

Bereavement and Mourning (Great Britain)

By [Patricia Jalland](#)

Summary

This article provides a synthesis of research on bereavement and mourning in Britain during the First World War and its aftermath in the historical context of changing British mourning practices from the 1860s to the 1960s. The First World War had a profound impact on attitudes and practices relating to death, bereavement and mourning in Britain after 1914. There was a gradual shift away from a dominant Christian culture of acceptance of death and more open expression of grief in the 1860s to a more secular culture of suppressed private mourning and public commemoration after 1914.

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Introduction

Julie-Marie Strange noted in 2011 that “almost no research had been conducted on grief cultures in the twentieth century.”¹ The initial pioneering studies relating to [bereavement and mourning](#) in 20th century Britain were published by David Cannadine and [Jay Winter](#) in the 1980s.² These were followed by major books published by [Adrian Gregory](#), Joanna Bourke and David Lloyd in the 1990s.³ The “standard work” on bereavement and mourning in England from 1914-1970 was published by [Patricia Jalland](#) in 2010.⁴

The aim of this article is to provide a synthesis of research on bereavement and mourning in

[Britain](#) during the First World War and its aftermath in the historical context of changing bereavement and mourning practices from the 1860s to the 1960s. The article is organised in major sections which analyse shifting approaches to death, bereavement and mourning from 1860 to the years immediately following the war: bereavement and mourning for soldiers at the front and the working class home front from 1914 to 1916; the upper class home front and communities of mourning from 1914; soldiers' bereavement, grief and [shell shock](#) at the front from 1916 to 1918; and communal and national commemoration for the dead and missing after 1918.

Changing Approaches to Death, Bereavement and Mourning (1860-1914)

Cultural norms relating to death and bereavement in Britain have changed dramatically over the past hundred years. They were powerfully shaped by the decline of religion, the two world wars and the medical revolution beginning in the 1930s. In the 19th century, Christianity gave families a model of acceptance of death and bereavement as the will of God and offered some hope of immortality, even of family reunions in heaven. A fall in mortality from infectious diseases and a rise in life expectancy marked a sharp divide between the two centuries.⁵ People were likely to live to old age and their babies were expected to survive. In addition, the slow progress of secularization, far from complete even today, inevitably altered the meanings and significance of death, bereavement and mourning as general fear of divine judgement declined significantly.⁶ Thus, there was a gradual shift away from the dominant Christian culture of more open expression of grief in the 1860s to a culture of avoidance and reticence a century later.⁷

Bereavement and Mourning for Soldiers at the Front (1914-1916)

Jay Winter has estimated the [total number of British servicemen killed in the First World War](#) at 722,785 or close to three-quarters of a million; [Gary Sheffield](#) puts it at 744,702.⁸ The middle and upper classes had a disproportionate share of the casualties. In absolute numbers, however, the majority of the total casualties were working class, with twenty of the lower ranks killed for every officer. Winter also observed that British servicemen only had a one in two chance of surviving the war without being killed, wounded or taken [prisoner](#): one in eight was killed.⁹

As a consequence, the First World War had a profound impact on the prolonged process of change in attitudes and practices relating to death, bereavement and mourning in Britain in

the fifty years after 1914. The sheer numbers of war dead were entirely unprecedented, the nature of their deaths was horrific and the communal grief was often overwhelming. Soldiers and bereaved families largely repressed their emotions and coped in silence.¹⁰ Soldiers' responses to the deaths of their comrades and the ever-present fear of being killed or mutilated were to some extent culturally prescribed, conditioned by their class, education, upbringing, religion and personality.

Most men did their military duty out of a mixture of motives including patriotism, honour and deference to authority. Heroic self-sacrifice in war was publicly valorised as a necessary expression of duty, honour, [masculinity](#) and patriotism. Such chivalric beliefs encouraged upper class men to "do one's bit," but ill-prepared them for the reality of death in industrialised [warfare](#) which destroyed many boyhood illusions. Working class soldiers did not share the idealized upper class view of death in war as "wonderful and glorious" in 1914-15¹¹, although elevated public rhetoric continued to be used at home to commemorate the dead, console the bereaved and soften the horror. Joanna Bourke's 1999 book, *An Intimate History of Killing*, suggests that fear of dying and not fear of killing was the most debilitating emotion for soldiers who were often sustained by the necessity to do their job of killing on the battlefield.¹² For many soldiers the only way to survive was by suppressing their emotions of grief, coping in silence and shutting out gruesome memories. Those soldiers whose work was affected by on-going grief, fear or depression were likely to be viewed as personally inadequate, not "man enough."

