

YMCA 175

# History Papers

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Arthur Yapp, appointed Secretary of the National Council of YMCAs in 1912, saw the outbreak of war in 1914 as an opportunity to broaden the appeal of the Association through service to King and Empire.

Despite its philosophy of young men working with and for young men, in Yapp's opinion the reputation of the YMCA by the 1900s was of an outdated, unexciting organization led by old men, out of touch with the needs and interests of youth, and unaware of how much the world was changing. On the other hand, it had valuable, and now very relevant, experience of working with the army in the summer camps of the Volunteers and Territorials, as well as in South Africa during the Boer War where it had provided writing tents and other social and recreational services to the troops.

The part played by the volunteers of the YMCA in the Great War is less well known than that of their medical contemporaries, but for those who were there, the YMCA's red triangle<sup>1</sup> was as well known, and as welcome a sight, as that of the red cross. Within ten days of the declaration of war the YMCA had a presence at more than 250 sites around the country - mainly at training camps or near railway stations used by troops in transit. In many places church or village halls could be rented, but in isolated camps the YMCA's marquees soon became a familiar and appreciated part of army life.

In November 1914 the first YMCA volunteers went to France and began operations along the lines of communication, and then, beginning in June 1915, hundreds of the prefabricated wooden huts for which the Association became famous were erected close to the Front and often within range of the firing line. The red triangle huts and marquees served refreshments and provided space for correspondence and games as well as concerts, lectures and religious services. The YMCA was soon also involved in giving battlefield assistance to the wounded and became, perhaps, most respected for its (largely forgotten) provision, free of charge, of hostels, transport and guides for civilians visiting severely wounded relatives in base hospitals.

It is also often overlooked that nearly a third of the men on the Western Front were permanently employed at supply and support bases, and for these, many of whom were too old for combat, the YMCA huts were settled places of resort and recreation, homes from home, and were decorated and furnished accordingly.

The Reverend Basil Bouchier, Vicar of St Jude-on-the-Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb, who served as a volunteer chaplain, said he could:

"think of only two adjectives to describe my impressions of the interiors of [the huts] - that is "cheery and bright." At one end, as a rule, is the platform and piano. The latter is seldom silent . . . [At] the other end what do we find? Just a counter, and ranged on shelves at the back of it a variety of stores. It sounds so simple doesn't it? . . . The YMCA is to the soldier very much the same as what the tuck-shop is to the schoolboy. The provisioning of these men with 'extras' is precisely what the YM has undertaken, and with unqualified success. "Where the troops are, the YMCA is." <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The emblem, which symbolized body, mind and spirit, had first been used by the American YMCA as part of a larger and more complex design. It was Yapp's inspired idea both to use it on its own, and to insist on its use as the Association's distinctive emblem.

<sup>2</sup> *St Jude's Parish Paper* 6 October 1916

The military authorities welcomed the work of the YMCA as contributing to good morale and discipline, while the official military chaplains soon realized that the light touch approach of the YMCA, of witnessing through example and service, was more acceptable to the troops than more traditional preaching and worship.

"The British Tommy is a man of few words, but nobody is so quick as he to weigh the situation up. He knows quite well that the Christian spirit of service is responsible for the presence of those behind the counter, and mentally he registers the fact . . . a man who is not possessed of any deep religious convictions (i.e. the average Englishman) is pretty certain to be susceptible to the religious influences of the person for whom he comes to entertain feelings of friendship and regard . . . Though a secular and unconsecrated building, the YMCA hut is the church in this foreign land [and] here it is that, Sunday and weekday, our men congregate to receive their spiritual as well as bodily food. Say what you will, the future religion of the nation, represented as it is out here by our very best and bravest, is being largely moulded in the huts of the YMCA".<sup>3</sup>

One of the YMCA workers Bouchier came across in France, in Arras in 1918, was the artist Walter Starmer with whom he "made a compact that, when the struggle was over, and if they both got back" he might suggest a mural scheme for the church in Hampstead Garden Suburb that had recently been erected to the designs of Edwin Lutyens. The author of the church history reported that Starmer's decorations to the places where the officers and men congregated [i.e. the YMCA huts] "have brought a little cheer and colour into their lives – a pleasant contrast to their usual drab surroundings".<sup>4</sup>

Arthur Yapp's account of the war work of the YMCA: *The Romance of the Red Triangle: the story of the coming of the Red Triangle and the service rendered by the YMCA to the sailors and soldiers of the British Empire*<sup>5</sup>, included eleven black and white illustrations by Starmer.

