


SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# “The streaming eyes of all the many men”: Revisiting male weeping in British commemoration of the First World War

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## Abstract

This article argues that commemoration practices performed in the aftermath of the First World War, on occasion of the British Armistice Day, and during the two minutes’ silence in particular, served as incubators for a change in feeling rules for the British population. It will show how British society engaged with, challenged, and finally shifted what the “emotional regime” of the period – commonly referred to as the “stiff upper lip” – commanded them to feel. A very short lapse of time – two minutes – turned into a moment where a fundamental change in an important subset of feeling rules specifying this emotional regime became manifest: those applied to male weeping. The two minutes encapsulated a challenge to the harsh contempt for expressive mourning through the shedding of tears, a verdict that was inherited from the nineteenth century but increasingly seemed inappropriate, not the least in the wake of the emotional turmoil that Britons had faced during the “Great” War.

**Keywords:** Great Britain; War remembrance; masculinity; stiff upper lip; two minutes’ silence

On November 21, 1920, the illustrated supplement of French newspaper *Le Petit Journal* published a colored drawing of the “two minutes’ silence” held in Britain on Armistice Day, November 11 the same year, in commemoration of the soldiers killed during the First World War (Figure 1). In the scene depicting a loosely dispersed group of people at London’s Trafalgar Square, in proximity to the bronze lions at the bottom of Nelson’s column, French illustrator André Galland showed the emotional attitudes that different strata of British society adopted on the occasion. Most of the people bow their heads and cast their eyes downward. The red-cloaked woman on the left covers her face to hide her tears, while the tall man next to her stands rigid, with a forward gaze that suggests perfect composure.

Galland’s scene resonates with the British norm of emotional restraint and harsh self-control known as the “stiff upper lip” (Dixon 2015: 185–245). Everyone – the woman in the red cloak included – is making an effort to not succumb to unbridled



**Figure 1.** André Galland (1920) “Les deux minutes de recueillement en Angleterre.” Colored drawing from the cover of *Le Petit Journal, Supplément illustré*, November 21. Courtesy of Gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

feelings and to avoid a public display of emotion, notably, weeping. The picture nicely reflects the subject of this article: it depicts the participants’ struggle to navigate between compliance with the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip and the public expression of grief and mourning (through tears). The tall man on the left epitomizes this conflict: his upright posture, which places him in noticeable contrast to the rest of the crowd, suggests restraint and composure. And yet, there is a small white dot in his right eye. It might just be a reflection of light, or perhaps his eye has become ever so slightly shiny and a bit watery.

When the two minutes’ silence was introduced in 1919, it constituted an unprecedented form of commemoration. Until then, ceremonies of war remembrance prized glorious victory and the feelings of joy, pride, and honor it inspired – not mourning for the dead. Silent commemoration was not unknown (it had its place in church or during private and official state funerals), but combining military victory with a sorrowful public ceremony was a novel way to represent war and the memory of it. People had to learn how to engage with this new kind of commemoration and how to feel during it. While they had models at hand, the new form both required adaption and provided an opportunity for renegotiating established norms. The two minutes’ silence therefore lends itself to an exploration of how feeling rules are challenged, adapted, and changed when new emotional configurations emerge in specific historical settings.

## Feeling rules as subsets of emotional regimes

This article examines how feeling rules disapproving male weeping – a key feature of the “emotional regime” (Reddy 2001: 124–30) of the stiff upper lip: the harsh, quasi-military stricture that ruled over British subjects from the 1880s to the middle of the twentieth century, imposing upon them emotional restraint, self-mastery, and the abstention from the expression and display of emotions – changed in the aftermath of the First World War. I conceive of “feeling rules” as subsets of those rules by which the normative framework established through emotional regimes is put into practice. A kind of middle ground between overarching emotion norms – “the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression” (Stearns and Stearns 1985: 813) – and their physical expression and experience through collective or individual bodily performances, they mediate between the macro-level norms and micro-level codes and styles.

Feeling rules, I argue, are key to a historical understanding of how the overarching normative framework that regulates emotional life in a given society by valorizing, or disapproving of, emotions and their display – in this case, the high esteem for controlled, restrained, and decorously checked emotionality – is specified through the more detailed rule to abstain from weeping in public.

Feeling rules are an integral subset of emotional regimes, implementing them within and adapting them to shifting spatial situations, historical contexts, and societal structures. Yet, feeling rules might also be negotiated, challenged, modified, or reaffirmed as an integral part of larger historical transformations, enabling rather rigid, general emotional regimes to remain operative on a contextual and situational level by introducing new rules, exceptions, or modifications to established rules. It is thanks to them that emotional regimes do not become obsolete when confronted with historical changes and challenges, but can be modified to preserve their power.

While both the Stearns and Reddy have extensively engaged with frameworks of emotion norms (referred to as “emotionology” by Stearns and Stearns [1985: 813], and “emotional regimes” by Reddy [2001: 124]; see the introduction to this issue), other contributions to the history of emotions have emphasized the performative and bodily dimension of emotional life, while still acknowledging the societal dimension of emotional bodies (Hochschild 1979; Scheer 2012). Emotions are not only learned through abstract, mostly discursively constructed meanings (as established in novels, advice literature, encyclopedia, newspapers, or magazines) but also in and through bodily performances. In such a perspective, emotions turn out to be more than the mere expression or representation of societal structures and cultural meanings or, conversely, the shifts thereof. Rather, they are an active, productive force in such changes, with their own rationality and cognitive potential. What makes such bodily performances socially meaningful is that they align with and reaffirm norms pre-established through the overarching framework, but they can also deviate from or be at odds with them. Thus, any historical caesura not only comes about as changes in societal structures and institutions, but also as changes in the feelings underpinning, negotiating, and challenging such structures and institutions (Frevort et al. 2023).

