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Stirling Moorey

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Step Forward the Cowards! – Humiliation, Shame and Countershame in Memories of the White Feather Campaign

STIRLING MOOREY*
Independent Scholar, UK
Email: s.moorey@btopenworld.com

ABSTRACT
One of the most enduring and dramatic tropes of the First World War is the image of a young woman giving a white feather to a man who is not in uniform to shame him into enlisting. This article examines the 'White Feather Campaign' from a history of emotions perspective, focusing on the male shame experience. It analyses this as part of a dynamic interaction of the participants: the white feather giver, the receiver, and the witness(es). The narratives of the men involved illustrate the varied ways they regained their sense of manhood in the face of humiliation: through reframing and counter-shaming.

The White Feather Movement

The image of a young woman shaming a man into enlisting by giving him a white feather is, in the public imagination, one of the most potent symbols of foolish Great War jingoism. References are to be found in contemporary fiction and popular culture ranging from Pat Barker's *Regeneration* to television's Downton Abbey. This metaphor denoting cowardice originated in cock fighting, where a white feather in a bird's tail was evidence that it was 'not of the true game breed'.[1] It took physical form through the practice of presenting or sending white feathers to men as a sign of cowardice. It was by no means the only way in which both sexes sought to embarrass 'shirkers' but it became one of the enduring memories of the home front. Nicoletta Gullace's 1997 article, 'White Feathers and Wounded Men', was the first study to explore the subject

*Stirling Moorey is a Consultant Psychiatrist. He holds an MA in History from Goldsmiths, University of London, where Professor Jan Plamper provided support and encouragement in the preparation of this article.

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[1]Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1785), p. 177.

in any depth.[2] Since Gullace's article, a new and vibrant field has developed, the history of emotions, with a rapidly growing historiography of emotions in the military and war.[3] Anne Marie Kilday and David Nash recently revisited the White Feather phenomenon from this perspective, using it to illustrate two of the themes they believe characterise shame in modernity.[4] First, men receiving white feathers often resisted the humiliation by fighting back in some way – a concept they term 'anti-shame'. Second, the initial support for the white feather movement soon waned and turned to a rejection of the practice: the shamers were themselves shamed, demonstrating the 'reverberatory nature of shame in the modern context'[5] The main source used by Gullace was a collection of letters in the Imperial War Museum (IWM) associated with the BBC's *The Great War* television series of 1964. Kilday and Nash, also utilised recordings of interviews in the IWM archives. The current article examines these sources in more depth from the perspective of the men who received white feathers: their varied emotions of embarrassment, shame and anger; and how they managed this experience to maintain self-respect.[6] Each white feather story is part of a dynamic interplay between the white feather giver, the receiver, and the witness(es): a humiliation triad. Exploring how the participants shifted roles in this triad furthers our

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[2]Nicoletta Gullace, 'White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War', *Journal of British Studies*, 36, 2, (1997), pp.178-206.

[3]For an overview of the history emotions see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For the history of emotions in war, see Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare,* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); William G Rosenberg, 'Reading Soldiers' Moods: Russian Military Censorship and the Configuration of Feeling in World War I', *American Historical Review*, 119, 3 (2014), 714-740; Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch and Katrina O'Loughlin**,** *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature,* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

[4]Anne-Marie Kilday and David S. Nash, *Shame and Modernity in Britain,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 21-62.

[5]Ibid., p.47.

[6]The BBC's Great War television series letters were searched for letters related to white feathers. The IWM has a collection of recorded interviews conducted with servicemen and civilians who witnessed the First World War. There are two sets of recordings: those from interviews for the BBC series (here referenced as recordings) and those from later interviews (available online and referenced here as interviews). The search term 'white feather' was used to extract and transcribe relevant oral narratives. A search using the term 'white feather' was also carried out in British newspaper archives.

understanding of the reverberatory nature of shame. A third dimension which has received little attention so far is the context in which these IWM stories were collected many years after the events. The period during which the memories were recorded came at a particular point in the emotional memorialisation of the war, and the way in which the written and oral narratives were elicited may have contributed to the absence of the voices of key players in these dramas - the white feather women themselves and conscientious objectors.

The White Feather Movement arose in the context of concerns that insufficient numbers were answering their country's call to service. At the outbreak of war, Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, recognised that the armies of France and Germany meeting in Europe would be evenly balanced, and that a substantial British force was required to break the stalemate. The Territorial Force and reserves comprised fewer than 750,000 men. In contrast, the French and German armies were able to rapidly mobilise to over 2 million men each.[7] Conscription was politically unpalatable so a massive recruitment drive was required. A full propaganda machine eventually emerged, but in the early months of the war, publication of the report citing German atrocities, followed by Moore's *Times* newspaper dispatch describing the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from Mons prompted a surge in enlistments. 175,000 men volunteered between 30 August and 5 September 1914.[8] This massive influx overwhelmed the recruiting structure but may also have given a false benchmark for recruitment, contributing to the persistent belief that there was a reservoir of untapped manpower.[9] The 'shirkers' were staying at home while men from occupations needed to support the war effort were going to the front. This was one factor that eventually led to the introduction of conscription in 1916.[10] It also fuelled the white feather phenomenon, which was part of a wider engagement of women in the recruitment initiative. Baroness Orczy formed the 'Women of England's

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[7]Peter Hart, *The Great War,* (London: Profile Books 2014), p.33.

