

ALTERNATIVE SERVICE AND ALTERNATIVE GENDER ROLES

Conscientious Objectors in B.C. During World War II

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I N JUNE 1942, Clayton Burkholder, a young Mennonite from southern Ontario, saw the mountains of British Columbia for the first time. As a conscientious objector — or “co” — to war, Clayton had been assigned to Alternative Service work with the British Columbia Forestry Service (BCFS) in lieu of training for military service. Having served already for close to a year in northern Ontario working at road construction, Clayton was disheartened at the prospect of being so far from his family and girlfriend for the duration of the war. At Christmas 1943, during his second leave from camp, Clayton and his girlfriend of three years, Helen Erb, were married just four days after his arrival at home. Not willing to endure another full year apart, they decided that Helen would return with Clayton to B.C., which she did in January 1944. Clayton returned to camp near Langford on Vancouver Island and Helen found employment doing housework in Victoria. While Clayton earned the co wage of fifty cents a day, Helen became the primary breadwinner, earning fifty cents an hour.¹

In economic terms, this couple experienced a shift in gender roles which characterized the World War II era. Yet the adaptation in their understanding of their respective roles was slightly different than for the majority of Canadians. For men from historic peace churches which rejected military service, conscientious objection not only represented a political nonconformist stance, but also meant a deviation from a gender construction which equated masculinity with militarism and which saw men bravely take up their weapons to protect their nation and their homes. The female relatives of cos, on

¹ The story of Helen and Clayton Burkholder is mainly drawn from an interview by the author with Helen Burkholder, 24 July 1992. An interview with Clayton Burkholder can be found in the Oral History Collection of Alternative Service in World War II, Conrad Grebel College Archives (hereafter CGCA), Waterloo, Ontario.

the other hand, had to step outside traditional gender roles for a short time, yet without the kind of propagandistic or material support lent to other Canadian women who were actively supporting the war effort. Even while assuming alternative gender roles during the exigencies of war and conscientious objection, both men and women were structuring their experience so as to be able to reclaim their proper gender space. This paper will explore the ways in which individuals found themselves in foreign territory, both physically and as far as their understanding of who they were as men and women was concerned, and their efforts to restore gender "normalcy." Although Alternative Service placements existed across the country, the B.C. experience was unique in that it saw both men and women travel far from home to a completely different geographic and social setting than that to which they were accustomed. As well, the nature of the work assigned to cos by the BCFS, and the urban job opportunities available to women in B.C.'s two major cities, offered a context in which gender roles were stretched perhaps more than for co families elsewhere.

Historians of women and gender during World War II have, for the most part, viewed the 1940s as a critical point for women, and there are numerous studies that examine women's altered wartime roles in industry, in the armed services, in volunteer labour, and in the home. Most notable for the Canadian context is the work of Ruth Roach Pierson, who emphasizes the ambivalence which existed for those women entering non-traditional employment while wartime ideology stressed their femininity.² Although scholars such as Cynthia Enloe and Betty Reardon have made important contributions to an understanding of militarization as a "gendered process" and established the links between war and patriarchy, the specifically gendered nature of men's roles in the military has not been adequately examined.³ Studies

² See Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986). Other Canadian studies include Jean Bruce, *Back the Attack! Canadian Women During the Second World War — at Home and Abroad* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1985). Notable American studies specific to World War II include Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982); D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

³ See Cynthia Enloe, "Bananas, Bases, and Patriarchy," in Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, eds., *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), also "Beyond 'Rambo': Women and the Varieties of

of gender and the peace movement have also tended to focus on women.⁴ There has been little study, however, of gender and either peace or war in the context of societies with an historic peace stance.⁵ Included here would be such religious groups as the Society of Friends (Quakers), Mennonites, Hutterites, Doukhobors, Amish, Brethren in Christ, and Jehovah's Witnesses. That pacifist groups may experience an opposing structure of gender to that of the mainstream is suggested by Jean Bethke Elshtain, who observes, "Pacifist constructions reinforce and reaffirm dominant cultural images of women . . . but challenge masculine representations, calling into question male identity as fighters, warriors, protectors."⁶

For co couples in British Columbia, the immediate rules were different vis-à-vis non-pacifist Canadians, but the overall pattern whereby the "deconstruction and reconstruction of gender was another battlefield"⁷ in the war was very much the same. An important distinction is that both men and women, and perhaps men even more than women, found themselves taking a stance which placed them outside of the norm. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the transformations in gender during wartime, it is important to

Militarized Masculinity," in Eva Isaksson, ed., *Women and the Military System* (Hertfordshire: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1988), 71-93; and, Betty A. Reardon, *Sexism and the War System* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985). Judith H. Stiehm also describes the military as a "male-defining institution." Referred to in Isaksson, "Introduction," *Women and the Military System*, 3. An important contribution to the study of war and gender is Margaret R. Higonnet, et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). The collected essays in this study emphasize the dynamism in gender systems, whereby the cultural perception of gender identity alters in response to social phenomena such as war and is subsequently restructured in response to new conditions prevailing in peacetime.

⁴ For studies of women and peace which include a Canadian perspective, see, for instance, Ruth Roach Pierson, ed., *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Janice Williamson and Deborah Gorham, eds., *Up and Doing: Canadian Women and Peace* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1989).

