A little known personal journal and a global health catastrophe

by Philip Dutton

2020-05-05 12:34:36

Samuel Pepys Junior and the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic in Great Britain - as reflected in his 'A Last Diary of the Great Warr'.[1]

The 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918-1919, despite its cost in human lives worldwide, is notable for its near absence from many standard histories of the First World War. The grave uncertainties and human drama of the international conflict of 1914-1918, and the enormous number of its casualties and vast scale of physical destruction have tended to overshadow the unprecedented social disaster represented by the pandemic with its own incalculable death toll[2]. The second deadly wave of infection, occurring in the autumn of 1918, around the time of Allied victory, has ensured that the pandemic's existence has been acknowledged rather as a footnote to the man-made calamity it enveloped than a major historical event in its own right. Invaluable assessments of the pandemic's course and impact on societies of course exist but in widely disparate often very specialised forms, which makes the intimate observations of 'one who was there' all the more important as providing a humane and readily intelligible outline of the social effects of its onset.

During these desperate, deadly and anxiety-filled days of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic some perspective or even solace may perhaps be derived from observations recorded of comparable health disasters long past. Of those associated with Great Britain, Daniel Defoe's 'A Journal of the Plague Year' and Sam Pepys's plague-related entries in his Diaries offer glimpses of how similar, despite our own 21st century advantages in living conditions and health care, were these earlier initial reactions to the arrival of 'the pestilence' and its subsequent management. Concerns with social distancing, fake news, conspiracy theories and quack remedies are by no means new. But more recently, in fact just over 100 years ago, another and much less well known Pepys emerged in time to chronicle the arrival of the first two visitations of what was then commonly called the 'Spanish Flu'. Samuel Pepys Junior 'a wholly fictional but equally gifted 'descendant' of the original Sam Pepys - (and pseudonym for the combined literary talents of Robert Massie Freeman [1866-1949] and Robert Augustus Bennett) - produced three volumes of lively personal commentary covering his experience of the conflict of 1914-18[3] which his publisher was pleased to market as diaries of the 'Great Warr' (sic). These artful histories are not everybody's cup of tea, retaining as they do the archaic spellings and complex syntax of his distinguished 'forbear'. But, and very importantly, they constitute a sustained and first rate parody of the original Pepys, and like the original, contain much wit, and an abundance of invaluable insights into the minutiae of civilian life. The diary entries open an almost primary source window into those profoundly troubled times - data accumulated from the acute perspective of an upper middle class government official on the British home front. His chronicles include indisputable facts merged with the authentic flavour of the period rooted in the shared anxiety, gossip, rumour, prejudice, and enduring concerns about food rationing and prices.
of everyday necessities; the very stuff of human existence in times of prolonged crisis.

The first explicit reference to 'the flue distemper' comes in his entry for 24 May 1918, no doubt distilled from news reports or gossip, was concerned with estimates of the state of the German Army on the Western Front, which, given the military setbacks endured by the allies that spring, he optimistically rehashes:

> The best news of the warr is, by a report out of Paris, the Emperour's army do mutiny for lack of victuall; and, moreover, the whole now mightily stricken with the flue distemper. So this thought to be the reason of their lying long so idle. (*p.138*)

Earlier, in his journal entry for 4 May 1918, while celebrating a slight ease on the bacon rationing, sinister reference is made to a gruesome-sounding disease observed at home. Though it is not absolutely clear that the infection he refers to as 'the botular sicknesse', and its growing hold on 'the common people', is in fact the very beginning of the pandemic:

> The news out of London is my Lord Rhondda[4] will encrease to each citizen, being of full age, his portion of cured flesh of hoggs; which is, I think, a thing to 'ease the publick discontent, increasing our portion of fatt victuall. However, some I hear say it shall further breed the botular sicknesse; which do now grow mightily upon the common people. (*p.129*)

No such uncertainty exists in relation to his second reference to the illness ' now clearly spreading on the home front in early summer. The 'flue?', first linked with the German army, now reappears in an entry for 24 June, which also reveals something of the popular thinking about the disease's origins[5], how its symptoms were presented, and fears of its rapid spread. Notably, he highlights a now long forgotten conspiracy theory, voiced by an hysterical minority, which held that the influenza illness was nothing less than an appallingly misguided German experiment in biological warfare:

