

A lifetime devoted to the peace movement

By Owen Palmer

Muriel Morrison is a pioneer of the peace movement in New Zealand. Now aged 70 she is still one of its most active workers.

Her parents, Bert and Elsie Ockenden, were agnostic radicals, committed to do all in their power to eradicate the causes of war. Accordingly they sent their four daughters, Lorna, Muriel, Enid and Marjorie, to the Socialist Sunday School. The ideals of peace and justice were woven into the very fabric of instruction. The No More War Movement was

established in the 1920s, and the whole family were deeply involved. Eventually Muriel became secretary of the movement. Another member was John Morrison, who later became her husband.

The movement defined the root causes of war as social and economic injustices. Bert Ockenden was also a member of the League of Nations Union, and Muriel became secretary of that organisation, too. But the No More War Movement was her main interest, and she attended its conferences up and down the country.

From 1930 onwards, Muriel studied at Canterbury University College — on a part-time basis because it was necessary to earn her living.

For two years she ran her own private kindergarten in St Luke's Church Hall. The children paid her one shilling a week each.

HOUSEWORK

Another job was housework at Stonehurst Private Hotel, which her parents managed. Bert had been a builder, but the building industry came to a standstill in the early part of the Depression.

By 1936, Muriel was writing her thesis for an MA in history. Her professor was Dr James Hight, rector of the college. At a function after she had completed her degree he asked her about her current concerns.

"I told him," she said when we were discussing this part of her life, "though I forget now which particular project I was on about. He looked at me over the top of his glasses, as was his wont. 'It's the beginnings that matter', he said. 'That was a confirming remark for me.'"

In those years she became an

active member of the Student Christian Movement, which she says influenced her profoundly. I recall that she herself brought insights to the SCM discussions from her own experience.

In the late 1930s she became a convinced Christian and a member of the Christian Pacifist Society. She also joined the Society of Friends. Did this commitment alter the basis of her pacifism?

"Oh yes," she said. "I came to realise that my pacifism must involve all my living, and be based on a spiritual and feeling foundation. Later I preferred not to use the pacifist label at all."



Training

After graduation she taught for a year at Friends' School in Wanganui. Then she returned to Christchurch for a year's teacher training, followed by a year as a probationary assistant at Sydenham School.

During this two-year period she and fellow peace workers held weekly meetings in Victoria Square, and on Show Day they paraded their posters outside the Show Grounds. She admits she prayed fervently that none of the parents of her pupils would see her. Given the mood of the time she was very courageous.

By now she was prominent in the work of the Peace Pledge Movement. About this time Ormond Burton was bravely preaching pacifism, and she joined in his work with enthusiasm. With A. C. Barrington she spoke from a soap-box in Wellington just before World War 2.

In 1940, Muriel returned to Friends' School. After a serious illness she came back to Christchurch, and married John Morrison in September 1941.

Soon she became aware that millions of children were starving in Europe. She called a public meeting and became strenuously involved in organising relief work. (This was really the seed from which CORSO grew).

So much was her involvement that Judge Archer allowed her appeal against direction to factory work by the Manpower Department. Had the appeal failed she would not have complied with such direction on the grounds that this would have assisted the war effort.

In Sydney

In 1945, John and Muriel went to Sydney where John studied to qualify as a social worker. Muriel worked to support them, but found time to become immediately involved in the Australian pacifist movement. In 1945 they were in Britain teaching in schools for maladjusted children all over the country.

Soon they returned to Christchurch and were appointed master and matron of the Anglican St Saviours' Orphanage. Times were changing, and John and Muriel were convinced that institutional care was not the best substitute for family life.

They organised the children into

suitable groups, and encouraged the Anglican authorities to place them in cottage homes throughout the city. Each home had its parents. Muriel and John looked after a family which varied in numbers from nine to 13.

They continued in this work until 1958, when they bought their present home in Opawa. In those years Muriel was effectively out of the peace movement as such, but most certainly not out of the field of learning and teaching peaceful relationships.

Some of the children remained with them until they were old enough to be independent. Some still regard the Morrisons as their foster parents.

Vietnam

With the move to Opawa, Muriel was once more involved in peace work, this time with the emerging Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. With such stalwarts as Elsie Locke and Mary Woodward she organised peace workshops.

Then came the war in Vietnam. She led the formation of the group called "Christian against the War" in Christchurch. They approached all the clergy, asking permission to speak to congregations. The movement grew fast and for the first time, to her great joy, she met Roman Catholics working for peace.

She has been deeply involved in programmes to combat racism in New Zealand. She was a member of Christchurch CARE. In 1972 she attended a conference to examine New Zealand's relationships with racism and colonialism in South Africa.

The Society of Friends, at its yearly meeting, listened with respect to her report. Anticipating that much bitterness would be aroused in New Zealand, the society decided to bring from the United States a Quaker named George Lakey who was skilled in the techniques of training

for non-violent action. Groups throughout the country took advantage of his training courses.

Muriel is deeply committed to the Society of Friends. From 1975 to 1977 she was its yearly meeting clerk, a job which is virtually full-time and unpaid.

For the next five years she was a member of the New Zealand Quaker Peace Committee, and became its clerk after her return from a term, at the Quaker college, Pendle Hill, in Philadelphia in 1979.

The New Zealand Foundation for Peace Studies was set up in 1975. Muriel is a vice-president, and regularly presents its needs to the Society of Friends.

Films and talks

On behalf of the foundation she now visits some Christchurch schools, showing films and talking to pupils. The foundation brought Dr Helen Caldicott and Dr Bill Caldicott here. Muriel worked hard to help make their visit an outstanding success.

Since 1976, when the American Quakers, Charlotte and Stuart Meachem brought new ideas, Muriel has organised a continuing series of experimental workshops dealing with peace and conflict resolution. They are led by experts in this field, John Morrison and Rosemary Tredgold.

She has known times of despair, but more of joy. Through all the frustrations her faith in God and in people, including herself, has grown.

"It is the beginnings that matter," said Dr Hight. Muriel has been a vital part of so many beginnings. Now, when more and more people identify with the peace movement, Muriel chooses to go on working for peaceful relationships.

Her wisdom and experience are readily available to all who test the waters of the Ocean of Peace and Light.