

“CRYING HAVOC!” BEVERLEY NICHOLS AND PACIFISM IN BRITAIN DURING THE 1930s

Good morning, ladies and gentleman, and may I extend to you my own personal welcome today to the Imperial War Museum, and to thank you for your kind invitation to participate once again in the annual Peace History conference.

In previous years I have spoken about interwar organisations and events such as the League of the Nations and the 1935 Peace Ballot. So last autumn, when Bruce turned all his considerable powers of persuasion on me to speak again today, I thought that this year I would give a talk on a peace history personality. And one perhaps not immediately thought of when the subject of Peace history and pacifism are mentioned-Beverley Nichols.

For many, in today's overcrowded world of celebrity, the name will mean nothing, and yet for a good half or more of the Twentieth Century, Beverley Nichols was one of the most famous personalities in Britain. American writer Mr Brooks Peters in a recent blog has summed him up thus:

“One of most curious figures of English letters is Beverley Nichols, (1898-1983). A Renaissance man of the Roaring 20s and 30s, Nichols was a handsome, debonair author and playwright, a pianist, song writer, actor, mystery writer, gardening expert, sparkling wit, bon vivant, cat champion, children's storyteller, and what used to be described delicately as a 'confirmed bachelor', despite a 40- year long relationship with his male companion. For decades he was inescapable on the British literary and social scene. He knew and was lauded by many leading lights of his day. And he outlived many of his staunchest rivals.”

Sir Osbert Sitwell described Nichols as the original “Bright Young Person” of those Roaring 1920s. And indeed, Nichols even wrote a novel called “Crazy Pavements” about the “Bright Young Things” that appeared three years before Evelyn Waugh's much more famous “Vile Bodies” on the same theme.

All in all, one might think, an unlikely champion of British pacifism in the 1930s. And while some of his works, like the gardening classic “Down the Garden Path” have always remained in print, his best-selling 1933 pacifist book “Cry Havoc!” has long disappeared from publishers' lists, although copies can still be found in second hand bookshops and, of course, on Amazon. And yet at the time it was hugely influential. In her memoirs “Hons and Rebels” Jessica Mitford recalled:

“When I was fourteen I read ‘Cry Havoc!’ Beverley Nichols' indictment of war. It pictured in vivid detail the horrors of bombing raids in the First World War and pleaded eloquently for total, world-wide disarmament. ‘Cry Havoc!’ made an immediate appeal to young people throughout England; it was a best-seller overnight. I was enormously impressed with originality of and force of its arguments. A whole new world had opened up for me.”

What had prompted Nichols, seen up to then as a talented but essentially lightweight chronicler of the Mayfair 'beau monde' and intimate friend of Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward and Ivor Novello, to take up the cause of Pacifism?

Well, one, if not the main, answer lies in the mood, temper and state of public opinion in Britain at the beginning of the 1930s, as the country grappled with the Great Depression, only ten years or so after victory had been won in the Great War, “The War to End War”.

As the late Lord Annan wrote in his book “Our Age: Portrait of a Generation”:

“For a decade no wanted to relive the horrors of the Great War. And then R. C. Sherriff’s ‘Journey’s End’ startled West End audiences. He showed a subaltern no more than a boy breaking down under shell fire and the company commander whom he idolized able to carry on only by taking to the bottle.”

Sherriff himself donated the original manuscript of “Journey’s End”, (now here at the Imperial War Museum), to the League of Nations Union to be auctioned off to raise money to further the work of the Union in promoting the cause of world peace.

And Sherriff’s play did not come alone. The end of the 1920s saw a veritable flood of books, memoirs and novels, denouncing, in one form or another, the futility of war. Among the most distinguished were Robert Graves’ “Goodbye to All That”, Richard Aldington’s “Death of a Hero” and Siegfried Sassoon’s “Memoirs of an Infantry Officer.” And from defeated Germany came the best-selling novel “All Quiet on the Western Front” by Erich Maria Remarque. It was soon to be turned into an even more influential Hollywood film with a ringing endorsement from “Variety” magazine:

“The League of Nations could make no better investment than to buy up the master print, reproduce it in every language, to be shown to every nation every year until the word ‘war’ is taken out of the dictionaries.”

And in the theatre, Sherriff’s play, which incidentally has been revived yet again this year, was joined by Hans Chlumberg’s “Miracle at Verdun”, produced in London in September 1932. Said at the time to “be numbered among the most powerful War plays ever written”, its theme was:

“...that the millions who died that we might live rise from their graves to see what kind of better world we have built to justify their sacrifice. They find no better world at all, but the old follies, the old vices, in measure greater even before. And so they return to their tombs, disillusioned....”

