

***The Crimean War in the British Imagination* by Stefanie Markovits, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009; pp. xi + 287. £50.00).**

The Crimean War not only gave us the cardigan, the balaclava, the Crimean beard and a generation of girls named Alma, it also unleashed considerable artistic and literary creativity. From Tennyson's epic poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* to Lady Butler's *The Roll Call*, the words and images created in response to this conflict have occupied an enduring place in the British imagination. So it is perhaps puzzling that this book, part of the *Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* series, is the first to take the cultural impact of this war as its main theme.

Stefanie Markovits' study begins the process of redressing this neglect with a work focusing on the representation of the war in journalism, novels, poetry and art. Unsurprisingly, given that this conflict is often regarded as the first media war, it is journalism which emerges as the most potent and influential force. Heightened enthusiasm for newspapers during the war, and particularly for the dispatches of *The Times* correspondent W.H. Russell, caused a corresponding slump in book sales as the public thirsted for the next instalment of 'reality'. Nothing it seems could rival the excitement and novelty of first-person accounts of battle and conditions, often telegraphed from the front within hours of events. Such was journalism's importance during the war that Markovits argues *The Times* itself became a key protagonist in the war, providing a forum for national debate, marshalling its readers into charitable donation, embarrassing politicians into action and even bringing down the Aberdeen administration in the wake of revelations about the mismanagement of the conflict.

Yet as Markovits reveals, the popularity of newsprint posed a number of challenges for writers and painters in more traditional media. The aura of authenticity and rugged masculinity implicit in the authorial voice of frontline correspondents, combined with the immediacy of their medium, presented a tough act for artists and writers at home to compete with. *Punch* openly lampooned domestic poets for merely “shedding a little ink” rather than blood. Moreover, as public opinion turned against the war, amidst fresh revelations of military and governmental blunders and a rising death toll more attributable to disease than to action, artists and writers struggled to find an appropriate voice that would accommodate public disquiet without seeming unpatriotic.

Tennyson responded to the challenge by drawing on the reports of W.H. Russell for his inspiration. The Poet Laureate caught the sense of valiant blunder conveyed by Russell’s ephemeral dispatches on October 25, 1854 and distilled it into enduring verse, perpetually associating the fateful charge of the Light Brigade with the lines “Their’s not to reason why, Their’s but to do and die.” Visual artists went beyond using the press as an inspirational muse. John Everett Millais acknowledged the new cultural order head-on, placing *The Times* centre-stage in his *Peace Concluded* (1856). Whilst John D’Albiac Luard simultaneously underlined the popularity of newsprint and the realism of his own work with his depiction of the interior of a Crimean hut, pasted ceiling to floor with images torn from periodicals, in *A Welcome Arrival* (1857). Journalism, Markovits asserts, was not only central to the image of the Crimea presented to contemporaries on a daily basis at the time, it also fed into the image of the war memorialised for posterity by novelists, poets and painters.

The choice of source material in this book is at times a little unexpected, informed no doubt by Markovits' interests as a literary scholar. Chapter two, for example, provides a detailed study of the character of Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell's 'condition of England' novel *North and South*. A surprising inclusion at first sight, yet Markovits uses it imaginatively to demonstrate the cultural reach of the war by tracing the linkages between the depiction of the brave, independent-minded Margaret and the concept of female heroism embodied by Florence Nightingale. Harder to fathom is the absence of any broader analysis of the impact of Nightingale herself, beyond this analogy with Margaret Hale, despite being acknowledged as one of the key elements in our collective memory of the conflict. Other surprising omissions include Roger Fenton's photography and the host of wartime memoirs published in the years following the war, which receive barely a mention despite their obvious contribution to the cultural legacy of this conflict.

In highlighting the fact that war, as much as empire, exerted a powerful influence on the British imagination in the mid-nineteenth century, this book breaks valuable new ground. It deserves particular praise for the meticulous attention devoted to exploring the stylistic and thematic nuances of each medium's response to the conflict. Where it touches on broader historical analysis however, it does at times feel less sure-footed. Some of the arguments perhaps stake too much of a claim for novelty and change. Rather than a novel development particular to this conflict, the discourse attaching respectability and heroism to the ordinary soldier during this war might be better understood as part of a recurring cycle evident in many other wars as the work of Diane Purkiss, Linda Colley, Nicolletta Gullace and others has demonstrated. Similar caution might also be exercised over the degree to which a

unified national identity was forged through the cultural output accompanying the war,

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particularly since much of the evidence cited extolled an English national identity, ignoring the importance of Scottish manpower to the British military venture. These quibbles aside, this book is a welcome addition to the growing body of work on the cultural history of war and has much to recommend it. It is the self-avowed “first book devoted to the wider cultural effects of the conflict” (p.6). Having provided an insight into the riches to be explored, I hope it will not be the last.

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