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# CARNAGE, MEDICINE AND “THE WOMAN QUESTION”: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CRIMEAN WAR IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse and compare representations of the Crimean war in three neo-Victorian novels, Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (1998), Julia Gregson's *The Water Horse* (2004) and Katharine McMahon's *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007), with reference to the commonly established view of this historical event. The novels foreground the experience of civilians who found themselves on the periphery of the battlefields, caring for the casualties of the war. As the course of history and private lives intersect, the main characters undergo a personal transformation; for the female protagonists, the experience leads to liberation from conventional gender roles. It is argued that by focusing on civilians rather than soldiers the novels offer a new perspective on the war; nonetheless, they uphold its overwhelmingly negative image in British collective memory.

## Key words

*Crimean war; historical novel; neo-Victorian fiction; war in literature; “the woman question”*

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The great appeal of the Victorian Age for contemporary British writers resides in the era's simultaneous distance from and proximity to our own time. On the one hand, the period is sufficiently remote to be ripe for assessment and study; on the other hand, it is close enough to be regarded as a prelude to modernity, capable of revealing connections and inviting comparisons with contemporary culture. In *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* Kate Mitchell contends that “[n]eo-Victorian fiction ensures that the Victorian period continues to exist as a series of afterimages, still visible, in altered forms, despite its irrevocable past-ness, its disappearance” (2010: 7).

This article aims to analyse and compare representations of the Crimean war in selected neo-Victorian novels<sup>1</sup> in relation to its prevailing image in British collective memory. The three books discussed here represent different types of formal engagement with Victorianism, but it is their depiction of the war rather than their formal framework that will be the focus of analysis. Whereas Julia Gregson's *The Water Horse* (2004)<sup>2</sup> and Katherine McMahon's *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007)<sup>3</sup> are conventional third- and first-person narratives, respectively, *Master Georgie* by

Beryl Bainbridge (1998)<sup>4</sup> is formally far more complex. It features three first-person narrators, each of whom projects a personal, indeed, an idiosyncratic perspective on the warfare. In her review of Bainbridge's novel, Carrie O'Grady asserts that, effectively, the reader provides a fourth way of looking at the events: "you are able to see the Hardy family's slow progress towards the Crimean war from four perspectives simultaneously: Myrtle's, Dr Potter's, Pompey's and your own bird's-eye view" (2011). Apart from the device of multiperspectivity, the novel self-consciously voices its scepticism about historical knowledge by exposing the role of photography in documenting the Crimean war – each component narrative (four out of six are concerned with the war) revolves around the shooting of a photograph which records a moment while mispresenting it.<sup>5</sup>

There is a small body of neo-Victorian fiction devoted to the Crimean war, the majority of which features soldiers and scenes of combat. Several series of novels portray soldier-protagonists for whom the Crimean war is an episode in their adventurous military career: *The Valiant Sailors* (1966), *The Brave Captains* (1968), *Hazard's Command* (1971), *Hazard of Huntress* (1972), *Victory at Sebastopol aka Hazard to the Rescue* (1973) in the Phillip Hazard series by V.A. Stuart; *Badge of Glory* (1982) – the first novel in the Royal Marines saga by Douglas Reeman; *Killigrew's Run* (2000) – Jonathan Lunn's novel in the series about Lieutenant Kitt Killigrew. The Crimean war also is the background to the first five novels in the Sergeant Jack Crossman series by Garry Douglas Kilworth: *The Devil's Own* (1997), *The Valley of Death: Sergeant Jack Crossman and the Battle of Balaclava* (1998), *Soldiers in the Mist* (1999), *The Winter Soldiers* (2002) and *Attack on the Redan* (2003), as well as Paul Fraser Collard's *The Scarlet Thief* (2013) in the Jack Lark series. *Flashman at the Charge* (1973) in the Flashman series by George MacDonald Fraser portrays the protagonist as a reluctant (anti)hero of the Crimean war. In more recent novels this military conflict is fictionally reconstructed also in Patrick Mercer's *To Do and Die* (2009), Marina Julia Neary's *Wynfield's War* (2010) and A.L. Berridge's *Into the Valley of Death* (2012).

