

Who Blew the Balaklava Bugle?: The Charge of the Light Brigade and the Afterlife of the Crimean War

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Of battles and bugles

‘Just who DID blow the bugle that sounded the Charge of the Light Brigade on the battlefield at Balaklava in 1854?’ So Edward Vale, a correspondent for the *Daily Mirror*, enquired in April 1964. Vale’s query was occasioned by an auction at Sotheby’s, where a coiled bugle blown by Trumpet Major William Brittain was sold for sixteen hundred pounds. The young trumpeter was severely wounded on the field of battle, meeting his death just a few months later in hospital. His brief life notwithstanding, Brittain would achieve immortality as the member of the 17th Regiment who sounded the charge. Across the century, his bugle passed through various hands. In 1964, it was purchased by British actor Laurence Harvey and American television personality Ed Sullivan in a transaction that married the mechanisms of consumer culture to the pursuit of treasured relics. They became its possessors at a sale that attracted great interest, one that attained a drama that was reminiscent of the storied battle that had occurred one hundred and ten years earlier on the Crimean peninsula.¹

On that April day at Sotheby’s in 1964, the agent working on behalf of Harvey and Sullivan was swift, acquiring the bugle in just fifty-five seconds, ‘less time than it [had taken] to sound the Reveille’. The daily press and the tabloid newspapers made the most of the occasion, billing it as an ‘unprecedented scene’ and an occasion of ‘high drama’, not unlike the Charge of the Light Brigade itself. The conquest at Sotheby’s occurred when the prize possession was ‘sold’ — and sold, as the *Daily Mirror* noted, ‘to a YANK’. Just after stirring the patriotic fervour of its readers, the tabloid reassured them that the American in question had saved the bugle ‘FOR BRITAIN’. In his own enactment of the special relationship, Sullivan planned to present the object on live television to the Museum of the 17th Lancers, a storied regiment that had participated in the fateful

¹ Edward Vale, ‘Battle over that Bugle’, *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1964, London, National Army Museum (NAM), 1976-07-28.

Charge of the Light Brigade. The occasion appeared to profit a great many, and not just the papers that capitalized upon the event. It enriched the man who sold the bugle, which had come into his possession as a family inheritance bought for two pounds back in 1901. It brought moral and patriotic capital to Harvey and Sullivan, and to the entertainment industry as a whole. When it learned of the plans for the object, even the often sceptical *Guardian* reflected, ‘there is nothing, but nothing, to compare with the pure unselfish generosity of the men of show business.’ As promised, Harvey and Sullivan ultimately saw that the bugle was deposited ‘where it belonged’.² Thanks to their largesse, the bugle holds pride of place at the Royal Lancers Museum in Nottingham even at the present time (*Fig. 1*).



Fig. 1: Bugle carried by Trumpeter William Brittain, Museum of the Queen's Royal Lancers © Rachel Bates.

There were many who profited from the auction at Sotheby's. While it provided a nostalgic diversion for the press, the sale of the bugle offered financial gain for the seller, social credit to the buyers, and cultural capital to the museum. Approbation for the transaction was not, however, universal. Particularly distraught was 63-year-old Bertha Kearns of Middlesex, who

² Dixon Scott, ‘Ed Sullivan Buys that Bugle — for Britain’, *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1964; ‘Light Brigade's Bugle Saved, Chiefly for the Regiment’, *Guardian*, 21 April 1964, NAM, 1976-07-28.

claimed that the auctioneers had the bugle's provenance all wrong. It was not Brittain who had blown the bugle, but rather her grandfather, Trumpet Major Henry Joy, Kearns alleged. Certainly, according to Kearns, there was enough evidence to prove the fact. A newly refurbished headstone in Chiswick churchyard confirmed that Joy had 'sounded the memorable Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava'. Another relative, W. R. Turner, held, too, that it was Henry Joy, his great-great-great-grandfather, who blew the charge (Vale, NAM, 1976-07-28). These claims reopened a dispute that had raged with particular fervour at the turn of the twentieth century, when Joy's family put up his bugle for sale, just after his death. In 1898, it had become the possession of a new owner, F. G. Middlebrook. It would, at the beginning of the twentieth century, come into the hands of the American-born W. W. Astor, who donated the bugle to the Royal United Services Institution in a 'thoughtful and generous act' that put 'the seal upon his [British] citizenship'.³ One long-standing and enduring result of this action is the fact that Joy's bugle is displayed today in Britain's National Army Museum. Located in Chelsea, London, this — and not the Nottingham collection — is the flagship museum of the British armed forces.

While Joy's bugle has retained its august environs, the claims of his descendants have been dashed. On the occasion of the 1964 auction, Sotheby's looked to experts to solidify its case in the face of cavils from Bertha Kearns, W. R. Turner, and other sceptics. The verdict favoured William Brittain, casting him as the man who had sounded the charge and conferring legendary status upon him once and for all. It confirmed as well that Joy was no mere pretender. He was, in fact, a bugler of note. It turned out that Joy had sounded the Charge of the Heavy Brigade, which had preceded the Light Brigade's actions at Balaklava. The Charge of the Heavy Brigade may have been more successful than the Charge of the Light Brigade. Yet the event, which has all but faded from popular memory, lacked the tragedy and fame of the following action. Its protagonists would never enjoy the celebrity and veneration of their counterparts, who were, at once, both less and more fortunate. Undoubtedly, the verdict must have been a disappointment to Joy's partisans.

