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## Book Review: Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War

Rhodri Hayward

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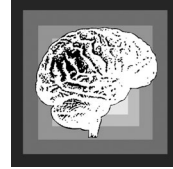
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## Book Reviews

Peter Barham. **Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War.** *New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. x + 451. \$45.00, £19.99. ISBN 0-300-10379-4.*

*Never were quieter folk in teaparty history.  
Never in Cranford, Trollope even. And as it were, home  
Closed around us*

Ivor Gurney, *First Time In*<sup>1</sup>

When Ivor Gurney wrote these lines in 1922 he was struggling to build a new life for himself. From 1917 he had moved between war hospitals in Edinburgh, Warrington and St Albans and short-term work as a warehouseman, cinema pianist and farm-hand, before nervous collapse forced his rehospitalization. That year he was committed to Barnwood House in Gloucester and then to Stone House, the City of London Mental Hospital in Dartford where he would remain until his death. The ‘quieter folk’ he found himself among were his fellow servicemen, broken by their war experiences and now left stranded in temporary occupations and county asylums as ‘home closed around’ them. It is the stories of these men that Peter Barham has set out to rescue and recover. His new volume is not so much a conventional history as an exercise in remembrance. His work can be seen as an attempt to introduce a new politics into the history of psychiatry: a politics concerned less with the issues of provision and treatment than with the ethics of remembering and forgetting.

Psychiatry and forgetting have always maintained a close relationship, in both the popular and the historical imagination. The lunatic figures of literature – Charlotte Brontë’s Mrs Rochester or Wilkie Collins’ *Woman in White* – are exiled individuals pushed to the limits of public consciousness. Likewise, professional psychiatrists have long complained that their discipline is the ‘Cinderella science’ of the medical services, overlooked and under-resourced. In contemporary accounts of psychiatric history, moreover, the asylum is all too often figured as a kind of welfare oubliette into which troublesome relatives are forced and forgotten. Yet despite the ubiquity and significance of this trope, few authors have presented the history of psychiatry as a problem in the ethics of commemoration. Barham is different,

and his work is infused by his desire to mark the forgotten lives of the Great War's lunatics. The book opens with Barham recounting how he stumbled upon 'a cultural mass grave, or "pauper's pit"' of the life histories of Britain's psychotic servicemen, 'unrecognisable as a burial place because there were no signs' (p. 7), and it ends with a roll call of the names of the lunatic dead. Barham describes his work, following Richard Cobb's example, as an attempt to write a 'collective Diary of a Nobody'. His triumph is in opening up a new ethical perspective in the history of psychiatry, but as we shall see this perspective brings with it a number of new problems.

At its simplest, *Forgotten Lunatics* can be seen as a history of the 'psychiatric fallout' of World War I. It tells the story of the many mentally ill ex-servicemen who remained in the county asylum system or dependent on disability pensions long after the armistice had been declared. Despite the wealth of attention devoted to the shellshock epidemic and its implications for the organization of British psychiatry, these psychotic pensioners have remained oddly ignored, obscured behind the more dramatic and romantic narratives surrounding the temporary treatment of officer patients such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. In part, then, Barham's new work can be read, alongside those of Ben Shephard and Peter Leese, as a useful corrective to our mythic conception of shellshock. Against the old idea of shellshock as a kind of somaticized protest against inhuman conditions which was met with either sympathetic psychotherapeutic insight (for the officers at Craiglockhart) or punitive psychiatric Darwinism (for the other ranks at Queen Square). Barham, Leese and Shephard have shown how the medical response to mass breakdown on the Western Front drew upon an eclectic patchwork of psychiatric therapies, whose use, for the most part, was determined by the Ministry of Pensions' financial demands.