To show not only that but also *how* feeling rules change historically, I focus on the two minutes' silence as a public ceremony of commemoration. Émile Durkheim famously drew attention to the ongoing importance for modern secular nations of "reunion[s] of citizens commemorating . . . some great event in the national life" (Durkheim 1915: 427). Such gatherings and ceremonies not only serve the purpose of creating a nation's shared memory, but also "the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments" (ibid.). Such events, however, go beyond the mere "upholding and reaffirming" of feeling rules; they also – and this is something that Durkheim neglects – provide opportunities for challenging, and thereby changing, "the collective sentiments and the collective ideas" (ibid.). Public ceremonies are key to (understanding) shifting feeling rules because they provide a society with an occasion to expose possible issues with the normative emotional framework, and to subsequently reflect on and negotiate these issues through media coverage.

In the following, I will first provide some details on the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip in general, and the feeling rule disapproving male weeping in particular, examining how these were challenged in a newspaper caricature of the "strong, silent men." Then, after a brief overview of the history of the British Armistice Day and the two minutes' silence, I will show how, in the early interwar years, newspaper coverage of the observation of the silence and the emotional practices involved in performing it ventured to challenge, renegotiate, and change the feeling rules applied to male weeping. The article will draw extensively on reports and comments on the two minutes' silence in British newspapers, a key source for how onlookers made sense of the numerous bodily mourning practices that the public ceremony involved. As part of the public discourse, they also contributed to shaping the rules and establishing models for future occasions, making them, more broadly, an integral part of the collective perception, experience, and memory of the event. As Margrit Pernau has written, discussing her concept of "feeling communities" (Pernau 2017: 1) as relying on closely intertwined bodily and media practices,

The emotions evoked through media are . . . hardly less intense, and possibly even more enduring, than those experienced in and through bodily proximity. They are central for the emotional training which precedes the face-to-face encounter and creates the embodied knowledge and expectation which permits actors to recognise and interpret an atmosphere and thus to feel it. After the event, they are as important to the translation of an emotionally charged yet highly unstable face-to-face community into a stable feeling of belonging together centred on both the emotions of the members of the community (and of those who do not belong) and the assumed knowledge of their emotions and character, which media help create. (ibid.: 16)

I therefore take reports, comments, and calls published in press media to have both a descriptive and prescriptive dimension, which makes them into media "scripts" that

do not only reflect but can also establish, negotiate, and challenge feeling rules. What's more: many of these newspaper sources did not merely describe other people's emotions – namely, their weeping – but also delved into the feelings elicited in their authors, and thereby bolstered their normative judgements with subjective experience.

### “Where are the strong, silent men?” Questioning the stiff upper lip

Although the two minutes' silence on Armistice Day was to stand out as the key moment in changing feeling rules, the process of challenging the Britons' stiff upper lip was not the work of two short minutes alone. The ceremony articulated an unease that had obviously been ushered in some time before, and was related to macro-level sociological structures and cultural contexts.

There was good reason for feeling uneasy with the imposed restraint on feelings like grief and sorrow across class and gender lines. The social group most affected by problems inherited from the pre-war period and aggravated during wartime was the working class. They were hit by massive unemployment, a severe housing shortage, and had become disillusioned with the promises made by the government to war volunteers, and later to conscripted soldiers regarding socio-professional reintegration, house-building programs (“Homes for Heroes”), and state assistance for those with disabilities and their relatives (Barr 2005; Pugh 2017). These troubles were all the more searingly felt since the military strategies employed by the government, General Staff, and admiralty had been heavily criticized for sacrificing huge numbers of soldiers in pointless operations. The latter also affected the upper-middle class, and particularly acutely, because casualties within the army and navy were highest among young officers who had been recruited from public schools – rather elitist institutions in the British education system – and universities (Barr 2005: 224). More broadly, the end of the First World War ushered in the decline of the British Empire's rule and “glory,” the shadow of which had been already cast, but had not yet been deeply felt.

Accordingly, doubts arose about the suitability of feeling rules that had been established in close alliance with this empire and that were especially crafted onto and by looking at its male heroes. Signs of unease with it popped up here and there – among them, an article published in the November 8, 1919 issue of the *Daily Mirror*, the title of which pointedly asked: “Where are the strong, silent men?” (Campbell 1919: 5).

A few years before, the newspaper had been established as a tabloid geared at a middle-class readership, and stood out for being mainly written by and addressed to women (though it was neither run nor owned by them).<sup>1</sup> The privileging of female reader- and authorship would not last long; soon after its establishment the *Daily Mirror* had become a largely male-authored “paper for men and women” (*Daily Illustrated Mirror* 1904: 11), but gender-related issues were clearly still of particular interest to the newspaper. The portrayal of “strong, silent men” can easily be recognized as a parody of the male ideal type who sported the stiff upper lip:

<sup>1</sup>Its founder, Alfred Harmsworth, stated in his opening editorial that it was “no mere bulletin of fashion, but a reflection of women's interests, women's thought, women's work” (Harmsworth 1903: 3).

that higher order of species, with distinguishing traits, such as firm jaw, set lips and piercing eyes. . . . He has generally been born of “humble circumstances” – never poor. When he is not informing you of this interesting fact his dotting admirers are doing so. Of course, all silently, yet somehow verbosely. In the same silent vein he harangues all who come into contact with him on the virtues of self-discipline. (Campbell 1919: 5)

As the article explains, this example of the human species – “looking very strong (i.e., with forehead deeply corrugated) and imposing a terrific silence upon himself” (ibid.) – stands out due to his self-discipline, silence, and the admiration he is given, a characterization reminiscent of the tall man in the *Petit Journal* illustration at the beginning of this article.

