

When Immortals Die:

Excavating the Emotional Impact of the Death of Prophets in Nineteenth-Century England

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the emotional aftermath of the death of two leaders of millenarian movements in nineteenth-century England who claimed immortality until their dying breath: John Nichols Thom (1799–1838) and Mary Ann Girling (1827–1886). How did communities that defined themselves by their belief in the imminent apocalypse and were infused by notions of death as a purely symbolic rite, cope with the death of their immortal prophet? By focusing on the impact of bereavement, this article analyses the role emotions played in society’s marginalisation of millenarian cults. It applies a close reading of these communities’ material, emotional, and spiritual practices by incorporating written sources—press articles, court records—to engage with shifting perceptions and norms about what constituted ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ emotions during times of loss in Victorian England by honing in on communities already known for their ‘heightened emotionality’. As such, it suggests an answer to the question at its centre: How and why did reports on these communities’ emotional practices determine or reinforce their status as fringe phenomena?

KEYWORDS: Victorian England; cult; death; resurrection; apocalypse

Death and religion form a natural, intimate bond as research subjects but have rarely been studied in tandem by historians of nineteenth-century England.¹ The Victorian philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) argued that the origins of religion could be traced to people’s veneration of their dead ancestors appearing as

ghosts: death as a trigger for religiosity in which, according to Spencer, the afterlife took centre stage.² It is an idea that reverberates, for example, in Pat Jalland's exploration of the Victorian conceptions of heaven which, from the 1850s, was increasingly seen as the place where one could reunite with loved ones.³ In his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, John Corrigan conclusively states that emotions 'associated with mourning are important in the history of religion' and that 'mourning and weeping have been a key part of Christian mysticism'.⁴ This article explores the intersection of the history of religion and the history of emotion by focusing on the emotional impact of the death of John Thom (1799–1838) and Mary Ann Girling (1827–1886), two charismatic leaders in nineteenth-century England, who each led a small millenarian movement toward the imminent end times. The authority of the 'Canterbury Messiah' and the New Forest 'God-mother', and therefore also the cohesion of their devoted groups, depended to a large extent on their self-proclaimed divinity and immortality.

In Victorian England, death was not only considered a trigger for religious feelings, it was also understood as one of life's central mysteries: the churches in England taught that death opened a portal to the eternal, a portal through which the living in the nineteenth century attempted to communicate with the dead. Simultaneously, historians have argued—with mixed results—that the nineteenth century was also the age in which death became secularised and religious authority in the domain of death was contested by the rise of science. Philippe Ariès, for example, illustrated this by showing how physicians and doctors replaced priests and ministers at the deathbed. For Ariès, such changes in Victorian England show an emphasis that shifted from the religious sphere to matters of, for instance, physical pain relief, sentimental expressions of bereavement, and keeping the dead alive in *memento mori*.⁵ Ariès went so far as to launch the notion of a culture of death.

Since its conception, such a 'Victorian culture of death' has been called a 'myth of our [i.e. historians] own making'.⁶ Victorians, nonetheless, displayed a particular and multifarious

interest in the practices and emotions surrounding death and fostered a lasting pre-occupation with the concept of immortality. Throughout the nineteenth century, attempts were made to lift the veil and rationalise the unknown that came after death. Conceptions of the afterlife, in general, and the immortal nature of the soul, in particular, became part of wider culture. By the last quarter of the century, Victorians were attempting to communicate with the deceased through spirit photography, table rapping, or ectoplasm readings.⁷ Death could be overcome in immortality; a material culture comprised death-masks, hair lockets and post-mortem photography developed in support of that idea. Such artefacts of affection ensured the deceased had a continuing role in the living world and 'had the capacity to reconstruct the body into an ideal form that could live beyond death.'⁸ Deborah Lutz remarked that 'behind many Victorian narratives of personal relic collecting is the wish that the relic, rather than being a *memento mori*, might mark the continued existence of the body to which it once belonged.'⁹ In other words: these treasured relics made possible the preservation and remembrance of the dead, and as symbols of immortality kept them alive in the hearts and minds of those who went on living.

As became clear early into the nineteenth century, resurrection and immortality did not solely exist as symbols. Nor were the scientific and the mystical mutually exclusive, as Ariès and others argued, but often found each other in an idiosyncratic blend. Roy Porter described how on 17 January 1803 the body of the hanged murderer Thomas Forster was displayed in an anatomy theatre in London. Forster's corpse was subjected to a 'spark of life': a jolt of electricity that, so demonstrated the experimental scientist Giovanni Aldini, gave 'an appearance of re-animation' manifested in spectacular muscle contractions.¹⁰ The idea that dying could be reversible was made acceptable in the second half of the eighteenth century as Elizabeth Hurren has shown by, for example, the introduction of resuscitation techniques. By 1796, the London Humane Society claimed more than two thousand successful resuscitations.¹¹ If, as Porter maintains, such techniques and experiments began to erode

the mysterious, mystical aspects that had characterised death in the previous centuries, they reinforced the absolute boundary between life and death. The focus here on small religious groups in nineteenth-century England elucidates environments in which attitudes toward dying, death and immortality were still infused with expressions of ‘heightened emotionality’ and an awe-inducing *mysterium tremendum*.¹² They are environments in which the boundary between the material and the immaterial worlds remained problematic and blurred. Unlike William Blake in the laconic quote above, for the people discussed in this article, the emotional stakes were high.

End Times

‘I am the resurrection and the life.’¹³

On Thursday 31 May 1838 an immortal died in the woods outside Canterbury, in the south-east of England. Earlier that morning, John Thom—a large, bearded prophet who referred to himself as the Messiah and the ‘Saviour of the poor’—had declared to his followers that Judgment Day had come, and that the end times were upon the world.¹⁴ His apocalyptic message had inspired William Wills, one of his followers, to write a suitably ominous and cryptic warning on the door of the local tithe barn: ‘If you new ho was on earth your harts Wod turn / But dont Wate to late / They how R / O that great day of gugdement is close at hand’.¹⁵ Between the trees, the prophet’s programme of radical political, economic, and spiritual reform, for which he insisted a revolution was essential, came to a violent end when his self-styled band of revolutionaries clashed with an army regiment. Thom’s programme was interlinked with this idea and with its realisation after which the Millennium would arrive and Christ would rule the world. For the Canterbury Messiah, that meant a personal divine mandate and life everlasting. Death could not have been more untimely.

