Vera Brittain's mind during the First World War. She noted in her diary on Sunday 30th August 1914 the last sermon by the Rev Ward before he was forced to resign from his parish due to local pressure:

He has always bidden us consider three great questions – what we are, why we are here, & whither we are going. He had told us that we were not mere bundles of matter, mocked by moral insight & longing which could never attain its end, but divine spirits, full of power to do great deeds, think great thoughts, range over spiritual worlds, & create the Kingdom of God by our Godhead – beings inspired from a source whence the supply was unfailing & inexhaustible. We were here to develop our high mental qualities, & to increase our sensibility to emotion, not to drift on idly & aimlessly but to unite our wills with the power for righteousness that runs through all things & all ages, to resist the ape & tiger in our natures & to develop the divine.²⁷

This concern with the 'divine' is reflected in the many letters that Vera Brittain wrote during the course of the First World War, one of them to her unofficial fiancé Roland Leighton on 28th February 1915 in which she discussed the religious mood of the county:

In the churches in Oxford, where so many of the congregation are soldiers, we are always having it impressed upon us that 'the call of our country is the call of God'.

Is it? I wish I could feel sure that it was. At this time of year it seems that everything ought to be creative, not destructive, & that we should encourage things to live & not die.²⁸

Claire Tylee suggests that Vera Brittain's decision to train as a VAD in June 1915 was itself a form of religious fervour, that 'This became a religion in which letter-writing and nursing the wounded formed the ritual, the nurses' uniform the vestments, and the propaganda of chivalry and Brooke's poetry the liturgy'.²⁹ Writing to her brother Edward on 27th February 1916 with further details of Roland Leighton's death on 23rd December 1915, Vera Brittain included a paragraph on her own religious attitudes at the time, expressing her faith in both Christ and humanity but also her continuing doubts and questions:

He was unconquerable, the person He loved ought to be unconquerable too, n'est-ce pas? Nations may fall, & religions may fail, and there may be a Hereafter & there may not – but amid all these things, amid death & grief and disaster & danger, the mind of man is unconquerable, if it choose.³⁰

These sentiments in part explain why Vera Brittain was not upset when it became known that Roland Leighton had converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before his death in France. She and his family knew of his interest in the Church of Rome, but none knew of

his plans to convert. In particular his mother was distraught that he had changed his faith without telling her. In contrast Vera Brittain expressed a very rational and rare view, characteristically upholding the rights of the individual in religion, 'I think that even the people nearest to one are not entitled to know everything about one's innermost mind'.³¹ On 31st May 1916 she again wrote to her brother Edward, a letter filled with questions about the nature of God and the true meaning of the war, in which can be seen her religious belief in good works even in the context of the fighting:

Perhaps the Great Force we call God means us & our Allies to be special instruments of its progress & knew we should only be worthy to be this after the tremendous ordeal we are going through now. And perhaps we are not only making ourselves worthy but are preparing a double work – that of making an end to War at the same time. For 'they that live by the sword shall perish by the sword' and so War could only be abolished by War itself.³²

From 1916 onwards, while still believing strongly in the teachings of Christ, she became increasingly agnostic regarding both God and the possibility of life after death. However the experience of nursing 'acute' wounded German prisoners in August 1917, many of whom were dying, had a profound effect on both her later religious belief and political thought. She wrote of this time in *Testament of Youth*, 'the German ward might justly have been described as a regular baptism of blood and pus'.³³ In 1957 she would acknowledge this experience as a religious epiphany, while her compassion for individuals despite the propaganda was also present during the First World War as she carried out her nursing duties.³⁴ But she rarely attended formal church services from 1917 onwards, and when she did it was more as part of her ritual of grief and mourning; she received no solace from the

services themselves except as a means of honouring and remembering the dead. By September 1918 her religious belief had all but evaporated, 'At this stage of the War, I decided indignantly, I did not propose to submit to pious dissertations on my duty to God, King and Country'.³⁵ Indeed her official biographers Berry and Bostridge write that, 'Vera had ended the First World War doubting the existence of a divine architect in human affairs'.³⁶

Agnosticism and Politics

By April 1919, as a consequence of the First World War, Vera Brittain had lost her formal religious belief. Up to about 1935, she may be more accurately described as an agnostic who believed passionately in the individual as a force for good and positive progress who contained certain Divine qualities, but who had no firm religious convictions or close association with any church. This is certainly reflected in her life and work from 1919 onwards and her return to Oxford University and the establishment of a literary career in London. She focused all her spiritual energy on feminism and associated areas such as employment rights, equal pay and birth control. I can find only one reference in either her published or unpublished journalism of this period to religious matters; this is an undated book review entitled 'Women and Christianity,' which is more concerned with the effects of feminism on church hierarchies and administrative structures than theological matters.³⁷ Her novel *Not Without Honour* (1924) does have religious debates at its core and echoes *Robert Elsmere*, but its major theme is social and political in nature. Later in her life, as her Christian belief returned, her religious conviction once more became the guiding framework for her political actions. The return of her Christian faith in 1936 was

accompanied by an increasing belief in pacifism, but also with the political belief that religion was the best means of ensuring the rights of individuals, with politics being the practical means by which these rights would be expressed and protected.

Throughout her life, including her period of agnosticism, Vera Brittain's fundamental faith in human beings, and hope for the future, was never to change. As an agnostic, she still retained her belief in a human spirituality, and used Christian vocabulary to express her own beliefs and actions. She believed that those who had died in the First World War, including several close friends and relatives, had not died pointlessly, and that those like herself who had survived had a moral responsibility to make the world a better place. It was this view that led her to take an active role in politics from the 1920s onwards. Her involvement in politics, particularly in the Labour Party and in feminism, may be seen as an expression of the value system that she derived from her original Anglican beliefs, and which later merged with her returning Christian faith and pacifist convictions. In this period politics was in both her public and private life the expression of her moral values and of her dormant religious beliefs.

The process of linking religious conviction and politics together as a practical force began for Vera Brittain while she visited her brother Edward's grave on the Asiago Plateau in Italy for the first time in Autumn 1921, which she described using Christian terminology as a 'pilgrimage', travelling through France and Germany. In 1933 in *Testament of Youth* she wrote that at the side of his grave she underwent a religious experience, that a sense of 'profound despair' overcame her and that she reflected in religious terms on the meaning of the question asked by Pilate of Jesus Christ – 'What is truth?'³⁸ Her own reply was phrased in the context of the destruction, poverty and suffering of Europe which she had witnessed

on her journey. 'In the occupied territories' she wrote in *Testament of Youth*, 'sincerity is unavailing, and conscience loses its power as a guide'.³⁹ She also questioned what the future could be for all those who had survived the war, only to inherit such a legacy.⁴⁰ As a result of this experience, on her return to London she applied at once to lecture for the League of Nations Union, for which she started to work in February 1922. This is the first example of behaviour which would become characteristic for Vera Brittain throughout her life: a conviction coming from a highly personal spiritual experience being translated into public political action.

The experience of lecturing for the League of Nations Union, which continued until 1937, also exposed Vera Brittain for the first time to a wide spectrum of religious and political views:

Between 1922 and 1925, my numerous meetings for the League of Nations Union gave me acquaintances belonging to every social class from earls to dustmen, every shade of religious conviction from Roman Catholicism to Christian Science, and every type of political opinion from true-blue Diehard Toryism to blood-red Bolshevik Communism.⁴¹

Her sense of community and political activism was very strong indeed. She worked during the 1922 and 1923 General Elections for the successful Liberal candidate in Bethnal Green, a poor working-class district in London. But although approving of this particular candidate as an individual, she wrote that, 'At that time I still belonged to no political Party, for my interest in politics was chiefly international'.⁴²

This experience enriched Vera Brittain's social consciousness by bringing her into contact with the people for whom the Fabian Society of Socialists was formed in 1884.

Edward Pease, in his official history of the movement, describes its aim as ‘the reconstruction of society on a non-competitive basis with the object of remedying the evils of poverty’.⁴³ Although not a religious organisation in itself, several parsons were among its founder members, including the Rev Stewart D. Headlam, who drew inspiration from the Christian Socialist movement which had flourished between 1848 and 1852, and which used Christianity and Socialism as interchangeable terms. While any idea of a distinct Fabian Christianity is problematic, Pease himself wrote that, ‘To some of those who joined the Society in its early days, Christian Socialism opened the way of salvation,’ and a monthly journal called the *Christian Socialist* was published 1883-1891.⁴⁴ The Fabian Society in its early years often made use of Christian ideas and vocabulary, including naming its pamphlets ‘tracts’ in the manner of the Anglican and Dissenting Christian tradition.

By the time that Vera Brittain became involved with the Fabians, this idea of ‘Christian Socialism’ had become subsumed into a more political Socialism, more in keeping with her own agnosticism. But religious imagery and ideas were never far from the surface in the language of Socialism of the time. The statement ‘that no reasonable person who *knows the facts* can fail to become a Socialist,’ which Margaret Cole calls ‘one of the most important parts of the Fabian creed,’ expressed in the key doctrinal pamphlet *Facts for Socialists* first published in 1887 (and reprinted until 1956) is virtually identical to the Anglican and Dissenting Christian missionary tradition that simply hearing the gospel should itself be sufficient to bring about conversion and salvation.⁴⁵ Vera Brittain had been brought up in this Anglican tradition; her style of conviction politics may have derived from her religious attitudes, and certainly they complemented each other. Her political

thought included the conviction, increasingly marked as her ideas matured, that anyone who disagreed with the logic of her argument had simply not understood its main points or central core. The paradox between Vera Brittain's combative nature and her later adoption of Christian Pacifism was recognised both by herself and others; she was once called 'that warlike champion of peace' in a public meeting.⁴⁶ But she had always practised what she preached in terms of feminism, and after her conversion to Christian Pacifism she continued this behaviour into religious matters. In July 1938 she wrote a letter to the *Daily Herald*:

Neither of my own two children has been baptised. If they wish, when they are adults to become members of a Church which combines lip-service to Christ with the championship of re-armament, that will be their own affair. But I shall not commit them to it in their childhood. I suggest that all church-going peace lovers should refuse to have their children christened until the Church explicitly renounces war as part of the devil and all his works. The ecclesiastical hierarchy might then realise how completely the Church has forfeited the respect and allegiance of thinking people.⁴⁷

Vera Brittain never became a member of the Fabian Society itself, but she had been aware of its policies since 1914.⁴⁸ From 1924 onwards her political ideas were closely associated with the Fabians' beliefs, including their emphasis on education and social research.⁴⁹ The Fabian Women's Group often asked popular authors who wrote on social issues to lecture, and Vera Brittain gave at least one lecture to a meeting, in March 1938, entitled 'The Changing Scene' which she described as, 'a fairly outspoken account of the way in which manners and morals have changed since the time of our grandfathers up to the present

day'.⁵⁰ Victor Gollancz, her friend and publisher from 1933 onwards, also published Fabian Society pamphlets and lectured at a Fabian Summer School in August 1941. Her husband G. also wrote Fabian pamphlets, and attended their social and political gatherings.⁵¹ Their daughter Shirley (later Shirley Williams MP and Baroness Williams) also became the Society's first woman General Secretary in 1960, to Vera Brittain's delight as she saw this as promoting Shirley's parliamentary ambitions.⁵² One of Vera Brittain's increasingly rare public appearances later in her life was at a Fabian meeting in November 1965 to lecture on 'Women in Politics, 1966 and After'.⁵³

Although she never joined the Fabians, Vera Brittain's Christian, political and social beliefs were bound together in her decision, together with Winifred Holtby, to join the Labour Party in 1924. As remembered by Ellen Wilkinson MP (1891-1947), who later became a good friend of both Vera Brittain and G., at constituency level the Labour Party of this period included many women, particularly working-class women, doing the 'slogging work' at local party meetings.⁵⁴ At that time, the Labour Party with its Socialist ideals appeared to offer the political means by which future war could be prevented, and also promised practical assistance to those who had served in the First World War and to the widows and orphans of those who had died. For Vera Brittain its most important policies were its declared support for 'the abolition of war through the League of Nations, and the strengthening of the collective peace system by expanding and clarifying the undertaking not to resort to war'.⁵⁵ This desire to prevent war fed directly into her own great concern with Equality Feminism in its aim of achieving better economic and social conditions for working-class women, since she believed that working-class women in particular had suffered socially and economically both during and after the First World

War. She sought to improve their economic and social status and so give them greater political power to oppose any future war. The Labour Party's policies were in keeping with her views:

It had been, ironically enough, as much Bethnal Green as Central Europe which was responsible for our decision to quit the Liberal Party. For the first time, during those General Elections of 1922 and 1923, I came into intimate contact with the homes of the poor, and learnt, as my provincial middle-class upbringing had never permitted me to learn, the semi-barbarous conditions – intensified beyond calculation by the War and its consequences – under which four-fifths of the population are obliged to live in a confused and suffering world. I saw the men fighting one losing battle against economic depression and increasing unemployment, while the women waged another against excessive procreation combined with an accumulation of wasteful, interminable domestic detail, while the babies fought yet a third against under-nourishment, over-clothing, perpetual dirt and inadequate fresh air and sunshine.⁵⁶

This identification at both a local and international level with individuals in need made Vera Brittain 'politically minded once and for all'.⁵⁷ The experience was a first crucial link between her view of feminism and what was to become her pacifism, as well as her concern for the individual, at a time when she was seeking a belief system that offered a hope for the future to replace her Christianity.

Although Vera Brittain had lost her religious faith after the First World War, she still agreed to be married under the rites of the Catholic Church at St. James's Spanish Place in London in June 1925. This was not the act of a hypocrite but of someone seeking

comfort in conventional social practices and traditions. Before going to Oxford University after his return from war service in 1919, George Catlin had briefly considered entering the Dominican Order, and Vera Brittain appears to have been happy to acquiesce to her husband's desire to be married by an old friend and Dominican priest, Father Bede Jarrett.⁵⁸ She had known St. James's while a VAD nurse in London in 1915, and it also had connections to Roland Leighton. But she declined to convert to Catholicism, later writing that 'I could not follow him there, being temperamentally too much of an agnostic to become a convert even in tribute to his [Roland's] memory'.⁵⁹ As already mentioned, their two children John (born December 1927) and Shirley (born July 1930) were not baptised at the time into any faith, apparently because of a private arrangement between their parents at the time of their marriage.

From this time onwards, Vera Brittain would become an active and life-long Labour Party member, helping her husband in his two unsuccessful attempts to be elected to Parliament in 1931 and 1935. Deborah Gorham discusses in detail the contradictions between Vera Brittain's and her husband's declared Labour and egalitarian politics and their own distinctly upper middle-class lifestyle, with servants and private schools for their children.⁶⁰ Both Vera Brittain and G. recognised this issue themselves and debated in numerous private letters their differing views of the Labour Party and Socialism of the 1930s. She replied with considerable force in a letter to G. dated 12th February 1932:

Why do you say that socialism has no significance to me as a matter of passionate faith? What – to be explicit – actually is socialism nowadays, and how does one express 'passionate faith'? The two 'causes' I care for most are the abolition of war

and the further progress of feminism; neither one is compatible with the mode of privilege and dictatorship by persons with no responsibility towards society.⁶¹

Publishing *Testament of Youth* in 1933 was an important spiritual experience for Vera Brittain, especially in coming to terms with her relationship with the dead. By 1934, despite her continued agnosticism, her religious position had begun to shift as she wrote at the time:

For it seems to me that the essence of religion is not so much blind faith in a known or unknown god as the extent to which one's work is disinterested and one is moved by a desire to contribute to 'that long age which we shall not see,' rather than to one's own petty profit here and now.⁶²

Claire Tylee, using both *Testament of Youth* and the war diary it was based on, later published as *Chronicle of Youth*, details the process by which Vera Brittain was forced by cultural and social pressures to acquire a conventional wartime identity as a nurse and fiancée. She discusses how women's involvement in the war was seen as having a significant religious aspect which men's involvement did not, in particular in cases of women who had lost sons, whose bereavement was perceived as a form of self-sacrifice to a greater cause.⁶³ Partly as a result of her experiences as a VAD, Vera Brittain developed a strong identity with, and belief in, a 'community' of individuals, regardless of class or other distinctions, who shared her common experiences and from whom she could receive comfort and understanding. After the First World War this 'community' was comprised of people who had lost a loved one. But over time the 'community' changed, as the events of her life did, to comprise feminists, mothers or successful women writers, and only much later to include fellow Christians.

In many ways *Testament of Youth* was a series of personal reflections through which Vera Brittain expunged her own anger towards God over the war and her own loss; and was also her own way of communicating with the dead, chiefly her fiancé, close friends, and brother – Roland Leighton, Victor Richardson, Geoffrey Thurlow and Edward Brittain – through the text. Unlike many women who had been bereaved by the First World War, at no time did she consider exploring the very popular and respectable faith of Spiritualism, with its promise of direct communication with the dead. As she wrote in 1935, the year that her close friend Winifred Holtby died, she did believe, ‘that there may well be means of communication between one spirit and another even after one person’s consciousness is gone,’ but in her case the communication was indirect by means of writing to people who were in a sense not dead to her; Winifred Holtby whom she saw in death was ‘more completely gone & extinguished than those who died in the War, except perhaps Victor, whom I saw dead, whereas the others merely ceased to write’.⁶⁴

In *Testament of Youth* Vera Brittain sought answers from the dead of the past to questions being asked by the living in the present, and her sense of duty and loyalty was extended even to the dead. At this date she wanted a political, not a religious, answer to her questions about war, and in part concluded the book with an important declaration about its fallen:

In spite of the War, which destroyed so much hope, so much beauty, so much promise, life is still here to be lived; so long as I am in the world, how can I ignore the obligation to be part of it, cope with its problems, suffer claims and interruptions? The surge and swell of its movement, its changes, its tendencies, still mould me and the surviving remnant of my generation whether we wish it or not,

and no one now living will ever understand so clearly as ourselves, whose lives had been darkened by the universal breakdown of reason in 1914, how completely the future of civilised humanity depends upon the success of our present halting endeavours to control our political and social passions, and to substitute for our destructive impulses the vitalising authority of constructive thought. To rescue mankind from that domination by the irrational which leads to war could surely be a more exultant fight than war itself, a fight capable of enlarging the souls of men and women with the same heightened consciousness of living, and uniting them in one dedicated community whose common purpose transcends the individual.⁶⁵

The same ideas are implicit in many of Vera Brittain's writings and actions after the publication of *Testament of Youth*. In Autumn 1936 in *Red Poppy* magazine (the house magazine of the British Legion) she published an article entitled 'If They Came Back,' which argued that the dead of the First World War would reject national sovereignty and want a stronger League of Nations with real powers of collective security:

Never has an age existed in which compassion, the hatred of cruelty, the desire to understand human motives, has spread so widely in civilised societies. Our dead, if they returned, would recognise this new development of mental awareness and spiritual wisdom.⁶⁶

Once again, Vera Brittain saw an association between personal spirituality and collective political action at a national or international level.

In 1935 Vera Brittain experienced what she described some years later as a major spiritual crisis, which was to lead to the restoration of her Christian faith, and eventually to its becoming the dominant force in her world-view and political thought. On 2nd August

1935 her father Arthur Brittain, who had long suffered from depression, committed suicide by drowning; and on 29th September her close friend Winifred Holtby died after a long illness.⁶⁷ She described her friend's last hours, and how she found comfort with her husband in prayer at the Catholic church where Winifred Holtby had been their bridesmaid:

We found St James's, Spanish Place, already open for 7 o'clock Mass, and we went in again and knelt there for a few minutes, and as we left I lit a votive candle for her soul, wherever it might have gone or whatever become.⁶⁸

She wrote of Winifred's soul, 'Whether it had become nothing I did not know. I felt it had, despairingly. If it still existed, it had gone, very far away, and was nowhere near me'.⁶⁹ However, shortly after Winifred Holtby's funeral in Yorkshire she experienced a very vivid dream in which Winifred appeared and spoke to her saying 'We were wrong, there is something after death,' from which she took great comfort and which rekindled her religious faith in the hereafter.⁷⁰ She was later to write of this time, 'When deep sorrow smites human life and personal faith is insufficient for religious consolation, I know of only three ways to sublimate grief'. These were creative work, including the birth of a child 'who atones for the loss of its predecessor'; travel which provided her with new experiences; and a political or social campaign, which carried for her the possibility of a spiritual reward. In this case, she converted her spiritual crisis into political action once again, with a political campaign over the Abyssinian crisis that year.⁷¹



Vera Brittain in 1936, a publicity photograph taken by Howard Coster

Vera Brittain started to re-evaluate her own views on Christianity, collective security and war in the second half of 1935, after her spiritual crisis but before meeting the Christian Pacifist Canon Dick Sheppard in June 1936. Sheppard was a public figure whose services from St. Martin-in-the-Fields had been broadcast each month on radio since 1924.⁷² He and his followers believed strongly that the teachings of Christ were opposed to war, and in particular in the Sermon on the Mount, which was also a key text for them, and

that following these teachings could be a way to help prevent war. She wrote of this meeting and subsequent contacts with Christian Pacifists, 'When I found that I shared their views, I had no honest alternative but to join them'.⁷³ Many years later she defined this view:

I don't believe in war but I do believe in resisting evil. I believe in a religious pacifism the sort that Gandhi practised and taught. It is possible to resist tyranny and evil without violence. My sort of pacifism holds that a person should be prepared to die for a cause but not kill for it.⁷⁴

Vera Brittain did not become a pacifist because of her Christian beliefs alone, but because she believed that Christian teachings, in particular The Sermon on the Mount and the Commandment 'Thou Shall Not Kill' could provide a practical means of morality, which could be equally applied to individuals or countries alike. She accepted that there were risks to the Christian Pacifist stance, but came to believe by 1937 after a year's exposure to the influence of Dick Sheppard that it offered 'practical and effective methods of resistance to war itself without recourse to arms'.⁷⁵ Her key Bible text at this time was taken from the Sermon on the Mount, 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'.⁷⁶ Her momentous meeting with Sheppard is detailed in the chapter of this thesis on pacifism, but she wrote of Sheppard's importance to her religious development in 'The Kind of God I Believe In':

From the words and works of that great, good and suffering man, and from the pacifist creed which I came perforce to embrace, it gradually dawned upon me that the goodness and Wisdom of God, though always there for our inspiration and example, cannot function to transform the universe without the co-operation of man.

Perhaps if I had known Dick for longer than twelve months – he died, too soon, in 1937 – I might have taken less than nine years [until 1945] to come to the convictions that I now hold.⁷⁷

Vera Brittain was lecturing in the United States at the time of Sheppard's death on 31st October 1937, although G. attended Sheppard's funeral.⁷⁸ She wrote to her husband, 'It was as though the bottom had dropped out of the world'.⁷⁹ Her son later wrote of how important the relationship with Sheppard was to his mother's spiritual development:

She had only known him a year but his life – and death – left an indelible impression on her. Knowing Sheppard was undoubtedly a crucial factor in her decision to stay in England in the event of war, and in her determination to preach pacifism, war or no war. She did not acquire religious faith from Dick Sheppard, but his example was supremely important to her. After his death she became relatively less concerned with being the successful writer and more concerned with propagating pacifism. Certainly to my mother pacifism was not so much a political expedient or pragmatic way of dealing with international affairs as a form of religious faith.⁸⁰

One hundred thousand people over two days filed past Sheppard's coffin to pay their last respects. Reading G.'s description of the funeral, Vera Brittain wrote of Sheppard and his work, 'When the spirit of man, at its noblest and best, does shine through, unimpeded by worldly interests... it appears to have a more compelling influence upon other men than anything else in the world'.⁸¹ Siegfried Sassoon, who like Vera Brittain was also a Peace Pledge Union (PPU) Sponsor, described Sheppard in a poem for *St. Martins's Review*, 'You, and your work for Christ, for who you died,' emphasising the link between pacifism

and Christianity, something which was fundamental in Vera Brittain's political thought from this time onwards.⁸² This importance of Christianity not only to Vera Brittain's pacifism but to all her political thought has been seriously neglected in all previous discussions of her life and significance.

Vera Brittain and Dick Sheppard had much in common when they met, and this may be part of the explanation for his great influence in converting her to Christian Pacifism. They shared a religious faith in the teachings of Christ, and a belief that every individual was special and gifted with possibilities. Both had a love of humanity and respect for people, but the First World War had challenged to the very core their respective religious belief systems. Sheppard had been a chaplain in France in the early months of the war, and had spent at least part of the time with the Australian Hospital near Boulogne, administering to wounded and dying British soldiers. He became famous for comforting the dying, and one doctor later described how he 'would identify himself with every dying man... sit there just because he had promised the dying man that he would, just because he really thought it might somehow comfort the poor fellow'.⁸³ Writing in 1950, Vera Brittain recalled her own experiences nursing dying German soldiers at Etaples in 1917 in similar terms, emphasising the religious meaning of the experience:

I 'belonged' to my generation in a way that I could never have done if I had sat out the war in Oxford lecture-rooms. I was part of a fellowship of suffering whose members had learned in a hard school that human beings, whatever their national labels, possess an underlying unity which makes War the sin against the Holy Ghost, and the attainment of reconciliation our generation's reply to the age-long challenge of Calvary.⁸⁴

By 1945, Vera Brittain had come to regard war as the ultimate evil, and individual political action to stop war as a religious duty, a belief that she took from her encounters with Dick Sheppard and the Peace Pledge Union from 1937 onwards.

The Second World War and its Aftermath

Vera Brittain's diary entry for Sunday 3rd September 1939, the day that Great Britain entered the Second World War, contains no reference to spiritual matters. According to Berry and Bostridge she still had some remaining doubts about the nature of God at this date.⁸⁵ She recorded her sense of disappointment as she listened to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's famous radio broadcast as she sat between her two children:

I found that the tears were running down my cheeks – I suppose from some subconscious realisation of failure of my efforts for peace over 20 years, for I had expected the announcement.⁸⁶

As early as 24th August, the day on which British newspapers published news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the possibility of war seemed more likely, her first reaction was to reflect on her loved ones and in particular her children. After the British declaration of war she recorded in detail the many and dramatic changes the war regulations caused. By 28th September her reflections on war had widened from the domestic and personal to the future loss of beautiful things, and the destruction of established communities and patterns of life.⁸⁷ Her spiritual reflections were on personal matters and nature, but these would not translate into any religious expression until the following year.

As was characteristic of Vera Brittain, this period of reflection was soon transformed into political action. From the Munich Crisis onwards, she had begun to

receive letters from PPU members, and even more from the general public, mainly from women, seeking her advice and support as a Christian Pacifist and well-known public figure. This was one of the reasons that she gave for publishing her own private *War-Time Letters to Peace Lovers* as a weekly newsletter, starting on 4th October 1939 with as her text a line from the Norwegian humanist novelist Johan Bojer (1872-1959) 'I went and sowed corn in my enemy's field that God might exist'.⁸⁸ Vera Brittain saw this newsletter, which she continued until December 1946, together with her other writings as an essential part of her good works during wartime. In what she saw as a spiritual duty, she also provided financial support for refugee centres, many of them run by religious groups, and for individual refugees and their families. She wrote that 'apart from the evening shelter-work' for refugees or those whose homes had been destroyed by bombing, 'I felt myself summoned at the time to another form of inconspicuous service,' through her newsletter and through visiting groups who opposed the war or its conduct, usually speaking at Friends Meeting Houses throughout the country.⁸⁹ She became a member of the Friends' Ambulance Unit and helped at a mobile canteen for air-raid victims in South London; and she also represented conscientious objectors at tribunals.

Although these actions still lacked an absolute religious basis, they were in keeping with Vera Brittain's views of Christ's teachings, particularly the eight 'beatitudes' section of the Sermon of the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the Peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.⁹⁰

In all her work and practical pacifism during the Second World War she sought to carry out the spirit of the beatitudes, which also reflected her increasing contacts with the Society of Friends (Quakers).

As part of her 'good works,' in July 1940 Vera Brittain started to write about the Battle of Britain and the Blitz over London, touring many parts of London and many other bombed cities, including Coventry and Plymouth, both to gather information for her book *England's Hour* and to support other Christian Pacifists in their public work and beliefs. In 1942, her article entitled 'England's Bombed Cities' was published in the *Toronto Star*, in which she detailed many individual acts of courage and bravery which she had recounted to her on her travels.⁹¹ She wrote of her public lectures and talks at this time, 'On the platforms of the small chapels and Meeting Houses where I stood, there had seemed always to be an altar too,' and she felt that she was in the presence of God on these occasions.⁹²

One of Vera Brittain's principal fears at the start of the war was a very personal one: that her two children might be harmed or killed, a concern that grew as the war went on, and which resulted in a profound spiritual crisis for her. On 22nd September 1939 she wrote 'Have decided it is just selfishness which makes me wish in these days that they had

never been born; it isn't so much the fear that they will suffer, as reluctance to suffer more myself through my love for them'.⁹³ On 26th June 1940, the children were evacuated to the United States, where they would remain for the next three years. Her diary is filled with deep concern for them, but she believed she would be able to visit them later in the year. At the start of the war the Ministry of Information had told her that, as a well known author, they might have important war work for her to perform, although she had noted, 'Can only reply that as a pacifist can be useful only in so far as information contributes to peace'.⁹⁴ But despite a previous lecture tour of the United States, unlike her husband on 3rd October 1940 she was refused a further Exit Permit to visit the United States and her children, on the grounds that she was an active Peace Pledge Union Sponsor, throwing her into a state of panic.⁹⁵ She later wrote of this time:

During the autumn of 1940, a keen sense of injustice had brought me much bitterness. I had been 'deceived', as it seemed, into parting with the children before learning that I should no longer be allowed to do the work abroad which the previous winter had been represented as my duty.⁹⁶

She wrote to G of her great sorrow, 'I suddenly came to myself to find I was sobbing like a baby from sheer loneliness and unavailing grief. At times having lost the children, I feel I *can't go on*'.⁹⁷ She made two further applications for an Exit Permit in 1940 and 1941; both were refused.

The stress of this anxiety prompted some form of profound emotional and spiritual crisis in Vera Brittain, leading to a divine revelation that the separation from her children was a test of her personal religious faith. Once more, what began as a personal and spiritual matter became the motivation for political action, and this experience would inform and

motivate her public and private behaviour during the rest of Second World War and beyond. Writing in 1957 in *Testament of Experience* she described this pivotal event as follows:

One October week-end I had walked through a country lane considering, with the ready indignation of a combative temperament, how I could 'get my own back' on the obstructive bureaucrats who had made such havoc of my personal life.

Suddenly, in an empty valley covered with fallen leaves, something seemed to check the direction of my thoughts. Within my mind, an inconvenient second self addressed me firmly.

'Don't you realise that this is a spiritual experience? For the past few years you have had far more honour and appreciation than you deserve. Now you know what it is to be humiliated; and this gives you a new kinship with those to whom you have hitherto felt superior – prisoners, refugees, the unemployed, the down-and-outs, and all the despised and rejected of men'.⁹⁸

She referred again to this event at the end of *Testament of Experience* as 'In a Berkshire valley at the end of 1940 I had perceived humiliation to be a moral discipline, accepted by John Bunyan as a necessary part of his pilgrim's progress'.⁹⁹

Despite these later writings, the contemporary evidence for this episode as a profound turning point in Vera Brittain's life is not strong, and it may only have become so important to her with hindsight. Neither her original diary for 1940, nor the edited version *Wartime Chronicle* (1989), makes a *specific* reference to this experience; although it does place her in Berkshire in late October and early November 1940, and includes brief descriptions of country walks (for example, the entry for Monday 4th November reads

‘Finished “England’s Hour”; except for revisions. Worked all day except for ½hr walk in rain in the middle of afternoon’).¹⁰⁰ There are gaps and omissions in the diary as she travelled between various addresses in London and around the country, and she was also working very hard; she may have been unable to reflect on such a revelation of her inner beliefs at the time, only to recognise this moment of clarity at a considerable distance of years. She may also have been seeking in *Testament of Experience* to rationalise her actions since 1940. But there is no need to dismiss the episode as a later fabrication; from October 1940 onwards her actions did follow a changed and complex, but very distinct, pattern based on her inner spiritual beliefs, which perhaps she did not immediately recognise at the time. From late 1940 onwards, her writings show an increasingly marked religious imagery, particularly when discussing the war and what she believed to be the correct response to it. In October 1941 she wrote an ‘Open Letter’ to the workers in the Christian Pacifist Forestry and Land Units, which were composed of conscientious objectors, in which she stressed the importance of their work both in itself and as a practical expression of their convictions: ‘As pacifists you and I are attempting to cultivate more than the land; we are trying to sow the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven in the minds and hearts of men and women’.¹⁰¹ After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7th December 1941, she wrote her own definition of what she believed a true Christian Pacifist should aspire to, following the attack: ‘He must point ceaselessly to the ideals of a nobler community even though he knows it is far away and that he is unlikely ever to see it’.¹⁰² On 27th January 1942 she reflected in her diary on the suicide of her father, which had been the start of her earlier renewal of faith in 1935:

Thought of Father, & realised how fortunate I was to encounter Dick Sheppard & P.P.U. when I did – to be now part of a Christian fellowship & within it to realise, through the Nemesis which has come to the erring nations, the working out of a moral principle in the world which would recompense good. This war has reversed for me the spiritual process of the last, which made me for a time a Rationalist.¹⁰³

Vera Brittain's efforts at this time to 'accept Christianity as a way of life' were to reach fulfilment in her work with the prominent Quaker [Thomas] Corder Catchpool (1883-1952).¹⁰⁴ A fellow member of the Peace Pledge Union, his ideas and personal influence first became important to her in 1941 over the issue of their opposition to strategic or area bombing, particularly by the Royal Air Force (RAF); and they were founder members of the Bombing Restrictions Committee, formed to criticise this British government policy.¹⁰⁵ Given her beliefs in Christian Pacifism, Vera Brittain was already unhappy with the established Church of England's support for the war, and its use of passages from the Gospels to justify its views. On 19th May 1940 she recorded that:

In Bristol Cathedral a Canon tries to square the Gospel with the present violence – says it was written in the mist of a military society, but failing to point out that it was directed *against* that society. My God – let us say if we must that we have no choice but to do as we are doing, but don't let us call it Christian.¹⁰⁶

She became very critical of the role of the Anglican Church's support for the state, writing in February 1942 that, 'as the power of the Church has diminished, the power of the State has increased. Totalitarianism is the measure of democracy's failure to impose sufficiently strong limits upon political authority'.¹⁰⁷ This, and her increasing contacts with the Quakers, took her further towards the Dissenting tradition.

Corder Catchpool was a lifelong example of the kind of practical 'good works' Christianity that appealed to Vera Brittain, including his involvement in political issues and his reconciliation work in Berlin between the wars with the Friends War Victims Relief Committee and the Friends International Centre.¹⁰⁸ He had been arrested in Berlin in April 1933 on suspicion of 'having spread false reports about Germany abroad,' but was released and the charges dropped, and he continued his work with groups suffering Nazi persecution until August 1936, when he and his family returned to England.¹⁰⁹ The example of his life, his love of humanity and the practical nature of his profound faith were a major religious influence on Vera Brittain. Like Dick Sheppard, he also shared with her the experience of First World War hospital work in France: he had served as a volunteer with the Friends Ambulance Unit from November 1914 until May 1916. He had resigned from this only because, as an 'absolute' pacifist conscientious objector, he refused to accept the 1916 Military Service Act which imposed conscription. As a result he underwent three court-martial and was imprisoned with hard labour, being released in April 1919. During the Second World War he volunteered for hospital duty and shelter work, and like Vera Brittain he also advised conscientious objectors. In 1940 he re-issued *On Two Fronts: Letters of a Conscientious Objector* first published in 1918, which contained letters of his service in France and in particular from the first year of his imprisonment; and in 1941 he published *Letters of a Prisoner For Conscience Sake*, containing additional letters to his mother not included in his first book. Both books were intended as a source of aid and comfort to Second World War prisoners of conscience and their families.

Vera Brittain wrote that she 'loved' Catchpool, in a spiritual sense, so much so that in March 1942 she even considered quite seriously becoming a Quaker herself, and he was

disappointed when she declined. Among her reasons were her refusal to accept the Quaker rejection of physical beauty, and the lack of mysticism in Quaker theology; she also doubted that the Quaker emphasis on self-effacement was appropriate for an author, especially one of her temperament. In March 1945 she further developed her arguments, 'I believe, none the less, that if all those Anglicans who share Quaker convictions on war were to migrate to the congenial pastures of the Society of Friends, we should not advance but postpone the growth of a community which will graduate through self- knowledge to constructive peace-making'.¹¹⁰ In 1956 she defined herself as 'the religious hybrid that I once described as "a Quaker-inclined Anglican married to a Catholic",' (although the original remark does not seem to have been recorded).¹¹¹ The very different Christian doctrines of Quakerism and Catholicism share one thing in common: that faith is not enough and must be supported by good works, which can be defined as individual actions or conduct carried out as a part of a person's religious faith.

The combination of Vera Brittain's personal spiritual revelation in October 1940 with her increasing concern over the conduct of the war resulted in 1942 in practical action, in the form of an important book. In June she published in the United States an article entitled 'The Ordeal of British Pacifism: Pacifist Christianity in War Time – V.'¹¹² This article was a summary of what was to become *Humiliation with Honour*, a book written in epistolary form to her son and published in October. It was the closest that she ever came to producing a theological text on her beliefs as a Christian Pacifist.¹¹³ Her epilogue for the book summarised her view of the role of religion for the individual in war, and was a clear statement both of her own belief in God, and for the need for humiliation and other trials as part of the Christian life:

War begins first in the human soul. When a man has learned how to wrest honour from humiliation, his mastery of his own soul has begun, and by just that much he has brought the war against war nearer to victory. He no longer looks to the men on the heights to supply him with evidence that God exists. Instead he himself, from the depths, becomes part of that evidence. He has proved that power itself is powerless against the authority of love.¹¹⁴

Hannah Arendt in her own doctoral thesis wrote of the relationship of love between God, the world, and man, based on the writings of St. Augustine.¹¹⁵ There are elements of the text of *Humiliation with Honour* that reflect both this relationship, and also the style and tone of John Bunyan's great allegorical work *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which was itself a product of a deep religious crisis, and which expressed doubts about faith and man's relationship with God. Bunyan was imprisoned for twelve years for refusing to obey the dictates of the state on both political and religious matters, and used this confinement to write *Pilgrim's Progress*. Vera Brittain, her readership, and anyone of her class, upbringing and generation were very familiar with *Pilgrim's Progress*, which like *Humiliation with Honour* sought to offer comfort in dangerous and troubled times to their readers, but also a future of joy and individual contentment.¹¹⁶ But Bunyan's life was also just as great a source of religious inspiration to Vera Brittain as his written works. In 1950 she wrote his biography, and in the book's introduction expressed what Bunyan meant to her: 'He is the individual who established, through political confusion and religious persecution, the right to maintain a direct relationship between himself and God'.¹¹⁷ In August of the same year she wrote her most overtly religious poem, a short piece entitled *Testament of Faith*, which echoes Christian's search for God in *Pilgrim's Progress*:

When war clouds gather
And the day grows dim,
The seeker after God shall trust in Him
... Beyond death's night
Lies the hour of birth
When they, the meek, shall inherit the earth'.¹¹⁸

Humiliation with Honour, although a seminal text in Vera Brittain's political thought, has been out of print until quite recently, with its reprint as part of *One Voice*, and remains difficult to obtain, and for this reason its arguments are given in précis form as part of this thesis (see Appendix D). In this book, Vera Brittain claimed that all wars are caused by injustice, writing that:

In my last letter I endeavoured to explain the pacifist belief that Christ's injunction to 'overcome evil with good' lays upon His followers the obligation to pursue a way of life which uses, like Gandhi in India, only weapons of the spirit against the powers of darkness, and directs those weapons first against sin in themselves. It also obliges them to affirm that pursuit publicly, and to accept, with as much charity and as little bitterness as possible, whatever penalty their faith may involve. A decision of this kind has been a turning-point in the lives of many people. In the deliberate, unresentful choice of avoidable punishment, we come as near as most of us ever get to the heart of religious experience. Though the results of enforced pain may be evil, the redemptive function of pain consciously chosen and accepted seldom fails.¹¹⁹

She concluded the book with a call for individuals to join in collective action to reconstruct the world after the war, as an act of religious observance:

That work of reconstruction will demand every gift which can be contributed to the common weal by all the races of men: the black, the brown, the yellow, the white, 'whose prayers go up to one God under different names'.¹²⁰

On Friday 7th August 1942 she recorded in her diary the response from her publisher Andrew Dakers to the manuscript of *Humiliation with Honour*: he praised its reasonableness, tolerance and its clear statement of the pacifist position but also added that, 'There is nothing in the book to offend any Christian citizen'.¹²¹ The forgiveness of enemies, even those who had committed horrific sins against humanity, was at the core of the text. This was the only way of breaking the cycle of violence and retaliation; as she wrote, 'I also emphasised that this undertaking must be carried out humbly and without self-righteousness, since we are all part of a society which has failed, and must bear our proportion of responsibility for that failure'.¹²² At the end of the Second World War she discovered that the book has been smuggled into occupied Norway and circulated at great risk throughout the Resistance movement.¹²³

The beliefs expressed in *Humiliation with Honour* were also central to Vera Brittain's decision to write a pamphlet in 1942 entitled *The Higher Retribution*, which sought to counter the anti-German views prevailing at that time in British Establishment circles, particularly those of the former diplomat and politician Lord Vansittart (1881-1957) and his supporters.¹²⁴ Vera Brittain was vehemently opposed to Vansittart's belief in draconian actions to be taken against the German population. In 1941 he had written, 'The *German* is often a moral creature; the *Germans* never; and it is the *Germans* who count.

You will always think of *Germans* in the plural, if you are wise. That is their misfortune and their fault'.¹²⁵ She replied that given Great Britain's behaviour in India and Africa over many years the British were not in a position to be 'judge and executioner,' and further:

For ourselves retribution has followed, not only the punishment and humiliation of Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, but the blindness and pride of our Far Eastern 'pukka sahibs' who habitually treated black, brown and yellow races as 'lesser breeds without law,' and were guilty of racial superiority little different in essentials from that of the Nazis.... We can safely leave the war's criminals – whether nations or individuals – to the Almighty who has claimed vengeance as his, and to the working out of his moral law as demonstrated by history.¹²⁶

Corder Catchpool also shared this view and Vera Brittain's opposition to Vansittart's position, writing in 1944 that after the Second World War when Germany was defeated any peace settlement should be based on consensus and reconciliation and 'the will of the German people'.¹²⁷

Vera Brittain's belief that the cycle of violence and retribution must be broken was the motivation for the demand in her pamphlet *One of These Little Ones* in January 1943 that famine relief should be provided by the British government to the starving populations of Nazi occupied Europe. According to Berry and Bostridge, 'The central tenet of her pacifism was the maintenance of civilised values in wartime'.¹²⁸ She noted at the time 'Felt a real call to write it' and later expanded on this as 'Firmly an inner voice commanded "Write!"'.¹²⁹ In this pamphlet she expressed her disgust that the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple (1881-1944), would not publicly support such a humanitarian gesture, 'But this dreadful willingness of the official Church to let the Govt. get away with anti-

Christian evil without ecclesiastical protest!'¹³⁰ Her conviction that the Anglican Church was ignoring the most basic tenets of Christianity was displayed in April 1943, when despite her increasingly deep belief in God she refused to observe Easter:

But I don't feel like celebrating Easter. 'Christ is risen!' What a mockery, when the world has buried him more completely than ever before in history. I'll celebrate Easter (I hope) when the War is over.¹³¹

Vera Brittain's strongest condemnation was for Allied bombing of German cities, which she saw as an act of barbarity.¹³² This led to her most controversial publication, the pamphlet *Seed of Chaos: What Mass Bombing Really Means* which appeared in Great Britain in April 1944, the same month that the Pope spoke out against the Allied bombing campaign; the pamphlet was also published in the United States in an amended version as *Massacre by Bombing* (a full discussion of this pamphlet is included in Chapter 3 The Pacifist Circle).¹³³ In this pamphlet she wrote not only about the appalling loss of life but also the moral and spiritual damage which was being done to human civilisation, quoting frequently from the Bible, and using religious as well as pacifist arguments against the policy. She also quoted Corder Catchpool in the pamphlet, and criticised the refusal of the Archbishop of Canterbury to debate the issue.

The opposition to the views expressed in *Seed of Chaos* was considerable, particularly in the United States' press, although Vera Brittain's reaction to this was that:

When you are putting forward unpopular views, the thing that really creates despair is to be ignored; when people take notice, abuse you & defend themselves, you know you have got under their skin & uncovered a bad conscience!¹³⁴

Writing in 1963 she summarised the experience and efforts of the British government to silence the protests of the BRC:

I was their scribe, incorporating in articles and booklets the facts patiently collected by Corder Catchpool from foreign newspapers. One of our pamphlets, the American version of *Seed of Chaos*, renamed *Massacre by Bombing* and published by the New York Fellowship of Reconciliation, was shouted down in the United States by over 200 journalistic blasts. In Britain the original was so quietly and effectively suppressed that today the younger writers even on such leading pacifist publications as *Peace News* are unaware that the protest was made.¹³⁵

When in September 1945 she found out that her name was in the Nazi 'Black Book', which listed individuals to be arrested in the event of a German conquest of Great Britain, she felt that this proved her point about the need for the stand that she had taken:

It showed that the Nazis understood, far more clearly than those at home who tried to identify pacifists with Fascists, anti-patriots and pro-Nazis, the danger to themselves, & to their doctrines, of Christian pacifists. They realised that those who are ready to resist them by spiritual, non-violent means were at least as dangerous as those who were prepared to fight them by military weapons; they understood that the faith by which we lived was a power inimical to, because precisely the opposite of, their doctrines.¹³⁶

By the end of the Second World War Vera Brittain's religious views had coalesced into a firm belief both in God and in Christian Pacifism, culminating in another moment of personal divine revelation, in 1945. In her typescript 'The Kind of God I Believe In' she gave the exact moment when God's existence was made clear to her beyond question:

I can probably best explain the kind of God I believe in by describing the simple experience through which the fact of His existence eventually – and I think finally – became a certainty in my mind. This certainty began to grow in, of all places, Parliament Square on V. E. Day (May 8th) 1945, and worked itself out in the weeks that followed.

That warm, sunny afternoon I went to Whitehall to hear the announcement that the War in Europe was over, and deliberately stood on almost the exact spot in which, as a young Red Cross nurse with my friends gone, I had ‘celebrated’ Armistice Day in 1918. But this time the humble civilians on the pavement amongst whom I stood did not burst into noisy rejoicing; too many had seen their fellow citizens killed and their homes destroyed. They acquiesced – though not always willingly – in such evil deeds as obliteration bombing and the starvation of Europe, but they had also endured with patience much wrong done to them by others. Suddenly I had an overwhelming impression of their essential goodness - a goodness which could transform the world if they worked with the God within them instead of blindly joining His enemies.

And then came the strange experience which defeats even now my power to describe it in words. I only knew that out of the humiliations, errors and confusions of the war just ending had emerged a certainty so immense that the sad record of human fallibility acquired a totally new perspective... I knew that God lived, and that the sorrow and suffering in the world around me had come because men refused to obey His laws. The self-interested policies which had driven mankind to the edge

of the abyss seemed to me to supply incontrovertible testimony that an opposite policy, the way of God, the road of the cross – would produce an opposite result.¹³⁷

As she later wrote in the unpublished foreword to her *Letters to Peace Lovers*:

Because God exists, we shall survive only by living, as nations and as individuals, in accordance with values and standards of conduct that are precisely the opposite of those to which, especially during the last thirty years, human society has subscribed. In that belief my halting voice has spoken, and, so long as life remains to me, will continue to speak.¹³⁸

This profound personal belief in God was accompanied by the strengthening of her conviction that individual reconciliation was the only way to unite nations and prevent war. She was also seeking to distance herself from the authority of the Church of England for what she saw as its subservience to the state and its failure to address the moral issues of warfare, and particularly the use of atomic weapons in 1945, which she saw as a crime against God. She never ceased to be an Anglican, retaining the close connection with St Martin-in-the Fields church which had begun with her association with Dick Sheppard in 1936. But her idea of religious faith was something to be practised in good works, and in opposition to political decisions which seemed to her to be contrary to God.

Despite her own increased and deep Christian faith, Vera Brittain had always accepted the idea of different religious belief systems, and by about 1945 she had come to think that each person reaches their own personal relationship with God as He is understood, very much in the Quaker theological tradition. In an unpublished and undated article which comes from this period, entitled 'Loving Our Enemies,' she stressed the importance of the Sermon on the Mount and how it offers 'not only religious values but

sound practical politics, offering clarity to both the general public and politicians when discussing international treaties and accords'. She called for Christian Pacifists to use faith, hope and charity in particular in their work with international refugees, and for no bitterness or revenge, even for the crimes against the Jewish population, to enter into the political process with the German people when the war was over, concluding that 'Our hate recoils upon us and destroys us. It is only our love that survives and is immortal'.¹³⁹ This was also the reason why she published *Above All Nations*, a collection of first-hand reports of acts of humanity and kindness, carried out by all sides and often at great personal risk, during the Second World War. This appeared in late April 1945, only a few days before incontrovertible evidence of the Final Solution and the death camps became public knowledge in Great Britain, and in May was distributed by the Friends Committee to German prisoners of war.¹⁴⁰ In reviewing the book, John Betjeman wrote of the German entries that there were 'hundreds of instances where Germans acted, for a moment, as humans instead of Germans, where they obeyed their consciences instead of their State'.¹⁴¹

Vera Brittain mentioned the first newsreel film coverage of the liberation of the concentration camps in her diary a few days later.¹⁴² Despite the horror of what she saw, she still maintained her faith in people and in their inner desire to do good in the community in which they lived and shared with others. This is what she recorded in *Above All Nations*: acts of kindness which represented hope in the future. This was the critical point for Vera Brittain's belief in the relationship between individual religious faith and the conduct of war, a belief shared by her publisher Victor Gollancz in his foreword:

Hope must come, if it is to come at all, from faith: the faith that in every human being some goodness is latent. And that in the fullness of time – it may be after a

few generations, it may be in ten thousand years – this goodness must surely issue in an international society worthy of our human dignity and pride.¹⁴³

In keeping with Vera Brittain's previous behaviour, when Victor Gollancz created the Save Europe Now Campaign (1945-1948), which supplied food parcels to the starving people of Europe and in particular Germany, she and Corder Catchpool expressed this hope for the future in practical terms by taking part in the campaign. Many British people objected to this relief effort to aid people still seen as their enemies, when they themselves were still rationed. In 1951 she wrote of this time in characteristically religious terms:

The cries of self-pity which greeted responsible post-war appeals to 'Save Europe Now' suggest that this technique of loving one's neighbour as one's self is still far from general acceptance. To the housewife buying her weekly rations at a suburban store, the pale rows of homeless refugees asleep on the midnight pavements of Calcutta are less than the dust in which they lie. Human salvation waits, as it has always waited, upon the slow growth of human imagination. 'To realise God,' wrote Mahatma Gandhi, 'is to see Him in all lives, to realise our one-ness with all creation',¹⁴⁴

This mention of Gandhi, a non-Christian whom she greatly admired, is a reflection of a strong anti-imperialist aspect of Vera Brittain's political thought and a knowledge of other spiritual or religious belief systems. From as far back as the mid-1920s she had supported the Indian independence movement, in part influenced by Winifred Holtby's work for black trade unions in South Africa following her visit there in 1926.¹⁴⁵ In December 1942 Vera Brittain added her name to a published leaflet calling for the 'immediate release of all political prisoners in India, and the immediate conference with the

Congress leaders in order to form a provisional Indian Government with full responsibility and complete independence'.¹⁴⁶ After the Second World War, her ideas on the importance of reconciliation and consensus in peacemaking included the granting of independence to India, a view which was also closely linked to her admiration for Gandhi as an inspirational spiritual figure.

One of Vera Brittain's most important political ideas was that individuals could effect change and make a difference. In terms of her feminism she saw this in the lives and works of Olive Schreiner and Winifred Holtby; in religious terms it was the lives and works of Dick Sheppard and Corder Catchpool; and in political terms it was the life and works of Mahatma Gandhi.¹⁴⁷ Her diary throughout the Second World War is peppered with entries about Gandhi's work, and the British government's treatment of him and the Indian independence question. It had long been her ambition to visit India, and twice in 1940 and 1941 she received invitations to an All-Indian Women's Conference, although the British government's refusal to grant her an Exit Permit prevented her attending. Mrs V. Pandit, President of the conference and sister of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, spoke of this at the time:

The decision was unfortunate. At this critical period in the relationship between the people of India and those of England, human contacts are important. Miss Vera Brittain would have forged another link in that chain of friendship between peoples which this organisation has been trying to create.¹⁴⁸

In August 1947, India gained independence with partition, at a very high price of civil and religious war between Moslems and Hindus. On 20th January 1948 Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, and Vera Brittain wrote two days later of the shock and despair of his murder, calling him the 'Patron saint of Pacifism'.¹⁴⁹ By this time she saw a very direct connection,

at a spiritual level, between personal hate, political vendetta and warfare, including especially atomic weapons. In late January 1948, in her rough notes for a lecture entitled 'Human Spirit v Atomic Bomb,' she used Christian religious imagery to debate the new technological developments in warfare and the role of Christians:

The hand that killed the Mahatma is the same hand that nailed the cross; it is the hand that fired the faggots; it is the hand that through the ages has been growing ever more mighty in war and less sure in the pursuit of peace. It is your hand and mine.¹⁵⁰

This was followed in April 1948 with a lecture at Caxton Hall, London entitled 'Atomic Challenge'. In the rough speaking notes that she prepared, she wrote of the failure of conventional Christian leadership, and concluded that a stronger spiritual lead was required to influence politicians to reject the further development and use of atomic weapons.¹⁵¹ In a further undated typescript from this period entitled 'Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Deputation to Archbishop of Canterbury' she explored this theme further, criticising the Church of England leaders for apparently being more concerned with being popular with the general public, or with pleasing the Prime Minister of the day, than causing any embarrassment on the issue of atomic weapons. The typescript mentions that not until 1948, in a report entitled 'The Church and the Atom,' had the Church of England criticised area bombing in the Second World War, and for Vera Brittain this moral failure had helped make the creation and use of atomic weapons possible: 'A pacifist initiative taken at that time would actually have been of value to the State, which has hardly benefited by the deadly weapons invented since massacre bombing showed governments the way to total destruction'.¹⁵²

Christianity, the State and the Individual

For most of her life, Vera Brittain believed in a theory of Christian ethics which was at least closely related to that espoused by the political philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), based on morality, reason and revelation, and the use of experience to direct one's actions. As Locke wrote in his book *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), 'Such a law of morality Jesus Christ has given us in the New Testament, but by the latter of these ways, by revelation. We have in him a full and sufficient rule for our direction, and conformable to that of reason'.¹⁵³ This concern with moral action was also a constant theme in Vera Brittain's life and work. For Locke action was, 'the great business of mankind, and the whole matter about which all laws are conversant'.¹⁵⁴ Locke also argued, particularly in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (probably 1660), for the right of individuals to hold their own religious beliefs despite the views of the state:

The toleration of those who differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light.¹⁵⁵

Vera Brittain very much supported Locke's view of toleration; and she appears to have adopted his hypothesis of the importance of genuine faith and worship, in which the state has no right to impose its opinion or force its views on individuals, as an important guide to her own life, particularly from 1936 onwards as she re-evaluated and renewed her own Christian beliefs.

