

# Killed Fighting For Their Country: Two Unitarian Ministers

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"The First World War swept away 19th century England for good, and with it went 19th century Nonconformity. For those with eyes to see, the slowing down of Nonconformist expansion had been apparent long before. But the war produced a new crisis of faith, and dissolved many traditional values." These words written by David M. Thompson in 1972 in his seminal collection of readings entitled *Nonconformity in the 19th century* (p.229) reflect the now universally received view of the enormous social impact of the War. While the part played by the various churches in World War 1 has been described in numerous books there is nothing, as far as I know, on the role specifically played by Unitarians in the War, their attitude towards it and its effect on them. It is only in recent times that researchers have started to look at the history of British Unitarianism post 1914. It is clear to me from preliminary excursions into documents covering the period 1914-18 that there is much of historical interest and the field for research is large.

In particular it would be valuable to test the proposition that there was a significant shift in outlook between 1914 and 1918, and that optimism drained away from the Unitarian movement during these years from which it never recovered. It has been said that the last of James Freeman Clarke's Five Precepts, which held such sway within Unitarianism before the War - "The Progress of Mankind, onwards and upwards forever" - virtually disappeared from view after the War, as the positive outlook it represented could no longer be sustained. British Unitarianism in 1914 had possibly 40,000 adherents and the relatively large numbers involved in the hostilities certainly suggests that the horrors of the War touched many<sup>1</sup>; by 1918 it was estimated that 6000 Unitarians had served in the forces and at least 1000 people connected with various churches had been killed.<sup>2</sup>

However these conclusions have not been tested against the evidence to be found in Unitarian newspapers, periodicals, and published works as well as in private letters. This present article is a first attempt to direct the attention of historians towards the examination of Unitarian attitudes to

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“the War to end Wars”, and its impact on the movement in Great Britain. If the War really did have the pervasive effect on liberal Nonconformity, and especially Unitarianism, that is claimed then it is time that the evidence is brought forward and evaluated. I am far from certain that the case is fully proved. My contention is that the “decline” of Unitarian strength in Great Britain dates back well into the 19th century, and that World War I accelerated rather than initiated the process. Therefore I would agree with Dr. Thompson’s conclusion, adding that in the case of Unitarianism the onset of the decline can be traced back to factors which arose before 1880.

Contributions evaluating the effect of the War on Unitarianism will be welcome in the *Transactions*. I want to open the debate by examining the lives and attitudes of, and towards, the only two Unitarian ministers killed on active service during the War – Edward Stanley Russell and Walter Short. Both started in the ranks but became commissioned officers (Captains) and served in front line regiments, though in different theatres (Russell in the Near East and Short in France). One was educated at Oxford, the other at Manchester and both had University degrees. There were no Unitarian chaplains appointed during the War. However Rev. T.P. Spedding was recognised by the War Office as a pastoral visitor to Unitarians in the forces in the UK, working on behalf of the British & Foreign Unitarian Association.<sup>3</sup>

Unitarian ministers were exempt from conscription, but both Russell and Short enlisted well before the Conscription Act came into force in 1916. This did not however deter several ministers from joining in the war effort by volunteering to serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps, the Ambulance Service or with the Young Men’s Christian Association, often at advanced ages.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most well known example was Rev. Mortimer Rowe, who was awarded the Military Medal for his devoted work at the Western Front, returning home in 1918 suffering from gas poisoning; he wrote very regularly and at length for the *Inquirer* under the undramatic heading “Field Ambulance Notes”.<sup>5</sup> It was this column which brought Rowe to the attention of the Unitarian public, and helped him on his way to become the first General Secretary of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches when it was formed in 1929. Rowe and Russell were fellow students at Manchester College Oxford. I wish to turn first to the complex and enigmatic character of Edward Russell.



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### **Baptist origins**

E.S. Russell was born at Weston-Super-Mare on 11 June 1882, the fifth member of a family of six and the youngest of four sons. His father was Rev. John Roebuck Russell, a Baptist minister then in charge of the Church in Bristol Road, and who remained active amongst the Baptists into the 1920s. The young Russell was surrounded by religion, as his mother, Emilee, was related to a number of Baptist ministers. The family lived on the North Lancashire coast from the time he was two until he was six, when it moved to High Wycombe, where most of his boyhood was spent.

