


SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# To stay civil during the carnage: Feeling rules for soldiers in British military memoirs from the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15)

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## Abstract

During the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), an unprecedented number of soldiers wrote “military memoirs,” firsthand accounts of the “first total war.” Next to private forms of recording experiences and keeping contact with those at home, such as letters or diaries, these memoirs were part of a larger shift in the relations between the army and civil society: soldiers wrote, at least partly, to change what non-combatants thought about them. As Britain did not see battles on home soil, war was both omnipresent and far away. Moreover, the reputation of the British armed forces was notorious, with common soldiers famously called “the scum of the earth” by Wellington. In conveying the battlefield experience to a sheltered audience, military memoirs, especially those written during or shortly after the wars, aimed at bridging the emotional divide between military and civil life, between the callous soldier and the compassionate citizen. Soldiers, too, these texts argued, were men of feeling, able to preserve a moral sense of respectability despite all the killing, blood, and trauma. Many memoirs communicated viscerally and in graphic detail about the horrors of war, both to make the traumatizing experience understandable and to show the heights of their emotional self-discipline. Bringing together the history of biography, reading, and emotions, this article argues that, by writing frankly about their horrific experiences, British soldiers fighting during the Napoleonic Wars contributed to changing civil society’s feeling rules about the army, reproaching the civilians’ contempt, and soliciting their compassion.

**Keywords:** Napoleonic Wars; Peninsular War; British army; military memoirs; reading practices; history of violence

## Introduction

“Nothing can be more spirited or impetuous than the first attack of French troops,” British ensign George Gleig (1825: 181) wrote in 1825 about his experiences with the enemy during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). “The ardour of the French is, however, admirably opposed by the coolness and undaunted deportment of Britons,” he concluded of another attack: “no man quitting his ground, but each deliberately

waiting till the word of command was given, and then discharging his piece” (Gleig 1825: 136). But such composure in war could easily slip into numbness. “I have been always struck with the great coolness of the women,” Gleig would observe. “You seldom hear a single expression of alarm escape them; indeed, they become, probably from habit, and from the example of others, to the full as indifferent to danger as their husbands” (ibid.: 92–93). The intrepidity of men and women at war was an admired characteristic, and thus to be cultivated, but its downside – the indifference and desensitization arising from too much coolness – was an occupational hazard every member of the army, including non-combatants and families, faced. Maybe it was inevitable, as another soldier, rifleman Benjamin Harris of the 95th Regiment of Foot, concluded matter-of-factly: “War is a sad blunter of the feelings of men. . . . I am afraid we longed for blood” (Harris 1848: 160).

This article discusses the emotional landscape of war and violence as narrated by military men themselves. War is among the oldest and most frequent subjects of writing – one of the earliest works in existence, Homer’s *Illiad* (eighth or seventh century BCE), centers on it – but military experience, especially from below, had long been difficult to reconstruct. With the number of ego-documents and availability of print increasing since the early modern era, however, both professional and lay interest in individual experiences with warfare grew. At the same time, with Western societies becoming less violent at close range since the emergence of modern statehood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Elias 1997 [1939]: 81–82, 356–76), the experiential gap between military people engaged in brutal, physical violence and civil society required such violence – including the feelings it engendered or by which it was animated – to be explained.

Together with the Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802), the Napoleonic Wars are sometimes called the “first total war” (Bell 2008: 7) and put an end to the Holy Roman Empire, the *ancien régime*, and (seemingly) old Europe. While the degree of novelty of these conflicts in terms of warfare is debated (Forrest 2004; Planert 2010), they led to the restructuring of the European order, mobilized a larger number of soldiers than ever before, and caused fundamental changes within the British army. The Wars also compelled an unprecedented amount of these soldiers to pick up a pen and record what it meant to fight in the most momentous conflict since the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) (James 2013: 42–67; Ramsay 2011; Tomkinson 1971: v). Contemporaries of the likes of Gleig and Harris had noted already that the wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had given British combatants an intense desire to write (Patterson 1840: 2–3), and it is estimated that, over the course of the nineteenth century, more than 100 memoirs were produced by Britons who had been in active service during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (Greig 2021: 2). These included soldiers, but also engineers, surgeons, musicians, and artists, and many manuscripts and transcripts remain(ed) unpublished. That Britain was the only major European power that did not see fighting on its own soil required instruments that bridged the gap between the violence undergone by some and the daily life of others.

Circulating as books, letters, or in the press, accounts of war experiences often claimed to offer readers unprecedented insights into what it meant to be at war. In doing so, they renegotiated “military feelings,” which included the readiness to always engage in “anxious and active service,” to bear “the fatigue and dangers” and

to have a “strong sense of duty” and a “soldier-like determination” (“Obituary” 1810: 85). But the emotionality that came with actually fighting bloody battles was more multifaceted, and contradictory, than these precepts. Just as rifleman Harris, one of a new group of rank-and-file soldiers sharing their experiences, had observed, duty and bravery were only seconds away from bloodlust and blunted feelings as well as compassion and wistfulness:

amidst all this, softer feelings occasionally filled the breasts of those gallant fellows . . . Some of the men near me suddenly recollected, as they saw the snow lying thickly in our path, that this was Christmas eve . . . and many talked of home, and scenes upon that night in other days, in Old England, shedding tears as they spoke of the relatives and friends never to be seen by them again (Harris 1848: 160–61).

In using first-person accounts, soldier-authors complicated the existing set of military feeling rules. Next to bravery, coolness, and gallantry – the mainstays of representing military men from one’s own country – soldiers were depicted as experiencing fear, enthusiasm, frenzy, loss of control, sadness, shock, indifference, and compassion, often in quick succession. Military feelings as imagined in the early nineteenth century did not preclude ardent “zeal,” “humanity,” a “character discreet, sincere, and manly,” or a “heart grateful and affectionate” (“Obituary” 1810: 85). Battles, sieges, and guerrilla warfare put such humanity to the test, but they also enabled the demonstration of supreme emotional self-discipline. Many soldiers in the Napoleonic Wars talked freely and in graphic detail about what they saw and felt. The bloody Peninsular War (1807–14), in particular, had them write frankly about the horrors of war, atrocities, pain, fear, rape, torture, wanton cruelty, and neglect. But the ubiquitous violence also allowed them to showcase the extent of both their manliness and their heart:

Thus was I left, bleeding, in the street; surrounded by the most pitiable and horrid objects that can be imagined, who were lying on the pavement, screaming and groaning, without the soothings of compassion or succour of any kind. . . . Some officers . . . described the sight of dismembered limbs, embowelled and otherwise mangled bodies, as too horrible for contemplation (Hawker 1809: 103, 108).

