Lady Butler: The Reinvention of Military History

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Le cas de Lady Butler

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Abstract

Très appréciées par les visiteurs des Royal Academy Shows de 1874 et 1876 et ensuite par le grand public, les représentations des guerres napoléoniennes et de la campagne de Crimée dans les tableaux d’Elizabeth Butler marquent un tournant décisif dans la peinture de guerre anglo-saxonne. Fortement influencée par les français Meissonier et de Neuville, Butler s’intéresse davantage aux simples soldats qu’aux généraux, aux scènes d’avant et d’après-bataille qu’au moment même du combat. Son regard, qui se veut direct et réaliste, se porte sur les acteurs ordinaires de la guerre, présentés à la fois en héros et en simples citoyens. Cette représentation trouve une profonde résonance auprès d’un public victorien ému par le courage et la souffrance des troupes et friand de cette version de l’histoire militaire qui place le citoyen britannique ordinaire au cœur de l’aventure politique du XIXe siècle.
Lady Butler: The Reinvention of Military History

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The hit of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1874 was a military scene, *Calling the Roll after an Engagement, Crimea*, which was taken by most spectators to be a representation of soldiers of the Grenadier Guards mustering after the Battle of Inkerman¹. The star of the show was the artist, Elizabeth Thompson (later Lady Butler)², aged 27, educated at the Female School of Art, South Kensington and in Italy and aspiring professional battle artist. Rechristened *The Roll Call* by the press and public, the picture received the sort of attention and inspired the kind of economic activity that the new millennium reserves for dissecting room thrillers and reality shows. The purpose of this article is to examine why *The Roll Call* and its three immediate successors were the object of such interest and enthusiasm, and thus the manner in which Elizabeth Butler's way of seeing moments of military history coincided with a nation's desire for a new emphasis in its reading of the past and a new æsthetic with which to interpret it.

British Battle Painting

British battle painting before Butler fell broadly into two categories, the hero portrait and the battle scene. Both narrate a concept of battle/war, which highlights the role of the commander and insists on the importance of strategy. The purpose of the portrait is simply to designate the hero, a named individual (there is a title plate on the frame), shown, usually full or three-quarter length, with the attributes of a soldier (uniform, sword) but removed in the composition from the immediate

¹ Elizabeth Thompson, *Calling the Roll after an Engagement, Crimea* (1874), 91 x 182.9 cm, oil on canvas.
² The bulk of her work was done under her married name, and it is by this name that she is best known.
context of warfare\textsuperscript{3}. If any military activity is apparent at all, it appears in the background landscape/skyscape and tends to be the least important element in the picture in so far as its function is decorative and sustaingly symbolic. In other words, the events of the battle itself are kept at a temporal and spatial distance—temporal because the subject is never shown actively fighting, spatial because the battlefield is distant or even invisible. Warfare, as such, is practically beside the point in these portraits, the purpose of which is to confirm the social prestige, which has been acquired through battle and to “offer up images of men […] worthy of respect”\textsuperscript{4}. There is neither the potential nor the desire for movement from designation (representation of a precise named individual) to denotation (the individual as the representation of a class or group) in these portraits\textsuperscript{5}, and it is not intended that there should be, since the point of the picture is to celebrate an individual, not a profession, still less human communities and states of mind.

To a great extent, the purpose of the second category of pictures, the battle scenes, is to celebrate the decisions of these same individuals. They are essentially landscapes with figures having a descriptive and celebratory function and, like the portraits, are painted according to precise rules and with clear objectives. The typical battle scene purports to show a precise moment in the battle. The spectator, placed “outside”, views the situation much as one might consider the state of the board during a game of chess. The painting is generally organised into three sections. A generous skycape/landscape occupies the upper third or half of the canvas, the middle ground contains figures of cavalry or infantry, drawn up waiting or in action, the foreground depicts a scene of action or the commanders surveying the scene. Topographical detail tends to be extremely accurate and it is this accuracy which validates the representation of strategy and fighting\textsuperscript{6}. Good geography, so to speak, allows the spectator to presuppose good history. Denis Dighton's \textit{The Battle of Waterloo} is an example of the genre\textsuperscript{7} and combines this characteristic topographical accuracy with an account of strategy (cavalry movements, the British square). There is action and an indication of the

\textsuperscript{3} A splendid example is the portrait of General Sir Henry Clinton, c. 1760, artist unknown, National Army Museum, London.


\textsuperscript{5} See Richard Brilliant's discussion of denotation/designation in \textit{Portraiture, op. cit.}, p. 45-47.