If the question posed by the *Daily Mirror* was answered to satisfaction in 1964, why revisit it now? My aim, in so doing, is not to reopen the matter itself. The case, it seems, is closed. That said, the question of 'who blew the Balaklava bugle' was no trifling matter. It is an issue that has carried great freight in public institutions and in family lore alike. As such, it allows us to appreciate the politics of presence on the field of battle and the dynamics of afterlife in the case of war. More generally, it enables us to understand the allure of the war relic in a commercial and secular age.

³ Undated press cutting, NAM, 1964-10-3.

As the best-known military action of the Crimean War, the Charge of the Light Brigade provides an ideal occasion for entering into these matters.⁴ In its day and long afterwards, the charge epitomized the dynamics of the Crimean War, which was known for the ‘duty’ of the ‘British soldier’ and the ‘hideous blunder’ of the Army’s leadership.⁵ The charge endures as the most emblematic moment in the war. That said, it was a decidedly atypical occasion in the Crimea for the way that it was uncommonly action-packed. In a war where many soldiers died of disease, where others waited in vain to fight, and where still others lamented the fact that they arrived in the Crimea too late to serve, the charge condensed the Janus-faced nature of the struggle into fifteen minutes of tragic drama. For its suggestiveness and singularity, the event has been celebrated across the ages in poetry, prose, and pageantry that seared the event into the national consciousness and impressed it upon the Anglo-American imaginary. In this context, the relics of the charge, both the survivors themselves and the souvenirs of battle, attained great significance and value. The survivors of the charge were, themselves, aware of their status as ‘relics of a famous band’.⁶ As such, they sought to capitalize on their status, hoping to gain access to funds and fame in the war’s aftermath.

The most notable relic of the charge, however, was the legendary bugle, whose mythologized notes condensed in their sound the virtue of soldierly duty and the glory of British loyalty, even in the face of certain death. If the preoccupations with the bugle attune us to the ongoing resonance of the Crimean War, they point more generally to the importance of relics in mediating wartime experience. This is a matter that has not been lost on scholars of the Napoleonic wars who have considered the ways in which souvenirs and trophies from the battlefields just across the English Channel sated the Romantic longings for connection to past glory in an increasingly commercialized society.⁷ As their pursuit suggests, in the nineteenth century, battle relics assumed a status not unlike holy objects in what we take to be an increasingly secular world. If this was the case for the many fragments gathered from the field at Waterloo, it was certainly so when it came to the putatively singular bugle from the Crimea. The competing claims for the bugle thus attest to the capaciousness and endurance of the sacred and the singular in an apparently secular and an avowedly commercial age.

⁴ See, notably, Daniel Hack, ‘Wild Charges: The Afro-Haitian “Charge of the Light Brigade”’, *Victorian Studies*, 54 (2012), 199–225.

⁵ Editorial, *The Times*, 13 November 1854, p. 6.

⁶ Lydia Melland, ‘Anniversary Poem’, NAM, 1998-06-07.

⁷ Stuart Semmel, ‘Reading the Tangible Past: British Tourism, Collecting, and Memory after Waterloo’, *Representations*, 69 (2000), 9–37; Clara Tuite, ‘Sanditon: Austen’s Pre-Post Waterloo’, *Textual Practice*, 26 (2012), 609–29.

The battle and its reverberations

To appreciate these matters, it is helpful to begin on 25 October 1854, the day that the Light Brigade made its famous charge. The charge was a crucial element in the second of a trio of three largely victorious, if overwhelmingly bloody battles waged by the British Army in the East in the autumn of 1854 — Alma, Balaklava, and Inkerman. Together, they would become symbols of the bravery of the rank-and-file soldier, on the one hand, and the limitations of the officer class, on the other. On no occasion were these antinomies starker than on the day of the Battle of Balaklava. In the morning hours of 25 October, the actions that would comprise the battle commenced when Russian artillery overtook the Turkish redoubts that protected the town of Balaklava. Two British actions — the movement of the Thin Red Line, composed primarily of the celebrated 93rd Regiment of Highlanders led by Sir Colin Campbell; and the Charge of the Heavy Brigade, a formation of cavalry regiments commanded by General Scarlett — managed to stave off Russian attack. The good fortune of the allies would end, however, with the Charge of the Light Brigade. This was an event that was wrought out of the imprecise orders given by the legendary Army General Lord Raglan and delivered via the tragic aide-de-camp, Captain Nolan. The unfortunate Lord Lucan, Commander of the Cavalry, received the orders. It was up to him to interpret what was meant by Raglan's confusing order to 'Attack the Guns' and by Nolan's baffling gesture of waving his arm. The botched order that Lucan received has informed military legend, historical debate, and counterfactual imaginings. The matter is particularly compelling for its admixture of understanding and misapprehension, of honesty and imposture, and of bravery and cowardice. Its uncertainty is exacerbated, moreover, by the fact that the 'hot-headed Irishman', Captain Nolan, presumed to be the only soul to know the truth of the matter, was, as the *Cork Constitution* reported, 'tragically and poetically the first to be taken in the action'.⁸

The action that took the life of Nolan and more than two hundred of his compatriots, and, with them, more than three hundred horses, unfolded as follows. After receiving Nolan's order, Lucan sent the Light Brigade, composed of five cavalry regiments, into the Tchernaya Flats, the land between the Fedyukhin Heights and the Causeway Heights that was later christened 'the valley of Death' by Tennyson.⁹ We can assume that the bugle call of Trumpeter Brittain initiated the charge. Survivors overwhelmingly attested that he sounded the commands to 'Walk', 'Trot', and 'Gallop'. Most likely,

⁸ 'Charge of the Light Brigade: New Light on Heroic Blunder', *Cork Constitution*, 6 March 1912, NAM, 1990-06-400.

