

## **Sedition.**

**A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor. (Originally written for New Zealand, Methodist Taonga, September 2005. Reprinted with their permission.)**

“Sedition” is a 140 minute film documentary, shown in the 2005 New Zealand Film Festival. It uses interviews with participants to narrate the fate of conscientious objectors during World War 2. Interviews are cleverly laced with war footage to form an ongoing narrative. The facts are sobering. Our New Zealand history includes repression of protest and publication. Religious freedom was denied the Jehovah’s Witness Church. Hundreds of New Zealand men were confined behind barbed wire. Further protest was rewarded with solitary confinement. By the end of the War, protest included hunger strikes lasting more than 50 days in duration.

“Sedition” is thus a playful title. The film opens, and the publicity promotes, the irony of Peter Fraser, Labour activist who was himself imprisoned during WW1 for sedition. Come WW2, Fraser is Prime Minister and leading a government that introduced increasingly draconian measures and laid charges of sedition against ordinary New Zealanders. Thus one charged with sedition is now the author of policies of governmental sedition.

“Sedition” probes the legitimacy of sedition. When is the time for religion to oppose the state? New Zealand prides itself on its secularity and it is unlikely God will ever be co-opted in the name of the state. Yet how are we to react when in the words of one conscientious objector, “We believe the Government is asking us to act contrary to Christian teaching”?

“Sedition” highlights the role of Methodism in this pacifist movement. It documents the practical application of a Biblical faith. Applications of the teachings of Jesus have a radical impact on behaviour, stirring protest.

I have some minor quibbles with the film. The documentary approach was based on interview footage. Each speaker was initially introduced by a subtitled name. To maintain pace and momentum, the film cut quickly between many and various interviews. Perhaps a repeated use of names might have helped the viewer distinguish between the many participants. The boundary between film and documentary also needs probing. If this is documentary, why not explore why Fraser changed his stance between the two Wars?

A further quibble was the fact that those interviewed were overwhelming male. Surely it was not only men that were pacifist in New Zealand’s history? Surely the impact of imprisonment upon families, if told by women, would have enriched the documentary? The lack of women’s voices was a striking absence for a film that was highlighting a historic silencing of voice.

The film ends on a hopeful note. Protest, no matter how small, was deemed to have value. The film could equally have ended with a waiata, in lament. James Baxter, whose father

Archibald was a conscientious objector, condemned the burying of the history that was the New Zealand Land Wars. “Our forgetting is too like amnesia,” he protested. “We are unable wholly to opt out of history.” “Sedition,” in documenting a forgotten history, works against the grain of our cultural amnesia.

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