

Shell-shocked: trauma, the emotions and the First World War

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I was 16 or 17 when I first read Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, and 26 when I completed my PhD on shell shock in First World War Britain. It would be doing more than one of my university lecturers, as well as Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, a disservice to say that I ended up working on shell shock *just* because I liked *Regeneration* – but my career would almost certainly have developed along different lines had I not read the book. There may not be many historians who would attribute this degree of influence to *Regeneration*, but it is nevertheless treated with great seriousness in histories of war trauma. All major histories of shell shock published since the mid 1990s have made reference (favourable, critical, or simply thoughtful) to Barker's novel.⁽¹⁾ I'll return to the possible reasons for historians' obsession with *Regeneration*

at the end of the review, but for now it should just be noted that it is really quite remarkable. Imagine, for example, that for the past 20 years every historian of the reign of Charles II had felt duty-bound to comment on Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989), as fine an example of historical fiction as *Regeneration*: it seems unlikely. Even if we limit the field to recent historical fiction concerned with the First World War, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), published contemporaneously with the *Regeneration* trilogy, has not caught on among historians to anything like the same extent, despite achieving significant critical and popular success. The singular status of *Regeneration* provides one way into understanding the relationship between history, historical fiction, and historians.

But not right away. This is because, much as I hate to admit it, historians aren't actually all that important to understanding the success of Barker's novel. When I was 16 I was not a historian, no matter what my history teacher tried to tell her charges, and *Regeneration* got under my skin not because I was given to musing on the boundaries between history and fiction, but because it was a good read. In fact, it wasn't the 'real' history in the novel, which centres on the protest against the war made by poet Siegfried Sassoon and his subsequent 'treatment' at Craiglockhart War Hospital, by the eminent neurologist-cum-anthropologist-cum-psychologist W. H. R. Rivers, which appealed to me at all. I loved *Regeneration* because I loved Billy Prior, a fictional character. Prior is a working-class officer from the north of England, intelligent, ambitious, and above all, awkward. He is not immediately charming, or even that likeable at the first encounter, although he soon wins the reader round. Prior is not cut from the same cloth as aristocratic Sassoon or middle-class Wilfred Owen. His England is not the England of rolling green hills and honey still for tea, but a place of crowded streets, grey skies, and grim poverty. This alone makes him stand out in the pantheon of First World War popular characters, real and fictional (there are accounts by and about working-class soldiers' experiences in the war, but you're not likely to stumble across them at GCSE level, or at least, I never did).

Prior's working-class identity is one of the defining facets of his personality. The other is the fundamental ambiguity which inheres within him. From the first, Prior confounds our expectations. We know nothing of him except that he is a second-lieutenant, and that his main symptom is mutism. He is described as 'a thin, fair-haired young man of twenty-two with high cheekbones, a short, blunt nose and a supercilious expression' (p. 41). This combination of attributes and attitudes conveys, somehow, an impression of toffishness. As he cannot speak, Prior's side of this initial 'conversation' with psychologist Rivers is conducted in writing, but it still takes on the aspect of a confrontation. He tells Rivers that there is nothing physically wrong with him; he challenges Rivers' judgment that the test for analgesia of the throat does not hurt; when Rivers suggests that Prior writes in block capitals because it is less revealing, Prior passes the pad to him and judges Rivers' own handwriting; he repeatedly insists that he cannot remember any of the events which led to his breakdown; and finally, he turns his back to Rivers and refuses to respond to his questions any longer, writing simply 'NO MORE WORDS'. None of this is typical patient behaviour. In this initial encounter, Prior is infuriating, passive-aggressive, and vulnerable. We know nothing about him beyond that he is a man of contradictions.

The next time Rivers meets with him, Prior's voice has returned. We revise our first impression of Prior at the same time as Rivers, and through his eyes and ears:

A Northern accent, not ungrammatical, but with the vowel sounds distinctly flattened, and the faintest trace of sibilance. Hearing Prior's voice for the first time had the curious effect of making him *look* different. Thinner, more defensive. And, at the same time, a lot tougher. A little, spitting, sharp-boned alley cat (p. 49).