Most men's defences could not survive the deaths of their closest friends. The trauma of such a loss was vastly greater if their friend was blown to bits, died on the [barbed wire](#) of [no-man's-land](#) or just went missing. Men would often risk their own lives to bring back the bodies of their friends from no-man's-land. They also went to great trouble to bury comrades with as much reverence and respect as circumstances allowed. Remarkably, rituals of mourning were sustained wherever possible even in the darkest days of the war. But the capacity and opportunity for normal grief and mourning were usually lost in these conditions.

Bereavement and Mourning on the Working Class Home Front (1914-1916)

The three-quarters of a million British servicemen who were killed in the war came from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds. However, the burden of bereavement for relatives, friends and neighbours at home was borne unequally, varying markedly by class, region and family. Adrian Gregory suggests that about 3 million Britons out of a population of less than 42 million lost a close relative, son or brother. The secondary bereaved who

mourned a cousin, friend or neighbour “encompassed virtually the entire population.”¹³ Within the working classes, families of those in the North Country [“pals” battalions](#) who volunteered to fight with men from their town or village were especially affected. When whole units fought and died together, their home towns suffered disproportionately heavy losses. The *Barnsley Chronicle* mourned for its families on the first day of the [battle of the Somme](#) in July 1916: “there is hardly a home that has not experienced some great loss or suffered some poignant sorrow.” The *Chronicle* was still confident that these huge sacrifices would be borne “with Spartan courage” and that the brave women of Barnsley “will show the same fortitude under affliction as is being displayed everywhere by the women of England...the grief and anguish of one of our number is the grief and anguish of us all.”¹⁴

Many working class families told stories of great hardship and sorrow as they learned their sons or husbands were missing or dead. Catherine Laffey was a “heart-broken mother” who had lost two sons and considered suicide: “I got out of drowning as I am getting afraid I [would draw] more trouble on myself.” Elizabeth Wallace wrote from the Liverpool Royal Infirmary: “My trouble was twofold as I lost my eldest girl & the Father inside ten months and my baby was only nine months [to] the day. He [her husband] was killed so it quite broke my health up.” Yet the bravery and stoicism in such letters is remarkable. One father wrote on the death of his son that “thousands of fathers are in the same position.” A widow recognised that “I am only one in many hundreds.”¹⁵

The Upper Class Home Front and “Communities of Mourning” from 1914

Upper class family letters and [correspondence](#) across the class spectrum from 1914 provide a deep insight into British “communities of mourning”¹⁶ which varied according to gender, class and religion. These families, especially the wives and daughters, found it invaluable to share their grief in letters and conversations with close friends who were also suffering. They kept precious remembrance books of their son’s lives and deaths, pasting in letters, press cuttings and memorabilia.¹⁷ In September 1915 [Rudyard Kipling’s \(1865-1936\)](#) son went missing in action and was never found. Kipling’s poetry, including his poem “For All We Have and Are,” written after the Battle of [Mons](#), reinforced the chivalric language of sacrifice which helped to console upper class families in mourning.¹⁸

A prominent example of upper class approaches to mourning was [William Cecil \(1863-1936\)](#), Bishop of Exeter, and his wife [Florence Cecil \(1863-1944\)](#) who suffered the devastating loss of three sons in the Great War. The beloved Bishop displayed a Christian resignation even in

his deepest mourning and grief which equalled his wife's courage and calmness. He sought refuge in his Christian faith: "Life must be taken as a whole, the sorrows and the joys." Cecil's sister-in-law, [Violet Cecil \(1872-1958\)](#) also lost her beloved son, [George Cecil \(1895-1914\)](#), during the retreat from Mons in September 1914. The Cecil family looked to their Anglican faith and its promise of an after-life for comfort. Yet they were unable to find adequate words of consolation for their bereaved daughter-in-law who was not religious. They sought further refuge in words of patriotism and sacrifice which also were of little help to Violet.¹⁹

