Connie Camfield, ‘born pacifist’: my first 100 years

As told in conversation
with Elizabeth Plumridge, 2014.
With thanks to Janet Tyson

Wellington Society of Friends

Connie Camfield: a born pacifist

I was born on 2nd February 1914 at 17 East Park, Crawley (Creepy Crawley people used to call it). Crawley is in Sussex in the south of England and when I grew up was a little village, quite close to a small airfield called Gatwick. It was still a village – a half-way point for the London-Brighton car rally – until about 1948 when it was developed as a new town to rehouse people bombed out from their London homes. And of course Gatwick became a major airport. It's all changed now.

17 East Park, Crawley. I was born in the upstairs bedroom in 1914. We always had a window open.

My parents were Herbert Thirkell Burr and Rose Mary Burr. I was the second of six. I had an older brother, Stan, and a sister Mollie who was only 18 months younger than me and then there was a gap because of the war! There were two more brothers after that, Dave and Bob.

We kids played together - can't remember everything that we did, but we played together. From Dad we must have inherited our love of puzzles and word games. My daughter Janet remembers Mollie and me doing crosswords together in our 80s. When we were kids, I gave Mollie a bad time! I was an *awful* sister. We used to have to wash up and I always made her do the drying.

My father was not a military-minded man but he did support the war and he was actually in the army. But he was what they called a C3 man because he was born with a heart defect and they wouldn't let him go on active service in the First World War. He just looked after horses – he had to serve in the war, but he did not go near the fighting – he didn't go into France at all but was always in the UK.

I was born in February 1914 and war started in August so I can't remember the actual war. After all there wasn't any fighting in England in the First World War, it was all in Europe. I can remember that during the war we used to have people staying, there was always

someone staying, somebody new. I think my mother had to take in lodgers. To help with the money. And I *can* remember my father coming home from the war, probably in 1918. I can remember him coming through the door and I just said, 'Oh Dad's back'. That's it. I didn't really think much about the war as a kid.

My Father Herbert Thirkell Burr.

Thirkell was a family name but I never knew the origin of it

Dad worked for the local 'corn-and-seed-and-coal-and-everything' merchant and he used to travel for them. Initially he had just worked in the office, he *was* an office worker really, but then I think as things altered he travelled for them – he was the first one in the street to have a car! But he had it because of the firm, it wasn't *his* car. He used to travel for the firm, buying coal and farm produce. As I understand it he used to go round to farms and he'd examine their haystacks. 'Look at that haystack', I remember he used to say, 'you know, that haystack will catch fire'. The temperature used to rise inside. He could judge that.

My mother Rose Mary Burr; her maiden name was Wood

My mother had been a children's nurse. She wasn't an *ordinary* nurse, she was a *children's* nurse she used to tell me. In those days any sort of family if they'd plenty of money they'd have a nurse as well. That's the sort of thing she did. They were called nurses but they were in private homes. I think they would consider themselves a bit better than the others! Oh they were awful snobs my parents, especially my mother sometimes!

When we went to school we used to think the Malthouse Road kids were not as good as us. Those kids used to get their penny for the collection but they'd spend it on sweets. One day I decided I'd buy sweets too. But you know, I never enjoyed those sweets. I decided I'd never buy sweets with collection money again.

The Burr Children: Mollie, Stan, me and Dave. Bob is seated

But what I can remember more than anything else of that time were the Services of Remembrance. On November the 11th we always used to have a remembrance service and there were kids that used to cry because their fathers had been killed. I can remember that quite well. I was shocked because they had never even *seen* their father: anything could have happened to them. That really used to upset me. And always on November the 11th you had to have two minutes' silence. I can remember I always used to worry and think my *stomach* would rumble. It was silly! I used to think 'oh can I remain silent?' I never worried about anything but my stomach!

I can also remember how after the war it was common to see men disabled by fighting in the war. I always remember a particular a soldier, I'll always remember seeing him; he had no legs and he was just on the stumps. His legs were cut off above the knee, I think. I always remember that, seeing that man, standing on the stumps. I don't know why he was there, probably when I saw him he was just standing still in the street. You wouldn't see it now, they wouldn't do that these days.

