

# THE FIRST TRUE WAR

*From the Crimea, William Simpson enthralled both Queen Victoria and the British public with a new journalistic device: the on-the-spot combat picture.*

by Peter Harrington



In the early autumn of 1854, shortly after the British army had landed in the Crimea, a young Scotsman living in London named William Simpson received a letter inviting him to visit the premises of Paul and Dominic Colnaghi to discuss an important proposition: Simpson was asked to go to the Crimea and provide sketches for a series of lithographic plates to be published by the Colnaghis' company.

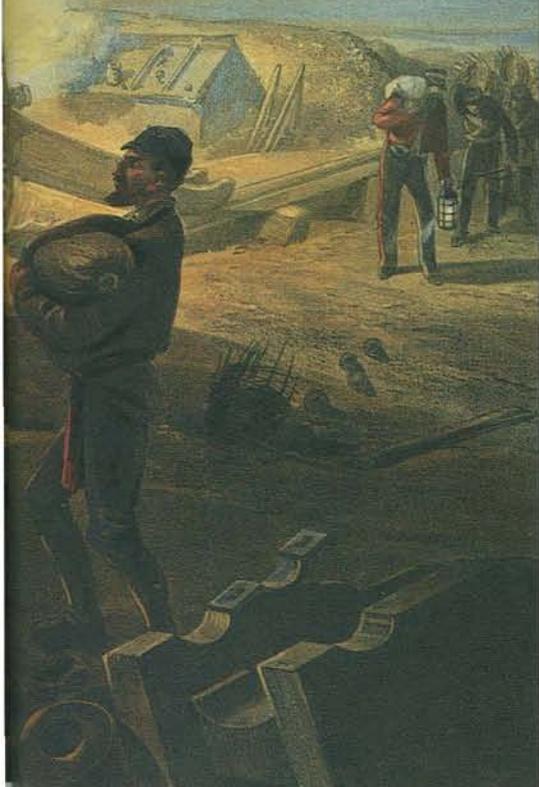
British, French, Turkish, and Sardinian forces had encamped on the Crimean peninsula to confront a large Russian army stationed in the major naval base at Sebastopol. The war had broken out in the previous year, precipitated by a diplomatic quarrel between the Turks and Czar Nicholas I, and France, Britain, and Sardinia came to Turkey's aid. This was the first major conflict involving the British army since Waterloo, and the British public was eager for news and images of the war. Illustrated newspapers were still in their infancy, but lithographs were already becoming popular (at least with

the wealthier classes, who could afford them). Consequently, printmakers and publishers vied for the upscale public's patronage and commissioned various artists to record the war's scenes.

Simpson, born in Glasgow in 1823, started out to be an architect, but in 1840 he became apprenticed to the Glasgow lithographic firm of Allan and Ferguson. The year of the Great Exhibition, 1851, took him to London in search of work and, once there, into the employ of lithographers called Day and Son, who saw the potential of the young Scotsman. It was no doubt on their advice that the Colnaghis ap-

# ARTIST

*William Simpson painted A Hot Night in the Batteries in 1855, recording the British shelling of Sebastopol. The artist is seen in old age (below left).*



proached him with their offer—far more to their monetary advantage than to the young artist's, who was happy enough just for the commission.

Prior to this, Simpson's only involvement with the war had been to make a sketch of the September 20, 1854, battle of the Alma between a combined Anglo-French force and the Russians, based on various accounts, so that it could be lithographed by Lloyd's (a London publisher). His search for prints of besieged Sebastopol produced only a few maps and a silhouette, which demonstrated the need for on-the-spot sketches. Simpson later wrote in his autobiogra-

phy of the importance of firsthand drawings: "Here they are making 'gabions,' 'fascines,' 'traverses,' etc. What are these? No one knows. If I were there I could send sketches of them, so that every one would understand."

Simpson left London in October 1854. He arrived off the Crimea on November 15 to the sound of distant gunfire. Disembarking at the British naval base at Balaklava, he lost no time in walking the six miles or so to the Allied lines before Sebastopol to make preliminary sketches. Armed with several letters of introduction, he presented his credentials to the likes of Admiral Sir Edmund Lyons (regarded by Simpson as "the greatest of all our bluejackets"), Captain Peel of the Royal Navy, and the British commander, Lord Raglan. To them, he was a curiosity, the first "special artist" they had ever laid eyes on. (Others would follow, sent out by newspapers, but only toward the end of the campaign.)