[8]Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.61; Roy Douglas, 'Voluntary Enlistment in the First World War and the Work of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee', *The Journal of Modern History,* 42, 4 (1970), pp. 564-585. Rethinking British Volunteerism in 1914: A Rush to the Colours? | University of Oxford Podcasts - Audio and Video Lectures. http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/rethinking-british-volunteerism-1914-rush-colours. Accessed 22 July2021.

[9]David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916,* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p.129.

[10]Silbey, *The British Working Class*, p.129. In fact, between 1914 and 1915 Britain raised the second-largest volunteer army in history, Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.73.

Active Service League'. Mrs Humphrey Ward supported similar sentiments, and Emmeline Pankhurst suspended her fight for suffrage to support recruitment.[11] The white feather campaign originated on 31 August 1914 when retired Admiral Penrose Fitzgerald gave a speech promising that 30 ladies of Folkestone would 'present a white feather to every young 'slacker' found loafing about the Leas [the promenade], deaf or indifferent to their country's need, just to remind them that British soldiers are fighting and dying across the Channel.'[12] Penrose Fitzgerald warned 'the young men of Folkestone – the idle ones – that there is a danger awaiting them far more terrible than anything they can meet in battle, and that is, if they are found idling and loafing tomorrow they will be presented with a white feather.'[13] On 1st September, the *Daily Mail* reported that 'There was hardly a slacker on the Leas yesterday, and recruiting has had a new stimulus.'[14] By then, with reinforcements from London, the campaign had moved to Deal where they 'smilingly' distributed the feathers to young men who 'regarding the affair as a joke, permitted the 'favours' to be placed in buttonholes,' but later, 'realising that they had been duped by the artless way in which they had been decorated the young men hastily removed their 'favours'.'[15]

It is not clear how much the symbolism of chivalry was the invention of Penrose-Fitzgerald or the newspapers. By awarding the 'Order of the White Feather', the rules of chivalry were turned upside down. Young ladies handed out 'favours' as they would to knights who they chose as their champions, but the men were actually being awarded an emblem of cowardice. The practice soon spread across the country, peaking in 1915, but persisting until 1918.[16] There is little evidence that this was an organised campaign.[17] Nevertheless, white feather women often worked together and

[11]Emmuska Orczy, 'To the Women of England,' *Daily Mail,* September 4, 1914, p.3.
[12]'Women's War,' *Daily Mail*, August 31, 1914, p.3.
[13]'Women's War', *Daily Mail*, August 31, 1914, p.3.
[14]'White Feather Campaign', *Daily Mail*, Sept 1, 1914, p.3.
[15]'White Feather Favours', Duped youths at the seaside', *Daily Mail*, September 2, 1914, p.3.
[16]96 of the IWM letters gave dates: 1914 – 7; 1915 – 54; 1916 – 18; 1917 – 12; 1918 – 5.
[17]Orczy distanced her organization from white feather giving; There is no support in the pages of *The Suffragette* or the *Britannia,* and no reference in Emmeline or Christabel Pankhurst's autobiographies. Mona Anne Kaiser 'Emmeline Pankhurst and the Great War: Radical Suffragist, Conservative Patriot or Political Opportunist?' (MA dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Canada, 1995), pp.57.

frequented locations such as stations and theatres.[18] At first it was seen as 'an amusing, novel, and forceful method of obtaining recruits,' but even within the first week there was concern that the wrong men would be targeted.[19] Soldiers home on leave, men rejected on medical grounds, too old to fight, those in reserved occupations, and wounded men might all be out of uniform but not 'shirking.' White feather women were now the abusers and the men receiving their 'favours' were their victims. Partly in response to the white feather problem, the Government introduced 'Derby armbands' to signify a man had registered as willing to enlist but not been called up, 'Silver War Badges' to indicate a man had been wounded, and 'On War Service' badges for those in 'reserved occupations.'[20] Ironically men needed these new symbols indicating they were *not* cowards to protect them from the feathers. In a further twist, men were often too embarrassed to openly wear these symbols and so remained targets.[21]

Shame, Humiliation, Honour and Masculinity

Sociologists have argued that shame is an essential feature of how we manage our social image.[22] At its core is a sense of the self-judged negatively by others. As Sartre observed, shame is a feeling of 'being *an* object…of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed and dependent being which I am for the Other.'[23] Phenomenologists speak of how in shame 'the lived body is momentarily reduced to the corporeal body' as we become aware of how our body reacts with blushing, sweating, increased heart rate etc.[24] Behaviourally shame involves gaze avoidance, cringing, and a wish to hide or

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[18] 109 letters indicate where the feather was given out: 53% in the street, 19% on public transport, 11% at stations, 6% on the seafront, 5% at theatres, 3% at public meetings or pubs.

