

A Few Small Candles: War Resisters of World War II Tell Their Stories

Larry Gara

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Larry Gara was a war resister when it wasn't fashionable. World War II is widely seen as "the good war," a triumph of righteousness over evil with little of the moral ambiguity that clouded subsequent conflicts. In this collection of essays, Gara and nine other men who went to prison rather than take up arms recount their experiences. Even readers who scorn pacifism will grudgingly admire the courage and passion with which these resisters waged what retired historian Gara labels a "war against war."

Americans' sharp disagreement over whether to join the fight against Hitler evaporated after Pearl Harbor. Still, some 12,000 conscientious objectors served as medical corpsmen or civilian laborers. But an additional 6,000 refused even to register as CO's, considering it a form of conscription. The contributors to this book were among those all-out resisters. Some would become household names in the peace movement, such as Bronson Clark of the American Friends Service Committee and Chicago Seven defendant David Dellinger.

With varying degrees of eloquence, each writer explains his opposition: "I felt a need to say as emphatically as I could that war is insane and that conscription is the first step in that insanity," John Griffith offers. They describe prison life and their feelings about the ordeal a half-century later. Some went on hunger strikes or spent lengthy periods in solitary confinement for declining work orders or protesting racial segregation in the prison system. Their accounts are by turns poignant, intellectually powerful and amusing; Gara hilariously tells of barring himself inside his cell on his release date in a final face-off with officialdom.

The book's primary disappointment is that the writers are better at arguing against war than prescribing realistic alternatives. Most offer little beyond vague references to Ghandi's model of passive resistance, which succeeded brilliantly in liberating India but seems of dubious value in the face of atrocities such as the Holocaust and the rape of Nanking. "As a realist ... I have virtually no good, short-term, convincing answer" to the question, Lawrence Templin writes. Gara admits as much yet insists, as do the others, that violence is not the way.

"What we did was to light a few candles in the darkness," he concludes, "to keep the ideal of nonviolence alive for use when the world came to its senses." Agree or not, anyone pondering weighty issues of war and peace would do well to give these battle-scarred veterans a fair hearing.

JOHN FLESHER (March / April 1999)

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