

## A Very Active Pacifist

People were certainly now ready for action. In 1958, the newly-formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament organised the first of its famous Easter Marches to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston.

The nearest town to Aldermaston was Reading, which thus found itself with a crucial role to play in organising the March. Ian Mikardo, who had just declared his support for unilateral disarmament, addressed a packed meeting at the Town Hall, and the Labour Council agreed to let the marchers stay overnight in its schools – much to the disgust of local Tories.

Trouble with her leg kept Phoebe from taking part in that first March, but she put up some of the leaders at her house, including Dora Russell, who organised the Mothers' (later Women's) Caravan of Peace which travelled from Edinburgh to Moscow later that year.

The 1958 March was a great success. Locally, however, the anti-nuclear movement was sorely divided over the old problem of communism.

The Reading Peace Association, with its pro-Communist leanings, had carried the candle of nuclear disarmament throughout much of the 1950s. Most of the members joined the new CND with their political allegiance unchanged, to the disquiet of the newer, younger membership.

In October 1958, led by Reading councillor Inez Randall, the 'new guard' split from the old, thus forcing the group to take stock – for, as one ex-RPA member put it, 'let's face the fact that her group contains most of the keenest people'.

Phoebe responded by calling a meeting, and sent out a circular to all members of the group. 'There is little hope of resolving conflicts at the international level if we cannot find a way to live and work together for a common end on the personal, local and national level'. It sounded like a reprimand, and brought a stiff response from some members. 'It really is unfair and indeed somewhat ludicrous to be chided for my "methods"', replied Phoebe, clearly stung, to one such letter of criticism.

Phoebe, unusually for her, managed to compound the felony by suggest-

ing at a public meeting that, if the local group was dominated by communists, it was the fault of the non-communists for not becoming more actively involved.

'There was a horrible and awful slanging match', recalls Molly Casey.' 'You are stupid!', shouted Inez to Phoebe, and stormed out. It was not the sort of thing that people said to Phoebe, and though she didn't take offence she was clearly startled'.

But Phoebe's obviously genuine desire to reconcile all the factions eventually won through. By December 1958, the warring peace groups were united under the umbrella of the Reading and District Association for Nuclear Disarmament, with Phoebe in the chair, and quietly rejoined the CND fold.

That month Inez, with others, was arrested and imprisoned for a non-violent protest at the Swaffham rocket site in Norfolk. Phoebe, still a magistrate, offered to brief her on the law; managed the Swaffham Prisoners' Fund Appeal; and sent a strongly-worded letter to the *Times*, deploring the way in which 'irresponsible persons were permitted to act with shocking brutality towards men and women who were using non-violent methods to express their views'.

Re-united, Phoebe next year rallied Reading's peace workers to prepare for the second Aldermaston march: CND 'is counting on our help', she told them. Sir Richard Acland, with Canon Collins of St Pauls, led the march, and the town once more found accommodation for most of them: 'They marched with faith, to bring hope, and found charity', wrote Inez to the local press.

Not everyone agreed, and there were serious dissensions within the local Church of England. The Vicar of Burghfield distributed leaflets suggesting that 'God's appointed destruction of ungodly men and the burning up of the evil things of the world might be effected by nuclear power', and in March 1959 the Bishop of Reading declined to support the CND position, telling Phoebe that 'life is not just black and white and that, I am afraid, is what you and your friends will not see'. A counter-demonstration in St Mary's Churchyard featured the Salvation Army band, who, to the satisfaction of one *Reading Standard* reader, 'successfully drowned the hideous 'skiffle' of the marchers'. Other accusations involved the large number of women who dared to march in trousers.

In 1959, the country went once more to the polls, and the Conservatives were returned to power. Ian Mikardo, the anti-nuclear campaigner, lost his seat.

Phoebe was disgusted. 'What do you think of the British public?', she wrote to her WILPF friend Else Zeuthen in Denmark. 'They voted in accordance with what they regard as their own material interests and completely

ignored the Government's record in Africa and elsewhere and the under developed countries might not exist as far as they are concerned...the H bomb simply doesn't count for anything.'

