

The Flu Pandemic of 1918-19:

Did Wealth and
Class Influence the
Experience of the
Flu in Great Britain?

Daniel Romeyn Davis
Cardinal Spellman High School - Brockton, Massachusetts

Why this topic?

- British society is notoriously stratified by class and wealth (which are not synonymous)
- The First World War (1914-18) alongside the Flu Pandemic (1918-19) struck both *haves* and *have nots* alike
- After the First and Second World Wars there were egalitarian movements in public health within Great Britain that were not mimicked in the United States



So what did I find?

This specific area of enquiry is under-researched. Most of the existing literature on the Flu Pandemic in Great Britain either ignores class distinctions within British society or provides a *throwaway line* about how the Flu infected all members of British society or about how wealth provided some level of social isolation from infection and additional comforts.



Imperial War Museum - First World War Recruitment Posters



So what did I do?

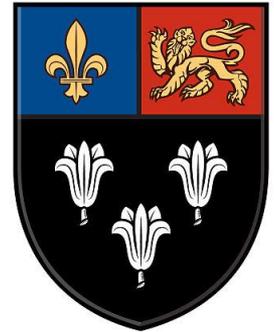
I focused on one institution in particular that is associated with the elite of British society in order to ascertain how the flu impacted the people there.

The research focused on Eton College, a secondary school founded in 1440 under Royal Warrant by King Henry VI and the *alma mater* to 19 Prime Ministers.

The Eton College *Chronicle* was published weekly and allowed me to search for obituaries of recently graduated students to determine who died from the Influenza Pandemic and then I researched more about specific individuals.

I was able to find a handful of stories about recent Eton graduates who had died during the Flu Pandemic. There were others whose stories remain hidden within the historical record. Far more died as a result of the First World War. It has been estimated that 20% of *Old Etonians* who served in the War died (compared to 12% of all soldiers and 17% of all Officers).

A notable feature of the obituaries and death announcements (listed as: *Etona Non Immemor* - “Eton Does Not Forget”) are the descriptions of the boys which are often reverent, detailed, and oftentimes lighthearted.



ALBERT EDWARD GEORGE ARNOLD KEPPEL, The Rifle Brigade.



Edward Keppel, the fourth son of Lord and Lady Albemarle, came to Eton (B.I., T.P.C.) from Ludgrove in May, 1911, and left at Easter, 1915. **He had no great liking for books; but his quick intelligence, his talent for lively conversation, his ready wit, and his *joie de vivre* banished all gloom from his presence.** In games, if he did not fulfil the promise of his early days at Ludgrove, where he was Captain of the Football XI., and won the Racquets and other events, his pluck and his courage were unquestionable.

He was killed in action on July 31, 1917, shortly after returning from his first leave. His last message was : " Give my best love to all my friends, and very much *au revoir*."

"He was perfectly splendid," his C.O. writes, " in the attack, and was killed by a rifle bullet whilst running forward with a Lewis gun, which he was about to use on some Germans who were running away. He had a wonderful influence on his men, who loved him, and would do anything for him. He was always absolutely cheerful under even the worst conditions." Another writes: "I can say from personal knowledge that the British Army never had a more gallant officer than your soul, who met his death in the most gallant fashion."

He died as he had lived, with a smile on his face and a joke on his lips, at the head of his Riflemen.

"Droit comme un rayon de lumière, Et, comme lui, vibrant et chaud."

- The Eton College *Chronicle* (Nov. 1, 1917)