Prior's background is working-class, but his 'genteel' mother has instilled in him a fierce ambition. Before the war, he was a clerk in a shipping office, a white collar post which he found unrewarding, but which nevertheless would have constituted a step up in the world; during the war, he rose up through the ranks to officer status. Yet he does not belong to the world he now inhabits; he is alive to the snobbery he encounters, and often scathing about the officer class. He is, according to his father, 'neither fish nor fowl' (p. 57). At the

deepest level, though, Prior remains working-class. Rivers tells us that officers rarely suffer from hysterical symptoms such as mutism, whereas these are common among privates. The form of Prior's breakdown – the symptom through which his psyche chose to manifest his pain – fixes his class identity more firmly than his accent, the colour of his shirts, his nostalgia at the smell of steak frying, or any of the other myriad tiny markers of social class which litter the pages of *Regeneration*. Class, Barker seems to be saying, exists beneath the skin.

Barker's portrayal of the distribution of symptoms along lines of social class is an accurate reading of Rivers, and of the histories of shell shock which draw heavily on his work. By making Prior mute, she accepts Rivers' testimony that officers and ranking men suffer from different forms of shell shock, but she does not accept his account of the reasons for this difference. Rivers argued that war neurosis stemmed from a conflict between self-preservation and duty, and that different symptoms represented different means of attempting to solve or repress this conflict. The hysterical symptom resolved this conflict by incapacitating the sufferer and thereby removing him from military service. This was, Rivers stated, a 'crude solution of the conflict between instinct and duty', which was unlikely to satisfy officers owing to their 'more complex and varied' mental life and the moral standards inculcated by public schools, particularly the repression of fear. (2) Historians have tended to let Rivers off the hook for these statements of class prejudice remarkably easily, but not so Prior:

'Are you serious? You honestly believe that that *gaggle* of noodle-brained half-wits down there has a complex mental life? Oh, *Rivers*'.

Barker's presentation of Rivers throughout the trilogy tends towards the hagiographical, but through Prior, she also challenges his assumptions in a way which few historians have either dared or considered. I still silently cheer whenever I read this passage.

For Prior, class infuses everything: it shapes his sense of who he is and who he isn't, it determines who he will love, and it is revealed through his accent and through his inability to speak when he breaks down. If hysteria is the visible symbol of pain, emotion written on the body, it is also, in Prior's case, a revelation of his primal class identity. Barker understands that class is inescapable and inseparable from other aspects of life, including bodily experience. This is a knowledge she shares with Joanna Bourke, whose *Dismembering the Male: men's bodies, Britain and the Great War* was published in 1996, a year after the final part of the *Regeneration* trilogy. Bourke's ambitious aim in this book is to explore 'the impact of the First World War on the male body', defining the body as 'the subject of both imagination and experience'. It is a cultural history, which takes as its starting point the view that 'bodies lived, were imagined and died' within a socially constructed 'frame' composed of 'signs and declarations of age, generation, class and ethnicity' (p. 11). Yet throughout the book, class looms much larger than these other aspects of identity, almost deserving equal billing with the body in the book's title: the social is a vital, ever-present, acknowledged part of the cultural here. Among other things, *Dismembering the Male* therefore offers a tantalising glimpse of one of the ways in which cultural history should have developed, and might still.

Unlike *Regeneration*, I have no strong sense of personal involvement with *Dismembering the Male*. At an early stage in my acquaintance with the book, I realised that ostentatiously reading it on a train is a good way to ensure that no-one sits next to you, but that's about it as far as anecdotes go. Somewhat shamefully, I had never read it cover-to-cover until I was asked to write this review, despite first dipping into it as an undergraduate and probably getting through more than half of it in disjointed segments over the intervening decade-and-a-bit. This was a mistake on my part, as the book is definitely more than the sum of its parts. It makes an important contribution to well-established historiographical debates on the effects of the First World War on British society, but it would also make an interesting and refreshing read for someone unfamiliar with these debates. Reading it as a whole, I realised the extent to which *Dismembering the Male* has influenced subsequent writing on masculinity and British experiences of the First World War. Bourke emphasises the importance of civilian experiences in shaping responses to the war, the extent to which men

retained their civilian identities despite the temporary adoption of the warrior role, and their continuing attachment to home throughout the war. She recognises that the war operated on different groups of men in different ways, and acknowledges its devastating effects for many, but nevertheless sews it into the fabric of modern British history rather than treating it as a thing apart. In recent years, these themes have been picked up and explored further by historians as different from Bourke and from each other as Peter Barham, Ilana Bet-El, Jessica Meyer, and Michael Roper.⁽³⁾ This is some achievement.