Sometimes referred to as “Victorian” or “Edwardian Stoicism,” the stiff upper lip was considered a distinctive British emotional regime, yet it was not independent from broader dynamics in nineteenth-century emotion culture across Western Europe. Taking up older stoic traditions, from its roots in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy through to seventeenth-century neo-stoicism and eighteenth-century Augustan literature, a heightened control and discipline in the display of emotions could be observed in France and Germany, too.

Within these broader dynamics, the stiff upper lip of Britons stood out for three particularities. First, Victorian and Edwardian Stoicism imposed particularly harsh emotional restraints on their subjects. Second, they applied to all genders and classes, though most rigidly to bourgeois and military-trained men: The origins of the stiff upper lip were closely tied to the expansion of the British Empire, for which reason it was particularly geared towards (military) men who had to conquer and defend it.<sup>2</sup> From childhood, they were taught to abstain from expressive or ostentatious displays of emotions, which were pointedly lampooned as distasteful “streams of emotional incontinence” (Maudsley 1886: 300).<sup>3</sup> In school or at home, boys and men had to learn to repress public displays of sorrow, grief, or fear, and to keep these to themselves. Better still, they would not allow them to occur at all. Third, the stiff upper lip was claimed to be an exclusive marker of Britishness – or of hegemonic Englishness, to be more precise – since it was in opposition not only to the emotional attitude of other nations, but also served as an internal distinction against what was considered the maudlin tears of the Irish or, famously, of the Welsh-born prime minister, Lloyd George.

Feeling rules about weeping in general, and male weeping in particular, were strict. Shedding tears publicly was, quite literally so, seen as the epitome of “emotional incontinence” (ibid.: 300). However, in his study *Weeping Britannia*, historian Thomas Dixon (2015) has convincingly shown that the nineteenth-century prohibition on (male) weeping was hardly a perennially cherished

<sup>2</sup>“The stiff upper lip had its purpose . . . during Britain’s emergence as the world’s greatest empire, in the Victorian and Edwardian eras” (Dixon 2015: 5).

<sup>3</sup>Maudsley’s expression was coined at tearful religious joy in the context of his critique of religious sentimentalism imbued with “streams of emotional incontinence, and of effusive eloquence strained to its utmost ingenuities of expression to give vent to ecstatic sentiments of the sweetness and joy of divine communion” (Maudsley 1886: 300–301).



characteristic of the British national character. Rather, it broke with a long history of British weeping and, more largely, of British passion and British furor. Yet, once incepted, however, the verdict on public tears lasted largely unbroken from the last third of the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century (Cook 2012, 2014; Dixon 2015; Francis 2002).<sup>4</sup>

With regard to weeping, Britain also epitomized a general European development. In the nineteenth century, a distinction between male and female tears was introduced. While the former had been shed in abundance throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without restraint or disdain, and even passed as a sign of refinement, sensitivity, culture, and education, increasingly men's crying was condemned and so receded from public life. While in the first half of the nineteenth century, women's tears could still be cherished for expressing delicateness (if shed in the intimate, private sphere), from the 1850s on, they became more and more suspect: tears turned into markers of social and gender distinctions, springing either from the superficial, deceitful, or overly sensitive emotional character of women, from the lower classes' primitive, uncivilized emotionality, or from the lack of reason and self-control in members of other nations, political demagogues, and people of color (Francis 2002: 358–60, Vincent-Buffault 1986). Hence, the British contempt for weeping was not an isolated phenomenon, but it still spearheaded the general turn – to the point that British soldiers were held to be incapable of shedding, or even producing tears (Dixon 2015: 1–2, 207–8).

Of course, the stiff upper lip and the feeling rules that prescribed it were a normative ideal. Just like rules and norms in general, they must not be confounded with historical practices such as the performance of emotions – the feelings experienced and expressed in concrete times and places. Just like any emotion culture, the British was not a monolithic bloc, and Victorian and Edwardian Stoicism did have its opponents (Charles Dickens being only the most famous) and non-adherents. But as a powerful myth, perpetuated by both contemporaries and today's cultural historians, the stiff upper lip has undoubtedly had profound effects on the Briton's experience and display of emotions. Even if it was also ignored, lampooned, opposed, and ironized by individuals and social groups throughout its entire rule, the sheer amount of engagement with this emotional regime, be it in support or opposition, attests to it as a cultural force of self-fashioning. This became further evident in the aftermath of the First World War, when it was eventually challenged by large parts of society. Whether from the lower, middle, or upper class, men or women, almost all Britons had been confronted with the grievances of wartime, at the front or at home. And when it was over, the memory of wartime fear and suffering as well as the grief over lost loved ones persisted.

Under these circumstances, how could a population not feel the urge to challenge an emotional regime that so harshly imposed the restraint on and suppression of grief in public as the stiff upper lip? This question brings us back to the newspaper article in the *Daily Mirror*, which ironically reassures its readers that the author

<sup>4</sup>According to Dixon (2015: 3–4), it spanned “an era of nearly a hundred years, running roughly from the death of Charles Dickens in 1870 to the death of Winston Churchill in 1965, and at its zenith during the First and Second World Wars.”

himself has “what I might call an applauding acquaintance with the strong, silent men ... – on the stage” (Campbell 1919: 5).

