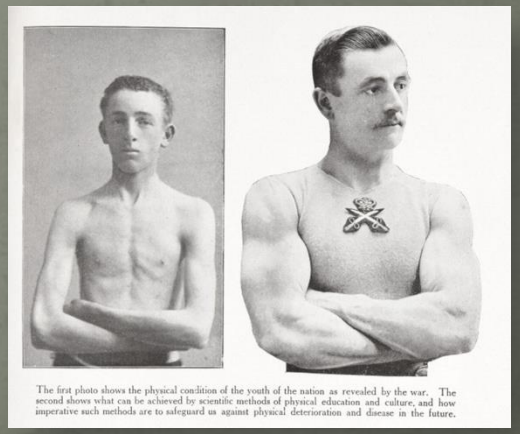
Victorian Medicine and Masculinity at Home and Abroad

Science and Gender: New Perspectives

University of Leicester, 14 July 2011

Introduction – who am I?

- Michael Brown, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Roehampton, London
- Social and cultural historian of nineteenth-century Britain with strong interest in history of medicine
- Interested in identities, representations and social performances e.g. forthcoming book
- In more recent research have become particularly interested in gendered dimensions of medical practice and identity + relations between war, empire and the body in Victorian Britain
- Have also become increasingly drawn to literary sources and methodologies – exploring interface between medical, scientific and literary representations

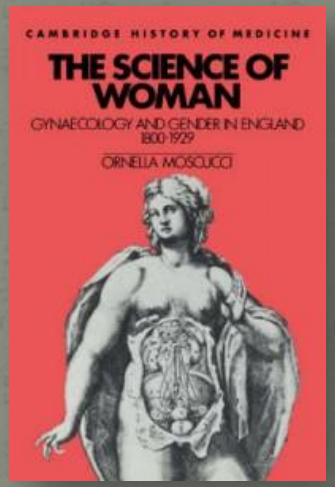


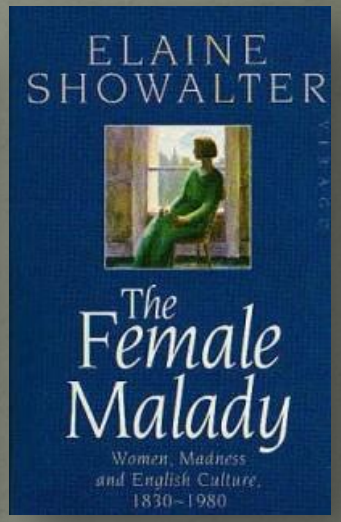
Introduction – structure and content

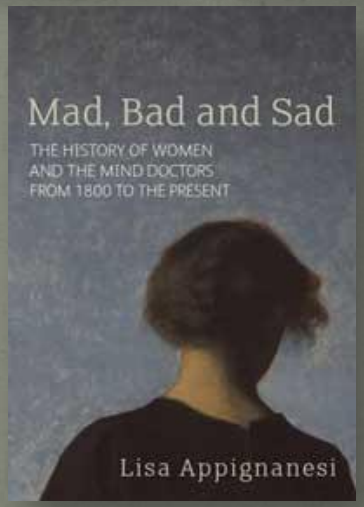
- c.40min lecture with c.20min for questions
- Lecture essentially divided into two halves:
  - First half to explore aspects of my research into medicine, masculinity and the 'military paradigm' in Victorian Britain as appeared in *JBS* article last year
  - Second half to explore aspects of my more recent research into mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of late Victorian empire (work in progress!)
- First half = cultural history of medicine whereas second half = cultural history of technology (with medical dimension)
- Speaking on specific research topics but will try to keep generalities in view (i.e. theories and methodologies) – will attempt to elucidate thought process of research, etc.
- Will endeavour to highlight interdisciplinary aspects of research

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Lots of historical literature on gendered dimensions of medicine
- Especially true of feminist scholarship which explores role of medicine in constructing knowledge about women e.g. gynaecology and midwifery, women and madness etc.
- Rather less literature on the ways in which medicine has framed conceptions of masculinity or indeed on the ways in which masculinity has served to frame the cultures and values of medicine. Why?
- Masculine conventions of medicine often so pervasive (hegemonic) as to escape attention – assumed to be normative – since 1960s social historians generally more interested in marginal or subaltern identities
- More recent studies in the history of masculinity have shifted the terrain somewhat – serve to deconstruct and re-politicise normative or hegemonic modes of being a man







Medicine, war and masculinity

During the course of my research into C19 medical culture, I noted the recurrence of a very specific kind of rhetoric being deployed by medical practitioners. For example, at a meeting in 1847 to commemorate death of Jordan Roche Lynch who had died attending the poor of the West London Union:

