FEAR
A Cultural History

JOANNA BOURKE
A few years ago, with fear and trembling, I set out to confront the most pervasive emotion of modern society: fear. Politically, the world was a different place then. It was before 9/11, when aeroplanes hijacked by terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But personally, too, that was a more innocent time, before I was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and reminded of my own mortality. The past seemed safer. Within the austere shelter of dozens of libraries and archives, I spilled the contents of other people’s lives on to my desk, and voyeuristically eavesdropped as they confessed to feeling scared. Self-proclaimed specialists in emotional management could be heard counselling these timid individuals. Often, however, those writers who preached secular gospels of ‘fear not’ were found to wallow in scaremongering. People everywhere seemed very apprehensive. Despite the distance in time and place, their frightened stammerings were sometimes deafening; at other times they admitted to their anxieties in faint, hesitant whisperings.

Death and disaster; nightmares and phobias; new killing techniques and dangerous technologies; treacherous bodies – a seemingly endless range of terrifying trials and tribulations seemed to face people in the twentieth century. Worse: there were times when all of history seemed to be reciting a traumatic script, devoid of answers or ‘sense’. On these occasions people’s terror was so overwhelming that their most fundamental identities were in danger of being engulfed. It took some time to notice the astonishing
creativity with which these scared men, women and children made sense of their predicament and remade their world in the wake of the crippling energy of fear. Looking at our society’s fears, in both their past and present manifestations, enables us to meditate on the future. It is a future of our choosing.

Nevertheless, since I completed this book some threats that sparked great trepidation in the past have grown exponentially. The spectre of ‘the Terrorist’ has taken on a god-like power, equivalent to the plague of earlier times or the Satan of religion. The proliferation of surveillance systems, the persecution of immigrants, the giddy boasting about the need for ‘pre-emptive strikes’ are some of the results of this panic. We now use terror-speak to justify terrorising others. As a result, the science and practice of destruction has made rapid and alarming strides in the past few years. In the twenty-first century we must consider the possibility that the most frightening peril is the one we are in the process of forging. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reminded us that we are perpetrators of violence against others, as well as being the victims of terrorist brutality. Torture is now routinely justified, not only in scruffy tabloids but also in supposedly reputable legal circles. The revulsion generated by the pornographic torture snapshots taken by American personnel in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 rapidly subsided; only a few people observed the relative indifference expressed in the press when equally shocking photographs of bound and hooded prisoners languishing in a legal no man’s land in Guantánamo Bay were published. The routine portrayal of violent death in the mass media has blunted sensibilities: when hearing about real-life viciousness we may feel pity or distaste, but when we identify the emotion of fear it is our fear that concerns us. It is the fear of something that may befall us, rather than fear for others, those people on whom we inflict suffering. Authoritarian, indiscriminate and disproportionate responses have become the norm. Public policy and private lives have become fear-bound; fear has become the emotion through which public life is administered. It is time we returned to a politics which feared for the lives of others, near and far. Although fear is humanity’s inheritance, trembling is our testament. And we must always tremble in the face of the stranger glimpsed beneath the rubble of history.
Introduction: Fear

What fear of freedom then
Causes our clasping hands
To make in miniature
That earth anew . . .

AUDEN, 'THE AGE OF ANXIETY'

A spectre is haunting humanity: the spectre of fear. Death stares unblinkingly at us. Danger dallies in everyday environs. Sometimes a scary person or menacing object can be identified: the flames searing patterns on the ceiling, the hydrogen bomb, the terrorist. More often, anxiety overwhelms us from some source ‘within’: there is an irrational panic about venturing outside, a dread of failure, a premonition of doom. There often seems no limit to the threats. In this book we will be encountering the fears and anxieties of hundreds of British and American men, women and children who lived in the twentieth century. We hear how Arthur Hubbard’s battle experiences made his ‘head jump’, Vincent’s agoraphobia rendered him ‘a nervous wreck, weak, worthless’ and Edna Kaehele’s diagnosis of cancer was ‘horror beyond reason’. Sometimes, these people resemble us. We are constantly reminded of the child’s vulnerability — infants like eleven-month-old Albert B., whom two psychologists deliberately taught to panic in the presence of furry animals. In sleep, not only children but adults too are at risk: for many of us, Raymond Bellamy’s nightmare in which he frantically sought to rescue his loved one from danger but seemed
frozen in dream-space will seem familiar. Warfare, too, elicits recognisable fear reactions. Given the degree of terror engendered by military strife throughout much of the twentieth century, it is no coincidence that three out of the eleven chapters in this book confront war's horror. And the 'prayers, curses and meaningless shrieks of terror' of people sealed in the fiery inferno of the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago on 30 December 1903 were echoed by people trapped in the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001.

