

COLLABORATING WITH BUSINESS

by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Creative partnership helps anthropologist share forgotten Second World War stories

Professor Tobias Kelly's collaboration with National Museums Scotland has shaped his research on Britain's conscientious objectors and allowed him to share this work with a whole new audience.

If you had just half a page of paper to explain a decision that could cause you to be shunned by your community or even imprisoned, what would you write?

For the 60,000 British men and women who objected to fighting in the Second World War for religious, political or moral reasons, these short statements were the only way they could exercise their right to request an exemption from compulsory military service. These conscientious objectors also had to defend their principles in front of a public tribunal.

Despite the social stigma they faced, many of these people went on to play an essential role in post-war Britain's politics and culture. Conscientious objectors also founded major humanitarian organisations such as Oxfam and Amnesty International. However, Professor Tobias Kelly says history has mostly forgotten their stories.



Tobias reveals the research - which he carried out with colleague Laura Major - came about by chance when he mistakenly ordered the wrong file from the National Archives in London. "I found myself reading through hundreds of original tribunal documents, each containing different objections", he recalls. "Quakers and Jehovah's Witnesses said the conflict was against their pacifist religious beliefs. People with German or Italian family connections appealed against having to fight compatriots, while those who had lost loved ones in the First World War expressed anguish at the prospect of causing their families more pain."

While searching for a way to tell these historically important but little-known stories, a colleague from National Museums Scotland suggested turning the research into an exhibition. Held at the National War Museum, within Edinburgh Castle, **Conscience Matters** explores the history of the people who made the decision not to fight, through paintings, poems, letters, music and speech.



The process of transferring a research project into an exhibition capable of engaging a broad audience was a significant undertaking. “Tobias had collected a wealth of material, from journals and diaries to leaflets, documents and letters. But paper artefacts are notoriously difficult to display”, explains National Museums Scotland exhibition officer, Maureen Barrie. “We created touchscreen interactive displays to allow visitors to engage with the process of becoming a conscientious objector. We also wove music, poetry and interviews into a short films along with paintings and photographs to present tangible expressions of conscience”.

Tobias says the experience has given him valuable insights into the art of storytelling. “When you’re so immersed in a subject you can start to take things for granted when talking about it. Maureen and the team have shown me how to tell a story in a way that quickly

engages people with no prior knowledge”, he notes. “Their input has helped me to write my new book in a more accessible way. Laura Major is also now working with colleagues across the University as part of the **Atelier Network** to explore new ways of telling stories through objects.”

Despite the relatively short time they had to deliver the project, Maureen believes the collaboration worked exceptionally well. “We had less than a year to take Tobias’s painstaking research - more than seven years of work - and distil it into sixty square metres of exhibition space”, she says. “It was important we listened to his academic objectives and delivered the key messages he wanted to get across. We were extremely pleased he was so open to our suggestions. ”

“The project has become my passion, but I knew I had to trust the National Museums team’s considerable expertise to bring it to life and take it in new directions”, Tobias agrees. “From the beginning, I was in their hands as much as they were in mine.”

Tobias is keen to share his experience of how partnerships can play a valuable role in promoting both research and research impact. “The exhibition has allowed me to reach a wider and more diverse audience”, he says. “My last book sold in the thousands, while hundreds of thousands of National War Museum visitors could pass through the doors of Conscience Matters. It’s a hugely exciting way to engage people in my work who would not otherwise know about it.”



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