'Now I base the claim … of the widow and children, who are left unprovided for, on the fact that the service in which Dr Lynch fell was a public service; that it was extra and special and of a high order of importance. This service, against ravages greater than the ravages of war is, when closely pursued, attended with dangers really greater than those of military service, but without the glory, the excitement, and the support'

Edwin Chadwick

'Of all the professions, the members of the medical profession are the shortest lived and the poorest. They are the shortest lived, because while the situation of the other learned professions is that of ease and safety, many of the members of the medical profession are engaged in a service as dangerous of that of the officers of the army in time of actual war. They are the poorest because it is a rule of the profession to give their time and skill to those who need their aid without waiting to consider their ability to remunerate them'

Thomas Southwood Smith

Medicine, war and masculinity

- So, mid-C19 doctors comparing themselves to soldiers and invoking language of war and heroic self-sacrifice
- Ties into wider Victorian cult of heroism e.g. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841)
- Straightforward then, right? Not quite - picture rather more complex
- After all, army not an unproblematic exemplar – British traditionally distrustful of army (unlike navy) – for many it is associated with spectre of domestic tyranny and political repression e.g. involvement in Bristol riots of 1831
- Also, war not the obvious choice of metaphor for medical practitioners – doctors cure and care rather than kill – surely the church would be a more apt comparison, cure of souls, etc?
- Actually, doctors do use religious metaphors too, particularly language of missionary self-sacrifice– however, it is the military trope that becomes increasingly dominant
- Why is this?

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Have to look at who is deploying this language – not the medical elite, wealthy practitioners who make their money from lucrative private practices, but by those at the lower end of the medical hierarchy and by medical reformers e.g. poor-law surgeons and the *Lancet*
- 1840s a period of social, political and sanitary crisis - Irish Famine, typhus epidemics, cholera epidemics – many poor law surgeons do actually die while attending the poor
- Image of military improving throughout the 1840s – physically more distant but imaginatively more appealing – role in expansion of imperial territory, etc.
- Construction of militarised vision of medical masculinity therefore serves a political end – harnessed to a reforming and middle-class vision of public service – contrasts with indifference of aristocratic elites, both medical and political, to the 'Condition of England'
- However, ambiguous 'enemy' – disease or the poor themselves?

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Military imagery and language also serves another set of related functions:

1. Poor-law surgeons are in some sense employees of the state – so too are the military …
2. However, poor-law surgeons feel that their sacrifice is not as well acknowledged– issue of pensions, medals, awards, etc. - comparison therefore serves to highlight discrepancy as much as similarity
3. Unlike the church, which is sectarian (e.g. Anglicans vs Catholics, non-conformists, etc.), army is a truly national institution – serves reformist image of medicine as a public service in the interests of the 'people' as a whole
4. Unlike language of compassion and care, which is domestic, maternal and feminine, language of war is explicitly masculine, serving professionalising ideology which excludes women, be they nurses or others (e.g. relatives) caring for the sick

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Image of heoic self-sacrifice also present in literary representations e.g. character of Alan Woodcourt in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-3) – Woodcourt an intrepid, brave doctor who cares for the poor
- At one point Ester Summerson learns that he has been shipwrecked:

There, and through it all, my dear physician was a hero. Calm and brave, through everything. Saved many lives, never complained in hunger and thirst, wrapped naked people in his spare clothes, took the lead; showed them what to do, governed them, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors safely off at last! My dear, the poor emaciated creatures all but worshipped him. They fell down at his feet, when they got to the land, and blessed him. The whole country rings with it

- But once again, medical heroism is neglected:

"My dear," said she ... "my brave physician ought to have a Title bestowed upon him. And no doubt he will. You are of that opinion?"

That he well deserved one, yes. That he would ever have one, no.

"Why not ...?" she asked, rather sharply.

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great; unless occasionally, when they consisted of the accumulation of some very large amount of money.

