

WWI and the flu pandemic:

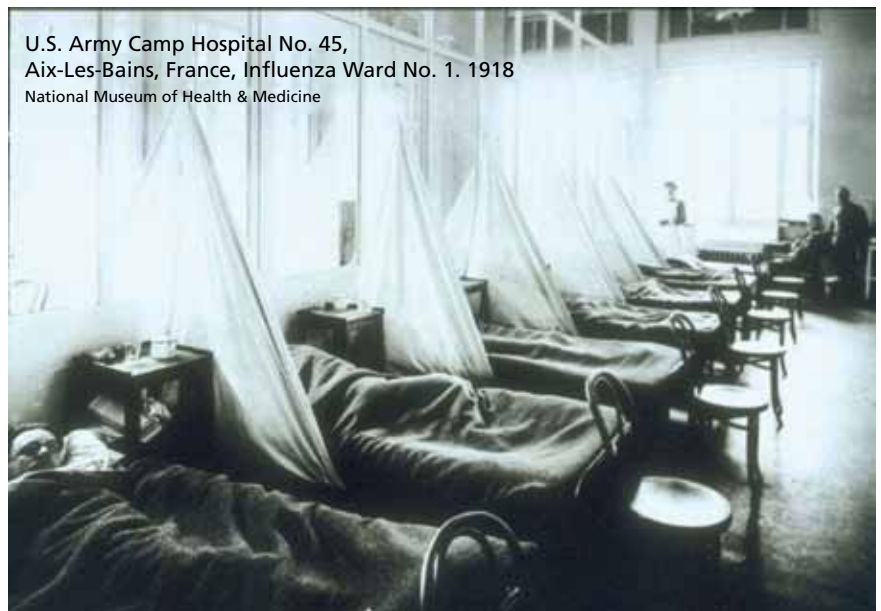
life, death and memory

In our continuing Aspects of War series **Hugh Gault** reveals that the flu pandemic, which began during the First World War, presented another danger that challenged people's lives and relationships.

Wounded in the neck on the first day of the battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, Arthur Conan Doyle's son Kingsley eventually recovered but was to die of flu in St Thomas' Hospital, London on 28 October 1918, two weeks before the armistice.¹ About 10 million people in Britain were attacked by this flu outbreak and nearly a quarter of a million of them died. Yet like the war itself it was a worldwide phenomenon that added considerably to deaths in 1918 and 1919, killing 50 million in total – as Honigsbaum labels it, 'the mother of all pandemics and a continuing enigma'.² A mild primary wave was followed by a severe secondary one, which in Britain took place in the last months of 1918, and then the least severe third wave. This was the normal course of influenza, but the outbreak was unusual in that mortality was greatest among those aged 20 to 40, in other words the fittest rather than older people or the very young as might be expected. Nor was it any less prevalent among the wealthy than the poor.

According to Martin Wainwright in his book on the English village, 'the flu pandemic seemed to threaten scenes reminiscent of the Black Death', recounting the experience of Colin Coote, a future editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, immediately after the war:

Standing as a Conservative candidate in that year's general election, [he] canvassed farmhouses in the Isle of Ely where he found the entire household dead. As he toured other villages in Cambridgeshire, he noted that not one was without its limbless or shell-shocked victims of the trenches.³



Both the war and the flu pandemic left few families, and even fewer communities, untouched. Mark Honigsbaum gives a grisly description of its swift onset:

... [it] struck suddenly and without warning: one moment a person was up and about, the next they would be lying incapacitated coughing up greenish-yellow sputum. As pneumonia set in their temperature would soar to 40 or 41 [degrees] C and they would slip into a delirium. The final stage came when their lungs filled with fluid prompting their heart to leech oxygen from the blood vessels supplying head and feet. It must have felt like drowning.⁴

Perhaps because of the horrific symptoms, or possibly because it came on the back of four years of carnage,

the flu pandemic seems either to have escaped public memory or been suppressed.⁵ Unlike the nursery rhyme Ring-a-ring o' roses, for example, alleged to date back to the plague,⁶ there is no such verse that commemorates the flu, even though one purpose of such rhymes is to enable children to quell their fears and give them a feeling of exemption, if not control.⁷

People's accounts of their experience were gathered in 1972 and Honigsbaum cites some of these in his 2009 book. But it is another story that I want to recount, having stumbled across it more than five years ago. It is by no means unique but underlines the tragedies that were commonplace at that time and the redemption that some people found even while this could not diminish their suffering.

William Robert Bruce-Clarke was born in Harley Street in 1885, the son

of a surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital (also called William) and his wife Effie. He was educated at Harrow School and was already aged 20 when he went to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1906 to study engineering, obtaining a third-class ordinary (rather than Honours) degree in 1909. In May 1912 he joined the Trinidad Lake Asphalt Paving Company of Fulham and was still working for them when war broke out. Meanwhile, he and Ethel Cox, whose father was also a doctor, married in July 1913 at her local church in Cottenham, living with her parents at their home in the village.