Yet behind the scenes, in private, this “dramatic puppet” (ibid.) turns out to lose much of his emotional composure. The author’s “friend Jones,” he reports, “is acclaimed as a ‘strong silent man.’ No man is weaker and more under the thumb of his wife. He reads all about Napoleon and mumbles audacious flights from Nietzsche. Some of these maxims he displays in his office. But you should see him when he arrives home and having kept the family waiting for dinner. He is the quintessence of humility” (ibid.). Continuing his quest for the strong silent man into public life, the author discovers “that the ‘strong silent man’ of popular conception is generally weak-kneed, apologetic, tortuous, addicted to confused hithering and thithering. In business, in the City, you find the ‘strong silent man’ a creature of moods and vacillation, as garrulous as the flapper and as inconsequent” (ibid.). Finally, the author denounces the “strong silent man” as a purely “mythical figure ... : What a humbug!” (ibid.).

Remarkably, the war experience is entirely absent from the *Daily Mirror* text. This silence is all the more telling considering the date of publication: November 8, 1919, three days before the first Armistice Day. Arguably, Campbell’s satirizing of the “strong, silent men,” (ibid.) published in a newspaper suspected of effeminacy, was only a singular voice challenging what was undoubtedly a powerful emotional regime, both before and after the world war(s). And yet, only three days later, on November 11, other voices would join his in challenging the stiff upper lip. And in this case, the impact of the war experience would not – and could not – be silenced.

### Challenging the feeling rules: The “two minutes’ silence”

On November 11, 1919, the first British Armistice Day was to be held. It had been instigated by South African politician and author Sir Percy FitzPatrick, who had sent a memorandum to Alfred Lord Milner, then secretary of state for the colonies, suggesting a silent commemoration of the dead soldiers throughout the empire – a silence supposed to feel like the “moving, awe-inspiring silence of a great Cathedral where the smallest sound must seem a sacrilege” (FitzPatrick 1919: 285). Milner had forwarded the memorandum to the king and cabinet in late October, but it was only on November 5<sup>th</sup> that the latter – firmly prompted by King George V in a letter dated November 3<sup>rd</sup> – decided to adopt FitzPatrick’s proposal. The commemoration ceremony thus had to be organized rather spontaneously, with just a few days of preparation. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, an address signed “George V” was published in all major national as well as regional and local newspapers, calling for his people to fall silent in remembrance of the British soldiers killed during the war:

I believe that my people in every part of the Empire fervently wish to perpetuate the memory of the Great Deliverance, and of those who have laid down their lives to achieve it. To afford an opportunity for the universal expression of this feeling it is my desire and hope that at the hour when the Armistice came into force, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, there may be, for the brief space of two minutes, a complete suspension



of all our normal activities. During that time . . . all work, all sound, and all locomotion should cease, so that, in perfect stillness, the thoughts of every one may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the Glorious Dead. (George 1919: 12)

The two minutes' silence that was to take up this call clearly marked the emotional climax of Armistice Day. It was usually framed by a large variety of ceremonial practices, most of them acoustic in nature: there was instrumental music, chorales, and hymns; military trumpet calls like "Last Post," "The Rouse," or "Reveille" captured audiences' attention, and still other signals marked the very beginning and often also the end of the moment of silence, such as ringing bells, firing cannons, rifles, maroons, and sirens. While there were main ceremonies, most often held at town centers, cemeteries, or recently built memorials (the most important took place at the temporary cenotaph at London Whitehall), the commemoration was also simultaneously observed in other places, with innumerable smaller gatherings in big cities and small villages all over the nation, in factories, public places, and streets. Its most distinctive feature, participants were supposed to be virtually interconnected and in communication across all of these distant locations – through and in silence.

The king's call heavily resonated with the population, large parts of which (though not its entirety) engaged with the ceremony over the years, turning it into an "invented tradition" (Gregory 1994: 9). In the 1920s, the ceremony became central to British memorial culture and was taken up by numerous countries.<sup>5</sup>

In foregrounding emotions like reverence, gratitude for (if not joy over) the "Great Deliverance," and honor for "those who laid down their lives to achieve it" (George 1919: 12) – rather than grief and mourning – the king's call largely followed the rules of the stiff upper lip. Within this emotional regime, the capacity to keep silent, even when feeling pain, sorrow, or grief was crucial: "The first lesson to be taught by example as well as precept, is to suffer in silence, to control one's self, and to be master or mistress undoubtedly of one's own miseries" (Panton 1896: 148, cited in Joy 2012: 132). As they do not facilitate ostentatious display of emotions, silence, and standstill were not only in line with the feeling rules of the stiff upper lip but also with those of British mourning culture more specifically, as it had developed by the end of the war.

Research on death and mourning in early twentieth-century Britain (Cannadine 1981: 187–231; Jalland 2010: 2–34; Noakes 2020: 21–43) has argued that the major trend towards soberness, non-ostentation, and emotional restraint originating in the second half of the nineteenth century continued, despite the challenges brought about by the war (or even because of the war, reinforced and strengthened by the omnipresence of loss and grief). In the (early) Victorian era, opulent, spectacular, and often expensive funeral rites and mourning habits were obligatory, at least for the

<sup>5</sup>Belgium and France introduced it in 1922, Weimar Germany in 1924 (only to abandon it the year after), and Poland in 1925. After 1945, it was institutionalized in Israel (1953) and the Soviet Union (1965). The minute's silence would eventually transcend the national framework and be observed on highly mediated occasions, such as Princess Diana's funeral or in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

middle and upper classes, but to a certain degree even the lower classes followed the imperative to display emotions, and, through them, status (Jalland 2010: 189–96). The decline of this tradition, and the establishment of a new, rational, and non-pathetic treatment of death – in line with the implementation of the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip – was due to several factors, the most important of which were the construction of new cemeteries and the introduction of interment reforms in the mid-nineteenth century, inspired by a rising concern for hygiene and the growing influence of religious nonconformism. By the end of the century, funeral rites had become private, humble, and quiet, with distinctly gendered roles. While the women's task was the care and dressing of the corpse (often at home), as well as the remembrance in private, the organization and realization of the funeral was men's duty – and often the interment was for men only, as women were deemed too emotional to restrain their feelings.

