

## Negotiating a 'Tangled Web of Pride and Shame': A Crimean Case-Study

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### Introduction

When thinking about difficult histories, the Crimean War sits squarely within this category. Taking place between 1853 and 1856, it saw an unlikely alliance between Britain, France and Turkey to check Russian ambition in the East. The armies negotiated a hostile climate and engaged in a protracted siege between 1854 and 1855 to capture the Russian naval port of Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. The war's overall reputation is one of military bungling, botched tactics and bureaucratic failure. Norman Dixon's seminal book *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* frames the war as 'an exceedingly low point in British military history' (Dixon 1994: 36). His book addresses personality failings of senior commanders, but this article will address how military failure has impacted on the representation of ordinary soldiers both during the Crimean War and in the museum. It will contrast the reception of the Charge of the Light Brigade on the 25 October 1854 with that of the final assault on the Redan on the 8 September 1855. Dixon's dim view of the war has its origins in powerful mid-Victorian rhetoric surrounding its mismanagement, which became a standard for judging war.<sup>1</sup> And as other scholars have demonstrated, unprecedented public consumption of the war, via detailed and uncensored reports from the front, spoke to domestic agendas as much as it did foreign policy. The effect of this figuring of the war is captured by J.S Bratton, who remarks that mismanagement caused more damage to national pride than 'the enemy' (Bradby *et al.* 1980: 134). Olive Anderson registers feelings of 'overt class bitterness and impatience with prevailing institutions' during the Crimean War (Anderson 1967: 97). Middle-class agitation against aristocratic leadership in public office is explored in Matthew Lalumia's work on the visual output of the war (Lalumia 1983: 25-51). The ordinary soldier had a prominent role in bourgeois narratives illustrating military incompetency, and as this article demonstrates, his image worked in diverse ways to support this rubric. The press war on mismanagement tested traditional ideals of military heroism and accelerated a shift in public perception of the soldier, from aristocratic fop to brave private (Markovits 2009: 4). This truism of increased recognition of the ranks is borne out in public memorials, notably the Crimean Guards Memorial at Waterloo Place, in commercial photographs commissioned by the Queen, such as the 1855 'Crimean Heroes' series featuring returning rank and file soldiers carrying their military equipment, and is elaborated upon in the pages that follow in assessments of the Charge. However, adverse reactions to the performance of rank and file infantrymen at the Redan complicate this claim. The article provides further evidence of what Dixon and the poet, Rudyard Kipling, have identified as the anomalous position of the Army in society (Dixon 1994: 202). In poems such as *Tommy* and *The Absent Minded Beggar*, Kipling highlights a fluctuation of feeling between war and peace, but it is apparent from the contrasting receptions afforded to the Charge and the Redan that responses shifted during wartime. The two episodes reveal that public apprehension of military failure rested just as much on press perceptions of the common soldiery as it did on strategy and tactics.

This article complements an identified 'cultural turn' in military history, which emphasizes the potency of perception and the extent to which successes, failures, opportunities and threats are culturally conditioned (Black 2004: 233-35). It will deal with issues surrounding 'collective remembrance', a concept which Joanna Bourke identifies as problematic. For Bourke, 'collective memory' has been characterized by a 'museal sensibility' in which mass narratives 'wallow' in a nostalgic world of community, stability and certainty (Bourke 2004: 473). She argues that

collective memory is an exclusive script, which imposes unity on individual experiences and overlooks conscious acts of cultural selection (Bourke 2004: 473). Whilst scholarship on the relationship of present with past rightly takes issue with collective, or public, memory, precluding individual, or private, memories, Bourke usefully draws attention to the mythical qualities of collective remembrance.<sup>2</sup> Military history, integral as it is to national identity yet harbouring inherently difficult histories, is particularly susceptible to cultural, social and political mediation. This article traces nineteenth-century treatments of two Crimean failures and the legacy of these attitudes today in museums, which to a large extent echo some of the dominant myths and silences of Victorian Britain.

### Charged Encounters

'A tangled web of pride and shame' is taken from a poem by Robert Monckton Milnes on Florence Nightingale's redemptive work caring for sick and wounded soldiers, but it can be applied equally to the Light Brigade's actions during the Battle of Balaclava. Other British cavalry charges, whether successful or unsuccessful, have not gained the same status over time. Who now remembers the humiliating rout of the British cavalry at Chillianwala during the second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849? Here, Pope's brigade of cavalry was under no illusion about their order to make a co-ordinated attack with the infantry, but retreated in a disorderly manner after encountering difficult terrain. An undignified flight in the face of those resisting British advances in the Sikh Empire did not possess the ingredients for celebration in misfortune, whereas the actions of the Light Brigade at Balaclava were isolated and singular, taking place on a highly visible European stage against a rival aggressor and mediated by newspaper reporters and spectators. Due to a misunderstanding, which the commanders failed to resolve, the Light Brigade charged down a valley into the heart of Russian artillery instead of recapturing British guns in another part of the field.<sup>3</sup> They were not only targeted from artillery in front, but from guns lining both sides of the valley. Those that made it beyond the guns were eventually forced to retire up the valley on foot, initially pursued by the Russians. The Charge depleted the Light Brigade as a fighting force, but the majority of the men recovered to experience a surprising level of renown. It will be demonstrated that the actions of the Light Brigade are privileged in military museums, particularly regimental museums representing cavalry units. Why are the Light Brigade given special recognition, eclipsing the claims of others equally deserving of eulogy, and the Charge awarded the status of a privileged military disaster? If, as Peter Thwaites contends in his book *Presenting Arms*, regimental museums have traditionally promoted their own achievements, why is a serious military mistake celebrated by them (Thwaites 1996: 89)? Thwaites notes that military blunders are only likely to appear in museum displays as a way of highlighting the courage of the men involved (Thwaites 1996: 72). Arguably, it is Victorian reaction to the actions of the Light Brigade which allow for this observation. Prior to the debacle, courageous conduct was represented by commanding officers. However, the Light Brigade's commanders, notably Lord Cardigan, did not survive unprecedented press scrutiny and interest afforded to them.<sup>4</sup> The actions of the Light Brigade were a watershed moment in substituting military incompetence with bravery from the ranks. The public recognized that the troops should not only escape punishment for the mistakes of their commanders, but as the victims of mismanagement be held-up as paragons of virtue. The influential *Times* journalist, William Russell, idolised the horsemen as demi-gods with 'a halo of flashing steel above their heads.'<sup>5</sup> For Russell, the Brigade's valour helped to rationalise and compensate for the dire consequences of the Charge. A similar approach was employed by Tennyson, who elevated the Brigade's status in spite of their ordeal and harnessed appreciation of the soldier's sacrifice.