Dismembering the Male is, then, an inspirational book in many ways. It is also sometimes a frustrating book, mainly as a result of its wide remit: men have men's bodies and like gender, the body is everywhere. It is not always evident what makes this book a history of men's bodies rather than simply of men and what they felt, thought, and did. The book is divided into five chapters: 'Mutilating', which examines disability and war; 'Malingering', which explores feigned illness in the civil and military spheres; 'Bonding', which deals with comradeship and with the effects of war on heterosexual relationships; 'Inspecting', which investigates military, governmental, and voluntary physical fitness campaigns; and 'Re-Membering', which focuses on the corpse and the evocation of the dead in ceremonies and rites. All of these chapters deal with men's bodies, but it is not always apparent that certain experiences are best studied via the body. 'Bonding', for example, can be achieved through bodily activities, but it is conventionally defined as an emotional or psychological attachment: physicality is an accidental rather than an essential element of bonding, or at best it is an integral part only insofar as all actions of embodied creatures have a corporeal component. The body was more obviously at stake in discussions of malingering, but even here it was really the shirker's will, character, or personality which was perceived to be at fault, and which had to be acted upon.

The book is undeniably 'baggy', but this is an unavoidable consequence of its ambition. It is difficult to imagine how a book on the effects of the First World War on men's bodies would not end up straining at the seams of its defined subject matter. Ultimately, the focus on material experience is a strength rather than a weakness, as it means that Bourke never strays far from the lived realities of male existence. Cultural history which operates purely on the level of representation and construction often feels curiously divorced from what real people thought and felt, with little sense of the relation of the text to the texture of life, but this is never a danger here. The book is based on the correspondence, diaries and memoirs of 'ordinary' servicemen, rather than the literary productions of more famous combatant authors: it does for the history of the First World War what Barker did for its fiction when she invented Prior. These men do not flit bloodlessly between discursive subjectivities, or slot themselves into the masculine ideals or warrior stereotypes beloved of cultural historians. They live and die in earthy idioms which make us laugh, cry, wince or gasp with them. Take, for example, Cockney soldier John William Rowarth's tales of his wartime sexual education:

the platoon started to talk of their love conquests, and one of my mates Said to me, Casey have you ever dipped your wick, what do you mean, I aint got no wick to dip, when the laughter had subsided, they put it more blunty had I ever made love to a girl, when I said no, oh you must be a bloody virgin, and when we get to France we will soon remedy that, and one of the blokes said if the French tarts are as tall as our Irish girls, Casey will have to lug a brick to stand on ...

When Rowarth did meet a girl before going abroad, she was shocked to discover that he was a virgin. He did little to remedy the situation when he asked ‘a Virgin, wats a virgin, the only Virgin I know of is the Blessed Virgin Mary, since I have been in the Army, I have heard so many new words which frankly I don’t understand. the Girl then said, lets change the subject’ (pp. 159–60). This is rich stuff, which can tell us much about homosocial and heterosexual relations in the early 20th century: but most of all, hapless Rowarth stands in stark contrast to the visions of impregnable masculine domination elaborated by the proto-fascist Freikorps members analysed in Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, which for a very long time was the only serious study of masculinity and the First World War. *Dismembering the Male* is full of stories such as Rowarth’s, which convey the irreducible individuality of war experience but also, stitched together, form a colourful patchwork social history of men at war.

