The British Empire at War Research Group

Research Papers

No. 3 (2013)

‘Good-goody Fellows? Quakers and the End of Empire in India’

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The *British Empire at War Research Papers* series publishes original research online, including seminar and conference presentations, theses, and synoptical essays.
Background and abstract

This paper analyses Quaker activity in India in the 1930s and 1940s. It examines the work of the India Conciliation Group (ICG) and the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU). The IGC attempted to conciliate between British political decision-makers and Indian independence leaders. The FAU delivered humanitarian relief in Bengal and monitored support to refugees in India and Pakistan during Partition.

The main research question asks what contribution, if any, the Quakers made to the cause of Indian independence? The paper argues that although Quaker conciliation methods were to work quietly behind the scenes, promoting better relationships between adversaries, rather than achieving visible political outcomes, their record of work during the period, demonstrates that their conciliation made a significant contribution to the struggle for Indian independence, and influenced the way international politics were conducted in the post-war period. Their influence on and relationships with key historical figures such as Gandhi, Nehru and Cripps gained them respect and imitation far beyond their size and resources.

The Quakers were frequently misunderstood, or perceived as naïve, by some of the actors, British and Indian. Their relationship with India in the 1930s would lead to doubt about the effectiveness of conciliation methods, and the possibility of transnational solidarity. Gandhi and the Quakers believed they were achievable, but many nationalists did not. Using broader theoretical frameworks, they had a much wider influence than could be expected. Their conciliation made a considerable contribution to post-war methods of international co-operation.
About the author

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Goody-goody fellows? Quakers and the end of empire in India

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1 A term used to describe the Quakers by Shri Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s secretary, in a letter to G.D. Birla. In Birla, G.D. (1968) Chapter 23 Wartime Episodes, In the shadow of the Mahatma: a personal memoir, Bombay, p. 234
Introduction

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is a Protestant sect of English origin. They have a long-lasting testimony against war, and a consequent commitment to alternative methods of peace making. This commitment may take the form of individual refusal to accept conscription into the armed forces in wartime. It may take the form of commitment to alternatives to violence, such as conciliation, conflict resolution, and nonviolent resistance of injustice.

The paper will analyse two areas of Quaker work in relation to India in the 1930s and 1940s. Both employed conciliation as a philosophy and a technique, but in different ways. The India Conciliation Group (IGC), attempted to bring together British political decision-makers with Indian independence leaders to achieve better information about each other, and a greater understanding of each other’s positions. Quaker pacifists in the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) delivered humanitarian relief in Bengal in the second World War, liaising between British occupiers and Bengali local government and voluntary organisations. They monitored support to refugees on both sides of the India-Pakistan divide during partition after the Second World War.

The paper will also examine the effectiveness of these two strands of conciliation and their inter-relationship in India and in Britain. It will look at what the Quakers did and with whom, in the changing political context of the struggle for Indian independence. My research questions will be - what were their aims? Who did they work with and what was the effect of what they did? Did their intentional invisibility make their
work essentially marginal and if not, how influential were they in helping India (and Pakistan) achieve independence and a new place in the world?

I will argue that although Quakers in India intended to work quietly behind the scenes to promote better relationships between adversaries, rather than achieve visible political outcomes, their record during the period demonstrates that their practice of conciliation had an influence on the way international politics were conducted in the post second World War period. Their aim of conciliation was often misunderstood by many of the actors, both British and Indian, but their influence on and alongside key players like Gandhi, Nehru and Cripps gained them respect and imitation far beyond their size and resources. Their work had many disappointments, and was critiqued as naïve. However, using broader theoretical frameworks than standard historical analysis, we can demonstrate that they had a much wider influence than could be expected. In assessing the importance of this work, I will use the standard political perspective of success in influencing policy decisions, alongside the more measured frameworks of statesmanship. I will also look at the Quaker achievements from alternative perspectives and methods, including nonviolence, the study of power relations and oppression of minorities, and conciliation along with other methods of alternative peace-making.

I will start by explaining who the Quakers are, and what conciliation is. I will then look at their relationship with India. Why were they there? Who did they work with and to what extent could they, and did they, establish a common understanding with Indians at the time? I then go on to analyse the work of the ICG, taking examples of their work and assessing it from a conventional historical perspective. These examples
include their influence on Indian nationalists and the British government, their work with other organisations in Britain in the 1930s, and with Stafford Cripps in his mission of 1942 and follow up in 1945-7. I will follow this with an assessment of the practical conciliation work of the FAU and its contribution to the practice of humanitarian relief to all sides in a conflict, regardless of who are the winners and losers. I will then assess the work from the ideals and practice of statesmanship, and theories of nonviolence. To conclude, I will examine what contribution their conciliation methods made to post-war idealism and international co-operation.

There is very little secondary literature looking at the impact of Quakers in this period, partly because Quakers actively discourage publicity of their work. I spent several days in the archives at Friends House in London, studying the correspondence and testimonies of the main players. Particularly fascinating are the tiny notes from Gandhi to members of the ICG (written on his days of silence). Collections of testimonies, and biographies of the main actors, have also been invaluable in analysing the success of Quaker influence and its effect. Broad context was provided by British empire and South Asian histories of the period, historiographical summaries, and theoretical literature about nonviolent social change, and the history, philosophy and techniques of nonviolence and conciliation. I will start with a section describing Quakers and their way of working.

Chapter 1: Quakers and conciliation
The Quakers originate from the period of political and religious ferment of the English civil war. At the time they were just one of many sects proclaiming the second coming of Christ, and throwing off the shackles of conventional religion to follow their own religious leadings. The Quaker Peace Testimony was their response to the accession of a new King, Charles II, and their desire to distance themselves from those who used violence who during the civil war to further their aims. They declared their intention to never ‘fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.’ As part of their belief that ‘there is that of God in everyone’, they have a testimony to Equality. Their testimony to Truth meant that they refused to swear an oath on the Bible in a court of law, saying that they were committed to truth telling throughout their lives, not just in court. Quaker testimonies underlie what Quaker actors did in the 1930s and 1940s in India. An individual refusal to fight is not necessarily a passive act, and the experience of conscientious objection to war led Quakers to seek active alternatives to violence in solving disputes. Many were tried and imprisoned for their pacifism during the first World War, when as an alternative to war service, and a positive contribution to the relief of suffering, Quakers set up the Friends Ambulance Unit.

So what is conciliation, and why are Quakers committed to it? It is one of many alternatives to violence in solving disputes. It has been described as ‘activity bringing about an alteration of perception (the other side is not as bad as we thought; we have misinterpreted their actions) that will lead to an alteration of attitude and eventually to

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3 Quaker Faith and Practice, Advices and Queries, Section 1
an alteration of behaviour." Conciliators meet with the parties separately in an attempt to resolve their differences. They try to reduce tension, help the parties to communicate better, explain issues and provide information that each side may not have about the other. Quakers are particularly committed to it because of the potential it offers for what Adam Curle calls ‘private diplomacy’. The private diplomat has advantages over the official diplomat because he or she does not represent any organisation, and is speaking entirely in a personal, individual capacity. The private diplomat’s role is to work for the establishment of conditions in which a settlement can be found, rather than to determine the nature of the settlement.

