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Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears

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Thomas Dixon's *Weeping Britannia* is a tour through six centuries of British tears, from 'extreme weeper' Margery Kempe to the televised 'sob-fests' of *Britain's Got Talent* and *The X Factor*, via tear-stained judges, the emotionally extravagant novel of sensibility, supposedly stiff-upper-lipped politicians, and the bemused disdain of dry-eyed journalists observing the public outpourings of grief at the death of Princess Diana. Dixon sets out to dispel the 'persistent myth' of Britain as a nation of emotionally repressed stoics, writing that the stiff upper lip, far from being a constant element in the national character, emerged only in the late 19th century amid the militarism of the age of empire.

The focus of much of *Weeping Britannia*, then, is to show how the shedding of tears, supposedly a universal human phenomenon, came to be seen as distinctly unBritish - an effeminate, weak and embarrassing display of emotional incontinence. In contrast, the medieval imagination could envisage tears as signs of holy thoughts and feelings, manifestations of religious devotion as well as human compassion. Public crying was characteristic of medieval Catholic piety: we are told that it was common for bishops to weep as they celebrated mass, and that the Pope 'poured forth streams of tears' as he delivered the eulogy of St Francis of Assisi, prompting the congregation to 'bedew' their clothes with their own weeping (pp. 24-5). Religious art and literature abounded with tears, which mingled with other spiritualised bodily fluids such as the milk of Mary and the blood of saints. The picture of the middle ages that Dixon creates is one drenched in socially-endorsed lachrymae, culminating in 'the all-time "weeping champion" of recorded history': the 15th-century mystic Margery Kempe, 'a woman upstaged by her own tears' (pp. 15-18). Kempe believed that her own tears, shed copiously and at the slightest provocation, represented those of Mary for the crucified Jesus, and served as lamentations for the sinfulness of worldly existence as well as a desire for the transcendent bliss of heaven.

Kempe's experience was as the extreme end of contemporary attitudes to weeping, and yet her account is illustrative of prevailing attitudes towards public as well as private displays of emotion, and of wider social meanings assigned to tears. Dixon identifies three subsequent turning points in British attitudes towards weeping; three moments in British history which 'contributed more than any others to the idea that tears were something foreign to these islands' (p. 108). The first of these was the Protestant Reformation. 'It was not only institutions, doctrines, and liturgies that were to be reformed', Dixon writes, 'but also bodies, emotions, and sensations: the whole physiological life of the nation' (p. 26). For Protestants, there was something indecent about outward displays of emotion: extravagant shows of tears seemed a suspiciously foreign, barbarous and alien practice that was to be banished along with other outward signs of devotion. The medieval view of crying – that tears could *do* things, and had real, spiritual consequences for human souls – seemed just another Catholic superstition. Thomas Cranmer advocated grieving in private: public weeping was both blasphemous and ineffective, suggestive of a lack of faith in God's power and justice, and an inflated sense of the weeper's ability to influence the divine plan. The Protestant spirit ushered in the British 'sense of visceral discomfort with tears', transforming tears from 'outward, communal signs, produced as parts of rituals of devotion, confession, and mourning', into essentially 'inward and private experiences' (pp. 35–38).

Socially acceptable public weeping returned in the 18th century, in the form of the age of sensibility. Sentimental novels, operas and plays, as well as public preachers, encouraged veritable orgies of tears – 'the zenith of national lachrimosity'. Dixon prefers the term 'enthusiasm' to stand for the period, as opposed to 'sentiment' or 'sensibility', which he views as too limp to convey the hot and earnest passion with which tears were believed to express moral virtues and aesthetic sensitivity (p. 69). The second of Dixon's turning points in British attitudes towards weeping was the French Revolution, an event 'that marked the beginning of the end for the age of enthusiasm' (p. 108). The bloodshed and violent political passions of the Revolution seemed to some social commentators to represent the logical extreme of public emotionalism, suggesting that sensibility was a deranged morality with a propensity towards public disorder. The French Revolution and the cult of sensibility alike appeared to be the 'bastard offspring' of Rousseau – twin products of a dangerously subjective and emotive philosophy. The idea emerged among anti-sentimentalists 'that to shed tears of sympathy for the suffering of others was not only potentially childish and effeminate, but that it was something foreign too [...] a dangerous fashion that had been imported from the French' (p. 110). Thenceforth, rationality, reflection and emotional restraint were to become characteristics that distinguished Britons from excitable and intemperate foreigners.