Almost fifty years later, on 18 September 1886, another immortal passed away between different trees, this time on

the edge of the New Forest in southern England. Mary Ann Girling succumbed to womb cancer within the confines of her millenarian community, dressed in white robes and with a wreath of white flowers in her hair. She began her prophetic career in the 1860s, first within the cradle of the Primitive Methodists, but by the end of the decade she established an independent prayer group with an increasingly independent and unorthodox programme that placed the end times at the core of their belief system. In the New Forest, she transformed her loose group into an enclave commune of roughly a hundred-and-fifty people living in tents and barns built around the apocalyptic doctrine of their leader and her own proclaimed divinity. Girling, like Thom, identified with Christ and went to some length to prove she was in fact the Lord's reincarnation. When Alice Read, an acolyte who nursed her 'through her final illness', asked Girling why she could not see the prophet's stigmata—the wounds of Christ crucified—she was told she did not believe in Girling hard enough.¹⁶ She judged not only herself to be immune to dying but also promoted her converts, who clung to their prophet through several hardships, to the status of an immortal. As one convert told the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* a few months before Girling's death: 'If I did not feel sure I was going to live forever [...] I would leave the camp tomorrow.'¹⁷ For Girling's community, as was the case with Thom's, her death was an unexpected and momentous event.

Though in the last few decades much has been written about the Victorians and their religions, those studies have largely concentrated on the 'mainstream religions', most notably the Anglican Church and, to an extent, Catholicism. Smaller religious movements are usually mentioned only in passing in these studies, much like the Victorians themselves condemned these groups to the outskirts of their society. Similarly, although in recent years the history of emotions has begun to incorporate the field of religion, it has concentrated almost exclusively on emotions within 'mainstream' denominations, leaving smaller nonconformist and dissenting groups by the wayside.¹⁸ This

is all the more surprising because, more so than members of established religions, acolytes of deviant religious movements in the margins of Christianity were, by their own communities as well as by English society at large, considered to live in a perpetual state of 'heightened emotionality' and were presented in scathing articles that, one could argue, are characterised by a sensationalist tone.

Monique Scheer defines emotions as the intersection 'where bodily capacities and cultural requirements meet': they are acts within a social context.¹⁹ By honing in on the emotional practices of Thom's and Girling's followers as they were described in these accounts and attempting to disentangle them, this article aims to show how and why these practices were fitted into a normative framework that contributed to the marginalisation of the practitioners because it situated them outside what was considered culturally appropriate. At the same time, it suggests that a close reading of the emotional practices—from emotional embodiment (tears, facial expressions) to materiality in the form of objects such as relics, rituals, and pastimes that convey an emotional state—and the ways in which they were represented allows us to adjust our historiographical focus on the people.²⁰ This approach is particularly relevant in the context of millenarian movements coping with the death of their prophet, where members frequently displayed uncontrolled and involuntary emotions such as trances and convulsive fits that were perceived as inappropriate behaviour.²¹

The depiction of millenarians as overly emotional predates the Victorian age. There existed in England a millenarian tradition that had persisted in the shadow of the Reformation and flourished, for example, during the Civil Wars and the Interregnum in the seventeenth century, 'often within larger movements like the Quakers, the Ranters, the Diggers, the Fifth Monarchists and the Muggletonians'.²² In the eighteenth century, not coincidentally considered an age of 'religious enthusiasm', apocalyptic religion was a sensation banished by contemporary analysts to the realm of mania and emotional weakness of the will. Colourful millenarians continued to appear throughout the

early nineteenth century. Signs of the impending end times could be read everywhere in a rapidly changing England. The Magic Methodists, for example, lived in constant hopeful expectation of the apocalypse.²³ The followers of Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), who had prophesied her own pregnancy with Christ, held onto her dead body in the belief that she would rise again. Edward Irving's acolytes in London saw their leader as the very embodiment of the end times.²⁴ Richard Brothers (1757–1824) fashioned himself the prophet of British Israelism.

In the 1830s, John Thom entered the city of Canterbury and immediately created an atmosphere of 'considerable curiosity and interest', not in the least because of his perceived likeness to Christ.²⁵ He deduced the time was ripe for Judgment Day after witnessing the corruption and nepotism that thrived in the political and ecclesiastical structures of Canterbury.²⁶ His revolutionary plans were met with enthusiasm from his supporters, but the social establishment expressed 'fear for the success which [Thom] met with.'²⁷ Thom was increasingly painted a maniac in the newspapers, ruling in a 'reign of terror' over his followers by, for instance, threatening with eternal hellfire if they left him.²⁸ Mary Ann Girling had begun to prophesise the apocalypse in 1869, after Christ himself had appeared to her and announced his Second Coming.²⁹ From then on, she was convinced that the 'present generation [...] was the last before the second coming of Christ, and her voice would be the last echo to call sinners to repentance.'³⁰ Her sermons were attended by converts and large groups of curious sceptics alike. In the nineteenth century, prophets and the supernatural could still inspire emotional reactions among all strata of English society.

Simultaneously, with what Robert Cecil has called the millenarian revival in the nineteenth century, displays of 'heightened emotionality' inspired by religious zeal were generally considered abnormal social behaviour and, therefore, increasingly defined in psychopathological and sociological terms. Whereas 'religious emotion' was labelled an imbalance of the humours since the Middle Ages, the Restoration had

opened the door for English clergymen to deploy an arsenal of medical vocabulary to condemn what was in their eyes an exuberant, deviant display of enthusiasm. As religious 'enthusiasm' became the subject of secularisation and medicalisation in the eighteenth century, diagnoses of 'shattered nerves', hypochondria or hysteria were increasingly institutionalised, for example in the 'mad laws' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³¹ Religious enthusiasts became 'hysterics' or 'maniacs', their prophets 'frauds' or 'lunatics' who could pose a risk to the social order.³²

Consequently, religious emotions were sometimes depicted as highly contagious and as necessitating a reaction from the authorities. Religious revivals characterised by their emotional spontaneity, for example, were in the nineteenth century routinely talked of in terms of disease.³³ Richard Brothers, referenced by John Thom as an inspiration, was arrested for treason and interned in a workhouse, a prison, and finally a mental asylum.³⁴ Thom himself was sentenced in court to several years in the Maidstone asylum and painted by his opponents as instilling radical excitement into his followers, in particular women, who were said to pass their radicalism on to their husbands. On the battlefield, tucked into Thom's shirt, a follower found a few pages of the Book of Revelation, earmarked at chapter 6, verse 17: 'For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?' The *Times*, when reporting this anecdote, stressed how the man had not been able to read the verse: 'his wife read the book to him every night, and said that some such person as [Thom] was spoken of in it'.³⁵

Girling's preaching incited ecstasies and moments of intense joy but also convulsions that could be equally infectious. In December 1872 a Girlingite testified to the police that he 'had been affected in the arms and legs, which had moved voluntarily about from side to side, in all directions, without any exercise of his will'.³⁶ Another anecdote in which a man 'having attended a [Girlingite] meeting with its usual accompaniment, was seized that same evening, while serving at dinner with a fit

of the “Shakes”; and these proving uncontrollable he had to be forcibly removed.³⁷ Girling herself was, in the 1870s, frequently threatened with the asylum though she was never admitted.³⁸ Her followers, whose ecstasies and public displays of emotion drew large crowds, were frequently called deluded and impressionable. By framing such spontaneous manifestations of religious enthusiasm—both of the spiritual leader and of their followers—as expressions of emotional weakness or illness, sceptics attempted to discredit the millenarian movements in the eyes of Victorian society.