Nowhere in Vera Brittain's extensive published or private writings is there a clear statement that she had consciously adopted Locke's philosophy, including his view of the

value of Christianity, as a personal creed. But her writings particularly on Christianity reflect Locke's theory so closely that it may be described at the least as a very profound influence upon her. It is virtually certain that she first studied Locke, along with Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and J. S. Mill (1806-73), whose works she mentions, as part of her Modern History degree at Oxford, which included political science as well as European history 1789-1878.¹⁵⁶ She repeatedly employed Locke's ideas that the legitimate political power of the state must be weighed against the faith and reason of the individual Christian, together with the natural rights of the individual to life, liberty and property; and used this to measure the relationship between Christianity, the state and the individual in her own life.

In 1945, writing in the *Christian Pacifist*, Vera Brittain argued against the supremacy of the state over the church on the historical grounds that this supremacy promoted nationalism, and therefore led to totalitarianism and war:

The beginning of this process coincided with the Reformation, which accelerated it by bringing into being those State churches whose priests preferred the religion of nationalism to the Gospel of Christ. Some theologians would even trace the causes of total war as far back as the Dictate of Constantine, which first undermined by compromise the spiritual power of the ecclesiastical authority that for twelve more centuries kept Europe united. From nationalism sprang the competitive imperialism which, at the beginning of the first Great War, had given Britain and France the combined possession of sixteen million square miles of territory. Not, in the first instance, from national aggressiveness, but from the inequitable division of the

earth's surface with the concurrent privileges of possession, arose the frantic cry for 'Lebensraum' of the Have-not Powers.¹⁵⁷

She was strongly opposed to the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and his distrust of human-nature, and in particular his view of the all powerful and absolute state. In 1947 she argued that Hobbes' famous description of life without the state as 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' was more applicable to the nature of the totalitarian state of her own time.¹⁵⁸ She often used the term 'totalitarian' in her own writings as a term of strong criticism. In a private letter to her friend Margaret Storm Jameson dated 7th August 1940 she wrote, 'I hate Nazism and all forms of totalitarianism as much as you do;' in another private letter to her publisher Andrew Dakers in December 1940 she described the 'totalitarian treatment' that minorities such as pacifists often received in wartime; while in a book on John Bunyan published in 1950 she wrote of his life, 'It brings the challenge of hope and courage to all who are fighting for integrity of the human soul against totalitarian philosophies and spiritual demoralization'.¹⁵⁹

As already described, Vera Brittain grew up in a Liberal household and did not join the Labour Party until 1924, following a tour of Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary where she witnessed for the first time the suffering of a defeated civilian population and the full economic aftermath of war. She was very clear as to what kind of Socialism she believed in, writing an article entitled 'What Democracy Means to Me' for the magazine *Home Chat* in February 1942:

You may tell me that I am just preaching Socialism. But Socialism, like Democracy, is a much-abused word. Correctly used, it merely means the public ownership of the vital means of production. The dictatorial conservatism of many

Trade Union leaders shows clearly that it is possible to advocate and even practice Socialism without having much idea of Democracy.¹⁶⁰

Within Vera Brittain's concept of a Socialist political state at this date the rights of individuals and minority opinions would be protected and respected; it would be a state in which democratic traditions and values would form a vital element, the very opposite of a Nazi or Fascist totalitarian state. Also as already described, despite her increasingly deep religious faith she never described herself as a Christian Socialist, and she never became a member of the Fabian Society. Her beliefs about the relationship between the state and the individual, like all her beliefs, were always very personal to herself, and expressed as much in her actions as her writings. She was always ready to praise anything that she saw as a practical move by the state to benefit its members, particularly if they were underprivileged. For Vera Brittain the state should be a source of protection, provision, and security for its citizens as individuals, and should not put those citizens and their rights in needless danger.

John Locke, although he was inherently opposed to the idea of war since it undermined the natural rights of its citizens, was prepared to allow that there was such a thing as a just war.¹⁶¹ Vera Brittain went further than Locke in her view of the rights of the individual, and the impossibility of a just war, because of circumstances which Locke could never have envisaged: the consequences of total industrialised war between states in which all members of the community could become both participants and potential victims, particularly through war in the air and through mass conscription. As George Robb put it, 'Individualism, that much cherished ideal of nineteenth-century society, had clearly lost

ground to collectivism' as a consequence of the way that the First World War was fought.¹⁶²

Inevitably, on the issue of war and the individual there exists a considerable overlap or interlinking of the circles of Vera Brittain's beliefs in Christianity and pacifism. Within a few months of her conversion to the Christian Pacifist position, she gave her ideas on the proper relationship between the state and the individual full expression in an article dated March 1937 entitled 'Is War Really Inevitable?' in which she demanded that individuals should pressure the government into avoiding war:

When a democratic people puts forward its demand on a large enough scale, those demands become irresistible to the Government of the day. Once they are seriously considered, we may well find that even the States whom we regard as our potential enemies are ready to accept our propositions with relief, and that 'next war' which we thought so imminent will vanish into thin air and disappear like smoke with flame.¹⁶³

This was followed in August 1938 by an article written for *Peace News* in which she warned pacifist writers not to be afraid to carry out their Christian duty to denounce war, and wrote of the importance of their ethical and moral responsibilities. In particular she cautioned against self-censorship, and provided practical advice if a writer fell foul of the existing laws on sedition and the Official Secrets Act. She also praised the National Council for Civil Liberties, 'an invaluable organisation for safeguarding the rights of minorities which any author whose views are not those of "official" majority should join'.¹⁶⁴

Respect for individual human life and horror at the nature of war had motivated Vera Brittain's beliefs and political thought since the end of the First World War, but it was greatly increased by her deepening Christian faith. In February 1942 she published an article in *Christian Century* which was also produced as a pamphlet, entitled 'Say Yes to God, No to the State: How shall the Christian Church Prepare for the New World Order?' in which she argued for a role for the church in opposing the power of the state if it threatened individual rights:

If totalitarianism is not to be supreme throughout those infinite decades which we call the post-war world, the Christian church should already be concerned in creating a religious revival *within its own ranks*... We all know noble individuals leading spiritual lives who belong to no church, preferring to choose their own way of seeking God and serving their fellow men. But, whatever the value of those individual lives, the fact remains that, separate and unorganised, they can have little effect upon the terrible power of the juggernaut state.¹⁶⁵

In the same article she criticised the church for failing, as she put it, to 'balance' the state in what she saw as its increasing power, going back to the Reformation or earlier, but greatly enhanced by its capacity to wage industrialised war. Her concerns about the authority of the state and its power to enforce its own will against the moral scruples of individual citizens was expanded upon in an article in 1947 entitled 'Conscription and the Individual' in which she saw the retention of military conscription in peacetime (as National Service) as 'the encroachment of totalitarianism into British life' concluding that 'the decline of the individual is the grimmest feature of our catastrophic age'.¹⁶⁶

Particularly after the Second World War, for Vera Brittain personal morality meant a religious morality, in her own case a devout Christianity, although her commitment to the

rights of the individual meant that she readily accepted a deep personal faith and respect for other religions. In June 1947 in an analysis of the Labour government and its foreign policy published in the United States, she argued for this individual sense of morality as a replacement for the use of force by the British state:

The only 'reality' for Britain today lies in a frank recognition of its military weakness and its potential moral strength. As an inspiration to social-democratic forces throughout the world and a rallying point for moral and cultural reconstruction, this country can count on an independent and significant future.¹⁶⁷

This theme of Great Britain as an international broker for peace on the world's stage was expanded upon in her article on the death of Mahatma Gandhi on the front page of *Peace News* of 6th February 1948, in which she argued that the only true tribute to Gandhi as a great spiritual and political leader would be the prevention of another war through negotiation with the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁸ The use of Christian imagery to describe a world of individual morality opposed to an increasingly immoral state appeared repeatedly in her later writings, together with her belief that an individual's religious faith should be part of any relationship with the state, and recognised by the state as inviolable. Her rough notes for the lecture entitled 'Human Spirit v Atomic Bomb' given in January 1948 include obvious Christian tenets, which she applied to the issue of atomic warfare:

Principle for Peacemakers:

1. Accept suffering rather than inflict it.
2. Look for guilt in self before others.¹⁶⁹

In another set of rough notes for her lecture at Caxton Hall on atomic warfare in the same year, she blamed the present danger on the way that human intellectual inventiveness had

outpaced any equivalent developments in morality and its accompanying controls on behaviour, and again pointed to a revived Christianity as a practical solution:

Failure of Christian Leadership to strengthen spirit and mend fences. Note growth of communism, which has filled gap.

- a. Church & atom
- b. Church forethought, not afterthought, would have avoided horror & chaos...
- d. Churchmen will argue must be practical, face facts. This is not their job. Job to teach will of God as interpreted through Christ and how to fulfil it whatever consequences meeting challenge to church – support would follow courage....

Let us meet the challenge of the Atom Bomb in our souls - & make ourselves worthy of the better spirits.¹⁷⁰

Towards the end of her activist career, Vera Brittain's solution to what she saw as the increasing power of an immoral state, which was prepared to use nuclear weapons, was that an individual conscience should take precedence over any claims of the authority of the state. In a book review for *Peace News* in March 1953 she defined the Cold War as 'nothing other than the peace-time misrepresentation of truth', since 'While avoiding physical violence, it permits that unlimited corruption of the spirit which is the essence of totalitarianism'.¹⁷¹

She visited the United States and Canada in 1957 and attended a 'Religion and Life' week conference, in which discussions about atheism formed a part, at the University of Florida, at which a US Congressman spoke. His tone and content of his hysterical, rabble-rousing, anti-communist speech shocked her to write an open letter to the Quaker magazine *Friend*

about the prevailing climate of fear then being generated by the United States' government and directed towards its own population:

America's terror of Communism has to be experienced to be believed; in it the evil done by the late Senator McCarthy lives after him. New York and other large cities not only arrange periodic black-outs with air-raid sirens, but have provided shelters with printed directions to bomb-threatened citizens which recall Britain at the outbreak of the Second World War. When I assured my audience that London, so much nearer and more vulnerable to the anticipated attack, practices no such precautions, they seemed uncertain whether to admire our equanimity or deplore our lunacy.¹⁷²

Vera Brittain's view of the relationship between the state and the individual was essentially Lockean in its assumption that the state should protect the natural rights of each citizen; the state should not menace or threaten these natural rights, by acts of war in particular or the creation of fear and terror in its population. It is not surprising that Vera Brittain was outraged by the congressman's lecture, which also offended her Christian conscience, she asked an American Methodist minister who sat beside her in the lecture and was also distressed by the speech, 'Do we hate people that hate God?' He suggested she read the parable of the Good Samaritan, and substitute the word Communist for Samaritan, whenever it occurred.¹⁷³ From 1945 onwards, a critical part of her wider political thought was this linking of Christian theological teachings and current political events.

The Devout Christian

In June 1949 Vera Brittain in her first address to the Peace Pledge Union annual general

meeting as their new Chairman spoke of the power of prayer, and the strength it gave her to carry on out her pledge as a Christian Pacifist, 'For 12 years I have regarded my pledge as the only real answer to war and to sin. Mankind needs us and our pledge, and we must respond to their need'.¹⁷⁴ Her Christian faith had become so strong, and her faith in the political actions necessary to break the cycle of violence had so imbued her thinking, that from this point on she scarcely ever needed to make further overt reference to her personal religious beliefs: God and reconciliation simply overlaid her political thought and actions.

In September 1949, as the Soviet Union tested its first atomic weapon and the Cold War escalated, Vera Brittain felt that the Christian Pacifist standpoint was gaining a wider political audience:

'Someone,' I wrote to G. 'must make a breach in the vicious circle of even more destruction but still ineffective military weapons. Have not both the Government and the Opposition endorsed, in four short years, what we said during the war about both Obliteration bombing, and unconditional surrender?'¹⁷⁵

In November 1949, she attended the World Pacifist Conference in India, held at Santiniketan, by special invitation; delegates from 30 countries were present. She was also the first British woman to address the Indian Legislative Assembly at Parliament House and was rapturously applauded in particular by the women Members.¹⁷⁶ She was greatly impressed with Prime Minister Nehru, who had once been a guest of hers and G.'s in London. She wrote in spiritual and adulatory terms of an important speech that Nehru gave at one of the Conference official functions, seeing him as the natural heir to Gandhi:

As he spoke, his face reflected his emotions like a mirror; it seemed impossible to perceive the real anxiety shown there and yet doubt, as so many do, his sincerity. It

was he who had saved India from the paralysis that descended upon her with Gandhi's death.¹⁷⁷

She toured both India and Pakistan in ten weeks, meeting Begum Liaquat Ali Khan, wife of the prime minister of Pakistan, in January 1950, and discussing with her the Kashmir dispute and the changing role of women in Pakistani society. She also paid a formal call on Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Mohammed Ali Jinnah the founder of Pakistan, whom G. had met. In 1951 she published these experiences as a book, *Search After Sunrise: A Traveller's Story* which deliberately focused on her first impressions of not only the political and social changes in India and Pakistan, but also the many people and places she encountered. She was delighted with the opportunity to study the ideas and practical techniques of Gandhi's pacifism.¹⁷⁸ However the strict asceticism practised by Gandhi and his followers repelled her, just as the aestheticism of Corder Catchpool and the Quakers had done. She believed strongly that art, literature, music, and all the cultural achievements of a civilisation embodied a spiritual quality which was available to all, writing that:

They underrated, I felt, the part with beauty plays in the catharsis of the human spirit. . . Creative art, as those who tried to produce it knew, involved an inexorable obedience to the artist's vision; beauty at least as much as control of the senses, was the product of discipline. After religion, if indeed the two were separable, it represented the highest source of inspiration, and even, for the most austere dedicated of human beings, the supreme expression of a divine in nature and man.¹⁷⁹

She wrote at great length about the 1949 World Pacifist Conference itself, seeing its central theme as being 'the creation of peace through spiritual power'.¹⁸⁰ She recorded in *Search*

After Sunrise a very pertinent question which was asked by one of the students at the start of the conference:

‘How is it,’ he asked ‘that England, which professes to be a Christian country, treats the Sermon on the Mount as a dead letter?’ I told him that he must distinguish between the official Christianity and the faith of the individual Christian. The leaders of a State Church were liable, especially in war-time, to render to Caesar the things which were God’s. But the individual Christian had often been ready, like many Indians, to face prison and death rather than repudiate the standards laid down by the Sermon on the Mount and in Gandhi’s teaching.¹⁸¹

But she was also embarrassed by the idolatry expressed by some of the delegates towards the Gandhi legend, writing, ‘Gandhi had been a man, not a god; the temptations which he overcame were conquerable also by others’.¹⁸² She feared that the very practical achievements of his work could be harmed and future progress put in jeopardy, and that not least of these was the political and social advancement of the women’s revolution in India.¹⁸³

Vera Brittain was certainly inspired by the surroundings and the conference itself, but her character was always emotionally reserved. She was described by one of the other delegates as, ‘devout, sober-minded, almost, if not quite, a Puritan in many ways’.¹⁸⁴ This near-Puritanism was present in her attachment to Bunyan and to the Quakers, but did not extend in her case to a rejection of the world and its politics.

Just as Vera Brittain’s religious belief and faith in people fused together in the life and work of Gandhi, her experience of this conference increased her belief in the power of prayer to effect political change. She was particularly concerned that mis-reporting by

newspapers of events at this time was fuelling the likelihood of further armed conflict between Pakistan and India; and in response on her return to London she organised with others an intercession service calling for their reconciliation, which was held on 22nd March 1950 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields.¹⁸⁵ She continued to believe that the cycle of violence and retribution must be broken, and that prayer was a positive means for this to be achieved. She wrote of the group's motives, 'One initiative at least was possible; they could call on the help of a higher power which functioned when earthly resources failed,' and saw a connection between this service and the compromise peace reached between India and Pakistan on 4th April 1950.¹⁸⁶ Despite its religious and even mystical nature, she saw this intercession service as a very practical political action.

Vera Brittain had been educated in history and international relations, and was not naive in her understanding of the factors that produced the settlement between India and Pakistan as two members of the Commonwealth. But she believed that the unique social and political history of India and Pakistan offered a new type of diplomatic environment in which to stop war, writing, 'Thanks to the moral legacy of Gandhi, two Prime Ministers had withdrawn their peoples from the brink of mutual attack'.¹⁸⁷

This trip to India and Pakistan resulted in yet another profound religious epiphany for Vera Brittain, which this time led her to summarise the development of her religious journey. She wrote of a powerful spiritual episode when attending the multi-faith service on the prayer-grounds of Sevagram on Christmas Day 1949, which she linked directly to the other spiritual epiphanies in her life.¹⁸⁸ This was Gandhi's last *ashram* (a place of spiritual retreat) in which he lived for nine years, and was perceived as a place saturated with his love of humanity and tolerance:

In retrospect this service became one of the creative experiences which stand like signposts along the journey of my life.

The first, not fully understood until I knew Dick Sheppard, had come from the German war prisoners at Etaples in 1917; the sudden perception of a common humanity that they brought had sent me after leaving Oxford University to work for peace and the League of Nations.

During 1936, when I met Dick, I had realised that peace meant nothing less than the total readjustment of previous values and a full acceptance of the revolutionary doctrines taught by the Sermon on the Mount; in that grander conception, the humility found in the German ward took its place. Dick Sheppard had indicated the road which eventually led me to India and Gandhi, though even he had left me uncertain whether a Power existed outside ourselves from whom strength might come to help us in our spiritual struggle.

In a Berkshire valley at the end of 1940 I had perceived humiliation to be a moral discipline, accepted by John Bunyan as a necessary part of his pilgrim's progress.

Five years later had followed the illumination of V. E. Day, when the innate goodness of the men and women waiting patiently in Whitehall had shown me that God lived, but only with their co-operation could carry out His purpose.

To these experiences the Sevagram service made a fitting epilogue. I had known that there were many roads to Jerusalem but now this truth came alive for me, and I saw that the Christian revelation was only a small part of the evidence accumulated, in different fashions and many languages, by the great religions of mankind that God exists.¹⁸⁹

In her unpublished typescript from the 1950s 'The Kind of God I Believe In', summarising her religious beliefs, Vera Brittain rejected the image of God from her childhood as an all-seeing grandfather who would punish naughty children. She also rejected the notion of supernatural magic, 'that is the contravention of natural laws which in any rational and spiritual universe must be assumed to have been laid down by Himself'. She believed that God would show Himself though all human beings and in particular Jesus Christ and those who she calls his 'saints': Isaiah, Buddha, St. Frances of Assisi and Gandhi, rather than the conventional list of Christian saints. She wrote that her faith was not dependent on miracles, and that 'The life and teachings of Jesus seems to me to provide enough evidence that God exists without a supernatural beginning and end, and I find the Resurrection as irrelevant as the Nativity'. While accepting that the Soul exists, she was ambivalent about a life after death. However she went on to define God as a 'spirit of wisdom,' writing that 'the best description of Him that I can find is no more remote than the familiar mystical opening words' of St. John's Gospel (Authorized Version):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In Him was life and the life was the light of man. And the light shineth in the darkness and darkness comprehended it not.¹⁹⁰

Vera Brittain wrote of John Bunyan and faith in the future in an article in October 1949 which concluded, 'Wherever *The Pilgrim's Progress* is read, there the men and women who spring from the same stock as its author confront the challenge of the human crisis. Their place, now as then, is in the van of the struggle for these Christian values which carry the pilgrims of every century through the River of spiritual death to the Celestial City'.¹⁹¹ Her next book, *In the Steps of John Bunyan: An Excursion into Puritan England* (1950)

further developed the need for faith in Christ, but also in the goodness of people. While the text of this book is very well researched with a full bibliography, and describes in depth the many stages of Bunyan's complex life, it also contains insights into Vera Brittain's own Christian faith and pacifism.¹⁹² She perceived Bunyan as an example of a prisoner of conscience who put his religious belief above his own life and even his own family, calling him 'a conscientious objector against State-imposed orthodoxy,' who fought for the right to form his own relationship with God outside of an Established Church and the control of the state.¹⁹³ In the final chapter she made a comparison between the political and religious upheavals of the seventeenth century and the Fascist and Communist totalitarian states of her own time. She was also concerned that 'progress' defined in terms of material civilisation and technical knowledge had, as in the seventeenth century, increased levels of fear and uncertainty in society:

So far has this process now advanced that such knowledge may lead our own age to annihilation unless, like John Bunyan and his seventeenth-century contemporaries, we can counter-balance it with new forms of spiritual development.¹⁹⁴

Vera Brittain was concerned about the future of Christianity, stressing that it must be organic in order to grow and be relevant to meet the needs of the generations yet to come. In 1929, she wrote an article entitled, 'Women As Ministers' which discussed the objections to ordaining women, which concluded, 'Most absurd of all seems the notion that women should remain celibate, for the qualities of patience and tolerance and observation developed by every conscientious mother are exactly those which are most needed in the care of spiritual children.'¹⁹⁵ She expanded this point with a sarcastic book review for the *St-Martin's Review* in September 1953, entitled 'The Church and Women,' actually

reviewing two books published in 1916 with the comment 'The author regrets that they are not out of date, since the position of women in the Churches has hardly altered in 37 years'.¹⁹⁶ This theme of the Church's need to be relevant to modern political issues was further explored in a two-part article for *Peace News* entitled 'Humanity Versus Policy. Some contrasts between Moral Man and the Immoral State', published in December 1953. These articles discussed human compassion as shown in the recent disastrous floods at Lynmouth and along the North Sea coast, citing many acts of individual bravery and kindness as part of the 'perpetual conflict between the morality demanded from us as individuals by our Churches, schools, and civil duties, and the immorality which the State accepts and even demands'.¹⁹⁷

At this time Vera Brittain more and more saw the individual as being in ethical danger from the state, and that there was a constant challenge between an individual's religious beliefs and the state's actions. Hence it was a logical step when the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was founded in February 1958 for Vera Brittain to become a founder member, and give it much needed media coverage in *Peace News*. It combined her religious and feminist principles together with her political ambition to prevent war. From this point onwards much of her writing in *Peace News* reflected her very deeply felt views that nuclear war would eventually destroy the entire human race and all other life on the planet. In 1963 she lectured on these issues, including a lecture summarised in the *Caterham Weekly Press* for 19th October:

So many Christians appear to believe only in the power of the politician, putting the supreme power of God in second place. It is our job as Christians to denounce evil, and everything which goes with it, and to rely on the power of God, even if our

friends cut us off for so doing, or even if we have to endure persecution for our belief. We must be prepared to face all costs in order that what is right will prevail in the end. Our country should take the lead in repudiating the nuclear weapon.¹⁹⁸

Until her death, Vera Brittain remained a close supporter of CND as well as a devout Christian. But from about 1963 onwards she increasingly withdrew into the background, writing and speaking less. Partly this was due to a belief that her actions could harm the political ambitions of both her husband G. and her daughter Shirley, and that past her 70th birthday she had reached the end of her own activist career.

Vera Brittain was never interested in following the doctrinal teachings of any one facet of Christianity; it was the individual's relationship with God and their own conscience which was of importance to her. Her entire religious, political and social development was guided by her great faith in individuals, who inspired her, either in their writing, or by the example of their lives, and sometimes both. But what is also clear is her great respect for human life. As the conclusion to 'The Kind of God I Believe In' she wrote:

I did not, and do not, regard Him as omnipotent in any supernatural or automatic sense, but only with the co-operation of the creature whom He made in his image and endowed with free will. So far, throughout the centuries of human history, that co-operation has been rejected by all but a few, and I know clearly that its refusal may continue until man ends his life on earth with the weapons of his own invention. But to-day, even at this late hour, it is still attainable; it lies in the divine potentialities with which we, sinners as we are, have been invested by the mere fact of our humanity. And once it is attained, but only then, God's Kingdom will come and we shall build Jerusalem on earth as it is in heaven.¹⁹⁹

Ultimately her hope in the future and faith in people became the secure thread, the organising principle along which her whole life and political work should be followed. It is this thread upon which were strung, like pearls reflecting each other, the circles of Christianity, feminism and pacifism which made up the necklace of her political thought. It was particularly strong when she wrote about the relationship between the state, the individual and religious conscience after 1945. For her, from at least 1937 onwards, war was the ultimate evil and sin against God; but the development and use of atomic weapons in 1945 meant the destruction not only of the present, but of all hope of a future, and not just for individuals or nation-states, but for the entire human race. She wanted to leave a political legacy to the generation that followed her that was better than that which her own generation had inherited, both in domestic and international politics and in their personal lives. For Vera Brittain, this was a religious duty.

NOTES

1. Undated statement entitled 'Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Deputation to Archbishop of Canterbury'. Internal evidence suggests that this was written c. 1948. 7 VBA.
2. Vera Brittain 'Jesus of Nazareth' *John O'London's* 14 Sept. 1961. G808 VBA.
3. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 356.
4. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 170.
5. Vera Brittain 'Loving Our Enemies', unpublished typescript, not dated but c. 1938-1940. H349 VBA.
6. Vera Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1942), p. 64.
7. Vera Brittain 'The Present Situation in Europeans' Lecture notes 1947 F104 VBA.
8. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 317.
9. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, end-note to p. 356 on p. 552.

10. Gorham, Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life, p. 22
11. Vera Brittain, *The Rebel Passion: A Short History of Some Pioneer Peace-Makers* (London: Allen and Unwin, p. 15.
12. Emery, *Rose Macaulay - A Writer's Life*, p. 50. Mrs. Humphry Ward's book *Robert Elsmere* as a text has now lost much of its controversy and shock value and is now seldom read, for this reason a brief synopsis is contained in Appendix E.
13. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 41.
14. Mrs. Humphry (Mary) Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (London: Thomas Nelson and Son, 1888), p. 486.
15. Ward, *Robert Elsmere*, p. 334.
16. Alan Bishop (ed.), *Chronicle of Youth: Vera Brittain's War Diary 1913-1917* (London: Gollancz, 1981), p. 27.
17. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 31. This film was presumably *From the Manger to the Cross*, made in the USA in 1912 and released in London in the same year. See the website of the International Movie Database <http://us.imdb.com> (accessed on 13 April 2004).

18. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 41.

‘Daddy, somewhat to my surprise, went on like anything, saying that such men as Mr. Ward were dangerous to the Church, that it would be a good thing if he were tumbled out etc. I was too indignant to speak and all my powers of argument promptly left me; I did try to argue against there being any miracle in Our Lord’s life or any other divinity different in kind from our own, but he seemed to think it terrible heresy, and argued on the lines of the usual threadbare superstitions and traditions – i.e. that any science or discovery that proved the Bible different from what he had always believed it must be wrong *because* it told him different from what he had always believed (not that *he* could possibly be wrong by refusing to see the Bible in the true light of modern discovery). Finally he ended up by saying that I didn’t know what I was talking about, and it was ridiculous a little slip of a girl arguing with him about what I didn’t understand etc.’

19. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, pp. 44-5.

20. Vera Brittain, ‘The Kind of God I Believe In,’ undated. 174 VBA.

21. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 35-7.

22. When Olive Schreiner was nine years old, her infant sister died which caused her to reject Christianity, and this was reinforced by the death of her own new born daughter in 1895, only a few hours after her birth. Vera Brittain would have been

unaware of these facts but later (from about 1930) studied Schreiner's life in detail, culminating in her centenary pamphlet on Schreiner, published in 1955.

23. Avrech Berkman, *The Healing Imagination of Olive Schreiner: Beyond South African Colonialism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 20.
24. Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography* Rutgers University Press, New Jersey: 1980), p. 52.
25. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, pp. 62.
26. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, pp. 73.
27. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, pp. 99-100. Vera Brittain's second novel *Not Without Honour*, published 1924, was in part based on Mr. Ward's actual treatment. See also Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 37-9, and Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* p. 45-6.
28. Bishop and Bostridge, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, p. 56.
29. Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 65. See also Brittain, *Testament of Youth* pp. 248-49. Vera Brittain writes of creating a

‘shrine’ in her hut at Etaples after Roland’s death, of the books which they had admired and read together.

30. Bishop and Bostridge, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, p. 238.
31. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 94.
32. Bishop and Bostridge, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, p. 259-60.
33. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 374-5. See also Vera Brittain *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925-1950* (London: Gollancz, 1957), p. 470-1.
34. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 470-1; Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 374.

‘So it was somewhat disconcerting to be pitch-forked, all alone – since V.A.D.s went on duty half an hour before Sisters – into the midst of thirty representatives of the nation which, as I had repeatedly been told, had crucified Canadians, cut off the hands of babies, and subjected pure and stainless females to unmentionable ‘atrocities’. I didn’t think I had really believed all these stories, but I wasn’t quite sure. I half expected that one or two of the patients would get out of bed and try to rape me, but I soon discovered that none of them were in a position to rape anybody, or indeed to do anything but cling with stupendous exertion to a life in which the scales were already weighted heavily against them.’

35. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 450.
36. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 446.
37. Vera Brittain, 'Women and Christianity,' a book review, undated. H418 VBA.
38. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 527; see John 18 verses 37-38: 'Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"' (New Jerusalem Bible). For the wider context of Vera Brittain's experiences on this pilgrimage, see David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1998) pp. 46, 96, 129 and 136.
39. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 643.
40. Brittain *Testament of Youth*, p. 527.
'How can the future achieve, through us, the sombre majesty of the past? Oh, Edward, you're so lonely up here; why can't I stay for ever and keep your grave company, far from the world and its vain endeavours to rebuild civilisation, on the Plateau where alone there is dignity and peace.'

41. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 568.
42. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 569.
43. Edward Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1963), pp. 37-8.
44. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, pp. 25-6.
45. Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (London: Mercury Books, 1961), p. 18.
46. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 359.
47. Vera Brittain, 'Not Baptised,' *Daily Herald* 15 July 1938. Newspaper cutting G532. VBA.
48. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, 18 Sept. 1914, p. 110.
49. Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism*, p. 339.
50. Vera Brittain to F. W. Galton, letter held at The Fabian Archives, London School of Economics. 26th Jan. 1938. A6/3.

51. George Catlin, *For God's Sake Go!* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smith, 1972), pp. 139-40.
52. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 509.
53. Gillian Statham 'A Chance – if she deserves it – Vera Brittain on the Woman's Place' *Birmingham Post* 9 Nov. 1965. Newspaper clipping. VBA.
54. Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 35. Ellen Wilkinson MP was appointed Minister of Education in 1945. Among the many administrative and policy issues she introduced, she also ensured the practical measure of free school milk for primary school children was established. She constantly overworked becoming depressed and frustrated at the slow pace of change. In February 1947 she died from a drug overdose, with a suspicion of suicide.
55. Graves, *Labour Women*, p. 208.
56. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 575-6.
57. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 576.
58. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 200.

59. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 248.
60. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, pp. 205-08.
61. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 213.
62. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 359.
63. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, pp. 69-71.
64. Alan Bishop (ed.), *Chronicle of Friendship: Vera Brittain's Diary of the Thirties 1932-1939* (London: Gollancz, 1986), 29 Sept. 1935, p. 218, 30 Sept. 1935, pp. 220-1.
65. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 656.
66. Vera Brittain, 'If They Came Back,' *Red Poppy*, Autumn, 1936. G511 VBA.
67. Bishop, *Chronicle of Friendship*, pp. 217-20.
68. Bishop, *Chronicle of Friendship*, p. 218.
69. Bishop, *Chronicle of Friendship*, p. 221.

70. This was recounted to me by Paul Berry in a conversation on 13 Nov. 1995. Our conversation formed part of the discussion for my research for this thesis; Vera Brittain had told him of this dream at sometime after their first meeting in July 1942. Paul Berry himself died in 1999.
71. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, pp. 135-6.
72. A number of books detailing Dick Sheppard's life and work have been published, the most detailed of these are; R. C. Northcott, *Dick Sheppard and St. Martin's* (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1937), and Carolyn Scott, *Dick Sheppard* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977).
73. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 29; Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 359.
74. Vera Brittain 'British Author Likes New Residence Here' *The Montreal Star* 11 Dec. 1956. newspaper cutting VBA.
75. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 358.
76. Matthew Chapter 7 verse 12, Authorized Version of the Bible.
77. Vera Brittain, 'The Kind of God I believe In,' undated. 174 VBA.

78. Scott, *Dick Sheppard*, p. 246.
79. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 375.
80. Catlin, *Family Quartet*, p. 134.
81. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 376.
82. Vera Brittain, *The Story of St. Martin's: An Epic of London* (London: Pitkin Pictorials, 1951).
83. 'Dick Sheppard' from the Peace Pledge Union website:
http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/infodocs/people/pst_dick.html (accessed on 1 Sept. 2004).
84. Vera Brittain, 'What Nursing Taught Me' *Chelsea Hospital Quarterly*, Jan. 1950. p. 10. G675 VBA.
85. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 423.
86. Alan Bishop and Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett (eds.), *Wartime Chronicle: Vera Brittain's Diary 1939-1945* (London: Gollancz, 1989), p. 28.

87. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 32. 28th Sept. 1939:
‘Went for walk with G. Very quiet afternoon; no wind stirred the interlacing boughs of the beeches in the woods. Coming back, we passed the little group of cottages at the corner of the glade; a smell of peat-fires came from them, mingled with the scent of flowers & ripe red apples. In the corner garden was a riot of large dahlias—orange, crimson, yellow & scarlet. In the lane a little boy was twisting himself on a swing above a wood-pile. I remarked to G. how much more tragic the war seemed down here than in London; the contrast is so poignant between the lovely, serene, stable, civilised things which are the real essence of people’s lives, and that cruel unnecessary violence, carnage & destruction that threatens their very existence.’
88. Winifred Eden-Green and Alan Eden-Green (eds.), *Testament of A Peace Lover: Letters from Vera Brittain* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 3.
89. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 276.
90. The Gospel according to St. Matthew Chapter 5 verses 3-10, Authorized Version of the Bible.
91. Vera Brittain ‘England’s Bombed Cities’ *Toronto Star* 2 Jan. 1942. G569 VBA.
92. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 279.

93. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 31.
94. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 29.
95. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 59. See also Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 402-3 and 407.
96. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 291.
97. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 408.
98. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 291.
99. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 471.
100. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 63. In response to an enquiry as to whether the original diary mentioned anything left out of *Wartime Chronicle* regarding this episode, Kathy Garay of the McMaster archive replied by e-mail 27 May 2004: 'Alas, I have been right through Sept. to Nov. and have had no success. Alan [Bishop] has left out very little from these months and what has been omitted doesn't connect in any way with what we are looking for.'

101. Vera Brittain, 'The Land and Peace' published in the C.P. Newsletter, Oct. 1941.
G561 VBA.
102. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 424.
103. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 124.
104. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 358.
105. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 432, William R. Hughes, *Indomitable Friend: The Life of Corder Catchpool 1883-1952* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), pp. 175-84, Jean C. Greaves, *Corder Catchpool* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1953), p. 33-8; and also Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 135 & p. 142:

16 March 1942

'Very busy day with a good many letters. One long one from Corder Catchpool to which I replied at length, on the possibility twice discussed with him of my joining the Society of Friends. He invited me to go to their house in Highgate for a weekend and talk it over. Certainly to be supported by the strength of the Friends' organisation would be wonderful experience, and a great one for one if I were worth their having.'

18 April 1942

'Went after tea to spend the night with the Catchpools at Hampstead Heath &

discuss Quakerism. Their whole family – 3 girls & a small boy – were home from school, so after a long meal in the kitchen, music, etc, we didn't get to discussing the main topic till nearly midnight. By then I was almost too tired to be coherent, but I did manage to express the doubt whether the Society, which is collectivist, was a suitable religious affiliation for the artist (whether writer, musician or painter), who is by nature individualistic, egotistical & exhibitionist. No conclusion reached.'

106. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 40.
107. Vera Brittain, 'Say Yes to God; No to the State!' G567 VBA.
108. Hughes, *Indomitable Friend*, pp. 68-121. In October 1904 Corder Catchpool and four other Friends also founded an Adult School at the Bedford Institute in the East London. Vera Brittain published a pamphlet which praised the Friends work in London during the blitz of 1940-41, which was now providing spiritual comfort, food and shelter for bomb victims, assisting displaced persons and refugees, while continuing and expanding education and training courses, in particular for young people. Vera Brittain felt this was of vital importance for the next generation and the London Bedford Institutes provided a model, which should be copied across the country, by local and national authorities. Vera Brittain 'The Bedford Institute in London's Blitzkrieg' dated 1940-1941. G550 VBA.
109. Greaves, *Corder Catchpool*, p. 22; Hughes, *Indomitable Friend*, pp. 85-90.

110. Vera Brittain, 'Why I'm Not A Friend – A Personal Statement,' *The Friend*, 9 March 1945. G603 VBA. See also 'My Debt To Friends,' *Reynard*, March 1956. Vol.1. No. 2. G738 VBA.
111. Berry and Bishop, (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, p.337, see also Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p.432.
112. Vera Brittain, 'The Ordeal of British Pacifism. Pacifist Christianity in War Time – V,' G575 VBA.
113. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 151, 31 May 1942:
'As I was arranging notes for Ch.3, realised that the thing was dead, read like a tract, must be re-written in accordance with some new technique that would make it live. Suddenly got inspiration of doing it as a series of letters to John - '
114. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 114.
115. Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (London: University of Chicago, [1929] 1996).
116. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 137, 'Everyone had been raised on it'. Indeed the jacket-cover of Catchpool's *Letters of a Prisoner For Conscience*

Sake (1941) calls it, 'This modern Pilgrim's Progress,' which reflects how all pacifist groups were steeped in this particular text.

117. Vera Brittain, *In the Steps of John Bunyan: An Excursion into Puritan England* (Rich & Cowan, London: 1950), p. 15.
118. Vera Brittain, 'Testament of Faith,' 1950. VBA.
119. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 41.
120. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 111-2. The quotation is not referenced and has not been identified.
121. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 167.
122. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 86.
123. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 293.
124. Vansittart was a former senior British diplomat with the Foreign Office who visited Germany in 1936, who became convinced of the danger of a future war. After meeting Hitler and other senior Nazis officials he became uncompromising in his views of both Nazism and the German people. In particular he rejected the notion of

- ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Germans. He was raised to the peerage in 1941 and used his position in Parliament and with the press to call for revenge against the German nation and people for their war crimes and that they be forced to agree to unconditional surrender terms.
125. Robert Vansittart, *Black Record: Germans Past and Present* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1941), p. 18.
 126. Vera Brittain, ‘The Higher Retribution’ pamphlet for The Peace Pledge Union, 1942. G581 VBA.
 127. Corder Catchpool letter to the *Times* 7 March 1944; see also Hughes, *Indomitable Friend*, p. 187, Vansittart, *Black Record: Germans Past and Present*, passim.
 128. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 389.
 129. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1943 p. 208; see also Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 302.
 130. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, 4 Feb. 1943, p. 212.
 131. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, 25 April 1943, p. 229.

132. Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Deputation to Archbishop of Canterbury undated, but c. 1948. 7 VBA.
133. Newspaper cutting from *The Catholic Worker*, April 1944. VBA.
134. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 441.
135. Vera Brittain, 'The Annihilation of Dresden,' book review, *The Friend*, 5 July 1963. G840 VBA.
136. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 271.
137. Brittain, 'The Kind of God I Believe In,' undated. I74 VBA.
138. Vera Brittain, 'One Voice: A Collection of Letters,' undated but internal evidence suggests 1946; also quoted in Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 446. This quotation is referenced by Berry and Bostridge in an end-note on p. 560 as "“One Voice” unpublished foreword to “Letters to Peace Lovers” McM [Vera Brittain papers in the McMaster archive]'. In the early stages of this research, it proved very difficult to check the original document since it had been misplaced. An enquiry to the McMaster archive (e-mails to and from Kathy Garay 6/7 September 2004) revealed that this document had been photocopied and re-filed in

the wrong box. I am very grateful to Kathy Garay for successfully searching for it in the 150 linear feet of the Vera Brittain papers.

139. Vera Brittain, 'Loving Our Enemies,' undated and unpublished. H349 VBA.
140. Letter to Vera Brittain from Victor Gollancz's office, 14 May, 1945. VBA.
141. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 445.
142. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 264, 3 May 1945:
'Picture of camps (as horrible as I expected, largely pictures of living skeletons & disintegrating bodies) accompanied by a hate-arousing talk wh. omits to point out that half victims in camps (& all before 1939) were Germans; & that camps, & Gestapo, wouldn't have existed if opposition to Hitler had not been tremendous.'
143. Vera Brittain, *Above All Nations - An Anthology* (London: Gollancz, 1945), foreword.
144. Vera Brittain, *Search After Sunrise: A Traveller's Story* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 14.
145. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 453.

146. The pamphlet is dated 1 December but with no year, however the context suggests 1942. G874 VBA.
147. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise* p. 22. Vera Brittain wrote about seeing Gandhi once on his visit to England in 1931 but it was G. who actually met him and was involved with the transfer of power, working as part of a team advising Mountbatten.
148. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 29.
149. Vera Brittain, 'London Letter, Jan. 1948', *New Zealand Christian Pacifist*, Feb. 1948. 'Postscript to London Letter', *Fellowship*, March 1948. G660 VBA.
150. Rough notes made 31 Jan. 1948 and given as part of a lecture at Harpenden on 9 Feb. 1948. F111 VBA.
151. Rough notes for a lecture at Caxton Hall entitled 'Atomic Challenge,' 23 April 1948. F115 VBA.
152. Undated statement entitled 'Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Deputation to Archbishop of Canterbury'. Internal evidence suggests that this was written c. 1948. 7 VBA.

153. John Locke (ed. George W. Ewing), *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Washington DC: Gateway [1695] 1965) pp. 174-5;
154. John Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding; A Selective Commentary on the 'Essay'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.)
155. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, [1660] 1950) p. 16; see also John Locke (ed. and intro. John Horton and Susan Mendus), *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (London: Routledge, [1660] 1991), and Brian Redhead (ed.) *Plato to NATO: Studies in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1984) pp. 110-14.
156. Brittain, *Testament of Youth* pp. 479 and 499.
157. Vera Brittain, 'After the "Cease Fire",' *Christian Pacifist*, June 1945. G610 VBA. The 'Dictate of Constantine' refers to the Emperor Constantine I's calling of the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325, which established the authority of Emperors over the Church.
158. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 499. Also, Vera Brittain, 'The Labour Party Reviews Its Foreign Policy,' *Human Events. A Weekly Analysis for the American Citizen* Vol.IV, No. 25. Issue 177. 18 June 1947. G647 VBA.

159. Letter from Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 7 Aug. 1940. VBA;
Alexandra Bennett, Introduction to Brittain, *One Voice*, p. xiv; Brittain, *In the Steps of John Bunyan*, p. 15.
160. Vera Brittain, 'What Democracy Means to Me,' *Home Chat*, 21 Feb. 1942. G568 VBA.
161. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: A Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) p. 108.
162. George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 68.
163. Vera Brittain, 'Is War Really Inevitable?' March 1937. H346 VBA.
164. Vera Brittain, 'What Pacifist Writers Might Have to Face,' *Peace News*, 13 Aug. 1938. G533 VBA.
165. Vera Brittain, 'Say "Yes" to God; "No" to the State!' *Christian Century*, 11 Feb. 1942. G567 VBA.

166. Vera Brittain, 'Conscription and the Individual,' *Peace News*, 17 Jan. 1947. G639 VBA.
167. 'The Labour Party Reviews Its Foreign Policy,' *Human Events*, 18 June, 1947. G647 VBA.
168. Vera Brittain, 'Let New Anglo-Russian Talks Be Gandhi's Memorial,' *Peace News*, 6 Feb. 1948. G658 VBA.
169. Vera Brittain, 'Human Spirit v Atomic Bomb' given as a lecture in Coventry on 9 Feb. 1948. F111 VBA.
170. Vera Brittain, rough notes for a lecture at Caxton Hall entitled 'Atomic Challenge' 23rd April 1948. F115 VBA.
171. Vera Brittain, 'America and the Cold War,' *Peace News*, 13 March 1953. G713 VBA.
172. Vera Brittain 'The Peace Issue Among America Friends' *Friend* 24 May 1957 G744 VBA.
173. Vera Brittain 'The Peace Issue Among America Friends' *Friend* 24 May 1957 G744 VBA.

174. Vera Brittain, 'The New National Chairman Speaks to the PPU,' *Peace Pledge Union Journal*, No. 38. June 1949. G669 VBA.
175. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 459.
176. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, pp. 141-142.
177. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 170.
178. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 12:
 'The South African writer, Sarah Gertrude Millin, once discussed with me the fierce impact of first impressions. 'You can write about a country after twenty-four days,' she said. 'If you don't do it then, you must wait for twenty-four years.'
179. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 263-4.
180. Berry and Bostridge *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 453; see also 'Pilgrimage to India,' *International Review*, Spring/Summer 1950. G683 VBA, and also 'Gandhiji's Method for Attaining World Peace,' *The Aryan Pat*, Oct. 1951, G693 VBA, and 'A Writers Impression of a World Conference,' *Indian Opinion*, 24 March 1950, G680 VBA.
181. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 71.

182. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 142.
183. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, pp. 127-8. Vera Brittain did visit the place of Gandhi's assassination in the garden of Birla House and was shocked to discover that it was still a private home. 'I had expected to find a national shrine or museum. Why had this prosperous financier not given to India his home and garden which had witnessed a human Calvary? Future generations might well come to regard them as a second in their significance only to the scene at the Cross.' See also a book review 'Which Side Idolatry,' *Peace News*, 4 May 1951. G689 VBA.
184. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 454.
185. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, pp. 240-1:
'In reporting the Indo-Pakistan dispute, the Press of both countries, with the unmovable exception of *The New Statesman*, departed from normal standards of journalistic integrity. Its part in the creation of bitterness was recognised by both Prime Ministers when they met in the spring of 1950.' See also 'Indo-Pakistan Intercession Service', 22 March 1950. This was written by Vera Brittain but not used. 71 VBA.
186. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 266.
187. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, p. 268.

188. Brittain, *Search After Sunrise*, pp. 157-60.
189. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 470-1.
190. Vera Brittain, 'The Kind of God I Believe In', undated. I74 VBA; Authorised Version of the Bible, John I verses 1-5, omitting verse 4.
191. Vera Brittain, 'John Bunyan For To-Day,' *Reconciliation*, Oct. 1949. G670 VBA.
192. She sent a copy of this book to King George V1 and was pleased to have received an acknowledgment from his Secretary thanking her for the gift. 'Memorial Queue,' *The Hindu*, 2 March 1952. G703 VBA.
193. Brittain, *In the Steps of John Bunyan* p. 220.
194. Brittain, *In the Steps of John Bunyan* p. 417.
195. Vera Brittain, 'Women As Ministers: Some Opening Doors, And A War With Tradition,' *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1929. G211 VBA.
196. Vera Brittain, 'The Church and Women', *St-Martin's Review*, Sept. 1953. I45 VBA.

197. Vera Brittain, 'Humanity Versus Policy. Some contrasts between Moral Man and the Immoral State,' *Peace News*, 18 and 25 Dec. 1953. G718 VBA.
198. *Caterham Weekly Press* 'So much is being neglected in the cause of destruction,' 19 Oct. 1963. Newspaper cutting VBA.
199. Vera Brittain, 'The Kind of God I Believe In,' undated. 174 VBA.

The Feminist Circle

A Born Feminist

Vera Brittain's faith in individuals and hope for their future informed her Christianity, but was particularly evident when directed towards women, and was also a guiding principle of her feminism. Deborah Gorham, who in her book *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* (1996) studied the early years of Vera Brittain's feminism, making extensive use of the juvenilia and unpublished diaries, journals and letters held in her archive, has described her in the following terms:

Brittain was one of those women who was born feminist, in that she responded with a spontaneous sense of outrage when confronted with the confines of the feminine role. As soon as she discovered it, feminism allowed her that outrage.¹

Deborah Gorham's work provides a valuable insight into Vera Brittain's opinions on the social conventions and sexual taboos that she was expected to obey as a girl and a young woman, and her rejection of these to live and work as a feminist. Vera Brittain was specifically an Equality or Equal Rights Feminist, a branch of feminism defined by *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* as follows:

Equality is based on the idea that no individual should be less equal in opportunity or in human rights than any other. Liberal feminism campaigns for the granting of the full equality of formal rights to women as the solution to women's subjection. Equality, like equal rights, would also to liberal feminists be part of a progressive rationalisation of human society.²

The distinction between the First Wave Feminism of the early 20th Century and the New or Equality Feminism that followed it did not apply to all feminists, and the terms have been loosely used and confused over time.³ However, a recent analysis argues that First Wave Feminism sought legal, political and economic rights and protections for women, and can be traced in Great Britain back to the 18th century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This work argued for the equality of women with men, stating that ‘the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinctions of sex, and secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone,’ and so established the Liberal Feminist strand within British feminism.⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft argued that this equality would be good both for individuals and for society at large, since with the removal of prejudice against women, ‘as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including women, will become more wise and virtuous’.⁵

Equal Rights Feminism in Great Britain had its roots in the First Wave Feminist movement, which was primarily concerned with gaining women the Parliamentary vote, which was achieved in a limited form in 1918. Women such as Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929) who led the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Society (NUWSS) and Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), who led the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), raised the issue of women’s emancipation in the public sphere and campaigned in very different ways for women’s employment, legal and parliamentary rights. This political movement was succeeded, between 1919 and 1938 by New Feminism, developed by Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946) and [Agnes] Maude Royden (1876-1956), along with others. New Feminism made a considerable effort to improve the status of women within British society

by changes to women-centred areas of social concern such as maternity provision and child-care, and also birth-control, family allowances and housing. Vera Brittain, although she called herself an Equal Rights Feminist, embraced both Equality Feminism and New Feminism: she wanted women to have equal access to opportunities outside of the home, including education, career opportunities, and equal political rights, while also ensuring good social provision for mothers and children.⁶ This was the public expression of her own personal ambition of pursuing a fulfilling career, while also being a successful wife and mother.

From an early age, Vera Brittain felt that both her private family and the public Buxton social circles in which they moved took the inferiority of women for granted, and she later extended that view to the wider society in general in which she found herself. In October 1915 as a VAD nurse she wrote to her fiancé Roland Leighton about her father's views of herself as a person when compared to her brother:

Of course he can't waste his thoughts so much on me as to expend them often on someone who in comparison with Edward is so valueless and unimportant as I... since I am a woman and therefore a creature of an inferior grade to himself, my grief & anxieties don't count in the same way, and if I were to have a great cause for sorrow, I think he would regard me with much the same sort of detachment & disinterested pity as I should look upon a devoted dog that has lost its master.⁷

Her father's lack of regard for her intellectual needs and lack of respect for her as an individual fuelled her feminism.



Vera Brittain at the front gates of her father's house 'Melrose' in Buxton c. 1911

Much has appeared in recent writings about Vera Brittain's feminism, particularly within the wider literature of British feminism (see the Literature Review in the Introduction for a summary). Indeed, Vera Brittain together with her publications has become an icon of modern feminist writings. However, most of these works use Vera Brittain and her life for illustration and discussion, and only touch briefly on her views on feminism, and her own position within the movement. For example, Pamela Graves in *Labour Women* (1994) simply defines Vera Brittain as a 'middle-class' feminist with no other discussion.⁸ Sheila Rowbotham in *A Century of Women* (1997) gives a short account of Vera Brittain's life including her achievements in literature and her political actions, but not her feminism.⁹ Jean Kennard has used the friendship between Vera Brittain and

Winifred Holtby to explore the psychologist's concept of a 'the second self' as it exists in their published writings:

Someone close enough to be experienced as inseparable from oneself and yet different enough to be felt as other. They bring together three concepts: the friendship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, the idea of female friendship as a means of self-definition, and the two selves present in any reading experience.¹⁰

Of those few works which identify Vera Brittain as an Equality Feminist, Jane Lewis (1984) illustrates Vera Brittain's practical expression of Equality Feminism solely by her founding and vigorous promotion of baby-clubs for middle-class, fee-paying parents in the 1920s.¹¹ Some authors have been so highly selective in their choice of Vera Brittain's writings, in making their assessments of her world-view and place in British feminism, as to have seriously distorted her real position. She has even been criticised, by Brian Harrison in *Prudent Revolutionaries* (1987), for *failing* to include intimate details of the relationship between Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and his wife Emmeline in her biography of them in 1963.¹² Martin Pugh has repeatedly claimed that Vera Brittain was a 'strident supporter of the war effort.' during the First World War, which was far from the truth.¹³ The misrepresentation of Vera Brittain's real views in Gerard De Groot's *Blighty* published in 1996, and Martin van Creveld's *Men, Women & War* published in 2001, are both discussed in Appendix F. Following the methodology of this thesis, and because selective quotation has so often led to this kind of misrepresentation, I will use Vera Brittain's own words to illustrate her ideas on feminism at various stages of her life.

