

## Off the Chart: The Crimean War in British Public Consciousness

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In June 2013 I was privileged to attend the ‘Charting the Crimean War’ conference at the National Army Museum in London. It was wonderful to meet so many real historians all passionate about the Crimean War, but as a novelist my greatest sadness was in having to tell them that ‘Crimea Doesn’t Sell’.

It is hard to believe. The public appetite for military fiction continues unabated, and the Crimean has unique dramatic advantages over other wars. The politics surrounding it may be murky, but if we concentrate solely on the Crimean theatre then the rallying cry of ‘Take Sebastopol!’ provide a mission with a clear goal and a ‘hero’s journey’ any reader can understand. Three battles in six weeks are a commercial gold mine in terms of action, and among them we have such iconic events as the Charge of the Light Brigade and the stand of the ‘Thin Red Line’. There are wonderful characters too, and Fanny Duberly, Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole, and the presence of army wives all provide the female element often missing in military fiction. One would expect Crimea to ‘sell’ like the proverbial hot cakes.

Yet publishers have their doubts, and I finally have an official reason to offer for it. When HarperCollins accepted Patrick Mercer’s novel *To Do and Die* (2009), their publicity department warned him not to expect high sales on the grounds that ‘Crimea is grey’.<sup>1</sup>

In literal terms that is a surprising allegation, especially when one of the Crimean War’s earliest legacies derives from its multiplicity of colour. Quilts made from the fabric of soldiers’ uniforms were already gaining popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, but the war produced such a variety of hues and so many convalescent soldiers to sew them that all such patchwork in Europe now bears the generic name of ‘Crimean quilts’ (*Fig. 1*).

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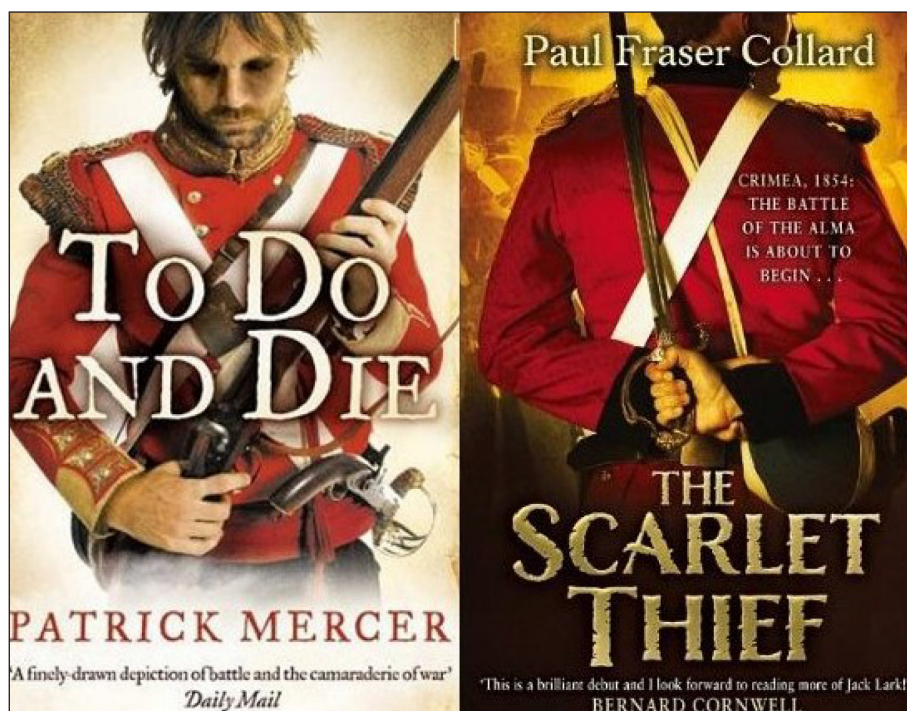
<sup>1</sup> Patrick Mercer, personal communication.



Fig. 1: Thomas William Wood, *Portrait of Private Thomas Walker*, 1856. Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons.

This may seem trivial, but colour has a unique power to seize the public imagination. The attractive palette of Crimean uniforms has ensured the war's survival in the fields of both war-gaming and re-enactment, while

one particular aspect of it has a special appeal for publishers of military fiction. The film *Zulu* started it, Bernard Cornwell's *Sharpe* novels perpetuated it, and we have only to look at these covers for two of the most recent Crimean War novels to see what is now considered vital to success in my genre (*Fig. 2*).



*Fig. 2:* Paperback cover art for *To Do and Die* and *The Scarlet Thief*. © HarperCollins Publishers and Headline Publishers.

The ubiquitous red coat. The characters' faces are averted, hidden; their individual identities lost in the universal image of the historical British soldier. Even my own otherwise very reasonable publishers took my breath away when their first attempt at cover art for *Into the Valley of Death* depicted the entire blue-clad Light Brigade in coatees of dazzling scarlet.

Bright colours can truly 'sell' a war. Director Tony Richardson knew it when his 1968 film *The Charge of the Light Brigade* replaced the respective blue and grey overalls of the 17th Lancers and 13th Light Dragoons with the red 'cherry picker' pants of the 11th Hussars. Painters have always known it, and while there are many famous paintings of Alma and Balaklava, artistic enthusiasm tails off abruptly with the Battle of Inkerman. The greatcoats are on, the red has disappeared, and the fog makes everything a universal grey.

