THE CAUSES OF DISEASE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY ARMY

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In an earlier paper it was shown that, although the sickness and mortality rates in the English armies of the sixteenth century were high, they do not appear to have been much worse than similar rates in subsequent centuries. Little improvement occurred, or indeed could occur, until sanitary knowledge had been placed upon a scientific basis; and until bacteriology had advanced sufficiently to devise means of protecting individual soldiers by raising their resistance to the commoner diseases of military life.

During this long period, stretching from the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, many thinking men and conscientious soldiers, realizing that the health of the soldiers was unsatisfactory, had done what they could to ameliorate the lot of the soldier and to reduce the dreadful wastage from disease. Such men as these attempted to ascertain the causes for these high rates of morbidity and death and came to various conclusions as to why they were so severe.

In the sixteenth century numerous suggestions were put forward to explain the causes for this wastage. Complaints were made of the poor quality of the men enlisted into the Army. For this the medical service was in no wise to blame, as the recruits were not medically examined on entering the Service. Recruitment was partly voluntary, but the numbers obtained in this way were normally insufficient to fill the ranks, and compulsion had to be resorted to, to bring the Army up to strength. This gave unscrupulous captains and other officials opportunities of making money, and of cheating the State by recruiting men unfit for service. The classical description of how this was done will be found in Shakespeare’s Henry IV, act IV, scene 2, where Falstaff gives an account of how he recruited his company of foot for service with the king. In the first place he impressed well-to-do householders, the sons of yeomen, those about to be married, and others of a similar type who, although highly respectable, had not the slightest desire to be dragged off to serve in the wars. These Falstaff released from service on the payment of a couple of pounds apiece, which he pocketed. To fill their places he enlisted tramps, rogues, and poor undernourished men, who could not afford to pay him off. The final result was that he had “a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals,” of whom he was so ashamed that he marched them round Coventry to avoid the town, as he dared not let the people see that a pitiful collection of humanity he had gathered together.

It was the custom of the authorities of a county, when ordered to make a levy for the Army, to round up all the rogues and vagabonds at large in the district, and to release criminals from the gaols to fill up their quota. This had
The twofold advantage of relieving respectable citizens of an unpopular duty, and of freeing the county of a large number of objectionable characters who were liable to be a nuisance and an expense to those in authority. The county was also largely responsible for arming, equipping, and clothing the men that they had recruited. As this was a direct charge upon the locality, for which it saw little in the way of return, the local authorities tended to skimp this duty, and the men were sent off on active service badly armed and worse clothed.

It is, therefore, not surprising that commanders complained of the poor standard of the recruits that were sent to them, and the badness of their dress and equipment. Nor is it surprising that it was generally believed that new recruits were more susceptible to disease than soldiers with longer service.

In 1581 the Lord Deputy of Ireland protested against "the evil choice of men" sent to that country, and expressed the hope that the next batch of recruits would be of a higher standard (Salisbury, II, pp. 384-5). Later in the same year he complained that "the new men fall sick daily" (CSP, 1574-85, p. 311). The soldiers sent to the Continent in 1588 from Sussex were badly equipped in every respect (CSPD, 1581-90, p. 261). That year most of the troops in the garrison at Ostend were thoroughly seasoned soldiers, and well equipped. To this was assigned that high standard of health among the garrison of that town. But at the same time there were present at that place four companies of immature youths, who were said to feel the effects of the cold autumn, and to "fall lame and sick and die like unsound sheep" (CSPF, Jan.-Dec., 1588, p. 366). The troops levied in Somerset for service with Sir John Norreys so impressed that officer, when he saw them at Portsmouth, that he said that half of them were the worst men and the most poorly equipped soldiers that he had ever inspected. He had to leave a great number of them behind, because they were physically too weak to stand a sea voyage (CSPD, 1591-4, p. 26).

In 1597 the Lord Deputy of Ireland wrote:

"The causes of all decay amongst us is the ill-choice of men, who come so wretched as they be half-dead when they first land, and many such silly creatures as die for fear" (CSP, 1596-7, p. 399).