The IGC and the FAU used conciliation methods in different arenas. The ICG brought together Indian nationalist and British Government leaders when they could, to promote understanding and acceptance between them. The FAU provided relief and rehabilitation for civilian populations in Bengal at a time of hostility between Indians and British. Their conciliation work also has significance on a wider canvas. Between the World Wars there were many efforts to prevent another war, including the setting up of the League of Nations, and its successor, the United Nations, in an attempt to systematise methods of preventing and solving national disputes. This wider canvas will be important in establishing the effectiveness of Quaker conciliation efforts.

So what made India a particular concern for Quakers in general in the 1930s and 40s? From their own history and experience of persecution, Quakers protested regularly against the abuse of human rights in colonial India. Their testimony to Equality made

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5 Quaker peace activist and British academic, first professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University, UK, 1973
them early identifiers with the need for Indian self-determination, and raised concerns to government about the imprisonment without trial of Indian nationalist leaders. They were concerned about gender injustice in Indian society, and actively opposed discrimination against women such as sati (widow-burning), and child marriage. And in end-of-empire India, Quaker pacifists responded to Gandhi’s leadership of Indian resistance to imperialism through nonviolent civil disobedience. I will start an examination of what the Quakers did, by briefly summarising what was happening in India during the period.

Chapter 2: Overview of developments in India

The 1930s saw a new impetus towards British acceptance that they had at least to be talking about India’s eventual exit from the Empire. The Congress civil disobedience campaigns of the 1920s, and in particular Gandhi’s 1929 Salt March, had publicised Indian independence in Britain, and around the world. The London Round Table Conferences in 1929-1931 were critical moments in attempting to find a constitutional solution. A new Labour government was in power, and for the first time, politicians seemed to be serious about discussing how self-government in India might work. A flowering of visits, initiatives, and meetings between the main protagonists ensued, although Indians suspected, and British actions seemed to confirm, that the British were not yet serious about action, in the short-term, or even the mid- to long-term.

The political context changed with the onset of the second World War. Britain needed to access Indian productive capacity, wealth, and manpower for the war effort, and brought India into the war without consultation with Congress, the biggest Indian
political party. Enraged by this lack of consultation, and faced with disagreements in its ranks, Congress called a civil disobedience campaign, ‘Quit India’, which put the Congress leaders in gaol and out of political life for the rest of the War. British Conservatives, led by Churchill, were unwilling to contemplate the end of empire, and subverted serious negotiations on India’s post-war status, leading to the failure of the Cripps mission in 1942. However, wartime realities began to change perceptions about empire. Incoming Labour and Liberal MPs viewed Indian independence as a ‘not if but when’ question. Discussions on post-war structures were in progress in 1945. Negotiations led ultimately to the creation of two new independent states, India and Pakistan, in 1948. Now let us turn to the role of the India Conciliation Group in this changing pre- and post-war scene.

Chapter 3: ‘Sentimental and harmless people’? The India Conciliation Group

The idea of the India Conciliation Group (ICG) was hatched in late 1931, when the London Round Table Conference had failed to agree a solution to the problem of India’s status. Friends House (the Quaker national headquarters) saw a flurry of activity including the holding of Quaker Meetings to support the Conference and attended by some of the key players, and an emergency conference addressed by a range of speakers including Tej Bahadur Sapru of the Indian Liberal Party, who made it clear that Dominion status for India was inevitable. Key influential Quakers were huge admirers of Gandhi, and had met him in the late 1920s. Carl Heath and Horace Alexander worked with the Church of England missionary, C. F. Andrews in

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arranging publicity, meetings and opportunities to meet the public, for Gandhi on his visit to Britain.

Carl Heath, a leading Quaker, called a meeting to consider ‘how best to inform the British public about events in India. “Soon afterwards, with Gandhi’s encouragement, the Group was set up. Carl Heath said, ‘we feel that the time may have come for…all those who care for a right understanding between this country and the new India to cooperate in advancing a much more thorough spiritual and cultural understanding between Indians and English than at present exists.” The millionaire industrialist G.D. Birla, close friend and admirer of Gandhi, paid the salary of Agatha Harrison as Group secretary. She became a well-known source of information about what was happening in India, kept and sent out press cuttings from Indian and British newspapers, fielded requests and briefed MPs, Ministers, the India Office and the Press at every opportunity. Her response when Nehru’s wife died in February 1936 epitomises the ICG’s way of working with the most important players. ‘Phoned Polak, Barns, Manchester Guardian, Wilkinson, Lothian, Halifax, India Office (Croft and Magregor), Brown (Times) Durden Smith (Religious Press) Santwan, Reuter (Penman), Midgeley (Star). Then the phone rang continuously for information. In afternoon the India Office rang up for JPs (Nehru’s) address.’ She had her hands on information that no one else had, even those, like the India Office, who might be expected to have it.

So the group’s aim was to provide information about India to the British public, and to promote cultural understanding. Its methods were to inform and interpret each side

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10 Friends House Library archive (hereafter FHL) TEMP MSS 41/1, Formation of the ICG
11 FHL TEMP MSS 883 1/9, Agatha Harrison correspondence with Nehru 1936-53
(British and Indian) to each other, bringing powerful individuals together in the cause of better understanding, and providing information that the other would not get in any other way.

Who were they? The original membership of the Group was 28 people of various Christian denominations, including 10 Quakers, and women’s rights workers. They were not a representative body. They had no constitution, and met when the need arose, usually to hear reports of developments from the main workers, or to discuss how to expand their influencing in response to events. Significant members for the purposes of this study included Lady Pethwick-Lawrence, suffragette wife of Pethwick-Lawrence, later Secretary for State for India after the second World War, and Lady Parmoor, stepmother of Stafford Cripps, Minister in the wartime coalition Cabinet. However, most of its day-to-day work was carried out by a much smaller group of Quakers – Carl Heath as chairman, Agatha Harrison as secretary and Horace Alexander as roving conciliator.

![ICG member Horace Alexander](image)
How did they work? They were well connected, both with the Indian nationalist leaders later to become power-holders in the future Republic of India, and with British Government politicians and officials known to them through to social class, religious, and academic connections. Agatha Harrison writes of Stafford Cripps that ‘his door was always open to us, despite heavy governmental responsibilities.’ They attempted to access Government of India officials from the Viceroy downwards during their frequent visits to India. Agatha Harrison was particularly successful at arranging off the record private meetings between the British and Indians who officially were in disagreement. She was invited to meet the Viceroy more than once on her visits to India, and describes a meeting in 1938 when she had ‘40 minutes with Lord Linlithgow, and he was extremely friendly.’