⁵ Although there have been numerous studies of conscientious objectors in World War II in both the United States and Canada, none have dealt with the issue of masculinity per se. A small collection of work exists which examines the wartime roles of women in pacifist churches. For the U.S., see Heather T. Frazer and John O'Sullivan, "Forgotten Women of World War II: Wives of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service," *Peace and Change*, 5:2&3 (Fall 1978), 46-51; Rachel Waltner Goossen, "Conscientious Objection and Gender: Women in Civilian Public Service During the Second World War" (PhD thesis, University of Kansas, 1993), and her article, "The 'Second Sex' and the 'Second Milers': Mennonite Women and Civilian Public Service," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 66 (October 1992), 525-38. For Canada, see Lorraine Roth, "Conscientious Objection: The Experiences of Some Canadian Mennonite Women During World War II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 66 (October 1992), 539-45; and Marlene Epp, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall': Canadian Mennonite Women as cos in World War II," *Mennonite Life*, 48:3 (September 1993), 7-10.

⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War*, 139.

⁷ Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 17.

explore the experiences of those men and women who represented an ideological aberration from the norms of society. This paper will attempt to address a gap which exists in the historiography of gender and war.

In the summer of 1940, following the passage of the National Resources Mobilization Act, which authorized conscription for Canadian home defence, leaders of historic peace churches in Canada began to lobby the federal government for an Alternative Service (AS) program for those young men who claimed conscientious objector status. Arrangements for a program that would put cos to work on non-military projects of "national importance" were implemented in June 1941.⁸ cos in western Canada were initially sent to national parks at Banff, Jasper, Prince Albert, and Riding Mountain, where they cleared forests of dead timber, built trails and roads, planted trees, and dug ditches. Most Ontario men were sent to a camp at Montreal River north of Sault Ste. Marie where they cleared rock and bush for road-building. Initially, the assignments were to last four months, a time equal to the training period required of military recruits.

In the spring of 1942, an agreement was struck between the Canadian government and the British Columbia Forestry Service whereby up to 1,000 cos would perform their Alternative Service in forestry work on the west coast and Vancouver Island. The attack on Pearl Harbor had created a perceived threat of bombing raids on the North American west coast, and thus an auxiliary force of fire-fighters was needed to deal with such a possibility as well as with the regular outbreaks during the summer fire season. In addition to fire-fighting, cos were put to work "snag-falling" (removing the trees or "snags" left

⁸ Generally speaking, scholarly studies of the Canadian co experience have focused on the organizational developments and ingroup wrangling that characterized the negotiations leading to alternative service, more than the experience of cos in camps. The following studies provide detailed discussions of negotiating the alternative service program: Hildegard Martens, "Accommodation and Withdrawal: The Response of the Mennonites in Canada to World War II," *Social History/Histoire Sociale* (November 1974), 306-27; David W. Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection in World War II" (MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 1977), and Fransen, "As Far as Conscience Will Allow: Mennonites in Canada During the Second World War," in Norman Hillmer, et al., eds., *On Guard For Thee: War, Ethnicity and the Canadian State, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, 1988), 131-149; William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), esp. Chap.9. Studies which focus more directly on alternative service camps include Lawrence Klippenstein, *That There Be Peace: Mennonites in Canada and World War II* (Winnipeg: Manitoba co Reunion Committee, 1979); E. Morris Sider, "Life and Labor in the Alternate Service Work Camps in Canada during World War II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66:4 (October 1992), 580-97. A good study which deals with all pacifist groups involved in alternative service is Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), chap. 8.

in the aftermath of a fire), in road construction and park improvement, and supplying firewood for general consumption. At the peak of the program in July 1943, there were nineteen Alternative Service camps in B.C., of which fourteen were on Vancouver Island and five were on the mainland. At that point, close to 800 men had been assigned to duties with the BCFS.

During the course of the war, approximately 11,000 men received exemption from military service, almost all of whom were cos as the result of their membership in certain religious groups. Of these, about 7,500 (68 per cent) were Mennonites, an ethno-religious group with a doctrinal tradition of non-participation in war. Most of the specific examples in this paper are drawn from the Mennonite experience. During World War I most Mennonites received automatic exemption from military service on the basis of agreements made with the federal government when they immigrated to Canada. This time, however, the National War Services Regulations demanded that cos make a formal application and plead their case for exemption before the Mobilization Board in their district.⁹ If their claim was accepted, the co then was compelled to perform some form of Alternative Service.

For men just entering Alternative Service, or those nearing the end of four-month terms, the news that they would be sent to British Columbia came on the heels of an announcement that cos were obliged to serve for the duration of the war. This came as a shock to cos and their families, especially those from conservative and rural Mennonite communities in Ontario. While young, unmarried cos came to view their term of service far from home as an adventure, those who were newly married and with young children felt the double burden of loneliness and financial worry.¹⁰ Defying the enforced separation from their husbands, a number of women from Ontario and the prairies moved temporarily to British Columbia and found housing and employment near the Alternative Service camps. Some brought small children with them and others gave birth to their first child while on the west coast. Most remained in B.C. until a shift in the Alternative Service program in mid-1943 saw their husbands transferred to assignments in agriculture and industry back home.

⁹ In practice, the process of making a claim of conscientious objection differed from one district to another and between groups as well. The varying status held by different migrations of Mennonites caused substantial friction during the initial phase of negotiating Alternative Service. For a detailed discussion, see for instance Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection," and Janzen, *The Limits of Liberty*.

¹⁰ I have not established exact numbers of cos working for the BCFS who were married. Thomas Socknat, in his book *Witness to War* (p.240), has statistics on the marital status of Alternative Service workers in national parks but not for those with the BCFS.

