

Fred Page: anti-war movement founder

November 23, 1991

AN inscription on a plain headstone in the churchyard of the parish church of West Lavington, Wiltshire, in south-west England, marks the grave of a young Christchurch man who was a peace leader:

In memory of Alfred William Page, younger son of Samuel and Sarah Saunders Page, of Christchurch, New Zealand, and great grandson of Amram Edwards Saunders, of Market Lavington. Born at Christchurch, New Zealand, 24th March, 1899. Died at Paris, on 7th July 1930. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

His Christchurch friends, his former pupils, and his teaching colleagues still remember him — the man who founded the No More War movement in 1923, New Zealand's first doctrinaire peace movement, at the age of 24.

While still a pupil at Christchurch Boys' High School, he was deeply influenced by his brother's imprisonment in Paparua Prison in 1916 as a conscientious objector. Writing to the Minister of Defence, he requested that he, too, should be imprisoned, as he had the same beliefs as his brother. Fred became a member of the National Peace Council, and although still at school resolved to spend his life working for the cause of peace.

Many ways existed, he discovered, to help the conscientious objectors. He visited Paparua Prison every Saturday, cycling the 14 kilometres from his home in Mays Road, Papanui. He was also able to write to the relatives unable to visit their husbands, sons, and brothers.

My father, a conscientious objector, met the Page brothers at this time, and often recalled Fred's visits with pleasure.

At Boys' High Fred Page was awarded junior and senior scholarships, and afterwards attended Canterbury University where he gained a master of arts degree with first-class honours in botany.

His father was a lecturer in chemistry at the university, while his mother before her marriage had been headmistress at Ashburton Girls' High School.

Besides being a brilliant student, Alfred Page was a first-class athlete and one of the founders of the University Harrier (now Cross-Country) Club.

Encouraged by a family friend and feminist, Ada Wells, Fred Page began to speak at anti-war meetings in Christchurch. Some speakers were arrested and charged with using seditious language, but he was left at



Four members of the Page family are in this 1929 photograph of the Christchurch No More War committee. Back row: Fred (second from left), Robin (third from left), and Sam (extreme right); middle row, Sarah Saunders Page (centre).

youth, the authorities did not think he could be a subversive influence.

After the war he became a teacher at the Socialist Sunday School founded by the Rev J. H. G. Chapple. There he founded a weekly newspaper for the school, "The Sunbeam", which carried the message of economic justice, freedom, peace, and world brotherhood.

Fred Page became in May 1921 an assistant teacher at Christchurch Boys' High, where he taught according to Froebel methods. One of his pupils told me that he remembered Fred because "he was one teacher who never used the cane".

J. B. Bluett recalled his gentleness and his interest in the theory of evolution. He remembers winning an essay prize when in Fred Page's class; the topic was "Evolution". "Fred was ahead of his time in many ways," Mr Bluett said.

But, in extraordinary circumstances, Page was dismissed from his position in 1922. He refused to sign the teachers' oath of allegiance, unless the wording was altered to include a proviso which read "so long as the above undertaking continues not to conflict with what I consider my duty to God".

Burton also refused to take the oath, and both he and Fred Page were the subject of a debate in Parliament about their objection to the wording. Six teachers at the school wrote to the Minister of Education, C. J. Parr, protesting the dismissal.

Fred Page's work with the peace movement developed, and with the consent of the Peace Council he established the New Zealand No More War Movement.

To spread the message he worked in the Blackball colliery as a trucker. He set up adult education classes in the town, the curriculum including current affairs and debating. After three years he returned to Christchurch.

More than 200 people had by then become members of the growing No More War Movement in Christchurch.

FOR the next four years he worked at the Woolston Tanneries, where his brother, Robin, was a chemist. The brothers collaborated in a series of scientific articles for the "Lyttelton Times" and received much praise for their research at the tanneries.

Fred Page continued visiting Paparua Prison, where he gave

kind of topics which he thought would be beneficial to the prisoners. After work he took classes and coached students for University Entrance and continued editing "The Sunbeam" at the Socialist Sunday School.

Many friends remember Fred vividly. Muriel Morrison and Lorna Duff (nee Ockenden) speak of "his gentle nature and his steely will". They recall his amazing walking feats, including a walk of 75 kilometres from Fairlie to Mount Cook. Another was a walk from Springfield to Arthurs Pass.

In 1930 he planned an overseas trip "in order to gain experience which will I hope help me to develop peace and disarmament in New Zealand through the message of the No More War movement".

He contacted War Resisters' International, and it was decided that he should visit groups in France, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Russia, Lithuania, and the Balkans. He left New Zealand in February on the SS Herminius, working his passage as assistant purser.

He travelled to England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and France. He planned to visit conscientious objectors who were still being held in the penal colony in

But it was not to be. On his arrival in Paris, his host, an English Quaker, later wrote of his tragic death.

The following extract from a letter to Fred Page's parents describes the sad event:

"We occupy the fourth floor of a new five-storey apartment. Each tenant was left to install his own bathroom. I had just finished ours, with the help of a book on plumbing. Fred went to the bathroom and shut the door. An hour and a half later, I noticed the light still burning, but I could hear no sound. His bedroom was empty, and when I knocked on the bathroom door there was no response. I became alarmed and opened the door to find him lying in the bath, stretched out. He might have been asleep, except for a great stillness."

A post-mortem showed that his death was from asphyxiation by carbon monoxide. The fumes from the gas calfont above the bath led into a wide chimney. Tragically, the top of the chimney was blocked by a thin layer of plaster, a common practice in new buildings.

He was buried near his Saunders ancestors in the village from where, in 1842, his grandfather, Alfred Saunders, had emigrated to New Zealand.

A schoolboy, deeply influenced by his brother's imprisonment as a conscientious objector, decided to spend the rest of his life working for peace.
PATSY CREED reports.



Fred Page in 1917.



West Lavington parish church, where Fred Page is buried.