Universal indeed, for after 5 November 1854 the greyness of the Crimean War becomes as symbolic as it is real. All the major British battles are over, and the campaign descends into the grim business of winter, sickness, privation, and the horrors of trench warfare. These are all vitally important to our understanding of the war, but HarperCollins may be right to suspect they are hard to ‘sell’ as entertainment. When struggling with the realities of cholera and dysentery in my latest Crimean novel, I was irresistibly reminded of the famous quotation by Joyce Grenfell: ‘People say, “These things really happen.” Well so does diarrhoea, but that doesn’t mean I want to see it on the stage.’<sup>2</sup>

People seem reluctant to read it in their novels too. The first significant fictional treatment of the Crimean War is G. A. Henty’s *Jack Archer* (1883), and even the acknowledged father of historical action-adventure balks at the reality of Crimea after Inkerman. Henty’s heroes are characterized by patriotic ardour and love of action, but even the Jack Archer who is ‘half out of his mind with pleasure’ at the prospect of ‘thrashing the Russians’ cannot credibly retain his innocent zeal in the winter trenches of 1855.<sup>3</sup> Henty does not try. He packs his hero off to captivity soon after Inkerman, and dismisses the hiatus with a speedy summary on Jack’s return:

The recital was a long one, and Jack was fain to admit that the hardships which he had gone through were as nothing to those which had been borne by our soldiers in the Crimea during the six months he had been away from them. (p. 243)

Indeed they were, and most of Henty’s successors in the genre have adopted similar ruses to avoid inflicting these horrors on their readership. George MacDonald Fraser’s *Flashman at the Charge* (1973) bundles its eponymous hero off to Russia straight after the Battle of Balaklava, while the hero of Patrick Mercer’s *To Do and Die* spends the worst period sick in England and returns only in time for the successful Battle of the Quarries. Paul Fraser Collard’s *The Scarlet Thief* (2013) neatly dodges the issue by concentrating on the Alma, while my own *Into the Valley of Death* (2012) ducks out swiftly after the Battle of Inkerman. Only Garry Douglas Kilworth’s *The Winter Soldiers* (2002) has really attempted to make action-adventure of the dark period, but it does so by focusing on fictional missions which keep Fancy Jack Crossman well away from the trenches.

In commercial terms, these are all wise choices. The suffering of soldiers is harrowing enough to read in William Howard Russell’s reports to *The Times*, but if a novelist adds names and personalities to the victims then the experience is all but unbearable. Perhaps the safest literary

<sup>2</sup> Anne Jesper, *Raising Good Children* (London: Lutterworth Press, 2004), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> G. A. Henty, *Jack Archer* (Fairfield: 1st World Publishing, 2005), p. 16.



approach is that taken by Katherine McMahon in *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007), where the siege is shown in clear, even graphic detail, but still remains principally a grim and turbulent backdrop to the tragic love story played in foreground. Beryl Bainbridge created an even more searing reality in her award-winning *Master Georgie* (1999), where she uses the siege as a crucible in the character journeys of three different narrators, but despite enormous critical acclaim, the novel proved less popular with her regular readers. *Guardian* reviewer Carrie O'Grady may have identified the reason for this when she claimed the novel was (unsurprisingly) 'a little joyless, a little lacking in natural exuberance'.<sup>4</sup> 'Joyless' is a fairer word than HarperCollins's 'grey', but the point is just the same: danger is exciting, tragedy is cathartic, but there is little entertainment in relentless misery.

Yet, paradoxically, it is this very misery that has given the war its arguably most enduring legacy. The greater the suffering, the greater the glory to those who alleviate it, and the Crimean is perhaps the first war in which the most memorable heroes were medical rather than military. Many of the nurses are still known and celebrated today, notably Elizabeth 'Betsi' Cadwaladr in Wales and the newly 'Venerable' Frances Taylor in England, but first among them has to be the one name from the Crimean War which almost everyone still recognizes: that of Florence Nightingale herself.<sup>5</sup> As Mike Hinton's article in this issue demonstrates, her medical achievements (or lack of them) are still hotly debated among historians, but her story, her gender, and, above all, her nickname of 'The Lady with the Lamp' have all propelled her to the status of an icon. National heroines are especially rare, and Nightingale is accordingly memorialized in her own museum, an annual commemoration service at Westminster Abbey, and even in her portrait on the British ten-pound banknote. At the unveiling of her Derbyshire statue in 1914, the Mayor of Derby described it as a memorial 'to one of the world's greatest women'.<sup>6</sup>

But Nightingale was not the only woman to rise to prominence in Crimea, and in recent years the name of Mary Seacole has done almost as much to restore the war to public consciousness. Controversy rages about both her achievements and the suggestion that history has ignored her on

<sup>4</sup> Carrie O'Grady, 'Master Georgie by Beryl Bainbridge — Review', *Guardian*, April 1999 (republ. 20 April 2011) <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/20/master-georgie-beryl-bainbridge-review>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Simon Caldwell, 'English Nurse who Tended Soldiers in Crimean War Declared Venerable', *Catholic Herald*, 16 June 2014 <<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/06/16/english-nurse-who-tended-soldiers-in-crimean-war-declared-venerable/>> [accessed 24 April 2015].

<sup>6</sup> 'Lady of the Lamp, Memorial Statue Unveiled, Derbyshire Tribute to Florence Nightingale', *Derby Mercury*, 19 June 1914, quoted at <[http://www.picturethepast.org.uk/frontend.php?keywords=Ref\\_No\\_increment;EQUALS;DRBY005002&pos=2&action=zoom](http://www.picturethepast.org.uk/frontend.php?keywords=Ref_No_increment;EQUALS;DRBY005002&pos=2&action=zoom)> [accessed 24 April 2015].

the grounds of race, but the very publicity of the debate has catapulted her to a position where a commentator on one of my blogs claimed that Seacole's was the *only* name from the Crimean War with which she was familiar.

