
John Grehan. *The Charge of the Light Brigade: History's Most Famous Cavalry Charge Told Through Eye Witness Accounts, Newspaper Reports, Memoirs and Diaries (Voices from the Past)*. Yorkshire: Frontline, 2017.

Book Review

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During the Battle of Balaklava on 25 October 1854, the British Light Brigade, for no apparent tactical reason, galloped into a heavily defended Russian position, and fell under cannon fire from three sides. John Grehan explores the Charge of the Light Brigade through numerous primary sources such as Queen Victoria's letters, letters from soldiers, correspondence, and dispatches from the Crimean War. He forgoes paraphrasing. As such, there are numerous long quotes, fifteen in the first chapter, and it may appear that Grehan is quoting his way through the book. Though cumbersome at times, most of these long quotes are from primary sources and introduced in a way that maintains the narrative. It is clear from the beginning of the book that Grehan's intended audiences are those with an understanding of the Crimean War and the famous Charge of the Light Brigade. For example, of the thirteen chapters, the reader must wait until the second chapter before Grehan discusses the background of the Crimean War. Nevertheless, due in large part to a well argued introduction, the text maintains the reader's interest. Furthermore, chapter one contains much information on the "Purchase System," whereby British officers bought their commissions and rank, rather than gained them by merit (p. 5). The British reinstated the system in response to Oliver Cromwell. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, military men no longer controlled the Army. Rather, wealthy landowners, with nothing to gain from revolution, filled the senior ranks of the military. In this way, the army became part of the upper class with shared interests (p. 5). As much as it secured Britain from a military revolution, it diminished its readiness for war because the Army's senior officers had bought their rank and had little or no experience in matters of war. "Out of fifteen regiments of cavalry and twenty-six of infantry which we have here [in Flanders], twenty-one are commanded literally by boys or idiots" (p. 5).

Such was the situation for Britain during the 1850s and it is from this world that the main characters evolved, including James Henry Somerset, first Baron Raglan, James Thomas Brudenell, seventh Earl of Cardigan, and George Bingham, third Earl of Lucan. Raglan, served as military secretary for Sir Author

Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington. During the Battle of Waterloo, he suffered a terrible injury to his right arm. He removed himself from the action to seek medical attention and a surgeon sawed his arm off below the shoulder. He never made a sound. Of toughness, there is no doubt. However, he never commanded forces in battle. Nevertheless, Army headquarters, with Queen Victoria's approval, appointed him Commander-in-Chief (p. 8). Lucan had not seen action for twenty-five years yet he commanded the cavalry. He was the type of person that believed he was always in the right regardless of evidence to the contrary. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Cardigan despised him. Cardigan, through backchannels of the purchase system, commanded the prestigious Light Brigade. Surrounded by scandals involving women, he nonetheless despised Lucan because he believed Lucan mistreated his sister. Not only was Cardigan Lucan's subordinate, he was also his hated brother-in-law! Though Raglan preferred to separate the two men and made this known to the Duke of Newcastle, the Secretary of State for War, the appointments stood (p. 10).



Figure 1. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, by Richard Caton Woodville, 1854.

Though the book does touch on other battles during the Crimean War, such as the Battle of Alma and the Siege of Sevastopol, the Battle of Balaclava makes up the heart of the book. Of this battle, Grehan focuses on three elements—the 93rd Highlanders, the Charge of the Heavy Brigade, and the Charge of the

Light Brigade. The five hundred-fifty men of the 93rd Highlanders that held firm in the face of two thousand Russian cavalry begins the action in earnest (p. 96). Lieutenant Colonel George Ainslie formed the 93rd only two ranks deep. The reporter for the *The Times*, William Russell, recognized as the first modern war correspondent, described the scene from a heightened vantage point. "The ground flies beneath their horses' feet; gathering speed at every stride, they dash towards that thin red streak topped with a line of steel" (p. 94). Latter the "thin red steak" evolved into "the thin red line" and to this day describes courage in the face of impossible odds. The 93rd Highlanders readily repelled the first four hundred cavalry to charge on them and the Russian Cavalry turned their attention to the Heavy Brigade.

Due to the topography of the North Valley, vineyards and orchards the Heavy Brigade, numbering eight hundred, did not see the two thousand Russian Cavalry until they were five hundred yards away. It was General James Scarlett's aide, Major Alexander Elliot, that alerted him to the Russian Cavalry. As such, he ordered an immediate uphill charge and repulsed the Russian cavalry (p. 98-99).

