



---

Review: BLUNDERS GALORE

Reviewed Work(s): *The Reason Why* by Cecil Woodham-Smith

Review by: Hiram Miller Stout

Source: *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Autumn 1954), pp. 602-605

Published by: University of Virginia

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26440089>

Accessed: 31-01-2022 18:00 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Virginia* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Virginia Quarterly Review*

## BLUNDERS GALORE

BY HIRAM MILLER STOUT

**J**UST one hundred years ago the people of England were excited by the beat of drums, the cadence of marching feet, and the jingle of harness. Great Britain was at war after forty years of peace. In alliance with France and Turkey, she was accepting the challenge of an aggressive Russia.

The immediate causes of the Crimean War were obscure and rather trivial, but for Britain an important strategic interest was at stake. The Czar was proposing to hasten the demise of the Sick Man of Europe and to nominate himself the heir to Constantinople and other valuable Turkish possessions. London viewed the prospect of Russia as a Mediterranean power with as much alarm in 1854 as the Western nations do today, and the British Government was determined to resist the threat. Consequently, naval vessels were moved into the Black Sea, and an expeditionary force was dispatched to bolster the Turkish army fighting in the Balkans.

The records of all wars contain instances of mistakes and blunders, many of them resulting in tragic losses of brave men. The Crimean War was no exception; indeed, it seems to have surpassed most other conflicts of the modern era in the degree of ineptitude displayed by commanders and the needless sacrifices borne by the common soldier. And the height of all its blunders was the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Battle of Balaclava.

"The Reason Why," by Cecil Woodham-Smith, examines the causes of this disastrous engagement. There were mistakes aplenty on the day of the battle, but equally important, as the author shows, was the system of military administration

*The Reason Why.* By Cecil Woodham-Smith. McGraw-Hill Book Company. \$4.00.

which gave commands to the principal figures concerned.

The British commander-in-chief was Lord Raglan, a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, in which he had lost an arm, but past his prime in 1854—he was apt to forget that the French were now his ally and not the enemy. He had never commanded large forces and, like most of his subordinate commanders, he was prejudiced against the less socially elect “Indian” officers, who were the only British soldiers with recent field experience. His commander of the Cavalry Division was the third Earl of Lucan. This Division had a Heavy and a Light Brigade, each composed of the finest cavalry regiments of the British Army. The commander of the Light Brigade was Lord Lucan’s brother-in-law, the seventh Earl of Cardigan. These two noblemen disliked each other intensely, and from the time of their arrival in the Near East they constantly quarreled and maneuvered for advancement. Cardigan, claiming an independent command, could not accept the position of a subordinate to Lucan, and Lord Raglan temporized and attempted to placate the obstinate, peevish generals.

Both Lucan and Cardigan had entered and advanced in the Army by the purchase of commissions. This long-established practice was defended on the ground that it prevented the development of a professional military caste, careerists who might threaten the liberties of the British. It gave rank and command to the aristocracy who had everything to lose and nothing to gain through revolution. No Bonaparte was likely to rise as long as the command of a regiment cost £40,000.

However valuable the purchase system was as a bulwark of constitutional government, it relegated poor but able officers to long service in junior grades and permitted incompetents like Lucan and Cardigan to obtain positions requiring skill and experience. By the time of the Crimean War both Earls had demonstrated that they were temperamentally unfitted for high command. Except for courage and martial

posture, they had little to recommend them. As a young man Lord Lucan had shown some ability as a soldier, but in 1837 he had resigned his command of the 17th Lancers and gone to Ireland to try to rehabilitate his Mayo estates. There his ruthless, imperious manner won him the dislike of the tenants, and during the potato famine his insensitivity to the sufferings of the peasantry was notorious. Lord Cardigan was less intelligent and more irascible. A martinet on the parade ground, he was removed from the command of one regiment because of his petty persecution of junior officers. The Army authorities hoped that this reprimand would be a lesson to the Earl, but when he was permitted to purchase another command he revealed that he had neither learned nor forgotten anything. Some of his high-handed actions became public scandals.

Such were the commanders who sat astride their horses at Balaclava. The battle developed out of an attempt by the Russians to seize the road and small base by which the British forces investing the fortified port of Sebastopol were supplied. The first attacks were repulsed by a battalion of Highlanders and by the Heavy Brigade of the Cavalry Division. The enemy succeeded, however, in occupying a series of artillery redoubts, manned by Turks, which were placed along a ridge that bisected the plain of Balaclava and created two valleys running up to the heights of Sebastopol. Lord Raglan apparently decided that the redoubts, which controlled the supply road, should be retaken. His orders to Lord Lucan, however, were ambiguous, and the last, scribbled by the chief-of-staff and carried by an aide, was misinterpreted. Instead of an infantry-cavalry operation against the unsupported redoubts, the order resulted in Lord Cardigan's leading a charge down one valley against the main enemy position and under murderous fire from the heights on either side. Seven hundred set off; twenty minutes later 195 returned. Their discipline and bravery deserved the legend the charge inspired, but it was a tragic blunder—the Light Bri-

## CONTRASTS AND CONTRADICTIONS 605

gade was lost and the road remained in Russian hands. Watching the charge from Lord Raglan's command post, a French general with a Gallic flair for summary remarked, "*C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la guerre.*"

In writing this book Mrs. Woodham-Smith, the author of an excellent biography of Florence Nightingale, has enhanced her reputation as an historian of the Crimean War period. She has the ability to discuss military affairs in language that satisfies the soldier and the layman. Besides the general sources on the war and its chief figures, she has had access to family papers that add much to her portraits of Lords Lucan and Cardigan. Here is a book that, although focused on a battle, reveals a great deal about the beliefs, attitudes, and customs of English society in the middle of the nineteenth century.

## CONTRASTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

BY AVERY CRAVEN

**I**T is a risky business to generalize about the Ante-Bellum South. What might be true at one time and place did not always hold for others. What might characterize one man or group of men might not fit those who lived next door. In fact, that complex agricultural world was so filled with contrasts and contradictions that one is tempted to reject all fixed patterns and to offer the equally dubious generalization to the effect that it was a land of individuals who were just themselves and did and thought much as they pleased.

Yet there was so much of romance about that South, and so much of what was thoroughly unromantic, that writers have been inclined to reach sweeping conclusions, and to pass along all kinds of questionable "snap shots" for the uncritical

*Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.* By L. Minor Blackford. Harvard University Press. \$5.00. *Confederate Agent.* By James D. Horan. Crown Publishers, Inc. \$5.00. *A History of the Southern Confederacy.* By Clement Eaton. The Macmillan Company. \$5.50.