My father was 21 years younger than his oldest sister. My grandmother thought she'd finished! And then there was him! Though I do say it, he was a clever man. One of my cousins, Charlie, was a pacifist. He would have been years older than me, just as his mother was years older than my father. Charlie was Plymouth Brethren. I think Plymouth Brethren were all anti-war. I can remember the arguments there used to be between Dad and Charlie because of the war. My cousin used to argue with my father who agreed with going to the war and Charlie didn't. I used to hear Charlie and I'd think, 'oh that's good'. I think I was a born pacifist. I don't know whether my father thought the war was a *good* war exactly but he thought that he should support it, because he felt he should support his own country. He felt that he was being patriotic.

All my cousins were a lot older than me. On Mum's side too. Her father had married twice and she was a child of his second marriage and his other children were a lot older than her.

In England in those days you either finished school at 14, or you won a scholarship to a secondary school – and there were only a few of those – or your parents paid for you. All our family went to secondary school. My father approved and agreed that we should go, so we all went. There used to be county scholarships (in Sussex there was probably only one), and then there were what were called managers' scholarships, which existed because someone had left money for a secondary school scholarship. And that's how I got my scholarship; I was 11 when I got it. Mine was due to a Quaker who had left money so that children from the country primary school could go secondary school. Whether I would have gone to secondary school otherwise, I don't know. My father approved of it and he was in a position to pay and he paid for all the boys. But he didn't pay for my sister; my sister won a scholarship too. My school, Horsham Girls' High School, had only been going for a year when I went there**.** It was a county school that had taken over a lovely historic building.

Horsham Girls' High School

My scholarship was for four years and Dad paid for the fifth year. You had to do a fifth year of secondary school to get a university scholarship. I had five year's secondary schooling so I had university entrance but I did not want a university scholarship. I left school when I was 16.

When I was 16 and leaving school, I was intent on going to be nurse because a friend of mine was going to be a nurse and I thought I'd do that too. My mother did not want me to be a nurse. She thought I needed a break from children – after all my youngest brother was eight years younger than me and I had done a lot of looking after the younger ones. And I did all the shopping for the family. Then somebody told me of this exam for the civil service. So I thought, 'oh I'll take that'. And so I got a position.

Once you were in the civil service you had to go where you were sent. I was sent to Inland Revenue and I remained always in Inland Revenue, different parts of it, but always Inland Revenue. My first position was in Somerset House, that's where births, deaths and marriages get recorded. Oh, I remember Somerset House, a huge building and we were on the top floor. On my first day it was the Lord Mayor's Show Day, I don't know if they have it now but it was a big thing then. They used to have elephants in the procession. The Head of the Department got another woman to take me down into the street to see the elephants since it was my first day. This woman took me down and then said 'if the elephants stampede you'll have to find your own way back!' And I thought 'how on earth will I do that?' She was a very nervous person and of course the elephants did not stampede.

I remember the first job I was given. I thought 'oh what on earth have I come here for?' Putting date stamps on certificates: 'Oh I thought what an awful job'. Stamping a pile of files that were just going – I don't know where they were going but oh, I had to put a date stamp on all of them and I thought 'oh this is hard work'. I realise looking back that I should have started higher in the Inland Revenue. I did have the relevant qualifications. It was very *dry* work in Inland Revenue. I used to have to work out who was making more than 5% interest, to make sure they paid the right amount of tax. But I was pleased after all, that I had not gone into nursing. My friend who went into nursing found the matrons such tyrants! I did get interested in figures too, in adding them up and working with them.

The Depression didn't really affect our family because my father kept his job. I do remember big marches, big demonstrations of Welsh miners in London; they were terribly hard hit. And after 1930 I had a job.

In my twenties, possibly during the war, when I was working at Llandudno because of bombing in London.