The experience of co men in forestry camps in B.C. reveals a struggle with gender identity in a number of ways. Having rejected the patriotic duty of going to war for their country, cos felt a strong need to be performing work of national importance. A certain crisis of identity occurred when they perceived their labour to be less than important. The sense of uselessness about their work first arose among cos working at road-building in northern Ontario. The following man's summation was echoed by others:

We didn't do anything up there in Sault Ste. Marie. We didn't build that road; we were just put up there to get out of the sight of the people. . . . What was done by all of us guys, one bulldozer could've done that. . . . I always had the feeling that we were being swept under a rug, so that we would be out of sight.¹¹

This same man was sent to Vancouver Island for his second term of service and, although he granted that firefighting was more worthwhile, when winter arrived and he found himself digging snow out of ditches, he said "enough of that" and enlisted in the Air Force. Another man stationed at Seymour Mountain north of Vancouver protested publicly in the co newsletter: "There are times when we are at a loss to explain to our own satisfaction just where the construction of a park, during what we are told is an acute labour shortage, would rate a very high rating in priorities for man power."¹² Other cos expressed the longing to perform work "which . . . would result in greater service to humanity" and to demonstrate their love for their country.¹³

Their diminished sense of self-worth over the nature of their work was accentuated by the cos' awareness of how they were perceived by the Canadian public. In the media, the term "Conchie" had become a

¹¹ Gerry Thiessen's story is found in Marcus Shantz, *Looking for Peace: Three Mennonites Remember WWII* (Kitchener, Ont.: Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, 1992).

¹² "Seymour Park Mountain," *The Beacon*, 2:1 (Jan. 1943), 4. *The Beacon* was published approximately monthly from October 1942 to October 1945 and was "owned, operated and controlled by asw men in the B.C. Forestry Service." Its predecessor was *The Northern Beacon*, published by alternative service workers in northern Ontario beginning in January 1942 and ceasing in July 1942 when the Montreal River camp was closed. See Elizabeth Suderman Klassen, "Alternative Service Work as reflected in *The Beacon*, October 1942-September 1945," *Mennonite Life*, 48:3 (Sept.1993), 19-25.

¹³ The first statement is from Harold Schmidt (Seymour Mountain Park, Dollarton, BC) to J. B. Martin (Waterloo, ON), 31 May 1943. Conrad Grebel College Archives (CGCA) XV-11.4.13, Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC) Collection, Military Problems Committee, Chairman's Correspondence. The latter sentiments are expressed by Gerry Thiessen in "The Different Path: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in World War II," (Video produced by Rogers Community TV and Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, 1990).

derisive label for conscientious objectors who were frequently portrayed as cowards or “yellow-bellies.” The B.C. Alternative Service camp newsletter, *The Beacon*, admitted that the common conception of the CO was “one who is weakminded, cowardly, lacking a sane understanding, without principle,”¹⁴ qualities which all served to emasculate those who were targets of such criticism. That COs themselves may have internalized some of this derision is suggested by one AS worker who bitterly complained about fellow workers who “want to go home and live like they formerly did. They forget about the millions that say goodbye expecting never to see home again. . . . Too many of them are just a bunch of yellow-jackets.”¹⁵ Although such strong expressions of frustration were not the norm, many COs expressed discomfort knowing that other young men were losing their lives overseas. One man had a “troubled spirit” realizing there were “those who had lost their lives” while he “was able to go through this period without really much danger to [him] personally.” Another felt “resentment” from families who had lost sons in the war.¹⁶ Some men believed they would be more justified in their pacifist stance if they were subject to “the same dangers as the soldiers.”¹⁷

Even stronger than the concern by the public and the COs themselves that they were not doing their part to protect the country were the feelings of helplessness on the part of COs that they were unable to protect their families economically. For COs who were providers for their families, the obligations of Alternative Service may have incurred a crisis in masculine identity. The small remuneration received by conscientious objectors — fifty cents a day — created hardship for some families, particularly after March 1942, when Alternative Service terms were extended for the duration of the war. Although many married women became wage-earners at this time, some households had difficulty staying afloat without the support of a father, son, or husband. One young man in camp in British Columbia wrote the following to the minister of his home church in Waterloo, Ontario in August 1942:

By this time you have perhaps looked over the enclosed letter addressed to mother from the government. . . . It appears as though

¹⁴ “Seymour Park Mountain,” *The Beacon*, 2:1 (Jan. 1943), 4.

¹⁵ “John” (Lake Cowichan, BC) to “Dear Father,” 12 Feb. 1944. CGCA, Mennonites in Canada Files (1940-wwII-Alternative Service).

¹⁶ These sentiments are expressed by Wilson Hunsburger and Gerry Thiessen in the video, “A Different Path. . . .”

¹⁷ “My Task,” *The Canadian C.O.* 1:2 (Oct. 1942), 5.

she has already become quite discouraged and seemingly has taken rather drastic steps toward obtaining what she thinks her justice. What I would appreciate is that either you or some member of the [church] welfare board would visit her sometime in the near future to see what suggestion could be offered toward getting the required help on the farm before she writes any more of these desperate letters.¹⁸

Another man wrote to the same minister in a desperate tone, asking "what happened to the promises that were made to us before we left as far as support for our wives goes or that they would be looked after."¹⁹ In September 1943, the Chairman of the Military Problems Committee of the Conference of Historic Peace Churches that advocated on behalf of cos, wrote to one of the Alternative Service officials, requesting the release of about fifty men from camps in B.C. and asking that they be placed on farms in order to support their families better. In each case, a woman's need to support herself was stressed as a negative consequence of her husband's service obligations. Regardless of whether her income was from gifts, charity, or self-support, the woman's dependency was stressed over against his inability to provide for her.²⁰ The chagrin of some cos over their own relative comfort in camp versus the hardships faced by their families was expressed by one man whose wife remained at home:

My wife of four months had to manage the farm while expecting our first child. She carried a great load by being alone and having farm responsibilities — although hired help did the work, while we were with friends and could engage in fellowship and sight-seeing.²¹

The extra financial burden carried by married cos was noted in one issue of *The Beacon* which congratulated three fathers of "handsome baby boy[s]." The writer wondered "how these fellows are able to keep so cheerful, realizing they are confronted by a financial difficulty greater than our own."²²

¹⁸ H. S. to J. B. Martin, 26 Aug. 1942. CGCA, J. B. Martin Collection, Hist. Mss. 1.34.1.1.1.

