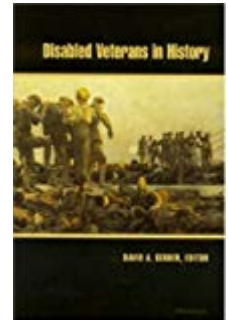


David A. Gerber, ed.. *Disabled Veterans in History. Corporealities: Discourses of Disability..* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000. vii + 348 pp. \$49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-11033-9.



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Limping Home

There are many ways to become disabled, but throughout history one of the most common has been as the result of warfare. Warfare has always been violent, and from ancient times to modern the wounded soldier has become the disabled veteran. David A. Gerber's recent anthology, *Disabled Veterans in History*, brings together fourteen essays focused on the disabled veteran from ancient Greece to the Vietnam War. In addition, Gerber's introduction, "Finding Disabled Veterans in History", reviews the previous limited historical work on disabled veterans and suggests three categories--representation, public policy, and living with a disability--under which the history of these men can be usefully examined. Gerber and most of the authors emphasize disability as a socially constructed condition. The condition of and support for the disabled veteran has varied over time (and from place to place) and has been shaped by public attitudes toward war, by notions of masculinity and work, by victory and defeat, and by the growing presence of disabled veterans in soci-

ety as a result of the successes of modern medicine.

Gerber argues that the representation of the disabled veteran can be found at the juncture of the discourses of the warrior and of the disabled (p. 5). Whereas the warrior has often embodied the ideal of the masculine heroic, the representation of the disabled veteran has often taken on aspects of the feminine. The masculine warrior ideal has long been used to inspire service and the disabled warrior has been held up as the exemplar of dedication and sacrifice (p. 6) on behalf of the nation. However, once the war ends, the need to exalt the sacrifices of the warrior recedes and the disabled hero gradually loses his luster and is reduced in stature to a beleaguered disabled man, whose needs may be perceived as an inconvenience (p. 6). In many Western societies pity and fear have long been the common response to the disabled veteran. Disabled veterans, like the disabled generally, have inspired the fear that their physical and/or mental disability was emblematic of a moral defect and, thus, they represent a threat to a well-ordered society. In the case of vet-

erans, especially those with mental and psychiatric disabilities, the fear of violence was heightened by the veterans experience with the violence of war and his familiarity with weapons. The pity directed toward the veterans resulted from the perception that people with disabilities are innocent sufferers (p. 7), especially in the case of men conscripted into the modern army. This justifiable pity, however, has often been publicly manipulated for instrumental purposes (p. 8), such as raising funds to support disabled veterans or to lobby for the passage of favorable legislation. Beginning early in this century, Gerber argues, pity for the disabled veteran was challenged by movements that insisted that a program of aggressive normalization through physical restoration and vocational training be adopted to return disabled veterans to the community and to the workforce (p. 8). Although pity has been somewhat mitigated in this century, representations of the disabled veterans as infantilized and feminized have persisted in fictional and cinematic treatments of these men. Gerber, however, suggests that under the influence of feminist and disability criticism (p. 11) these literary and media images may be slowly changing and broadening.

Public policy toward the disabled veteran is the second focus of this anthology. Gerber argues that Western societies have established different policies for needy disabled veterans than for needy civilians. Assistance to veterans precedes civilian welfare and has been governed by different principles and rules and has been more generous in its provisions (p. 11). Beginning as early as the seventeenth century, Western governments have provided assistance to disabled veterans that was not conceived of as charity or welfare but as a reward for, and implicitly an incentive to inspire, service, as well as repayment for especially significant personal sacrifice (p. 12). But if governments have been more willing to provide assistance to disabled veterans than to some other groups, it was partly because veterans and veterans groups were active and effective in lobbying

for help. Veterans assistance has also influenced subsequent public policy toward civilian welfare measures and especially toward public policy toward the disabled in general. Many of the medical and surgical developments and rehabilitation practices developed to serve veterans have later been extended to the civilian disabled and, as the welfare state has gradually expanded, the assistance once offered to veterans has gradually been made available in some measure to the civilian population. The evolution of public policy toward the disabled veteran, then, has to some extent served as a model for social policy and practice toward all disabled men and women.

Gerber also argues that, with the possible exception of the deaf community, the lived experience of the disabled veteran until recently has been unique. Whereas it has been rare until recent decades for the non-veteran disabled population to conceive of themselves as a distinct community and to organize and act on their own behalf, veterans have a longer history of collective experience and communal effort to improve their situation. The collective consciousness of the disabled veteran, Gerber argues, derives from the shared experience of battle, an already established relationship to governing authority, and a collectively experienced history of medical treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration (p. 25). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these shared experiences gave rise to a variety of veterans organizations to provide support for the disabled veteran and to pressure governments, not always successfully, for additional assistance.