By contrast, the novels by Bainbridge, Gregson and McMahon convey the experience of civilians who have found themselves on the periphery of the battlefields as doctors and nurses, therefore – in the words of Vanessa Guignery – as "secondary witnesses" (2010: 193). The war is initially a backdrop to the characters' personal lives but eventually turns out to be a central, life-changing event, when private stories become entangled in national history.

## The Crimean war – Victorian and modern views

In the case of the Crimean war, the imaginary connection with the past that historical fiction constructs is additionally sustained by the perception of this conflict as not only a landmark of the Victorian Age (Figs 2011: xix), but also as a foreshadowing of twentieth-century wars. Stephen R. Jones notes that the Crimean war is regarded as "either the last conflict of the new era or the first in the modern" (Jones 2017: vii). Orlando Figes describes it as "the first 'total war', a nineteenth-century version of the wars of our own age, involving civilians and

humanitarian crises” (2011: xix). It is alleged that “[l]osses from disease and poor medical facilities were far greater than losses in battle” (Arnold 2002: xxiv). This particular conflict supposedly marked a transition in the history of warfare by, initially, resembling the battles fought during the Napoleonic wars but, in its later stages, especially during the siege of Sevastopol, evolving into “a precursor of the industrialized trench warfare of 1914–1918” (Figs 2011: xix–xx). Figs substantiates his claim about the modern character of the 1853–1856 conflict by pointing out that the Crimean war entailed the use of new technologies, new means of communication and innovations in military medicine; as is well known, it was also the first war to be photographed and the first to be widely reported in the press and followed by the public on a daily basis (Figs 2011: xix; cf. also Tate 2019: 4).

Indeed, it was the attitude of the newspapers, especially the reports which appeared in *The Times*, that largely shaped the perception of the war at the time. Expecting a quick military and political success, the Victorian public soon grew impatient, dismayed and disappointed at the lack of achievement, the disturbing news about the number of casualties and the degree of ineptitude manifested by the authorities at home and the military at the front. As Trudi Tate claims, in Britain the prevalent image of the war has remained unchanged until today (2019: 3). Historians emphasise the persistence of the defining elements of the overall view of the Crimean war formed in the second half of the nineteenth century: the management of the conflict was criticised both then and ever since, and the war is remembered as “an heroic but ultimately pointless undertaking; a tragedy of suffering to no great effect” (Tate 2019: 6). It has become “a by-word for inefficiency and incompetence” while its historical context, its causes and consequences are now shrouded in obscurity (Ponting 2011: vii), just as in the mid-nineteenth century the reason why Britain went to war was not entirely clear to the contemporaries. Clive Ponting argues that because the Crimean war – despite the eventual tentative political success of the Allies – was regarded in Britain as a humiliating fiasco,<sup>6</sup> memories of the military calamities were soon suppressed<sup>7</sup> and displaced by “comforting myths” such as the heroism of the Light Brigade, as commemorated in Tennyson’s famous poem (“The Charge of the Light Brigade” [1854]), and Florence Nightingale’s pioneering commitment to nursing (2011: viii–ix).<sup>8</sup> Today, as in the years immediately following the war, the widespread British opinion is that the war was “senseless” and “unnecessary” (Figs 2011: xxi).

### **National history through the eyes of fictional characters: confusion, carnage and incompetence**

As Catherine McLoughlin writes in *Authoring War*, “To ascribe a start and an end to a conflict is to emplot it, and emplotment is the beginning of interpretation” (2011: 107). She points out that “[t]he starts of wars can be messy,” and historians often disagree about the precise moment when a war began (2011: 108). Analogously, for as long as it lasts a war has the property of “*open-endedness* or *endinglessness*” for those who are caught up in it (McLoughlin 2011: 107).

Bainbridge, Gregson and McMahon all chose to portray the Crimean war from the limited perspective of individuals while foregoing narratorial retrospection. In their fictional reconstructions, the distant conflict as experienced by the Victorians residing in Britain has no definite beginning – the war impinges on their daily preoccupations only gradually, at first mainly in the form of press reports or news about friends or relatives directly involved in it. In like manner, the novels refrain from depicting its termination – when the stories told in *Master Georgie*, *The Water Horse* and *The Rose of Sebastopol* come to an end, the fighting is still in progress and its outcome remains undecided.