The drafts sent to Ireland in December 1598 seem to have been rather above the average in quality and to have been well equipped; they were, however, quite raw, and without any training. This is about the only occasion when a good word was said for the recruits sent to Ireland. In February 1600, Lord Mountjoy, on the way to that country, was informed at Chester that the soldiers passing through that city were quite unfit for service (CSP, 1599-60). The troops sent over to the siege of Kinsale, in the winter of 1601, were of the usual low standard. Few of them knew how to handle their weapons, or how to look after themselves in the field. Lord Deputy Mountjoy felt compelled to send one thousand of them off to Cork, so that they could have buildings to live in; otherwise he believed that he would have lost most of them from exposure before they could have built huts to protect themselves from the weather (CCP, 1601-3, p. 164). Despite these precautions the greater
part of them were lost to the Army, partly through disease, and the remainder by desertion (*Ibid.*, p. 195).

When all these examples are taken into consideration, it is not to be wondered at that military men were of the opinion that newly joined men were less capable of withstanding the rigours of Army life than those who had undergone these hardships and had become inured to the conditions which arise on active service. Captain Baynard said that the soldiers in Ireland, who had recovered from the disease of that country, were three times more valuable than other troops for service in that country (CSPI, 1599–60, p. 350). Sir Patrick Barnewall stated that new troops were quite useless in the Lough Foyle district: before they could be trained they fell sick; then they either died or were evacuated to England. In either case they were lost to the Service before they became of any value. He also believed that a man who had been sick in Ireland, and had recovered, was three times as valuable as a new recruit (CSPI, 1600, p. 341).

One of the commonest causes assigned for the unhealthiness of the troops was the unsatisfactory state of their pay. Either it was insufficient, or it was so much in arrears, that they were unable to keep themselves in food, and consequently starved. The complaints about the poor rate of pay are confined to the earlier part of the century, and those about arrears to the latter part of it, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. This monarch was never overburdened with money, and always had difficulty in finding sufficient means to meet her obligations. In the matter of pay for the troops she was further handicapped by the corruption of her military officers, who misappropriated for their own use money intended for the soldiers. These officers, having done this, frequently had the impertinence to complain about the hard conditions under which their men were living for the want of money.

That the soldier should be regularly paid was even of more importance in the sixteenth century than it is at the present day. He had to buy his own rations, as they were not supplied to him by the government. Individuals, as a private speculation, laid themselves out to supply the troops with what they might require in the way of food. Towards the end of the century things became better organized, and the right to supply the troops was given out to contract to certain selected persons. In this way government was able to exercise some control over those who supplied food to the troops, and to see that the provisions were up to a certain standard of wholesomeness. But whether the soldier bought his rations from a private trader or an official contractor, he was quite unable to do so if he did not receive his pay at regular intervals. As this was frequently many months in arrears, there were often bitter complaints of the troops being starved; and for that reason suffering greatly in health.

It is unnecessary to consider all of the numerous references to the hardships arising from the irregular issue of pay. They occur throughout the whole of the period beginning with 1512, when the soldiers at Fontarabia complained that they could not live on their wages on account of the scarcity and high cost of victuals (LPH, VII, p. 396); and at the end of the period on
December 10, 1600, when Lord Deputy Mountjoy declares that he has not enough money to look after his troops (CSPI, 1600–1). Towards the end of the century, however, the complaints about the lack of money became less frequent, and their place was taken by grumbles about the quality of the rations supplied by the contractors. This probably arose from the fact that the soldier, instead of heretofore being able to obtain his supplies from several sources, was now confined to one contractor. That worthy, having no competition to meet from rival firms, no doubt often took advantage of his position and cut down the standard of his goods.

As was to be expected, many experienced officers considered that the men’s rations were largely responsible for many of the ills of the Army.

An early complaint on this ground comes from Ireland. In August 1548, Plunket and Allen reported to the Lord Deputy that the soldiers in Dublin were likely to perish for want of food (CSPI, 1509–7, p. 84). In November 1584, Captain Morrys said that the troops employed upon the fortifications at Antwerp, and at Burgerhout, had nothing to eat except cheese and bread. For want of meat they were killing and eating cats and dogs (CSPF, 1584–5, p. 151).