\textsuperscript{6} A French example is Pierre Lefant's \textit{Bataille de Fontenoy, 11 mai 1745}, approx. 300 x 400 cm, oil on canvas in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris. This very large panorama is presented with a map of the battlefield area and a written commentary on the strategies adopted by the various protagonists. The picture thus preserves its descriptive, pedagogical and commemorative functions.

\textsuperscript{7} Denis Dighton, \textit{The Battle of Waterloo, 18 June 1815: Attack on the British Square by the French Cavalry}, watercolour, National Army Museum, London.
consequences of war in the foreground (the cavalry charge and dead or dying soldiers) but the essential purpose of the picture is to show an army, a landscape and a decisive moment in a battle that resulted in a British victory.

**Other Ways of Seeing: Modern French War Painting**

The change in form and content proposed by Elizabeth Butler in 1874 was the result of her own contact with a completely different concept of war art that had emerged from utterly different and more recent historical conditions. Her narrative was essentially the same as that of the modern French war artists, particularly of her contemporaries Détaille and de Neuville. Traditionally, the British account of war was that of a nation which fought its battles abroad and, in general, won them. The French nineteenth-century narrative was invented in a climate of constant domestic and foreign threats to the country and its institutions, and against the background of the raising—and often defeat—of citizen armies. It seems reasonable to suppose that it was the proximity and urgency of the subject during the period that contributed to making war painting an important genre in France. Whether officially collected or commissioned and hung in the most significant of public places (the *Galerie des Batailles* at Versailles was opened in 1837), or shipped round the country in panoramas, battle paintings created and preserved collective memory by both presenting and fashioning an image of the History of France and of the role of the people in its making. Perhaps because of the prestige and popularity of the genre, French battle painters experimented in a way that their British counterparts—fewer in number and less valued—could not. Delacroix, Gros, Gericault and Vernet, for example, could show the intimacy of action and make portraits that went beyond simple designation to become a much wider reflection on the business of war\(^8\) while the space of their battles could be extended well beyond the moment and place of the fighting itself\(^9\). In nineteenth-century France—whether officially enshrined at Versailles or travelling from town to town as popular entertainment—war art was admired and perceived as educational, a crucial element in the creation and confirmation of national identity and a reflection of the nation’s values.

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\(^8\) Gericault's *Officier de chasseurs à cheval de la garde impériale chargeant* (1812) is the most obvious and compelling example.

\(^9\) Meissonier's *1814, la Campagne de France*, for example.
The Painting of History

War painting had no such status in Britain and Elizabeth Butler was unique as Meissonier is reputed to have recognized: « L'Angleterre n'a guère qu'un peintre militaire, c'est une femme10 ». She came to battle painting partly through personal taste—her earliest sketchbooks completed in early adolescence already contain drawings of soldiers working and resting11—partly because military subjects lent themselves well to the historical genre which, being particularly prized by the Academy, was a logical area of interest for an aspiring professional artist. Despite a certain reticence on the part of her parents who found such subjects “unsuitable for so young a girl” 12, she was encouraged to turn to historical/military painting in oils and presented a Franco-Prussian War subject, Missing, at the Royal Academy in 1873. Missing, inspired by the work of de Neuville and Detaille—whom she describes in her autobiography as being “my greatest admiration at the time” 13—received favourable notices and prepared the ground for her greatest public success, The Roll Call, shown the following year. The Roll Call was followed by three extremely successful oils, The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras (1875), Balaclava (1876) and The Return from Inkerman (1877), and these are the paintings which most concern us here14. Elizabeth Thompson married Major William Butler in 1877 and the constraints of life as an army wife as well as competition from a growing number of battle painters slowed her career. However, she continued to draw and paint—and sell—battle pictures with themes from recent colonial wars as well as the Napoleonic period into old age, her last oil painting, a First World War subject, A Detachment of Cavalry in Flanders, being completed at the age of 83, four years before her death.

Butler’s four great successes of 1874-1877 were all historical/military subjects, three (Roll Call, Balaclava and Inkerman) from the Crimean War and the fourth (Quatre Bras) of an infantry action fought in June 1815. Quatre Bras is distinct from the other three oils of the period by virtue of its subject but also because it is the only painting of the four to show action during battle. The Crimean War pictures, like Meissonier’s 1814, la Campagne de France and de Neuville and Detaille's Franco-Prussian War

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10 Attributed to Meissonier. See Paul Usherwood and Jenny Spencer-Smith, Lady Butler, Battle Artist, 1846-1933, Gloucester, Alan Sutton and the National Army Museum, 1987, p. 163. This is the essential work on the paintings and drawings of Lady Butler.


