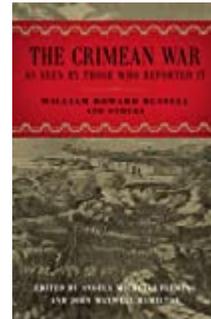




William Howard Russell. *The Crimean War: As Seen by Those Who Reported It.* Ed. Angela Michelli Fleming and John Maxwell Hamilton. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xxii + 181 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3445-0.



Reviewed by Eugenia M. Palmegiano (St. Peter's College)

Published on Jhistory (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

Whose War Was It Anyway? Journalists, Officers, Observers, and Outsiders in the Crimean War

William Howard Russell was the most famous reporter covering the Crimean War. His dispatches for the *Times* raised issues that haunt war correspondents and their governments today. *The Crimean War*, however, was not Russell's story. Rather, it was a blend of his columns and those of others on the scene from North African Zouaves and English officers to French generals and Russian princes. This mélange originally appeared under the title *The Complete History of the Russian War* (1856). According to editors Angela Michelli Fleming and John Maxwell Hamilton, the book was the brainchild of American printer, publisher, and bookseller John G. Wells, who wished to profit from American interest in the conflict (p. xviii).

Fleming and Hamilton's fourteen-page introduction is the only part of the work documented. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources in its thirty-eight notes, the editors give a brief summary of the causes of the war, focusing more on its immediate catalyst, the dispute about Russian protection of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, than on longstanding concerns,

such as control of the Black Sea and the Balkans and the implications of such control for the imperial game that Britain and Russia were playing in Asia. The introduction also notes now-familiar effects of the war on Britain—the professionalization of nursing sparked by Florence Nightingale and her volunteers, the collapse of the Aberdeen ministry in 1855, and some reform of the army in 1870—but does not notice that professionalization of nursing closed doctoring to women and that the Earl of Aberdeen's departure prompted the arrival of the diplomat Viscount Palmerston as prime minister.

Russell did not finish his columns at war's end. After the Paris peace conference in 1856, he worried about the vagueness of the treaty's terms and warned that the "friendly relations ... suddenly arisen between the French Emperor [Napoleon III] and the Czar [Alexander II] [were] a fact which fills all lovers of peace with deep uneasiness" (p. 174). Journalists are neither historians nor prophets, but the reports of Crimea cast a long shadow.

The introduction presents a balanced appraisal of Russell, placing him in both historical and contemporary contexts among war correspondents. Fleming and Hamilton remind us, for example, that Henry Crabb Robinson earlier covered the Napoleonic Wars for the *Times*; that Thomas Chenery, the paper's man in Constantinople, wrote the more dramatic pieces on the hospital at Scutari; and that Russell benefited from his association with the most important paper in Britain when telegraphy made news current. Further, the editors recognize that Russell's descriptive writing, in a *Times* then at its peak, made him a celebrity. This status was unusual in a newspaper world committed to anonymity and was serendipitous because the new penny *Daily Telegraph* soon outdistanced the *Times* in circulation and because his editor was John Delane, whose clout went well beyond journalistic circles. The influence of the *Times* made Russell preeminent among war correspondents. He exemplified the dilemmas we now view as typical for these reporters: whether to file narrow stories from the field or broad ones from headquarters; how to coexist with the military; how to decide what information to publish. In Russell's case, Fleming and Hamilton accuse him of lacking perspective on the British commander, Lord Raglan, and of sending facts perhaps helpful to the enemy causing Delane to limit him to reporting past events (p. xv). Fleming and Hamilton explain that Delane nonetheless continued editorial criticism of the military by which they no doubt mean that he authorized his leader-writers to take this approach.

