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**‘He does not appear to have done much useful work since he was wounded’:  
Age, disability, and the history of masculinity**

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**Abstract**

This article considers the ways in which the male life course in twentieth-century Britain can be reconstructed through individual personal pension files of British disabled ex-servicemen from the First World War. The files contain a range of documentation, including military enlistment and discharge forms, medical records, and correspondence from pensioners, their families, and other advocates. Close reading of five of these files explores pensioners’ changing experiences of health and disability. It examines men’s physical status as soldiers on enlistment, their ability to find work as physically or psychologically impaired ex-servicemen after the war, the significance of their status as husbands and fathers, and the effects of old age on their identity as men disabled in war. It argues that this ongoing engagement with the gendered legacies of war created a unique and important space in which the memory of the conflict was narrated.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** First World War, disability pensions, age, enlistment, work, marriage

The First World War shaped the masculine identity of the men who fought in it. It could ‘make’ men through the accrual of experience and maturity. It could also ‘break’ men, some through death, many more through the infliction of life-changing impairments, physical, psychological, and sensory (Hynes, 1997; Bourke, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Meyer, 2009a; Roper, 2009). In either case, the war was ‘the disruption of all previously established relationships’, particularly the relationships associated with life-cycle expectations (Scott, 1984, p. 4). For young men, war service interrupted education, training, and plans for employment and career progression, on which plans for marriage and the establishment of independent households were often contingent (Meyer, 2009a, pp. 113–114). Older men’s expected roles as providers and heads of household could similarly be disrupted by the requirements of war service, while those too old or otherwise unable to serve found themselves forced to question their role in a society at war (Ugolini, 2013, pp. 108–111). British culture responded to the war in terms of generational divides that defined men and masculinity in terms of age and life cycle. Overwhelmingly, this narrative centred on the destruction of youth by old age (Owen, 1918/1986; Sassoon, 1918). The deaths of some 750,000 British men of fighting age helped to underpin the concept of the Lost Generation, while the arts of the interwar period, including commemorative art, articulated what Samuel Hynes termed a generational war (Hynes, 1991, pp. 383–404; Wohl, 1979, pp. 85–121).

These cultural responses have influenced both histories and commemorations of the war (McCartney, 2014). Yet, in relation to the history of British masculinities and the First World War, the tendency to focus on the scale of death has tended to obscure the social and cultural disruption caused by war-attributable disability. The experiences of men who were disabled by war were less likely to be represented in wartime or post-war culture (Cohen, 2001, p. 101), yet they had profound implications for how masculinity was understood as a facet of identity and the ways in which individuals used gender codes to negotiate social expectations (Gagen, 2007; Meyer, 2009a). Men disabled during and by their war service could live, in many instances, for years, with bodies, minds, and senses reshaped in ways that

were not always easily accommodated either by wider society or men's individual expectations of themselves.

The negotiations that these men, and their families, engaged in across time, as bodies aged and social expectations altered, thus make a powerful lens through which to examine the ways in which masculinity and disability interacted in twentieth-century Britain. In particular, they expose the challenges men faced in negotiating a coherent life-course narrative that fully encompassed the disjunctures of war. Michael Roper has pointed to the difficulties for men for whom war disability was *not* necessarily central to their post-war identity, such as Lyndall Urwick, who used memoir to compose and recompose his gendered self over the course of many years (Roper, 2000). For men for whom disability was an inescapable facet of their lives in the years after the war, the construction of coherent life narratives was more often a process of accretion of official documentation related to their disability than the construction of self-reflexive narratives. In this process, they were forced to negotiate with official understandings of appropriate masculinity at different points in the life course, from enlistment through work, marriage, retirement, and into old age. Through exploring such official documentation, we can begin to understand this as a continuous process throughout men's lives, not one limited to the point of impairment and its immediate aftermath.

This article uses the official records of the Ministry of Pensions, now held in the PIN 26 series of the National Archives, London, to look at the histories of five men whose lives as disabled men are captured in their personal pension files. This is a minuscule sample of the 22,823 records that have survive.<sup>2</sup> They have been selected for close reading from an initial proof-of-concept database, containing data from 919 files drawn from three sub-sections, namely a sample taken in the 1970s, files of men of the ranks, and officers' files. All 207 files from the 1970s sample are included; the men's records are being added alphabetically by last name; the officer's records have been sampled based on type of disability, with a focus on psychological trauma and facial injury. During the process of adding data, the files discussed in this article were identified as containing documents relating to multiple points in the life course, including appeal statements, subsequent pension applications, and letters from advocates, as well as enlistment records and medical files. They form some of the more comprehensive examples of files containing such information. As such, they represent the ability of personal pension files to reflect men's varied lives as soldiers, husbands, fathers, employees, and retirees, lives that they lived at different moments as both able-bodied and disabled men.