In Britain, the ICG members used their

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12 Harrison, I. (1956) *Agatha Harrison, an impression by her sister*, London, p. 96
status in the Society of Friends to organise public meetings about India and host Indian speakers in different parts of the country, particularly in the 1930s, and mostly in London.

So the Quakers had access to the right people in for their chosen task of conciliation. They had an effective worker and well-established influencing methods. I will now go on to discuss their relationship with India and Indian nationals. How connected were they with India, and how effective did that make them, in the independence struggle?

**Chapter 4: The Quaker relationship with India**

Like other Protestant sects, the Quakers had a missionary presence in India from the last half of the 19th century. They set up in the 1860s in Itarsi, central India, providing education and support to agricultural projects. However, Quaker testimony to equality meant they were always half-hearted missionaries. They were committed to an individual’s relationship with God that admitted no intermediaries, and were consequently opposed to paid ministry, or planned evangelising. It was not until the first World War that a closer and different relationship emerged, rooted in cooperation and friendship between nations, and based on their testimonies to equality and peace.

Gandhi was a very significant inspiration to Quakers at the time. Gandhi was inspired in his commitment to ‘satyagraha’ (meaning truth-force), through a mixture of influential pacifists including Thoreau, Tolstoy, and his own reading of Jesus’ actions in the New Testament. He was a personal pacifist, but also a nationalist. His strategic analysis was that Indians had to recognise and use disobedience, the only power they had, to get the British, seemingly a massively superior power, out of India. He
recognised that the British might have legitimate power, backed at least in theory by military force, but that they were few, and could not operate without the obedience of millions of Indians. He believed that Indians could and should withdraw that obedience. His advocacy and use of nonviolent coercive techniques such as civil disobedience, economic boycott campaigns, and personal fasting, was hugely influential during the 1920s, when he was the undisputed leader of Congress. Gandhi and the Quakers disagreed to some extent about nonviolent methods, and Quakers did not necessarily agree with his judgement about how nonviolent political change would be achieved in India. Gandhi had frequently to remind the members of the ICG of the political realities of the struggle for Indian independence. ‘My grave misgiving is that those who are in authority do not want to part with India. With them it seems that to lose India is to lose the battle’.13

Horace Alexander, one of the members of the ICG, visited Gandhi in the late 1920s. He and others became Gandhi’s friends and advocates. Gandhi perceived their usefulness as fellow-pacifists and conciliators. He himself spent much time and energy trying to bring together Muslims and Hindus in the run up to independence. The Quakers represented the kind of British people whose qualities he most admired, such as a strong sense of justice. Their shared ethical and religious commitment to pacifism and nonviolence created a strong and lasting bond, which was not only valuable to both in their different conciliation work, but also helped to convince other Indian leaders of Quakers’ seriousness and importance. Therefore the Quaker relationship with Gandhi was absolutely central to their influence as conciliators and the success of their efforts.

13 FHL TEMP MSS 42/1/1937 Correspondence with Gandhi
Despite their differences, personal relationships between Gandhi and the members of the ICG were always warm and mutually supportive. Gandhi maintained that the British had standards for freedom and democracy that they were betraying in the Indian struggle for independence. His strategy was to shame rather than condemn the British. He was able to maintain closer relationships with British individuals than other nationalists found possible. Gandhi always had time for his ‘Quaker friends’, and is particularly warm in his regular correspondence with Agatha Harrison. When the Cripps mission broke down, and Gandhi and Congress broke off negotiations with the British, he remarks in sorrow in his ‘Note on Letter from Horace Alexander’, ‘Weak in body though she is, is wearing herself out in removing the cobwebs of misunderstanding. She sees every responsible English statesman who will see her (and let me admit that they all see her) and pleads for India’s cause.’

The friendship of the Quakers with Bapu\(^\text{15}\) gave them credibility, but whom else did they know, and how useful were they to the cause of Indian nationalism? The Friends House archive records visits from a number of prominent leaders addressing conferences during the 1930s. A succession of Indian political party leaders were invited to ICG meetings, addressed Quaker events in the 1930s, and kept them informed about what was happening in India. These leaders include Subhas Chandra Bose, leader of the Indian National Army, Dr. Ambedkar, leader of the Untouchables, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, described as ‘the frontier Gandhi’, M. N. Roy, Indian revolutionary, Chakravarti Ragagopalachari, Minister of Industry and Finance in the first post-independence government, Shri Rajendra Prasad, first President of India,


\(^{15}\) An affectionate term, meaning ‘father’, in common use at the time to describe Mahatma Gandhi.
and Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister. They well-understood the value of publicising their causes through Quaker connections, location, and position in the left wing and religious pro-India movement in Britain. For example, Jawaharlal Nehru met with various Labour politicians at Filkins in June 1938. He reported that meeting’s proposal of an Indian constituent assembly based on universal suffrage, to the India Conciliation Group two weeks later, and reiterated it at a public meeting at Friends House, London, in September.

So the Quakers were useful to the Indian cause, although some Indian nationalists found it hard to accept them and their methods. Steeped as they were in the needs of practical politics, they found the Quakers naïve, or misguided, or both. Shri Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s secretary, wrote to G.D. Birla in 1942, ‘Horace Alexander and Symonds have come here. They are goody-goody fellows like all Quakers. Horace saw Amery before he left London. A said H might meet Gandhi and others. But there will be no result I am afraid, as he is holding a brief for Cripps. However, they are
both good people, I am asking them to stay with you. I hope you will have no objection. You can educate Horace a little, I think, he knew very little, and you can find out something from him.”

Krishna Menon, Nehru’s eventual chosen representative in Britain, whose sharp tongue was notorious, said of the ICG, ‘They sought to strengthen the moderates of all faiths in India, make them sit together, deny all possibilities of giving offence to one another, work out a mode of understanding between them, open all closed doors, soften the blows of unsympathetic official actions, and make both sides appreciate the problems and difficulties of each other.”