¹⁹ B. S. to J. B. Martin, 1 Mar. 1943. CGCA, J. B. Martin Collection, Hist. Mss. 1.34.1.1.1.

²⁰ The following examples are representative of this correspondence: "Mr. Stere has been in camp in B.C. since June 1942. His wife and child are dependent on her earnings for support. She is in B.C. at present." "Mr. Burkhardt has been in camp since June 1942. He has one child. His wife keeps a few boarders to earn a little money. She also is dependent upon gifts and charities from the church and friends." J. B. Martin, Chairman, Military Problems Committee, CHPC, to J. F. MacKinnon, Regional Alternate Service Officer, 22 Sept. 1943. CGCA XV-11.4.13, CHPC Collection, Military Problems Committee, Chairman's Correspondence.

²¹ Quoted in Klippenstein, *That There Be Peace*, 100.

²² "Horne Lake 'High' Spots," *The Beacon* 2:2 (Feb. 1943), 12.

The CO who looked in vain to his home congregation to help look after his family was not alone in feeling that more could be done by the church to minimize the economic disadvantages of its pacifist stance. A young minister from Alberta who visited camps in B.C. wrote very pointedly about the church's economic neglect of the CO, and addressed one of the social problems that challenged the masculinity of the CO:

Why, when the conscientious objector, to a greater extent than will ever be known and appreciated, stood for all that the church proclaimed, did not the church in turn stand for him? This would in comparison have been very easy. There was the conscientious objector's little farm, his newly started business, and with it in most cases his hopes and plans for future happiness and success all going on the rocks, when with little effort on the part of the church, it could easily have been preserved. Did not everyone else make such provisions for those fighting for or representing them? Long before he returned, provisions were made for the soldier's rehabilitation. His wife and family were adequately cared for. . . . And that smarting social letdown! His chum of yesterday marched down the street with measured tread and the young lady only too often preferred to hang felicitously on the handsome soldierboy's arm. And the conscientious objector could just go his own way as far as she was concerned.²³

Some Mennonite churches did in fact establish funds for COs with dependents. In most cases, however, these were not monies divided equitably but were more akin to welfare funds which put the onus on individual families to prove their own need. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these funds were at all active. The Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers) was also "instrumental in assisting the dependents of conscientious objectors."²⁴

More effective than church intervention to address economic need were several changes to the Alternative Service program itself. In April 1943, in response to pressure from the historic peace churches and to a growing national labour shortage, new legislation was passed

²³ J. W. Nickel, "The Canadian Conscientious Objector," *Mennonite Life*, January 1948, 27. A 1970 study based on questionnaires completed by COs also noted that "if the boys from the camps and boys from the active forces were home at the same time, the girls would pay more attention to the boys in uniform than the others." From Jake P. Krause, "Their Experience and Opinion," (Unpublished research paper, 1970), CGCA, Mennonites in Canada Files (1940-Conscientious Objection), 15.

²⁴ Socknat, *Witness to War*, 249.

which diverted service away from camps and towards placements in agriculture and industry.²⁵ Following this change, the majority of cos who received call-ups were placed on farms, while those already in camps were gradually re-assigned. Men who were assigned to farm labour were paid at the prevailing wage rate, of which they received twenty-five dollars per month as well as room and board while the remainder went to the Canadian Red Cross. cos who were placed in non-agricultural employment received an additional monthly allowance to cover living expenses. While this was an improvement over the meagre fifty cents a day received by men in the camps, and for married cos eliminated the loneliness of separation, it was only a partial solution to the dilemma of providing for their families.

In July 1944, recognizing that a problem of support existed, the Canadian government passed legislation which established allowances for dependents of cos.²⁶ These allowances were increased a year later, after the war had already ended.²⁷ While these government measures were an important step towards reducing the glaring contrast between cos and servicemen, for cos who had been in Alternative Service since mid-1941 the new arrangements came too late to undo the problems they may have experienced at the outset.

Some cos, rather than waiting for either the church or the government to step in and make things better, took matters into their own hands and rejected Alternative Service. Reacting to a sense of the uselessness of their labour in camps as well as their concern about families struggling at home, a few cos went AWOL (absent without leave), causing "embarrassment" to their churches and "irritation to the government officials."²⁸ A more common response was to enlist in the military. One historic peace group, the Mennonites, saw a large portion of their young men join the armed forces without even declaring themselves as cos at the outset. The most recent of various estimates concludes that approximately 4,500 Canadian Mennonites enlisted in the armed forces, compared with 7,500 who chose Alterna-

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of these legislative changes, see Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection in World War II," 125-30; Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 245-50.

²⁶ The exact amount of these allowances varied according to individual circumstances and was subject to the discretionary power of the Alternative Service officer in a specific locale. The average dependent allowance was five to ten dollars per month for a married man, with an additional five dollars for each child. See J. A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada During World War II* (Winnipeg: Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, n.d.), 90.