> ...At our carpentry this day much talked of the new sicknesse that is come upon us, and is named the Spanish flue, the Spaniards first smitten with it, and the king and all his court catcht, they say; whence catching the French, and all the armies a-field, it do jump upon England. So some saying it is carried by the plague of lice among the soldiers, others making it to be sown abroad by the Germans, and their ayr men to carry the seed of it in bottels. However, as to lice, Mr Grainger did mention 4 ladies in our works that be flued, of whom it were a sin to name them for lousy; nor aught do he observe wherein this Spanish sicknesse is other than the old flue, save that in the first seizure many be awhile bereft of their senses, but presently, vomiting mightily, their senses do return. Which troubles me to hear, being that I am so apt to fall into the old flue. (*pp.154-55*)

By the beginning of July many civilians had grasped that close proximity to people, unavoidable especially in crowded cities, posed an increased risk of catching the infection. Thus on 1 July 1918 we are told that Sam Pepys Junior gave his wife sufficient cash for her to use taxis that week rather than public transport, so as to avoid unnecessarily exposing herself to threat of contagion:

> ...I did giver her 10s to pay for taxi-coaches, charging her that she ride this week in nor buss nor tube, for fear of the flue sicknesse... (*p.158*)

The disease was then, as now, no respecter of persons, rank or authority and Prime Minister David Lloyd George was severely stricken by influenza during a visit to Manchester in September 1918. At the time Pepys Jr
was much personally discomforted by a recurrence of his sciatica and rheumatics and, being no supporter of the 'Welsh Wizard?', showed a malicious delight at the PM's plight when informed about it by his doctor on 22 September:

...He did mention to my comfort, Lloyd George being likewise taken sick in Manchester, and is pretty bad of it, he hears. But is, it seems no more than the flue distemper, which is a small matter, such as God forbid one should say it of lumbago(p.221).

Of course, the 'flue' was no laughing matter; Lloyd George was seriously ill and Pepys Jr grudgingly records, 8 days later (30 September), that the Prime Minister was 'still sick, it seems', (p.229) and Bonar Law [6] was acting in his place.

By the third week in October the first of Pepys' relatives had become infected; we are told on 21 October his sister Pal was then 'abed with the flue distemper (which do now grow heavy upon us' (p.245) and on 23 October that 'The pestilence do wax daily; many dead of it, I hear, and the worst of it is the club of 4 serving wenches by it.' (p.248) Two days later the disease strikes his own household - or so he then believed. Which forced him and his wife rapidly to relocate to a hotel:

So home, and to find, to my dismay and confusion, that cook is seized by the pestilence; so as I did sit awhile as one astounded, thinking of our victuall, how we may be fed, and my fear of my wife catching the distemper. In fine, I to the Grosvenor inn, where, by God's mercy, did find a fair chamber, which done and my wife dispatched, and our night baggs packed...With which, and our two noses washed with chymickall water, all is done that a man may do, I believe (pp.251-52).

The thorough cleansing of the nasal passages was indeed but one among a host of health and dietary recommendations gaining popularity as a consequence of astute product advertising and influence of the daily press. The routine of regular washing of the nostrils was in fact a nostrum energetically pedalled by the 'News of the World'[7].

Pepys's entry for the 26 October records his concern to get his 'ill', and presumably infectious, cook out of his flat and the property thoroughly sterilised. He also notes the growing practice of drinking of port wine [8](at least among those who could afford it) as a protection against influenza and also reminds us of the deadly character of the disease itself especially for key workers 'trades people and servants:

...So to the club, where some discourse with Mr Glumby as to our best measures of security against the pestilence. As to which, he hath his physicien's word of a gill or 2 of port wine, drinking it daily, being as good a fortification of a man's body as there is allmost...I hear that one of our serving wenches, that did sicken but 2 days since, is dead of the plague, the poor girl; and of some is said that they do die in 12 houres of it taking them. God preserve us! (p.252).

As it turned out, Pepys' cook did not have the influenza, merely what was described as a 'rheum of her head that did trouble her spleen' (p.252); she was restored to health and the Pepys household returned to their now 'purged' home.

Several days later it was clear that the pandemic was in full and deadly swing, especially in London. The diary entry for 29 October records the dreadful toll and hints at an understanding that this flu was often accompanied by acute symptoms of pneumonia; improbable and rumoured 'causes' for the contagion are also detailed:
The bill of the pestilence do encrease; in London above 5,000 sick, and 2 or 3 hundred dead this last day or 2. Meeting Mr Chopley, he told me he has the best warrants of Mr Crowe, the undertaker, that it is no true flue sicknesse, but a putrid distemper of the lungs, that is bred of the corpses on the battlefields. But many I hear lay it to our great poverty of our victuall, and so much offal and foul matters as the people must eat. (p.255)

Certainly the poorer classes, and especially city dwellers, engaged in physically demanding work and living in inadequate accommodation would not have had their chances of resisting the disease improved as a consequence of their impoverished diet and crowded working and housing conditions.