Tennyson's eponymously named poem, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', acts as a powerful memorial to the cavalymen. Tennyson's imperative to 'Honour the Light Brigade' signals, as Matthew Bevis points out, not only a need for remembrance but also for an answering action, like the honouring of a debt (Bevis 2007: 15). Therefore, early commemoration of the Brigade can be seen as motivated in part by a sense of national guilt. In a favourable review of the poem, *Fraser's Magazine* hoped that others would erect their 'monument' to the Charge, 'the only reparation now possible for the great wrong done to those brave men' (Kingsley 1855: 273). A desire to atone for tactical error on the battlefield was bolstered by

public commentary emerging from the winter troubles of 1854-55, which had focused on what Elaine Scarry has famously described as 'the body in pain' (Scarry 1985: 3-11). The initial publication of Tennyson's poem in the *Examiner* on 9 December 1854 coincided with stories of neglected troops, an overwhelmed medical department and of aloof command. The suffering soldier became a distinct media category and the principal subject of public interest at this time. In an article reporting on the discernible benefits of the 'Sick and Wounded Fund', a *Times* correspondent wrote of the special claims of those 'whose wounds and sufferings constitute them as chief actors in the bloody drama' of war.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates the extent to which mid-Victorians realised the centrality of the body in war, what recent scholarship has characterised as 'politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking and feeling bodies of men and women' (Maltby and McSorley 2012: 3). However, for the Liberal and Radical press, the ordinary soldier's body was broken by ineffective administration as much as it was by the natural consequences of a 'bloody drama' enacted against the foe. As Tennyson's own response to the winter troubles reveals: '[...] my heart almost bursts with indignation at the accursed mismanagement of our noble little army, that flower of men.' (Lang and Shannon 1987: 104) Whilst the soldier's physical condition may have brought home the effects of war to a distant public, it also served as a powerful trope for motivating the positive and active intervention of reforming civilians.

One of the clearest instances of the Charge engendering redemptive response can be seen in one use made of Tennyson's poem. The 'Charge of the Light Brigade' was promoted as a form of therapy for sick and wounded soldiers in 1855, though claims of miraculous recovery have not been corroborated in the writings of soldiers. A nurse working at Scutari Hospital recorded the poem's effect on a taciturn patient, who, after its recital, 'at once forgot his pain and entered into a spirited description of the terrific gallop to and from that cannon-crowned height.' (Goodman 1862: 96) Hospital chaplain C. E. Hadow also reported the success of the poem amongst Light Brigade veterans, which he had diligently copied out for them.<sup>7</sup> In a letter to the United Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, Hadow requested printed copies be circulated amongst the men, a request which Tennyson embraced enthusiastically, making final alterations to the poem. In response to his publisher's suggestion of sending double the suggested number of copies, he wrote earnestly: '[...] they might be sent now if the printing another 1,000 did not delay sending the first; but I am anxious that the soldiers should have it at once' (Lang and Shannon 1987:120). The changes made by Tennyson accentuated his existing focus on exemplary loss, by erasing references that were too historically mooted, superfluous or controversial. For example, he erased references to rank and to named individuals, such as the unfortunate Captain Nolan whose critical role in sanctioning the Charge or otherwise has remained mysterious due to his sudden death at its outset.<sup>8</sup> The phrase 'Someone had blunder'd' is repeated twice in the first published version of Tennyson's poem and specifically in relation to the order, but it is reduced to a single instance in order to praise the men's unquestioning conduct ('Theirs not to reason why') in the version modified for the soldiers.<sup>9</sup> These changes occurred during a particularly low point in the British Army's morale. Hadow's request for Tennyson's verse is preceded by a description of the 'gloom thrown over the whole Army' following the British infantry's overwhelming defeat during the first attack on the Redan on 18 June 1855, and the subsequent death of the British Commander-in-Chief, Lord Raglan.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Tennyson's poem served to boost the spirits of an ailing army whilst assisting the work of chaplains to improve literacy and provide occupation for sick soldiers. The request is an early example of the poem's potency, which saw representation of the soldier become more powerful than the event it described as a singularly futile loss and defeat for the British Army. Tennyson's poem cleverly converts a sense of bewilderment ('All the world wonder'd') and indignation into national gratitude and pride felt towards the soldier. Therefore, Tennyson's injunction to 'Honour' the Light Brigade not only helped to compensate for the blunder and individual suffering, but also to promote martial discipline and valour for public edification.

