

EXHIBITION: PEOPLE POWER - FIGHTING FOR PEACE

This exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) London, which I saw recently, felt like a just acknowledgement of the Peace Movement, exhibited in a building, which has since the 'First (Great)' war, studied and documented violent conflicts. This was a marking of the museum's centenary and the first time protest had been the subject of a major special exhibition.

I delayed my journey till the last few days, uncertain of my resolve to visit a building, which is almost certainly used by war interests for promoting their commercial activities. Before attending, I asked which companies and organisations were hosted there for receptions, but apparently this was confidential information. I noted a sign in the building indicating BAE systems was a corporate partner. I was told that the Stop the War coalition had loaned material. I wondered if such Peace organisations received a fee for their exhibits or simply preferred to publicise their campaigns wherever they could. I also wondered if this is what a Peace protester does – pay £10 to go into the IWM to see peace protesters.

One is greeted at the museum by two huge guns, laid out at the front. On finding the entrance to the Peace exhibition you encounter a banner 'Blessed are the Peacemakers'.



It was in the 1914-18 war that Conscientious Objectors (COs) were first recognised, although every war in history must have had their refusers. One CO had said 'I am not fit to go the the front as I have a very awkward impediment, called a conscience'. Many stories of their difficulties were documented and oral history added to the vivid portrayal.

The Friends War Victims Relief committee and the Friends Ambulance Unit were set up by COs. They worked with civilians and alongside troops as necessary. There were a variety of motivations and individual views, among them were Quakers, following their Peace Testimony, and other religious and non religious groups, as well as socialists and intellectuals.

Memorabilia - posters, letters, photos, recordings illustrated the struggle. COs then were often sentenced to death – staged as for a firing squad and then reduced to penal servitude. They were often mistreated and some tortured – solitary confinement, hard labour and general taunting being common. They could be denied the vote for 5 years after the war.

Art featured prominently in the exhibition. There were banners by John Hargrave for the Womens Peacemakers Pilgrimage in Hyde Park in 1926 – a breakaway group from women's suffrage campaigns.



The Peace Pilgrimage North Wales contingent 1926

Gerald Holtom's original drawings of the CND logo for the 1958 1st Aldermaston March were displayed. It portrayed the semaphore symbols for N and D. He also saw in it the figure of Goya's 'Peasant before the Firing Squad', arms stretched down. There was a letter about the logo, perhaps at that time understandable, from a campaigner - *'.... Frankly we think it quite obscure – it conveys no meaning at all and we fear people seeing it may think us members of a Secret Society'* – ironic now that it is so universally used as an icon for peace – How difficult it is to guess which actions will be seen as most effective in the future!



Other notable displays showed: footage of 1963 protesters encroaching on Porton Down across fields, where biological and chemical weapons (now illegal) were processed, a BBC letter explaining why their Academy award-winning film *The War Game* 1965 would not be screened (It was shown by them 20 years later), the well known pamphlets 'Protect and Survive' and its parody 'Protest and Survive' and the book and film 'When the Wind Blows'.

The Committee of 100 was featured, formed to promote acts of civil disobedience for the antinuclear campaign. I was pleased to see reference to the Greenham Common women's decorated fence and recordings included, as well as Brian Haw's peace camp against the Iraq war outside parliament (a war now denounced) and his successful fight against prosecution.



Prominent contemporary peace campaigners including Kate Hudson (CND), Lindsey German (Stop the War Coalition) Debbie Handy (activist) were filmed describing their experiences and the importance of protest. Changes in campaigns were highlighted such as the influence of social media.

I have left out much, and just given a flavour of the exhibition. There were also organisations I was puzzled not find (Did I miss something?), such as the well known and very effective Campaign Against the Arms Trade and Trident Ploughshares. They and others deserved a place. We will speculate on reasons for their absence.

War Protest has an honourable history and warrants a comprehensive permanent display in a museum such as this. We can learn from these brave people of the past. Their actions are often vindicated in later years. We know that the struggle goes on, as illustrated below by the courageous protests at the International Arms Fair (DSEI) in London this September.



The peace campaign continues here and across the world.

There is a book published on the occasion of the exhibition by

Lyn Smith

*People Power :Fighting for Peace from the First World War to the
Present* © 2017 The Trustees of the Imperial War Museum

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/People-Power-Fighting-Peace-Present/dp/0500519153>

This personal account of a visit to the exhibition was prepared by
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