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Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Das' book is framed in the title as *Touch and Intimacy in First War World Literature*. For historians, the book is more of a cultural history of touch in the First World War, with a wide range of sources including diaries, letters and memoirs, as well as novels, poetry and limited amounts of discussion of visual culture. Das' introduction is also important for this reading group in proposing the neglect of touch in the examination of sensory experiences, in comparison to the other senses, although he highlights increasing literature on the topic. This short review looks at the book's value for historians of medicine more broadly, and my own work on the Red Cross in particular. I have read more recent literature on nurses and voluntary aid society members as writers, but have long been meaning to revisit Das' 2005 text on this topic, with his comparison of soldiers and nurses as writers.

The first substantive chapter examines mud. It is entitled 'Slimescapes' and explores the descriptions of trench mud as slime, like plaster, as sucking, and the fear of dying in that mud. These descriptions, particularly sucking, serve to enhance understanding of the sensory experience of war. For a historian of medicine, the danger of this mud in containing bacteria which could cause conditions such as gas gangrene, and the struggle of stretchers carrying soldiers through that mud is key to understanding the wounds and deaths of soldiers, and the experience of care-givers. In examining mud first, Das' concept of touch also includes what is touching the soldiers and stretcher bearers, not just the touch of the nurse or fellow soldier in compassion.

The second chapter examines the theme 'Geographies of sense' and 'haptic geographies' and explores other senses such as smell and also sound and how that relates to touch, for example shelling, anxiety and pulsations. It also considers space and sensations in terms of 'entrapment and darkness'. The second half explores the perceptions of Jewish authors of the trenches including their use of biblical language, contrasted with anti-Semitic views in relation to the First World War.

The third chapter focuses on various aspects of relationships between men, particularly in terms of touch and intimacy, with themes including men caring for each other whilst dying, including dying kisses, together with other aspects of emotional and physical care, including bandaging. The fourth, connected chapter concentrates on Wilfred Owen, but themes relating to the history of medicine include trauma and Craiglockhart Hospital, and topics relating to the body in his poetry and letters, such as hands and eyes, and also his literally graphic recording of injuries.

The particular focus of my interest in the book is the next two chapters – "The impotence of sympathy": service and suffering in the nurses' memoirs', and 'The operating theatre'. Writing could be used as therapy and as escapism by nurses, as explored since by historians such as Christine Hallett. I am especially interested in the difference between professional nurses' and Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurses' and orderlies' writing about their daily work, which Das does not always clearly separate. The book does not present the diverse picture of VAD members which I strive to; he concentrates on 'genteel Edwardian ladies', and lacks awareness of the large number of men who were involved in care as volunteers or in lieu of conscription, a topic which I address in my book. He does very briefly mention male doctors' and nurses' narratives. Yet his examples do provide some contrasts in style; Das notes how Mary Ann Brown wrote about her

day with abbreviations and lists, devoid of emotion even though most of her work involved amputations that day. He ponders whether the 'horror', limited time, exhaustion and the need for 'efficiency' had led to 'the amputation of one's own intimate nerves.' He reflects on Vera Brittain's account of a transition; how at first she felt "sick and faint" but learnt to dress amputated limbs "without emotion", and yet she had nightmares about mutilated bodies, and dwelt on 'physical contact with male wounds'. He also explores Brittain's longing to touch her boyfriend Roland, and her care for others leading her to care for (and therefore touch) Roland 'by proxy'. This is a topic which permeates her memoir and diary until Roland dies. There is not as much clear distinction between diaries and memoirs as I would have expected in the first of the chapters on women, but Das does use this methodology in comparing Brittain's memoir, letters and diary in the chapter focussed on the 'Operating Theatre', finding the diary is much briefer in its descriptions. There is continuity with earlier chapters, with references to hands, including injuries to the nurses, such as septic wounds, fingers which were stiff and clumsy, and touching bodies and wounds. Another theme is witnessing pain, rather than feeling it, and reactions including feeling 'faint', 'powerless' and 'helpless'. Das focusses on this witnessing of trauma and women's anxiety and reaction to it by writing. Their senses were recorded, including sight, such as the visibility of organs such as brains, smell, such as the stench of gas gangrene, and the sound of men screaming in agony. However, he also briefly goes beyond witnessing to allude to the high death toll amongst female nurses, and nurses who were stationed near the front. Das' sensitive and graphic approach to 'touch' and the sensory experience of the nurse and volunteer in the First World War informed my early general reading about Red Cross volunteers for my book. I can only approach this topic briefly considering the scope of my book, and a fairly substantial amount of secondary literature has been published since on nurses and stretcher bearers, but Das' approach of focussing on the sensory experience of war draws out some key examples of caregivers' physical and emotional experience and how this impacted upon their writing, and has usefully highlighted a couple of particularly useful memoirs which I would otherwise have missed.