²⁷ In June 1945, Red Cross payments were reduced for those in agriculture and industry, while all married cos over the age of thirty were exempted entirely from such payments. Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 345-6, endnote 85.

²⁸ Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection. . .," 122-3.

tive Service.²⁹ This study of Mennonite soldiers by T. D. Regehr argues that the dominant reason for Mennonite young men enlisting in the military was "because they wanted to respond patriotically when their country called on them in its hour of need."³⁰ The high rate of enlistment also points to the fact that commitment to pacifist principles had waned in some communities. That there was also a direct linkage between the desire for more useful and better-paying labour and the decision to enlist is suggested by the fact that Mennonite enlistments declined in the spring of 1943, following the diversification of the Alternative Service program. For some men, the decision to enlist was also based on images of themselves and images of life in the military. Some Canadians likely shared the sentiments of an American co who joined the military in order to prove to himself and others "that he was not a coward."³¹ One man who volunteered for the Air Force did so "because flying was considered pretty glamorous: it was well-paid and promotions were pretty good."³² A number of cos were able to fulfil their desire for service to country and also experience the glamour and danger of military service by entering noncombatant service in the medical and dental corps of the Canadian army.

Although the historiography of the Canadian co experience does not address the issue of pay to any great extent, it is probable that the substantially higher remuneration did draw men from pacifist groups into military service. Sheldon Martin of Ontario was called up in June 1942, and, in accordance with his own beliefs and that of the Pentecostal church of which he was a member, declared himself a conscientious objector and began Alternative Service in B.C. on the mainland. Mary Ann, his wife of six weeks, followed Sheldon to B.C. and found work in a shoe factory in Vancouver. After about nine months, Mary Ann developed health problems which required costly treatment by a specialist. In order to pay for his wife's health care, Sheldon joined the army, where he received \$1.30 a day to start, almost triple his co wage. He said that had it not been for their immediate financial need, he

²⁹ T. D. Regehr summarizes the historiography behind his estimate. See "Lost Sons: The Canadian Mennonite Soldiers of World War II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 66:4 (Oct. 1992), 461-80.

³⁰ Regehr, "Lost Sons," 472. The same conclusion is reached by Mark Epp in his paper, "Mennonites in Military Service during World War II" (Unpublished research paper, Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, 1986), 21.

³¹ Olive Stucky, quoted in Keith L. Sprunger and John D. Thiesen, "Mennonite Military Service in World War II: An Oral History Approach," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 66:4 (Oct. 1992), 488.

³² Mark Epp, "Mennonites in Military Service. . .," 21.

would have remained in the Alternative Service camp.³³ While the number of men who left alternative service camps and enlisted in the military is not high — 243 Mennonites had taken this course of action by October 1944 — the feelings and dilemmas that prompted their more drastic choice were fairly widespread. Although few men spoke directly about their self-identity as males, a masculine construction that included patriotism, service, bravery, and support of family did indeed shape their action as gendered beings.

Men who chose to remain in alternative service camps in B.C. were not acting out their wartime gender dilemma as outwardly as were those who chose to reject their co status. However, men in the camps also found ways of structuring and imaging their experience to make it fit societal and personal expectations of who they should be as men. In order to narrow the gap in experience between the co and the fighting soldier, the media and cos themselves used descriptive language and metaphor which likened Alternative Service to the military. The observation by Jean Bethke Elshtain that the co often saw himself in “mimetic terms as the militant analogue of the violent warrior” seems especially apt when applied to the situation of cos in B.C.³⁴ Perhaps in order to lessen public perception that cos were having an easy time of it, one newspaper story about cos working for the BCFS observed: “At camp the men are subjected to army routine, and from all appearances like it.”³⁵ The task of fighting forest fires in particular lent itself to images parallel to those associated with the combatant soldier. cos were described as “combatting” fires and “standing on guard” on the west coast. A photo caption of co fire-fighters read: “Return journey, after several days of battling the blaze. These heroes feel a war weariness of their own.”³⁶ The fact that cos were initially stationed as fire-fighters on the coast because of a perceived military threat did in fact make them part of the military effort from a defensive perspective. It did not really matter that no bomb attack ever occurred. The military image went beyond fire-fighting, however, to include other aspects of forestry work. In an almost amusing comparison, Alterna-

³³ Interview by the author with Sheldon and Mary Ann Martin, 9 May 1994. Historian Rachel Waltner Goossen, who has studied gender and the American co experience, also found that some cos left Civilian Public Service (the American equivalent of Alternative Service) and opted for combatant service to better support their families. See Waltner Goossen, “The ‘Second Sex’ . . .,” 531.

³⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 202-03.

³⁵ “Mennonites Doing a Fine Job,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, no date. Article found in ccga, Mennonites in Canada Files (1940-Conscription Objection).