The war and its dead had both strengthened and modified these general developments in British mourning culture. Due to material and logistical restrictions, pragmatism loomed large. Caring for the dead body became impossible because the repatriation of the corpses of soldiers was forbidden in 1915, a decision reaffirmed by the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917. However, despite this pragmatism and the absence of corpses, the dead continued to matter to the nation and they continued to “work” for it: “As the numbers of the dead, and of the bereaved, mounted, silence and restraint were increasingly seen as the only appropriate, patriotic response; a means of both demonstrating resolve and placing the needs of the wartime community over the mediation of individual grief” (Noakes 2020: 33). Death was anything but invisible or absent during war – it was present as the driving force of a wartime emotionality valorizing honor, reverence, pride, and gratitude.

It was with this emotional economy that the newspaper address by King George to his people resonated so strongly. The call for silent, reverent, and restrained commemoration was in line with the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip and British mourning culture in the wake of the war. And yet, the bodily performance of the ceremony, as well as the newspaper coverage of it would become an occasion for challenging, renegotiating, and changing the emotional scripts that put the normative framework into practice. In the observance of the two minutes' silence, feeling rules established under the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip – namely, the disapproval of and ban on male tears – met with a moment in space and time that was intended to reaffirm these rules but would ultimately make room to alter them because they had become outworn. They were deemed inadequate to the emotional impact wrought by the massive loss and suffering endured by British ex-soldiers, and to their need for public recognition of their misery, past and present.

### “Tears fell, silently like jewels”<sup>6</sup>: Changing the feeling rules around male weeping

The feeling rules of the stiff upper lip as well as wartime emotionality left no place for expressive manifestations of grief and mourning or publicly shed tears – infractions of these rules should have incurred critical, dismissive, if not outright condemnatory judgment. Yet, as becomes evident from the following analysis of

<sup>6</sup>“Armistice day in Bath” 1925: 11.

British newspapers, references to and depictions of tears shed on November 11, even by men, were not disrespectful.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they were appreciative of publicly displayed weeping. This clearly marks a change in the feeling rules applied to public weeping by both women and men, though most strikingly with regard to the latter.

To begin with the tears shed by a woman, however, *The Globe* of November 11 provides a pathetic article on the two minutes' silence, full of lengthy if somewhat kitschy depictions of ostentatious emotional displays. Entitled "My Boy," it centers on an incident that supposedly occurred at the temporarily erected cenotaph in London Whitehall, where the main ceremony was held:

Half an hour before the maroons were fired an aged, poorly clad, and travel-stained lady threaded her way through the crowd. She came opposite the monument [the Cenotaph] and hesitated as if uncertain whether she might approach. A burly policeman saw her and stepped towards her with a kindly smile. "Do you want to go across, mother?" "Yes, may I?" she asked a little shyly. "You see, it's my boy. He died at Loos." "Get hold of my arm, mother." And he piloted her over the roadway to the base of the sepulchre, the crowds making way for her. Then, trying to hide the tears that flowed down her wrinkled face, she just stood there. It was a pathetic picture. (Tidmarsh 1919: 8)

While here, the description pays tribute to the familiar norm of emotional restraint by referring to the woman's embarrassment and attempt to conceal "the tears that flowed down her wrinkled face," (*ibid.*) this picture is exchanged, only a few moments later, for another: "And the two minutes passed. Then a slight rustle, a whisper, and the hum of life began again. Still on the arm of the big-hearted policeman there came through the crowds the bereaved mother with the silver hair. And she was smiling through her tears!" (*ibid.*).

Now, the author presents weeping in a favorable manner, and in her final "smiling through tears" (*ibid.*) the old woman takes pride in her expression of grief. Moral and aesthetic approval are conveyed in the portrayal of the woman as a person of dignity, a "lady" whose demeanor – she is shy, but does not conceal her emotions ("You see, it's my boy. He died at Loos." [*ibid.*])<sup>8</sup> from the public – the author is sympathetic to. The change in attitude is, almost literally, mirrored in the narrative transformation of her visual appearance: from an aesthetically rather unappealing "old," "poorly clad, and travel-stained lady," uncertain of the demeanor

<sup>7</sup>A methodological remark: The selection of newspapers on which my argument is based cuts across distinct geographical, political, and social orientations and is therefore representative of the general attitude towards emotional display. My choice accounts for distinctions between broadsheets addressing middle- and upper-class readership, popular tabloids geared toward the lower classes and between leftist, liberal, and conservative papers (or blends of these); it includes papers of national influence, but also those of regional or local reach (stemming from Western, Northern, Southern, Eastern or Central England, and Scotland).