While such detail was unheroic, its apparently raw authenticity provided the site where feeling rules played out – those displayed by soldiers, but also those of which they were made the object: military men were both sympathetic and in need of sympathy.

By making their experiences with violence public and talking about their wartime feelings, army-men contributed to fashioning the figure of the sensitive soldier (Furneauux 2016). These narratives were part of a long-term shift that emerged during the Enlightenment (Pichichero 2017: 110–50) and continued throughout the nineteenth century. They used “heroic representations of the military men of feeling” to perform cultural and emotional work, both to change the image of the soldier and to catalyze political goals for reform, peace, or war (Furneauux 2016: 2).

In so doing, British soldiers proved their commitment not simply to a national or military community, but also to an emotional community, a group that distinguished itself through fine-tuned feelings that were not lost even through violence.

The emphasis on the soldier's complex emotionality, their humanity, and their suffering was intertwined with material shifts in the make-up of the army and cultural shifts in society's mentality. When the Duke of Wellington notoriously wrote in a letter that "We have in the service the scum of the earth as common soldiers" (Wellington 1845: 575), he voiced the general sentiment that regiments consisted of those who had nothing to lose, an opinion that was widespread but not necessarily true. That brutal treatment was used to ensure discipline within the army and navy did not help the reputation of the armed forces. However, while the British army attracted reckless daredevils or criminals, many soldiers fighting during the Napoleonic Wars were from respectable backgrounds, such as trade, even though they may have been poor (Coss 2013). Moreover, mass mobilization and volunteering, which saw the number of British soldiers rise from c. 40,000 in 1793 to c. 250,000 in 1813 (Gates 1994: 132), had individuals from higher strata of society enter the lower ranks of the primarily working-class military. While their education and social and cultural capital provided them with better access to publishing opportunities, an increasing number of rank-and-file soldiers from humble backgrounds had become sufficiently literate to write about their own experience of being at war.

This article draws on 15 published military memoirs, as well as reviews and newspaper articles. The texts were chosen because they had some success with audiences, save one (Harris 1848), which is included because it offers the view of an illiterate rank-and-file soldier.<sup>1</sup> As a qualitative analysis that both historically contextualizes autobiographical descriptions and identifies patterns of rhetoric and tropes, the article brings together the cultural history of war and violence (Horne 2019; Horodowich 2009) with studies in the history of reading, the public sphere, and life writing, on the one hand (Harari 2007, 2008; Travers 1994; Woodward and Jenkins 2018), and the history of emotions, on the other (Dodman 2018; Kuijpers and Van der Haven 2016; Langhamer et al. 2020). Still, it is not so much an investigation into experiences that I will be offering, but rather an exploration of the social uses of making war experiences public (Pahl and Kivimäki 2023: 47–55).

Autobiographical writing can serve as an ethnographic source, but it is also a historically grounded social practice (Rapport 1994), whose genre and distinct expressions are historically and culturally embedded (Bourdieu 1996; Burke and Porter 1987; Hall 1979; Mann 1982). First-person testimonies circulated in different forms, including as journals, letters, or extracts in newspapers, and certain features

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<sup>1</sup>While it is very difficult to ascertain reliable print-runs or sales figures before the twentieth century, historians of the book and of reading have been able to assemble quantified data on prices and circulation through meticulous historical and archival work (Altick 1957; 1969; St Clair 2004: 1–18). The measure for success used in this article, however, is some kind of popularity, which I consider indicated either by reviews and quotations or by an author's standing.

intrinsic to autobiographical genres, most importantly eye witnessing and factuality, contributed to their impact (Forrest et al. 2009: 7; Gilmore 2001; Kleinreesink 2017: 13–59). Military memoirs would prove to be particularly influential, however, partly because they, as Neil Ramsay has written, “responded to and enabled elements of a modern culture of war to function through the specific deployment and rhetorical construction of the soldier’s suffering” (Ramsay 2011: 3).

Military memoirs, this article argues, showcase the social and strategic uses of talking about experience and feelings. Publicizing war experiences could be an intentionally interventionist practice, by which authors aimed at changing opinions and feelings of the reading audience. Sometimes, it had the very material goal of military reform (Jones 1814: v–xvi), but more often, it was about the vaguer notion of raising awareness of what it was really like to go to war.

### Military recollections and the British fashion for “Lives”

The genre of the military memoir has a long trajectory. Reaching back to antiquity (Harari 2007), it became popular on the English book market toward the end of the seventeenth century (Ramsay 2011: 1–54). It first peaked during the Nine Years’ War (or War of the Grand Alliance, 1688–97), which saw England, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Dutch Republic fight against Louis XIV’s France, and again during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) – the latter being another major Anglo-French conflict. The English Civil Wars (1642–51) – the most catastrophic fought on the Isles before the bombing of the country during the Second World War – produced many narratives and counter-narratives (Peck 2021), but they saw no sizable output of journals or memoirs – with one notable exception being John Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding* (1666). They did, however, give rise to a variety of eyewitness accounts. The Irish Rebellion of 1641 was a popular subject, too, with each side accusing the other of excessive atrocities: “Who can remember without griefe, the generall burthen of each expression, ‘Give us bread, or else we perish?’ ... Then entered the sword . . . I could never give an accompt of 20 men escaped” (Mervyn 1642: 3).

By contrast, the major conflicts of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw hardly more than a dozen memoirs appear in print, respectively. Even first-person narratives mostly aimed at reporting events rather than personal experience and many were short, rarely more than sixty pages. *An Exact Account of the Siege of Namur* of 1695, reporting on the pivotal recapturing of the city of Namur in the Spanish Netherlands (now Belgium) from the French, who had held it since 1692, comes closest to military memoir writing. It is, at the same time, characteristic of the matter-of-fact style adopted by seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century soldier-authors: “in the night the Enemy made a Sally with about a thousand men, with an intent to disturb our Workmen, and Works, but were beaten in again with the loss of about forty men, besides what were wounded” (“Gentleman” 1695: 12). Even cases of illegitimate violence, so crucial to the narratives after 1800, were dispassionately recounted: “The *French* being enraged at their having thus missed their Aim,” the author notes, “took their revenge upon the Countrey people, plundering and burning in their march, without having even any regard to the Religious Houses” (ibid.: 15).

