

Book Review

Physical control, transformation and damage in the First World War: War bodies

Simon Harold Walker

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Nearly a century after the conclusion of the First World War of 1914–1918, the British military historian Ian FW Beckett expressively stated, “[h]istorians walk with ghosts.”⁵⁷⁷ As an explanation, he descriptively noted, “[t]hey are privileged ... to see what others do not as they tread the deserted banquet-hall of the past, endeavouring to repopulate it with those who have gone before and who might otherwise be forgotten.”⁵⁷⁸

Most readers will agree that any literature on the subject of history is worth reading when historians succeed in transporting their audience along with them through their journey in the past together with the men and women who populated it. With the approaching and passing centenary of the First World War, a plethora of titles has appeared. This period also witnessed a departure from the more traditional ‘drum and trumpet’ and ‘history from above’ approach and a concomitant increase in writing ‘history from below’. As a result, numerous literary pieces have appeared using soldiers’ experiences as a lens on quotidian life on the battle front.⁵⁷⁹ Such developments have opened new avenues for historians to explore, and a fresh set of ‘ghosts’ to ‘walk with’ as they travel through the past. In this process, thousands of previously, almost impersonal, commemoratively engraved, marbled and emboldened names on plaques, monuments and memorials are saved from obscurity.

Accompanying this trend was also the use of various tools of analysis to explore a myriad of experiences from fresh angles. A handful of historians have opted not to disturb soldiers’ immortal souls beyond the veil but instead to revive their mortal corporeal forms in ink and on paper as they were a century ago. These historians therefore view experience from the perspective of men’s bodies. Among this rank and file are individuals such as Joanna Bourke, Ana Carden-Coyne, Emily Mayhew, Jessica Meyer, Leo von Bergen, Paul Cornish, Nicholas J Saunders, Suzannah Biernoff and others. All of them explored some aspect or aspects of the war or thereafter through the perspective of soldiers’ bodies.⁵⁸⁰ This trend has gained ground and comprises books, journal articles and special issues, such as ‘The body at war: wounds, wounding and the wounded’ in the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*.⁵⁸¹ One of the latest additions to this collection of works is Simon H Walker’s book, *Physical control, transformation and damage in the First World War*. The book has its origins in Walker’s PhD dissertation completed

in 2018, which aimed to contribute to contemporary historiography on the body and war where gaps exist.⁵⁸² As he notes, “it is with these studies [by Mayhew, Macdonald and Bourke in particular] in mind that this book has focused more directly with the relationship between men’s bodies and combat”.⁵⁸³ To this end, Walker uses British war bodies that fought in the war as a lens to “understand the experience of transformation, conditioning, destruction and rehabilitation for the British men who served.”⁵⁸⁴ Walker aptly illustrates this aim in the title of his book.

Much like the sources from which it draws, and as Walker sets the parameters, the book focuses on the perspective of British bodies. Like comparative literature, the bodies considered by Walker as ‘British’ are largely left undefined, and little attention is given to placing these bodies within the larger context of the British empire. For example, a short two pages mention Indian soldiers from the imperial periphery and Indian burial culture.⁵⁸⁵ In comparison, Walker mentions the contribution by Canada to the imperial war effort once or twice in a sentence or three.⁵⁸⁶ Similarly, apart from one footnote on South African troops, none of the other participants from the farthest points of the empire is included.⁵⁸⁷ It is therefore assumed that the British bodies under discussion are either British nationals or empire-born men who joined British units. Furthermore, many, if not all, of the experiences of these British bodies on the home front are restricted to Britain. At the same time, the war front is primarily limited to the Western front. Walker mentions other war theatres in the Middle East, Africa, Mesopotamia, Macedonia and Palestine in passing, but nothing more.⁵⁸⁸ Since the body as a tool of analysis has delivered such stimulating research and has proved to be of some interest in recent years, one cannot but desire an analysis that incorporates fresh perspectives from the layered order of the British empire. Alternatively, at least, a study on a different battlefield. This could gradually assist in shifting the greater war story from a monotone to a technicolour narrative. However, these limitations are understandable, as Walker himself writes, “[t] here are hundreds of thousands of individual accounts ... significantly more than a single study can consider.”⁵⁸⁹