Dixon's third and final turning point was the culmination of this train of thought in the 'stiff upper lip' of the age of high imperialism, at the end of the Victorian era, during which 'religious, military, and scientific forces combined to distinguish the tearless Brits from their primitive subjects' (p. 108). Initially serving as a rationale for the control of colonial subjects, Dixon sees the age of the stiff upper lip as being extended by the emotional and military pressures of fighting two world wars. Its demise, though, has been a long and uncertain one: whilst Dixon sees the age of emotional repression as 'surely over' in the 21st century, he notes that social commentators and journalists have been proclaiming the death of the stiff upper lip for several generations, with the social and sexual revolution of the 1960s, the 'new masculinity' of the 1980s, and the death of Princess Diana variously posited as ushering in the present-day acceptance and approval of tears.

This is a trajectory that will be familiar to those acquainted with the history of emotions, and yet it is one complicated by Dixon's own research. The distinction drawn between Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards tears is perhaps overstated: we are told that whilst Margery Kempe's deluge of tears was praised by some of her contemporaries as evidence of saintliness, equally she attracted condemnation and mockery with her ostentatious performances of weeping. 'I wish this woman were

out of the Church' was one visiting preacher's assessment, after Kempe's continual outbursts interrupted his sermons; 'she is annoying people' (p. 19). On the other side of the Reformation, Dixon writes that Oliver Cromwell was a 'man of tears', prone to extensive weeping both in public and in private. Whilst Dixon argues that the Protestant spirit held tears to be indicative of a lack of faith in divine justice, he also cites the Leveller leader Richard Overton's description of the Lord Protector's religious tears: 'You shall scarce speak to Cromwell about anything but he will lay his hand on his breast, elevate his eyes and call God to record, he will weep, howl and repent'. Indeed, Dixon notes that Cromwell's weeping, through which he 'initially passed himself off as pious and well-meaning', was ultimately believed by his contemporaries to be a carefully managed 'piece of stagecraft', indicating a measure of continuity in attitudes towards religiously motivated tears from the 15th to the 17th centuries (pp. 65-6).

We might also question how extensive was medieval lachrymosity, and how widespread was the approval of displays of public grief – especially male tears. Hagiography might have been a fruitful source for medieval attitudes towards crying: miracle stories from the lives of saints often contain numerous references to outpourings of grief. A common trope in such stories is the miraculous resurrection by saints of dead children, and narrators of hagiography detail the tears and lamentations of grieving parents. Yet narrators frequently disapprove of the public expression of fatherly emotions, deriding their 'womanish wailing' or suggesting that public tears impugned masculinity, and, on occasion, venturing tacit approval for fathers who suppress outward shows of emotion until they have retired to grieve alone and in private.⁽¹⁾

Yet *Weeping Britannia* also illuminates the recurrences and consistencies in attitudes towards crying over six centuries of British history. Dixon writes of the endurance of the 'witch's dilemma' from the middle ages to the present day: the 'Catch-22 of femininity and tears [...] women who weep are accused of being weak and manipulative; those who don't are called hard-hearted, callous, unfeminine, a bitch or a witch'. There is, too, the persistence of the 'actor's paradox': that tears are supposed to be 'the ultimate hallmarks of heartfelt emotion, yet they are also the stock in trade of professional fakers'. Historically changeable attitudes towards weeping, then, seem to rest upon an ahistorical set of contradictory beliefs, in which tears are understood to be at once 'a loss of control over one's emotions, and also an act of cold and deliberate manipulation', suggestive of an 'admirable capacity for compassion' as well as a 'pathological susceptibility' to emotion (pp. 54-55).

Indeed, what is perhaps remarkable in the history of tears is that the contested nature of crying, and the ways in which emotional display and performance are problematised, is itself markedly consistent. It seems that, whatever the prevailing attitude, tears always have the potential to evoke the same sets of connotations and contradictions: tears as hallmarks of authentic or false emotion; tears as spontaneous outbursts or acts of calculation. The tears of politicians and public figures, from Oliver Cromwell to Charles James Fox, Margaret Thatcher and George Osborne, even Paul Gascoigne and Andy Murray, seem to provoke the same sets of reactions. For some, public breakdowns were a laudable sign of passion and common humanity, whilst others satirised such spectacles as 'hysterical blubbing', or barely disguised machinations to provoke public sympathy. Similarly, Dixon notes that 'the notion that weeping is weak and effeminate is always in the background of discussions of tears in western cultural history', as is the continuing belief that tears are a sign of moderate grief, whilst the most profound sorrow is beyond tears (p. 145).

