

**Allan Martin panel discussion, Wednesday 7 May, 4.15pm, Menzies Library, ANU**

**Karen Downing**

## Men's Tears

When asked to speak today I didn't think that my work had much affinity with Bruce's but something in common jumped out as soon as I began to think more seriously about it: there are a lot of tears in our work. And, most interestingly for me, a lot of men's tears.

But the tears, I think, do very different work in the histories that Bruce and I make. I thought it worth taking some time to consider this because it highlights many unresolved difficulties that historians face when we begin to consider emotions in our work. Whose emotions are we talking about for a start? The emotions of our research subjects? Our own emotions as historians? The emotions of our audience? Or do we mean some disembodied idea that can be an object of study – like a history of anger, for example? *A Brief History of Anger* did appear in 2010.

If we mean the emotions of our subjects, what sources can we use? If we mean our own emotions, is that our emotional response to our subjects, or the emotions created by present day or personal concerns? If we mean the emotions of our audiences, is it because we are trying to elicit a particular response from them?

I am not, of course, going to answer all these questions for you but I think they can be usefully kept in mind during our discussion.

As anyone who has read Bruce's work, or listened to him last night, would know, there is no surprise to find tears in his work on war, memory and commemoration: mothers' tears on receiving a fearful telegram, soldiers' tears for fallen comrades, families' tears on finding a loved one's grave, backpackers' tears at a dawn service at Gallipoli – they are tears of grief over the shocking and enduring consequences of war. But some of the tears are of hope and some are ones of patriotic pride. They are summed up by Jenny, an oral history subject that Bruce quotes in the introduction to *Return to Gallipoli*: they are, she said, tears that nobody could feel ashamed of.

But I was a bit surprised when I opened Bruce's first book, *A New Australia: Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic*, to find, in the first two lines, Henry Lawson wiping a tear from his eye as he wrote his poem *The Australian Marseillaise*.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised because my own work has turned up unexpected tears. I had no idea I would encounter so many when I started to look at Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* and the ways in which it was implicated in a restless male subjectivity at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. But there were lots of tears in Defoe's novel – tears of sorrow, of despair and of joy. And there were lots of tears in the personal papers of men that I looked at: tears of grief over the death of loved ones, tears on happy occasions like weddings, tears of gratitude over kindnesses, and tears of sadness over leaving home for the Australian colonies.

Defoe's novel was not the only damp book read at the time. Robert Darnton has pointed to the amount of sobbing in both French and English literature of the eighteenth century, in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, for example, and in the novels of Samuel Richardson. Henry Mackenzie's very popular *The Man of Feeling* is wet with weeping: gentlemen's eyes constantly moisten, male servants' breasts heave with convulsive throbs, young boys stifle their sobbing, old soldiers blubber like boys.

Some contemporary commentators blamed such novels for the heightened sentimentalism that characterised the second half of the eighteenth century but to blame books was to fail to acknowledge an upsurge in Anglican hymns which were full of 'trembling hearts', 'troubled breasts', 'tempest tossed' souls, and 'endless exultation'; and blaming books did not acknowledge the fervent emotions aroused by the American and French Revolutions, or the British patriotism fostered during wars with the French, or the widespread sadness over the loss of sons who went to war or adventuring in the colonies. Paul Langford has described the period as an 'age of unchained feeling'. And it is hard to quibble with that description when, in the British House of Commons, Edmund Burke's dramatic dagger-flinging departure from the Foxite Whigs made Charles James Fox burst into tears in response.

Thomas Dixon has chosen tears as the prism through which to explore emotional responses over time – to find some explanation for those times when the emotional responses seem

unfamiliar. He's the director of the Centre for the History of the Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London, and he's writing a book titled *Weeping Britannia: Why and How to Write the History of Tears*. It is going to be a study of Britishness and emotion through, as he describes it, six centuries of sobbing, beginning with Margery Kempe, who was known for her bouts of religiously inspired weeping in the fifteenth century, and ending with George Osborne crying at the funeral of Margaret Thatcher last year. Crying has a history, says Dixon, and he intends to show how an activity that is so personal and so particular can illustrate changes in society at large.

Some of those changes, for example, are how inordinate crying, particularly the wailing and rending of funeral practices, became associated with Catholicism during the Reformation. Protestants did cry but rather than tears to ease the soul of the dead into Purgatory, their tears were expected to be a sign of repentance for sins. In the early eighteenth century it was Methodism that became associated with public displays of weeping. Later in the century the so-called cult of sensibility encouraged feelings but crying was meant to be limited to a more refined and controlled moist eye.

Public tears become less acceptable during the 1790s and an expected stoicism in the face of adversity grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: it was exemplified in the 'spirit of the Blitz' during the second world war. That expectation wasn't eroded until the 1960s when various factors, including psychoanalysis, converged to create the opinion that it was healthier to openly express emotion.

Somewhere along the way tears in many contexts became not only unmanly, but un-British. Part of that change was a response to the French Revolution, when British men claimed for themselves the self-control that the excessively emotional, and dangerous, French men lacked. And the change continued during the nineteenth century though the influence of the military and the public school system on a society that was building an empire. As Thomas Dixon says, a nation that is attempting to rule the world needs to rule its own heart very severely.

