

Significance Of Songs And Poems Sung In The Crimean War

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Introduction

Songs and poems connected to war do more than describe military events. They preserve memories, communicate public attitudes, celebrate courage, criticize leadership, and help communities make sense of death and suffering. During and after the Crimean War, popular ballads and literary poems became important ways of presenting battles to people who had not witnessed them directly.

Two significant examples are the traditional ballad “The Heights of Alma” and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Both works describe British military action during the Crimean War, but they focus on different battles and use different literary traditions. “The Heights of Alma” commemorates the Allied victory at the Battle of the Alma on September 20, 1854. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” responds to the disastrous British cavalry charge at the Battle of Balaklava on October 25, 1854.

When the Irish Country Four released their self-titled Topic Records album in 1971, Trevor Stewart and Jess Harpur included a performance of “The Heights of Alma.” Their recording helped preserve a nineteenth-century song that had survived through oral tradition and printed street ballads. The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library classifies “The Heights of Alma” as a traditional ballad under Roud number 830 and Laws number J10, confirming that the song circulated in numerous versions rather than remaining attached to one fixed text or single performer (Vaughan Williams Memorial Library [VWML], n.d.).

Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” by contrast, was written by a nationally prominent poet in response to newspaper reports about a military disaster. Its strong rhythm, repetition, imagery, and direct command to honor the soldiers transformed an instance of failed military communication into one of the best-known poems about courage and obedience.

The significance of these works lies not only in their descriptions of battle. They also demonstrate how songs and poems shape historical memory. Both works celebrate ordinary soldiers, but they also reveal tension between the courage of those who fought and the failures of those who commanded them.

Historical Background of the Crimean War

The Crimean War was fought from 1853 to 1856. Russia fought against an alliance that included the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and later Sardinia-Piedmont. Although the conflict involved disputes over religion, diplomacy, imperial influence, and control in the Ottoman territories, much of its most famous fighting occurred on the Crimean Peninsula.

The war became especially important in British cultural history because it was extensively reported by newspaper correspondents. William Howard Russell of *The Times* sent accounts of military conditions, leadership failures, battlefield suffering, and inadequate medical arrangements to readers at home. The National Army Museum describes the Crimean War as the first British campaign to be covered directly by a war correspondent in this influential manner. Public criticism generated by such reports contributed to political controversy and pressure for military reform (National Army Museum, n.d.-a).

Songs and poems developed alongside these reports. A newspaper correspondent might provide a detailed description of a battle, but a ballad could turn the event into a memorable narrative that people could sing in homes, streets, public houses, military communities, or local gatherings. Poetry could also transform a recent event into a national symbol.

The Crimean War therefore existed in two connected forms. It was a military conflict fought by soldiers, but it was also a cultural event interpreted by journalists, singers, poets, publishers, and audiences.

“The Heights of Alma” and the Irish Country Four

“The Heights of Alma” survived through a long tradition of printed and oral performance. Trevor Stewart and Jess Harpur sang the song on the Irish Country Four’s 1971 album of songs, ballads, and instrumental music from Ulster. The recording demonstrated that a song originating in the Crimean War period could remain meaningful more than a century after the battle.

The song was popular with street-ballad vendors in England, Scotland, and Ireland during and after the war. Street ballads were commonly printed on inexpensive sheets and sold publicly. A topical song about a major military victory could be learned quickly, performed repeatedly, and passed from one singer to another.

This process explains why different versions of “The Heights of Alma” contain different words, dates, regiments, and descriptions. Oral transmission does not preserve every line exactly. Singers remember, alter, shorten, expand, or localize songs. A performance may emphasize Irish soldiers, British patriotism, military suffering, or a particular regiment depending on the singer and audience.

The song’s survival among Irish and Irish-descended singers is especially significant. Irish soldiers

played a major role in the British war effort. Britain sent more than 111,000 soldiers to the Crimea, and historians estimate that more than 30,000 were Irish. Irish soldiers participated in major actions including the Alma, Balaklava, Inkerman, and the siege of Sevastopol (Murphy, 2023).

For Irish audiences, “The Heights of Alma” could therefore carry a personal or community meaning. It was not only a song about a distant British victory. It could also commemorate relatives, neighbors, or local men who had enlisted in the army, often because military service offered employment after the devastation and poverty of the Great Famine period.

The Battle of the Alma

The Battle of the Alma occurred on September 20, 1854. It was the first major battle fought by the Allied expeditionary armies after they landed in Crimea. British, French, and Ottoman forces were moving south toward Sevastopol, the important Russian naval base.

The Allied army had landed on the Crimean coast on September 14. The soldiers then began moving toward Sevastopol while suffering from sickness, exhaustion, insufficient supplies, and disorganized transport. Cholera and other diseases had already weakened sections of the army.