³⁶ From Klippenstein, *That There Be Peace*, 42.

tive Service workers, embarking on a project of lifting tree seedlings on the mainland for reforestation on the island, were likened to soldiers entering battle:

Last week this camp was a seething cauldron of excitement. A rumor had been spread that the first week of February would see us in action. However, beyond the wildest dreams and expectations of the most hopeful, orders were issued that today the zero hour had come. Everyone rushed to their posts and at the close of the first half day, no less than 64,000 trees were pulled, tied and heeled in, before the murderous onslaught. Due to the imminent danger of the attack being blunted, reinforcements were summoned from the Seymour camp, hastily assembled and with a minimum of training, rushed into the fray at the side of their comrades. The field was carried by storm. Tabulations on the last day of January show one million trees torn from their moorings, calmly awaiting shipment to the Island.³⁷

Similarly, the dramatic account of one man's accomplishment felling a snag which measured fifteen feet in diameter at its widest point was thought to be a good story in later years when his children would ask, "Daddy, what did you do in the war?"³⁸

Fighting fires and felling trees were not the only activities in which cos could exhibit their manly qualities of strength and courage. For some cos, sin was an enemy as threatening as the Nazis. Some AS camps had strongly evangelical factions which regularly sang hymns such as "Onward, Christian Soldiers" or "Soldiers for Christ," and which proselytized in nearby towns. One article in *The Beacon* responded to critical editorials which had appeared in B.C. newspapers attacking the cowardliness of cos. The co writer said, "We all wish as young men to be numbered among the brave and strong," and challenged cos to be like the biblical Samson, who had to kill a lion bare-handed before he could proceed with his life plans. Rather than killing lions (or Germans for that matter), the writer called on cos to attack the sin in their lives.³⁹

³⁷ "Camp GT-1 News," *The Beacon*, 3:2 (Feb./March 1944), 5.

³⁸ "GT-4 News," *The Beacon*, 2:10 (Oct./Nov. 1943), 26.

³⁹ "Editorial," *The Beacon*, 2:4 (April 1943), 2. Critical press coverage of the cos was especially strong in the Fraser Valley where there was also a growing population of Mennonites. Criticism was directed at the AS workers but also at what was perceived as a Mennonite "land-grab" in the Valley. Articles included: "Valley Boards of Trade Urge Ban on Mennonite Land Grab," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 June 1943; "Mennonites Protest Criticism — Organize to Buy Loan Bonds," *Chilliwack Progress*, 12 May 1943.

There were many other small and subtle examples which demonstrate what Elshtain has suggested are “ironic similarities” between the CO and the soldier.⁴⁰ These included a comparison of the close friendships formed among soldiers on battlefields with those established among men in the forest service, as well as the simple “Song for Conchies” composed by Alternative Service workers and sung to the tune of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” Other ironies included the occasional interaction between COS and regular army personnel stationed on Vancouver Island. Sometimes they worked side by side on road or forest projects and sometimes CO camps would challenge army camps in sports. There was no hiding the tone of triumph when the COS won over the soldiers in games of softball and volleyball.⁴¹ Sports activities were important for alleviating boredom and were also a means for the CO to emphasize his virility. Apparently boxing and wrestling were popular past-times and may have been so because they were especially masculine sports which demonstrated aggression and fighting ability. According to one chronicler, “In one instance a man spent several weeks recuperating from cracked ribs received in boxing, and in another case the floor of a cabin needed to be replaced because of the vigor of the wrestling matches.”⁴² Life in AS camps may well have resembled the “masculine culture” characteristic of logging camps described by historian Ian Radforth.⁴³

To emphasize further their masculinity and, perhaps, look more like soldiers, some COS grew moustaches in camp, a practice which would have been taboo in their home communities. One young man antagonized his parents by growing a moustache, which “makes me look more officious, and that’s what a fellow needs in camp here.” He obliged them and shaved it off, saying, “I’m sorry my little moustache hurt you so. . . . I can’t see that there is anything unChristian about it.”⁴⁴ Thus, even while standing ideologically outside of society’s wartime image of the militarized male, COS consciously and subconsciously found ways of redefining their own experience which allowed them also to be wartime heroes.

⁴⁰ Elshtain notes that historic accounts of pacifism in wartime have tended to ignore these similarities. See *Women and War*, 203.

⁴¹ “Q-2 Chips,” *The Beacon*, 2:5 (May 1943), 14.

⁴² Sider, “Life and Labor in the Alternate Service Work Camps. . .,” 593.

⁴³ Radforth makes several references to the machismo which was part of the logging industry. See *Busbworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁴⁴ “John” (Lake Cowichan, BC) to “Dear Father” 12 Feb. 1944, and “Dear Father and Mother” 1 Feb. 1944, and “Dear Mother” 13 Feb. 1944. In CGCA, Mennonites in Canada files (1940-ww11-Alternative Service).

For the women married to cos, the outbreak of war and their husbands' departure for Alternative Service also meant a disruption in their activities and self-understanding as wives. Unlike their menfolk, however, women from historic peace groups experienced a shift in gender roles that more closely paralleled the experience of their mainstream counterparts. Since their pacifist stance posed no direct problem for them as far as military conscription went, co women found themselves supporting the "peace effort" in much the same way that other Canadian women were supporting the "war effort."

Like other women, co women collected clothes for war sufferers, knit bandages for the Red Cross, and learned to manage their households in light of wartime rationing. Many married co women also entered the workforce, both part-time and full-time, to bring income into the household. In many cases, women stepped out of their traditional domestic roles and stepped into the vacant shoes of their brothers and husbands. In a style which echoed much of the propaganda surrounding women's wartime roles, a 1942 article in a Toronto newspaper featured a Mennonite-owned farm north of the city where the Wideman sisters were helping to run the farm in the absence of male hands. Entitled "Girls Man the Farm Front," the article described how Anna alone plowed 120 acres while her sister Ella "did a man's job daily."⁴⁵ The profile of one co in *The Beacon* also noted that "his wife now operates his large farm" in Saskatchewan.⁴⁶ (Ironically, it is still HIS farm.)