The increased interest in personalized war experience shortly before 1700 was part of the general rise of biographical and autobiographical writing. Originally an offshoot of history, biography became associated with intimate insights into the personal life of individuals (Hamilton 2007; Nadel 1984; Wheeler 1987). In the 1680s, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* of "great men" from Greek and Roman antiquity were newly translated, and the Greek author's summary of a biographer's task would shape the genre's trajectory. Focusing on the character of people rather than events, Plutarch aimed to write "Lives," not histories: "sometimes a Matter of less moment, an Expression, or a Jest, informs us better of their Manners, and Inclinations, than the most famous Sieges, the greatest Encampments, or the blouidiest Battels whatsoever" (Dryden 1683: 223–24).

Biography as a historical genre soon coalesced with the concurrently emerging form of spiritual autobiography, an intensely personal reckoning with God widespread in Protestant and reformed circles. Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* had his military experience inform his religious conviction: chronicling his way from swearing and fornicating sinner to Puritan preacher, Bunyan's text interpreted it as a sign of God's mercy when a comrade took the author's place during a siege and was promptly shot dead (Bunyan 1693 [1666]: 6). Military memoirs reconnected Plutarch's antagonism between the small things in a person's life that rarely matter and the bloodiest battles, placing their subjects in high-stakes predicaments, where they were wagering their lives and their souls. Yuval Noah Harari has argued that battlefield memoirs contributed to rendering combat "a quasi-mystical experience of revelation," a rebirth, or an "epiphany," unmatched by anything that happens in civil life or peacetime (Harari 2008: 1–2). Whether published or not, such texts attest to a particular interest in self-exploration and self-presentation, in making sense of a soldier's life, the battle, the killing, the danger, and the feelings that came with it: sadness, joy, enthusiasm, bloodlust, patriotism, melancholy, or desensitization.

Soldiers are a preeminent example of what Barbara Rosenwein has called an "emotional community," a group "tied together by fundamental assumptions, values, goals, feeling rules, and accepted modes of expression" (Rosenwein 2007: 24). At the same time, military memoirs were not just about group membership. The army and navy were the material and symbolic buttresses of Britain as a fiscal-military state, the force that made Britain into a European, colonial, and imperial superpower in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Brewer 1989; Graham 2015: 1–31), but its inner workings were difficult, even impossible, to grasp for outsiders. The British military fought exclusively away from home, and the forceful drafting of men for military service or voluntary enlistment could mean the difference between never moving away from one's birthplace or seeing Spain, Portugal, America, Canada, the Atlantic, Pacific, or the Chinese coast. Military memoirs forged connections with those outside, demonstrating how members of a profession navigated subjectivity that was notorious for aiming to obliterate, rather than encourage, individuality.

### From "unfeeling rigour" to humanitarian sentiments

Memoirs were thus critical for alerting the public to the fact that soldiers, too, had feelings and could suffer. That this registered, however, did not so much have to do

with the fact that battles had become bloodier, but that awareness had changed. By the mid-eighteenth century, a new culture of sensibility had emerged, foregrounding moral values expressed by feelings such as sympathy, compassion, and care, which were imagined to transcend class, race, and religion, but also time and space (Barker-Benfield 1992). While practices of charity had been an intrinsic part of civil society long before the Enlightenment (Van Dijk et al. 2017), a new ethos of mercy and philanthropy aimed not only at alleviating suffering, but also at bettering people (Cunningham and Innes 1998; Gregory 2021). In cultural and literary scholarship, the “age of sensibility” is used to describe the second half of the eighteenth century (Frye 1956: 144) to capture the broader shift in mentality, the effects of which continued to unfold in the nineteenth century (Reddy 2000). Rooted in a seventeenth-century turn toward the cultivation of manners, especially politeness, as a civic duty, the culture of sensibility understood feelings – not station, rank, or birth – as arbiters of moral truth (Barker-Benfield 1992, 2010). Facilitated by an expanding print market and genres of writing such as the novel and biography, the culture of sensibility was originally a phenomenon of the rising capitalist middle class. Britons, in particular, fashioned themselves as “polite and commercial people” (Langford 1989), equipped with a refined sensitivity that proved their cultural superiority and contributed to social cohesion. An increasing number of groups were thought able to fine-tune their feelings and thus considered worthy of compassion: peasants, workers, slaves, children, prostitutes, criminals, animals, and, by the Napoleonic Wars, military servicemen. This cultural shift has been credited with contributing to the American and the French Revolutions (Knott 2009; Pearsall 2011) and sometimes (even if controversially) considered instrumental for ushering in modern-day humanitarianism (Hunt 2007).

The memoirs of soldiers thus met with a public accustomed to both a moral discourse of feelings and a rhetoric of social reform that harnessed narratives of emotional experiences for improving society (Pichichero 2017: 110–50). While it had long been seen as an essential part of a soldier’s professional existence to endure violence, be disciplined by the harshest of measures, and be drilled for hours “with the most unfeeling rigour” (Pococke 1819: 15), in the nineteenth century people were called upon to turn their attention to “the long and slow and terrible sequel to the heroic game of war, the gathering up of the wounded” (Ludlow 1865: 218). For the French case, Christy Pichichero (2017: 4) has identified “an overarching project of the Military Enlightenment,” the proponents of which wanted to see war waged as effectively and humanely as possible. During the Crimean War (1853–56), British nurse Florence Nightingale assisted wounded soldiers. Around the same time, the Swiss Henri Dunant proposed a scheme to neutralize sanitary services and war relief (which resulted in the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863) after he saw many soldiers perishing miserably on the battlefield of Solferino in Northern Italy in 1859 (Charponnière 2022: 75–100).

Autobiographical genres, including novels that posed as memoirs, were crucial for the sensibility shift of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Narrating one’s life was not just done for an interested reading audience, however, but also for the purpose of raising awareness of oppression, exploitation, and violence (Blanco 1968; Innes and Burns 2007; Carey 2005; Laqueur 1989). Moreover, it was a technique that was woven into the fabric of charitable and philanthropic enterprises. Most, if

not all, of them required self-storying to determine if people were worthy of care and donations, and abolitionism, most prominently, relied heavily on the so-called slave narrative to make its case (Carey 2005; Sinanan 2007). Thomas Laqueur (1989: 177) has called these texts “the humanitarian narrative,” that is, stories of suffering bodies presented to the public to solicit compassion. Such biographical stories were used to petition civil stakeholders (members of the jury, trustees of orphanages, or donors), making them neither an instrument of the state nor one of protest (Miller 2019), but a way to address monied or powerful individuals (Zytaruk 1999).