We owe this extensive knowledge of Russell to the determination of his close friend Rev. Arnold Heynes Lewis (1878-1968), who in 1918 wrote a biography of his fellow student and close friend. Assembled with the aid of letters from relatives and friends, this glowing eulogy not surprisingly failed to find a publisher. The manuscript and certain of the letters went to Lewis's younger son, John, after his death, who passed the items to me in 1992. They are now lodged at Manchester College Oxford and the Imperial War Museum (War material only). However I anticipate, for as a teenager, there was not even the slightest suggestion from Russell of a move away from the Baptists.

He seems to have had little schooling of note and a commercial life was seen as the best course as he had a ready tongue and engaging personality. He spent a period as a successful commercial salesman of ink in Glasgow. He was fully involved in churches wherever he went, and was a natural magnet for young people. In 1903 he took the obvious course and entered Regents Park College, then in London, to train for the Baptist ministry, registering the following year at University College to read for an Arts degree. It was at Regents Park that he met Lewis, who had been there since 1899 and who had, if anything, more Baptist ministers as relations than did Russell. What happened next is best described in Lewis's words:

Russell had scarcely begun his second year at College, when he began to entertain misgivings as to his fitness for the Baptist ministry. His convictions were deepening, his ardour for the work increasing; but he found himself less and less able to cast his beliefs into the phraseology and formulae to which the churches were accustomed. In particular he inclined to a pantheistic view of God, and was more disposed to assert the general divinity of human life than the unique Deity of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

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He left in 1905, "to the great regret of the Committee and the Tutor" but continued with his degree which he took in 1907. Believing that the ministry was the future for him, he looked around for a theological college which he could with conscience join and enter the ministry of an as yet unspecified denomination. He applied to become a student at Manchester College Oxford on the suggestion of one of his former tutors, Dr. W.R. Boyce Gibson. This would lead in the natural course of events to ministry amongst the Unitarians, though there is little evidence that he knew much about them, apart from talks he had with another University tutor in London, Rev. Dr. G. Dawes Hicks.<sup>7</sup>

### Oxford

Manchester College and its atmosphere suited him from the start (October 1908) and he soon settled down to the life of an Oxford theological student. Mortimer Rowe remembers him:

We were the best of friends from the beginning, and his friendship was indeed the outstanding fact of my third year at MCO...We spent a great deal of our time together, including I fear, much of the time we ought rather (by academic standards) to have been studying seriously and in solitude. Russell could tell a story remarkably well. When we foregathered, as we did almost nightly, round the fire in someone or other's room, many were the sittings to which Russell contributed much more than his share of the amusement or the interest... (remembering a walking holiday together in 1912 in Skye) I shall be there again someday, I hope, and when I cross the Bealoch or scramble to the summit of Sgùna Gilleann, I shall be quiet and listen for some echo of Russell's voice.<sup>8</sup>

Russell made as great an impact on R.F. Rattray when he arrived at MCO in 1908:

I need not try to describe him. He was arrestingly handsome, good looking; his dark eyes had great depths of tenderness and sparkled with fun, as he himself did. He was singularly endowed with gifts and graces. Everywhere he went he stirred men, women and children to enthusiasm about his charm and cleverness...There was hardly anything he couldn't do if he put himself to it. To Manchester College he gave a decided fillip – socially and academically...As editor of "Poz" (short for "Repository"), the College magazine, he made exceedingly clever contributions... Russell had an heroic power.<sup>9</sup>

He was also highly successful as student minister at Banbury, and as R.V. Holt, another fellow student, recalled:

It was in the evening in his room that we used to discuss the universe. After some such meetings several of us drew up a statement of faith, and the actual wording



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was chiefly Russell's.

1. We believe in God, the substance of all things, the Spirit of our Spirits, and the ideal of our lives.
2. We believe that in the life and death of Jesus Christ is revealed most fully the self-sacrificing love of God.
3. We believe that Religion consists in the worship of God and the service of man in the spirit of Jesus Christ.
4. We believe that the service of man consists in the conflict with sin, the endeavour after social welfare, and the setting up of God's Kingdom among men.
5. We believe in the Catholic Church of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

It is not therefore surprising that on leaving Oxford he was considered to be perhaps the brightest new entrant to the Unitarian ministry. Principal Carpenter saw his impulse to the ministry as clear and strong, and clearly L.P. Jacks was of a similar opinion.<sup>11</sup> In 1910 he went as assistant to Rev. J. Collins Odgers at Ullet Road Church, Liverpool, and the world looked to be his oyster.