During the 1930s, Menon believed that the Quaker desire to smooth difficulties and avoid conflict was not helping the Indian cause. His comments reflect the sense among many Indian nationalists that conflict was unavoidable in dealing with colonialism, and force was necessary to make Britain acknowledge and respond to their demands. The nationalists saw Quaker conciliation as a distraction from the struggle, in which the British would be ejected from India not by persuasion but by force. The ICG efforts were seen as a betrayal of the nationalist’s best interests, or at best, a confusing diversion. While Nehru appreciated the value of the Quakers and of members of the ICG in publicity, as a politician he preferred to follow his own instincts rather than follow any advice from them. When Agatha Harrison pressed him repeatedly to meet with ‘the big ones’ (i.e. British Ministers) on his visit to Britain in 1935, he writes to Rajendra Prasad, ‘good people, mostly Quakers, believe in bringing about contact between prominent Indians and men in authority. They work quietly and individually, frequently approaching the big noises. I like these people but…I do not think it takes us anywhere, and sometimes it might even add to our difficulties by

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creating confusion of issues." And it was not just the ICG that came in for criticism. An unnamed Indian nationalist said of the FAU, ‘I admire your work and spirit, but you have attempted the impossible. You have tried to remain disinterested in a situation that will not tolerate neutrality. If I have a bully on my back I must shake him off before I can begin to be reconciled to him. In India to-day no one can avoid being political; the one thing you must do is to come off the fence.’

According to the logic of nonviolence theory, it is hardly surprising that the Indian nationalists disagreed with the Quaker’s methods. Tinker elaborates on the logic of nonviolence as adopted by Gandhi. He says the ICG ‘…in adopting the role of mediator is…standing between the powerless and the power holders. The powerless are dissatisfied with the prevailing situation and call urgently for thoroughgoing, radical change. They are impatient. They want change now, a complete transformation of their relationship with the power holders. They (the power holders), on the other side, are broadly satisfied with the status quo.’

The ICG members were unable to believe that conciliation might not work, that constitutional reform was not enough, and that changing the balance of power in India needed nonviolent coercion. They had to be reminded that the playing field was not equal, and was not going to be, without conflict. ‘I saw that some form of conflict was inevitable to bring home the truth to the British mind…British authority would deal summarily with the movement. The sufferings will be all on the side of the people…in

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19 Davies, T. Friends Ambulance Unit, London, p. 296
the end Britain will lose in the moral fibre…what is relevant here is the fundamental fact that the movement is designed to help Britain in spite of herself.22

Central to nonviolent social change theory is the significance of key moments in which the powerful group is shocked into a realisation that their position is untenable. Rabindranath Tagore, Indian poet, provided such a moment. He was the first non-Quaker to address a Quaker event, and in his speech to Yearly Meeting in 1930, described British rule as ‘a machine’, in a ‘dark chasm of aloofness’, and ‘a disease in political conditions’.23 Many British Quakers had not understood the scale of Indian resentment, or the oppressive nature of the colonial relationship.

So were the Quakers naïve to try bridging the colonial gulf? How possible was a genuine meeting of minds between individuals from the oppressive and the oppressed races? To what extent were the even the Quakers simply unable to see that their perspective could only ever be British, and however much empathy they had with Indians they knew, they would always be misunderstood? Quakers’ optimistic belief was that person-to-person relationships across races were not only possible but also essential to the achievement of equality and justice. They had no doubt that such transnational understanding was possible. And we will see that as the relationship between Britain and India changed, post-independence, conciliation took its place as a favoured method of solving conflict in the post-war era. While the Quaker relationship with India was troubled, their persistent efforts throughout the period, and the strong pacifist bond with Gandhian nonviolence, led to more success later. Let us move on

now to assess the effectiveness of the India conciliation group, first in conventional historical terms, and then using wider criteria.

**Chapter 5: The India Conciliation Group and the British government**

Success in influencing policy can be measured by the degree to which senior decision-makers are persuaded, or the extent to which they actually use, information given to them. It can also be seen in the wording in official documents or announcements, and acknowledgement that the providers, and the contributions they have made, changed minds and provided solutions. We will first examine at the India Conciliation Group’s work from this criterion.

The India Conciliation Group left no stone unturned in using their personal contacts to provide information for civil servants and influential politicians about what was happening in India. They collected press cuttings on a daily basis and sent them to Ministers, who often wrote back thanking them and asking for more. They wrote to the papers, and organised coalitions to raise key issues in the public arena. They asked, and very frequently got, private meetings with decision-makers. They published a succession of public pamphlets on current Indian issues. They spoke on the radio. They organised public meetings. In lobbying terms, they did everything required. But what influence did they actually have in changing minds and promoting Indian self-determination in British policy? Some examples demonstrate their lack of success, others that their influence had a measurable effect. We will look at first one, and then the other.
The ICG put a great deal of effort into ensuring that Gandhi’s attendance at the 1931 conference was as well publicised as possible, but the conference failed to come up with any ways forward. They courted leaders of the Coalition government led by Ramsay Macdonald, and had a good relationship with Lord Irwin. They commented extensively on the Government White Paper on constitutional advance in India in 1933. However, when the India Act was passed, it had a poor reception in India. The Quaker efforts continued into the later 1930s but the time was not right and there was little movement of any significance, because of the limited influence of sympathetic politicians, and the opposition of Churchill and other senior Conservatives. The evidence is that the ICG was no more and no less successful than any of the other groups trying to promote Indian independence at the time. However well planned and executed, the time has to be right for effective political influencing. The 1930s was not the right time.

There were some significant moments when the Group and its members had an impact on decisions. One example is when Agatha Harrison’s private suggestion to Cripps that he should visit India to negotiate a settlement, came back to her as a Labour Party proposal with no acknowledgement of its origins. However, the British political actors found it hard to see what the Quakers were hoping to achieve, with their entirely altruistic aims, their private off-the-record meetings, and their lack of desire to publicise what they did. Later, we will assess their work from wider perspectives, but in terms of straight political influencing, it was not crowned with visible success.

24 Moore, R. J. (1979) Churchill, Cripps and India, p. 54, Oxford
I will examine one particular success to which the ICG contributed - the 1942 mission of Stafford Cripps to India, and follow up visit in 1945. The second World War seemed an inauspicious period for influence, as all pacifists and appeasers were under suspicion, including the Quakers. Agatha Harrison describes what it must have felt like. ‘The years 1939-45 were like a very bad dream. Work for “mutual understanding” between India and Britain presented insuperable difficulties…anyone who in the written or spoken word questioned what was going on was liable to be dubbed “quisling”, “anti-British”, etc.’

ICG members were personally close to people such as Stafford Cripps and Clement Atlee, who were gaining more power through wartime Coalition in power, and were sympathetic to the Indian cause. Cripps used the ICG more than once as a sounding board for possible solutions to the India dilemma. He met privately and off the record with 18 members of the ICG in February 1942, put forward his national government proposals and invited comment. Carl Heath wrote to Cripps in positive mood, and while warning him of the ‘heavy hand of Whitehall’, goes on to say ‘(it is) a situation ripe for the new and healing hand…at the moment many believe that you are the man’.