It could be argued there is a degree of rightness in this. Mary Seacole was neither qualified nurse nor well-born lady, but her very 'ordinariness' is precisely what makes her such a fitting heroine for this war. It could fairly be said that while generals and politicians failed the soldiers in Crimea, it was always the amateurs and volunteers who came to their rescue. William Howard Russell alerted the public to their suffering; Samuel Morton Peto, Edward Betts, and Thomas Brassey built them a railway; Florence Nightingale went out to nurse them, Alexis Soyer to cook for them, and a Jamaican woman called Mary Jane Seacole packed her bags and went to the battlefields to provide them with home comforts. She was technically only a sutler, and Nightingale may well have been right to suspect her of providing the men with drink, but the soldiers loved her, the public took her to their hearts, and in 1867 even the Queen and Prince of Wales subscribed to the Seacole Fund for her benefit.<sup>7</sup>

If this celebration of the ordinary seems strange to our perception of class-driven Victorian England, we have only to look at the parallels in Russia to realize it was a general feature of the Crimean War. As Yulia Naumova's article reveals, the Russian Army Medical Department was under just as much scrutiny, but while the great medical hero of Sebastopol was surely Surgeon Nikolay Pirogov, whose work during the siege earned him the international soubriquet of 'the father of field surgery', the name most beloved of the public was that of Darya Lavrentyevna Mikhailova, or simply 'Dasha of Sebastopol'. Dasha, like Seacole, was unqualified, and had only been a laundress and needlewoman before the war, but she is alleged to have ventured out with little more than vinegar and strips of her own clothing to dress the wounded Russian soldiers on the battlefield. Like Seacole, she was honoured by the highest in the land, receiving not only the Order of St Vladimir from the Tsar himself, but also a pension of 500 silver roubles, and a further 1,000 on her marriage to a private soldier. Dasha is remembered with pride to this day, and her bust is featured on the outside wall of the museum housing Roubaud's great panorama of the defence of Sebastopol (*Fig. 3*).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> An account of her 'rapturous' reception by former Crimean War soldiers can be found in 'The Dinner to the Guards', *The Times*, 26 August 1856, p. 7, quoted in Ron Ramdin, *Mary Seacole* (London: Haus, 2005), p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Little has so far been published about 'Dasha', but the Russian article that revived her story for modern scholars is A. D. Tiuliandin, [Dasha Sevastopolskaia, 'First Sister of Mercy'], *Meditsinskaia sestra*, 41.12 (1982), 60–61.



*Fig. 3: Bust of Dasha Sevastopolskaya on the Panorama Museum, Sebastopol.*  
© Andrew Butko, CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Dasha, however, was serving on her own ground, and the involvement of British civilians is far more significant. Few could emulate Seacole and go to Crimea themselves, but the scale of the public response to Russell's reports was unprecedented, and marks the beginning of a shift in consciousness which would change forever the way in which the British

public looked at war. Tai-Chun Ho shows how the seeds had already been sown by works like ‘The Soldier’s Dream’ by Thomas Campbell, but Russell’s passionate complaint lifted public concern to new heights, and added to it the new glamour of patriotism. Indeed, what Anthony Dawson now reveals to be his false perception of French logistical superiority may even have been a deliberate attempt to exploit the ancient rivalry between these national allies. Poor conditions for British soldiers were bad enough for Russell’s readers, but that they should be worse than the French would be intolerable.

The immediate effects of his reports are well known. People flocked to donate to *The Times*’s ‘Sick and Wounded Fund’, but Lord Ellesmere’s ‘Crimean Army Fund’ required more personal contributions, and received an equally enthusiastic response. On 2 December 1854 Lady Charlotte Bridgeman wrote in her journal:

We are all better with the desire to do something for the poor soldiers in the Crimea & hearing that Lord Wilton, Lord Ellesmere & some others are fitting out a yacht with warm clothing & other comforts, which is to start in a fortnight, we have all frantically begun knitting muffetees & comforters, have written to ask several people to do the same & Lady B. has been buying flannel for the schools to make up & stockings to be knitted.<sup>9</sup>

Even Russell was startled by the tsunami of goodwill unleashed by his own rhetoric, and while he never uses the word ‘coddling’ to describe the new treatment of the troops we can feel it trembling on the end of his nib:

The camp was a sea of abundance, filled with sheep and sheepskins, wooden huts, furs, comforters, mufflers, flannel shirts, tracts, soups, preserved meats, potted game, and spirits. Nay, it was even true that a store of Dalby’s Carminative, of respirators, and of jujubes, had been sent out to the troops [...]. Had things gone on at this rate we might soon have heard complaints that our Grenadiers had been left for several days without their Godfrey’s Cordial and Soothing Syrup, and that the Dragoons had been shamefully ill-supplied with Daffy’s Elixir.<sup>10</sup>

Nor was this the end of it. The public’s concern grew dormant as the crisis passed, but it never died completely and took only the smallest spark to

<sup>9</sup> Lady Charlotte Bridgeman, *Journals* (2 December 1854) <<http://ladycharlottesdiaries.co.uk/Journal/Select.php?Year=1854&Month=12&Day=2>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

<sup>10</sup> William Howard Russell, *The British Expedition to the Crimea* (London: Routledge, 1877), p. 238.



reignite. As Lara Kriegel points out, Rudyard Kipling's 'The Last of the Light Brigade' (1890) was a damning indictment of the way in which yesterday's heroes had been abandoned to 'the streets and the workhouse', and the public response was immediate. A 'Light Brigade Relief Fund' was set up under the aegis of the *St James's Gazette*; the Marquis of Hartington wrote to *The Times* requesting donations, and fund-raising dinners and entertainments were instantly devised. Even the Americans became involved, and the newly formed Edison Company made three commemorative wax-cylinder recordings to encourage donations: Tennyson declaiming 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', Martin Lanfried sounding the charge on a Light Brigade bugle, and a special greeting from Florence Nightingale herself. By March 1891, the Relief committee had raised enough money for grants to the most needy, with a surplus of £3,000 to create annuities for the future.<sup>11</sup>