Discussing Bainbridge's novel, Brett Josef Grubisic aptly notes that *Master Georgie* “does not examine the war as a historical event of international consequences. Rather it depicts ordinary thoughts and exchanges during extraordinarily chaotic days” (2008: 159). Similarly, the stories by Gregson and McMahon concentrate on personal experience without outlining the broader historical context. Consequently, the causes of the war and the overall development of the conflict remain obscure and puzzling to the characters in all the three novels. Despite the fact that they live in a modern society, in which political views may be freely voiced and independent media convey a frank critique of the authorities, there is a strong sense that arbitrary decisions affecting thousands of lives are made by the powers that be, which results in a degree of fatalism felt by those directly involved in the war. The geographical remoteness of the battlefields from the centre of power back at home enhances the confusion felt by individuals as to the rationale behind the orders they are following.

Bainbridge's novel charts the earlier stages of the war, until the death of the eponymous Master Georgie. Of the group of characters who travel from England to the war zone, none goes there to fight. George Hardy, a surgeon, intends to offer his medical skills to the army whereas the others lack any clear motivation. His wife Annie and his stepsister Myrtle travel as his companions, together with George's young children, Doctor Potter has a mild scientific interest in the area, his wife Beatrice acts as his travelling companion. Indeed, with the exception of the surgeon, these civilians' journey to the Crimea may be categorised as “war tourism” (Guignery 2010: 200). The conflict is represented as gathering momentum and gravity, from the characters' initial idle wait for the action – interspersed with picnics, parties and excursions – to more and more frequent and direct encounters with the atrocities.

Bainbridge's novel has been described as “a carefully planned attack on the concept of the heroic war narrative” (Sánchez-Arce 2001: 93). From the perspective of the civilians, the military conflict evolves from minor skirmishes, battles fought at a distance, to full-scale horrendous carnage happening at close quarters, when apparently no one controls the situation any longer. The action culminates in a pandemonium of chaotic bloodshed, in which the primal instinct to survive determines the actions of individuals. Pompey Jones, a photographer who came to the Crimea with no intention of engaging in any combat, is inadvertently caught in deadly fighting. He frantically kills Russian soldiers for no reason other than to save his own life, and apparently his enemies are driven by the same motivation:

Shortly, we were pounced on by Russians looming up in looking-glass reflections of ourselves, eyes dilated with horror, bearskins bristling like brushwood. It was hand to hand encounters and my bayonet proved its worth. After that first sickening thrust into flesh and muscle – I swear the steel conducted a discharge of agony – it became ordinary, commonplace, to pierce a man through the guts. I didn't look at faces, into fear-filled eyes, only at the width of the cloth protecting the fragile organs from the daggers of death. (Bainbridge 1999: 186)

In the heat of the battle, Pompey admits to having no idea “what cause [he] was promoting” (187). The circumstances of George's death reinforce this sense of futility. He is killed long after the fight is over, while attending to the injured bodies strewn on the battlefield. A wounded Russian soldier fires a single deadly shot at the doctor – an action which is both cruel and senseless.

*Master Georgie* openly advances the notion that the British war effort is absurd from the start. The British declaration of war on Russia comes immediately after the news of a Turkish victory over the Russians, which makes the decision seem quite irrational. Constantinople is no longer at risk but once Britain has wandered into the theatre of war it has to stay there, invent a part for itself and play it, if only for the sake of sustaining its reputation. The siege of Sevastopol, as presented in the book, apparently is launched for no other reason than the need to justify the continuity of the British military presence. As a colonel explains during a dinner party, “We have to do something [...] We can hardly turn tail and go home, not after all the flag waving and drum beating” (123).