⁹ 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, rev. edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 508–11 (p. 509).

Brittain also gave the order to 'Charge'. At that moment, over six hundred cavalry galloped into the direct fire of the Russian troops. The fifteen minutes that followed witnessed the slaying and wounding of hundreds, not least among them, Brittain himself, who was taken to Balaklava Hospital, and subsequently to Scutari, where he would die from his wounds, leaving behind his bugle, a 'tragic souvenir of one of the most gallant deeds to be carried out by the soldiers of the Queen', to borrow the words of one hagiographer.¹⁰ It was a remarkable 'portable memento' and a notably singular souvenir (Semmel, p. 9).

Many forms of remembrances, or souvenirs, conceived broadly, emerged out of the debacle. These included a significant archive of written records produced in the aftermath. Such works would play a pivotal role in conferring the august status that the action would enjoy in the public mind for decades to come. On 13 November 1854, the events of the fateful day in the Crimea seared themselves into the public consciousness in Britain thanks, in no small part, to the words of William Howard Russell, the war correspondent for *The Times*, who has been touted as the first battlefield reporter.¹¹ Russell's famous report appeared in *The Times* just a few weeks after the calamity. Combining the languages of Romantic longing and modern disaster, *The Times* described the charge as a 'melancholy loss', an 'annihilation', and even a 'grand military holocaust'. It was a 'causeless and fruitless' undertaking, the result of a piteous 'mistake'. While he cast the army's leadership as blundering incompetents, Russell upheld its rank-and-file as heroes, duty-bound unto death.¹² Tennyson would transport Russell's veneration of the Light Brigade into his legendary poem about the charge. Published just one month later, in December 1854, his poem would confer everlasting honour on the men of the participating regiments, ensuring that their 'fame' would 'never die'. Following Russell's lead, Tennyson's poem upheld the valour of the 'noble six hundred', going so far as to sanctify the Light Brigade's action by drawing upon Psalm 23's image of the 'valley of Death'. In his last stanza, Tennyson lent to the survivors an aura of immortality. He enquired of the cavalry, 'when can their glory fade?'. He directed his readers to 'honour the Light Brigade'. As Stefanie Markovits has noted, Tennyson may have differed from Russell in his efforts to provide a salve for the nation, even while offering his own critique in verse. But he shared with Russell the desire to venerate the participants in the charge and, thereby, to confer fame on the survivors and

¹⁰ Roy Dutton, *Forgotten Heroes: The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Oxton: InfoDial, 2007), p. 283.

¹¹ Rupert Furneaux, *The First War Correspondent: William Howard Russell* (London: Cassell, 1944).

¹² Editorial, *The Times*, 13 November 1854, p. 6; see also, NAM, 1972-03-36.

immortality on the deceased.¹³ To use the formulation of Trudi Tate, he offered up a worthy, and enduring, ‘monument’ to the occasion.¹⁴

Our understandings of the actions on 25 October 1854 do not come solely from the outside, however. Survivors of the charge would, themselves, shape the image of a blessed, heroic, and exclusive band, both in the battle’s immediate aftermath and in the longer term. In the weeks and months after the battle, cavalry soldiers would participate in the making of the image of the Balaklava veteran. Among the hallmarks of the Crimean War’s modernity was the number of letters from the front that circulated back to Britain, finding their ways into private homes and public papers alike. In these missives, which assured loved ones that the letter writers were out of harm’s way, the survivors offered up two complementary, if not competing, explanations for their good fortune at having made it through the ‘perfect hail of shell, grape & round shot’.¹⁵ Cavalrymen acknowledged first and foremost the grace of God, who, in His ‘unbounded mercy’ had allowed them ‘to survive and escape’ the ‘most dreadful fire’. To come out of it all with life and limb intact was nothing short of a ‘mirricle’ [*sic*].¹⁶ Second, survivors noted the prowess of ‘British swords and pluck’, even in the face of indomitable odds. To manoeuvre through it all was not unlike ‘walking through drops of rain’ or placing one’s head ‘into a hive of bees’.¹⁷

The experience lingered for decades to come in the minds of those who had fought. Twenty years on, one survivor recalled the charge ‘as if it had occurred but yesterday’ (Dunn, NAM, 1997-05-07). Just as the charge’s formative role in the making of individual consciousness endured, so too did its critical function as a rallying point for regimental solidarity and national pride alike continue, if in altered registers. In the later nineteenth century, Balaklava played an important role in the making of an associational masculinity and a popular, middlebrow nationalism. In the 1870s, veterans convened at celebratory banquets and joined in commemorative societies. A twenty-first anniversary banquet, held in 1875 at the newly opened Alexandra Palace in the north London suburbs, treated survivors

¹³ Stefanie Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and ‘Rushing into Print: “Participatory Journalism” and the Crimean War’, *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), 559–86.

