

The Prison Diary of A C Barrington: Dissent and conformity in wartime New Zealand

Written by John Pratt

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In October 1940, the Christian Pacifist Society, New Zealand's most assertive pacifist group before and during the early days of the Second World War, underwent a crisis of confidence. In light of the Fraser Government's ever-tightening crackdown on dissent, members at its annual meeting were split among those who wished to retreat into a quietist 'peace-making' organisation, not challenging the government over its deepening intransigence against pacifists (including the possibility that the CPS itself be banned as a 'subversive' organisation) or a 'war-opposing' organisation dedicated to continuing its vigorous and public pursuit of its Christian witness against war. Probably owing to the mana of the society's leader, Rev Ormond Burton, who along with A C Barrington had founded the CPS in 1936, the latter group won the debate by two votes.

Consequently, numbers of this group organised a speaking roster every Friday night in Wellington's Pigeon Park between March and June 1941, knowing by then that under the latest and toughest bout of Emergency legislation, each participant would be arrested and imprisoned. Barrington's turn came on 21 March. He was pulled down off the rostrum after less than a minute by no less a person than Chief Superintendent C W Lopdell, head of the Wellington Police District. Later, considered a ringleader in this 'crime', he was effectively tried and imprisoned twice. In the Magistrates Court, he received three months for 'obstructing a constable' and then in the Supreme Court he received the maximum 12-months sentence on two charges-the first 'for holding, or attempting to hold a prohibited meeting'-and secondly for 'publishing or attempting to publishing a subversive document'-in his case a written cyclostyled sheet advertising this meeting. His sentence reflected an institutional commitment to stifling any wartime discord. Chief Justice Sir Michael Myers, presiding, inferred that Barrington was 'dangerous', calling him 'able, but conceited and arrogant.'¹

These circumstances led Barrington, unbeknown to anybody else, to keep an illicit and comprehensive diary during his time in Mt Crawford Prison. Many years later, his son John, a retired educationist from Victoria University, chanced upon this diary while perusing his father's papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library, written in the margins of two religious texts which he had kept in his prison cell, and where it was unlikely to be discovered and confiscated by the prison authorities. John Barrington photocopied the relevant pages and with his sister Janet transcribed and typed the diary before giving it to John Pratt, professor of criminology at Victoria University. Pratt was enthusiastic when he learned of the diary and its contents. He expressed a strong desire to write a book, not only to assess the diary in its own right as such documents are exceptionally rare in New Zealand but also to extrapolate the human story in two ways; a discussion of prison conditions alongside penal policies and their changes before, during and after Barrington's time, and more broadly, a discussion of New Zealand society to try to uncover what caused the intolerances that Barrington and others suffered as non-conformists before and during the Second World War.

The intuitive insights that Barrington elucidates in his diary afforded Pratt the confidence to embark on both of these journeys. He presents his information thematically rather than chronologically and this allows him to explore Barrington's activities in the prison and his acutely held observations on both prison practices and those individuals with whom he had

close connection. Pratt's investigation is multi-faceted. Following introductory chapters and sub-chapters on the anti-war groups during the war and their treatment (in comparison with their kin in the other allied countries) and Barrington and his fellow Christian pacifists, he embarks on a discussion of penal practice in New Zealand between the wars, and later, highlighting the changes through the war and afterwards.

From information in the diary, Pratt discusses the prison's facilities, the cells, bedding, the library, exercise yard, common room, the regulations, security, clothing and visits. He comments upon and analyses Barrington's observations about the rules and the inconsistency of their enforcement, the punishment cells, the food, his and others' health, the work (in particular the farming practices where Barrington mostly worked), the superintendent and the warders, the Prison Boards (the forerunner of today's Parole Boards), the inmates (the criminals and the war dissenters) and the impact of prison upon him.

