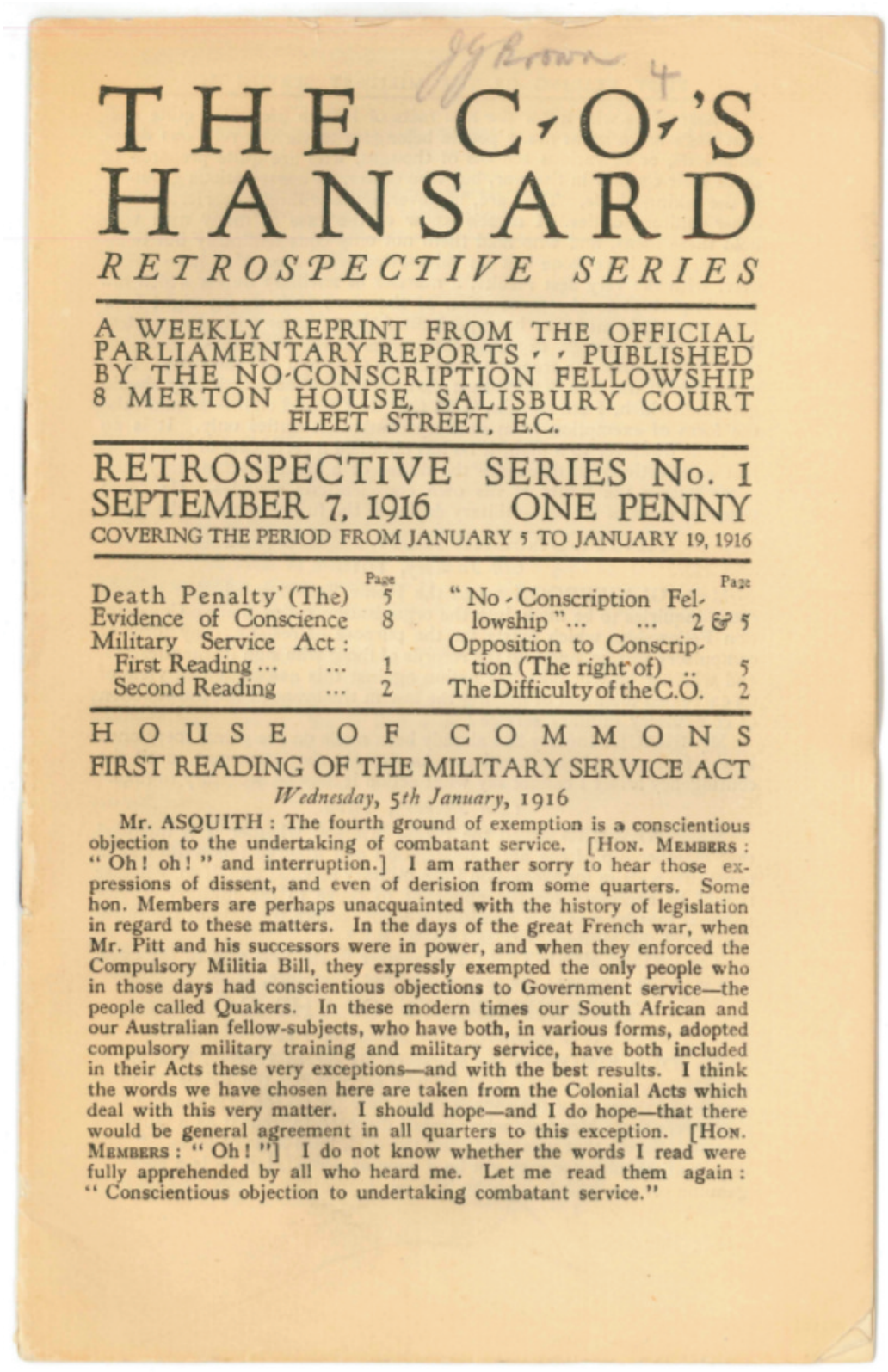
conscientious objection

Repeal the Act **Source 1**



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THE C.O.'S HANSARD

RETROSPECTIVE SERIES

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COVERING THE PERIOD FROM JANUARY 5 TO JANUARY 19, 1916

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

FIRST READING OF THE MILITARY SERVICE ACT

Wednesday, 5th January, 1916

Mr. ASQUITH : The fourth ground of exemption is a conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service. [HON. MEMBERS : "Oh! oh!" and interruption.] I am rather sorry to hear those expressions of dissent, and even of derision from some quarters. Some hon. Members are perhaps unacquainted with the history of legislation in regard to these matters. In the days of the great French war, when Mr. Pitt and his successors were in power, and when they enforced the Compulsory Militia Bill, they expressly exempted the only people who in those days had conscientious objections to Government service—the people called Quakers. In these modern times our South African and our Australian fellow-subjects, who have both, in various forms, adopted compulsory military training and military service, have both included in their Acts these very exceptions—and with the best results. I think the words we have chosen here are taken from the Colonial Acts which deal with this very matter. I should hope—and I do hope—that there would be general agreement in all quarters to this exception. [HON. MEMBERS : "Oh!"] I do not know whether the words I read were fully apprehended by all who heard me. Let me read them again : "Conscientious objection to undertaking combatant service."

housed 2,000 people, given seeds to the poor to enable them to grow new crops, and done other work of that kind. The desire of an increasing number of Friends, and others holding similar views, was to be allowed to extend that service of a voluntary character. In all that work they had had the most generous help from Mr. Stanley, Lord Derby, and others.