Often complementary to the pathological and medical interpretations of religious expression, there persisted a socio-economic analysis of people’s idolatrous devotion, defining millenarian movements as ‘cults of the poor’. Girling’s appeal, for instance, was often explained as the hope she offered to the economic victims of industrialisation.³⁹ The prophets’ hold over their followers was understood in a similar light: Thom’s acolytes were routinely reduced to ‘spiritual ignorance’ and ‘barbaric credulity’; Girling’s converts were generally suspected to be desperate, of weak mind, and vulnerable to her alleged mesmeric powers.⁴⁰ Their followers thus continued to be characterised as a faceless group of superstitious, hopeless radicals. ‘There is a sense in which any religion which places great emphasis on the after-life is the Chiliasm of the defeated and the hopeless,’ one historian concluded.⁴¹ This categorisation of the feelings of prophets and their followers as indicators of superstition, hysteria, or socioeconomic deprivation contributed to their enduring historiographical marginalisation. By illuminating their inner lives this article aims to offer a critical alternative to that characterisation.

The intense affectations, at once individual and shared, together with the belief in the impending end of the world, served to maintain a sense of group cohesion centred around the charismatic leader who functioned as the embodiment of their followers’ sensory, spiritual, and emotional experiences. What happened when that spiritual and social core died? What emotional ripples were caused by Thom’s and Girling’s death, and how were they

manifested and perceived? There were in nineteenth-century England ever-shifting prescriptions for and polemics over what constituted an appropriate or indecent (display of) emotion, particularly in the context of dying and death. Dying became a social event, and mourning became a social ritual in the Victorian age: one was expected to pay respect to the dead in public and to be seen as respectable; at the same time, excessive public display of grief could be condemned as selfish vanity.⁴²

The subject of death in the nineteenth century has an extensive historical literature. Social and cultural historians have examined Victorian mortality rates, the careers of undertakers and coroners, mourning and commemorative practices, changing funeral rites, and the emergence of a 'good death'.⁴³ They have focused on spaces where grief for loved ones lost was expressed. The church, the cemetery, the funeral parlour, and the deathbed are particularly emotionally charged settings—the image of Victoria's family gathered around the queen's deathbed in Osborne House on 22 January 1901, was etched into the memories of her contemporaries.⁴⁴ Literary scholars have analysed Victorian emotions regarding death and loss through the prism of fiction, focusing on poems of death like Tennyson's *In memoriam* or Rossetti's *After death*, elegiac prose or, for example, on the sentimental deaths—particularly of children—in Dickens' work.⁴⁵

Others have analysed attitudes toward death by examining the Victorians' material culture. Deborah Lutz, for example, has shown how matter and spirit were inextricably linked in Victorian dealings with death. Recent scholarship has shed light on how death affected the living by looking at mourning dresses and pendants, iconography and headstone designs, mortal remains, and the wide range of mementos, from brooches to spirit photographs: 'death-infused things', charged with emotion.⁴⁶ These works have engaged with the emotions that shaped Victorians' attitudes toward death. Most recently, for example, the study of the nineteenth-century fear of premature burial has shown just how varied these emotions could be.⁴⁷

Two fundamental aspects of the faith system of Thom's and Girling's communities and, by extension, fundamental to

the cohesion of the community, make the study of emotions and death within millenarian movements especially relevant because they imply an intensely ambiguous relationship with death. The apocalyptic doctrine at the root of the programmes of both prophets which situated their communities' time as the final days before the imminent Judgment Day, meant that the followers lived in an 'everyday atmosphere of expectation that at any moment the transcendent would break into time'; in other words, they organised their lives in concordance with a constant anticipation of the end times, a divine intervention to 'bring the present evil world system to an end and to replace it with an ideal one', and, consequently, of their salvation.⁴⁸ As one of Girling's followers explained to the *Weekly Hampshire Independent*: 'We never know what we shall do in the morrow; we only live from one moment to another.'⁴⁹ The second pillar of both communities' faith systems was their belief in the divine mandate and immortality of their respective prophets.

The shared pre-occupation with the end times and the belief in their leader's immortality meant that a study of the emotional resonance of the death of the two self-proclaimed Messiahs provides a particularly effective way into how Victorians applied normative definitions of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' emotions to controversial small religious movements. At the same time, this window offers a view to the emotional life of cult communities by choosing as its focus a momentous, disruptive moment in their existence. How did fringe groups react to the death of someone resembling, as Deborah Lutz wrote in reference to medieval cults of the saints, 'one's lover, family member or best friend'; someone, moreover, who they believed to the last moment to have been incapable of dying?⁵⁰

The remainder of this article focuses on three themes to answer this question. First, it compares Thom's and Girling's funerals; second, it looks at the issue of immortality and the afterlife, and finally it briefly examines both prophets' legacies and the implications of Victorian normative definitions of religious emotion.

Funerals

After Thom's death in 1838, his body (and that of the others who had died in the battle) was transported to The Red Lion, a nearby inn, for the coronary. There it was put on display: a 'hideous spectacle' that would astonish 'the vulgar people,' according to one journalist.⁵¹ Many of his followers came to the inn to mourn by Thom's corpse, to touch it in hope for miracles, and to acquire a much-coveted memento. 'As he lay dead,' the journalist observed with some disdain, 'his blouse was torn up; that his followers might carry away the shreds as relics.' This manner of paying respect was not limited to Thom's close community: according to the owner of the inn, almost twenty thousand people flocked to the dead prophet in the few days during which his corpse was stalled out. When his clothes had been distributed 'with equal pious ardour by the thousands of his admirers,' his hair and beard followed, in early nineteenth-century fashion, to go into 'the hands of the Canterbury jewellers to fashion into brooches, &c.'⁵² His body became the site to acquire a relic not only for his millenarian followers but for the masses. When the coronary report was made, '[o]ne of the medical men carried home with him in his hat [Thom's] heart. It was a remarkably large heart [...] It was preserved and subsequently deposited in the medical museum of the Kent and Canterbury Hospital,' a medical curiosity as much as a symbol of the intense emotional turmoil its owner had caused to Canterbury and the surrounding villages.⁵³ The 'pious ardour' was not limited to Thom's body. Trees in the area where he was shot were stripped of their bark, and 'even the blood-stained earth in the several spots where he and his followers fell has been scraped up and carried off as sacred mementos.'⁵⁴

With the 20,000 people flocking to Thom's body in mind, the authorities took measures to avoid similar excitement at the funeral. The magistrate present during the coronary, Dr. Poore, expressed his hope in these words:

if any [of the visitors] attended the funeral of the unfortunate individuals [...] they would conduct themselves in a manner

in accordance both with their own responsible position and the very precarious one in which their fellows in misfortune still stood.⁵⁵