Despite their claim to universalism, sympathy and humanitarianism were exclusionary practices. Their proponents could deny charity, compassion, and even humanity to the suffering if they saw fit; access to the philanthropic community came with potential conditions, whether education, respectability, or such features as race, age, or nationality. Just like most petitioners or “the deserving poor” (Hindle 2004: 38–39), soldier-authors were probably well aware that to elicit sympathy, they had to behave in a certain way: respectable, civil, and with integrity. Thus, in the many memoirs, scenes of slaughter were set next to situations through which authors demonstrated their own sensibility. They frequently talked about how much they appreciated the local architecture or art, showed interest in local customs, and recounted altruistic deeds. Through their accounts, soldiers were eager to show that they were able to maintain a certain standard even when wading through splattered corpses.

### Civility on the battlefield: Military memoirs from the Napoleonic Wars

After battlefield writing had peaked around 1700, neither the victorious Seven Years’ War (1756–63) nor the lost American Revolutionary War (1778–83), which threw Britain into a deep political and cultural crisis, produced any significant autobiographical output. In comparison, the sudden outpouring of literary self-presentations by soldiers after 1792 is even more striking. It was facilitated by rising literacy rates, mass mobilization, increased class diversity, and a publishing industry with interest in the genre (Greig 2021), but these developments can only partly explain the surge. For sure, soldiers wrote during and about the continuous colonial wars and the Crimean War (1853–56), but only with the First World War would the soldiering experience become as important to the public as it had been during the Napoleonic Wars. This was arguably the case because only these wars precipitated comparable upheavals: the end of an old world and the rise of another. Catriona Kennedy, who has traced the “centrality of warfare” to the collective experience of the time through first-person accounts, has called the “interpenetration of historical process and private existence” one of the period’s most salient features (Kennedy 2013: 3).

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are often seen as the battles that ushered in the modern European states (Bell 2008; Nipperdey 1983: 11). They produced unprecedented numbers of dead, with estimates of military and civilian casualties ranging from 3.5 to more than 6 million. In proportion to population size, this death toll is comparable to the First World War. The British army and the Royal Navy lost approximately 300,000 men in total, most of them, as was usual on battlefields, through infections, illnesses, or accidents. By comparison, during the



Seven Years' War, the major global conflict of the eighteenth century, Britain lost c. 160,000 men altogether (Speelman 2012: 524).

Reflecting this experience, military memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars were often visceral, dispensing with the lofty and detached mode of previous campaign reports, which had been mostly penned by officers (Travers 1994). "I have doomed myself to seven years' punishment," a Scottish soldier described his first taste of the drill (Pococke 1819: 14). It would only get worse: "Drenched with rain, famished with cold and hunger, ignorant when our misery [a retreat in Spain] to cease. This was the most dreadful period of my life. . . . Dreadful as our former march had been, it was from Villa Franca that the march of death may be said to have begun" (ibid. 1822: 73, 75). Authors apologized for transgressing literary tastes with such indecorous details, which, however, breathed the spirit of authenticity. That these texts were written "with only a partial knowledge of grammar, and none of the rules of composition" (Donaldson 1824: vii) was part of their appeal.

It was critical to these memoirs that their authors were reflecting not only on events, but also on feeling. Moyle Sherer (or Joseph Moyle Sherer) of the 34th Regiment of Foot noted that "the reflections, opinions, and warm (perhaps romantic) expressions of feeling I have scattered through these pages, they are such as naturally arose to me" (Sherer 1823: Preface). Scottish army-man James Donaldson, who published his memoirs in 1824, wrote that he "aimed more at giving a delineation of the feelings, manners and customs of those around me, than a description of the positions of the army" (Donaldson 1824: vi). Given his position on the battlefield, he had no idea about the larger movements of the troops; of his own feelings, however, he had first-hand knowledge (ibid. 1824: xi).

Through their individualized lens, the soldier's micro-experience offered a radical departure from the contemporaneous histories and glorious reports of army movements. That the ongoing war made it uncertain if the author would eventually return added to the grim suspense. Constant threat of death was not only part of the profession, but fused into the military memoir beyond the wars, the text implying it might become the last trace left by the soldier. Donaldson prefaced his 1824 memoir with a letter to the editor, explaining that "I have been induced to finish it more hastily than I at first intended, in consequence of expecting to leave Britain, once more, for a foreign station: whence it is doubtful whether I may ever return" (ibid. 1824: v).

One of the most striking parts of many pre- and post-Waterloo military memoirs is their graphic description of violence. Previous memoirs had been much less explicit, often only cursorily referring to cruelty, barbarity, or inhumanity. The Peninsular War in particular, however, which intertwined with the Spanish War of Independence and was famously given shape in Francisco de Goya's *Disasters of War* of 1812–15 (Figure 1), left a mark on armies and civilians alike. A particularly traumatizing experience appears to have been the debordering of fighting. The British and the French often ambushed each other or besieged, unsuccessfully and at high human cost, towns held by the enemy, which were afterward plundered and their inhabitants robbed, raped, or killed. It was unclear whether the Catholic Spanish and Portuguese allies, whose language most Britons did not speak and whose culture appeared from another time, were reliable, or if they would throw them into the gorge while pretending to lead them over a steep pass. Wolves were roaming the mountains, ready



**Figure 1.** Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), *This is worse* (*Esto es peor*), from the series “The Disasters of War” (“Los Desastres de la Guerra”), plate 37, depicting war atrocities during the Spanish War of Independence, c. 1812–15, National Library of France.

Source: © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

to feed on corpses, and with the French occupying the land, the only way out was the sea. Soldiers seem to have felt trapped in a cul-de-sac of incessant massacres coming from all sides: “it seemed to be beyond the power of man to await the enemy’s approach,” one officer wrote, “The whole country fled before him” (Fane 1820: 177–78). “Every object which presented itself on the roads and in the villages,” an artist accompanying the army noted, “were so many proofs of the terrors of war, and of the devastation that surrounded us” (Porter 1809: 253). Corpses and carcasses covered the streets, towns were burnt down, and people died of starvation before the eyes of the regiment. Some scenes were too much to describe: “I dare not tell you of the dreadful objects that lie before me as I look from my window: they are enough to make one *muse even to madness*” (ibid.: 257).

Authors distinguished between kinds of violence. The British fought – and brutally so – but non-combatant cruelty against civilians was mostly alleged to come from the enemy; it was then met with retaliation from Portuguese and Spanish allies (Daly 2013: 148–55). When a French army entered Lisbon, a soldier “met a woman with a child at her breast, . . . the appearance of the infant excited his pity, but ‘se rapellant qu’il était soldat’ [remembering he was a soldier], he pierced the two bodies with a single thrust of his sword” (Fane 1820: 8). Another author described how “the mercy of instant death was denied, and so good an opportunity of satiating

their revenge was not overlooked by the Portuguese” (Broughton 1815: 115). The locals tortured and stoned French prisoners to death, including women (*ibid.*: 115), or would attack the rear of a retreating French regiment with whatever could serve as weapons and “put to death every straggler from the main body” (Stothert 1812: 49). While one author voices his understanding for the locals’ hate, his remarks throughout the text, which characterize the Portuguese as indolent, superstitious, and tyrannical toward their wives, make it clear that he considers their vengeance the doings of people not accustomed to “polished society” (*ibid.*: 52).