The poem inaugurated an increasingly reverent vision of Light Brigade veterans later in the century and beyond, at events such as the first Balaclava Banquet in 1875 and the launch of the Balaclava Commemoration Society in 1877. The former was preceded by a 'fête day', during which relics from the battlefield were displayed as objects of curiosity and Tennyson's

poem read aloud. According to one survivor, William Pennington, the banquet was suggested at an informal gathering of veterans in Manchester by a journalist, who proposed an anniversary event of national standing to underscore the claims of survivors to be of 'no ordinary kind' (Pennington 1906: 143-44). Both commemorative events subordinated the different phases of the Battle of Balaclava, including notable successes such as the Charge of the Heavy Brigade and the repulse of the Russian cavalry by the 'Thin Red Line', to the futile actions of the Light Brigade. 'Balaclava' thus became synonymous with the Light Brigade, elevating Light Brigade veterans above the other soldiers who participated in the battle. Victorian fixation upon the Charge became increasingly a point of national pride. The banquet speech given by Sir Edward Lee collapsed the blunder into deeds of a 'chivalrous exploit', beyond Greek and Roman fame.<sup>11</sup> The idea of the Charge transcending ancient conquest complemented the banquet's overtly patriotic focus on English gains from the medieval period onwards. The organisers capitalized on the coincidence of the Battle of Agincourt (1415) having also taken place on the 25<sup>th</sup> October, by displaying medieval armour around the banquet hall.<sup>12</sup> The stories of those involved were increasingly prized as time wore on. Many published accounts incorporated memorable phrases from Tennyson's verse in their titles, subscribing to an all-embracing 'Six Hundred', and a part to whole relationship. The title used by Mitchell's publishers employed 'one of the Light Brigade' and titles such as 'One of Six Hundred' and 'Left of Six Hundred' were also common.<sup>13</sup> Interest in original accounts is still high. The memoir of Trooper James Olley sold for £4,500 to an anonymous bidder in 2008.<sup>14</sup> However, the creation of these memoirs and the investment in them of a certain authority by the end of the nineteenth century fulfilled a complex blend of patriotic and commercial agendas. In its item on Olley, *The Guardian* reported that the trooper had been reduced to begging until he was recognized by a local squire, who encouraged him to write a memoir and helped raise a subscription fund by writing an outraged letter to the newspapers.<sup>15</sup> Many of the accounts were published to bring in additional income for those in varying states of poverty and to stimulate public beneficence in the absence of an adequate pension. Whilst, therefore, the impoverished status of many Light Brigade veterans lent an irony to public eulogy of past exploits, campaigns to help Light Brigade survivors in the late-nineteenth century reveals the far-reaching sense of national indebtedness. The extraordinary cultural investment in the Charge, as channelled through its veterans, is summed up by the frustration of one officer, who described the Light Brigade Relief Fund of 1890 as 'ludicrous' and 'unjust', in view of the bloody sacrifice of those all over the Empire equally deserving of help.<sup>16</sup>

The National Army Museum (NAM) and regimental museums reinforce Victorian capital in the Charge and the incompetency thesis that informs responses to it. NAM provides more of a top-down perspective, its display exploiting controversial objects representing military command and poor battle-field communication. Its star objects include a small piece of paper containing one of the original orders, with its fatal lack of specificity, issued in the lead-up to the debacle, as well as the diary of Captain Nolan.<sup>17</sup> Such objects have supported lively public engagement activities, such as the mock-trial hosted in connection with the Museum's special exhibition on the Crimean War in 2004 entitled 'A Most Desperate Undertaking'. Members of the public were invited to decide which of the senior commanders was to blame for the military error based upon evidence put before them. For cavalry regimental museums, objects relating to the Charge assume a special significance and a large share of Museum interpretation. Even in museums where only a few objects relating to the episode exist, considerable space is devoted to narrating the Charge through the eyewitness testimony of a member of the regiment. The most distinctive gallery in the Museum of the 13<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars, Cannon Hall, contains the atmospheric surroundings of 'Camp Balaclava', which tells the story of the Charge through the words of the ordinary cavalryman. The gallery achieves rare sombre reflection, emulating public shock present in Tennyson's poem. A display board on the Crimean War prepares the visitor for the account, highlighting the war as one long struggle for the brave, ordinary soldier, negotiating a difficult climate and a primitive supply system. Upon entering the dimmed space, the visitor is greeted with an audio of the memoir of Private Mitchell, with an accompanying screen visual of an injured trooper speaking from camp (Fig.1). The Museum does not attribute the account, but the narrative matches the published account of Private Albert Mitchell, who served in the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons (Mitchell 1884: 82-84). The memoir is highly personal, expressing



Fig 1. Audio-visual of Light Brigade survivor narrating his personal experiences, Museum of the 13th/18th Hussars (© Rachel Bates)

a keen sense of loss and frankly illustrating the sights, sounds and futility of the engagement. The actor used for the recording speaks in the local Yorkshire dialect, providing a point of identification for regional audiences. Similarly, a display board at the Queen's Lancers Museum features testimony describing the Nottinghamshire bellow of Corporal Thomas Morley as he mustered survivors. As a result of the proliferation of memoirs in the late nineteenth-century, museums do not lack material when it comes to presenting humble insights into the experience of the Charge. The Museum of the King's Royal Hussars in Winchester uses an extract from the diary of Sergeant-Major Loy Smith of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars to shape its account. The Museum retains the original diary but the account was also published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1887 and the *Historical Record of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars* in 1908. Like Mitchell's account, Smith's conveys his battlefield emotions and war's assault on the senses: 'I sat down and was moved to tears when I thought of the havoc I had seen.'<sup>18</sup> The centrality of soldier memoirs to these Museum displays engenders public sympathy for the ordinary soldier and the tragedy of the Charge, bridging civil-military relations by placing soldiers as victims of war. These displays no doubt owe something to Marxist influence on twentieth and twenty-first century historiography and its emphasis on the experiences of ordinary people. Greater interest in the plight of the Brigade has also been achieved through the use of humble battle-field objects, which have gained status as a symbol of their owner's bravery.