The other men who had fallen in the battle were buried first, with considerable press attention for the emotional devastation of the local communities. One reporter noted: 'I never before saw so many real mourners [...] Indeed, I may truly say, that all present were stricken with unaffected sorrow. It seemed like a public mourning for some national calamity.'⁵⁶ Even the reverend could not hold back his tears. Women were described as 'sad spectacles of trembling and wretchedness', whose grief was 'so infectious, that even old and hardened men completely gave way under it, and retired from the scene with eyes red with weeping'. By that stage the atmosphere was so overwhelming that the reporter himself had to leave the scene, 'praying that I might never suffer such a sight again'. Yet, at the same time, articles like this interpreted the emotions in the churchyard as expressions of fanaticism by 'simple, deluded' people, with 'afflictions excessive'.⁵⁷

Important for the aim of this article is the way in which reports contrasted the 'agony of grief' at the funeral of Thom's followers with the lack of mourning during the prophet's own funeral. In fact, there were no grievers present at all—'no child, no wife, no relative' the *York Herald* stressed—when Thom was committed 'unwept and unhonoured to his kindred dust', in an unmarked grave only four feet deep.⁵⁸ The absence of people 'sobbing as if their heart was breaking' was deliberate: the authorities ensured that Thom's funeral was unceremonious and done quickly to avoid an escalation to 'national calamity'. Thom's female followers in particular were targeted with this funerary strategy. They were depicted as especially vulnerable to Thom's personal magnetism persons who had born their 'contagious afflictions' into their households.⁵⁹ The legal inquiry report following the battle served as an 'especial warning to the female part of the families, who instead of encouraging and exciting their husbands [...] to acts of violence and breaches in this affair, would, as better became them, suggest to them the propriety

of abstaining from any species of outrage.⁶⁰ The same reverend who earlier wept with the crowds as he buried the dead now refused Thom's coffin—'of the plainest description'—be taken into the church, choosing instead to read his final words outside before the 'earth was shovelled into the grave'.

The lack of public grief, orchestrated by the authorities, was also an effective strategy to show Thom's fleeting significance as a prophetic leader and revolutionary hero, and as such served to further marginalise his followers as well as discourage them from continuing their leader's revolutionary, millenarian cause. A few days after the funeral, *Bell's Weekly Messenger* concluded that the prophet's demise had an immediate positive effect, namely that

the most violent feuds have been long raging in this district between members of the same family on account of their belief in, and their disbelief of Thom's superhuman qualities [...] All these feelings of hatred and animosity will be terminated by the death of their author, and these villages, it is to be hoped, will soon settle again into that fixed state of tranquillity and order which is so necessary to the enjoyment of domestic happiness.⁶¹

With the prophet's departure, quiet peace could at last return to the local communities.

Mary Ann Girling's funeral in the village of Hordle was an altogether more respectable event. When she died in 1886, she did so away from the public eye. Her cult made the arrangements. An anecdote from 19 September, the day after Girling's death, retold in 1937 by the Reverend W. T. Andress, illustrates the profound sense of loss felt by the Girlingites:

"Who is the coffin for?" asked the timber merchant, a late dear friend and deacon of mine, as he booked the order one morning. "For Mother," was the terse reply. "What!" exclaimed my astonished friend, in an enquiring voice. But no more would the utterly dejected Shaker say.⁶²

Despite the devastation of her followers, Girling was buried on 22 September. A procession from the cult's encampment to the

churchyard was led by the community's gardener and a cart pulled by the Girlingites' old donkey, on which the coffin was placed. Though upon leaving the line of mourners was made of Girling's followers, people came out of their cottages and joined in, and visitors 'who had secured conveyances in time to see the funeral' followed. When the procession passed railway works, the labourers paused and took their hats off, 'every one behaving with great propriety'.⁶³

Newspapers reporting on the funeral of the 'high priestess of the Shaker community' frequently used the words 'propriety', 'very reverend behaviour', and 'respect', and indeed the attendants adhered to the traditional decorum of the late nineteenth century.⁶⁴ In a letter to the *Standard*, the officiating Reverend Frederick Fisher commented that 'it is characteristic that they wish the funeral to be as quiet and orderly as possible, using the Church of England office without deviation, and only asking that they may appear in their garb of white instead of black'.⁶⁵ This aura of respectability made it possible that, unlike during Thom's funeral, the church and the cemetery were crowded to witness Girling's funeral: 'The Church was filled with spectators, every seat being occupied,' the *Evening Standard* reported, 'Many persons could only find standing room, and there was a much larger number outside.'⁶⁶ Most accounts estimated a crowd of five hundred spectators.

Of the Girlingites' emotional 'exuberance', so often the focus of derisive reports and public opinion on the cult community in previous years, nothing was seen during the burial service, an event marked by overall restraint. They were 'much affected, but there was no noise nor extravagance of any kind,' newspapers mentioned not without surprise, 'The women were remarkably staid and quiet.' The coffin was carried by male Girlingites to the plot of land, 'a sign and symbol of the social and cultural enrichment of plebeian life which had recently taken place' in the apocalyptic cult.⁶⁷ After it was committed to the earth, they threw in bouquets of white flowers and left, 'quietly and dejectedly'. Girling's grave was the last in a line of twelve in the churchyard: eleven cult members had preceded her; eleven times before

did the community gather there to grieve. The twelfth grave was similar in style to the first eleven: a simple mound of grass with a tree instead of a headstone. These graves symbolised the Girlingites' opinion of death as a temporary obstacle. They were not meant as sites of memory, but were instead 'rather a contribution to the earth's fertility and beauty.'⁶⁸ The feelings of solidarity and sympathy from people outside the cult that emerge from these accounts are surprising. After the ceremony villagers and spectators comforted and accompanied the remarkably composed Girlingites back to their encampment, where they retreated into their seclusion to mourn in private. Journalists concluded this was the end of the cult as a whole.

Hans-Georg Gadamer defined the burial of the dead as 'perhaps the fundamental phenomena of being human.' In his analysis, burying the deceased is a way to hold on to what has been taken from us, to deal with 'life that has spiralled out of the order of nature.'⁶⁹ Yet in both Thom's and Girling's case, the funeral seemingly marked the anti-climactic end of both millenarian movements. Both burials were represented in newspapers as simultaneously signifying the death of the communities. In Girling's case, her funeral was even elevated to a metonymic symbol for the funeral of a pre-modernity that had outstayed its welcome in modern England.⁷⁰ The devotion of followers to their leader was not questioned when Thom and Girling were still alive. Thom's acolytes 'would have followed him to death through such a series of observances as only a lunatic could have imposed.'⁷¹ But what now that Thom was buried? Neither Girling nor her Girlingites had made arrangements 'to ensure carrying on her work' when she died, because their belief in 'the nigh-at-hand Second Coming' made it unnecessary to.⁷² But what now that Girling was buried? As convincingly argued by Leon Festinger, the failure of prophecy did not always result in the disbanding of the cult.⁷³ But as we will see below, it did evoke feelings of existential anxiety. Did the funeral of the community's charismatic leader also inevitably signify the interment of their acolytes' belief system, which after all hinged on the notion of immortality and, consequently, the end of the community itself?