The fashion for sensibility had always rested on the assumption that feelings were markers of social distinction, both domestically vis-à-vis the profligate aristocracy and the ignoble “vulgar,” and globally with regard to other nations, races, or cultures. It would thus continue to exclude (with some exceptions) a range of national, classed, and racialized others, whose ability to feel was disputed either partially or entirely, or was seen as sufficiently capable of improvement to warrant what would later be called the civilizing mission (Pernau et al. 2015). Lynn Festa (2006: 3) has argued that sentimentality itself was not simply a mode to fashion sensitive interiority, but “a response to colonial expansion”: “Even as global encounters demanded innovative methods of imagining relations to others, the sentimental text sought to anchor and preserve a continuously narrated self in a world whose local attachments were being unmoored by exposure to different cultures and peoples” (*ibid.*). It was a strategy both of finding connections and keeping a distance.

In the same vein, soldiers often heightened their refinement through contrasts with French depravity, Spanish cowardice, and Portuguese laziness (Daly 2013: 122–55). They argued that they would never succumb to the base instincts war engendered: “Nothing more revolting to the mind of civilized man can be produced,” an officer claimed about the French enemy, “than the list of horrors committed during this lamentable period” (Fane 1820: 205).

Those fighting during the Peninsular War wrote about Europeans, but in the military experience, Europe and other parts of the world were not necessarily neatly distinguished. Soldiers frequently brought their previous service during colonial wars to bear on their perceptions or, conversely, would go on to be deployed on other continents. John Blakiston, who had fought under Wellington both in India and on the Peninsula, felt out of place in South Asia, but when he returned, he felt foreign in England, too. Compared to India, everything seemed small and the people too reserved, and he continued to refer to himself and his comrades as “Indians” (Blakiston 1829, vol. 2: 125–31). In Lisbon, meanwhile, “the weather was so disagreeably hot, that I began to imagine myself again in India” (*ibid.*: 142). At the same time, however, Portugal and Spain made him feel more English again because of differences in national character: while the French enemy mingled with, and were accepted by, the civilians and “domesticate with the families where they are billeted . . . , John Bull keeps aloof from the family, and conducts himself with a degree of hauteur towards all” (*ibid.*: 262–63). People from India, Portugal, and Spain alike were not to be trusted, but considered abject and two-faced, pandering to whomever benefited them (*ibid.*: 112 and 148–51).

Before the background of both nascent nationalism and expanding imperialism, soldier-authors deployed memoirs to stake a claim to a specific British emotional community. Apart from the nation, the kingdom, and the empire, Britons were thought to share a particular sensitivity and were united by common emotional standards. What the public was supposed to feel about soldiers was at least partly predicated on what soldiers were supposed to feel while at war. Thus, while the graphic violence was meant to showcase the brutality of war, many gory parts seem to have been included to mark the contrast between the sensitive and the desensitized: “on arriving at the Plaza in the town, he [a German mercenary fighting for the French] desired me to remark a marble seat covered with the blood and brains of victims recently butchered,” a prisoner of war wrote (Blayney 1814, vol. 1: 143). The scene led him to discontinue the conversation with the enemy, “so much was I shocked with the blood-thirsty character of this monster” (ibid.: 144). While Lieutenant-General Andrew Thomas Blayney, eleventh Baron Blayney, was an Anglo-Irish peer and thus probably especially invested in emphasizing social distinction, his way of using scenes of violence to fashion himself as emotionally different was common beyond the aristocracy. William Stothert, captain with the 3rd Regiment of Foot Guards, saw that the “roads were covered with the dying and the dead . . . with mutilated cattle, with every thing, in short, that could create horror and disgust,” and, in consequence, felt “sentiments of indignation against the barbarous enemy, and of pity for the suffering and ravaged natives” (Stothert 1812: 240–41). Whatever uncivility or carnage the authors encountered, they emphasized that they would retain standards of behavior and feeling and thus remained tethered to the civilized society they had, hopefully, only temporarily left behind.

However, there was not a straightforward binary between the “‘discovery’ of difference and . . . the ‘discovery’ of sameness” (Kennedy 2013: 7). In his analysis of the bloody siege and eventual sack of the Spanish town of Badajoz by an Anglo-Portuguese army (6 April 1812), Gavin Daly (2019) has used first-person accounts to outline the contradictory sentiments that prevailed among British forces. Even though the death toll is estimated at c. 100 and thus comparably low, the three-day sack of Badajoz shocked contemporaries for the atrocities committed by British soldiers against Spanish civilians (but not the French military), partly, as Daly has argued, because of how officers wrote about it: “reactions were complex and multifaceted, but above all we find a deep moral dimension, with most officers horrified, outraged and scandalized by the human suffering they witnessed” (Daly 2019: 162–63). Officers, in particular, straddled “both ‘military’ and ‘civilian’ spheres” and in that they “never lost sight of their broader sense of morality and humanity . . . lay much of the inner struggle that British officers experienced over the sack of Badajoz” (ibid.: 173).

Important for emphasizing this ingrained civility, especially by authors from the higher ranks, was not only expressing horror at violence, but also showcasing their ability to appreciate the situation in spite of it: “The atmosphere was serene,” physician Adam Neale wrote about a French attack that happened near Peniche, Portugal, in 1808, “the sun blazed forth from a blue and silvery sky, streaked with fleecy clouds, and I could distinctly perceive every motion of the contending armies” (Neale 1809: 13).