The star object at the Queen's Royal Lancers Museum is a battered bugle (Fig.2), used by Trumpeter Billy Brittain. Brittain was wounded in the Charge and given the bugle, then the property of the regiment, after the engagement as a personal keep-sake. Gifting the bugle in this way reveals early investment in the Charge's significance for all ranks of the cavalry. The continuing interest in the bugle today stems partly from its example as war salvage. In its permanent display, the Museum maximises the power of its battlefield presence with an explanation of how the bugle was pierced by a Russian lance. The bugle underwent





Fig 2. Bugle carried by Trumpeter William Brittain, Museum of the Queen's Royal Lancers  
(© Rachel Bates)

conservation in 2004, in preparation for a special 'Charge of the Light Brigade' exhibition at the Queen's Lancers marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Crimean War. Rather than restoring the bugle to its former, pre-battle state, the conservator preserved the integrity of the bugle's post-battle condition, thus maintaining the object's link to the events of the 25 October 1854.<sup>19</sup> Tragically, Brittain died from the wounds he sustained in action and so never lived to appreciate the extraordinary significance that came to be attached to the bugle. Its value is magnified by debates about who sounded the Charge, although these debates have displaced the more crucial question of why it was sounded at all.<sup>20</sup> The trumpet, or bugle, represents the last point in the chain of command and is the least accountable link. Yet, the instrument has become an important trophy for collectors, its value increased by its role as a call to heroic arms, however fateful. When the bugle appeared at Sotheby's in 1964, it attracted international interest and sold for £1,600 to American film-maker Ed Sullivan and British actor Laurence Harvey.<sup>21</sup> The buyers generously returned the bugle to the regiment and therefore to collective ownership, where it continues to be exhibited with pride as the bugle that launched the Charge. The sale attracted widespread press coverage, one newspaper article staking the bugle's authenticity on its exposure to the ferocity of battle. Revealing an excitement incongruous with the devastation of war, the article extolled its battered state and noted the fatal wounding of Brittain as further testament that it had been in 'the thick of things.'<sup>22</sup> It is unsurprising that a specialist and geographically remote museum should endeavour to attract visitors by maximising existing interest in the bugle, but the display does not point to the contested claims surrounding it, whether it really was the bugle that sounded the Charge. NAM provides a more reflective stance in relation to a rival bugle, which was used by Trumpet-Major Joy. The display points to its uncertain associations, concluding that it was more likely to have been sounded in the separate action of the Heavy Brigade during the Battle of Balaclava, one of the engagements overshadowed by the Light Brigade's debacle.



*Fig 3. Short-tailed coatee worn by Sergeant Frederick Peake, 13th Light Dragoons, at the Battle of Balaclava, 1854, National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)*

also displayed the uniform of Sergeant Frederick Peake in its 'War Horse' exhibition of 2013, which reflected on the role of horses in conflict and covered the tragic loss of horses during the Charge. Peake's coatee was not crucial to the theme of the exhibition, other than representing the uniform of a nineteenth-century cavalryman, but it has intrinsic significance in showcasing the melee of battle (Fig.3). The right sleeve is cut off on the coatee, since Peake's right arm was broken by canister shot during the Charge. The uniform verifies Peake's battlefield presence, the stunted sleeve materially representing the cleaved arm. Peake and Gordon survived their injuries, aligning the significance of these tarnished uniforms less with death and sacrifice and more with survival. The preservation of these uniforms by the wearers and their families memorializes and authenticates endurance in the face of adversity. In Peake's case, alterations were made to the coatee to enable him to wear it in old age, at exclusive events for Charge veterans hosted by the Balaklava Commemoration Society.<sup>24</sup> Had Peake and Gordon died as a result of their injuries, as Brittain did, the uniforms might take on a more uncomfortable aspect for the museum visitor, bearing as they do explicit and direct signs of their owner's trauma.

It can be seen therefore that first-hand encounter with the Light Brigade was treasured by Victorian audiences, through re-unions, memoirs and prized objects, a trend that has been perpetuated by museum practice. The public has been encouraged to re-live the Charge time and again, the effect of which has been to raise the profile of those involved in the blunder as either brave victims or as tenacious warriors. Yet, a continued focus on the cavalryman has

The interest and claims surrounding both bugles reveal an increasing fascination with the execution of the Charge and the visceral nature of the encounter. The survival of Brittain's bugle and its display at the Queen's Lancers is both affirming and unsettling for the viewer. On the hand, it elicits marvel that this small and malleable object should have survived the canon, hooves and lances of the Charge, but this response is clouded by knowledge that Brittain did not. The bugle's exalted status and prominence in the museum display can either sharpen the viewer's apprehension of the violence of war and its human cost, or, as an object once removed from Brittain, act to distance wounding and death on the battlefield. NAM's bugle is in much better condition than that of the Queen's Royal Lancers, but next to it within the Museum's display is the blood-spattered dress jacket of Lieutenant William Gordon, who sustained five severe sabre cuts to the head during the Charge.<sup>23</sup> The jacket bears visible blood stains on the right collar and down the front. NAM

often been at the expense of the Crimean infantryman, who bore the heaviest brunt of the war and who was also subject to its mismanagement. The dominant afterlife of the Charge has in many ways reinforced some of the inflated attitudes of the Cavalry prevalent at the time, such as those which inspired a cartoon by Lieutenant William Markham of the Rifle Brigade (Fig.4). Markham satirizes the air of superiority and self-importance exhibited by inexperienced cavalry officers prior to landing in the Crimea. Depicting a young cornet and his colleague sitting casually in their tent, whilst an infantryman stands on guard, the caption reads: 'I say, Charley, do you think now that in the event of our being sent to Sevastopol, the Infantry will be required to accompany us?' In reality, the roles were reversed: the Cavalry, already greatly reduced in number as a result of sickness prior to landing in the Crimea, were relegated largely to supporting the infantry and transporting their supplies. Yet, Tennyson was not to be inspired by the daily privations of foot soldiers undertaking arduous duties in the trenches, nor by the haphazard plight of various infantry regiments during the mismanaged final assault on the Redan.