<sup>8</sup>Mention of the northern French town of Loos emphasizes the patriotism of the "boy's" (*ibid.*) death. The battle at Loos – fought in September and October 1915, during the first major Allied offensive after the war turned to the trenches – was a baptism of fire for many of the young volunteers the British Army was composed of in the first two years of the war (Britain introducing conscription in 1916 only). The over 60,000 British casualties at Loos were unprecedented, yet the military leaders had not been in doubt about the bloodshed that the – ultimately failed – attack would cause.

befitting her, she turns into a self-confident, smilingly weeping mother crested with “silver hair” (ibid.). In its sympathetic perspective, the text bestows a special dignity on the old woman.

It could be objected that Armistice Day in general and the two minutes’ silence in particular were a momentary exception, which allowed the “weaker sex” (ibid.) to weep for husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers lost to the war. Men, however, had been taught to withhold their tears even in war; a simple remembrance ceremony should not have therefore been accepted as a pretext for public weeping. And indeed, some newspaper articles reaffirmed the strict distinction between female tears and male stoicism. For the *Scotsman*, the former were still somewhat pardonable:

Every mark of reverence was shown – from the bared head of the men to the attitude and, in many cases, the tears of the women, and a dead hush prevailed among the multitude. . . . Many of the women wrung their hands in grief, and had to be assisted from collapsing by those who stood close by. They were two minutes of tense emotion, and, short as the spell was, it seemed a relief when motion recommenced and the streets resumed their normal condition. (“The great silence: Empire’s tribute to her glorious sons” 1919: 9)

The *Hull Daily* goes even further, presenting us with an example of the male stiff upper lip at its finest: “Whilst their men folk stood in stoic silence, sorrowing, but not complaining, a sob here and a tear there showed that the women at least could not forget, and could not bear, the memory of the dead. There is no glory for the woman” (“The nation’s proud grief” 1922: 4).

Yet, there were other, more attentive and nuanced observers. The *Hampshire Telegraph* programmatically stated that “Emotion – once so alien to the British people – was evident as men thought of comrades they had left in some foreign strand” (“The great silence: Portsmouth homage” 1919: 11). In this case, what made the “once so alien” emotion “evident” in the men remains unclear. Did they cry, or was it simply their faces that showed expressions of emotion?

Other journalists took a closer look. The *Globe* article on the silver-haired mourner retains a wry distance when describing the effect of the old lady and her tears on male bystanders: “It was a pathetic picture, and some of the sterner sex near her suddenly found they had some dirt in their eyes” (Tidmarsh 1919: 8). Though a somewhat mocking comment, this clearly references men fighting back tears, moved by someone who was able to publicly weep for a life lost.

Other voices were more frank. *The Times*, notorious for perfectly conforming with British bourgeois manners and soberness, and not known for an overly pathetic tone, began its main article on the November 11 Armistice Day ceremonies with a surprisingly emotionalized description of the event:

At 11 o’clock yesterday morning the nation, in response to the King’s invitation, paid homage to the Glorious Dead by keeping a two minutes’ silence for prayer and remembrance. Deep, true emotion cannot be contained in mere words: and no combination of phrases could describe the feelings of the multitudes who stood silent and prayerful in London’s streets yesterday. Many

were experiencing again a grief of the war; many thought of friends they would never see again. Everywhere there was mourning, sorrow, and thanks-giving. For some minutes before the maroons ushered in the period of prayer a strange self-consciousness had fallen upon the people. A new gentleness seemed abroad. ("The great silence: Nation's homage to its dead" 1919: 15)

*The Times's* mentioning of a "new gentleness" is remarkable, all the more so since the article continues by undergirding it not only with depictions of the shedding of female tears, but of men seemingly weeping without restraint: "In the great awful silence that fell upon London's streets yesterday there was a glimpse into the soul of the Nation. Women weep – often, it is to be feared – and the best tribute to the genuineness of the moments was to be seen in the bowed heads and streaming eyes of all the many men" (ibid.).

The article concludes by articulating emotional unease with the feeling rule of restraint on male weeping: "And even those [men] who kept the tears back cleared their throats, coughed, and seemed very uneasy when the traffic again began to move and hats were replaced" (ibid.). Tellingly, it is those who do *not* weep who are presented in a slightly dismissive way. The correspondent's depiction suggests it would have been better not to force their bodies to refrain from expressing their inner feelings.

If this attitude toward male weeping had been a singular exception, exclusive to the 1919 Armistice Day, it could be interpreted as a spontaneous reaction to a unique moment when, for the first time, a whole nation synchronically mourned for their dead soldiers. However, acceptance of and sympathy with male tears persisted, and we find similar accounts in coverage of Armistice Day in the following years.

For many of the bereaved who had never been able to bury their lost relatives, the internment of the remains of an unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey in 1920 was perceived as a highly emotional symbolic compensation for what they had been prevented from doing in private. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described the huge crowd passing by the tomb at Westminster in a "silence that is only broken by the muffled tread of the multitude that passes to pay the tribute of their tears to the Empire's Unknown Warrior . . . , some with quivering lips and eyes dimmed with tears" ("Children's tribute" 1920: 1). In 1920, two minutes of silence were again observed, providing an occasion for expressing feelings of grief – by weeping in public. Thus, the *Leeds Mercury* observed, "An almost uncanny silence settled over the city. Men raised their hats and stood reverently at attention. Women wept freely, and the eyes of strong men were dimmed with tears" ("Yorkshire's day of memory" 1920: 9). The *Derby Daily Telegraph* stated that "Armistice Day was a day of weeping. . . . There were red eyes amongst the women, and even men wept," and illustrated this with a brief anecdote: "A lady friend tells me that she stood in Whitehall behind a policeman, who was choking with emotion. She could hear the gulping throb in his throat, and see him brush away the tears from his cheeks. 'It was the most poignant incident,' she said" ("Our London letter" 1920: 5).