This article thus builds on the work done by Wendy Jane Gagen and Michael Robinson on men's embodied and regionally specific post-war experiences of physical and psychological war disability. Where Gagen focuses on J.B. Middlebrook's construction of the subjective self during the period of his rehabilitative hospital treatment (Gagen, 2007), and Robinson considers the intersections of gender and race in the treatment of Irish sufferers from shell shock (Robinson, 2020), this article considers how official and social systems forced men to continue to reconstruct their masculine identities over time. It examines key points at which these men's places within the life course defined in gendered terms intersected with their embodied status as able-bodied or disabled, including their enlistment as soldiers, their definition by the state as disabled ex-servicemen, their negotiations in finding and maintaining work, the recognition of their status as husbands and fathers, and the effects of the frailties of old age. At each point, men engaged with age-related social expectations and anxieties, including fears of both perceived immaturity and premature ageing, similar to the contexts in which American male polio survivors would seek to narrate their experiences of illness and disability later in the century. However, where Wilson argues that polio survivors used metaphors of war and warriorhood in their efforts to perform normative masculinity, for British men whose disabilities were acquired on or in association

with an actual battlefield, asserting normativity was more complex (Wilson, 2004, pp. 131–132). Disabled ex-servicemen did invoke their soldier statuses but also drew on norms associated with a range of aspects of the male life cycle, including employment and domesticity, extending the negotiation with disabled identity beyond considerations of the ageing body. By considering the intersections of gender and disability across men's lives, this article demonstrates the ways in which these facets of identity interacted in the construction of entire life stories as men sought to define and locate themselves in twentieth-century social and economic structures.

### **The ministry of pensions**

In 1916, the British parliament created the Ministry of Pensions, a government department overseeing the care and financial recompense of those disabled by their war service. While contributory old age pensions had been on the statute books since 1908 (Thane, 2000, p. 223), the formation of the Ministry of Pensions was the first time that military service pensions were a statutory right in Britain. Previously, service pensions were awarded at the discretion of the War Office and Admiralty (Bettinson, 2002, p. 19). With the mass mobilisation of total war, which included the institution of separation allowances as inducements for men to enlist (Pedersen, 1995, pp. 109–110), state support for those who suffered injury in the course of their service to the nation at war became not merely a logical extension of policy but an imperative that contributed to cultural narratives of the nation's 'debt' to servicemen.

Such state support was not uncontested, however. Ministry policy on the evaluation and awarding of pensions was developed in relation to debates over workers' rights to civil compensation for disabilities arising from workplace accidents. The result was a system that disarticulated and surveilled the disabled, predominantly male, body (Bourke, 1999, pp. 65–67). Under the terms of the 1916 statute, pension could only be granted for impairments deemed by Ministry-appointed medical boards to be either attributable to or aggravated by service in the war. Injuries that were the result of accidents deemed to be the man's fault, and self-inflicted wounds, were excluded (Bettinson, 2002, p. 9). Additionally, pensions were awarded for 'loss of amenity' rather than 'loss of working capacity', with '[e]ach part of men's bodies ... allocated a moral weighting based on the degree to which it incapacitated a man from "being" a man, rather than "acting" as one' (Bourke, 1999, p. 65). This loss was assigned a degree of disablement according to an official schedule, ranging from 20% for the loss of two fingers from either hand to 100% for the loss of multiple limbs, the loss of a combination of limbs and senses, total loss of sight, severe illness, or severe facial injury. In spite of the apparent detail of the official schedule, the actual classification of impairments was often subjective, particularly in relation to the question of permanency. Wounds and illnesses could respond to treatment, so that a man once 'bedbound' might not always be so. Equally, wounds could deteriorate. A stump infection might lead to the re-amputation of a limb above a joint, moving it from a 50% categorisation to 60% or even 70%. Over time, a man's sight might deteriorate or he might suffer a recurrence of malaria or tuberculosis that might leave him bedridden, at least temporarily. In these latter cases in particular, the question of whether the experience of illness was attributable to or aggravated by the war when its recurrence occurred in a post-war context was a common matter for contestation between pensioners and the pensions authorities.