Fig 4. William Thomas Markham, 'In the Cavalry Camp at Devna' c.1854, National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)

### A War of Two Halves

Although undoubtedly an anti-climax for the British, the attack on the Redan on 8 September 1855 marked the end of a siege which had strained British resources to the limit. The assault was part of an allied push to take key Russian fortifications, in order to hasten the fall of Sevastopol. For a number of reasons, the French assault on their target fortification, the Malakhov, was successful, causing the Russians to retreat. The British assault on the Redan made no real impact, thus damaging national pride. Queen Victoria was sorely disappointed that the Redan represented her Army's last engagement (Longford 2000: 275). Yet, the assault shared many features with the Charge. It involved a hopeless attack against a barrage of Russian artillery, at greater calibre and at even closer range, and a difficult retreat. The memoirs of Timothy





Fig 5. Lieutenant Herbert Radcliffe, 'Charge of the 23rd at the assault of the Redan, 8 September 1855', National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)

Gowing pre-figure the terrible suspense and slaughter of action on the Western Front sixty years later as he recalled his foreboding whilst waiting in the trenches. Identifying with the sense of doom accompanying the Light Brigade's fate, Gowing recycles Tennyson's metaphor: 'the attack seemed to be a rush into the very jaws of death (Fenwick 1954: 119).' Unlike the Charge, there are few official depictions of the assault on the Redan, but this eye-witness sketch by Lieutenant Radcliffe (Fig.5) conveys its havoc and terror, as men, encumbered with ineffectual ladders, struggled across 200 yards of open ground in a direct line of fire. Radcliffe's sketches made an appearance in the National Army Museum's 2004 exhibition, which exposed the hardships of life on campaign. However, Radcliffe's unique sketches are not currently on display in the permanent galleries. They are unusual in exposing the chaos and terror of war, in contrast with the attractive views provided by William Simpson after the event (Fig.6). Simpson's watercolour entitled 'Interior of the Redan' exudes a sense of tranquillity, domesticity and familiarity, featuring a small dog in the foreground, warm, soft hues and the British flag waving on the summit of the fortification. The presence of the British flag proclaims the result of the joint allied assault, establishing British claims to the fortification. Yet, the British Army were prevented from conquering their target and like the Light Brigade, were forced to retreat across the same exposed ground over which they had advanced.

Like the Charge, the affair was mismanaged and provided further evidence that the most senior military figures were ill-equipped for their positions. A caricature produced by E. Gambart and Company visualises William Russell's first-hand description of the British Generals as they watched the assault (Fig.7). In his report for *The Times*, Russell emphasized mismanagement by undermining the manliness of the commanders. He wrote of the astonishing sight of Generals Simpson, Jones and Airey as they sought to protect themselves from the cold, which, he noted, detracted somewhat from a 'martial and belligerent aspect.'<sup>25</sup> General Simpson was a reluctant Commander-in-Chief and delegated full responsibility for the operations to his divisional commanders. Given the ridicule attached to senior commanders on the day, it is surprising that the influential Russell did not attempt to elicit sympathy for the men involved in the assault. Indeed, Russell's observations of the men, discussed below, only serve to reinforce Thwaites'



Fig 6. William Simpson, 'Interior of the Redan. Taken from its left face looking towards the salient angle, looking South, September 1855', National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)



Fig 7. 'Tete d'Armee, or how the British Generals stormed the Great Redan', coloured lithograph, October 1855, National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)

analysis concerning the manipulation of courage in military narratives. Varied responses to the Redan demonstrate the degree to which presentations of bravery, or lack thereof, were inextricable from the incompetency thesis alluded to earlier. Whilst the Charge elicited pride in the pluck of ordinary cavalrymen to reinforce the absence of the aristocratic 'other', the Redan prompted unfavourable impressions of the collective efforts of infantrymen to redeem the incapability of command. A failure to exculpate the ordinary soldiers, as admirable bearers of the blunder, from poor leadership at the Redan, partly accounts for the marginalization of this final engagement of the war, evinced by gaps in museum narratives.



*Fig 8. 'The Seat of War in the East - First Series' after William Simpson, published by Paul and Dominic Colnaghi and Company, 1 March 1855, National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)*

Upon making enquiries to regimental museums representing the infantry regiments involved about the content of public displays, many confirmed that little reference was made to the Crimean War at all let alone to the final assault on the Redan.<sup>26</sup> The lists of items provided revealed mostly officers' effects and passing references to the assault, with no allusion to its mismanagement and horrors. Of course, many of the regiments present at the Redan bore the brunt of fighting and trench duty throughout the war and so specific actions are easily buried in displays designed to give a flavour of the war as a whole. However, a narrative board in NAM's 'Changing the World' gallery, points to another reason for the absence: 'Britain did not have either conscription or trained reserves. Once the hardened veterans had died, all that there were to replace them were hastily recruited boys. Unsurprisingly, they performed badly during the attack on the Redan.'<sup>27</sup> This focus on the performance of the men, linked to the faults of the recruitment system, downplays the extraordinary challenges and strategic failures of the assault, which are otherwise well documented in the Museum's archives (Massie 2005: 209-30). Not least amongst these was an inability to learn from an almost identical assault on the Redan three months previously, which had ended in catastrophic failure due to poor timing, a lack of reserves and trenches unsuited to housing the assaulting columns (Massie 2005: 202-5). NAM's gallery interpretation echoes secondary accounts of the final assault, which in turn draw upon nineteenth-century criticism found in newspapers and the correspondence of senior officers: early commentators placed the burden of defeat on the British soldier.<sup>28</sup> For regimental museums covering wide expanses of history, it is easy to see why the episode has been over-looked.



