THE HORTON CHAPEL PROJECT

Research presented by Amanda Spavins

Shell Shock

Ewell Epileptic Colony, later known as St Ebba's hospital, opened in 1903. At the time epilepsy was considered a mental illness, and the hospital was built to accommodate 329 patients. In 1918 it became a war hospital and treatment centre for ex-servicemen suffering from neurasthenia – more commonly known as "shell shock" – and served this purpose until 1927.

Amanda Spavins shares her research on the topic:

The word "shell shock" may be synonymous with World War One, but the condition is far older than that and it has undergone many name changes over the years: war neurosis, combat hysteria and neurasthenia. Today it is often seen as a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The ancient Greek historian Herodotus, writing in 440BC[1], describes a soldier called Epizelus experiencing sudden-onset blindness after seeing a fellow warrior killed during the battle of Marathon. Despite being spared any physical injury himself, Epizelus's vision never returned. During the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars and the American Civil War, many soldiers suffered from persistent psychiatric disorders following traumatic experiences in the battlefield, even if physically unscathed[2].

The advent of the Industrial Revolution and steam-driven machinery gave rise to the first instances of man-made catastrophes outside of war[3]. Doctors were mystified by the psychological conditions affecting survivors of industrial or railway accidents. Some medics considered these afflictions to be the result of "railway spine" or "railway brain", concluding that the victims must have acquired microscopic damage to the nervous system[4]. Other doctors ascribed the symptoms to shock and hysteria. A new diagnosis, traumatic neurosis,

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[11] Herodotus, History Book VI, quoted in Marc-Antoine Crocq, "From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: a History of Psychotraumatology" Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience 2000 Mar; 2(1):47-55
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181586/

[2] Suzie Grogan, Shell Shocked Britain:The First World War's Legacy For Britain's Mental Health (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2014) p13

[3] Marc-Antoine Crocq, "From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: a History of Psychotraumatology" Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience 2000 Mar; 2(1):47-55
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181586/

[4] Fiona Reid, Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-30 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010) p13

appeared in psychiatric journals of the time and Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, wrote about it extensively at the beginning of the 20th century[5].

However, despite the long history of shell shock, it came into prominence during the First World War. Up to 325,000[6] British servicemen returned from the front with unexplained and varied symptoms: blindness, mutism, hysteria, hallucinations, nightmares/insomnia, paralysis[7]. Similar afflictions were found in French and German soldiers[8]. The term "shell shock" was coined by a Cambridge medical officer, Dr Charles Myers, in 1915. He initially thought that the men had suffered concussion or some other physical injury from exploding shells, but some of the affected soldiers had not actually been on the front line. By 1916, Myers realised that many cases were caused by terror arising from sustained shelling, combined with the shock of seeing so many comrades maimed and killed[9].

Why was shell shock so prevalent during the First World War? There are several theories. WW1 involved trench warfare, and that held unique horrors. As well as the danger posed by the endless bombardment of shells and bullets and the deafening noise, men in the trenches found themselves living in nightmarish conditions. Being confined with the dead bodies of their fellow soldiers, along with rats and lice, meant infectious diseases were rife[10]. Trench foot, a painful condition caused by spending long hours with wet feet, added to the misery, along with hunger and lack of sleep. There was a powerlessness to being in the trenches. Soldiers were vulnerable to chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas[11]. This was the first war fought with modern weapons, and the huge numbers of deaths and mutilations came as a terrible shock.

Soldiers suffering from shell shock were initially regarded with suspicion. Some people felt that it signalled lack of fortitude or even malingering, an easy way out from the battlefield. Hundreds of shell-shocked soldiers were charged with desertion or cowardice, and shot[12]. However, others recognised shell shock as an unfeigned reaction to the intolerable pressures of war. Soldiers who had previously been seen to fight selflessly tended to be treated more sympathetically than those who hadn't already demonstrated their courage[13]. There was also the question of predisposition, since the majority of WW1 soldiers did not

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[5] "Traumatic Neurosis", Francoise Brette, Encyclopedia.com
https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/traumatic-neurosis
[6] "Shell-Shock", Tracey Loughran, British Library, 2018
https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/shell-shock#:~:text=Recent%20estimates%20suggest%20that%20up,of%20the%20First%20World%20War.&text=In%20July%201917%2C%20Siegfried%20Sassoon,the%20continuation%20of%20the%20war.
[7] "Shell-Shock", Tracey Loughran, British Library, 2018
https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/shell-shock#:~:text=Recent%20estimates%20suggest%20that%20up,of%20the%20First%20World%20War.&text=In%20July%201917%2C%20Siegfried%20Sassoon,the%20continuation%20of%20the%20war.
[8] Fiona Reid, Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-30 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010) p28
[9] Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005) p22-24
[10] Peter Leese, Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p38-39
[11] Wall text, First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London
[12] "Subjectivity and Emotions (Great Britain and Ireland)", Jessica Meyer, 1914-1918 Online, 2014
https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/subjectivity_and_emotions_great_britain_and_ireland
[13] "Developing medical attitudes to shell shock after the war", Open University
https://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=27348&section=2

go on to develop shell shock, and this was affected by personal resilience, background, recent news from home and other factors.

The sheer volume of broken men overwhelmed the field hospitals, and many lunatic asylums and private hospitals in the United Kingdom were hastily requisitioned to treat patients with shell shock – over twenty such hospitals by the end of WW1[14]. However, as the war progressed, there was a tendency to treat soldiers in frontline hospitals, within sound of gunfire but with the support of their units. This seemed to lead to a more rapid recovery[15]. Prevailing medical opinion at the time held that shell-shocked soldiers should pull themselves together and get on with supporting their units, but the war poet Siegfried Sassoon's psychiatrist W H R Rivers felt that some soldiers experienced mental collapse as a consequence of their attempt to repress their experiences of war[16]. Indeed, some historians have suggested that officers (usually from middle/upper class backgrounds) appear to have suffered disproportionately from shell shock because they were expected to repress their emotions in order to inspire and motivate their men[17]. Treatments varied from hospital to hospital, from benign regimes of bed rest, warm baths and nursery food, via occupational therapy (such as working on farms), hypnosis and River's talking cure, to electric shock therapy (faradisation) and solitary confinement[18]. Although many soldiers recovered with care, at least 20,000 men were still affected after the end of the war and some continued to suffer for the rest of their lives[19].

Siegfried Sassoon: Survivors (1917)

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride…
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad[20].

[14] "Shell Shock", BBC Inside Out, 2004
http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/extra/series-1/shell_shocked.shtml
[15] Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005) p24-25
[16] Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005) p33-34
[17] Fiona Reid, Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-30 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010) p17
[18] Suzie Grogan, Shell Shocked Britain:The First World War's Legacy For Britain's Mental Health (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2014) p54
[19] "Shell Shock", BBC Inside Out, 2004
http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/extra/series-1/shell_shocked.shtml

[20] Siegfried Sassoon, "Survivors", 1917
https://allpoetry.com/Survivors

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