As a result of the ambiguities and subjectivities in the pensions system, pensioners were often required to attend multiple medical boards to assess their level of impairment before they received a final award. If the impairment was deemed to be below 20%, the pensioner would be offered a final pension either as a lump sum or a fixed-term weekly

pension. In such cases, men often appealed, providing them with the opportunity to state their own case for consideration. Medical boards and appeals tribunals thus became important spaces in which men were both defined and sought to define themselves as disabled by their war service. However, pension files also contained records of men's entire war service, including enlistment, disciplinary, medical, and discharge records. These could all be cited in the narratives of progress through the male life cycle that men sought to construct through their engagements with the Ministry.

## **Enlistment**

Enlistment was men's first formal encounter with the gender and embodied expectations of soldiering. British recruitment policy made explicit the social and political expectations of what a soldier should be – male, young, unmarried, and physically and mentally fit (Gullace, 2002, pp. 35–52). While the moral suasion mobilised by some of the more retrospectively famous propaganda images, such as 'Daddy, What Did You Do in the Great War?' (Lumley, 1915), focused on the responsibility of husbands and fathers to protect their families, most recruitment practices, such as the implicit promise of sexual favours made by the music hall star Vesta Tilly, were aimed at young, single men without domestic ties.

Ultimately, only the requirement that soldiers be male was adhered to throughout the war. The age, marital status, and fitness of recruits were all compromised by the recruiting process. The Regular Army recruited unmarried men up to the age of 38, but men enlisted in the Reserves, many of whom were married, were recalled to the colours up to the age of 40, or 42 for the Special Reserves. Recruits to Kitchener's New Armies, formed on the outbreak of war in 1914, could enlist up to the age of 45, although many men were able to enlist over age (Simkins, 1988). Underage recruits were also not uncommon, although generally less successful at getting past military surveillance (Van Emden, 2012). The numbers of men enlisting, particularly in the early months of the war, meant that physical inspections were often rushed, allowing men with a range of physical impairments to enlist (Winter, 1985).

Ongoing military demands for manpower meant that age and fitness parameters were increasingly broadened (Meyer, 2021). The age for enlistment, meanwhile, was becoming more blurred. The census of men for attestation for service, introduced in 1915, covered men from age 15 to 65. Attestation included married men, who had not been targeted by previous recruitment efforts. Conscription, brought in by the Military Services Act in 1916, was more clear-cut. Men would be conscripted if they were aged 19 to 41 and unmarried or widowed. However, both these parameters were revised in 1918 when married men and men up to the age of 51 could be conscripted to the armed forces.

While the insatiable demand of the military for manpower shifted the official recruitment parameters, cultural assumptions about the youth and single status of the ideal soldier remained dominant. This can be seen in the anxieties that were expressed 'about younger men's willingness and fitness to take on the responsibilities they were expected to shoulder' (Ugolini, 2013, pp. 108–109). Such doubts were commonly expressed during the period of attestation but also continued to find expression through the work of the military service tribunals that adjudicated on men's appeals against conscription. While the support of dependents was taken into consideration in these for a, the invocation of domestic masculine responsibilities most often led to a deferral of conscription rather than outright release (Gregory, 2008, pp. 92–95). In wartime, the civil life-course markers of masculine status became compromised, with demands of the military taking precedence. Men were forced to respond through engagement with the recruitment process.

The sample of PIN 26 files examined here reflects the shifting age-related expectations of masculinity that emerged over the course of the war.<sup>3</sup> Three of the five men

examined here were in their twenties and unmarried when they enlisted. One claimed to be 38 in 1915, although other records in his file indicate he may have been older. The final man, AA18, was a reservist, having served for 12 years as a regular soldier after enlisting at 20.<sup>4</sup> He was 50 when recalled to service in 1914, and his second period of service was far shorter, lasting less than a year with no service overseas. He was discharged as medically unfit due to gall stones and chronic neuritis of the right shoulder in October 1915, conditions for which he received a temporary pension as they were deemed aggravated by his service. In 1920, his wife launched an appeal for a new pension for impairments related to a stroke AA18 had suffered in 1916. This condition was not deemed attributable to war service at the time, and the medical board that examined him in 1920 diagnosed his condition as confusional insanity, noting the '[i]nsanity appears to be due to senile arterial changes leading to cerebral degradation' (PIN 26/325, 13 December 1920). Age, not war, was the cause of AA18's illness and consequent impairment. There were, therefore, deemed to be 'no grounds for award' (PIN 26/325, 23 September 1921). Because he (re)enlisted beyond the appropriate age limits for service, AA18's impairments were attributed to age rather than the war.

