

‘Spare Your Tears’: Representing and Narrating Blind Bodies in Britain 1915-1925

Julie Anderson

Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine

University of Manchester

An advertisement that appeared in *The Times* in July 1918 exhorted the general public to ‘spare their tears, but not their doles’. While requests for funds to provide comfort to disabled ex-servicemen were not new by the end of the war, those issued by St Dunstan’s were the most high profile and recognisable. St Dunstan’s a home for blind ex-servicemen, was culturally significant in its presentation of these men as heroic, upstanding, masculine and employable. When historians talk about bodies disabled in war they often talk about the ways in which war disabled bodies were made heroic and deserving as a result of their sacrifice. While this may be true, the differentiation can actually be extended further to body or disability ‘type’. Some bodies were more heroic than others, and this hierarchy of disablement is often judged by public perception. The ways in which disability was caused has important ramifications for its place on the hierarchy of disablement and the public and cultural perceptions of such disability as ‘deserving’. This paper will examine the representation and the narration of the most heroic, deserving and ultimately useful bodies in this hierarchy, the blind ex-servicemen of St Dunstan’s. The cultural creation of this hierarchy of disability, with blindness at the top is at the core of this paper. St Dunstan’s was the key agency in the creation, delivery and maintenance of the imagined blind body as a national hero, deserving of respect, not pity. This paper attempts to examine the ways in which these blind men were represented, their stories were controlled and narrated, and the ways which this affected their levels of public and fiscal support.

The original St Dunstan’s opened in 1914 in a house in Bayswater. It was moved about a year later to a property in Regents Park London, funded by donations from a private financier from the United States. It was established by the National Institute of the Blind (which became the Royal National Institute of the Blind) the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John of Jerusalem. This was no small venture, occupying some 15 acres of prime real estate in Regents Park with several houses and annexes: St Dunstan’s was the best home available for the most heroic of the war.

The ultimate aim of St Dunstan’s, and the focus of much of their narratives was a system that would retrain these blind bodies into useful citizens. As *The Times* in 1923 reminded its readers,

The aim of St Dunstan's...is to assist its men to become useful and productive citizens rather than idle and unhappy pensioners, the basic view being that true happiness can only be enjoyed by those who contribute in some way to the work of the world.

Workshops where blind people could earn a living were relatively common before the war but at that time St Dunstan's catered exclusively to ex-servicemen who had been blinded in the 1914-1918 conflict. During the war, 1,833 servicemen were blinded in various ways as a result of the conflict and 95% of them were at one time living or being trained by St Dunstan's. 103 colonial ex-servicemen were also trained at St Dunstan's and then went back to their own countries to establish their own charitable enterprises based on the St Dunstan's model.

In order to make sense of all this we must first understand the way that blind bodies were seen, categorised and recognised by those around them. Disability cannot be seen in isolation, but in reference to other, usually able-bodied people. It is these people, the broad society, who will define the ways in which disabled bodies are useful. (or 'useless') Although blindness was culturally constructed as the worst disability, (ideas of darkness, helplessness and dependency) society was paternalistically driven by an altruistic need to combat the deprivations of blindness. This meant that blind people occupied a charitably constructed place in the public's sympathy. At this point in the paper we should all be able to agree that not all disabilities were not the same for a myriad of reasons, I would go further and suggest that not all blindness was constructed in an equitable fashion.

In order to understand why the heroic war blinded were culturally significant, it is necessary to understand blindness as it existed in the early part of the twentieth century. Prior to the appearance of the war blinded, there were two major blind narratives. First, the blinded beggar who was viewed with a combination of derision, scorn, guilt and embarrassment. Blind beggars were not honourable. Second were the civilian blind who were given jobs in workshops. While more respected than the blind beggar, they were still objects of pity and charitable onus despite being unionised earlier in the century. It was not until 1920 that the Blind Persons Act came into force in Britain and Ireland that blind workers were allowed some kind of state aid to supplement their meagre earnings from their workshops. This piece of legislation existed for blind people only; no other disabled groups were included. This demonstrated not only the perception of a blind body as a useful employable body, but also the power and significance that had been bestowed on the blind because of the First World War and the activities of St Dunstan's. Riding above all other types of blind people, honourable unlike the beggar and more heroic than the blind civilian worker were the

men of St Dunstan's. They allowed society to embrace the blind ex-servicemen; the institution of St Dunstan's and its leadership as cultural signifiers of heroism, triumph over adversity and the embodiment of restored masculinity.