British criticism of its soldiers was founded on a war of contrasts. The first half of the war is undoubtedly where the weight of public interest has fallen, combining a heady mix of pitched battles, high-profile blunder and a public outcry precipitating Florence Nightingale's services. Russell, of *The Times*, lamented the composition of the Army at the Redan compared to the beginning of the war.<sup>29</sup> Writing shortly after the assault, Russell's report barely disguised his disdain for the 'trench-bred' foot soldier, who had learnt to 'take pot shots from behind stones & parapets' rather than testing collective courage in open combat.<sup>30</sup> Although Russell went on to qualify that the men were not lacking in courage, but in discipline and faith in their officers, he returned to his theme when he asserted that siege operations are the worst training ground for developing, 'the courage and manly self-reliance of a soldier.' Here Russell was clearly contrasting siege warfare with the war's earlier field combat and idealizing pitched battle as a stage for resolute purpose and hand-to-hand fighting. The Charge had fulfilled this criterion early-on in the war, setting a particular benchmark for heroic duty and visual spectacle. The appeal of certain kinds of warfare has to be taken into account when thinking about the persistence of the Light Brigade in the public imagination and the branding of courage.

In the first instance, the Charge held a strong visual appeal, which was seen to complement its striking surroundings. Reflecting on the event in later life, Russell wrote that the Charge formed one of the most visible battles from a spectator's point of view. He described a panorama of exceeding beauty, with its green valley and mountain ridges (Russell 1895: 138): indeed, he almost have been describing William Simpson's contemporary print, which focused on the beauty and suspense of the advance rather than the disappointment and chaos of the return (Fig.8). The heightened angle and full profile view of the action allows for a better delineation of unrealistically straight lines of regiments. This print supports a view of utmost discipline comparable to a parade or re-enactment. The visual impact of the cavalry is still utilised today, with pride of place at ceremonial occasions (Gates 2001: 87).



*Fig 9. Richard Catton-Woodville, The Relief of the Light Brigade, 1898, National Army Museum (© National Army Museum)*

In addition to presenting a striking appearance, the cavalry also fulfilled fantasies of chivalrous combat. During the anniversary celebrations in 1875, one reporter remarked: 'It is the fashion to say that chivalry is past, that it has been slain by pipeclay and modern science. Balaclava proved the contrary.'<sup>31</sup> An increasingly congratulatory view of cavalry charges emerged



in the late-nineteenth century, capturing channelled aggression, not vulnerability. The tenacity of the men conquering the guns is the viewpoint chosen for Richard Caton-Woodville's painting *The Relief of the Light Brigade* on display at the NAM (Fig.9). It is an image of British dominance and can be seen alongside contemporary initiatives, such as the patriotic publication *Battles of the Nineteenth-Century* of 1899, which traced major British engagements from Hastings onwards, to account for the vastness of the British Empire. In this history, the Charge is enlivened with onomatopoeic excitement, the 'ping' of a bullet and the 'whang' of roundshot, the narrative culminating at the guns. The authors conclude that it would be difficult to find a better example of 'romantic courage or desperate adventure' (Forbes et al. 1899: 113-15). The Museum of the King's Royal Hussars in Winchester greets the visitor with a similarly imposing model of a Victorian charger waving his sabre (Fig.10): This visualizes the spirit and character of a regiment described in the audio introduction as rooted in the



*Fig10. Royal Doulton Figurine of a 17th Lancer during the 'Charge of the Light Brigade', Museum of the Queen's Royal Lancers (© Rachel Bates)*

'courage, dash and discipline' of its cavalry ancestors. These representations support what Paul Volsik has identified as a certain paradigm of masculinity, a dream of the ardent male focused upon the kinetic and unbridled physical expression (Volsik 2010: 149-50). Exciting movement and resolve under duress is encapsulated in a Royal Doulton figurine of a 17th Lancer in full flight (Fig.11), on display at the Queen's Royal Lancers Museum. The figurine forms only a select handful of objects held by the Museum relating to the Crimean War, but it occupies one of the largest and most impressive display cabinets, alongside Britain's battered bugle. Cavalry action presented a sequential and moral clarity to observers like Tennyson and Russell. Yet, this does not fully account for the differing treatment of infantry soldiers during the final assault on the Redan, who not only failed to elicit much praise, but were criticised as much as their commanders. These soldiers were not elevated above the politics of defeat, as with the Charge, but were integral to disaffection.

Although the final assault on Sevastopol had been an allied victory, focus not unsurprisingly fell on the individual contributions of Britain and France. The contrast to France's successful assault on the Malakhov only sharpened the pain of Britain's defeat for many. General Codrington mused: 'The hour came, the hour is gone; it is irrecoverable & I must not shut my eyes to the fact that England has failed in the light of France's success [...].'<sup>32</sup> The role of defeat in military history is gaining greater currency. As Jenny Macleod observes: 'Defeat in battle has the capacity to take on a significance beyond mere judgement on military efficiency; it can seem to reflect on the defeated society itself (Macleod 2008: 9).' Russell knew this better than anyone when reporting on the final assault, finding little to redeem the failure for the benefit of the public



Fig 11. Royal Doulton Figurine of a 17th Lancer during the 'Charge of the Light Brigade', Museum of the Queen's Royal Lancers (© Rachel Bates)

at home. Indeed, he actively ignited national sensibilities by comparing the swiftness of the French attack, 'drifting as quietly as autumn leaves on the wind' with the 'spray' of British soldiery that 'fretted' at the Russian edge.<sup>33</sup> His portrayal of faltering Britishness focused not so much on tactical error, but weakness of character and morale. Brigadier-General Charles Ridley expressed explicitly the 'cowardly' behaviour Russell implied throughout his report. Writing to his cousin, Maria, after the assault, he confided: 'there was a sad deficiency of pluck and courage in the main bodies of the assaulting columns,' explaining that not all men could be brought out to attack.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that Ridley's letter was littered with inconsistencies. For instance, he confidently predicted that the men of his own Division could have done a better job because they were fitter and fresher. However, later on in the letter, whilst expressing disgust at favouritism shown towards the Highland regiments, he disclosed that his men had returned from a thirty-six hour stint in the trenches on the morning of the assault.