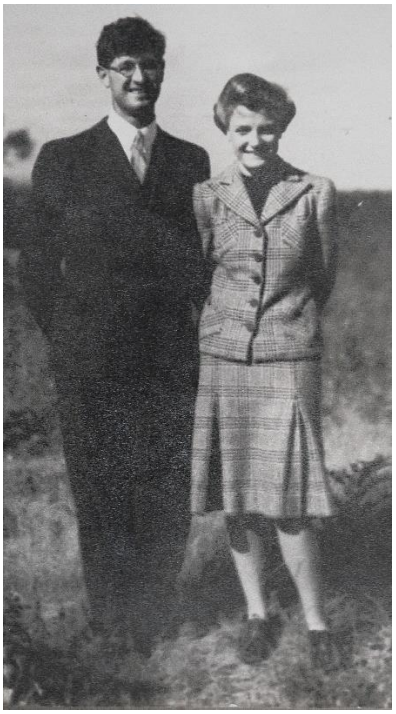
I worked in London. I used to travel up and down by train that took about an hour, longer if it was foggy. In one job, in York House I think, all the people in the ground floor had had something happen to them during the war. They had either one arm, or one leg, or their sight was affected. They all had something, some disability. One man I remember in particular he had damaged nerves and he used to have spasms and pull faces, grimaces. He was a very nice man. It was quite common to see such men. Then York House was destroyed in a wartime bombing raid and whole office was evacuated to Llandudno in North Wales where we worked from the Grand Hotel. I boarded while we worked in the Grand Hotel until I was married. I used to go home at Christmas and when I came back I would feel absolutely desolate. I wanted to be in Crawley where my mother and father were.

My parents were very religious-minded. They used to send us to church from a very early age. My parents were Methodists but where we were there was no Methodist Church so they went to the Congregational Church. We used to call it the 'Congo'. My mother used to go to Church at night- my father used to look after the children. When I quite young my father was still involved as a kind of Methodist minister – I don't know what they were called – a lay minister, I think, and he used to go out preaching. He gave that up, but for the children there was Sunday school morning and afternoon. Oh I had to go, oh gee, morning and afternoon Sunday school. You went home for your dinner and then you'd go back again in the afternoon. And you always took a penny for the collection! It must have cost my mother a fortune. As for going to church - there wouldn't be any idea that you *wouldn't* go. We never went to the pictures or anything like that.

I met Eric through the Congregational Church. I still lived at home when I went to work after 1930, and I still went to the Congregational Church Bible class. Eric used to go the Bible class too. I first met Eric on one of the Sunday school outings: Eric and I went around together all day long. I was only about 16, and it was years later before we had a serious relationship. It was a funny thing: Eric and I just 'gelled' somehow. He was 18 months younger than me, and he had had a different sort of education. He had gone to a private secondary school,

Collyer's School, which had been founded in the fifteenth century. My brothers all went to Collyer's. It has since been integrated into the state school system.

I was about 21 before Eric and I had a serious relationship. We had been going to the same Church but I can't remember how it started. I had had boyfriends but nothing serious. Eric had one particular girl, she was a friend of mine actually. But she was too gay for him! Eric wasn't like that. When Eric and I were serious and courting we used to go for walks and things like that. No dances. Goodness gracious you wouldn't see Eric dancing! I was 27 when I finally got married. The war had been one obstacle, but also Eric never earned much. His father had a tailoring business and Eric worked for his father. In the workroom the tailors still sat cross-legged to work. I always earned more than he did and in those days it was expected that the husband kept the family. We finally got married in January 1942 at Reigate.



My wedding photograph, January 1942. The photograph was taken some days after the wedding.

The day of the wedding was a terrible day, very cold and snowy. Nor was there was a camera available on the day.

Eric's father had been a CO in the First World War and his mother was sympathetic to Quakers, and used to go once we were involved in Quakers. We went in to the Quakers, both of us, after the war started because the Congregational Church was applauding those who here going off to war. We didn't agree with that, we didn't agree with fighting. We did not believe in that way of settling problems.

The local Quakers at Ifield were gathered round one particular family, and the head of the family, who used to follow his own interpretation. He used to give sermons and we didn't like that. And we knew about Quakers in Reigate and decided to go there. They kept to the meeting in silence, with individuals giving ministry as they felt moved. We had a tandem and

we used to cycle up to Reigate and back. It was about 10 miles to get to Meeting. We got married at Reigate and we used to cycle there and back until I was pregnant with Janet. Quaker marriage, it is a wonderful experience. You all sit round in Meeting and you wait until you feel it's the right moment. And then you stand and say you want to take the person to be your wife or your husband. You give the reason why you want to marry. You make a public declaration that this is the person that you want to spend your life with. No white gown. You wear what you want. You don't dress up! And you don't have bridesmaids! Or groomsmen! None of that. I remember that the clerk nearly spilt ink over me when we signed the marriage certificate. You sign it then and there.

Conscription came in and Eric had to go before the Tribunal. He was given alternative service. He wasn't a Quaker; he wouldn't register as a Quaker because Quakers got preferential treatment. He believed in being a conscientious objector, not appealing just because of being a Quaker: he was a conscientious objector before he was a Quaker. In fact we didn't join as members until 9 February 1952.