¹⁴ Trudi Tate, ‘On Not Knowing Why: Memorializing the Light Brigade’, in *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis 1830–1970: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer*, ed. by Helen Small and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 160–80 (p. 175).

¹⁵ Untitled, NAM 1987-07-148; Frank Dunn, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade: The Way We Were’, *Australian Sunday Times*, 2 February 1997, NAM, 1997-05-07.

¹⁶ Sir William Gordon, 17th Lancers, letter to his mother, 30 October 1854, NAM, 1983-10-132; Lt Headwirth Hylton Joliffe, 4th Light Dragoons, letter, 28 October 1854, NAM, 1979-07-148; ‘Robert’, a soldier in the 2nd Dragoons, letter, 13 November 1854, NAM, 1972-10-68.

¹⁷ Dunn, NAM 1997-05-07; Troop Sgt Thomas Williamson, 11th Hussars, papers, NAM, 1992-05-25.

and guests to a lavish dinner, theatrical performances, and relic displays. In response, the trenchant *Saturday Review* predicted, cynically, albeit incorrectly, that ‘there [would] be Alma Banquets, and Inkermann Banquets, and possibly Abyssinian and Ashantee Banquets, till every day of the year is filled up’.¹⁸

Hyperbole notwithstanding, it seemed that the participants in the Battle of Balaklava, and especially the survivors of the charge, enjoyed a particular monopoly on the notion of the military hero. To protect this status, the survivors formed the Balaklava Commemoration Society, whose by-laws made provision for yearly dinners attended by those who could prove they were ‘present on the field of action’.¹⁹ Vigorously upheld, such a standard led to the exclusion of many from the banquet table, not least among them Trumpet Major Henry Joy. While the survivors of the charge often gathered collectively, they did not hesitate, as individuals, to announce their special status as the most fortunate among a band of unfortunate brothers. Routinely, they signed letters to the press or engraved calling cards with the designation ‘One of the Six Hundred’. To this effect, one such veteran, N. W. Eastoe of Leytonstone, brandished a card that held out the offer to recite Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ in ‘full uniform’ at various entertainments for only a ‘moderate’ fee.²⁰

Whether it was manifest on an individual or collective level, this sense that the survivors of the charge were themselves the ‘relics’ of a ‘famous band’ only intensified at the century’s end.²¹ Renewed attention was kindled, in part, by the 1890 recording of the charge itself on an Edison wax cylinder by a Trumpeter Landfrey, who had fought as a member of the 17th Lancers at the Battle of Balaklava. Interest was heightened too by the publication of Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘The Last of the Light Brigade’, which appeared in *St. James’ Magazine* in the same year and recalled Tennyson’s verses in its title. As Trudi Tate has noted, Tennyson’s poem would reverberate among generations to come. While many were haunted by its content and verses, others found a shared cultural resource in its words and metre. Such was the case for Kipling, who recalled Tennyson’s efforts as he offered up a typically wry set of rhymes with metre befitting a children’s ballad. As he drew his readers in with his putatively comforting verse, Kipling revealed to them a startling fact: several survivors of the charge were living into their dotage in penury and facing their deaths in the workhouse. Effectively and promptly, Kipling’s verse galvanized the development of the philanthropic Light Brigade Relief Fund. With a striking rapidity reminiscent of the charge itself, the fund collected a sizeable subscription of

¹⁸ ‘The Balaklava Banquet’, *Saturday Review*, 30 October 1875, pp. 545–46 (p. 546).

¹⁹ ‘Rules of the Balaklava Commemoration Society’, NAM, 1998-06-07.

²⁰ N. W. Eastoe, Late 11th Hussars, calling card, NAM, 1972-03-36.

²¹ Lydia Melland, ‘22nd Anniversary Poem’, NAM, 1998-06-07.

over three thousand pounds that would provide annuities to struggling men and their wives rounding out their days in ‘miserable’ conditions.²² At this juncture, even the once critical *Saturday Review* determined that the ailing and ageing survivors deserved ‘a little gleam of better fortune’. Lest it appear too enamoured of the veterans, the arch weekly did note that the remnant of the six hundred benefited from a peculiar form of ‘good luck’ that had allowed it to ‘shine in the front of history’. It was, from the perspective of the *Saturday Review*, a curious thing to enjoy such status as an after-effect of being the most fortunate among the unlucky. Other soldiers, whether English, French, or Russian, ‘would have borne themselves no less well if called on’, after all, it noted.²³

Even in the face of such cavils, survivors of the charge continued cannily to leverage this renewed interest in their status to advantage at the century’s end. Over one hundred survivors had come together at the moment of the Golden Jubilee in 1887. Ten years later, some sixty-odd veterans reunited at Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. The fiftieth anniversary of the charge itself, observed in 1904, similarly offered an opportunity for the survivors to dress in traditional regalia and assert their presence, as did the coronation of Edward VII.²⁴ A heightened interest in heroic action and military culture kindled by the Second Anglo-Boer War and the rise of European hostilities that would lead to the First World War only intensified the venerable status of survivors, who gathered, their numbers dwindling to a handful, at the last of the commemorative dinners held in 1906, 1911, 1912, and 1913.