The views of Russell and Ridley were by no means universal and others rallied against implications of cowardice. *The Lancaster Gazette* defensively pointed to the fact that the men had held whatever positions they could for two hours under deadly fire. It denounced a distasteful passage in Russell's report, which described how fellow officers and men had laughed at panic-stricken soldiers as they launched themselves off the wall of the Redan onto the bayonets of comrades in the ditch below.<sup>35</sup> The glacis of the Redan afforded little shelter for the men as they advanced and retreated and the Russian guns were much closer in range than those targeted upon the Light Brigade: the casualties resulting from the action were proportionately far greater as a result. Approximately 2,000 men were killed or injured, an unequalled loss that one indignant soldier was quick to highlight in the aftermath of the assault: 'Could you expect – do you expect – more devotion from your country than this?'<sup>36</sup> A reporter for the *Daily News* remarked the following day that it was astonishing anyone survived with scarcely a foot of ground left untouched by grape shot and canister.<sup>37</sup> The *Illustrated Times* concluded that the failure of the British was due to poor management of the attack and the difficulties of scaling a fortification primed with guns - men were simply unable to advance with momentum and engage in the hand-to-hand combat that Russell and others expected of them.<sup>38</sup> The sketches of the talented artist Captain Henry Hope Crealock, held at The Cameronians Museum depict the difficulty of scaling the Redan (Fig. 12). Crealock focuses on the plight of a few soldiers as they grapple with their ladders amidst falling shot and shell. The viewer is positioned directly below the fortification and gains an impression of its scale. Crealock's sketches of the Redan

sit alongside unsentimental views of the Crimean War, employing titles such as 'War is Hell.' Crealock and Radcliffe's sketches counter the civilian dream of ardent action, showing that war can be a messy, prolonged and insurmountable affair. Possession of Crealock's insightful sketches may have inspired the Cameronians Museum's rare interpretation of the assault. The Museum's history for the 90th Regiment distils its Crimean involvement to the Redan, stating that many of its men fell there: 'their bodies being afterwards found in the place which marked the farthest limit of the British advance.'<sup>39</sup> This keenness to demonstrate the extent of the gains upon the enemy position and therefore their bravery is an exceptional piece of secondary interpretation.

The Crimean War can be seen as a war of mixed modernity, occurring at a pivotal point in the history of British warfare, halfway between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. The Redan presents an opportunity to address the emerging horrors of trench warfare and the more complex challenges of the siege alongside the spectacle of open-field combat. Instead this bungled final action has been neglected as a lesser tragedy because the British fighting force was perceived to be weak, both in contemporary reporting, secondary sources and reinforced in the museum record. An anxiety about the reception of the Redan failure was clearly expressed by Captain John Lewes of the East Kent Regiment, who wrote to his superior, Major Fyers, seeking reassurance that his men would be recognised: 'I trust in your report on the subject you will do us the justice to say we did our duty.'<sup>40</sup> Lewes was keen to ensure that at the very least the efforts of his men were not equated to the shirking attributed to others. At no other point in the war would this have been in doubt, with criticism of the conduct of the war restricted to senior commanders and government.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Light Brigade's only Crimean engagement, a mere mistake, became increasingly a source of pride in the British national consciousness. The fortitude of the Light Brigade was celebrated repeatedly at anniversary events and through temporary exhibitions in the nineteenth-century. It continues to be pushed to the forefront of public consciousness by military museums, using objects that capture the élan of the Victorian cavalryman, explore the nature of the military blunder and present the soldier's sense of loss in the face of adversity. Every perspective – fantastical, strategic and personal- provides a dramatic focus for the museum visitor and so long as the Charge retains an element of mystery as a result of unresolved responsibility for its outcome, it will continue to invite wonder and speculation. Arguably, the Charge was one of many Crimean War developments that raised the profile of the ordinary soldier in the British public consciousness. Yet, by the end of the war, the mismanaged soldiers of the final assault on the Redan, an action which resulted in much greater casualties, had become part of a narrative of public shame. A withdrawal of support for the ordinary soldier fighting in hopeless circumstances can be linked to a lesser interest in the infantry and siege warfare, national sensitivity towards France's performance, the timing of the assault and a narrow vision of what constituted exemplary conduct in battle. Whilst Russell was by no means the only voice, with many speaking-out and providing a more sympathetic view of the horrific ordeal endured by recruits, his interpretation of the assault has exerted greater influence over time. Yet, the final assault on the Redan is of value to military museums as a means of charting the Victorian origins of trench warfare, the confines, privations and unseen dangers of which are more commonly associated with the First World War. A comparison of the Charge with the Redan highlights the shifting nature of mid-Victorian responses to the ordinary soldier's role in defeat. A soldier's front-line efforts were manipulated as overtly courageous or simply inadequate as a result of political and cultural biases shaping responses to military failure. The weighting of current museum interpretation in relation to both episodes reveals the persistence of Victorian ideals of warfare and the soldier, mirroring its inconsistencies. These inconsistencies demonstrate the extent to which the ordinary soldier could be a prop to wider causes, in particular to bourgeois attempts to promote a more competent view of soldiering.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yuval Harari traces the origins of 'lions led by donkeys' to the War of Austrian Succession of 1740-48 (Harari 2008: 185).
- <sup>2</sup> Alison Landsberg addresses a troubled view of collective memory, as an imposed homogenous narrative, by looking at what individuals bring to mass narratives from their own perspectives in the present (Landsberg 2004: 9-21).
- <sup>3</sup> The Charge has inspired a number of articles and books venturing interpretation about who and what precipitated the blunder. They stress factors, to a greater or lesser extent, such as poor battlefield communication, exacerbated by vague orders, personal antagonism and differing views of the battle-field; incompetent leadership, fuelled by the purchase system, pride and vanity; and to a lesser extent blame has impinged on the repressed frustrations of Captain Nolan, who relayed the fateful order from the Commander-in-Chief. Speculation has endured in part due to the sudden death of Nolan at the beginning of the advance and so his intentions and exchanges with senior commanders have never been verified. Notable publications on the episode include: Cecil Woodham-Smith (1958) *The Reason Why*, London: Penguin; Mark Adkin (1996) *The Charge: Why the Light Brigade was Lost*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword; Terry Brighton (2005) *Hell Riders*, London: Penguin; J. Harris (1973) *The Gallant Six Hundred: A Tragedy of Obsessions*, London: Hutchinson; J. Sweetman (1990) *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Oxford: Osprey
- <sup>4</sup> Cardigan's lionisation for an exemplary lead down the valley was overturned by reports of his abandonment of the Light Brigade at the Russian guns. See Saul David (1998), *The Homicidal Earl: The Life of Lord Cardigan*, London: Abacus
- <sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 14 November 1854
- <sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 23 November 1854
- <sup>7</sup> USPG Archive (Rhodes House, University of Oxford) C/CRIMEA/1/f10, letter from Rev. C.E Hadow to secretary of the USPG, 6 July 1855
- <sup>8</sup> Nolan relayed the order from the Commander-in-Chief to Lord Lucan, the cavalry commander. His antagonism towards Lucan and the extent to which this was responsible for sending the Brigade in the wrong direction has been a source of speculation.
- <sup>9</sup> Comparison of *The Examiner*, 9 December 1854 and a copy of the soldier's copy held at the Tennyson Research Centre (Lincoln), TRC/P/69
- <sup>10</sup> USPG Archive (Rhodes House, University of Oxford) C/CRIMEA/1/f10, letter from Rev. C.E Hadow to secretary of the USPG, 6 July 1855
- <sup>11</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 30 October 1875
- <sup>12</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 26 October 1875
- <sup>13</sup> For example, W. Pennington (1887) *Left of Six Hundred*, London: Waterloo and Sons Ltd.; J. Nunnerley (1890), *Short Sketch of the Life of Sergeant-Major J. I. Nunnerley, Late of the Lancashire Hussars, and Formerly Sergeant of the "Death Or Glory Boys" (17th Lancers), and One of the "Six Hundred"*, Ormskirk: P. Draper and Sons.