12 Elizabeth Butler’s Autobiography quoted in Usherwood and Spencer-Smith, op. cit., p. 22.

13 Ibid.

14 The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras (1874) 97.2 x 216.2 cm, Balaclava (1876) 103.4 x 187.5 cm and The Return From Inkerman (1877) 104.4 x 185.6 cm, all oil on canvas.
subjects, occupy a temporal and physical space beyond that of the battle\textsuperscript{15}. They are pictures of figures in a landscape but the change in emphasis, compared to Dighton's \textit{Battle of Waterloo}, for instance, is self-evident. The three Crimean paintings are not battle pictures, they are war pictures in the sense that their purpose is to inspire meditation rather than to record historical fact. In each case, the interest of the picture, therefore, lies not in the military action but in the consequences of that action. The subject is not action but reaction and the reaction is shown within an environment that supports and emphasises the figures. The landscape/skyscape is no longer a backdrop extracted, as it were, from another genre and added to a battle painting or hero portrait because something is needed to furnish the canvas\textsuperscript{16}. It is an integral part of the subject and provides the atmosphere and the light in which the spectator will “read” the human group. Finally, the majority of the members of that human group are ordinary private soldiers or N.C.O.s, anonymous but individual and identifiable. There are only two completely visible faces in Dighton's picture of Waterloo (and one is that of a corpse), none of the other soldiers have any distinct individual identity. Precisely the reverse is true of Butler's pictures and of those of her French contemporaries and it is in this sense that they changed the nature of war painting. War is no longer depicted in terms of topography and strategy at the moment of battle, nor are the decision-makers any longer of primary importance. It is shown in terms of the effects occasioned by war, not necessarily during the battle, on the ordinary soldier. The heroes here are the troops, the place any field—after the battle—and the strategy is based on the painter's desire to record the dismembering nature of war and, in doing so, to encourage the spectator to re-member and to value its victim-practitioners. This being said, war as such is not an issue. Butler's work is not pacifist. It is an exaltation of legitimate sacrifice which relies profoundly on a \textit{pacte de lecture} with the spectator that supposes which the latter will read the picture as an illustration of the qualities of courage, solidarity and duty.

\textsuperscript{15} Like other painters of the Franco-Prussian War, both de Neuville and Detaille are interested in what happens before or after the battle itself, in preparation and consequences. Even during the action, the subject of the picture is the result of the fighting, not the action itself. Thus, in the \textit{Fond de la Giberne} panel of the \textit{Panorama de Champigny} by Detaille and de Neuville, three soldiers are shown in a foxhole, one firing out at, and presumably holding back an unseen enemy, the second stooping to help the third, who lies dying at his feet. The eye is first drawn to the central, stooping figure, and then along a diagonal to his dying comrade. The third soldier, the only one to be still involved in the action, is the most unobtrusive presence of the three, placed to the spectator's left and turning away to face the enemy. Similarly in de Neuville's \textit{Le Cimetière de Saint Privat, scène du 18 août 1870}, the military action is apparent in the small area of red and white—uniforms and reflected light on bayonets—visible in the centre of the composition under the lych gate, but the whole interest of the painting is in the depiction of the dead and wounded and the wrecked village—of the effect of action on soldiers and civilians.

\textsuperscript{16} There are exceptions. Goya's \textit{Portrait of the Duke of Wellington} painted against a uniform brown background, notably.
Butler’s soldiers, however grim the defeat, are represented precisely as soldiers who struggle to maintain a semblance of parade-ground values and order in chaos. Her depiction of solidarity among comrades and defiance in the face of appalling conditions serves to enhance an ideology of loyalty to institutions and principles in the face of crushing defeat, not to raise questions about the army and the logic of war itself.