[19] 'White Feathers' A Novel Method of Making Young Men Enlist,' *Chatham News*, September 5, 1914, p.8. 'The White Feather,' *Daily Mail,* September 3, 1914, p.4.

[20] Questions in Parliament demanded prosecutions (HC Deb 01 March 1915 vol 70 cc547-8); Gullace, 'White Feathers', p.199.

[21] Silbey, 'The British Working Class', p.22.

[22] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Thomas Scheff, 'Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory', *Sociological Theory*, 18 (2000), pp.84-99.

[23] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* translated by Hazel E. Barnes, revised edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 312.

[24] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception,* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Brent Dean Robbins and Holly Parlavecchio, 'The Unwanted Exposure of the Self: A Phenomenological Study of Embarrassment', *The Humanist Psychologist*, *34*, pp.321–345; p. 322.

escape. Contemporary social psychologists broadly agree that shame arises from negative evaluation of the whole self ('*I* am to blame, and this says something bad about who I am as a person') while guilt is focused on the transgressive act ('I am to blame for my *bad behaviour* in this particular situation'). Embarrassment is a more fleeting emotion, triggered by trivial events but paradoxically often associated with stronger physical reactions.[25] Shame and embarrassment arise in a social context, but there does not need to be another person present. We can feel ashamed of acts that no one else knows about. Equally, we can feel embarrassed or ashamed when we make a faux pas even when others behave kindly towards us. Being handed a white feather sometimes evoked feelings of embarrassment and sometimes deep shame, but primarily contained the element of humiliation which requires another to ridicule or degrade us.[26] Donald Klein suggested humiliation is not just an emotion but also a process, a dynamic interplay between a 'humiliator', a 'victim' and a 'witness': the 'humiliation triad'.[27] White feather incidents are often triadic like this with a woman attempting to humiliate a young man in the presence of others. But this dynamic can change, men can reverse the roles and humiliate their attackers, or bystanders may give up the role of witness and turn upon the white feather giver (both examples of anti-shame). The historiography of shame intersects with the study of honour and gender. Modernity, in Norbert Elias' influential view, has been seen to involve a transition from shame-based to guilt-based culture.[28] Nash and Kilday's work challenges this picture.[29] Rather than shame being marginalised their research shows that in modern societies it fulfils the same functions, albeit in different forms.[30] Men receiving white feathers often saw the implication of cowardice as an insult to their honour.

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[25]See Jessica Tracy and Richard Robins, 'Putting the Self into Self-Conscious Emotions: A Theoretical Model', *Psychological Inquiry*, 15 (2004), pp.103-125; and Michael Lewis (2008) 'Self-conscious Emotions: Embarrassment, Pride, Shame and Guilt', in *Handbook of Emotions* (3rd edition), ed. by Michael Lewis, Jeanette Haviland-Jones and Lisa Feldman Barrett, (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), pp. 742-756; June Price Tangney, Debra Mashek, and Jeff Stuewig, 'Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment: Will the Real Emotion Please Stand Up?', *Psychological Inquiry*, 16,(2005), pp.44-48.

[26]Donald C. Klein, 'The humiliation dynamic: an overview' *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 12 (1991), pp.93-121; p.94.

[27]Ibid., p.101.

[28]Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations.* Revised edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[29]David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday, *Cultures of Shame: Exploring Crime and Morality in Britain, 1600-1900,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.18.

[30]Ibid.

Prior to the 19th century, as John Tosh says, a man's honour 'was virtually coterminous with reputation', the social image inextricably linked with the personal.[31] Kitchener's exhortation of 'Your Country Needs You!' was a direct appeal to manly, patriotic honour. Aspects of this honour culture were still apparent in Britain in 1914, but an alternative masculine discourse had arisen through the 19th century. Tosh argues that the needs of a rapidly urbanising, industrial society led to the development of a model of Victorian manliness focused on work and home, which nonetheless retained the values of 'physical vigor, energy and resolution, courage, and straightforwardness'.[32] It has been argued that alongside this domesticated masculinity, an idealisation of a more militaristic virility grew from around 1870 onwards, possibly in reaction to the rising women's movement, and the needs of empire.[33] This was evidenced in the hypermasculinity of adventure stories for boys and men, the hagiography of soldiers and 'para-military' boys organisations like the scout movement.[34] Working class constructions of masculine identity have received less scrutiny but evidence suggests that respectable employment and physical labour were key components of the working class male identity.[35] The extent to which working class men shared the values of the hegemonic masculinity of other classes is not entirely clear. What is clear is that when war broke out in 1914 young men had a choice of a more complex range of masculine identities than is popularly assumed, and it is important not to forget that for many their identities were only just forming.[36]

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[31]John Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 330-342, p. 333.

[32]Michael Roper and John Tosh, editors, *Manful assertions: masculinities in Britain since 180,0* (London, 199l); Tosh, p. 335.

[33]Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth and twentieth Century Masculinity', *The Historical Journal*, 3 (2002), pp.637-652.

