

BOOK REVIEW

The Facemaker:

One Surgeon's Battle to Mend the Disfigured Soldiers of World War I

by Lindsey Fitzharris

Hardback and other formats, 336 pages

Allen Lane, ISBN 9780241389379

June 2022

Fitzharris has produced a riveting account of the way in which reconstructive facial surgery was developed to treat the horrendous disfigurements sustained in the First World War.

The prologue provides graphic descriptions of the gruesome injuries, in particular facial injuries and burns, suffered by soldiers on the Western Front. Plastic surgery was in its infancy and restorative facial surgery rudimentary. Those returning home with facial deformity might find that, in contrast to amputees who could be treated as heroes, they were shunned by society.

Harold Gillies, an ENT surgeon serving on the Western Front, realised that the complex management of facial deformities and burns would require a multi-disciplinary specialist hospital, which was established in Sidcup, Kent.

An international team of specialist surgeons, dentists and nurses, combined with artists, photographers and sculptors to create a leading world centre. Here, Gillies and his team devised innovations in surgical and dental techniques and developed new prosthetics and masks to treat and rehabilitate individuals with seemingly hopeless mutilation and deformity.

Fitzharris is a gifted storyteller whose writing style is more akin to a fiction writer. It is a style which may not appeal to all historians but it makes for easy reading. Yet the author retains the authority of the historian throughout the book, which has been extensively researched, judging by the wealth of end-notes and references. Among the strengths of the book are the vivid personal accounts from letters, diaries and newspapers, which give poignant insights into the horrors of war wounds and the courage of the patients enduring repeated, often painful procedures, over many months. Gillies is portrayed as an inspiring surgeon with the skill, courage and patience to make major innovations and the resilience to cope with many failures.

A series of 'before and after' photographs of individuals with facial disfigurement provides a poignant testimony both to the horrors of injury and the remarkable outcomes that could be achieved. This book will appeal to anyone interested in the history of surgery, but it is not a volume for the fainthearted!

Iain Macintyre

August 2022

Published online at www.bshm.org.uk