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Contrast between middle-class medical self-sacrifice and aristocratic incompetence comes into its own during the Crimean War (1854-6)

1. War sees popular outrage at government inefficiency e.g. Administrative Reform Association
2. Also sees valorisation of subaltern heroism e.g. Victoria Cross (1856)
3. 'Watershed in civil military relations' – greater popular support for army and military culture– cemented by Indian 'Mutiny' (1857-8) – martial heroism becomes dominant mode of heroism

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Medicine plays key role in popular perception of the war
- Most famous e.g. is Florence Nightingale, nursing and reform of Scutari hospital
- However, 54 army doctors also lose their lives during the war -three subsequently awarded the VC
- Most celebrated is James Thomson, assistant surgeon to the 44th Regiment of Foot. Immortalised in 'The Good Physician' from Arabella and Louisa Shore's *War Lyrics* (1855):

'Thou God's true soldier! take thy place with those
Fall'n children of renown!
No swordsman fighting off a crowd of foes,
Toiled for a braver crown
Than thou, meek Duty's knight, who on thine arms lay'st down'

Medicine, war and masculinity

- Crimean period sees an ever greater conflation of medical and martial masculinities in both medical and literary realms e.g. character of Tom Thurnall in Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857) or Terrence Brady in William Howard Russell's *Doctor Brady* (1868)

'All the true glories of the medical profession are unostentatious. They are founded on duties performed … in scenes of poverty and pestilence at home, and of wounds and pain … amongst our gallant soldiers and sailors abroad. . . . In civil life it is the same. The medical practitioner is the slave of all. . . . If some fierce epidemic rages, and his wealthier neighbours fly for safety, he remains to encounter every danger'

'Obituary', *Lancet*, 9 December 1854

Medicine, war and masculinity

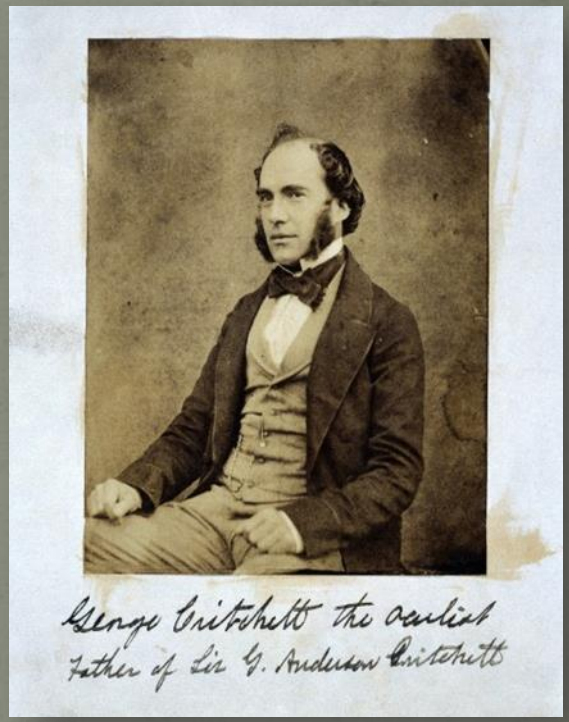
- From mid 1850s onwards, medical discourse saturated by language and imagery of war and martial masculinity – sustained by an increasingly bellicose culture of nationalism and imperialism. Two examples:

1. Metaphors of warfare come to frame conceptions of health and disease – disease becomes something to be fought and destroyed – illness conceived as an 'invasion' of the body (particularly resonant with emerging theories of bacteriology)
2. Inaugural lectures to medical students position medicine as an equivalent endeavour to war and imperial conquest

Medicine, war and masculinity

'It is now universally admitted that our profession is carrying on a noble work; not only is disease combated and suffering allayed, but pestilence is traced to its lurking places and the laws of health are explained and enforced. The important body of men who are toiling to accomplish all this are diminishing in number; each year makes sad havoc in their ranks: constantly exposed to contagious diseases, death is often busy amongst them; going forth in the spirit of a missionary, they sometimes encounter the death of a martyr. It is an important and interesting day, when our country sends up fresh recruits to fill up the ranks of our profession, and to meet the increasing demands of our army, our navy, our merchants' service, and of those vast and numerous colonies upon which it is said the sun never sets. It is this fresh infusion of young life, and vigour, and enthusiasm that from year to year renews and sustains our profession'

George Critchett, 'Introductory Lecture Delivered at the London Hospital Medical School at the Commencement of the Session 1859–60'



Medicine, war and masculinity

- There are complexities and ambiguities of course – metaphorical link between medicine and warfare sometimes hard to sustain and, for some, hard to stomach, especially with rise of international medical humanitarianism e.g. International Committee of the Red Cross (1863)
- However, with rise of 'New Imperialism' from later 1870s onwards, many medical practitioners continue to invest in militaristic models of identity
- Indeed, with debates surrounding eugenics, degeneration and military preparedness which mark end of the century they become increasingly vocal proponents of popular militarism e.g. arguing in favour of compulsory military training …

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- 1870s sees rising anxiety among medical practitioners and military theorists about the physical capacities of the British solider – 'The Recruiting Question'
- Prompted by success of Prussian conscript army during Franco-Prussian war – feeling that British army is composed of underage boys and degenerate men
- Fuelled by emergent Social Darwinist ideas about national competition and 'survival of the fittest':

