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[Review of: B. Linker (2011) War's waste. Rehabilitation in World War I America]  
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War's waste. Rehabilitation in World War I America, by Beth Linker, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 291 pp., £22.50 or \$35 (cloth), \$7.00 to \$30.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-226-48253-8, ISBN 10: 0-226-48235-7, ISBN 978-0-226-48255-2

Reading Beth Linker's excellent book on rehabilitation of American soldiers disabled in World War I is a thrilling experience, particularly now, at the time of Republican and Democratic conventions on the one hand and London Paralympics on the other. It is rather amusing to read that it was the Republican Party that, around 1900, was accused of socialism or even communism, because it was in favour of granting a pension to the Civil War disabled, while the Democrats defended the American 'Tea Party' way of life, arguing that government support killed individual entrepreneurship and stopped the disabled from making something out of their lives. Pension-neurosis avant la lettre. The Paralympics underline her point: the disabled should compete just like people without disabilities, striving to go further, higher, faster, and those who don't are considered failures.

Linker starts by taking us back to the Civil War. The many men disabled then were granted a pension and left to their business. This changed in the years after World War I. Tales of Verdun and the Somme had made clear that the human cost, the war's waste, would be enormous. Granting all of them a pension could result in severe financial troubles. Therefore rehabilitation and vocational training (which became the subject of a fierce debate as to whether this was a medical field) had to make them fit again; fit enough to get a job, a wife, children. In short, fit enough to earn their own money, fit enough to be called 'normal' again, fit enough to be called 'men' again. Becoming disabled was an emasculating event (sometimes even literally, but there was no prosthesis for that). Rehabilitation and vocational training were directed to restoring the damage. To achieve this, prosthetics became more and more elaborate, although to reduce costs in manufacturing limbs, 'one size fits all' became the goal. Few escaped trouble with conveyor-prosthetics not fitting individual sizes.

There was also a clear a racial side to the rehabilitation programme. It was all right for white physicians to treat black patients, but impossible for black physicians to treat white. It was the white male to whom the limbs were moulded (even black soldiers had to wear white prostheses). African-American soldiers were the aberration who had to adjust to the norm.

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Another change when compared with the Civil War was that just having a wound was no longer enough to get respect and be called a hero. You had to die, no matter how, to earn that doubtful honour. Wounds alone did not prove that you had fought 'like a man' (partly because of the 'unmanly' nature of trench warfare, although shortly after American active participation, the Sitzkrieg once more became a Blitzkrieg). Successful rehabilitation did,

however, prove your valour. Some succeeded, many failed, often because of the – not very manly – mental problems the war had left, problems no limb, however sophisticated, could treat.

Manliness had to be earned by doing the best you could to get 'whole' again. As Linker says when discussing the 'ethic of rehabilitation', 'he who refuses rehabilitation and does not do all he can to become physically and financially independent, is considered a failure' (p. 1). When saying this she was not talking about days long past, but modern times, which leads to an interesting epilogue on rehabilitation today in the Walter Reed hospital. Linker makes clear that much has changed, especially techniques, but some things have not, especially the underlying ideas and morals. Rehabilitation is still directed at getting the disabled into a job – or better still, back to battle – and keeping them out of pensions. Propaganda still focuses on those who succeed. The ideal image is still of the white male, even in an era when more and more women also do their bit on the field of battle. For a man a prosthetic with which he can run and climb and do all sorts of other sporting activity can be something to be proud of. For many women, it is far more complicated than that.

All in all Linker makes it perfectly clear that, although as much as possible is done to deny or hide it, as long as there is war, war's waste is here to stay.

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