

Eliana Heath

Scharfen and Rutherford

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Mental Trauma and WWI: My Great-Grandfather's story

My mother, when she talks about her father's family, always jokes that their ancestors came over to England during the Norman conquest, settled down, and then didn't do anything for another thousand years. My English family, my (now-deceased) maternal grandfather's family, lived in the south of England for hundreds of years, living respectably quiet lives. Where exactly they lived and loved and died is more or less lost to time, but somewhere, there's supposed to be a village graveyard filled with rows of Goslings—for that was, and still is, the family name. I don't suppose there's much to say about any of them, other than that they lived quietly respectable agrarian lives and didn't seem to get up to too much trouble. Other branches of the family—my grandmother's Brazilian family history, my father's assorted European emigrant relatives—seemed to have had far more interesting, or possibly more *exciting* lives.

This isn't, however, a story about my many, unknown and unknowing, long-gone ancestors. This is, instead, more or less a story about my great-grandfather—my mother's father's father, to be exact, one John Gosling.

I haven't uncovered much about my great-grandfather's early life—he, himself, is now long dead, as is my grandfather and several of *his* siblings. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to talk to any of my relatives who might have actually known him during his life, which means that all that I really have to work on is my mother's memories of the stories her parents (my grandparents) told her about him. He and his immediate family apparently hailed from Otterton,

a small village in Devon in the south of England. At some point prior to his involvement in the war, he and a friend of his started up some kind of small business or shop—what exactly they sold is, unfortunately, lost to time. He also became engaged—and, just like the co-owned business, the name and identity of his fiancée is unknown to the my surviving family. In short, before he left home, we could probably assume that his life was pretty good. Happy. Stable.

World War One ruined his life. I don't say this for the sake of exaggeration; things really did go entirely downhill for him after he left home. His fiancée left him (*why*, and for *whom*—if she left him for someone else—is, like so much else, unknown), his friend ran their business into the ground and then apparently vanished, and John Gosling himself returned from the war as so many other young men did—more or less wrecked for “normal life” by the experiences he had had during the war. He never truly recovered from the war—he managed to hold down a job as a door-to-door salesman for a number of years, starting in the '20s, but he lost it in the Depression years of the 1930s, and ended up spending the remainder of his life depending on first his sister, then his children, for his livelihood. He married (somewhat late in life) and had three children, but it sounds, from everything I've been told, as though the marriage wasn't a particularly happy one.

My great-grandfather's story is, at the end of the day, one that's probably all too similar to the stories of hundreds, thousands of other World War One veterans. One of the most important things to have come out of that long and dreadful war—besides the seeds of the next immensely terrible war—was the awareness of the mental and emotional damage incurred by those soldiers that had fought in it. “Shell shock,” a phrase common at the time, referred to post-traumatic stress incurred in immense numbers by many of the men who had been part of the war. At the time, shell-shock was believed to have been a kind of mental “disruption” caused by the

noisy repercussions of big guns firing across the battlefields—but the vast numbers of soldiers suffering from this “shock” indicated, perhaps, that there was something more than that at play, something significant about the ways in which the violence of that war affected its participants. In fact, WWI ended up being one of the first wars to truly bring to light the potential for severe mental and emotional stress and even damage in war time. In a way, the war more or less introduced and made visible the necessity for war-related psychiatry, and the acknowledgement of the psychological distress of war.

John Gosling’s story, as well as the uncounted other stories of the uncounted other World War One veterans, is important not just because of the pain and suffering that they went through, during the war and after it, but also because of the effects that this pain had on the following generations. My grandfather and his siblings who grew up under the legacy of my great-grandfather’s trauma were affected by his experiences and how those experiences translated into his own life: for example, the frugality and the extreme narrowness of his family life led to some of his children following this pattern in their own adulthoods, and some of them (my grandfather, at least) rejecting this kind of life outright. The damage that so many of the shell-shocked soldiers of WWI faced was carried on in how they related to their families and to future generations—which certainly meant that World War One affected not only their own generations but the generations that followed them, making the significance of “the Great War” all the more important.