By the end of the first week of November occurrences of influenza had by no means diminished as evidenced by entry for 9 November. By then, with the end of the war in sight, there was much celebration and crowding in the capital; additional thousands flocked to see the Lord Mayor's show, which included many 'trophies of war' and march pasts by contingents of the Allied forces, including Serbians and Italians. The pressures to loosen the disciplines of social distancing were seen to grow:

...This night to the Court House and to see 'Twelfth Night,' praying we catch not the pestilence; but, come what may of it, I cannot keep myself to sit at home evenings, such a tumulte as do now grow in all our minds. (p.267)

The armistice of 11 November brought the fighting to an end on the Western Front; but the battle with the pandemic was far from over; Pepys notes that it had, by 15 November, incapacitated the wife of a close friend (p.275) and, on 18 November (p.277), records that his own wife's cousin had too become a victim and lay 'abed', seriously ill.

No further references to the flu occur in the diary and his final entry, for 31 December 1918, constitutes a personal review of the year. This summary, like a number of sober and serious histories which were later to appear, includes no mention of the pandemic - despite its unprecedented toll of casualties. Pepys Junior instead, avoids depressing tallies of the dead in favour of expressions of profound and enthusiastic delight in victory, and his own and family's survival:

So ends this yeare; the most wonderfull, I believe, that ever was since the world begun; in particular for its at the first bringing the greatest extremity of our gloom and foreboding, yet in the end our greatest joy. (p.308)

*Postscript:* it is now recognised that the influenza pandemic occurred in three main phases 'in the spring and autumn of 1918 (a particularly virulent strain), returning in the spring 1919. We have no notion of how the diarist's family fared during the New Year, although the figures look grim. Estimates of total fatalities for Great Britain have increased over time[9]; recent research suggests that over 200,000 of its citizens died of the disease.

-------------

*Online References*
Published references

- *The First World War on the Home Front*, Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch (in association with the IWM), 2014
- *War Books*, Cyril Falls, Greenhill Books, 1989 (originally published by Peter Davies, 1930)
- *The Influenza Pandemic*, D R Sherman, Purnell's History of the First World War, Volume 7, pp.2973-2978

----- NOTES ------------------

[1] Free online access to the text available via the ALA's Internet Archive
https://archive.org/details/lastdiaryofgreat00freeuoft/page/n8/mode/2up

[2] Exact figures have never been reliably established; current estimates of fatalities directly linked to the illness, range from 50 to 100 million people.

[3] The third and final volume was published in 1919.

[4] David Alfred Thomas, first Viscount Rhondda (1856-1918) the respected and highly efficient 'Food Controller?', had introduced compulsory rationing early in 1918. He died suddenly, aged 62, on 3 July 1918, not of influenza but heart disease and rheumatic fever.

[5] According to some sources cases of the illness were first reported in Spain; as a neutral Spanish press restrictions were less rigorous than the censorship employed by the belligerents. Strong arguments exist to support theories that the disease may have originated in the USA and France.


[8] Other popular preventatives included the consumption of quinine, cinnamon, OXO, Veno's cough mixture, and, as a disinfectant cleaning agent, Jeyes Fluid. (*The First World War on the Home Front?*, Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch, 2014, pp. 294-95)

[9]
By considering how artists are influenced by, and become influencers of, cultural trauma, and the role of this in national identity, we can understand how the impact of World War One affects our sense of self today.

The year was 1914. Living in a fashionable, elegant neighbourhood near Bois de Bologne, Claude Debussy had little on his mind beyond his growing debts.

Then the war began. Everything changed.

Debussy's friends and family become increasingly politically involved. Huge numbers of wounded began to return, the landscape became physically mutilated through trench warfare, and no end was in sight. France, and Debussy's national identity, was under very real threat.

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffrey Alexander states that:

"Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."

World War One epitomises 'a horrendous event': entire families were wiped out, a large portion of young men were killed or injured, and civilians grieved. The translation of this trauma from event to art to cultural narrative is what Jeffrey Alexander calls 'the trauma process', and its stages can be traced through Debussy's compositions between 1914 and his death.

**Step 1: Symbolic Representation**

Debussy was not a natural patriot, declaring once that he never 'had occasion to handle a gun.' But after being confronted daily by newspaper reports of 'the Hun's atrocities?', his attitude changed. His first work from this period appeared in November 1914, in *King Albert's Book: A Tribute to the Belgian King and People from Representative Men and Women Throughout the World*. The Book was aimed to increase the Allies' support, and Debussy was one of the few composers featured. He contributed a short piano piece, *Berceuse héroïque*. 
Psychoanalytic descriptions of trauma generally agree that one response to trauma is to 'displace' it into another form, such as art; Debussy does this exactly. The misery of feeling powerless in events, combined with everyday unhappy shortages of necessities, is expressed in *Berceuse héroïque*. Debussy acknowledges this himself, describing his piece as 'melancholy and discreet' with no pretensions other than to offer homage to so much patient suffering. Thus Debussy's music claims to be symbolically representing the mood of the civilian population, with himself as spokesperson.