Several writers, drawing on more recent theories of feminism, have argued that Vera Brittain's middle-class lifestyle as a writer and mother was incompatible with her

writings as a feminist as they currently understand and use the term. Shani D'Cruze has suggested that since this lifestyle 'meant a modification but not an abandonment of the nineteenth-century codes of middle-class domesticity,' Vera Brittain cannot qualify as a feminist.¹⁴ Martin Pugh has repeatedly expressed the view that she 'has been misunderstood in the context of feminism,' as she simply wanted to be a wife and mother.¹⁵ Maroula Joannou (1995) has made a Socialist-Feminist critique of Vera Brittain's work, criticising her for having 'no women mentors' and for failing to address areas which Joannou herself sees as central to women's diversity and identity, such as age, class, nation, race and sexual orientation.¹⁶ In fact, Vera Brittain was well aware of class distinctions, although she never pretended to be anything other than middle-class herself, but as an Equality Feminist of her era she was more concerned with social issues than class politics. In 1999 in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, Joannou does acknowledge this with an analysis of Vera Brittain's book *Halcyon: Or the Future of Monogamy* and her novel *Honourable Estate*.

As with any writer over a long period, examples of apparent inconsistencies in Vera Brittain's writings on feminism are easy to find. In her review of Mrs Ray Strachey's *The Cause* (1928) she praised the book as 'a very valuable addition to the growing literature of feminism'.¹⁷ Some 35 years later she wrote of the same author that, 'She was less than fair in her treatment of the militants, and one page cast unfounded aspersions on the account-keeping of the WSPU'.¹⁸ But in fact the problem lies with the methodology of her critics in being so selective in their choice of Vera Brittain's writings, rather than with Vera Brittain herself. Debora Gorham discusses this accusation of inconsistency, and argues that on the contrary, Vera Brittain's ideas as a feminist changed over time due to her life experiences,

both public and private: 'It is because [Vera Brittain] believed so strongly that individual experience is essential to the study of history that she carefully left behind such a complete record of her own life,' including these apparent self-contradictions.¹⁹ Vera Brittain's views on specific issues changed with the social or political circumstances, and her preoccupations changed according to the way that her own life developed: for example, she wrote more about child education after the birth of her own children. But her underlying position as an Equality Feminist never varied.

By adopting a chronological approach stretching back to Vera Brittain's early life, Gorham avoids these methodological errors. The methodology of her book is to divide Vera Brittain's development as a feminist into three stages. The first stage was her Edwardian childhood and the First World War 1893-1918. The second stage was 1919-1935 with her return to Oxford University and the start of her writing career, her friendship with Winifred Holtby, and her marriage and children. The third stage was 1936-1970, including her work as a pacifist. However, and unfortunately, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* effectively ends in 1940 with the publication of *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*, and deals with Vera Brittain's work and views as a feminist during the remainder of her life, which was of significant importance, only in its last 13 pages.

Far from having no feminist mentors or role models, Vera Brittain had in fact four and was aware of the wider history of feminism, which she drew upon throughout her life. In 1928 she wrote about Florence Nightingale as a feminist, and her place within feminism: 'it is an attitude towards life, resentment against conventional restrictions, but essentially constructive in its reaching out to a wider freedom and a more independent self-sufficiency'.²⁰ Her awareness of the status of women within the political and social culture

of her own times was evident in the early novels that she wrote with major feminist themes, such as *The Dark Tide* (1923), *Not Without Honour* (1924), and *Honourable Estate* (1936). These works inspired readers at the time with their feminist ideas, and the continuing relevance of the first and last was marked by their re-issue by Virago Press in 1999. In her later books on women's history she detailed the complex political and educational hurdles which women had to overcome to gain full and equal citizenship, including *Lady Into Woman – A History of Women From Victoria to Elizabeth II* (1953) and *The Women at Oxford – A Fragment of History* (1960). Writing in 1963 about the role of militant suffragettes in the early 20th Century, she continued to show the same historical awareness, arguing that:

Had these [WSPU] claims never been made and publicised, the First World War would not have brought their fulfilment. That is the simple answer to the often-argued question whether votes for women came through the Suffragette movement or the War.²¹

The development of Vera Brittain's feminism mirrors the development of her religious beliefs, and indeed her political thought in its entirety. But where Vera Brittain's feminism differs significantly from her Christian beliefs is that her feminism was strong right from the beginning and never wavered, although she wrote less about feminism after 1933 and the success of *Testament of Youth*, and more about pacifism from the later 1930s onwards. For Deborah Gorham, Vera Brittain's feminism was at the core of her being, 'It was the central organising principle of her personality, the belief that gave direction to her energies, that enabled her to make the best possible use of her talents as a writer, and through which she defined her personal relationships and her own sense of self'.²² Although this thesis argues

that it was Vera Brittain's wider faith in individuals that was the true organising principle of her personality and political thought, feminism was always one of its most important 'circles' or pearls along the thread of her faith in individuals.

Deborah Gorham's book provides a firm base upon which to develop a detailed critique of Vera Brittain's early feminism. But while others use Vera Brittain to illustrate wider social and political issues, Gorham does not discuss Vera Brittain's feminism in any political or social context, including an absence of the history of feminism and its development. I agree that Vera Brittain's development as a feminist can be usefully divided into three phases of her own life. But the more thematic approach adopted in this chapter is to divide her personal experience as a feminist into the areas of 'Education and Training', 'Career, Marriage and Children', and 'Feminism in Politics'. This thematic approach also reveals much more clearly the role that certain individuals played in developing Vera Brittain as a feminist, and their influences on her actions and political thought.

I will also argue that four women were to assist as mentors in the shaping of Vera Brittain's feminism, either in person or through their writings, or both: her teacher Louise Heath Jones (1869-1931), the writer and novelist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), her close friend Winifred Holtby (1898-1935), and their mutual friend Viscountess Rhondda (1883-1958). Vera Brittain encountered them at different stages in her feminist development, and each made a distinct contribution to her life and work.

In addition to these individual examples, it was politics, women's history, and the wider social issues of the time as much as her own life experiences which motivated Vera Brittain's feminism, as can be seen in her writings on the subject. As an Equal Rights Feminist the essence of her feminism was that every woman should have a self-determined

life of her own as a full active citizen, with the same legal rights and opportunities as men. Contrary to Martin Pugh's belief that her sole desire was to be a wife and mother, she saw being in fulfilling paid employment outside of the home as an essential element of her own life.

Education and Training

Vera Brittain's views as an Equal Rights Feminist on education and training were very much influenced by her own experiences. She received the standard education for a girl of her social class and background, being taught at home by a governess and then from the age of 11 attending a private day school in Buxton. In her two books, *Not Without Honour* (1924) and *Testament of Youth* (1933) she described her resentment at what she saw as her own inferior education as a girl, comparing it unfavourably to the attention and money lavished on her younger brother Edward, who attended Uppingham public school and would have gone to New College Oxford except for the First World War.²³ From the age of 13 she attended St Monica's private boarding school in Surrey, run by her aunt Florence Bervon and by Louise Heath Jones (its motto being 'Service and Sanctification') which attempted to mirror the public-school ideals of leadership and public service of the time.²⁴ The experience of mixing with girls from a higher social status, and with whom she had very little academic connection or understanding, was in itself a vital element in Vera Brittain's education as a feminist. This was the start of her political development in class and gender politics, which began while she was at school, with Louise Heath Jones, 'an ardent if discreet feminist' and the first woman to assist Vera Brittain's own conscious emergence as a life-long feminist.²⁵ Louise Heath Jones, who had been educated at Cheltenham Ladies College and Newnham

College, Cambridge, was passionate about the suffrage cause and took Vera Brittain to a meeting of the constitutionalist National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUSS). She encouraged her to read widely on the subject, including the coverage of the suffrage campaign and militant Suffragette activities of the time in the local Buxton newspapers.

Louise Heath Jones introduced Vera Brittain to the second critical influence on her developing feminist ideology, the writings of Olive Schreiner, by giving her a copy of Schreiner's *Women and Labour*, later described by Vera Brittain as 'that Bible of the women's movement'.²⁶ Schreiner's writings held great potency for many First Wave Feminists, including Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Lady Constance Lytton, who found comfort while in prison from Schreiner's book of allegorical short stories *Three Dreams in a Desert* (1891) and quoted at length from it in her memoirs *Prisons and Prisoners* (1900).²⁷ Vera Brittain's second novel *Not Without Honour* (1924) has her central character, a young woman with an emerging feminist consciousness, wondering in a library if 'she could pluck up the courage to ask for "*Women and Labour*" for herself'.²⁸

Olive Schreiner's writings, not only on feminism but on human freedom, racial discrimination and war, would be a life-long source of advice and inspiration to Vera Brittain, a way of seeking an identity. In 1950, in her review of a biography entitled *Not Without Honour: The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner*, she stated, 'Her literary qualities were inseparable from her capacity for revolutionary thought on all the great questions which still stir mankind'.²⁹ It was often Vera Brittain's habit to open her newspaper articles on feminism with quotations from Schreiner's *Women and Labour*, and as late as 1955 she published an article entitled 'The Greatness of Olive Schreiner'.³⁰ Schreiner's inspiration also led Vera

Britain to link the idea of the emancipation of women with the issue of racial equality. In 1926 she wrote that:

The thinking minority is none the less indebted to Olive Schreiner because her ideas on the position of women and on native policy in South Africa, which were so startling and revolutionary when she first expressed them, have since her death become the commonplace of advanced opinion.³¹

This link in Vera Brittain's political thought between equality for women and equality for all races was further influenced by Winifred Holtby's views on racism in South Africa, and connects directly with Vera Brittain's views on the state and the individual.

Roland Leighton, Vera Brittain's future fiancé, sent her a copy of Schreiner's first novel, *The Story of An African Farm* (1883) after staying with the Brittain family in April 1914. Its central motif of a woman seeking freedom of action and suffering for her independence was a major theme within their correspondence, and Hilary Bailey records that Vera Brittain still quoted from it 'during times of emotional crisis when she was forty years old'.³² Writing in 1926, Vera Brittain claimed that Schreiner's writings 'sounded with a note that had the authentic ring of a new gospel' for her own generation's struggle for female emancipation and for men and women to become equal partners in all relationships.³³ In February 1955 the National Council of Women of South Africa published a centenary issue of their newsletter which celebrated Olive Schreiner's life and work, and Vera Brittain as a major contributor wrote:

The past half-century has seen freedom from economic fear come to the submerged millions in many countries; freedom from political subjection raise the status of women throughout the world; freedom from racial oppression bring hope to non-

white peoples in many countries; freedom from foreign domination release great nations in the East to pursue their own ends. These immense constructive revolutions have developed, in each case, from the insight of small dedicated minorities drawing their stimulus from one another. Upon them all, whether their members know it or not, the life and work of Olive Schreiner has exercised the vitalising influence of an organic power.³⁴

Vera Brittain left St. Monica's in December 1911 aged 17, returning to Buxton for over two years to take up the life of a provincial debutante, which she found boring and frustrating. The prevailing view among local young girls and their mothers that their only ambition should be marriage appalled her, and later became a theme of her novels and other writings.³⁵ She was also very critical of her parents' own relationship and marriage, which was not the kind of union she wanted for herself.³⁶ Her unusual exposure to feminists and feminism as part of her education as a girl convinced Vera Brittain that political action in a wider sense was the way forward for social change, but not by means of violence and in particular by the wanton destruction of cultural artefacts. She recorded in her diary on Tuesday 10th March 1914 the Suffragette hatchet attack on the Velasquez's Venus at the National Gallery, 'It shames the glorious cause for which the best women are fighting that *one* should act like this under cover of their standard'.³⁷ From an early age, she disapproved of the use of violence in pursuit of feminism or any other political goal, an attitude which later found full expression in her pacifism.

Vera Brittain took a course of University Extension Lectures held in Buxton in January 1913, and her tutor John Marriott encouraged her to enter the Oxford 1913 Summer School Essay Competition, which she won. She wrote in her diary with real yearning about

wanting a university education and a role for herself in the wider world, but although she had done well in her school exams, her parents refused to consider paying for her to go to university.³⁸ It was the efforts of John Marriott which convinced her father to let her apply for Oxford, and she was awarded a College Exhibition to Somerville.³⁹ Even so, her father's reaction to her award, recorded in her diary for August 1914, continued to reflect his views on her status and proper ambitions:

At first my delight, which I expected to be intense, was quite spoiled by Daddy, who instead of giving me a little of the praise which I had at least some reason to expect, burst out that it was no use my thinking of going to Oxford with this war on, that I wanted to turn out my parents when they were getting on in life, that we were all robbing him, etc, etc.⁴⁰

Her brother Edward was instrumental in persuading their parents to allow her to leave home and to pay for her studies at Oxford, which began in October 1914. Again for Vera Brittain a personal experience translated into a wider political principle, and this issue of resources for women's education was to continue to be of deep concern to her.

Vera Brittain was keenly aware of the changing political and social attitude towards women at the end of the First World War, and followed the General Election of December 1918 closely. It was in this election that women over thirty years of age, if they were in their own right qualified as local government electors or married to a local government elector, could vote for the first time. She returned to Somerville in 1919 but her character had been altered by grief and by witnessing the horror of the First World War. She changed her degree topic from English to Modern History and took a special subject in International Relations and Foreign Affairs. Outside of her formal studies, feminism was her other chief concern at

Oxford, and as 'a forceful and articulate feminist' she became active in the Degrees for Women campaign within the university.⁴¹ She often wrote on the issue for student newspapers, magazines and other Oxford publications.

Vera Brittain met Winifred Holtby in a shared tutorial in April 1919, beginning an immensely important friendship, which perhaps had the greatest influence on her development as a feminist. Winifred Holtby later described herself as 'I am a Feminist, and an Old Feminist, with the motto Equality First. And I shan't be happy till I get it,' although she also felt that it was Vera Brittain 'who made her a feminist' rather than the other way around.⁴² The English Heritage Blue Plaque marking 52 Doughty Street, London (now number 58) as their first home together describes them as 'Writers and Reformers'. Much has been written about their shared relationship, not least by Vera Brittain herself in *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* (1940), which was written as a celebration and tribute to Winifred Holtby's devoted friendship and affection. It was a book conceived and written with deep respect both for their relationship and the shared memories of how each had supported the other in troubled times. Vera Brittain was to reflect in 1965 on the experience of writing this book:

I attempted the intimate biography in *Testament of Friendship*, the story of Winifred Holtby, the incomparable friend of my youth. Though I struggled for detachment I was not, I think successful; I had been too close to her to achieve it, and throughout too sorrowfully possessed by the tragedy of her untimely illness (today probably curable) that cut off the vivid magnanimous life with which she would have done so much.⁴³

In an interview for this thesis, Vera Brittain's daughter Shirley Williams said that '*Testament of Friendship* was the book my mother most wanted to be remembered for by the general public'.⁴⁴ However not every reader appreciated the book; Frances Partridge, who along with her husband Ralph was an absolutist pacifist, wrote in her diary on 25th January 1940:

Spent most of the morning reading Vera Brittain on Winifred Holtby – frightfully bad, it aroused various reflections. It is a glorification of the second-rate and sentimental and reeks of femininity. Why should women on women so painfully lack irony, humour and bite? And it's too winsome and noble, somehow... Vera Brittain writes of the number of women now happily married with children who still hark back to a khaki ghost which stands for the most acute and upsetting feelings they have ever had in their lives. Which is true I think, and the worst of it is that the ghost is often almost entirely a creature of their imagination.⁴⁵

Indeed, although Winifred Holtby's influence on Vera Brittain as a feminist, first in their shared education and then later more widely, is indisputable, its exact nature is harder to assess, since a number of contemporaries expressed concerns about the accuracy of *Testament of Friendship*, including Winifred Holtby's mother, and also Lady Rhondda in her review of the book.⁴⁶ There was also some contemporary speculation that their relationship might have been lesbian or otherwise sexual in nature. Vera Brittain herself dealt with this point in writing very close to the time of her own death, 'I loved Winifred, but I was not in love with her,' and modern writers have agreed with this assessment.⁴⁷

Some modern critics have also challenged Vera Brittain's view of her relationship with Winifred Holtby. Deborah Gorham discusses how Vera Brittain rewrote their

relationship over time, first in *Testament of Youth* as ‘two modern women, both daughters of conventional and bourgeois families, who relied on each other as they fashioned new patterns of living and working as aspiring workers and social activists,’ and then going further in ‘eulogising the friendship’ in *Testament of Friendship*. Gorham’s view is also supported by Marion Shaw who stresses that Winifred Holtby had other friends and interests of her own.⁴⁸ Jean Kennard has used a feminist psychological approach to Vera Brittain’s and Winifred Holtby’s writings to analyse their relationship, and their respective relationships with their mothers, arguing that they may have created in literature ‘acceptable fictions’ of each other, which spilled over into reality.⁴⁹

As with her later friendships with Dick Sheppard and Corder Catchpool, Vera Brittain was attracted to Winifred Holtby both by shared personal experience and by wider political beliefs. Winifred had also volunteered for service in the First World War, as a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), and the two young women came from similar social backgrounds. One big difference between them was that Winifred Holtby’s family supported both her education and her involvement in politics. Her mother was also active in local government politics, serving as a county councillor and as an alderman.⁵⁰ Brought up to be confident and secure in her own abilities both as a woman and as a writer, Winifred Holtby gave Vera Brittain the same confidence. This I believe was the core of their friendship: they shared an intense ambition to succeed in their individual literary careers and each reinforced the faith in the other’s literary and political efforts.

Vera Brittain subscribed to the well-known Fabian principle that education is a positive force, and believed from early in her life in education for girls and women in

particular. This was certainly at the core of her first novel *The Dark Tide* (1923) and was a regular theme of her writings in the 1920s: that girls were still not being educated for the new careers that social change was offering to them, opened up in theory by the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. For example, in an article in March 1928 she wrote, 'An adequate supply of women doctors, with the best possible training, represents, in short, an important public need'.⁵¹

This deep concern with education and training is plain in *Women's Work in Modern England* (1928) in which Vera Brittain discussed current career paths and new opportunities for women in employment. She described her purpose in writing this book as:

[T]o give some idea of the political, economic and social background against which any chosen career [for women] must be carried out, and which, in the majority of occupations, a good working knowledge is almost as necessary to success as the prescribed special training.⁵²

She was also concerned that neither boys nor girls were being educated for the social changes in marriage and the raising of children together that were taking place in this period, marked by a change in the divorce law in 1923 allowing women to obtain a divorce on the grounds of adultery alone, the Married Women's Property Act of 1925, and the granting of the full franchise to all women over 21 years of age by the Representation of the People Act of 1928.⁵³

In this period Vera Brittain's feminist views fused with her wider political experience, with her career, and with her private life. In addition to *Women's Work in Modern England*, she wrote several articles in the later 1920s and early 1930s, prompted partly by these changes in social attitudes and political rights for women, and partly by her

decision to return to London from New York in 1926 to pursue her literary career (leaving her husband to pursue his academic career in New York), and also by the birth of their children. In May 1928, after the birth of John, she wrote 'If ever I have a daughter as well as a son to educate, I shall bring her up with the idea that she is to adopt a career,' and went on to suggest the type of education that would most assist her future daughter:

Aim at making your knowledge as wide as possible. In the earlier years study as many subjects as you can – especially languages, for these, if thoroughly learnt from native teachers, are never wasted – but study always in relation to the special work you want to do.⁵⁴

She also believed in the importance of educating boys in the ideas of the equality of the sexes. In an article in 1929 on children's education, in response to a friend who joked that her son, who was just over a year old, would 'probably grow up into an anti-feminist footballer,' she responded, 'Shall we enter him, we wonder, for one of the great public schools with "traditions" (called sometimes by a harder name) and hope he will react?'⁵⁵ In a further article on state and private children's education in 1931 she decried the fact that education for girls was still aimed chiefly at marriage rather than a career, arguing that 'Success and appreciation await the school which will honestly prepare girls to make the best of both worlds that men have always had, and women are now demanding'.⁵⁶

Vera Brittain was opposed to public (boarding) schools because of the social consequence of separating families, which may have been a factor in her joining the Labour Party in 1924. The cost of private education, both in emotional and financial terms for both parents and children, was a real concern for her. She was convinced that the relationship of trust between child and parent was destroyed by the separation:

The feeling of security is broken, and continuity – a main source of friendship between two generations – is lost for both.... Let your children stay where they are loved, valued, and understood as individuals. They will go out into the impersonal, competitive, ruthless world all too soon. While they are growing keep them at home.⁵⁷

This feminist belief goes some way to explaining her response to her own forced separation from her own children in 1940, a separation over which she had little or no control.

Although she wrote little on the subject of education and training much after the mid-1930s, the topic remained central to Vera Brittain's views as an Equal Rights Feminist. She saw it as empowering women to make both public and private decisions, as she had done over what she called the 'semi-detached marriage' into which she and her husband entered in 1926, when they agreed to pursue their own lives and careers as they saw fit, while still remaining married to each other.

Career

In seeking an autonomous life of their own, away from the demands and restraints of their families, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby matched the stereotypical image of the 1920s 'new woman' seeking a life outside marriage with a career. After graduating from Oxford University in the summer of 1921 they settled together in London to live the kind of life they wanted. It was here that Vera Britain met the last of the four feminists who were an important influence on her life: Viscountess Rhondda, owner and editor of the Equality Feminist magazine *Time and Tide*, founded in 1920, and also founder of the feminist organisation The Six Point Group. Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby met her in early

1922, while attending a meeting in support of the aims of The Six Point Group, and both became active members of the group, and writers for her magazine.⁵⁸

I believe that Lady Rhondda was a role model for Vera Brittain; she introduced her into the feminist circles of London of the time, and showed her the skills necessary to mount a successful political campaign. She played a pivotal role in Vera Brittain's education as a political activist, which she drew on extensively in later life, particularly in her pacifist work. It was Rhondda's sheer force of personality, the confidence in her own abilities, the faith in the various causes which she espoused, together with the total belief that they would be achieved, which first impressed Vera Brittain, who described her as follows: 'Her aim, in a word, is justice based on reason, and especially justice for women, and this object involves her in perpetual attacks upon sentimental prejudice and injustice of all kinds'.⁵⁹

Vera Brittain and Lady Rhondda were never to develop a close personal relationship; their backgrounds and support of different political parties precluded any real understanding of the other's point of view. While she was both a philanthropist and social crusader, Lady Rhondda was a Conservative who came from an extremely wealthy family, and often entertained both in London and at her country houses in Kent and later Sussex. Shirley Eoff in her book *Viscountess Rhondda: Equalitarian Feminist* (1991) describes her as 'a popular, attractive, and slightly unconventional hostess'.⁶⁰ The guests were an eclectic mix of her interests, which included not only personal friends but literary and political contacts, staff from *Time and Tide*, and active feminists from the Six Point Group. Shirley Eoff describes Vera Brittain's place within these gatherings:

Vera Brittain, herself a frequent guest, cited as Lady Rhondda's foremost asset the fact that she was a perfect listener, always attentive, informed, and genuinely interested. Another frequent visitor, Winifred Holtby, emphasised Lady Rhondda's ability to draw people out and persuade them to share confidences.⁶¹

These were the very social skills that Vera Brittain needed to acquire and practice; her own personality was always very intense and humourless. Lady Rhondda's public persona and example of hard work also provided a useful template on which Vera Brittain modelled her own public self.

While the Socialist and the Conservative shared little common ground, they each held trust and loyalty in friendship to be above all things. As Lady Rhondda wrote, 'There must be absolute loyalty to those one works with, whether alongside, above, or below'.⁶²

However, this loyalty was ultimately not to be extended to Vera Brittain, who never learned that on 2nd January 1940 Lady Rhondda had reported in person to the British Ministry of Information to object to the idea of her undertaking a third lecture tour of the United States. The Ministry of Information already knew about this proposed tour, and of Vera Brittain being a Peace Pledge Union Sponsor, but decided that it was too late to stop its taking place. However, this unfavourable report, in which Vera Brittain was described as not only 'a determined pacifist' but also 'a crank, and a self-opinionated one at that,' played a part in her being refused an further Exit Permit for the United States later in that year, an intervention that was to have profound personal consequences for her, as already described.⁶³

All Lady Rhondda's private and business letters, together with other documents and papers pertaining to her life, were destroyed in a flood at her office shortly after her death in 1958, and the exact motives for her behaviour consequently remain unknown. However, her

action against Vera Brittain may have some kind of precedent in 1918, when she was central in the dismissal of Violet Douglas-Pennant from her new appointment as Commandant of the Women's Royal Air Force.⁶⁴ In both cases, Lady Rhondda's actions appear to have stemmed from professional or personal jealousy, mixed with patriotic conviction, and a belief in the inherent superiority of her own social class.

Vera Brittain began to lecture for the League of Nations Union in 1922. She travelled not just in London but all over the country, and she needed the confidence and tact acquired from contact with Lady Rhondda and her feminist circle. This was the start of what was to become for her, a diverse and successful lecturing career. However, Vera Brittain later ruefully described a common early experience in *Testament of Youth*:

Organisers and secretaries were apt to greet me at stations with fallen faces and the irrepressibly spontaneous exclamation: 'Are you the speaker? I was looking for somebody older!' And on one deplorable occasion the disappointed words emerged: 'You don't mean to say that you're Miss Brittain? I thought headquarters was sending us a proper lecturer!'⁶⁵

In 1927 Vera Brittain's pamphlet 'Why Feminism Lives' was published by The Six Point Group, and she took an active part on its executive committee and remained involved with the Group until the late 1960s.⁶⁶ In this pamphlet she defined the core aim of her own personal feminist belief, 'Recognise our full humanity, and we will trouble you no more'. She also used her own experience and knowledge of how accredited women members of the League of Nations were treated to criticise the organisation:

At present the majority of eminent women – such as our woman representative at the League of Nations Assembly – go through life as substitute-delegates, vice-chairman,

sub-editors and assistant-secretaries; they are human beings with a hyphen, never quite complete.⁶⁷

Vera Brittain was to publish often on the theme that women in the public sphere were not being taken seriously in the post-First World War era, not least by other women. In December 1928 she published an article in which she explored the stereotype of a feminist of the time:

[T]here is still a general notion that 'feminists,' though they merely happen to believe in the social value of equal opportunities for men and women with much the same energy and sincerity as some people believe in peace, and others in educational reform, and yet others in the saving power of the Church, are spectacled, childless, dowdy, and generally unloved.... The only difference between [the feminist] and her feminine critics is that she has a positive attitude to life and wants it to include as much joy and achievement as possible, to be impoverished by no wastage of powers, no frustration of personality, no failure of its vital stream in the arid deserts of lost opportunity.⁶⁸

In January 1929 in an article for *Time and Tide*, she returned to the theme that no woman had been appointed to senior posts within the League of Nations, either onto the Council or the Permanent Court of International Justice, expressing her bitter resentment of this failure and the wilful neglect of women's skills and talents.⁶⁹ This was followed in February 1929 with a further article for *Time and Tide* in which she criticised the League of Nations for failing in its responsibilities towards women as both citizens and human beings. In this article she detailed the areas central to the lives of ordinary women which were being ignored the League of Nations, while citing the practical work being done by such groups as the Open-

Door Council to force the principle of equal pay and retention of nationality after marriage. She blamed the 'polite attitude' culture of the League of Nations, which had influenced the women members 'in spite of themselves, to be content with auxiliary roles and insignificant concessions'. She ended the article by predicting a future worldwide movement:

A truly feminist international campaign would be a unique event in history, and might result in raising for all time the status of womanhood throughout the world. Whether any group of women will have the courage and the enterprise to initiate such a campaign, the future alone can show.⁷⁰

I believe that Vera Brittain was predicting in 1929 the rise of what became Second Wave Feminism, marked by the publication in 1949 of Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, a text that in particular challenged patriarchy and sexist assumptions which limited women in all areas of their public and private lives. Second Wave feminists campaigned for the next 30 years after de Beauvoir's book for women's full economic equality with men, to counter the traditional roles and social expectations that oppressed women in many societies.⁷¹ Second Wave Feminism sought to give women the confidence to create a life and pattern of living of their own choosing, just as Vera Brittain had sought to do as a writer, wife, and mother in the 1920s.

Vera Brittain wrote from her own knowledge and interests, and was concerned to establish herself in a career as an author. She also wrote in the 1920s and 1930s on topics, particularly for *Time and Tide*, which she knew would appeal to her readership. This meant that most of her writing on careers and employment opportunities were concerned with middle-class ambitions and aspirations such as her own, or with women being granted access to elite or senior positions within politics and the professions. So, she wrote very

little about the concerns of working-class women, except in passing, because she believed that the most effective way to help them was for women to reach positions of power and influence so as to effect real lasting changes in law and politics. Although she has been criticised by some Second Wave Feminists for neglecting class issues and what has become known as the 'glass ceiling' in careers, in fact her organisation of her own private life and career provided an example for later feminists to follow.

Marriage and Children

Vera Brittain's views of marriage and children were also based on the experiences of the privileged middle-class and the elites that she knew and lived with, particularly after she established her career as a writer in London in the 1920s, although she was more aware of working-class issues than her critics have acknowledged. In an unpublished article in May 1930, she wrote of the problems of motherhood and of how 'the penalisation of motherhood operates in every class of society and every type of mother'.⁷² But she wrote mainly about the middle-classes and the tangible successes of feminism as it altered their social norms and the privileges open to women in the 1920s and 1930s. In January 1928 she wrote that, 'Woman, thanks to feminists, is no longer dependent for her joys and her occupations upon the whims and tastes of others'.⁷³ In a long article in August 1928, discussing the effects of marriage on both men and women, she chose the examples of Lord and Lady Astor, Mr Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley, and Mr and Mrs Sidney Webb, writing that 'Now that women are individuals with earning power and knowledge of the world, there is no need for the holy estate of matrimony to be regarded as life's inevitable spoil-sport'.⁷⁴

Despite this possible joke, marriage was always a serious matter for Vera Brittain, and in its immediate aftermath the First World War appeared to have robbed her of a chance of children, fulfilment and happiness with what she called 'the husband of my imagination'.⁷⁵ She had written to her fiancé Roland Leighton in September 1915 about a letter published in *The Times* newspaper from a young woman whose own fiancé had recently been killed at the front, and who offered to marry any officer who had been blinded or incapacitated by the war. While acknowledging the tragedy of the offer, she disliked the manner in which marriage has been reduced to a commercial transaction: 'It is purely a business arrangement, with an element of self-sacrifice which redeems it from utter sordidness'.⁷⁶ Even so, she was to follow a similar course of action in April 1917 when she briefly considered marrying the blinded Victor Richardson, in part for what she saw as atonement for the death of Roland in December 1915, but after Victor's unexpected death from his wounds she gave up any expectation of marriage for some years.⁷⁷

From 1919 onwards newspapers often depicted in a hostile manner the new breed of single woman that emerged from the First World War, who had economic, political and social advantages, but whose morals were suspect, in part because they were not married. They were blamed particularly for taking jobs which should have been offered to ex-servicemen in a time of high unemployment. Gail Braybon has described how newspaper reporting had become more resentful towards any woman, married or not, in paid employment. In July 1919 the *Southampton Times* reported, 'there is no reason to feel sympathetic towards the young person who has been earning "pin money" while the men have been fighting, nor the girls who left women's work, to which they could return without difficulty'.⁷⁸ The myth of the greedy woman, regardless of class, who was working

for 'pin money' when she should be supported by her parents or her husband, was established in the national consciousness and press during the First World War, from 1915, and despite the general patriotic call for more women to support the war effort by working in munitions. Between 1918 and 1919 the press became very hostile to women still employed outside their 'proper place', this being domestic service, calling them 'limpets', 'bloodsuckers' or 'bread snatchers'.⁷⁹ This was a menacing and powerful image, which still haunted the national consciousness of the inter-war years. During the Second World War the general public's, press's and trade unions' attitude towards working women had changed for the better, but employers discovered that women, married or single, could not be enticed even with overtime rates to work weekends, which they wished to devote to domestic and family matters.⁸⁰ Following the end of the First World War in a further double edged argument, women's perceived wilful refusal to marry, rather than the lack of opportunity, was regarded by society as a neglect of duty leading to a drop in the nation's legitimate birth-rate and other unspecified social ills, and marked them as failures as women. Vera Brittain responded to this hostile view of unmarried young women by writing an angry and bitter poem in July 1920, in which she lamented the death of both her future husband Roland and her loss of the love of their possible children. In this poem she voiced the sorrow and regret of the many thousands of young women like herself, 'But who will give me my children?' (see Appendix B for the full poem); she later reflected, 'I did not send it to any of the Oxford magazines, and it certainly would not have found favour in the eyes of my feminist friends of a year or two later, for it was called "The Superfluous Woman"'.⁸¹

Almost a decade later in a published article Vera Brittain gave vent to a well-reasoned attack from her own Equal Rights Feminist perspective on the popular perceptions of married

and single women's lives. I have quoted at some length from this article, because it so clearly summaries her experiences and opinions at the time:

It will, of course, be assumed, as it always is, that the term 'superfluous women' necessarily designates a spinster. Because she does not happen to be married, the customary subject of this description is discussed as though she were indeed that 'national excrescence' which an unmannerly colonel of my acquaintance once called her.... One of the most deplorable results of this wholesale contempt for spinsterhood is the agreeable screen that it provides for the complacent idleness of many married women. No doubt the numerous fertility-cult enthusiasts, who believe the continuation of the human race, quite irrespective of what it is or does, to be an end in itself, will overwhelm me with execration if I dare to suggest that, so far as I can see, there are far more superfluous women amongst the married than amongst the single.... We hear a good deal to-day about the mother who neglects her children for the sake of her career. Personally I have never met her.... The discipline of professional training and experience develops a sense of responsibility and a power of organisation which operate as effectively within the home as outside it.... It is indeed time that the self-appointed critics of womanhood left both the spinster and the professional mother to work on in peace and turned their attention to those married women who are firmly attached to the little mill wheel of trifling social amusements. Marriage, after all, is the product of chance, and we cannot turn an unmarried woman into a wife by referring contemptuously to her spinsterhood. Intellectual development and public service, on the other hand, are matters of conscious effort and individual choice.... The wife who regards marriage as a permanent licence for avoiding both is superfluous in a far more

serious sense than the spinster worker who is using her trained mind for the benefit of human progress.⁸²

In the interval between the poem in 1920 and the article in 1929 Vera Brittain's confidence had been increased and her grasp of feminist ideas developed by coming into contact first with Winifred Holtby and then with Lady Rhondda and her circle. Her Equal Rights Feminism was based on the idea that women, whether married or not, should have not only legal equality with men but also the opportunity to achieve financial independence for themselves. In 1925 she put this into practice in her own marriage, following the feminist ideals that she espoused. In January she wrote to G. as her future husband, defining her view of their forthcoming marriage, 'I regard the first year or so of marriage as an experiment – the most serious, the least wanton, experiment that anyone can make – but nevertheless an experiment'. G. held a lecturing post in political philosophy at Cornell University at the time, and she was very concerned about living in the United States and losing all her London literary connections and publishing contacts, but understood and accepted how important the post was to G.'s academic career. In the same letter she wrote: 'I have always sacrificed individuals to my work, self included'.⁸³ Together they drew up a formal marriage contract which covered areas such as finance, responsibilities for children (if any) and time for both their careers. After the exchange of a succession of letters, Vera Brittain also raised for the first time the possibility of an unconventional 'semi-detached' marriage:

Let us – after that necessary year of intimacy – each consider our own interests (not *selfish* interests, but the thousand and one interests involved in our work) as though we were not married. Let us agree that *if* at the end of a year it is still to your interest to remain abroad but mine to come home, that we each abide by our own conditions.

G. replied and gave tacit consent with a rewritten version of the marriage vows:

We who have different interests, and serve God in different ways, yet knowing that all interests are poor and worldly compared with human devotion which is the means whereby we enter into eternal experience, do desire to take each other; not for the incessant cohabitation of the body, but in the unfaltering fidelity of like minds, so long as love lasts, and so long as piety to ancient loyalties and to the sacrament of unrepeatable experience binds us together.⁸⁴

This understanding led to Vera Brittain's decision to return to London in August 1926, to resume her friendship and domestic arrangements with Winifred Holtby, despite her deep love for her husband, to whom she had written a month before, 'Darling, I do love you, you are an ideal husband – I would not change you for anyone in this world or out of it'.⁸⁵ In the same year she wrote a short poem called 'Married Love' in which she defined her view of the role of a woman in marriage, which was that neither being a lover or a wife should be seen as a profession, or as making a woman into her husband's possession.⁸⁶ G. shared Vera Brittain's strong feminist views, and they sought to create a marriage which expressed these shared beliefs in practical terms. Although their very close relationship changed and developed over time, its original feminist ideals were respected and supported by both partners throughout their long married life. In May 1928 Vera Brittain published an article on the 'Semi-Detached Marriage' and its advantages, although as she wrote:

No one, of course, claims that 'semi-detachment' is as agreeable as a joint household and the constant mutual companionship of two individuals who are too fully and happily occupied to have any room in their lives for the old personal jealousies. Nor is it a solution adapted to every type of man and woman.⁸⁷

Indeed, the strains of this semi-detached marriage were a constant theme in the private correspondence between Vera Brittain and G. She was also well aware that very few middle-class women could afford to run two households, with servants and child care which suited all their private and professional needs, in the manner that she, G. and Winifred Holtby did.

Vera Brittain often wrote about the problems of domestic arrangements and their impact on the professional careers of married women. In an article in June 1927, she argued against the tyranny of housework, writing that society regarded and judged a woman as 'married' to the fixtures and fittings of her home, and placed a very high 'intrinsic moral value' on her domestic skills, rather than on the relationship she had with her husband and any children. She decried the fact that women themselves had allowed this situation of badly planned homes, with poorly designed domestic equipment, to continue for so long. She concluded that the 'devotees of drudgery' were holding back both changes in social attitudes and practical improvements, which would benefit 'women who want to work outside the home'.⁸⁸ In particular she wrote against the obsession of spring-cleaning; and in an article in August 1928 she declared that 'women with limited lives and narrow, underdeveloped minds go in for cleaning with jealous, militant vigour'.⁸⁹ In February 1929 she wrote comparing Great Britain unfavourably with the United States in its recognition of the rights of women, linking economic independence for women with their social status and even with domestic improvements:

American women have achieved so much more independence, security and respect (which is quite different from the sentimental patronage that sometimes goes by that

name) than ourselves, mainly because of a social recognition that circumstances are bound to drive them into the labour market whether they want to go there or not.⁹⁰ She cited research in the fields of economics, psychology and sociology in the United States leading to better home design, labour-saving devices and nursery schools, and called for the same approach for British women. This was to become a key concept in British Second Wave Feminism of the 1970s: a woman's right to a life outside of the home in the public world of paid employment, with practical support, together with rights and an identity within the private sphere of marriage and home life. These concepts and the issue of patriarchal power, first outlined by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 in *The Second Sex*, were fully developed in 1970 by Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*, but they had already been touched upon in the writings of Vera Brittain several decades earlier.⁹¹

In the 1920s, the whole issue of the nature of marriage was a controversial and lively subject for debate, within both the feminist movement and the wider journal and newspaper-reading public. Vera Brittain wrote extensively on the subject in the 1920s and 1930s, each time emphasising her Equal Rights Feminist position, and the right of women both to careers and to a different kind of marriage to that of their mothers. In an article in March 1927, she stressed companionship and friendship in marriage as being more important than similar ages, but rejected marriage at a young age for either men or women: 'The supporters of early marriage are apt to forget the fact that with many men, and with an increasing number of women, ambition is a passion as fierce as love and often more permanent'.⁹² She also continued to be very critical of middle-class women who married and then gave up all public or political interests and ambitions. In June 1927 she wrote a long letter to *The Outlook* on the subject of 'Women's Names' in which she linked a

woman's taking her husband's family name on marriage with a possible loss of prestige or reputation and so of income, 'To many women, as to many men, the name which they receive at birth is an integral part of their personality and a very precious possession'.⁹³ She retained her own name after marriage and refused to change either her bank account or passport to her married name. She expanded on this theme in a long article in April 1929:

The wearing of a wedding-ring, the adoption of a husband's nationality and titles, the non-recognition of a wife's domicile, and other legal and social remainders of the idea which belongs to a past system – all these are evidence that we still regard a wife as her husband's possession.... The time is long past when women only counted in so far as they were the recognised appendages of male persons. To-day they possess and earn money which their husbands cannot touch, and are awarded titles which their husbands do not take. They have reached a stage in human dignity which demands the use of a name that is something more than a mere label of relationship.⁹⁴

These views reflected the changes in the law, but not necessarily in social attitudes, since the First World War.

Vera Brittain's visionary view of marriage as a partnership within which a woman maintained her own identity and economic independence was sensational for its time, and in her writings on the subject she foreshadowed much of the Radical Feminist discussion in the Second Wave Feminist debate. This view of the need for the middle-class wife and mother to change her established role was further developed in a long article in April 1930 in which she stated that 'If the vote and struggle for it have any real meaning, that meaning is equal citizenship. But equal citizenship, in a commercial and industrial age, has one test

and that is economic'.⁹⁵ Her book *Women's Work in Modern England* (1928) is a detailed survey of women's employment, the role of trade unions, and the obstacles which she believed must be removed so that women of all classes, married or single, could have 'both equal pay and equal opportunity' in the workplace.⁹⁶ In particular she raised the issue of domestic service as being:

[A] very serious problem, which cannot be satisfactorily solved so long as 'women's work' remains a synonym for 'inferior work'. Until domestic service comes to be regarded as the skilled occupation that it is, and to be prepared for accordingly, its workers are likely to remain unorganised, and there will be little prospect, in this country at least, of better wages and conditions.⁹⁷

She wrote further on this topic in an article in *Quiver* in August 1932:

The intimate and purely personal relationship of marriage has suffered unduly from the false identification of wifedom with domestic economy, for marital success does not, and should not, depend upon the economic occupation selected by either partner.⁹⁸

This conflict between the public and private spheres of a married woman's life was expressed in a further article in January 1929, in which she defended married women who sought paid employment outside of the home:

Every woman who abandons her post on marriage helps to keep her spinster colleagues at the bottom of the wage-market. Throughout industry and the professions, the unmarried pay in poverty and the lack of opportunity for the economic parasitism of the married.⁹⁹

She further explored this theme in 1929 when she wrote *Halcyon, or the Future of Monogamy*, a hypothetical account of married life backed by political and social arguments, one of a series of books on future possibilities by various authors (including Basil Liddell Hart, who wrote *Paris, or the Future of War* in the same series). Her vision of mid-20th Century marriage was:

Man's need for diversion was indeed comprehensible when his wife resembled at best a well-groomed cow devoid of mental qualities. By the middle, however, of the twentieth century, the majority of wives had ceased to be either slaves, toys, exotic green-house plants, or carefully-reared animals with whom sex-intercourse was an humiliating concession grudgingly bestowed in return for an economic quid pro quo.¹⁰⁰

In this book she touched on controversial topics such as birth control, sex education in schools, prostitution, trial marriage and venereal disease. She also foretold paid maternity leave, better welfare provision for mothers and children, and medical treatments for infertility and menopausal problems such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and hormone replacements (HRT). In particular she stressed the increased involvement of the father in bringing up children, and the changed status of married women both inside and outside of the home. In November 1929 she wrote a long letter and article in direct reply to the criticisms of *Halcyon*, which had been attacked for encouraging the 'disintegration of the patriarchal social system' and its 'replacement by a kind of matriarchal socialism or feminist super-nursery'.¹⁰¹ She began by refuting the claim that feminism was to blame for a rise in British maternal mortality rates by quoting official sources.¹⁰² She cited the work of the psychologist Alfred Adler to challenge the 'fallacy of the inferiority of women,' and rebutted each criticism, using the

works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Olive Schreiner, and writing about the role of class and politics in the oppression of women:

The 'changing conditions' which have brought about the decline of the patriarchal family are directly traceable to two great movements, the French Revolution, with its new doctrine of the Rights of Man which was the origin of modern democracy, and the Industrial Revolution, which changed England from an agricultural to a commercial community, gradually removed every kind of economic occupation out of the home, and left the middle-class woman an unemployed parasite at the same time as it transformed the working-class woman into the most oppressed wage-slave of society.¹⁰³

She concluded by linking birth control and the family home: 'neither marriage nor future generations will be served by a futile endeavour to reverse the clock, and to drive women back like sheep into the stultifying prison of the old-fashioned home'.¹⁰⁴

Vera Brittain believed for a short time that *Halcyon* was in danger of been censored and suppressed, because it discussed sexual matters and birth-control, to which she had been both very sympathetic and supportive, perceiving these as a means to protect the health and life of the mother.¹⁰⁵ Ellen Wilkinson MP in 1929 said of the maternal mortality rates, which covered all social classes, 'Marriage should be scheduled as a dangerous trade'.¹⁰⁶ These were subject areas which Marie Stopes (1880-1958), the pioneer of birth control and contraception in Great Britain, had written about and campaigned for since the publication of her own book *Married Love* in 1918.¹⁰⁷ Vera Brittain was a long-time supporter of Marie Stopes, becoming a member of the Executive Committee of the Society and Clinic for Constructive Birth Control on 3rd February 1932.¹⁰⁸ However she recorded

in her diary that night, 'Must go warily or shall have pressure put on me to undertake various non-literary jobs'.¹⁰⁹ She remained an active committee member until September 1934, when she resigned due to pressure of work caused by the commercial success of *Testament of Youth*, but remained a member of the Society.¹¹⁰

In March 1930 Vera Brittain wrote suggesting that, as legal and social changes took place, wives were more likely to be regarded as individuals in modern marriages rather than accepting routine bullying from their husbands, acting 'as a buffer between daddy's temper and the rest of the household'. She added that children and society benefited from this change in attitude, 'Their own chance of growing up as decent men and women with civilised standards has thus increased a hundred fold since mother became a person'.¹¹¹ In a more outspoken article in December 1933 she returned to this theme of a woman in a traditional marriage being a form of property and also an unpaid domestic servant:

Husbands, we are told, are entitled to a wife's full-time service, and a woman who does not work hard to 'keep' her husband will soon find that she has 'lost' his affection. Personally, I cannot accept this idea of husbands as selfish, unreasonable, semi-adult beings who must be constantly propitiated like the petulant little gods of Ancient Greece, and whose affection is a kind of cupboard love which has to be stimulated by food, warmth and comfort.¹¹²

Vera Brittain's view of children within marriage was that both parents should want to have them, and that society at large should provide practical support for their health and education. She also believed that both parents should take equal practical responsibility in rearing them, including their education and social development. As she wrote in an article in *Good Housekeeping* in 1930, 'Bringing up a child is a tremendous and comprehensive

undertaking. No one woman can fulfil alone all the obligations demanded by it'.¹¹³ At times her writings on the subject of marriage and children were almost Marxist in emphasising the financial and economic basis for both career and domestic decisions. In an article in May 1927 she discussed class, wealth and the use of birth control:

Children, in those classes which maintain their own standard by means of an orderly home and a Public School and University tradition, are for at least twenty years a heavy financial liability, and as such must be provided for by an adequate and reliable endowment. This situation precipitates the inevitable conflict between the future of the race and the present standard of life.... It is this conflict which makes marriage so serious a matter for the middle classes in these days; this conflict which causes the number of children to be decided upon even in the engagement period, and the time and place of their subsequent birth to be so carefully staged.¹¹⁴

She was also well aware that childcare, nursery schools and 'Babies Clubs' were only an option for the wealthy middle-class in the society of her time. In an article in April 1928 she argued that mothers from all social classes should have access to such facilities:

The feminist movement, claiming as it did that woman, as much as man, was a reasonable being who could and should behave as such, led women to realise that intelligence, investigation, and expert knowledge might work as great a revolution in the sphere hitherto regarded as peculiarly theirs as in the world of science, industry and politics. Gradually the notion grew up that if instinct were replaced by reason, and the blind laborious conscientiousness characteristic of half-educated women were supplanted by thought, one-half of the human race might soon be liberated from a daily round of mechanical and time-absorbing toil.¹¹⁵

She followed this with an article in March 1929 in which she championed the new social movement of education for children under five years old, and the new concept of nursery schools:

[They] are of the greatest possible assistance to women who wish or are obliged to combine motherhood with paid work. To be able to leave a child in good hands from nine to four is an inestimable boon to the mother and also advantage to the child, who requires companionship of his own age and specially adapted occupations and surroundings far more than he needs the constant society of his own parents.¹¹⁶

Once again, Vera Brittain in her political beliefs and her writings on marriage and children drew directly and frequently on her own experience as a wife and mother; this practice has been particularly noted by Gorham, who has written of 'her extensive writing on marriage, sexuality and childbearing in which she frequently used examples from her own life as illustrative material,' and also of her husband G.'s objections to her using their private life in this way.¹¹⁷

An excellent example of Vera Brittain's approach in her writings is an article dated February 1929, published when her son was just over a year old, in which she reflected on his possible future as a feminist husband and father:

I visualise him not so much as my son as somebody else's husband.... But I honestly believe that a mother can bring up a son to be a good husband and father. Hitherto mothers have lost sight of this possibility through concentrating overmuch on making their daughters into good wives and mothers.... The good husband of the future will be the man who understands how to play the part of equal comrade to a wife whose

mother discovered for herself that freedom and independence in women make happier homes than fear and submission. Such a husband will realise that, if life's prizes are to be accessible to men and women alike, the practical and domestic obligations of marriage must be reduced to a minimum for each by being shared by both.¹¹⁸

In February 1930, she warned young men against neglecting 'fathercraft' and their share of domestic responsibility if they wanted their future marriages to be a success, adding the advice, 'Shared domestic tasks must be if the marriages of to-morrow are to work successfully and the homes of to-morrow are to run smoothly. By all who train boys, from the kindergarten to the University, this fact cannot be recognised too early!'¹¹⁹

Vera Brittain's position was that every woman should have the right of an employment opportunity or career outside of the home, made of her own free choice. However, she supported the rights of wives who desired to remain at home with their children, calling them 'the domestic type,' while still asserting that:

But no one is entitled to lay it down that, because a woman chooses to enter into an intimate personal relationship, she must therefore be obliged, whatever her gifts or her training, to take up domestic work and no other kind.... People who discuss this problem of marriage and a career so often speak of motherhood as if it meant only the mothering of infants. But children, after all, grow up, and to be the successful mother of an eighteen-year-old son or daughter demands qualities very different from those required by the care of a baby.¹²⁰

The same article gave her view of parenthood, 'wifehood and motherhood are not jobs; like husbandhood and fatherhood they are intimate and sacred personal relationships, which exist quite independently of the economic occupation, whatever this may be, of the person

who adopts them'.¹²¹ The article's conclusion was that to limit a woman to the fixed role of mother, which made little or no use of her previous skills or training, was unacceptable and potential harmful to both mother and child.

In November 1930 Vera Brittain reviewed for the *Clarion* the book *Save the Mothers* by Sylvia Pankhurst, which detailed the way in which mothers' needs were not being recognised by either national or local government in Britain, with systemic underfunding by the health authorities of maternity provision, which was mostly used by working-class women. Vera Brittain wrote in her review:

Miss Pankhurst has undoubtedly fulfilled her own part in exposing, very clearly and fully, the 'savagery' of this country's contemptuous indifference towards the needs of maternity and its consequent long endurance of haphazard obstetrical methods of which no condemnation could be too severe.¹²²

Vera Brittain and Sylvia Pankhurst became friends as a result of this shared concern, and later worked together on a number of political projects, including committees to lobby the British government from 1931 onwards. It was entirely characteristic of Vera Brittain's life and political thought that she could find common ground on single issues both with Sylvia Pankhurst, who had been a Communist since about 1920, and with the Conservative and aristocratic Lady Rhonda.¹²³

Vera Brittain's last major article on mothers and children, in which she argued that 'motherhood is as much a science as any other type of specialised knowledge' and against what she saw as a dangerous myth that women could become good mothers by instinct alone, was published in May 1935.¹²⁴ Thereafter she wrote increasingly less about marriage and children, as her life and writings became increasingly preoccupied with pacifism and

the possibility of another war. However, the threat of war did lead her to write occasionally about loving relationships and the need for children in the future, reflecting her own experience as a 'superfluous woman' after the First World War. In June 1936 she published what appeared at the time as her most shocking article on marriage, in which she argued against the existing law that adultery could be the sole grounds for divorce:

I must confess that I have little sympathy, or expectation of future happiness, for the jealous, intolerant husband or wife who terminates a marriage on account of one solitary infidelity of his or her partner.... I am not one of those who believe that adultery should be the sole ground for divorce.¹²⁵

This article was reprinted in October 1941, when the pressures of the Second World War on social norms and conventions had led to a more relaxed and forgiving attitude towards extra-marital relationships for both men and women.¹²⁶ In February 1937, in response to a debate in Parliament about the falling birth-rate, she added that:

If our Government is seriously alarmed about the falling birth-rate, let it cease to regard motherhood as a misfortune for the mother, as a tiresome handicap to commercial production, and instead treat the birth and rearing of children as a national service worthy of reward.¹²⁷

Vera Brittain wrote eloquently, frequently and at length in this period about middle-class issues of marriage and children. However, she was harsh in her condemnation of what she saw as the traditional middle-class married woman who gave up both her identity and her sense of responsibility to society upon marriage. This was a view that she never altered. In April 1959 she accompanied her husband, then a professor at McGill University in Canada and part of a Canadian delegation travelling to London for NATO's Atlantic Congress that

June. When interviewed on board ship about her own political and social concerns she said that if she were to run for office, 'I would run for the Labour party' since 'I have always been interested in the welfare of people once oppressed,' and criticised the lack of political involvement by women limited to the private sphere:

They seem to be anaesthetised – you might say stupefied – by little domestic details.