Other women took in boarders, did laundry and sewing in their homes, or moved in with family members to make ends meet. The experience of Clara (Lebold) Roth is fairly typical for young wives of cos. Clara was pregnant with her first child and only two weeks short of her due date when her husband Ken was sent into Alternative Service in B.C. Although her sister had been boarding with them, without her husband's income as a truck driver, Clara could not afford the rent on their apartment and so moved in with her parents. It would seem that life with a new baby in her parental home was not entirely satisfactory and so after seven months, Clara moved out on her own, supporting herself and her infant son by sewing lingerie at home for a nearby clothing factory. Loneliness overcame her, however, and after a short time she returned to live with her parents. Before long Clara took a "big step" and travelled to B.C. to be near her husband, despite opposition from her mother-in-law and even though

⁴⁵ "Girls Man the Farm Front," *The Star Weekly*, 14 Aug. 1943.

⁴⁶ "Who's Who," *The Beacon*, 2:5 (May 1943), 15.

her church "wasn't much for it either." Once in B.C., Clara easily found work as a housekeeper, and she and her husband shared a cabin in Deep Cove with another co couple.⁴⁷

Housekeeping was a common occupation for co women in B.C. and positions were plentiful in both Vancouver and Victoria. Wages were good as well. In oral accounts, one woman reported earning as much as twenty dollars a week in Vancouver,⁴⁸ while others commonly juxtaposed their hourly wage of fifty cents against their husbands' token allowance of fifty cents a day. Women also worked as salesclerks, picked hops, and worked in factories. Annie Martin from Ontario stumbled somewhat unintentionally into what would become a lifetime vocation during her two-year sojourn in B.C. While working as a housekeeper for a family in Victoria, she was unexpectedly left with the permanent care of two young children when her employers (their parents) abruptly separated and the children were left with the local Children's Aid Society. Over the next months, she took in five more foster children, a task which she resumed after returning to Ontario and continued well past the age of retirement. The stipend Annie received for the children's care as well as money earned providing room and board for several sailors stationed in the city created a good income for her and her co husband, Sylvester. He, incidentally, was earning the "enviable" wage of seventy-five cents a day because of added responsibility as a co clerk and truck driver.⁴⁹

For co wives, the decision to accompany their husbands was not made lightly, especially for young women who had hardly been outside their home communities, much less several thousand miles from church and family. Some experienced opposition from their families and in-laws over their decision. One woman, who was shunned by her church and family for marrying out of the highly conservative Old Order Mennonite community, chose to accompany her husband west because there was no support for her at home and, in her words, "it was easier to be among strangers."⁵⁰ The brief sojourn in B.C. was also an adventure for these women; in recalling the war era, many remembered their western experience as a high point in their lives. Helen Burkholder, in fact, viewed her relatively short four-month stay on Vancouver Island as a honeymoon!⁵¹ Oral history accounts told some

⁴⁷ Interview by the author with Clara Roth, July 1992.

⁴⁸ Annie Martin's story is told by Lorraine Roth in "Conscientious Objection: The Experiences of Some Canadian Mennonite Women. . .," 544.

⁴⁹ Interview by the author with Annie and Sylvester Martin, 17 May 1994.

⁵⁰ Interview by Lorraine Roth with A. M., 15 May 1991. Ms. Roth kindly shared her interview notes with me.

⁵¹ Interview by the author with H. B., 24 July 1992.

fifty years after the war present a positive and nostalgic, even rose-coloured, look at what was for most of the women a relatively short experience. It is important to remember, however, that at the time cos were assigned to Alternative Service terms for the duration of the war, the prospect represented a frightening unknown for their families. One woman provided a glimpse of emotions which were likely shared by others when she said, "At the time I didn't think anything would be the same again."⁵²

The distant separation from home also allowed women temporary freedom from some of the rigid constraints which characterized the culture and belief of their sectarian communities. These freedoms included relatively simple cultural experiences such as hearing a symphony in Stanley Park or spending a night at the luxurious Empress Hotel in Victoria. For women from those Mennonite sub-groups that maintained dress prescriptions which were discomfiting for women and set them apart, the distance from home may have afforded them the opportunity to discard the head coverings and outdated bonnets which were part of their church's "uniform." One woman from a conservative branch of the Mennonite church who, when interviewed in 1994 was still wearing her net head covering and cape-style dress, said that she had not worn her head covering while living in Victoria, where such a uniform would have been unfamiliar to the general public.⁵³ Another woman wore her bonnet but dressed it up so as to make it more fashionable.⁵⁴ Deviating from the dress code was one way to avoid being an ethnic curiosity. There may have been another, less conscious, motive to defy dress regulations. To the extent that dress, particularly the head covering prescribed for women, was understood to be reflective of a God-ordained gender role of submission, women who chose to discard or modify the dress code were also challenging that role.⁵⁵

The memories women express about their wartime employment and income-earning are mostly positive and with little emphasis on the hardships they may have experienced. This would suggest that for them, the episode in B.C. was a time in which they summoned and found inner qualities of courage, resourcefulness, and independence, all of which boosted their self-esteem. The concern that women were

⁵² Interview by the author with Clara Roth, July 1992.

⁵³ Interview by the author with A. M., 17 May 1994.

⁵⁴ Interview by the author with H. B., 24 July 1992.