Omitting to specify the official causes of the war, *The Water Horse* and *The Rose of Sebastopol* draw an ironic contrast between the response of the public at home and the experience of the soldiers and nurses at or near the frontlines. Both novels satirise the naïve, triumphalist attitudes that prevailed at the early stages of the conflict. Gregson's book contains a scene in which middle-class ladies collectively form simplified ideas about the war on the basis of accounts in *The Times*: “Here is Turkey and here is Russia, and here [...] are some of our more important trade routes. [...] You see the Russians are now rampant. They want to seize Sebastopol, which is in the Crimea” (Gregson 2010: Ch. 28). Their confidence of a landslide British victory is derived from comparisons with the last war that Britain fought: “The war in the Crimea will be another Waterloo” (Ch. 28). Catherine, the heroine of the novel, becomes a nurse and travels to the scene of the conflict, where the dreadful reality defies any such facile, ill-informed notions. An old soldier sums up the present war as “one of the worst cock-ups in England's history” (Ch. 56).

In a similar vein, *The Rose of Sebastopol* lampoons the mistaken grandiose expectations of yet another triumph of the British Empire. At the beginning of the novel, the heroine and her father proudly watch a parade of troops going off to fight. Overwhelmed by the occasion, Mariella succumbs to the emotions of the crowd:

I gave a half sob, waved, shouted, ‘God save the Queen!’ and abandoned myself to the cacophony of sound and movement: the stamp of marching

feet, the bellowing of the crowd, the band playing ‘The British Grenadiers’, the flurry of handkerchiefs, the proud, uplifted faces of the men. (McMahon 2007: Ch. 2)

Mariella’s father envies the men their chance to fight “a just war against a barbaric enemy” and the opportunity of leading a worthy life by making a sacrifice of it (Ch. 2). They both follow the progress of the campaign in *The Times*, believing that the future of the Empire is at stake. While Mariella’s naivety initially prevents her from doubting the commonly held opinions, her eccentric cousin Rosa is fiercely opposed to the war from the start, ridiculing the causes of Britain’s involvement that Mariella cites to her from the newspapers: “Nobody has yet given me a coherent reason why we are at war with the Russians,” and sarcastically suggesting that the impulse to go to war arose from the boredom of forty-years’ peace since the Napoleonic campaigns.<sup>9</sup> As the reports from the front become alarmingly critical of the way the situation is being handled, Mariella’s father perceptively remarks that “[t]he people will come to hate the war” (Ch. 18).<sup>10</sup> On arrival in the Crimea, the heroine witnesses the full scale of the debacle, which is commonly attributed by the soldiers to “[s]hocking mistakes” (Ch. 9). In accord with the images that emerge from the other two narratives, a character in McMahon’s novel sums up the Crimean war as “hell, start to finish” (Ch. 17).

In none of these novels is the consistently critical portrayal of the war alleviated by any of the “comforting myths” to which it gave rise. Florence Nightingale, rather than being the caring “Lady with the Lamp,” an icon of popular imagination (Berridge 2015: 5), is portrayed in Gregson’s novel as a stern disciplinarian, full of class prejudice and remorseless towards her nursing team. Each novel makes a passing reference to the charge of the Light Brigade while downplaying the incident to one of numerous military confrontations, i.e. to what it originally was prior to its conversion to a national narrative of heroism. In Bainbridge’s story a character welcomes the opportunity to obtain a good horse after “over two hundred cavalry horses of the Light Brigade stampeded into the camp, their riders having perished in a charge along the north valley” (1999: 160). In *The Water Horse*, the disastrous charge is casually mentioned by a soldier as yet another instance of the ineptitude and irresponsibility of the commanders: “A shambles [...] A complete moog-up. [...] They say if you were to search the length and breadth of England, you’d be hard put to find two greater muffs than Lord Lucan and Lord Cardigan” (2010: Ch. 41).

