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Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. 275. ISBN 978-0-19-932245-9.

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We have long known that the “war to end all wars” did not end all wars. Nor have we seen an end to writing about what Woodrow Wilson called “the culminating and final war for human liberty.” Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart served on the Western Front three times before he was gassed at Mametz Wood during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 and sent home for good. In his history of the war,¹ he tried his best to fulfill the angry, unrealistic wish of one among the ANZAC² foot soldiers massacred at Fromelles and Pozières during the same battle, “For Christ’s sake, write a book on the life of an infantryman ... and by doing so you will quickly prevent these shocking tragedies.”

But even Liddell Hart’s explicit descriptions of the senseless suffering of the soldiers and bitter criticisms of the strategies of the generals have not prevented the “shocking tragedies” of war from recurring. Nor have books about what soldiers endured in World War I perceptibly influenced western ways of considering, deciding upon, and waging wars. It is hard to tell what effect Emily Mayhew’s peculiar new history of the Western Front might have in this regard. Some thoughtful readers may object to their government’s sending men and women off to kill and traumatize and to be killed and traumatized. Others may feel deeply, if vicariously, what soldiers suffer in wartime, without asking whether they should support or tolerate a given conflict. Still others may feel pride and wonder at the individuals who fight their country’s wars and meet the almost impossible demands placed upon them. Soldiers have behaved selflessly, faithfully, and honorably under the ghastliest conditions in the service often of questionable causes. Called upon to act inhumanly, they have yet retained their humanity or, most miraculously, recovered it afterwards.

At times in reading *Wounded*, I thought it might well be the book that anonymous Australian soldier at the Somme had begged for. One big plus here is Mayhew’s concentration on many strong and clear voices of the women who served as nurses and volunteer caregivers on the continent and in England. These sympathetic firsthand witnesses commented on the sights, sounds, and deeds of war and their indelible imprint on hearts, minds, and souls.

Mayhew (Imperial College School of Medicine) starts by explaining that “Being wounded was one of the most common experiences of the Great War [A]lmost every other British soldier could expect to become a casualty, with physical injuries ranging ... from light wounds to permanent, life-changing disabilities.... [T]he scale and power of the fighting has drowned ... out ... the sounds of the voices of the wounded” (1).

Thus, rather than attempting to write another standard scholarly treatment of the vast and complex war effort through an exhaustive “analysis of the official archive of military medical operations” (2), she has chosen to isolate and amplify the voices of the wounded, those who cared for them, and others deeply affected by their plight. Some of the (mostly unpublished) testimonies she has gathered were “tucked into the file of an archive; ... some were just a page or a fragment of a hastily scribbled letter home. Others were well-organized, neatly written accounts spanning the entire course of the war” (157–58). She has relied on these recollections of those who served and on the memories and memorabilia preserved by their descendants: letters, diaries, memoirs, photographs, even the chalice used by a chaplain, Father John Lane Fox, who, in the dark on the battlefield of Loos in late September 1915, “silhouetted against flashes of shell fire” (258), dug and dug and dug into the mud in order to bury as many bodies of dead soldiers as he could.

1. *The Real War, 1914–1918* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930).

2. Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

The accounts in *Wounded* vary from “the rough and unschooled voice of the stretcher bearer” to “the smooth, educated prose of the surgeon’s memoir” (2–3). We read the words of nurses, orderlies, medics, and army chaplains in the trenches, in No Man’s Land, and along the route the wounded and their helpers traveled back from the battlefield and trenches—on or carrying stretchers, in ambulances, in ambulance trains, at casualty clearing stations, field hospitals, and railway stations, and lastly at hospitals where “[t]he trains brought the front right into the heart of London, the tracks a poison trail that led all the way back to France” (204).

The book comprises thirteen chapters and an epilogue, arranged both chronologically and thematically; the voices of the wounded are heard during every year of the war, as (in Kurt Vonnegut’s phrase) massacre machinery competed with measures taken to rescue, treat, heal, and repair damaged bodies, minds, and spirits. The four chapters specifically focused on the wounded each highlight the story of one individual: Mickey Chater at Neuve Chapelle (12 March 1915), Bert Payne at Montauban (1 July 1916), John Glubb at Menin Road (21 August 1917), and Joseph Pickard at Moreuil (Easter Sunday 1918). Other chapters reveal the perspectives of those who cared for the wounded in critical locations: stretcher-bearers, Regimental Medical Officers, surgeons, nurses, orderlies, chaplains, and ambulance train personnel at the railway station in Furnes, Belgium, or working with the London Ambulance Column. Ample and varied documentation³ is woven into vivid and intense short-story-like narratives,⁴ reminiscent in their imagery of Wilfred Owen’s poetic eyewitness word pictures.

Historians, especially ancient historians like myself, must often make do with sources that are few and fragmentary. Mayhew provides another salutary reminder that major human undertakings can all too easily disappear from the historical record. For example, but for Claire Tisdall’s “Memoir of the London Ambulance Column,”⁵ “the history of the LAC would have faded away entirely, and this absence would have greatly diminished our understanding of the home front” (256).

The LAC was formed, operated, and funded “almost entirely by Mr and Mrs Dent, whose family had made a fortune in Hong Kong and who had also donated ... a large Georgian house in Regent’s Park” after the First Battle of Ypres (19 October–22 November 1914). Chaos prevailed when unexpectedly large numbers of wounded reached London: “There were trains to bring the wounded from the coast, and hospital beds ready to receive them, but no real thought had been given to how they got from one to the other” (189–90). But the Dent papers vanished in World War II and Red Cross archives make no mention of the family or the essential services their generosity enabled many dedicated volunteers to perform (256).