After Life

In the immediate aftermath of the battle of Bossenden Wood in 1838, Sarah Culver, Thom's alleged lover, rushed to the site of the battlefield carrying water. As instructed by Thom on the morning before the battle, 'if he should faint on his journey, and word should be brought to her that the Lord had recalled him, not to believe it, but to hasten to him and to pour some water into his mouth and wash his face, and that he should revive again, for that his father had allotted him much to do on earth ere he should be recalled to heaven.'⁷⁴ Sarah washed Thom's face as onlookers awaited his resurrection 'in the belief that she could bring him back to life', in vain.⁷⁵ The unmarked grave in which he was buried further complicated any attempt at resurrection.

In fact, neither Thom's nor Girling's interment heralded the immediate end of their movements. In the eyes of their followers, both had died a martyr's death. Thom had 'looked death in the face' a hero. His unceremonious funeral had the purpose of discouraging a post-mortem escalation of his martyrdom. A Girlingite acolyte had said as much of his prophet in the poem he solemnly recited at the funeral: 'And by her dreams and visions over-wrought / She died a martyr to the creed she taught.'⁷⁶ This indicates that death was not the end, not for the prophets' followers, nor for the prophets themselves.

Thom and Girling both entertained specific notions of the transformative nature of death, which became structural components of their millenarian doctrines. Both considered themselves an incarnation of the Messiah and had the charismata, divine attributes, to prove it. Thom had even fashioned himself explicitly in the likeness of Christ: when he entered Canterbury in 1832 onlookers immediately compared his appearance to 'the paintings of Christ by Guido and Carlo Dolce.'⁷⁷ In the months before his death, he increased his display of supernatural powers to attest to his immortality which often led to scenes of wild excitement. He showed his followers his stigmata, 'marks in his hands and side, as veritable tokens of his identity', an element

referred to repeatedly by followers when attempting to explain why they supported Thom's cause.⁷⁸ Thom claimed to be 2,000-years-old and to have arrived 'into the world in a cloud, and I shall leave it in a cloud.'⁷⁹ To prove his invulnerability, and by extension the invulnerability of his companions, he had allegedly shot himself in the chest and had remained unscathed. On the morning before the battle, he administered the sacrament to his supporters by distributing bread and water, and promised them that '[w]hosoever will save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall be saved' and live forever.⁸⁰

Girling, too, claimed personal Messiahship. The miraculous healing from a severe illness by Christ in 1858, so she claimed, had made her immune to death. From the 1860s onwards she increasingly identified with Christ himself. It is worth quoting here from her only theological tract, *The Close of the Dispensation*, written in 1882, in which she defines her own divinity:

It is the same life that once was crucified in the male form. The marks of this crucified body that went up to Heaven in His body came down from Heaven in the celestial body, even in her body, and in due time reappeared through her body, thus proving that it is the same life of Jesus, now the God-mother and Saviour from the Lord God of Heaven [...] His first appearing was in the form of a man. He now appears as a woman, yet it is the same life, the same God, the same Jesus Christ.

She signed the tract with 'Jesus First and Last (Mary Ann Girling)'.⁸¹ Though, according to Geoffrey Rowell, arguments in favour of (physical) immortality had lost most of their power by the 1870s, the Girlingites believed in their cult's immunity to death.⁸² One testimony of a former Girlingite in 1937, when asked about his devotion, repeatedly mentioned the cult leader saying: 'I shall never die.'⁸³

Death fulfilled a primarily symbolic role in Girling's community. The act of 'dying' was a pivotal aspect of the community's spontaneous and intensely emotional conversion ritual. When

'touched by faith' during prayer meetings, women and men fell to the floor in ecstasy, 'writhing in agony' while repenting for their sins until they got up again purified, 'reborn', and immune to physical death.⁸⁴ When Judgment Day came, Girling assured her disciples, they would ascend to heaven without dying, having already died to the world during their conversion.⁸⁵ Defining conversion in terms of death and rebirth did not only transform those terms into symbolic, cathartic acts; it also served to create a tight-knit community. Every aspirant-Girlingite went through the same process of ecstasy and spiritual repentance to enter Girling's 'communion of saints'—their own individual apocalyptic moment—and by doing so achieved immortality of their own, their fates bound to each other and to their prophet.

Historian of emotions Barbara Rosenwein's analytical concept of 'emotional community', which she developed in her work on the early Middle Ages, can effectively be applied to Thom's and Girling's followers to frame the collective emotional experiences as a set of behaviours, rituals and practices that helped constitute and sustain a cohesive community of believers.⁸⁶ 'Feeling together' was essential to forge a bond and a social hierarchy and, therefore, certain emotional energies were intended to be aspired to collectively, for example through religious ritual.⁸⁷ Simultaneously, that sense of community reinforced feelings of separateness, a 'bunker mentality' toward the outer world, as Janet Rose described the emotional cohesion of the Girlingite community.⁸⁸ Instead of disbanding immediately after their prophet's mortal remains were committed to the earth, followers of Thom and Girling retreated into the comfort of their community.

Notions of immortality were deeply ingrained in millenarian movements. Death was not the end but a divination, a metamorphosis: Thom's followers were promised eternal life if they put their faith in him; Girling's converts were immortal like her. She derived charismatic authority from the absence of death, proudly claiming that her community had 'not troubled the undertaker'.⁸⁹ When the first of the Girlingites died, it deeply shocked the community, driving Girling to assure her followers

that those who died had ‘insufficient faith.’ That assertion was only hesitantly accepted by the community; the eleven followers who died in the 1870s were much-respected members and some of the earliest converts.⁹⁰ The emotional restraint shown by Girling’s followers at the funeral was not so much a symbol of ‘social and cultural enrichment of plebeian life’ but pointed to a sustained and even re-invigorated faith in their immortal prophet that manifested itself soon after the funeral.

The gates of death opened both ways: when an immortal died, they could return. While the men were crying for their fallen prophet on the battlefield of Bossenden Wood in 1838, Sarah Culver’s ‘eyes were undimmed with a tear,’ so wrote an eyewitness journalist. ‘She even persisted that on this day Thoms [sic] would rise again.’⁹¹ In the days before Thom’s interment, reporters flocked to the Kentish countryside. ‘It was evident upon listening to the observations of the peasantry,’ so wrote one, ‘especially of the females, that the men who have been shot are regarded by them as martyrs, while their leader [Thom] was considered and is venerated as a species of divinity. The rumour amongst them is, that “he is to rise again on Sunday”.’⁹² Thom’s followers held out hope for his resurrection on the third day after his interment in spite of the unceremonious funeral and the unmarked grave. The persistence of frenetic rumours even resulted in the deployment of armed forces in Hernhill churchyard.⁹³ Millenarianism, both in Thom’s and in Girling’s incarnation, was based on strong feelings of wanting something to happen, of the hopeful desire for divine intervention. Those feelings persisted after their leaders’ deaths. The death of a millenarian prophet could evoke popular curiosity.⁹⁴