Throughout the 1920s, Armistice Day continued to be "a day of weeping" (ibid.). The tears did not stop flowing, once the program and key elements of the ceremony had been established. In most cases, it was the moment of silence that provided people of both genders with an opportunity to let out their tears: "The two minutes'

silence . . . was a most impressive spectacle, and brought tears to the eyes of many men and women who stood with bowed heads” (“Our London correspondent” 1923: 4).

The weeping could provide the silence with a punctuated soundscape of its own: “Many people were weeping softly, and these muffled sounds of grief alone broke the tremendous stillness of the countless throng” (“Children’s tribute” 1920: 1). The November 11, 1924, issue of *The Leicester Mail* even listened closely to the acoustic distinctions in the silent sounds of weeping, resulting from differences in gender, and their respective memories: “Here and there mothers and sisters and perhaps sweethearts too, sobbed, thinking of those who had made the supreme sacrifice, while tears were also in the eyes of many men, probably thinking of pals whom they had left ‘over there’” (“Armistice day” 1924: 1).

But on Armistice Day, tears also made their appearance in other situations, notably in Christian religious settings. Thus, the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* related that “the processional hymn was ‘O Valiant Hearts who to your glory came,’ the beautiful words and lovely setting of which moistened even brave men’s eyes with tears” (“A nation’s tribute to its heroes” 1921: 1). A correspondent from the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* noticed how “in the Choir women crushed their handkerchiefs in their hands and Lord Selborne wiped the tears from his glasses” (“The glorious dead: Whole nation at prayer” 1923: 5). One of the most striking pieces of evidence for the ennoblement of weeping was a poetic description in the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*: “Tears fell, silently like jewels; men and women could not keep them back” (“Armistice day in Bath” 1925: 11). Though this use of metaphoric language might be questioned – would jewels fall “silently”? – the description could hardly emphasize the restored value and preciousness of tears better.

It is impossible to know how many men actually wept on November 11, 1919, during the two minutes of silence. Nor can it be taken for granted that the above-mentioned newspaper reports were truthful descriptions of historical reality. But even if fictionalized or embellished (or perhaps especially then), they matter less as descriptions of historical realities, but as challenges to normative scripts for appropriate conduct, as media practices that affirm or question emotional regimes and feeling rules. They were not just about bodily practices in concrete, “real-life” situations that happened to deviate from otherwise stable norms and rules of how to perform emotions, but challenged the feeling rule that demanded men to refrain from weeping *as a rule*. Otherwise, it would not have been something particularly remarkable about “real men” crying, for at all times, there have been discrepancies between rules established in normative moral and esthetic discourse, and their application to bodily practices and situations (Stearns and Stearns 1985: 824).

This does not mean, though, that the challenge to emotional regime and feeling rules was a merely discursive one. As the media coverage on the two minutes’ silence makes clear, bodily practices are a full-fledged part of feeling rules and a crucial means of establishing, stabilizing, and modifying these rules. Due to their fugitive, ephemeral quality, they are often not written down and are therefore more difficult to trace, but scenarios such as the two minutes’ silence are evidence of their importance, both for historical actors and for observers. By way of description, narration, and depiction, bodily practices become part of the discursive and non-discursive normative framework ruling over emotions, their inner experience



and outer display. In the case of the first Armistice Day, there is ample testimony suggesting that a considerable number of men did actually weep during the silence. But this is not what matters in the first place – this might have happened on a number of other historical occasions, too. What matters primarily is that these bodily practices were reported on in a non-dismissive or even sympathetic way, and therefore themselves became part of the norms ruling over and templating the feelings of people (Frevert et al. 2023). The description of emotional practices in the newspapers – a key element in the normative discourse – changed, and this suggests that something profoundly affected the feeling rules: a fundamental unease with the stiff upper lip and its call for emotional restraint from public weeping.

This unease made for a break in feeling rules that reached beyond the singular and transient ceremonies of Armistice Day. In the interwar years, the British ban on men's tears was put into question in a more general way – quite literally so by an article published in 1926 in the *Daily News*. Under the headline “Should Strong Men Weep?” (Hope 1926: 4) it takes up the question as raised by letters from two male readers, one of whom had frankly complained about the injustice of his being refused the right to weep: “I am more susceptible, more tender-hearted than my wife; but if anything untoward happens she it is who dissolves in tears, while I, who feel more deeply, must hide my feelings though it kills me. Why is this?” (ibid.).

This makes the female author of the article “wonder if things are moving now the other way? Will strong men soon weep openly and unashamed?” (ibid.). Within her response, she delivers a perfect model of how to uphold the emotional regime of control and restraint while adapting it to shifting historical contexts by introducing a new subset of feeling rules. In line with overarching norms, she insists on the need for men to uphold and train their capacity to fight back their tears: “For if men allowed themselves the luxury of tears every time they were hurt or defeated, they would become poor things, a prey to emotions, and lacking in control, and control is necessary” (ibid.). Yet, if there is necessity to emotional control and restraint, there is also a necessity to male weeping. While she explicitly refers to the war, when “many a fine old father died with a broken heart as a result of . . . repression of deep-rooted sorrow” (ibid.), she goes beyond this unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience when arguing for a general, even natural need for weeping: “Anything that is unnatural is wrong and should be avoided, for it ultimately works harm in the individual. . . . It is terrible to see a strong man weep, but it is more dreadful still to see him shaken and ravaged by a grief for which he can find no outlet” (ibid.). An all too harsh withdrawal of emotional display might even result in a lack of cognition and morality, as becomes evident from her contempt of “men with souls and minds so shallow that they escape the realities and never feel deeply about anything. What do they know of life who skim about on its surface?” (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>An article entitled “Tearful Men” and published on December 27, 1930 in the *Northern Weekly Gazette* agrees that “the principle that men should never weep seems false. In these days of sex equality, it does not seem right that the privilege of a good cry should be accorded to women alone” (John 1930: 17). While also not oblivious to the norm that “after all, crying is a nasty, messey [*sic*] habit” (ibid.), the author pleads that “still it should be regarded as a convention and nothing more. Liability to tears does not by any means imply weakness of character” (ibid.).