Not only were they exalted in Britain at the *fin de siècle*. At that time, the survivors of the charge — and the action itself — enjoyed a hallowed status well beyond Albion’s shores, even among former belligerents in Russia. To this effect, one British traveller reported an 1898 encounter with an elderly Russian veteran. When asked about the charge that had taken place so many years ago, the ‘old Officer’ recalled the whole affair as ‘brilliant’ and ‘splendid’ — and this, despite the fact that it was ‘all a mistake’. With great detail, he recollected the display of English grandeur. ‘Such saddles! Such harness!’, the elderly Russian exclaimed. He was struck, too, by the English sense of duty that had come to be associated with the charge. Conjuring up the Light Brigade’s descent into the valley of Death, he remarked of the cavalry: ‘They did not seem to have a bit of fear in them.’ ‘You never saw anything like it’, the ‘old Officer’ told his English

²² ‘The Patriotic Fund and the Light Brigade Fund’, Kew, The National Archives (TNA), TS18/322.

²³ ‘The Balaklava Subscription’, *Saturday Review*, 21 June 1890, p. 760.

²⁴ See, for example, ‘Short Sketch of the 17th Lancers and Life of Sergeant Major J. I. Nunnerly’, NAM, 1971-08-03; ‘Fac-simile of the Signatures of 65 Survivors of the Balaklava Charge’, NAM, 1961-08-46.

interlocutor. Despite the fact that the spectacular debacle had taken place ‘many years ago’, the aged Russian still remembered hearing the bugle.²⁵

The bugle and its resonances

As I have endeavoured to show, the bugle call resonated in cultural memory within Britain and well beyond its shores at the turn of the twentieth century. The Charge of the Light Brigade seemed to enjoy especial currency at that time. Over the course of the half-century that followed the war, poetry, prose, and pageantry had combined to make the charge a pivotal event in the nation’s military history, tragic in its errors and glorious in its heroism. By the 1890s, the claim of having been present at the charge held great purchase. It conferred immortality on the dead. It offered pathways to celebrity among the living. If the status of belonging to the ‘noble six hundred’ promised so much, then sounding the very charge was sure to confer unceasing accolades and, perhaps, unanticipated fortune.

It is in this context that we might consider the passing of Trumpet Major Henry Joy, who fought at the Battle of Balaklava and survived to the age of seventy-four, dying in 1893. Joy’s obituary noted with regret the end of yet another of the ‘Death and Glory Boys’. With Joy’s death, it suggested, something even more significant, even more resonant than his life itself had disappeared. In a tone of melancholy finality, the obituary declared that Joy’s bugle would ‘give no more trumpet calls, nor answer any until the great roll call summons all regiments together’. To this tribute, it added the confirmation that Joy’s bugle was, unquestionably, ‘the bugle from which the regimental trumpeters received the order for the celebrated Light Brigade Charge’. His tombstone, of course, set this claim in stone.²⁶

Understandably, then, Joy’s family must have had high hopes when it put his bugle up for auction at Debenham’s in 1898, just five years after the trumpet major’s passing. Joy had clung tenaciously to the bugle throughout his life, but financial exigencies plaguing the family after his death made the sale a necessity. The prized possession delivered on its promise in manifold ways. It fetched a ‘handsome sum’ from J. G. Middlebrook, the landlord of Regent’s Park’s Edinburgh Castle, who paid the price of seven hundred and fifty guineas to become its owner. Subsequently, the bugle attained a new presence in civic culture at the *fin de siècle*, when it offered respectable entertainments and stirred national sentiment. Proudly and generously, Middlebrook loaned out the treasured relic for patriotic

²⁵ ‘Russian Officer’s Memories of Balaklava, by an Old Resident in Russia’, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1898, NAM, 1972-03-36.

²⁶ Undated press cutting, NAM, 1972-03-36.

pageants and military fundraisers held at such locales as Sydenham's Crystal Palace and Brighton's Aquarium. Among the grandest of events at which the bugle appeared was a 'Naval and Military Concert' in support of the service charities that aided veterans and their families at the time of the Second Anglo-Boer War. This fusion of martial and civic elements, and of sacred and secular practices, took place in July 1901 at Sydenham, where philanthropic ladies, each flanked by a 'sailor and soldier boy in smart uniforms', greeted visitors to the Crystal Palace, which had been 'profusely and beautifully decorated' for the gala. At this decidedly singular event, thousands of visitors beheld a 'descriptive Fantasia' that involved the much anticipated appearances of celebrated 'Artistes', the synchronized marching of a band of six hundred and fifty musicians, and a re-enactment of the Battle of Waterloo. The day culminated with the sounding of the Charge of the Light Brigade on what was purported to be the 'original Death or Glory Bugle'.²⁷

As one of the most resonant relics of battle in British history, the bugle appealed to many senses at the turn of the century. Many delighted simply in hearing its sounds. Others, like Madame Antoinette Sterling, desired a more intimate and tactile contact with the relic, which approximated a holy object in its freight during an epoch associated with the rise of secular society. At one concert, she paid 'half a sovereign to kiss the battered bugle, for charity's sake'. Those in attendance were quite taken with the possibilities of an encounter such as Madame Sterling's. Accordingly, 'many ladies' opened their purses to follow 'her example'. All told, by 1904, the appearances of the bugle once blown by Henry Joy would generate five thousand pounds to be directed to the aid of soldiers' widows and orphans.²⁸