Memoirs written in the 1820s, in particular, emphasized the author's ability to see the picturesque side of Southern Europe. With the public mood shifting toward conservatism after a brief post-Waterloo turn toward reform, the Napoleonic Wars passed into heroic historiography. Many memoirs of that period, as Neil Ramsay (2011) has shown, successfully tapped into Romantic imagery: they effectively evoked atmosphere, offered immersive descriptions of the landscape and colorful Southern European locals, or captivated readers with characters from times past. The description by surgeon Samuel Broughton (1815: 170–71) is characteristic: "Throughout the whole, indeed, of this part of our march it appeared as if we were traversing the very land of romance; extensive ravines every where intersect this mountainous country. This wild and romantic scenery is pleasingly intermingled with rich cornfields, vineyards, olive-groves, and a few woods; among which the Ebro irregularly winds its majestic course through some of the finest parts of Spain." While the march was fatiguing, a man of taste and feeling was still able to enjoy the prospect. In a similar vein, Moyle Sherer found the dress of Portuguese boatmen "very picturesque" (Sherer 1823: 3–4), and for long stretches, his recollections read like a verbatim description of the many contemporary Romantic paintings. Sherer admired Lisbon street life, the many "lemonade-sellers" and "monks and friars in the habits of their orders," the houses with "elegant balconies" lining the streets, and "hundreds of small, neat boats, with white or painted awnings" that lay at the quay (ibid.: 6). Portugal was presented as a sensual experience, full of sights, sounds, and smells at marketplaces and in churches, in convents and *castelos*. That it was all either "tasteful" or "in tawdry and offensive taste," either "truly handsome" or "ugly and ill contrived" (ibid.: 13, 11, 16), had the author connect to an imagined reading public of a particular class and learning, while also drawing distinctions between himself and his comrades. Portugal was foreign, but unlike his regimental peers, Sherer had an eye for its value. The others would lambast Lisbon for not being London: "Where I had been struck by the fine appearance of some public building, or private palace, they had only seen the heaps of dirt lying near the portals . . . with such different eyes do men look upon the same scenes" (ibid.: 15–16). He was not, Sherer aimed to show, one of the "vulgar." These inter-regimental frictions between those from humble origins (who were either conscripted by authorities, without the right of veto or had enlisted because they had nothing to lose) and the more educated were repeatedly reflected in the writing. Rifleman Harris, dictating his memoirs when working as a cobbler in the 1840s, used plainer language than others. When he looked around the mountains, he saw no sublime beauty, but rather the exertion of his comrades, the mules falling down and breaking their necks from the heavy baggage, and the "extraordinary sight afforded by the thousands of our red-coats, who were creeping like snails, and toiling up the ascent before us, their muskets slung round their necks, and clambering with both hands as they hauled themselves up" (Harris 1848: 180).

With regard to the construction of difference, it is notable, moreover, that female and non-white authors, even though both were present in the armed forces, are mostly or entirely absent from the military autobiographical tradition. A number of female soldiers had fought in the infantry and navy disguised as men. Hannah Snell, who had been first a soldier, then a sailor while wearing her husband's clothing, published her memoir in 1750, and the sailor Mary Lacy, who received a pension from

the British Admiralty, published her story in 1779. Both the French and Prussian armies of the Napoleonic Wars had women among their ranks (Hopkin 2009). By all accounts, this was the case in the British army, too, as several women wearing men's uniforms were found on the Waterloo battlefield. At least one memoirist reported on finding a woman among a dozen dead French soldiers and speculated that she must have been either the partner of one of the men or "enamoured like many an Amazon of war for its own sake" (Porter 1809: 229).<sup>2</sup> In 1847, Jane Townshend applied unsuccessfully for the Naval General Service Medal for Trafalgar as she had apparently served at the famous battle, as was attested to by her ship's captain, but nothing else is known of her (Stark 1997: 116–17). Women in military memoirs appear overwhelmingly in scenes of local life, as victims, or part of the accompanying train, taking care of food, children, the wounded, and sex, and authors rarely elaborated on the quite common occurrence of local women defending their home towns.

Thus, military memoirs presented a decidedly masculine ideal of sensibility, one that managed to reconcile violence and brutality with compassion and aesthetic appreciation.

### Adventurers, pacifists, reviewers: Reading military memoirs

Contemporaries recognized that works written by rank-and-file soldiers, rather than officers, could add different perspectives. The term "from below," even though a modern one, well describes the principle. When reviewing a Scottish soldier's *Journal*, the Westminster Review of 1827 found that the public could do with more works that "make us acquainted with the realities of a soldier's life and habits" ("Military profession" 1827: 484). Every text on the military would affect the reader, "but the degree to which our attention is invited to them depends greatly upon the condition of the party narrating" (ibid.). While officers and historians talked about fame, triumph, national pride, and huzzahs, "the private soldier's story moves quietly along, his real miseries too constantly present to admit of a delusive relish for scenes of glory" (ibid.: 485). Therefore, he was able to see that, in truth, "the 'oppressed Spaniards' disliked the presence of their 'liberators'" and he questioned if the French were really so much worse than "the thraldom and misrule of their priests and provincial oligarchies" (ibid.: 485–86). The *Journal*, the reviewer concluded, "abounds in . . . affecting descriptions, and is . . . uninterruptedly mournful" (ibid.: 486). From-below memoirs were believed to offer truthful accounts, including on the emotional states of the authors. Another book, the review wrote, saw the author "disgusted by his profession"; yet another gave insight into the "revolting and barefaced contempt for moral principles" prevalent in regimental culture (ibid.: 486, 493).

<sup>2</sup>Magdalene de Lancey, who was officially accompanying her husband, Quartermaster-General of the Army, Colonel Sir William Howe De Lancey, wrote "A Week in Waterloo," which circulated in manuscript before it was published in an abridged version in 1888 and fully in 1906. De Lancey went with her husband first to Brussels, then to the battlefield, and her account centred on nursing her husband through the eight days that he lay dying (Wiltshire 2019: 147–53).

These histories came mostly from infantrymen who experienced ground combat. “We passed . . . over the field of the dead,” the author of the *Journal* under review wrote: “Men who, in the morning, exulting, trode forth in strength . . . now lay shockingly mangled, and a prey to animals: and *I* had been an assistant in this work of death!” (Pococke 1819: 27–28). As such, these texts gave a flavor of what it meant to be, literally, an author on the ground: “The contents of the following pages (never intended for the public eye) were hastily noted down amidst the scenes attempted to be delineated,” captain Peter Hawker explained in 1810, “and the author’s sufferings from a wound have precluded him the possibility of afterwards correcting them” (Hawker 1810: preface). Hawker’s injury gave his text its final shape.

Sharing these views from below reconciled the different characteristics of military men. They were hardened enough to fight, kill, and write with an injured hand, but had still feeling enough to register the effects of violence and lament the loss of life.