The ICG was optimistic that their methods would work. In 1939 Agatha Harrison was lobbying for Cripps to visit India, as the ideal person to ‘bring the parties together’, suggesting he work towards the formation of a national government. She describes a sudden late night call to a meeting with Stafford Cripps and his wife, who was a

25 FHL TEMP MSS 883/1 Agatha Harrison papers, ‘some impressions’, March 1947
26 Letter from Heath to Cripps, January 1942, footnoted in Moore, R. J. Churchill, Cripps and India, p. 55
personal friend. She was asked for her opinion of the Government’s proposals for India. She describes her walk back down deserted and blacked-out Whitehall, by moonlight, gaining some confidence from her underlying knowledge of ‘the minds of the men to whom this statement was going (i.e. the Indian leaders) and I did the best I could do to interpret this.’ In so many cases, they knew that their answers were not going to please the politicians, but they felt the fear and did it anyway, speaking ‘Truth to Power’. Often prepared to point out the obvious but unpalatable in the name of what they perceived to be the Truth, ICG members cautioned that any plan was doomed to failure unless Churchill clarified that the Viceroy would agree to a reconstruction of his executive. The bigger political picture was not favourable, of which they were well aware. They understood the Indian position, and foresaw the failure of the Cripps offer at the time. Churchill took the opportunity of Cripps’ absence in India to lobby against what he was doing, leading to the failure of the mission.

Towards the end of the second World War, when Labour Party politicians were beginning to find their feet as members of the wartime coalition with real power for the first time. Churchill’s influence was beginning to wane, and the details of a post-war settlement in India were being worked out. Quakers were again given access to the corridors of power in Britain, and were included and consulted as an informed and possibly useful interest group. They were able to give advice based on their direct knowledge of what was happening from Indian leaders. Well-informed about what Indian leaders wanted, their advice was adopted in the initial negotiating positions of the British Government. We can see this when Carl Heath, called to a private meeting

with Pethwick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, is invited to give his opinion on a series of questions, and replies forcefully. For instance, when asked about Jinnah and Pakistan, he says, ‘Personally I thought that in this the government would be compelled to govern and say firmly at this stage that whatever India decided ultimately for herself and in freedom, we were not having any in the division of India. But that we propose to meet the Moslem claims as far as possible in the development of the provinces as states.’\(^{30}\) The multi-state vision for India was never realised, but the principle that the British could not make the final decision about its shape, was very much as Heath advised.

ICG members were present at the time of the 1945 Cabinet Commission sent to India to start negotiations for Indian self-government, at the request of Cripps and Pethwick-Lawrence. Staying in Delhi, Harrison describes a Quaker meeting held in the YWCA sitting room ‘to which came men and women of different religions, with one or two of the Cabinet Ministers, Mr. Gandhi, and other leaders present.’ She also describes ‘a supper party…all three of the Cabinet Ministers came – a thing they haven’t done, I believe, at any other gathering.’\(^{31}\) Horace Alexander and Agatha Harrison were present at the Simla conference at which Viceroy Wavell met Indian leaders, at the request of Cripps and Pethwick-Lawrence. This is how Agatha Harrison describes their role. ‘We knew the Cabinet Ministers personally, we had the privilege of knowing the Indian leaders, and opportunities might arise for ‘mutual understanding’.\(^{32}\) They were present during the first rounds of negotiation for independence in Delhi in 1945, staying with Gandhi, whose approval was needed for new negotiating positions.

\(^{30}\) FHL TEMP MSS 48/6, Papers between ICG and Commonwealth Relations Office, August 1947  
\(^{31}\) Harrison, I. (1956) *Agatha Harrison, an impression by her sister*, London, p. 119  
\(^{32}\) FHL TEMP MSS 883/1 Agatha Harrison Papers, ‘Some impressions’, 1947
How much difference did their presence make? In a fast-moving set of independence negotiations marked by increasing lack of trust on all sides, it is hardly surprising that their presence made no observable difference. Tinker attributes this to their failure to make the widest circle of Indian contacts, which could have included major figures such as Jinnah and other leaders of what became Pakistan, and as suspicion and conflict gradually spiralled, their equation of India with Gandhi, Nehru and Congress, meant that they were unable to carry out their chosen role of intermediary between the parties. The papers of the India Conciliation Group in Friends House provide evidence that Tinker’s view is incorrect, as Jinnah and others leaders such as Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, feature in ICG correspondence at the time. And also, if the ICG’s influence was invisible, that is exactly what the Quakers intended: it is the role of a conciliator to work behind the scenes. Overall we can conclude that the ICG were close to power in the British government at a critical time. They were able to attract the key figures to informal gatherings and Quaker meetings. As private diplomats involved in government conciliation they had strengths as well as weaknesses: their advice could be ignored, or heeded, in the knowledge that there was no pressure to listen to them. They gave good advice based on information from sound sources, which led to temporarily successful approaches. So while the evidence is not conclusive, it is strong.

We have described in what ways the ICG influenced the course of events through their lobbying of the British government. Now we turn to their relationship with their British contemporaries, and what they achieved for independence by working in alliance with others.
Chapter 6: The India Conciliation Group in Britain: ‘You can’t fight British imperialism on £14’

Where do the ICG, and the Quakers in Britain more broadly, fit in the constellation of left-wing organisations adopting the Indian cause in the 1930s and 1940s. How useful were they perceived to be, by those groups, and by Indian nationalists?

A plethora of groups formed, split, and reformed in support of Indian independence, among other causes, during the 1930s. Owen, in The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-imperialism 1885-1947, describes London at the time as an ‘anti-imperialist junction box, providing connections between anti-colonial nationalists from India and metropolitan radicals’. A succession of groups, predominantly left-wing and internationalist in their outlook, offered solidarity and a platform to the nationalists.

Quaker testimonies to peace, social justice and equality, and their commitment to social action, means they occupy political arenas and work alongside other organisations in tackling oppression and unequal power relations, regardless of how this is framed – in terms of class, revolution, of reformism. This was certainly true of the ICG. They worked with other churches on letters to Ministers, to newspapers, to raise the profile of Indian affairs. They worked with left wing, feminist, anti-colonial groups, and with Indian nationalist groups to publicise human rights issues such as the

33 Quotation attributed to the Friends of India Secretary, in Owen N. (2007) The British Left and India, Metropolitan Anti-imperialism 1885-1947, Oxford, p. 145. The original reference is from from Scotland Yard Report, 8th Nov 1934 L/PJ/12/371, OIOC; ‘New Indian Political Group’ Oct 1933, L/PJ/372, OIOC.
34 These included the Theosophists and their offshoot, the Commonwealth of India League (set up by Annie Besant in the late 1920s), International Labour Party, and British Communist Party.
imprisonment of political leaders, and gender discrimination against Indian women. In addition to those working for social justice from a reformist political standpoint, they were also constantly seeking backing from other church denominations, in for example letters to the Press, or lobbying Ministers, and working alongside peace organisations such as the National Peace Council. The ICG followed its own track, sharing platforms and hosting events, but never in formal alliance with any other organisation.