They should run for political office and things like that. Children and a husband all have their place, but housewives should follow what's going on around them, locally and on an international level.¹²⁸

Her husband G. wrote about marriage in his autobiography *For God's Sake, Go!* in 1972, 'It would be idle to suppose that marriage today is easy between people with a developed sense of their own powers. The solution is to be found in reason, patience and common-sense'.¹²⁹ For Vera Brittain, a woman had to be in paid employment outside of the home, to enable her to maintain both political and social awareness. These ideas were to be most fully explored and discussed in her feminist novel *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition* (1936).

Feminism, the State and the Individual

In *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain wrote of her own views on the relationship between the life of the individual and the wider world (what would later be called the public and the private spheres) starting to change and develop while at Oxford University:

When I was a girl at St Monica's and in Buxton, I remembered, I imagined that life was individual, one's own affair; that the events happening in the world outside were important enough in their own way, but were personally quite irrelevant. Now,

like the rest of my generation, I have had to learn again and again the terrible truth of George Elliot's words about the invasion of personal preoccupations by the larger destinies of mankind, and at last to recognise that no life is really private, or isolated, or self-sufficient.¹³⁰

The public and private realms of women's lives were for Vera Brittain a practical reality which needed to be debated within the political domain. Her feminist political thought was rooted in the notion of natural rights for all individuals. She saw government and the state as the servant of its citizens, not as their master, and believed that the state had a particular duty of care towards vulnerable members of society. During the Second World War she wrote that:

Most governments behave as though they were immortal; they even endeavour to intimidate the ordinary citizen and crush his initiative by this wishful presumption. Actually, in any democracy, it can almost be guaranteed that a government which has been over long in office will be thrown out of power immediately the people are able to re-assert their will, and supplanted by another with a totally different outlook for perhaps a decade.¹³¹

As already mentioned, Vera Brittain's Equal Rights Feminism was guided and informed by the life and writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, in which she was also well versed. Although the first written references to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appear late in her life, at Oxford it is very likely that she would have encountered Edmund Burke's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, to which Wollstonecraft's book was a direct reply, and it is possible that she would have read Wollstonecraft herself. Both her association with other *Time & Tide* writers in the 1920s and the views expressed in her own writings from that period

onwards make it highly likely that Wollstonecraft was an early rather than a later influence on her feminist political development.

More generally, Vera Brittain in her writings and actions showed a strong agreement with the views of Locke and Wollstonecraft on the individual and the state. Following Locke's theory of natural rights, for Vera Brittain every individual, man or woman, had rights and responsibilities, which the state should both protect and respect. She linked this view of the state and the individual to her feminism in a very personal way in an article in May 1935, in which she sought changes to the marriage ceremony, arguing that the bride should no longer be 'given away' by a male relative, or wear a veil or a wedding ring. In this article she stressed the private nature of obligations being entered into upon marriage, and argued that the ceremony could be conducted either as a religious service or in a civil setting.¹³²

As part of her feminism and her view of the relationship between the individual and the state, Vera Brittain encouraged women in Great Britain to take an active part in politics at all levels, and to support parliamentary democracy. For her, the state was a positive institution when it supported and protected its individual citizens. In 1929 in an unpublished article she praised the accomplishments of Eleanor Rathbone MP, one of the few women then elected into Parliament, particularly for her practical contribution to the economic independence of mothers.¹³³ She was equally supportive of the work of Jennie Adamson MP for the Ministry of Pensions in providing care for war orphans during the Second World War.¹³⁴ But she was later critical of what she saw as the failure of the authorities after the Second World War to provide support for people with either long-term mental or physical wounds, writing in 1947 that 'The State assumed responsibility for

bricks and mortar, but the claims of flesh and blood were apparently overlooked',¹³⁵

Vera Brittain believed that representative government would be made more truly democratic by the involvement of women and their becoming more politically aware, since political parties would be required to express the views of the whole population more completely. In a short talk broadcast for the BBC's Women's Indian Programme Section on 17th January 1944, she spoke of a new movement to bring more women into Parliament and the policy changes that would ensue, 'If the Women for Westminster movement succeeds, women in politics will have more influence, and will help to build a better England and a world without war'.¹³⁶ This echoes a similar plea made by the First Wave feminist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in a pamphlet published by the Peace Pledge Union after 1934, entitled 'A Call to Women to Resist War', which states:

If they do not defend their human young they bring forth their children to their doom. The opposition of women to war should be absolute. Women are in a special sense the custodians of human life. Human life and modern mechanised warfare cannot co-exist on the earth. The one must cease or the other. It is for the women to choose. Mechanised warfare does not stand still.¹³⁷

Vera Brittain was a friend and admirer of both Frederick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, writing a book about their joint life together in 1963. While no direct reference was made to this pamphlet in Vera Brittain's writings it is again highly likely that she knew of it: she was given access to their papers during her research, and discussed Emmeline's long term support for pacifism and her membership of the Peace Pledge Union, which she also joined as a Sponsor in 1937.

Vera Brittain saw the issue of gender as particularly important in the role of women in politics, linked to her belief that a small group could effect wider political change, and to the issue of individual and minority rights. As she wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* on Remembrance Day, 11th November 1934, 'The world, nevertheless, is always moved in the first instance by minorities. Slave emancipation and women's suffrage were both the fruit of minority movements'.¹³⁸ She expanded on this theme of the connection between individual and minority rights with feminism in an article published in *Home Chat* in February 1942, 'My democratic community would be one in which the privileges of the superior sex, race or class, and the disadvantages of women, "niggers" and "the lower classes," would alike be as out of date as the dodo,' an identification of the triad of gender, race and class which was some years ahead of its time.¹³⁹ In the same article, she strongly advocated the redistribution of wealth via taxation, equal citizenship, and access to education, health care and employment opportunities regardless of gender, race, ethnic group or religion.

Along with her husband G., Vera Brittain was stunned and delighted by the Labour landslide in the July 1945 General Election with the prospect of the introduction of the Welfare State, and she supported in particular the National Health Service in 1946 with its better maternity provision and child-care, although it fell short of her own long-term demand of free or affordable nursery schools for all working mothers.¹⁴⁰ She believed that, since women quite literally gave birth to the next generation, they had a particular right to a political voice on the issue of war and the related issue of compulsory military service, with its associated human suffering and loss of life. In an article written in 1942, very much reflecting her forced separation from her own children, she wrote that 'The worst thing

about this war is the way it has broken up family life'.¹⁴¹ From her own experiences, and those of other women, of personal loss during the First World War, she felt that the state had ignored women on this issue, and that their collective voice should be heard. In an article in January 1931 entitled 'The Philosophical Sex – Women and Suicide,' she linked the suicide figures for British women 1920-1930 to their individual personal losses in the First World War, and the failure of the state to provide basic services such as housing, employment and healthcare.¹⁴² In an unpublished article in March 1937 she took this view of the link between the state's war-making powers and the popular view of women's position within the state even further:

Women are popularly supposed to be fatalists by temperament. Some such psychological explanation must surely account for their attitude of resignation when discussion centres round another world war – a catastrophe which would turn to tragic futility those talks of wifedom and motherhood which represent the whole of life for so many.¹⁴³

Particularly after 1933 and the success of *Testament of Youth*, she wrote frequently linking feminism with the prevention of war. She called on women to support organisations which sought to end conflict and disputes by international agreements, such as the League of Nations Union or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.¹⁴⁴ In an article for *Highway* in February 1934 entitled 'Women and Disarmament' she called for women to become active citizens in public life in order to promote the cause of disarmament, linking war and the preparation for war with what were at the time regarded as 'women's issues' such as housing, education and welfare, and with her own view of the structure of the state at the time:

But war not only wrecks the emotional relationships of women; it empties the pockets of some for purposes directly contrary to their interests, and prevents the purses of others from ever containing more than the mere pittance now paid for those underestimated activities described as 'women's work'. A military civilisation – and any civilisation which spends as much as our own upon war preparations, euphemistically called 'defence,' can be justifiably described as military – is wholly inimical to women. It involves the undervaluation – usually combined with the sentimentalisation – of their special functions and the underpayment of their work, since a civilisation of this type finds expenditure upon instruments of destruction more congenial than the endowment of the sources of life.

The article concluded that while 'The abolition of war as a means of settling national differences depends, in the long run, upon changes of values in the individuals of which nations are composed,' it was necessary for women to be educated and involved in politics in order for those values to change.¹⁴⁵ Although her view of war and the state altered with her adoption of Christian Pacifism in 1937, her position on the importance of a voice for women in preventing war was established some years earlier, and did not change.

Feminism in Politics

Vera Britain's views on the importance of Equal Rights Feminism in politics had considerable influence, both in Great Britain and elsewhere. In 1937 her speech given in Washington D. C. to the Conference of the National Women's Party in support of the Equal Rights Amendment was even read into the Congressional Record at the instigation of Senator Edward R. Burke of Nebraska. This speech focused on her often repeated point that

it was of great importance for women to become involved in both domestic and international politics as equal citizens.¹⁴⁶

Paula Bartley wrote of Emmeline Parkhurst that she was ‘dedicated to challenging inequalities of gender rather than class’.¹⁴⁷ Vera Brittain, in contrast, challenged inequalities both of gender and of class, although she not only observed but also largely wrote about the middle-class world she knew and inhabited. As an Equal Rights Feminist she expressed all she had seen in her feminist novel *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition* (1936), which is also the most personal of her novels. By this date she had worked through her arguments about feminism in her articles and books, and was very much living the feminist life that she wrote about. *Honourable Estate*, although a work of fiction, represents the pinnacle of her political ambitions for feminism. The novel deals with both private family matters and public social and political issues in the years 1894-1930, following the fortunes of two British middle-class families. Vera Brittain dedicated it to the memory of her mother-in-law Edith Kate Catlin (née Orton), whose real-life tragedy formed the basis for the character ‘Janet Harding’, who appears early in the novel. Edith Catlin was an active supporter of the Suffragette campaign, who in 1915 left her clergyman husband after he became violent towards her because she refused to give up her open feminist beliefs, even though it meant leaving her adolescent son (Vera Brittain’s future husband G.). She found employment and lodgings with other Suffragettes, but sadly died two years later.¹⁴⁸ Vera Brittain also drew on her own ancestors, family background, Buxton society, and on the experiences of First Wave Feminists such as Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, and their work with the WSPU.¹⁴⁹ The novel discusses the moral and social value of the ‘honourable estate’ of marriage and reaches a high point in the union of the novel’s heroine

‘Ruth Alleyndene’ with the character ‘Denis Rurherston’ as equals, in which both partners’ individual needs are respected and not crushed.¹⁵⁰ When proposing marriage, Denis Rurherston recalls the vow he made over the grave of his mother Janet Harding, ‘I’d never bring any woman unhappiness in marriage’ and makes another to Ruth Alleyndene: ‘You’ve got courage and great ability and work that’s worth while. If you consent to marry me, I promise I’ll do everything in my power to further whatever part in life you choose to play’.¹⁵¹ In this book, Vera Brittain dared to deal with such topics as class, gender and social prejudices, sex outside marriage, abortion, birth-control, domestic violence and rape within marriage, and even homosexuality and suicide. She has Ruth Alleyndene remark that, ‘I can’t help feeling that the really immoral people are the ones who punish and ostracise without understanding a thing about the persons they condemn’.¹⁵² This radical analysis of the hidden private world of middle-class family life and marriage, as well as an account of a woman’s successful political ambition, combined the public and private aspects of Vera Brittain’s feminism in one book. Reprinted in 2000, it well deserves Hilary Bailey’s praise as ‘the only novel of Vera Brittain’s which has stood the test of time’ (as distinct from the *Testament* books, which are not novels).¹⁵³ It is certainly the most readily accessible for modern readers, and represents the single greatest summary of Vera Brittain’s feminist ideals, concluding with Ruth Alleyndene being elected as a Labour Member of Parliament in 1929.

The theme of British women standing for election and the importance of them actively engaging in politics, at local, national or international level was also the subject of five lengthy newspaper articles written by Vera Brittain between April and August 1929.¹⁵⁴ In April 1934 she wrote a further long article entitled ‘Anti-Feminism in Europe’ published

in *The Times of India*, which continued the earlier discussion about the need for women to be at the very centre of political debate.¹⁵⁵ As Deborah Gorham has stated:

Feminism and internationalism were, indeed not separable for Brittain. For her, feminism meant the assertion of women's right to play a full and equal part in all aspects of life, and that brought with it both the right and the obligation to take as full and as responsible an interest in politics as men did. The war had taught her that men and women alike ignore politics to their peril: ignorance had not protected her in 1914.¹⁵⁶

Vera Brittain always acknowledged the debt she owed in her feminist politics and understanding to the inspirational writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (described by Horace Walpole as 'a hyena in petticoats').¹⁵⁷ In *Lady into Woman* she wrote that:

With my contemporaries I have witnessed the most dramatic stages of that movement towards freedom and equality which began with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* a century and a half ago.¹⁵⁸

Mary Wollstonecraft laid the foundations of feminist politics in Great Britain, and although she wrote primarily about political equality between the genders and economic opportunities for women, she was also concerned about education and class prejudice:

But I insist that not only the virtue but the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral but rational creatures, ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the *same* means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of *half* being.... The preposterous distinctions of rank, which render civilization a curse, by dividing the world between voluptuous tyrants and cunning envious dependants,

corrupt, almost equally, every class of people, because respectability is not attached to the discharge of relative duties of life, but to station, and when the duties are not fulfilled the affections cannot gain sufficient strength to fortify the virtue of which they are the natural reward.¹⁵⁹

Vera Brittain as an Equal Rights Feminist and member of the Labour Party in the 1920s and 1930s was also concerned about the same issues and wrote about them. She devoted the late 1930s and the whole of the Second World War to pacifism, but she did produce a few distinctly feminist articles during this time. Most of these were on the theme of women becoming more adventurous and taking on new jobs such as aircraft ferry pilot, mostly published outside Great Britain, including in Canada and Australia.¹⁶⁰ But she also used the opportunity of the 1944 Education Act to write an article for *Peace Commentary* condemning Parliamentary opposition to the idea of equal pay for women.¹⁶¹

In December 1947 Vera Brittain returned publicly to the importance of women's involvement in politics, combining this with her concern over a possible future nuclear war. In a talk for BBC Radio's 'Women's Hour' programme, she spoke about her concern over the threat of future war and the special responsibility which women had to prevent it:

When I was a girl I used to think a great deal about freedom, because my schooldays coincided with the suffragette agitation just before the First World War. In those days freedom for women meant chiefly political freedom – the right to vote, to choose our work, to be equal companions of our brothers and sweethearts. Today we have won most of those liberties, though not quite all, and our opportunities have changed beyond recognition.... We [women] get so swamped in the domestic routine, and we feel the great issues of life don't concern us. But they

do, every one of us. Since the atomic bomb threw the shadow of fear over all our lives, our concern or the lack of it may decide whether our children have a future at all.¹⁶²

In 1948 Vera Brittain wrote notes for a manifesto for her planned Women's Party that had a strong emphasis on pacifism and the prevention of war. In these notes she wrote that 'Women are the right sex to take the initiative. As the instruments of the divine gift of life, they have a special responsibility to fight for the human right to live'.¹⁶³ This idea of a political party solely for women had long been an ambition of some First Wave Feminists active in the politics of Great Britain: Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst had founded a Women's Party in November 1917, having long distrusted Party politics and seeking to ensure that woman and their issues were at the centre of the political agenda. As Emmeline Pankhurst remarked, 'men had grown so accustomed to managing the world in the past that it had become rather difficult for women in politics to hold their own if they were associated with men'.¹⁶⁴ Their Women's Party was disbanded for lack of support in June 1919, and Vera Brittain's plans for a successor did not materialise.¹⁶⁵ But this idea of women having a separate political agenda to men, identified by Vera Brittain as being anti-war and anti-militarism, looked forward to the Radical Feminist movement in Great Britain and the United States of the 1970s. This Radical Feminist movement perceived men as the political and social oppressors of women, and the public and the private aspects of a woman's life as part of the political struggle against patriarchy.¹⁶⁶ Vera Brittain was indeed ahead of this movement. She was incensed in April 1964, by an article entitled 'The Woman who will win an Election?' by William Rees-Mogg, which ridiculed women's participation in public election meetings. In a published letter she defended women against the charge of being 'family-centred and un-political'.¹⁶⁷ This was

followed in January 1965 by a letter which heavily criticised the decision of a parliamentary selection committee to interview the wives of prospective candidates. Foreseeing the political future and increase in women parliamentary candidates, she wrote, 'Are the husbands to be summoned for interviews too?'¹⁶⁸ Although Vera Brittain has been criticised by later feminists as a middle-class conformist, much of her feminist writings, and indeed the manner in which she conducted her married life, appear revolutionary in their implications for the future.

Vera Brittain's feminist and pacifist concerns about the true cost of war and the funding of the military-industrial complex found expression in her active part in non-violent protests against British H-Bomb testing from May 1957 onwards, and in CND.¹⁶⁹ This pacifist circle of her political thought will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, but the connection between feminism and anti-militarism has a long history of which Vera Brittain was an important part, including the Radical Feminist protests of the 1970s and 1980s. Long before her death in 1970, Vera Brittain had made the link in her writings between war and the lack of equal social rights and political power for women that was the basis for later Radical Feminism.¹⁷⁰

The issue of feminism and politics in other countries had also long been of interest to Vera Brittain, including the link between feminism and race issues. In March 1927 she wrote an article on 'negro' women voters in Harlem, New York City, and how in the United States all women enjoyed the right to vote if over 21 years old, something that was not true in Great Britain at the time.¹⁷¹ In a follow-up article later in the same month she wrote about racial prejudice against professional black women in New York, and the efforts being made to establish a black culture and identity in Harlem. She was explicit in linking

the sexual politics of Harlem with race politics, 'There is even a feminist movement, though the struggle for sex-equality is likely to be second for many years to the struggle for race-equality'.¹⁷²

The role of women in international politics, linked to the issue of combining sexual and racial discrimination, was to be Vera Brittain's last great feminist political campaign. After her first lecture tour of India and Pakistan in December 1949 she wrote an article in which she gave her views about the long hard fight which Indian women underwent for their legal and political rights:

The struggle for Indian Independence was long and bitter; those of us who supported it from Britain knew something of its costs, for in terms of official suspicion and antagonism we paid our own price. But perhaps if Indian Independence had come earlier – say fifty or even twenty years ago – the women leaders who now stand in proud equality beside their men would not have had the same opportunity to join in writing a new page of India's history.¹⁷³

She expanded on this theme in her book *Search After Sunrise* (1951), and it continued to be an interest for her.¹⁷⁴ In 1957 she wrote an article for the *Pakistan Times* describing the Pakistani Women's Movement since independence in 1947, concluding that:

Pakistan's women have put the clock forward. The striking of their hour of destiny salutes ten years of progress, and offers a challenge to the Western world where with far greater initial advantages, women have travelled a shorter distance in a longer time.¹⁷⁵

This continuing interest in the progress of the Women's Movement in other countries, and the part that class and race played in social and political developments, found full

expression in her final lecture tour of India and Pakistan in 1963. Her visit was very well reported in the regional press, and again she lectured on feminism, pacifism and her own various publications. The newspapers also carried articles about her views on Indian feminism and its political and social progress. A lecture entitled 'The Expanding Horizons of 20th Century Women' in particular was very well received and reported upon.¹⁷⁶ She was also gathering material for her fifth biography, *Envoy Extraordinary: A Study of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit* (1965), the sister of Pandit J. Nehru. They had been in correspondence since 1940 and had actually met in 1949, on Vera Brittain's first lecture tour. The book described the remarkable life of a woman who used non-violent means to champion Indian independence, and who had been imprisoned three times before 1947 for her political beliefs and membership of the Congress Party. She went on to become the first Indian woman to be a cabinet minister in any country of the British Empire (except for Great Britain itself), and later an important Indian ambassador, being ambassador to the United Nations and then President of the United Nations Assembly after the end of the Korean War in 1953. Vijaya Pandit shared Vera Brittain's views on Equal Rights Feminism, saying that 'Congress recognises no distinction of race, caste, creed or sex'.¹⁷⁷ But Vera Brittain also admired Vijaya Pandit as a peacemaker. In her acceptance speech as President of the United Nations Assembly in September 1953, Vijaya Pandit saw her appointment as 'a recognition of the part that women played and are playing in furthering the aims and the purposes of this great organization,' and its attempts to secure world peace.¹⁷⁸

In *Envoy Extraordinary*, Vera Brittain advanced a theory of feminism and emancipation which combined elements of cultural imperialism, patriarchy, and race and

gender issues, all of them themes that were to be central to Radical Feminism and indeed the whole Second Wave Feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s:

In India there have been vast actual inequalities between men and women due to religious and social practice, and a far higher rate of illiteracy among women which created a barrier between themselves and the world of knowledge. But no *theory* of inequality existed. Though the British introduced a measure of female education, they also carried to India the contemporary Western notion of women's 'place'.¹⁷⁹

In Vera Brittain's view, this absence of a cultural theory of sexual inequality in Indian society had played a critical role in India's independence movement and the role of women within it. She even justified the role of middle-class women within this radical political organisation, on the grounds that only they had the level of education to counter long established theories, writing:

In India a suffrage movement was unnecessary because no ineluctable theory had to be changed: it proved essential only to provide women with the actual practice of power all the way from the picketing of shops to Ministerial authority. This exercise of initiative, which in itself destroyed taboos, Mahatma Gandhi furnished by calling women out of their homes to take part in the Independence movement, and by giving them in his writings sufficient sustaining theory to remove any doubts which the more conservative might entertain.¹⁸⁰

Further in *Envoy Extraordinary*, Vera Brittain argued that class and life chances were starting to replace race as the main source of identity, 'Today differences of experience and values, which can occur as much within as between races, create higher barriers than differences of colour, nationality, and even background, and that modern travel and

communication had removed these obstacles for the middle-class Indian Women's Movement'.¹⁸¹ Many of Vera Brittain's concerns about women and war, employment and international politics are still being debated today, particularly in the academic study of gender and international relations theory.¹⁸²

Maroula Joannou in particular has been critical of Vera Brittain and her apparent failure to address the central concerns of Second Wave Feminism, claiming in her analysis of *Testament of Youth* that, 'a text cannot be considered a fully feminist text if its treatment of any of the key factors of gender, nation, sexuality, sexual orientation, race and class, is seriously open to question'.¹⁸³ This may be a fair if limited criticism of this one book of Vera Brittain's, which was a product of a unique historical moment, even though *Testament of Youth* does acknowledge sexual identity, class and gender politics as it details her life over twenty five years and the changes which took place because of the First World War. But in her wider range of writings throughout her long and active life as a political feminist, Vera Brittain did indeed comment on all of the areas listed by Maroula Joannou, and did so in a way that foreshadows many Second Wave Feminist views. Some of the more important feminist writings by Vera Brittain on gender and class issues have been largely overlooked by her critics. In a long article entitled 'How *Can* you tell a Duchess in 1955?' she argued that social changes over the decade following the introduction of the Welfare State had done much to destroy class distinctions, and so to liberate women. She praised the achievements of Eleanor Rathbone MP whose long term campaign for Family Allowances became part of the Beveridge Report, and other major legislative developments which created the Welfare State in 1945. This directly affected the lives of particularly working-class women in Great Britain, with Family Allowances being finally introduced in 1946.¹⁸⁴ Vera Brittain argued in

this article that, 'Social changes and the struggle for equal rights have produced these advantages, which create in working women of all classes the confidence once limited to women of the aristocracy,' using a Rowntree Social Survey to discuss the importance of full employment from 1947 onwards, and the role this had played in encouraging married women into the work place. Even so, she concluded with a call for greater economic and political freedom for women through further legislation:

Our legislation still falls behind the matrimonial level of the Scandinavian Code, under which husbands and wives pool their incomes and equally divide them. The British housewife, though responsible for family expenditure, has no legal right to share her husband's income, and too often does not even know what it is.¹⁸⁵

Vera Britain in many ways foresaw and wrote about what were to become after her death the primary concerns of Second Wave Feminism, although within the context of her own class and social experience.

Briefly in both her early and later career, Vera Brittain also wrote about and supported political campaigns for change in attitudes towards women in such controversial areas as sexual identity, sex workers and pornography, just as Mary Wollstonecraft had done.¹⁸⁶ In her own era, Mary Wollstonecraft had written about women's sexuality, and had denounced what she saw as the convention of her time of women being raised and schooled solely as attractive sexual and social partners for their husbands:

They are either made fine ladies, brimful of sensibility, and teeming with capricious fancies, or else mere notable women... The intellectual world is shut against them... A man of sense can only love such a woman on account of her sex, and respect her because she is a trusty servant.¹⁸⁷

This clearly agrees with the views on married relationships that Vera Brittain expressed repeatedly throughout her own life. Both Wollstonecraft and Vera Brittain valued the sexual side of their relationships, while rejecting the exploitation of women for and by sex. Wollstonecraft was so concerned about this issue that Barbara Taylor has accused her of being a prude who rejected altogether the idea of fulfilling sexual relations, an accusation of 'abnormality' which again was levelled at Vera Brittain.¹⁸⁸

In 1929, Vera Brittain wrote a ten-page leaflet, 'A Memorandum showing the Connection between the Status of Women and the Relations between Countries,' for The Six Point Group, arguing for the need 'to obtain by international agreement what national legislation has failed to accomplish' to combat the trade in women being forced into the sex industry. The purpose of this leaflet was to raise awareness of this trade, and it proposed what was then a radical solution, arguing for the rights of prostitutes as part of the rights of all women:

If sex alone can be made the basis of Conventions written specially for women, so can the rights of sex. If a Convention can be made on behalf of other women who are prostitutes, a Convention can be made on behalf of other women who are not prostitutes. It is not necessary to be exceptionally degraded, underpaid or oppressed in order to become the subject of an International Convention.¹⁸⁹

Vera Brittain's last published book was *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (1968), in which she recalled her part as an expert literary witness for the defence team in the famous obscenity trial against the book *The Well of Loneliness*, which dealt openly with lesbian sexuality, at the time of its publication in 1928.¹⁹⁰ In this book she reflected on the purpose of the trial and what it had achieved:

If the lesbian of today is regarded, not as a pariah whose eccentricities are a form of depravity, but as a part, if only a small part, of the human pattern, it is largely because Radclyffe Hall accepted crucifixion, and made her own story a factor in the growth of understanding and hence of toleration.¹⁹¹

In both these cases Vera Brittain displayed her characteristic attitude of tolerance for diversity and respect for the individual, both important parts of her political thought.

In 1966, four years before her death, Vera Brittain wrote an 18 page synopsis for a proposed book *A Human Revolution*, giving her views of the success and failures of the emancipation of women, which she called, 'the most remarkable social fact of this century' and identifying three main changes caused by the feminist movement since its beginning:

The first is the inclusion of the so-called 'women's question' in the general programme of the Welfare State. The second great change has carried women a long way from their old rivalry with men to a recognition of their own value as women. Thirdly, there has been a real revolution, which we have all experienced, in personal relationships both within the home and outside it.... As one of the many makers of the revolution that I have described, I am frankly in favour of these new patterns.¹⁹²

Vera Brittain was very proud of the considerable achievements which women from all social classes had made in her lifetime in the areas of political representation, education, careers and employment opportunities. From 1928 onwards, she saw the practical changes that women's active involvement in local and national government had brought about in influencing for the better policies which affected women and children. Once again as with her Christianity, her hope in the future and faith in people, particularly women, was the secure thread and organising principle on which the pearl of her feminist life and political work hung. She

had never separated the public and private spheres of her own life, writing of marriage and the emancipated woman of the 1960s, 'To-day she has learnt to recognise the true gold in an equal partnership, and it has become hers, to keep and cherish'.¹⁹³ But increasingly during the 1930s she feared that war and preparations for war would halt the progress that women and society had achieved. It was a logical step that pacifism would be her next great political concern.

NOTES

1. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 174.

2. As defined by Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, 2nd. ed. (London: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 79.

3. Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, pp. 98-9:

First Wave Feminism: 'The term usually refers to the mobilization of the suffrage movement in America and England between 1880 and 1920, although an organized 'feminist' movement for women's suffrage had existed for forty years earlier. First wave feminism created a new political identity for women with legal advances and public emancipation. The struggle for the vote, and later battles for family allowances, contraception and abortion, and welfare rights, twists around several axes: women's domestic labour, the endowment of motherhood, protective legislation and women's legal status. In Britain first wave feminism is represented by WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union); WFL (Women's Freedom League); NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) and the Women's Co-operative Guild; and by the inter-war solidarity of the feminist pacifist organization, the WILP (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom). In *Woman and Labour*, Olive Schreiner described women's double exploitation - in private as well as public spheres - and argues that women's candidature for the political sphere depends not only on access to that sphere but also on an alteration in the *meanings* of public and private (Schreiner 1978).

Subsequently the campaign for the vote in the first decades of the twentieth century embraced wider issues. It addressed women's rights as wives and mothers, and divorce and property legislation; and it gained the widespread support of working-class women and radical activists.'

4. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin Books, [1792], 1992), p. 82. See also *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 7.
5. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.122.
6. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1959*, (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 236-44. See also Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 187-97; Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), pp. 153-79 and Christine Bolt, *Feminist Ferment: The Woman Question in the USA and England, 1870-1940* (London: UCL Press, 1995).
7. Bishop and Bostridge (eds.), *Letters from a Lost Generation*, p. 175.
8. Graves, *Labour Women*, p.208.

9. Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 589.

10. Jean Kennard, *Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), p. 1.

11. Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions & Social Change* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984), p. 103-104.

12. Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 244.

13. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1959*, p. 11; Pugh repeats this claim word-for-word in the revised and expanded version of this book, *Women and the Women's Movement* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 11.

14. Shani D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family' in Purvis, J. (ed.), *Women's History Britain, 1850-1945 An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 56.

15. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1999*, p. 262.

16. Maroula Joannou, 'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': *Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 38; see also pp. 25-53.

17. Vera Brittain, 'The Road to the Franchise' (review of *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* by Ray Strachey) *Nation and Athenaeum*, 17 Nov. 1928. G157 VBA.
18. Vera Brittain, *Pethick-Lawrence: A Portrait* (London: George Allen, 1963), p. 94.
19. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 266-7.
20. Vera Brittain, 'The Lady of the Lamp. Florence Nightingale As Feminist,' *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Jan. 1928. G174 VBA.
21. Brittain, *Pethick-Lawrence*, p. 71.
22. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 174.
23. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 19. Virginia Woolf wrote with real passion about the unfairness and lack of opportunity given to middle class girls, 'It was a voracious receptacle, a solid fact – Arthur's Education Fund - a fact so solid indeed that it cast a shadow over the entire landscape'. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, [1938] 1977), p. 11.
24. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 20.

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26. Vera Brittain, 'The Road to the Franchise,' G157 VBA. See also First and Scott, p. 265.

27. Charlotte Bruner (ed.), *Unwinding Threads: Writings by Women in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1994), pp. 110-116; see also First and Scott, *Olive Schreiner*, p. 185.

28. Vera Brittain *Not Without Honour*, (London: Grant Richards, 1924), p. 129.

29. Vera Brittain 'A Forerunner' *Peace News* 4th Aug. 1950. G682

30. Vera Britain, 'The Greatness of Olive Schriener,' *News Chronicle*, 24 Mar 1955. G728 VBA.

31. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 23 Oct. 1926. G23 VBA.

32. Bailey, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth*, p. 12.

33. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 22.

34. Vera Brittain, 'The Influence of Olive Schreiner: An Appreciation,' *N.C.W. News Olive Schreiner Centenary Issue*, Feb. 1955. Vol. 20, Number. 7. G726 VBA.
35. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 35-6:
'Both for the young women and their mothers, the potential occurrence that loomed largest upon the horizon was marriage, and in spite of the undaunted persistence with which both the Principals upheld their own progressive ideals of public service, almost every girl left school with only two ambitions – to return at the first possible moment to impress her school-fellows with the glory of a grown-up toilette, and to get engaged before everybody else.'
36. Deborah Gorham, 'Have We Really Rounded Seraglio Point?: Vera Brittain and Inter-War Feminism,' in H. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Elgar, 1990), p. 86; see also Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 52.
37. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, p 61.
38. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 29.
39. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 59-60.
40. Bishop, *Chronicle of Youth*, p. 97.

41. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 153.
42. Winifred. Holtby, 'Feminism Divided' reprinted in Berry and Bishop, *Testament of a Generation*, p. 48; Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 152.
43. Vera Brittain. *Envoy Extraordinary: A Study of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and her Contribution to Modern India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 13.
44. Interview with Rt. Hon. Baroness Williams of Crosby, House of Lords, 11 a.m. 6 Nov. 1997.
45. Frances Partridge, *A Pacifist's War* (London: Robin Clark, 1983), p. 26.
46. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 275 and 333.
47. Berry and Bishop, *Testament of a Generation*, pp. 12-3, 272-3; also Vera Brittain 'Winifred Holtby: A Friend's Tribute 10 Years After Her Death,' *Yorkshire Post*, 28 Sept. 1945, G614 VBA.
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Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 173.

49. Kennard, *Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby*, p. 12.
50. Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, p. 12; Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain*, p. 153.
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52. Vera Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1928), p. 2.
53. Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 164.
54. Vera Brittain, 'Training Our Daughters for Life,' *Daily News and Westminster Gazette*, 5 May 1928. G108 VBA.
55. Vera Brittain, 'Bringing Up a Son. Future Husbands and Fathers,' *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 Feb. 1929. G179 VBA.
56. Vera Brittain, 'How Shall I Educate My Daughter?' *Daily Express*, 8 Aug. 1931. G350 VBA.

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61. Eoff, *Viscountess Rhondda*, p. 101.
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77. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 344-58.
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82. Vera Brittain 'Superfluous Women are Really the Tennis Mad who Neglect their Homes. While the Professional Spinsters Work from 9 to 6 – the Elegant Matrons fill in their time with Trivialities,' *The Evening Standard*, 24 June 1929. G223 VBA.
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84. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 206-7.
85. Letter from Vera Brittain to George Gordon Catlin, 8 July 1926. VBA.
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- Vera Brittain, *Poems of War and After* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), p. 34.
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101. Vera Brittain, 'The Future of Women', *Everyman*, 21 Nov. 1929. G251 VBA.
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104. Vera Brittain, 'The Future of Women,' *Everyman*, 21 Nov. 1929. G251 VBA.
105. Vera Brittain, 'Monogamy and Censorship' *Realist*, Nov. 1929. VBA G255; see also Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 177.

106. Rowbotham, *A Century of Women*, p. 137.

107. Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, p. 80.

Marie Stopes had started the campaign for Constructive Birth Control at a public meeting in London on the 31 May 1921, and sought to force the issue of birth control onto the agenda of the League of Nations to make it one of its central aims. She wrote a stage play entitled *Our Ostriches*, which was produced in the West End of London in 1923, to gain wider publicity for her work, which was not being reported in the press. This was an issue that was written about by Winifred Holtby in an article entitled 'A Conspiracy of Silence' for *Time & Tide* in Oct. 1933.

108. Vera Brittain's name appears on the notepaper of the Executive Committee from this date; see letter from Marie Stopes to members, 3 Feb. 1932, 58589, Stopes Papers held the Department of Manuscripts, British Library, London. See also Gorham, *Vera Brittain: a Feminist Life*, p. 198.

109. Bishop, *Chronicle of Friendship*, p. 31.

110. Letter from Marie Stopes to Vera Brittain, 20 Sept. 1934. MSS Volume Bradford-Bronson PP/MCS/A39, The Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London.

111. Vera Brittain, 'Straws that Show the Wind. The Wife becomes a Person,' *Manchester Guardian*, 14 March 1930. G280 VBA.
113. Vera Brittain, 'You Are Still Two People After Marriage,' *Everybody's Weekly*, 16 Dec. 1933. H118 VBA.
113. Vera Brittain, 'Why I Think Mothers Can Have Careers,' *Good Housekeeping* April 1930. G285 VBA.
114. Vera Brittain, 'Our Malthusian Middle Classes,' *The Nation and The Athenaeum*, 7 May 1927. G47 VBA.
115. Vera Brittain, 'Middle-Class Welfare. A Chelsea Experiment,' *Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1928. G105 VBA.
116. Vera Brittain, 'Nursery Schools. A Solution for Many Problems,' *Manchester Guardian*, 26 March 1929. G195 VBA.
117. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 188-9.
118. Vera Brittain, 'Bringing Up a Son. Future Husbands and Fathers,' *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Feb. 1929. G179 VBA. In Nov. 1931 she wrote an unpublished follow-up article 'Babies' Clubs and Their Progress,' 19 Nov. 1931. H176 VBA. It

reflected both her keen personal support for these ideas, in particular the promotion of breast-feeding but also that middle-class mothers were in more need of expert advice and information.

119. Vera Brittain, 'Should Husbands Be So Helpless?' *Sphere*, 15 Feb. 1930. G275 VBA.
120. Vera Brittain, 'Why I Think Mothers Can Have Careers,' *Good Housekeeping* April 1930. G285 VBA.
121. Vera Brittain, 'Why I Think Mothers Can Have Careers,' *Good Housekeeping* April 1930. G285 VBA.
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123. Patricia W. Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical* (New Haven Conn: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 212; Barbara Castle, *Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst*, *Lives of Modern Women Series*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 153; Harrison, *Sylvia Pankhurst*, pp. 195-215.

124. Vera Brittain, 'The Great Motherhood Myth,' *Tit Bits*, 4 May 1935. G493 VBA.
- She listed three practical measures she wished to see introduced to benefit future parents and their offspring. The first of these was formal classes in mothercraft for girls at school, in particular this would assist middle-class girls who wished to combine motherhood and a career. The second was fathercraft classes for boys, '...so the responsibilities of parenthood may be shared, instead of being borne, as at present, by the mother alone'. The third was greater information and advice from doctors, midwives and maternity nurses, with greater financial resources being allocated to maternity services in general: 'Mothercraft, like gynaecology, has long been one of the Cinderellas of medical science, and only a very few doctors are as yet qualified to deal confidently with the peculiar troubles of babyhood. The great motherhood myth has been largely responsible for the neglect of this important subject in the average medical training.'
125. Vera Brittain, 'Marriage Is A Lottery?' *Harrow Opinion*, Oct. 1941, duplicate of 'Is There a Second Chance in Marriage?' *Woman's Journal*, June 1936. G560 VBA.
- See also Deborah Gorham's comments on Vera Brittain's lack of sexual contact with her fiancé Roland Leighton in 1915 in Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 92.
126. Rowbotham, *A Century of Women*, pp. 241-2.
127. Vera Brittain, 'Marriage Needs Security,' *The Star* 12 Feb. 1937. G519 VBA.

128. Vera Brittain, 'Says Women Anaesthetized By Domestic Details,' *Winnipeg Tribune*, 27 April 1959. Newspaper cutting VBA. Also Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 495-6.
129. Catlin, *For God's Sake Go!* p. 130.
130. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 471-2.
131. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 370.
132. Brittain, 'Is Giving Away Brides Barbaric? Miss Vera Brittain Emphatically Says It Is,' *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* 5 May 1934. G457 VBA.
133. Vera Brittain, 'Miss Rathbone MP,' unidentified newspaper article, June 1929. H267 VBA.
134. Vera Brittain, 'She Mothers War Orphans,' *Star Weekly*, Toronto, Canada. 23 May 1942. G572 VBA.
135. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Times*, 20 June 1947. VBA.
136. Vera Brittain, notes for a BBC Indian Programme Section five minute talk in a women's programme, 17 Jan. 1944. H345 VBA.

137. Pethick-Lawrence, E. 'A Call to Women to Resist War' Peace Pledge Union, undated but internal evidence suggests 1934 or 1935. I purchased this pamphlet from a feminist book dealer who records the date as, c.1918. Please see Elizabeth Crawford *Women and Her Sphere*, Catalogue 129.
138. Vera Brittain, 'Youth and War,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 Nov. 1934. G479 VBA.
139. Vera Brittain, 'What Democracy Means to Me,' *Home Chat*, 21 Feb. 1942. G568 VBA.
140. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, 26 July 1945, p. 267.
141. Vera Brittain, 'She Mothers War Orphans,' *Star Weekly*, Toronto, Canada. 23 May 1942. G572 VBA.
142. Vera Brittain, 'The Philosophical Sex. Women and Suicide,' *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Jan. 1931. G319 VBA. See also 'Suicide Toll Nears the Road Death Total,' *Sunday Times* 6 May 1926, newspaper clipping VBA.
143. Vera Brittain, 'Is War Really Inevitable?' March 1937. H346 VBA; see also Vera Brittain, 'Women are Fighting Again. We Must Save Our Men's Lives,' *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 April 1934, G451 VBA.

144. Founded at The Hague in 1915 by Jane Addams. See also Vera Brittain, 'An Epic for Today,' review of *The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1915-1965*, in *Peace and Freedom* April-June 1965. G857 VBA.
145. Vera Brittain, 'Women and Disarmament,' *Highway*, Feb. 1934. G445 VBA.
146. 'Equal Rights For Women,' [Equal Rights Amendment] United States *Congressional Records*, Washington DC, 1938, copy held by Vera Brittain. G538 VBA.
147. Paula Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.
148. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, pp. 195-97, see also Catlin *For God's Sake Go!* pp. 14-15.
149. Vera Brittain, *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition* (London: Gollancz, 1936).
In May 1961 Vera Brittain was considering writing a book about the Pankhursts and the First Wave Suffrage movement; see letter from Victor Gollancz to VB 18 May 1961 and reply 22 May 1961. This book project was not carried out, but she did publish *Pethick-Lawrence A Portrait* (1963) which is a biography of Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, who was the only man to become an ex-officio member of the WSPU, joining in 1906 together with his wife Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. They were at the very centre of the leadership, working with all the Pankhursts, Frederick

providing financial and legal support, while Emmeline was the Treasurer. They both served prison sentences and were force fed, together they edited the WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women* from 1907 until 1912, when they were both expelled by Emmeline Pankhurst for opposing the use of increasing militancy by the WSPU. As Brian Harrison acknowledges Vera Brittain believed that an important book on Pethick-Lawrences' life and work together should be written. *Prudent Revolutionaries* (Oxford, Clarendon: 1987), p. 271. But many important documents were destroyed by Fredrick Pethick-Lawrence and this limited the scope of her book 'Given Fred's systematic working methods and the wide range of Pethick-Lawrences' interests, the archive might have become a major source for modern political history'. Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*, p. 272.

150. Brittain, *Honourable Estate*, p. 270.
151. Brittain, *Honourable Estate*, p. 499.
152. Brittain, *Honourable Estate*, p. 504.
153. Bailey, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth*, p. 111.
154. Vera Brittain, 'Our Outworn Privileges – Citizenship and Responsibility,' *Manchester Guardian*, 4 April 1929. G198 VBA; Vera Brittain, 'The Ideal Man

Candidate,' *The Daily Chronicle*, 14 May 1929. G210 VBA; Vera Brittain, 'The Woman's Alternative – Tired Feminist or Helpless Parasite?' *Manchester Guardian*, 16 May 1929. G212 VBA; Vera Brittain, 'Political Wifehood – The Revolt of Mrs. Webb,' *Manchester Guardian*, 12 July 1929. G229 VBA; Vera Brittain, 'Feminist and the General Election – What Progressive Women Want,' *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Aug. 1929. G203 VBA.

155. Vera Brittain, 'Anti-Feminism in Europe,' *Times of India*, 19 April 1934. G453 VBA.
156. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, p. 183.
157. Miriam Broady, introduction to 1992 edition of Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 13.
158. Vera Brittain, *Lady into Woman - A History of Women from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1953), p. 1.
159. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 124 and p. 256.
160. Vera Brittain, 'Women With Wings,' *Star Weekly*, Toronto, Canada. Dec. 1941. G565 VBA; Vera Brittain, 'Women are Going to be More Adventurous – After the war, they will be more genuinely equal to men in both their values and their outlook

- than at any time in history of the world,' *Empire News*, 3 Feb. 1944. G589 VBA;
Vera Brittain, 'Women in the Adventurous Future,' *Australian Women's Digest*,
March 1944. G605 VBA.
161. Vera Brittain, 'Equal Pay,' *Peace Commentary*, 1 June 1944. H391 VBA.
162. Vera Brittain, 'Women and the Future,' Women's Hour BBC Radio, typescript 1
Dec. 1947. H435 VBA.
163. Vera Brittain, 'Draft Notes for Manifesto,' Spring 1948, (for a peace campaign for
women) unpublished. H338 VBA.
164. Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography*, p. 302.
165. Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts*, (London: Penguin Books, 2002) pp. 342–50; see also
Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography*, pp. 300-17.
166. Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in
Social Movement, Ideology and Activism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 55
'Their intent was personal and political action; they were anti-capitalist, but
divorced from the left.' See also Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, pp.
231-3.

167. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Sunday Times*, 4 Oct. 1964. G852 VBA.
168. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Times*, 1 Jan. 1965. G856 VBA.
169. Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism & Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 187.
170. There is a long history of the connection between feminism and anti-militarism, see Mararet Kamester and Jo Vellacott, *Militarism Versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War* (London: Virago, [1915] 1987). Jill Liddington, in *The Long Road to Greenham* discusses feminist support for various peace organisations and cites Vera Brittain throughout the text.
171. Vera Brittain, 'Women and the Vote. The Position in Other Countries,' *Manchester Guardian*, 14 March 1927. G36. VBA.
172. Vera Brittain, 'The Dark Women of Harlem,' *Yorkshire Post*, 28 March 1927. G38 VBA.
173. Vera Brittain, 'India's Women. A Visitor's Impression,' *Roshni*, 18 March 1950. H397 VBA.

174. Vera Brittain, *Search After Sunrise: A Traveller's Story* (London: Macmillan, 1951).
175. Vera Brittain, 'Pakistan's Women Have Put the Clock Forward,' *Pakistan Times. Tenth Anniversary Number*, Jan. 1957. G743 VBA.
176. Newspaper cuttings 'Women No Longer 2nd, Class Citizens – Mrs. Catlin,' *Statesman*, New Delhi, 23 Jan. 1963; see also 'No Door Closed To Women, Says Vera Brittain,' *Times of India*, 23rd Jan. 1963. VBA.
177. Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, p. 67.
178. Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, p. 114.
179. Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, pp. 15-6.
180. Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, p. 16.
181. Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, pp. 13-6.
182. Marianne Marchand, 'Challenging Globalisation: Toward a Feminist Understanding of Resistance,' *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 29. Dec. 2003, pp. 145-160.

183. Joannnou, *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows*, p. 27.
184. Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone*, pp. 359-374.
185. Vera Brittain, 'How Can you tell a Duchess in 1955?' *Daily Herald*, 17 March 1955. G727 VBA.
186. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 142.
'I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character.'
187. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 138-9; see also Lyndall Gordon, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A New Genus* (London: Little, Brown, 2005) pp. 147-151.
188. Barbara Taylor, 'For the Love of God – Religion and Erotic Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Feminism,' in Eileen Janes Yeo (ed.), *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminisms* (London and New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), pp. 26-27.
189. Vera Brittain 'A Memorandum showing the Connection between the Status of Women and the Relations between Countries,' Six Point Group Leaflet, 1929. G264 VBA.

190. In an undated note to herself while awaiting the trial verdict, she mused:
- ‘What, in the first place, is the object of these self-appointed moralists? Ostensibly it is to secure that the book criticised shall be read by as few people as possible. Yet – as Miss Hall’s publishers have appropriately protested – nothing is better calculated to direct public attention to the condemned work than these shrill Press denunciations... but should a ban be imposed it is unlikely to achieve any better result than that of giving to the book a morbid and exaggerated importance such as James Joyce’s “*Ulysses*” has long enjoyed.’ Undated. VBA.
191. Vera Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (London: Femina, 1968), pp. 157-8.
192. Vera Brittain, *A Human Revolution*, 10 March 1966, Unpublished outline for a book. I61 VBA.
193. Vera Brittain, *A Human Revolution*, 10 March 1966, Unpublished outline for a book. I61 VBA.

The Pacifist Circle

Peace of the Mind and Conscience

Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett has claimed that ‘It is incontrovertibly true that [Vera] Brittain was the most important woman pacifist in twentieth-century Britain’.¹ Pacifism is not simply a political doctrine, but a philosophy or belief system which holds that war is morally wrong.² This belief system can have religious, political and social imperatives, which will direct the actions of an individual pacifist. Many religions tend towards a pacifist stance by rejecting violence, but in the case of the Society of Friends (Quakers), a very clear ‘Declaration’ by George Fox dating from 1660 makes their position opposing all war explicit:

We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatever; this is our testimony to whole world. The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again, and again to move unto it; and we certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the Kingdoms of the world.³

As already described, Vera Brittain was much influenced by the Quakers, and became a strong Christian Pacifist in early 1937; in October 1937 she expressed her opposition to the Spanish Civil War, quoted below, in very similar terms to those of Fox’s original ‘Declaration’.⁴ But although her pacifism was very strong, she never became what she later called an ‘absolutist’ pacifist, the kind that rejected any involvement in the state at

war, including such activities as fire-watching or ambulance duty. Vera Brittain understood the aims of pacifism in terms of a philosophy which held that war is an absolute evil, and that it is a duty both to stop it and to assist all who suffer because of it. But she also came to regard pacifism as a political tool with practical applications for individuals and governments alike. In 1942 she wrote that:

Defined in medical terms a pacifist is a specialist, who sees that war is the deadly disease which threatens the very existence of our civilisation, and that – however unanswerable the arguments which support it – it must be overcome if that civilisation is to survive.⁵

In her book *Humiliation with Honour*, also published in 1942, she identified Christian Pacifism as distinct from other forms, as being based on the doctrine of original sin and the idea of redemption:

Most of the religious war-resisters – those, that is, who call themselves ‘Christian Pacifists’ – believe that war arises, not from the evil ambitions of any one man or the inherent wickedness of any nation, but out of the collective sin of mankind.⁶

She further defined her own Christian Pacifism in a *Letter to Peace Lovers* dated 18th May 1944 as ‘an endeavour to live according to the values of a society which has yet to come,’ adding in an unpublished foreword to a planned edited collection of these letters that ‘so far I have not evolved a better definition’.⁷

The exact philosophy and faith of individual pacifists has always been highly personal, and often linked to deeply held convictions about the place of the individual within the state. For example Arthur Ponsonby MP (later Lord Ponsonby), a friend of Vera Brittain’s, was described after the First World War as a ‘pugilistic pacifist’ who pursued a

very individual approach of informing the general public about pacifism, including his own short-lived 'Peace Letter' in 1925, believing that, 'War is always the direct parent of future war'.⁸ Ponsonby's numerous books included the pacifist tract *Now Is The Time: An Appeal for Peace* (1925) and *Falsehood in War-Time* (1928) in which he sought to show that wartime lies and distortions led to inflamed popular passions and so to artificially generated hatreds, fuelling the cycle of violence. *Falsehood in War-Time* was reprinted several times, including early in the Second World War when Vera Brittain commented on it in an unpublished article:

I suggest that everyone interested in truth and peace (which are, of course, inseparable) should at once re-read the Introduction to this remarkable collection of political lies with its preliminary quotation: 'When war is declared, Truth is the first casualty'... [As the war continues] very soon the public mind will be unutterably confused and deluded by the familiar galaxy of inaccurate statements, biased presentations, deliberate prevarications, concealments of fact, atrocities, exaggerations, fakes and cruel charges, which are part of the stock-in-trade of authority in war-time.⁹

Vera Brittain's own pacifism was influenced both by the Quaker position and by political views such as those of Ponsonby, but was finally unique to herself, closely intertwined with her Christianity, and as Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett has argued, also with her feminism.¹⁰

Because of its nature as a belief system rather than a political doctrine, there has never been a universally agreed definition of pacifism; but there is an extensive modern literature on possible definitions, particularly for the inter-war years in which Vera Brittain converted to Christian Pacifism. Deborah Gorham has described Vera Brittain's position as

‘principled pacifism’.¹¹ Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett has adapted the vocabulary of the Anglican Church of which Vera Brittain was a member, describing her up to December 1936 as a *low pacifist*, ‘dedicated to the advancement of the cause of peace but willing, as a final course, to employ military sanctions to ensure peace’ and after January 1937 as a *high pacifist*, who ‘does not accept military or violent intervention under any circumstances’.¹² Putting the same idea in different language, Martin Ceadel has identified ‘Pacific-ism’ as being opposed to war in general principles but accepting the political and legal authority of a state to declare war.¹³ This was the broad position of the many people who supported the League of Nations, who wished to see all other avenues actively explored in the hope of avoiding war, but who would support their government if war was declared, and it was Vera Brittain’s position up to December 1936. Ceadel divides the true pacifists of the 1930s into ‘Optimistic,’ a minority view that pacifism in itself could effect practical political change even at the international level; ‘Mainstream’, a view that while practical political change was not yet possible there was a need for pacifists to campaign politically and to support both Pacific-ism and any broader anti-war movement; and ‘Pessimistic’, a belief that pacifists should take no part in politics until a fundamental change in human nature took place.¹ This last position is almost identical to the religious doctrine of Quietism favoured by the Quakers, and to ‘absolutist’ pacifism as Vera Brittain herself used the term. Her own pacifism after January 1937 was closest to Ceadel’s ‘Mainstream’ position but with a strong element of the ‘Optimist’ position that pacifism could be a powerful political force if practised by enough people over a long period.