⁵⁵ For an historical study of dress and gender among the Mennonites, see my article, "Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity: Ontario Mennonite Women and the Dress Question," *Conrad Grebel Review*, 8:3 (Fall 1990), 237-57.

unfortunately stepping outside of appropriate gender roles was expressed, however, by some cos and their churches. One co raised the question as follows: "According to past teachings in our churches on home life is it right that mothers should have to find some one to take care of the baby and they have to work in the shop etc. for a living?"⁵⁶ The feeling that they were renegeing on their responsibilities as providers and that this would reflect poorly on them was a concern raised by some cos. For instance, one minister visiting cos in the AS camps reported that the question had been raised, "If our dependents accept financial help will that embarrass us in later years?"⁵⁷ A Mennonite minister from Kitchener, Ontario expressed the church's own ambiguous position with respect to the problem of support for families of cos. Stating that the most preferable and "normal" option for co wives would be to "return to their own parents," he nevertheless recognized that some women had taken on work "in a shop, office, or factory." Although he advocated financial assistance for co families, the minister expressed the fear that support for younger women (those under sixty) could cause them to become "idle, busybodies, tattlers, and wanderers from house to house."⁵⁸ Rather than recognize the significant economic contribution that women were making, which in fact enabled cos to maintain their ideological stance, this particular minister was fixed in traditional thinking about gender which emphasized women's dependency.

If recognition of women's breadwinning role was subverted by thinking about what their proper role should be, other aspects of their support fit a feminine image more easily. Women who travelled to B.C. to be near their husbands in Alternative Service camps were viewed above all as morale boosters. Brief news notes in *The Beacon* repeatedly mentioned the arrival of women near camps, making "things more pleasant" for their husbands.⁵⁹ Another typical entry was the following:

Since we were transferred from Q-7, most of the men have their wives in the vicinity. Pete M., Pete L., Waldemar H., George B., Ben R., and Henry J. are the lucky fellows. Whenever possible, these men are among the missing during week-ends, and can probably be found comforting, and getting comfort, from their better halves.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ J. B. Martin and E. J. Swalm, "Report of Alternate Service Workers in B.C. and Alberta," no date. CGCA, J.B. Martin Collection.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ C. F. Derstine, "Canadian Conscientious Objectors in Camp," *Gospel Herald*, 13 Aug. 1942, 426-7.

⁵⁹ "Green Timbers Manning Depot," *The Beacon*, 2:6 (June 1943), 14.

⁶⁰ "GT-3 News Roundup," *The Beacon*, 2:7 (July 1943), 21.

One co had a "real break" when his mother, sister, girlfriend, and younger brother all set up housekeeping in a small cabin near the AS camp in Vancouver Island. The co with his sister and girlfriend delighted the other men with their singing trio while "Mrs. T. is just like a mother to us."⁶¹ The "mothering" role that many co wives performed for AS workers frequently took the form of providing home-cooked meals. Helen Burkholder arrived in B.C. with a steamer trunk full of home canning which nourished the stomachs, and also the spirits, of her co guests for several months. Care packages sent from home to AS camps usually included food — in one case a fully-cooked pork roast and in another a jar of fresh strawberries, which unfortunately arrived spoiled, having been en route for over a week. While holding down full-time jobs, co women, some of them with young children in tow, also provided a home-away-from-home for their menfolk, thus fulfilling a domestic role even while far away from their own homes.

A full discussion of the lives of co families following the war is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to point out, however, that of the co couples studied, all resumed a "normal" ordering of gender roles after their wartime experience in B.C. Some men were able to return to their former places of employment, while others continued working, with full wages, at the service placements in agriculture and industry assigned to them after their stints in the camps. Women, for the most part, left the paid workforce and stayed at home fully engaged in childrearing and housekeeping. In Canada's postwar economy of prosperity, jobs for men were plentiful and a second income provided by women's labour was usually not needed to maintain the family. The "gender-stratified household" containing the "production-oriented husband and the domestic-centered wife" which characterized one Mennonite community in the postwar era probably held true for other similar communities.⁶²

The skills learned by both sexes during the Alternative Service experience, however, continued to influence the activities of co couples in varying degrees. As mentioned above, Annie Martin cared for

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See Royden Loewen, "Rurality, ethnicity, and gender patterns of cultural continuity during the 'Great Disjuncture' in the R. M. of Hanover, 1945-1961," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1993), 161-82. The southern Manitoba community of Hanover was predominantly Mennonite. In research I have done on Mennonite women in the postwar era, I found that the "gendered division of labour" described by Veronica Strong-Boag of Canadian suburban communities also held true for Mennonites, especially those in urban areas. Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960," *Canadian Historical Review* 72 (December 1991), 471-504.

foster children for many years after her first experience doing so in Victoria. Helen Burkholder continued to work as a housekeeper until her first child was born. Co men were often able to use skills with tools and machinery that they had gained working for the BCFS in their later job choices. Despite the ambivalence which some men felt about their Alternative Service labour during the war, many looked back proudly at their work, pointing in particular to the large numbers of trees they had planted on the Island.⁶³

The term ephemeral has been used by some historians to describe wartime transformations in gender roles that occurred especially for women and this is how co couples also viewed their experience. Although the long-term effect of alternative roles on things like self-perception and gender consciousness are more intangible than the actual roles themselves, and thus are difficult to measure, it is clear that both men and women viewed their altered tasks as temporary wartime exigencies. For these couples, the dynamics of gender roles represented continuity and change that were not mutually exclusive.

In conclusion, the experiences of co men and women in B.C. during World War II reveal both difference from and sameness to the gender deconstruction and reconstruction occurring in other Canadian families. While men were becoming militant pacifists, women were simultaneously breadwinners and dependents. To what extent either sex was conscious of the gender re-definition underway is difficult to ascertain. In any case, it is clear that both men and women were carving out new gender space which altered their self-definition, even as they and their communities simultaneously held onto proper, or normative, notions of their roles as husbands and wives.

⁶³ In 1992, cos who had worked for the BCFS held a reunion on Vancouver Island. Today, some view their wartime labour of tree-planting as a contribution to the environmental movement.