There was to be no going back. In 1892 Parliament was sufficiently shamed to introduce pensions for all veterans with ten years' service, but by the time the next military crisis erupted in the Second Boer War there was no longer any question as to where to look for help. The *Daily Mail* commissioned a poem by Kipling — 'The Absent-Minded Beggar' (1899) — to which Arthur Sullivan set a tune 'guaranteed to pull the teeth out of barrel-organs' and the resulting fund-raising bonanza yielded a staggering £300,000, which would equate to at least seven million pounds today.<sup>12</sup>

This, in my opinion, is one of the most significant legacies of the Crimean War, and it rises directly out of the misery HarperCollins calls 'grey'. Russell's reports had put human faces on Britain's soldiers, and the public were never again able to 'unsee' them. These were Queen Victoria's soldiers, as Rachel Bates clearly demonstrates, and when a monarch formed a personal relationship with her own troops then loyal subjects were bound to follow. Florence Nightingale's example had done even more, and her iconic picture in the *Illustrated London News* presented an astonishing image of a nicely brought-up English lady tending to rough men in their night-clothes. These were ordinary private soldiers, but if Miss Nightingale thought it her Christian duty to care for them, then anyone could do the same.

The word 'Christian' is crucial. Victorian evangelism under the leadership of William Wilberforce and Hannah More was already humanizing the 'lower orders' out of the status of brute beasts, and it seems only

<sup>11</sup> Roy Dutton, *Forgotten Heroes: The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Oxon: InfoDial, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself and Other Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Thomas Pinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 88; Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 329.

natural that this should be extended to Britain's soldiery.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the soldiers themselves were changing, and while the Duke of Wellington's men had been considered 'the scum of the earth [...] enlisted for drink', Queen Victoria's were frequently and overtly Christian.<sup>14</sup> Not all, of course, and we must make allowances for pious lip service in pieces meant for publication, but Russell himself had been struck by hearing common soldiers pray aloud before the Alma, while the death of evangelical Captain Hedley Vicars inspired such moving letters from his men that the bereaved family included them in his memorial. This, as Trev Broughton shows, was carefully crafted by Catherine Marsh for widespread appeal, but the letters are real, and this from Private James Kelly of the Coldstream Guards (formerly a Crystal Palace workman) is typical of their tone:

He is gone to sleep in Jesus. I wish I had been by his side and seen him all asleep. But I know that he is in greater glory than is to be had in this world [...]. But I will put no trust in princes to get me to heaven; but I look on the blood of Jesus on the cross. I will trust in Him, and He will never forsake me.<sup>15</sup>

Yet what is perhaps most important about these letters is the fact they were written at all. In 1858 the Lefroy Report claimed that only about twenty per cent of the army could neither read nor write, and this growing literacy was already giving soldiers a real voice.<sup>16</sup> The public's view of the Napoleonic wars had been largely shaped by generals and politicians, but now NCOs and private soldiers were writing their memoirs and even having their letters published in the newspapers. It became harder for the British public to see their soldiers as mere cannon fodder when they were reading, 'Please God, I will be home before long', from a sergeant of artillery in the *Sunderland Times*.<sup>17</sup>

The implications of this reverberated long after the war was over. Even ordinary soldiers were now seen as Christian men and brothers, and the Crimean is the first war where Britain made a serious effort to respect

<sup>13</sup> There are particularly relevant studies in Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

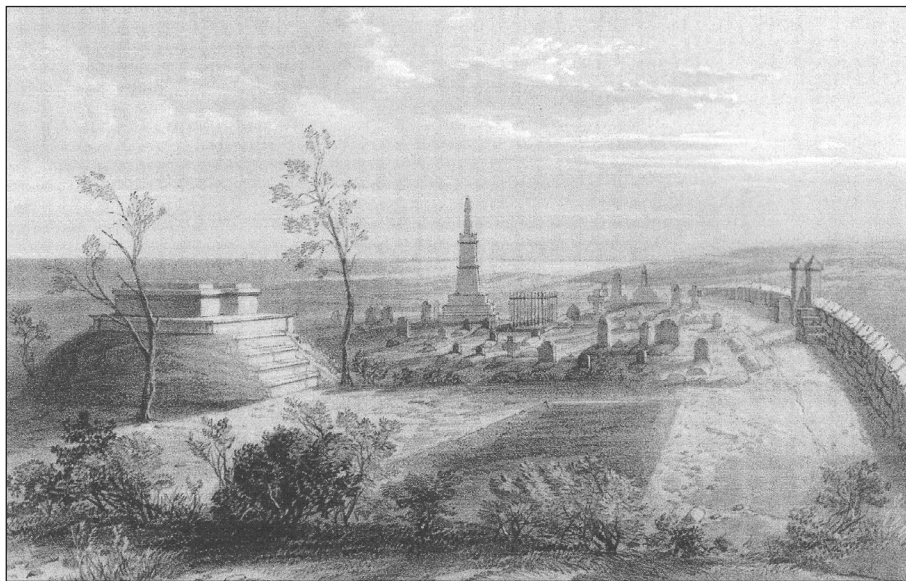
<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Philip Henry, 5th Earl Stanhope, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington 1831–1851* (London, Murray, 1888), p. 14

<sup>15</sup> [Catherine Marsh], *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars, Ninety Seventh Regiment* (London: Nisbet, 1856), p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by E. A. Smith, 'Educating the Soldier in the Nineteenth Century Part II', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 66 (1988), 35–45 (p. 39).

<sup>17</sup> Henry Tyrrell, 'The Present Expedition against Russian Aggression in the East', in *England's Battles by Sea and Land*, ed. by William Freke, 3 vols (London: London Printing and Publishing, 1857), 1, 335.

her fallen of all ranks. Proper burial was impractical after the Battle of the Alma, where most ended in the kind of mass graves typical of the Napoleonic wars, but the long Siege of Sebastopol afforded the opportunity for more traditional obsequies, and divisional graveyards gradually took on the look of pretty country churchyards (*Fig. 4*). Most of the headstones are predictably for senior officers, but John Colborne and Frederic Brine's *The Last of the Brave* (1857) lists many markers for NCOs, private soldiers, and even women and children.