In the wider context of opposition to war in the inter-war period, Geoffrey Best has described pacifism in terms of non-violence and passive resistance, and the role of anti-

militarism in society as part of even wider legal and political agenda. Among Best's central arguments is that pacifists, in raising the matter of the weapons and means with which a war is fought, can then broaden the issue into why and for what motives the war is being fought at all, and that this explains the hostility of state authorities towards them.¹⁵ Martin Gilbert makes it clear that pacifism should not be confused with Appeasement, particularly as the term was used in the 1930s, which while having some of its roots in Christian views of non-violence was chiefly a method of political negotiation with a potential aggressor, conducted from a position of military strength.¹⁶

Although pacifism is not the exact opposite of militarism, defined by Alfred Vagts as being a set of military-like values for society opposed to 'civilianism', Vagts argues that militaristic societies have feared pacifism because it challenges their authority, while admiring the personal character strengths of pacifists.¹⁷ Volker Berghahn agrees with Vagts' central idea that in the 1930s 'Militarism had assumed the importance of a basic cultural value' for some wider societies.¹⁸ This issue is of great importance in understanding the inter-war period in Great Britain, with peace societies and anti-war groups holding public events to encourage political discussion on pacifism, and to counter the recruiting methods of the British Union of Fascists.¹⁹ Michael Howard has identified the apparent paradox that in the 1930s what he calls the British 'Liberal conscience' was equally opposed to both Fascism and war, by pointing out that many people in mainstream British politics saw no actual distinction between the two ideas.²⁰ But although Vera Brittain was deeply opposed to Fascism and Nazism, as a Christian Pacifist she identified war as very much the greater evil, something which placed her well outside the mainstream Liberal or Pacific-ist position after the outbreak of the Second World War.

One of Vera Brittain's reasons for rejecting Absolutist Pacifism was her belief in pacifism as a positive force. In an article in March 1945 she gave her two most important reasons for not becoming a Quaker.²¹ First, as a writer and 'an imaginative artist' she had a strong sense of individualism, and she felt this was incompatible with the spirit and practice of the Society of Friends, since 'the peculiar genius of the Quakers seems essentially social'. Secondly, she believed that she could not in good conscience withdraw into a religious community that shared or respected her own views and opinions, when outside in the wider world practical work still needed to be carried out. For these reasons she rejected the idea of being a Quietist herself, but remained attracted to parts of the idea of Quietism with its Pietistic overtones of duty and practical service to others.²² This belief in pacifism as a practical force was at the very centre of her Christian Pacifism, together with a belief in the ability of prayer to effect change. As she wrote in the same article, it was 'I think, amid the dust and heat of larger and less integrated societies' than that of the Quakers 'that the revolutionary battle against war must be waged and won'.²³

Vera Brittain has been called 'self-pitying' by Gerard DeGroot.²⁴ Again as already noted, going further, Martin Pugh has claimed that she was only ever interested in being a conventional wife and mother who 'drifted away from organised feminism in the 1930s'.²⁵ The tone and thrust of these remarks imply that she lacked both political realism and a desire to be an active citizen. On the contrary, and in common with other political thinkers of her era, she believed that she needed to be in the world of action, and that only this would allow her to write effectively, by being in a public community of formal and informal spaces.²⁶ Vera Brittain always gained knowledge from her own and others' experiences, and applied this to the political events of the day. Her political realism

included an expectation of slow progress and frequent setbacks for her Christian Pacifist beliefs. She wrote in 1964 that, just before Great Britain entered the Second World War, some members of the Christian Pacifist community saw their role only in terms of a political campaign, failing to grasp the wider truth that:

Christianity was founded on a failure – the death of its leader on the Cross – and that politically the pacifist movement has never succeeded and (unless some basic transformation occurs in the characters of modern politics) can probably never hope for success.²⁷

For Vera Brittain this was no excuse for not attempting to achieve a political environment where the teachings of Christianity would be at the core of British politics and government. In order to understand this praiseworthy goal it is necessary to follow the long and complex evolutionary process which Vera Brittain took to become a Christian Pacifist. This had its roots in her experiences of the First World War, but only reached maturity in the Second World War. Her path to becoming an uncompromising Christian Pacifist was bound up with the historical events of her time, and as always personal experience framed her political beliefs and thought.

The First World War and Its Aftermath

In a letter to her fiancé Roland Leighton in September 1914, Vera Brittain defined her attitude to the war so far: 'Not that I am in the slightest degree a militarist, for I suppose no enlightened person in these days regards war as anything but insanity & a check to progress & civilisation'.²⁸ This attitude developed during the time when she was serving as a VAD nurse in a hospital in northern France, when what she later described as the 'Great Raids'

by German aeroplanes took place in late April and early May 1918. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, she later recalled the terror of being bombed at night in one of her most evocative poems, entitled “‘Vengeance is Mine” (*In Memory of the Sisters who died in the Great Air Raid Upon Hospitals at Etaples*)’ (see Appendix B), a poem which contains images of fire and death falling from the air onto helpless victims. The memory of this air raid remained with Vera Brittain her whole life. I believe that this was the catalyst for her opposition to war in general, and in particular the bombing of civilians in their homes, and that it led to her lifelong concern about war. A desire to understand both the war and the subsequent peace settlement certainly formed part of her decision to change to studying Modern History when she returned to Oxford in 1919.

From her perspective of writing *Testament of Youth* in 1933, Vera Brittain described her desire to understand what had happened to her generation in terms of international politics and war as ‘my mind groped in a dark, foggy confusion, uncertain of what had happened to it or what was going to happen’.²⁹ From 1922 until 1936 she was not a pacifist as the term is normally used, although she was deeply opposed to war, and she was one of many who embraced ‘collective security’ as offered through the League of Nations as a practical and political means to prevent another one occurring. Like many others, she supported the League of Nations Union from its inception in 1919, as is shown by her lecturing for it from 1922 onwards.³⁰ After 1933 and the considerable success of *Testament of Youth*, she became a very sought-after speaker, both at home and overseas, including many feminist groups, some of which had pacifist views. Her own concerns about the need to avoid a further European war grew stronger after the start of the Depression in 1929 and the rise of the Fascist and Nazi movements across Europe. At the time, the idea of

preventing such a war through faith in the League of Nations and the policy of Appeasement was a very respectable and logical British political position.³¹ A number of 'peace groups', not necessarily pacifist but with a strong opposition to war and a strong feminist base, were active in expressing their concerns about the deteriorating international situation.

Vera Brittain became a pacifist largely in response to the increasing practice in the 1930s of using aeroplanes to bomb civilians. In June 1934 she wrote for *Time and Tide* an article entitled 'Must the Conquest of the Air Mean the Death of Humanity?' which was later produced as a pamphlet.³² Sylvia Pankhurst, with whom Vera Brittain had both personal and political links, was also active in a number of peace groups at this time: in January 1931 they were both part of a peace deputation to the Foreign Secretary, and they were both members of the International Women's World Committee against Fascism, founded in 1934.³³ But although Sylvia Pankhurst was horrified by the Italian use of bombing with mustard gas in December 1935 in Abyssinia, she supported Great Britain's entry into the Second World War, and also Winston Churchill's conduct of it, seeing Nazism as a greater evil than war.³⁴ In contrast, Vera Brittain remained a constant critic of aerial bombing, writing in 1941 that 'I believed the invention of the aeroplane to be the greatest evil which man had inflicted on himself,' only modifying this view when an account of an air ambulance led her to accept that aeroplanes could be used for peaceful purposes.³⁵ She was concerned not only for the loss of human life, but that civilisation itself was at risk of being destroyed by the new technology of aerial bombing and the extra capacity for destruction that it had added to warfare.

The Peace Pledge Union

In June 1934, Vera Brittain attended, as a journalist, the mass rally of over 20,000 people held by the British Union of Fascists (BUF) at Olympia in London led by Oswald Mosley. She reported on the violence to which hecklers were subjected during the meeting, and contributed to a pamphlet published by Victor Gollancz, which consisted of eyewitness statements and interviews.³⁶ In March and April 1936 she visited Germany and heard Hitler speak.³⁷ But despite these experiences, she wrote in her diary on 16th May 1936:

I fear War more than Fascism; anyhow I am sure you can't use Satan to cast out Satan; that Fascism which sprang from colossal injustices will only grow stronger if the injustice is rammed home; that the only way to kill it is to ostracise it as we have the Mosley Movement. The Press and all people I meet seem to be divided into 1) those who hate murder in Germany but don't mind it in Russia; 2) those who hate murder in Russia but don't mind it in Germany; 3) a few minoritarians like myself who hate it anyway.³⁸

This was a critical point in her evolution as a Christian Pacifist: despite her first-hand experience of Nazism in Germany and Fascism at home, she regarded war as the greater evil. She held this position because of what she had witnessed during the First World War, and in January 1936 wrote an open letter to children to warn them of the dangers of a future war:

[T]he same dreadful things may happen in your lifetime unless, when you are older, you all help to make the League of Nations so strong that it will be able to prevent great countries like Italy from attacking little countries like Abyssinia.³⁹

It was in May 1934, as a direct reaction to the growing alarm, that Canon Dick Sheppard of St. Martin's-in-the Field founded the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) as a Christian Pacifist organisation. All members undertook a pledge to renounce war, and the movement attracted great public sympathy; by 1936, the year in which its journal *Peace News* was first published, it had over 100,000 members.⁴⁰ Vera Brittain's friend and fellow writer [Margaret] Storm Jameson became a PPU Sponsor. In June 1936 when Vera Brittain spoke at a Peace Rally in Dorchester at the invitation of Dick Sheppard, she began to be aware of the debate that the rise of Christian Pacifism had started. Although a very experienced professional public speaker, she was so impressed with the arguments in favour of Christian Pacifism that she rewrote her own speaking notes while on the platform. On the return train journey that night she listened closely to the general discussion between her fellow speakers, George Lansbury, Dick Sheppard and Donald Soper, and concluded that, 'I found myself more and more sympathetic with the complete pacifist outlook'.⁴¹ By September 1936, after being heckled by members of the PPU at various League of Nations Union meetings, she began to consider the value of a broad Christian Pacifist stance as a political force, and was asked by Sheppard to become a PPU Sponsor.⁴²

Vera Britain had long regarded Bertrand Russell's writings as both a political and spiritual source of courage and comfort, although she found him lacking in faith and mysticism.⁴³ Nearer the end of her life she was approached to write a birthday message for Russell, which she was delighted to do, writing with great affection and respect:

I honour him for his undaunted support of unpopular causes which has often given me much-needed courage in bearing witness to minority convictions, but above all I

am grateful for his books, which I have read for inspiration from my college days onwards.⁴⁴

As a political theorist and activist she was influenced by some of Russell's ideas, rather than subscribing to his philosophy in any wider sense, and they became correspondents only briefly in the 1960s. As with many other activists with whom she came into contact, she found common cause with Russell in his pacifism, while not sharing his rejection of Christianity. It was only after reading Russell's *Which Way to Peace?* late in 1936 that she made the transition to being an uncompromising Christian Pacifist, finding that she shared his view that 'modern war is practically certain to have worse consequences than even the most unjust peace,' particularly because of bombing from the air.⁴⁵ She resigned from the League of Nations Union in December 1936, believing that the League had become 'a mere French-dominated instrument for continuing the unjust status quo, set up at Versailles, of which Hitler was the appalling consequence,' and in January 1937 she became a Sponsor of the PPU.⁴⁶

An Uncompromising Christian Pacifist

In May 1937 Vera Brittain wrote a long article in which she attacked the failure of the League of Nations and the collective security in which she had previously believed. However, she continued to hold out hopes for a political settlement based on pacifism and disarmament:

No pacifist denies that a policy of disarmament has its risks in a world distraught by passions, grievances and ambitions, but all history shows that a willingness to take risks is an essential quality of distinguished statesmanship. Conciliation may fail,

but it has an even chance of success. Re-armament, whether undertaken in the name of the League or of naked nationalism, can lead us nowhere but the edge of the abyss.⁴⁷

In 1937, Vera Brittain's friend and publisher Victor Gollancz circulated a questionnaire for the *Left Review* which became the pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*. Over 148 prominent British writers responded, including Vera Brittain.⁴⁸ Her response was a clear statement of her beliefs:

As an uncompromising pacifist, I hold war to be a crime against humanity, whoever fights it, and against whomever it is fought. I believe in liberty, democracy, free thought and free speech. I detest Fascism and all that it stands for, but I do not believe we shall destroy it by fighting it. And I do not feel that we serve either the Spanish people or the cause of civilisation by continuing to make Spain the battleground for a new series of Wars of Religion.⁴⁹

Once she had made up her mind to adopt Christian Pacifism as a belief system, her views and opinions were characteristically strong ones, something that others found unsettling.

Her son John wrote of his mother's views in the following terms:

Her unconventionality was confined to her attitudes, beliefs and ideas. Perhaps this was why so many people did not like her. To the *avant-garde* she looked too conventional. To the conventional her views appeared altogether unacceptable, if not outrageous: the fact that people could not be shocked by her appearance or behaviour perhaps made her unconventional views more disturbing.⁵⁰

After Dick Sheppard's death in October 1937 the PPU became divided, particularly between the religiously inspired members and the highly politically conscious groups, who

could not agree on a policy. Storm Jameson resigned from the PPU in September 1938 in response to the Munich Crisis, saying of its members, 'awfully respectable... such good people – but they didn't know much about life'.⁵¹ Vera Brittain never thought of resigning, but she was critical of the absolutists for their refusal of all forms of war service including non-combatant posts in the armed forces and work with the emergency services. In June 1940 she declared at a conference that:

I have seen the battle between the absolutists and the non-absolutists in which the whole organisation gets lost in the attempt to see which side shall prevail. If we continue in that way we shall fail as elements of sanity and stability when this period of chaos is over.⁵²

She repeated this position in an unpublished *Peace Letter* of 8th May 1941, criticising:

Die-hard pacifists who feel that any form of State service in wartime is compromise and 'touching pitch.' I can only reply that if this is true, I would rather soil my hands than remain so self-righteously pure and stainless. Die-hard pacifism seems to me as insufferably relentless, complacent and unimaginative as any other form of Die-hardness. You and I may think the State is wrong when it goes to war, but this does not mean that we are automatically right in every action that we do and every decision that we take.⁵³

She remained strongly opposed to giving higher importance to any theoretical position than to practical good works, and her opposition to the Second World War and the way that it was conducted would be based on her Christianity and feminism fusing with her pacifism. She also continued to express the belief that the nature of modern war led to an unjust peace, creating a cycle of violence. In November 1938 she wrote about the Munich Crisis,

praising pacifists for their part in getting 'ordinary men and women' in Great Britain to take an informed interest in the political crisis and to see Germany as one country involved rather than as an automatic enemy:

The explanation does not lie entirely in British fatalism and our national capacity for resignation. It is due to a largely unconscious acceptance of the pacifist view that Hitler is not a paranoiac, a 'mad dog', or one of those fortuitous phenomena known to insurance companies as 'act of God', but is the inevitable product of a situation for which the victors of the Great War are all responsible. Long before Hitler created modern Germany, post-war Germany had created Hitler.⁵⁴

She was also chiefly concerned with the impact of war upon women and families. Later in the same month she wrote of the prospect of a naval blockade as in the First World War:

Those who suffer most in economic warfare are pregnant women, nursing mothers, babies and small children. Bombs create surface devastation but the blockade cuts out the root of a people's life, and its effects endure from generation to generation.⁵⁵

Cut from the published version of this article were very much stronger remarks, repeating her view that even life under an enemy totalitarian regime was not as bad as the effects of war on women and children:

There are always rations for Statesmen and soldiers. However poor the quality, labourers, artisans, clerical workers both male and female, have also their portion reserved. Nobody values more deeply than myself the privilege of free speech and a free press. These democratic rights are the basis of my personal life and my professional career. But as a mother, I regard even these as too dearly bought at the cost of a nation's children.⁵⁶

A Practical Christian Pacifist

As the Second World War approached, Vera Brittain saw it as her Christian Pacifist duty to record events for the benefit of others. In May 1939 she produced a set of 'Publicity Notes' on the existing international crisis and her memories of the First World War, reflecting her views on Ponsonby's *Falsehood in War-Time*:

By insisting upon knowing the truth and keeping it alive, the democratic peoples can help to combat the war spirit. If war comes, every person of good will should avoid being captured by emotional ferocity, for it is not by hatred and ferocity that we shall avoid the disaster of another Versailles.⁵⁷

Later the same month in an article for *Peace News* she defended her Christian Pacifist position as being linked to her experience of verbal and written abuse over the years as a feminist:

As a lifelong feminist, I am of course, one of the last persons who could accept Fascist doctrine, with its insistence on woman's auxiliary role and its emphasis on her physical functions at the expense of her citizenship. Plenty of opprobrious labels have been attached to me for my persistent advocacy of equal opportunities for men and women; I have been called 'shrill', 'rabid', and even – despite fourteen years of happy marriage and two intelligent and affectionate children – accused of 'abnormality'. But I am now aware that if it suits war-mongers to re-christen me a Fascist, not one of the names which I have been given as a feminist will rescue me from that totally incompatible accusation.⁵⁸

Throughout the Second World War, Vera Brittain suffered both personal and professional snubs for her Christian Pacifism, but continued to lecture and write about it. While she was

emphatic about her convictions, she believed that she was rational rather than emotional in expressing them. When she engaged in public argument about the war and its conduct, she did so seeking to influence events by political arguments that could be accepted by the mainstream of British society, rather than expecting others to conform to the moral and ethical position on which her own Christian Pacifism was based. In September 1939 she wrote that:

At all times the Pacifist task is to act as a haven of peace and gentleness through out his society. But in time of war and crisis he becomes not less, but more important. So long as war can be prevented and this is right up to the moment that the bombs begin to fall – it is the Pacifist who will prevent it by determined sanity and the *refusal to be swept off his feet*. And if war comes, it is again the Pacifist whose level-headedness, power over others, and the ability to keep in touch with both sides, can alone guarantee the next generation against another Versailles.⁵⁹

In October 1939, she began her *Letters to Peace Lovers*, which had at its height a subscription list of over 2,000 people and ran until December 1946; she also made regular contributions to *Peace News*.

As already recounted, in January 1940 at the start of a critical episode in her life Vera Brittain started her third lecture tour of the United States, speaking again on her publications but deliberately avoiding any reference to Christian Pacifism or any type of peace organisation. Her established public role as an active Christian Pacifist had already caused her to be vilified by the general public and ostracised by her literary peers, and she had also come under the surveillance of the British police and security services who limited her ability to travel both at home and abroad. It was this which led to the question asked in

the House of Commons by Sir Henry Page Croft MP in February 1940 about her role in the PPU and her recent tour of the United States, expressing concern about American isolationist policies, and asking if she had any connection with the Ministry of Information, the start of the process which led to her being refused her Exit Permit for her next proposed tour. While there was never any formal connection, the Ministry did give her some support at this stage, believing that it was important to present a range of opinions from British speakers to the Americans. As Vera Brittain herself told the press on her arrival in New York, ‘Well, the fact that I am here is proof enough that we have a democracy;’ and she did write a letter as promised to the Ministry detailing her impressions of her audience’s views on current events.⁶⁰

When she was refused her further Exit Permit to lecture in the United States, Vera Brittain wrote a letter to Storm Jameson, dated 4th August 1940, venting her anger at the unfairness of her treatment by the British government (see Appendix C for the full text and other correspondence between Vera Brittain and Storm Jameson).⁶¹ This was followed by a further letter, dated 7th August 1940, in which she discussed the Nazi regime and her view of the appropriate form of opposition to it:

I hate Nazism and all forms of totalitarianism as much as you do. The difference between us, I think, is that I have never believed that Nazism could be effectively beaten by force, since it is on force that it thrives. I always believed that to fight Nazism by war would simply cause it to spread, first to Europe, then to this country, then America. And so far everything that I expected to happen has happened.⁶²

This is the start of a remarkable exchange of letters, of which only Vera Brittain’s replies have survived, which traces the breakdown of an important private relationship between

two professional writers and close friends for political reasons.⁶³ These letters contain in unusually frank and clear terms Vera Brittain's passionate belief in pacifism, and her fear and hatred of the Second World War, together with the slow realisation that because of her religious and political beliefs a valued friendship was being destroyed and lost forever. Vera Brittain always accepted that her Christian Pacifist beliefs would have professional and personal consequences, and she was prepared to make considerable personal sacrifices over the issue, including close friendships whose loss she mourned.

The two women had first met in 1927, just after Storm Jameson's second marriage, to Guy Chapman, and they shared a common problem as young writers in combining marriage, motherhood and a career. Their friendship grew closer in 1936, when Vera Brittain called Storm Jameson 'the greatest friend I have,' in part for the comfort provided at Winifred Holtby's funeral. Vera Brittain had provided over many years financial support, advice, gifts and professional contacts to assist Storm Jameson's writing career, including getting her signed by the publishers Macmillan in the United States. In 1937, Storm Jameson wrote to Vera Brittain, 'you are the best friend any one ever had and I thank God for you'. Vera Brittain appointed Storm Jameson the legal guardian of her children John and Shirley in January 1940, and made her literary executor of her will in May 1941.⁶⁴

The event that ended their friendship was Storm Jameson's pamphlet *The End of This War* of November 1941 explaining her own decision to leave the PPU, in which she quoted at length from their private correspondence. Vera Brittain regarded this as a breach of trust and of loyalty, and a misrepresentation of her Christian Pacifism as Appeasement rather than religious conviction.⁶⁵ This breach in a highly valued friendship meant so much to Vera Brittain that it forced her to write repeatedly to Storm Jameson setting out in detail

exactly what her pacifist beliefs were, and why she believed that Storm Jameson had misrepresented or misunderstood them. Storm Jameson destroyed most of her accumulated letters and papers shortly before her death in 1986, and only carbons of Vera Brittain's replies to her letters remain, from which it is possible to reconstruct the main points of their disagreement. Storm Jameson sent an advance review copy of her pamphlet to Vera Brittain, who responded on 10th May 1941 that:

No pacifist seriously believes that his faith and his fellowship is going to defeat Hitler now; he merely believes that by keeping it alive he will help people to keep their heads amid the present tide of violent propaganda, and thus perhaps help avoid another and even worse era of Hitlers in the future.⁶⁶

She expanded her argument in another reply on 5th September 1941, which was the clearest statement of her own Christian Pacifism to that date:

I fully agree with you that pacifists are mentally dishonest if they think Hitler's victory would be a worse blow to humanity than war itself. But I am not mentally dishonest because I don't think Hitler's victory would be worse for humanity in the long run (though it might be for this generation) than recurrent war. Basically, though I am not a good Christian, I accept the fundamental Christian belief that the road to spiritual victory is more likely to lie through suffering and defeat than through the victory of material force. And politically I think that we are so unfit for victory as a nation that our victory would merely mean yet again a divided Europe, a forcibly disarmed Germany [and] war all over again in twenty years. I am literally putting my fate in your hands by telling you this, for I know that these views, if publicly expressed with the frankness I have uttered them here, would put me in

prison. But they don't – heaven help me – mean that I want to see England defeated and Hitler win.... All I can do is try to further wartime experiments in Christian living: to endeavour to 'build Jerusalem' even in the midst of war; to achieve what Evelyn Underhill calls 'the bringing forth of eternal life in the midst of war.' Politically the best I can hope for is a negotiated peace; but my attitude is really a religious one.⁶⁷

Vera Brittain received a published copy of *The End of This War* in November, but gave only a terse response.⁶⁸ Her last letter to Storm Jameson dated 13th November 1941 is very angry and hurt, marking the end of their friendship, an episode in which the personal and the political had fused together for her.⁶⁹

The last two letters from Vera Brittain to Storm Jameson have an angry tone, rare in Vera Brittain's public or private writings, expressing her feelings of being a victim of state action; she wanted very badly to visit her children, and believed that her being a Sponsor of the Peace Pledge Union was not the only reason for the refusal of her Exit Permit. She felt that the associated government departments were embarrassed by the earlier parliamentary question being asked, and that she was being punished and made to suffer as an example of the power of the state over the individual. She also believed that it was for the same reasons that she was refused an Exit Permit to travel to India to attend the All-India Women's Conference in 1941. From then on, in any public writings or correspondence during the Second World War, Vera Brittain concealed or modified her true Christian Pacifist views in favour of political arguments for the moderation of the way that the war was being fought.

It is very wrong to assume that Vera Brittain remained aloof from the dangers or the actual realities of war and its suffering in London or elsewhere. She had the opportunity to

remain in the United States in January 1940, but chose to return home. Her 'principled pacifism' found a further practical outlet in working from June 1940 onwards for a government charity, the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB), which evacuated children to the United States, Canada and Australia. She was also prepared to get her hands dirty in very practical ways. As she wrote to Storm Jameson, she joined a Friends' Ambulance Unit as a nurse and worked at a mobile canteen in Bermondsey, looking after the victims of air-raids or those seeking shelter, and even leading community singing in a shelter in Bow, another poor district of East London.⁷⁰ She described life in the London shelters in a Canadian newspaper article in August 1941, including medical care for women and children.⁷¹ She not only gave financial support to the Adelphi Centre, a settlement in the East End of London, but worked in its canteen looking after air raid victims, and took part in fire-watching.⁷² In *England's Hour: An Autobiography 1939-1941* published in February 1941 she described her visits to PPU groups in heavily bombed areas including Birmingham, Coventry, Hull, Manchester and Plymouth, and her work with military tribunals hearing the cases of conscientious objectors. However she was denied entry to places defined as 'coastal defence areas' by the War Office, which she felt limited what she could do and report upon.⁷³ She recorded that the majority of conscientious objectors called before military tribunals based their objections on religious grounds or PPU membership.⁷⁴

England's Hour was very well reviewed in the United States and sold well, but it received a hostile reception in Great Britain, in particular for its message that if the country could not forgive Germany for the war 'then it has already lost the peace; and if it loses yet another peace, the war of 1965 will annihilate our children and our London'.⁷⁵ She

repeated her basic Christian Pacifist position on the need for 'truth, justice, brotherhood, compassion' as a way of moderating this war and preventing another in a speech at the Aeolian Hall in London in January 1942, published as a magazine article in the United States in April under the title 'Has Pity Forsaken Us?'.⁷⁶ By February 1942, she was convinced that she was under surveillance from the British Security Services and that her letters were being opened; the police did in fact interview her secretary about *Letters to Peace Lovers*, but no further action was taken and publication continued.

Food and War

Vera Brittain had long been opposed to food and starvation being used as an instrument of war against any civilian population. In April 1924 she gave a series of lectures for the League of Nations in Scotland, and was being constantly asked about the occupied Saar Valley and in particular the German economic crisis. She wrote, 'I began to feel that I should never really speak effectively on these complicated topics until I had been in the occupied areas, sensed their bitter psychology, and seen at least the external aspect of post-war hostilities for myself'.⁷⁷ In September 1924, she travelled via Geneva to Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary, and she wrote at length about what she saw in *Testament of Youth*.⁷⁸ In particular, she wrote of the thin and hungry German children and their exhausted mothers struggling to find them enough food:

Oct. 6th. Cologne afflicts me; I dislike seeing our well-fed strapping Tommies strolling about while these people go short of food to maintain them in idleness. War, especially if one is the winner, is such bad form. There is a strange lack of

dignity in conquest; the dull, uncomplaining endurance of defeat is more worthy of congratulation.⁷⁹

David Welch has described the food rationing and shortages to the German civilian population during the First World War, and deprivations still continued ten years later.⁸⁰

However what caused Vera Brittain the greatest distress was talk of a future war, writing that 'This country frightens me'.⁸¹ In a moment of despair, following on from what she has seen in Berlin, Cologne and the Ruhr during her visit, she wrote of the loved ones she had lost in the First World War:

This, this! ruin, cruelty, injustice, destruction – is what they fought and died for. All that expenditure of noble emotion, that laying down of life and youth and achievement and paternity, in order that German men and women might suffer indignity and loss, that German children might die of starvation, that the conquerors might strike triumphant over the stoical enduring conquered. I don't want to see any more of these results, but only to go back to a past in which abstract heroism was all that mattered, and men acted finely and bravely, believing that the end would be quite other than this.⁸²

In keeping with both her feminism and her concern for the impact of war upon civilisation, during the Second World War Vera Brittain was appalled that food was yet again been used as a weapon of war by any side, and headed a significant political campaign against the practice. She worked for the PPU Famine Relief Committee (FRC), which campaigned for the end of the Allied naval blockade on food shipments to Nazi occupied countries, and for controlled food relief to the occupied civilian populations.

Vera Brittain gave many public speeches on this subject, all over the country, often facing hecklers and other verbal abuse. In February 1943 she wrote a long article for *Peace News* criticising the British government for failing to lift the blockade of occupied Europe or to provide food aid, even when some occupied countries such as Denmark were providing assistance to those worse off.⁸³ She followed this with a pamphlet in the same month for the FRC entitled “‘One of These Little Ones...’ A Plea to Parents and Others for Europe’s Children’ which sold over 30,000 copies, calling in particular for shipments of dried milk and vitamins for children and expectant or nursing mothers to be allowed through the blockade, and became the Chairman of the FRC in the next month.⁸⁴ She expressed similar sentiments in October 1943 in *The Friend* in a short poem called ‘Europe’s Children’:

‘Europe’s Children’

The sands run out; no dawn light stirs the sky;
From North to South flicker the fires of hell;
Within the walls of Europe’s citadel
A million mothers watch their children die.
Themselves half famished, haunted by the cry
Of stricken youth for bread, they lift their prayer
To friends who from starvation and despair
Have saved themselves, but now all aid deny.
For ruthless in their pride the statesmen go;
Indifferent that their noon is Europe’s night,

They disavow compassion for the plight
Of babes abandoned both by friend and foe.
O, women of the West, rise now and speak,
Lest pity die, and strength betray the weak!⁸⁵

In *Peace News* of December 1943 she was able to report that the concerns of the FRC had been brought to the attention of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was pressing the State Department for concerted action together with Great Britain, Sweden and Switzerland.⁸⁶ She with 300 other supporters of the FRC undertook a two day fast to raise public awareness of the Food Campaign, and the fast received widespread and positive coverage in the American, British and Dutch press.⁸⁷ The Archbishop of Canterbury took up the issue, and it was debated in the House of Lords on 15th March 1944.

Later that month, Vera Brittain wrote an article for the *Catholic Herald* in which she linked the food aid issue together with what had become her other great political campaign, opposition to the saturation bombing of European cities. She wrote of the policy makers:

Let them frankly acknowledge that the 'necessities' of war have compelled them to abandon both international law and Christian morality, and thus to descend to the ethical level of the Nazis whose warped values induced them to take up arms. Let them make an end of all the pretence that these methods of making war have anything to do with the course of justice and the way of righteousness, or that, having used them, we are in any way morally superior to our enemies.⁸⁸

For Vera Brittain, this abandonment of any kind of moral or ethical principle had direct practical results in the destruction of civilisation and in human suffering, particularly for women and children. But her personal response was governed by what she considered to be politically practical at the time.

The Morality of City Bombing

As described in Chapter 2 *The Christian Circle*, in May 1941, after protests by Bishop George Bell of Chichester over the bombing of cities by both German and British air forces, Vera Brittain had accepted an invitation from Corder Catchpool to work with him and others on the Committee for the Abolition of Night Bombing, later reformed as the Bombing Restrictions Committee (BRC).⁸⁹ By November 1941 her personal views had become even more deeply religious, as she saw for herself the effects of war on ordinary people whose families and homes had been destroyed. She was also affected by the separation from her children and (as also described in Chapter 2 *The Christian Circle*) she viewed this as a test of her Christian Pacifist faith.⁹⁰ This theme was the basis of her *Peace Letter* of 20th November 1941, and influenced her decision to join the BRC in April 1942.⁹¹ The Committee, which comprised herself, Stanley Jevons, Corder Catchpool and Tom Foley, and had close links with Bishop George Bell, was opposed to all Allied bombing of German cities. Vera Brittain was horrified by the German air force's so-called 'Baedeker Raids' (named after a German cultural travel guide) on British cities which she regarded as being of no military importance but of great historical and cultural value, such as Bath, Lincoln, and York.⁹² She was equally opposed to Great Britain's policy of night area bombing of German cities by RAF Bomber Command, supplemented by daylight raids by the

US Army Air Force from early 1942 onwards.⁹³ She began systematically gathering material in support of her opposition to area bombing (also known as obliteration or saturation bombing), from March 1942 onwards.⁹⁴ On 1st May she published an article on the bombing of the port of Lubeck entitled 'Men Are Destroying the Jewels of Civilisation', in which she wrote, 'For my part I am ready to be identified with my country when it endures needless bombardment and suffers indiscriminate damage. But I reserve the right to dissociate myself from it when it inflicts those evils, and I put the fact on record'.⁹⁵

Shortly after Vera Brittain joined the BRC, on 30th/31st May 1942 Bomber Command under its new head, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris (later Air Chief Marshal), launched its first 'Thousand Bomber Raid,' against the German city of Cologne, which destroyed much of the old city and badly damaged the famous cathedral.⁹⁶ Within the cathedral's ancient precincts many hundreds of women and children who had been seeking shelter were killed in the fire-storm which accompanied the raid. Cologne had a very particular personal significance for Vera Brittain from her visit to the city when it was still under Allied occupation in 1924.⁹⁷ During this visit she had also attended a service in the cathedral, which had revived memories for her of nursing German prisoners as a VAD.⁹⁸ It was also in Cologne that she had heard Hitler speak in March 1936.⁹⁹ Further, she had heard about the everyday Nazi policy towards the German Jewish population from a friend in Cologne.¹⁰⁰ The bombing of the city and the deaths of so many deeply affected her, particularly as she believed that most of the dead had been civilians, women and children seeking shelter and protection from the bombing. She wrote a short poem in response to the raid, published on 19th June 1942 in the Quaker journal *The Friend* and later printed as a

leaflet, called '*Lament for Cologne*' with an accompanying German translation by Paul Hilderbrandt:

'Lament for Cologne'

(May 31st 1942)

The mothers on whose homes destruction fell,
Who wailing sought their children through the hell
Of London, Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade,
Will seek Cologne's sad women, unafraid,
And cry: 'God's cause is ours. Let there be peace!'¹⁰¹

These bombed cities represented for Vera Brittain the destruction of European history and the loss of culture and beauty from the world. She was still writing about the effects of the fire-storm on Cologne and its gruesome aftermath following her visit to the city in October 1947, and she expressed her anger about British bombing policy in a letter to *The Times* as late as 1961.¹⁰²

The BRC published a set of notes on 24th June 1942 arguing against area bombing, not only in terms of morality and international law, but also military effectiveness.¹⁰³ The debate on all aspects of saturation bombing especially in the Second World War continues to this day, and has provoked great emotions and controversy on all sides.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, its proponents agreed with its critics that Cologne was a major turning point. Sir Arthur Harris himself later wrote, 'My opinion is that we should never have had a real bomber offensive if it had not been for the 1,000-bomber attack on Cologne'.¹⁰⁵ The official British history of

Bomber Command poured scorn on any criticism of the raid, arguing that it had also raised British civilian morale.¹⁰⁶ But for Vera Brittain, Cologne symbolised all she had most feared about air warfare: the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the destruction of the accumulated culture of civilisation, and the abandonment of moral values struck at the very marrow of her Christian Pacifism, and against all the teachings of Christ as she understood them, including the Sermon on the Mount. Her view was that Great Britain was lowering herself to the level of the Nazis. She was convinced that Harris was no better than Hitler, and held him responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people, writing in 1943, 'I hope they include Sir Arthur Harris (who planned all these heavy raids) among the War Criminals'.¹⁰⁷ In fact Harris was carrying out wider British government policy, although he also supported it himself.¹⁰⁸

As part of the logical development of her Christian Pacifism, Vera Brittain sincerely continued to believe that a negotiated peace was the only way to prevent further acts of barbarity from all sides. Also in June 1942, she summarised her political aims as a Christian Pacifist in an article published in the United States as 'But despite failures, shortcomings, censure and unpopularity the fact remains that British pacifism is a constructive revolutionary movement that stands for the cause of life in a world overshadowed by death'.¹⁰⁹ In October 1942 she published *Humiliation with Honour*, which had three print runs in four months.¹¹⁰ In this book she again defined her own Christian Pacifism in a clear and unequivocal manner as an issue of personal morality:

Pacifism is nothing other than a belief in the ultimate transcendence of love over power. This belief comes from an inward assurance. It is untouched by logic and beyond argument – though there are many arguments both for and against it. And

each person's assurance is individual; his inspiration cannot arise from another's reasons, nor can its authority be quenched by another's scepticism.¹¹¹

Vera Brittain's Christian Pacifism, concern with morality and basic Christian values, was reflected in her diary from March 1943 onwards when the Battle of the Ruhr began with heavy RAF raids on German cities. She wrote of the war news of 13th March: 'Evening papers reported "Biggest ever" raid on Essen; felt sick at thought of the civilians suffering behind the gleeful communiqués. World has gone mad'.¹¹² On 29th March she wrote, '*Daily Herald* this morning described Berlin on Saturday night as having looked "like an oven". I wonder who really gets satisfaction out of this terrible deterioration in human values'.¹¹³ On 17th June 1943 she wrote in her *Letter to Peace Lovers* a reply to a member of the general public who had written to her that she should be blaming the Nazis for the war and not the British armed services:

After all, people sometimes say to me: the Germans began it, why always blame the British? My reply is that I am not responsible for cruel deeds done by the Nazis in the name of the Germans, and much as I deplore them I cannot prevent them. But so long as the breath is in me I shall protest against abominations done by my government in the name of the British, of whom I am one. The mercilessness of others does not release us from the obligation to control ourselves.¹¹⁴

She was particularly shocked by the public delight at another well heralded Bomber Command success, the famous 'Dambusters Raid' (Operation Chastise), which took place on the night of 15th/16th May 1943, and which received massive coverage in the British press and radio. The targets for the bomber crews were three dams in the Ruhr industrial area: two were breached flooding a large area and over a thousand civilians were

drowned.¹¹⁵ Vera Brittain was appalled by the gleeful tone of the press and radio, in particular the *Sunday Express* which dismissed calls for mercy towards the German population as 'All these sentimental appeals are bunkum and hypocrisy in effect, whether they come from a familiar prelate or some unsuspecting Quisling'.¹¹⁶ Her reply was direct and immediate:

I am obviously one of the voices selected for condemnation by the '*Sunday Express*.' Mine is only a small voice. But if I were the only voice left in England to say it, and were to be shot to-morrow for saying it, I should still maintain that by every civilised standard, 'Christian' or otherwise, it is brutal and wicked to attempt to win a war by burning and starving to death the young and the helpless, and by letting loose overwhelming floods upon unsuspecting mothers and their innocent children in the small crowded homesteads of an industrial area. ... But it is not, I know, with the young pilots, but with those who give them their orders, that responsibility really lies... But let us make no mistake about whose company we join when we do these things – or whose repudiate.¹¹⁷

This commentary on British area bombing continued in her diaries into 1944, rehearsing in private for herself attitudes and arguments which she was about to make even more public.

On 31st January 1944 she wrote:

The people who invented 'saturation raids' are nothing but homicidal maniacs who ought to be shut up in a criminal lunatic asylum. Berlin was cut off for 15 hours from the outside world. The papers don't give much detail now of what happens to the population – probably ashamed.¹¹⁸

As first described in the Christian Circle chapter, in March she put these long-standing moral and ethical views into print as a political argument in a short pamphlet, which was first published in the United States as *Massacre by Bombing*, where it received what she described as ‘a chorus of vilification in over 200 American newspapers,’ although she also kept some favourable reviews.¹¹⁹ In April an expanded version of 118 pages was published in Great Britain as *Seed of Chaos - What Mass Bombing Really Means*. While certain parts had to be revised before publication because they were considered to be libellous, this was a very well-researched document. Her aim was not to convert people to her own form of Christian Pacifism but to start a political debate, encouraging the general public to consider the RAF’s policy, writing ‘That they either do not know the facts, or, where they suspect the truth, they have consciously put shutters over the windows of their imagination’.¹²⁰ Again, she held Air Chief Marshal Harris personally responsible for the policy of area bombing, going as far as to write that ‘The change of RAF policy from “precision” to “area” bombing began on March 3rd 1942, with the appointment of Sir Arthur Travers Harris to the control of Bomber Command’.¹²¹ Throughout her life she drew inspiration from individuals and their ability to effect change, and in the same way she blamed an individual rather than an institution for what she saw as a massive failure of morality.

In *Seed of Chaos* Vera Brittain repeated her anger at the deaths of children, and the destruction of historic towns and cities. As Yvonne Alexandra Bennett has pointed out, ‘She was struck by the inability of most of her critics to grasp the fact that the protest was not against bombing, but against a type of bombing, namely area or saturation bombing’.¹²² She challenged the notion that even the people of Coventry, badly bombed by the Germans on 14th November 1940, would want revenge enacted on another city, and used evidence from

Mass-Observation to support her argument. She also criticised Prime Minister Winston Churchill's description, in *The Times* of 7th June 1943, of the mass bombing as an 'experiment'. She concluded that:

If the nations of the world cannot agree, when peace returns, to refrain from the use of the bombing aeroplane as they have refrained from using poison gas, then mankind itself deserves to perish from the epidemic of moral insanity which today afflicts our civilisation.¹²³

The pamphlet argued for a negotiated peace to end the war as soon as possible, and ended with a call for at least the abandonment of the policy of area bombing before further escalation took place, including the possible use of bombing with poison gas.

As a political pamphlet, *Seed of Chaos* appealed to a wide range of mainstream opinions beyond pacifism. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the few letters of support that *Seed of Chaos* received was from Basil Liddell Hart, the distinguished military commentator and certainly no pacifist, who wrote to Vera Britain on 25th July:

I have read your 'Seed of Chaos' with profound respect for your courage in upholding the claims for human decency in a time when war fever is raging... In such times as these, those who have an understanding should not only avoid fanning the flames of hatred, but ought to do what they can to check the spread – which endangers the prospects of future peace... Since you are likely to have abundant evidence of the resentment you create, you may like to have some evidence of the respect you inspire.¹²⁴

Liddell Hart opposed area bombing on military grounds as a poor use of resources and ineffective as a weapon of terror, arguing for precision bombing on targets such as German

communications and industrial sites. But he also regarded area bombing as incompatible with the stated Allied aim of unconditional surrender, given at the Casablanca Conference of January 1943; and, in keeping with his wider theories about warfare, he believed that the war should be fought with restraint, and with the aim of a negotiated peace.¹²⁵ Many years later Vera Brittain read and favourably reviewed Basil Liddell Hart's memoirs, writing that even without a knowledge of military history the intelligent reader, 'will have a unique understanding of our epoch from the end of the last century to the present day' from Liddell Hart's book.¹²⁶

The most extreme attack on *Massacre by Bombing / Seed of Chaos* came from the United States in a review by William L. Shirer, who claimed that 'Dr. Goebbels, with whose writings and tricks and lies I have certain familiarity, would hardly have written it differently'.¹²⁷ Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded with a public letter, reported in the *News Chronicle* of 27th April:

It is a mis-statement, Mr. Roosevelt said, to describe the bombings as revenge. Bombing, he declared, is shortening the war in the opinion of an overwhelming percentage of military authorities. 'You cannot talk conciliation,' the letter concluded. 'You can be pro-German and pro-Japanese and look forward to a new "dark ages," attended by world-wide death and destruction – or a continuance of the philosophy of peace and the maintenance of civilisation. You cannot effect a compromise between these two views'.¹²⁸

Vera Brittain's response was an article in June entitled 'Not Made in Germany – a reply to William L. Shirer and the President,' in which she argued a political case against area bombing and the Allied policy of unconditional surrender, rather than an ethical or moral

case based on pacifism:

Mr. Shirer argues that the only alternative to fighting Hitler with bombs is 'slavery to the Nazis.' This is not the case. One alternative to fighting Hitler with bombs is fighting him with intelligence; with constructive political proposals, the lack of which the Bishop of Chichester lamented in the House of Lords protest against mass bombing. If the United Nations sincerely desired to shorten the war, they would long ago have abandoned the obtuse demand for unconditional surrender and offered the German people some better incentive for abandoning Hitler than the dismemberment of their country and prolonged occupation by Allied troops. Offered no prospect better than this, the German people have no alternative to putting up with Hitler and enduring mass raids, which increase their resistance just as their smaller onslaught on us in Britain increased ours.¹²⁹

She also challenged what she claimed as President Roosevelt's position that in the circumstances of the war individual conscience should give way to the demands of patriotism:

If that State is indeed all, and those who criticise its policy must be ranked with its enemies, for what are we fighting the Nazis? Could we not merely have adopted their doctrines, without the trouble and expense of going to war? Is it not to demonstrate their belief in a higher Authority than the State, that thousands of American and British boys are offering their lives? ¹³⁰

Starting with a political pamphlet born out of her Christian Pacifism, this episode led Vera Brittain to express in public for the first time her considered views on the relationship between the state and the individual.

The most savage criticism of *Seed of Chaos* in the British press appeared on 19th May 1944 in an opinion column written by George Orwell, who was also far from being either a militarist or a pacifist:

She is willing and anxious to win the war apparently. She merely wishes us to stick to 'legitimate' methods of war and abandon civilian bombing, which she fears will blacken our reputation in the eyes of posterity... Now, no one in his senses regards bombing, or any other operation of war, with anything but disgust. On the other hand, no decent person cares tuppence for the opinion of posterity. And there is something very distasteful in accepting war as an instrument and at the same time wanting to dodge responsibility for its more obviously barbarous features. Pacifism is a tenable position, provided that you are willing to take the consequences. But all talk of 'limiting' or 'humanising' war is sheer humbug... The immunity of the civilian, one of the things that has made war possible, has been shattered. Unlike Miss Brittain, I don't regret that.¹³¹

In response, Vera Brittain defended her position in a letter, published alongside a reply from Orwell, on 23rd June:

My chief concern is with the moral deterioration to which a nation condemns itself by the unrestrained infliction of cruelty; and with the setback of European civilisation which obliteration bombing must cause in addition to blockade and invasion.¹³²

Orwell's reply set out his own view of war and of pacifism, rejecting Vera Brittain's moral and political arguments:

As to war, you can not at present avoid it, nor can you genuinely humanise it. You can only, like the pacifists set up a moral alibi for yourself while continuing to accept the

fruits of violence. I would sooner be Air-Marshal Harris than Miss Brittain, because he at least knows what he is doing.¹³³

In a later column on 14th July, Orwell dismissed the idea of condemning the killing of women in warfare as 'sheer sentimentality'.¹³⁴ Vera Brittain confronted this challenge directly, although not by writing again to Orwell's column. In a short letter to *The Friend* dated 3rd June, and an article 'Should We Humanise War?' in the July 1944 issue of *Christian Pacifist*, she explored historical examples of the humanising influence on war and its possibilities, developing her argument that those with direct experience of the worst aspects of warfare, in particular being bombed, had more pity and toleration for their enemies. She concluded her moral and political analysis by quoting Kant: 'But if we proceed by gradual reform, and are guided by certain clear and fixed principles, we may lead by continuous approximation to the highest political good; we may lead to Perpetual Peace'.¹³⁵

Although a Christian Pacifist, in writing *Seed of Chaos* and in the subsequent arguments about it Vera Brittain took a position closer to the Pacific-ist political mainstream of the time, arguing for moderation in war and a negotiated peace, rather than for a Christian Pacifist position that she accepted was unlikely to be adopted. She maintained this position in a further article in July 1944, arguing that the highly indiscriminate German V-1 'buzz bomb' pilotless aircraft were, as a further escalation in the barbarisation of war, a response to Allied area bombing as part of the cycle of violence. She saw the mechanisation and depersonalisation of war, from blockade to bombing to 'robot planes,' as inherently dehumanising.¹³⁶

Vera Brittain's worst fears about the policy of saturation bombing and the effects of total war were realised with the Allied bombing of Dresden on Shrove Tuesday 13th/14th

February 1945, in which massive bombing of the city created what Frederick Taylor has called the 'perfect firestorm'.¹³⁷ She collected newspaper reports of the time on the bombing of Dresden, as she had done on many other German cities, in particular on Lubeck; and in the margin of one newspaper clipping she wrote, 'The evil that men do'.¹³⁸

Much of the information from these newspaper clippings about Dresden was typed up and used for Vera Brittain's contribution to *The End of Dresden*, a pamphlet produced by the Bombing Restrictions Committee in 1945, which she mentioned in *Testament of Experience*.¹³⁹ This collection included a cutting from the US Army official newspaper *Stars and Stripes* 5th May 1945, which gave the Dresden death toll as 300,000, a figure obtained from official German propaganda at the time.¹⁴⁰ She was still gathering information on the bombing of Dresden in 1946, including a newspaper clipping from the *New York Times*, which gave a figure of 200,000.¹⁴¹ The exact death toll for Dresden has long been a contentious and political issue. David Irving claimed in his book published in 1963 *The Destruction of Dresden* that 135,000 had died in the bombing, which he increased to 250,000 after being given a copy of a official document, which he took to be genuine and allegedly produced in Dresden while efforts to bury the dead were taking place.¹⁴² Vera Brittain reviewed Irving's book for the Christian magazine *Friend* and was supportive of his findings, writing that 'It is perhaps not surprising that a strange silence has shrouded this monstrous tragedy'.¹⁴³ The much-respected military historian John Terraine has discussed the bombing of Dresden and its consequences for British bombing policy in his seminal history of the RAF in 1985:

The argument, sometimes heard, that it was 'unnecessary' to bomb Dresden because the war nearly over anyway is absurd. That was a thought that could only have

reality after May 7; in February it was an unfact, and what mattered above all else to most people was to end the war as soon as possible by any and every means.¹⁴⁴ Frederick Taylor gives a figure of between 25,000 and 40,000 people killed on the date of the raid itself, although he also notes on the debate about the death toll at Dresden, 'None of this is to minimize the appalling reality of such a vast number of dead, so horribly snatched from this life within the space of a few hours, or to forget that most of them were women, children and the elderly'.¹⁴⁵

In *Testament of Experience* Vera Brittain wrote about the newspaper accounts she had collected which represented for her the most brutal state of human nature and the ultimate evil – war:

They could all, I thought, have been summed up by the glum description of barbarism in the book called *Leviathan* by the seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. 'No arts, no letters, no society, and which is worse of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short'.¹⁴⁶

It gave her little comfort that this woeful collection of press cuttings now included an article by George Orwell, dated 8th April 1945, in which he shared many of her earlier concerns about British bombing policy.¹⁴⁷

As the Second World War in Europe drew to a close, Vera Brittain was deeply concerned that the cycle of violence would soon begin again with an unjust peace and enduring hatred. It was in an effort to help prevent this that she published her collection of first hand reports of acts of humanity and kindness by all sides during the Second World War: *Above All Nations: An Anthology* in April 1945. In this book she cited a Pastoral

Letter from the Archbishop of Cologne dated 20th May 1943 (ten days before the first 'Thousand Bomber Raid', although Cologne had already been bombed):

Love of one's neighbour is one of the chief Christian virtues; and includes love of ones enemies. Remember this to-day when all over the world so many voices are asking you to hate your enemies.¹⁴⁸

A month later in May 1945 as Germany surrendered, *The Enchanted Fountain*, the memoirs of Baroness Josephine Von Reitzenstein who had fled the Nazi regime, was published; Vera Brittain had befriended the author, and wrote the book's foreword, in which she asked the reader to:

Read this book, and then say whether you do not agree that all Germans, like the British, the Americans and the Russians, are a collection of varied individuals, good, bad, indifferent, stupid – or noble, tender and imaginative, like the writer of these pages.¹⁴⁹

Forgiveness of your enemies was a key belief of her Christian Pacifism, partly as a religious injunction and duty, and partly on the politically pragmatic argument that failing to do so would result in your becoming like them, and carrying the cycle of violence and hate into the next generation.

On 1st August 1945 Vera Brittain recorded in an article the reaction of a British cinema audience in Southampton to newsreels of the destroyed city of Hanover, 'Even from that damage accustomed audience, an immediate gasp of horror went up'. But the lasting response was not the one that she had hoped for, 'A few days later came pictures of the Nazi concentration camps, and the numbed minds of the much-bombed British were diverted from one atrocity to another'.¹⁵⁰ This idea stayed with her, and in *Testament of*

Experience she recalled that she saw Allied bombing attacks as being as morally reprehensible as the Holocaust, and the British government as being as deceitful as Hitler's:

How far, I asked myself, were the discoveries of the [concentration] camps being 'played up' by news-reel and radio to prevent the development of a growing sense of guilt for Germany's razed cities? What essential moral difference divided the murder of prisoners in concentration camps from the incineration of refugees in Dresden or the drowning of mothers and children in the Ruhr valleys below the shattered dams?¹⁵¹

In May 1945 she did re-consider her opinion of Hitler as she had seen him in Cologne in April 1936, now calling him, 'the paranoiac who was also, perhaps, a schizophrenic' rather than the product of circumstances; she hoped that his policies were destroyed forever, but warned that 'Only if those conquerors have now learned enough wisdom to give the German people the promise of a better society is Hitler likely to remain dead and buried'.¹⁵²

In Vera Brittain's world-view all sides had fought the Second World War in a way that was barbaric; for her there was no distinction between atrocities, and this view would remain with her for the rest of her life. She recognised evil and the horror of the Holocaust, but believed that the Allies had a choice to fight and win the Second World War without destroying the system of values, cultural, political, religious and social, that they claimed to be fighting to protect. In particular she saw obliteration bombing as a form of mechanised and systematic genocide of a defenceless civilian population. As both a Christian and a pacifist she could never in good conscience accept the British government's policy, or later analysis of the strategy. For her it would remain one of the greatest tragedies and shameful acts of the Second World War.