'The most dismal and desperate view of … our Army at the present time is that which associates the physical degeneration of the solider with a general falling off in the strength and stamina of the population … the British solider is no longer the man he was … [and] the evil portends the coming decline, not only of our military renown, but [as] a sign of national decay'

Leith Adams, Surgeon-Major of the London Recruiting District , 1874

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Cause of decline is clear. Britain's industrial prowess is also her undoing …

'You have only to visit the great manufacturing centres of England … and to stand outside any great manufactory and see the men and women, boys and girls, coming out at the end of their day's work, in order to arrive at the same conclusion that I have often done … that they were the most miserable specimens of humanity: and what is most to be deplored is that they are going from bad to worse. At the present day, the people working in our mills and great manufactories throughout England are decidedly inferior as a race physically, to what they were in past times'

Sir Garnet Wolseley, 1888

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Anxiety about physical degeneration coincides with period of marked imperial expansion, especially in Southern Africa – 'New Imperialism'
- Also coincides with marked leap forward in military technology e.g. adoption of Martini-Henry breech-loading rifle in 1871
- British find themselves waging war against technologically unsophisticated opponents, i.e. native tribal warriors
- Should be a foregone conclusion, but it isn't …

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Battle of Isandlwana (22 January 1879) during Anglo-Zulu War sees the destruction of British column by 20,000 Zulu warriors armed mostly with cow's-hide shields and assegais (short spears) - 1,800 killed including 800 British regulars
- Fuels anxiety that British soldiers not quite up to the job:

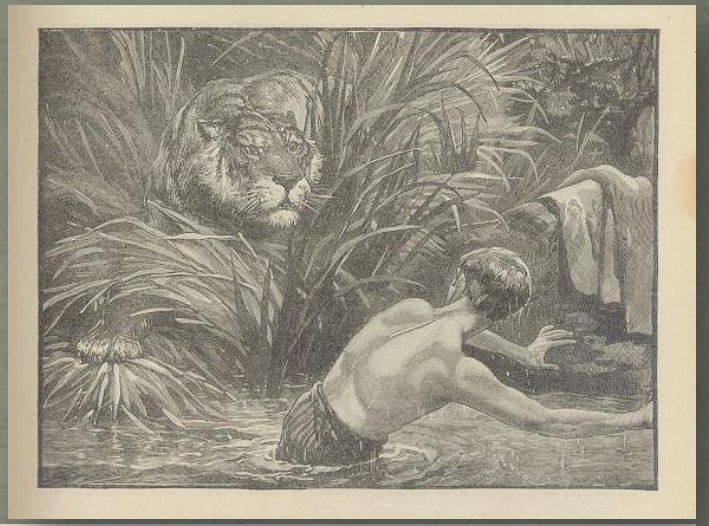
'Nothing, perhaps, tries British soldiers more than a sudden rush by a determined body of men, who mean to die, such as the natives of South Africa … The fact is, our men are not used to men coming at them, and are somewhat taken aback when they do'

Lord Frederick Roberts to General Prendergast, 9 October 1883

- Could it be that technological advantage might disguise the fact that the Zulus are, in fact, physically more developed and manly than the British …?
- Worse still, could an overreliance upon technology tend towards physical decline … ?

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

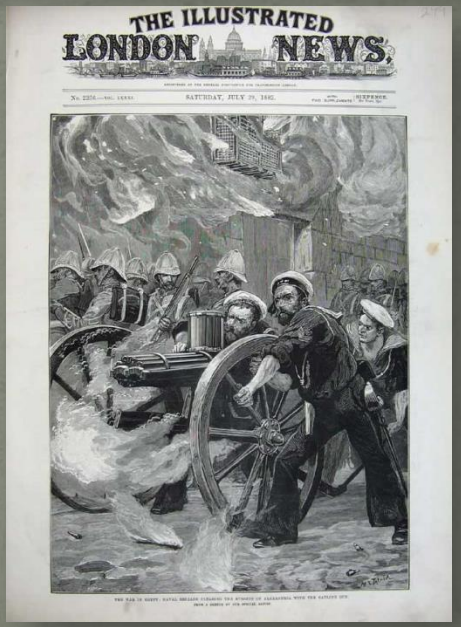
- Ambiguous place of the gun in contemporary literature e.g. juvenile fantasy fiction ('Boy's Own') or work of H. Rider Haggard
- Is the gun a symbol of strength and superiority or of physical inferiority and dependence?
- The rifle makes children of African men but might it also make 'men' of British boys?