Two photographs showing daily life in Paris during World War One. On the left, a queue for a café snakes around several streets. On the right, high prices for basic necessities. Copyright British Library.

**Step 2: Actor in the Public Sphere**

*Berceuse* was followed by two similar pieces: *Page d’album* and *Elgie*. With these, Debussy increasingly used his music to raise awareness of the effects of war, but also to try and alleviate them. *Page*, composed June 1915, was played as part of a concert series aiming to raise money for helping the wounded; *Elgie* was published six months later in *Pages indites sur la femme et la guerre*, a book whose profits were intended for war orphans.

His reputation continued to grow, and he became particularly regarded as a French composer writing about, and for, the French people: he became an actor, accepting and adopting this patriotic persona, even signing himself later as 'Claude Debussy, musicien français'. One side effect of his growing renown was becoming a carrier: Debussy's work may have helped certain individuals but in fact it served to increase cultural trauma by drawing attention in the public sphere repeatedly to its extent.

**Step 3: Public and Context**

As the war dragged on, the public mood became more and more despairing. The context of Debussy's work changed: instead of composing for funds in support of the war effort, his compositions became more philosophical about the point of war itself. His *Nol des enfants qui n’ont plus des maisons* (*Christmas for Homeless Children*) exemplifies this. The lyrics are a prayer from homeless, orphaned French children, calling for Christ to punish German soldiers. They ask for the invaders to not be visited that coming Christmas (in fact, to 'jamais plus?', never again, be visited), and they beg for bread instead of toys as gifts. The orphans symbolise the loss of social and familial structure brought on by war: they have no history as previous generations are
erased, and their very survival is uncertain as they do not even have 'pain quotidienne?, daily bread.

Furthermore, Nol shows Debussy's idea of audience changing as well. He writes to God, suggesting no more faith in earthly, political powers to resolve the conflict, and he also writes to the future, for posterity. Debussy confided to a friend that he wrote 'not so much for myself, [but] to offer proof, small as it may be, that 30 million Boches can ot destroy French thought . . . I think of the youth of France, senselessly mowed down by those merchants of 'Kultur' . . . What I am writing will be a secret homage to them.?

What happens now?

Returning to Jeffrey Alexander's definition of cultural trauma, he stated that Cultural Trauma must 'mark their memories forever and change their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.' Debussy died before the end of the war, but his works lived on. They became part of a larger artistic movement which established a new cultural narrative, one which began with World War One. 1914 became 'marked forever' as the beginning of a period of pain and misery to France.

Debussy's works would go onto take a special role during World War Two, claimed by the Resistance as representing the cultural prowess of the French, and he, amongst others, became a locus for a new French identity which emphasised national pride and a staunch unbreakable resistance to invasion ' an identity which endures to this day.

REFERENCES


Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

Some Sounds of the War

by Nick Milne

2016-07-06 00:06:00
The First World War's cultural impact can be felt quite heavily in song as well as in literature and art.

A distinction should first be cast between two different kinds of songs: those that were popular on the home front and in the musical halls, and those that had their origins in the trenches themselves. The former certainly made their way into the trenches as well -- often with quite surprising additions to the lyrics -- but they were not born there.

**Music Hall**

Songs of this sort were written for popular, public consumption, and often with a patriotic intent. Lyrics ranged from the winkingly suggestive to the nauseatingly sentimental, and much of the pleasure your average Tommy would take from it came with inventing his own additions or substitutions.

For example, the refrain to Paul A. Reuben's popular "We Don't Want to Lose You"(1914) ran thus:

Oh! we don't want to lose you  
But we think you ought to go  
For your King and Country  
Both need you so;  
We shall want you and miss you  
But with all our might and main  
We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you  
When you come back again

The man in the trench, swiftly fed up with this kind of cloying sentimentality, had his own take on the matter:

Now we don't want to hurry you,  
But it's time you ought to go;  
For your songs and your speeches  
They bore us so.  
Your coaxings and pettings  
Drive us nigh insane;  
Oh! we'll hate you, boo you and hiss you  
If you sing it again.

