

World War 1: Trauma and Memory

Interview with Dr Fiona Reid

DR. FIONA REID:

Shell shock is a catch-all term. It's a descriptor used to describe the symptoms suffered by men fighting in the First World War. It can cover anything from stammering to full blown nervous breakdown. It can cover nervousness and irritability. And at the same time also functional neurosis, such as hysterical deafness, or hysterical blindness.

So it's not, medically, a helpful term as people recognised at the time. But it was an emotionally important term. It made sense to people.

We suspect that men were using the term shell shock right at the beginning of the First World War. It's not in evidence, it's not in print until February 1915, when Charles Myers, the consulting psychologist of the British Expeditionary Force, referred to it in an article in the *Lancet*. And after that point, the term shell shock was very widely used.

It makes sense because it creates a very graphic illustration of the battlefield. It creates a strong link between the exploding shell and the shock in the man. Also, it's tied into a sort of old soldier's law. Before the First World War, soldiers used to talk about the wind of the shell. That a man very, very close to an exploding shell, or if a man for example had a bullet whiz past his ear, he could after that point become mentally disturbed in some way. Because the changing air pressure had affected the fluid in the brain.

And this is why old soldiers talked about being 'windy', or having the 'wind up' if they were excessively afraid. So the term shell shock has some kind of a connection to this old soldier's belief in the wind of the shell. And it simply made sense to so many people that despite military authorities trying to outlaw it people continue to use it. And continued to use it throughout the war and afterwards.

Because it's medically imprecise, someone who's suffering from, for example, hysterical deafness, is really not suffering in the same way as someone who is suffering from amnesia or someone suffering from stammering.

It's also medically imprecise in that men did not necessarily suffer mental complaints because of a direct contact with an exploding shell. It might be weeks and weeks of cold and anxiety and hunger. It might be the conditions of trench life. It might be extreme fear. There's so many different reasons behind a man's breakdown that to attribute the break down to the shock of a shell, is simply too simplistic.

Shell shock is tied up with masculinity. Because to be a man, to be essentially masculine, whether you're working class or whether you're from one of the elite classes, the central tenet of masculinity is to control your emotions. And clearly, shell shock men were not controlling their emotions.

And so there's a loss of masculinity implied in shell shock. But, if you had been a good soldier, if you had shown bravery, your mental collapse was not seen as shameful. And diaries of soldiers indicate that they did care for their friends. They nurtured them. If they thought they were showing the symptoms of incipient breakdown, they would go out of their way to protect them. So shell shock, in some cases, could be seen as a respectable war wound.

For many of the contemporaries trying to understand shell shock, they were of course dealing with young men. And a lot of the publicity surrounding the early shell shock dealt with boys. So if you look into newspaper accounts you can read tales of poor, trembling boys. And this was used during the war to attract sympathy for those sufferers.

And what it's done, is it's given us a rather skewed understanding of shell shock. In that we tend to assume it is associated with a very young boy who can't fight. But some men became extremely aggressive and violent when they suffered from shell shock.

After the war, you tended to get more stories about these very negative perceptions of shell shocked men. Some sort of change takes place after the war as there was less sympathy for wounded men, generally. Whereas the poor, nerve-wracked boy is a sympathetic figure, a mentally disturbed man is a frightening one.