There is both liberality and illiberalism in the information that emerges, some of it surprising. Among the former was the decision to split the pacifist prisoners from the 'mainstream' so that they were able to develop their own culture. They were allowed to hold religious ceremonies, discussion groups, chess games. Ormond Burton was allowed his own library. In comparison with today, prisons were run informally; there was less scrutiny of prisoners, gangs and prisoners with drugs and alcohol issues were a rarity and the two sex offenders mixed with the others without rancour. Unlike today, the Prisons Board arrived to discuss a prisoners' potential early release which seems to have been granted, dependent on how long he had been there and, more importantly, how well he was able to impress the board during an interview. What also shines through was Barrington's lack of rancour towards his captors. He even exhibited his Christian compassion to an imprisoned soldier who had pulled him off the rostrum during one of his earlier street-speaking attempts in Pigeon Park.

Unlike many modern prisons, violence was rare. The only case of savagery Barrington recorded was of a prisoner, Parsons (in jail, nonsensically, for failing to enrol for military conscription), being beaten by the chief warder, a bully, in contrast to his underlings whom Barrington recorded as being relatively congenial. This is the book's most remarkable revelation. The incident caused an extraordinary furore, reaching all the way to parliament after Burton and others made a written complaint to the superintendent. This, alongside the assault becoming public knowledge, caused three Cabinet Ministers, acting Prime Minister Walter Nash, Minister of Defence Fred Jones, and Minister of Prisons Rex Mason, to visit the prison to investigate. Barrington believes they ordered the superintendent to hold an official enquiry into Pratt's assault which he did, although nothing seems to have come of it. The questions remain as to why the Government ministers were so concerned as to become involved directly in a prison assault.

Pratt argues convincingly that the Government was so determined the country move forward together in pursuit of the war, that disruptions like this needed to be clamped down upon so as to maintain the consensus of uniformity. Hence Parsons, the 'rebel', was perceived to be 'as hazardous' during this time of stress as the Christian pacifist street speakers. Stringent censorship regulations were by then in place banning any criticism of the war and conscription. It was noteworthy that Nash, and to a lesser extent Mason, were among the very few politicians who became concerned about the civil liberties of wartime dissenters.

The illiberalism in prison during Barrington's time, as he recorded it, was primarily its 'military' nature which led to nonsensical rules. For example, there was the requirement that

all prisoners salute the superintendent and the doctor every time they meet them. Inmates were not allowed to wear overcoats, even when prisoners were working in the garden during winter. The last chapter is climactic, and in many respects the most important. Some might argue that a discussion of the narrow-mindedness of the New Zealand Labour Government led by Peter Fraser in cracking down on dissent in this war, in comparison with the relative liberality of the attitude of the governments of Great Britain, Australia and Canada, is a stretch too far from the earlier dialogue based around one person's diary. Yet within the sequence of Pratt's extrapolation, the transition appears seamless. This was a book about war dissent after all.

Alongside the six pacifist street-speaking prisoners, there were four other prisoners incarcerated for anti-war 'offences': the aforementioned Parsons, and a second defaulter, Price, in jail for a remarkable two years for the same offence, probably, as Barrington surmises, because he had 'done time' before. There were also two Communists, Sid Harrison (imprisoned because he had copies of the banned *Peoples' Voice* in his possession) and James Kelman, a Wellington hairdresser jailed for 12 months for sedition for publishing a pamphlet complaining about the forced deportation of a British-born anti-conscription activist.

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Pratt adds potency to the now well established argument of New Zealand's intolerance and heavy-handedness towards wartime dissenters. He argues that the intolerance was not a wartime 'aberration' but one episode in a long history of intolerance and repression in this country. While for many observers it lacked distinction in contrast to the old country from where the great majority of its immigrants arrived, this homogeneity was also its downfall. Successive administrations feared change and the populace respected that historically; this conformity led to high levels of informal and formal suppression of difference. Nowhere better is that expressed in this State's historical attitude towards Chinese who were forced to pay a debilitating poll-tax before a select few of them were allowed to settle in this country.

Pratt drew on wide sources to sustain and expand this argument and it is persuasive. The deep irony of course about what he writes, and what I have also written, was that our 'love' of Great Britain, the mother country, and all that it stood for, was selective when it came to wartime expression. Michael Savage's famous 1939 expostulation 'Where Britain goes, we go' was a myth. While Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill both called for tolerance for the non-conformist conscience and exercised it during the Second World War, in New Zealand there was no such forbearance.

¹ Carol Markwell, 'Barrington, Archibald Charles', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Five: 1941-1960* (Auckland 2000), 37.