AA18 was at the more extreme end of the age range, but JH4 was also an older enlistee, claiming to be 38 when he joined up in 1915 and 40 at his discharge three years later. It is possible, however, that he lied on his enlistment form, as a later medical board, dated 1922, gave his age as 54. This ambiguity is significant because, while JH4's disabling condition was malaria, caught on service in Salonika, and the debility that followed it, 'age' was also listed as part of his disability, apparently acknowledging it as an attributable cause of impairment. His medical record cards describe him as 'Rather old for his age' and 'Man looks old for his years but well-nourished' (PIN 26/69, 4 December 1919 and 23 April 1920). It is not clear if this disconnect between actual and perceived age reflected the age stated on his enlistment form or the older age later recorded. However, one medical board concluded that '[p]ensioner shows loss of nervous energy and this *with his advancing years* and deafness produces his debility' (PIN 26/69, 11 October 1921; my emphasis). By comparison with AA18, old age was explicitly given as the cause of JH4's impairment and could be recognised with a war pension.

Both AA18 and JH4 transgressed the cultural ideals of the soldier through enlisting at an inappropriate stage in their life course. Both suffered impairments that were related to this fact as much as to the actual service they undertook in the war. JH4, however, apparently because of his overseas service, was able to claim the impairments of age as part of the disability for which he could claim a pension. His impairments were thus more than simply the frailties of old age (Levine-Clark, 2015, p. 198). They were a war-attributable disability.

### **Becoming a disabled ex-serviceman**

Attributability was central to understanding the official construction of war disability. In some cases, it was clear. LA1, for example, suffered a gunshot wound to his right arm. Initially assessed at 30% disability due to 'muscle wastage [and] weak grip', he was ultimately awarded a 25% pension for life in 1923 (PIN 26/235, 27 February 1919). Neither the permanency of the wound nor its relation to LA1's war service were disputed. SA7, by contrast, suffered from a gunshot wound to the head while on active service in France. While attributability of the wound was not in doubt, the extent to which it, in turn, caused his subsequent intellectual impairments was a matter for considerable discussion within his file. Across medical examinations lasting five years from his discharge, Ministry doctors sought to dissociate his impairments from his war wound, instead casting them as inherent. His mentality was described as 'dull' and the fits he suffered were labelled 'hysterical', with the strong implication that they were not only effeminate, but also symptomatic of malingering

rather than genuine impairment (PIN 26/267).<sup>5</sup> The attributability of SA7's disability was discussed in terms that brought the masculinity of his disabled body and mind into question. There was, apparently, no scope for SA7 himself to assert his masculinity in relation to his own experience of impairment and the way in which he acquired a disability.

Ultimately, SA7's symptoms were deemed attributable to his wound and he was granted a 40% pension for life. As one official noted prior to his military discharge, '[h]e has a fairly severe head wound with some loss of bone & he complains of giddiness & headache. It is difficult to say how bad those symptoms are but at any rate he has some organic cause for them. He does not appear to have done much useful work since he was wounded & would probably be better employed at tailoring.' (PIN 26/267, 9 November, 1918) 'Work' here appears to refer to the specific work of soldiering rather than paid employment more generally. For the Ministry, the disruption that becoming disabled caused to SA7's masculinity was to his wartime identity rather than in relation to his entire life course.

The suggestion that SA7 would be better employed at tailoring was, in fact, an acknowledgement of his ability to demonstrate successful peacetime masculinity through returning to paid employment in the job he held before the war. 'Tailor' was listed as his occupation on his enlistment forms and he was recorded as a retired journeyman tailor on his death certificate in 1959 (PIN 26/267). While it is impossible to say from the documents contained in his pension file if he worked consistently at this occupation in the 36 years since the award of his final pension, his disability does not appear to have impaired his ability to fulfil that most important of masculine markers: the ability to achieve economic independence through paid employment (Levine-Clark, 2015, p. 27). He was thus able to demonstrate appropriate mature masculinity after the war, countering the wartime construction of his masculinity as compromised.

