

Significance Of Songs And Poems Sung In The Crimean War

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Introduction

The Crimean War entered British and Irish public memory through newspapers, letters, photographs, songs, and poetry as well as through official military reports. Two works associated with that memory, the traditional ballad “The Heights of Alma” and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” transform separate battles into stories about courage, suffering, command, and remembrance. “The Heights of Alma” commemorates the Allied victory of September 20, 1854, after British and French forces crossed the Alma River and attacked Russian positions on elevated ground. Tennyson’s poem responds to the British cavalry charge at Balaklava on October 25, 1854, when confused orders sent the Light Brigade toward Russian guns. The works differ in authorship and transmission: the Alma song circulated through street ballads and oral performance in multiple forms, while Tennyson’s poem was written by the Poet Laureate after contemporary reports. Studied together, they show that war literature does not merely preserve facts. It selects events, creates emotional emphasis, and shapes how later audiences remember soldiers and commanders.

“The Heights of Alma” as Popular War Memory

“The Heights of Alma” belongs to a traditional ballad culture in which topical songs could spread quickly through inexpensive printed sheets, public singing, family memory, and later folk revival. The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library identifies the song under Roud number 830 and Laws number J10, reflecting its existence in numerous collected versions rather than one authoritative text (Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, n.d.). In 1971, Trevor Stewart and Jess Harpur performed it on the Irish Country Four’s self-titled Topic Records album, carrying a nineteenth-century Crimean War song into a modern recording tradition. The ballad’s continuing Irish associations are historically meaningful because large numbers of Irish soldiers served in the British Army during the conflict. Its narrative simplifies a complicated battle into recognizable elements—dangerous heights, determined troops, enemy resistance, and victory—so that listeners can participate emotionally without knowing every military movement. That selectivity is not a defect unique to folk song; it is part of how popular memory compresses large events into scenes that can be repeated, sung, and shared.

The Battle of the Alma and the Meaning of Variation

The Allied armies landed in Crimea in September 1854 and moved toward Sevastopol before encountering Russian forces positioned above the Alma River. Despite difficult terrain, disease, logistical problems, and imperfect coordination, the Allies forced the Russians from their defensive positions. National Army Museum accounts place losses in the thousands, not in the wildly exaggerated figures that sometimes appear when historical material is copied or misunderstood. The subsequent decision not to attack Sevastopol immediately allowed Russian defenders additional time to strengthen the city, complicating any simple story of decisive victory. Ballad versions also vary in dates, regiments, wording, and emphasis because oral transmission changes details as singers remember, localize, shorten, or expand a song. A version associated with Cyril O'Brien of Trepassey, Newfoundland, illustrates how British and Irish repertory traveled through Atlantic communities and survived far from the battlefield. Such discrepancies make the song unreliable as a precise military record but valuable as evidence of how communities preserved and adapted the emotional meaning of a nineteenth-century war.

Tennyson's Charge and the Power of Rhythm

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" describes the cavalry disaster at Balaklava rather than the Battle of the Alma. Lord Raglan's order was transmitted through a chain of command to Lord Lucan and Lord Cardigan, who interpreted it in a way that sent the Light Brigade down a valley toward Russian artillery. The National Army Museum reports that approximately 673 men rode in the charge and 247 were killed or wounded (National Army Museum, n.d.). Tennyson turns the movement into sound through repeated phrases, short commands, and a driving rhythm that evokes galloping horses. "Half a league" is a measure of distance, not "half an alliance," and the repetition creates momentum toward danger. The placement of cannon to the right, left, and front verbally surrounds the riders, while images of the "valley of Death" and the "jaws of Death" transform a tactical error into a near-mythic descent. The poem's formal energy therefore helps readers feel disciplined forward movement even while they know that the command itself was disastrous.

Courage, Command Failure, and Two Forms of Commemoration

Both works honor soldiers without presenting military leadership as flawless. "The Heights of Alma" celebrates a difficult victory while later performances and interpretations can preserve awareness that Allied commanders failed to exploit the advantage decisively. Tennyson is even more explicit because the line acknowledging that "someone had blundered" keeps command failure inside a poem

otherwise devoted to obedience and courage. This produces a tension between patriotism and criticism. The soldiers are admired not because the orders were wise, but because they acted under extreme danger within the expectations of military discipline. The two works also preserve different kinds of authority. Tennyson's published text remained relatively stable and gained national status through literary institutions, while the traditional ballad survived because ordinary singers repeatedly recreated it. That contrast matters for historical memory: canonical poetry can shape a shared national interpretation, whereas folk song can reveal regional, class, family, and diasporic attachments. Neither should be treated as transparent battlefield evidence, but both help explain what later communities chose to remember about sacrifice and responsibility.

Why Songs and Poems Matter to Historical Study

War songs and poems are useful historical sources when researchers ask the right questions. They can reveal emotional vocabulary, patriotic language, grief, criticism, social identity, and assumptions about duty that official dispatches may not preserve. They can also distort chronology, casualty numbers, or causation in order to create a memorable narrative. Historians should therefore compare literary works with military records, newspapers, correspondence, and archival evidence rather than treating artistic texts as factual transcripts. The Crimean War is especially suitable for this comparison because it developed alongside modern war correspondence and rapidly expanding mass print culture. Newspaper reports helped Tennyson write about Balaklava, while street ballads converted public news into material that could circulate orally for generations. Later recordings such as the Irish Country Four's performance demonstrate that the war's cultural afterlife continued well beyond the nineteenth century. The survival of these works shows that public memory depends not only on what happened, but on which stories were repeatable enough to cross time, geography, and changing political contexts.

Conclusion

"The Heights of Alma" and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" preserve two distinct Crimean War battles through two different literary traditions. The Alma ballad transforms an Allied victory into portable popular memory and survives in multiple versions shaped by print, oral transmission, Irish military experience, and Atlantic migration. Tennyson's poem converts the failed cavalry charge at Balaklava into a tightly structured meditation on courage, obedience, death, and command error. Historical evidence corrects inaccurate dates, casualty claims, authorship assumptions, and phrases without reducing either work to a list of factual mistakes. Their larger value lies in the relationship between event and remembrance. Both celebrate soldiers while leaving room to recognize failures by leadership, and both demonstrate how art can preserve emotional truths that official military records do not express in the same way. Songs and poems therefore matter to the study of war not because they reproduce battles exactly, but because they show how communities turned battlefield experience into narratives of sacrifice, criticism, identity, and collective memory.

References

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