The remainder of the introduction focuses on American bookseller Wells, of whom the editors are rightly critical. They point out that he interspersed Russell's dispatches with a variety of materials by authors not always identified. Known authors represented a range of people, among them an English officer ... severely wounded at Inkermann (p. 88), a regimental surgeon at Sebastopol (p. 112), an Austrian journalist for a Habsburg military journal (p. 118), and British and French soldiers whose unsent letters were found on their dead bodies or whose posted ones found their way into the press (pp. 54-55, 114). Wells, Fleming and Hamilton complain, rewrote and added text, then published it in bad printing, which they reproduce complete with sections on the peace treaty and its conventions, on maritime law, and on the meaning of military terms as well as the book's original advertising. By contrast, while the editors acknowledge that the book had elegant and highly useful hand-colored maps, they do not reproduce these but refer the reader to a URL address (p. xviii). The intro-

duction concludes that the Crimean War is to be looked back upon as a golden age for war reporting ... a time when correspondents were in the exhilarating process of inventing the idea of an active, responsible press that served as a flywheel against powerful government (p. xx). This exuberant judgment would have surprised Russell and his colleagues who thought that their journalism served this end since its inception in the civil wars of the 1640s. However, Fleming and Hamilton make an important contribution to the writing of history when they remark that, for all its warts, the book offers considerable insight into how the war looked at the time (p. xxi). In this assessment, they reaffirm the historian's charge to convey a sense of how it felt to be there.

Following the introduction is a two-page unnumbered preface in which Wells offered the conventional wisdom that dailies provided a premature version of events instead of a true chronicle because they had no time to check references and to reflect on them. Hence, he asserted, audiences did not learn from later books but unlearned from them journalism's prior misstatements that tended to accumulate as copy flowed in complementing or correcting earlier columns. His aim, he announced, was to present a compendious, lucid, and reliable narrative. He did not accomplish this goal.

According to Fleming and Hamilton, Wells penned the next thirty pages. Therein he plodded through the background of the war missing the pivotal fact that Crimea split the alliance forged at the Congress of Vienna to keep peace in Europe and failing to appreciate why Piedmont-Sardinia joined the fight. Focusing on the Danube campaign, Wells saluted the Turkish commander, Omar Pasha (a/k/a the Austrian Lattas, a soldier of fortune), and bemoaned that thirty thousand Russian soldiers died from hunger, cold, and cholera before the British and French entered the war (pp. 23, 29).

This mundane recitation ceased when the Crimean campaign began. True, body counts make tiresome reading until one discovers that fifteen thousand Russians troops died at Inkermann, many of whom carried neither money nor books but only a miniature or lock of hair of some beloved; or one remembers that the word laughter never appeared but was evidenced by the casualty counts (pp. 91, 94). While the book contained prose of many styles because of its numerous scribes, Russell managed to capture moods and moments. For instance, he quoted Russians who regarded British men as lions unfortunately commanded by donkeys, which may account for the revelation later about troops unwilling-

ness on occasion to obey (pp. 123, 136). He rhapsodized about battle's end at nightfall—from the hot sun, mist, smoke, explosions, shot, shell, rockets, and the roar of ten thousand guns, to the cool, still, starlight sky—and mused, with reputed British understatement, that being under fire was every unpleasant (pp. 96, 64). He regretted that his countrymen, busy looting Sebastopol after the siege, died as magazines, set afire by Russians marching away from the city with sullen tramp, exploded (p. 156). Although Russell clearly softpedaled the debacle at Balaklava where 409 of the 607 members of the Light Brigade perished, he did not hide the desertion of 20 soldiers from British to Russian lines during the Sebastopol siege (pp. 72, 106). Yet, brilliant as his testimony and that of other eyewitnesses may have been, at least one returning officer said that no newspaper had captured the carnage displayed on Crimean battlefields, notwithstanding poignant portrayals of wounded men left to die in the sun without water as enemy fire thundered overhead

or in filthy hospitals as insects crawled over their bodies (pp. 88, 123, 161).

Overall, the editors treat journalism somewhat cavalierly. They describe it in 1850s Britain as becoming a highly profitable commercial enterprise based on advertising, not political patronage (p. xi). This generalization may be technically accurate insofar as newspapers no longer received subventions from parties, but major London gazettes certainly exhibited, indeed boasted of a Whig or Tory affiliation except for the *Times*. That newspaper's habit of editorial independence regularly provoked readers to complain that it was not consistent about politics. Moreover, Fleming and Hamilton fail to mention that Parliament cancelled the advertising duty in 1853 and the stamp duty in 1855, actions whose ramifications, among them the birthing of the penny morning paper, were significant for mid-century journalism and beyond.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Eugenia M. Palmegiano. Review of Russell, William Howard, *The Crimean War: As Seen by Those Who Reported It*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26272>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.