Violet's supreme consolation in her life-long grief was the precious memory of her son which she was able to share with her family and her similarly bereaved female friends. She made annual visits to George's grave in the Forêt de Retz near Villers-Cotterêts in northern [France](#) and erected an impressive monument nearby. There she regularly commemorated George's death with French villagers who became close friends. Despite the vital consolation of George's memory, however, her grief was endless, as she noted in her diary on the twentieth anniversary of his death: "the sorrow, the loss, the pain, are as great today as in 1914." The consolations of Christian faith and prospective heavenly reunion seemed to offer more solace to the devout Cecil family than did Violet's focus on memory in the interwar years.²⁰

Late in 1914, [Fabian Ware \(1869-1949\)](#), an English commander of a [Red Cross](#) ambulance unit, was saddened by the likely future loss of unmarked mass graves and the "pathetically lonely" graves identified only by fragile wooden crosses. He responded by ordering his staff to register the locations of graves dotted in and around the frontline. His continued efforts on behalf of the British war dead ultimately led to the establishment of the Imperial War Graves Commission in May 1917. The Commission's plans for the treatment of the war dead were published soon after the Armistice and included provision for the graves of fallen servicemen to be marked by headstones rather than crosses. There was an ambitious programme for the re-design of cemeteries and erection of memorials to the missing in the former theatres of war which was directed by Ware in the 1920s and 1930s with the aid of the great architects of the day.²¹ Kipling also helped the Commission in its work, and other Allied governments generously responded by granting land for permanent war cemeteries.²²

Soldiers' Bereavement, Grief and Shell shock at the Front (1916-1918)

It is scarcely surprising that there were so many [psychological casualties](#) of the Great War. Many soldiers lacked the capacity to endure prolonged [artillery](#) bombardment and the loss of so many comrades. A diagnosis of shell shock or "neurasthenia" was one extreme along an extended spectrum of emotional anguish. Some soldiers cracked suddenly, sometimes after

seeing a close friend killed brutally: finally fear became overpowering and the mind seemed to snap. By 1916, 40 percent of casualties in combat zones were attributed to neurasthenia.²³

Even the toughest soldier could become “a nervous wreck” during the attritional campaigns of 1916 to 1918. Captain [Herbert John Collett Leland \(1873-1931\)](#) was a staff officer in the South Staffordshire Regiment. His letters home to his wife give a vivid picture of the cumulative impact of grief following the successive deaths of many friends in January 1917 which caused him to contemplate his own possible death. His anxiety about the state of his nerves was justified and, by 2 April 1917, he was hospitalized with “a collapse.” By 14 May few of his original battalion were left.²⁴ Throughout the second half of 1917 the traumatic experience of the Third [Battle of Ypres](#) left Leland constantly “terrified that my nerve will go...All my friends have gone.”²⁵ By 26 October 1917 Leland admitted to his wife that he definitely had shell shock: “I have lost all I knew and have become absolutely callous.” All he wanted now was to return home. In December 1917 Leland was admitted to the officers’ hospital in England following a breakdown in France which left him mentally confused and utterly exhausted.²⁶ As [Wilfred Owen \(1893-1918\)](#) wrote in his poem, “Mental Cases”: “These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.”²⁷

Psychiatrists suggest that the shocking impact of multiple deaths of comrades in war can lead to an “imprint of death” which impairs the mourning process and subsequent civilian life. This was Captain Leland’s experience and we have no way of knowing if he recovered after his breakdown. He might have joined the 65,000 soldiers who were in mental hospitals by 1929.²⁸ The survivors had to live with appalling grief, survivor guilt and terrible memories. Adrian Gregory estimates that about 3 million veterans survived who had direct experience of the horrors of front-line fighting:

Every frontline soldier experiences loss, the loss of comrades who were often intensely bonded with those who survived. The combination of this loss, often horrific and witnessed at close range... produced a complex experience of bereavement, possibly even more intense than the loss of a close relative.²⁹

The responses of veterans to the deaths of their friends in the war were probably as complicated and ambivalent as their feelings about the war itself. Many wanted to forget. For some, haunting memories of lost friends and terrible battles resurfaced in recurrent nightmares and in later life. Those memories scarred the lives of the emotional casualties of war who spent years in special hospitals. Lieutenant R. G. Dixon wrote an unpublished memoir in the early 1970s which recalled his service as a subaltern through the “appalling

nightmare” of the Ypres campaign. He had tried to avoid emotional involvement to survive during the war but the individual deaths of friends hurt intensely. He believed that such a war changed young men and matured them beyond their years. His own experience of the Great War “spoiled [him], blunted [his] sensibilities and coarsened [his] reactions.”³⁰

