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| **Title: Emrys Hughes – Standing up for Conscience at a time of War** | |
| **Synopsis/Overview:**  *Emrys Hughes was born in the South Wales Valleys in 1894. As a young man, he refused military service in the First World War and was imprisoned as a Conscientious Objector. He served sentences in a number of civil and military prisons, often in harsh conditions, and wrote about his experiences in his ‘Journal of a Coward’. In later life, Emrys Hughes became an MP for South Ayrshire in Scotland. He was married to Nan Hardie, daughter of Labour politician Keir Hardie, herself an active local politician. Emrys Hughes died in 1969.* | |
| **When:** WWI | **Where:** South Wales valleys |
| **Background:**  Over 900 men from Wales objected to fighting in WWI – mostly on religious or political grounds. They were harshly treated. With the introduction of military conscription in 1916 many were imprisoned or sent to work in labour camps. | |
| **The Story:**  [http://www.cumnockhistorygroup.org/assets/places/streets/Emrys%20Hughes.jpg](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiA3Zu5rKfLAhWrIpoKHdIeD2AQjRwIBw&url=http://www.cumnockhistorygroup.org/places-streets.html&bvm=bv.115339255,d.bGs&psig=AFQjCNEK5wlMP6oQwEE6JZQZZBSlQfSHTA&ust=1457191749979387)Emrys Hughes was born in Tonypandy, the son of Rev. J.R. Hughes and Annie Hughes. He was educated in a primary school in Abercynon, and at Mountain Ash Secondary School. Deciding to become a teacher, he left the South Wales Valleys in 1913 for a training college in Leeds.  During the summer of 1914, at the end of his first year in college, Emrys followed news of the events leading up to the start of the war with great concern. He was already involved in politics, and his Socialist political beliefs led him to be convinced that war was wrong, and that ordinary people would suffer most. He watched with alarm as he saw many people being caught up in an atmosphere of patriotic excitement, and it became very unpopular to speak out against the conflict.  Returning to college for his second year, he found that a military hospital had been established in the building, and that his fellow students were being invited to join in with military training and parades. One day, he passed a military band as he walked back from the library on a Sunday afternoon: *‘I looked straight on and pretended to take no notice…I hated, detested it, loathed it…it would be the same in every town in England, in France, Germany, Austria and Russia, the same buoyant vitality being exploited in this shameful way’.*  As the war went on, the threat of conscription began to loom as more troops were needed. Now a qualified teacher back in South Wales, Emrys was clear that he would resist conscription when it came, whatever the consequences. He was summoned to appear in front of various officials, but his political objections to military service were dismissed and he was told to report for duty. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was arrested.  The arrest happened without warning, as he arrived at a railway station one day. He was handed over to the military authorities, and taken away, catching a last glimpse of the familiar hillsides and valleys of home as he went. He knew it might be a long time before he saw them again. Immediately, Emrys’ refusal to submit to military orders got him into trouble; he would not call the sergeant major ‘Sir’ or undress for a medical examination. He was sent to a ‘court martial’ or military court; the sergeant-major told Emrys and other conscientious objectors that he hoped they would all be shot.  At the court martial, the sergeant-major claimed that Emrys had used aggressive language towards him, threatened to ‘do him in’, and provided ‘witnesses’ to back up this story. Emrys was astonished and strongly denied that he had done any of this. He was sentenced to 9 months’ detention in a military prison.  [http://www.worldwar1postcards.com/resources/CO%202%20%5B1600x1200%5D.jpg.opt280x447o0,0s280x447.jpg](http://www.worldwar1postcards.com/conscientious-objectors.php)So began a pattern that was repeated many times. Emrys stated his political opposition to war, and the military authorities tried to force him to become a soldier. He and his friends were ordered to put on uniforms; they refused. Emrys was dragged away, his feet kicked from under him, and his clothes torn off. The next day he refused again to put on the uniform, and was struck in the face and forcibly undressed. His head was shaved. The prisoners were taken outside and ordered to march and to carry a gun; when Emrys refused, he was pushed to the ground. Eventually they had no choice but to walk around in a circle for two hours, trying to resist the rhythm of the shouts of ‘Left, right, left, right’.  Each act of resistance brought a punishment, for example missing dinner, or just having bread and water for a day. Much of the time, Emrys was locked up alone, and communication with other prisoners was often forbidden. Until the end of the war in 1918, Emrys was tried and re-tried many times, given further sentences for his refusal to serve in the military, and moved to various different military and civil (non-military) prisons. The civil prisons such as Wormwood Scrubs, although grim in many ways, at least brought relief from the pressure to wear army uniform and take part in ‘drills’. His health suffered because of poor food and lack of sleep and fresh air. During the winter, cells were often bitterly cold, and infested with mice and cockroaches.  Very occasionally, there were times when restrictions were relaxed, and he was allowed to go out and meet people briefly in local communities. Although an atheist himself, he often looked for local church ministers and Quaker communities where he thought he might find people who would be sympathetic. *‘Long hours of loneliness had made me deeply sensitive to little acts of kindness’*, he reflected.  Throughout the war, Emrys remained true to his principles, whatever the consequences. He did this not only because of his personal beliefs, but also because he hoped it might encourage others to stand up to the military too.  After the war, he returned to his political activities, and in 1946 became a Labour MP for Ayrshire in Scotland, which he represented in parliament until his death in 1969. He described his experiences in the First World War in a hand-written document which he called *‘Journal of a Coward’*, and he hoped that lessons would be learned: *‘It is well that the next generation should understand things as they were in the Great War, it will learn to loathe the stupidities of its fathers and rectify their results.’* | |