In a more suggestive strain we see something like Wimperis & Finck's "I'll Make a Man of You", which became a very popular recruiting song early in the war. One may perhaps see why:

The army and the navy need attention,  
The outlook isn't healthy you'll admit,  
But I've got a perfect dream of a new recruiting scheme,  
Which I really think is absolutely it.  
If only other girls would do as I do  
I believe that we could manage it alone,  
For I turn all suitors from me but the sailor and the Tommy,  
I've an army and a navy of my own.
[Chorus]

On Sunday I walk out with a soldier,
On Monday I'm taken by a Tar,
On Tuesday I'm out with a baby Boy Scout,
On Wednesday a Hussar,
On Thursday I gang oot wi' a Scottie,
On Friday, the Captain of the crew,
But on Saturday I'm willing
If you'll only take the shilling,
To make a man of every one of you.

You'll have to pardon me -- my glasses have fogged up, here. Not content with the promises made above, the soldiers' amended version ran something like this:

On Monday I touched her on the ankle,
On Tuesday I touched her on the knee,
On Wednesday I confess, I lifted up her dress,
On Thursday I saw it, gorblimey,
On Friday I put me 'and upon it,
On Saturday she gave my balls a treat,
On Sunday after supper, I whopped me fucker up 'er,
An' now I'm paying forty bob a week!

The clips above come from the darkly satiric 1969 film Oh What a Lovely War!, which does a great deal to ape the music-hall culture of the time. It also has a complex -- and at times surprising -- history.

Other popular songs included:

- "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag"
- "Good-bye-ee"
- "It's a Long Way to Tipperary"
- "Oh! It's a Lovely War"
- "Roses of Picardy"

Of these, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" has had the longest life and the most sustained popularity. Originally written in 1912, it became immensely popular both on the home front and as a marching song.

**Trench Music**

The most usual mode, as I've suggested above, was one of parody. This take on "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" was popular among transport drivers:

I've been in the saddle for hours
I've stuck it as long as I could,
I've stuck it and stuck until I said, "Fuck it,
My arsehole is not made of wood."

Sergeant, Sergeant, oh give back my stirrups to me, to me.
Sergeant, Sergeant, oh give back my stirrups to me.

While this one, to the same tune, was more broadly applicable:

My tunic is out at the elbows,
My trousers are out at the knee,
My puttees are ragged and frazzled
But the Q.M. says nothing for me.

My tummy knocks hard on my backbone,
My dial is as thin as can be;
Still all we get handed at mealtimes
Is bully and Maconochie.

[Bully beef = tinned corned beef; Maconochie = a widely-distributed brand of tinned vegetables.]

There were countless possibilities with a tune like this:

Last night as I lay on my pillow,
Last night as I lay on my bed,
I dreamt our old corp'ral was dying,
I dreamt the old bugger was dead.

Send him,
Oh send him,
Oh send our old corporal to He-e-ell;
Oh keep him,
Oh keep him,
Oh keep the old buffer in Hell.

Even some "official" songs had a harder edge to them. One of the regimental marches of the Royal West Surrey Regiment, for example:

Here they come, here they come,
Silly great buggers every one:
Half-a-crown a week to pay
For putting a girl in a family way.

Here they come, here they come,
Second of Foot but second to none.
Here they come, here they come,
Second of Foot but second to none.
Bullshit, bullshit,
Covered from head to foot in it.
Bullshit, bullshit,
Covered from head to foot in it.

[And so on]

The wide-ranging adventures of "Mademoiselle from Armenteers" were happily recounted by men in every branch of the service:

Mademoiselle from Armenteers, parlay-woo,
Mademoiselle from Armenteers, parlay-woo,
Mademoiselle from Armenteers,
She hasn't been fucked in twenty years,
Hinky dinky parlay-woo

[And on and on, with many variations]

Mademoiselle was not always looked upon with such affection, however, as in "Aprs la Guerre Fini":

Aprs la guerre fini,
Soldat Anglais parti;
Mam'sell Fransay boko pleuray
Aprs la guerre fini.

Aprs la guerre fini,
Soldat Anglais parti,
Mademoiselle in the family way,
Aprs la guerre fini.

Aprs la guerre fini,
Soldat Anglais parti;
Mademoiselle can go to hell
Aprs la guerre fini.

My favourite, both for its conciseness and strange pathos, is this popular riff on the tune of "Auld Lang Syne":

We're here because
We're here because
We're here because
We're here!
Oh we're here because
We're here because
We're here because
We're here!