The Tribunal directed Eric; they didn't send him to prison because he was already a volunteer fireman and so he was given that and gardening as alternative service. He didn't get paid, he was a volunteer. I went on working, but I gave up my job with the Inland Revenue. That was probably the wrong thing to do, but I was fed up with the commuting and I went to work at Pearl Insurance and I worked there until I had Janet in 1945. I suppose we had given up hope of the war ending, and I was 31, and I suppose we thought it was time we had a baby! When war ended Eric wasn't freed immediately. They weren't freed right away. No, no definitely not.

The German prisoners weren't freed immediately either. But they were allowed to go out, we used to have them for meals. We had them for Christmas dinner and we apologised because we thought the meat was awfully tough. But they thought it was great! It was meat! They were nice men. We managed to talk because they had some English and we had some German.

It was the system that was at fault. You know I think the worst thing about the war was that on Christmas day the fighting stopped. There was no shooting. People came together. And then on the next day they went back to shooting. Just because they were told to.

I was the only one in my family that became a pacifist. My family didn't query my beliefs though they didn't agree, especially my father - he was patriotic, but he never accused me. He volunteered the Home Guard and of course they didn't check his fitness for that, so he did heavier work than in World War 1. I remember I came home from Llandudno and I was shocked at how ill he looked. He died in 1941 from a heart condition.

All my brothers went to World War 2. My brother Stan was the most gentle man, he never tried to climb the ranks; he was always a foot soldier for the full five years of the war. My brother David - he was the cleverest and the most ambitious. It was sad and I always blame Churchill for this: Churchill sent the men out to Singapore and they walked right into the hands of the Japanese. My brother saw a Japanese officer strike a Japanese soldier over the face. My brother went to remonstrate and he was struck over the face too! My brother said he was arrested the moment he got off the ship. He was a prisoner of war at Changi. After four years and he came back weighing just 6 stone. He said if you didn't have family back home to think of, you would just give up. A lot did.

After the war you couldn't get a place on your own. Eric and I lived with my mother for a time and my daughter Janet was born there in April 1945. Then we lived with Eric's family. Eric's father had a shop and at the back of the property, there was a flat and we had that and lived there. Graham was born in 1948.

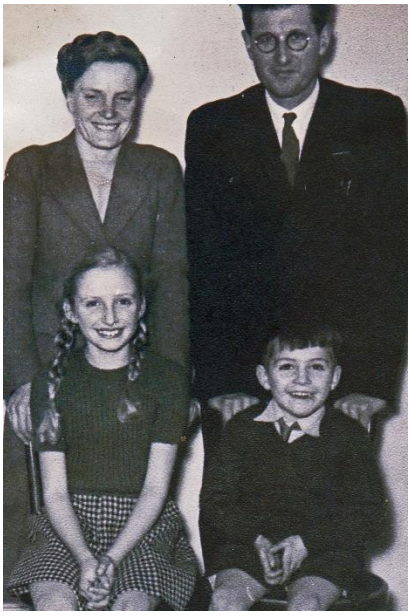
Janet and Graham on Graham's first birthday.

Janet was worried because he would not keep still. You know what one-year-olds are like!

But there were always my relations; it was too close.

That's when we moved to New Zealand.

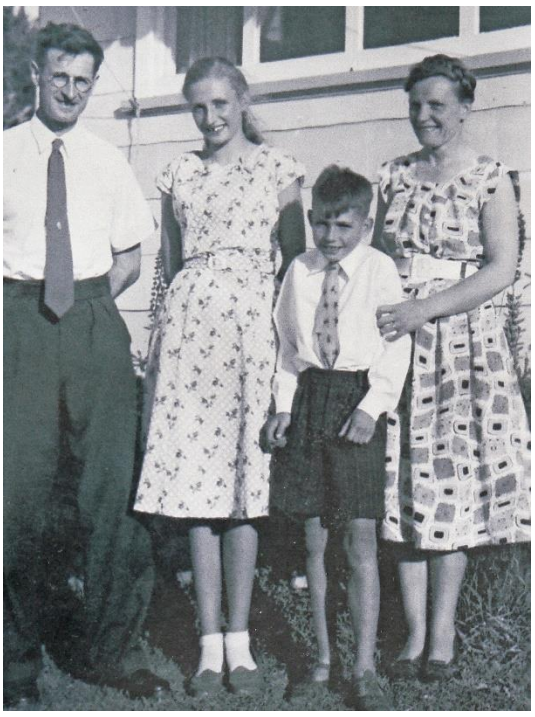
Well what happened was John Johnson wrote to *The Friend* and said 'why don't some Quakers come to New Zealand and help us?' And Eric replied to that, and the consequence was that John Johnson offered us a place in Diamond harbour. A bach. We couldn't get a home in England so we decided we'd take up this and see what it was like. And that is why we came to New Zealand.



