

REVIEW

Exhibition Review of *Wounded: Conflict, Casualties and Care* Science Museum, London (29th June 2016–15th January 2018)

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“Wounded: Conflict, Casualties and Care” is an exhibition being held at the London Science Museum. It is focused on the medical aspects and challenges experienced during the First World War. The exhibition also centres on the social implications that returning wounded or disabled soldiers faced, the charity efforts that began in response and the modern parallels today. This review summarizes the exhibition while highlighting its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords: Exhibition review; World War I; Science Museum; Medicine; Conflict

The summer of 2016 marked the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, one of the most notable conflicts of World War I. In commemoration of this centennial, the Science Museum has created the exhibition, *Wounded: Conflict, Casualties and Care*. This exhibit explores the advancement of medical technology and knowledge that occurred as a result of the First World War (1914 to 1918). Its focus is on the casualties incurred by soldiers at the Front, the medical response to care for these soldiers, and the social impact of wounded and disfigured soldiers upon their return to Britain.

Wounded is divided into three broad sections, the first of which introduces the exhibition visitors to the medical implications of war. This focuses on various aspects including the diverse range of injury that would

occur in battle, from bullets and shrapnel to chemical gases, how field medics and army hospitals treated such diverse casualties, and the practical logistics of caring for wounded soldiers both abroad and at home. The second part of the exhibition focuses on the British home front and the social implications of returning soldiers in regard to their care, future treatment and adjustment to life after sustaining serious injury. In this section, attention is given to the philanthropic efforts that were started in aid of soldiers and the laying of groundwork for new or infant medical subfields such as plastic surgery and mental illness. The final section looks at the interplay of conflict and medicine in the modern period, drawing on parallels between war in the 21st century and World War I.

The exhibition is rooted in science and technology and displays an array of objects from the era including medical devices for

both the field and the hospital, first-aid kits issued to British soldiers, and more mundane objects linked to charity efforts at home such as pin badges and adverts. Photographs of wounded soldiers at the Front and at home are used to visually demonstrate the various types of injury soldiers endured. Videos are also used to highlight topics such as post-traumatic stress disorder and the parallels to modern warfare.

The main focus of *Wounded* is the rapid development of medical tools and techniques in response to the realities of a total war. This includes blood transfusion, radiography and other detection techniques to locate debris in wounds, and various forms of surgery. Attention is also given to chemical warfare, as mustard and chlorine gas were first weaponized during this time (Fitzgerald 2008). Along with objects such as period specific gas masks, the exhibit also displays photographs of scarred soldiers, which helps to further explain and highlight the new danger gas attacks posed. Interestingly, the logistics of wartime medicine are also presented. Diagrams show how wounded soldiers were moved from the battlefield to the medical base behind the front and eventually to trains or ships outfitted as hospitals. Photographs of medical dogs provide anecdotal evidence of how these animals were trained to find wounded soldiers on the front, tear off a piece of their uniform and bring it back to the trench alerting the soldiers comrades.

However, it is surprising to see that *Wounded* is not entirely devoted to medical science and technology, as there is a heavy social component. Small items such as the lucky charms that soldiers put their faith in for protection, and descriptions of the soldiers' fear of 'bad wounds' emphasize how these young men faced the ever-present prospect of injury, pain and death. The social implications of casualty and conflict are further explored when the exhibition turns attention towards the British home front. Here, charities and philanthropic efforts, some backed with Royal patronage, are put

in the spotlight through various objects used to raise funds to care for wounded soldiers.

This focus on the social aspects of returning wounded soldiers and their life after the war is one of the exhibition's strengths. Many of the soldiers returning to Britain as early as the autumn of 1914, only a few months since the war's beginning, faced the arduous task of learning to live and cope with new disfigurements and disabilities. Institutions emerged in response to soldiers' rehabilitation and for the first time in modern history, the public was exposed to the human cost of war on a scale never witnessed before. *Wounded* brings these aspects into focus by displaying prosthetic limbs, false eyes and facial apparatus' used to conceal disfigurements from shrapnel and gas. These objects push exhibition visitors to consider the First World War from another perspective aside from medical science. Instead they are confronted with the impact of pain and injury on a person's life. The exhibition's execution of this perspective is bolstered by its presentation being given within the broader context of the early 20th century. The approaches and solutions to the various afflictions of the soldiers are never shown in negative ways, nor are their reference or allusion to modern knowledge or practice. By keeping within the context of World War I, visitors to the exhibition are exposed to casualty and conflict as it was experienced at the time. Furthermore, this contextual presentation is later well juxtaposed by the exhibition's concluding display on modern conflicts. Despite the difference between the science and technology of the 20th and 21st centuries, *Wounded* shows that parallels still exist in terms of the types of *wounds* that are inflicted.

The exhibition's wide display of objects, photographs and diagrams encompasses what would be expected when discussing and showcasing medical science and technology during the First World War. However, the exhibition would have benefited from further exploration of the impact on medical staff both during and after the war. The perspectives of

doctors and nurses on the various types of injury, technological advancement, and soldier's disability and disfigurement would add another layer to the framework that *Wounded* is centered on. This could have been accomplished with personal accounts from wartime medical personnel in either audio or video format and centered on not only their experience treating soldiers, but also their views of conflict and medicine after 1918.

Wounded: Conflict, Casualties and Care, explores medicine in the context of the First World War. The exhibition offers insights into the science and technology that laid the basis for modern medical practice and encourages visitors to remember the dangers that soldiers experienced in battle. *Wounded* is being held at the Science Museum and is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as the Eranda Rothschild Foundation. Admission is free and the exhibition runs

until 15th January 2018. Further information regarding the exhibition and its subject matter may be found at the Science Museum's website and blog (Science Museum 2017).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.


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