The English soldier had to have his butcher’s meat, and if he did not get it, he resorted to this practice. Indeed, during the Commonwealth period, and especially in the West Indies, the slaying of cats and dogs by the soldiers for food became so common that the Spanish imagined that the English preferred the flesh of these animals to beef and mutton.

In 1587 one-third of the soldiers at Flushing were sick on account of their not having enough money to buy food (CSPF, 1587, p. 340). Sir Thomas Norreys, writing from Cork to Sir Robert Cecil, mentioned that, although he had done his best to preserve his men, they had deteriorated seriously from sickness. He said that his officers believed that the cause of this was the smallness of the ration, and its inferior quality; if improvements were not made the force would be completely ruined (CSPI, 1598–9, p. 466). In the following year Carew wrote from Dublin that it would be a great comfort if the sick soldiers had fresh bread and meat instead of mouldy and rotten biscuits, cheese, fish, and “ristie butter, which doth breed much sickness and disease amongst the soldiers” (CSPI, 1599–1600, p. 97).

One could go on multiplying examples of a similar nature, but sufficient has been said to show that it was firmly believed that one of the principal causes of the unhealthiness of armies was the shortage of rations and the poorness of their quality.

Up to now we have not discussed the effects on the men of the drink that was issued to them. It was generally considered that the English soldier, if he were to remain healthy, had to have his beer regularly, and in adequate quantities: if he did not get it he went sick. A curious example of this belief comes from Havre, just at the time of the outbreak of the plague in that town. Kemys expressed the opinion that the epidemic was due to the fact that the soldiers, on account of the shortage of beer, had to drink wine (CSPF, 1563, p. 94). And the same doctrine was even more clearly enunciated by no less a
person than the Queen herself. In some instructions to the Lord Deputy and the Council In Ireland she writes:

"Forasmuch as there is no provision of beer made for the garrison at Lough Foyle, and that the soldiers there, by continual drinking of water, cannot but be made weak of their strength, which will hinder their service" (CSPI, 1600, p. 278).

Clothing, or rather the lack of it, was another important factor in the causation of disease among the troops. Any reader interested in this matter will find the system of supply of these articles described fully in C. G. Cruickshank's "Elizabeth's Army" so that there is no point in going over the same ground again in this paper. Suffice it to say that there is not the slightest doubt that it was frequently highly unsatisfactory: the clothing arrived long after it should have done, and was of poor quality; the result being that the soldiers were often in rags and almost without any clothes at all.

Clothing, however, is not generally put forward as a sole reason for the unhealthiness of the troops, but there is an example of this from Mallow, where the inefficiency of the older soldiers was assigned to the want of clothing (CSPI, 1659–60, p. 129).

Climate and the weather were looked upon as the most potent causes of disease in the English armies. The English soldier was evidently thought to be a rather tender plant, that did not take kindly to any other climate than that of his native land. The position is well described by Cruickshank in the following passage:

"The climate of the countries where they served was responsible for much of the sickness among Elizabeth's soldiers. France and Portugal were too warm for Englishmen, while Ireland was too cold. It was suggested in some quarters that proper precautions had not been taken against disease in Portugal, but one of the men who had been there indignantly refuted the suggestion. He pointed out that strange climates had always taken heavy toll of the English forces. The raw, cold air in the Netherlands had been too much for them, and had caused many deaths even when the men were in billets. The warmth of France aided by the abundance of fruit and wine, to which Englishmen were unaccustomed, had always undermined their health. In any case, even when the Spaniards campaigned in the summer months they could not avoid heavy losses owing to sickness" (pp. 126-7).

The above quotation is based upon Wingfield's defence of the authorities responsible for the Portuguese expedition, but much the same sort of thing was said during other campaigns. The climate of Ireland was considered to be especially accursed.