The novels unswervingly uphold the popular image of the Crimean war as an appalling display of incompetence. Class prejudice, which makes promotion dependent on high birth rather than personal skills and achievement, has put power in the hands of the wrong people, or, as Doctor Potter in Bainbridge’s novel says, “those buffoons who, by reasons solely of wealth and title, control both government and army [...] Idiots, triflers” (1999: 73). The campaign is first delayed, which results in thousands dying of cholera before any fighting has started, and then unnecessarily prolonged; the British army suffers heavy losses due to the Foreign Office and the High Command not having “anything other than the vaguest notion as to the possible strength of the Russian forces” (Bainbridge

1999: 123). Both the soldiers and the medical staff are also confronted by shortages of basic provisions. The state of unpreparedness for the war becomes all too apparent as soon as the characters arrive from England, and the situation is depicted as both grotesque and appalling. When George starts work at the General Hospital in Varna, he is forced to wear a dead officer's uniform and buy regulation boots at his own expense. This outrageous lack of supplies, however, contrasts with excessive bureaucracy: "he was asked to fill out numerous documents, only to be told that it would be weeks, possibly months, before the desired footwear arrived" (1999: 101). The narrator of Gregson's novel comments that "the system was falling apart – any fool could see that. As the days went by there was less food, less water, smaller and smaller buckets of fuel for the fire. Little problems loomed large" (2010: Ch. 48). There is a growing recognition that this campaign is unlike any previous one: "the rain, the mud, the complete lack of organisation" (Ch. 57).

### Wartime medicine – national disgrace vs personal growth

The infamous lack of organisation extends to the care of the sick and wounded. Among other things, the Crimean war is remembered for the inadequacy of medical care, which, however, sparked such outrage at home that before the conflict came to an end efforts were underway to improve its quality (Arnold 2002: 130).

In each novel, due to the main characters' civilian status, images of actual fighting are far outnumbered by depictions of life in the camps, outside the battlefields and in between the battles. The appalling standard of medical care is given prominence in these descriptions. The most extensive and vivid accounts may be found in *The Water Horse*, whose heroine is a member of Florence Nightingale's team of nurses. Her first job is at the hospital in Scutari – "long freezing corridors with their broken windows and filthy floors," where everything is "wretched and ugly and broken and could not be mended" (Ch. 38). An army doctor admits that nearly all the soldiers in his care are suffering from "non-combat injuries: cholera, dysentery, frostbite, exposure" (Ch. 46). Much space is devoted to graphic representations of the poor hygiene, the filth, stench and vermin on the wards.

Disregarding or disbelieving the current political war propaganda, the protagonists of Bainbridge's, Gregson's and McMahon's novels participate in it by choice, but exclusively for personal reasons. Despite the irregularities in his private life, George Hardy appears genuinely committed to his profession. As he himself hints, the opportunity to care for the casualties of the war may be a chance for him to redeem himself and restore a sense of purpose to his life: "He then began a rambling discourse to do with his past life, regrets, wasted opportunities, lack of application, etc., and how he felt, in some mysterious way, that the war would at last provide him with the prop he needed" (Bainbridge 1999: 85). The work, although extremely hard, appears to fulfil this need – Potter remarks that soon George "was a changed man. Though he returned weary and in need of a bath, hair cloudy with dust and clothes stained, his blue eyes conveyed a candour and innocence of spirit missing since his youth" (87).



Likewise, in *The Water Horse*, Catherine's motivation has nothing to do with support of the British war effort; instead, she chooses the privations and challenges of nursing in order to assert her independence and achieve more than the conventional domestic roles she is coerced to play by her father: "Her world suddenly shrunk to the kitchen, the dairy, the parlour: the whole world of footling tasks that made up being a woman" (2010: Ch. 1). By running away from home to study medicine, or at least nursing, as the only medical profession open to women, she both wants to do something useful with her life and to experience freedom from what she feels is domestic imprisonment. Catherine's journey from youth to maturity is framed by two encounters with mortal illness. At the beginning of the novel, she witnesses her mother's death in childbirth but is unable to prevent it, which fuels her ambition to study medicine. At the end of the novel, she redeems her failure by helping to save her wounded lover's life. From her private perspective, the Crimean war functions as a crucial, formative experience, from which she emerges bruised, traumatised, but ultimately also mature and self-reliant – which casts Gregson's novel in the category of female *Bildungsroman*.