Lodged at the heart of these issues was the “military contrast,” a turn of phrase used frequently to encapsulate the contradictions between military and civil life (Myrone 2005: 113–14; Mansfield 2019). First, there was the difference between war and peace, between “a gentle show’r of rain” at home and the “show’r of fire” when braving France and Spain (Bull 1799: 167). Then came a blurring of established social and national distinctions. Common soldiers fought side by side with Oxford students and the mixed-gender society of daily life turned homogenously male and militantly masculine in the barracks and on the battlefield (Brown et al. 2021). Especially drastic was the experiential contrast between those fighting the war and those being fought for. “It would be difficult to convey to the mind of an ordinary reader,” Gleig wrote, “anything like a correct notion of the state of feeling which takes possession of a man waiting for the commencement of a battle. . . . time appears to move upon leaden wings; every minute seems an hour, and every hour a day” (Gleig 1825: 50). Soldiers were then both solemn and giddy, praying and laughing at the same time; they hardly spoke, but their faces changed color, and “the limbs of the most resolute tremble, not with fear, but with anxiety” (ibid.: 50–51). To sum up: “it is a situation of higher excitement, and darker and deeper agitation, than any other in human life; nor can he be said to have felt all which man is capable of feeling who has not filled [felt] it” (ibid.: 51). Because there existed, according to Gleig, a particular emotionality of a man waiting for battle, the shared experience forged a temporary “feeling community” (Pernau 2017). It arose from experience, was bound to the specific situation, and could not be prescribed. Such a feeling community pertained not just to battlefield experience. When, in 1818, the troops were finally returning from France and were newly deployed all over the world, one author found that

It was the breaking up of a large family, which was, or ought to have been, bound together by those ties which the various scenes inseparable from the life in which they had been actors, might naturally be expected to create. It was impossible to witness, without feelings of regret, this thorough dispersion of regiments and of individuals so long known to each other; and who, in all human probability, would not be reassembled under similar circumstances of interest and excitement. (Leach 1831: 406)

Military communities consisted not just of soldiers, but while non-combatants shared parts of the military experience, and often observed the battles, looking on was not the same as participating. Even civilians fighting in places other than the battlefield did not truly have battlefield experience. With a view to the First World War, James Campbell has argued that an ideology of “combat gnosticism” emerged, “the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (Campbell 1999: 203; see also Harari 2008: 1–25). Combat gnosticism excludes all but those with combat experience from writing truthfully about war because they do not have access to “an arcane knowledge” (Campbell 1999: 204). While the rift between combatants, observers, and civilians was not as clear-cut in recollections produced a century earlier, soldiers from the Napoleonic Wars articulated too that there was a difference between knowing war and only knowing *about* war. One anonymous volunteer, quite impressed by the novel experience, told his biographer: “This was the first blood I had ever seen shed in battle; the first time the cannon had roared in my hearing charged with death. I was not yet seventeen years of age, and had not been six months from home” (Pococke 1819: 26–27). Volunteers, in particular, used their stories to talk about what it meant to find that their ideas and expectations had been misled: “oftentimes, on actual service, vanishes all that brilliancy which has won the heart and fixed the choice of so many a youth, and which appeared so gay and attractive on crowded esplanades at home” (Sherer 1823: 70). Gleig wrote that “a view of the real effects of war, contemplated in a moment of coolness and inaction, seldom has the effect of adding fuel to the valorous fire, which is supposed at all moments to burn in the breast of a soldier” (Gleig 1825: 63–64).

Providing the audience with these experiences was one thing, but how were they read? The history of reading practices (Colclough 2007; Darnton 1986; St Clair 2004) is often intertwined with political culture (Sharpe 2000: ix). Reading allows for participating in momentous processes that can only be perceived second-hand, be it political decision-making, be it soldiering. According to the moral norms of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readership (as well as of earlier ones), literature had to be edifying because people were to train particular feelings through imitation (Darnton 2009: 215–56; Zunshine 2006). Literature provided templates for behavior, either as a moral preceptor or a danger to the mind, and biography, in particular, was said to present characters for emulation.

But reading could also mean seeking out knowledge or even vicarious experience that might be found in a particular genre. Readers of military memoirs would probably not have been looking for court intrigue or domestic romance, but for thrill, heroism, or danger. Reading military memoirs would have come with a range of emotions: shock, but also national pride, gloating about exploits, sympathy for suffering, admiration for sacrifice, indignation about the inhumanity of the French, and exasperation at the uselessness of the Spanish and Portuguese allies. Readers may have winced at soldiers with amputated limbs frying in the heat without “a drop of water to moisten their clammy lips” or gasped at how the author, in pitch-black nights, had to find his way back home and “stumbled over many an unburied cor[p]se of man and horse” (Neale 1809: 19–20). As many memoirs dwelled on repetitive scenes, readers may have even experienced how one slowly grew accustomed to



violence and fatigue: “Why should I detain the reader longer on our march? – every day of which was like the day that was past” (Pococke 1819: 87). Reading connected the audience with the author’s world through emotions, which could range from quiet, intellectual appreciation to passionate identification.

Such a reading experience was predicated both on the events in question and the presentation. A cumulative review of three military memoirs quoted George Gleig’s work at length, and the reviewer thought his reflections on pre-battle feelings an excellent example of his engaging style. A soldier, the reviewer wrote, “sees human nature under modifications so multifarious and grotesque . . . the horrible and the ludicrous, the savage and the pathetic” (“Military memoirs” 1826: 407). But to convey this, authors must have “the good taste to shun affectation, and to tell his tale in plain intelligible language” (ibid.). Gleig’s book seemed true to the life and the feelings of its author, precisely because it was written a decade after the wars when the author “looks back in a calm and contemplative mood to the scenes of violent excitement; . . . He compels himself to record not only what he did but what he felt” (ibid.: 408). When initially felt, the reviewer implied, feelings were just an occurrence, but when described, they could become effective because narratives and literary style transformed them into objects of aesthetic appreciation.

Gleig was an accomplished author and his war memoirs ran to several editions (Ramsay 2011: 120–39). They were among the most widely known military memoirs and had purportedly been read by Wellington himself, but Gleig was not representative of the rank-and-file experience. An Oxford student before enlisting with Wellington’s army at a low rank, he went on to fight in America (1812–15). When the book, originally a series of magazine articles, was published, Gleig had already taken holy orders to later become a bishop. Despite the many claims in their prefaces that the memoirs’ appeal lay in them offering unembellished stories from average soldiers, Gleig’s success was probably due to his tasteful, genteel style.