Barham departs from the narrative analyses developed by Shephard and Leese, however, in his pursuit of the stories of individual patients. Although few of his subjects have left records to allow for complete biographical reconstruction, Barham structures his work around their various vexed trajectories, tracing out in the argument of his own book the military medical odyssey of a lunatic World War I everyman. The cast of disturbed volunteers and conscripts are followed into the war from their shops, offices, farms and workhouses and back out via the mammoth casualty clearing station at D Block Netley into the ad hoc provisions of the war hospitals, county asylums, workhouses, wives and families and the long struggle for recognition and support. One of the great strengths of this approach is that it creates a narrative which in part escapes the constraints of traditional medical history, introducing a swathe of new actors from the home front. In contrast to the established account of the shellshock epidemic, which often portrays it as an internecine struggle between enlightened psychotherapists, materialist psychiatrists, military officers and pensions administrators, Barham emphasizes the role of civilian and domestic actors. Noting that the terminology of

shellshock was developed in trenches before it was adopted in the medical reports, he argues that laymen continued to maintain their interest in the condition's definition long after the war was over. The involvement of patient groups (such as the Ex-Servicemen's Mental Welfare Society) is presented as much more than a simple challenge to the professional authority of medicine. For Barham, it marks the institution of a new 'psychological demos' in interwar Britain in which notions of treatment, respect, psychic suffering and the citizenship of the patient are opened up for public debate.

In one sense then, World War I is seen as fulfilling many of Barham's own ethical demands with regard to the recognition and treatment of the mentally ill. Before the war, Britain's lunatics, according to Barham, existed in a state of 'psychiatric mortmain' as distant from the English public as slaves were from citizens in the Roman republic. The conflation of military honour, public service and mental distress in the shellshock epidemic breaches the old separation between private suffering and public action. It creates new points of connection between psyche and polis leading to the emergence of new illness categories and treatment regimes. The special status granted to the service patient acts as a template for rethinking the lunatic's rights in the Royal Commission of 1926 and the Mental Treatment Act of 1930. The new psychological models of mental illness developed by military psychiatrists, such as Charles Myers, T. H. Pear and Millais Culpin, and the abandonment of hereditarian ideas confuse the old clear boundary between asylum insanity and everyday distress. The psychological sacrifice of the long-suffering service patient makes possible a new era of psychiatric sympathy (pp. 125, 150).

Condensed in this form, Barham's approach begins to sound like the 'war is good for babies, etc.' argument that has been so comprehensively critiqued by Roger Cooter and others. Yet Barham is too canny a commentator to allow militarization this transformative role. Instead he follows Jose Harris in emphasizing the Edwardian origins of these reforming trends. In this account, war is not so much an agent of change as a breach in the old order which makes possible new forms of expression. Into this breach advance the likes of Culpin, Maurice Craig and D. W. Winnicott infused with a new sense of the emotional life, one part Freud to two parts Edward Carpenter. For Barham it is not so much the war as the human feelings and sensations made palpable by war which transform psychiatry in Britain. As he notes: 'Traditionally, of course, "inner worlds" were supposed to adapt to "public events", but here perhaps the lesson was that public events were obliged to concede to subjective realities and acknowledge their own integrity and facticity.' (pp. 155, 206). This psychohistorical celebration of the emotional life as a motor of social change sits uneasily with the traditional literature that prioritizes economic and political developments as the agents of historical transformation.

Emotions and identity maintain an uneasy status in Barham's account. He recognizes their social construction and provides very brilliant accounts of the many frustrations engendered by asylum life and pensions administration

that might sustain the psychological suffering of the service patient (p. 221). Yet these socially constructed subjectivities are not mere epiphenomena. They have a tangible effect transforming the political environment that produced them. Thus in his description of the post-war situation, Barham (p. 154) claims that,

the emotional landscape in which the protagonists were moving was one in which subjectivity had come into its own, and had to be given its measure. This new kind of 'reality' could not be reduced or relegated to the 'back' or nocturnal space of dreams and pathology. Memories and emotions intruded into the organisation of space and time, with the result that it was radically disrupted.