A few months later, Lord Beaverbrook’s “Daily Express” published “Covenants with Death”, edited by T. A. Innes and Ivor Castle, which consisted of the most grisly photographic images of the Great War. Its title page bore the message:

“The purpose of this book is to reveal the horror, suffering and essential bestiality of modern war, and with that revelation, to warn the nation against the peril of foreign entanglements that must lead Britain to a new Armageddon...”

All this led, naturally enough, to an increased public revulsion to war and militarism in every form. In 1929, Ramsay Macdonald’s second Labour Government issued instructions that that November’s Armistice Day commemoration should be demilitarized with fewer service personnel on parade in Whitehall. And the League of Nations’ Union and the Fellowship of Reconciliation tried to abolish, unsuccessfully, the annual Hendon Air Display.

And a month before “Miracle at Verdun” opened in London, an international Anti-War Congress, with two thousand delegates from twenty-seven countries, was held in Amsterdam. Echoing the sentiments that had prompted Lord Beaverbrook’s “Daily Express” to publish “Covenants with Death”, the Congress issued a manifesto branding the conflict of imperialist ambitions as the real cause of war. The future of the human race, it declared, lay at the mercy of diplomatic disagreements, political crimes and border disputes. Wars might break out at any time. The manifesto put part of the blame on the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and especially the clause of the Treaty that saddled Germany with sole war guilt, denouncing it as “ a flagrant untruth that has been used by a trick of demagogic mysticism to contribute to the growth of Fascist reaction in Germany.”

At that time many people in Britain agreed with this assessment of Versailles. Jessica Mitford recalled:

“The younger generation was highly political. They accused the elder statesmen of the Allied countries of sowing the seeds of a new and more horrible world war through the Versailles Treaty, the systematic crushing of Germany, the demands made on the defeated enemy for impossible war reparations.”

Furthermore:

“Old concepts of patriotism, flag-waving, jingoism were under violent attack by the younger writers. The creed of pacifism, born of a determination to escape the horrors of a new world war, swept the youth. Students organized demonstrations against the Officers’ Training Corps.”

The greatest, or certainly the most publicised manifestation of this attitude, came just before Nichols published “Cry Havoc!” On 9th February 1933 the Oxford Union passed, in Churchill’s words, “their ever-shameful resolution”: “That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country” by 275 votes to 153. In the words of historian Professor Charles Loch Mowat, the resolution “received world-wide notice out of all proportion to its importance, as a sign of Britain’s pacifism and decadence which was an encouragement to dictators abroad.” But as Jessica Mitford was later to recall:

“This action by a small handful of Oxford undergraduates produced electrifying results. The Oxford Pledge, as it came to be known, was taken up as a rallying cry by youth of all countries. We read of student meetings in France, Germany, and far-off America, where the Oxford Union’s message was discussed and adopted. The Pledge became the subject of editorials in every newspaper and of raging debate in the letter columns.”

And while:

“The left-wing press hailed the Pledge as a blow to the armaments race, and called for its adoption by every trades union, every church, every youth group.....it seemed though as if every retired colonel must have roused himselfto put pen to paper in defence of King and Empire against the incredible pronouncement.....Parents and uncles alike agreed that the young pacifists of the Oxford Union would benefit greatly from a good horsewhipping.”

So such was the climate of opinion in Britain in July 1933 when Jonathan Cape published Nichols’ “Cry Havoc!” It was an immediate best-seller. That year it went through five impressions, two more in 1934 and an eighth in February 1935. Then in July 1935 it was brought out by Cape, (along with six other titles by Nichols) as a Florin Book, selling for two shillings, or 10p in today’s money. It carried a ringing endorsement from the “Manchester Guardian”:

“Here is a man who does actually feel a passionate hatred of war and the whole gang of warmongers-the devil’s gamblers of armament manufacturers, the Chauvinism of a commercial press, all the mean jumble of national spites and fears which are leading mankind up the next primrose path.....Some parts of the book are so effective, so good, that instead of being published very beautifully on good quality paper they should have been turned out on the cheapest newsprint and dropped from aeroplanes-if the Air Ministry allowed this form of pacifist bombing.”