Military memoirs seem to have been read mostly by men from different backgrounds, who probably perused them for heroic deeds and adventures – at least according to some soldiers who had been readers first (Kennedy 2013: 20–22). James Donaldson, a Glaswegian from a “respectable family,” had become first a sailor, then a soldier, inspired by “novels, romances and fairy tales.” However, “by this means, my ideas of life were warped from reality” (Donaldson 1824: 1–2). *Robinson Crusoe* made him (and not only him – see Nicol 1822: 4) join the navy, but he came to regret his decision immensely: “What might I not have been had I not taken the fatal step, that cut me off from that society which would have been congenial to my mind!” (Donaldson 1824: ix). Other memoirists consciously saw real life through the lens of literature, showcasing their cultural resources: “both officers and soldiers had all the appearance of those desperate banditti described in romances; their long moustachios, their faces blackened by smoke and gunpowder, and their bloody and torn cloaths, giving to their whole appearance a degree of indescribable ferocity” (Blayney 1814: 38). Tellingly, one contender for the first European novel, Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (two parts, 1605 and 1615), is a narrative about a reader taking books too seriously and trying to become a knight. Soldier-authors spurred to join the army by adventure novels connected to a tradition of quixotic reading, but were also frank enough about the truth of the matter, lest others come to share the regret that many of them had come to feel.

A strand of vocal pacifists likewise took issue with the dissembling display of glory. As they saw military memoirs as potent arguments in their anti-war cause, they published the most graphic excerpts to fix the reader's "attention upon the real character of war – of war divested of its pomp and pageantry, and pourtrayed in its true colours, the most dreadful of social evils" ("Evils of war" 1827: 483). Civilians were slaughtered and women raped by soldiers uninhibited through drink; starved mothers bore their children on the wayside and "the sick and wounded that we had been still enabled to drag with us in the waggons, were now left to perish in the snow. The road was one line of bloody footmarks" (ibid.: 487). Parts of the *Journal* of a Scottish soldier, discussed in the Westminster Review above, would be reprinted in the American pacifist journal *Advocate of Peace* in 1843 as a testimony for this "unchristian and barbarous custom" that was war ("Soldier's experience" 1843: 76).

Publishing military memoirs and reading them bridged the gap between two communities, the military and the civil, reintegrating soldier-authors by making the British nation also a community of particular sensitive individuals: "only where he was recognised as the military author was the soldier able to gain currency as a fellow citizen," Neil Ramsay has argued, "his story functioned as a legitimate component in a national commemoration of war" (Ramsay 2011: 3). Reading, even if done alone in a specific situation, was not an individual, disconnected practice. People read from a particular position in society, with men arguably sympathizing differently with soldiers than women. A particular reading group were reviewers. As specialized, or even professional, readers, they perused books with a view to cast judgment and present them to the audience, differing from the general reader, but still writing while aware of them, to impact how and what others read. Reviews at the time often included extensive quotes that easily outweighed the reviewer's text snippets, thereby directing what readers would come to know about a book if they did not read it themselves. Given the large number of books and the convention of extensive quoting – reviews regularly amounted to 10 pages or more (e.g., "Broughton's *Letters*" 1817: 149–64) – it is likely that a larger number of readers consumed books by proxy through reviews. At the time, the audience read not only individually at home, but also as members of literary societies or circles. If they read reviews instead of books, they engaged in yet another form of collective reading.

Barbara Rosenwein has developed her "emotional communities" from the concept of "textual communities" (Rosenwein 2007: 24–25). Originally, the term described groups that form around one authoritative text (accepting it either by reading or, if illiterate, through socialization), but has since been expanded to include communities where texts, published or in manuscript, are shared or co-authored (Stock 1983: 88–204). While not a textual community in any strict sense, authors of military memoirs constituted a community through a particular kind of textual production. Moreover, through their texts, soldiers aimed to create an emotional community, in which civilians participated by reading – an emotional community that bridged divides of class, profession, geography, and, most crucially, experience.

## Conclusion

Military memoirs transformed war experience into stories. They addressed the audience not just with pure fact, but through style, tropes, modes, pacing, and themes, and such literary properties of a work are indicators of a period's mentality (Darnton 1986; Paige 2008). Written overwhelmingly by white Protestant men to project a particular masculine idea of war and soldiery, military memoirs came about in specific historical situations, often catalyzed both by the impression that war had acquired a new quality and by authors leveraging, or gaining access, to well-established as well as novel aesthetic forms and cultural repertoires. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars seemed a never-ending conflict, engulfing wide parts of Europe and beyond, but they also contributed to a profound reshuffling of the social order and to increased social mobility. In order to express experiences both of violence and social change, soldiers tapped into the British tradition of biographical writing and the languages of sensibility and Romanticism.

Military memoirs worked in different directions. On the one hand, they reassured a group about their own professional ethos, morals, and feelings; on the other, they were rhetorical devices addressing an audience at home. Soldiers, they argued, were not corrupted by war or by spending too much time with the Portuguese and Spanish, these Catholic, superstitious, colorful, exotic people, who were allies but still seemed very foreign. The memoirs often showed their authors moving more or less involuntarily between different worlds, acknowledging difference, but eventually arguing for national similarity: they claimed that, through carnage and slaughter, amid streets strewn with putrefying corpses and heaps of disembowelled horses, they remained men of feeling and taste.

Memoirs were successful beyond the military realm. As sympathy required an individual to have the right kinds of feelings and to display them in an appropriate manner, autobiography was a literary performance of feelings by the author, inviting the reader to feel for and with them. Memoir writing was a social practice and part of social interaction, and, also, a form that was intrinsic to social movements more broadly: petitioners, slaves, and workers all made use of forms of writing and speaking about their experiences. While early eighteenth-century memoirists had used the form mainly to make sense of their actions, soldiers writing during the Napoleonic Wars made sense of their feelings – feelings that were, arguably, the most extreme imaginable, partly because of their encounter with shifting feeling rules: fear of death, horror, shock, and violence met with a normative framework requiring Britons to be civil, sensitive, and refined. Before this background, sharing their experiences enabled soldiers to intervene in the emotional regimes of both civil society and the army, trying to affect what they were supposed to feel and, in turn, what the public was supposed to feel about them. Autobiographical writing provided readers with perspectives from the micro-level and thus alternate views to both official representations of the military and abstract feeling rules. They did not dispute that a soldier was expected to “Do your duty” (Pococke 1819: 27), but they presented the emotional landscape of war as more variegated and conflicted than could be captured by emotional precepts. Such subtle shifts turned dutiful soldiers, who just accepted that war came with “a firm determined torpor, bordering on insensibility” (ibid.: 27), into emotionally complex human beings. The battlefield

became a space of experience where they developed what we have called “emotional connoisseurship” in the introduction to this special issue (p. 8), a refined ability to understand the nuances of emotional experiences. Such change in feeling rules and emotion knowledge was a collaborative process, involving not just the authors, but also the readers. It was through a combination of sharing experiences and reading about them that military memoirs wormed their way into the social consciousness. Existing perceptions of feelings and their rules did not change abruptly, but shifted through the continuous exchanges between military men and civil society.

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