

Fiona Reid, *Broken Men. Shell Shock, treatment and recovery in Britain 1914-30* (London: Continuum, 2010)

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‘And yet again a book on shell-shock’, was, to my surprise and immediate shame, my initial reaction when first hearing of Fiona Reid’s *Broken Men*. As if World War I (or any other war, for that matter) has not produced numerous more physically damaged (who, depending on the severity and nature of their wound, could of course afterwards break down still). But while reading her book my distraught soon vanished, because *Broken Men* is a well-written, powerful reminder of the fate of the mentally wrecked, of the way images on them and their psychological wound changed, and of the way after the war they themselves (together of course with those not blind for their grieve and hardships) tried to cope with the ghosts in their head and the all too real enemies in society, pension boards at front. Although indeed ‘yet again a book on shell shock’, *Broken Men* proves that the fascination for war-neuroses is neither strange, overdone nor just a modern hype, but as important as it was when starting about twenty years ago, and that the history of psychiatry remains one of the most fascinating aspects of the history of medicine.

Although also the part on the war itself is certainly a good read, it offers not much new to readers familiar with the subject. As in Peter Barham’s fabulous *Forgotten Lunatics*, the strength of the book is in the post 1918 story, showing how the mentally broken men - not the ‘shell shocked’, and ‘men’, not ‘boys’ - fought with society trying to regain self-confidence and, or better: by, showing that, in spite of their troubles, they were able to earn a living and take care of their families. Reid offers a fascinating story of changing images on the shell-shocked, - and by the shell-shocked themselves - for instance by telling the successful story of how they tried to avoid being put in regular lunatic asylums.

Yet, this post 1918 story is also the weakness of the book. It for a great deal focuses on the history of the Ex-Services Welfare Society (ESWS), an organisation established in 1919, trying to lift the burdens of the soldiers coming from the war psychologically damaged. The history

of this organisation - who cherished a conservative, heterosexual, masculine view of its charges, who by the way mostly shared this view - is highly interesting in itself. But, contrary to the story of the damaging war, it is a highly British story, reducing the worth of the book for non-British readers. Although the fate of broken German or French men is not entirely non descript, this is of course not Reid's fault. A book cannot be judged on what is not in it, although some minor comparisons would have been welcomed. *Broken men* therefore also serves as an incentive to for instance French or German historians to investigate how their psychologically (or physically) damaged veterans tried to make a living for themselves in the troubling years to come after the Armistice.

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