| **What change did Conscientious Objectors (COs) want to make?**  They wanted the State to recognise their right to follow their conscience and not to kill their fellow human beings. They also wanted to stand up for their belief that change can only be achieved via peaceful means. Some COs were willing to undertake alternative service (e.g. agriculture or ambulance service) but others were known as ‘absolutists’ and refused to cooperate with the war effort in any way. | |
| **Who did they try to influence?**  Often conscientious objectors’ stance was a lonely one, as they were in a minority. In attending military tribunals, they made their case to the military authorities – and ultimately to the State itself. | |
| **What failed, and why?**  It’s true that conscientious objectors were largely treated with contempt and cruelty during WWI, and that they were in a minority. Men who didn’t fight were handed white feathers as a symbol of cowardice. Some found it hard to find work after the war.  There are still many countries in the world who don’t recognise the right to conscientious objection. Can you find out which ones? Particularly during times of conflict, the right to conscientious objection is still contested (See: <https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2022/ebco-russiaukraine-peace-only-solution-protect-conscientious-objectors-and-all-civilians?language=en>; and <https://theconversation.com/why-banning-men-from-leaving-ukraine-violates-their-human-rights-178411>. | |
| **What succeeded, and why?**  The stance of conscientious objectors during WWI meant that there were more choices for COs to take up non-military service during WWII. After WWI, many COs took up prominent public positions, as did Emrys himself, and others were active in the movement to establish the League of Nations (a forerunner to the United Nations). Today, [the right to Conscientious Objection](https://www.ohchr.org/en/conscientious-objection) is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights and Conscientious Objectors Day is marked each year on 15th May. | |
| **Follow-up Activities:**   1. **Find out more about conscientious objectors during WWI:**   Why did they take the stance they did?  What change did they want to make?  What do you think it felt like to stand out against the crowd at a time of national crisis?  Were their actions successful?  Is their stance relevant today?   1. **Some questions to discuss:**   Are conscientious objectors cowards?  What would you do if you believed your government’s actions to be wrong?  Can peace be achieved through violence?  What would you be willing to suffer to support your principles?   1. **Imagine you are Emrys Hughes:**   Write in your diary how you are feeling and thinking……   * In 1915 – when you realise that a military hospital has been set up in your college * In 1916 when conscription comes in * During your tribunal * In solitary confinement * When the war came to an end.  1. **Tough decisions:** a) **Imagine you are a family in WWI** when you hear that conscription has come in. There are 3 sons in your family with differing beliefs. Act out the conversation round the dinner table.   b) Find out more about **military tribunals**. Act out a tribunal, with different people taking the role of people on the panel (military, town councillor, widow, pastor) and the conscientious objector himself. Background information and real examples of tribunal papers from Ceredigion can be found on Hwb here: <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/472321c6-930a-4eca-825f-25e74d004c05>.   1. **The use of language and propaganda:**   One way governments persuade people to fight in wars is by the use of language, portraying the other side as evil and the moral imperative to fight.  Consider materials, produced by the National Library of Wales Education Team, on [Propaganda](https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/61f45162-7817-4770-a6e7-8771843d8f37) and [Patriotism](https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/78bcda33-6249-4027-bee6-da09f7dd9b04). | |
| **Further Info/Links:**  For information on conscientious objection during WWI, see: <https://wciavoices.wordpress.com/2019/05/14/conscientious-objectors-day-15-may-opposition-to-the-great-war-in-wales-review/>  Other educational resources about conscientious objectors (on Hwb): <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/discovery?fields=resources&language=en&query=conscientious%20objectors&sort=relevance&strict=1>  A series of short videos on Welsh COS: <http://www.breakingbarriers.org.uk/voices-of-conscience/>  The National Library of Wales produced a series of resources about WWI during the centenary of that conflict. These are based on actual evidence in the Library and are all on Hwb [here](https://hwb.gov.wales/search?query=National+LIbrary+of+Wales). | |
| **What can you do?**  Find out about countries where the right to conscientious objection is still denied (See: <https://menwhosaidno.org/costoday/costoday.html>)  Write a letter of support to a young conscientious objector: e.g.  <https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2021/israel-conscientious-objectors-eran-aviv-and-shahar-peretz-resist-peace> | |