Walter Percival Starmer was born in 1877 in Teignmouth, Devon where his father, Henry, was minister of the Congregational Church. In 1885 the family moved to Norwich for Henry to take up the position with the British and Foreign Bible Society he was to retain for the rest of his working life. His task was to visit the many local East Anglia branches of the Society to raise money for the printing and distribution of Bibles across the world. He also occasionally preached and assisted the minister at the Princes Street Congregational Church in Norwich.

At 13 Walter Starmer left the King Edward VI School (later Norwich High School for Boys and now Langley School, Loddon) for the Norwich School of Science and Art, where for the next five years he was listed as a prize-winning or highly placed candidate in both local and national exams. In the summer of 1895 he won a scholarship for another three years at the school, but after just one year, and another 'excellent' in the 1896 examinations, Starmer transferred to the Art School in Birmingham, at the time the leading school in the country and a centre of the Arts and Crafts movement. His first known commission was for one of a series of murals illustrating the history of the town for Birmingham Town Hall.

By 1904 Walter Starmer was established at Breezemount, a large house in Mundesley-

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<sup>3</sup> Basil Bouchier in *St Jude's Parish Paper* 29 September 1916 and 'The Red Triangle from the clerical point of view' quoted in Michael Snape *The Back Parts of War: The YMCA Memoirs and Letters of Barclay Baron, 1915 to 1919* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 2009) 81-82

<sup>4</sup> [W. Ward] *History of S. Jude-on-the-Hill*, (London, Doulton, 1923) 25

<sup>5</sup> London, Hodder and Stoughton, not dated, but almost certainly 1919

on-Sea on the Norfolk coast. He held exhibitions there, of his own work, and also of other local artists, including his sister Edith who later came to live with him. He advertised Drawing and Painting Lessons by Post and became a member and later examiner for the Royal Drawing Society. His Christian faith remained as important to him as his artistic career and in 1910 he became a 'Paid Helper' of the Bible Society.

By 1911 he had returned to a studio in Norwich. He was making a career as a children's book illustrator, and as a cartoonist and caricaturist for newspapers and popular magazines. It was also around this time that he became active in the Norwich branch of the YMCA.

George Williams, the founder (in 1844) of the YMCA, like the Starmers had been a Congregationalist, and the church in Princes Street had played a leading part in establishing a Norwich branch in 1856. By the 1880s it had classrooms, social facilities and a gymnasium in its substantial premises in St Giles.

On the outbreak of war in August 1914 the Norwich YMCA moved rapidly to provide for the troops encamped in various sites around the city. Starmer was the popular leader of the tent at Hedenham, near Ditchingham. Within weeks, however, he and two YMCA colleagues, who had all had First Aid training a few months earlier, answered the call for three Norwich men to join the Red Cross in France.

Starmer, Stanley Larn and Theodore Scott, and around thirty other volunteers, crossed the Channel to Dieppe on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1914 and were enthusiastically welcomed by crowds of French soldiers and civilians. When they arrived at Red Cross headquarters at the Hotel d'Jéna in Paris later that night, however, they were told they were not expected and refused admission. Two lorries which eventually arrived to convey the party to another hotel both broke down, and a private car which stopped to assist and transport a few of the by now exhausted volunteers hit a lamppost and crashed into a wall. After ten days in the capital the Norwich men were posted to Le Mans, where for three weeks they lived and worked in makeshift conditions in the railway station, before moving to a properly equipped hospital in a requisitioned seminary in Rouen.

Starmer was discharged from the Red Cross on the last day of March 1915. His service in France within the first sixteen weeks of the start of the war entitled him to the 1914 Star in addition to the British War Medal and the Allied Victory Medal. He returned to France in August 1915 as a civilian worker with the YMCA.