[34]Francis, p. 640; Claudia Nelson, 'Sex and the Single Boy: Ideals of Manliness and Sexuality in Victorian Literature for Boys', *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1989), pp.525-550; Bradley Deane, 'Imperial Boyhood: Piracy and the Play Ethic', *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), pp.689-714.

[35]Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960, Gender, Class and Ethnicity,* (London, Routledge, 1994); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War,* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[36]See Michael Roper's psychoanalytically informed study of men's letters home to their mothers: Michael Roper (2004), 'Maternal relations: moral manliness and emotional survival in letters home during the First World War' in *Masculinities in Politics and* War edited by Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh, (Manchester: Manchester University Press) pp. 295-315.

White Feather Stories

The humiliation of receiving a white feather is explicitly evident in the letters and in the interviews in the IWM sound archives. The letters were written in response to newspaper articles (one headed 'Step Forward the Cowards') asking for men who refused to join the forces to volunteer to be interviewed for the BBC *The Great War* series. The theme running though these letters is an attempt to make clear, 'Why I am not a coward'. AH Devlin ironically titles his account 'One Coward' and explains that when given a feather he held the Mons Star.[37] A Parker says he volunteered underage after receiving a feather and spent his eighteenth birthday in the trenches.[38] F Cole tells us he was 'one of the "cowards" who raided Zeebrugge on St George's Day 1918.'[39] The letters also contain detailed lists of the men's war service, and are often signed with the First World War rank and number. What is most striking about the letters is the absence of the men the article referred to: there was only one account from a conscientious objector and only two from men of fighting age who were not in occupations perceived to be vital to the war effort.[40] As Adrian Gregory points out, 'the vast majority of the men of military age in Britain during the First World War chose not to volunteer for the armed forces.'[41] It required an active decision to go against the prevailing social pressure to volunteer, but this was rarely because of conscientious objection. Family commitments, rural indifference, and fear of being killed or maimed may all have contributed to these decisions.[42] But no one wrote to the BBC to justify their own refusal to enlist.

The interviews recorded for the series formed the basis of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) sound archive. Further interviews were conducted with veterans over following years, some of which contain direct questions about white feathers while in others the event is referred to spontaneously. While the letters are premeditated, albeit emotionally charged, accounts where the respondents felt sufficiently strongly to write in, the sound recordings contain responses to questions about white feathers

[37]AH Devlin to BBC, May 1964, DEA-DEW, fol. 188.

[38]AH Parker to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, PAC-PAR, fol. 197.

[39]F Cole to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, COA-COO, fol. 112-113.

[40]EH Walker's objections to fighting came from his Christian belief, and having German and Austrian friends; he was '…. almost ostracized by everyone, bombarded with white feathers in the street and found it impossible to get work except from a Quaker firm in Clerkenwell…' Notes on telephone interview with EH Walker, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol HAR-HAZ, fol. 331. Another conscientious objector wrote in to say he had never received a white feather! GS Wride to BBC, 21st May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, WRA-WYN, fol. 41.

[41]Gregory, *Last Great War*, p.89.

[42]Ibid., pp.87-95.

which were not necessarily predicted. The recording with its pauses, hesitations, non-verbal vocalisations, prosody and dialogic exchange adds a new dimension which is of particular relevance for the study of emotions in these encounters. Making use of correspondence and oral history in this way, however, raises issues about the relationship between the emotions expressed in a letter or interview many years after the event and those experienced at the time. There is substantial evidence that far from memory being a simple retrieval of stored information about an event, it is always a reconstruction, influenced by the environmental context, emotional state, and events experienced since the index event.[43] The written and spoken narratives tell us something about how men in the late 20th century recalled humiliating experiences from half a century before. Dan Todman has documented how memories and evaluations of the Great War have evolved and how over time veterans' versions of the war were reconciled with the way the war was being talked about around them.[44]

The stories they tell reveal something about the strategies they use to resolve and avoid potential shame. The extent to which this matches what they actually did at the time can never be known, although there is a close correlation between many of the white feather narratives and contemporary accounts from diaries and letters.[45] Nevertheless, the passage of time, the ageing process, subsequent life events, and the changing public portrayal of the First World War all influence how memories are reconstructed. The telling of any personal story is a performative act, in which the storyteller constructs the story to suit their purposes for the present situation.[46] Shame, however, urges concealment and silence. How many men did *not* write in to tell their white feather story? How many declined to be interviewed because of a shame they could not reveal? For those who did tell their story, there were various options for constructing the humiliation dynamic. In narrating the relationship between the giver and receiver, the storyteller has the option of emphasizing the role of victim, re-establishing the 'victim's' agency in some way (anti-shame), or referring to the perspective of witnesses to the event. Letters invite the reader to be a witness explicitly, while in recorded interviews this invitation is more implicit. The stories of those who have received white feathers tend to maximize their own agency within the

[43]See for instance, Elizabeth Loftus, 'Our changeable memories: legal and practical implications', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 4 (2003), pp.231-234.
[44]Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: A&C Black, 2014), p.187.
[45]Gullace, 'White Feathers', p.182.
[46]This approach of analysing narrative as performance is described by Riessman in Catherine Kohler Riessman, 'Analysis of personal narratives', *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, eds. J.F. Gubrium and J.A.Holstein, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

story. Stories told by those close to the recipient, emphasise the recipient's victimhood.