Gandhi believed that there was no need for the support of foreign groups. Nehru was more positive about the value of British solidarity organisations, and gave his blessing to Krishna Menon’s India League (IL) on the grounds of its socialist inclinations, Menon’s own abilities, and the fact that an Indian was head of the League.35 The ICG worked alongside organisations committed to reform, with Gandhi’s informal blessing. Gandhi advised Menon to work with British groups such as the ICG.

Although the IL and the ICG had completely different approaches, Suhash Chakravarty describes ‘a good deal of cooperation and give and take between the India League and the India Conciliation Group.’36 Horace Alexander chaired a meeting in Birmingham in January 1930 for the Birmingham Council for Indian Freedom, and was in touch with Menon about the campaign.37 Alexander was a member of the editorial board of India Bulletin, the journal of the Friends of India Society, and was active in bringing groups together and trying to set up new alliances.

He was in favour of an alliance for groups that believed in Indian freedom, similar to the National Peace Council, but Menon rejected this.

Did the ICG make a contribution to the metropolitan ‘junction box’? Nehru and other visitors to India noted the ineffectiveness of many of the organisations and their competition with each other for money and recognition. Owen, in *The British Left and India*, assesses the effectiveness of the pro-India movement against the criteria of engagement, durability and flexibility. He concludes that it was ‘a series of often-unsatisfactory couplings’ dependent on the initiative of individuals, and alliances that were always troubled. If his analysis is correct, then the Quakers’ contribution was helpful, because it was consistent, long-term, and principled. Unlike many of the left-wing organisations at the time, whose stability was always vulnerable to shortage of funds, its funding was secure and independent. It had durability, as Quaker commitment to work supporting its testimonies is long-term. Thus the Quaker contribution to the movement can be seen as effective. Quakers were certainly engaged, identified as they were with the philosophy of the most influential Indian nationalist at the time. The problem of influence was as much with the ‘junction box’ as it was with the Quakers. Apart from a brief period of coalition government under Ramsay Macdonald, there was few answering echoes from inside the corridors of power in Westminster. The alliance was not successful, but the Quakers made a contribution to it.

We now go on to examine the effectiveness of the other aspect of Quaker work in India, the Friends Ambulance Unit during the second World War, and the extent to which it contributed to Indian independence.

Chapter 7: Neither mercenaries nor missionaries: The Friends Ambulance Unit

The Friends Ambulance Unit was set up by Quaker Paul Cadbury in the second World War to “train ourselves as an efficient Unit to undertake ambulance and relief work in areas under both civilian and military control, and so, by working as a pacifist and civilian body where the need is greatest, to demonstrate the efficacy of co-operating to build up a new world rather than fighting to destroy the old.”

The FAU membership in Bengal was not large. By the end of the second World War, about 50 young men and women had served there. Mostly their work included civilian relief of suffering and rehabilitation after natural disasters.

Pacifists had to use all their ingenuity to get work in wartime. Richard Symonds, in charge of FAU work in air raid shelters in London during the Blitz, used his public school connections to get the FAU to Bengal. A member of Cripps’ staff carried a letter offering the services of the FAU, saying, “sole object of members is relief of suffering and distress in accordance with Quaker principles.”

Symonds and Alexander, who headed the FAU, visited Gandhi for the orientation and blessing that only Gandhi could provide, and which gave them credibility among Indians.

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40 Symonds was recommended by a contact in the India Office, a school connection of his father, to the Viceroy’s secretary. This is an enduring feature of how things got done in imperial India.
41 Cable from London to Governor of Bengal, April 1942, quoted in Davies, T., (1947) *Friends Ambulance Unit*, London, p. 297
The evidence is that the FAU’s work was appreciated and their collaborations with Bengalis in government were successful. Using their experience of shelter work in the London blitz, they worked with the Bengal Civil Protection Committee on civil defence against expected Japanese air raids. A cyclone and tidal wave in Midnapore in October 1942 meant their role changed to humanitarian relief, requested by the Bengal civil service. The FAU worked alongside the Indian Red Cross on cholera inoculation, a children’s milk programme, and providing clothing and blankets for the homeless. By early 1944 6,700 children were being fed.

Fig 4. Children’s hospital, Contai, Bengal

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The FAU were also responsible for raising the profile of India with the British public. An appeal organised by the British newspaper, the News Chronicle, raised £15,000, the Lord Mayor of London’s Relief Fund gave £2,500, and the Quaker Meeting for Sufferings, £500. In 1945 the American Friends Service Committee added significant funds and personnel, after a fundraising tour of the US by Horace Alexander.

The FAU were engaged in practical hands-on conciliation. Symonds believed that the long Quaker friendships with nationalist leaders meant its special contribution was to get the cooperation of non-governmental agencies not on speaking terms with the Government and its officials. He claims that the FAU accompaniment meant Indian voluntary organisations were able to work in Midnapore although it was a British military zone, and that the British military were persuaded by the FAU to help with

44 Symonds, R., (2001) In the margins of independence, Oxford
transporting relief supplies. The assistance was mutual, as the backing of the Bengal Civil Protection Committee helped to reduce suspicion of all English people. Symonds sees FAU work in Bengal as the forerunner to what he and Alexander did later in Delhi, the Punjab, and Kashmir, monitoring the supply of relief to both sides and reporting on discrepancies and fair treatment of both Muslims and Hindus in the newly partitioned country.

Symonds describes how the good relationships he and Alexander set up with national and Bengali leaders as part of the FAU and ICG work, bore fruit in the period after independence and during partition. These roots in Bengal allowed them the contacts to continue with the work. They were on good terms with all the key players, including Gandhi, Nehru, and H. S. Suhrawardy, Prime Minister in Bengal as head of the Muslim League government. In the tense atmosphere of 1947 when refugees were streaming in both directions across the new borders, Alexander and Symonds believed that the best use of their skills and knowledge was protecting refugees as volunteer observers and liaison officers, accredited by both countries and reporting on the situation of the minorities on both sides - Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab and Muslims in the East. Their relationships overcame the objections of many. Indian Home Minister Sardar Patel was unhappy but was prepared to accept if Gandhi approved. The proposal became an official agreement signed by both governments, who facilitated their work of inspecting refugee provision in the refugee camps in East and West Punjab. Later, in Kashmir, they negotiated the safe exchange of many Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims between the two countries, and ratified and reported on killings in Jammu and Sialkot district.45

45 For further details see Chapters 3-6 in Symonds, R. (2001) In the margins of independence, a relief worker in India and Pakistan 1942-49, Oxford
So what is the legacy of the FAU, and how effective were they? Symonds concludes that ‘our wide first hand experience…and the fact that we had no axes to grind or careers at stake usually caused our recommendations to be received and carefully considered at high levels.’\textsuperscript{46} If the conciliators are believed to be even-handed, and able to carry out their work to the satisfaction of both sides, it is effective. The good relations established through humanitarian relief work allowed Quakers to take on the monitoring of refugee movements between India and Pakistan, trusted by both countries.