"FIRE, YOU SCOUNDRELS!"

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Anxieties coalesce around machine gun …
- Gatling gun first employed at battle of Ulundi where one battery kills over 500 Zulu warriors
- Military theorists ambivalent about use in European theatre but seen as having particular use in colonial warfare – 'moral effect':



I have no doubt one gun of that sort, with a very few men, would hold a post against any number of natives. It would have this disadvantage [however] that it makes such a horrible row in going off that it would frighten the foe away; whereas you want them to stand [still] so as to get hold of them. It would no doubt strike great terror into these people.

Sir Percy Douglas, 1876

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Ironically, some see the machine gun as an answer to physical and moral degeneration:

'I look upon it as ten nerveless soldiers. The Gatling gun should be used … at that point when your own men's nerves begin to fail'

Major Hale, R.E., 1876

- In reality, however, men's nerves still get in the way – Gatling gun a delicate machine and in the heat of battle men tend to panic and over-crank the firing handle, leading to stoppages:

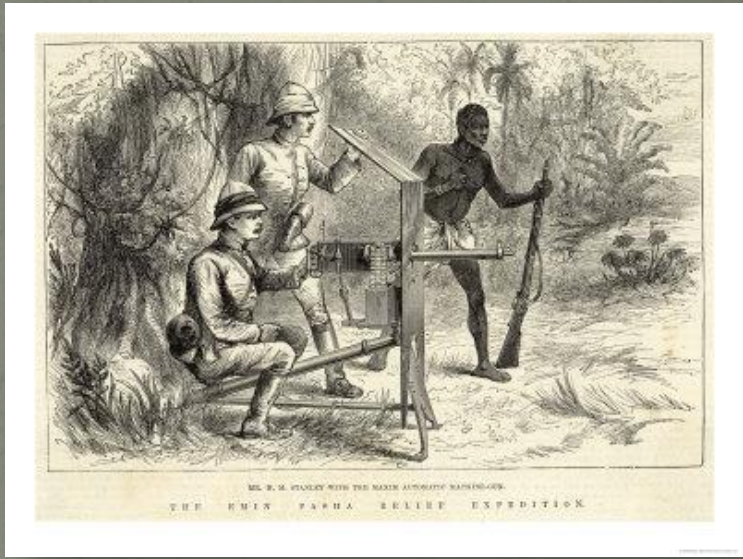
'If a machine gun can be invented that may safely be

entrusted to infantry soldiers to work, and could be fired very much as one grinds an organ, I am satisfied of its great value'

Lord Chelmsford, 1885

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Solution comes in 1884 in form of Maxim gun, a more sophisticated recoil-operated weapon requiring less human intervention:



'It can be made to fire as many as 600 [rounds] per minute [and] once placed in position, it could be kept firing by a boy'

'The Progress of Machinery', *The Friendly Companion*, 1 July 1885

- Employed with devastating effect in First Matabele War (1895-6) as well as in Reconquest of the Sudan (1896-99)

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- For some, however, using machine guns against lightly armed tribesmen doesn't quite seem like a fair or 'manly' thing to do
- Moreover, others concerned that an even greater reliance upon mechanism will further debase the nation's marital prowess:

'We have been educating men to believe themselves invincible because of the superiority of arms, forgetting that when those scientific toys fail them, the men are powerless. Men should be taught to depend on their own individual strength, pluck and prowess and not in any single weapon'

Captain Armitt, 1886

Mechanism, masculinity and anxieties of empire

- Anxiety over mechanism and masculinity helps to explain peculiar resurgence of the bayonet in late C19
- A weapon made largely redundant by technological advance and yet becomes central to both military thinking and popular imperial consciousness – 'Cult of the Bayonet':

'The very phrase – "at the point of the bayonet" – expresses the national idea of force; and apparently no illustrated newspaper of to-day convinces its readers of the reality of the war scenes depicted, without a picture of a transfixed Boer'

'The War and the Drill Book' *Contemporary Review*, August 1900

- Continues right up to First World War, with disastrous consequences

THE BENT BAYONET OF OLD ENGLAND.
AFTER THE BATTLE.

THEN WITH A CRY OF FURY THE MEN CLOSED WITH THE BAYONET.

Conclusions

- Exploring relations between war, empire and medicine/science in Victorian period
- Concerned with how images and visions of war and empire inform modes of thought and patterns of behaviour in civil life
- Sensitive to interrelations between professional and public spheres and between science and literature - not simply as forms of representation but as spaces for cultural production
- Especially interested in anxieties and ambiguities of modernity – not always explicit, sometimes sub-textual