

Battle on two fronts

Neville Hawcock on the professions of killing and curing, and the art that reflected them both

The days are short, the news is grim... How shall I cheer myself up? I know, I'll go and see the *War and Medicine* exhibition at the Wellcome. That should do the trick.

Or maybe not. The Wellcome Collection has a tough sell on its hands with this show, a collaboration with the forbiddingly named Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden. But don't be put off: provocative, eclectic, intelligently curated, outlining the tangled relationship between the killing and the curing professions, it is well worth the excursion.

The first thing you hear is the dense rumble of prop-driven aircraft engines. This is the soundtrack to "Theatre", a film installation by the Sheffield-based artist David Cotterell that was produced after a Wellcome-funded placement last year with a British army medical unit in Helmand province, Afghanistan. It displays, across three walls of a surprisingly dark screening room, footage of the dimly lit, cavernous interior of a transport aircraft. In it, figures in camouflage fatigues come and go, sometimes attending to a stretcher at one end of the fuselage, sometimes, clipboard in hand, quizzing figures seated along one wall. Presumably we're evacuating the wounded – or rather, pretending to, for we can also see, at one end of the aircraft, a hatch leading to a brightly lit space with a phone in it. What is going on?

"Theatre", it turns out, is a re-enactment of the last day of training for army medical crews before deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq, a full dress-rehearsal for the real thing. A caption explains that Cotterell, who accompanied one of these rescue flights during his secondment, wants to evoke "the sense of abstraction experienced as a civilian witness to the treatment received by combat trauma victims... at Camp Bastion". In this he surely succeeds: the muted lighting, the drone of the engines and the cryptic goings-on give the work a hypnotic quality.

It's also, given the modesty of Cotterell's aims – no gory didacticism, no voyeuristic striving for realism – a fitting prologue to this sensitively curated exhibition. There are

some challenging sights here, notably in the section dealing with the plastic surgery pioneers Harold Delf Gillies and Archibald McIndoe, but little blood and guts. Some of the most affecting exhibits are the most understated.

At the start, for example, in a section devoted to the simple improvements in

hygiene and organisation that have saved lives from the Crimean war on, is a blow-up of Florence Nightingale's famous diagram showing causes of mortality during the Crimea campaign. A strange combination of pie and bar chart (the nursing pioneer called it her "coxcomb" diagram, as vivid as a cockerel's crest), it makes it devastatingly clear that deaths from infectious diseases far exceeded deaths from wounds.

The Wellcome fleshes out Nightingale's numbers with contemporary accounts of the wretched conditions endured by soldiers on that bitter front. A poignant exhibit is a letter home by a Captain George Boldero, the handwriting shaky and spidery because injury to his right arm obliged him to write with his left. A caption tells us that it took him eight days to reach the hospital after being wounded.

A strong point of the show is its juxtaposition of old and new, of fine art and design – Abram Games posters with their clever, clean lines, shell-shocked prints by Otto Dix and George Grosz – and harshly functional equipment. Along the display case from Capt Boldero, sepia script and photographs give way to the bright colours of the triage cards used by today's army medics. Triage, the practice of sorting casualties by urgency of medical need, was, like Nightingale's hospital reforms, also developed in the Crimea, by the Russian surgeon Nikolai Pirogov.

Not all the exhibits are so grim – some are even funny, if only in hindsight. Cigarette cards from 1939 extol the virtues of physical fitness; a second world war British information film about the perils of VD [venereal disease] is presented by an actress with a voice so crisply, glacially posh that hanky-

panky seems emphatically off-limits; a splendidly crude first world war German propa-