As far back as 1522, the weather in France was blamed by Wolsey for the large number of deaths among the troops. But on this occasion it was not the heat of the country that was blamed for the trouble, but its extreme coldness! (SP H VII, vi, p. 233.) Norfolk, in 1544, described the weather of that country as being so terrible in September that it was impossible for the men to work in the trenches (LP H VII, xix, pt. 2, p. 133). In 1596 there were bitter complaints about the climate of St. Valery (Salisbury, vii, pp. 39, 45, 70) and this was blamed for causing sickness among the troops stationed at that place. But in an earlier paper it has been shown that the soldiers at St. Valery were not unhealthy, so, however severe the weather may have been, it was not responsible for any outbreak of disease among the English Army there.
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The Low Countries were equally unfavourable to the health of English troops. At Flushing in December 1585, death and disease was believed to have been due to the "noisome air of the place" (CSPF, 1585-6, p. 206). But it was the climate of Ireland that was responsible for the greatest outcries from military men. It was requested in March 1567 that the force at Derry should be removed to Strangford Lough on account of the weather being so cold at the former place (CSPI, 1509-73, pp. 328-9).

At the end of August 1600 the weather at Derry is described as "already grown wonderful stormy, even such as no man can conceive that feeleth it not" (CSP, 1600, p. 380).

Also Captain Dawtry, in October of the same year, writing to Cecil, remarks: "The weather for the time of twenty days fell out so extreme, as I never saw the like this thirty six or thirty seven years. For I will protest that in twenty days I could never say that all the clothes on my back were dry" (CSP, 1600, p. 531).

And finally an observation of Carew from Cork, on January 22, 1602, when he says: "The sharpness of this winter's journey hath tried the strength of our companies, but the mountains of Beare being at that time covered with snow, testing the strongest bodies, whereby many returned sick, and some (unable to endure the extremity) died standing sentinel. And that which much weakened them was their ill victualling, consisting mostly of poor-John (coarse fish, D.S.) and no other drink but water" (CCP, 1601-3, p. 405).

and so the complaints about the climate of Ireland went on.

Now we know perfectly well that there has been no great change in the climate of Europe during the past three hundred years; and that our troops have served time and time again in these various countries; and that the climate of these places has, at the very worst, been no more inclement than that of England. It is therefore hard to believe that the Elizabethan soldier was not as well able to withstand the rigors of these strange climates as his descendant of latter days. It would appear that these outcries against the weather of other countries were merely subterfuges put forward to explain away the outbreaks of disease in the armies, the real causes of which were unknown.

It is true that the troops in England did not appear to suffer to the same extent from disease, but the reason for this is obvious. What soldiers there were in England were few in number, living in small scattered garrisons, far removed from the conditions found on active service. For a long period, over a hundred years, there had been no active campaigning in England itself; if there had, it would soon have been discovered, as it was half a century later during the Civil War, that the English weather was just as unfavourable to the English soldier on active service as the strange exotic climates of France, Holland and Ireland.

If military officers of experience were wrong in thinking that the climate of the different countries, in which the English soldiers fought, was responsible for their poor health, were they more correct in their other suggestions? Was it the poor quality of the recruits, the irregularity in the issue of pay, the
poorness of the rations, and the indifference of the men's clothes and equipment, that was responsible for the high rate of sickness that always followed armies on active service? Though it cannot be denied that these factors have a definite influence on morbidity and mortality rates, their effect was grossly exaggerated.

As the years passed, the administration of the English, and later the British Army, improved. Men of better stamina were enlisted; generals arose who took an interest in the welfare of their troops, and who saw that the men's rations and clothes were properly and regularly supplied. Yet despite all this care, during the following two and a half centuries, there was little improvement in the health of the British Army when it went on active service. Wellington was a genius in military organization and administration, but even he, less than one hundred and forty years ago, could not reduce the numbers permanently sick in the Army under his command to less than 22⅞ per cent.

All precautions such as these were unavailing; and to return to the opening paragraph of this paper, little improvement in the health of armies could be expected until medical science had discovered the causes and the means of preventing those diseases which are most prevalent among soldiers in the field. Once this happened, generals were faced with a new problem; they had now either to kill or capture the forces of their enemies, instead of, as in the good old days, waiting for these forces to perish from disease.

KEY TO REFERENCES

CCP Calendar Carew Papers.
CSPD Calendar State Papers. Domestic.
CSPI Calendar State Papers. Foreign.
SHP VIII Letters and Papers Henry VIII.
Salisbury Salisbury Papers: Historical Manuscripts Commission.