But seven years later in their social history of Britain between the wars, "The Long Weekend", authors Robert Graves and Alan Hodge were not so enthusiastic about the book. Only a few months after the start of a new world war, Graves and Hodge wrote:

"Beverley Nichols, an able journalist of the "sob-brother" variety, to which Godfrey Winn also belonged, made a popular, non-political attack on war. His 'Cry Havoc!' was dedicated to 'those mothers whose sons are still alive.' He objected to the use of romantic and heroic word 'war' to describe modern warfare. A new word was wanted, not narrowed to the historical interpretations of armies in conflict, but which could be applied to the latest possibilities of blowing up babies in Baghdad by pressing a button in Birmingham. Nichols went on to attack armament firms as promoters of war. He blamed them for supplying hereditary enemies, such as Turkey and Greece, and thus encouraging them to make war on each other. (He was unaware that Turkey and Greece had recently become reconciled). He also criticised scientists for saying that gas was ineffective, and dismissed with contempt the idea that gas masks could be distributed to all civilians. He denounced O.T.C. s for their militaristic spirit-at the same time attacking their training as out-of-date. The League of Nations disappointed him; its talk of security he found to be only evidence of fear. Finally, he blamed newspapers and history books for putting a war-like emphasis on the facts of living."

Concluding their rather sour assessment of "Cry Havoc!" book, Graves and Hodge wrote:

"Nichols's book had a wide circulation, and was probably more effective in inculcating pacifism by its heart-to-heart un-political appeal than the carefully organized Left movements of the time."

That pacifism was being inculcated became more than ever apparent with the result of the East Fulham bye-election of October 1933, three months after "Cry Havoc!" first appeared. The Conservative National Government candidate, advocating an increase in the strength of the army, navy and air force was defeated by the Labour candidate who accused him of preparing for war. A Conservative majority of 14, 521 was replaced by a Labour one of 4,840.

And a year and a half or so later, in June 1935, the Reverend Dick Sheppard, a pacifist who had organised protests against the 1925 Armistice Night Victory Ball on the grounds that to commemorate a victory which had caused so much misery and hate would be blasphemous, founded the Peace Pledge Union. In October 1934, Sheppard had circulated a letter to the newspapers inviting men who would never support or sanction another war to send him a postcard pledging so to do. On 14th July 1935, an Albert Hall meeting was attended by seven thousand people who had signed the pledge. By that autumn the number had grown to 80,000 and two years later to 130,000.

But to return to Nichols and "Cry Havoc!" What had prompted him to abandon, albeit temporarily as it turned out, the doings of Mayfair and Café Society for the cause of peace? Here one comes across a major difficulty. Nichols was undoubtedly a gifted and imaginative writer and one who published over sixty books in his lifetime. Unfortunately, more often than not that imagination over-spilled from the novels into his autobiographical works, as the late Mr Bryan Connon so wittily pointed out in his life of Nichols. In his second volume of autobiography "All I Could Never Be" published in 1949, (he had precociously published the first volume when he was just 25 in 1923), Nichols wrote that the idea had originally come to him one evening while seated at his desk when "outside there was the wind in the elms and -as always-the echo of the guns."

Nichols continued:

“I could not imagine what was going to be written, nor if it would be any use: I only knew that I had to write it, whatever ‘it’ might prove to be. Looking back one one’s emotional condition at this time, it is difficult to understand why it should have been quite so tense; after all, the danger of war was not so immediate; Hitler was only just beginning to emerge from obscurity; the forces ranged on the side of peace were apparently invincible. And yet, my mind was always set as though the clock were pointed to the eleventh hour.”

But it was the very acute awareness of physical pain, both his and others’, Nichols claimed, that was really the basis of his pacifism. He later acknowledged that, “it was a cloudy and unstable foundation for any philosophy, but God knows it came from the heart.”

In late 1932, Nichols summed it up in a letter to H G Wells, with whom he had been arguing about the merits or otherwise of conscientious objection, (the letter formed the basis of the first chapter of “Cry Havoc!”):

“I believe that the discussion of war should *begin* with the personal agony of the soldier and should *end* with the political and economic frictions which result in that agony. I would like to see a model of a hideously wounded soldier on the respectable tables of the disarmament conferences.”

Writing four years after an even more destructive world war, Nichols conceded:

“There is a pathetic simplicity about this youthful plea. I really did feel that if only somebody could break into the conference hall at Geneva, and compel the delegates to stare at some image of scarred skin and shattered limbs, they would really suffer a change of spirit.”