Communal and National Mourning for the Dead and Missing after 1918

In the fifty years after the Great War there was a complex shift from a Victorian culture where death was often accepted and grief openly expressed to a culture of avoidance, minimal ritual and private sorrow. David Cannadine has argued that interwar England was obsessed with the cult of the dead in the face of widespread and harrowing bereavement. Victorian mourning practices seemed inadequate and inappropriate, particularly in the absence of most of the bodies of the fallen which had been buried on the battlefields.³¹ Due to the military policy of non-repatriation of war dead which was strictly enforced from the spring of 1915 onward, those who died at the front were buried in the countries in which they fell. The majority of those who lost loved ones in the fighting were therefore denied the consolation of a funeral or a grave in their home country that could be visited and tended.³²

Because traditional Victorian rites such as deathbed scenes and ritualized mourning were impossible, new and innovative methods were devised to commemorate the dead: the remarkable public rituals at the [Cenotaph](#), the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, Armistice Day commemoration and local civic war memorials erected across the country.³³ The spiritualist movement also gained mass appeal among soldiers and families during and after the war because it affirmed that the war dead could live on in a spirit form.³⁴

In the interwar years, memory and religious faith were major features of the numerous family pilgrimages to the Great War cemeteries on the former battlefields of France and Belgium. Public commemoration in Britain often had little appeal for the many families of the soldiers lost in Europe with no known graves. Britain’s policy of non-repatriation of soldiers’ bodies meant that both bereaved families and veterans saw pilgrimages to war graves abroad as vitally important. The Bickersteth family was one of many to make repeated ritualized pilgrimages to the newly created war cemeteries to visit the presumed grave of Lieutenant [Morris Bickersteth \(1891-1916\)](#) killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. The devoutly Anglican Bickersteth family saw their four visits in the interwar years as “sacred pilgrimages” to a holy place where they felt close to Morris’ spirit.³⁵ These visits evoked intense emotions, revealed in the family’s poignant detailed accounts of each

pilgrimage, which helped to assuage the deep sorrow of the bereaved parents and their three soldier sons.

Hundreds of bereaved families of all classes and religious persuasions made painful but often comforting pilgrimages to remember and seek solace.³⁶ Many veterans, like the Bickersteth brothers, also undertook pilgrimages to grieve for their dead and missing comrades. David Lloyd has rightly argued that religion and spirituality played a key role in British pilgrimages. Religious organisations like the Church Army and the St Barnabas Society organised many group visits to the war graves of Europe, some at low cost to the poor, who could usually only afford to visit once.³⁷

The national project of public commemoration for the war dead may have come at some private cost in that traditional family mourning rituals for civilians in peacetime declined even further after the war. Perhaps the grand scale of national commemoration overshadowed and to an extent limited public compassion for the ordinary deaths of individual civilians in peacetime. The interwar generation grew up in a bleak atmosphere of mass mourning for the dead servicemen of the Great War. Even the 200,000 victims of the [influenza pandemic](#) of 1918-19 received little of the attention given to the war heroes.³⁸ This foreshadowed the silences surrounding death and bereavement in peacetime in the interwar years and beyond. Prolonged death-bed scenes disappeared and bereavement rituals declined in length, fervour and consolation.

Conclusion

The two world wars of the 20th century had a cumulative and enduring impact in suppressing open displays of individual grief in the interest of public morale and social solidarity. The dominant culture of suppressed private mourning and public commemoration in post-1914 Britain was reinforced by the widespread removal of death and bereavement from the family home to the hospital, funeral home and crematorium. The Second World War marked a deeper break with the past than the First. The change in cultural norms affecting family bereavement was more intense, widespread and long-lasting from the 1940s. Open and expressive sorrow was strongly discouraged in favour of a pervasive model of death-denial and privatized grieving which became entrenched in the nation's psyche for the next thirty years.

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External Links

- [Kipling, Rudyard: For all we have and are, September 1914 \(Poetry Foundation\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website - Commonwealth War Graves Commission \(CWGC\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Owen, Wilfred: Mental Cases, First World War Poetry Digital Archive \(University of Oxford\) \(Article\)](#)

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