White Feathers for Un-enlisted Men

The letters and recordings contain stories of men who were on the edge of manhood when presented with white feathers, mature in appearance but too young to enlist. For many of these boys - at an age where self-consciousness is at its height - the shame of appearing to be adult but not in uniform was very powerful. Frederick Broome's experience is one of the most striking, because he had already been at the front and discharged, and then while on Putney Bridge was given white feathers by four girls:

> Several people had collected around the girls and was giggling and I, er, felt most uncomfortable and awfully embarrassed and said something about I had a good mind to chuck them into the Thames (…) and (I) eventually broke off the conversation, feeling very humiliated. I finished the walk across the bridge and there on the other side was the Thirty-seventh London Territorial Association of the Royal Field Artillery. I walked straight in and re-joined the army.[47]

He was still only sixteen. Seventeen-year-old Sebastian Lang was given a white feather in the street, then a sergeant came out of one of the shops, and said to me, 'Did she call you a coward?' And I said yes and I felt very indignant at the time. He says: 'Well come across the roadway to the drill hall and we'll soon prove that you are not a coward.'

In a daze he was taken to the recruiting office and sworn in.[48] In these instances the white feather seems to have achieved its purpose as a spur to recruitment. The feather is the trigger for action which resolves the liminality of adolescence. In the step towards the recruiting office the boy steps out of the humiliation triad and becomes a man. These stories of the feather prompting enlistment are reported by both middle class and working-class men. Because young men's motives for joining up were often difficult to verbalise, receiving a white feather was a significant event around which they could structure their story.[49] With years of retelling the story, the significance of the feather may have grown. It is likely that far more boys received a feather and did

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[47]Interview with Frederick Broome, Imperial War Museum [sound recording] 4039 (1964).

[48]Sebastian Lang, IWM Recording 4154, (1964).

[49]Jessica Meyer, *Men at War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain,* (London, 2009), pp. 34-36: Some expressed high minded patriotic ideals, but most spoke of specific individuals as their motivation for fighting e.g., G.R.Barlow told his aunt he volunteered 'so as to help protect you.'

not act but we do not have their accounts. We do not know if they experienced similar feelings of shame or how they managed them. An interesting way in which one or two boys reframed their gift of a feather was to see it as a recognition of manhood: 'someone obviously thought I looked old enough to be "doing my bit"… and I had a white feather to prove it! … I treasured that passport to maturity for a long time afterwards.'[50] Ironically, the humiliator was converted to an admirer in the eye of the recipient!

Men in reserved occupations reported multiple instances of humiliation. Walter Ostler was a railway clerk and exempt from service but being very tall felt conspicuous. On a crowded tramcar a woman stuck a white feather in his buttonhole, much to his 'embarrassment and discomfiture', and he 'began to think it was time to think about service.'[51] George Truphet working at Woolwich Arsenal, got so fed up with being given white feathers he joined the Navy.

> Oh, I had 'em handed to me. I had 'em handed to me in the street walking along […]. They would carry these feathers, you see, and if they saw a young fit fellow, and I was a bit of an athlete at the time, […] They would just go up and abuse you and make a scene and get everybody looking at you and this is what I couldn't take. That was a coward from that angle (laughs).[52]

Men who worked in munitions factories, shipyards, aircraft factories or coalmines, still felt the need to justify why they had not enlisted. L. Malpass, worked on the railways, only got relief from white feathers when he was given a badge with an engine on it and the inscription 'The Lines behind the Lines!'[53] The power of the white feather to induce guilt in others who knew they actually had good reason not to be in uniform was considerable. Medical students were ordered to complete their studies and knew they would be of more use qualified, but still joined the RAMC or Navy as Surgeon Probationers; Merchant Seamen also tried to enlist only to be told they were needed in their current, already dangerous, job.[54]

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[50]AG Wilkinson to BBC, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. WIB-WILfol. 89-90.
[51]Walter Ostler, IWM Interview 39 (1973).
[52]George Truphet, IWM Interview 693 (1975).
[53]AG Allen to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. ALL-ANT, fol. 263-264; L Malpass to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. MAB-MAR, fol. 150.
[54]FK Escritt to BBC, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. ELC-EYE, fol. 176; RR Powell to BBC, IWM, BBC/GW. vol.POL-PRE, fol. 166-167; Gerrard, Notes on telephone conversation with BBC Southampton Newsroom, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. GAD-GIT, fol. 228.