But, eighteen months before “Cry Havoc!” appeared, Nichols had already written a stage play with a strong pacifist theme entitled “Avalanche” to which Robert Sherwood’s more famous 1936 anti-war play “Idiot’s Delight” bears more than a passing resemblance. Set in Switzerland in the near future, “Avalanche’s” hero “Nigel”, a dramatist, plays a hoax on his chalet guests, persuading them that a new world war has broken out. Their mixed reactions allows him full rein in propounding his pacifist beliefs:

In one scene, “Nigel” rhetorically asks a guest who has told him that as Britain is now at war he should join up both for patriotic reasons and for his art:

“So I’m to join the British army in order to learn how to be a dramatist, am I?.....And you think that by the time I’ve formed a sufficient number of fours, and later on, when I’ve breathed an adequate quantity of chlorine gas, I may possibly rival the style of the author of ‘Journey’s End’?”

Incidentally, Nichols, like R.C. Sherriff, had served in the army as a junior officer during the latter part of the Great War, but unlike Sherriff had not seen any combat. Nichols was to write that during that war his father John, whom he detested, and whom, according to an account in a later book “Father Figure”, he attempted to murder, was:

“..... an obscene parody of Colonel Blimp. Reclining in his armchair, throughout the four years of the first great carnage, he gained a vicarious sadistic satisfaction through the blood-sacrifices of the world’s youth. One of his bitterest disappointments was that none of his sons was ever slaughtered.”

“Avalanche” was not a great box office success when produced at the London Arts Theatre Club in late January 1932, and made Nichols, or so he was to claim later, only £50 in

royalties, but it enjoyed greater success on the Continent, especially in Vienna, where it ran for nearly a year.

Just after the London production of “Avalanche”, Nichols met Dorothy Woodman at the Union of Democratic Control. She had written a pamphlet entitled “The Secret International” about the armaments industry. It was this meeting, and Miss Woodman’s pamphlet, that inspired Nichols to research further into the subject and to bring it to the attention of a wider audience. And in this he succeeded probably more even than he had hoped for. In the foreword to his 1941 book “Men Do Not Weep, Nichols wrote:

It, (‘Cry Havoc!’), had a very large sale, it was made compulsory in hundreds of schools, it was squabbled about in the House of Commons, it formed the subject of many sermons, and it was indirectly responsible for the long drawn out inquiry into the armaments industry which was front page news in the U.S.A. for months.”

But in a footnote he wryly observed:

“It is an ironic comment on what life has done to pacifism to recall that a special edition of 7,000 copies of this book was printed for the Department of Education of Toronto. I have met a number of Canadian airmen in the present war who were brought up on it. On the cover, in large letters, was ‘In no circumstances to fight for any ruler of any country.’”

In Ontario, those copies of “Cry Havoc!” were circulated for study in schools, albeit with heavy cuts to those parts of the book which were felt to promote “extreme socialism.” George Grant, who was to become one of Canada’s leading academics, read the book while at the Canadian equivalent of Eton, Upper Canada College. He and two school friends were so impressed with the arguments that Nichols put forward, that they became pacifists. They then sought, and surprisingly obtained from the school authorities, exemption from serving in the College’s Officer Training Corps.

And looking back in May 2011, the Reverend Geoffrey Beck, who still retained his copy of Nichols’ book and who was an absolutist conscientious objector during the Second World War, remembered how “Cry Havoc!” “swept” through his school Whitgift in 1933

In writing “Cry Havoc!” Nichols had received support from, among others, George Bernard Shaw who wrote:

“Dear Beverley Nichols

Dorothy Woodman tells me that you doing an important piece of work and doing it very well. You will need all the encouragement you can get. Here is mine.

It will come as no surprise to you to learn that I have already said all that you seem to be trying to say, but it cannot be said too often. And though nobody listened to me they might conceivably listen to you.

I have marked a passage which seems particularly apposite. If you wish to quote it, please do so.

Yours sincerely
Bernard Shaw”

The passage which Shaw sent to Nichols was from his play “Major Barbara” and was the speech of the armaments manufacturer “Undershaft”. It read:

“The Government of your country? I am the Government of your country. Do you suppose that you and a half a dozen amateurs like you, sitting in a row in that foolish gabble shop, govern Undershaft? No, my friend, you will do what pays us. You will make war when it suits me and keep peace when it doesn't. . . . When I want anything to keep my dividends up, you will discover that my want is a national need. When other people want something to keep my dividends down, you will call out the police and the military. And in return you shall have the support of my newspapers, and the delight of imagining that you are a great statesman.”