Prince Aleksandr Menshikov positioned the Russian forces on elevated ground south of the Alma River. The heights offered a strong defensive position because the Allies had to cross the river and advance uphill under fire. The French attacked on the Allied right, while British divisions engaged the main Russian positions.

Despite confused leadership and poor coordination, the Allied forces drove the Russians from the heights. The National Army Museum estimates that the Russians lost approximately 5,000 men and the Allies approximately 3,000. The number was therefore measured in thousands, not “hundreds of millions,” as stated in the original discussion (National Army Museum, n.d.-a).

The victory opened the route toward Sevastopol. However, the Allies did not immediately attack the inadequately defended city. Instead, they marched around it and established a siege from the south. This delay gave the Russians time to strengthen Sevastopol’s defenses. The victory at the Alma was therefore important, but poor decisions after the battle reduced the strategic advantage it had created.

It is also incorrect to describe the Battle of Sevastopol as the opening fight of the Crimean campaign. The Battle of the Alma was the first major field battle after the Allied landing, while Sevastopol became the location of a long siege.

The Meaning of Victory in “The Heights of Alma”

“The Heights of Alma” presents the battle as an Allied triumph. Like many military ballads, it tends to simplify a complicated event into a direct story of courage, advance, conflict, and victory.

This simplification is one reason ballads can become powerful historical memories. A battle involving tens of thousands of people, confused orders, multiple positions, disease, fear, and suffering is difficult to describe in a short song. The ballad therefore selects memorable elements: brave soldiers, strong enemies, dangerous heights, and final success.

The ballad’s chorus or recurring lines help listeners participate. Repetition turns history into a shared performance. The audience does not only hear about the soldiers. By singing the refrain, listeners join in commemorating them.

The song’s patriotic language may encourage pride in the British and Allied troops. It praises the courage required to cross the river and attack fortified high ground. At the same time, later commentary attached to performances of the song has often recognized the contrast between brave soldiers and ineffective commanders. The men achieved a difficult victory, but senior leadership failed to use that victory decisively.

This contrast is one of the most significant ideas connecting “The Heights of Alma” with “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Both works honor the courage of soldiers while leaving the audience aware that courage was made necessary, and sometimes wasted, by failures of command.

The Song as Popular History

“The Heights of Alma” is valuable as a form of popular history, but it should not be treated as an exact military report. Ballads preserve the emotional meaning of events more reliably than precise statistics or chronology.

A song may alter a landing date, substitute the name of one military unit for another, or exaggerate the certainty of victory. These changes do not make the song meaningless. Instead, they show how communities remembered and reshaped the war.

The ballad may have served several purposes:

- It informed listeners about a major event.
- It celebrated the soldiers’ courage.
- It supported patriotic feeling.
- It helped families and communities remember men serving abroad.
- It provided entertainment for public audiences.
- It converted suffering into a structured narrative.

- It allowed singers to preserve local or national connections to the war.

Street ballads were especially important before radio, television, and electronic media. A song could travel across regions and survive in memory long after the newspaper containing the original report had disappeared.

The VWML records show numerous versions of the ballad with different opening lines and sources. One version begins with an invitation to “loyal Britons,” while another begins by identifying the date of the Allied landing. These differences demonstrate that “The Heights of Alma” became a flexible tradition rather than one unchanging literary text.

Version Associated With Cyril O’Brien of Trepassey

The version attributed to Cyril O’Brien of Trepassey is significant because it demonstrates how Crimean War ballads traveled beyond Britain and Ireland into communities shaped by Atlantic migration and oral tradition.

Trepassey is a community in Newfoundland, where singers preserved many songs with Irish and British origins. In such communities, a ballad could survive long after it had disappeared from mainstream popular culture.

The version discussed in the original material gives September 18 as the arrival date rather than September 14. Historically, the Allied landing began on September 14, 1854. However, the difference does not necessarily mean that the singer deliberately falsified history. Dates are especially vulnerable to change during oral transmission because a singer may misremember a number, learn the song from another altered version, or adjust words to fit the rhythm.

The version also reportedly refers to storms, poor shelter, and the hardships experienced by British soldiers before their march. These details add an important dimension to the heroic narrative. They remind listeners that soldiers suffered not only from enemy fire but also from disease, weather, inadequate organization, and poor living conditions.

The exact authorship of “The Heights of Alma” is uncertain. Although some sources or later indexes may attribute individual versions to named writers or printers, the principal folk-song archives classify it as a traditional ballad. It is therefore safer to describe it as an anonymous or traditional work that circulated in multiple printed and oral forms rather than assigning it confidently to James Maxwell.