## Work

SA7 was by no means alone in being able to find and maintain employment after the war. In spite of his damaged arm, LA1 found work as a publican, which he was able to maintain until his retirement, reflected in the addresses of licensed premises listed as his residences in his file. Prior to his war service, he had worked as a warehouseman and salesman, so impairment interrupted his career trajectory but did not destroy his ability to work entirely. This disruption reflected the situation of many disabled ex-servicemen. In an economic environment where men without impairments struggled to find employment, those with disabilities found it extremely difficult to obtain work (Meyer, 2009a, p. 107). A range of schemes were established to give priority to disabled ex-servicemen in recruitment to jobs and to retrain men in work deemed suitable to their newly impaired bodies (Bourke, 1999, p. 74; Cohen, 2001, pp. 15–60; Kowalsky, 2007). These had mixed success, with many men experiencing retraining in particular as a form of loss of masculine identity independent from their status as disabled (Cohen, 2001, pp. 112–115; Meyer, 2009a, p. 113). Men's struggles to obtain and retain work that they felt reflected their position within the life course as independent earners with agency over their career choice formed the basis of considerable correspondence with Ministry officials.

JH4 provides a good example of this type of interaction. In 1920, he wrote to ask for his weekly pension to be converted to a lump sum, allowing him to set up as a baker, his pre-war profession. At the time of writing, his pension was still temporary as the extent of the disability incurred through his post-malarial disability continued to be assessed. His application was thus refused. This appears to have been the case for the majority of such applications, with only eight examples of such a request being successful out of the 919 proof-of-concept files so far inputted. While gratuities were the final award in 148 cases,

these were as a result of the Ministry concluding that the disabling condition had settled at less than 20% disability rather than because of a request for funds by the disabled pensioner. This distinction and its effect on the application of the rules reflects the extent to which Ministry officials sought to control both definitions of disability and what forms of employment were deemed suitable for disabled men to undertake. Their reluctance to support pensioner's independent investment in work of their choice reflected contemporary social attitudes that associated disability with dependency and, consequently, immaturity (Koven, 1994).

Such attitudes were infantilising and disabled ex-servicemen sought to resist them. Many, like JH4, presented themselves as having achieved independence and agency through describing how they were able or intended to obtain work. Those who, like LA1, were forced to change jobs due to their disability, articulated a sense of loss. A former mechanical draughtsman, for example, wrote that '[p]ractically my profession has been taken from me' when he found himself working as a shop assistant (PIN 26/21727, 14 April 1924). This sense of loss reflected the extent to which not just economic dependence but loss of agency in relation to the type of work undertaken was understood as emasculating. Lack of control over the work they were able to undertake located disabled ex-servicemen at a point in the male life course many felt was inappropriate to both their experience and their sacrifice for the state. While men sought to demonstrate their ability to fulfil expectations of adult masculinity through finding work in spite of their impairments, social expectations articulated by the Ministry placed limits on their capacity for full masculine independence and agency. These experiences, as much as the wounds and illnesses they suffered, were life-limiting for these men, and they often struggled to encompass them in suitable narratives of the male life course.

## **Marriage and family**

The limits on disabled ex-servicemen's agency placed by social expectations affected not only their identity as workers but also their identity as married men and household providers. The expectation that a man should provide for his dependents was central to social understandings of mature masculinity in the first half of the twentieth century (Levine-Clark, 2015). The inability of disabled men to do this posed a severe challenge to their understanding of their place within the gendered life course. The case of FR1 is particularly instructive in this regard. Having enlisted in 1914, aged 19, he was discharged in 1919 following hospitalisation for influenza. He received a temporary pension of 20% for Disordered Action of the Heart (DAH), a rather vague diagnosis that could cover psychological symptoms as well as coronary ones. He was, however, in work as an engine turner and no longer in receipt of a pension by the time he married his wife E in 1921. Ten years later, he applied for a new pension in relation to the tuberculosis he by then had been diagnosed with but died of the condition before the Ministry was able to assess his case, including whether his illness could be considered attributable to his war service (PIN 26/5).