Pacifism, the State and the Individual

Vera Brittain's Christian Pacifism, like all her political thought, was very much linked to her own experience as an individual, and to practical action as well as debate. Lynn Layton has claimed that this personal experience counted for more even than her early political beliefs, that in the First World War, 'Brittain's individualism and her tendency to personalise the war countered her patriotic abstractions and fostered her antiwar sentiments,' although she did not become a Christian Pacifist until 1936-37.¹⁵³ Writing in 1945, Vera Brittain claimed that she first formed her theories about the causes of wars while studying Modern History at Oxford:

Many years ago, when I was a college student just after the last War, I decided to try to discover the chief cause of wars from the study of history. I soon found out that for the last four centuries...wars have sprung largely from that barrier between peoples and civilisations which we know as nationalism... For millions of people in the present world, patriotism (i.e. nationalism) has come to mean the obligation to support one's own country in all disputes with other nations, irrespective of the justice of the conflict. By modern governments, this obligation is regarded as so far binding upon the citizen, that the system of conscription has been organised to compel him to serve, whether or not his will and judgement consent.¹⁵⁴

For Vera Brittain the different responsibilities of the state and the individual met and clashed particularly on the issue of conscientious objection and the right of the individual to criticise the state when at war. As she wrote in the same article about patriotism, 'Its highest expression links love of country with respect for all humanity'.¹⁵⁵ This fed into her faith in the individual and hope in the future, was the organising principle which connected

her Christianity, feminism and pacifism, which together formed her political thought. This was a perspective that developed in the course of the 1920s; as she later wrote to Victor Gollancz by way of explanation of a disagreement that had temporarily divided them:

My political thinking was fundamentally changed, not only by the study of history and international relations after the last war, but by the suffering and petty persecution that I saw in the occupied Rhineland and Ruhr in 1924. The experience of victory appears to have had such a devastating effect upon the psychology of both nations and individuals that I have little hope of averting another and even more terrible aftermath unless a far-seeing few can acquire enough influence to change what looks like the pre-destined course of events... What matters now is not to discuss whether the Second World War should have been fought, but to avert the Third.¹⁵⁶

As a convinced Christian Pacifist from 1937 onwards, Vera Brittain was adamant that each individual must take moral responsibility for his or her own actions and their consequences, and that violence, either by individuals or states, was never justified. For her, the state was a positive force, but its primary role was as a source of protection, provision and security for its citizens. Once the Second World War was declared she did everything to promote discussion and debate of its causes and the means by which the war was and should be fought. For a while her emphasis on debate led the British government to consider enlisting her support: in a Home Moral Emergency Committee Report for the Ministry of Information of 22nd May 1940 she was described as having left wing political opinions but, surprisingly, as having recently 'come round' to support the national cause and war effort, although in fact her own opposition to war *per se* never faltered.¹⁵⁷ She was even prepared to

welcome some social changes which the Second World War brought into being, including the weakening of the privileges of class and wealth with better and equal access to food, health-care and education for the working-classes, as long as this equality of opportunity was protected once the war was won, writing in 1944 that:

There is one thing and perhaps the only one, to be said in favour of the gigantic conflicts which have dictated the history of our time. They are convulsions, which shake our life to its foundations, and though they destroy too much that is good they bring down old traditions and prejudices as well.¹⁵⁸

But especially in time of conflict and war, the state needed to be reminded of its primary role, and if possible restrained from inflicting excessive harm on its own or even other states' citizens. From 1939 onwards she sat on various boards and hearings concerned with conscientious objection as an independent representative for the PPU, work that she described at length in *England's Hour*. At the time she was incensed not only that individuals in Great Britain were suffering injustice, but that democracy itself was being destroyed by the action of a government which claimed to be fighting a 'just war'. Her argument, based on her position as a Christian Pacifist, was that conscientious objectors held a superior position:

By insisting that there is always a Higher Authority than the State, they are helping to maintain an England which will still be in a position to restore the liberties that she has sacrificed when the war is over.¹⁵⁹

She saw the state as the guardian of individual free will and conscience, not as having the right to victimise those who expressed such free will in opposition to the state, nor to take away the natural rights of an individual. In a letter published in the *Manchester Guardian*

on 10th October 1943, she condemned the Government's sentencing policy towards conscientious objectors as a form of victimisation and an act of 'cat and mouse', writing that:

The law, which permits these recurrent sentences, has an uncomfortable resemblance to official vengeance on those who hold a minority point of view. Even if it were possible to break the spirit of a conscientious objector, which is usually difficult, would a man who was induced to violate his conscience by such methods be of any real value to society?¹⁶⁰

Vera Brittain visited many conscientious objectors in prison around the country, writing a pamphlet in 1944 in which she identified 'mass movements, mass creeds, mass politics and mass economics' as 'the root of Fascism' in opposition to her own view of the importance of the individual. She explored the vital importance of the prisoner as a catalyst for change:

When you study the history of civilisation, you will find that it is the story of the individual's gradual emergence from the control of powers hostile to his development; forces of Nature, the hasty judgements of the irresponsible public, and the all-powerful State with its machinery which operates to punish rather than reclaim. The prisoner is an individual; what is more, he is an individual who reflects the worst evils and injustices of our society in his own person.¹⁶¹

For Vera Brittain war was simply the ultimate evil, to the extent that she believed that a negotiated peace with Hitler and Nazi Germany was possible and preferable to a continuing war (she wrote little about the war with Japan, seeing the Axis very much as a single entity), and also the ultimate challenge to the individual in relation to the state. Her sense of both her own identity and the connection of each individual with another was based primarily on a

belief in a shared humanity, and the care and respect that was shown to others, rather than on notions of a shared race, nationality or even gender; although as will be shown below she regarded being a woman, and even on occasion being English, as giving her special affinity with those who shared these identities. This respect for individual human life and natural rights, together with her horror of war and its consequences, had motivated her belief system and political thought since the end of the First World War. For her, these personal matters were always more important than an abstract idea such as patriotism.

As the Second World War approached, it was the use of hate, the lack of a considered argument against Fascism, and rhetoric similar to that of the First World War which most distressed Vera Brittain. She feared a mass mob mentality, with the resulting loss of individual conscience and the ability to question the actions of the state, leading to a cycle of violence and revenge. This complex belief system led to the temporary loss of another important relationship, her friendship and working partnership with Victor Gollancz. From 1933 onwards they shared many political views in common, and worked together on a number of refugee and pacifist projects. But on 20th March 1939 they each spoke, together with Sir Stafford Cripps, at a Left Book Club meeting held at Chelsea Town Hall, London, where Vera Brittain strongly disagreed with the tone and topic of Gollancz's lecture:

Gollancz had about $\frac{3}{4}$ hour. He used it to make a terrible, emotional, irrational attack on Germany & Fascism which reminded me of the recruiting meetings of 1914. It was full of all the old illusions about a War to end War, smashing German militarism and making the world a safe place for democracy, and he used hysterical atrocity arguments (as if Soviet Russia, Republican Spain & ourselves in Palestine committed

no atrocities) quite unworthy of an intelligent person. There is an excellent case against Fascism but this hate-mongering does not strengthen it.¹⁶²

The split between them on this issue was so serious that she used a different publisher, Macmillan, for her next book *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* (1940). She greatly admired Gollancz on a personal and professional level, calling him 'one of the ablest business men in England'.¹⁶³ But she cited his lecture in a letter published in *The New Statesman and Nation* on 8th April 1939 as an example of propaganda designed to cloud intelligent debate on the expected war, concluding, 'If the worst happens and war does come, it is not by impaired judgement and emotional hatred that we shall avoid another Versailles,' an excellent example of how her political thought crossed between her public and private worlds.¹⁶⁴ In the end, she and Victor Gollancz rebuilt their relationship to work together in 1945, maintaining an affectionate friendship for the rest of their lives.

The Aftermath of the Second World War

For Vera Brittain the first use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a logical progression of the barbarisation that had gone before, and the route to even greater dangers. She wrote on V-J Day, 15th August 1945:

One is thankful that the awful slaughter has stopped, but the manner of its ending leaves no such feeling of relief as the end of the War in Europe – because the atomic bomb means that far from terror being over, its possibilities have only just begun. Squarely upon this demoralised generation is laid the awful responsibility of deciding whether the human race is to continue or not.¹⁶⁵

In September 1945 Vera Brittain signed an open letter with other notable public figures, who condemned the use of the atomic bomb, regarding it as an act of hypocrisy which breached both Christian and democratic values. The letter asked, 'What moral difference is there between Nazi "extermination camps", and the mass extermination of helpless civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?'¹⁶⁶ She continued her Christian Pacifist work after the Second World War by both literary and practical means. In her novel *Account Rendered* (1945), she reflected on the ways in which the effects of war were spilling over into a new generation, 'Every great war renders its account to the society that made it, but those responsible are seldom the ones who pay'.¹⁶⁷ In her next novel *Born 1925: A Novel of Youth* (1948), the central character the Rev Robert Carbury (based on Dick Sheppard), carries on her theme of the wrongs of history being visited upon later generations, and the need for redemption.¹⁶⁸ Her writings of this period, whether fiction or not, all have themes of pacifism, the way in which war destroyed lives, and the need to rebuild and forgive rather than inflicting further suffering on future generations.

As a very active Christian Pacifist, during the Second World War Vera Brittain had accepted that she would be vilified or shunned by many of her literary peers, was accused of being a Nazi supporter, and had come under police surveillance. But she remained respected by charities, Christian and pacifist groups in Europe, and visited the Netherlands in September 1945 with others at the invitation of the Dutch government to report on the refugee crisis.¹⁶⁹ When that month British newspapers published the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) *Special Search List GB*, an alphabetical list of people to be arrested after a German occupation of Great Britain, usually known as the 'Black List', both her name and her husband G's name were (as has been mentioned) on the same page

as Winston Churchill's.¹⁷⁰ This was widely accepted as proof by the general public that she had not been a Nazi sympathiser or a traitor for expressing her Christian Pacifist beliefs during the war. In fact she joined many of her friends on the list, including Victor Gollancz, Sylvia Pankhurst, Lady Rhondda, and Rebecca West, the last of whom still regarded Vera Brittain and the Peace Pledge Union as, 'that ambiguous organization which in the name of peace was performing many actions certain to benefit Hitler'.¹⁷¹ Their friendship continued but only at a superficial level, a very sad end to this relationship since Vera Brittain had introduced Rebecca West to her future husband Henry Andrews in 1929.¹⁷² She remarked on Rebecca West in 1949, 'Once she was a passionate feminist, Fabian Socialist and rebel; now she is a cautious and self-seeking Conservative'.¹⁷³

When Vera Brittain arrived in Holland in 1945, she was particularly concerned by what Dutch children had endured and the damage done to their moral character in order to survive, together with their physical condition.¹⁷⁴ Her Christian Pacifism found almost immediate practical expression by working with Victor Gollancz and his 'Save Europe Now' campaign to provide food aid to Europe, in particular Germany. Founded at a meeting on 26th November 1945 at the Albert Hall in London, this campaign ran until November 1948, being largely run by Gollancz's secretary Peggy Duff.



Christmas Card sent by Vera Brittain in December 1945
to raise awareness and funds for the Save Europe Now campaign. G226a. VBA.

Vera Brittain was an enthusiastic supporter of the Save Europe Now campaign, since the charity linked so many of her concerns about her horror of famine in Europe, the suffering of refugees, and the long term effects of bombing on not just a people but a whole civilisation.¹⁷⁵ She wrote in 1949 of Victor Gollancz, that he was 'a Jew, but a better Christian than most of us'.¹⁷⁶ Increasingly, her Christian Pacifist arguments included an economic as well as a political element, believing that economic stability was part of the reconciliation process. As she told a meeting on 17th December 1945, 'Europe is an economic unit, and we cannot separate Germany from it without danger to that unity'.¹⁷⁷ She was increasingly concerned about scarce resources being used on military developments,

which she believed could be better spent on health and education, hence linking her Christian Pacifism with her Equality Feminism.

Vera Brittain's work was recognised by the British government in 1947 when the Foreign Office asked her to visit the British Occupation Zone in Germany for the Department of Control Commission. She visited Kiel, Hamburg, Hanover, Cologne, Munster and Berlin and reported on the continuing refugee crisis and war damage. Following this, she returned to Great Britain and continued her writing career and her work for the PPU, serving as Chairman 1948-1950, with her opinion being sought on topical issues of the time. In June 1950 she was asked to give her views on banning atomic weapons and replied as a Christian Pacifist:

I believe that atomic weapons, like all military weapons, should be banned because war is murder, and therefore contrary to the will of God, who gave us life and alone has the right to take it away. Peace for me is an end in itself, for which my conscience as a Christian pacifist compels me to work.¹⁷⁸

The issue of atomic and nuclear weapons would become her last great political campaign as a Christian Pacifist.

The Christian Pacifist Pen and CND

By the early 1950s Vera Brittain's views on feminism, pacifism and Christianity had fused to the point at which she could easily direct arguments from one strand of her beliefs towards another. In her history of the feminist movement *Lady into Woman – A History of Women from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (1953) she summarised her economic argument against warfare and militarism as being also anti-feminist, writing that 'The military values which

dominate most 20th-century States can hardly fail to be prejudicial to women's interests, since money spent on armaments cannot also be used for health, education and the care of childhood'.¹⁷⁹ Her Christian Pacifism with its themes of personal responsibility and the preservation of civilisation and culture, together with hope for the future, was evident now in all her writings on atomic weapons. She was particularly outraged by the deceit practised by governments in the name of patriotism. In April 1954, she condemned the hydrogen bomb and the people who had brought it into existence:

The politicians impregnable in their castles of arrogance, the scientists manufacturing deadly substances and thankfully laying the responsibility for their use on others, the Generals ready to sacrifice immemorial beauty for a trivial military advance, the journalists skilled in the manufacture of words calculated to disparage Christian compassion – know only too well what they have done and are doing.¹⁸⁰

The next month in a lecture entitled 'Hydrogen Bomb' given in Lewisham, a working-class area of London, she stressed the principles of the Sermon on the Mount and argued that Christian values were being flaunted by the creation and use of such weapons.¹⁸¹

In March 1955 Gertrude Fishwick, a working class former Suffragette and committed Christian, formed the Golders Green Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons, in opposition to the British government's testing of atomic bombs and later hydrogen bombs. Vera Brittain followed this campaign with interest, collecting newspaper clippings and reported on the various protests in *Peace News*. In 1956 one active member of the Golders Green Campaign argued that:

It could well start a women's movement against Britain's nuclear armaments at least as powerful as the movement for women's suffrage... It seems that so long as we women are trivial, we are assured of space in the press, when we are deeply serious over a matter of life and death we are ignored.¹⁸²

In May 1957 when the first British hydrogen bomb test took place in the Pacific, the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapon Tests held a protest rally in Trafalgar Square. All the marchers were women (although men also showed solidarity in joining the rally), and many wore black as a symbol of mourning. One of their chief concerns was the danger of radiation fall-out caused by the H-Bomb tests, both to unborn children, and as carrying a risk of sterility to women. All of this, the escalating potential destruction of warfare, the threatened cycle of violence, the role of women in political action, and the threat to children and to civilisation, were the themes upon which Vera Brittain's Christian Pacifism and so much more of her political thought had been built, and it would have been remarkable if she had not been on the platform that day. She was one of six speakers, all women. As reported in *The Manchester Guardian*, she argued from a moral standpoint, 'Britain has not lost her soul nor her moral authority,' she was recorded as saying, 'I appeal to you with all my strength to give a moral lead to the United States and to the world'.¹⁸³ She also began to believe that Christian Pacifism was starting to have the long-term impact for which she had hoped. In July 1957 she wrote an article for *Peace News* entitled 'Hostility to Pacifism Weakening':

The A-bomb and the H-bomb 'lay in the logic of history' as soon as the different countries, including the Allies, began to practice the policy of genocide as carried out by obliteration bombing. Today it is hostility to pacifism which tends to go

underground; in other words, very few of our opponents in the Press and elsewhere are now willing to commit themselves to all-out opposition to our policies. A little while and we shall be accepted. A short time longer and we may even be acclaimed.¹⁸⁴

Vera Brittain's words were prophetic. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was founded in February 1958 with Peggy Duff, who had worked with her in Save Europe Now, serving as its first General Secretary until 1967. April Carter, who was Secretary of the CND Direct Action Committee 1958-1961 also worked for *Peace News* 1961-1962. To quote Joan Ruddock MP, 'While Canon [John] Collins and Earl [Bertrand] Russell were probably CND's most publicly identified personalities, women were its most effective organisers,' and many of CND's structures and tactics were founded on the experience of the First Wave Feminists, the PPU, and the 'principled pacifists' of the Second World War.¹⁸⁵

In 1959 Vera Brittain wrote an article 'Dissent by Demonstration' welcoming what she saw as a new era in pacifism based on its opposition to nuclear weapons, and drawing its inspiration from the Suffragettes and from civil disobedience movements including those in the United States, not hesitating in the process to compare the British government to the Nazi state:

The change is comparable to that which occurred early in the century when militant suffrage stole the headlines from the decorous constitutional feminism which sought to educate and persuade.... In every campaign a moment comes when a few crusaders realise that their tactics must change. Such a moment is now recognisable the world over in the minority campaign against war. In Britain, those who perceive

it have adopted a new name, the Non-Violent Resistance Group, which has brought into the news such unfamiliar English villages as Aldermaston and Swaffham. For their precedents this group looks back, not only to the useful campaigns which publicised the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the Second, but to Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement in India and the non-violent resistance of the Norwegians against the Nazis.... [The] bus boycott organised by Martin Luther King was a protest against racial segregation and not, like most recent instances of non-violent action, against the H-Bomb and nuclear testing. But each of these episodes has been a phase of resistance against the war on humanity by the possessors of power, and whatever the precise objective, the technique has been similar.¹⁸⁶

Despite her concern not to publish much herself on the issue of nuclear disarmament, she was prepared to repeat these views in the foreword to a pamphlet published in 1960 entitled 'War Outmoded'.¹⁸⁷ CND with its high profile influenced a new generation of women political activists, feminists, and writers. Sylvia Plath, who as a writer, feminist and mother had much in common with Vera Brittain, was inspired to be in Trafalgar Square on Easter Sunday 1960 with her new born daughter Frieda to watch the arrival of the CND march from Aldermaston.¹⁸⁸

Vera Brittain was an active supporter of CND from its foundation, and *Peace News* gave the movement much needed media coverage. Just as in January 1937 she had rejected Appeasement with its implicit threat of the use of military power to become a Christian Pacifist, in 1958 she saw nuclear deterrence with its basis in the threat of retaliation as part of the same logical progression, continuing the spiral of defence spending and preparations

for future wars.¹⁸⁹ Her position in the nuclear age remained identical to that she had taken up in 1937: that while Absolute Pacifism was unrealistic, Christian Pacifism in itself could be a long-term political force to encourage Pacific-ism or low pacifism, and to humanise and eventually eliminate war. In November 1958 she wrote for *The Christian Century*:

‘Pure pacifism’, however right and logical, still attracts only a few highly intelligent and devoted idealists. The idea of unilaterally repudiating the H-bomb has all but captured a whole political party – the British Labour party – whose ordinary members are restive under the decision of their leaders at the recent Scarborough conference to retain the bomb. Nuclear disarmament may be an illogical cause, but it is a half-open door to world peace. Those pacifists who do not push against this door after hammering on locked gates for two decades may well be losing an opportunity, which will never recur.¹⁹⁰

Vera Brittain the Christian Pacifist was ever the pragmatist, and had spent much of her time and energy from 1937 onwards in seeking practical solutions. In the late 1950s and early 1960s she went on CND marches, provided considerable financial support, and continued to write about CND in *Peace News*. In November 1961 as an active member of the Christian Group within CND and Christian Action, she sent an open letter to a number of magazines inviting Christians, as an act of repentance and dedication, to Trafalgar Square on Remembrance Sunday to pray for the renunciation of nuclear weapons.¹⁹¹

Vera Brittain chose to limit her public views on the wider debate on nuclear weapons or disarmament, since she wanted to protect the political ambitions of her husband G., who still hoped to become a Labour MP, and their daughter Shirley Williams, feeling that they ‘would be penalised for opinions they do not share’.¹⁹² Consequently, she never

developed in writing in her later life any Christian Pacifist views about nuclear weapons and the divided world in which they featured, beyond those opinions which she had already expressed. But towards the end of her life she was very clear about her past actions as a Christian Pacifist, what had been the cost on a personal level, and why she had continued in her beliefs:

I have shared... two formative emotional experiences: the official and frustrating dislike of the rebel by the wielders of power, and the bitter need arising from the cruelties of a political environment to part with young children at a crucial stage in their development.... I too was a rebel against [British] war-time policies – not to its actual opposition to the dictators, but to such methods of war-making as blockade, which especially penalised the mothers and children of Occupied Europe, and obliteration bombing, which led straight to nuclear warfare and the tentative quality of man's present life on earth.¹⁹³

Vera Brittain is a much quoted figure within CND, feminist opposition to warfare, and the wider Peace Movement, in such texts as *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*.¹⁹⁴ She reflected the views and war experiences of the many middle-class women who were the bed-rock supporters of early CND and of earlier peace groups such as the PPU, and who shared her beliefs. Her firm opposition to area bombing has since then become an increasingly respectable political and moral position. But her practical Christian Pacifism, often working with women's groups, reflected her hope in the future and faith in people. This was once again the secure thread and organising principle of her Christianity, her feminism, and her pacifist work during the

Second World War and later with CND, in which all of the circles of her political thought were to join together.

NOTES

1. Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett, 'Testament of a Minority in Wartime – The Peace Pledge Union and Vera Brittain 1939-1945,' PhD Thesis, McMaster University, Canada 1984, p. 8.
2. David Robertson, *The Penguin Dictionary of Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 361.
3. 'A Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People of God, called Quakers, Against all Sedition, Plotters, and Fighters in the World: For removing the ground of jealousy and suspicion from Magistrates and People concerning Wars and Fightings. Presented by George Fox to Charles 11. 21 Nov. 1660.' Website: www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhpp_dec1660.htm (accessed 4 Oct. 2004).
4. Vera Brittain's contribution to the pamphlet 'Authors take Sides on the Spanish Civil War,' London: Left Review, 1937 held as G527 Box 9 VBA. See also Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 177.
5. Winifred and Alan Eden-Green (eds.), *Testament of A Peace Lover*, pp.121-2. The whole emotional and intellectual process is described by Vera Brittain in one of her *Peace Letters*, dated 30 July 1942, quoted in *Testament of A Peace Lover*, pp. 118-22.

6. Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour*, p. 30.

7. Vera Brittain, 'One Voice: A Collection of Letters,' unpublished foreword, undated but internal evidence suggests 1946. VBA.

8. Raymond Jones, *Arthur Ponsonby: The Politics of Life* (London: Christopher Helm, 1989), pp. 165; 167-8. See also Peter Brook, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), Barbara Kraft, *The Peace Ship: Henry Ford's Pacifist Adventure in the First World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

9. Vera Brittain, 'The Twilight of Truth: Misrepresentation and the Peace Pledge Union,' undated but internal evidence suggests 1940. 204 VBA.

10. Yvonne Aleksandra Bennett, 'Vera Brittain and the Peace Pledge Union: Women and Peace,' in Roach Pierson (ed.), *Women and Peace* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 194.

11. Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, pp. 254-45 and Roach Pierson, 'Brittain and the Peace Pledge Union: Women and Peace,' in Pierson (ed), *Women and Peace*, p.194.

12. Aleksandra Bennett, 'Testament of a Minority in Wartime,' p. 12
13. Martin Ceadel, *Thinking About Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 139.
14. Ceadel, *Thinking About Peace and War*, pp. 135-65.
15. Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 144.
16. Martin Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966) passim.
17. Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism: Civilian and Military* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1959), p. 392.
18. Volker Berghahn, *Militarism: The History of an International Debate 1861-1979* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1981), pp. 9 and 32.
19. Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London; Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. 169-73.

20. Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 99.
21. Vera Brittain, 'Why I'm Not A Friend,' *The Friend*, 9 March 1945. G603 VBA.
22. C. T. Onions (ed.), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) defines a 'Quietist' as: '1. One who believes in or practices Quietism, or any similar form of mysticism. 2. One whose attitude towards political or social movements is analogous to Quietism in religion (1798).' Thomas Mautner (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) defines 'Quietism' as: 'a religious attitude of passive receptivity to divine illumination. The term was first used in the latter half of the seventeenth century to describe the attitude of certain Roman Catholic mystics and certain pietists.' and, 'Pietism' as: 'characterised by a strongly emotional individual religiosity in which prayer and contemplation feature prominently. Pietists could be accused of mawkish sentimentality, but to their credit remain the many orphanages and schools for the poor that they founded.'
23. Brittain, 'Why I'm Not A Friend' *The Friend*, 9 March 1945. G603 VBA.
Aleksandra Bennett, 'Testament of a Minority in Wartime,' pp. 35-6.
24. De Groot, *Blighty*, p. 275.

25. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 263.
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The Circles Join

The Political Thought of Vera Brittain

The three circles of Christianity, feminism and pacifism provided the ethical, political and social belief systems of Vera Brittain's political thought. As pearls in a necklace, they were strung on the thread of her faith in individuals and their ability to do good in the world. All together they comprised by 1945 her political thought, which was largely complete; and although little attention has been paid to her life and writings after the Second World War, this was the period in which her aims were in many ways reached, if not rewarded. She continued to lecture on the issues that were important to her, both at home and abroad; and she also re-established her literary career, although without the massive success of her former years.

Above all else, Vera Brittain continued to believe, despite all she had witnessed in the Second World War and its aftermath, that together the values which she espoused were the best way to break the cycle of violence and retribution, and protect the next generation from yet another war. Her political thought was to find its two last great campaigns in the issues of atomic and nuclear war, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Both campaigns brought together her Christianity, feminism and pacifism in their mature forms, her view of the relationship between the state and the individual, and her continuing belief in the ability of individuals to do good and make the future a better place.

Vera Brittain was physically and mentally exhausted by her personal experiences and wider knowledge of the Second World War, but she retained her faith in people, in particular women, to effect change and her hope for the future. She saw the election of the British Labour government in July 1945 as signifying a vote for future peace, and in an

Oxford Union Debate on 18th October 1951 she spoke in support of the motion, 'That this House prefers a Labour Government to any foreseeable alternative,' praising the realism of the Labour government's domestic and foreign policies in particular in the granting of independence to India. As reported, this was done with the reservations characteristic of her faith in people rather than in political parties: 'Miss Brittain, who is the wife of Prof. George Catlin, defending Labour's record, said she could not swallow the policy of any political party even that of the Labour Party'.¹ But she still saw the Labour Government as offering the best chance of peace, employment and social provision:

We have seen in the last 20 or 30 years a social revolution in which Labour and women have advanced together. The women voters of this country are not going to forget that. Together they have helped to build the Welfare State in the last few years.²

The motion was defeated by 419 votes to 264, but her speech made very clear her continuing belief in both Socialism and a Labour government in preference to any other. For Vera Brittain the individual rights and responsibilities of each human being had to be safeguarded and respected, and for her the best political means of achieving this was by means of the ideologies of Christianity, feminism and pacifism. A Socialist framework as provided by the Labour Party of 1945 established the practical blueprint for this to be carried out, but it was also individual acts of 'witness,' at both a practical and spiritual level, which were important to the success of achieving this aim and limiting the power of the state.

In February 1947 Vera Brittain addressed the Royal Dublin Society on the subject of 'Shaping the Future'. This was a lecture she had given at least twice before during the

Second World War, including in 1941 at Doncaster, and at Nottingham in 1943. In it she discussed the need for a fundamental change in social attitudes, linked to her view of the causes of the First and Second World Wars. These views she attributed once more to her study of history and international relations at Oxford and her continuing study of the subject ever since.³ The *Irish Times* reported the lecture as follows:

She attributed the two world wars to the following causes: - The break-up of the Medieval Christian unity by the Reformation and the national Churches; the rise of the National State and the development of competitive imperialism; the failure of the capitalist system to give security and a decent life to the common man and the outpacing [outpacing] by modern scientific development of man's power to control his own problems.⁴

The view that science had given governments too much power over individuals, particularly in respect of the state's power to make war, was not an original one, nor unique to Vera Brittain. For example, in 1925 General Sir Ian Hamilton, the much decorated and distinguished veteran of the First World War, had observed when unveiling a war memorial that 'There is no reason it [the memorial] should not endure till the scientists who invented poison gas carry out their principles to a logical conclusion and explode their own planet'.⁵ But the development, use and even the existence of atomic weapons gave the issue an added urgency for her. Her feminism was a vital element in this process, and sustained her practical work in Europe to help refugees and in particular the starving Dutch and German populations. Her passion that women's concerns and issues should never be dismissed or ignored when political decisions were being made was already present in her publications from 1923 onwards, but after 1933 she also saw feminism as a political means by which to

prevent war, and after 1937 as a way of furthering pacifism, a position from which she never varied. She had written about the need for women to be involved in international policy making as far back as 1928, when representing *Time and Tide* at the Seventh Assembly of the League of Nations.⁶ In 1934 she wrote an article entitled 'Can the Women of the World Stop War?', arguing:

I believe that the women of the world could stop war if they ceased to be completely absorbed in themselves and their homes and their children, and began to realise that their duty to mankind extends beyond their own doorstep. I sometimes feel that what the women's peace campaign needs is the sudden uprising of a movement as swift and dramatic as that of the militant suffragists, which would adopt expedients similar to theirs, such as the refusal to pay tax for war purposes, or the interruption of military pageants and tattoos.⁷

In 1937 she wrote a pamphlet for the PPU entitled 'To Mothers Especially' urging women to use their local and parliamentary votes to elect representatives who would work for peace.⁸ Certainly she perceived 'The bankrupt civilisation now engaged in destroying itself' in the Second World War as 'the creation of men' and a consequence of their excluding women from political power.⁹ On 15th May 1945, while writing to a friend, she discussed the new post-war world order and her desire that women should play a more active role at local, national and international levels to produce and safeguard a better peace settlement, stating that women should use 'vigilance and democratic methods to ensure that the ideas dominating the forthcoming Peace Conference' (an expected Versailles-like meeting which in fact was never to take place) 'are those leading to a constructive peace and not the perpetration of punishment and revenge'.¹⁰ For her, pacifism showed the means

by which a better world could be achieved. She was to write in 1964 in *The Rebel Passion*, 'Individuals moved by the rebel passion [of pacifism] have learned to transcend frontiers and, in spite of war and man-made political obstacles, to link men and women across the world who subscribe to similar ideals'.¹¹

Nuclear War

With the end of the Second World War Vera Brittain feared yet another and more terrible conflict: atomic and later nuclear war. She wrote in her diary on 7th August 1945:

Newspapers announced earth-shaking discovery (equal in probable revolutionary consequences to the discovery of steam) of the harnessing of atomic energy (to destruction, of course) & the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan a city of over 300,000 people who are now probably killed.¹²

On 15th August she added the equally depressed comment that, 'The atom bomb is not exactly an encouraging guarantee of happiness or even survival for anyone'.¹³

The British tested their first atomic weapons in 1952, and their first nuclear weapons in 1957, becoming the world's third nuclear power after the United States and the Soviet Union. Vera Brittain had often written of the need for Christian churches to take a moral stance and speak out against war. As a devout Christian Pacifist, she also viewed the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the Sermon on the Mount, as providing the philosophical basis on which all further international negotiations and peace treaties should be based. The influence of the Society of Friends, and Corder Catchpool in particular, was still very strong in her life, and she agreed with his view that, 'Friends were called to be "practical

mystics”’.¹⁴ In 1964 she summarised what the invention of, and use of, the atomic bomb had meant for her religious and political beliefs:

With its use of obsolete violence, war represents the supreme denial of Christ’s teaching... Just before the Second World War, Evelyn Underhill wrote that the Church was moving rapidly towards a moment when, if she was to retain her integrity and spiritual influence, she must define (one might add ‘unequivocally’ since within recent years a number of skilfully ambiguous pronouncements have been made) her attitude towards war. When the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, that moment came. The problem of seeking and keeping world peace then ceased to be a one great social concern amongst others; it became the dominant problem, for our failure to solve it means the end of seekers and solutions alike. Yet it is precisely here that the Christian comes into conflict with the State, for with the priority given to power the state enshrines immaturity in the seat of judgement.¹⁵

In her 1947 lecture in Dublin, she laid out her conviction that every person’s life is special, and that a life that could not be lived to the full because it was ended, or distorted, by war represented a tragic event which must be prevented at all costs.¹⁶ While speaking to the PPU Summer Conference in 1953, she remarked, ‘The more total war became, the more it destroyed family life, while atom weapons endangered even unborn children’.¹⁷ It was the idea of mass destruction of human life, culture and civilisation, by nuclear war that finally brought the circles of her political thought together in a single cause.

Vera Brittain’s view of the imminence of a nuclear Third World War varied depending on events: in July 1951, despite the Korean War, she was relatively less pessimistic; while in September 1952 she saw even ratification of the European Defence

Treaty as adding to the sources of international tension, in this case between East and West Germany, and so contributing to the likelihood of war.¹⁸ But until her death in 1970 she maintained her view that the inevitable conflicts between states would probably result in war, and that the likelihood and terrible nature of that war was vastly increased if those states possessed nuclear weapons. She saw major confrontations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 not, as many at the time did, as a great shock, but as one more confirmation of her views as often expressed in *Peace News*. She also saw the ownership of nuclear weapons by states as inherently distorting peaceful political and personal existence. She summarised her political thought on the issue of nuclear weapons in an unpublished article in 1953:

The basic dilemma of our time consequently lies in a perpetual conflict between the morality demanded from us as individuals by our churches, schools, and civil duties, and the immorality which the State accepts and even commends.¹⁹

This opposition to nuclear weapons both as a method of fighting war and for the damage that they did to the relationship between the state and the individual, affecting all aspects of public and private life, was of the first importance for Vera Brittain in the last decades of her life. But it was so much a culmination of the political ideas that she had worked out within herself that, unfortunately, she never troubled to write it down in one coherent statement. The closest that she came to this was the draft notes for a manifesto for her planned 'Women's Party' in 1948, which combined her feminism, pacifism and Christianity in a declaration against the atomic bomb:

The right to live is threatened by powerful governments armed with such lethal weapons as atom bombs, poison gas, and bacteriological missiles, which are capable

not only of destroying civilisation but of eliminating life on this planet. The terrible extent of their present development is known only to the few....

This question is far greater than the scope of peace and pacifist organisations.

Nothing less than a movement joined by all English women will be effective as a means of influencing our own Government, and through it the Governments of other nations.

Women should demand:

... From all the Churches, a declaration that war is morally wrong, and the use of lethal weapons, including the atom bomb, a crime against humanity.

We call on the women of this country to arise now, and assert the human right to live. Already the hour is late. We must act at once in overwhelming numbers.

Who will join us in saving humanity from the great wave of death which threatens to engulf our homes, husbands, children, and all mankind?²⁰

Just as Vera Britain's Christianity and her feminism can only be understood from the totality of her works and writings, rather than just from short pieces such as, 'The Kind of God I Believe In,' and her 1928 article, 'Why Feminism Lives'; and her political thought was so much greater than *Testament of Youth*; so the vast importance of the issue of nuclear weapons in demonstrating her mature political thought can only be shown through her actions, by the consistency of her opposition, and by the points that she repeatedly made in speeches and short articles. She may not have written it as a book, but she lived it completely.

Vera Brittain also took the trouble to master the arguments used to justify atomic and nuclear weapons in order to oppose them, as she had with area bombing in the Second

World War. Her notes for her May 1954 speech in Lewisham, London, in opposition to atomic weapons reveal that she understood the basis of nuclear deterrence theory in the ideas of capability, credibility and communication of the threat to the enemy, and was ready with counter-arguments:

Belief bomb a deterrent to war bec. [because] so terrible no one will use it... First proposition - an illusion wh. [which] has existed w. [with] invention of new weapons since war began. It is an illusion bec. [because] the will to refrain from using destructive weapons has where [it has] existed owing to [been due to] the comfortable & totally immoral belief that they will always damage someone else before they damage you.²¹

She became a member of the Christian Action group, founded by the Rev Canon John Collins (the former chaplain at RAF Bomber Command Headquarters under Air Chief Marshal Harris in the Second World War) which practised non-violent peaceful protest, and also of Christian CND, often speaking at their meetings. She summarised her beliefs at a Christian CND meeting in October 1963, 'So many Christians appear to believe only in the power of the politicians, putting the supreme power of God in second place. It is our job as Christians to denounce evil'.²² In April 1961 she wrote an open letter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, begging him to reconsider withdrawing from the ban on nuclear testing, which was reproduced in the American edition of *The Christian Science Monitor* by the America Friends Service Committee, who expressed the hope that her example would inspire American readers to also write and protest at the actions of their government.²³ This position on the development of nuclear weapons as both sinful and wasteful was based in part on her belief that, once more, the cost of weapons was diverting money from more

deserving projects. As she wrote in 1963, 'We must use all our resources and skill in alleviating hunger and distress in the world'.²⁴

Vera Brittain's support for CND was a matter of profound individual religious faith. But although she was one of its most famous and distinguished members, she maintained an increasingly low personal profile in her actions. Partly this was because of her increasing preference for faith in people over organisations, and partly her increased age. But also, her low public profile was a sacrifice that she was prepared to make for the sake of her family. In October 1960, Bertrand Russell invited her to join the Committee of 100, a list of people willing to be the public face of CND by taking part in high-profile protests. Although she made generous contributions to the Committee's funds, she declined the invitation.²⁵ Her motive was still that she wanted to protect the political ambitions of her husband G, and their daughter Shirley Williams. She wrote to Russell that 'I am sorry that I shall not be able to join your Committee, as this would inevitably mean that others members of my family, who are doing important political work and who are not pacifists, would be penalised for opinions they do not share'.²⁶ In August 1962, when invited by Russell to take part in a public fund-raising campaign for the Committee of 100, she again declined, citing the same reason of wanting to protect her husband's political career, and sent a donation instead, a position that Russell accepted.²⁷ In this way, she deliberately remained in the background of a major political campaign in which she could have taken a leading role. Given the strength of her convictions, this was not a decision made lightly, and the issues of balancing the public and private sides of her life are evident in a letter to her daughter in September 1961, in which she wrote that she needed to avoid the temptation of taking part in a forthcoming Committee of 100 demonstration:

It is a horrid decision to take because G. is so vehemently opposed to anything of the kind (you may remember he begged me not to join the Committee of 100 a year ago after the Press had prematurely announced that I was supporting it). Yet my convictions... run in that direction – I have so often advocated non-violent direct action in my articles and ought to practice what I preach.²⁸

For these reasons, her views can be found more in her private correspondence in this period. Also, the organisations with which she had worked since 1937 were changing. In April 1962 she wrote in *The Friend*:

I am not here concerned to discuss the present role of the PPU, with which I have had little connection... I shall always be proud that I was associated with the PPU in its great days, and took part in the deputations and demonstrations through which its then revolutionary witness was conveyed.²⁹

In July 1962 *Peace News* separated from the PPU and became an independent newspaper, more concerned with broader issues outside of pacifism, and less overtly Christian in tone and content. In particular it focussed on the Vietnam War, CND and the anti-apartheid movement. Vera Brittain remained in post as Chairman of the Board of *Peace News* and continued her work with the paper, writing an article entitled 'A Sense of History' to inform the readership of her support for the changes.³⁰ But other than this article for the sympathetic readership of *Peace News*, the only published statement that Vera Brittain ever made about CND was a short letter to *The Times* of 18th April 1963:

The achievement of CND, like that of the Suffragette campaign, has been to substitute informed realisation for blind indifference. The first crusade revealed gross injustice to half the population; the second illuminates nuclear policies which

determine the fate of helpless millions who are seldom if ever consulted. Such services to history and democracy cannot be performed without some shocks to the complacency of 'Establishment' supporters who naturally prefer public apathy to public awareness.³¹

Even in this short letter of 73 words, Vera Brittain linked her opposition to nuclear weapons as a pacifist with her feminism, her view of history and her willingness to challenge the accepted norms of her society at the time. She also shows her belief that public events were connected to private lives, and her faith in individuals to do good and be involved in democratic politics to effect positive change.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement

From her early life and career, Vera Brittain knew about the long history of racism in South Africa, through her reading of Olive Schreiner's literary works, and from Winifred Holtby's financial and political support for black trade unions in South Africa after 1926. Vera Brittain wrote about racism and racial issues in a number of countries in the 1930s and 1940s, including their link to imperialism, particularly in India. Her active concern for the effects of racial discrimination against Jews went back at least to 1933, when she was one of several signatories to a letter in the *Manchester Guardian* entitled 'Victims of German Fascism' which sought to provide practical means including food and shelter for 'victims of the Fascist Terror' and their families.³² In August 1933 she wrote again a letter entitled 'Germany and Beyond' which in particular was concerned with the suffering and ill-treatment of the German Jewish population.³³

The instigation of an apartheid system by law in South Africa after 1948, by the government of Hendrik Verwoerd, the institutionalisation of racism and the concept of inferiority imposed through violence by the state, was so much a complete violation of all Vera Brittain's beliefs that, together with CND and nuclear weapons, it became her last great political crusade. Also, as with nuclear weapons, the circles of her beliefs had joined to such an extent by this time that they were all reflected in her writings and actions in opposition to apartheid, without the existence of, or need for, any one great statement.

Soon after the first apartheid laws were passed, Vera Brittain started a correspondence with anti-apartheid workers in South Africa, and she often castigated the South African government in *Peace News* and when giving talks to Christian groups in particular in Great Britain. One correspondent wrote to thank her in April 1958:

By the way, a great many of us are most grateful for the criticism levelled at us South Africans and our behaviour by such organisations as 'Christian Action': far too many British people come here with the best of intentions, but are misguided enough to try far too hard to 'see to the other side' and are easily flattered into a sense of importance and I have recently been trying to encourage well meaning people to encourage the liberals more and pay less attention to 'the other side' which is potentially dangerous and in every way.³⁴

The letter continued by asking for Vera Brittain's assistance, as an acknowledged expert, for an article on the work of Emmeline Pankhurst and the Suffragettes. The request for information was to be used for political purposes, 'to revive interest in the women's vote specifically as it affects our non-white women and I intend if I can get support at all to launch into a campaign along these lines'.³⁵ In February 1960, Vera Brittain was invited by

the South African National Council of Women to attend the Natal Education Conference together with her husband, combined with an invitation to lecture on English and literature from the University of Natal, travelling out by ship for a six weeks' stay.³⁶

The conference which Vera Brittain attended was conducted in the political and social fall-out from the Sharpeville massacre of 21st March 1960, when police officers shot into a large crowd of unarmed black African demonstrators; 69 were killed and 186 wounded, many in the back. Press photographs, and in particular BBC television coverage of the event, shocked the world and revealed to many the violence of which the apartheid system was capable. Preparations were also in hand for the referendum of white voters on 5th October 1960, when a narrow majority opted to leave the Commonwealth to become the Republic of South Africa in 1961. Consequently, Vera Brittain arrived in Cape Town well aware that her private papers would be searched on disembarkation, and ensured that any letters and details of contacts in South Africa of a political nature were left on board ship and posted home. She wrote that, 'I don't remember having to do that even in the Rhineland of 1936, but then Nazi Germany was not a member of the Commonwealth'.³⁷

Even before the arrival of Vera Britain and her husband in South Africa in July, their visit produced a great deal of press coverage, described by the *Natal Daily News* of 24th March 1960 as 'Famous couple to visit Durban for University jubilee'.³⁸ The press coverage continued once the conference started on the 9th July: *The Natal Mercury* carried an article 'The Women of S. Africa Demanded Her', and even in these charged political circumstances Vera Brittain made her opposition to apartheid clear, recalling the early influence of the South African MP Margaret Ballinger, wife of William Ballinger the

prominent trade union activist and friend of Winifred Holtby, whom she met while in Cape Town:

I read Olive Schreiner's books at school and they influenced me tremendously...

But it was Margaret Ballinger who really brought me into sympathy with the Coloured peoples and of course Winifred, with whom I shared a flat, came back from this country as a champion of the Coloured races.³⁹

In all interviews she stressed that she was in South Africa to attend an academic conference, but also spoke to church and pacifist groups who opposed the apartheid system, under the pretext of giving a lecture on the subject of autobiography. She also visited in prison Chief Luthuli, a leader of the African National Congress who had led opposition to the pass laws, being granted a ten minute interview by the authorities and reporting on his trial. She later wrote in an unpublished article that the country's atmosphere was as sinister as Nazi Germany, with feelings that conversations were being monitored and reported upon, and praised the many brave individuals from all racial groups who campaigned against the government's racist policy.⁴⁰ On her return to Great Britain she wrote a series of articles on her experiences, and in the 1960 winter edition of *Woman Journalist* she revealed that at the conference she had directly linked the feminist issue of the subordination of women to apartheid policies:

When we discovered... that our hosts would welcome frank comments on the Verwoerd Government by the overseas speakers, we 'obliged' to the best of our ability. My own scheduled topic, 'Expanding Horizons of Twentieth Century Women,' made possible some plain speaking about 'second-class citizens,' and the need for women who had won their freedom to support the oppressed African

peoples struggling beneath the burden of *apartheid*... One fact which did strike me forcibly was the relative backwardness of South African [white] women, who regard themselves as a privileged class [but]... do not receive equal pay and are liable to be dismissed on marriage, while the property laws regulating the rights of married women still tend to regard husband and wife as one, and that one the husband... A direct connection exists between the incomplete citizenship of white South African women and the subterranean savagery of their country, to which the *apartheid* regulations contribute by the frustration and resentment that they provoke.⁴¹

This view was very similar to that which she had expressed about India in *Search After Sunrise* on the close link between upholding women's rights and ending racial discrimination. What made her opposition to apartheid in South Africa so much stronger was the way in which it violated all her beliefs at once. She could also support and advise the opposition that she found to apartheid in South Africa through her feminist and pacifist beliefs in the need for non-violent protest. Her Christian faith was affronted by what she saw in South Africa, and she wrote of the policy of the country's Liberal Party, which opposed the apartheid laws and campaigned for universal suffrage, that 'This policy, based on the Christian Gospel, follows the best traditions of Western Democracy'.⁴² Her articles seethed with anger and indignation at the 'policy of racial separation with its cruelty to individuals and its sacrifice of family life' as a challenge to her own belief system.⁴³ Her unpublished notes on her visit concluded that, 'the many gross injustices, which undermine the lives of non-whites in this fascist country, are transforming it into a boiling subterranean cauldron of frustration and resentment'.⁴⁴

For Vera Brittain, Sharpeville was an ultimate confrontation between the state and the individual, and in this case, there was no consideration of her husband's or daughter's political careers to prevent her taking part in public demonstrations. She became a member of the 'Black Sash Movement' of protesters, chiefly women, based in South Africa who paraded wearing black sashes in memory of Sharpeville, and she protested wearing a black sash outside the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in London in March 1961.⁴⁵ In a review written in 1960 of the book *Shooting at Sharpeville: The Agony of South Africa* by the Rev Ambrose Reeves, Bishop of Johannesburg, she compared Sharpeville as a watershed in political and social history to the 1919 Amritsar massacre, which played an important part in the growth of the Indian independence movement, a comparison which she repeated in her book *Envoy Extraordinary*.⁴⁶ An extract from this review was published in the *Johannesburg Star* on 3rd January 1961.⁴⁷ In the same month she published an article in *Fellowship* entitled 'White Resistance in South Africa' praising the refusal of the Anglican Church to segregate its congregations and the resistance to apartheid of many Christian churches, together with the opposition of many individuals, which she described as forming a 'White Resistance Movement' to the apartheid system. Following her faith in people and hope for the future, she praised these 'courageous and much hampered white minorities,' believing that the unjust authority and power of the state was being undermined by each individual act of justice and kindness, while realistically concluding that these groups and individuals needed help and support from the rest of the world.⁴⁸



Clipping from the *Evening Gazette* 8 March 1961, showing Vera Brittain (on the left) outside Lancaster House, London, on the day of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, wearing a black sash in protest against apartheid in South Africa and the Sharpsville massacre. VBA.

The Politics of the Public, the Private and the Individual

The best, although also the briefest, demonstration of the view of the relationship between the state and the individual in the mature political thought of Vera Britain is her attitude towards the rights of both regarding individual life, as expressed by her views in the 1960s on suicide, euthanasia and the death penalty. In keeping with her low personal profile at this time, she spoke only once in public on euthanasia and suicide (although as described above, she had written articles on suicide and its link to war early in her career), and her opposition to the death penalty was kept as a private campaign. But her position in both cases was a predictable reflection of her mature political thought, and particularly of her faith in the individual, and her profile was sufficiently high for her to be noted in a newspaper article of the time as one of ‘the champions of the Abolitionist Movement’.⁴⁹ As a Christian, Vera Brittain believed that neither an individual nor the state had the right

to take a human life. As she wrote in the context of atomic weapons in 1950, 'God... gave us life and alone has the right to take it away'.⁵⁰

In May 1962 Vera Brittain was invited to lecture by the Euthanasia Society, and spoke about euthanasia and suicide. From her rough notes it is clear she spoke in the most general terms, but she did refer to her father's depressive illness and suicide, and society's attitudes to suicide in general, using the opportunity to turn the talk to a social issue by arguing that suicides might be suffering from undiagnosed depression. She concluded that suicide was another type of violence, which caused great harm to both those that succeeded and those that survived their attempts, and their families. Drawing on her experiences as a VAD nurse, her view on euthanasia was linked to the idea of individual choice, that a person suffering from an incurable physical illness should be able to ask for 'conscious help' and that, 'Vol. [voluntary] Euthanasia may be at least one important method of adding dignity to the life or death'.⁵¹ In this talk it was her faith in individuals and their rights and obligations, both to themselves and others within society, which was her main concern, together with a view that the power of the state over individuals was, and should be, limited. She was also willing to discuss this very difficult issue in a public forum without feeling the need to set her answers within a strict religious framework.

Just as she was opposed to suicide and willing to consider euthanasia largely in the context of individual rights, so Vera Brittain was opposed to the death penalty as a punishment for criminals. She supported her friend and publisher Victor Gollancz in his work for the abolition of the death penalty for murder in Great Britain, which was achieved in 1965, although she did so quietly and discreetly as a private individual, possibly because of the political sensitivity of the issue and its potential impact on her husband's and

daughter's careers.⁵² In *Testament of Experience* (1957), she made a thought-provoking if indirect connection between violence practised by the individual and capital punishment as a form of state violence, in the decision of the Indian government to execute Nathuram Vinayak Godse, the assassin of Gandhi:

It seemed unlikely that Gandhi would have endorsed the death sentence passed upon Godse on February 10th, 1949. The following November a few early delegates to the World Conference who knew the Mahatma's views on capital punishment pleaded with the Indian Government to spare Godse's life, but in spite of their intercession he was executed on November 15th. Two months later, Soviet Russia reinstated capital punishment.⁵³

Her opinion appears to have been based on her political concerns first in her early years as a Liberal for individual rights, and then after 1924 as a Socialist for the greater good of society. But given the totality of her political thought and her belief in the individual, her opposition to the death penalty also may be seen as a predictable position.

Vera Brittain spent her adult life moving between the different circles of her political thought, the Christian, feminist and pacifist pearls connected by the thread of her faith in people and hope for the future. These 'communities', as the term is used and understood by Raymond Williams, shaped her as an individual and provided an insight into both the culture and society in which she lived, and which also produced her, as a product of education and socialisation.⁵⁴ Williams discusses the concept of service and solidarity within the idea of communities, which certainly reflects Vera Brittain's own experiences.⁵⁵ She was shocked by the living conditions of the poor in the working-class districts of Sunderland in 1935, which she canvassed with G.; they spoke to a couple with nine

children living in two rooms, the husband was a First World War veteran who had not worked since the war ended. Vera Brittain was never patronising in her approach, and genuinely sought to gather information. She recorded: 'Realised as so often what an expensive luxury cleanness is. Have never seen such terrible housing before – not even in Glasgow'.⁵⁶

Much has been written about the contrast between Vera Brittain's personal life and her political views, and her personal life has been the subject of much discussion, some of it very ill informed and spiteful, which has further obscured investigation of her political thought and world-view. She may have lived in an 'obviously upper-middle class' manner, but she identified most not with class issues but gender and political ideas.⁵⁷ In *Thrice A Stranger* (1938) she wrote that:

Looking back upon that part of my life which I have already fulfilled, I realise that its most valuable turning-points have always followed some refusal to accommodate myself to circumstances which I found hampering, uncongenial or oppressive. I have had constantly to choose between being disagreeable or becoming ineffective. In consequence I have acquired a large number of critics – some of considerable eminence – who look upon me as an aggressive egotist deserving of no encouragement; but I have never regarded this adverse opinion as too high a price to pay for freedom from that sense of frustration which follows the loss of one's lifework.⁵⁸

As described earlier, in many ways Vera Brittain lived her life constantly moving between labour, work and action, as described by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, which defines each stage as a process: a person engaging in labour serves organic wants and needs

of the body, in work they interact with the world around them, and in action they create and act in a political manner. Vera Brittain found a career first of all as a journalist to earn a living, her 'labour'; this initially paid for her to be able to write as a novelist, her 'work'; and both of them together enabled her to express herself as a feminist, her 'action'. Later on, the greater financial security brought by marriage and the success of *Testament of Youth* provided the 'labour' for her material needs; her 'work' including her writing became that of a peace campaigner interacting with the world around her; and her 'action' within the world became that of a political activist attempting to improve both the world and the people around her. But unlike Arendt, Vera Brittain did not distinguish between the public and the private spheres, except in the case of her involvement with CND and her wish to protect the political ambitions of her husband and daughter, and even in that case she had some public involvement.