The Aldermaston Marches had by now become a regular feature, an annual opportunity for protesters to express their solidarity, for the press to bay, and the ignorant to heckle or worse. Until 1962, Reading Council continued to permit the marchers to stay overnight in the schools, but in that year the Conservative administration decided to dig their heels in, and for the first time refused permission. Phoebe donned her First Citizen hat, and sent an appropriately stiff letter to the local papers:

As a life-long citizen of Reading who is jealous of the town's reputation for order and good government...I am deeply concerned at the hazards to public health and order that are involved in the influx of many thousands of people into the town without the prospect of shelter and sanitary facilities.

She even tried to go for the Conservatives on their own turf:

The decision of the Council will throw a substantial burden upon the rate-payers in consequence of the additional policing...for the honour of the Borough, I sincerely hope that, even at this late hour, the Council will reconsider its attitude and save the town from the chaos and danger to health that will otherwise result.

Her intervention was to no avail. One councillor chillingly told protesters that 'the bomb is sacred, its use inevitable'; and Molly Casey, with other local peace workers, spent a week investigating every possibly doorway and subway to which the marchers could be directed.

In the end, the crisis was averted when CND was permitted to put marquees on Kings Meadow to accommodate the 10,000 marchers, at about five times the cost of hiring out the schools. The march itself was a great success, as a WILPF participant wrote to Phoebe. She'd joined them on the road to Maidenhead 'in pouring rain...limping perhaps but singing cheerfully... dozens of good marching songs and choruses in the repertoire – some groups had their own instrumentalists playing merrily'.

Phoebe's other local work for peace included several attempts to re-launch the Reading branch of the Women's International League. Support was lukewarm amongst those she approached at first – 'even before we gave up the branch numbers were falling off', wrote one. In February 1961 she finally succeeded, with a re-born group of eleven members, including Molly Casey. 'It was through WILPF, into which Phoebe almost forcibly enrolled me (she never allowed you to dither) that I got to know her not only as a colleague

but as a friend'. The Chair was filled by Verdun Perl, a forthright Canadian who had had the misfortune to be born at the time of the horrendous Battle of Verdun in the First World War, after which her father had chosen to name her. Perhaps it was the name which drove her into the arms of the Peace Movement: Phoebe always called her 'Pax'.

They met at an early CND meeting in Reading Town Hall, when Verdun, from the floor, urged that membership should be open to members of all parties and none, for the Bomb would not discriminate. 'At the end of the meeting Phoebe came up and threw her arms around me 'they are human beings – it doesn't matter much about anything else' – and next week took her to join the WILPF in London.

Verdun herself was a convinced Liberal, a friend of Jeremy Thorpe, and twice stood as a parliamentary candidate, but her politics made little difference their friendship, although Phoebe used to tease her about it. Once, when Verdun was driving – badly – along an empty road, Phoebe turned round and told her that she truly was a Liberal: 'You even drive in the middle of the road!'

The Sixties began well for Phoebe and the WILPF. She had finally convinced the organisation that her beloved *Pax* 'could be the means, not only of maintaining the interest and effectiveness of present members, but of extending the membership, prestige and influence of the League', and the budget for the magazine was now assured. In August 1961 she managed to win official support for her contention that 'a revolutionary change in psychological attitude' was needed in global politics:

We believe that a completely new approach to world affairs is urgently necessary...it is essential that governments recognise the varying traditions and stages of development of the peoples of the world and the right of each nation to adopt its own political, economic and social systems without interference from outside.

Phoebe remained an active member of the League's British Section, and for some years was Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee. Every Wednesday, she and other members would travel to London. During the Vietnam War, they would spend the morning on the permanent picket outside the US Embassy, and then rushed – 'why must Phoebe take the steps two at a time?' – to spend the rest of the day at Westminster. The Committee was, as Verdun Perl recalls, 'a serious thing to belong to'. The League had a room to use in the Houses of Parliament, by courtesy of a friendly MP; and Committee members, well genned up on Hansard, put MPs and Ministers through their paces.