- <sup>14</sup> *The Birmingham Post*, 7 November 2008
- <sup>15</sup> *The Guardian*, 5 November 2008
- <sup>16</sup> *The Morning Post*, 22 May 1890
- <sup>17</sup> The diary, now published, increases our understanding of the mindset of this frustrated officer. The journal reveals his passion for the cavalry and keen sense of indignation at its 'culpable inactivity' in the period leading up to the Battle of Balaclava. A. Guy and A. Massie (eds) (2010), *Expedition to the Crimea*, London: National Army Museum.
- <sup>18</sup> Crimean War display, Museum of the King's Royal Hussars (Winchester)
- <sup>19</sup> Gill Noakes, 'Bugle to Sound Again', 2004 press release, <http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/news/2004/06/balaklavabugle.htm>, accessed 5 May 2014
- <sup>20</sup> Using NAM's archival material, Professor Lara Kriegal (Indiana University) explored the cultural status of the bugle and its provenance in a paper entitled 'Who blew the Balaklava? The Politics of Presence and the Afterlife of War' given at the conference *Charting the Crimean War: Contexts, Nationhood, Afterlives* (National Army Museum, 2013)
- <sup>21</sup> National Army Museum: 1976-07-28, newspaper cuttings regarding sale of bugle
- <sup>22</sup> National Army Museum: 1976-07-28, newspaper cutting
- <sup>23</sup> National Army Museum, 'Changing the World' Gallery
- <sup>24</sup> A photograph of Peake shows him in old age wearing the same jacket. National Army Museum: 1956-10-47-7
- <sup>25</sup> *The Times*, 26 September 1855
- <sup>26</sup> At some infantry Museums, decisions about what to focus on with limited space have omitted the Crimean War altogether. Stuart Eastwood, Curator of the Border Regiment and King's Own Royal Border Regiment Museum, personal communication, 12 July 2013
- <sup>27</sup> National Army Museum, 'Changing the World' Gallery, as of 2013 (the Museum is currently undergoing refurbishment, which will see new interpretations of all its displays).
- <sup>28</sup> For secondary criticism, see, for example: R.L.V French Blake (1973), *The Crimean War* London: Sphere Books Ltd, 131; Cecil Woodham-Smith (1972), *Queen Victoria: Her Life and Times*, vol. 1, London: Hamish Hamilton., 362; Trevor Royle (1999), *Crimea*, London: Little Brown and Company, 413. Woodham-Smith, famously condemnatory of military command throughout the war, attributes the men's inertia to a lack of faith in their generals as well as the rawness of recruits.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 26 September 1855
- <sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 26 September 1855
- <sup>31</sup> *Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercury*, 30 October 1875
- <sup>32</sup> Royal Archives, VIC/MAIN/F/3/95, Extracts from General Codrington's Diary, 13 September 1855. Quoted by gracious permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Times*, 26 September 1855
- <sup>34</sup> National Army Museum: 1989-03-47-7, Letter from Brigadier-General Charles William Ridley to Maria

- <sup>35</sup> *The Lancaster Gazette*, 29 September 1855
- <sup>36</sup> *Morning Post*, 1 October 1855. During the Charge, 110 were killed outright, 130 wounded and 58 taken prisoner. The National Archives, WO 1/369 f.685
- <sup>37</sup> *Daily News*, 27 September 1855
- <sup>38</sup> *The Illustrated Times*, 29 September 1855
- <sup>39</sup> The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), [http://www.cameronians.org/regiment/regiments\\_story\\_90thperthshire.html](http://www.cameronians.org/regiment/regiments_story_90thperthshire.html), accessed 12 July 2013
- <sup>40</sup> National Army Museum: 2002-02-1409, Letter from Captain John Lewes to Major Fyers, 9 September 1855

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