And Shaw was not alone in his support and encouragement. Nichols later noted that on the day “Cry Havoc!” was published most of the principal newspapers devoted their leader pages to it:

“And the majority of them, significantly, had nothing but praise for its conclusions, which were of course, uncompromisingly pacific.”

Even the “Army, Navy and Air Force Gazette” commended the book, saying:

“The book is an important one that officers of the Services should read and mediate upon. Mr Nichols is no fool and most of what he has to say is founded on fact and clear thinking.”

But two popular authors reviewing the book did take issue with Nichols: Compton Mackenzie writing in the “Daily Mail”, but more importantly and infamously, Major Francis Yeats-Brown in the “Daily Telegraph”. Yeats-Brown was at the time the best-selling author of “Bengal Lancer” on which Hitler’s favourite Hollywood film, “Lives of a Bengal Lancer”, starring Gary Cooper, was to be based.

Yeats-Brown was a keen supporter of Fascism, both at home and abroad, and regarded Nichols as a “public danger”. In 1934 he published a riposte to “Cry Havoc!” entitled “Dogs of War!” in which he outlined his scheme for massive rearmament in Britain and America so that the two nations could act as “World Policemen” and guardians of peace. The first chapter of the book was an open letter to “Mr Beverley Nichols” in which Yeats-Brown wrote:

“Your ideas have bemused a wide public. You have a feeling for words and an instinct for what the readers wants. That is why you are a public danger. In “Cry Havoc!” you were able to tell people what they wanted to hear, that war is wrong, that we are under no necessity to fight for our ideals; whereas my argument will seek to remind them that the pacifist position is dishonest in that it faces neither immediate international problems, nor the stern realities of racial evolution. You advocate the pleasant theory that we can seek safety by legislation and prohibitions: my task is more difficult, for it is to show that legislation against war may be more dangerous than the evils it seeks to remedy, and that prohibitions may lead to excesses which not only pacifists, but peace lovers such as myself deplore.”

Yeats-Brown continued that in his view:

“‘Cry Havoc!’ is a masterpiece of making drivel sound convincing.”

Ramming home the point, Yeats Brown continued:

“Yes, drivel, although sincere drivel. In no country but this, and in no generation but your own, could such a book have been taken seriously.”

Yeats-Brown in his earlier review of the book in the “Daily Telegraph” had sparked off a lively and heated debate in that paper’s correspondence column. A Mr J T Wardell wrote a blistering riposte to another reader’s view that the British were essentially a peace-loving race:

“The British are not peace-loving, nor are they lambs.....they have fought long and bitterly.....With a ruling House from Hanover, Prime Ministers from Wales and Scotland, and generals from Ireland England exhibits the true wisdom of making the best the advantages of the peace. In return, Englishmen have sought trouble in every part of the globe. There is hardly a country or nation outside Europe where England has not planted the invader’s flag.”

A view of the British Empire with which Yeats-Brown by and large agreed:

“It is the sword (combined, I gladly and proudly admit, with a great deal of tact and commonsense) which has created the most peaceful community of nations the world has yet seen. Pray God our greatness may not fail through craven fear of being great.”

Bloomsbury critic Desmond McCarthy took the opposite view. In a letter to the paper he was of the opinion that:

“...Patriotism, not Pacifism, is the insidious poison of which nations may die.”

And Nichols’ friend, Osbert Sitwell, a former army officer turned fervent pacifist, in his letter tried to analyse:

“ That curious, mystical quality which is always to be found in the mental make-up of those who extol war. What is this strange, haunting virtue in war which can never be explained; what is that draws tears to the old charwomen as they watch the troops go by (Bless the boys and Tipperary!)?”

Sitwell’s rhetorical enquiry drew the following tart response from a woman reader in London:

“Mr Sitwell wonders why the charwomen’s eyes fill with tears as they watch the boys march by. I, being a woman, can tell him. It is because of a quaint, old-fashioned emotion called gratitude. Having travelled about the world I know that where the Union Jack flies there I shall be free and safe, and I am grateful those who keep it flying.”

Other papers joined in the debate over the pacifist message of “Cry Havoc!” and the attack on it by Yeats-Brown. In the “Methodist Times”, Minister William Atkinson was of the firm opinion that:

“Compromise on this tremendous question is impossible. War is not only wrong: there is no language strong enough to describe its infamy. In the last war thirteen millions lost their lives directly, and twenty-eight millions more died as a result of it. War is so diabolically wicked, glaringly senseless, and demonstrably useless that it cannot be justified under any circumstances. There are no exceptions; certainly not the next! All that Christian people can do is to loathe it, curse it, and end it by refusing to participate.”

