An American Doctor at Graylingwell: Recollections of Lt. Bernard (Ben) J. Gallagher, MD.

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Introduction

The following article lets us focus on the autobiographical narrative of an American medic sent to work at Graylingwell War Hospital following the entry of the USA into the war in 1917. Lt. Gallagher’s narrative, *The Cellars of Marcelcave: a Yank Doctor in the BEF*, was published in edited form in 1998. The chief editor is the author’s grandson, Dr Christopher J. Gallagher. It highlights Ben’s reactions on coming to England, and to working in a hospital that had already been receiving patients from the front line for three years.

Discussion

“This hospital, Graylingwell, it used to be an insane asylum. Did you notice how thick the walls are, how small the windows?”

I hadn’t, but, now that he mentioned it, the windows were pretty small. They must have prevented insane patients from escaping.

“Now, it’s not a hospital for the insane,” Maxwell went on. “It’s a hospital for men who leave their homes, crawl into muddy trenches, and get bombed, shelled, machine gunned, buried alive, and poison gassed. And they do the same thing to a group of complete strangers who left their own homes and also live in muddy trenches. Sound sane to you, Ben?”

Madness. That’s what it sounded like to me. And I was about to enter that madness. I didn’t say anything.’

These words form part of the autobiography of 28 year-old American Doctor, Lt. Bernard (Ben) J. Gallagher, MD. They recall a conversation with his superior, Major James Maxwell, as Ben seeks to settle into life as part of the staff at Graylingwell War Hospital in 1917. Maxwell acted as mentor to the young and inexperienced American, helping him gain both practical experience and confidence during his short, 8-week stay at the former West Sussex County Asylum (WSCA), from September-November, 1917. Gallagher was posted to France in mid-November, but not before Maxwell had instilled in him the mantra necessary for him to succeed in fighting the horrors of war at the Front…the words he lived his life by as he
‘operated and operated…and irrigated, irrigated and irrigated’ the ghastly wounds of war. The words were “I see, and I forget. I do, and I remember.”

Other hospitals in the area, auxiliary to Graylingwell, were also involved in providing care for soldier patients; for example, the Royal West Sussex Hospital who accepted fifty men, in addition to their normal work as the city’s General Hospital. Arundel, Worthing and Littlehampton provided other sites of convalescent care. It was at Graylingwell, however, that the bulk of care was given, and where the major operations were carried out – trainloads of dirty, unkempt, exhausted and badly wounded troops often arriving in the middle of the night on troop trains from the Frontlines of France and Flanders, via the ports of Dover or Southampton. Ben Gallagher recalls standing with a railway official, Mr. Keith waiting for just such a train…

‘It made a deep impression on me. [He] was an older man with slouched shoulders, thick glasses, a blue cap, and a sad face…Even in the poor lighting of the blacked-out station, the million wrinkles on his face were visible…The train crept in, slowing ever so gradually. When it finally stopped, a few card still lurched a little…then a lower sound started up – moaning. An orderly from the train held a lamp over [a] man…the man had no face. No eyes, no nose, no upper lip. Just a huge gap with bubbles coming out. The urge to vomit was overpowering. I swallowed hard and fought it off.’

For the American medic the moment was a sobering one, and more so when he recalled that ‘this mournful procession’ of wounded ‘had been going on now for three years’. The station master had informed him that ‘early in the war, the coming of this ‘ospital train…this convoy of wounded, meant the turning out of the ‘ole town. But now…now the people of Chichester ‘hardly turn their ‘eads.’ Had compassion, then, really faded in the city since the arrival of the first wounded on 12 May 1915, or had the weariness of war put a different complexion on Cicestrians suffering? Certainly we can ask the question, for the Observer noted that by December 1915 the wounded en route to the hospital now excited ‘only a passing interest’ in the city, where once crowds had gathered to offer cheers and encouragement as they disembarked from the transport trains.

Returning to Lt. Ben Gallagher’s account of his time at the hospital he recalls that he and his three colleagues started the ‘wear out [their] welcome pretty quickly’ after poor behaviour at the ‘going-away dinner’ for the civilian English doctors who had been seconded to the hospital prior to their arrival. The English, Gallagher recalls, were ‘perfectly gracious’ to the foreigners, who in turn had done little but complain about the cold and the ‘dinky compartments’ in English trains. Gallagher was distressed at the situation, and a little embarrassed at the poor taste of some of his countrymen. Nonetheless, he thought the British a little stand-offish and the breach between the two groups in the mess remained - until a joke Gallagher made released the tension! However, the Americans still found life in England somewhat difficult, the overall impression gained were that the English were ‘stand-offish’ and ‘straight-laced’.

One group of patients whose condition was often mis-understood were those men suffering from shell-shock, or as Ben Gallagher described it, NDNYD (Nervous Disorder Not Yet Diagnosed). Gallagher understood that men ‘had a certain amount of reserve nerve power’,
just as they had a certain amount of ‘reserve muscular power’. The problem was, he stated, that ‘assessing that limit’ and differentiating it from malingering was beyond modern medicine’s ken’. Troops sometimes talked to the doctor of their experiences, understanding that some of their fellow patients thought them to be ‘swinging the lead,’ and one night Gallagher heard the story of Pte. T.L. whose mind was replaying the death of an enemy soldier he had killed in hand-to-hand combat, and whose piteous, repeated call of ‘Hilfe, Mutter’ (Help, Mother) continued to haunt him long after the event. His ‘red, red, red’ eyes stared out at the doctor, hardly blinking as he lay lost and disabled by memory.

Lt. Gallagher’s stay at Graylingwell was short, but he recalls it with intense feeling and clarity. He left the hospital in November 1917 to take up his duties at the front line – serving at a Casualty Clearing Station and was eventually captured as a prisoner of war by the German forces. After the armistice he returned to the USA, continuing to practice as a doctor.

Conclusions

Autobiographies are sometimes criticised for the subjective (biased) nature of their construction, critics arguing that the author’s memories do not always adequately represent the ‘facts’ of the events they describe. While we can acknowledge this, it is nonetheless true that Lt. Ben Gallagher’s memoir highlights forcefully the perspective of a foreigner working at Graylingwell Hospital as the USA joins the Allied forces. Christopher Gallagher in his retelling of his grand-father’s history, really seeks to highlight the history of the Great War as Ben experienced it, and it tells of the city of Chichester as going about its wartime business in a quiet and determined way, seeking to do the best for those needing care and respite.

References


‘Graylingwell War Hospital: Another Convoy of Wounded’, Chichester Observer, 22 December 1915.


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