There were plenty more like all the above -- including "Do Your Balls Hang Low?", which remains weirdly
well-known even today. Songs of this sort were a constant staple for the troops, who very often had to produce their own music if they wanted any at all -- Decca's charming efforts notwithstanding:

Interested parties should consult Max Arthur's *When This Bloody War is Over: Soldiers' Songs of the First World War* (2001) or Martin Pegler's *Soldiers' Songs and Slang of the Great War*
When I set out to trace exactly what my grandmother, Dr Isabella Stenhouse, had done in WW1, one document particularly intrigued me: her offer to serve with the British Army. This seemed to make little sense because, so far as I knew, the army had, with one exception[^i], refused to work with any of the many women doctors eager to do their patriotic duty.

This had left medical women with a conundrum. Either they stayed in civilian work, taking up the slack left by male colleagues departing for war, or they joined an independent hospital in France or Serbia and treated the wounded of Britain's allies. Isabella chose the latter and served in the Anglo-Ethiopian Hospital in France.

However, as the war dragged on, the army's need for doctors grew. Not only did the battle zones demand a constant supply, but many of the casualties required medical treatment that lasted for months or years. How was the military imperative to be met without threatening the health needs of the civilian population - the miners and factory workers whose work was vital if the war was to be won?

In December 1915 the Scottish Medical Service Emergency Committee[^ii] attempted to find out where each doctor was working and what help each one was prepared to offer. 3397 doctors replied to the questionnaire. Isabella, one of only fourteen women among 527 doctors listed in the Edinburgh area, volunteered herself for 'Group B (45 to 55) Part-time home military work.' She was only 28, but what would have been the point of offering 'Group A (under 45) Lieut. RAMC' when there was no chance of the army taking her on?

When conscription was introduced in spring 1916, the medical profession was a reserved occupation but, in June, the Director General Army Medical Services, Lt-General Sir Alfred Keogh called for, '... the mobilization of the whole of the medical services of this country for its civil needs on such lines as shall enable the pressing requirements of the Army to be met with the least possible injury to the civilian population.'

A journalist commented that '[Sir Alfred's] scheme ... is calculated to bring into the fold of national service every medical man who has the interests of his country at heart.'[^iii] He had perhaps not heard of Sir Alfred's other plan. The Director General and his advisors had been observing the professionalism and skill of medical women across the war zone and they had changed their minds: it was time to enlist the help of the medical women. A letter was sent to every woman on the medical register.

Long afterwards, Dr Letitia Fairfield remembered, 'In 1916 came a sudden and urgent appeal from the War Office for medical women to serve in Malta, Egypt, and in military hospitals at home. The reason (which had to be secret) for this reversal of policy was a demand for a large reserve of doctors to supply contemplated campaigns in the Mediterranean, at a moment when doctors were already extremely scarce.'[^iv]

The War Office's about-turn at last gave Isabella and her fellow women doctors a chance to use their professional skills for their own countrymen. Yet, the men in charge of the Royal Army Medical Corps...
(RAMC) were cautious. Despite working with thousands of nurses, their views as to the capabilities of women were fixed. They were certain, for example, that women doctors were unsuited to working in any spot that might come under fire. They were confident that medical women could never command a company because of the reluctance of the men to serve under women. Their solution was threefold:

- They sent the women to Malta, which was busy, but where there was little risk of fighting.
- They refused them the right to wear the uniform and badges of the RAMC.
- They denied them the temporary commissions automatically given to volunteering male doctors.

These conditions of service ignored the fact that the Boer War had proved it was impossible for volunteering male doctors to function properly within the RAMC without uniform and commissioned rank. The women apparently considered the conditions so 'deplorable' that they 'only accepted ... them on the grounds of grave national emergency.?'

Isabella signed up on 24th July 1916. On 12th August she set sail for Malta with fifteen other medical women - Scottish, Irish, English, a New Zealander, a woman from India, suffragists, old hands, young doctors who had worked in France and Serbia, one who had been imprisoned in Serbia and another who had been awarded a medal. All were ready not only to help win the war but also to make the most of this chance to prove they were as good as the men - it was one more opportunity to break down the barriers they faced as professional women.


[ii] Index of Doctors in Scotland During The First World War | Index to Doctors in Scotland during the First World War

On 24 November 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George gave a speech in Wolverhampton. The Armistice two weeks earlier meant he was 'the man who won the war'. Yet still, he told them: 'the work is not over yet - the work of the nation, the work of the people, the work of those who have sacrificed. Let us work together first'. He continued:
"What is our task’ To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in. I am not using the word ‘heroes’ in any spirit of boastfulness, but in the spirit of humble recognition of fact. I cannot think what these men have gone through. I have been there at the door of the furnace and witnessed it, but that is not being in it, and I saw them march into the furnace. There are millions of men who will come back. Let us make this a land fit for such men to live in. There is no time to lose. I want us to take advantage of this new spirit. Don’t let us waste this victory merely in ringing joybells."