An opinion which brought the following response from Yeats-Brown:

“But will you end it, Mr Atkinson, by refusing to participate? Your outburst of holy wrath would not have stopped the Germans invading Belgium.”

Nichols himself replied in a letter to the “Daily Telegraph” to Yeats-Brown’s criticism. It is, I think, worth quoting at length:

“I am utterly at a loss to understand the (Yeats-Brown) definition of pacifism as ‘an insidious poison that saps the moral fibre.’

“If pacifism is poison, then Christianity is poison. And Herr Hitler should be welcomed as a new Messiah. If pacifism is poison, then common sense is poison, for the smallest acquaintance with the facts mentioned in ‘Cry Havoc!’ shows us a world doomed to swift, complete, and hideous destruction unless the ‘poison’ is administered in very large doses.”

“ As for ‘sapping the moral fibre’, I should like to know exactly how the ‘moral fibre’ is improved by ascending in an aeroplane and dropping bombs of Lewisite (gas) on to hospitals, which will be the chief occupation of the dupes of the next war.....”

Nichols continued:

“.....Major Yeats-Brown hits the nail on the head when he writes that ‘the whole pacifist case rests on a denial of nationality.’ It does. We pacifists must be honest enough to admit it. We have to lower flags we love, to deny causes that are glamorous and profitable, to be prepared to wear on our sleeves the badge ‘Traitor to his Country’. It isn’t pleasant. It isn’t easy. But we must do it. Somebody must begin, lest all should end.”

Addressing Yeats-Brown’s thesis that “nationality is living force in Europe”, Nicholls argued:

“Nationality is a good deal more than a living force. It is crazy and criminal hysteria, to which all nations are dancing, because they are fed with lies from the cradle to the grave, because they suck in the poison with their mother’s milk, have it injected ad nauseam in all their schools, and live on an almost exclusive diet of it in their newspapers.”

Nicholls ended the letter by declaring:

“Patriotism is not an instinct. It is an utterly artificial quality. It has already brought the world to its knees and caused untold misery. Isn’t it time we looked this cheating goddess in the face, and then turned our back on her for ever?”

Naturally enough, Yeats-Brown rose swiftly to the attack, but prefaced his reply, probably with tongue in cheek, by giving Nichols credit for the courage of his convictions in publishing the book:

“His reputation might have been injured instead of being enhanced by the publication of ‘Cry Havoc!’. And he could not have known that the book would become a best-seller.”

And a best-seller, as we have seen, it certainly became. But what of the book, and its message today?

This same question was posed some twenty years ago by the late Mr Bryan Connon in his 1991 biography of Nichols. In the biography Mr Connon described “Cry Havoc!” as “a frontal assault, all intellectual guns blazing” and gave the following assessment which I believe remains valid today. Like everything he wrote, Nichols’ “Cry Havoc!”

“ ... is generally easy to read although some sections are facetious and elsewhere it is too deliberately emotional, but one thing that emerges with depressing clarity: despite the agony of the Second World War and the reappraisal which has gone on since, much remains fundamentally unchanged today.”

And twenty years on from 1991 that judgement remains all too depressingly true. Mr Connon quoted the example of Nichols’ 1933 chapter on Chemical Warfare:

“Beverley describes the stockpiling of this vile weapon in its various forms and points out that no attempt was being made to stockpile gas masks, the bulk of those manufactured in England being exported. The instructions issued by the British Red Cross under the title ‘First Aid in Chemical Warfare’ stated that ‘Any room with sound walls, roof and floor can be rendered gas-proof’, and explained that windows should be puttied, and the chimney blocked and the door sealed with strips of cloth. Beverley pointed out that this was not worth the paper it was printed on.”

Mr Connon added:

“Substitute the words ‘nuclear weapons’ for ‘chemical warfare’ and the advice on making your own bolthole becomes startlingly familiar.”

Here, Mr Connon was undoubtedly thinking of the controversial 1980 Government booklet “Protect and Survive”. He concludes:

“The argument employed today in favour of nuclear warfare is precisely similar to that used to support the stockpiling chemical weapons in the 1930s.”

But Lord Annan in his study of the men and women who made post-war Britain, “Our Age” that came out the year before Mr Connon’s book was airily dismissive of “Cry Havoc!” and its author, writing:

“Later Beverley Nichols, that ready guide to *chic*, came out as a pacifist; Our Age bore the news with stoic resolution.”