In 1956, E applied to the Ministry for a widow's pension. At the time, she was the beneficiary of both her husband's occupational pension and her own National Insurance pension, accrued through her work as a dressmaker since her husband's death. The existence of an occupational pension left to benefit his wife would seem to be evidence of FR1's ability to find and maintain work, and thus act as a socially sanctioned male breadwinner in spite of his wounds, which included a gunshot wound to his right hand and being gassed, as well as his pensionable disability. In her letters to the Ministry, however, E claimed that the lived reality had been different: 'My husband was granted a pension of 6/- per week when he first came out of the army, but they stopped it after a while as he was working full time. Some



days he wasn't fit to go to work but you just couldn't stop home or your job was gone.' (PIN 26/5, 27 May 1959) This retrospective narrative echoed FR1's own statement in his 1931 appeal:

I was passed into the army as A1 in 1914 & discharged in 1919 as Grade III. I received a pension for 2 years for D.A.H. I was able to work when my pension cease so I did not trouble about it but I realize now that it would have been to my advantage to have tried to have it continued. I have never been perfectly fit since discharge having chest trouble practically the whole time & continually attending the doctor. [...] I continued my work as long as I could but did not realize the nature of my complaint. So long as I was able to work & support myself I refrained – on patriotic grounds – from claiming any pension, but now owing to the nature of my complaint I am bound to press my claim. (PIN 26/5, 16 November 1931)<sup>6</sup>

In seeking to resist associations between dependence and disability, and at the same time seeking to lay claim to the patriotism associated with soldier masculinity in wartime, FR1 rejected the pension that would have identified him as disabled and disrupted roles in the life course where he believed himself to be successful.

While FR1's narrative sheds light on the importance of soldiering and work to the male life course, E's later narrative illuminates the tensions between disability and the role of domestic provider. The fact that she and FR1 married after his discharge from the military meant that she did not qualify for a widow's pension, even if her husband's death had been deemed attributable to his war service through his exposure to gas. The delay in their marriage, she explained, was itself a result of her husband's wartime illness. He was 'not in a fit state to be married' according to both her parents and his. Reverend H.M.W. Hocking, writing to the local Member of Parliament as an advocate for E, explained that 'when her husband, badly gassed and shell-shocked, received his discharge, it was felt that he ought to regain his health before undertaking the responsibility of a wife' (PIN 26/5, 13 June 1956). Such attitudes reflected wider social anxiety about the ability of disabled ex-servicemen to successfully fulfil the mature role of head of household, anxieties which were often expressed by men themselves. Nurse J. Badger, for example, wrote on behalf of Lt. Arthur E. Kaye, who was blinded in one eye and had his leg amputated, that 'he says he cannot come back to his Wife like that' (as cited in Bourke, 1999, p. 73). J.B. Middlebrook, whose arm was amputated, expressed similar anxieties about continuing his relationship with his fiancée once he was disabled (Gagen, 2007).

In obtaining and retaining work up until his final illness, and in supporting his wife through his labours, FR1 was able to address these anxieties only by refusing to identify himself as disabled. This would ultimately cost him claims for Ministry support but appears to have been a common pattern. This prioritising of the identity of independent domestic provider by ex-servicemen helps demonstrate the centrality of domesticity to interwar British masculinities (Bourke, 1999, p. 168). Within the sample discussed here, AA18 was already married on enlistment. Both LA1 and SA7 married after the war, in 1919 and 1928 respectively. Only JH4 was and remained single. In this, the sample reflects marriage rates among the general population reflected in analysis of the 1921 census (*Census of England and Wales, 1927*, pp. 81–84). Being disabled by the war had little impact on men's ability to marry or, based on the qualitative example of FR1, their wish to do so. Disability may have created social anxiety but does not appear to have undermined lived experience in the ways that sociocultural narratives of dependency and masculine insufficiency articulated. Instead, men sought to fulfil normative expectations of behaviour congruent with their time of life.

The ability to sustain and support marriage and family life, however, may have been more challenging for disabled men. SA7, for example, was separated from his wife by 1948 when she was imprisoned for two years. Pensioners regularly complained to the Ministry

about being separated from wives and children while undergoing treatment or looking for work, a pattern that was particularly noticeable among men who emigrated while still in receipt of a pension from the British government (Meyer, 2009a, pp. 121–122; Moncrieff, nd.). As a life-course marker for disabled ex-servicemen, therefore, marriage and family life were, like work, both attainable and ways in which men challenged social narratives of dependency. Also like work, the ability to maintain marriage and head-of-household status over time was a struggle for many disabled ex-servicemen. It was thus the process of sustaining as much as attaining the markers of mature masculinity that proved difficult for disabled ex-servicemen in defining their masculinity relative to wider social expectations over time.