Our family, me, Eric, Janet and Graham at the farewell from the rest of the family, the night before we left for Glasgow to sail for New Zealand

Diamond Harbour was a little place. Oh it was lovely, to live there. We really enjoyed it. We had our own place. It was wonderful to be on our own. At first we had a long-drop toilet and the kids hated that. And we had to collect rainwater. But after a year the water came on and it was alright then. But I remember I thought, 'nobody comes to the door'. I was used to there always being someone at the door. I missed that. Eric worked as a gardener for the Lyttelton Borough Council for a while then he got a job as a tailor's cutter. Eventually he became a Borough Councillor. As a Councillor's wife I had to be very discreet. If I saw somebody doing something like cutting down a tree, I never told Eric.

I worked for an accountant in Lyttelton – he was the coach of the All Blacks and I remember I met them!



Eric, Janet, Graham and me, Christmas day, 1957. Photograph taken in Diamond Harbour

We went to Meeting in Manchester Street Meeting House. Then we went to Auckland on holiday. Eric liked it and the gardens were so good. He'd gone there only this one Christmas but he always liked it and he always wanted to go back. When he saw this job up there at the Technical Institute, as a tutor, he applied. He got the job as tailoring tutor. I don't think they even teach it now. I was quite happy. We went to Quakers in Auckland in Mt Eden. They didn't have the Quaker Centre then. One of the Quakers, Hilda Gill, she was born a Quaker and she was a Quaker through and through. Quakers were her family. She bought the house next door and she eventually left it to Quakers and that's how it came about.

We moved to Whenuapai and eventually settled in Waimarie Road. We had a huge garage and we used to have big end-of-year parties for Quakers on the North Shore and Mt Eden. We had an acre of land and planted a lot of fruit trees. I enjoyed living there.

Our 60th wedding anniversary celebrated at Waimarie Road, Whenuapai

I decided to go further with my accountancy and in 1980 I graduated. I was 66! I wasn't young but I did work for a bit after that.

Receiving my accountancy qualifications from the Mayor of Auckland, Sir Dove-Meyer Robinson

While we were in Waimarie Road, we went to hear a speaker at a public meeting, and Eric had a heart attack while we were there. They called an ambulance and there was a doctor present who kept working on reviving him. He worked for ages. Eric was technically dead but they got him to the hospital and he came round. They asked him, a bit of a test I suppose, 'who is the Prime Minister of New Zealand?' He hesitated and I thought 'oh he's forgotten' then he said 'Oh Bolger'!

It did affect him though and Janet used to come up from Wellington each weekend to help, so we decided to make it easier and go to Wellington and buy a house. Then I saw this place, Malvina Major, and I thought 'if we go there we won't be a burden'. I've never regretted coming here.

Eric and me at Malvina Major

Eric and I agreed with Quakerism.

Quakers believe every day is the same as any other. There's no special day. And that was why I don't believe in all this Christmas singing. I still don't. When the kids were growing up we celebrated Christmas with a tree and all that. It was a holiday but it wasn't a religious day. I still believe no day is the different from any other. You may *use* a day to celebrate something but that day in itself is nothing different from any other.

Jesus was a person. A human being. I still believe that, even more now. I might not have believed it in the early days but I certainly believe it now. I think no person is greater than any other person. I believe there's no personal god. I've tried to think of what god is. I don't believe in a personal god. There's a force but it's not a personal god. I mean the highest and the best that you know, that is prayer. In Meeting I sit there and try to be open and let the thoughts come. I don't pray, I try to let the thoughts come: 'what can I do to make life better?' Prayer is the best thoughts that you can have.

I think this life is the end of it, myself; I believe this is it, this life is it. But that doesn't mean we don't need to be the best we can be. It's even more important.