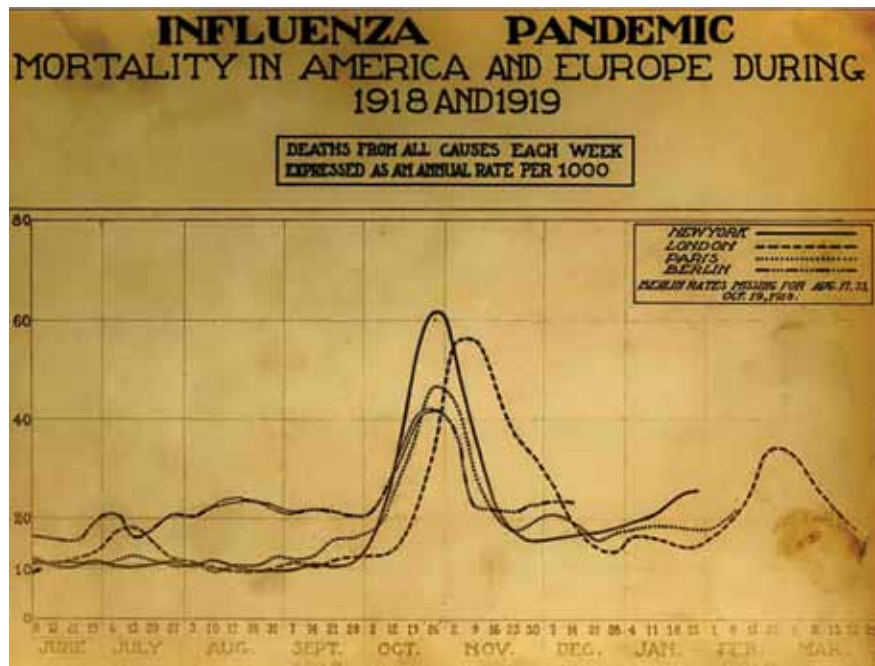
A month after the war started Bruce-Clarke joined the 14th County of London Battalion (London Scottish), a territorial force. Although the 1st/14th Battalion fought at Messines, Ypres and Loos in 1914-1915, the 2nd/14th did not reach France until 1918 and the 3rd/14th never did, ending up in Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. Meanwhile, Bruce-Clarke had transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in December 1915 repairing aeroplanes as an Assistant Engineering Officer. Eighteen months later he had worked his way through the engineering grades to the rank of Captain. He was subsequently included in Field-Marshal Haig's despatch of 7 November 1917 naming those conspicuous for their 'distinguished and gallant services and devotion to duty'.

He had been in France for about three years when he came home on 48 hours' leave in November 1918 to visit his wife Ethel who had succumbed to the flu. She recovered but he caught it. When it then turned to pneumonia he was admitted to the 1st General Eastern Hospital in Cambridge on 28 November 1918, dying there three days later.⁸ He was buried with full military honours in Cottenham and awarded the MBE on 1 January 1919. Two Generals wrote to his wife:

We were all so terribly sorry to hear about poor B.-C. He had worked with us for so long that I shall hardly know how to get on without him. He was one of those invaluable people whom one could put on to any job with the certainty that it would be carried through.

General R. Brooke-Popham

I knew your husband intimately all the time he was in France, and, in common with us all, I had the greatest admiration and affection for him. Whatever he did he did with all his might. One knew that what he undertook would be carried through right to the end. The Air Force has



lost a very fine Officer and a good friend.

General F. Festing, Air Ministry⁹

Ethel's mother died in January 1919, adding to her grief, and as well as a young daughter she now had her father to look after as well. A year after Bruce-Clarke's death his wife placed an In Memoriam notice in *The Times* 'in proud and loving memory'.¹⁰

Two months later on 7 February 1920 her forthcoming re-marriage to Major Robert Ellis was announced in *The Times*. He had studied medicine at Cambridge University and was also the son of a doctor (from the neighbouring village of Swavesey). A month later she ceased to be Bruce-Clarke's widow and became Mrs Ellis at the Chapel Royal, Savoy.¹¹ Whether for tactical or other reasons her father was absent, supposedly because of ill-health, and she was given away by a Mr Livingston Oakley of Esher in Surrey.

This is not the end of the story though. Bruce-Clarke's headstone in Cottenham cemetery, erected by his wife, is pictured right. Tellingly, though, her life is commemorated on the reverse. She may have been Ethel Ellis since 1920 but she clearly remained Ethel Bruce-Clarke for longer.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Honigsbaum, M. (2009) *Living with Enza: the forgotten story of Britain and the great flu pandemic of 1918*, London: Macmillan, p.88.
- ² Honigsbaum, M. (2011) 'Putting pandemics in perspective' in *History and Policy*, 3 October, at www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/putting-pandemics-in-perspective
- ³ Wainwright, W. (2011) *The English Village: history and traditions*, London: Michael O'Mara, pp. 25-26.
- ⁴ Honigsbaum (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83 for other reasons.

⁶ Iona and Peter Opie, eds (1951) *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, pp. 364-65.

⁷ Opie, I. and Opie, P. (1969) *Children's games in street and playground: chasing, catching, seeking, hunting, racing, duelling, exerting, daring, guessing, acting, pretending*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

⁸ The history of this hospital, on the site of what is now Cambridge University Library, has only recently been uncovered by Philomena Guillebaud. She tells the story in *From bats to beds to books: The First Eastern General Hospital (Territorial Force) Cambridge - and what came before and after it*, Haddenham, Cambs: Fern House, 2012.

⁹ Both recorded in Harrow memorials of the Great War.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 1 December 1919.

¹¹ *The Times*, 11 March 1920.

Hugh Gault is a writer and historian, currently working on the second part of his biography of Kingsley Wood, a one-nation Tory in the Baldwin and Macmillan mould.

