

## 'Poor devils without noses and jaws': facial wounds of the Great War

Kerry Neale | Australian War Memorial and University of NSW, Canberra

The Great War affected the lives of thousands of soldiers through severe facial wounds and subsequent disfigurement. With improved medical treatment available in the field and advances in the transportation of the wounded, many soldiers who would have died from such wounds in earlier conflicts were now surviving and requiring further treatment. These men, though, are largely absent from histories of the war, their experiences overshadowed by the apparently less confronting image of a 'stoic' amputee or blinded veteran or the 'pitiful' shellshock sufferer.

But were disfigured men 'poor devils' with little hope for the future or do we just need to learn more of their experiences? The Queen's Hospital in Sidcup, England, was established in August 1917 for the treatment of severe facial wounds and the work carried out there set the precedent for the future of maxillofacial reconstructive surgery. In this talk I will examine a number of case studies from the hospital to highlight the medical innovation and support that was available to these 'poor devils'.



*Kerry Neale works in the National Collection Branch of the Australian War Memorial and has just submitted her doctoral thesis through the University of New South Wales, Canberra*

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While the medical innovations made at the hospital make fascinating research in their own right, my research also encompasses the experiences of these men once they left the supportive environment of the Queen's Hospital. I investigate the ways in which the return of disfigured soldiers from the Great War altered the social and political landscape of post-war society. Representations of wounded soldiers in the press, and even letters sent home from the soldiers themselves, did little to prepare the public for this particularly confronting group of veterans.

While advances in medical techniques enabled the faces of these soldiers to be repaired, the level of repair possible varied with the severity of the wounds; many veterans were left permanently disfigured.

My talk explores the obstacles confronted by these veterans on their return home – of finding employment, returning to loved ones and coming to terms with their changed appearance – within the context of the return of other groups of Great War veterans to post-war society.

What has become apparent to me is that the treatment available was far from rudimentary – they were not necessarily all 'poor devils' – and I argue that, while some men did struggle in their post-war life, many more found the resilience to surmount the tragedy seemingly inherent in their wounds.

**Manning Clark House, 11 Tasmania Circle Forrest at 5:30pm, Monday, 26 May.**

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**Light supper; please advise dietary requirements**