No one could have known in advance what warfare conducted between lines of trenches stretching north to south across Europe and fought with heavy artillery, machine guns, gas, tanks, grenades, airplanes, and barbed wire would be like. The British Army’s combat experiences in South Africa and other colonial territories were from another age. Mayhew graphically conveys the more lethal consequences of the new weapons for human bodies:

The Flanders casualty was almost torn apart. Gone were the neat round holes made by rounded ammunition that flew slowly in the hot, dry African sun, could be easily located and extracted, and didn’t leave much damage behind. Instead, the cylindrical-conical bullet fired by the new powerful weaponry hit fast and hard, went deep and took bits of dirty uniform and airborne soil particles with it. Inside the human body, it ricocheted off bones and ploughed through soft tissue until its energy was spent. Shrapnel fragments were just as bad. They created jagged wounds, huge blooms of trauma that didn’t stop bleeding and, if the casualty could survive long enough, provided the perfect environment for infection and sepsis. And there were so many of them. At the

3. Outlined in the book’s acknowledgments (222–24). Mayhew places all notes and references at the end of the book (225–58) and for each chapter explains the unique circumstances, conditions, and developments connected with its subject, listing further readings and germane works of art, poems, etc.

4. The general effect recalls the fiction of Pat Barker in *Regeneration* (NY: Plume, 1991) or Mary Renault in *The Last of the Wine* (NY: Pantheon, 1956).

5. Archives of the Imperial War Museum, no. 42 TIS (1976).

base hospitals soldier after soldier arrived with the most dreadful injuries: deep, ragged wounds to their heads, faces, limbs and abdomens. (5)

Tim O'Brien has written that "a true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe."⁶ Every chapter of *Wounded* assaults our stomachs. The pity is in the details and how they are told.

In the cold, rain, and mud, stretcher-bearers encumbered by wet, heavy overcoats had to carry the wounded over bombed out terrain, through barbed wire, and along collapsing trenches full of frightened men, all while being targeted by machine guns, artillery shells, and gas attacks. They stepped on the unrecognizable corpses of soldiers who had fallen still in formation like upright dominoes along the crowded trenches where they had been hit: "They kept tripping up, their legs squishing down into the soft corpses, but they carried on and returned covered in blood" (28). The physical effects of such heroic work are brought home by the reaction of one bearer's mother:

It was several months before [Ernest] Douglas went home on leave, and when he did his mother grasped his hands and wept at the state of them. Everyone at the front could spot a bearer by his hands. The wooden handles of the stretchers quickly started to deteriorate. They got shot at, or had bits broken off, and the splinters were the very devil. In the wet, the wood rotted, splitting the handle ends. All the bearers could do was wind a length of wire round the handles to keep them together, but the wire would cut their hands to pieces.... Douglas had bearer's hands: a mix of blisters and calluses, rubbed raw and then scar-cracked and worn. (21)

Ernest did not take off his shirt in front of his parents, because on his back and shoulders "the flesh [was] rubbed raw and the muscles and joints strained" (21) from carrying wounded men by means of bearing straps.

Voluntarism was common on both sides of the channel. Claire Tisdall was a working class, intelligent, healthy young woman. Giving up her dream of reading English at university, she volunteered in part to escape sitting "night after night in [her] shabby home, listening to her parents endlessly lamenting their state" (200).

By contrast, fifty-year-old Sarah MacNaughtan kept her steadily debilitating chronic illness to herself. She had the means to pay for a thousand of Harrod's thickest wool socks, which she distributed to the wounded who came to her post in Furnes Railway Station in 1914 with "cracked and broken boots." She cared for "men with horrific facial injuries, stripped of their dignity and their ability to speak. She saw how they watched the other men eat and drink. Only a few had somebody to help them feed through a straw. Most were beyond help and would soon die." Then there were the mental cases—one of them twisting and straining, unable to make a sound, aphasic; "no raving and screaming, but total silence. She had to remind herself that this wasn't a dream. She was awake and at Furnes Station" (189).

MacNaughtan returned to England at the end of 1915 and died in July 1916, mercifully spared the reports of the carnage of the Somme Offensive. Her memoir describes the wear and stress of caring for the wounded face to face.

Some people enjoy this war. I think it is far the worst of time ... I have ever spent. Perhaps, I have seen more suffering than most people.... I see them by the hundred passing before me in an endless train all day. I can make none of them feel really better. I feed them and they pass on. One reviews one's life as one departs. Always I shall remember Furnes as a place of wet streets and long dark evenings with gales blowing and as a place I have always been alone. (190)

Like Walt Whitman's "I Saw the Vision of Armies," MacNaughtan's account includes reflections on what the coming and going of wounded and dying soldiers might mean for loved ones left behind.

Wounded is a powerful evocation of people whose resolve, life circumstances, education, presence of mind, and mental fortitude enabled them to tell their stories. A hint of Emily Mayhew's admirable conviction that even the most obscene horrors of war can and should be made accessible to readers may be found in her epilogue, where she reports that Claire Tisdall "was a casualty with invisible scars, and it took her

6. *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 84.

decades to find the strength to revisit her wartime experience.” She did, however, earn a degree in medieval English in 1927 and, in retirement in the 1960s, wrote her memoirs “with the clarity and skill of an English Scholar, although she was never able to quite purge the text of the deep, unmended pain” (220–21).

I think a story of “deep, unmended pain” was what Liddell Hart’s ANZAC soldier had in mind.