Dixon also writes persuasively of the recurrence of emotional styles, and the reappearance of familiar attitudes towards crying. He likens 21st century TV talent shows to 18th-century sentimentalism, writing of the 'emotional hyperinflation' of *Britain's Got Talent* and *The X Factor*:

Here the form and feeling of the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility are rediscovered.

Fragments of narratives of personal tragedies, poverty, illness and bereavement are the backdrop to performances by ordinary people. [...] Cheryl's tears trickle down her cheeks as she and her fellow judges decide between fame and obscurity for those supplicants who appear before them, begging for celebrity, and recounting their hard-luck stories (pp. 309-10).

The contemptuous reaction of satirists to these televised spectacles recapitulates the disdain of 18th-century anti-sentimentalists for such naked attempts to pull on the audience's heartstrings. Dixon wryly cites a 2013 headline from *The Daily Mash*: 'Crying now meaningless. The act of shedding tears has been made emotionally meaningless by *The X Factor*. The show's over-exploitation of visible despair has disabled the sympathetic response formerly evoked by seeing a crying person' (p. 311). This was essentially the verdict delivered to William Hogarth's 1759 portrait of a woman in tears, *Sigismunda*. Hogarth's evidently concerted attempt to provoke tears from the viewer at the sight of such pathos provoked a viciously derisive reaction from critics and the public, who were sceptical of the merits of a work that seemed to have been designed with the sole intention of making them cry.

In relying on TV talent shows, weeping celebrities and the opinions of newspaper columnists to exemplify modern attitudes towards teariness, however, *Weeping Britannia* has little to say about the emotions of 'ordinary' people. There is an excellent section in which Dixon uses Mass Observation records to interrogate post-war attitudes towards tears, through an analysis of responses to a questionnaire about crying in the cinema. Yet the reader is left wondering - what about tears outside the cinema? With the exception of public grief over the death of Princess Diana, Dixon's examples of weeping since 1945 are drawn in the main from the consumption of film, television and popular music. But what about 'ordinary', everyday sadness, or depression, loss or bereavement? There is perhaps an opportunity missed in not considering the resurgence of male emotional suppression, which has drawn considerable media attention in recent years. The rise of 'laddism' and lad culture, and the rise in male suicide rates, coupled with a reluctance among men to access mental health care provision all might have provided food for thought. Even the post-recession popularity of faux-vintage 'Keep Calm and Carry On' paraphernalia might have been a useful entry point into contemporary attitudes towards the stiff upper lip.

This connects to what is perhaps a more abstract problem with the approach of *Weeping Britannia*: that it does not distinguish between different types of crying. Whilst all emotion, to a greater or lesser degree, entails an aspect of performativity, there is a marked difference between crying as a reaction to fictional narratives and forms of entertainment, and reactions of genuine grief - a distinction that Dixon does not always disentangle. Weeping cathartically over the death of Little Nell whilst reading Dickens, for example, is very different to weeping over real-life bereavement, and the two demand to be treated with a degree of separation. The sections on weeping in modern Britain especially rely on forms of self-willed tears, in which crying itself becomes a kind of entertainment.

That said, *Weeping Britannia* wonderfully illuminates some surprising and unfamiliar emotional reactions in modern Britain. To 21st-century eyes, the ire and disgust provoked in the mid-1950s by the BBC series *This Is Your Life* seems remarkable. Reviewers wrote of the 'repulsive, preposterous and snivelling' nature of the 'deplorable programme', which reduced its victims to public humiliation as they shed tears over the sentimental tributes of friends and colleagues; such an experience was perceived by many to represent an 'unforgivable intrusion' into the private emotions of its participants (pp. 258-9). Dixon invites us to imagine the 1970 Christmas party at the psychiatrist Arthur Janov's Primal Institute, 'with adults role-playing as children, receiving from Santa Claus gifts they were denied in their childhood, and rolling around on the carpet sobbing' (p. 273). More

strange still, to those unacquainted with psychoanalytic theories, is Dixon's description of the influential belief amongst psychoanalysts in the 1940s that weeping was a displacement of urination. Female weeping could be envisaged as a symptom of suppressed infantile penis envy, in which the ejaculation of tears attempted to achieve the much-desired feat of male urination.