More frequently, their stories remind us that the past is a foreign country. Often incitements to fear in the past seem bizarre in retrospect. In Chapter Six, for example, we will be examining in greater detail a panic that broke out in Britain in 1926 after a seemingly innocuous radio broadcast. This panic is barely remembered today (unlike a similar one that occurred a dozen years later in America, after Orson Welles's *The War of the Worlds* broadcast), but it tells us a great deal about the emotional vulnerability of interwar Britons.

But even the most commonplace of anxieties may appear different when we look back into history. Take shyness, or the mild apprehension of other people, for instance: early-twentieth-century commentators frequently lamented the fact that humanity was plagued by the fear of others. Shyness was regarded as particularly problematic in class-ridden Britain, where even the most innocuous characteristic, such as accent, could expose a person to ridicule. As 'A Former Sufferer' of stage fright explained in 1921, a person's 'tone of voice' provided irrefutable evidence of their breeding: 'How many people pass muster as "ladies" and "gentlemen" until they open their mouths — then their status in life discloses itself,' he anxiously observed.¹ Uncertainty abounded to such a degree that people were even becoming afraid of their own servants. A book entitled *Casting Out Fear* (1918) bemoaned the fact that the middle classes were becoming 'afraid the servants will not be sufficiently impressed with their superiority and power; afraid they will realise how dependent their employers are on them; they are even afraid of getting fond of them. It would be so undignified.'² Class tensions, democratisation and uncertainty about what constituted 'good manners' were swelling the population of nervous citizens.
Introducció: Fear

Strangely to the modern ear, it was men rather than women who were regarded as particularly prone to bouts of timidity.\(^3\) The ‘cool self-possession’ of modern womanhood was responsible for the epidemic of nervous men.\(^4\) When a socially timid woman was encountered, turn-of-the-century commentators explained their fear as an effect of high-heeled shoes and — even more importantly for commentators in this period — tight lacing. As the author of Bashfulness (1906) explained, tight lacing caused an ‘undue quantity of blood’ to ‘stagnate’ below the waist, a condition that always resulted in bashfulness, ‘particularly when the woman is brought suddenly into the presence of men, or when men come near them’.\(^5\)

According to this view, female dress reform was part of the emotional management of society.

If turn-of-the-century assumptions about which gender was more timid seem very different to what we might expect, it is not surprising that even ‘basic fears’, such as the horror of death, might also turn out to have a surprising history. As we shall see throughout this book, the fear of death was not universal. After all, many people faced death without shrinking, animated by a higher sense of purpose or by a belief in an exalted afterlife. Firemen, lifeguards and air-raid wardens, for instance, routinely risked their own lives to help others. As one physician noted in 1910, the fear of death ‘is and always has been very easily dominated by strong emotions. Military valour, religious zeal, the exalted tension of pride or duty or affection, easily lead men of the soundest disposition to wholly disregard death and everything pertaining to it.’ At the same time, baser feelings, such as ‘jealousy, pique, anger, disappointment, sorrow, sickness, distress of any sort, pecuniary loss, disgrace, and a thousand others that lead to suicide’ provided evidence of ‘what contempt the act of death may be thrown by other even trivial emotions’.\(^6\) Equally, in battle, when mutilation or death seemed imminent, many people claimed that they were not afraid. During the First World War a Medical Officer observed in his memoir The Adventure of Death (1916) that the fear of death is not a deep-rooted instinct, or it would not be so readily overcome. It is the least of fears. It gives way before many sudden
emotions or impulses such as love, the excitement of battle, the call of duty, religious devotion, and the maternal instinct.\(^7\)

Fear could ascend for irrational reasons; it could subside just as impulsively.