For the most part, Walker grounds the bulk of the content of his book in the existing secondary literature, essentially promoting standing arguments and ideas. However, this might also explain the richness of the book. Certain pre-existing ideas, some of which are underdeveloped in other literature, are tweaked, expanded, developed, highlighted and brought to the forefront by Walker. In some cases, Walker uses archival research ranging from oral testimonies to official documentation, private papers, memoirs and diaries to achieve this, adding a layer of uniqueness. The use of primary source material also sees the inclusion of some precious nuggets of bodily experience. One such case is Private Shaw, who tried to modify and enhance his body, particularly his chest width, by exercising with “a ‘chest expander’ and ‘dumb bells’” to meet the physical recruitment requirements.⁵⁹⁰ The book succeeds by Walker combining all of this in one compact volume that logically and effortlessly ensues.

Each chapter in the book focuses on a phase of the war that British bodies experienced, and cascades down to sub-themes adding nuances and diversity. In the first chapter, Walker contextualises his study within current historiography and paints a picture of

the broad strategic landscape. Here he includes the perception of the British public, the state and the military of the body in the early twentieth century and how it changed in the years leading to the First World War. This introductory chapter is followed by a chapter on the recruitment and enlistment process, followed by making bodies ready for war service through training, sport, clothing, diet and other means. The two succeeding chapters discuss the bodily experiences behind the front lines, in combat, on leave, and at different intervals of the evacuation chain and, in some instances, a return to the front. Finally, the last chapter traces soldiers' bodies as they leave the war either through death or by way of demobilisation or as a result of medical discharge.

A central theme that emerges in the book is the increasing amount of scrutiny, control, categorisation, cultural consideration and state-level interference on men's bodies. Such interference increased after the South African War of 1899–1902 until the First World War. After that, it continued as the military and the state demobilised war bodies and remoulded, refitted and re-categorised them into civilian bodies. Even when they transitioned from soldier to patient, their bodies remained controlled in different ways, and their clothing reflected this as 'hospital blues' replaced their uniform.⁵⁹¹ Here Walker also examines the responses of the various bodies throughout these phases. These responses were wide-ranging. Responses could, for instance, include self-inflicted wounds as a means for men to retake control of their own bodies or exchange parts of their bodies for safety behind the frontlines.

Despite its limitations, most readers interested in this area of history or new to it will enjoy reading Walker's first, and hopefully not last, book. Walker excels in carrying his audience with him as he treads through the past with the civilian bodies who enlisted, were then transformed into war bodies and later passed to either the grave or were remoulded into civilian bodies. As Walker reflects in the opening lines, he "did not have a chance to personally know the men" under discussion. However, they "have become an important part of ... [his] life". Through his research and the writing process, Walker realised he "could never fully understand what ... [they] saw, felt and did, but for a brief time ... [he] was honoured to shadow ... [their war bodies] over the top" – an experience that all readers will undoubtedly share.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁵⁷⁷ IFW Beckett. *The Victorians at war*. London: Hambledon & London, 2003, xiii.
- ⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸⁰ A Carden-Coyne. *Reconstructing the body: Classicism, modernism, and the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; A Carden-Coyne. *The politics of wounds: Military patients and medical power in the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; J Bourke. *Dismembering the male: Britain, male bodies and the Great War*. London: Reaktion books, 1996; ER Mayhew. *Wounded: From battlefield to Blighty, 1914–1918*. London: The Bodley Head, 2013; J Meyer. *Men of war: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; L von Bergen. *Before my helpless sight: Suffering, dying and military medicine on the Western Front 1914–1918*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009; P Cornish & NJ Saunders (eds). *Bodies in conflict: Corporeality, materiality and transformation*. London: Routledge, 2014; S Biernoff. *Portraits of violence: War and the aesthetics of disfigurement*. Corporealities: Discourses of Disability. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017.
- ⁵⁸¹ N Cooper & M Hurcombe. “The body at war: Wounds, wounding and the wounded”. *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1/2. 2008. 119–214.
- ⁵⁸² SH Walker. “‘A different existence altogether’: Constructing, conditioning and controlling the British soldier’s body in the First World War”. Phd dissertation. University of Strathclyde, 2018.
- ⁵⁸³ SH Walker. *Physical control, transformation and damage in the First World War: War bodies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 178.
- ⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.
- ⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- ⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 114, 161.
- ⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
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