## **Conclusion**

It is this question of maintaining a sense of self over time that proved the greatest struggle for men in their understanding of themselves as disabled. While the Ministry of Pensions attempted to impose normative understandings of an appropriate life course, these were challenged by ex-servicemen's disabled bodies and minds. Men themselves sought and were often able to demonstrate the achievement of the necessary identity markers of masculinity appropriate to their stage in the life course, including soldier in time of war, independent wage-earner, and husband and father. Their ability to sustain such identities over time, however, proved more problematic. Thus AA18's enlistment as a soldier at a culturally inappropriate moment in the life course led to the denial of his impairment as attributable to the war. JH4's disability was used by the Ministry to control the form of work he was able to engage with through the withholding of a lump sum payment. FR1's marriage was delayed by anxieties over his health and capacity, with long-term financial effects on his wife.

Not all men faced such difficulties. LA1 and SA7, both in receipt of permanent pensions from the mid-1920s, appear to have negotiated the challenges of finding work, married life, fatherhood in the case of LA1, and, ultimately, retirement with enough success that they had no recourse to appeal to the Ministry of Pensions. Both died of illnesses unrelated to their pensionable disability in the 1950s, leaving records of their deaths in the archives but large gaps in this official record of their lives. The extent to which they, and the many others like them, needed to continue to negotiate changing social expectations of both disability and masculinity is not immediately apparent from an archive that centres on complaint and contestation.

Yet, even with these gaps, the archive captures something that reflexive constructions of subjectivities seen in ego documents do not. J.B. Middlebrook's letters and Lyndal Urwick's endlessly rewritten memoirs capture their perception of masculinity as a particular moment. Pension records, which forced men to continue to re-narrate their shifting experiences of physical and psychological disability in response to changing circumstances, which brought the outside gaze of the medical board to bear as well as providing space for the articulation of self-understanding, demonstrates the ways in which war continued to shape men's lives throughout the life course. Constructing coherent narratives of masculinity in such circumstances was challenging.

Individuals engaged with social constructions of masculinity in a variety of ways to articulate their lived experiences of disability. Cultural norms were contested, accepted, and incorporated into daily lives as men and women sought to fashion coherent post-war identities in a post-war that, for some, lasted well over half a century. The commemoration, which has privileged narratives of veteran silence, has tended to obscure this ongoing engagement with the aftermath of war that was an essential part of ex-servicemen's lives. Yet, that engagement has much to tell us, both about the shifting definitions of masculinity

and male life course and the status of war-disabled men in British society across the twentieth century. By constructing their masculinity in relation to definitions beyond those associated solely with war and warriors, disabled ex-servicemen of the First World War located their experiences and understanding of disability in their life course as a whole rather than simply in the ageing process. In doing so, they demonstrate the diversity and complexity of disability as an aspect of a gendered life.

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately 1.2 million men applied for a disability pension under the terms of the 1916 statute and later amendments, each generating their own file. A large number of these were destroyed or damaged during the Second World War. The surviving files form a sample taken on advice from an expert panel of historians in the 1980s, with the remainder of the files destroyed. See <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11539>

<sup>3</sup> Analysing patterns of age at enlistment for the entire proof-of-concept sample is complicated as the records reflect the enlistment not only of volunteers in 1914 and 1915 and conscripts from 1916 onwards but also of Regulars and Reservists whose date of enlistment predates the war, as well as men with enlistment records from the 1899–1901 South African War. In addition, a significant portion of the sample misrepresented their age at enlistment. The five files discussed here reflect several of these variables from the wider sample.

<sup>4</sup> The subjects of the personal pension files that make up the PIN 26 series will be referred to throughout this article by unique alphanumeric references generated by the Men, Women and Care project database, in line with the project's ethical approval (University of Leeds, Research Ethics Report PVAR 14-065). For further discussion, see Meyer and Moncrieff (2021).

<sup>5</sup> On the gendered meanings of hysteria as a wartime diagnosis and its relationship to malingering, see Showalter, 1985; Gilbert, 1987; Meyer, 2009b.

<sup>6</sup> Men's health was officially classified by the military on a scale from A1 (fit for overseas service) to C3 (unsuitable for military service) at enlistment. Classifications could change on medical inspection throughout the war, reflecting experiences of illness and injury. 'Grade III' appears to be FR1's own classification of his medical status on discharge, probably a misunderstanding or misremembering of C3.