*Fig. 4:* E. Walker, *Graveyard of Second Brigade, Light Division*, 1856. John Colborne and Frederic Brine, *The Last of the Brave; or, Resting Places of Our Fallen Heroes in the Crimea and at Scutari* (London: Ackermann, 1857), facing p. 6.

If anything, the plan was too ambitious. Britain had cheerfully appropriated more than thirty square miles of prime Crimean agricultural land to accommodate her dead, and despite what seem to have been the best efforts of the Russian government, it is scarcely surprising that a process of 'reclamation' began soon after the departure of the Army of the East. What is perhaps more worthy of note is that the British public were concerned by it. Glenn Fisher has given a splendidly detailed account of the campaign, which found champions in Nightingale, Russell, the Duke of Cambridge, and even the Prince of Wales himself; and although the efforts of successive governments achieved little in reality, the Crimean war graves were nonetheless acknowledged as a formal responsibility.<sup>18</sup> The Imperial War Graves

<sup>18</sup> Glenn Fisher, 'Resting Places of our Fallen Heroes in the Crimea', *War Correspond-*

Commission took it over from 1923, and it is only in the last fifty years that its successor, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, has permitted the touchy subject to disappear without trace.

But it still simmers in the public mind, and we can see its legacy clearly in the changing face of Britain's war memorials. Major commemorations before the 1850s tend to be either grand architectural features or statues of the commanders in suitably warlike poses, but the focus of the Crimean War Memorial in Waterloo Place is the men themselves. The reason may simply be that John Bell's work was originally tended specifically as a memorial to the Guards, but the presentation is strikingly different from any that preceded it, and has set the pattern for all that would follow (*Fig. 5*). There is nothing jubilant about these figures. They are grim, even sombre, and the eyes of the outer pair are actually downcast. The sculpture honours sacrifice rather than victory, and these figures make clear exactly whose it was.



*Fig. 5:* John Bell, Detail from Crimean War Memorial, Waterloo Place, London, 1861. A. L. Berridge.

And again, there was no going back. Boer War memorials also focus on the men, some even visibly wounded and bandaged, and if the London Cenotaph is visually plain, its emphasis is still entirely on the men who

*ent*, 27.4 (2010), 36–48.



gave their lives. That view is now so deeply rooted in British culture that while many countries celebrate a Memorial Day with flags and marching bands, the British Remembrance Day focuses on sacrifice and a hope for future peace. It is true that official commemoration begins only with the two World Wars, but it was the lessons of Crimea that ensured the British public never again forgot the real cost of war.

There are, of course, many more tangible memorials. Surviving 'trophy cannon' captured from Sebastopol are still displayed at towns like Chelmsford, Ely, Ludlow, Dudley, and even Eton College, while if 'Alma' is no longer a popular Christian name for British girls, it is still a more common title for a public house than even 'Waterloo'. Indeed the great names of Alma, Inkerman, and Balaklava can be found on streets, estates, and even almshouses; and when the BBC sought a typically British suburban address for Eric Sykes and Hattie Jacques in the TV comedy series *Sykes* (1972–79), they famously plumped for 28 Sebastopol Terrace. All these things suggest a major war which Britain imagined would never be forgotten.

Yet in some respects I fear it already has. The names themselves may be everywhere, but they are written on signs rather than in the national memory, and history itself has moved on. All earlier conflicts have been eclipsed by the cataclysm of the First World War, and it is perhaps symbolic that so many of the original 'trophy cannon' were melted down for the war effort in the Second. The Remembrance Day service commemorates only those conflicts fought since 1914, and earlier wars are ignored as if they had never been.

Perhaps that is the natural way of things, but I question whether it does justice to the impact of the Crimean War in Britain. The tragedy of 1914–18 is certainly on a far larger scale, but as Dan Snow has recently pointed out, the 11.8 per cent British mortality rate in the First World War is considerably lower than the figure of 19 per cent yielded by official statistics for the Crimean.<sup>19</sup> It is true the Crimean is a much smaller, localized affair, but its impressive number of 'firsts' (including first war correspondent, war photographer, hospital train, army telegraph, transport corps, use of ironclads and anti-personnel mines, and even the first major trench warfare) are more than enough to give it global significance. The Crimean War can be seen as a kind of catalyst in national memory, sparking dozens of notable reactions but remaining itself dark and obscure, the province of historians rather than the general public.

Some of this may simply be a problem of accessibility. Roger Fenton's posed photographs cannot rival graphic battle footage from more recent conflicts, while the kind of battlefield tours that have given modern immediacy to the First World War were for a long time impossible in a Crimea

<sup>19</sup> Dan Snow, '10 Big Myths about World War One Debunked', *BBC Magazine*, 25 February 2014 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25776836>> [accessed 19 April 2015]; John Sweetman, *Essential Histories: The Crimean War 1854–1856* (Oxford: Osprey, 2001), p. 89.

‘out of bounds’ behind the Iron Curtain. Yet popular culture can transcend these difficulties, and the example of Cy Endfield’s *Zulu* (1964) proves how easily a single blockbusting film or novel can lift the most obscure conflict into the height of public awareness. The question remaining is why no one has yet achieved this for the Crimean War.

There is at least one obvious reason. The Napoleonic wars are chiefly remembered for the decisive victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo, but there was no such thing in the Crimean. Despite our successes in the Black Sea, we fared less well in the White Sea, Azov, and the Baltic, and even the fall of Sebastopol itself can scarcely be credited to the British. The public response to this can again be gauged by the work of painters in the period, who pounced happily on the visual opportunity of Kerch but largely ignored the final fall of Sebastopol. What patriotic Victorian gentleman wanted to look at a picture of the British weltering at the Redan while the French successfully stormed the Malakoff? Painters, like novelists and filmmakers, steer clear of the siege after Inkerman because it lacks the ‘happy ending’ necessary for commercial success.