We have very few accounts concerning the many men who would not have been doing important war work, but those we have suggest family ties kept them at home. Perhaps for the family man, in contrast to unmarried men, masculinity was framed much more in terms of domestic responsibility rather than physical bravery, but they still felt varying degrees of guilt. George Taylor had been married for two years, had a son aged 20 months, and his wife was expecting another baby. He was employed in a City Stockbrokers and 'to be perfectly truthful was not keen to join the Forces' but on receiving lots of white feathers, 'notwithstanding my home ties I must confess that I felt terribly guilty & made up my mind to join up.'[55] The daughter of Robert Smith wrote that after her father received a feather 'he came home and cried his eyes out.' His pregnant wife had delivered the day after she heard of her brother's death at the Dardanelles, and the baby died after a few weeks. Again, the letter is written to refute the implication of cowardice: 'So you can see that it was through these circumstances and not cowardice that my father was still in civilian clothes'.[56]

From the 1950s onwards the predominant sense was that the First World War had been meaningless and futile.[57] These attitudes pervade the narratives of surviving relatives who often blamed the white feather for the deaths of their loved ones. Olive Shapley's brother Frank was out with his scout troop when a woman asked him 'What's a big chap like you out playing, you get out and fight,' and gave him a white feather. Though only seventeen, 'he went and joined the navy before he came home that night,' and was drowned at the battle of Jutland.[58] Speaking in 1986 John Dorgan tells how his brother Nicol received a white feather through the post. The family believed they knew the girl who had sent the feather. Dorgan intones his story in a very deliberate, ponderous manner:

> Nicol opened his letter and a white feather dropped out. Nothing else in that envelope, just a white feather. Remember, Nicol, was in a reserved occupation, working down the colliery, down the pit. A good living lad. He got up off that table, white faced, and he went out of the house. That was the last time I ever saw him alive. He left the house and went to the recruiting agent in Newcastle and joined the Durham Light Infantry - never once came home.[59]

[55]GF Taylor to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. TAB-THO, fol. 194.
[56]J Upjohn to BBC, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. UDA-VOS, fol. 32.
[57]Todman, *Myth and Memory*, p. 144.
[58]Olive Shapley, IWM Interview 8555 (1984).
[59]John Dorgan, IWM Interview 9253 (1986).

Nicol died in France. His parents did manage to see him when visiting their other son Tom when he was wounded. However, John never saw him again and he never came home. Years later John met the woman who the family believed had sent the white feather when she was still a girl. She visited with her husband asking if John could find a job for her son on a training scheme he ran. He made excuses for not helping them and could not even come out to meet them. He never found out why she sent the white feather. The anger and shame are still very much alive in his account despite the story having been honed by years of retelling. He is angry at the injustice, yet the family was too ashamed to confront the perpetrator. They 'just wanted to live it down.' What the relationship between Nicol and the girl had been remains a mystery. The shame has become a family affair with multiple dynamics shifting through the story. Nicol is initially shamed by the girl. His withdrawal from the family is a function of this shame, but in itself then shames the family. This shame paralysed the family who seemed unable to engage in anti-shame and so the emotional impact of the whole affair is unresolved. Giving voice to shame is immensely difficult and this may explain why the preponderance of stories reflect the minimisation of the insult or agentic anti-shaming. Listening to John Dorgan's story we are drawn in to the third point of the triad, drawn in to act as witnesses to what John solemnly calls 'the story of the white feather.'

White Feathers for Soldiers

The white feather stories that have entered into popular culture feature soldiers back from the front who may have been out of uniform because they were on leave, had been wounded, or invalided out. There seems to have been a definite preference to get into 'civvies' when on leave, which often had the very practical purpose of allowing the uniform to be cleaned. AG Lewis stayed at the Union Jack Club the first night on leave, frightened to go home because of the lice.[60] R Gorrell arrived home, had a bath and then set fire to his uniform and underwear.[61] Aware that they had nothing to be ashamed of some soldiers brushed off the incident as amusing. Others found ways to turn the tables on their humiliators, and some became overtly angry at the insult. Those who were able to rise above the insult, at least according to their report years later, recounted vague memories of the incident when asked questions about white feathers. These were often officers who presumably held positions of control and power which helped them minimise the affront. Bertram Steward was amused to be given a white feather on the Strand by 'quite a nice young lady'. William Shipway was given one by 'a little gaggle of girls' aged about 15: he accepted it and stuck it in his buttonhole. He didn't say anything to them because he did not want to embarrass

[60]AG Lewis to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, LEC-LEW, fol. 305-306.
[61]R Gorrell to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, GLA-GOW, fol. 215-216.

them![62] William Benham, in his 1973 interview, says he was on leave when 'some little girl came up and presented me with a white feather'. He laughs, then after a pause adds, 'But that was quite common'.[63] His earlier letter to the BBC in 1964 told a different version of the story. He had enlisted in 1916 but could not go to France until he was 19; he finished officer training in June 1917, and while waiting for a posting his mother took him to visit a cousin in Wales to cheer him up. He was out of uniform because he 'hated wearing the white patches of a cadet', and was shopping in Harlech when:

> a young flapper with fair hair hanging down her back came darting across the road. She pushed a white feather into my hand and at the same time asked, 'Why aren't you in khaki fighting for the country?' Before I had time to make any sort of reply the brave little lassie had darted away again; my mother was simply furious and urged me to run after the wench, but I was too late starting and she got away.[64]