The Girlingite theological doctrine of salvation hinged on the idea of resurrection as much as on that of symbolical death, as Janet Rose has pointed out.⁹⁵ Girling, when alive, was revered by her followers as the embodiment of a resurrected Christ. It was not strange, therefore, that they held on to their feelings of hopefulness after she was buried. On the third day after Girling’s interment, ‘in the deeper gloom of the Hordle churchyard,’ almost a hundred cult-members gathered at their

prophet's grave, which was covered in flowers. 'Here and there, a particularly lyrical account by the writer Laurence Housman went, 'against the knees of their elders, stood young children, in a vague wonderment, and beginning to be tired of this strange vigil.'⁹⁶ But this gathering was not a vigil. The atmosphere was overwhelmingly not one of solemnity and shared grief, but of Promethean expectation. As during the funeral service three days before, women and children were dressed in white and men wore a white band on their arm. Some had instruments ready for when the moment came. Many were praying; prayer turned to song. Housman's sentimentalised account of these hours before dawn makes effective use of detail to evoke the sincere hopes of the crowd. Housman describes a child asking one of the elders: 'Will she come up through the ground, our Mother? Won't the flowers be in the way?', after which the flowers were 'respectfully' removed.

But, like Thom, Girling did not rise at dawn. When hope turned to impatience then doubt, one of the older Girlingites suddenly exclaimed: 'She has come! She is risen. But we were too weak of faith to see it.' Then the mood shifted again. 'But I did see it,' Housman has another cult member affirm, 'Yes, I saw her rise!' Others concurred: they had indeed seen Girling arise and go up to heaven. Only when several followers had succeeded at putting their doubts to rest did they all return to the community houses, some to contemplate the ascension of their immortal prophet, but most now reached the last of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: they collected the remains of their few possessions and broke with the cult.

Memory and Legacy

The dead are not easily dismissed; they remain among us. In these last few paragraphs I turn to Thom's and Girling's legacies, shaped to a large extent, but not exclusively, by the newspaper articles, court records, and interviews that depicted their emotional practices as hallmarks of credulity, deprivation, despair, and lunacy, often to harrowing effect. In these third-person accounts, the millenarians' emotions were used as discursive instruments to

condemn them to the fringes of Victorian society. This article approached the emotional lives of these groups ‘from the outside inward’. Its central argument was that through a close reading of the representations of emotions—in this case with particular focus on the impact of death on Thom’s and Girling’s tight-knit communities—we can move beyond the nineteenth-century normative narratives of marginalisation and pathology that have reduced the community members to caricaturised stereotypes and approach them as individuals with complex inner lives and mixed emotions: not defeated but aspiring, not hopeless but hopeful. However alien and eccentric the beliefs of millenarians may seem to us, their hopes and fears are not.

When a messianic prophet dies and does not return from the afterlife, an existential crisis is born which permeates the feelings of each individual member of the millenarian movement. Where once there may have been unwavering faith, now there exists doubt. Movements can fall prey to succession crises and power struggles, and sometimes collapse. J. Gordon Melton defined a first-generation cult movement when under the control of its founder as an ‘extension of the founder’s ideas, dreams, and emotional make-up’.⁹⁷ As the volume to which Melton wrote the introduction shows through a list of contemporary case studies, however, nonconformist religious groups that wither at the death of their central charismatic figure are exceptions: ‘When a new religion dies, it usually has nothing to do with the demise of its founder; it is from lack of response of the public to the founder’s ideas or the incompetence of the founder in organizing the followers into a strong group’ and arranging their succession.⁹⁸

Thom’s and Girling’s followers believed in their prophet’s message of the imminent end times and their claims of divine immortality. As a consequence, long-term planning was deemed unnecessary, and succession arrangements were pointless. As shown, the decisive moment that sealed the fate of both movements was not the death of their leader, but their failure to rise from the grave and confirm their immortality. The impression that all Thom’s and Girling’s followers gave up their devotion is

to a large degree a consequence of the newspapers' depicting this as the definitive end of both phenomena. But few glimpses suggest otherwise. After Thom remained dead, a few followers nonetheless maintained their belief in his return for some time and were ridiculed for it in print. The subsequent imprisonment and detention to Van Diemen's Land of several of Thom's co-conspirators further discouraged former followers to express their sentiments.⁹⁹ Others found guilty were made to sign a paper declaring their shame and sorrow 'at their impious delusion.'¹⁰⁰ Such public, publicised shaming had the power to silence people.

But emotional memories formed in the following years, and they were occasionally recorded. Some of those memories were sad, particularly when they concerned the demise of the sense of community. Accounts of the period after Girling's failed resurrection showed her acolytes' disappointment. 'From the lips of two old women who in their girlhood days had been ardent disciples of Mrs. Girling,' T. A. Wylie told about his interviewees forty years after Girling's death, came 'expressions of grief for the break up of their community life.'¹⁰¹ In most of the glimpses of the afterlife of both millenarian movements, former followers sound as if they made pace with their past. Those few followers who were interviewed often described romanticised and sentimentalised memories. 'You could not always understand what he said,' one of Thom's supporters recalled when being interviewed after the funeral in 1838, 'but when you did it was beautiful, and wonderful, and powerful, just like his eyes, and then his voice was so sweet.'¹⁰²

In 1937, the Reverend W. T. Address recorded a churchyard visitor's mixed emotions—a melancholic hope, or hopeful melancholy—when he visited the graves of the prophet's followers years earlier: 'Some have died in the flower of their youth, unable to endure the hardships of camp life; others in mature age, and now, with the prophetess herself, are quietly waiting for that Second Coming they so fondly hoped to have seen with mortal eyes.'¹⁰³ Several Girlingites continued to convene in the months after their prophet's interment and the official

disbanding of the community in 1886. Though they rejected the cult's rule of celibacy and married, often to each other, some of them nonetheless saw themselves as remaining loyal to Girling and the spirit of her faith system.¹⁰⁴ A few ex-Girlingite households clustered near their old community centre, and some of them took in single former followers as lodgers, indicating that, contrary to the self-assuredness with which newspapers reported the end of the Girlingite community, several of them retained a sense of fellowship. Laurence Housman, whose lasting infatuation with Girling brought him to Hordle twenty-six years after the funeral, visited several of the 'survivors'. One woman in particular, who in 1912 still lived in the cult's meeting house, caught his attention. Her memories of Girling were positive. 'She was quite happy,' Housman wrote, 'and she spoke of the "Mother" as if she were yet alive.' The unnamed Girlingite told him that 'she [Girling] taught us to have joy.'¹⁰⁵ Another former follower, Lizzie Robinson, defended Girling 'publicly and privately' until her death in 1941. When interviewed in 1937, she started to smile and 'jumped out of her arm-chair and commenced to show how they danced when moved by "the Holy Spirit".'¹⁰⁶ Affection did not die with the immortal leaders.