In the face of the great visibility that it was afforded and the high veneration that it received, the so-called Balaklava bugle became the object of intense scrutiny in the public and the press at the turn of the century. To this end, the *Newcastle Chronicle* called into question the identity of the bugler; the *Daily Graphic* wondered whether the mythic charge had even been sounded at all. Finally, Fred S. Tuffield of Kent made a case that the bugler was a certain Sergeant Richard Davis, who had left the cavalry for 'civil life in Canada'. A musical reputation served to strengthen the case. Davis, it turns out, was renowned not only as a 'clarinet performer', but also as an entertainer so talented that he could 'use the castanets like a Spaniard'.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'Kissed the Balaklava Bugle', *Evening News and Evening Mail*, 23 February 1904, NAM, 1972-03-36.

²⁹ Press cutting, NAM, 2004-10-88; see also, *The World's Most Famous Bugle: Used by the Late Trumpeter William Brittain, 17th Lancers* (Newcastle: North of England Printing Company, [n.d.]), NAM, 1972-03-36-2.

Joy's partisans responded by offering a stream of testimony that sought to dismiss the claims of pretenders and to dash the allegations of the doubters. One man who rose in Joy's defence was the Natural History Museum's John Saunders. Saunders derived his authority not only from his august position at one of the nation's leading institutions, but also from his long-standing knowledge of the Joy family, with whom he claimed to enjoy an 'intimate connection'. To his professional expertise Saunders thus added the evidence of experience, holding that Joy's bugle was the genuine article, having 'never left' the man's 'possession till his death', at which point his widow guarded it assiduously. An 'Old Officer' seconded the claim, as he too attested to the tenacity with which the man had held on to his bugle. According to the 'Old Officer', the regiment had proposed, a few years after the conflict in the Crimea ended, to give Joy 'a silver trumpet' in exchange for the relic. The bugler had stoutly refused the shimmer of silver held by the glimmering replica, opting instead for the promises of posterity carried in the genuine object. A letter from Lord Lucan alleging that 'Joy was his trumpeter on the day of the battle' appeared to close the case. One newspaper seemed to find, in the person of Henry Joy, an unshakeable source of certainty in an event plagued, both in its time and afterwards, by vexing questions of agency. 'Someone blundered on that morning when Trumpet Major Henry Joy of the 17th Lancers was ordered to sound the Charge', it curiously noted.³⁰

Even in the face of this onslaught of testimony, there were those who remained unconvinced. Particularly sceptical was James Baker, a publican from Newcastle who had come into possession of the bugle once blown by William Brittain. Like Middlebrook, who made good use of Henry Joy's bugle, Baker hoped to deploy Brittain's instrument to his advantage. Baker did as much, however, in a somewhat different fashion — that is, by prominently displaying the Brittain bugle in his pub, the Percy Arms. It remained in that secular cathedral of sociable consumption for some twenty years. Baker thus brought a strong, and long-standing, business interest to the question of the Brittain bugle's authenticity. With his livelihood tied to its provenance, he mounted a vigorous charge on its behalf. Baker deployed as his weapon of choice an early twentieth-century pamphlet that offered an onslaught of evidence meant to dislodge the claims of Joy's partisans. To open the case, Baker reminded his readers of the Brittain family's venerable lineage. A fervent advocate, he followed the argument from genealogy with an impressive sampling of testimony from the surviving veterans of the 17th Lancers, the regiment that had led the charge. James Nunnerly claimed, with certitude, that he 'saw and heard' the charge as sounded by Brittain, whom he subsequently carried 'off the field' when wounded. Others too joined the chorus. Among them was Thomas Morley, who

³⁰ Undated press cutting, NAM, 1964-04-91; see also, NAM, 1972-03-36.

had not himself heard the charge due, perhaps, to the din of the artillery. Yet, Morley remained certain that it was ‘sounded by Trumpeter William Brittain and none other’. Another advocate was Colonel James Mustard, the longest-living officer to survive the charge and a man of great good fortune. Mustard would live to see the outbreak of the First World War, dying as late as 1916, despite having been ‘severely wounded’ alongside the less fortunate Brittain. Finally, Corporal Peter Marsh sought to lay the matter to rest. ‘I have been asked this question more than once’, Marsh told, ‘and I have given the same answer, for there is no other can be given as to who sounded the charge. It was decidedly Trumpeter Brittain.’ To doubt as much, claimed a 1906 article appearing in the *Yorkshire Weekly Post*, was to do an ‘injustice to the memory of William Brittain’ (*World’s Most Famous Bugle*, NAM, 1972-03-36-2).

