

“Documenting Shell Shock”: LAURE Research Story Essay

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Since the fall of my junior year here at Miami, I have spent much of my time devoted to studying the topic of shell shock in the United States, specifically examining the ways in which newspapers facilitated the spread of information— and misinformation— about the diagnosis during the World War I years. My research journey began in Dr. Andrew Offenburger’s course “Raiders of the Lost Archive”, where we were tasked with locating a research topic of our choice using the online newspaper repository *Chronicling America* as our main source base. Fascinated by the idea of how wars can produce a sense of collective national trauma— a topic introduced to me in the “History of the World Wars” course I took the previous year with Dr. Stephen Norris— I decided to explore the relationship between the collective trauma of modern warfare and the psychological trauma of shell shock. This project has since evolved into my undergraduate thesis for the History Honors Program, titled “Documenting Shell Shock: Developments in the Public Perception of Psychological Trauma in the United States, 1915-1922.” The thesis provides a chronological examination of shell shock in the United States through newspapers, beginning with the earliest reports out of Great Britain in 1915 and continuing into the interwar period to examine the lasting effects of wartime trauma on American recovery efforts. The first two chapters are included in my submission.

My primary source research has taken place almost entirely using *Chronicling America*. I began in early 1915— when Charles S. Myers coined the term shell shock— and have been working my way through the newspapers year by year. Using the key term “shell shock” as well as any other term that may have been used in its place, such as war neurosis or combat stress, I have located hundreds of articles from varying publishers discussing shell shock symptoms,

treatments, medical opinions, and individual cases. As my research has progressed through the end of the war, I've been able to identify examples of both continuity and change over time in the way that newspapers discussed shell shock, demonstrating an evolving public perception as more and more American soldiers and families were affected by the disease.

While I have largely relied on *Chronicling America* for primary sources, the Miami University Libraries databases have helped me immensely in locating the secondary sources necessary to build my historiographical understanding. Using the keyword search tools through OneSearch, I was able to discover the works of historian Annessa Stagner, whose extensive research on shell shock serves as the foundation of much of my own thesis. I reference her article "Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA During and After the First World War" many times throughout my writing, as it is the most comprehensive analysis of shell shock in American print culture that I have found thus far. Other examples of her work that I use, all of which I found using the MU Libraries database, include the article "Recovering the Masculine Hero: Post-World War I Shell Shock in American Culture" and the chapter "Making Broken Bodies Whole in a Shell-Shocked World" from the book *Body and Nation: The Global Realm of U.S. Body Politics in the Twentieth Century*.

Throughout my research, library resources have also assisted me in learning about the experience of shell shock outside of the United States and further shaping my understanding of how different nations adjusted to the emerging mental health crisis. When I first began developing my thesis during the spring of my junior year, I initially thought that I would shift my geographic focus away from the United States and instead study the ANZAC troops of Australia and New Zealand. I found the book *Madness and the Military: Australia's Experience of Shell Shock in the Great War* by Michael Tyquin, which I was able to access using the library's

physical collections, extremely helpful in this regard. This book raised important questions about the role of both colonialism and nationalism in the shell shock narrative and— although my research focus has since shifted back to the United States— it has provided me with a more well rounded understanding of shell shock as a global phenomenon.

Similarly, a book review of Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson's *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* that I found through OneSearch has led me to investigate how the American public reacted to the many reports of shell shock coming out of Great Britain prior to U.S. entry into the war in 1917. The overall ambiguity surrounding shell shock at the time contributed to accusations of malingering and a harsh stigma of cowardice connected to the disease— so much so that there were instances where British soldiers were executed for desertion despite being diagnosed with shell shock by military physicians and demonstrating clear psychological distress. I use one specific example from *Blindfold and Alone*, the case of Eric Skeffington Poole, as the introductory narrative for my thesis. I believe that his story represents the tragic consequences of misinformation that I seek to highlight in my research. The overall failure from both military personnel and medical officials to recognize shell shock as a genuine form of psychological trauma proved to be deadly for him and others, worsened only by the subsequent dissemination of that misinformation through print media.

This research project has taught me a great deal about the process of “doing” history— not only has it allowed me to develop my research and historical analysis skills, but it has also shown me the many resources available to myself and other researchers to aid us in producing meaningful scholarship. As I finish my undergraduate time here at Miami, I'm excited for the opportunity to share the product of over a year of research, editing, and coffee-fueled writing

sessions in the basement of King Library with a wider audience, while hopefully using the past to spark modern discussions regarding how we talk about mental health.