His earlier written account has none of the nonchalance of his later interview. It seems a much 'thicker' description of a young man sitting uncomfortably on the boundary of filial and martial identity. If he had perceived the girl as unthreatening, as in his later report, no action would have been necessary. But at his mother's instigation he needed to engage in some form of anti-shaming. These two accounts of the same incident illustrate the vagaries of reconstructed memory. Had the passage of 10 years dimmed his recollection or was it easier to create a more detailed and nuanced narrative in writing? Counter shaming can take various forms in the white feather narratives. Stories of turning the tables with the bon mot are common. William Parry-Morris, given a white feather on his way to a recruiting office, told the woman she could 'have it back in half an hour'.[65] Thomas Painting escaped from a Prisoner of War camp and on his return to England was given a white feather by a young woman:

> 'Oh,' I said, 'I see what you're doing now. […] this white feather is because I'm chicken hearted. So, I […] showed her my paybook which was shot to pieces on the Aisne and I said, 'Well, I said, I'm a soldier.' I said, 'You can see where I've come from. I was a prisoner of war,' I said, 'and I escaped from Germany. I'm going back to the regiment now to do a little bit more'. […] The poor girl

[62] Bertram Steward, IWM Interview 9279 (1986); William Shipway, IWM Interview 10118 (1988).
[63] William Benham, IWM Interview 95 (1973).
[64] WG Benham to BBC, May 1964, IWM/GW vol BEL-BEX fol. 101.
[65] William Parry-Morris, IWM Interview 9488 (1986).

> didn't know where to put her face (laughs). I kept that white feather for a long while, but it's gone now.[66]

Unsurprisingly, written accounts tell of more eloquent responses than the oral accounts. Letters to the *Daily Mail* from relatives tell of brothers or fathers calmly showing their uniform under their greatcoat, or coming up with a witty riposte: when asked why they were not in khaki, a sailor replies, 'Because I prefer Navy blue, madam.' In his letter to the BBC, F Bicknell says he was asked why he was not in uniform and replied, 'Madam, when your breeches get as lousy as mine were, you'll probably be glad to change them for a while,' and FW Noble told them the army wouldn't accept him because he kept getting 'blotto'.[67] Others, highlighted in Gullace's article, tell of wounded men revealing their amputated limbs or lifting their shirts to show their wounds.[68] H Owen promised his accuser he would join up the next morning and suggested they shake hands on it – 'When I gave her my dummy hand to shake she nearly fainted and I am quite sure she was permanently cured'.[69] Norman Demuth was wounded and discharged. He always wore his ex-service badge, but this did not prevent him receiving 15 white feathers in all, while he was looking in shop windows, on buses, or walking along the road 'even with a limp'. His reaction was varied and fluctuated – 'At the beginning I got very, very angry. Then I got a little bit aggrieved, then I got angry again and I decided that something had got to be done about it. If they were going to be rude to me, I was going to be rude back.' His solution was to take the next feather he was given, use it to clean his pipe, and give the filthy pipe cleaner back to the woman who had given it to him. His account is richer than many of the briefer stories and reminds us that for many the repeated irritations were frustrating and disempowering.[70]

These men were able to respond assertively, calmly telling the white feather women the facts, with mixed results, from disbelief to apologies and rewards. More often, though, the soldiers' response was one of anger. The letter writers are too polite to reveal too much of what they said ('I will not mention what my reply was. It was in a new language which we spoke on the Somme'), but they speak of telling the women

[66] Thomas Painting, IWM Interview 212 (1974).
[67] Miss R. Mainwaring, *Daily Mail* 21st May 1964; Ethel Hackworth, *Daily Mail* 21st May 1964; F Bicknell to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. BIC-BLY, fol. 7; FW Noble to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. NAG-NYW, fol. 273.
[68] Gullace, 'White Feathers' pp. 200-201.
[69] H Owen to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. OAK-OXL, fol. 218.
[70] Norman Demuth, IWM Recording 4077, catalogued as 'The Great War', (1964).

what to do with their feathers – 'close your eyes and imagine you're a fantail pigeon'.[71] Sometimes the anger spilled over into violence with slaps and punches, or even pushing the feather in a woman's mouth and forcing her to swallow it.[72] Tolerating the abuse may have been easier in certain instances because others got angry on the recipient's behalf. Leonard Mundy just 'done a grin' to himself when some girls gave him a feather, but his mother's fury extracted an apology from them. Alfred Irwin's wife got angry for her wounded husband when he was given a white feather in a restaurant while on leave.[73]

Penrose Fitzgerald created the 'Order of the White Feather' as an ironic gesture of shame, but quite soon the soldiers who received them began to reappropriate the feathers by ostentatiously accepting them as a favour and putting them in their buttonhole. They often took them back to the trenches with them and even incorporated them into trench art. A common ending to a white feather story is, 'I kept that feather for years. I don't know what's become of it now.' H Jackson carried his feather 'through the worst battles of Ypres & Arras' and at the end of the war gave it to a Flemish girl. He writes wistfully, 'I often wonder if she still has it.'[74] Families sometimes failed to appreciate the double irony in this reclamation of the feather