May Plimsoll remembers that Phoebe had certain techniques to make sure

that she had their attention; one of which was to approach MPs as they sat down to eat. 'Never approach them until they've picked up their knife and fork...then they're committed!'. May remembers Phoebe's mischievous sense of humour in the Commons, and how she vowed to make the poker-faced Black Rod smile. She never managed to do so, but she played many other little pranks within the portals of the Palace of Westminster, while maintaining a look of virtuous innocence: 'She never got caught'.

For Phoebe, the 1960s were dominated by the horror of Vietnam, and a growing disbelief in her own party's apparent acquiescence in the War. As early as March 1963, she convened a meeting at Castle Street, calling on the Macmillan government to end its support for American policy. Labour was returned to power next year, but it made little difference to the country's policy over Vietnam. Still apparently unwilling to believe that her party could be tacitly sanctioning the American occupation, she persuaded the Bishop of Reading and others of the local Great and Good to sign a letter to Prime Minister Harold Wilson urging him to take a public stand – 'the time is past for secret diplomacy'.

Nothing happened. 'The Vietnam situation makes one desperate, helpless and hopeless', she wrote to her American WILPF friend Adelaide Baker in March 1965. 'Sanity, imagination and compassion seem to have disappeared from the minds and hearts of governments and politicians'.

Next month Alice Herz, a WILPF member from Detroit, burnt herself to death in protest. 'This is becoming more and more of a nightmare', Phoebe wrote to another American member of the League. 'What are the friends of America to do? Opinion all over the world is getting more and more horrified.'

But Phoebe received no reply to her letter, for the League's large American membership was very divided over Vietnam. In July 1965, Phoebe tried her hand at some secret diplomacy herself, trying to persuade a British member to stand as a candidate for the post of International Vice Chairman in order to dilute American influence within the League: 'At this juncture, I think it would be better for the League if we did not have an American'.

That month, her friend Verdun Perl travelled to Hanoi, bearing a large cardboard box containing the first shipment of supplies for the Medical Aid for Vietnam (of which she was Vice-Chairman). She flew to the North Vietnam capital from China, in an ancient American aeroplane that had been given to China during the Second World War (which neatly symbolised the hypocrisy of the situation). They almost came under fire from the Americans.

In North Vietnam, Verdun went on night patrol with the 'Viet Cong', and found them convinced that they would win. 'But are they fully aware of what the price of victory may be?... Whenever I suggested that America's

capacity for destruction was infinite, I was watched with scepticism. I became suddenly a white person, a member of the dominant race.'

The veteran Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh, had resolutely refused to meet British leaders on the grounds that they were pro-American, but he agreed to meet Verdun Perl.

Amid the tea, cakes and courtesies, Ho expressed himself sharply about Mr Harold Wilson, whom he regards as little more than an American puppet. Why a politician who had so frequently endorsed the American position should imagine that he could pose as a mediator was beyond Ho's comprehension.

Phoebe was delighted with her friend's success. 'For years she kept nagging me to write a book about it', remembers Verdun. Her trip was widely covered by the British press, and she addressed a rally in Trafalgar Square; but plans for a lecture tour in America were vetoed by the US Government. 'This was, perhaps, not unexpected. Much more hurtful was the refusal of the Women's International League to let Verdun address that year's conference at 'The Hague. 'My views were distinctly abhorrent, to the US Section in particular'.

It was the old problem again. Although few US members of the League actively supported the War, many of them, as Phoebe said, were still afraid 'to take a sane line on relations with Communist countries...[we] are regarded as fellow-travellers and appeasers...we have to live on the same planet (until we colonise the moon !) and hostility is not the way to secure harmonious relations'.

Meanwhile, the carnage continued. President Johnson declared that his country would 'continue as best we can to help the good people of South Vietnam to enrich the condition of their lives'.