Bourke writes history and Barker writes fiction, but both tell stories which were, when first published, at odds with how most of us imagined the First World War. They are both also stories which are very much products of their time. *Dismembering the Male* still repays reading today – very few historians dealing with similar aspects of the war have matched its scope or achievement since – but it is also rooted in the historiographical trends of the mid 1990s. Bourke partly inspired further historical research on masculinity, the body, and war, but her book is also a product of existing interest in these areas, and the alacrity with which her lead was followed suggests a field ripe for harvesting. There’s nothing odd about this: the discipline of history works through the continual revision of old arguments and realization of new perspectives, and sooner or later gender and the body will seem old hat. Yet although cultural history has its critics, no serious historian would now condemn Bourke for writing a history that is informed by the disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) concerns of its time. Barker, on the other hand, has been seen as fair game, with historians happy to censure her for projecting the concerns of 1990s liberals and lefties onto her wartime protagonists.⁽⁴⁾ There is a case to be made that, at least in *Regeneration*, this isn’t quite what she’s doing: after all, she is writing about a soldier who protested against the war and a doctor who was transformed from an instinctive Conservative into a potential Labour candidate by the experience of war. This isn’t projection so much as selecting a story which chimed with more widespread concerns at the time of writing the book.

These criticisms suggest a lack of sympathy for the aims of historical fiction, which are not the aims of history. Barker uses historical fiction in a now well-established way, drawing on the exoticism of the past and attempting to balance it with an appeal to the apparently universal aspects of the human psyche, and alternately using this foreignness as a vehicle for greater understanding of the present. *Regeneration* is a literary work about literary figures (Sassoon, Owen, Graves) from a war which has always been approached by general readers through its poetry and fiction as much, if not more than, through its histories. It appeals to those who enjoy reading the poems, novels, and memoirs of the First World War, as well as to historians interested in the shaping and re-shaping of the memory of the war in literature and popular culture. It helps, of course, that the tale of Sassoon’s protest is a cracking story even without the intervention of the novelist; it was a staple of histories of shell shock before *Regeneration* was published. For all its literariness, though, *Regeneration* is also a novel which asks questions which are both ethical and historical. As Barker dissects and probes the ethical issues raised by Sassoon’s protest, the reader is forced to engage with a number of very big questions around the ‘justified’ costs of war, the rights of the soldier to protest, and the purpose of military psychiatry. These were all issues which were definitely on the liberal-left agenda in the late 1980s and 1990s, but strangely enough also caused soul-searching among those involved in waging a world war. Long before Barker came along, Freud described military doctors as ‘like machine guns’ driving fugitives back to the front.⁽⁵⁾ OK, *Regeneration* isn’t A. J. P. Taylor, but it’s not Georgette Heyer either.

Most historians’ comments on *Regeneration* are less critical than engaged, but they are fascinated by the novel for the same reason: it is the unusual proportion of fact to fiction in *Regeneration* which really gets under my professional colleagues’ skins. Siegfried Sassoon really did protest against the war in 1917, and after some string-pulling by his friend Robert Graves, he really was sent to Craiglockhart for treatment by W. H. R. Rivers. It needs none of what Hilary Mantel calls ‘the novelist’s arithmetic’ to manoeuvre a strange meeting with Owen: it happened, and we have Sassoon’s handwriting all over the drafts of ‘Anthem for

Doomed Youth' to prove it. Most of the less familiar characters in *Regeneration* are also real: the doctors Bryce, Brock, Head and Yealland all treated shell shock and published details of their work in wartime medical journals, while the histories of patients such as Burns and Anderson correspond to case studies in Rivers' published writings. Of the major characters in the novel, only Billy Prior and Sarah Lumb are entirely fictional creations. The novel liberally quotes from historical 'documents', including the *Times* and the poetry of Owen and Sassoon. Barker not only portrays real people and events, she constructs a narrative which takes its place among several other factual, fictional, and semi-fictional versions of the same events by the protagonists, of varying length, depth and reliability: Sassoon's fictionalized memoir *Sherston's Progress* (1936); his 'straight' autobiography *Siegfried's Journey* (1946); Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That* (1929); Rivers' *Conflict and Dream* (1923); and Owen's letters. The author's note at the end of the novel also points readers to two histories which Barker drew on, Eric Leed's *No Man's Land: combat and identity in World War I* (1979) and Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: women, madness and English culture, 1830–1980* (1985).