Trudi Tate’s study has already explored the ambivalent response to that ending, which indeed casts a darker light over the entire siege. It might have been bitterness at the British failure that led Captain Earle of the 57th to write, ‘I have seen more joy in the army after the taking of a rifle-pit than after the fall of Sevastopol’, but what really shook the conquering armies was what they found inside the town itself.<sup>20</sup> For the first time they saw the shattered ruins in which the gallant defenders had fought for so long, and the devastating carnage they themselves had wrought on the dead and dying who lay in heaps in ‘every possible attitude of agony’.<sup>21</sup> Even Sergeant Timothy Gowing, who writes with frank enjoyment of the looting in the captured town, was compelled to record that ‘the sights on all sides melted to tears many veterans who had resolutely stormed the heights of Alma’.<sup>22</sup> The British army was by now well fed, well clothed, and well equipped, and we need not invoke their much-vaunted love of ‘fair play’ to understand why their accounts of the fall are tinged less with jubilation than with shame.

It is hard not to feel the same today. W. Baring Pemberton takes it even further in his *Battles of the Crimean War* when he writes:

For almost exactly a year the Russians — ‘what plucky troops they were’, ejaculated the future General Gordon — had put

<sup>20</sup> Lt A. M. Earle, 57th (West Middlesex) Regiment of Foot, Crimea, 1854–1856, letters, London, National Army Museum (NAM), 1994-03-153.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Clifford, VC, *His Letters and Sketches from the Crimea* (London: Joseph, 1956), p. 264.

<sup>22</sup> T. Gowing, *A Soldier’s Experience; or, A Voice from the Ranks* (Nottingham: Forman, 1892), p. 168.

forth a defence which evoked the admiration not only of their enemies but of the whole world. And now they were gone, with dignity and with honour, having tended our wounded as they lay in the Redan and put water within their reach.<sup>23</sup>

Even that withdrawal has a heroic drama to it. In the course of a single night, the entire population of the town was secretly and silently evacuated over a hastily constructed floating bridge while their homes were set ablaze behind them. It is a great human story, and as I stood in front of Roubaud's moving *Last Look* in Sebastopol I could not help a pang of novelist's regret that I was writing from the point of view of the British rather than the Russians (*Fig. 6*).



*Fig. 6:* Franz Roubaud, *Last Look*, 1901–02. Museum of the Black Sea Fleet History, Sebastopol. A. L. Berridge.

And therein lies the heart of the problem. Whatever the politics behind the British invasion of Crimea, it is difficult to write a sympathetic viewpoint of a besieging force pitted against men, women, and children defending their homes. Writers can try to counter with well-documented Russian atrocities, but nothing matches the power of Tolstoy's images from beleaguered Sebastopol, where a girl in a pink dress hops across a shattered street, and the strains of an old waltz mingle with the sound of shells.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> W. Baring Pemberton, *Battles of the Crimean War* (London: Batsford, 1962), p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Tolstoy, 'Sebastopol in December', in *The Sebastopol Sketches*, trans. by David

For if the ‘Siege of Sebastopol’ struggles to find popular appeal, the ‘Defence of Sebastopol’ does not. Crimea itself bristles with memorials and museums to the nineteenth-century conflict, and while the supposed victors of the war have quietly forgotten it, the losers celebrate it to this day. Much of Sebastopol was destroyed in the Second World War but the site of every bastion has been marked and memorialized, and even the harbour contains a monument to the sunken ships that saved the town from the Allied Fleet in 1854. The central feature is Number 4 Bastion (the Flagstaff) where the gabion defences have been painstakingly recreated and openings to the original Russian countermines have been preserved. One is given special prominence, and purports to be the very sap in which Todleben crouched on 30 January 1855 to listen to the digging of the approaching French (*Fig. 7*).



*Fig. 7:* Opening to countermine preserved at Number 4 Bastion, Sebastopol.  
A. L. Berridge.

But Number 4 is also home to the war’s greatest attraction: the Panorama Museum of the Defence of Sebastopol, where Franz Roubaud’s spectacular all-round mural of the siege is supplemented by objects in the foreground to create a three-dimensional experience (*Fig. 8*).

McDuff (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 39–58 (pp. 44, 57).





*Fig. 8:* Franz Roubaud, *Panorama of the Heroic Defence of Sebastopol*, 1905.  
A. L. Berridge.

To stand inside the Panorama is to understand why the Crimean War holds such a special place in Russia's national consciousness. Russian performance was as patchy as Britain's, marred by the same problems of poor commanders, dreadful communication, and inadequate supplies, but at the heart of it lies the astonishing heroism of this gallant defence. At 349 days it lasted longer even than the second siege of 1941–42 and is considered to bear its own credit for Sebastopol's official designation as a 'Hero City'.

Perhaps we should not read too much into this enthusiasm. There is bound to be greater awareness in the country where the central conflict was actually fought, and had it taken place in London we would surely have marked it in much the same way. Yet there is more in Crimea than physical memorials, and I was startled not only at the number of readers I encountered in the Crimean War section of the Tolstoy Library, but also at the sheer number of books. The knowledge was alive too, and no fewer than three academics rushed to help me learn where the Light Brigade prisoners presented to Menshikov would have been taken, while another gave up an entire afternoon to walk me round the battlefield of the Alma. The Crimean War is more than a curiosity or tourist attraction here, but a vital part of national history to be subjected to constant study.

It is the 'national' element that matters most, as can be deduced from the behaviour of other countries which have taken possession of Sebastopol. The Cold War did not affect Russian respect for Britain's role in the Crimean War, but in 1954 Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine and one of the first actions of the new authorities was to bulldoze the last remaining British cemetery at Cathcart's Hill and build houses over the top. The Crimean War was Russian rather than Ukrainian history, and as such immediately less worthy of preservation.