The motif of war-enforced personal growth also features prominently in McMahon's story. Mariella, the protagonist of *The Rose of Sebastopol*, undergoes a comparable transformation from a conventional young girl to a mature woman, capable of making her own choices. Her own involvement in the war is motivated by her wish to rescue her fiancé, an army doctor, who has travelled to the Crimea and gone missing. Even after she finds him, she remains near the battlefields. By the end of the story, Mariella has taken up nursing and has witnessed scenes that she would never have confronted had she not left her parents' comfortable but restrictive home in England. Vanessa Guignery views the heroine's "frantic personal quest" as a replacement for "the traditional heroic and glorious male account of the conflict" (2010: 201).

Known for launching the practice of professional nursing, the Crimean war was the first military conflict in which women participated in an official capacity but it took time before their presence became generally accepted.<sup>11</sup> The ambivalence with which women's involvement in the war was treated is also reflected in *Master Georgie* – the war photographer is disconcerted to realise that he accidentally captured a woman in one of his shots: "we weren't encouraged to have women in the pictures, not unless they were ladies, and we hadn't any of those, and besides, it was thought people back home don't like to see the weaker sex in such grim surroundings" (1999: 179–180).

By disrupting the patterns of everyday life and placing the women who have become involved in the military conflict outside the conventions of social life, the representation of the Crimean war in the novels by Gregson and McMahon highlights the problem of women's social inferiority in the Victorian Age. In each story, the female characters confront circumstances which differ radically from the safe and narrow confines of domesticity. They become embroiled in men's warfare, but, irrespective of their dedication, can play only subordinate roles and are continually subject to disdain and sexual harassment. Nevertheless, although the personal freedom that the heroines eventually achieve comes at a high price, they appreciate the change that they have undergone. At the end of Gregson's

story, Catherine reflects: “‘At least I’m useful now,’ she thought with bleak satisfaction. ‘I know what I’m for’” (2010: Ch. 65). In McMahon’s novel *Mariella*, too, acknowledges the ineffectualness of her domestic life back in England and gradually learns to be useful. Her moral growth culminates in her ability to “stop being ornamental” (Zipp 2009) and adopt the position of a humble nurse. As a result of her harrowing experiences, the heroine awakens to “a different sense of self” (“The Rose of Sebastopol”). It may be said that in *The Water Horse* and *The Rose of Sebastopol* “the woman question” comes to the fore, becoming just as important as the image of the warfare. In this respect, both novels situate the Crimean war within the history of women’s struggle for self-determination.

The war-induced redefinition of gender roles, consequent upon the destabilisation of the existing social norms, further justifies the comparison between the Crimean war and the First World War. The Great War constituted a major turning point in the process of women’s emancipation in the early twentieth century. It is estimated that approximately 25,000 British women served abroad, in a range of capacities, as “nurses, first aiders, canteen workers and driver-mechanics” (Pattinson 2020: 165–166). Although resented in many quarters of society, the reshaping of the constructions of femininity during the war ushered in an enduring change. Hence, if the Great War is regarded as the first modern military conflict – although, as has been said earlier, some historians are prepared to describe the Crimean war in these terms – then the wartime reinscription of gender roles may be seen as one of the signs of its modernity (Pattinson 2002: 5).

## Conclusion

Some literary critics draw a distinction between neo-Victorian novels that aim at a plausible, immersive historical reconstruction, and those that approach the past critically from the modern point of view by rewriting aspects of it, recovering forgotten or suppressed voices, revealing past secrets and imaginatively filling in meaningful omissions in historical accounts. Novels of the former type, in the words of Kate Mitchell, “are less concerned with *making sense* of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood” (2010: 7). Yet Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn define such novels as “historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (2010: 6) and are inclined to reserve the term “neo-Victorian” only for those texts that are “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and revision concerning the Victorians*” (4, emphasis in the original).