The Significance of Variation

Differences among versions are important because they show how collective memory works. A written poem associated with a famous author is often preserved in a relatively stable form. A folk

ballad, however, may exist in dozens of forms.

Each singer becomes partly responsible for preserving and recreating the song. The singer may retain the central story while changing:

- The opening date.
- The identity of a regiment.
- The number of verses.
- The political emphasis.
- The melody.
- The pronunciation.
- The description of the enemy.
- The level of attention given to suffering.

These variations reveal what different communities considered memorable. An Irish singer might emphasize Irish participation. A Newfoundland singer might preserve language brought across the Atlantic. A twentieth-century folk-revival performer might emphasize the criticism of military leadership more strongly than a nineteenth-century patriotic singer did.

The song therefore has two histories: the history of the Battle of the Alma and the history of all the people who continued singing about it.

Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade"

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" refers to a different event during the Crimean War. The charge occurred during the Battle of Balaklava on October 25, 1854.

The Light Brigade was a British cavalry formation. Because of a confused and poorly communicated order, the brigade advanced toward Russian artillery at the far end of a valley. The cavalry was exposed to artillery and rifle fire from the front and both sides.

The National Army Museum reports that approximately 673 men took part and that 247 were killed or wounded. Other calculations include men who were captured and produce a figure of more than 260 casualties. Hundreds of horses were also killed, wounded, or lost, seriously reducing the brigade's military effectiveness (National Army Museum, n.d.-b).

The original analysis states that the brigade rode for "half an alliance." The correct phrase is "half a league." A league was a measure of distance. Tennyson's repeated line, "Half a league, half a league," creates the impression of continuous forward movement into danger.

Tennyson was Britain's Poet Laureate and followed the war through newspaper reports. He wrote the poem after reading about the cavalry charge, and it was published in *The Examiner* on December 9, 1854.

Rhythm and Sound

The poem's rhythm is one of the main reasons it has remained memorable. Its repeated patterns imitate the sound of galloping horses. The opening immediately places the reader within the movement of the charge.

The repetition of "half a league" produces momentum. The soldiers appear to move forward without pause, and the reader is carried with them. Short commands such as "Forward, the Light Brigade!" reproduce the force of a military order.

Tennyson also repeats the location of the cannon:

- Cannon to the right.
- Cannon to the left.
- Cannon in front.

This arrangement surrounds the soldiers verbally just as Russian artillery surrounded them physically. The repetition creates a feeling of enclosure. The cavalry cannot escape the danger because fire comes from every direction.

Words such as "volleyed," "thundered," "flashed," and "stormed" create sound and visual imagery. The audience can imagine the noise of artillery, the movement of sabers, the smoke of the guns, and the confusion of horses and riders.

The poem's rhythm is therefore not decorative. It allows the reader to experience the speed, discipline, fear, and violence of the charge.

Courage and Obedience

The poem celebrates the bravery and patriotism of the soldiers who obeyed the command. Tennyson emphasizes that the men recognized that an error had been made but continued forward.

This idea creates one of the poem's central tensions. The soldiers are heroic because they obey and continue despite almost certain danger. However, the poem also acknowledges that "someone had blundered." The disaster resulted not from cowardice among the troops but from a failure somewhere within the command structure.

The soldiers' obedience can be interpreted in two ways. It represents military discipline and self-sacrifice, but it also raises questions about whether unquestioning obedience can become tragic when leaders make serious mistakes.

Tennyson does not investigate which commander was responsible. Instead, he directs attention

toward the soldiers. Their duty is described as responding to orders, not debating them during the charge.

This focus helped convert a military failure into a national story of courage. The British army did not achieve a significant strategic victory through the charge, yet the soldiers became symbols of loyalty, discipline, and sacrifice.

Imagery of Death

The “valley of Death” is the poem’s most famous image. It presents the battlefield as a place into which the cavalry knowingly descends.

Tennyson also refers to the “jaws of Death” and the “mouth of hell.” These metaphors transform the valley into a living creature capable of swallowing the soldiers. The cavalry appears to enter a supernatural space beyond ordinary danger.

The imagery makes the survival of some soldiers seem extraordinary. They enter the mouth of destruction, break through the Russian line, and return under fire. However, the repeated reminder that not all the six hundred return prevents the poem from becoming a simple celebration.

Death is both glorious and horrifying. The soldiers gain lasting honor, but that honor cannot restore their lives or erase the command failure that sent them into the valley.

Patriotism and Criticism

“The Charge of the Light Brigade” is often described as patriotic because it asks readers to honor the soldiers. The closing section commands the nation to remember their charge and celebrate their glory.

However, the poem is not entirely uncritical. The phrase acknowledging that someone had blundered ensures that leadership failure remains part of the memory.