Phoebe responded with a thunderous leader in *Pax*, calling the President's remarks

little short of blasphemy...it is dishonest to put sole blame on Ho Chi Minh for failure to reach the negotiating table...let us bring whatever pressure we may on responsible people on both sides to free the people of the countryside from the daily terror of death and destruction and so enable them to grow their rice and enjoy their family lives in peace.

As always, Phoebe tried to find positive solutions, and gave her support, and space in the magazine, to those who advocated the peaceful development of the Mekong River Basin. 'Some such scheme carried out under the auspices of the United Nations would make sense to peasants in the rice fields and should be welcomed by American taxpayers who are having to pay for a war which nobody believes can be won by military means'.

In July 1966, she published an article by a distinguished Buddhist professor at Saigon University, who called for an end to the bombing, and a timetable for withdrawal; but privately she was less hopeful. 'Vietnam is sickening', she wrote to Hilda Walmesley of the WILPF in September 1966.

Do you think that the UNICEF or the Red Cross could do something for the children? I wish we could get them all away from that devastated country into clean, tranquil and human surroundings....One wonders whether this decadent world of ours is worth saving!

In March 1967, Phoebe turned eighty, and her many friends in Reading decided that event should not go unmarked. A party was held in her honour, and 'a happy intimate affair we decided it would be, and I suppose it was as long as you don't equate intimate with small', recalled Molly Casey, who helped to organise it. 'When we finally got together no more than two representatives of each organisation she was connected with, the Friends' Meeting House was crammed shoulder to shoulder'.

Phoebe was delighted with the event, but when the journalist from the Reading Evening Post asked her for her reaction, she could not resist the opportunity to put in a word for the Cause. 'I have had a very happy life', she told him.

But the meaning of happiness is having something worthwhile to do, the ability to do it, the will to do it, and friends who are willing and able to support you. There is a great deal of adventure, danger and happiness to be got from following causes which are of value to mankind.

Her birthday out of the way, Phoebe returned to work. For some time now she had been railing against the arms trade, which she blamed for deliberately prolonging the debacle in Vietnam.

It is clear to me that the hawks (armament firms and military bigwigs) are doing all they can to keep the pot boiling...what hope for disarmament when big financial and armaments manufacturers pursue their devilish trade across national frontiers?... I think we must institute a vigorous campaign to take the profit out of arms.'

At times, the amorality of the arms trade almost drove her to question her own pacifism. 'It is easy for those of us outside Africa who advocate the abolition of war and the non-violent settlement of disputes to criticise violent resistance to violent oppression', she pointed out in *Pax* at a time when Portugal was blatantly diverting arms supplied by NATO, ostensibly for her own defence, into Vietnam-style oppression tactics within its African colonies. (Hers was always a very active sort of pacifism. 'I am not a pacifist',

she told the *Evening Post* in 1969, when – by error or design – an interviewer had suggested otherwise.

‘Pacifism doesn’t mean sitting back and letting evil flourish. It means combatting evil with consistent and continuous mental and spiritual activity, including the full and intelligent use of the democratic processes’.)

In June 1967, Phoebe was invited to deliver a paper to the *Voice of Women* conference in Montreal, all expenses paid. ‘We believe that arms are a major cause of war, not just its tools’, she told them, and went into some detail about how arms dealers exploited local tensions to their own advantage.

The VOW Conference was Phoebe’s first trip to North America, and she was determined to enjoy herself as well.

She visited New York – ‘rather near to my idea of hell!, miles of roads jammed with unending processions of cars between canyons of concrete and glass – and noise’, and stayed with her old friend Mildred Scott Olmsted in Pennsylvania. ‘I enjoyed every minute of the visit’, she wrote to her afterwards. ‘I loved it all – as much as I hated New York! (not the people, of course!) Pennsylvania is human, homely and beautiful.’

In New Jersey, she was interviewed by Mac Pohle, of the *Burlington County Herald*, and the ‘brown-eyed English lady of letters and peace who claims to be 80 years old’ completely bowled her over. Phoebe explained with a touch of exaggeration – that the British peace movement was ‘taken more for granted’ than in America: ‘oh, the right wing thinks peace workers are very left, but most people are quite blasé about us...’