However, the analysis of the representation of the Crimean war in the fiction of Beryl Bainbridge, Julia Gregson and Katherine McMahon demonstrates the difficulty with the above categorisation. The narratives uniformly debunk the official propaganda of the war as a grand imperial project. They might be called subversive and revisionist, if it were not for the fact that a highly negative image of the Crimean war began to shape itself while the war was still in progress. Therefore, the analysed fiction in fact endorses and reinforces the well-established popular consensus about this war as “a national scandal,” characterised by

“muddle, incompetence, and corruption” (Arnold 2002: 30). The writers stress the atrocities of the warfare, the enormity of suffering and death, and the staggering failures of the authorities – but there is nothing new about this. The original contribution to the fictional portrayal of the Crimean war is the shift of focus from the military to the medical staff. As A.L. Berridge notes, “the Crimean is perhaps the first war in which the most memorable heroes were medical rather than military” (2015: 5). In parallel to the antiaristocratic critique of the military leadership, the war resulted in the “democratisation of heroism”: it was the courage of common soldiers as well as the professionalism and dedication of the medical personnel that earned public recognition (Brown 2010: 606–607). Yet the three novelists do not try to glorify their protagonists – they are ordinary women and an ordinary man who wish to do something useful with their lives. Whereas there is no doubt that the war is traumatic for everyone (and fatal for Master Georgie), for the female protagonists who survive it is likely to have other, multi-faceted consequences, and not all of them negative. In registering the change in women’s roles which was occasioned by the Crimean war, the novels by Gregson and McMahon implicitly gesture towards the future and may be said to hint at a contemporary perspective on the past.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Neo-Victorian” is used here in a broad and inclusive sense, as “contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era” (cf. Hadley 2010: 4).
- <sup>2</sup> Julia Gregson (b. 1947) is the author of short stories and five novels. *The Water Horse* was shortlisted for the 2005 Waverton Good Read Award (“Julia Gregson”).
- <sup>3</sup> Writing is one of Katherine McMahon’s numerous preoccupations. To date, she has published ten novels in which she combines her passion for history with an interest in creating captivating female protagonists. Time-wise, her fiction ranges from Jacobean times (*After Mary* [2000]) to WWII (*Footsteps* [1998]) (“Katherine McMahon”).
- <sup>4</sup> Unlike the other two writers, Beryl Bainbridge (1932–2010) has an established reputation in contemporary British fiction. During the later stage of her prolific career as a novelist she turned to historical fiction. Apart from the Crimean war in *Master Georgie*, Bainbridge depicted Captain Scott’s failed expedition in *The Birthday Boys* (1991) and the sinking of the Titanic in *Every Man for Himself* (1996). All the three novels, as Brett Josef Grubisic observes in *Understanding Beryl Bainbridge*, address “national calamities” (2008: 136, 145, 152).
- <sup>5</sup> A detailed discussion of the role of photography in Bainbridge’s novel may be found in Guignery (2010).
- <sup>6</sup> Unlike the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean war is not associated with any spectacular British victory. Even the eventual capture of Sevastopol gave little occasion for jubilation, since on entering the city the victors were confronted with horrific images of death and devastation (Berridge 2015: 14).
- <sup>7</sup> As A.L. Berridge notes, the irony is that while the victors of the Crimean war would rather forget it, the losers continue to commemorate it; the defence of Sevastopol especially is eulogised in Russian history (2015: 16–17). She contends that from the contemporary British point of view it was “a war of outdated imperialism for which Britain now feels only embarrassment” (2015: 18).

- <sup>8</sup> Contemporary historians writing about the Crimean war concur in remarking on the discrepancy between the actual impact of the war and its relatively minor, stereotyped role in popular imagination. Indeed, Clive Ponting argues that the term currently used for the conflict is in fact a misnomer which misleadingly reduces the conflict to the far-off and relatively isolated Crimean Peninsula, whereas the war was fought over a much larger territory, involved several nations and had far-reaching consequences (2011: vii).
- <sup>9</sup> This view has been expressed by the British historian G.M. Trevelyan (cf. Guignery 2010: 196).
- <sup>10</sup> Arguably, it was William Howard Russell's reports published in *The Times* that initiated a change in the public perception of the war (Berridge 2015: 7–8).
- <sup>11</sup> Resentful or downright hostile attitudes to Florence Nightingale's efforts are well evidenced; for example, Dr John Hall, a British army physician, perceived her reports and reforms as a challenge to his own reputation (Arnold 2002: 98).

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