In addition, as we will see throughout this book, the nature of the fear of death changed through the century. One hint of these shifts is illustrated by a sermon preached by John Jefferson in the 1830s, in which he argued that life was full of fear caused by uncertainty. He noted that

Difficulties the most unanticipated, and trials the most unexpected, continually arise. Health cannot be calculated upon for a moment; friends may be suddenly snatched from our embrace; riches 'make themselves wings, and fly away'; the deepest reverses, and the greatest elevations, are occurring in the daily history of men; and ‘in the midst of life we are in death’.\(^8\)

Nothing could be further removed from post-Cold War fears, where people are no longer consumed by the terror of sudden, natural death. Indeed, for many this is the preferred death. People are more worried about the excessive prolongation of life after all pleasure has been removed than about sudden death. Organ transplants, life-support systems, intravenous nutrition, dialysis and resuscitation techniques prolong the process of dying. Although people still fear the transition from life to death, it is hard to imagine anyone today responding, as a distinguished literary woman did at the end of the nineteenth century, by acknowledging that fear of ‘premature burial’ meant that she ‘never made a will without inserting a clause requiring my throat to be cut before I am put underground’.\(^9\)

Old terrors about being wrongly declared dead (resulting in live burial) became less meaningful than more recent anxieties about being wrongly obliged to stay alive and so denied the opportunity to ‘die with dignity’. Medical personnel, rather than clerics, increasingly presided over death’s terrors. Finally, Jefferson’s anxiety about sinking swiftly into poverty diminished, but not because increased public provision has eradicated the fear of poverty. The nature of this
fear changed from the pain attendant upon not having sufficient food to eat or shelter, to that of deterioration in social status. In the West, people do not fear starvation but are anxious about relative impoverishment, such as being forced to sell their home or car. The 'deepest reverses' spoken about by Jefferson are seen today as internal states, such as the fear of loss of others' respect and of self-esteem, rather than of riches flying away.

In fact, sermons like Jefferson's were part and parcel of a fear-provoking enterprise. Theologians, physicians, psychologists, film-makers and other cultural commentators counselled people to 'fear not' while simultaneously inciting anxiety and terror. As we shall see in Chapter One, religious chronicles aroused fear by threatening sinners with everlasting punishment in the hereafter. Yet scientific discourses have been no less vexatious. In the words of Archdeacon R. H. Charles in 1931, science may have 'exposed many superstitions of the dark ages and laid bare the falsity of the religious and secular magic of the past and present, yet in their stead it has introduced legions of new alarms that beset our lives from the cradle to the grave. In fact, it has changed the character of the fears that encompass human life, but multiplied their number beyond count'.

Unseen, yet harmful, microbes and bacteria were equal to the task previously carried out by evil spirits. Scientists replaced sorcerers in threatening to destroy the world. The rise of science provided modern individuals with threats just as chilling as the plague. Indeed, the three most terror-inspiring creations of the past two centuries were born in laboratories. Shrapnel, nuclear bombs and biological weapons were modernity's gift.

It is not unusual to find texts with titles like Nothing to Fear (1952) reminding readers that they have a great deal to fear: the invention of hand grenades and the atomic bomb, for instance, had placed humanity at greater threat than ever before. Nor is it rare for peddlers of 'life assurance' to use fear to sell 'peace of mind' or for feminist tracts promoting the empowerment of women to warn them that they are right to fear all men. Theologians argued that penitents suffering from extreme anxiety about sinning should be frightened further into giving up their fears: a scrupulous man or woman 'teases God, irritates his neighbour, torments himself and
oppresses his [spiritual] director — it is useless to argue with men in this disposition, our temptation is to strike them,' fumed one influential moral theologian. 12 Psychologists advising parents on how to raise their children concurred, suggesting that ‘should it become a matter of decision between the rod and direful threats in an effort to correct the child, the former ought to be preferred’. 13 Fear was frequently used to drive out fear.

How can we understand the way people in the past experienced emotions such as fear? Although fear, hate, joy and love have always been at the very heart of human experience, in historical scholarship they still tend to be regarded as by-products. In a number of Afterwords to the sections of this book, we will be examining some exceptions.

More generally, however, the reluctance of many historians to analyse emotions stems from problems of nomenclature. Was what people in the 1970s called ‘fear’ the same thing as it was in the 1870s? Probably not. Or, more accurately, many historians feel that they have no way of knowing. Looked at historically, subjective feelings are invisible. We can identify publicly choreographed panic reactions (during theatre fires or when attacked in the street at night, people might be assumed to be scared), but how do we know what individuals ‘really felt’? They might have been angry rather than terrified. To put it another way, how can historians recognise everyday manifestations of fright in the past? Facial expressions as captured in photographs or paintings, for instance, are useless. We know that people frequently confuse the facial expressions of fear with those of anger, amazement and suspicion. 14 Indeed, individuals with damage to the part of the brain known as the amygdala (an almond-shaped neurostructure located in the brain’s medial temporal lobe) almost unanimously fail to recognise the fearful face. 15 Does this imply that fear is primarily a physiological perception or does a cognitive (or conscious thought) element predominate? Even if fear is located within the corporeal self, it is clear that the body refuses to surrender unambiguous signs of the emotion. Glandular secretions and the range of arousal experienced by the heart and skeletal muscles can be identical for angry and frightened people. 16 Also, different fears elicit very different visceral responses: adrenalin often overwhelms
Introduction: Fear