Perhaps even more significant are the events of the German occupation from 1942 to 1944. The Nazis were already known for humiliating conquered nations by destroying evidence of their past glories, and they made no exception of Sebastopol. The statue of Todleben was one of the first to have its head struck off, but the smirks of the vandals were almost immediately wiped from their faces by the horrible revelation that the great Defender of Sebastopol was in fact German. A new head was sculpted at frantic speed in Germany to be restored to its rightful place on the honoured trunk, but the haste was again the conqueror's undoing, for while the new head boasted the correct hat for the period, no one had noticed the statue already depicted Todleben's own hat clasped firmly in his left hand. The now desperate Germans commissioned another hatless head, but the whole operation had proved so risky and expensive that further vandalism was halted and much of Sebastopol's statuary was saved for posterity.

It is a revealing incident. The same man, the same achievements, but when Todleben was Russian he could be defiled, and when German he must be glorified. The responses of Russia, Ukraine, and Germany all make clear that time and distance are of little importance to historical consciousness, and what matters most is national pride.

And that, perhaps, is the most important explanation for Britain's own neglect of the Crimean War. The two World Wars can be hailed as battles for freedom against aggression, but the Crimean is a war of outdated imperialism for which Britain now feels only embarrassment. The Russians' cause was no better, but they have the advantage of being able to blame it on the old regime of the Tsars, where Britain carries the burden of its colonial past as something for which it must always apologize. People remember what they want to remember, and few have any desire to remember shame.

Unfortunately there is shame in almost everything about the Crimean War. The military incompetence, jingoism, casual racism, and snobbery are all qualities the British public would rather forget, and yet these are exactly the aspects of the Crimean War highlighted in its one modern representation in the cinema. Tony Richardson's 1968 film *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is a brutally satirical account of the Crimean expedition up to the Battle of Balaklava, and while its stylish anti-war message won it six

BAFTA nominations, it is scarcely surprising that it failed to recoup even half its original budget at the box office. The film is remorselessly negative, concentrating on the fictional frolics of Nolan, Cardigan, and Mrs Duberly within the context of a stifflingly class-ridden and incompetent army, and the dominant images are the recurrent animations based on *Punch* cartoons which exhibit British nationalism at its worst.

There is truth in all of Richardson's criticisms. The cartoons of British Lion and Russian Bear, for instance, were indeed used to whip up aggressive war fever in Britain, and the iconography has become so deeply embedded in the national consciousness that modern cartoonists like Dave Brown of the *Independent* have been able to adapt them to the current Crimean crisis in full confidence that readers will recognize them for what they are (*Fig. 9*).



*Fig. 9:* © Dave Brown, *Russian Bear*, *Independent*, 18 March 2014.

Yet these images are only part of the truth, and to let them define the Crimean War would be as wrong as to define the First World War by the early caricatures of murderous Huns. Demonizing by race played no part in the famous Christmas truces of 1914 and 1915, but such fraternization was almost a regular occurrence in Crimea. Rival picquets left messages and gifts for each other, opposing artillery teams set secret competitions, and Russell even records a friendly encounter which ended with a Russian calling out, 'Français, Anglais, Russes, nous sommes tous amis' (p. 211).

Indeed, there is more truth in that quotation than *Punch* would have cared to admit, for the real racism in Crimea was directed less against the Russians than against Britain's own supposed allies, the Turks. Timothy Gowing wrote that 'we were going out to defend a rotten cause, a race that almost every Christian despises', and after the Turks' unfairly perceived failure at the Battle of Balaklava, this initial grumbling Islamophobia expressed itself in open contempt (p. 18). Somerset Calthorpe describes yet another incident of fraternization in which the following exchange took place:

1st Russian soldier: 'Englise bono!'  
 1st English soldier: 'Ruskie bono!'  
 2nd Russian soldier: 'Francis bono!'  
 2nd English soldier: 'Bono!'  
 3rd Russian soldier: 'Oslem no bono!'  
 3rd English soldier: 'Ah, ah! Turk no bono!'  
 1st Russian soldier: 'Oslem!' making a face, and spitting on the ground, to show his contempt.<sup>25</sup>

The race issue is therefore far more complex than Richardson's film suggests, and while British soldiers were happy to hate the 'despot' of the Tsar, there was little active hostility towards either Russia or Russians. This was even more so with the officers, and Calthorpe relates one particular incident when Admiral Dundas sent his opposite number a Cheshire cheese rather than a roundshot, because they had been friends in Athens before the war (p. 207).

But as with race, so with class, and Richardson's film predictably presents the class system in Britain's army at its hidebound and snobbish worst. Again, there is undeniable truth in the charge, and Lt Col Frederick Dallas doubtless spoke for others when he wrote in a letter home: 'As regards ourselves, I find what I always expected and knew: that gentlemen can bear discomfort and privation better than the lower orders.'<sup>26</sup> But Dallas wrote this on 16 September, and as the siege wears on we see his attitude change. Even by 26 November he writes with every appearance of sincerity: 'The greatest trial here is seeing the sufferings of our men, without in any way being able to alleviate them. They are positively worked to death' (p. 51).

Nor was he alone in his concern. There are numerous eyewitness accounts of officers helping their sick and wounded men, and Russell even saw a young officer of the 38th Foot carrying one end of a laden transport pole to take the place 'of a tired man' (p. 197). Shared hardships broke

<sup>25</sup> [Somerset John Gough Calthorpe], *Letters from Head-Quarters; or, The Realities of the War in the Crimea*, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1858), II, 48–49.

<sup>26</sup> Lt Col George Frederick Dallas, *Eyewitness in the Crimea*, ed. by Michael Hargreaves Mawson (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), p. 33.



down barriers once considered impregnable, and by the war's end only the most snobbish of officers retained the aristocratic distance of the beginning. Yet the beginning is often all we have, and the reluctance of writers like myself to look further than Inkerman has meant that many popular perceptions are based entirely on what the protagonists were like at the very start.