Indeed, the continuous long quotes are distracting at the beginning of the book but they are of much interest when the Battle of Balaclava begins. Operational reports, soldiers who were members of the 93rd Highlanders, the Heavy and Light Brigade tell their stories with all the shades of humanity. Fear, pride, respect, and duty are all present in their accounts. For example, Hector McPherson, a member of the 93rd Highlanders wrote, "We declared that we would die to a man rather than not maintain the position assigned to us" (p. 94). An anonymous sergeant from the Heavy Brigade wrote to his parents from the hospital in Scutari, "At one time I was surrounded with about ten Cossacks, and with the assistance of my long sword (which is the only thing you can depend upon with those Cassocks), I got clear of them, with two wounds in my head and one in my right hand, all saber cuts" (p. 104).

The Charge of the Light Brigade followed that of the Heavy Brigade and the intensity of the action increases. Here Grehan begins describing the charge by addressing the great controversy surrounding it. The controversy centers around what Raglan's orders were. For example, whether Raglan's last order complemented his previous orders or if each was a stand-alone order. General Airey set down Raglan's last order, it reads,

Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front-
follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the
guns - Troop of Horse Artillery may accompany - French cavalry is

on your left - R. Airey
Immediate (p. 113)

Captain Lewis Nolan, who became the first to fall in the charge, galloped down from the Sapouné Heights to deliver both Raglan's written and verbal orders to Lucan. None of this made sense to Lucan except "immediate" and "rapidly." It is with this in mind that Lucan ordered Cardigan to charge the Light Brigade, formed in two lines, into the heart of the Russian Army. Again, Grehan, quoting primary sources allows the reader to feel the tension, fear, and horror members of the Light Brigade endured. For example, "A shot came over the hill and dropped on the neck of the horse of a man named Gowens. The shot cut off the head as cleanly as with a knife. The horse stood still for a moment, and then dropped. Gowens got on a spare horse running by, and in a few minutes this horse's head was also shot clean away" (p. 139). The same thing was happening to the soldiers! The action here is intense. The Light Brigade charged three quarters of a mile down the North Valley while cannon fire from three sides assailed it. That of the Don Cossack battery came from directly in front and crossfire fire on their left and right fell from batteries on Fedioukine Hills and Causeway Heights. The Don Cossack battery directly in front and crossfire fire on their left and right from batteries on Fedioukine and Causeway heights. Upon reaching the Don Cossack battery and engaging the artillerymen, "they had no chance with us, and we cut them down like ninepins" (p. 152), they had to return the way they had come through cannon fire on both flanks!

Though the narrative told through eyewitness accounts is dramatic, the book does not include a map of the battlefield. Thus, readers will do well to familiarize themselves with the relative topography of the battlefield. The Sapouné Heights where Raglan viewed the battle and gave orders, the Fedoukine Hills and Casuseway Heights and their relationship to the North Valley are central to the story. Grehan does provide photographs of the battlefield taken during his fieldwork. From them it is clear the terrain posed obstacles or gave the advantage depending on which position one held. Nevertheless, they do not give an overview of the battlefield.

The Light Brigade—670 strong at the onset of the charge—lost 271 men (p. 178). Though spectacular, the charge destroyed the Light Brigade and for no tactical advantage. Someone had to answer for this blunder. The controversy over who was responsible was lively as well, again Grehan provides correspondences from Lucan, Raglan, and Cardigan to Army High Command and it is quite entertaining to witness the political positioning that took place.

The Charge of the Light Brigade was spectacular in the same way it was unnecessary. The sheer audacity of it prompted Stefan Kozhukhov of the Russian 12th Artillery Brigade to take note. “With a sort of brave despair, these mad daredevils flowed back along the path they had forced open, and not one of them, wounded or not, laid down his arms” (p. 155). As much as it is the heroism, the controversy that surrounds the event keeps the story relevant. Though Grehan makes his thoughts clear, his many block quotations allows readers to examine the evidence for themselves and come to their own conclusions. In addition, there are many reference notes and the bibliography is extensive. If one is new to the famous charge, a little additional research, mostly concerning topography, will enhance the read. For those well versed in the story, Grehan’s book provides access to the many primary sources that surrounds the Charge of the Light Brigade.