\textsuperscript{46} Symonds, R., (2001) \textit{In the margins of independence}, Oxford, p.19
Chapter 8: The final analysis: what did the Quakers do for India in the 1930s and 1940s?

Let us now examine Quaker work for India overall, and assess how influential it really was. We will look at their apparent successes, and also at what limited them in their objectives as conciliators and humanitarians.

The Quakers had enormous faith in the potential of alternatives to violence using conciliation, and the positive effect of bringing together opposing sides face to face to solve disputes and conflicts. But they also knew that simply bringing those sides together in the same place and at the same time, was difficult. For conciliation to succeed, both sides have to be willing to consider it a necessary step in achieving their goals, and that those goals can be achieved in no other way. In theories of nonviolence, the oppressors (in this case, the British) had to be coerced through nonviolent action to acknowledge inequality and injustice, before they would come to the negotiating table at all. While the Quaker belief in conciliation was idealistic, there is evidence that the Quakers were also realistic about what had to happen to bring the sides together. They knew they had to work around what would make the political power-holders respond. While committed to neutral support for all sides, Quakers at the time understood that engaging with the messy realities of politics was essential to meet their aims successfully. They knew that practical humanitarianism (the FAU service) and nonviolent resistance (as in Gandhi’s methods), were important in achieving results. We will now give some examples of how the Quakers used politics to achieve their ends.
The FAU members went into work in Bengal with open eyes. Members of the Unit were clear that relief and political influence are inseparable, and that they could not avoid them to achieve their goals. Michael Cadbury, one of the Quakers involved in the setting up of the FAU, saw this very clearly, saying, ‘yes, this job was political, and one had no inhibitions about it being political. One of the things Quakers have been very odd about is getting in on left-wing views.’

The FAU trod this tightrope with full awareness of the risks. Alec Horsfield was asked by a professor at Calcutta University to talk about his first hand experience of tension in Calcutta. He was smuggled into ‘a room full of Indian men where … a little man with a beard came in from a side door (and) asked more questions…I was pretty certain he was a leader whom the police and the British Army would have loved to have caught.’ Quakers were forthright about how necessity determined their working partnerships. Pamela Bankart, one of the nurses and in charge of liaison with Bengali women’s organisations, said, ‘the people we relied on were the communists…and what we gave them to distribute, they did honestly and quickly.’

The IGC were also operating in a political sphere, lobbying politicians who would not be convinced except by practical solutions. Their work complements the relief and mediation work of the FAU. Horace Alexander and Agatha Harrison both accompanied Gandhi on his attempts to calm Hindu-Muslim tensions in Bengal. Symonds and Alexander, who from the beginning had worked with both Muslims and

Hindus, believed mediation had a role to play in the relief of refugees. Their role was potentially highly political and risky.\textsuperscript{49} It is possible to say that such Quaker mediation and relief work set a good example for what was seen as possible in the humanitarian relief of conflict situations. It was not unique, but arguably influential, with Indian and Pakistani government practice at the time, and later.

To what extent were the ideals of the Quakers reflected in their structures? Tinker has critiqued the ICG as ‘self-appointed and self-selected…containing only shades of the same outlook. The members came from the same social class – enlightened professional and managerial folk. Assured of each other’s good intentions, there was no compulsion towards institutional self-analysis or self-criticism’\textsuperscript{50}. It is certainly true that its members came from the same social class, with similar attitudes and approaches: almost all were Christian. However, the Quaker history of persecution and long-term struggle against discrimination meant a tradition of willingness to tackle difficult hard issues and speak Truth to Power if necessary. They were often downcast at the apparent failure of their efforts, but believed in the long-term effectiveness of the work they were doing. Carl Heath letter’s to Percy Bartlett in July 1949, discussing the future of the Group, gives a flavour of their motivation. ‘For God’s sake don’t let us be daunted in this way by the size of the universe (or even the cosmos) for it is God’s work, not primarily ours. …Compulsion is not an attribute of

\textsuperscript{49} Yarrow, C. H. Mike (1978) \textit{Quaker experiences in international conciliation}, New Haven, p. 154
\textsuperscript{50} Tinker, H. (1976) \textit{The India Conciliation Group, 1931-50, Dilemmas of the mediator}, The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, 14:3, 238-9
God, our Conciliation is, and if the thing is in right ordering it can be taken in hand with confidence."

In making a deeper assessment of the Quaker work of conciliation, we turn from political history to international statecraft. Political lobbying is about what can be achieved under the circumstances with the players as they are. Statesmanship has a wider view of public affairs and what can be achieved in the longer term, and what the Quakers did in India is much more susceptible to this approach. Ron Kraybill assesses the significance of religious bodies in achieving the Rhodesian settlement of the 1970s. He identifies the characteristics and goals of Quaker interventions, and these echo the ICG’s methods in the 1930s. These are the establishment of human solidarity with all parties, disciplined listening, opening channels of communication, supporting formal negotiations, and advocating policies and actions in support of reconciliation.

Kraybill gives two main criteria for success: the amount of access granted by the opposing parties, and subsequent comments made by the parties about the conciliators. If we apply these criteria to the India Conciliation Group, what they did was successful. Its members were rarely refused access to Ministers and civil servants in the British government, and the Raj in India. The archives in Friends House are littered with notes thanking them for their information and meetings they had asked for. The ICG conciliators pursued the openings with tenacity. Like the Quakers in

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51 ‘Right ordering’ in Quaker thinking means done ‘in keeping with Quaker tradition and practice, a body of wisdom and insights that has evolved over three hundred years of seeking the guidance of the Spirit.’ (Quotation taken from Ealing Quaker Meeting’s Quaker Jargon Buster)
52 FHL TEMP MSS 42/2/1949-50, Laying down of the ICG
Rhodesia, their circle of contacts was extensive, and they were indefatigable in keeping in touch with all parties, and putting them in touch with each other.

Kraybill argues that in terms of tangible results, most of the Quaker initiatives in Rhodesia ended in failure. They tried to set up four major meetings between the man parties, and none of them took place. His judgement is that their focus on ‘perceptions and processes that would enable a negotiated settlement….rendered the work of the Quakers almost invisible against the backdrop of larger success.’ In a similar way, the ICG endlessly chased possibilities for conciliation during the period, and very few were conventionally successful, or visible. However, although their direct aims were not met, the ICG, still achieved success on the second criterion – subsequent comments about their work by the parties involved. I will give some examples here.