The poem therefore performs a careful balancing act. It protects the dignity of the soldiers while admitting that the event should not have happened as it did.

This balance may explain its public influence. A poem that only condemned military leadership might have been considered disloyal during wartime. A poem that ignored the blunder might have appeared dishonest. Tennyson found a form that allowed readers to grieve, admire, and question at the same time.

Comparison of the Two Works

Element	"The Heights of Alma"	"The Charge of the Light Brigade"
Historical event	Battle of the Alma	Charge at the Battle of Balaklava
Date of event	September 20, 1854	October 25, 1854
Main outcome	Allied victory	Heroic but disastrous cavalry action
Literary form	Traditional folk and street ballad	Literary narrative poem
Authorship	Anonymous or uncertain	Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Method of circulation	Broadsides, oral singing, later recordings	Newspaper publication, books, recitation
Central emphasis	Victory, military courage, communal memory	Courage, obedience, sacrifice, and command failure
Relationship to history	Exists in numerous changing versions	Preserved in relatively stable authored versions
Cultural significance	Preserves popular and local memory	Shapes national literary memory

Both works honor soldiers, but they create different memories. "The Heights of Alma" presents a victory that could be sung collectively. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" presents a disaster transformed into a tribute to courage.

The ballad belongs strongly to oral and popular culture. Its meaning changes slightly with every performance. Tennyson's poem belongs to literary and national culture, although its driving rhythm also makes it suitable for memorization and public recitation.

Songs and Poems as Memorials

Songs and poems serve as informal memorials. A stone monument remains in one place, but a song can travel wherever people remember its words.

“The Heights of Alma” preserved the names and emotions associated with the battle in Britain, Ireland, Newfoundland, and other communities. Its continued performance by traditional and folk-revival singers shows that cultural memory does not depend entirely on official military histories.

“The Charge of the Light Brigade” became a verbal monument to the cavalrymen. Its final appeal asks succeeding generations to honor them. The poem helped ensure that the charge remained far more famous than many strategically more important events in the war.

This influence also demonstrates that cultural memory is selective. People often remember the Crimean War through a few famous images: the Charge of the Light Brigade, [Florence Nightingale](#), the “Thin Red Line,” the siege of Sevastopol, and battlefield reports. Songs and poems contribute to this selection by making particular events emotionally memorable.

Limitations as Historical Evidence

Although the works are historically important, they should not be used as completely objective accounts.

“The Heights of Alma” simplifies the battle, varies among singers, and may contain inaccurate dates or exaggerated language. Tennyson’s poem focuses on the soldiers’ courage rather than providing a complete explanation of the confused command structure.

Both works are shaped by artistic goals. The ballad must be singable and memorable. The poem must produce rhythm, emotional force, and a sense of national commemoration.

Therefore, historians should compare these works with military records, letters, newspaper reports, casualty lists, and later scholarship. Their greatest value lies in showing how people felt about the war and how they chose to remember it.

Conclusion

Songs and poems from the Crimean War were significant because they transformed military events into cultural memories. They allowed people far from the battlefield to imagine the courage, suffering, victory, and loss experienced by soldiers.

“The Heights of Alma” commemorates the Allied victory of September 20, 1854. The battle did not kill

hundreds of millions of soldiers; the combined losses were measured in several thousand. Nevertheless, it was a bloody and important engagement that opened the route toward Sevastopol.

The song became popular through street-ballad culture and survived in oral tradition. Performances by singers such as Trevor Stewart and Jess Harpur of the Irish Country Four helped carry the song into the twentieth century. Versions associated with singers such as Cyril O'Brien demonstrate how a British and Irish war ballad could cross the Atlantic and survive in Newfoundland communities.

The variations among versions are not simply errors. They reveal how oral tradition reshapes history according to memory, rhythm, local identity, and community experience.

Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" commemorates the failed cavalry action at Balaklava. Its rhythm imitates galloping horses, while its repetition and imagery surround the soldiers with cannon fire and death. The poem praises their courage but preserves the knowledge that the charge resulted from a blunder.

Together, the two works show that the significance of war literature does not depend only on factual accuracy. Songs and poems communicate emotional and moral truths. They distinguish the courage of ordinary soldiers from the mistakes of military leaders. They give communities language through which to express grief, pride, anger, and remembrance.

Most importantly, these works prevent the individual soldier from disappearing into military statistics. "The Heights of Alma" keeps alive the memory of soldiers who climbed the defended heights, while "The Charge of the Light Brigade" ensures that the cavalrymen who entered the valley of death continue to be remembered. Their survival demonstrates the power of music and poetry to shape public understanding long after the guns of war have become silent.

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