At St Dunstan's, blind bodies were seen as the most useful type of body for several reasons. This is partly to do with the fact that these men at one time had vision. The process of blinding in battle conferred a special status as these men as they had had a view of the world already, unlike those who had been born blind. The ultimate handicap to a society culturally constructed on the primacy of seeing was the nightmare of sight as something these warriors had 'lost'. Despite this fear of loss, society viewed these men more with more hope for the future than those born blind as they did have a clear picture of what the world around them was actually like. The narratives suggested they would 'learn to be blind'.

A society that had been through the horrors of war, and its associated loss and feelings of guilt, was driven by the belief in rebuilding. For such a society the pathetic remains of ex-servicemen (whether limbless, mad, dirty, drunken or vagrant) that were seen begging on the street were a horrific and an embarrassing sight. What more pleasant for a society faced with the fallen heroes in the gutter than the sight of the upright, rehabilitated and hard-working blinded hero of St Dunstan's. This is not to say however that blind ex-servicemen did not beg, but they were less likely to if they had employment and support from St Dunstan's. (Begging was against the rules) The role of St Dunstan's was to ensure that these men did not beg on the streets and continue the long narrative of the blind beggar. St Dunstan's were blind men with dignity conferred not only by their status as war heroes. They proudly displayed their gold and red flaming torch, the St Dunstan's badge on their coats as they walked around Regents Park. Their place in the Remembrance Day ceremony on November 11th was assured, reports in the newspapers made constant reference to the dignity in those unseeing eyes – the notion that their last 'vision' had been one of death, putrefaction and destruction gave them a moral authority that was not evident amongst other war disabled.

The men of St Dunstan's were acceptable as they took the air in Regents Park because they could still communicate within the constructs of normal society; their blindness did not terrify or repulse. Maiden aunts, Edwardian stockbrokers or small children walking to London Zoo were undisturbed - they were whole. By comparison, some of the pathetic mangled remains of shattered humanity that had returned from the trenches were not easy, and in some cases were repellent to look at. Blind ex-servicemen were fortunately ambulatory; they did not require clumsy metal prosthetics which

highlighted the loss of an arm or leg. They may have had to learn new skills as they learned to be blind, but they were not infantilised. These blind ex-servicemen did not have to be taught to walk, talk, drink, eat and function. To all intents and purposes, their bodily identity was as before, albeit now in a darkened world. In many cases, blindness was imbued with positive and heroic qualities. For example, many believed that blind people possessed heightened awareness in their other senses - they were believed to have an increased sense of touch and hearing - this accounts for the reportage of the training at St Dunstan's in jobs such as masseuse and piano tuner.

Since such positive associations were made with the heroic blind of St Dunstan's, society was keen to embrace, support and identify with the cultural resonance and significance of the St Dunstaners triumph of adversity. Products were sold to help to meet the charitable goals set by St Dunstan's that allowed people to 'consume' the spirit of heroic blindness. One of those most interesting charitable initiatives was devised in 1921 when St Dunstan's launched its own brand of cigarettes. It is the only war charity that produced this type of branded product for mass-market consumption. The advertisements that appeared in national newspapers exhorted the public to buy these cigarettes because it was one way for the average person to support this worthy cause. In buying these cigarettes, the consumer could purchase a cultural icon of its time. Cigarettes symbolised the mateship of the trenches, shared by opposing soldiers, dying comrades, wounded and survivors alike. The cigarette could now be bought by the non-combatant populace as a way of helping out their blinded mates; the heroic survivors of the trenches now being supported by St Dunstan's. A few of the former residents even started businesses selling newspapers and tobacco. It is highly likely that the sales of St Dunstan's cigarettes would have been higher in their kiosks than in others. Wherever they were bought, this essentially masculine pursuit of smoking was associated with St Dunstan's and the blind war wounded. Because people were prepared to smoke in the name of charity, the war disabled blind bodies were the recipients of assistance that would allow them to live 'normal' lives.

