

# Violent Intrusions

## Wound Care in First World War Medical Accounts

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‘When one shoots at a man it makes a hole,  
and the doctor must make seven others’

Enid Bagnold, *A Diary Without Dates*, 103

‘When I first approached him, he implored me not to touch him “at any price” [...] I was called an “assassin” and also on several occasions, a “brute”’.

‘Lerondeau can as yet only murmur a half articulate phrase: “Mustn’t hurt me”’

‘Tricot, who had allowed us to cut into his chest without an anaesthetic with tears: “No, no more operations! I won’t have any more operations”’

““Doctor, you never hurt me so much before as you have done this time””

‘ “Don’t pull off the dressings! I won’t have it. Do you hear, doctor? Don’t pull. I won’t have it” Then he would begin to tremble nervously all over his body... “He’s pulling, he’s pulling...Oh, the cruel man! I won’t have it, I won’t have it” ’

Georges Duhamel, *The New Book of Martyrs*, 59.

‘took a curette, a little scoop, and scooped away the dead flesh, the dead muscles, the dead nerves, the dead blood-vessels. And so many blood-vessels being dead, being scooped away by that sharp curette, how could the blood circulate in the top half of that flaccid thigh? It couldn’t. Afterwards, into *the deep, yawning wound*, they put many compresses of gauze, soaked in the carbolic acid, which acid burned deep into the germs of the gas gangrene, and killed them, and killed much good tissue besides.’

Ellen N. La Motte, *The Backwash of War*, 52.

‘We **conspire** against his right to die. We **experiment** with his bones, his muscles, his sinews, his blood. We **dig** into the yawning mouths of his wounds. Helpless openings, they let us into the secret places of his body. We **plunge** deep into his body. We make discoveries within his body. To the shame of the havoc of his limbs we add the insult of our curiosity and the curse of our purpose, the purpose to remake him. We lay odds on his chances of escape, and we **combat** with Death, his saviour....He lays himself out. He bares himself to our knives. His mind is annihilated. He pours out his blood, unconscious. His red blood is spilled and pours over the table onto the floor while he sleeps’

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, 80.

‘There was a glass container fixed to the head of the bed full of [the solution]. From it a long rubber tube ran down to where the man was lying. Then just by his wound the rubber tube ran into a glass tube that was divided into maybe as many as five different nozzles. On each of these was fitted a little tube and all these were packed into various parts of the wound. They were kept in place with bandages; and then a clamp was fixed onto the biggest rubber tube so that the right quantity dripped through the wound.’

Rebecca West, *War Nurse: The True Story of a Woman Who Lived, Loved and Suffered on the Western Front*, 60-2.

‘A large area of raw flesh lay revealed, with two pieces of rubber tubing embedded in it for drainage purposes. Each tube was drawn out with a little glooping noise and dropped into a dish. The mackintosh sheet was now slipped beneath the leg, and Sister lifted the irrigator high in her left hand, and, holding the nozzle with her right, directed a stream of saline on to the wound. Joan held the kidney-dish, and every time it came near to overflowing emptied its contents of brown water into the pail.’

Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 196-197.



‘Then, things become very trying. I feel at once that whatever I do, Gregoire will suffer. I uncover the wound in his thigh, and he screams. I wash the wound carefully, and he screams. I probe the wound, from which I remove small particles of bone, very gently, and he utters unimaginable yells. I see his tongue trembling in his open mouth. His hands tremble in the hands that hold them. I have an impression that every fibre of his body trembles, that the raw flesh of the wound trembles and retracts. In spite of my determination, this misery affects me, and I wonder whether I too shall begin to tremble sympathetically’

Duhamel, 170.

‘We have having awfully heavy dressings now. One that I did today almost made me cry, and I don’t cry easily, either. The lad was a Canadian, about twenty-two, with a frightful arm; elbow joint smashed, and the whole arm stiff and swollen, and full of gas gangrene. In getting off the dressing I *had* to move it some, and though I was careful as I could be, I could hear the bones crunching and grating inside. Then I had to pull off hard, dry sponges, and haul out yards of packing that kept catching on the splintered bone. The lad just turned his head away and never made a sound – didn’t even grit his teeth. Once, accidentally touching a bare nerve-end with my forceps, I hurt him terribly and he turned his head to see what I was doing. I saw that his eyes were full of tears and the pupils enormously dilated with pain. But not a word out of him. No groaning. No “Please wait a minute, Sister.” Just patient silence. I choked for an instant, and then burst out, “Oh, I’m awfully sorry, lad! I didn’t want to hurt you”. And he said, so gently, “It’s quite all right, Sister. Carry on”

Helen Dore Boylston, *Sister: War Diary of a Nurse*, 148-149.

‘It was all very fine for the theatre people to fill his shoulder chock full of pluggings while he lay unconscious on the table; they had packed it as you might stuff linen into a bag: it was another matter to get it out. I did not dare touch his hand with that too-easy compassion which I have noticed here or whisper to him, ‘It’s nearly over...’ as the forceps pulled at the stiffened gauze. It wasn’t nearly over. Six inches deep, the gauze stuck, crackling under the pull of the forceps, blood and pus leaping forward from the cavities as the steady hand of the doctor pulled inch after inch of the gauze to the light. And when one hole was emptied there was another, five in all’

Bagnold, 140-141.

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