The *Magazine of the Norwich High School for Boys* records Starmer's presence at the Front in all of its wartime editions and through until the summer of 1919. In November 1917 another of the school's old boys, Lieutenant Ralph Empson of the Royal Flying Corps, wrote to their former headmaster, Jeremiah George Chapman, that he had found himself sitting next to Starmer in a YMCA hut in France in the summer. In the summer of 1918 Chapman reported a visit from Starmer while on leave: "He was looking well . . . He is a leading YMCA worker at the French Front and was wearing the 1914 ribbon, which is a well-deserved honour to a thoroughly good and conscientious worker".

There is no record of Starmer being employed by the YMCA to record its war work, even though at least twenty-one of his works were in their possession by 1919. It is possible

that he had some kind of roving commission, perhaps from Yapp himself<sup>6</sup>, to work as an artist, recording what he saw, and making his skills available in other ways.

Yapp seems to have selected the (eleven) images for *The Romance of the Red Triangle* in order to show the range and variety of YMCA sites and locations: tents pitched along roadsides, in orchards, in bleak shell-scarred landscapes, or in requisitioned semi-ruined buildings. To the modern eye he seems to have chosen some of the less remarkable of Starmer's pictures from those available to him, and which the YMCA donated to the Imperial War Museum in 1919.

In many of Starmer's war paintings the combatants are either absent altogether or present only as individuals or in very small groups, suggesting both their loneliness and the desire for isolation as a means of coping.

In a sketch of a YMCA canteen set up in a ruined warehouse, reproduced in *The Romance of the Red Triangle*, two soldiers are listening to a third playing a piano, while two more sit alone at some distance, and facing away, from the others, reading or writing. With one exception all are wearing their tin helmets, perhaps as much for protection from the broken building as from the enemy. In the foreground papers lie abandoned on a table and a chair stands out of place towards the centre of the scene, bearing silent witness to those who at the front or have been lost. Tables laid out in front of a marquee outnumber the chairs needed for those who might sit at them.

One of the few pictures showing large groups of soldiers is a night scene of a French farmyard. Outside a brightly lit half-timbered farmhouse a few – probably Australian – soldiers are warming themselves at a brazier while a larger group watches the projection of a Pathéscope film onto a barn wall. Starmer records that none of the buildings occupied by the YMCA was large enough for the occasion. In the sky behind two flares can be seen visually echoing the projector's beam. The majority of those in the background may actually be ghostly shadows cast on the buildings by the projector and so evoke the missing and the lost.

Two pictures in the Imperial War Museum collection are worthy of note for showing the presence of Asian troops and workers on the Western Front.

Starmer described his picture of Lucheux, south-west of Arras, as showing "a typical [YMCA] tent for Chinese Labour parties in a limber forest, where Chinese coolies are engaged sawing and carting wood, road making etc". Close to 100,000 served near the front lines as paid volunteers in the British Chinese Labour Corps (and another 40,000 with the French) from 1917. Although in theory neutral civilians until China declared war on Germany in August of that year, they served under British officers and full military discipline. Many remained for some time after the war filling in trenches, laying out cemeteries and carving headstones.

His picture Le Mesnil, Somme, shows "one of the centres for Indian work, near Peronne, amongst Coolies repairing roads etc." Almost 1.5 million of the 2.5 million men of the British Empire who fought in the First World War were Indians, and another twenty thousand were also recruited as labourers. The India Corps arrived in France in autumn 1914 but was transferred to Mesopotamia the following year. Indian workers, however,

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<sup>6</sup> There is another possible connection between Starmer and Yapp through the Jarrold family of Norwich who were (and still are) active supporters of the YMCA and publishers of *Told in The Huts: The YMCA Gift Book* (London, Jarrold, n.d., probably 1916) for which Yapp wrote the Introduction.

remained throughout the war and were usually deployed closer to the front lines than the Chinese on the fortifications or in the supply of ammunition.