It was not just the arms trade whose amorality outraged Phoebe. She was just as concerned with the ethics of the scientists whose researches were making warfare progressively more ghastly.

In April 1966 she gave the eminent Nobel laureate Philip Noel-Baker a fortnight to produce an article for *Pax* on ‘the duties and responsibilities of scientists’, which he did (few people, however eminent, were ever able to refuse Phoebe’s point-blank requests).

From Noel-Baker’s article, Phoebe evolved the concept of a Hippocratic Oath for scientists, which would bind them to ensure that their discoveries were only to be used for the good of humanity. In February 1969 she revealed her idea in a letter to the *Times*. Her suggestion was taken up in the *Observer*, and a further letter followed in the *Times*, signed by Dr G W Scott-Blair, who was then invited to write an article for the *New Scientist*.

The idea of the Oath was rather an unworkable one, and nothing came of it, but the episode at least provided Phoebe with the chance to renew her friendship with Scott-Blair, once a mainstay of the Reading peace movement but now languishing in Oxford. ‘You never tire in the cause of peace’, he

wrote to her. 'I often wonder how the Peace Movement is going in Reading. Oxford is rather depressing.'

Phoebe's work-load as editor of *Pax*, meanwhile, remained as relentless as ever. 'Life is hectic', she wrote to Mercedes Randall of New York in October 1964, 'single-handedly coping with all aspects of *Pax & Libertas* (editor, circulation manager, book-keeper and accountant, secretary-typist!) is rather wearing, especially as I want to *write!*'. She failed to mention that she was also having to look after her brother Ernie, who died in January 1967 after a prolonged illness: 'though very undemanding, [he] is a constant responsibility', she wrote in October 1965. (Ernie, his father's son, enjoyed his beer, and his teetotal sister cheerfully had a crate delivered for him every week: a source of some amusement to her friends.)

Time and again, Phoebe hinted at her need for paid assistance to help her with her work on *Pax*. On rare occasions, she asked for it explicitly. 'I am dreadfully overworked' she told a friend in March 1965:

the work on *Pax* (unaided) is quite fantastic.... It really is a gruelling job...I wish the budget allowed for secretarial help...I am working up to the limit of my time. If I could have a paid secretary...but our officers seem so short-sighted and inert when it comes to organisation.... What is needed in the WILPF is the spirit of the pioneers – and fire in the belly!

By February 1965, Phoebe had begun to seriously think about retiring from the editorship. 'I don't want to give it up – I enjoy it – but I am not getting any younger and it is a heavy burden...I have to do it all. I am afraid that when I give it up it will be difficult to get anyone else to do it all voluntarily, and to provide an office rent-free. I am only too happy to make this my contribution to the WILPF but I don't think the officers of the Executive realise what the position will be when I resign, although I have warned them more than once!'

But the Executive, probably through inertia, did nothing. In 1968, she finally called their bluff, and gave the WILPF a years' notice. 'For myself, I think I have nearly 'run my course', she wrote. 'It is time someone else took over. But who? I am concerned about this'.

A successor was found in the end, but the officers of the League somehow forgot to tell Phoebe about it first, let alone to ask her opinion. It was an extraordinary oversight, and though the people concerned apologised profusely, a very revealing demonstration of just how much the League had come to take her for granted.

Phoebe's achievement with *Pax et Libertas* was considerable. 'A thoughtful and dignified paper', one member called it accurately, and under Phoebe's editorship the 1956 circulation of under 2,500 had almost doubled.

She herself had no reservations about the value of this 'exciting and satisfying piece of work', as she saw her editorship. 'The paper has undoubtedly become established as a source of reliable information', she said in 1967. 'I venture to believe that it makes a real contribution to sane and objective thinking on important aspects of world affairs'.

In addition to the many articles which she succeeded in cajoling from the pens of experts and specialists, *Pax* under Phoebe's direction published speeches from major world leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Martin Luther King (whose wife Coretta was a member of the League). Albert Schweitzer's 'Last Message to Mankind' appeared first within its pages.