*The Roll Call* and its successors, like the paintings of Meissonier and de Neuville, are intended to be “read” both face to face (with the spectator looking head-on at the picture) and from face to face (with the spectator scanning the picture). This was an extraordinary initiative at a time when galleries and museums hung on every available inch of wall and a painting might reasonably expect to be “skied” or find itself in the shadows, but Butler was lucky, at least with *The Roll Call* which was hung at eye level in such a way as to make the “head-on” point of observation and therefore the examination of detail physically possible. In all four paintings, the spectator’s gaze is organised by the composition itself (the left to right reading of the file in *The Roll Call*, the centred corner of the square and shell-shocked hussar in *Quatre Bras* and *Balaclava* respectively, the foreshortened mounted figure leading the infantry column drawn in perspective in *Inkerman*) and then by repetitions and the constitution of sub-groups determined by the gaze of the soldiers themselves. In *The Roll Call*, for example, the spectator’s eye is first drawn to the three planes of the picture (sky, the file, snow in the foreground), then to elements that intrude into another plane (the mounted officer, a soldier lying in the snow and a discarded helmet), then to connections within the line of men. Here, the visual repetitions are to do with signs of dismembering: the bandages, the white cross-belts echoing the bandages, the wounded leaning on the fit or on a flagpole or rifle, exhausted men drinking from water gourds, two men standing to parade-ground attention while others, completely beyond military ceremony turn their backs to the officers. The gaze from soldier to soldier organises the file into sub-groups and, at the same time, conditions the progression of the spectator’s gaze. Thus the central figure of the painting (the guardsman with the bandaged hand) looks at the N.C.O. who is taking the roll and who is, in turn, watched by the mounted officer. On this guardsman’s right and in the officer’s line of vision are the two parade-ground figures, their wounded comrade and one of the water-drinkers between them. On the other side of the central figure, another group is looking at a fallen soldier and, continuing the file, a guardsman is bandaging his hand, indifferent to the wounded man next to him who is, however, the object of gaze and gesture from the two men on his left. Substantially the same thing happens in *Balaclava* and *Inkerman* with the spectator’s gaze organised again from within the painting. *Quatre Bras* presents a slightly different case since it shows a
square fighting (albeit towards the end of the battle) with its members looking out towards the enemy—and the spectator—rather than at each other. Here, the spectator's eye is drawn to the centre of the painting, a corner of the square, which is represented in a whirlpool of attacking cavalry and gun smoke, and, more particularly to the men in the eye-level kneeling file which has reloaded and which, for the moment, has nothing to do until the order is given to stand and fire. The spectator begins with the central kneeling figure, who is laughing and talking to the friend behind him, then scans the line looking at the different faces and reactions to the attack. In this sense, Quatre Bras functions exactly like the three Crimean paintings. Butler's major concern is the effects of war and, specifically, the effects on individuals visible in posture and facial expression. To all intents and purposes, her preoccupations of the mid-1870s were identical to those of photographers like Don McCullin working a century later in Vietnam and her representation of the battle fatigued hussar in Inkerman bears a startling resemblance to McCullin's eponymous shell-shocked Marine17.

Three of Butler's major successes, then, were characterised by the choice of a historical military subject, by the decision to paint a post-battle scene and by a desire to depict the effects of battle on ordinary soldiers. By doing so, and by insisting—like her French contemporaries—on the importance and inevitability of individual human sacrifice in a national enterprise, she placed them at the centre of the narrative of war that the present-day British public continues to recognise and repeat. Her pictures "work" because they are full of detail, detail that suggests to the spectator that the artist's moral position may be as reliable as her capacity to record a physical situation. They also "work" because, in representing individuals caught in the action or aftermath of war, they achieve the transition from what might be called anonymous designation (the figures are all individuals but none are named) to denotation so that the men depicted become exalted archetypes of all soldiers. Thus, The Illustrated London News turned the individuals of The Roll Call into types: “one poor fellow has fallen dead even at the muster; a comrade feels in vain for the beating of his heart; another wounded man sickens at the sight; one near him stares out vacantly, frenzied by a wound in the head; another binds up his bleeding hand: the hardy veteran and the new recruit, the sickly and the strong, the insensible and the impressionable” 18.

17 The photograph The Madness of War, in Don McCullin Sleeping With Ghosts: A Life's Work in Photography, London, Jonathan Cape, 1994, p. 71, was published all over the world.

18 The Illustrated London News, 9 May 1874, Usherwood and Spencer-Smith, op. cit., p. 31.
The Importance of Being Accurate