And in one very important respect, Nichols was sadly well off beam in “Cry Havoc!” In the original draft of the book, Nichols had written a chapter on the political chaos of last years of Weimar Germany and its extremist politics, both Left and Right. This he dropped and substituted a brief note that Hitler had become Reich Chancellor on 30th January 1933 and dictator by the end of March. But he went on to rashly predict that:

“And by the time these words are published, it is quite possible that Hitler may be exiled from his own country, a discredited pantaloon, twiddling his swastika in a glass of cheap champagne somewhere on the Cote d’Azur. Or again, he may have repudiated the homicidal lunatics who surround him, and have pulled himself, and Germany, together.”

The book’s runaway success brought Nichols increased fame, but also attracted the usual quota of eccentrics, and what we might today call “stalkers”. Looking back in 1949, Nichols recalled that he was plagued by:

“.....religious cranks, who appeared at the front door in white draperies, waving banners and proclaiming that they had a Message. There were medical cranks, who believed that you could stop man fighting by altering his diet.”

And one day Nichols received the following cablegram from a lady in California:

“ Arriving England Wednesday next with the largest book in the world measuring sixteen feet across when fully opened *stop* propose obtain signatures in favour of peace from every prominent man and woman in Europe beginning with the King of England *stop* kindly arrange for open truck to transport book with full publicity from Savoy Hotel to Buckingham Palace *stop*

Nichols was at first startled, but then rather touched, believing that the lady “had the right idea and that her heart was in the right place.”

Nichols' new found celebrity as a pacifist was such that he was constantly in demand as a public speaker. Already, on 15th November 1932, he had addressed a disarmament rally meeting of the League of Nations Union at the Albert Hall presided over by Lord Robert Cecil. That evening, in immaculate white tie and tails, Nichols shared the platform with Christian socialist Sir Stafford Cripps and William Temple, the Archbishop of York. The meeting's resolution proposed by Lord Robert called for world-wide disarmament, the banning of heavy weapons, aircraft and submarines, and to agree to collective security with each nation maintaining only a minimum of arms.

When it was his turn to speak Nichols was deliberately provocative:

"... at the risk of appearing presumptuous, I would suggest that this meeting, up to the present moment, has been a good deal too polite. I would also suggest that the resolution, drastic as it is, is a good deal too polite. There are four words missing from it. And those four words are 'Peace at any price'. The condition of the world is too desperate for half measures. Unless you are prepared to accept those four words, don't fool yourselves that you are for peace."

Pointing dramatically to the Union Jack hanging behind the speakers' platform, Nichols said: "I am standing in front of a great and glorious flag but I am not ashamed to acknowledge my loyalty to a greater."

At this point hecklers inevitably called out "The Red Flag", but Nichols shouted out: "No! The white flag of peace, and it is the only flag I would die for."

In his diary, a fortnight later, Nichols wrote of the occasion:

"This was without exception the most remarkable personal success I have ever had. The hall was packed. The meeting was a dead flop until I got up and, from word one, they roared with delight and practically stormed the platform when I sat down. The meeting was practically barred by the press but was shown on Movietone (the cinema newsreel). Mine was the only speech recorded at any length. So I am going to do a book on Peace and I see great publicity in it, and, I hope, acclaim, to say nothing of money."

I think that the last sentence leaves rather a nasty taste, and indeed a friend of Nichols when interviewed by Mr Cannon for the biography told him:

".....that audience acclaim went to Beverley's head and he believed he had a mission to change the world and a divine right to say what he thought and without consideration of the consequences."

Nichols, that same friend claimed, revelled in all the controversy and publicity that "Cry Havoc!" brought with it, although always remaining aware that it was bringing him as much dislike as popularity. Nichols was also supposed to have admitted that the whole business had got out of hand. But the acclaim he received from enthusiastic audiences at peace meetings, together with his enormous post bag, had become like a drug which Nichols was unable to resist and would do nothing to avoid.

The film of the Albert Hall meeting was shown in cinemas all over Britain, and at one London newsreel theatre, Nichols encountered his near contemporary, lifelong friend and sometime rival Noel Coward. Coward had been a less than enthusiastic patriot during the First World War and an even more reluctant conscript in the Artists' Rifles for a few short months in 1918. But now, as the author of the Union Jack- waving "Cavalcade", Coward had become ultra-patriotic. "I have come to hear what you have been up to," he told Nichols, who

replied, "You won't like it." "I'm quite sure I shan't" said Coward, "That's why I am here. I've come here to hiss."