At a time when relation to one of the ‘noble six hundred’ was a point of familial pride, such weighty evidence proved particularly upsetting among the Joy clan. Especially distraught was Joy’s daughter Amy, who had received her share of personal enquiries into the matter. The situation called for a matriarch who might protect the family’s honour and console her daughter. Rising to the occasion, Jane Joy, Henry’s widow, sent a letter to her daughter. ‘I am so sorry you are so worried with people writing to you about the Bugle’, the mother declared. ‘Take no notice of it. You know it is not true.’ Seeking to allay her daughter’s worries and to close the case, Mrs Joy even went so far as to claim that the Brittain brother in question had not served in the armed forces. He had, it appeared to her, ‘never become a soldier because he was a cripple’.³¹

Henry Joy’s relations cleaved tenaciously to this family mythology across the course of the twentieth century, as the protestations of Bertha Kearns and W. R. Turner suggest. It was not only the family that remained captivated by the allure of the Crimea, however. At the time of the centenary, renewed attention turned to the Light Brigade and the Crimean War. Such was the case across the cultural spectrum, in the spheres of journalism, scholarship, and antiquarianism alike. The *Illustrated London News* reprinted articles discussing the charge, so bringing it to the attention of a post-war public; historians including Cecil Woodham-Smith made the Crimea, with its blunders and its heroes, familiar to a modern readership; and the magazine *Country Life* featured in its pages the story of a cat called ‘Tom’, a ‘fine Tabby’ who had been ‘rescued from the ruins of Sebastopol’, and then preserved — stuffed — for posterity. Tom had, curiously, found his way into the possession of a collector, Lady Faith Compton Mackenzie. On the occasion of the centenary, she wrote to *Country Life* to learn of his provenance. She hoped, in particular, to discover just ‘who was fond enough of him to have him stuffed so well’. It turned out that Tom had once been

³¹ Jane Joy, letter to [Amy] Joy, 1 November 1904, NAM, 1972-03-36.

the prize possession of William Gair of the Dragoon Guards. As luck and serendipity would have it, Gair's granddaughter and sole descendent, Lady Mary Lloyd, had the good fortune to find the enquiry about Tom while perusing *Country Life*. Raised on 'stories of the Crimea' during her girlhood in India, Lady Lloyd was particularly moved by Tom's surfacing, for it 'awakened' for her 'many dear memories' that had been 'buried for half a life time'.³²

Among these childhood memories of Lady Lloyd's were stories of knitted stockings, Arab horses, and, of course, Florence Nightingale, the war's foremost heroine and a figure who, at her death in 1910, had been elevated to a sort of secular sainthood. Fittingly, the Lady with the Lamp herself became the centrepiece of a series of celebrations in 1954 that marked her departure to Scutari, where she would nurse the Crimean soldiers who suffered from cholera. Events in London included a thanksgiving service at St Paul's Cathedral, a commemoration at Westminster Abbey, and a memorial exhibition at the Royal College of Surgeons. This last occasion involved the collection and display of a great many 'Nightingale treasures', including Scutari Hospital scarves, one of Florence's walking sticks, and even a 'locket' containing a clipping of the heroine's hair.³³ As had been the case with the droller incident of Tom the Crimean Cat, the publicity wrought by the relics had the power to kindle memory among and elicit testimony from those elderly Britons who boasted links to the Crimea. They claimed these connections with great pride, as the words of Elizabeth Copley suggest. On the occasion of the Nightingale centenary, Copley wrote a letter to the matron of St Thomas' Hospital wherein she identified herself as the daughter of a cavalry soldier from the 17th Lancers who had been present at 'Inkermann, Alma', and the 'Siege of Sebastopol'. The familial claim to distinction did not end there. In fact, Florence Nightingale had 'nursed' Copley's father at Scutari. 'I wonder whether there is any one else living today who can tell you what I have told you', Miss Copley boasted to the matron.³⁴

Even after the centenary, the war — and with it, the charge — continued to receive attention well into the 1960s. At first glance, this most Victorian of wars seems antithetical to our images of Swinging London. But in that decade, the eldest descendants of the Crimean soldiers — like the septuagenarian Arthur Allwood, whose 'mother's great uncle' had ridden in the Charge of the Light Brigade, as he vigorously

³² Press cuttings, NAM, 1958-03-10.

³³ See, for example, Florence Nightingale Collection, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), HO1/ST/NTS 1/12/2a; HO1/ST/NC22/2, 3, 5.

³⁴ Amy Elizabeth Copley, letter, 10 May 1954, LMA, H1/ST/NC8/13.

demonstrated — were entering their dotage.³⁵ Additionally, the veterans of the last properly Victorian war, the Second Anglo-Boer War, were passing away. Military blunder, just then, was gaining a new relevance against the backdrop of the escalating Vietnam War. The possibilities of reworking Victoriana through fashion and film were becoming quite rich, too. Such trends were manifest, of course, in the vogue for military regalia. They were also evident in the success of Tony Richardson's 'epic film', *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, released in 1968. Cleverly and gingerly, Richardson's production married love story and costume drama to political critique and social commentary. In gestures that would have carried resonance with the audiences of *soixante-huitards*, the film exposed the 'myopic quality' of the leadership class, the 'foppishness' of the Victorian officers, and the 'contrast between Victorian upper-class frivolity and the bloody, grim fighting in the Crimea', to use the words of the film's official press pack. Imaginatively, it cast Captain Nolan, played by David Hemmings, as an 'angry young man' struggling for 'intelligent individuality amid official apathy' in a 'classic clash of old and new generations'.³⁶