Conclusion

As she grew older, Vera Brittain began to reflect on her past political activities. In 1950 when addressing the PPU annual general meeting she said, 'To change his age for the better a man must be a *united* personality; he must live as he professes, or those whom he seeks to teach will rightly dismiss him as a hypocrite'.⁵⁹ She was certainly no hypocrite and indeed lived her life according to the totality of her own political thought. She enjoyed the material comforts of life, but was also clear on the need for action, writing that 'Scenery is a poor substitute for living'.⁶⁰ In 1957, she spoke at 'Stop the H-Bomb Tests' meetings all around the country.⁶¹ In 1962, she was still giving public lectures for CND, one being entitled, 'Christians and the H-Bomb'.⁶² Her *Times* obituary wrote 'In her later years though she did

not cease to write, she gave the impression that her heart was more in lecturing'.⁶³ Her world was becoming insular, and she was somewhat disillusioned with political events, but she still maintained a keen eye for detail. She kept her interest in current political and social matters, writing about them in a surprisingly amusing manner. This was reflected in an article entitled, 'Casualty' that she wrote in good humour for *The Guardian* on 29th November 1966 about her emergency medical treatment following a fall in the street:

The moment you enter a casualty department, you become the living equivalent of a suitcase at an airport terminal travelling along a conveyor belt. It is worth being a casualty to be reminded how human common humanity can be.⁶⁴

But this accident was to mark the start of her declining health, and she wrote and appeared in public increasingly less. One of her last published letters, in *The Times* on 5th January 1967, was concerned with the proper attribution of one of her poems, still being used as a symbol of the First World War:

Last November, at the Remembrance Day T.V. commemoration, I was one of three writers whose poems were quoted. Full acknowledgement was given in the programme to the actors who read the poems, but no reference was made to their authors.⁶⁵

Vera Brittain died on 29th March 1970, aged 76. The following day, her obituary notice in *The Times*, headed 'Miss Vera Brittain: Controversial Writer Who Was Pacifist and Feminist,' focused on the outspoken nature of her political beliefs, together with her use of personal experience in her writing of *Testament of Youth* as being 'embarrassingly frank'.⁶⁶

Testament of Youth will always be regarded as expressing the true voice of British women of a certain class and age during the First World War. This is what makes it part of

the literary canon of that war. But Vera Brittain's political thought as a whole should be understood and valued as the voice of a woman who took a major part in developing, and in living her own life according to, some of the most important and revolutionary political ideas of the 20th Century. Vera Brittain was not a philosopher, but she drew on philosophers along with many others for her inspiration. Her hope in the future and faith in people to do good was the secure thread and organising principle which linked together her Christianity, feminism and pacifism. These formed the necklace of her political thought, which she created and 'wore' in both the public and private spheres.

Vera Brittain was a political activist as much as a political thinker, and her political thought cannot be considered as a coherent political theory. Rather, it was a highly individual belief system, with normative ethical and moral values, which she used to conduct her own adult life, in particular in her reaction to war. This constituted an ideology which, although drawing on the ideas of many others, was both unique to her and also logically consistent. She always looked to the next generation, including her own children as they were growing up, to find examples to provide comfort and hope for the future. In December 1957, she wrote in an article entitled 'Challenge For a Frightened World':

Today their generation, surmounting pessimism and despair, is constructing new patterns of life from the past's 'enormous disarray'. In these patterns atomic and hydrogen bombs do not mean the end of civilisation; their threat involves a summons to human resourcefulness which has already found answers to poverty, disease, inequality and oppression, and can similarly find the answer to war.

Thanks to this young and optimistic courage which counts on an unlimited future, I recognise that the harsher any experience may be, the more fully men and women of

all ages can summon their God-given strength and respond to the challenge of their time.⁶⁷

Particularly after her conversion to pacifism in 1937, she never varied from this stance: that individuals, working together, could also not only prevent war but could one day eliminate it from the human condition.

Vera Brittain's world-view, rather than being original or unique, came from her role as a political activist, reacting to the world around her, and seeking to make constructive change. It was injustice towards the individual which most motivated her, rather than a wider theoretical view of how the world should be.

Vera Brittain accepted that some of her beliefs, including those most deeply held, did not represent a realistic course of action and would never be accepted by a majority in her own lifetime. Nevertheless, she saw it as her duty to present those beliefs as a moral goal that both individuals and states should be endeavouring to meet. Only twice in her life she chose to temper her public views compared to her private ones, once in the Second World War after 1940 on the issue of area bombing, and once in the 1960s on the issue of nuclear war; in both cases the decision was made to protect her family rather than herself, and in both cases she recorded her decision and her reasons for making it. Her belief system was based on the view that both individuals and governments should aspire to the values set out in the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, which provided a code for living, representing a view of human nature which called for charity, morality and justice. Her repeated use of the word 'Testament' in her writings, particularly after the success of *Testament of Youth*, reflected not just commercial writing sense but also her conviction that her role was to testify or bear witness to those beliefs. She used the word in the Biblical

sense: first of 'a covenant between God and man', and then of a record of that covenant, as in the 'New Testament' of the Bible.

Vera Brittain has been criticised for not understanding or writing about the issues of class or race, economic imperatives, or imperialism. In fact, among the last views she expressed in public were the comment in 1963 to an India newspaper that 'workers, women and subject races had ceased to be second class citizens,' and a book review in 1966 condemning racial discrimination, 'A multi-racial society within Britain lies in the logic of history and is bound to come, like our present relative freedom from class consciousness, though the changes involved may take longer'.⁶⁸ This thesis has shown that she wrote on all these subjects, and each was an integral part of the circles which made up her political thought. This political thought was based on an interaction between theory and practice, the public and the private, and the state and the individual, which meant that her political thought was constantly evolving and developing, and could never have reached a final or completed form, since she would always seek new experiences.

Above all, to the end of her life Vera Brittain was concerned with preventing war, as a Christian, a feminist, and a pacifist. She firmly believed that the seed for the total destruction of the human race had been planted during the carnage of the First World War and the political intrigues that ensued, and that by the 1950s nuclear weapons had provided the means. For her, the First World War involved the slaughter not just of individuals but also of accepted moral values, establishing a level of suffering and the application of violence to be used both against combat soldiers and civilians which become worse as the 20th century progressed. This view was reinforced during the Second World War, and the

Cold War and arms race which followed, so that she feared that the human race would shortly be the author of its own destruction.

Vera Brittain was concerned about how life should best be lived in society, the importance of community, and she had a deep felt apprehension about the preservation of both the human race and its best cultural and social values.⁶⁹ In 1957 she became Vice President of the International Cultural Exchange, a non-political organisation which sought to use art and culture (dance, music, and theatre) to overcome the artificial boundaries of individual nation-states and promote greater understanding.⁷⁰ In one of her last public acts, an address to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in August 1965, she summarised her view for the future:

To raise cultural standards takes longer than to alter Constitutions, but to raise moral standards, as Gandhi raised them for India, is far harder. Yet it is on this that the war against war really depends. Nuclear weapons cannot be abolished by competitive Defence Ministries, but only by changes in the hearts and minds of men. Here lie the obstacles which Virginia Woolf once called 'tough roots but tangible as sea-mist'.

The amoral elements which keep war alive are undefined, yet they must be defined since men cannot fight the intangible. One great task before the W.I.L.P.F. is perhaps to define, through long and careful study, just why, where and how morality breaks down in the international community.

The attempt of human beings to become moral has continued since the Buddha, and before. Only a very few have tried to follow in his footsteps; but we have now

reached a point where the majority of men and women must learn and practice large-scale morality, or perish.

That is the challenge of the next fifty years.⁷¹

She feared war, and what had been and what could be lost for ever in a future conflict, and she spent her long and active life seeking practical means by which to prevent another generation suffering as hers had done.

In 1957, at the conclusion to *Testament of Experience*, Vera Brittain tried to summarise her own life's work and its importance:

I reflected on the new field of knowledge which I had entered.

From the end of the First World War, I had seen my work ever more clearly as an attempt to enlarge 'the consciousness of humanity'. It had not brought me any special reputation, but I believed that it had played a small part in creating the mental revolution through which I had lived. The real cause of the two World Wars had been political unconsciousness; the too-slowly diminishing failure of the mass of people in all countries to perceive what was happening. If the peace-makers could extend, however little, this power of realisation, they had accomplished much of their task.

In those moments of depression which come to us all would-be creators, my mind dwelt on the ends that I had set myself and my lack of success in reaching them. But in those happier times when a truer perspective sustained me, I remembered rather the distance that I had travelled from the 'little girl' whose Staffordshire father had not thought her worth educating.⁷²

In the few brief pages of notes that comprise the outline for *The Citadel of Time* Vera Brittain wrote of seeking, 'to draw some conclusions about the generation which has experienced so much history'.⁷³ In 1955, on the twentieth anniversary of Winifred Holtby's death, she contributed the foreword to a bibliography of her friend's writings, opening with 'Nothing is more difficult to predict accurately than the status of an author a few years after his death'.⁷⁴ Her own status, however, has continued to grow, both as a writer and as a political thinker. In his assessment of Vera Brittain for her entry in the new revised *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, after praising her writings, Alan Bishop has written that:

Her achievement as a pacifist is also attracting renewed attention. It seems clear that Vera Brittain's social, political, and literary importance, very well acknowledged now, some thirty years after her death, will continue to grow.⁷⁵

In March 2005, I was invited by the Women's Studies Program at the University of Southern Mississippi to give a lecture on my research. The title was 'Vera Brittain (1893-1970) Feminist and Political Activist: A Life Shaped by World War,' the lecture was very well attended, and in discussions afterwards the remarkable current relevance of her experiences to both young men and women in the United States today was repeatedly raised by the students.⁷⁶ The importance of Vera Brittain's writings on war and the topic of bombing policy has been recognized by the re-issue on 1st May 2005 of *Humiliation with Honour* and *Seed of Chaos* in one volume entitled *One Voice: Pacifist Writings from the Second World War*. Both texts are still pertinent and have much to contribute to the debate on the deaths of civilians in armed conflicts and the wider moral and political discussion of war. Vera Brittain dared to raise these issues during a time of total war, in 1942 and again

in 1944, and they have continued in importance to this very day. Perhaps this is the greatest legacy of her political thought to further generations. She wanted people to think and consider their own and their political leaders' actions, for her war, all war, was evil. She accepted that not everyone would agree with her, but she wanted questions asked so moral, political and social decisions would be made, at a personal, national and international level.

The image of Vera Brittain which most exists in the public consciousness is of a young woman dressed as VAD nurse, mourning the deaths of her loved ones during the First World War, helpless and alone, awaiting an uncertain future. However, in her short 1987 biography, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth*, Hilary Bailey has provided a different image, in a very fine pen-portrait of the spirit of Vera Brittain during the Second World War:

The vision of this small, middle-aged woman standing, for a second time, in the ruins created by war, doing something practical, readying herself to write about it so that other people could know what it was like, is not just impressive, but very touching. Her determination, resolution, sheer physical courage and her insistence on bearing witness to what happened – those are the qualities she perhaps never valued sufficiently in herself, but they are the qualities for which we most remember her.⁷⁷

This image of Vera Britain that Hilary Bailey invokes was perhaps best captured in a photograph that appears on the back cover of her official biography. It was taken of her speaking on a platform in Trafalgar Square in July 1942 at a Food Relief Rally; and it is

this image of a mature Vera Brittain which deserves to be more widely known as representative of her career, rather than that of a young and insecure VAD nurse.

The fact that Vera Brittain's ideas and writings are still being widely quoted today, over thirty years after her death, suggests that her political thought has been both sustainable and of continued relevance, in particular to feminism, pacifism and the involvement of women in warfare, but also to the place of the individual within the state and society, today.



Vera Brittain addressing a Food Relief Rally in Trafalgar Square, London, July 1942

NOTES

1. Staff reporter, *Oxford Mail*, 19 Oct 1951. Newspaper clipping VBA.
2. Staff reporter *Oxford Mail* 19 Oct. 1951. Newspaper clipping VBA.
3. Letter from Vera Brittain to the *Doncaster Chronicle*, 9 Nov. 1941. G562 VBA; see also 'Future World: Miss Brittain On Prime Needs,' *Nottingham Journal*, 18 Oct. 1943. Newspaper clipping VBA.
4. Staff reporter, *The Irish Times*, 1 Feb. 1947. Newspaper cutting VBA.
5. Robb, *British Culture and the First World War*, p. 219.
6. Vera Brittain, 'Women and The League of Nations,' unpublished, 1928. H292 VBA; see also Vera Brittain, 'Women's Part in the International World,' unpublished, 1928. H295 VBA.
7. Vera Brittain, 'Can Women Stop War?' *Modern Woman*, February 1944. G444 VBA; see also 'Women and Disarmament' *Highway*, February 1934. G445 VBA.
8. Vera Brittain, 'To Mothers Especially,' pamphlet, (London: Peace Pledge Union, 1939). G528 VBA.

9. Vera Brittain, 'Women And Pacifism,' *Highway*, no date but internal evidence suggests 1940. H377 VBA.
10. Letter from Vera Brittain to Mrs. Innes, 15 May 1945, Innes Donation, Special Miscellaneous B5, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum, London (hereafter IWM).
11. Brittain, *The Rebel Passion*, p.17.
12. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 267. Atomic weapons (A-Bombs) were used in 1945 on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; very much more powerful nuclear weapons (H-Bombs) were developed from these and first tested in 1952, but have never been used in war.
13. Bishop and Aleksandra Bennett, *Wartime Chronicle*, p. 267.
14. Hughes, *Indomitable Friend*, p.206.
15. Brittain, *The Rebel Passion*, p.19. Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was a woman mystic and spiritual leader of the Anglican Church in the inter-war years.
16. Staff reporter, *The Irish Times*, 1st Feb. 1947. Newspaper cutting VBA.

17. Vera Brittain, 'Women and War,' *Peace News* 4 Sept. 1953. G716A VBA.
18. Vera Brittain, *London Letter*, July 1951; *The Times*, 15 Sept 1952. G691.
Newspaper clippings VBA.
19. Vera Brittain, 'Humanity versus Policy: Some Contrasts between Moral Man and the Immoral State,' amended version published in *Peace News* 18 Dec.1953. G718 VBA.
20. Vera Brittain, 'Draft Notes For Manifesto,' 1948. (for a peace campaign for women). H338 VBA.
21. Vera Brittain, 'Hydrogen Bomb,' lecture notes, Lewisham, 11 May 1954. F175 VBA.
22. Vera Brittain, report of Christian CND meeting in *Peace News*, 18 Oct. 1963.
Newspaper clipping VBA.
23. Letter from Vera Brittain 'Nuclear Testing,' to *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 1961. G796a VBA.
24. Vera Brittain, report of Christian CND meeting in *Peace News*, 18 Oct. 1963.

Newspaper clipping VBA.

25. Letter from Bertrand Russell to Vera Brittain, 2 Oct. 1960. VBA.
26. Letter from Vera Brittain to Bertrand Russell, 9 Oct. 1960. VBA; see also Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 506.
27. Letter from Vera Brittain to Bertrand Russell, 4 Aug. 1962; letter from Bertrand Russell to Vera Brittain, 8 Aug. 1962. VBA.
28. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* p. 506.
29. Vera Brittain, 'Story of the Peace Pledge Union,' book review, *The Friend*, 20 April 1962. G821 VBA.
30. Vera Brittain, 'A Sense of History,' *Peace News*, 20 July 1962. G824 VBA.
31. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Times*, 18 April 1963. Newspaper clipping VBA.
32. Letter from Vera Brittain to the *Manchester Guardian*, 'Victims of German Fascism,' 30 June 1933. G399 VBA.
33. Open Letter from Vera Brittain to the *Manchester Guardian*, 'Germany and

Beyond,' 22 Aug. 1933. G410 VBA.

34. Barbara M. Grieve, letter posted from South Africa to Vera Brittain, 18 April 1958. G753 VBA.
35. Barbara M. Grieve, letter posted from South Africa to Vera Brittain, 18 April 1958. G753 VBA.
36. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 497. On 20th January 2005, I gave a research paper based on research for this thesis to the KwaZulu-Natal Branch of the South African Military History Society at the University of Durban in Natal, as the 'Major Darrell Hall Memorial Lecture,' in which I discussed the significance of Vera Brittain's visit to the anti-apartheid organisations existing in South Africa in 1960.
37. Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, p. 498.
38. Unnamed reporter, 'Famous couple to Visit Durban for University Jubilee,' *Natal Daily News*, 24 March 1960. Newspaper clipping VBA.
39. Unnamed reporter, 'The Women of S. Africa Demanded Her,' *The Natal Mercury*, 13 July 1960. Newspaper clipping VBA.

40. Vera Brittain, 'A Summer in South Africa,' Oct. 1960, not published, 190 VBA; see also Vera Brittain, 'A Visit to Albert Luthuli in Pretoria Jail,' unpublished typescript, Oct. 1961. 208 VBA.
41. Vera Brittain, 'African Journey,' *Women's Journalist*, Winter 1960. G783 VBA.
42. Vera Brittain, 'Apartheid: Is There a Peaceful Alternative?' *The Yorkshire Post*, 7 Sept. 1960. G777 VBA.
43. Vera Brittain, 'A Bench In the Park – For Whites Only,' *The Yorkshire Post*, 3 September 1960 G776 VBA.
44. Vera Brittain, 'A Summer in South Africa,' October 1960, not published, 190 VBA.
45. Newspaper clipping, 'Anti-Apartheid Vigil,' *Middlesbrough Evening Gazette*, 8 March 1961. VBA.
46. Vera Brittain, 'Vera Brittain on Civilisation Without Mercy,' book review in *John O'London's*, 8 Dec. 1960. G782 VBA; see also Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary*, p. 26.
47. Unnamed reporter, *Johannesburg Star*, 3 Jan. 1961. Newspaper clipping VBA.

48. Vera Brittain, 'The White Resistance in South Africa,' *Fellowship*, Jan. 1961. G784 VBA.
49. Unnamed reporter, 'The Champions of Abolition,' *Birmingham Post*, 8 March 1965. VBA. Newspaper clippings.
50. Vera Brittain, 'Why I Would Ban Atom Weapons,' *Daily Worker*, 17 June 1950. VBA.
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52. Unnamed reporter, 'The Champions of Abolition,' *Birmingham Post*, 8 March 1965. Newspaper clipping VBA. A large number of other clippings on the subject are also in the VB archive. See in particular, 'Hanging's No Answer,' report of a public rally, 18 April 1961.VBA.
53. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 461
54. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 93-6.
55. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin

- Books, 1963), p. 314-8.
56. Bishop, *Chronicle of Friendship*, p. 232.
57. Catlin, *Family Quartet*, p. 12.
58. Brittain, *Thrice A Stranger*, pp. 23-4.
59. Vera Brittain, 'The Chairman's Address,' *Peace Pledge Union Journal*, July 1950.
G681 VBA.
60. Brittain, *Thrice a Stranger*, p. 23.
61. Hand-bill for a public meeting 'Stop the H-Bomb Tests,' published by The National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Tests, Brentwood. VBA.
62. Hand-bill for a public lecture, 'Christians and the H – Bomb,' published by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, The Egmount Hall, Midhurst. VBA.
63. Vera Brittain Obituary, *The Times*, 30 March 1970.
64. Vera Brittain, 'Casualty,' *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 1966. G867 VBA.

65. Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Times*, 'Author's Credit,' 5 Jan. 1965. Newspaper clipping VBA.
66. Vera Brittain Obituary, *The Times*, 30 March 1970.
67. Vera Brittain, 'Challenge For a Frightened World,' typescript for *This Week*, December 1957. 28 VBA.
68. Vera Brittain, 'No Door Closed to Women, Says Vera Brittain,' *Statesman New Delhi*, 23 Jan. 1963, VBA; Vera Brittain, 'Two Racial Studies,' book review, *Christian Action*, Winter 1966. G864 VBA.
69. In 1941 she wrote to *The Times* deploring the destruction of public documents and papers, which would be in the future essential to researchers in history and politics, for so called 'salvage'; see Letter from Vera Brittain to *The Times*, 24 Oct. 1941. G559 VBA.
70. A general pamphlet gives details of the organisation: '*Towards Friendship – The Story of the International Cultural Exchange*' G751 VBA.
71. Vera Brittain, 'W.I.L.P.F. The Next 50 Years,'. Augsut 1965. 220. VBA.
72. Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, p. 472

73. Brittain, *The Citadel of Time. A Postscript to Testament of Youth, Friendship and Experience*, typescript, no date. VBA.
74. Vera Brittain, foreword to Geoffrey Handley-Taylor, *Winifred Holtby: A Concise and Selected Bibliography Together with Some Letters* (London: A. Brown, 1955), p. xi.
75. Alan Bishop, 'Brittain, Vera Mary (1893-1970),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* website: [http:// www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32076](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32076) (accessed on 21 Nov. 2004).
76. 'Vera Brittain (1893-1970) Feminist and Political Activist: A Life Shaped by World War', Women's Studies Program, University of Southern Mississippi, 3rd March 2005.
77. Hilary Bailey, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) p. 117.

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY

Vera Mary Brittain 1893-1970

- 1893 29th December, Vera Mary Brittain (VB) born at Newcastle-under-Lyme in North Staffordshire, the only daughter of Edith and Arthur Brittain. The family are middle-class and have long been established in the area as owners of a prosperous paper mill.
- 1895 30th November, VB's only brother Edward Harold Brittain born, they were to form a close and supporting relationship. The family move to Macclesfield in Cheshire.
- 1905 The family move to Buxton in Derbyshire; this would be the children's family home. The move in part reflects the growing financial status of the Brittain family, and ensures better schools and social connections for the children. VB receives the standard education of a girl of her class and background, starting with a primary education from a governess at home. At the age of 11 she attends a private day school in Buxton, at 13 she is sent to a private boarding school, St Monica's in Surrey. She is an excellent student, with a great gift for writing, in particular novels, which she wrote to entertain her brother. VB would like to go on into higher education, but her family insist that she behave as a provincial debutante in Buxton society and make a suitable early marriage.

- 1912 1st January, VB makes her first entry in her diary, an account of a New Year dance with friends in Buxton. In the same month she attends the Oxford University Extension Lectures and is encouraged to enter the Oxford 1913 Summer School essay competition, which she subsequently wins. After much hard work and study, together with the support of her brother Edward, but against the wishes of her parents, VB is allowed to apply for a place at Oxford University. VB keeps this diary from 1913 to 1917, later published as *Chronicle of Youth* (1981).
- 1914 March, VB wins an Exhibition to Somerville College, Oxford University, and continues to be interested in the suffragette campaign, although she holds strong views against the use of violence to achieve political goals. April, Edward invites his best friend, Roland Leighton to stay with his family in Buxton. July, VB attends, with her mother, Edward's final speech day at Uppingham School, VB is introduced to Victor Richardson. He and his great friends Roland Leighton and Edward are known as the 'Three Musketeers' at the school. All expect to attend university in the autumn, 4th, the First World War is declared, Edward is very keen to enlist straight away but his father refuses to give his permission. It is only with VB's active encouragement that their father gives his consent, Roland Leighton and VB become unofficially engaged, 'for three years or the duration of the War'. Edward becomes a lieutenant, later captain, in the 11th Sherwood Foresters. Roland Leighton enlists as a lieutenant in the 7th Worcesters, his poor eyesight having delayed his commission. October, VB goes up to Somerville to read English Literature. November, the last of the 'Three Musketeers,' Victor Richardson, enlists as a

lieutenant in the 9th King's Royal Rifle Corps. 16th December, Winifred Holtby (WH) – later a great friend and influence on VB – as a schoolgirl witnesses the German naval bombardment of Scarborough; her account is published in the *Bridlington Chronicle*.

1915 January, the first German Zeppelin Raids on England. Edward meets at an Army training camp Geoffrey Thurlow, who has enlisted as a lieutenant in the 10th Sherwood Foresters. Thurlow had just left University College, Oxford University to join up. He, Edward and VB are to become close friends. 22nd April, the first large-scale use of poison gas on the Western Front, by the Germans at the Second Battle of Ypres; its use soon becomes common to all sides. June, VB leaves Somerville to train as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse. VB's basic training is done at the Devonshire Hospital in Buxton. October, VB is moved to the First General Hospital, Camberwell, London. 23rd December, VB's unofficial fiancé Roland Leighton is shot in the stomach while leading a wiring party near Hébuterne in France on the Western Front and dies later of his wounds, he is buried at Louvencourt.

1916 January, military conscription comes into force throughout Great Britain, except Ireland, applying to all single men aged 18-41 without dependent children. Tribunals are set up to deal with conscientious objection and pacifists. 5th June, Lord Kitchener is drowned at sea when HMS *Hampshire* is sunk while on a secret trip to Imperial Russia; VB comments on this in *Testament of Youth* as a great

shock. 1st July, the Battle of the Somme begins, continuing until 19th November. Edward is wounded in the first morning's attack with a bullet through the thigh and then a shell splinter in the hand. 4th July, he is sent to London for treatment, by chance to the First General Hospital Camberwell, where VB is serving. August, for his actions on the Somme Edward is awarded the Military Cross 'for conspicuous gallantry and leadership during the attack'. September, VB having volunteered for overseas service is posted to St. George's Hospital, Malta, two miles west of Valletta. The island is at the centre of German submarine activity in the Mediterranean. Once safely arrived VB works with women doctors, and nurses patients with venereal disease.

1917 6th April, the United States of America declares war on Germany. 9th April, the *Battle of Arras begins, Victor Richardson is shot in the arm and head at Vimy Ridge*, which results in blindness. 23rd April, Geoffrey Thurlow is shot and killed in action at Monchy-le-Preux: he has no known grave. May, VB breaks her VAD nursing contract and returns to London with the notion of marrying Victor Richardson. 9th June Victor dies of his wounds, having been awarded the Military Cross; he is buried at Hove, Sussex. 31st July, the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) begins. August, VB re-enlists as a VAD nurse and requests a posting to France. The reason for her breaking her contract is accepted, and she is sent to the 24th General Hospital at Etaples, the main British Army base camp in France on the Western Front, a vast complex of eight hospitals, supply depots, railway yards, port facilities, training and transit camps. VB nurses German

prisoners of war, and gas cases from both sides. September-October, VB is present at Etaples during the 'Bull-Ring mutiny', when all nurses are confined to their camps. 20th November, the Battle of Cambrai sees the first use of mass tanks (476 in all) by the British, marking the emergence of new technological ways of fighting the war; VB mentions this battle in *Testament of Youth*.

1918 21st March, the German Spring Offensive begins with a huge bombardment of British positions on the Western Front, the start of a series of attacks that last until July. The Etaples base camp is repeatedly bombed, including the hospitals, in which a number of patients and nursing sisters are killed. VB later writes a poem *Vengeance is Mine* in memory of the nursing sisters who died. 11th April, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig issues his Special Order of the Day calling for no retreat; VB took great comfort from this order, and quotes it in *Testament of Youth*. Late April, VB is forced to break her contract after being ordered home by her father to nurse her ailing mother, although she bitterly resents being summoned for a 'domestic difficulty'. 15th June, Edward Brittain is shot in the head and killed by a German sniper while in action on the Asiago Plateau on the Italian Front. VB is with her father when the War Office telegram is delivered informing the family of Edward's death. The exact details of his death and surrounding circumstances are to concern VB for many years. Edward Brittain is buried at Granezza, Lusiana, Italy. July, the Second Battle of the Marne begins, the first major Allied counter-attack which halts the German offensives. August, VB publishes her first book of poetry, *Verses of a V.A.D.* 8th August, the Battle of Amiens begins, 'the Black Day of the

German Army'; British and French armies (including Canadian and Australian troops) attack with great success. This is the start of the '100 Days Campaign' on the Western Front in France, which will end the war. The Germans suffer massive casualties, and large numbers of prisoners and guns are taken. September, VB re-enlists as VAD nurse in London, but she is not allowed to serve overseas because of breaking her contract. She works first at St. Thomas's Hospital and then Queen Alexandra's Hospital, Millbank, where she nurses influenza pandemic cases. 28th September, the start of the British and Allied offensives to break the 'Hindenburg Line,' the formidable system of fixed defences which the Germans have built on the Western Front (about 20 miles behind their lines in 1916-1917, to which they withdrew in February 1917, and from which they had attacked in March 1918). 4th November, the last major British battle on the Western Front, the crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal, takes place; in this battle the poet Wilfred Owen is killed. 11th November, at 11 a.m., the Armistice comes into force, ending the First World War; VB hears the maroons all over London sounding the Armistice at 11 a.m., while washing dressing bowls. The League of Nations is founded based on one of United States' President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. December, the first British General Election since 1910 takes place, also the first Parliamentary Election in which women (aged 30 or over) are allowed to vote and to stand for Parliament. The wartime Coalition government (Unionist, Liberal and Labour) under David Lloyd George wins; the first woman MP to be elected is Countess Constance de Markievicz MP of Sinn Fein, who refuses to take up her seat as a political protest.

1919 The Sex Disqualification Removal Act opens all the professions to women, except becoming officials in the Church of England. April, VB returns to Somerville, changing her subject from English to read Modern History with a special subject in International Relations. October, VB meets WH in a shared tutorial; the relationship is hostile at the start, since they were exact opposites in temperament and even physical appearance. Their situation becomes worse due to a misunderstanding about a Somerville debating society motion: 'Four years travel are a better education than four years at a university'. VB spoke for the motion and WH against it, VB lost and felt acutely humiliated. The relationship only starts to recover when WH learns that VB is ill and visits her in her rooms. They are to form a close and sustaining friendship which touches all aspects of their private and professional lives. December, Lady [Nancy] Astor MP is the first women to take up her seat in the House of Commons.

1920 Lady [Margaret] Rhondda founds (and later edits) the weekly magazine *Time and Tide*, for which VB and WH will later write extensively. January, the Treaty of Versailles, part of the Peace of Paris, comes into effect. This complex document sets the terms of the peace settlement with Germany: war reparations (£6,000 million) are to be paid to Britain and her Allies, the Rhineland is to be declared a demilitarised zone, and Allied occupation of parts of western Germany is to continue for a planned 15 years. Germany loses national territory to France, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, as well as all her overseas colonies which are placed under League of Nations mandates for the victorious

powers. Germany is allowed only an army of 100,000 long-service troops with no reserves, no aircraft, no tanks, no submarines and limitations on the size of her navy. The 'war guilt clause' of the treaty states that Germany alone was responsible for starting the First World War. VB refers constantly in her writings to the Treaty of Versailles, believing it to be unfair to the German population and to be a potential cause of a future war. May, the Women's Statute at Oxford University comes into effect, allowing women to gain full Oxford degrees for the first time. July, VB writes a sad and powerful poem called *The Superfluous Woman* in direct response to a newspaper article which reflects society's attitudes towards unmarried women after the First World War, regarding them as redundant.

1921 Marie Stopes, author of *Married Love* (1918) opens Britain's first birth control clinic, in London, providing advice and practical information on sex education and contraception. Both VB and WH later write in support of the birth control movement, and VB becomes involved in its committee work. VB and WH graduate from Oxford University with second-class degrees. September, VB and WH begin a six-week tour of France and Italy, during which they visit Roland's and Edward's graves. VB and WH decide to move to London to pursue their writing careers.

1922 January, VB and WH set up a home together at 52 Doughty Street, London, 'a beautiful little flatlette' and start to write their first novels. They each seek to earn their living by a mixture of journalism and teaching, although each does receive financial support from their families. VB established a very successful and lucrative

career as a professional journalist for many newspapers and magazines both in Great Britain and around the world. February, VB starts lecturing for the League of Nations Union. March, VB and WH first meet Lady Rhondda when they attend a mass meeting of the Six Point Group, a feminist organisation established by Lady Rhondda which campaigns for the legal and political rights of women. Both VB and WH become members. Lady Rhondda is involved in a legal action, 'the Rhondda Peerage Case,' as she wishes to take her seat in the House of Lords as a Viscountess in her own right. She wins the case, but the Law Lords on appeal overturn the decision of the Committee of Privileges. August, VB attends the League of Nations Summer School in Geneva. November, VB works for a Liberal candidate in Bethnal Green, a poor working-class district of London, he is elected as their MP, but the Conservatives win overall control of the country and form the next government, with Andrew Bonar Law as Prime Minister.

- 1923 Changes in the divorce laws make it possible for women to divorce their husbands on grounds of adultery alone. VB is the official correspondent for *Time and Tide* at the Fourth Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva. VB's first novel, *The Dark Tide*, is published, set in a women's college with the topical theme of desertion within marriage and the difficulties of divorce; this causes much upset in Somerville when individuals recognised themselves as characters in the novel. December, a General Election is held, and VB again works for the sitting Liberal candidate in Bethnal Green; he is again elected as their MP but no party wins an overall majority, the Conservatives have the largest number of seats.

- 1924 VB publishes *Not Without Honour*, a novel which draws on her experiences of growing up in Buxton ('Torborough' in the novel 'a complacent little health resort') with its small town expectations and prejudices. It has two central characters, one of which is the cleric Albert Wellington Clark, based on the Rev Joseph Ward, of Fairfield, near Buxton. The other main character is Christine Merivale, based on VB, who is frustrated in her desire to become a journalist by the conventions of her family, who forbid her to take up such a career. Only after a rumour of scandal between herself and Albert Clark is she permitted to leave Torborough to study at Oxford. The story continues with the outbreak of the First World War and her decision to become a nurse despite her pacifist leanings. *Not Without Honour* is the least accessible and successful of her novels, being poorly reviewed at the time; it has not been re-printed. January, the first Labour Government of Britain is elected, a minority government under Ramsey MacDonald, with Liberal support. September, VB and WH started a ten week tour of Germany, Hungary, Austria and Czechoslovakia. The city of Cologne makes a particular impression on VB, and she writes about it on a number of occasions. On her return, VB becomes an active supporter and a lifelong member of the Labour Party. November, the General Election results in a Conservative government under Stanley Baldwin.
- 1925 27th June, VB marries George Edward Gordon Catlin (G.) at St. James's, Spanish Place, a Catholic church in London. They honeymoon in central Europe, staying in Vienna, Budapest, Trieste, Venice and Verona. They sail to the United States of America via Canada before settling in New York, so G. can maintain his academic

post as a political scientist at Cornell University. December, the Treaty of Locarno is signed, guaranteeing the mutual frontiers of France, Belgium and Germany, and that the Rhineland will remain demilitarised. This is the high point of the search for a stable peace since Versailles.

- 1926 3rd-12th May the General Strike, VB is in New York with G. at the time. Disputes in some industries last for months, and there are government fears of a major revolution. August, VB returns to London and re-establishes a home with WH as the start of VB's 'semi-detached' marriage to G., a separation by mutual consent caused by VB's desire to continue her own successful journalistic career. A joint household is created, with G. commuting between London and New York two or three times a year; all three establish a pattern of living together, which is to continue for the next sixteen years. WH is an active supporter of trade unionism, opposes racist policies particularly in South Africa, and favours Indian independence. This heavily influences VB, who becomes an admirer of Gandhi.
- 1927 VB writes an important article '*Why Feminism Lives*' on women's roles within The League of Nations, which is printed as a pamphlet for the Six Point Group. 19th December, VB's and G.'s first child, John Edward Jocelyn Brittain-Catlin, is born.
- 1928 The first countries sign the Briand-Kellogg Pact, of which all signatories 'renounce war as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another'. VB publishes a study of women's progress in employment 1900-1928, using detailed

Government statistical data, entitled *Women's Work in Modern England*. VB is called as an expert witness for the defence in the obscenity trial of the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* by Radcliff Hall, but is not allowed to give evidence by the judge; the book is banned and all copies are ordered to be burned. April, the Representation of the People Act means that all women can vote at aged 21 years, the same as men (although multiple voting remains).

1929 May, a General Election is fought with domestic unemployment, disarmament and peace as major themes. A minority Labour government forms under Ramsay MacDonald; Margaret Bonfield becomes the first ever woman Cabinet Minister. October, the Wall Street Crash starts the 'Great Depression,' which causes hyperinflation around the world, particularly 1929-1932. VB publishes *Halcyon: or the Future of Monogamy* which discusses the changing relationship between husbands and wives since the First World War, not least her own semi-detached marriage. The book covers controversial topics, and also the new idea of companionship within marriage and the development of voluntary monogamy for both men and women. The book also reflects VB's concerns with maternity and nursery provision for working mothers. She writes about and actively supports the work of Marie Stopes. These new interests were also common themes in her journalism. VB starts to write her memoir of the First World War, based on the diary which she kept 1913-1917, later published as *Chronicle of Youth* (1981).

- 1930 27th July, VB's and G.'s second child, Shirley Vivian Brittain-Catlin, is born.
- 1931 February, Sir Oswald Mosley founds The New Party, a mixture of Labour and Conservative politicians that changes its name to the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932. Its manifesto calls for a radical economic policy to combat mass unemployment. It also proposes taking power by force if the conventional political system of the country fails; by 1936 it is becoming explicitly anti-Semitic. 24th August, a coalition National Government forms to deal with the deepening economic crisis, with MacDonald remaining as Prime Minister. September, the Manchuria Crisis breaks, Japan invades and occupies Chinese territory and resigns from the League of Nations after it is condemned; this is the first major episode to suggest that the League is failing. October, a General Election returns the National Government under MacDonald, the Conservatives being its majority party.
- 1933 30th January, Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany; the first concentration camps are opened. 9th February, the Students Union at Oxford University votes 275 votes to 153 in a debate on the motion 'this House will in no circumstances fight for King and Country'. May, VB publishes *Testament of Youth. An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, it is a huge financial and literary success for the publisher Victor Gollancz, and establishes VB as an important author and peace campaigner. October, Germany resigns from the League of Nations.

- 1934 22nd May, Canon Dick Sheppard founds the Peace Pledge Union (PPU), a Christian Pacifist organisation whose members undertake a pledge: 'We renounce war and never again directly or indirectly will we support or sanction another'. VB's friends the writers [Margaret] Storm Jameson and Rose Macaulay become Sponsors, together with Sir Arthur Ponsonby, George Lansbury M.P, Donald Soper, Bertrand Russell and Siegfried Sassoon. September, VB begins her first lecture tour of the United States, speaking on the risk of a future war, the League of Nations, and *Testament of Youth*; she publishes a second book of poetry *Poems of the War and After*. September, the Soviet Union is admitted to the League of Nations.
- 1935 March, Hitler repudiates the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, and Germany starts to rearm on a large scale. May, G. returns to live permanently in London, having resigned his professorship at Cornell and hoping for a political career as a Labour MP. June, G. is selected to stand for a marginal constituency in Sunderland at the next General Election. 2nd August, VB's father, Arthur Brittain, who has suffered from depression for many years, commits suicide by drowning in the River Thames at Richmond. 29th September, WH dies of Bright's Disease, or kidney tuberculosis, a condition which hardens the tissues of the kidney; a memorial service led by Canon Dick Sheppard is held at St-Martin's-in-the Field Church, London, the start of an important friendship with Sheppard for VB which will have religious and political consequences for the rest of her life; WH is buried at All Saints Church, Rudston, Yorkshire. November, Fascist Italy under Benito Mussolini attacks Ethiopia. In Great Britain a General Election takes place: VB canvassed, ran

publicity, and spoke at dozens of meetings to support G. in Sunderland but he is unsuccessful. The country returns the National Government under Baldwin, with the Conservatives holding the largest number of seats.

1936 VB publishes her feminist epic saga *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition*. In part this is based on the life of her mother-in-law Edith Kate Catlin (née Orton). She also uses her own ancestors, and the history and politics of Buxton and the North Staffordshire area, as background material. January, King George VI dies, and is succeeded by Edward VIII. March, German troops move into the Rhineland, previously demilitarised under the Treaty of Versailles. VB travels with G. to Germany in order to write a series of articles about the Nazi regime and people's reaction to the re-occupation of the Rhineland. They visit Aachen, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt and Heidelberg. In Cologne VB hears a speech by Hitler, and becomes aware of the Nazi policy towards the German Jewish population. April, VB undertakes a lecture tour of Holland, speaking in The Hague and Amsterdam on the work of peace groups and her publications. July, the Spanish Civil War begins, VB starts to write for the PPU's journal *Peace News*, with which she would have close links for many years. October, Mosley's BUF start a series of marches into Jewish districts of London, one of which becomes known as the 'Cable Street Riot,' a very violent confrontation between BUF members, anti-fascist demonstrators, local people and the police. December, Edward VIII abdicates without being crowned, because of his continuing relationship with Mrs. Wallace Simpson, an American divorcée.

1937 The Divorce Act is passed, making desertion and insanity grounds for divorce.

January, VB becomes a Peace Pledge Union Sponsor at the invitation of Canon Sheppard. May, King George VI is crowned, Neville Chamberlain replaces Baldwin as Prime Minister. June, VB replies to the pamphlet/questionnaire *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War* sent out by the *Left Review*; VB's publisher Victor Gollancz has strong links with this Socialist organisation. September, VB starts her second lecture tour of the United States, speaking about her publications but now also as a convinced Christian Pacifist. 31st October, Canon Sheppard dies from an asthma attack brought on by overwork; VB learns of this while in New York (he had just been elected Rector of Glasgow University, the other candidates being Winston Churchill and J. B. S. Haldane). 14th December, VB is invited to the White House to meet First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and also has an impromptu meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He asks VB what impressions she has formed about the political mood of the country while she has been lecturing.

1938 VB publishes *Thrice A Stranger*, a book which is divided into three separate parts, in which she describes in some detail her experiences of living and lecturing in the United States. In the first part 1925-1926, VB reflects on the natural beauty of the scenery as she travels via Canada, and the trials and tribulations of being a new bride within a small university community; she discusses the manners of this provincial social elite and other domestic matters. She describes in some detail G.'s work on prohibition for the Social Science Research Council, which he began in March 1926, the high point of their travels together being a visit to the White House

and meeting President Calvin Coolidge. VB details meeting the dynamic feminist leader of the National Women's Party (NWP) Alice Pauls, whose main aim was the establishment of equal rights for women in the United States. While on this visit VB also lectures for the League of Nations Non-Partisan Association. She also visits Harlem and discusses the issue of racism in the United States, but she has not enjoyed her visit and is happy to be returning to England. VB opens the second part of her text from 1934 onwards with a discussion of the economic changes in the United States since her last visit. Her American publisher Macmillan had arranged this visit, and as an established and very successful author after the publication of *Testament of Youth* (1933) she is in constant demand for book signings and interviews with both print and radio journalists. She lectures to large audiences on both the writing of *Testament of Youth* and the League of Nations Union. The pleasures and problems of literary fame are described, together with the hectic time-table and brief outlines of the many places and people she meets during this tour. The warmth, with which the general public receives *Testament of Youth* has a profound effect upon VB, who now views the United States as looking to the future and being interested in peace, she regrets having to return home. The third and final part of her text, 1934-37 details a similar hectic time-table: in total for both tours VB gave 77 lectures, made over 100 appearances, and gave many interviews, while visiting 70 cities in 30 states of the USA, together with a tour of Canada. VB's reception from both the press and general public was still very warm, but she was embarrassed to be asked questions about the British public's reaction to Wallace Simpson. She was repeatedly asked in interviews about her views on the League of

Nations, pacifism and the risk of a future war in Europe, which reflected the developing political crisis. VB returns to England hopeful that the United States will remain outside of any future conflict and continue to build a new society, free from the history of Europe. September, the Munich Crisis breaks, Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy reach an agreement that Czechoslovakia will lose a part of its territory claimed by Germany. Chamberlain returns to Britain as a national hero, the popular opinion being that he has prevented another war; his policy of 'appeasement' towards Germany is respected by most of the British public.

1939 March, Germany violates the Munich agreement and occupies the Czech part of Czechoslovakia. Britain and France offer Poland a treaty guaranteeing support if it is attacked. VB and Gollancz have a serious falling-out over the tone of a lecture he gives, which seems to her to promote hatred against the German people. June, for the first time in British history, peacetime military conscription for men is introduced. July, Mosley's BUF holds a 'Peace Rally' at Earls Court, London, calling for a negotiated peace with Hitler and describing itself as a 'pacifist' organisation. August, the Emergency Powers Act is passed, allowing the British government to intern people as security risks. Mosley and other BUF leaders are imprisoned and the BUF becomes a prescribed organisation, but no pacifist organisation is suppressed. 3rd September, Britain and France declare war on Germany after it invades Poland. 4th October, VB publishes the first of her own private *War-Time Letters to Peace Lovers* as a weekly broadsheet, in part because of the many individual letters she had received from Peace Pledge Union members

and the general public. Soon renamed *Letter to Peace Lovers*, this runs from October 1939 to December 1946.

1940 January, VB starts her third lecture tour of the United States, speaking again on her publications but deliberately avoids referring to Christian Pacifism or any type of peace organisation. April, Germany invades Denmark and Norway; VB returns from the United States with G. for the publication of *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*; VB's account of their relationship reflects the great affection and respect which they shared for each other over many years. Their professional and personal lives were also inter-linked, which was further merged by their shared sense of duty and responsibility for others, which moulded their political and social views. 10th May, Germany invades France, Belgium and the Netherlands, Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister and forms a Coalition government, but VB was not to admire him. 4th June, the British Expeditionary Force and part of the French Army is evacuated from Dunkirk; the Netherlands and Belgium have already surrendered. 10th June, Italy declares war on Britain. 22nd June, France signs an armistice with Germany. Late June, VB and G. evacuate their children John and Shirley, at their own expense, to friends in the United States, where they remain for the next three years. July, the Battle of Britain begins, fought in the sky between the British and German air forces over London and south-east England this continues until September; it is perceived as the beginning of a likely German invasion of Great Britain. VB witnesses many dog-fights while living in London. VB works for a government scheme to evacuate children overseas, and

continues to give lectures on pacifism; she also sits on the local Military Tribunals to hear the cases of conscientious objectors. 15th August, German bombers penetrate London's air defences for the first time, marking the start of 'the Blitz,' the bombing of London; by the second week 1,286 Londoners had been killed; these raids on London continue until May 1941. 14th November, Coventry city centre is bombed, the Cathedral is destroyed and 568 men, women and children are killed. October, VB is refused an Exit Permit from the country to visit her children because of her being a PPU Sponsor. The British government is concerned that the neutral United States may be influenced by pacifist arguments.

1941 January, VB works in the canteen of a settlement in the East End of London, looking after air raid victims. She also joins a Friends' Ambulance Unit and a mobile canteen in Bermondsey. VB publishes *England's Hour: An Autobiography 1939-1941* as her record of the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. Corder Catchpool, a prominent Quaker, establishes the 'Committee for the Abolition of Night Time Bombing'; VB is one of its founder members. 22nd June, German and Axis forces invade the Soviet Union. June, VB is again refused an Exit Permit to travel to India to attend an All-India Women's Conference; the official reason given is her known pro-Indian independence views. The proposed route of travel would have taken her through the United States where she could have visited the children. 7th December, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, and the United States enters the Second World War. 12th December, Germany declares war on the United States.

- 1942 VB publishes *Humiliation With Honour* in which she explains her Christian Pacifism, and which should be read as a spiritual text in which her personal belief system is detailed. She and Victor Gollancz reach an accord and become friends again. He publishes his pamphlet '*Let My People Go: some practical proposals for dealing with Hitler's massacre of the Jews*,' a vital document in bringing the Final Solution to the attention of the British people. The Germans start the so-called 'Baedeker Raids' of bombing British cities such as Bath, Exeter, Norwich and York. 30th May, Cologne is heavily bombed for the first time by the British in a 'Thousand Bomber Raid' and great damage is caused to the famous cathedral; VB writes a poem *Lament for Cologne*. She becomes a founder member of the 'Bombing Restrictions Committee,' the aim of which is to stop the saturation bombing of Germany and the occupied countries, and the targeting of civilian areas by the RAF. She continues her work for the Peace Pledge Union's Food Relief Committee. July, VB addresses a large demonstration in Trafalgar Square on the issue of famine relief for occupied Europe, at which she first meets Paul Berry, who will become a life-long friend and supporter.
- 1943 January, the 'Casablanca Declaration,' Britain and the United States announce their war aims towards Germany as being 'Unconditional Surrender'. VB continues her work with Corder Catchpool and Bishop Bell of Chichester on the Bombing Restrictions Committee, together with the PPU Famine Relief Committee, and writes '*One of These Little Ones... A Plea to Parents and Others for Europe's Children*,' a pamphlet about the effects on children's health of food shortages, in part

caused by Allied naval blockades of occupied countries, in particular Greece and Belgium.

1944 VB publishes *Seed of Chaos. What Mass Bombing Really Means*, a pamphlet about the 'senseless' killing of women and children by Allied area bombing policy. 6th June, the 'D-Day' landings in Normandy start the final Allied campaign to liberate Western Europe. 13th June, the first use by Germany of V-1 'flying bombs,' pilotless aircraft carrying high explosives aimed at London and the south of England, supplemented in September by V-2 ballistic missiles, contributing to the 'Little Blitz' of 1944.

1945 13th February-14th February, the British and American bombing raids on Dresden, which create a fire-storm in which thousands of people are incinerated in the ruins; VB writes extensively about this and similar 'fire storm' raids. April, VB publishes *Above All Nations: An Anthology* a collection of first hand reports of acts of humanity and kindness by all sides during the Second World War. 17th April, Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is liberated by British troops; hard evidence of the 'Final Solution' and Nazi policies towards the Jewish people becomes indisputable. 8th May, Germany surrenders, VE Day (Victory in Europe). July, a General Election produces a landslide Labour Government under Clement Atlee. 6th August and 9th August, atomic weapons (A-Bombs) are used for the first time; American aircraft bomb the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (92,233 killed) and Nagasaki (48,857 killed); the British government supports the use of atomic

weapons. 15th August, Japan surrenders, virtually unconditionally, VJ Day (Victory over Japan) which ends the Second World War. September, VB is invited to the Netherlands by its government to report on the needs of the population. She visits Vucht Concentration Camp, she passes through Eindhoven and tours The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. October, the United Nations (UN) holds its first meetings in New York, absorbing the League of Nations; VB is a great supporter of the UN, seeing it as a strong force for peace. VB tours Sweden, Denmark and Norway at the invitation of The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. November 20th the 'Nuremberg Trials' of Nazi war criminals by the Allies begin. VB publishes *Account Rendered*, her only Second World War novel, in which past First World War experiences cause tragic events in the present. VB works with Victor Gollancz and his secretary Peggy Duff, lecturing and raising money for his Save Europe Now Campaign, which will continue until 1948 to supply food parcels and gather independent information on the refugee crisis across Europe, particularly in Germany.

1946 May, VB tours the United States and Canada to raise funds for the Save Europe Now Campaign. June, the Bikini Island test of atomic weapons by the United States makes it clear that countries will continue to develop these weapons for future wars.

1947 VB publishes *On Becoming a Writer*, a guide on how to become a professional writer and journalist, particularly for those returning to civilian life from the armed services. July, VB is invited by the Foreign Office to lecture in the British

Occupation Zone of Germany for the Department of Control Commission. She visits Kiel, Hamburg, Hanover, Cologne, Munster and Berlin. August, India becomes independent and is partitioned with the creation of Pakistan, resulting in ethnic and religious violence. This begins a long period of intermittent wars of decolonisation for Britain. VB writes extensively about these issues, especially in *Peace News*.

1948 20th January, Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated, a deep shock to VB who greatly admired him and his methods of peaceful protest. VB publishes *Born 1925: A Novel of Youth*, her pacifist novel, which was based loosely on the life and work of Canon Dick Sheppard. 24th June, VB's mother Edith Brittain dies following the effects of a cerebral thrombosis; her death comes as an emotional blow and VB suffers an unexpected level of grief, given that her mother was aged nearly eighty and had been frail for some time. July, the Berlin airlift marks the first major episode of the Cold War: aircraft supply Berlin when the Soviet Union closes all other supply routes. VB writes about the threat of another world war starting. December, VB becomes Chairman of the Peace Pledge Union.

1949 April, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is created, formalising the United States' contribution to an armed alliance to defend western Europe against a possible Soviet attack. September, the Soviet Union tests its first A-Bomb. November, VB attends the World Pacifist Meeting held at the Conference Centre at Santiniketan, India. She undertakes a considerable amount of 'press work' to ensure

that the proceedings of each day of the conference are available for despatch to the international press. She tours both India and Pakistan, interviewing a number of important figures in the Independence movement, and gathering material for a forthcoming book.

1950 February, a British General Election is won by Labour, however with a much-reduced majority; Atlee remains Prime Minister. VB publishes *In the Steps of John Bunyan: An Excursion into Puritan England*, richly illustrated with both maps and photographs. The book, set against the background of the English Civil Wars 1642 - 1651 and the political and religious upheavals which followed their conclusion through to the Restoration in 1660, seeks to act as both a biography and guidebook to the life, and work in and around the Bedford area, of Bunyan, who was famous as a Dissenter and author of the religious allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). June, the Korean War starts, lasting until July 1953: troops from the United States, Great Britain, and other member states of the United Nations are sent to fight. The United States threatens the use of atomic weapons and (in 1953) nuclear weapons against North Korea and China.

1951 VB publishes *Search After Sunrise: A Traveller's Story*, which details her experiences of the World Pacifist Conference and her impressions of India and Pakistan after independence. She also publishes a history of the church with which she has long been associated entitled *The Story of St. Martin's: An Epic of London*. April, VB resigns as Chairman of the Peace Pledge Union so she can devote more

time to *Peace News*. October, a General Election produces a Conservative government under Sir Winston Churchill as Prime Minister; the first Conservative woman Cabinet minister is Dame Florence Horsbrugh.

1952 Great Britain tests its first A-Bomb, the United States tests the first nuclear bomb (H-Bomb) – followed by the Soviet Union in 1953, and Great Britain in 1957. King George VI dies and is succeeded by Queen Elizabeth II.

1953 VB publishes a study of the early feminist movement called *Lady into Woman: A History from Victoria to Elizabeth II*, in which she draws on her considerable research and personal experience to produce a very readable and informed analysis of women's history from 1901-1952.

1955 April, Churchill retires and is succeeded as Prime Minister by Sir Anthony Eden, who calls a General Election, won by the Conservatives, and remains Prime Minister.

1956 October, the 'Suez Crisis' breaks following Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal; Israel, Britain and France agree secretly that Israeli forces will invade Egypt, on which British and French forces will invade to occupy the Canal Zone, expecting the Egyptian government to collapse. The United States, which has not been informed, demands British and French withdrawal after a cease-fire. This marks the end of 'Imperial' Britain as a power strong enough to act in the face of outright

American opposition. VB writes extensively in *Peace News* about this and also the Hungarian Uprising of the same month, and lectures extensively in Britain about both issues.

- 1957 January, Eden reigns and is replaced as Prime Minister by Harold Macmillan. The first British H-Bomb tests on Christmas Island take place. VB publishes *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925-1950* and tours the United States and Canada speaking on pacifism and her publications.
- 1958 The Life Peerage Act admits women to the House of Lords; Lady Rhondda dies but *Time and Tide* continues until 1962. VB tours the United States and Canada again speaking on pacifism and her publications. February, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) is launched at a mass meeting at Central Hall, Westminster, London. The CND Secretary is Peggy Duff. VB becomes a benefactor of CND, which supports unilateral disarmament, and also Canon John Collins' Christian Action group and Christian CND.
- 1959 October, a General Election is won by the Conservatives with a landslide victory and Macmillan remains Prime Minister. VB tours the United States and Canada again speaking on pacifism and her publications.
- 1960 June, VB travels to South Africa to attend a conference on education at the University of Natal. She is asked to lecture on English and literature by Dr.

