

## *Manchester College, Oxford during the First World War*

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Seeking information about the impact of the First World War on the life of Manchester College, Oxford with the help of the Library staff I have examined College yearbooks in the archives, starting from 1913. If I had expected hints and portents of impending war, I would certainly have found none. It appeared that those sun-drenched, tranquil Edwardian afternoons still held sway. The First World War crept up on most people – even in Oxford – unawares. It was evident from my reading that most were unprepared in every way, not least emotionally, for what was to come.

An early indication appears in the minutes of the meeting of the College's General Committee of 12<sup>th</sup> October 1914: a somewhat petulant note that Sturger, an under-porter, had enlisted for military service, causing additional duties to fall on Cox, the Head Porter. But the Committee approved an invitation to Dr Gilbert Slater, of Ruskin College, to deliver a course of lectures on Peace and War. This was perhaps the result of a personal initiative of Dr Carpenter, Principal of MCO from 1906 to 1915, who had a special concern for the cause of international peace. In 1912 he had addressed the National Peace Conference at Westminster, and in the post-war years he was an ardent supporter of the League of Nations.

At the same meeting it was noted that first-year student M. P. Evans had been granted leave of absence, as he too had enlisted. Another student, Norman McGee, joined the Officer Training Corps and was later noted to have failed his exams, which led to his bursary being discontinued. However, the Committee minutes of 18<sup>th</sup> January 1915 note that Rev Henry Gow had written to tell McGee that the College would give favourable consideration to his eventual re-admission.

Although conscription had yet to be introduced, as the months went by greater numbers of students and staff were departing for war-related reasons. Students were more routinely told that their re-entry to College would be favourably considered, and the recently appointed Librarian, Lachlan Macrae, took a commission, with the

Committee's approval, as a Lieutenant in the Cameron Highlanders for the duration of the war; D. C. Simpson, the Professor of New Testament and Hebrew, was appointed to serve as Acting Librarian in his absence.

Also at this time, the building of the Arlosh Hall reached completion (at a cost of £11,100), but its official opening, together with the presentation of a portrait of the retiring Principal, Dr Carpenter, was to be postponed "until the end of the war".

Among the students who enlisted or undertook non-combatant activities in the first years of the war were Mr Arundel and Victor Fox (Royal Army Medical Corps). Miss Crook (one of the few women students) applied to join a relief unit organised by the Society of Friends, helping in the shattered villages behind the French lines in Marne et Meuse. J. L. Gerrard was granted leave to assist in the tracing of missing and wounded soldiers in France. It was also noted at this time that a Hungarian student, Mr Kish, had applied to enlist but had been interned (although he later returned to the College).

Financial hardship for the working classes had preceded the war and was now apparent to the extent that some would-be young soldiers were deemed physically unfit to serve. As wartime conditions took hold, the Committee noted a general increase in the cost of food and rents, and when Head Porter Cox enlisted, the Committee agreed to award his mother 10 shillings per week throughout his period of service.

### **L.P. Jacks**

By the beginning of 1916 the severity of the war situation was becoming overwhelmingly apparent. The new Principal, Dr L. P. Jacks, had two sons fighting at the front. The death of the son of the Principal of Mansfield College (next door) was reported fulsomely, with heartfelt expressions of sympathy and respect. It seemed that the denizens of the dreaming spires were about to confront the full reality of grief ...

By 1916/17 the mild indignation occasioned by the enlistment of a College under-porter was compounded across Oxford, and the city was described as "ghostlike" in the absence of the annual influx of young men, now gone to war.

With the eventual advent of conscription in April 1917, regulations decreed that all men of military age (including students) should be liable for service. The Principal, however, wished Manchester College to remain open, to allow remaining students to complete their courses, with the proviso that exemption certificates should not be used to evade military service. The College was at this time under threat of closure, or of being taken over for use as a military hospital.

Meanwhile, the Committee decided at various times to donate 100 guineas to the Emergency Relief Fund, and a further £25 to the Mansfield College fund for wounded soldiers. On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917, the General Committee sent expressions of deep sympathy to Mr and Mrs Leigh, whose son had been killed in action in France.

Two courses of lectures, of presumably particular relevance, were arranged: one by the Dean of St Paul's on *The Pilgrimage of the Soul; The Good and Evil of the World; and Eternal Life*. Perhaps even more relevant was the other course, given by the Master of Balliol (Arthur Smith) on *Educational Reconstruction; Industrial Reconstruction; and A Realisable Social Ideal*.

As the war progressed, differing opinions began to emerge in the general population, and also in academic and religious circles. It is probably the case that in Anglican and non-conformist denominations, as in the general populace, the War had the effect of exaggerating religious doubts which had already spread to British shores from continental Europe: the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of Matthew Arnold's sea of faith (expressed in his poem *Dover Beach*). This was partly the case at MCO, in that the staff were on the whole more bellicose than the students, whose doubts were expressed in the form of pacifist and anti-war scruples. L.P. Jacks, the Principal, who was of the former persuasion, emphasised that National Service was the first duty of all students.

## **Officer Cadet Club**

By 1917 the College had five remaining full-time students and 14 trained ministers attending courses, but soon afterwards the Residence was taken over as an extension of hospital facilities in Oxford, for which the military authorities agreed to pay £150 in compensation. A little later an application was received for another part of the College to be taken over for use as an Officer Cadet Club, providing some form of refuge for young soldiers, on the basis of educational need and the general difficulties of travel in war time.

Anticipating the occupation of the Residence by 200–400 people, it was decided that catering and canteen facilities would be managed by the existing cook and college servants. Carpets were taken up and stored, and floors and woodwork protected.

By March 1918 a generally tentative and tenuous situation seemed to prevail; arrangements were made for a Ministers' School, but not until the autumn. It was noted that Mr M. P. Evans would be unlikely to return to take up his former post, since he was permanently to retain his commission and was en route to India. The uncertainty of the situation persisted until October 1918, and beyond the Armistice to December. There was mention of closure, and doubts were still expressed about the future of the College. The Cadets' Club was to continue for at least a further six months, with "open financial arrangements" and no information about when the Residence might be vacated.

In his address to the Committee, Dr. A. H. Worthington asserted that in the post-war world ministers trained in the atmosphere of free religion were of supreme importance in bringing life and hope and peace into the hearts of men.