The essays in the anthology are divided into the three categories that Gerber introduces in his introduction: representation, public policy, and living with a disability. Under representation, Martha Edwards explores the historical context of the Homeric wars in which the tale of Philoctetes came to embody the wounded soldier; David Gerber examines the social reintegration of the disabled World War II veteran as developed in the

1946 film *The Best Days of Our Lives*; and Martin F. Norden analyzes the disabled Vietnam veterans portrayed in a series of Hollywood films. The largest section, seven essays, addresses the development of public policy concerning disabled soldiers. Geoffrey L. Hudson studies the ways in which the state in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England treated wounded soldiers; Isser Woloch describes the treatment of disabled veterans in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France as a sacred debt that was not always discharged; Robert I. Goler and Michael G. Rhode illustrate the ways in which medical records of the American Civil War and the medical exhibits at the Army Medical Museum can be used to explore both the veterans experience of disability and the government's use of this material in support of scientific research; Jeffrey S. Reznick explores the value placed on work in the programs developed by the government to rehabilitate British World War I wounded soldiers; R. B. Rosenberg analyzes the ways in which the American South represented and supported the disabled veterans of the Confederacy who were barred from the U. S. government's programs developed for the Union veterans; Gregory Weeks describes the efforts of Austrian World War II veterans who served in the German army to secure support and assistance; and Ethel Dunn describes the often difficult circumstances of disabled Russian war veterans following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the final section on living with a disability, James Marten explores the reasons why Civil War veterans living at the National Home in Milwaukee so often turned to alcohol and its impact on their lives and on the operation of the facility; Deborah Cohen explores the ways in which the work imperative shaped the treatment of disabled soldiers in post-World War I England and Germany; and Mary Tremblay traces the influence of John Counsell, a veteran with a spinal cord injury, on the development of rehabilitation practices and policy toward the disabled in Canada after World War II.

Although Gerber's three categories--representation, public policy, and living with a disability--accurately describe the general thrust of the essays in each section, there are several other themes that emerge from a reading of these essays. With the exception of the three essays dealing with representation, all of the other essays focus in one way or another on efforts of governments, veterans associations, or private organizations to provide some level of care, rehabilitation, and assistance to veterans. The authors all seem to endorse the modern assumption that disabled veterans are entitled to assistance as a reward for their sacrifice: aid to disabled veterans is not charity but what society owes the wounded soldier. The separate essays, then, develop the extent to which this assumption is adopted and put into practice, or more typically, the ways in which government programs fell short of what was needed and the disabled veterans themselves took on the additional burden of lobbying for what was due them. Few, if any, of the governments studied provided adequately for the needs of the disabled soldiers, either through public policy or through mixed private and public programs. Treatment and care accorded the disabled veteran depended on, among other things, whether the nation was the victor or the vanquished, the state of the post-war economy, the health of government finances, and on public attitudes toward the war and the men who fought it. Treatment of disabled veterans and policies developed to care for them were often later extended to disabled civilians, although the argument for the entitlement of non-veteran disabled populations was harder to make. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least in Europe and North America, the imperative to useful work emerged as the central theme in the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers. For veteran's own sense of dignity, for their ability to support themselves and their families, and for reducing the financial burden on governments, rehabilitation and government policy increasingly embraced the goal of restoring the individual's abili-

ty to work as the key to reestablishing him as a useful member of society. Finally, in diverse ways many of these essays demonstrate that despite the best will of governments and private organizations, the disabled veterans received adequate care only when they organized to demand it. An implicit lesson of these essays is that if disabled veterans had to organize to secure government support, collective action is even more necessary for the civilian disabled.

This is a valuable anthology, although as David Gerber notes in his introduction, it is only a beginning and much work remains to be done on the subject. The essays each in their own way demonstrate what is possible by historians who search out previously unused sources or take a fresh look at familiar material. Scholars interested in the history of disability who are not directly studying disabled veterans will find here considerable evidence of the ways in which rehabilitation practices and government policies originally developed to aid disabled soldiers were later made available to civilians. The extensive notes for each of the essays suggest numerous possibilities for further research. Although the essays are diverse in their focus, several subjects are under-represented or not represented at all. The disabled soldier as studied in this anthology is exclusively male. Gerber notes in his introduction that even less work has been done on women disabled by war, but it would have strengthened the anthology to have had at least one essay dealing with women's experiences, which from the evidence he does cite, were generally worse than the men's. In spite of a section labeled "Living with Disability", relatively little is said in these essays about the lived experience of disabled veterans. The focus is largely on how governments treated veterans through their policies and practices and on the effort of veterans organizations to improve their situation. One or more essays dealing more directly with what it was like to be a disabled veteran in post-Civil War America or post-World War I Germany would have been a welcome addition.

This anthology, as Gerber acknowledges, is centered on veterans in Europe and North America with an emphasis on the last two centuries. Again, given the prevalence of war in other parts of the globe, it would have been illuminating to have had one or more essays from an Asian, African, or Latin American perspective. No anthology, however, can satisfy all readers. *Disabled Veterans in History* nicely demonstrates the possibilities for studying how societies treat men wounded in the service of the state. Historians of disability in general will also find the volume useful in suggesting the many ways in which the treatment of disabled veterans prefigures societies' responses to their non-veteran disabled population. Much work remains to be done, as David Gerber and his authors are well aware, but this anthology marks an excellent beginning and the questions raised here and the sources uncovered point to the exciting possibilities for further scholarship.

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