individuals afraid of being attacked, while individuals terrified of contracting tuberculosis experience no such physiological response.

The only access we have to fearful people from the past is through the things they left behind. Fear acquires meaning through cultural language and rites. Analysis of these 'texts' allows historians to pursue fluctuations in the nature of 'fear' as the emotion is rendered visible in language and symbols. Emotions enter the historical archive only to the extent to which they transcend the insularity of individual psychological experience and present the self in the public realm. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously stated in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), 'not only ideas, but emotions too, are cultural artefacts in man'.

This is not to ignore fear's body altogether. Although there are no consistent visceral responses to fear, we all remember the 'feeling' of being afraid. The emotional body rapidly gives forth a multitude of signs: the heart pounds faster or seems to freeze, breathing quickens or stops, blood pressure soars or falls and sometimes adrenalin pours into the bloodstream. Irrespective of any conscious desire to 'carry through', frightened people cannot escape physiological signs of terror. Frightened people possess a body — witness the trembling limbs and hysterial gait of the survivors of earthquakes or tornadoes. It is not enough merely to repress the subjective awareness of fear: the body will betray itself through its respiration, circulation, digestion and excretion. As we shall see later, in wartime combatants suffered from a range of uncontrollable physical disorders. Diarrhoea, stomach upsets and incapacitating illnesses were common. Frightened soldiers experienced epidemics of diarrhoea (as did American troops immediately before landing on Iwo Jima), suffered chronic gastrointestinal problems or escaped into dyspeptic invalidism. Or, as one person tormented by scrupulosity (that is, the fear of having sinned or offended God in some way) described his attacks in the 1950s:

Suddenly my stomach tightens up, there's a choking in my throat, and my torture begins. The bad thoughts come ... I want to drive them out, but they keep coming back ... It is terrible to be in a struggle like this! To have a head that goes around and around
The emotion of fear is fundamentally about the body — its fleshiness and its precariousness. Fear is felt, and although the emotion of fear cannot be reduced to the sensation of fear, it is not present without sensation. The body is not simply the shell through which emotions are expressed. Discourse shapes bodies. However, bodies also shape discourse: people are 'weak or pale with fright', 'paralysed by fear' and 'chilled by terror'. The feeling of fear may be independent of social construction (after all, people in different times and places may have experienced identical physiological responses to threats). Nevertheless, emotions are fundamentally constituted. In other words, agents are involved in creating the self in a dynamic process that, at the same time, is a 'coming into being'. In this way the body plays a role in social agency. The sensation of fear is not merely the ornament of the emotion: fear is 'what hurts' — the most irreducible 'real' of an individual's history.

As these introductory comments imply, all human interactions are based on emotional expression. The boundaries between fear and other emotions are not clear-cut. How does fear differ from dread, consternation or surprise? Anger, disgust, hatred and horror all contain elements of fear. Jealousy may be understood as fear of losing one's partner; guilt may be fear of God's punishment; shame may be fear of humiliation. A history of fear would be rendered meaningless if all negative emotional states were classified as 'really' being fear states. This makes nonsense of any claim to comprehensiveness in writing a history of even one emotion. Although fear has a strong claim to be one of the most dominant emotions, its status depends upon a distinction between the 'simple' emotions (such as fear) and the 'complex' ones (such as horror, disgust, awe and jealousy), all of which contain elements of fear.

It is tempting to allow fear to invade every part of human emotional life. Rather, this book seeks to examine a selection of representative fears plaguing individuals within British and American societies in the 'long twentieth century'. Some chapters focus on areas that are particularly petrifying — external traumas such as...
disasters, terrorism and wars, as well as internal ones such as phobias and nightmares. Other chapters focus on frightening themes in the history of all individuals — vulnerability, the decaying body and death. In all cases the bruising encounter between individual subjectivity and social norms defined what it meant for modern Britons and Americans to be fearful.