Contributing in no small way to the cultural awareness of St Dunstan's in the mind of the nation, were regular features in the national press: the product of inspired leadership who became the embodiment of St Dunstan's. Of all charities for disabled war veterans, St Dunstan's got a substantial amount of coverage in British newspapers. One of the most important contributors to the popularity of St Dunstan's in the press was the role of its chairman. Arthur Pearson became blind around 1910 and was made president of the National Institute for the Blind in 1912. One of the reasons that St Dunstan's became a regular feature in the dailies was the influence of Arthur Pearson who had been a newspaper proprietor. He had

established his own light entertainment magazine, *Pearson's Weekly* in 1890 the newspaper *Daily Express* and at one time owned both the *Evening Standard* and the *Standard*. As a newspaper proprietor he had the ear of many influential people, which made his campaign for those at St Dunstan's much more effective. He knew what would sell and certainly 'sold' the narrative of St Dunstan's to the general public. Their sporting exploits, the high quality of the products they made, the shops which they established were reported consistently and constantly in the press. However, this narrative was very much collective. Very few accounts or books were published by individuals who were at St Dunstan's. One book about St Dunstan's detailing experiences was written by James Scrymegeour, an Australian, these were few. The narrative of St Dunstan's as an institution and the collective experience of the men there was more important than that of the individual. However, there was one individual that did matter. It was not the blinded ex-serviceman, getting fit while rowing on Regent's Park Lake, and training in telephony, but instead the chairman, Arthur Pearson. As well as narrating their stories, he was the front man of St Dunstan's, his position in society (he was made a Baronet in 1916 and had attended Winchester Public School) and well-known face providing an overall identity for the institution. He wrote his own account of his blindness and his work at St Dunstan's called *Victory Over Blindness*, and a biography by Sidney Dark detailing his life appeared in 1922. He was mourned openly and publicly as the 'Blind leader of the blind' by those from St Dunstan's when he died from complications as a result of a fall in the bath in 1921. The men at St Dunstan's even published a black edged edition of the *St Dunstan's Review*. His assistant, who had learned this method of narration became his successor. Ian Fraser, blinded on the Somme in 1916 and originally an inmate of St Dunstan's took over from Pearson. Like Pearson, he was very influential (he was a parliamentarian) and devoted much of his life to his work at St Dunstan's and was also a founder member and a tireless supporter of the British Legion. These two men imbued many of the qualities admired at the time, one wealthy and well respected, and the other cut a 'handsome dashing figure' despite his blindness. They were responsible for many of the changing attitudes if not toward all blind people, certainly toward the blind ex-servicemen of St Dunstan's. At the many balls and events held by the well-to-do in their honour, the men of St Dunstan's rarely if ever appeared, but were it was enough that they were embodied in these two men Pearson and then Fraser. These two men represented to the nation, St Dunstan's as a living commemoration of the sacrifice of the blinded ex-servicemen: better to support the endeavours of the living blinded than to mourn the dead by standing around expensive stone memorials. Their charity was not simply their commemoration of the war blinded, but through their own work they also memorialised, celebrated and utilised their own personal blindness. Their visibility in the newspapers and political and celebrity circles of the

time allowed them to become the popular shorthand embodiment of all the blind ex-servicemen of St Dunstan's. Fraser continued Pearson's work; not only in the sense of narrating the stories of those from St Dunstan's, essentially filtering them through books and articles that he wrote. Fraser wrote several books on blindness and adjustment and throughout his life became a spokesman for the 'can-do' attitude to disability. His work with the BBC during the Second World War also ensured that St Dunstan's was consistently in the press.

Blindness caused by traumatic injury conferred more status than a non-traumatic case as the heroic battle wounded soldier and was much more closely identified with St Dunstan's in the public eye than blindness caused by complications from venereal disease. Disfigurement was not accepted, whole blind bodies, with their pleasant aspect were more representative of the blind war hero. Those who were blind and badly disfigured were moved to a special home in Cheltenham where they were not expected to work or, more importantly, represent St Dunstan's. Those who might be less appealing to society were kept from public view. They still received assistance from St Dunstan's. As those blinded by venereal disease or whose eyesight had deteriorated as a result of the war were given no pension, St Dunstan's ensured that they received much support although this was conducted with less fanfare. St Dunstan's treated all men equally yet only those war heroes, blinded as a result of enemy action, and which as a result captured the public's imagination was called on to represent them.

There is no doubt that thanks to the influential figures of Arthur Pearson and Ian Fraser that St Dunstan's was the most promoted and well-recognised war charity, amidst some of the best known and well-promoted charities following such an appalling and wasteful war. In their capacity as Chairman, these two men embodied the idea of the blind soldier. They did this by giving him a sense of masculinity with the association with sport and games; a sense of independence with their training regimes and efforts to find blind ex-servicemen employment; and a sense of pride and dignity in their association with an establishment that commanded the interest of the very influential in society.