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Experience, Emotion, and Emoting: Jack Peirs and the Aftermath of Loos

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Abstract

An investigation into the personal letters of one man on the Western Front, this paper seeks to uncover some of the complexities of emotion and emoting within British societal narratives of the First World War. Conceptions of masculinity and stoicism imposed limitations on soldierly expression, forcing them to abide by preordained 'scripts' to continually qualify as men. The difficulty lay in finding ways to cope emotionally with their surroundings while still playing their 'roles'. By looking closely at the words and coping mechanisms of one man, Lieutenant-Colonel H.J.C. Peirs, in the aftermath of the Battle of Loos, this paper attempts to frame the emotive techniques of soldiers struggling to find peace within while remaining a 'man' without.

Keywords

World War One, Jack Peirs, The Battle of Loos, Emotional Trauma, The Great War

Disciplines

European History | Military History | Social History

Comments

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Experience, Emotion, and Emoting: Jack Peirs and the Aftermath of Loos
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Though seemingly personal, as Michael Roper reminds one, any and every article of correspondence is filtered through sets of complicated identity and culture politics.¹ In the case of Lieutenant-Colonel H.J.C. Peirs - better known to his loved ones as Jack - his correspondence is steeped in codes of masculinity and the mud he so complains of in the trenches of the Great War. Subject to such conventions, his letters home to his family become something of a puzzle. While the words Peirs writes are indicative of his situation, equally so are the words he does not and the events he purposefully skims over. They are missing pieces of the whole, and through the combination of words written and unwritten, one begins to see the portrait of a man processing his experiences as best he can within the mental and physical environment he must inhabit, and the male space afforded him.

While he was undeniably exposed to great hardship and unrepentant misery at the bottom of the trenches, Peirs maintained an overwhelmingly jaunty tone in his letters during the period of mid-September, 1915, through the end of the year. There is, however, one notable exception. In a sea of letters beginning with “many thanks,” Jack Peirs’ letter to his father on the 28 September, 1915 is an island. There are no thanks offered for various letters or treats, instead, Peirs opens dully “I am too miserable for words.”² The frankness of this statement is missing from earlier and later letters, and serves as a blunt refusal to couch his emotions in words which

¹ Michael Roper, “Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity, and the First World War Veteran,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 252.

² Letter from 28 September, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

might hide their intensity. But why, so persistently, has he avoided such frankness and censored his emotions so?

In Maria Ritter's work on silence as an indicator of trauma, she states that silence signifies "a state of survival functioning where words fail ... [it] constitutes also a self-protective, self-imposed firewall to avoid total psychic fragmentation."³ This notion of mental, verbal, or emotional shut-down as a method of self-preservation in situations of extreme stress has long been discussed, and has been recognized from men in trenches to patients with eating disorders.⁴ Peirs' radio silence on the hardships of war – beyond, that is, the boredom of tinned food, muddy trenches, and "the ins & outs of the business" of day-to-day army life, all of which he complains frequently – can be attributed to an emotional coping mechanism.⁵ This is exemplified by the way in which Peirs' letters, after that on the 28 September to his father and one more on 30 September to his mother, cease to openly discuss the action that inflicted substantial losses upon his Brigade, leaving him "too miserable for words" and "simply heart broken."⁶

There is also the matter of Charlie Crossy [sic].⁷ In his first letter on the subject, Peirs takes the time to touch upon and explain the death of his friend, quite blatantly focusing on this incident as he asks his father not to "say a word about Charlie as they had better get the official information first & I do not know absolutely for certain that he is killed as no one has seen his

³ Maria Ritter, "Silence as the Voice of Trauma," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74, no. 2 (June 2014), 180.

⁴ See Lt. Col. Grossman's *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* for a more in-depth discussion of the effects of battle stress on the soldier. Information on eating disorder patients is drawn from the author's personal knowledge.

⁵ Letter from 5 October, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

⁶ Letter from 28 September, 1915, *ibid.*

⁷ It should be noted that 'Crossy' should actually be written 'Crossey'. Peirs, uncharacteristically, misspelled his friend's name in his letter. Ian Isherwood, "28 September 1915 – Commentary," *The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs: a digital history*, September 28, 2015, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/28-september-1915/>.

body, but I am afraid he is.”⁸ Yet, after one more mention in a subsequent letter to his mother, Charlie vanishes from Peirs’ writing just as he did from his life.⁹ Peirs obliquely refers to the event when he mentions “the Battalion is being refitted ... with new drafts” on 8 October, recollecting the damages sustained, but thereafter, he seems to compartmentalize the occurrence, along with any accompanying emotions, and move on. This fits in with trends seen in traumatic silence, especially in the way described in the idiom “*Es hat mir die Sprache verschlagen* (it rendered me speechless),” which refers to a reaction where, by avoiding the expending of energy needed to verbalize trauma, the mind is afforded the opportunity to “organize the experience.”¹⁰