Barker is not the only novelist to draw heavily on real events and historical texts, or to direct readers towards the histories she has used, but she is clearly wandering into the historian's territory here. After all, what do historians do but construct an account of events based on historical documents and on the work of previous historians? Although all but the most extreme postmodernist would agree that there is a clear difference between fiction and history, the lines are not as clearly drawn as it might first appear. Barker does not only tell a story, she implicitly provides an analysis of events and judgments on issues such as the legitimacy of war; she continually nudges the reader towards meaning. Historians might do this in different ways (most of us accept that we're not allowed to make things up, whereas this is part of the novelist's job description), but they never simply write 'what happened'; they seek to explain it, and although these explanations are mostly explicit, they too unconsciously nudge readers towards meaning in ways which are less overt, including imposing certain boundaries on their subject matter, such as the period covered, the type of sources used, the selection of material, and the interpretations presented to the audience. When Bourke chooses to use the unpublished diaries, letters, and memoirs of ordinary soldiers, she privileges a particular perspective on the war above others, and her choices are doubtless informed by a political standpoint which filters into her sense of what history should be and who it serves. This is not so different from Barker's invention of Prior to tell a story she believes needs to be told, although one is a project of invention and the other a project of recovery.

Again, though, the two types of project are not as rigidly separated as might first appear. Imaginative reconstruction is a tool of the historian as well as the novelist: no document explains every dimension of a particular event, and no document can be taken at face value. Historians circumvent these problems by consulting as wide a range of sources as possible, comparing these sources to determine the probable reliability or particular perspective of each, and acknowledging the constraints and potentialities of these different sources in their published works. By incorporating elements of the accounts of all protagonists, Barker again does something that historians do, albeit on a lesser scale. It is this blending of fact and fiction, with no way for the uninitiated to separate truth from imagination, which provokes reaction from historians; but it is also what appeals to readers. Having spent years researching shell shock, I can argue with confidence that some aspects of Barker's interpretation are not supported by the primary evidence: but I also know that my meticulously researched scholarly articles on the construction of diagnostic categories in wartime medical literature, worthy as they are in the context in which they were intended to be read, are not likely to inspire any 16-year-olds to spend years delving into trauma in the First World War.

This is not to say that history does not kindle the imagination, or achieve great things. It is evident from reading Barker that academic histories have influenced her interpretative framework; I wonder how many history undergraduates taking modules on the First World War have encountered Eric Leed or Elaine Showalter on their reading lists years after reading *Regeneration*, and found their arguments uncannily familiar? It is rather that academic history tends to act on minds prepared in other ways, by family stories, GCSE English Literature coursework, the History Channel, and books like *Regeneration*. I am not suggesting a linear progression from historical fiction to 'real' history, as though fiction is for children and

fact for adults, but that one of the purposes of historical fiction is to spark an interest in history among new audiences. These readers will approach academic histories with fresh minds, and read different historical novels with a deeper understanding of history; this is a cycle which can continue for life. Novelists like Barker feed academic history, and history in turn feeds back into historical fiction. They are not in competition with each other, but locked in a relationship which is often satisfying but which sometimes chafes. This is perhaps because, from my side of the fence, the restrictions on the historian seem tighter, and the imagination of the novelist both awe-inspiring and envy-provoking. Historical novelists operate in the no man's land between history and fiction, where historians fear to tread. To walk with the dead unfettered by footnotes seems a terrible kind of freedom; this may be why historians persistently return to *Regeneration*, as though it is an itch which can't be scratched.

Notes

1. A. Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), p. 68; P. Leese, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 173–5; B. Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914–1994* (London, 2002), p. xx and p. 109; P. Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven, CT, 2004), p. 388, fn 3; E. Jones and S. Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove, East Sussex, 2005), p. 60; F. Reid, *Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914–1930* (London, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. W. H. R. Rivers, 'War-neurosis and military training', *Mental Hygiene*, 2 (October 1918), 513–33, 516–7.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. P. Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven, CT, 2004); I. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Lost Legions of the Great War* (Stroud, 1999); J. Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009); M. Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. B. Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914–1994* (London, 2002), p. xx; B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 76. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Brunner, *Freud and the Politics of Psychoanalysis* (Oxford, 1995), p. 121.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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