In such circumstances omission is a form of distortion, and this is not the only one in Richardson's *Charge*. Inspired by Cecil Woodham-Smith's seminal work *The Reason Why* (1953), the film concentrates on the characters of the key protagonists whose actions led to the famous blunder in the North Valley at Balaklava, but in doing so it neglects the men who would be most affected by it. It is an understandable focus and a fascinating subject, but it has still helped perpetuate the misleading perception that the British soldiers in Crimea were mere passive creatures, victims of incompetent command and callous government, poor tragic fellows to be killed by incompetence or nursed to health by Florence Nightingale.

And again, that is only half the truth. No one would deny the troops' suffering, nor the unnecessary deaths caused by military folly and commissariat inadequacies, but these things do not deprive them of character or will. What would be the value of St Arnaud's exhortation before the Alma, 'I hope you will fight well today', without the Connaught Rangers' response of 'Shure, your honour, we will, don't we always fight well?' (Gowing, p. 36). Would Sir Colin Campbell's injunction to the Highlanders to 'die where you stand' be so memorable without the 93rd's response of, 'Ay, ay, Sir Colin, we'll do that'?<sup>27</sup> It is true that disobedience was never an option for these men, but that does not discount the courage with which they carried out their orders, nor the fact that they sometimes pursued them to a victory their commanders had not deserved. Indeed, arguably their finest performance was at Inkerman, where fog and confusion rendered moot the orders of their commanders, and it was left to field officers and ordinary men to win what is still called the 'Soldiers' Battle'. It was not the reports of Russell but the quality of the men themselves that led not only to the creation of the Victoria Cross, but also to the commission that would later institute the far-reaching Cardwell Reforms.

Yet this is scarcely remembered today, and the distortion of history is shown most clearly in depictions of the charge itself. Contrary to the impression of 'lambs to the slaughter' offered in the 1968 film, survivors like Thomas Hutton of the 4th Light Dragoons and John Richardson of the 11th Hussars made it clear not only that every man in the brigade knew exactly the 'trap that was laid' for them, but that they rode into it anyway, retreated only when ordered, and told Lord Cardigan afterwards that they

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<sup>27</sup> Surgeon-General Munro, *Reminiscences of Military Service with the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders* (London: Hurst & Blackett 1883), p. 35.

were willing to ‘go again’.<sup>28</sup> More than that, and as Terry Brighton has recently argued, they fought both Cossack battery and cavalry so effectively that they took the position and might well have held it if Lucan had not turned the Heavies from support (pp. 295–302). This is surely heroism, and we do these men an injustice if we forget it.

We also do injustice to history, for while the Crimean War may not be the HarperCollins ‘grey’, neither is it black and white. Few would wish either to defend the Charge of the Light Brigade or to glorify the tragedy of war, but if we are right to acknowledge the worst truths about this conflict, then we ought in honesty to acknowledge the good things too. Indeed, the truth has its own advantages. The Crimean War is neglected in popular culture because it seems something of which Britain should only be ashamed, but writers and film-makers might have more success if they also presented those qualities of which Britain can be justly proud. Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole are remembered for precisely that reason, and I only hope a better writer than I will come along and achieve the same immortality for the rest.

I hope it will happen soon, for after 160 years the Crimean War is beginning to look like a story whose time has come. Perhaps the opening of Sebastopol to the public made a difference, but in recent years the British Embassy at Kiev has been inundated with complaints about the state of the British Memorial at Cathcart’s Hill; the Royal British Legion and War Memorials Trust have joined the Victorian Society in pressing Sheffield to restore its own Crimean War Memorial; at least two British councils have restored local graves of Crimean War heroes; and the controversy over the proposed statue of Mary Seacole at St Thomas’ Hospital has seen letters about the Crimean War appearing once again in the pages of *The Times*.<sup>29</sup> Neither is the interest purely commemorative. The sale of Lord Raglan’s Crimean collection and troubles of the latest Lord Cardigan have kept Crimea in the newspapers; Patrick Mercer is in talks about both film and television treatments of the war; while 2012 saw two unrelated novels published about the conflict, and Penguin have asked me for a sequel. Interest in the war was already bubbling up to the surface of public consciousness even before the events of February 2014 catapulted it straight back into the headlines.

It remains there even as I write this, and objective historical knowledge of the Crimean War has never been more important. Russia certainly remembers it. Maybe it is memory of the British cry to ‘Take Sebastopol!’

<sup>28</sup> Terry Brighton, *Hell Riders: The Truth about the Charge of the Light Brigade* (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> In November 2013 *The Times* published letters by two Florence Nightingale biographers on consecutive days: Mark Bostridge on 4 November (p. 33) and Hugh Small on 5 November (p. 35).

that fuels Moscow's fear of NATO expansion near the base of the Black Sea Fleet. Maybe Russian wariness of the Crimean Tatars is sparked by memory of the way in which they once spied for the British and pointed out ethnic Russians for rape and murder by the victorious Turks at Kerch.<sup>30</sup> And maybe Western Europe should remember too, for Sebastopol's grip on Russian national consciousness is no longer of mere academic interest, but of urgent international concern.

It seems the initiative of the University of Leicester and the National Army Museum in bringing together historians of the Crimean War could not have been more timely. I hope that by the time this article is published both the danger and the conflict will be over, but it is still a sharp reminder of the importance of Crimea's history, and provides one last reason why we should fight to ensure its place on the chart of public consciousness for future generations to come.

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen M. Harris, *British Military Intelligence in the Crimean War 1854–1856* (London: Cass, 1999), p. 68; 'The Kertch [*sic*] Expedition: Dreadful Turkish Atrocities', *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* (NSW), 13 October 1855, supplement, p. 1.