While the new feeling rules still distinguished male from female attitudes towards weeping, now the former stands out not for the absence of tears, but for their rareness, which makes them into manifestations of an emotionality particularly “deep” and precious.

## Conclusion

Through their detailed descriptions of emotional practices, newspaper coverage of public commemorations on Armistice Day 1919 and the two minutes’ silence challenged and (re-)negotiated the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip and its prohibition on male weeping in public. Presenting men and women shedding tears publicly not as distasteful but as something that did not warrant contempt or shaming, or even as a dignified behavior and appropriate demeanor, the articles challenged the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip and contributed to changing the feeling rule around male weeping. Just like the newspaper article caricaturing “strong silent men” (Campbell 1919: 8), the texts questioned the restraints on public displays of emotions (such as grief and sorrow) by showing sympathy with those who wept in public (women and men alike) and by presenting even the abundant shedding of male tears as an appropriate, esthetically appealing emotional practice that one need not to be ashamed of – as something totally in line with Britishness.

Yet, a change in the feeling rules did not mean that the entire emotional regime of the stiff upper lip was overthrown or replaced by a new one. Conceiving of feeling rules as subsets of emotional regimes facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the latter’s response to changing historical contexts. The approval of weeping men changed the feeling rules specifying the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip, and therefore also affected the emotional regime as such. It introduced a new practice that had not been previously acceptable. Thus, the stiff upper lip turned out to be – almost literally so – more supple than early twentieth-century Britons and today’s cultural history would suggest. A middle ground mediating between enduring overarching norms and individual or collective practices, feeling rules allow for the introduction of changes and new elements into existing emotional regimes: actors who are uneasy with, or refuse the emotional regime in its existing form, might not only be left with the sole possibility of withdrawal into private, clandestine, or subversive “emotional refuges” – “a relationship, ritual, or organization (whether informal or formal) that provides safe release from prevailing emotional norms and allows relaxation of emotional effort” (Reddy 2001: 129) – outside of the regime; instead they might also challenge and change some of the latter’s sub-elements. Thus, the turn towards self-awareness and introspection in Britain’s interwar emotion culture (see Noakes 2020: 59) could be conceived of as another such adaption in the feeling rules that did not do away with the stiff upper lip but adapted it to changing historical contexts: “the need for soldiers experiencing anxiety and fear in the trenches of the Great War to recognise and thus control these feelings underpinned a growing expectation that men would understand, and thus successfully manage, their own feelings. Stoicism was still expected of men, but it was to be built on an understanding of feeling, not on their repression” (ibid.).

By adapting its feeling rules to new challenges, an emotional regime might be able to perdure and continue its rule in the face of shifting historical contexts and social structures. The importance for modern secular societies of gathering in public commemoration ceremonies – emphasized by Durkheim – does not only pertain to their crucial role in “upholding and reaffirming . . . the collective sentiments” (Durkheim 1915: 427), but also in modifying and adapting these. Thus, while the two minutes’ silence was generally in line with the emotional regime of restraint, soberness, and silence, it provided an occasion to challenge, renegotiate, and change the feeling rule applied to male weeping. Tears shed by men were no longer dismissed as signs of “emotional incontinence,” (Maudsley 1886: 300) but accepted, valorized, or even exalted as adequate articulations of grief. Through its close reading of shifting attitudes towards male weeping, this article demonstrates the importance of bodily practices, emphasized by Hochschild (1979), Scheer (2012), or Frevert et al. (2023), for a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the historical change of “emotionologies” (Stearns and Stearns 1985: 813) and “emotional regimes” (Reddy 2001: 124).

Beyond its more theoretical and conceptual reflections, this article also contributes to empirical research in the emotion history of the interwar period. If women – whose infractions on the emotional regime of the stiff upper lip were traditionally more easily tolerated, if not needed to provide it with a gendered dimension – were joined in weeping by men, this clearly corroborates criticism of the classical brutalization thesis, which holds that ex-soldiers had impoverished feelings and capacity for empathy, and became “numb . . . in the face of human cruelty and the loss of life” (Mosse 1990: 159).<sup>10</sup> On November 11, men were allowed to mourn their dead comrades, but also the traumas that went along with their “emotional survival” (Roper 2010: 3), without being scorned (by other men). They publicly manifested their emotional fragility and sensitivity. This is not to say that there was no brutalization, but a larger picture shows men’s feelings to be more complex and ambivalent (ibid.: 28–34) than suggested by their subsumption under this concept. If there was hardening and hiding behind “cool conduct” (Lethen 2002: xii), another spectrum of emotions could also become manifest in public, for moments at least, and these were appreciated, or even ennobled – among them tears which “fell, silently like jewels” (“Armistice day in Bath” 1925: 11).

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<sup>10</sup>Introduced by George Mosse’s *Fallen Soldiers* for the German context (Mosse 1990: 159–81), this thesis was generalized for other European countries by other authors, but has been critiqued by research in the history of emotions (cf. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002; Bourke 1996; Hämmerle 1999).

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