There is little, however, by way of theoretical engagement with literature on the history of emotions, or interdisciplinary perspectives on the nature of tears. *Weeping Britannia* opens with a seductive description of crying: 'Tears are produced when our soggy spongelike bodies are gripped, and then squeezed, by a powerful set of ideas, often in narrative form' (p. 7). Yet there is little more of such analysis for the next 300 pages - though in the final pages of the conclusion Dixon offers a persuasive series of suggestions as to why we cry. Particularly appealing is his likening of the experience of crying to an 'oceanic feeling', a moment of transcendence in which the sense of self seems to dissolve and melt away in the experience itself.

This lighter approach to theory is no doubt due to the target audience for *Weeping Britannia*: with endorsements from Ian Hislop and Jo Brand on the cover, this is clearly an academic book that also aims at a popular market. *Weeping Britannia* deserves to be widely read by both of these audiences. It makes for an enjoyable as well as an instructive read; Dixon's writing style is lively, engaging, and very human. The tone of the book is generally lighthearted, and at times it is very funny - certainly, a 330-page account of weeping needs moments of levity. Yet Dixon also writes sensitively and empathically of his subjects. There is a section towards the end of a chapter on the stiff-upper-lip mentality exemplified by Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If', in which he writes, quietly and unshowily, of the sons of Kipling and Oscar Wilde; parents who represented the two extremes of late Victorian emotional styles. The passage deserves to be quoted at length. Cyril Wilde changed his name to Holland following his father's imprisonment. He joined the army in 1905, and in June 1914 wrote to his brother, Vyvyan, about his determination since childhood to escape the reputation of his father:

first and foremost, I must be a *man*. There was to be no cry of decadent artist, of effeminate aesthete, of weak kneed degenerate [...] I ask nothing better than to end in honourable battle for my King and Country.

Dixon writes:

In this world, as a character in one of his father's plays observed, there are only two tragedies: 'One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.' On 9 May 1915, near Neuville-Saint-Vaast in northern France, Cyril Holland was shot dead by a German sniper.'

Rudyard Kipling's only son Jack, despite his very poor eyesight, was commissioned into the army thanks to his famous father's contacts, on the month of his 18th birthday in August 1915. The following month he was missing, presumed dead; one of 20,000 British troops killed in the Battle of Loos. The last known sighting of him was by a fellow soldier,

who was sure he had seen Kipling, 'trying to fasten a field dressing round his mouth which was badly shattered by a piece of shell'. This soldier said he would have helped, but that 'the officer was crying' from pain and he had not wished to 'humiliate him by offering assistance'. The teenaged second lieutenant had broken the code of the stiff upper lip, and his tears cost him the aid of one of his regiment. You'll be a Man, my son

(p. 214).

I confess that I cried when I read this. Perhaps it was intended to provoke tears; certainly it is not something that is often achieved in academic writing. But *Weeping Britannia* raises an interesting question for historians of emotion: what should historians do with the tears of the past, or their absence? How should they narrativise past emotions, and how far should they engage with these emotions themselves? Questions of detachment from and empathy with one's research apply to anyone engaged in historical practice, yet it is more pertinent still for historians who engage with the emotions of their sources. *Weeping Britannia* is not a book that sets out to theorise answers to these questions, but it is one that provokes such reflections.

It marks, too, the welcome entry of the history of emotions into academic writing aimed at a wider readership. And it is a very timely book, in this respect - more timely, perhaps, than Dixon could have anticipated. In the wake of the November terror attacks in Paris, two very different instances of crying drew widespread media attention. One was the restrained, single sob of BBC reporter Graham Satchell, who apologised for breaking down on air as he described the mingled atmosphere of sorrow and hope in the French capital. Even as he did so, hundreds viewers took to Twitter in praise of this rare show of compassion - a commendable departure from otherwise stiff-upper-lipped news reporting. The second was journalist Kay Burleigh's tweet of an allegedly weeping Golden Retriever on a Parisian pavement, widely derided as risible sentimentalism. The attitudes towards crying that Dixon details in *Weeping Britannia* live on.

Notes

1. For example, see R. C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents, Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York, NY, 1997), pp. 155-7 and Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300-1500* (Manchester, 2006), p. 52. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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