The resulting maxim that 'boys don't cry' is an idea that, I think, we still live with to some extent. Of course the term 'don't' really means 'shouldn't'. Men did continue to cry

throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the appropriateness or not of their tears was always contextual.

But when and where the tears are shed, and by whom, has always made a difference to how they are described and judged. That Jesus himself apparently wept was a source of both consternation and justification for men's tears in the eighteenth century. Stoicism on second world war battlefields might have been expected of men but it was acceptable at the same time for both men and women to cry in the cinema. Crying over the death of your own child seems to have always been understandable but crying for yourself, as Margaret Thatcher did on leaving Downing Street in 1990, rarely attracts sympathy. North Koreans cry *en masse* at the deaths of their leaders, the British cry *en masse* at football matches.

Henry Lawson's tear at the beginning of Bruce's first book was a patriotic one as he penned his rebellious vision of a new republic of Australia. But it was also, Bruce tells us, a drunken one. It is a telling detail that opens the scene to differing interpretations. A man's tears shed over a nationalistic dream sketched with martial fervour have rarely been criticised. A drunken tear, however, at some times in some places might be considered doubly unmanly in its lack of control over both emotion and desire. But Lawson's working class background and the literary bohemia in which he worked would probably have viewed the drunkenness as an expression of a manly style that set itself against the wowsers of the bourgeoisie.

The tears in my work, the men's tears, were a barometer for changing emotional registers that men had to navigate – and I borrow that term from William Reddy's book *The Navigation of Feeling*. They were just one of the aspects of manliness that men had to manage in the midst of changing circumstances and shifting expectations.

While middling class men aspired to the various luxuries of a civilizing life and paid for it by sedentary occupations in urbanised environments, the labouring classes were working harder and longer than ever before in the manufacturing works that supplied the material trappings of that civilised life. Though this changing world offered the opportunity of increased social mobility, it was itself an uneasy enterprise for which a plethora of conduct guides gave little reassurance. Traditional forms of aristocratic patronage appeared less favourable in light of changing aspirations to independence but their replacement, in the form of 'friendship' and 'connections' demanded no less obligation or reciprocity. Laws too,

like those against poaching, and government policies such as land enclosures, cast older manly behaviours outside the law and the introduction of a centralised police force undermined their traditional responsibility for community law and order. The changing register of emotions that accompanied this social, economic and political upheaval at the turn of the nineteenth century too often verged on the excessive and where religion might have been expected to provide a guide for self-discipline it too, could be a source of seemingly unmanly passions.

In navigating their way through these changes men constantly judged themselves and each other and the potential for failure was ever-present. Even tears can be suspected of insincerity.

Tears are an outward and physical manifestation of some internal somatic or cognitive agitation – tears are signs of something, but they can be signs of pain as much as emotion – and peeling onions can produce the same results. Tears are biological, in that they are not restricted to humans. And in humans, tears are both a universal physiological response and a social performance which is highly sensitive to cultural difference. As such, they are perfect for study by historians.

But they are not an easy study. The multivalency of tears is evident in just the wide vocabulary we have for describing the secretion of moisture from our eyes: crying, weeping, sobbing, blubbering, trickling, snivelling, shedding, bursting, dissolving, welling. Try matching that physical description to a particular emotion – grief, sadness, joy, gratitude, despair – and you can see how slippery they are as signs.

This vocabulary also makes it difficult for historians to discuss tears. Few of those words are neutral and many of them quite explicitly evaluate the genuineness and appropriateness of the tears being described. Language adds layers of complexity to our interpretations of emotion – but that is a challenge familiar to historians and I think we are well prepared to take it on.

Language is also what historians use to reach our audience. There is a huge difference in our response to someone weeping than to someone snivelling and, whether we do it

consciously or not, we choose our words to create a specific feeling in our audience for the people in the past that we are asking them to understand.

We don't often talk about it openly but historians are in the business of persuasion and we know, as any successful sales person knows, that we have to capture our audiences' hearts as well as their minds. For the most part we do it intuitively and, I think, quite legitimately, but I also think we need to do it with self-awareness to avoid the type of accusation made by the reviewer of Macauley Culkin's movie *My Girl* in 1991. Don't be mistaken, said the reviewer, this movie will bring you to tears, but so will peeling onions – with a lot more honesty.

I would like to finish by suggesting that work on history and the emotions might be as much of an opportunity for historians as a challenge. In March this year some of the Fairfax newspapers, including the *Canberra Times*, ran an article by the popular historian Paul Ham which attacked academic historians for writing works that are, in his words, 'almost universally unread'. The reason for that, wrote Ham, is that we don't understand how, in his words, 'love, hope, greed, envy, ambition, fear, will to power and revenge are the true diviners of the destiny of the human race'.

Leaving aside Ham's ignorance of a decade or more of fascinating work in the field of history and the emotions – and his defensiveness about being a popular historian that his academic colleagues don't appear to take seriously – he might be correct about the broader audiences with whom we want to communicate: they probably are more susceptible to works that engage directly with the emotions of people in the past. We should use that interest to keep emphasising how relevant history is.

Bruce, of course, has been doing just that for quite some time. In challenging stereotypes and narratives to change our understanding of the past, he has honed a finely-tuned capacity to move his audience. More historians could take up the opportunities for persuasion and relevance that are offered by considering emotions in our historical practice. More of us probably should follow Bruce's example.