Because detail was crucial as a means of confirming the historical, and by implication, the moral veracity of the picture, Butler devoted much time to getting her subjects right. The superficial elements—uniform, accoutrements and so on—were borrowed from veterans, bought from second-hand shops or, in the case of Quatre Bras, made up for the purpose by the Army Clothing Factory. Each element of the picture itself was worked up from sketches, from the thirty-odd guardsmen of The Roll Call to the rye grass of Quatre Bras, and was made as real as possible: “Each figure was drawn in first without the great coat, my models posing in a tight ‘shell’ jacket so as to get the figure well drawn first. How easily then could the thick, less shapely great coat be painted on the well-secured foundation. No matter how its heavy folds, the cross-belts, haversacks, water-bottles and everything else broke the lines, they were there, safe and sound, underneath” 19. The illusion of accuracy was so complete that, for some time, Butler was rumoured to have served as a nurse during the Franco-Prussian War, thereby gaining the capacity to make “a picture of the battlefield, neither ridiculous, nor offensive, nor improbable, nor exaggerated, in which there is neither swagger nor sentimentalism but plain, manly, pathetic, heroic truth” 20. The fact that the rumour was patently untrue does not affect the argument. What is interesting is that it existed and as such illustrates a profound public desire for “truth”—normally contented by realism—in war painting. British Official War Artists from World War I to the Falklands have been criticised for being “unreal” while artists working for the illustrated papers miles away from the front and painters, like Butler, working on historical subjects and drawing from models in the studio were applauded for their accuracy21. This is certainly because the most usual narrative of war in modern western societies requires recognisable illustrations of private soldiers during, before or after action. The modern public’s basic expectations of war art are simple—it should supply elevation, commemoration and familiarity. Reactions to attempts to paint and draw war in any coded system that is not severely “realistic” or “accurate” are still sharply criticised and non-representational pictures may be deemed unworthy of the people who actually fought the war. Butler is important because she introduced to British war painting the simultaneously realistic and glorified depiction of the ordinary soldier, in or out of the time and space of the battle. In doing so she not only began to shape the criteria upon which formal military art was to be assessed by

20 The Times, 2nd May 1874, quoted in ibid., p. 31.
the general public, certainly for the next century, but also contributed to the change in the public's perception of the ordinary private soldier, N.C.O. and junior officer.

The Elevation of “Tommy Atkins”

Why was Elizabeth Butler's elevation of the ordinary soldier so popular? Quatre Bras, Inkerman, Balaclava and, above all, The Roll Call were seen in London and in travelling exhibitions by hundreds of thousands of people; their engraving copyrights sold for huge sums. According to William Holman Hunt, The Roll Call “touched the nation's heart as few pictures have ever done” 22. The Prince of Wales liked it, the Queen commissioned a picture from Butler on the strength of it. It needed police protection from the crowds at the Royal Academy and, in a very short time, copies hung in the nation's drawing rooms while parts of it appeared on the nation's postcards and biscuit tins. The picture's subject, described by Butler as “an archetypal image of the Crimean War” 23 appealed to a nation which, twenty years on and sufficiently distanced from the appalling mistakes of the Crimea, was ready to construct a humanist-military myth around the catastrophe. Enough was known about Balaclava and Inkerman for public recognition of the circumstances of the Crimean pictures to be certain. The Crimean War had come into every literate household through William Russell's dispatches in The Times and continued to enter people's lives during the years after the war in the form of veterans' memoirs, histories, novels. The iconography of the war was equally well established, The Illustrated London News and its contemporaries being the source of the artists' impressions that flooded the same literate households. There was, therefore, a pre-existing visual and written culture of the Crimea, one into which The Roll Call's sentiments could fit most comfortably. It should also be said that they fitted most comfortably and conveniently into the atmosphere of social concern and philanthropy of the period reflected, incidentally, in the other great success of the 1874 Royal Academy Exhibition, a poorhouse subject 24.

The Crimean pictures and Quatre Bras were, therefore, to some extent the right pictures in the right place at the right time and the relative decline of Elizabeth Butler's career from the 1880s would seem to confirm that her public appeal was, to a large extent, a matter of fashion, of novelty, in execution which touched the right chord. It is true that

22 William Holman Hunt quoted in Usherwood and Spencer-Smith, op. cit., p. 36.
23 Ibid., p. 35.
24 Samuel Luke Fildes, Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward (1874), 142.3 x 247.7 cm, oil on canvas. Ibid., p. 32.
these paintings were the physical manifestation of the general public's sentiments about warfare and the confirmation of what it imagined soldiers to be like. However, Butler's work cannot be reduced to a fortuitous meeting of individual imagination and technical competence with a public desire for representational and morally elevating painting of the victim-practitioners of war. Inspired by the example of her French contemporaries, she single-handedly shifted the emphasis in British military painting and set the precedent for the coming, expanding, generations of battle painters and, most importantly, for many of the Official Artists of the First World War. “Amazon's work this; no doubt about it” 25.

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25 “John Ruskin on Elizabeth Thompson's works in 1875”, in Usherwood and Spencer-Smith, op. cit., p. 16.