A year later, Nichols appeared in another film produced by Movietone, this time a documentary to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the signing of the Armistice in November 1918. It was entitled "Peace or War?" and featured a discussion between four women, one of whom was the film actress Madeleine Carroll, soon to star with Robert Donat in Hitchcock's "The Thirty Nine Steps". Nichols introduced the film and provided the epilogue and was described in the magazine "Cinema Today" as being "rather good".

That same month Nichols published "A Thatched Roof" the sequel to his enormously best-selling gardening book "Down the Garden Path", which, as I remarked earlier, still remains in print today. Mr Cannon was undoubtedly correct in his assessment that the publication of "A Thatched Roof" "must have come as relief to many of his readers, that far from there being the hint of a militant pacifist in it, it was a return to the cosy, sentimental Beverley of old."

But that is not to say that Nichols was ready, willing or indeed able to abandon the cause of pacifism or his self-imposed crusade to abolish war. Throughout the rest of the 1930s this sometimes took him into dangerous waters. While associating with the Peace Pledge Union he also flirted with the Oxford Group, whose leader Frank Buchman bizarrely described SS Chief Heinrich Himmler as a "grand lad". And for a time Nichols sincerely believed that Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists might prove amenable to adopting his pacifist philosophy. Writing in 1941, Nichols pointed out:

"I never joined, nor dreamt of joining, the British Union of Fascists. But I did attend two or three of their meetings, I did buy a little book by Mosley called "The Greater Britain" and at one moment I had a wild idea of trying to 'reform' Mosley, i.e. of persuading him to cut out certain repulsive features of his policy (such as his anti-semitism, which was still very much soft-pedalled in those days)."

And in common with many well-meaning people in the Western democracies during the 1930s, Nichols was prepared to believe that Hitler and other leading Nazis were sincere in their denunciations of the horrors of a new world war. And he thought that, like him, they actively wanted to prevent the "folly" of such a war.

So to "prevent that folly", Nichols was later to write:

"I tried to 'get at' Germany. I worked hard for the Anglo-German Fellowship, thereby incurring the odium of many pacifist friends of the past. They seemed to think it inconceivable that anybody with a sincere detestation of war could possibly have any truck with men who were obviously bent on making it. 'Either you are blind,' they used to say, 'or you have been pretending all along. But it was not blindness, nor insincerity which caused me, and a few others who felt like me, to hold out the hand of friendship to the Nazis.'"

It was, Nichols later claimed, a belief in miracles that made him persist in his quest for an Anglo-German understanding, while Britain was at last re-arming to counter the Nazi threat. He felt that "the only thing that differentiated the pacifist who sought friendship with Germany and the average man who merely yelled 'more tanks, more planes, more guns' was the pacifist's conviction that tanks, planes and guns never did, and never will, stop a war. They can only alter its date...that is all."

Looking back today, seventy-five years later, one can but wonder how and why Nichols could have allowed himself to be well and truly duped by the Nazis, including Dr Goebbels himself in person, and how naive he was. In September 1936, after visiting Germany during the

Berlin Olympics, he wrote in his "Sunday Chronicle" column words that might have come from the pen of Dr Goebbels himself:

"Very few people in this country have the faintest conception of the strength of the new Germany. I do not mean the military strength, but the moral strength. Here is a nation united as no nation has ever been united before.... There is so much in the new Germany that is beautiful, so much that is fine and great. And all that time in this country we are being trained to believe that the Germans are a nation of wild beasts who vary their time between roasting Jews and teaching babies to present arms. It simply is not true."

Three years later, almost to the day, the Second World War broke out, and during it the horrors which Nichols had pooh-poohed in 1936 as unthinkable fairy tales became ghastly everyday realities. But as Britain went to war, Nichols conceded that "never was aggression so flamboyant as in that September of 1939, never was the sword drawn by this country with greater reluctance, never would the pacifist be compelled to bend his mind so exclusively to theory and shut out any of the contaminating influences of fact."

A few days earlier on 31st August 1939, Nichols was in the South of France and saw the French mobilizing for the war that was only days away. Nichols had no great faith in Britain's ally; three years before, he had prophesied in an article that: "France will let us down." Now, as he watched French conscripts reluctantly going off to their battle stations, he sadly thought back to his bestseller of 1933:

"This is a pretty end to "Cry Havoc!". This is indeed an elegant conclusion to those years of endeavour when I actually had the impudence to imagine that I could light a torch which would bring a new message to the world. Where had it all led to? To a nightmare road in France, choked with men marching once again to slaughter-and this time, without even a song on their lips."

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

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