### **New Pastures**

All went well for a couple of years. Russell's success in leading the Sunday School was marked, but it is clear he was restless in the ministry of a single church however much his work was appreciated. No doubt to encourage him he was made joint pastor with Odgers in 1912. He had also met Elizabeth Durning Holt, to whom he was soon engaged; the correspondence suggests that she unsettled him even more, so that by the time of their marriage in 1913 he had resigned. The signs were clear in a letter to his former Baptist tutor, Dr. W.R. Gibson, in July 1912.

I'm afraid the different tendencies of the two pulpiteers is going to need some delicate handling. The dear old man (ie Odgers) is set on making everyone comfortable and nice and homely and smug and I'm rather set on getting things a little uncomfortable so as to avoid somnolence which is settling down like a cloud on us in the form of self-satisfaction as a Church.

Russell wanted a wider scene for his preaching especially as his marriage had made him financially independent. In a letter to Lewis, who was at the time preparing to leave the Baptists, at Russell's prompting, to join the Unitarian ministry, he wrote (15 February 1913):

I've resigned my pastorate! I feel I'm simply impelled to do so for the sake of a work I'm simply bound to do; I'm boiling over with a gospel, and I find being in a church involves so much expenditure of time upon affairs to which I am not

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heartily devoted and which stand increasingly in the way of leisured thought and study essential to the work that I am set to do. So I'm offering myself to our Conference as a minister-at-large; I am to go round whenever a man wants help in special efforts...first probably in Sunday services and subsequently, when there is a fruitful ground, develop public meetings in some local hall – arranged by the local church. This is my **plan**; and comes before Conference this spring: and I have little doubt they will accept it.

However this was not to be as the National Conference of Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing or Kindred Congregations, following detailed discussions with Russell, concluded that “the Committee cannot take the responsibility of organising or giving official recognition of such work without express directions from the Conference”.<sup>12</sup> He was deeply disappointed and went around churches as a guest preacher for the next year, from the base of a new family home at Presteign, Radnorshire. The advent of the War could be said to have given him direction as he had without doubt lost his way.

### To the end in Gaza

Russell joined the army at Liverpool as a Private within days of war being declared. He visited Rattray, who had taken his ministerial place at Ullet Road, immediately after enlisting. “No one who knew Russell could doubt his natural aversion from all that enlisting meant: but, as I have said, anything he put himself to he could make a success of. He complained bitterly to me how wrong it was that German wrong-doing should bring upon people such sacrifices”.<sup>9</sup> L.P. Jacks at Manchester College was in no doubt as to the rightness of his action “I greatly honour you for joining the forces now fighting in reality for Truth, Liberty and Religion. I envy you your youth. There is no doubt whatever that you are doing your duty. God be with you. My three eldest sons will join and I gladly give them to the good cause.”<sup>13</sup>

It is not necessary to describe here his military career except in brief outline. Within a few months he received a Commission in the 1st. Herefordshire Battalion. He fought in Suvla Bay in the Near East before being invalided home for some months in 1916 with enteric disease. He returned to serve in Palestine, where he was awarded the Military Cross at the first Battle of Gaza in April 1917. He then served for a time as a staff Captain before being killed in action at the Second Battle of Gaza on 6 November, 1917.



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There was an obituary to him in the Times on 20 November 1917, which was repeated in several newspapers, including the *Inquirer* (24 November, p.465) which added 'He was the first Unitarian minister who has been killed in action. He was a man of great personal charm and will be deeply mourned by a large circle of friends'. His letters to his wife are notable, and Lewis' extraction from them show the great potential that was never to be fulfilled.

#### **Walter Short**

If the denominational press has little information on Russell the same cannot be said of Rev. Walter Short, Captain in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, who from the time of his enlistment in November 1915, wrote extensively on his army experiences in the *Inquirer* and the *Christian Life*. Following his death in action in France on 20 July 1918, Rev. John Ellis edited his letters home in a book, *Pictures from France*, published in Manchester in 1919.