In 1966, Phoebe opened up the magazine to the membership for a debate on the future of the League, and the need to 'reassess WILPF's role in the world and in the currently expanding peace movement'. Useful comments and contributions from ordinary members were received and duly published, but it is very doubtful that senior officials of the WILPF were in the least aware of the vital role that *Pax* played in keeping the League together.

WILPF's United Nations representatives regularly neglected to keep her informed, or to supply the articles they'd promised, on occasion sending their reports to national WILPF newsletters instead. This was probably more the result of the organisation's chaotic amateurism than from any antipathy to Phoebe herself, though she did wonder, and at times was stirred to uncharacteristic anger. 'I think that I am justified in being annoyed about this,' she wrote to her friend Nell Greaves in January 1965, having once again received 'precisely nothing' from the League's UN delegates. 'I put in a great deal of time, energy and anxiety into the production of the paper, with the minimum of co-operation.'

Phoebe remained as 'consultative editor' for a year or so, to help her successor, now based in Geneva, to find her feet; but the magazine did not long survive the loss of her dedication. In the summer of 1972, the International Executive resolved to wind it up, and replace it with a 'duplicated bulletin'. (A very similar fate befell the *Reading Citizen* twenty years earlier, when she and Albert finally gave it up.) It was, as one member wrote, 'a real tragedy for the Women's International League', and Phoebe was understandably incensed. 'With the killing of *Pax & Libertas* we now have no organ to interpret the aims and activities of the WILPF to the general public and the decision-makers' she wrote in August. 'I have always been an optimist, but I feel depressed and apprehensive for the future of the League, since we sadly lack inspired guidance.'

In May 1973 she seriously considered resigning from the WILPF altogether, despairing 'at the way the League was going, with its lack of consistent purpose and courage, its reluctance to take a firm stand until others

have spoken...today the League is a follower instead of a leader.' But she didn't resign, and continued to contribute articles to the annual *Pax* Review that replaced the magazine, attempting to define a future role for the League:

We have not faced up to the implications of the affluent...consumer society we have allowed to take control of our destinies. And we have largely overlooked the duty to 'study, make known and try to abolish' the causes of the ills which absorb so much of our energies.

Almost single-handedly, Phoebe compiled the sixtieth anniversary souvenir in 1975, and persevered with her mission to try and help the League find a new direction. 'If the WILPF is to survive as a viable organisation with a distinctive function and purpose', she wrote to the Secretary of the British Section in August 1975, 'it must do some fundamental thinking on the deeper causes of conflict and war; and we must begin by getting rid of our own individual prejudice and intolerance.'

*Pax* provided Phoebe with a useful vehicle for ideas, which, being Phoebe, she used to its full potential. The lack of real interest in the magazine amongst senior members of the League meant that she had an enormous amount of freedom to publish what she wished, and it is to her credit that she never used it as a vehicle for her more unpopular views. But the League itself was less and less a force to be reckoned with, and with hindsight Phoebe might have done better to have put her efforts into a more dynamic organisation.

CND springs to mind; but she valued the authority that the League carried, and the potential for developing its work to encompass broader and more fundamental issues than nuclear disarmament. She was also very loyal, and she hated to admit failure. Her Women's' Peace Movement had fallen apart after a few months; and she did her very utmost to prevent the League from meeting the same fate.

When Phoebe, jokingly, told Elise Boulding in 1969 that she was giving up *Pax* 'before I become too decrepit', the WILPF Chairman replied that 'a decrepit Phoebe is a contradiction in terms, since she is the most fiery-spirited of us all'.

That was, perhaps, the problem. By the 1960s the League, in Britain at least, had become seriously dated. Very few of its ageing membership had Phoebe's zeal and energy, and the much-vaunted non-political status of the League provided a comfortable excuse to avoid controversy and action. Its officers held conferences, where they passed resolutions, swapped impressive-sounding jobs, and then went home again.

At its best, however, the League was an effective network of well-informed and public-spirited women, who kept abreast of developments