When the nationalists had achieved their objectives, when the power balances had changed and powerless Indian nationalists had become powerful leaders, the Quaker contribution was recognised. For instance, a letter from India’s health minister in 1948 to Agatha Harrison said ‘I spoke to Jawaharlal and he too agreed that you should come out this winter…you and your group are doing extremely valuable work, I think it is necessary that you should see for yourself what this government is trying to do and how far we are trying to live up to Gandhiji’s teachings under the most difficult circumstances.’ Success is not measured in dinner invitations, but the biographies of the ICG members tell of many such invitations and appearances by the most senior Indian leaders at Quaker events in the years after independence. And this influence


56 Harrison, I. ((1956) Agatha Harrison, an impression by her sister, London, p. 123
can be perceived as far wider than the decision-makers. Agatha Harrison describes her amazement at the comment of a Calcutta customs officer in November 1949 who looked at her passport, recognised her name, and said ‘you worked with the Father of our Nation – there is nothing for me to ask…no one who was connected with Gandhiji would make a false declaration.’ 57

In November 1952, during the Korean crisis, we find Nehru directly attributing the influence of Agatha Harrison to his decision to make a speech in the Indian Parliament. Writing to Nan (Vijayalakshmi Pandit, his sister) on the India Delegation to the UN in New York, in a letter marked ‘secret and personal’, he says, ‘Last night I got a telegram from Agatha Harrison from New York suggesting I should say something… the immediate urge to speak in Parliament today came to me from Agatha’s message. Will you tell her this?’58

Because they have no official position, the private diplomat involved in conciliation is there entirely in their personal capacity, and their success depends on establishing trust through good relationships with all sides. Quaker efforts in this regard were highly valued, both in India, and later, in Rhodesia. Agatha Harrison of the ICG went to great lengths to help the Indians she worked with. She attempted to rent a flat for Nehru in London on his visit in 1935, and was shocked and embarrassed to find it extremely difficult, because of the endemic racism in British society at the time. 59 She was very useful to Nehru and his family around the time of the death of his wife, Kamala. Nehru was in prison, his wife was very ill and he was told that he might not see her alive again unless he came immediately. Harrison lobbied intensely for his

58 FHL TEMP MSS 883/1 Agatha Harrison unsorted correspondence
59 FHL TEMP MSS 883/1 Agatha Harrison unsorted correspondence
release, and achieved her goal – Nehru was able to be beside his wife when she died. The way in which direct and personal relationships contributed to acknowledgement of the value of their work is best summed up in a short letter from correspondence with the India office in 1947, responding to words of encouragement from Harrison. ‘I appreciate very greatly your most friendly words which I should think too flattering if I did not know your deep sincerity. With affectionate greeting, ever yours, Pethwick-Lawrence.’

**Conclusion**

I have argued that despite the lack of visible wins from conciliation work, and despite the desire to work quietly and behind the scenes, the Quakers were influential in supporting the process leading up to and beyond Indian independence. They influenced the major players like Nehru towards an internationalist and non-interventionist stance in foreign policy. Nehru was one of the main architects of the non-aligned movement of nation-states recently freed from colonialism, wishing to remain independent of the main post-war power blocs. We have seen Nehru’s admission of the influence of Quakers like Agatha Harrison on his own actions, but Quaker influence was built on wider foundations too. After the first World War, Carl Heath, one of the prime movers of the ICG, persuaded the Quakers to open Quaker ‘embassies’ in the European cities where they had worked during the war. His aim was ‘a new kind of evangelism which…would be spreading Quaker ideas and ways of dealing with situations of conflict.’ The practices established in the ‘embassies’ (such as seminars for information sharing, off the record meetings for diplomats) were later formalised into article 71 of the UN charter, creating a mechanism for
nongovernmental organisations to bring their knowledge and influence to the international negotiating table. Quaker ideas were influential for non-aligned nations such as India. They used the UN as a primary influencing platform to create the conditions for lasting peace: non-engagement with conflict between the major power blocs, support for peace building, conflict resolution, and behind the scenes mediation.

Therefore in the post-colonial optimism of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the achievement of Indian and Pakistani independence, and the rise of the United Nations, the time was again ripe for idealism that fitted with Quaker methods, and built on Quaker experiences of conciliation and humanitarian relief on all sides of a conflict. In 1947 the American and the British Friends Service Committees were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their relief work for all sides during and between the World Wars, in Europe and around the world, making their work more visible. The prize was specifically given for Quaker ‘silent assistance from the nameless to the nameless’62, thus celebrating their ways of working away from the public eye. After the second World War, continuing the conciliation and peaceful diplomacy established in the 1920s and 1930s, Quakers set up and supported offices attached to the UN in New York and Geneva as a focus for NGO influencing. Nehru’s adoption of pacifism, his idealism about the United Nations and its potential, and his espousal of the non-alignment principle, can arguably be traced not only to Gandhi’s enormous influence, but also to the influence of Quakers such as the India Conciliation Group with their mix of practical political engagement, faithful idealism, and behind the scenes methods of solving disputes. It could be argued that by being well informed, well

62 Quotation from presentation speech on the occasion of Nobel Peace Prize given to the American Friends Service Committee, and the British Friends Service Committee in 1947, by Gunnar Jahn, Chairman of the Peace Prize Committee. For more information, see http://www.quaker.org.uk/nobel-peace-prize-1947
connected, idealistic about goals, but realistic about what can be achieved politically, Quaker work in India achieved far more than could be expected.

One of the FAU volunteers, quoted in the Nobel Peace Prize Chairman’s speech, reveals the respect with which Quaker principles were viewed with hindsight. ‘We've come for a definite purpose, to build up in a spirit of love what has been destroyed in a spirit of hatred…When our work is finished it doesn't mean that our influence dies with it. Religion means very little until it is translated into positive action.”63

The impetus to continue the conciliation work continued. Even during the winding-up of the ICG in 1950, the correspondence between Quakers involved is all about what the next piece of work should be. Take on mediation among the Commonwealth nations? What about the need in South Africa? Quaker faith in the value of their conciliation, and support for international peace building, mission, regardless of whether it is perceived as conventionally successful, remained unshakeable.

63 Quotation from The Friends' Quarterly April, 1948, p. 75, from speech by Gunnar Jahn, Nobel Peace Committee Chairman in 1947, awarding the Peace Prize to Quakers
Illustrations

Figure 1: ICG member Horace Alexander, Friends House Library, © Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Figure 2: ICG secretary Agatha Harrison, with Gandhi, Friends House Library, © Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Figure 3: Nehru sharing a joke with Gandhi, 1946. From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, http://www.aicc.org.in/images/nehru-gandhi.jpg, photographer unknown

Figure 4: Children’s hospital, Contai, Bengal, Friends House Library, © Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Figure 4: Bengal Civil Protection Committee, Friends House Library, © Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Figure 5: Richard Symonds, FAU, Friends House Library, © Religious Society of Friends in Britain
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