However, this is not the only possible reason why Peirs focuses far more on the events that tie him to the home front, such as discussing the “carburettor [sic] needle” on the family car on 9 December and the trappings of the Christmas holidays in letters from the 19th to the 25th.¹¹ In their examination of contextual contributors to trauma among damage control surgery (DCS) team members in Helmand, Afghanistan, Mark de Rond and Jaco Lok uncovered a common coping strategy among these “rear located medics.” They sought to “put everything in its right place” by distinguishing between the events around them and their lives as humans.¹² It is likely that Peirs sought to do the same, and separate himself and his humanity from the brutality of war by retaining connection with the events at home. As de Rond and Lok noted, there were “various routines and rituals that appear to have been invented, or imported, by the DCS medics so as to

⁸ Letter from 28 September, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

⁹ Letter from 30 September, 1915, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Maria Ritter, “Silence as the Voice of Trauma,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74, no. 2 (June 2014), 188.

¹¹ Letters from 9, 19-25 December, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

¹² Mark de Rond and Jaco Lok, “Some Things Can Never Be Unseen: The Role of Context in Psychological Injury at War,” *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 6 (December 2016), 1978.

try and establish enclaves of normality, familiarity, and home comfort.”¹³ Roper also notes and discusses the “intensified sense of home as a refuge among soldiers,” specifically soldiers of the Great War, as well as an emotional draw to more domestic activities in seeking comfort.¹⁴ This could explain why, after “a most awful doing” on 26 September, Peirs wrote a letter to his father and two days later opened a letter to his mother discussing her “letter of the 26th received this morning & a copy of the Autocar also for Odd’s letter of the 21st.”¹⁵ In retelling the negative events, Peirs has ultimately coped by creating a space wherein memories of the action at Loos “can be lived ‘in relative psychic comfort.’”¹⁶

There is, represented elsewhere in the work of Michael Roper, yet another explanation for Peirs’ opaque representation of his time at war. Among “the available cultural scripts” of the Great War Era, is one which dictates manliness and masculine expression quite stringently. Evaluation of manliness at the time, Roper argues, was based on adherence to the script of “stoic endurance ... the forbearance of pain and the suppression of sentiment.”¹⁷ The emphasis which Peirs places upon the way “it is a trifle chilly in the early morning as [the dug-out] has no window” and his statement that “at the moment one could not tell from the noise whether there is a war on or not” seem to conform to this expectation.¹⁸ Peirs is stifled by the “demands made of him in active service” as both a man and a soldier, just as Roper argues that Second Lieutenant

¹³ Mark de Rond and Jaco Lok, “Some Things Can Never Be Unseen: The Role of Context in Psychological Injury at War,” *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 6 (December 2016), 1983.

¹⁴ Michael Roper, “Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity, and the First World War Veteran,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 263.

¹⁵ Letter from 30 September, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ Michael Roper, “Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War,” *History Workshop Journal* no. 50 (October 2000), 183.

¹⁷ Michael Roper, “Between Manliness and Masculinity: The ‘War Generation’ and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 2005), 347.

¹⁸ Letter from 17 October, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Lyndall Urwick, the subject of his case study, is.¹⁹ Added to this script of manliness is the notion that “an emotional experience is rarely detached from communication with another,” and that words act as “containers of emotional experience.”²⁰ Not only, therefore, is Peirs bound by the mandates of manly expression, but the consideration he must give to the emotions of his family members. In his – likely exaggerated if not blatantly false – statement “I have quite forgotten what a gun sounds like it is so peaceful,” he minimizes the emotional effect of the war upon him both for the sake of his manliness and his family.²¹

De Rond and Lok point out that “war exposes some of the intrinsic limits of home comforts, routines, and rituals in normalizing lived experience.”²² To this end, one must wonder how effective the coping mechanisms Jack Peirs employed in his letters actually were. His protracted focus on events at home, the small occurrences of trench life, and his overwhelming silence on emotional trauma only tell one so much. While he may have been largely successful in staving off the existential damage noted by de Rond and Lok among their examined DCS team members, one is nevertheless left with Roper’s chilling reminder: that “what the First World War taught” was no preparation, “however vigorous, could quell fear.”²³

¹⁹ Michael Roper, “Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War,” *History Workshop Journal* no. 50 (October 2000), 192.

²⁰ Michael Roper, “Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity, and the First World War Veteran,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 253, 254.

²¹ Letter from 22 October, 1915, H.J.C. Peirs Papers, Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

²² Mark de Rond and Jaco Lok, “Some Things Can Never Be Unseen: The Role of Context in Psychological Injury at War,” *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 6 (December 2016), 1986.

²³ Michael Roper, “Between Manliness and Masculinity: The ‘War Generation’ and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 2005), 350.

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