This is an intriguing approach, mixing as it does the tempered constructionism of Ian Hacking with the psychoanalytic object-relations theory of D. W. Winnicott. It offers a useful set of analytic tools for modern historians investigating the vogue topics of subjectivity and the emotional life and provides an escape from the radical relativism that has bedevilled contemporary discussion in the philosophy and sociology of science. Yet it also places a special onus on the historian as he or she conjures up new golem-like constructions and grants them a life of their own.

If subjectivity is fabricated from our memories, imaginings and expectations (as Winnicott might claim) and made real through acts of recognition (as Hacking would have it), then the historian becomes an active participant in this process of identity construction. Indeed, Barham's insistence on the necessity of memorializing can only make such acts of construction more likely. Yet our acts of recovery are always tentative and the urge to memorialize may trap individuals in identities every bit as foreign as those fashioned in regimental field exercises or the ledgers of pensions administration. Barham's sympathetic biographies of his Great War lunatics rely upon a series of empathic conjectures. George Gomm, a draper's assistant who volunteered for the Royal Fusiliers in 1915, went to war, we are told, 'carrying a double burden: not merely the expectations that attached to his own person, but also the [parental] hopes that had been extinguished in his [recently deceased] brother and were now transferred to him' (p. 15). Earlier we are told that an episode of sunstroke 'must have reawakened a memory of the anguish he had experienced when he thought he was dying from pneumonia' (p. 14). While these psychodynamic conjectures have certain plausibility, we cannot know they are correct, and the historian like the pensions official finds himself engaged in the fabrication of an imagined identity. The danger of the urge to memorialize, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has shown in his studies of psychoanalysis, is that we create the identities we wish to remember. Barham criticizes the efforts of Lieutenant Montgomery, who first treats Private Gomm after his breakdown in France, for simply transcribing the soldier's disconnected utterances 'when it is surely easy enough to intuit a narrative thread' – but sometimes it must be better to record

modestly rather than to fabricate a line (or life) out of our imagined sense of connection (p. 20). It is a testament to the sympathetic intelligence of Barham's work that he alerts us to the urgency of such empathic reconstructions while at the same time leaving us deeply uneasy as to political costs involved.

RHODRI HAYWARD

*Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine  
University College London*

### Note

1. Published in *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, edited by P. J. Kavanagh (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004), 128–9; reprinted with the publisher's permission ([www.carcanet.co.uk](http://www.carcanet.co.uk)).

Eric Engstrom. **Clinical Psychiatry in Imperial Germany: A History of Psychiatric Practice.** *Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 295. ISBN 0-8014-4195-1.*

Eric Engstrom's *Clinical Psychiatry in Imperial Germany* offers an account of the emergence of psychiatric modernity that is at once conventional, focused on major figures and institutions, and refreshingly original. Using a lightly Foucauldian framework to trace the consolidation of what he calls new economies of power and knowledge, Engstrom focuses not only on the theoretical and conceptual innovations that will be familiar to specialists but also, in a highly innovative vein, on the nitty-gritty of psychiatric practice at ground level; for example, he devotes several pages to Emil Kraepelin's adoption of a system employing diagnostic cards, like those used by Bavarian census takers, that allowed him to track efficiently the course of each patient's disease, even after discharge from his clinic. With this small but telling detail, Engstrom establishes that Kraepelin's research methodology, directed at establishing the temporal course of mental diseases, was rigorously statistical in orientation. Just as significantly, he observes that the research depended on access to a robust and steady supply of patient material, and links this to Kraepelin's encouragement of ever-greater numbers of admitted patients. In addition, he shows how, in the crowded conditions of the clinic, prognosis – which would come to be among the hallmarks of Kraepelinean psychiatry – was to be established earlier and earlier, from four weeks after admission to, finally and perhaps improbably, on the day of admission. Throughout the book there are many similarly striking instances of taken-for-granted research practices subjected to illuminating analysis. The methodological payoff for the historian in all this is a much deeper appreciation for the intertwining of psychiatric research and knowledge with carceral practices in the context of state policy than almost any other history of psychiatry has yet provided.