Arthur Yapp described the work with Indians:

“When it was decided to send the Indian troops to France, the YMCA offered its services to the Indian Government. The offer was refused. It was felt that if it became known in India that a Christian Association was at work amongst the Indians at the front, there would be mutiny. At last, however, permission was given to supply recreation marquees for the use of the Indian Army in France, but only on condition that there should be no proselytising, no preaching, no prayers, no hymn singing, no testaments or Bibles given and no tracts. The YMCA accepted the conditions, and though some of its friends felt it meant lowering the flag, it has loyally kept its promise, and most people realise it is one of the greatest pieces of Christian strategies of our times. A visit to one of the Red Triangle huts or tents in an Indian camp is a revelation. You hear the Mohammedan call to prayer, see the tiny mosque, and realise in how many and varied ways it is possible for the YMCA to be of service to these brave men of another faith.

[On one occasion] we proceeded to the adjoining recreation tent, and it was an inspiration to see it crammed from end to end with men of many religions and different races, all happy and contented and all usefully employed. On the platform a "budginee" or Indian concert was proceeding; a crowd of men at the tables were learning to write; another crowd receiving a lesson in English; a large group looking at pictures and illustrated magazines, whilst others were playing games or listening enraptured to the strains of the Indian records on the gramophone".<sup>7</sup>

The Lucheux picture shows its Chinese subjects, in their characteristic blue overalls, hard at work on individual tasks. The Indians, Sikhs by their appearance, are, by contrast, enjoying a period of rest, mainly in small groups. Some are cooking or washing, while two appear to be in prayer or meditation. Prominence is given in both pictures to the large YMCA marquees. The Chinese one is decorated with several coloured lanterns.

Despite being the only examples of his work in a public collection, Starmer rarely referred to the war paintings and did not include them in artists' directories or in his personal portfolio.

Between 1919 and 1929 he was employed by St Judes's Church initially to decorate the Lady Chapel as a war memorial. Although the Chapel contains a list of the fallen it is the decoration as a whole that is the parish's First World War memorial, and the memory of the fallen is primarily, and rather surprisingly, commemorated through images of women.

In an apparent revision to the original scheme of 1919 whereby the Lady Chapel was to be decorated with representations of the women of the Bible, a ceiling dome was filled with portraits (Starmer wrote) "illustrative of various types of women who have laboured and suffered in various spheres for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God, as witnesses for right as they conceived it, and for the extension of righteousness among men. The intention is to suggest the continuity of efforts towards this end through the Christian ages."

Starmer, says they are mainly types, with the odd well-known figure for emphasis, but the majority are in fact portraits of identifiable female saints and heroines from Christian

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<sup>7</sup> *The Romance of the Red Triangle* 201-205

history. Some are of quite recently deceased women. These include the anti- vivisectionist and suffragist Frances Power Cobbe (d. 1904), the social reformer and women's rights campaigner Josephine Butler (d.1906), Angela Burdett-Coutts (d.1906), philanthropist and supporter of animal causes, the executed nurse Edith Cavell (d.1915), Elsie Inglis (d. 1917) a Scottish doctor and suffragist who had established all-women medical units to work with the Allied forces and served in Serbia (where she was captured) and Russia, and Agnes Weston (d. 1918) who had dedicated her life to the welfare of the men of the Royal Navy.

It is image of Joan of Arc that confronts the visitor or worshipper entering the chapel. Although Joan had become a symbol of resistance to German militarism and outrages against women and children in the war, her presence in St Jude's probably owes more to her role as an inspiration and symbol for the women's suffrage movement in England. Emily Wilding Davison saluted the centrepiece statue of Joan of Arc at the Women's Suffrage and Political Union summer fair in 1913 with Joan's own last words "Fight on, and God will give victory". The same words would appear on Emily's grave a few days later – after she had died beneath the King's horse at the Derby.

At the time of the painting (and from 1918) only certain women over 30 had the vote; it would not be until 1928 that it was granted on the same terms as men, to all over 21. Starmer's Lady Chapel mural scheme became much more than a war memorial. It was a celebration of the contribution of women to the church and nation, but also part of the continuing campaign for universal adult suffrage.

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