

David Cotterrell: telegraph.co.uk : ..staggering history of suffering

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Wellcome Trusts Exhibition of War and Medicine: staggering history of suffering

Visitors may find some images in this exhibition disturbing. How often one has seen this sign, and breezed past, smug in the knowledge that it only referred to some puerile bit of pornography or the sort of grisly jokiness peddled by Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst. Shockable, moi?

But here is an exhibition where the conventional warning is necessary: I reeled out of War and Medicine shaking - my stomach churning, my headspinning, my knees knocking. Images of what I saw have been recurring in my dreams and creeping up on me unawares during the day. It displays, with exemplary clarity and an absence of sensationalism, a truly staggering history of a hundred and fifty years of appalling human suffering and of equally inspiring human ingenuity and compassion.

We start with the Crimean War. Here is Alexis Soyers Field Stove, an invention which allowed the fresh preparation of food on battlegrounds and in its way brought as much relief to soldiers as Florence Nightingales hygiene. Here are mementoes of Nikolai Pirogov, pioneer of the practice of triage and anesthesia, and Brunels designs for Renkioi, an entirely prefabricated hospital.

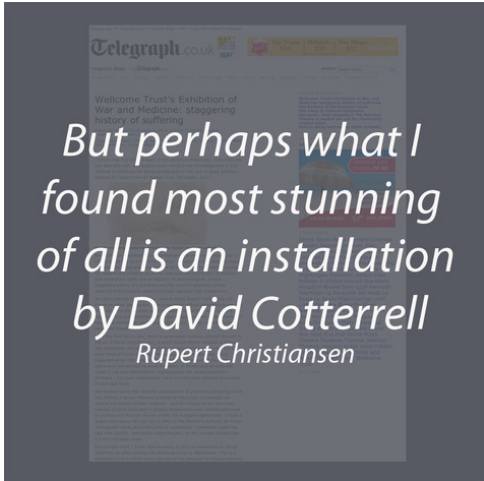
From the First World War, there is some heart-rending material devoted to the art of facial reconstruction, in which Queen Marys Hospital in Sidcup was prominent, and some remarkable newsreel footage from the Royal Army Medical Corps, showing among much else the wounded being piggybacked by their pals and the hospital barges in which the severe cases were transported to avoid the agony of jolting carts on potholed roads. I was also fascinated by a propaganda film about preventive dentistry I'd never realized how many recruits were rejected on account of their bad teeth!

The Second World War sees the development of penicillin (producing which was initially a labour-intensive process of meticulous complexity) set against the horrors of Nazi medicine and its chilling to see how many German doctors implicated in ghastly experiments and cruelties continued to practise and flourish into the 1960s. On a slightly lighter note, I loved a quaint information film put out in 1943 by the Womens Auxiliary Air Force, advising the ladies about the perils of gonorrhoea, sometimes called the clap and syphilis, sometimes called the pox, as the narrator briskly puts it in her cut-glass tones.

But perhaps what I found most stunning of all is an installation by David Cotterrell, an artist sent by the Wellcome Trust to Afghanistan. This is a darkened room in which video reproduces the sensation of being a sedated wounded soldier taken to a hospital inside the hold of an RAF Hercules the combination of haze and noise make this quite terrifying. There's much else including displays relating to psychological disorders and prostheses in this deeply absorbing and magnificently mounted exhibition. Not to be missed, if you think your nerves can take it.

Rupert Christiansen

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