These words were important. Not only because they constituted a promise - from the Prime Minister to those who were returning from the horrors of the war and in the memory of those who would not return. But also because this promise was in many respects the foundation stone of the Lloyd George coalition as it went to the polls, barely a month after the end of the war. A coalition between aradical LiberalPM and the Conservative Party (amongst others) had been understandable during the war. All sides were committed to refocusing the war effort and saw a greater role for the state in doing so. Conscription, for example, Lloyd George and his coalition allies were reader to consider than many Liberals. But what was their common purpose in peacetime?

Whether or not Lloyd George genuinely sought a permanent realignment in British politics by continuing his coalition beyond the war, in the short term he certainly needed it to embody a broader sense of national unity. In speeches such as this, he was laying claim to the notion that this shared spirit was one of reform. AsChancellor of the Exchequer he’d used pensions and national insurance tocommit the British state for the first time to directly addressing the poverty caused by old age and sickness. Now, asPrime Minister, and he had no intention of relinquishing his reforming zeal.

Yet, by the time he left office in 1922, it had amounted to little. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the case of housing, as Kenneth (now Labour life peer Lord)Morgan explained in his history of Lloyd George's postwar coalition. After six months of the house-building programme there was a shocking gulf between calls for half a million new homes and the 10,000 under construction, let alone the 180 actually occupied. The final figure of 170,000 was nowhere near the scale widely agreed as necessary, and certainly a long way short of the hopes roused by Lloyd George's stirring rhetoric.

Explaining what Philip Abrams, inhis influential 1960sPast and Present article, dubbed 'the failure of social reform' has been a long-running exercise for political historians. Was it inevitable that a Conservative-dominated government would recoil from any extensive plans for social reform' Did the wave of businessmen elected to the Tory benches in 1918 shift the centre of gravity in the party away from accommodation with Lloyd George' Was the Prime Minister himself more interested in foreign affairs or simply remaining in office at any cost' Were any ambitions for major reform hopeless in the economic circumstances of the early 1920s?

These are bigger questions than can be answered in a blog post. But I would like to briefly consider something that suggests Lloyd George's ambitions, at least, were genuine. And that is who he appointed to key positions. During the war his social reconstruction committee had brought together the social investigator Joseph Rowntree and the Fabian Beatrice Webb with the former Conservative Prime Minister and former president of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association Lord Salisbury. This was perhaps indicative of what Lloyd George attempted to do in all areas of government, bringing together figures from across the political spectrum who might share his willingness to think big.

And the same can be said after the war of the three key appointments to the newly-established Ministry of Health, responsible not only for medical services but also housing as part of a broader understanding of 'health'. This made itthe government department essentially charged with delivering on the Prime Minister's promise of homes fit for heroes.
**Christopher Addison, 1869-1951**

The UK's first Minister of Health was a medical man of some repute. Before entering politics his method for thoracoabdominal topography (locating the pancreas) had become known as "Addison's clinical plane". He had been appointed Professor of Anatomy at University College Sheffield and gave the prestigious Hunterian lectures for the Royal College of Surgeons in 1901. His doctoring in some of the poorest areas of East London and beyond brought him deep insight into the most crushing poverty of the earliest days of the twentieth century and this motivated his move into elected politics.

In 1910 the forty year-old Addison was elected Liberal MP for Hoxton, soon finding himself in the middle of the fierce debates over Lloyd George's health insurance plans. In their sympathetic biography, Jane and Ken Morgan credited him with making the national insurance bill passable and workable, as he became the vital go-between for the Chancellor and the sceptical medical profession. Addison's role grew from key advisor to Lloyd George's under-secretary and crucial to making 'war socialism' a reality even before Asquith was relieved of the premiership. Once Lloyd George became Prime Minister, Addison took his place at the head of the Ministry of Munitions before he was charged with setting up two new government departments. In 1917 this was the Ministry of Reconstruction and then in 1919 the Ministry of Health.

His tenure as Minister of Health - of less than two years - saw plenty of bold thinking about the postwar settlement. This was best embodied in the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act, remembered as the Addison Act, which established council housing essentially as it's been known ever since. Yet the implementation of his plans were constantly thwarted and his effectively dismissal in April 1921 (to the post of Minister without Portfolio, from which he soon resigned) is often seen as the moment when Lloyd George opted to remain in office by handing over control of domestic policy to his Conservative ministers.