While Russell came from a strong Baptist background, Short (born 31 May 1879) was as a youth a member of the United Methodist Church. He was one of many brothers in Sheffield, of whom four ultimately entered the ministry. His brothers Henry Fisher, James Horace and Leonard helped found a "dynasty" of Unitarian ministers. An ardent lay preacher, he left Methodism to join the Unitarians at Upper Chapel Sheffield. His obituary continues the story:

In 1903 he entered the Unitarian Home Missionary College, bringing with him an ardent enthusiasm for the work of religion, every considerable capacity as a preacher and speaker, and a large experience of human nature gained in business life. His College career was eminently successful. He took many prizes and finally graduated BA. His first pastorate at Stalybridge (1909-12) was a marked success, and he was called unanimously to Bootle, in the Liverpool District, in 1912.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Russell and Short were fellow ministers for a year in Liverpool and must have known each other. That is where the connection ends although in 1912 both were seen as the best the two very different Colleges could produce. If Russell made an uncertain way in the next couple of years, Short on the other hand was firm in his belief in his ministry of a specific church. His dissatisfaction however took a different form:

From the outset of the War, Mr. Short was deeply convinced of the unavoidable necessity for war and of the righteousness of Great Britain's entry into it. Everything in his spirit of ardent idealism led him to envisage the war as a mighty

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crusade for good against evil, a struggle for the holiest of life's values, in which there could be no other duty than to give all...As he understood the matter, the time had come when the preaching of the gospel could only be adequately carried through by deeds, even deeds of violence, and the injunction to sacrifice could only be enforced by unfaltering practical example. He felt he could not bid others go to the battle and himself remain at home.<sup>14</sup>

Short's own words echo this evaluation at the conclusion of his last published letters from France (written 13 July 1918) after he had been at the Front for a long period, and his own Battalion had been almost wiped out:

Religion and War are strange bedfellows, but that soldier who has chivalry and idealism, achieves peace even in conflict, and enjoys the fruits of a good conscience, and the blessing of the Most High.<sup>15</sup>

His time in the army can also be briefly described. After a year's training and waiting he received a commission, going to France in January 1917 as a First Lieutenant. After experience in the trenches, he became a staff captain adjutant later that year. Returning to the Front in December 1917, he continued there until he was killed in an attack. The army careers of both men were very similar, and even at home the "dear old man" (Odgers) conducted both their memorial services.<sup>16</sup> Both likewise left a wife and young son.

## Evaluation

The attitudes of Russell and Short and their associates does not encapsulate the variety of Unitarian viewpoints on the War. Both supported it and saw Great Britain's actions as morally right, and there is every reason to suppose that this reflected the majority view within the movement. It clearly does so if the columns of the denominational press in the period 1914-1918 are an accurate reflection of grass roots opinion. There was however a very different side; there were many Unitarian conscientious objectors and some supporters of the peace movement, though none of the former were Unitarian ministers at the time.<sup>17</sup> Many of ablest young men associated with Unitarians had been killed by 1918, which will have adversely affected the quality of the leadership amongst the laity in the 1920s and 1930s. However the same cannot be said of the ministers who provided the spiritual and moral leadership. It could be argued that the Unitarian ministry had a "good" war, if such a thing is possible, the examples of Russell and Short being edifying and up beat. The service of several other Unitarian ministers in the ambulance service