In these reflective journalistic pieces, often conducted several years after the deaths of the controversial prophets, more nuanced accounts emerge of the ways in which their followers mourned and processed loss. Time seemingly healed the wounds of bereavement, but also seemed to allow for a more mellow reporting on the ex-millenarians. People remembered Thom, or Girling, with mixed emotions, which only become observable upon a close reading of the many reports of 'heightened emotions' and 'afflictive manias'. Thom's and Girling's followers were not the hysterical fanatics portrayed in contemporary accounts, nor were their emotional legacies entirely negative.

One final legacy is manifested in the ways Thom and Girling have had a lasting effect on the imagination. As they spoke to the imagination of their followers, so too did they speak to that of writers and poets. Both appear as fictionalised characters in various works—or fictional characters were

read as representations of either Thom or Girling—some of which were published during the prophets' lifetimes, as in the case of M. B. Major's *The man of mystery* (1833) or William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834), both featuring a character strongly resembling John Thom. Three years after Girling's death, in 1889, George Meredith published *Jump to glory Jane* in the *Universal Review*, a satire of the 'sensations of Mrs. Girling and her followers [...] with her blood at the spin with activity, warranted her feeling of exaltation.'¹⁰⁷ Published as a volume in 1892, it was now accompanied by 'forty-four designs invented, drawn, and written by Laurence Housman.' Even in the twenty-first century, Thom and Girling continue to spark the imagination and live on in memory. In 2012, several descendants of Thom's followers were brought together in the Red Lion inn where Thom's body had awaited the coronary, and in 2011 a caricatured portrait of Girling featured on the poster of a build-your-own-cult workshop in London. In these imaginative artefacts of emotional practices—commemorative acts, images, literature, poetry, folk tales—both prophets achieved a different kind of immortality.¹⁰⁸

Notes

1. Those studies that have looked at nineteenth-century conceptions of death and afterlife from within the framework of English religions have largely focused on the theological discussions concerned with mortality and immortality. See, for instance, Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: a Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

2. Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1876–1896), in particular chapter 8 to 17.

3. Pat Jalland, "Victorian Death and its Decline: 1850–1918," in *Death in England: an Illustrated History*, eds. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 230–55: 235–37.

4. James Corrigan, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. James Corrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

5. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: the Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: Allen Lane, 1981), 559–601.

6. Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief, and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.

7. Two monographs in the 1980s sparked an extensive literature on English spiritualism, see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989).

8. Rachel Harmeyer, “Objects of immortality. Hairwork and mourning in Victorian visual culture,” *Art of death & dying symposium proceedings*, 33–49: 35.

9. Deborah Lutz, “The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2011), 127–42: 130.

10. Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (Norton: London, 2003), 215–16.

11. Elizabeth Hurren, “The Dangerous Dead: Dissecting the Criminal Corpse,” *The Lancet* 382, no. 9889 (2013), 302–03. Cited in Floris Tomasini, *Remembering and Disremembering the Dead. Posthumous Punishment, Harm and Redemption over Time* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 11.

12. The term was introduced by Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: an Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Humphrey Milford, 1923), chapter 4.

13. Rev. Hanley at John Thom’s funeral, cited in *York Herald*, 9 June 1838, 2.

14. [John Thom], *The Lion* 6 (1834), 2.

15. Cited in *Times*, 6 June 1838.

16. Arthur T. Lloyd, “The Shakers of Hordle,” *Hampshire Magazine*, November 1961: 12.

17. *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 24 April 1886.

18. For an excellent general introduction to the history of emotions in religion, see Corrigan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*.

19. Monique Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach

to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012), 193–220: 202; 219.

20. The term ‘emotional practices’ is borrowed from Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?”. For an examination of the importance of including media studies in the history of emotions in modernity, see Frank Bösch and Manuel Borutta, eds., *Die Massen bewegen: Medien und Emotionen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2006).

21. A detailed account of Girlingite ecstasy can be found in Janet K. Rose, “‘The Woman Who Claimed to be Christ’: the Millennial Belief of Mary Ann Girling and her Disciples, 1860–1886” (PhD diss., University of Oxford), 125–127.

22. On the millenarian tradition in seventeenth-century England, see, for instance, Richard W. Cogley, “Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism,” *Religion* 17, no. 4 (1987), 379–96. On religious ‘enthusiasm’ in the age of Enlightenment, see Lionel Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm. Prophecy and Religious Experience in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Clarke Garrett, “Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 1 (1984), 67–81.

23. John Tomlinson, “Magic Methodists and Their Influence on the Early Primitive Methodist Movement,” in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church, Studies in Church History* (Suffolk: Boydell, 2005), 392–93.

24. Arnold A. Dallimore, *The Life of Edward Irving: Fore-Runner of the Charismatic Movement* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 161.

25. Canterbury Cathedral Archives [hereafter CCA], P.C.K324, “The poll of the freemen and electors entitled to vote for members to represent the city of Canterbury in Parliament,” 5.

26. CCA, U184. “Courtenay,” 6–7.

27. Anon., *An Essay on the Character of Sir William Courtenay, Knight of Malta, and the Causes of his Influence over the Public Mind* (Canterbury, 1833), 24.

28. See, for instance, *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838.

29. William Oxley, *Modern Messiahs and Wonder Workers* (London: Trübner, 1889), 79.

30. *The Spiritualist*, 7 January 1876.

31. Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm*, 217–18.

32. Robert Cecil, *Cults in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1988). Cecil attributes this millenarian revival to the 'perennial interest in the mystery of life and death': 4.

33. Daniel Ritchie, "The 1859 Revival and its Enemies: Opposition to Religious Revivalism within Ulster Presbyterianism," *Irish Historical Studies* 40, no. 157 (2016), 66–91.

34. On Brothers, see, for example, J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), chapter 4. The creation of a pathology of emotions considered inappropriate, especially within the context of religious experience, coincided with an institutionalisation of mental illness that took the form of mental asylums across England. See on the medicalisation of religious experience in the eighteenth century, for instance Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm*, 217–19. See on the rise of mental asylums in Victorian Britain: Kathleen Jones, *Asylums and After: a Revised History of the Mental Health Services from the Early Eighteenth Century to the 1990s* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993). By the end of the eighteenth century England's most well-known asylum, Bedlam in London, attracted on average 100,000 tourists a year.

35. *Times*, 9 June 1838.

36. *Times*, 17 December 1872.

37. Hampshire Record Office [hereafter HRO], 26M79/P24.

38. Her wealthiest follower, Julia Wood, however, was less fortunate. She was apprehended for displaying her 'religious enthusiasm'. See Rose, "The Woman Who Claimed to be Christ", 85–7.

39. Janet Rose stressed the social diversity of Girling's following. Cult members ranged from labourers to landowners. Rose, "The Woman Who Claimed to be Christ", chapter 7.

40. For a socioeconomic analysis of Thom's appeal, see, for example: F. Liardet, *State of the Peasantry in the County of Kent* (London, 1968; first published 1839). For Girling as a mesmerist, see, for example, HRO, 26M79/P254/3, T. A. Wylie, "New Forest Shakers." Paper, Milford-on-Sea Society, 8 February 1926, 20–36: 20.

41. Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 381. Thompson mentions Thom's revolt in passing, referring to it as the 'last millenarian peasants' revolt': 800–01.

42. On dying as a social event, see Margarete Holubetz, "Death-Bed Scenes in Victorian Fiction," *English Studies* 67, no. 1 (1986), 13–34: 34. Some of Holubetz' claims have since been nuanced by historians of

emotions, most notably: ‘... it is not the Victorian family scene of adieu we find ridiculous, but the attempt to glorify it with exalted emotions; it is not the encounter with death we shrink from, but the morbid ways of rendering it harmless by sentimental palliation, which deprive it of its true mystery.’ (34)

43. Mary Riso, *The Narrative of the Good Death. The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

44. On Victorian cemeteries, see, for instance, John Morley, *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971). For an early, in-depth analysis of Victorian commemorative practices see James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972).

45. For a comprehensive introduction to the conception of death in Victorian literature, see Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

46. Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: a Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 51.

47. Brian Parsons, “Premature Burial and the Undertakers,” in *When is Death? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and its Timings*, ed. Shane McCorrestine (London: Palgrave, 2017), 69–85.

48. Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy. The Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45; Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 167.

49. *Weekly Hampshire Independent*, 19 December 1874.

50. Lutz, *Relics*, 30.

51. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 4 June 1838, 6.

52. *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 11 June 1838, 3. Shrewd entrepreneurs quickly made use of the wider sensational and emotional impact of Thom’s death, and the fervour with which people wanted to acquire a relic. People were paying money for what was allegedly a strand of Thom’s hair, as they had while he was still alive: ‘The inhabitants of Boughton always idolised [Thom],’ so wrote *The Morning Post* after Thom’s death, ‘and a laughable joke was played off against them whilst he was at the tread-mill at Barming Heath. [...] One of the prisoners, knowing the credulity of the good people of Boughton, on his liberation purchased a quantity of hair at a hairdresser’s, which he actually

sold at a good profit to the inhabitants of Boughton as the hair of the immortal Knight of Malta, and they were not undeceived till some time afterwards.' *The Morning Post*, 9 June 1838.

53. Anon., *A Canterbury Tale of Fifty Years Ago: the Extraordinary Career of Sir William Courtenay, Alias John Nichols Thom* (Canterbury: H. J. Goulden, [1888]), 19–20.

54. Anon., *A Canterbury Tale*, 20.

55. *Times*, 5 June 1838.

56. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

57. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

58. *York Herald*, 9 June 1838, 2.

59. CCA, P183 U3/235/3/2. "The Book of Hernhill, from 1816-", un-paginated.

60. *The Morning Post*, 5 June 1838, 6.

61. *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 11 June 1838, 3.

62. HRO, 26M79/P23, Rev. W.T. Address, "True history of 'Mother' Girling, the mystery woman of the New Forest Shakers," 1937, 2.

63. *London Evening Standard*, 23 September 1886, 3.

64. HRO, 26M79/P23, 6.

65. HRO, 26M79/P23, 18.

66. *London Evening Standard*, 23 September 1886, 3.

67. James Walvin, "Dust to Dust: Celebrations of Death in Victorian England," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 9, no. 3 (1982), 353–71: 370.

68. HRO, 26M79/P23, 6.

69. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 75.

70. This notion of the funeral of premodernity was still present in recent studies of Girling. See, for instance, Philip Hoare, *England's Lost Eden. Adventures in a Victorian Utopia* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005).

71. CCA, U3/235/28/1/2, un-paginated.

72. HRO, 26M79/P254/3, Wylie, "New Forest Shakers": 34.

73. Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails: a Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

74. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

75. Anon. *A Canterbury Tale*, 25.

76. HRO, 26M79/P23, 18.

77. CCA, U43. Margaret Endersby, “‘Sir William Courtenay’ and the Light that His Career Throws on Canterbury and the Surrounding District in the 1830s,” un-paginated.

78. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

79. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

80. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

81. Mary Ann Girling, *The Close of the Dispensation* (Hordle, 1882), 4.

82. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 4. For an in-depth analysis of the Girlingites’ faith system, see Rose, “‘The Woman Who Claimed to be Christ’”, in particular chapter 4.

83. *Hampshire Advertiser*, 4 December 1937.

84. For one eye-witness account of these conversions, see Charles Maurice Davies, *Unorthodox London* (London, 1875), 90–95. The Girlingite conversion process resembled the emotional tableaux during religious revivals, see David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

85. Oxley, *Modern Messiahs*, 84. If the sins proved particularly damaging and numerous, the spiritual ‘dying’ could take on spectacular, horrific forms. During a prayer meeting in 1873, a man fell to the floor and did not arise for more than an hour, grimacing and suffering in front of the crowd. ‘Some die very hard, in great agony,’ a Girlingite explained. As the man was older than most converts, his sins must be more plentiful and therefore take longer to purify. His ‘dying’ shocked members of the audience. Cited in Lawrence Popplewell, *Moving the Shakers* (Bournemouth: Melledgen Press, 1993), un-paginated.

86. Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

87. For an analysis of religious rituals as instrumental to emotional group constructions, see Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 79–100; J. David Knottnerus, “Religion, Ritual, and Collective Emotion,” in *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology*, eds. Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 312–25.

88. Rose, “‘The Woman Who Claimed to be Christ’”, 267.

89. *Spiritualist*, 7 January 1876.

90. Rose, “‘The Woman Who claimed to be Christ’”, 264–65.

91. *Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette*, 9 June 1838, 4.

92. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 4 June 1838, 6.

93. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4; *Home Counties Magazine*, 5 (1903), 42.

94. Laborie traces examples of the excited expectations throughout English post-Reformation history. In the afternoon of 25 May 1708, for instance, more than 20,000 people descended upon Bunhill Fields to watch the millenarian Thomas Emes rise from the dead. Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm*, 105.

95. Rose, "The Woman Who claimed to be Christ", 180–82.

96. Laurence Housman, "The Watchers," *The Listener*, 22 September 1949, 42, no. 1078, 479.

97. J. Gordon Melton, "Introduction," in *When Prophets Die: the Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 8.

98. Melton, "Introduction," 9.

99. CCA, U3/235/28/1/1. "List of Persons Engaged in the Courtenay Riot."

100. CCA, U3/235/28/1/2.

101. HRO, 26M79/P254/3, Wylie, "New Forest Shakers": 34.

102. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 9 June 1838, 4.

103. HRO, 26M79/P23, Address, "True history of 'Mother' Girling," 7–8.

104. Housman, "The Watchers," 492; *Standard*, 20 September 1886; *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 23 October 1886; *Lymington Chronicle*, 7 June 1886; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 September 1886; *Times*, 2 October 1886; *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 9 October 1886.

105. Housman, "The Watchers," 497–98.

106. Lloyd, "The Shakers," 18.

107. St. Barbe Museum, Lymington. LMGLM: 2011.24. Letter from George Meredith to Harry Quilter, 10 September 1889.

108. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 135.

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