> My parents on being told were indignant & annoyed with me for insisting on wearing it. It went back to the trenches with me for luck & I kept it till I was wounded. Was it lucky? I think it was for I came home and was in hospital during the Somme offensive, where my regiment was badly cut up. I rejoined them after the battle.[75]

George MacKenzie Samson was given a feather on the day he received the Victoria Cross and kept the two together in the same box![76] FA Riddell, on leave recovering from being wounded 8 times was given a 'beautiful chicken feather' outside East Ham Palace of Varieties. His mother kept it for years with the bullets taken from his lung.[77]

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[71]WF Lester to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. LEC-LEW, fol. 236; L Laister to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. LAB-LAZ, fol. 19.
[72]A Paine to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. PAC-PAR, fol. 75.
[73]Leonard Mundy, IWM Interview 5868 (1980); Alfred Irwin, IWM Interview 211 (1973).
[74]H Jackson to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. JAC-JIN, fol. 3-4.
[75]A Everett to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. ELC-EYE, fol. 275.
[76]Kilday and Nash *Shame and Modernity,* p.43.
[77]FA Riddell to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW. vol. RIC-RIX, fol. 116-118.

In these examples, the humiliation dynamic is turned inside out. The feather becomes a symbol of bravery, bestowed by a lady who is unconscious of her admiration, and witnessed by family or fellow soldiers. Riddell's mother kept the feather and bullets together, strange companions, one insubstantial and delicate, the other all too substantial and deadly. Both symbols to her of her son's bravery.

Conclusions

Twenty first century sensibilities may find it hard to comprehend the depth of injury felt by these men when they were accused of cowardice. Their masculinity was not only impugned, but the feminine source of the attack deprived them of the assertive response they might have given to a man. There was a range of shame management strategies employed by the men who received white feathers. Some, often the officers, seemed able to rise above the insult, portraying the white feather women as silly and non-threatening. They were able to construct a narrative in which they were confident in their role as a soldier out of uniform and stepped out of the humiliation triad altogether. Others knew they were not shirkers but still felt humiliated. They felt unjustly accused and responded with some form of action to reverse the humiliator-humiliated dyad. They exerted agency by humiliating the humiliator in some way: by showing they were wounded or finding the *mot juste* or action at just the right moment to put the girl in her place. They thus regained a sense of self-worth. The tables were turned and those around became witnesses to the restoration of dignity or even joined in the counter-shaming. Some of these stories sound almost too good to be true and may well have been ways to reconstruct an embarrassing incident in a manner that established self-efficacy. But what of men who were not soldiers? The narratives we have suggest that some underage men and men in reserved occupations managed their shame through action: by volunteering they put themselves beyond reproach. The feather achieved its purpose and it became the stimulus to joining up. But these were probably far fewer than the men who had to carry on because of family or work commitments; and what of conscientious objectors? We do not know how many men had to simply put up with abuse. They have not told their stories. Were they able to shrug it off in some way, or did they suffer silently like Nicol Dorgan who bore his shame in silence and died. Did they accept the insult and feel paralysed and helpless? We will never know how many men were unable to verbalise their shame. And missing from the archives are the stories of the feather givers themselves. Only two of 200 letters and one recording is from a white feather girl. Thyra Mitchell admitted to giving an acquaintance a feather: 'I must have been an awful person, and I really made a chump of myself'.'[78] Linda Sanderson however remained unrepentant 80 years after she gave her uncle a white feather because 'he should have enlisted and he didn't'. He reacted with 'fury'.

[78]Douglas, Marlborough, 'Grannie Admits She Branded Man a Coward', *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1964, p.11.

> Interviewer: It must have required quite a bit of courage to give your uncle a white feather.
> LS: I think we were (…), courageous.
> Interviewer: How exactly did you give him it?
> LS: I think we tied it on his coat (6 sec pause).
> Interviewer: When it was hung up, you mean?
> LS: I think it was when he was in it [half sighs, half laughs][79]

Linda Sanderson's disgust had not been tempered by changing attitudes to the war. Penrose Fitzgerald's intervention in August 1914 appealed to a dynamic in which virile men were expected to rescue vulnerable females from the impending barbarian German threat. In so doing the white feather women and girls publicly shamed men out of uniform and appealed to bystanders to be witness to the men's cowardice. The stories recounted in this paper reveal some of methods the recipients of white feathers used to manage the humiliation. Almost as soon as the campaign began public opinion turned on the women and they were seen as abusive. Contemporary accounts vilified the women as foolish but did not condemn their aim - to persuade able bodied men to enlist. White feather girls are now seen as contemptible and shameful, despite having been 'enlisted' as unofficial recruiting agents. The dominant narrative is of noble manhood shamed into sacrifice. Society, witness in the humiliation triad, vilifies white feather women, and sees them now as symbols of heartless patriotism.

[79]Linda Sanderson, IWM Interview 13654 (1993-12-21).