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and with the YMCA was similarly positive and they came back to serve their churches often before the end of the War. It is therefore unlikely that they were main conduits for the spread of pessimism that has been said to be one of the chief reasons for the numerical decline of Unitarianism in the 1920s. This indicates, as I have suggested, that the cause for the decline lies elsewhere.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> There are no accurate statistics of the number of Unitarians within Great Britain from the 1890s onwards. The denominational press conducted censuses in the 1870s and 1880s which gave numbers for specific localities but overall figures are difficult to estimate, especially as they included Sunday School Scholars. The 40,000 figure is a best estimate. *Inquirer (Inq.)* 3 and 10 Dec. 1927, p. 704, 713 gives current membership figures for some 129 churches from which a national figure of 30,000 is a reasonable extrapolation. Research on Unitarian strength at different periods would be most valuable.
- <sup>2</sup> *Inq* 1916, p. 538/9, Report of meeting of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (B&FUA) provides the figure of 6000. The Association maintained a Central List of all Unitarians known to it who have been killed or died in the War, see *Inq.* 26 Jan. 1918, p.30. The Supplement to the *Inq.* 8 June 1918 consists of a Roll of Honour of 703 names of the fallen associated with churches and schools from only one third of the churches. The estimate of 1000 dead is therefore conservative.
- <sup>3</sup> "The War Office has amended Rev. T.P. Spedding's authorisation by giving him permission to visit military hospitals as well as the home camps. He is named in the letter, issued by the War Office, "Military Agent of the B&FUA". (*Inq.* 13 Jan. 1917, p. 35)
- <sup>4</sup> Among those fully accredited ministers who served in these capacities for varying periods were H.D. Roberts (Lieutenant 1915-19 who was born in 1858), J. Cyril Flower, John Ellis, W.G. Price (RAMC 1916-19), Edgar Thackray, Harmon Taylor (Captain RAMC 1917-19, who then left the ministry), Evan Glyn Evans, Henry Gow, Charles Biggins, Charles Piper (RAMC 1917-19), William McMullen, Harry Andrew (1916-20), W.H. Drummond (YMCA France 1917-19 who was born in 1863), F.W. Foat, L.J. Hines (a Congregational Minister who joined the Unitarian roll following war service 1917-19), A.S. Hurn, Lawrence Redfern, C.P. Scott. *Inq* 1917, p. 104 et seq (Supplement), "Some Ministers who are doing their bit" includes photographs of Walter Short and T.P. Spedding.  
Perhaps the most unusual example was Percival Godding, who entered the ministry in 1912 at Ballyclare. He volunteered for the army in 1917, aged 34, became a Lieutenant, and went out to France in April 1918. Taken prisoner he later described his harrowing journey to a POW camp at Baden (*Inq* 29 Dec 1918, p. 418; 11 Jan. 1919 p.13). He is unique as the only Unitarian minister on active service to become a POW. On demobilisation he resumed his ministry at Ballyclare.
- <sup>5</sup> *Inq.* 1 & 29 Dec. 1917, p. 471, 504/5 are two examples.
- <sup>6</sup> Biography, Chapter 2 – Student Days at Regents Park. All material and letters from 1904 are at Manchester College Oxford. The Imperial War Museum has only the material relating specifically to his war service September 1914-November 1917.

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- <sup>7</sup> Letter from Hicks to Lewis 10 March 1919 (original) plus contribution for the biography (typed copy). Dr. Dawes Hicks had been Unitarian minister at Islington 1896-1903 and Professor of Philosophy at University College London from 1904.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter to Lewis, 1918 (typed copy)
- <sup>9</sup> Letter and long note, Rattray to Lewis, 13 Feb. 1918 (original). Besides being a Unitarian minister Dr. Rattray also became Principal of University College Leicester.
- <sup>10</sup> Letter to Lewis, 12 February 1918 (original). Holt later became the Principal of Unitarian College Manchester.
- <sup>11</sup> Letter Carpenter to Lewis, 6 March 1918 (original), Letter Jacks to Lewis, 6 January 1919 (original) in which he doubts the wisdom of the biography and says in retrospect of Russell: "The tragedy of his life, to my thinking, was that it was cut off before he had had the opportunity by his subsequent actions to bring his renunciation of the regular ministry into harmony with the rest of his life."
- <sup>12</sup> Extract of letter to Lewis of 20 Jan. 1918 from Rev. James Harwood, Secretary of the National Conference, relating to Committee decision 14 May 1913 (typed copy).
- <sup>13</sup> Letter Jacks to Russell, 15 September 1914 (typed copy).
- <sup>14</sup> *Inq.* 3 Aug. 1918, p. 249.
- <sup>15</sup> *Inq.* 3 Aug. 1918, p. 250.
- <sup>16</sup> Summary of memorial Address for Russell by Odgers, Ullet Road Church, 25 Nov. 1917. *Inq.* 10 Aug. 1918, p. 257, Memorial Service for Short at Bootle Free Church, 20 July 1918, conducted by Odgers at which John Ellis preached.
- <sup>17</sup> Examples include J.W. Dyer who was imprisoned in Dartmoor as a conscientious objector and who later entered the Unitarian ministry, and Claude Brewer of Oakfield Road Church Bristol who was similarly imprisoned at Oxford, and was visited there by Dr. J.E. Carpenter (personal knowledge). These are by no means the only Unitarians so treated and again this would be a fruitful area for detailed study.