The Sotheby's auction of 1964 may have lacked the critical potential carried within Richardson's film. That said, the choreographed spectacle similarly exploited a nostalgia and longing for a bygone era while relying upon the engines and actors of modern media. The auction brought the personalities of the entertainment industry into contact with the mythologies of Victorian warfare. Aware of the resonant qualities of the event, Sotheby's sought to choreograph the transaction by marrying modern commerce and traditional spectacle. The event was staged so that the charge could be sounded after the sale by a latter-day trumpeter dressed in traditional regalia. So eager was Harvey and Sullivan's agent to gain possession of the prize, however, that the bidding concluded in fifty-five seconds. Despite the efforts at impeccable choreography, the trumpeter, Philip Costen, had not yet reached the auction house. Learning of the sale, he rushed to Sotheby's in a taxi, so receiving accolades from an officer for his great 'initiative'. Upon his arrival, Costen sounded the charge to stirring effect. The juxtaposition of past and present — and with it, an appreciation for the long afterlife of the war — was, however, lost on the young man. When asked about his connections to a venerable lineage of trumpeters, Costen replied, 'I don't worry about history. This is 1964.'³⁷

³⁵ Arthur Allwood, *Nunnerly and Co. of Balaklava*, NAM, 1968-03-21.

³⁶ Promotion pack, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, NAM, 2007-02-10.

³⁷ 'Light Brigade's Bugle Saved, Chiefly for the Regiment', NAM, 1976-07-28.

Of relics and resonances

The transaction at Sotheby's that elicited both public fascination and private consternation is now, itself, the stuff of history, having transpired more than fifty years ago. Shaped by the sociopolitical exigencies and generational rhythms, as well as the stylistic leanings and media capacities of its own moment, it is just one of many points of access onto the Crimean War, and particularly onto its epitome, the Charge of the Light Brigade. As a transaction, the Sotheby's auction conferred symbolic and material capital on the Balaklava bugle. It reminds us, even today, of a strange irony of warfare and the politics of presence involved therein. While the men who happened to be present on the field of battle for the Charge of the Light Brigade were doomed, with many of them condemned to certain death, they were, simultaneously, oddly fortunate. Those who died in the storied action gained immortality; those who lived attained fame. Their descendants would continue, as their own lives cycled, to cleave to the things and stories that connected them to the Crimean War, the Battle of Balaklava, and, especially, the Charge of the Light Brigade. At bottom, then, the pursuit of an answer to the question of 'who blew the Balaklava bugle' does not simply provide evidence for the long afterlife of the Crimean War; nor does it merely illustrate the ongoing reverberations of the charge itself. More broadly, it allows us to understand, and to appreciate, the power with which we attach to the things and stories that allow us to connect to the past and its battles, in all of their resonances.³⁸

This story of the bugle and its enduring resonances may point us, ultimately, to broader questions about the persistence of the sacred in a secularizing age. Historian W. E. H. Lecky once famously noted a 'general secularization of the European intellect' that commenced sometime around 1865; leading thinkers in the Western tradition, including Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, understood the unfolding of modern history, certainly from 1848, if not from as early as 1789, similarly.³⁹ Received orthodoxy has it that this development culminated with the 'cataclysm of 1914'.⁴⁰ Many participants in the secularization debate have questioned whether the notion is synonymous with 'the decline of religion'.⁴¹ Some have argued that 'the political imagination' offers one 'expansion of possibilities' for

³⁸ See, for example, Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

³⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Secularization in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), esp. pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁴¹ Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, 'Secularization: The Orthodox Model', in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. by Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 8–30 (p. 11).

understanding the ways in which the sacred ‘survives, acts, and influences’ in the modern age.⁴² Theodore Ziolkowski has noted that ‘other modes of faith’ arose in the place of religion in the years around the First World War (p. 49). In arguing as much, Ziolkowski looked to such highbrow pursuits as art and pilgrimage, and to such politicized zones as socialism and utopianism. The case of the Balaklava bugle indicates that these modes of faith did not only operate at the level of the highbrow and cosmopolitan, but in currencies of the middlebrow and nationalistic as well. A cherished relic, the bugle appeared at ritual appearances such as parades and banquets. It attracted the adoration of many who sought not only to hear it, but also to touch it. As an object of display, it became the focus for pilgrimages to pubs, exhibitions, and museums, which, taken together, present an intriguing array of cultural shrines. Interestingly, just as the bugle reminds us of the persistence of the sacred in late modernity, and in postmodernity, too, it asks us to engage in the endeavour of rethinking the relationship between war and secularization. As they have unsettled the sense that wars led to the crises of faith that made secular society, leading historians of modern wars, including Drew Faust and Jay Winter, have demonstrated the ways in which practices of mourning and sites of memory came to shape the afterlife of such cataclysms as the American Civil War and the First World War.⁴³ The story of the Balaklava bugle signals, too, that modern warfare serves not merely to upend modes of faith, but also to relocate understandings of the sacred.

These reminders, in fact, persist. Though its appearances are rare these days, the Balaklava bugle continues to appear at present-day rituals. In October 2011, it was blown at the British Military Tournament, a re-enactment festival. Two years later, in October 2013, the Balaklava bugle made a return to television with an appearance on *Antiques Roadshow*. What better meeting of the sacred and the profane could there be?

⁴² Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Introduction: Multiple Secularities’, in *Religion and the Political Imagination*, ed. by Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–22 (pp. 8, 20).

⁴³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2009); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Canto, 1998).