Malherbe, the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the university, who had met Winifred Holtby when she lectured in South Africa in 1926. Vera Brittain also lectures on autobiography to church and pacifist groups who oppose the apartheid system. She also visits Chief Luthuli in prison and reports on his trial. He is President General of the African National Congress (ANC) and was arrested in December 1956, being accused by the South African government of treason for burning his 'pass-book'. VB publishes a book about the struggle by women for degrees at Oxford University called *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History*, in which she describes the complex process of development of the five women's colleges: Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville both founded 1879, St Hugh's 1886, St Hilda's 1893 and the Society of Home Students 1891, which became St Anne's in 1939. It makes fascinating reading, in which individuals' lives and achievements are discussed, while being placed in the social and political context of the time. VB also publishes *Selected Letters of Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain 1920-1935*.

- 1961 VB is elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The United States sends its first combat troops to South Vietnam, and suffers its first casualties there. This marks the start for the United States of the Vietnam War (Second Indo-China War), which ends in 1975 after the United States withdraws its forces and signs a cease-fire in 1973. VB regularly attends anti-apartheid, anti-Vietnam War, and CND rallies in Trafalgar Square, and writes about them in *Peace News*. August, the Brandenburg Gate is sealed by the Communist government of East Germany,

dividing the former German capital. This is the start of the building of the Berlin Wall, which will divide East and West Germany until November 1989.

- 1963 January-February, VB undertakes her last international lecture tour to India and Pakistan, again speaking on pacifism and her publications, but also gathering material for her next two books. She publishes *Pethick-Lawrence: A Portrait*, a biography of her friend and fellow Socialist the suffragist Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and his wife Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. He was the only man to become an ex-officio member of the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) joining in 1906 together with his wife; and they were at the very centre of the leadership, working with all the Pankhursts. Harold Macmillan retires and is replaced as Prime Minister by Alec Douglas-Hume.
- 1964 VB publishes *The Rebel Passion: A Short History of Pioneer Peace-makers*; she wrote of the long and distinguished tradition of peace societies and in particular of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, with its Christian creed of love and peace. The book had been commissioned to commemorate its half-century of work in Great Britain, the United States, central Europe, and elsewhere. She cites Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), in which a Fellowship member is heavily featured and punished for his views. India receives special attention, being in many ways so successful in achieving the aims of the Fellowship, with many references to Gandhi. She concludes that passive protest such as the demonstrations to Aldermaston against nuclear testing show the way forward for spiritual matters to become a

greater part of political discussion and life. September, a General Election is won by Labour with Harold Wilson as Prime Minister.

1965 VB gives up the Chairmanship of *Peace News* and becomes its President. She publishes a biographical study, *Envoy Extraordinary: A Study of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and her contribution to Modern India*. VB and Vijaya Pandit enjoyed a long friendship which started in 1940 by letter and was based on their shared opposition to the British Government's colonial rule of India. The book details Vijaya Pandit's three terms of imprisonment and her distinguished political career in India, being elected in 1936 as the Minister of Local Self-Government and Public Health in the United Provinces, later called Uttar Pradesh. She was the first Indian woman in the British Empire to be a Cabinet Minister and her later career included being Ambassador to Moscow 1947-1948, to Washington 1949-1951, the United Nations 1952-1953 and London 1954-1961, after which she returned to India. In 1964 she stood and was elected as the Congress candidate for the national Parliament in a key seat in the United Provinces. Vijaya Pandit was very influential in political circles both in India and overseas, as the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the aunt of Indira Gandhi. The book also details the history of the independence movement in India and the peaceful protest methods of Mahatma Gandhi.

1966 March, a General Election is won again by Labour, with Harold Wilson remaining as Prime Minister. 2nd November, VB has a fall on her way to lecture at St-Martin's-in-the Field, and from this point on her health starts to decline. December, Victor

Gollancz asks to see VB, he is very ill following a stroke and knows he does not have long to live, but wants to say good-bye to certain old friends.

1967 February, Victor Gollancz dies, and though expected this is still a great shock to VB, who feels isolated and alone. Her own health continues to decline despite physiotherapy, but what is far worse is the effect on her mental abilities, in particular her level of concentration and memory. To aid her recovery and lift her spirits VB and G. take a holiday in Malta. The Family Planning Act is passed, allowing local health authorities to provide a full advice, information and practical services to limit family size. September, VB and G. sail to Montreal, but her health deteriorates further.

1968 February, VB and G. return to London by aeroplane, which she always disliked as a form of transport. She publishes her last book *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* which discusses her part in the famous literary trial. March, G. returns to lecture in the United States. 27th March, VB, although very weak, makes her last public appearance on the platform of Central Hall, Westminster, at the Golden Jubilee celebration of women gaining the vote in 1918. VB is concerned about the demands her health is making on her family. June, VB and G. take a holiday together but her health is still in decline and she can no longer walk without help.

1969 February, G. takes VB to Morocco, since travel had always been a favourite hobby of hers and she enjoys the hotel garden. On her return, professional full time care is

required to look after her at home. The Divorce Act is passed, allowing divorce on grounds of 'irretrievable breakdown'.

1970 January, VB is admitted to a nursing home, because of her very confused mental state and extreme frailty. Family and friends visit often, but she is depressed and fears being a burden to others, although she does have happy times with visitors. 29th March, VB dies aged 76. June, a memorial service is held at St-Martin's-in-the-Field, which is well attended by family, friends, people with whom VB had worked and also many readers of her books. September, VB's ashes are divided, and in accordance with her last request some are scattered on her brother Edward's grave in Italy, and the rest are to be buried with her husband G.; he dies in 1979 and is buried with her ashes at St. James Church, Old Milverton, Warwickshire.

APPENDIX B

SELECTED POEMS BY VERA BRITTAIN

'Vengeance is Mine'

(In Memory of the Sisters who died in the Great Raid upon Hospitals at Etaples)

Who shall avenge us for anguish unnamable,
Rivers of scarlet and crosses of grey,
Terror of night-time and blood-lust untamable,
Hate without pity where broken we lay?
How could we help them, in agony calling us,
Those whom we laboured to comfort and save,
How still their moaning, whose hour was befalling us,
Crushed in a horror more dark than the grave?

Burning of canvas and smashing of wood above –
Havoc of Mercy's toil shall He forget
Us that have fallen, Who numbers in gracious love
Each tiny creature whose life is man's debt?

Will He not hear us, though speech is now failing us –
Voices too feeble to utter a cry?
Shall they not answer, the foemen assailing us,
Women who suffer and women who die?

Who shall avenge us for anguish unnamable,
Rivers of scarlet and crosses of grey,
Terror of night-time and blood-lust untamable,
Hate without pity where broken we lay?

Vera Brittain, *Verses of a V. A. D.*, (Imperial War Museum, London: [1918] 1995)

The Superfluous Woman

Ghosts crying down the vistas of years,
Recalling words
Whose echoes long have died;
And kind moss grown
Over the sharp and blood-bespattered stones
Which cut our feet upon the ancient ways.

But who will look for my coming?
Long busy days where many meet and part;
Crowded aside
Remembered hours of hope;
And city streets
Grown dark and hot with eager multitudes
Hurrying homeward whither respite waits.

But who will seek me at nightfall?
Light fading where the chimneys cut the sky;
Footsteps that pass,
Nor tarry at my door.
And far away,
Behind the row of crosses, shadows black
Stretch out long arms before the smouldering sun.

But who will give me my children?

**Vera Brittain, *Verses of a V. A .D.*, (Imperial War Museum, London: [1918] 1995) –
written July 1920 and added to the reprinted version.**

APPENDIX C

SELECTED CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN VERA BRITTAIN AND MARGARET STORM JAMESON 1940-41

Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 4th August 1940 VBA:

Apparently all my work for Anglo-American relations during the past seven years, and the fact that I scrupulously avoided doing pacifist propaganda when I was over this spring, are to count as nothing beside the mere fact that I belong to an organisation which is one of six peace societies in which I have served in various official capacities for periods of four to nineteen years. If I am never allowed to go to U.S. till the war is over I shan't see the children for indefinite years, I shall get right out of touch with George. I shall lose my status as a resident alien since a permit can't be renewed more than twice, and all the literary and lecturing contacts which I have so carefully built up over seven years will go with the wind.

Margaret Storm Jameson, *The End of this War*, P. E. N. Books (Allen & Unwin, London: 1941) – extract including a private letter from Vera Brittain:

I believe that negotiation – which supposes that both sides mean the same things by the words they use and are faithfully anxious for agreement – was never possible with Nazi Germany. For horror of war, as well as from goodwill, and from fear or greed, many deceived themselves. We could not have negotiated; we could have acquiesced, we could have submitted. Would it have been better to submit? I have under my hand a letter from a well-known pacifist which says:

‘I admit that not to fight Hitler would have meant great difficulties and many compromises of the Munich type for which we should have been bitterly criticised. But these compromises were slow affairs. Each one would have taken *time*, and even Hitler is not immortal. As long as he lived his influence would have grown, but he would only have taken one little bit of a country here (e.g. the Danzig corridor from Poland) and another little bit there. There would have been large areas of democracy left and the European civilisation that we have known and loved would have been continued, especially in France.’

The image this starts up is of a prisoner quaking and hoping that Giant Despair will die or be sated before his turn comes. Why not? We have all been there at some time, praying and quaking. Look at it and see whether it is a sensible forecast.

Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 10th May 1941 VBA:

Anyhow, why should ‘wish-fulfilment’ be such a deadly Sin? You and others who encourage various exiled nationalists in their nationalism, and lead them to believe that some day their countries will be restored just as they were, are indulging in wish-fulfilment as completely as any pacifist, but you are probably justified by the fact that your encouragement, based though it may be upon illusions, is giving these unhappy people heart and thus helping them to live. All forms of idealism, after all, are types of wish-fulfilment based upon a belief in the capacity of human nature to change, however slowly... No pacifist seriously believes that his faith and his fellowship is going to defeat Hitler now; he merely believes that by keeping it alive he will help people to keep their heads amid the present tide of violent propaganda, and thus perhaps help avoid another and

even worse era of Hitlers in the future.

Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 5th September 1941 VBA:

I fully agree with you that pacifists are mentally dishonest if they think Hitler's victory would be a worse blow to humanity than war itself. But I am not mentally dishonest because I don't think Hitler's victory would be worse for humanity in the long run (though it might be for this generation) than recurrent war. Basically, though I am not a good Christian, I accept the fundamental Christian belief that the road to spiritual victory is more likely to lie through suffering and defeat than through the victory of material force. And politically I think that we are so unfit for victory as a nation that our victory would merely mean yet again a divided Europe, a forcibly disarmed Germany (the 8th of the Eight Points confirms this view) and war all over again in twenty years. My reading of history tells me that Hitler is not the cause, but the consequence, of the course of history in Europe, after four centuries of declining Christianity and half a century of decaying capitalism; and that a far more radical solution has to be sought than the defeat of him or any other dictator. Just as he replaced the Kaiser, so another dictator will replace him if we imagine we can settle the terrible conflicts of Europe by means of victory achieved by force – assuming we can achieve it. I am literally putting my fate in your hands by telling you this, for I know that these views, if publicly expressed with the frankness I have uttered them here, would put me in prison. But they don't – heaven help me – mean that I want to see England defeated and Hitler win. They don't involve me in any defeatist activities, because I respect the opinions and the conscience of those who think as you do, just as I could wish they respected mine. It does, however mean that I cannot in honesty work for a victory which I

believe would defeat its own ends, in a war that I think should never have occurred. All I can do is try to further wartime experiments in Christian living: to endeavour to 'build Jerusalem' even in the midst of war; to achieve what Evelyn Underhill calls 'the bring forth of eternal life in the midst of war'. Politically the best I can hope for is a negotiated peace; but my attitude is really a religious one.

Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 10th November 1941 VBA:

Your pamphlet seems to me inadequate and even less than honest, in particularly two respects. In the first place, you do not indicate even an awareness that the Russian totalitarian state has produced atrocities comparable to these of the Nazis, and of much longer duration... Apparently atrocities can always be overlooked when the nation that committed them happens, through no choice of its own, to be fighting against the same enemy as ourselves. In the second place, you do not mention and seem even to be unaware of the immense and prolonged historical processes which have gone to produce the modern totalitarian state, with all its excesses... The historic factors which have produced totalitarian states in Germany, Russia, Italy and Japan are of a kind which victory over the Nazi in itself will only exacerbate. That is the crux of the pacifist position.

Vera Brittain to Margaret Storm Jameson, 13th November 1941 VBA:

You always talk and write as if I had sent the children away without me lightly and irresponsibly, instead of after a spiritual and emotional conflict which is the worst that I have known in a life of conflict. I let them go alone because I didn't want to leave Gordon to face the Blitz and invasion without me.

APPENDIX D

Précis: Vera Brittain, *Humiliation with Honour* (Andrew Dakers, London: 1942)

Humiliation With Honour, though written as a series of letters to a teenage boy, is very turgid, and at times it is difficult to extract important information from the very dense surrounding text. None the less, it is a very informative text on Vera Brittain's political thought, as is shown by its recent reprint as part of *One Voice*.

In Letter 1 'The Wheels of Juggernaut,' Vera Brittain details the origins of her views in questioning the state in the conduct of war, which began when nursing German wounded prisoners in 1917. She continues with a discussion about the history of the Christian individual rights and responsibilities against the power of the state. In Letter 2 'The Decline of the Individual,' she discusses the history of the war resistance movement in Great Britain from 1914 onwards, and the pacifist movement in general, both from a religious and a political perspective. She cites Germany and Japan in her arguments as examples of the failure of state violence in resolving international disputes. In Letter 3 'Numbered with the Transgressors,' she answers the critics of pacifism and gives what she believes to be the causes of the Second World War. She also praises the supporters of minority pacifist views in Germany, and acknowledges the real dangers that they run in speaking openly in a totalitarian state. She ends by comparing Christian Pacifists with members of the early Christian Church. In Letter 4 'Humiliation with Honour,' she writes of the humiliation of pacifists by the state, and of the war-waging British public using pacifists as a safety-valve for their emotions from 1939 onwards. She analyses how the British authorities have treated pacifists, and details how pacifists have used the teachings

of Christ at both a practical and spiritual level to 'overcome evil with good,' accepting the consequences of their actions. She also cites Gandhi as a working example of pacifism, and concludes by quoting a German pastor who is being held in a Nazi prison for his beliefs. This whole Letter is concerned with what could be called Vera Brittain's creed that, 'Evil arising from injustice will never die until the injustice has been supplanted by justice'. In Letter 5 'The Functions of a Minority,' she seeks to define in her own words two different types of pacifists with who she was working. She is very scathing about Absolutist Pacifists, who she regards as non-constructive and harmful to the cause, calling them irrational, obstinate and irresponsible. In particular she dislikes their attempts to embarrass the government for the sake of it, while she considers this practice to be a legitimate tactic for many other political issues. She believes that it was only by reasoned debate and education that people, including governments, would be brought over to the political aims of pacifism, which she saw as the ending of war, of which disease, capitalism, imperialistic nationalism, poverty, hunger, unemployment and repression were the symptoms. She criticises self-righteous pacifists for failing to see members of the armed services, both in combatant and non-combatant roles, as also victims of war and power politics. Letter 6 'Their Name is Legion,' is concerned with the ordinary and obscure victims of war, not just those who have been, 'bombed, blasted, massacred, starved, transported, and conscripted' but also internees, prisoners and refugees. Those who had lost their religious and social values because of their experiences are of particular concern. She is deeply aware of what a total loss of faith, in not only religious matters but also in the political values of democracy and human reason, could mean to an individual. In part this is based on her own experiences, but her work with refugees and people who had been bombed in London or

elsewhere more and more informed her opinions. In Letter 7 'Youth and the War,' she discusses the effect of war on young people. This is the most personal letter, directed towards her own children, and ends on a note of hope for the future, 'Young adult human nature is essentially constructive'. In Letter 8 'They That Mourn,' she writes about the adults, in particular women from all sides of the conflict, who have lost husbands and sons, 'Once even in the last War, sorrow was honoured as an emotion deserving of consideration. This respect is extended to the mourners of "the other side". To-day even this measure of human decency has vanished'. This loss of pity, which underpins the moral codes of Christianity and family life, is of great concern. She sees words as offering comfort and support to the bereaved and being as important as practical measures such as providing shelter for the homeless. She writes:

They must have deeds, they say. Nothing matters but 'constructive action.' I do not agree with them. The power of words is greater than anyone can calculate. Words have made revolutions before to-day. The use of the right words at the right time can transform the existence of a man or woman from desolation to glory. But you may have to live a whole lifetime before you learn how to choose those words.

Letter 9 'The Descent of Society,' is concerned with the preservation of culture and civilisation as expressed in religion and society as a whole, which she feels is in danger of being lost because of war. She names 'charity, magnanimity, compassion, and truth' as weapons in the fight against the spread of spiritual rot. Her greatest fear is that even if Great Britain and her Allies win the current war (and she is no defeatist), the cost will be disastrous in ethical terms. She believes that the decline in morality as exercised by the state will cause another 'vindictive peace,' and sow the seeds for a Third World War. In

Letter 10 'The Shape of the Future,' she discusses the political and social history of Europe, which she believes had created the current conflict. For her the first phase was the Reformation, which destroyed the unity of Christendom across the continent of Europe and created nationalism. This established the second cause of war in the rise of the nation-state, and the associated economic and political demands of each separate nation. The third cause was the failure of the capitalist economic system, which caused mass poverty and unemployment following the world economic crisis in October 1929. In particular, Germany has suffered hyperinflation, and lost trust in both its economic and democratic political structures, which led to the rise of the Nazi totalitarian state. She looks to the future and suggests that the power of the nation-state needed be reduced, while individual cultures must be preserved. She sees a central place for Christianity in politics, and that nationalism is a danger to any further progress in the prevention of war. She does not blame the political machinery of democracy for the failure to stop war and all its associated horrors, but rather the human beings that have ignored its structures, and any attempts to create a better world based on Christian principles. In the Epilogue, she concludes with a discussion on the power of the love of God, in whose existence she no longer has any doubt. She writes, 'War begins first in the human soul. When man has learned how to wrest honour from humiliation, his mastery of his own soul has begun, and by just that much he has brought the war against war nearer to victory'.

APPENDIX E

Précis: Mrs Humphry [Mary] Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (Thomas Nelson and Son, London: 1888)

Mrs Humphry Ward's religious novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888) is divided into seven books. Books 1 details Elsmere's meeting and courtship of Catherine Leyburn. It explores the history and manners of the local society, so giving a context for the different characters' behaviour. The story follows the traditional romantic novel of the time, with the established pattern of an eldest daughter having to choose marriage, in this instance to a clergyman, over her duty to her mother. But there are hints of Elsmere's interest in the Oxford University religious revival and his radical views even as their courtship unfolds. In Books 2 and 3 a detailed description of his married life in Surrey with his wife and their joint work in his parish is given. He comes into contact with his former mentor and University tutor, who describes Catherine's solid religious belief and faith in the established Church of England as 'She is the Thirty-nine Articles in the flesh!' (page 162). Elsmere meets the new squire Mr Wendover, whose library provides the access to new radical texts on religion and science, which further fuel his religious doubts. Book 4 details Elsmere's religious crisis and the strain this puts upon his marriage. This causes him to leave his parish, and to go with his wife and child to London. Book 5 details his wife's reaction to her changed domestic circumstances and other family matters. Elsmere's interest in working with the Unitarian Minister Murray Edwardes in the East End of London is discussed in detail, as is the establishment of a secularist Settlement and working men's society, which stressed educational classes to help the poor of the district. In Book 6 Elsmere confesses his

own faith, 'I am not a Unitarian, nor am I an English Churchman... Last autumn I left it and resigned my orders because I could no longer accept the creed of the English Church'. He continues 'the man who is addressing you to-night believes in *God*; and in *Conscience*, which is God's witness in the soul; and in *Experience*, which is at once the record and the instrument of man's education at God's hands' (page 474-5). Book 7 concludes with the creation of the New Brotherhood Settlement, which combines practical provisions for the Settlements members, both men and women. The teachings of Jesus, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, is the focus of the Brotherhood's belief system, whose creed is, 'This do in Remembrance of Me,' (page 555), this being at the centre of their belief in Christ's teachings. The book ends with Elsmere's death; his work continues and his wife remains in contact with The New Brotherhood, giving support and encouragement in memory of her husband, while still maintaining her own religious faith and practices.

APPENDIX F

Paper Given to the University of Birmingham War and Society Seminar

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VERA BRITAIN - The Militant Pacifist:

Misconceptions of Her Importance in Military History

Vera Britain (1893-1970) is best known to this audience for her sixth book *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, published in 1933 and based on her own war diary – *Chronicle of Youth* published in 1981.

Testament of Youth opens with Vera Britain as a young, middle-class girl seeking higher education and a role for herself in the wider world, outside marriage. She discusses the life of provincial Buxton, and her relationships with her brother Edward, his close school friends Roland Leighton and Victor Richardson, and later Geoffrey Thurlow.

The outbreak of the First World War with all the excitement and naive patriotism, soon becomes the main theme of the book. Vera Britain describes her changing moods and reactions to the war news and details her own decision to train and serve as a Voluntary Aid

Detachment Nurse (VAD), in June 1915. She trained at the Devonshire Hospital, Buxton, before being posted to the 1st General Hospital, London in November. In March 1916, she volunteered for overseas service and was posted to Malta in September, where she remained until May 1917. She requested a posting to the Western Front, and she was sent to 24th General Hospital at Etaples on the coast of Northern France from August 1917 until late April 1918. She broke her service contract at the command of her father to return at once and nurse her mother. Vera Brittain was to feel 'a cowardly deserter'.¹ She would and remain 'conscience-stricken for many years'.² She resented being called back over what was in reality a minor domestic crisis, as her mother soon recovered from her illness. Vera Brittain returned to a home posting, nursing first at St. Thomas's and then Queen Alexandra's Hospital, London in September 1918 until April 1919.

Vera Brittain's service record as a VAD nurse is placed within the historical, social and political context of the First World War. She also writes about her own private fears and concerns. For example, her discussion of the Battle of Mons and the British Expeditionary Force is linked to Roland's fears of not being able to enlist because of poor eyesight, and to problems with learning Greek for her Oxford Entrance exam. She also writes of her active support of Edward to be allowed to enlist, over the fierce refusal of their father, and her early days at Somerville College, Oxford reading English Literature. She followed the war news intently and wrote to Edward and Roland, in particularly about each new development and the minutiae of their training. This correspondence is almost unique within the context of First World War primary sources, being published as *Letters from a Lost Generation – First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (1998). Vera Brittain did believe most firmly in the national myth of the 'lost generation,' the nature of which has been questioned by the

research of military historians in recent years, or as I think of them, the Bond School.

However with the confines of Vera Brittain's own restricted world-view and social conventions, the myth was a very harsh reality.

Vera Brittain's decision to become a VAD nurse and to be of practical service to people who needed these skills, was partly made because of the atmosphere around her but also because of her strong sense of duty. The tone of *Testament of Youth* becomes sorrowful, after the first death, the true realities of the war, its anguish and despair become real, not just for Vera Brittain but for many thousands of others.

Lieutenant Roland Leighton, 7th Worcesters, Vera Brittain's unofficial fiancé, died of wounds on the Western Front on 23rd December 1915. In 1916 she wrote to her brother Edward: 'If the War spares me, it will be my one aim to immortalise in a book the story of us four'.³ Lieutenant Victor Richardson MC, 9th Kings Royal Rifle Corps, was blinded at Vimy Ridge on 9th April 1917. Vera Brittain broke her service contract as a VAD nurse in Malta in order to return to London with the intention of offering to marry him, but Victor died of his wounds in June 1917. Her action was partly prompted by the death of Lieutenant Geoffrey Thurlow, 10th Sherwood Foresters, who was killed when attacking on the Scarpe on 23rd April 1917. Vera Brittain's only brother, Captain Edward Brittain MC, 11th Sherwood Foresters, was the last to be killed, while leading a counter-attack on the Italian front, 15th June 1918. Dr. John Bourne has written that 'After the war Vera Brittain became a pacifist and socialist, but during it she remained committed to an Allied victory, which alone could justify the losses she had suffered'.⁴

Vera Brittain returned to Somerville College, Oxford in April 1919, to read Modern History with a Special Topic in International Relations. She sought to understand the causes

of the First World War and its aftermath. She graduated in 1921 with a Second Class Honours Degree, and she established a home in London with her college friend Winifred Holtby. That September they toured Europe together and visited the graves of Roland and Edward.⁵

Testament of Youth follows Vera Brittain's very successful career as a political journalist and activist, writing for newspapers such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *Time and Tide* magazine on topics such as equal pay and married women's careers. Her support for the feminist Six Point Group, founded in 1922 by Lady [Margaret] Rhondda, and the changing economic and social status of women in British society is also discussed. Vera Brittain started to lecture for The League of Nations Union in 1922 at public meetings all over the country, and attended Summer Schools and League Assemblies in Geneva. In 1923 she published her first novel *The Dark Tide*, set in a women's Oxford College. In 1924 she published *Not Without Honour*, a novel which draws on the social manners of pre-war Buxton society, the same year she became a life-long Socialist and member of the Labour Party. *Testament of Youth* ends with Vera Brittain meeting her future husband, the political scientist George Catlin, named as G. in the text. He wrote Vera Brittain a fan letter after reading *The Dark Tide*, and they married in 1925, after which they moved to the United States so that G. could continue his academic career at Cornell University.

When *Testament of Youth* was published it received laudatory reviews from literary figures of the time such as Compton Mackenzie, and Storm Jameson, who wrote:

Its mere pressure on the mind and senses makes it unforgettable. The cumulative effect of these pages, on a contemporary, is indescribably troubling and exalting. To later generations... it must convey the weight and the nervous and spiritual excitement of an

experience which, though it only struck them a glancing blow, intimately concerns them.⁶

The general public's response to the book was reflected in its sales, all 5,000 copies of the May 1933 print run were sold out within one week, and by September 15,000 had been sold. On the first day of publication in the USA 11,000 copies were sold. *Testament of Youth* was to remain in print until the Second World War, with 120,000 copies being sold and twelve impressions being published in Great Britain alone.⁷ Toni and Valmai Holt have Vera Brittain as the only woman in their book of First World War poetry, *Violets from Overseas*, 'Vera Brittain is not included in this anthology as a mere "token women," but earns her place on several counts. Unlike many of the other published women poets of the Great War, she actually served in theatres of war as a V.A.D. She was literate and educated to an unusual degree for a girl of that period and a highly competent poet'.⁸

Vera Brittain published in August 1918 a slim volume of poems dedicated to Roland, one of them is entitled '*Vengeance is Mine; In Memory of the Sisters who died in the Great Air Raid Upon Hospitals at Etaples*', the last six lines refer to the terror of night-time bombing;

Shall they not answer, the foeman assailing us,
Women who suffer and women who die?
Who shall avenge us for anguish unnameable,
Rivers of scarlet and crosses of grey
Terror of night-time and blood-lust untameable,
Hate without pity where broken we lay?⁹
April 1918

Vera Brittain read the personal recollections and the novels of the First World War as they were published, for example she saw the first production of R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* in 1928. She lamented the lack of books being published by women about their experiences of the First World War, notable exceptions being Mary Lee's novel *It's a Great War* (1929) and Helena Zena Smith (the pen-name of Evadne Price) *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of the War* (1930). Vera Brittain started to write *Testament of Youth* in 1929, and on 21st February 1930 she wrote to *Time & Tide* magazine on the subject of women and war-books:

Sir -

Being a woman, and one who has both read and reviewed a considerable number of war-books, I should like to add further comment to A.D.'s letter in your issue of February 7th on the attitude of women toward war-books in general.... In several of the books – as in *Journey's End* – women do not appear at all; in nearly all others (*Death of a Hero* is an outstanding example) they are either morose or time-servers, parasites or prostitutes. At best they play the part of wives in Kingsley's *Three Fishers*, “giving” their husbands and sons, and weeping forlorn, unavailing tears. Rarely, if ever, is any description given of their active war-work; only occasionally is the existence of nurses, W.A.A.C.s or land-workers even mentioned, and then very often in an uncomplimentary sense... Mary Lee's gigantic novel, *It's a Great War*, seems to me to have been more unfairly treated by reviewers than any important book for a long time... I suggest, therefore, that women are not, as A.D. indicates, bored with war-books, but that their real interest has not yet been aroused. And it will not be aroused

until a war-book is published which removes the impression that one sex only played an active part in war, and one sex only experienced its deepest emotions.¹⁰

This letter was prompted by the review given by Cyril Falls in *War Books, A Critical Guide* (1930):

Novels by women with the "Great War" as a subject are not numerous. In the best of them the authors have wisely pictured events at home or at any rate far from the front. Miss Lee is more ambitious. But really, it is not the place of women to talk of mud; they may leave that to the men, who knew more about it and have not hesitated to tell us of it. Miss Lee's long book – a prize winner in America, by the way – is lively and exciting after a fashion, but not a very serious contribution to its subject. She is wholly mistaken in her notion that important books on the war must be written by women.¹¹

In a further letter to *Time & Tide* of 7th March 1930, Vera Brittain continued the discussion:

Sir -

Your correspondent... appears to have been rather unduly annoyed by my harmless and entirely speculative little letter on women and war books. Her objections to it – or to me – do not, however, seem to be altogether relevant... I am far from despising... the women who wept 'forlorn, unavailing tears' provided that this was not the only thing that they did. Most of us, both men and women shed such tears on occasions during the war – not because we thought them useful, but because we could not help ourselves. What I object to is the sentimentalization of women's suffering that was current both then and later, the idea (perpetuated in some of the war books) that, provided one was a female, merely to weep and suffer was somehow an active contribution to victory... Somehow, I regret to say, this idea of women's passive

suffering – because, I suppose, it is the traditional idea – seems to have captured the imagination of those more benevolent war-recorders who were not moved to a screeching bitterness by the war-time parasitism of women. Yet at each of the five hospitals in which I served at home and abroad for nearly four years, I have known women who thrust that fatal telegram into their pockets and carried on – not with any idea that such assumed callousness was ‘noble,’ but because it was, in the long run, the easiest way to bear the unbearable. I cannot see that I have in any way disparaged the men who fought in the trenches by my suggestion that the women who thus preferred active work to inanimate grief have so far been inadequately portrayed.¹²

Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle in their excellent edited volume *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (1996) have brought many sources of First World War writing together from all sides, enabling a greater understanding of the authors’ feelings and motives. This provides a context in which *Testament of Youth* can be viewed against its exact contemporaries. However a number of military historians have misunderstood Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which is NOT a pacifist text, nor an anti-war book. She did not become a convinced pacifist until 1937, four years after its publication.

Professor Gerard De Groot in his book *Blighty* (1996) is very antagonistic to both Vera Brittain and *Testament of Youth*. While quoting extensively from the text, he describes the nurses of the First World War in the following terms:

A large number of women, Vera Brittain notable among them salved their frustrations by becoming nurses, predominantly in the Volunteer Aid Detachment. Their contribution was undoubtedly significant but it is still reinforced the traditional female

role of carers. And strict rules determined where women were allowed to do nursing.

Most were not allowed anywhere near the fighting front.¹³

Vera Brittain published an article in *The Manchester Guardian* on 22nd May 1930, following public fears about nurses' morals when on active service, entitled 'The Real V.A.D.: From Fancy Back to Fact':

The full-fledged member of a Voluntary Aid Detachment, complete with first-aid and home nursing certificates and the experience of preliminary weeks of training in a civilian hospital, who passed (for the magnificent salary of £20 a year, plus £2 for uniform) entirely under the control of the Army Nursing Service, renewed her contract every six months, and was liable in the same way as an R.A.M.C. orderly to military orders involving either home or foreign service... The majority of V.A.D.s were, like myself, very young and quite unsophisticated. When we first joined up our chief preoccupation was the fear of being turned down for incompetence after the month trial with which every voluntary nurse's army career began. Disturbed far more by the unfamiliarity of our duties than by sex complications, we were childish and ardently conscientious; inspired by a pathetically high patriotic idealism, we had a touching faith in the righteousness of our cause and the disinterested Olympian virtue of such war-time leaders as French, Jellicoe, Foch and Mr. Lloyd George. This type of mentality may be consistent with nervous over-exertion and unnecessary self-sacrifice, but it is quite incompatible with emotional orgies and physical excess.¹⁴

Professor De Groot continues that 'Excessive attention has been given to the war experiences of young middle class women'.¹⁵ In this view he is correct; in recent years many more accounts of working-class women's experiences have been published, for example Claire

Tylee's *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (1990), and Deborah Thom's *Nice Girls and Rude Girls* (1998). The majority of working-class women were employed in the expanding (after March 1915) armaments industry. These women lived at home or in local hostels and so produced very few written records. The writer Sylvia Townsend Warner, an exact contemporary of Vera Brittain's, answered an advertisement in 1915 for 'lady-workers' at Vickers factory in Erith, a district on the banks of the Thames in South London. The pamphlet she received included the advice that 'low-heeled shoes are advisable, and evening dress is not necessary'.¹⁶ But the blunt fact does remain that only single middle-class women could afford to volunteer as full-time nurses, and they produced the letters, diaries and books of their war service. These form the backbone of the many local and national archive collections, not least that held at The Imperial War Museum in London. Vera Brittain never claimed to be other than middle-class, and *Testament of Youth's* success reflects the fact that she WAS typical, the very embodiment of many women who served as VADs.

Professor Jay Winter refers to Vera Brittain's social status in a recent interview published on the Internet in the following terms; 'Vera Brittain was very much the daughter of an upper middle class family whose sons were recruited into the officer corps in the British Army... And Vera Brittain's entire male company, her social world was stripped from her because of her social situation, where she was and who she was'.¹⁷ The wives, sisters and daughters of these men had no means to have their voices heard in public, but Vera Brittain could articulate and personify in writing their motives and emotions, making them accessible to a readership which was seeking both information and understanding. Professor De Groot describes Vera Brittain and *Testament of Youth* in the following terms:

Vera Brittain, egotist, elitist, mistress of self-pity and principal spokeswoman for the Lost Generation, described male survivors of the war as ‘fussy, futile, avid, ineffectual. They wallowed in nauseating sentimentality and hadn’t the brains of an ear-wig, simply provided one proof after another that the best of their sex has disappeared from a whole generation’. (As regards sentimentality, one can only conclude that is a fine example of the pot calling the kettle black.)¹⁸

The actual passage, from which he quotes selectively, is in full:

The various men, I thought bitterly, with whom I had come into contact since the War men who were married already but enjoyed making use of my company for a little romantic diversion, men who imagined that I could be tempted by wealth and promises of financial support in politics, middle-aged men who were fussy and futile, elderly men whose avid eyes looked upon me with a narrow, appraising stare, young men who were ardent but ineffectual, men of all ages who wallowed in nauseating sentimentality and hadn’t the brains of an earwig – simply provided one proof after another that the best of their sex had disappeared from a whole generation.¹⁹

The context of this passage is also very important: Vera Brittain had just received, in June 1923, a visitors-card from G. her future husband, introducing himself as a fellow student from Oxford and inviting her to tea with him on the river. She threw the card of this ‘impertinent young man’ into the wastepaper basket, and in the passage quoted above is recalling past romantic trysts.²⁰

In an article of 26th July 1996, published in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, Professor De Groot asserts that Vera Brittain was a member of the movement against Field Marshal Earl Haig after his death in 1928:

The reaction against Haig was a post-1928 and largely middle-class phenomenon. As the years passed, sections of the middle class began to feel shame over what they saw as a betrayal of trust by Haig. This upsurge of remorse was fuelled by disillusioned war poets, by anguished writers like Vera Brittain.²¹

Again this seriously misrepresents Vera Brittain's actual views. On 3rd February 1928, the day of Haig's death, Vera Brittain had an article published in *The Manchester Guardian* entitled 'Our Backs to the Wall - A Memory of War' in which she paid tribute to Haig's Special Order of the Day of April 1918:

Standing there, with our weariness and our hunger strangely diminished, we read the words which put into so many whose need of endurance was so much greater than ours... Most of those who were reading, at any rate among the V.A.D.s belonged to that generation which had grown into womanhood with a scorn of showing its feelings and a reluctance to admit even their existence; but fatigue had made us vulnerable to emotion, and we left the notice-board fired with a tearful and growing determination. Whatever our private views about the war, we were then in the midst of it and individuals – whether fighters or merely workers – who are faced with the alternatives of resistance and collapse, seldom stop to argue the merits of the case until afterwards. No doubt we were all mad, and a noble madness is the most dangerous form of insanity; the fact remains that it was nobility at which we aimed, and nobility that Lord Haig's order enabled us for the time to achieve.²²

In *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933, Vera Brittain again refers to this Special Order:

[T]he publication of official 'revelations' has stripped from the Haig myth much of its glory, I have never been able to visualise Lord Haig as the colossal blunderer, the self-

deceived optimist, of the Somme massacre in 1916. I can think of him only as the author of that Special Order, for after I had read it I knew that I should go on, whether I could or not. There was a braver spirit in the hospital that afternoon, and though we only referred briefly and brusquely to Haig's message, each one of us had made up her mind that, though enemy airmen blew up our huts and the Germans advanced upon us from Abbeville, so long as wounded men remained in Etaples, there would be 'no retirement'.²³

Testament of Youth is no more an anti-war book than any other first-hand account of the First World War, and well deserves its status as an accepted text within the established literary canon on the subject. The experience of being a VAD influenced and stayed with Vera Brittain for the rest of her life. She and George Warbuton Sizer, Hull Vice-Chairman of the British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association, co-wrote a book called *Long Shadows* in 1958. This was a semi-autobiographical novel of his experiences of physical disablement, after losing a leg in the First World War. In this novel Vera Brittain describes the reaction of wounded servicemen to VAD nurses in general:

She well knew the dread she inspired. She had saved many lives, but she was always the giver of pain. This was the damnable part of the job. The doctors – they didn't know the half of it. They were not in hourly contact with the pus, with the pain and the stinks.²⁴

Professor Ian Beckett in his respected book *The Great War* (2001) claims *Testament of Youth*; 'fits well into the pattern of anti-war books and assisted in establishing 1st July as a symbol of tragedy'.²⁵ In fact, Vera Brittain wrote very little about the Somme in *Testament of Youth*. The Somme and its aftermath is dealt with on pages 274-289, which mostly discuss her brother

Edward and his experiences of the morning of the 1st July 1916. He was wounded, first in the thigh and then by a shell splinter in the arm, when leading his men twice over the parapet and into no-man's-land for about seventy yards. He crawled into a shell-hole and was later joined to two other wounded soldiers, later he dragged himself back to the British lines, was picked up by stretcher-bearers and directed them to his companions in the shell-hole. For this very brave act he was awarded the MC, for 'conspicuous gallantry and leadership'. Vera Brittain's own war diary, on which *Testament of Youth* is based, has brief entries for 1st, 3rd, 4th and 5th July, and then nothing until the end of August, due no doubt to the pressure of work.²⁶ It was the 3rd Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), which began on 31st July 1917 and lasted well into November, which Vera Brittain writes about with some emotion:

I was now quite hardened to living and working on my feet; only a very exceptional 'push' made bones and muscles ache as they had ached after the Somme. As for the wounds I was growing accustomed to them; most of us, at that stage, possessed a kind of psychological shutter which we firmly closed down upon our recollections of the daily agony whenever there was time to think.²⁷

Vera Brittain was working at the time at the 24th General at Etaples in a surgical hut, nursing British and German wounded. She writes about the views of Pacifists in *Testament of Youth*, and states that the central problem for Pacifists is overcoming the general public's reaction to war, 'this glamour, this magic, this incomparable keying up of the spirit in a time of mortal conflict'.²⁸ However she refutes with some force the claim of Pacifists; 'that war creates more criminals than heroes,'²⁹ replying 'that war while it lasts, does produce heroism to a far greater extent than it brutalises'.³⁰ In *Testament of Youth* she wrote:

I have heard, as yet, very little of the bitter tale of pacifism during the War – the Union of Democratic Control, with its interrupted meetings and police-raided offices; the imprisonment of E.D. Morel; the removal of Bertrand Russell from his post at Cambridge; the persecution and humiliation of conscientious objectors – but I had already started on the road which was ultimately to lead me to association with the group that accepted internationalism as a creed.³¹

The group was the League of Nations Union, she wrote in *Testament of Youth*:

I'm so glad I did 'International Relations,' glad I am lecturing on them now, though in ever such a small way, glad to do anything, however small, to make people care for the peace of the world. It may be Utopian, but it's constructive. It's better than railing at the present state of Europe, or always weeping in the dark for the dead.³²

Vera Brittain believed at the time in a political means to prevent war, collective security as offered by the League of Nations, which she had supported since its inception in 1919 and for which she lectured from 1922 with the League of Nations Union.

Vera Brittain contributed a chapter entitled 'Peace and the Public Mind' in a book called *Challenge to Death* (1934), in which she discusses the use of propaganda and its effect on public opinion, 'In wartime only half the truth is ever told; the enemy's virtues and our own vices are alike omitted. To allow a detestation of Fascism to drive this fact from our minds is to find ourselves already half-way to a new war mentality'.³³ She praised the League of Nations Union and peace organisations in their efforts to prevent another war. She suggests that, 'the practical alternative does not lie between national war and unilateral disarmament, but between national and international control over the means of defence'. This was to be achieved by the creation of 'An international police force... for some distinguished pacifists it

is certainly not direct enough – but many peace-workers closely in touch with public opinion accept it as the only effective method of arresting a new race in armaments'.³⁴ She concluded that more women and young people should be involved in politics and that writers have a particular part to play in the process of peace. She insisted that their central role should be 'To assist in the creation of that state of mind is the first obligation of all those whose pens and voices have any authority over public opinion to-day'.³⁵

Vera Brittain was active in a number of peace groups, but did not have direct contact with Pacifist circles until June 1936, when she spoke at the Dorchester Rally at the invitation of Canon Dick Sheppard of St. Martins-in-the Field and founder of the Peace Pledge Union. In a recent biography, *Vera Brittain – A Life* (1995) by Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, her views on Pacifism are set out in the following terms:

Christianity, though 'apparently unattainable,' was the only commonsense left and the only condition of survival. But she interpreted Christian pacifism, as espoused by Sheppard and his followers, as a state of mind, offering a 'revolutionary principle' ultimately rooted in Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a constructive policy which could provide an alternative to war.³⁶

Only in September 1936 did Vera Brittain start to re-consider the question of Pacifism, after being heckled by members of the PPU, at League of Nation Union meetings, and it was only after reading Bertrand Russell's *Which Way to Peace?* (1936), which concludes 'modern war is practically certain to have worse consequences than even the most unjust peace,' that she become an uncompromising Pacifist. She resigned from the League of Nations Union, believing that 'It had become a mere French-dominated instrument for continuing the unjust status quo, set up at Versailles, of which Hitler was the appalling consequence'.³⁷

On the 13th January 1937, Vera Brittain shared a platform with Siegfried Sassoon, a Sponsor of the Peace Pledge Union, and very shortly she became a Sponsor herself. From this point on Vera Brittain was a 'high pacifist: a person who does not accept military or violent intervention under any circumstances' a term used by Yvonne Bennett in her thesis *Testament of a Minority in Wartime*, awarded in 1984. After Dick Sheppard's death in October 1937, divisions within the Peace Pledge Union became apparent, in particular the religiously inspired members and the highly politically conscious groups could not agree on a fixed policy. Yvonne Bennett remarks:

Brittain was herself a politically minded pacifist, although like many in the Union, her religious sense grew deeper during the war. At no time, however, did she lose her belief in the validity of activism and the possibility of co-operative action with non-pacifists.³⁸

In 1942 Vera Brittain wrote *Humiliation with Honour*, in which she tried to define her Pacifism:

Pacifism is nothing other than a belief in the ultimate transcendence of love over power. This belief comes from an inward assurance. It is untouched by logic and beyond argument - though there are many arguments both for and against it. And each person's assurance is individual; his inspiration cannot arise from another's reasons, nor can its authority be quenched by another's scepticism.³⁹

Vera Brittain's close friend Storm Jameson and fellow Sponsor, who resigned from the Peace Pledge Union in September 1938 said of its members, 'awfully respectable... such good people – but they didn't know much about life'.⁴⁰

In a recent book entitled *Men, Women & War* (2001) Professor Martin Van Creveld, cites Vera Brittain as an enthusiastic supporter of the outbreak of the First World War on 4th August 1914. He writes that she regretted that she could not fight on the front-line: ‘the subsequent pacifist Vera Brittain, expressed her fear lest “our bungling government” would remain neutral and “desperately wished” she were a man so she could “play that Great Game with Death”’.⁴¹ After checking the references given by Van Creveld, I contacted the Vera Brittain Archive, which is held at McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada and where I undertook my primary PhD research in November 1999. They faxed back a letter written from Vera Brittain to her brother Edward, dated 19th February 1916:

My Dearest Edward,

I received your most interesting letter written on the 16th Feb this morning, which was quite quick; Roland’s nearly always took longer – It quite thrilled me to read it, just as when I read his first letter from the trenches it made me wish desperately that I were a man and could train myself to play that “Great Game with Death” – I wish it were my obvious duty to “Go and live in a ditch” as Roland called it. But you roused my interest and curiosity very much. I want immensely to know what it was about the trenches that surprised you so. Couldn’t you write to me more fully & explicitly & not censor it yourself? I should imagine that censoring your letters must make you almost over conscientious. I know it would me. Roland, I remember, when He wrote long explanatory letters, censored by someone else, and I don’t remember anything ever being cut out. I want to know, too, exactly what it all looks like before you actually step into the trench. Is it just two rows of ditches & nothing more – or are their ruins of

things about? And are there always a lot of shells & things bursting, like you see in Punch cartoons?⁴²

Vera Brittain is in fact quoting back to Edward in 1916 a letter from 1914, written by Roland. This letter is four pages long, and she is clearly seeking information about the conditions in which her brother is now living and in which her fiancé died. My only comment of this misuse of primary sources is that it is distortion of the facts, and that it falls well below the normal academic standard.

Vera Brittain gave a lecture at the Royal Society of Literature entitled 'Literary Testaments' in December 1960, which was published:

I was present when Mr. Edward Blunden, the poet who wrote the distinguished memoir *Undertones of War*, took the chair at a lecture on autobiography. He began by saying that the previous night he had dreamed of himself looking up the word "autobiography" in the Oxford Dictionary, and finding beneath it "See Fiction" So he looked up "Fiction" and found "Autobiography".⁴³

She continues:

[S]ome of the literary testaments of this century are likely to retain their interest for posterity, not because they represent the work of official personalities on pedestals, but because they are the recourse of ordinary men and women who happened to live in an age of stupendous change.⁴⁴

Testament of Youth was re-issued by Virago Press in 1978; a BBC television production was first broadcast in November 1979, has been repeated twice since then, and was released as a video in the spring of 2000. Roger Smither discusses in detail the importance of "television history" as both an event in itself and as a means by which cultural history is

absorbed and understood by audiences and its importance to the research and study of history.⁴⁵ *Testament of Youth* is still important today, because it is on the history syllabus of the English and Welsh National School Curriculum since its introduction in 1990. For many young people this may be the only book they read about the First World War. Hence it is essential that it is studied and understood in the social and political context in which it was written.

The very success of *Testament of Youth* is now obscuring everything else which Vera Brittain did in her long and productive life. Her literary output was considerable and in part this explains the many diverse texts and references to her writings. Vera Brittain published 29 books – she undertook the roles of poet, novelist, bibliographer, social researcher and editor – as a journalist she published over 1,000 newspaper and magazine articles, many of which were in the international press and read around the world. Her experiences of the First World War led directly to her development as a Pacifist, and her actions during and after the Second World War. Hilary Bailey in her book, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth* (1987) has drawn a very fine pen-portrait of the spirit of Vera Brittain at this time:

The vision of this small, middle-aged woman standing, for a second time, in the ruins created by war, doing something practical, readying herself to write about it so that other people could know what it was like, is not just impressive, but very touching. Her determination, resolution, sheer physical courage and her insistence on bearing witness to what happened – those are the qualities she perhaps never valued sufficiently in herself, but they are the qualities for which we most remember her.⁴⁶

This duality in Vera Brittain's life has caused confusion, both with the general public and some military historians even misrepresenting her views. This is dangerous and unfair, not least because the topic of women and warfare has a long and very distinguished academic history, as cultivated by Professor Arthur Marwick in his seminal book *The Deluge* (1965) and other texts.

I hope my own PhD, entitled *The Political Thought of Vera Brittain*, will break through some of the puzzlement and at times open hostility to Vera Brittain's life and work. I have sought to place Vera Brittain within the social and political context of her time, in part by studying and understanding military history.

NOTES

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22. Vera Brittain, article 'Our Backs to the Wall – A Memory of the War' 3 Feb. 1928, *The Manchester Guardian* G92. (VBA)
23. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 420.
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28. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 291.
29. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 369.
30. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 370.
31. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 473.
32. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 539.
33. Vera Brittain 'Peace and the Public Mind' in Philip Baker, et al. *Challenge to Death* (London: Constable, 1934), pp. 40-66.
34. Brittain in Baker, *Challenge to Death*, p. 55.
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36. Berry & Bostridge, *Vera Brittain*, p. 356.
37. Berry & Bostridge, *Vera Brittain* p. 357.

38. Yvonne Bennett, *Testament of a Minority in Wartime: The Peace Pledge Union and Vera Brittain 1939-1945*, PhD thesis awarded in 1984, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada, pp. 35-6.
39. Vera Brittain, *Humiliation With Honour* (London: Andrew Drakes, 1942) p. 8.
40. Bennett, *Testament of a Minority in Wartime*, p. 175.
41. Martin Van Creveld, *Men, Women & War: Do Women Belong in the Front Line?* (London: Cassel, 2001) p. 22.
42. Vera Brittain to Edward Brittain letter 19 Feb. 1916 (VBA)
43. L. P. Hartley, (ed.) *Essays by Divers Hands* Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature New Series Vol. XXXIV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) p. 21.
44. Hartley, *Essays by Divers Hands* pp. 34-35.
45. Roger Smither, 'Why is So Much Television History about War?' in David Cannadine (ed.) *History and the Media* (Palgrave, Basingstoke: 2002) p. 63.
46. Hilary Bailey, *Vera Brittain: The Story of the Woman Who Wrote Testament of Youth* (London: Penguin, 1987) p. 117.

APPENDIX G
CONFERENCES ATTENDED AS PART OF
THE RESEARCH FOR THIS THESIS

1. **'The 1914-1918 Commemoration Conference - The War Experienced'** held by the University of Leeds by the Liddle Collection, 7th-10th September 1994.
2. **'Women in Britain and Europe 1939-1994'** held by the University of Luton, 25th February 1995.
3. **'Vera Brittain – Love and War in the Twentieth Century'** gallery talk and book launch by Mark Bostridge, held by the Imperial War Museum, 15th November 1995.
4. **'Airpower – Theory and Practice'** held by the British Commission for Military History at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, 13th April 1996.
5. **'Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement'** held by the Galton Institute for the Study of Biology and Society, London, 26th September 1996
6. **'Gendering History – War and Gender'** held by York University, 27th-28th September 1996.

7. **'War Literature: Its Relevance for the Military Historian'** held by the British Commission for Military History at De Montfort University, Bedford, 12th October 1996.
8. **'Official Histories: Problems, Limitations, Values'** held by the British Commission for Military History at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, 3rd May 1997.
9. **'Unit Histories: Problems, Limitations, Values'** held by the British Commission for Military History at Chester College, Liverpool University, 11th-13th July 1997.
10. **'The Literature of the 1930s: Visions and Revisions'** held by Anglia Polytechnic University, 29th November 1997 – of particular interest was the paper by Professor Marion Shaw 'Why War?: Interbellum Writings on the Gendering of Conflict'.
11. **'British International Studies Association (BISA) 22nd Annual Conference'** held by Leeds University, 15th-17th December 1997 – in particular a selection of sessions on Feminism and International Ethics, and Gender and International Relations Theory. The plenary session was given by Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain entitled 'Women and War Ten Years On'.
12. **'Winifred Holtby 1898-1935 Centenary Celebrations'** held at Hull Central Library, 23rd July 1998 – in particular papers by Mark Bostridge, 'A wonderful

friendship: Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain' and Professor Marion Shaw,
'Writing a Life of Winifred Holtby'.

13. **'The Battle of Britain Conference'** held by the University of Edinburgh Centre for Second World War Studies, 18th-19th September 1998.
14. **'Sir Douglas Haig: 70 Years On (1928-1998)'** held by the Imperial War Museum, 26th September 1998.
15. **'The Special Operations Executive (SOE)'** held by the Imperial War Museum, 27th-29th October 1998.
16. **'Women and the Great War'** gallery talk and book launch by Joyce Marlow held by the Imperial War Museum, 30th October 1998.
17. **'Representations of RAF Bomber Command on Film from the War to the Present'** Military History Seminar held at King's College London, 23rd March 1999.
18. **'The Battle of France and Flanders, 1940: Sixty Years On'** held by the British Commission for Military History in association with ISWAS, De Montford University, Bedford, 7th-9th July 2000.

19. **'The Literature of the 1930s: The Text in History'** held by Anglia Polytechnic University, 18th November 2000.
20. **'Bonhoffer paper'** held at RMA Sandhurst, 23rd September 2002.
21. **'Hysterical Fictions: Women, History and Authorship'** held by University of Wales, Swansea, 5th-9th August 2003.
22. **'The Great War Fighting Fronts, Home Fronts, Memory and Legacy'** held by University of Kent, 15th December 2003.
23. **'The Future of the First World War'** held by Queen Mary College University of London, 4th June 2005.

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Winifred Holtby Archive: The Central Library, Hull

Innes Donation, Imperial War Museum

George Orwell Archive: University College, London

Marie Stopes Archive (1): The British Library, London

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