Like many Liberal reformers, Addison's future lay with the Labour party. His Lincolnshire farming family background served him well as Minister of Agriculture under Ramsay Macdonald, Labour's first Prime Minister, before he left office as another unlikely coalition with the Conservatives was formed. In 1945 Clement Attlee brought him back into government, this time as Leader of the House of Lords for the duration of the first Labour government with a Commons majority. He also served as Secretary of State for the Dominions, playing an important part in Labour's anti-imperial policies, until his health declined in 1947.

This means Addison held government posts under every non-Conservative Prime Minister for half a century, playing key roles in domestic, foreign and constitutional affairs. He deserves to be remembered as a major figure in the progressive politics of early and mid twentieth-century Britain.

**Robert Morant, 1863-1920**

The Ministry of Health's first Permanent Secretary was a very different figure. Where Addison's family had found the money (which he duly paid back) to send him to Trinity College, Harrogate then Sheffield School of Medicine, Morant's widowed mother found enough to send him to Winchester College before he needed to take up private tutoring to pay his way through New College, Oxford in the 1880s. His disappointing third-class degree in classical moderations (before a rather superfluous first in theology) didn't hold him back from ending up private tutor to the crown prince of Siam only a few years later.

His passionate advocacy of English educational values as part of an imperial civilising mission led to him being
called the Big Teacher, and less favourably accused of behaving like 'the Uncrowned King of Siam'. If he was a less controversial figure once he returned home to England, he was no less an oddity. Beatrice Webb said he was 'a strange mortal, not altogether sane', yet also 'the one man of genius in the Civil Service'; while to Florence Nightingale he was 'a good genius'.

His atypical career path and personal energies saw him work his way into, and swiftly to the head of, the Board of Education. His time there was marked by an effective reorganisation and a raft of progressive policies successful implemented under Conservative and Liberal administrations. This earned him an offer from Lloyd George in 1909 of a significant pay rise if he moved to the Development Commission, which he turned down to stay at the Board of Education. Two year later, however, politically damaging criticism from the chief inspector of elementary schools meant he was happy to take up a new offer and move to head up Lloyd George's new National Insurance Commission.

From the beginning, Morant made it clear to Lloyd George he saw implementing the National Insurance Act as a step towards unifying the complex patchwork of medical services of the day. He was no socialist but believed strongly in effective administration. He pushed Lloyd George to devote greater resources to staffing than he had intended, over-riding financial concerns at the Treasury. So his appointment as Permanent Secretary of the new Ministry of Health can only have been intended as one in which he would continue to be a forceful advocate of progressive policies and bigger government. Indeed, if he had not died of pneumonia only a year later, the deviousness commented upon by his critics and admirers alike would undoubtedly have been aroused against the Conservative attacks on the ambitious reform plans of the new ministry.

George Newman, 1870-1948

For George Newman, studying medicine in Edinburgh then at Cambridge was an alternative to continuing the missionary work of his Quaker father. In 1900, after turning down the post of government bacteriologist in the India Office, he moved from university teaching to local government public health work, and in 1906 produced his seminal report *Infant Mortality: A Social Problem*. His successful solution of a milk depot in Finsbury Park was indicative of a shift from curative to preventive medicine he would advocate throughout his career. It also attracted the attention of Beatrice Webb, who introduced Newman to Morant, who in turn appointed him as the first Chief Medical Officer at the Board of Education in 1907.

Newman headed up the introduction of the School Medical Service from the Board of Education, something seen by many in the medical profession as a worrying expansion of the state. He was also involved, again alongside Morant, with the implementation of National Health Insurance - ensuring institutional treatment for tuberculosis was included where no other hospital services were. This fell far short of the universal healthservice he wanted, but like many progressives he saw it as an important step in the right direction.

Like Morant he turned down a tempting government offer away from the Board of Education out of a commitment to the pioneering reforms he could implement from there. Unlike Morant, however, the First World War saw him in demand elsewhere. He worked on the establishment of factory canteens as an alternative to less sober venues, measures to maintain the health of industrial war workers and the setting up of Quaker ambulance services on the continent.

His appointment as the first Chief Medical Officer at the Ministry of Health ensured the three highest positions in the new department were held by men with strong track records in delivering radical reforms. Yet he soon found himself without his allies. His primary contribution thereafter was to national debate, through his influential annual reports on the health of the nation, as well as a great many books and lectures. He died an old man, after a career dedicated to the cause of unified, universal and preventive medical services, just weeks
before the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948.

Addison, Morant and Newman were Lloyd George’s ministry men - the radical reformers chosen to set up the government department at the heart of his ultimate failure to provide homes fit for heroes. Each of these men was influential in a different way. But none were second-rate appointments.

---

Cross-posted on the author’s personal website

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

Original version