But there were other conscientious objectors who did not feel they could do that kind of work and he begged Members when they were apt to criticise these men to recognise that there was a great principle at stake. " Religion during this war has had a great triumph and a great failure. It has had a great triumph in the magnificent heroism of men who, at the call of conscience, have given themselves for their country. It has had a great triumph in the consolation that it has brought to those who are distressed. Is there one of us but feels that it has had a great failure in being unable to stop this devastating and desolating war? There are in this country to-day large numbers of men who feel that they cannot help in the way of which I have spoken, because they are afraid of getting within the military machine. They are willing to be persecuted if you are prepared to do it, but it is a question of conscience with them. I have been trying to understand it in the last few days, because I have been often in the conflict with some of them. What they feel is, that if there is to be a re-establishment of right relations between nation and nation there must be a new spirit, and they feel that they must try and interpret that spirit, the gospel of love, the gospel of meekness. They feel that it is possible that before you get this new feeling established over the world there may have to be on the part of a large number suffering. They may have to sacrifice their position. I want to suggest to you that it would be a most disastrous thing if, in connection with this war, you were to do anything that might bring about religious persecution in this country.

" I am one of those who feel how much we owe this country. I believe that the view of most conscientious objectors is that they cannot do enough to pay back what this country has done for them. I believe the view of most conscientious objectors is that they remember day by day the men who are dying for them in the trenches, and they want to repay that debt. I ask this House to be very careful that it does nothing that is going to fan anything that might be a religious war in this country. I know it is not your intention to do so, but directly you begin to try and find out who is a conscientious objector and who is not, your difficulties begin. I do not think that the tribunals at present suggested are the best. They are right for the other exemptions, probably, because largely that is a question of fact; but to find out who is a conscientious objector needs a very broad sympathy."

Then suppose a good many of the conscientious objectors did not ask for exemption on the ground that they felt that the State had no right to compel them to fight. They would be court-martialled as deserters and would have to suffer the penalties. They were not afraid of suffering penalties; they would suffer anything; but he felt sure it would be a bad thing for the country to have hundreds of the thousands of these men suffering for conscience sake in that way.

Major LANE-FOX said he knew there were many conscientious objectors who were genuine and he felt sure the House would be anxious to find an outlet for them to do their duty to their country

without doing an injustice to themselves. At the same time they were wrong-headed. If we were all conscientious objectors it would only be a matter of time before the nation would be exterminated. If the whole world attempted to run on as unpractical lines it would only show the absurdity of the idea.

THE RIGHT TO OPPOSE CONSCRIPTION

17th January, 1916

Mr. TREVELYAN asked the Prime Minister whether, if the Military Service (No. 2) Bill passes, the Government will promise that no steps will be taken, either under the Defence of the Realm Act or otherwise, to prevent the holding of meetings or the publication of writings for the purpose of demanding the repeal of the new law or of objecting to any extension of compulsory service?

Mr. H. SAMUEL: The Prime Minister has asked me to reply to this question. Meetings which are limited to opposition to the passage of the Military Service (No. 2) Bill, or to advocating its repeal if passed into an Act, or to opposition to any extension of compulsory service, and writings of the same character, would not be liable to suppression; but if there were violence, or incitement to violence or to illegal action, or if the law were transgressed in any other way, the object for which the meetings were held or the writings published would not, of course, entitle them to any exceptional treatment.

"NO-CONSCRIPTION FELLOWSHIP"

17th January, 1916

Major GLAZEBROOK asked the Secretary for State for the Home Department whether he will state the results of his investigation into the records of the men whose names appear on the manifestoes of the "No-Conscription Fellowship"; whether proceedings have been taken against any of them since the beginning of the war; if so, with what result; and whether any of them have shown signs of favouring the enemy?

Mr. HERBERT SAMUEL: It would be contrary to public interest for me to make a statement with regard to any such inquiry as the hon. and gallant Member refers to.

THE DEATH PENALTY

Tuesday, 18th January, 1916

Mr. SNOWDEN moved, at the end of Sub-section (2), to insert the words "but no provisions in any Acts or Regulations referred to in this Section which impose the death penalty shall have effect under this Act." He said it would be possible for the death penalty to be inflicted under the Army Regulations for offences committed by the conscripts enlisted under the Bill. Section 12, Sub-section (1), of the Army Act ran as follows:

"Every person subject to military law who commits any of the following offences, that is to say (*a*) deserts or attempts to desert His Majesty's Service; or (*b*) persuades, endeavours to persuade, procures, or attempts to procure, any person subject to military law to desert His Majesty's Service, shall, on conviction of court-martial, if he committed such act when on active service, or under orders for active service, be