He arrived late for the battles of Balaklava and Inkerman—both failed Russian attempts to break the siege of Sebastopol in October and early November 1854—but in a letter to Dominic Colnaghi dated November 16, he recognized the need to provide drawings of these actions: "Of course I know what you are most anxious for—the late Battles. Well, I am anxious for them too, and no time shall be lost, and it will take some time. I have received no official or other accounts of them, I have only heard vague general descriptions of them, so I have yet to learn those features, sketch the locality, and some of the uniforms of the different regiments engaged before I can begin to make my pictures."

Simpson sought out witnesses and participants in the battles for the information he needed. "On Sunday last, before quitting the Camp," he wrote, "I managed to visit the field of 'Inkermann' [sic], and got a sketch of it; . . . I picked up some stray bullets and two caps of the Russians . . . we passed two bodies, both Russians still unburied; I sketched one of them; the ball had gone right through his head, and his face had turned quite black." The artist came quickly to the conclusion that in-

terpretations of these actions differed, in particular the ill-fated Light Brigade charge through a murderous cross fire (and Tennyson's "Valley of Death") at the Battle of Balaklava on October 25. As he wrote later: "There must always be some slight uncertainty in details of important historical events." He walked the battlefields to get a feel of the ground and made several sketches of the fateful charge. Lord Cardigan, who led the charge, exclaimed upon seeing them, "It is all wrong!" Finally, after several revisions, Simpson offered Cardigan a sketch showing him prominently leading the charge. (One can only presume that in the earlier versions, Cardigan was less conspicuously portrayed.) The soldier displayed much pleasure at the revised scene.

While Simpson came into contact with the soldiers and commented on these "miserable looking beings . . . covered with mud, dirt, and rags," he hobnobbed with the staff officers and other notables and lived in the comfortable surroundings of a naval ship in Balaklava harbor (although he did spend a week in Captain Peel's tent at the siege lines "so that I may get a good knowledge of the entrenchments"). Besides Cardigan and Raglan, he socialized with the dukes of Cambridge and Newcastle and Lord Lucan, commander of the British cavalry division in the Crimea, and he met William Russell, the correspondent of the *London Times*. He also met the photographer Roger Fenton, who was not too impressed with the artist's methods: "[He] makes only pencil outlines on the ground and puts in the colour from memory," Fenton wrote his publisher.

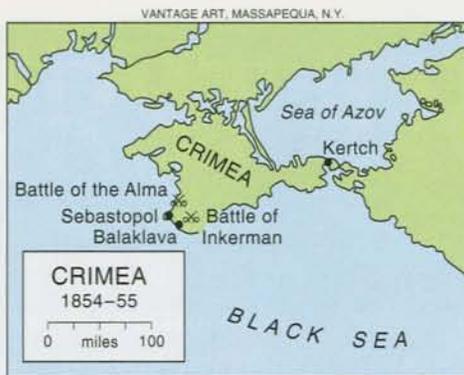
The criticism was unfair. Simpson despaired over the time it took to get his drawings done—due to the demands of research and interviewing eyewitnesses—but felt that quality was of the utmost importance. This alone would separate his pictures from the numerous sketches drawn in London once written accounts arrived. "Here I have to wait before even the drawing is begun," he wrote, "till I see some one in authority who is said to know all about it. I have to go and see the locality—

listen to a variety of long, conflicting accounts—make a number of sketches—then a great many alterations; . . . in all cases, [I try to] get the approval of the chief at the head of the department concerned in the affair.”

All his sketches had to pass under the watchful eye of Raglan before being sent to London, but as Raglan and, more importantly, Queen Victoria admired Simpson's works, he was allowed to send his finished watercolors with the official dispatches. Upon their arrival in London, the queen herself viewed them. She also commissioned the artist to paint several scenes. (He produced one, a view of what was probably the 1st Grenadier Regiment of Guards' camp, with Balaklava in the distance. It was published with the rest of the series but did not find its way into the Royal Collection.) On his return from the front, Simpson had an interview with the monarch, who surprised him with her detailed knowledge of his own movements in the Crimea and her ability to identify landmarks in his paintings.

It was during the winter and spring of 1855 that Simpson produced his most striking and evocative work, detailing the grand drama as it unfolded, as well as the personal sufferings and endurance of the troops. It is from this period, for example, that we get *Huts and Warm Clothing for the Army* and *Captured Russian Rifle Pit*, in which Simpson's skill in rapidly executing a scene on paper and his acute eye for detail are especially evident.

The war was not going well for the Allies at this time. They were bogged down before Sebastopol, several assaults on the city having been repulsed, and their troops suffered greatly from poor food and inadequate clothing in the bitter winter conditions. Like Russell of the *Times*, Simpson expounded both in his work and in some of his letters on the miseries of the war. In 1895, he reflected: “Every one of the men must have been wet through, with no possible means of drying a rag upon them—and many had only rags, and rags of the thinnest; so when it changed to frost they must have become little



**Simpson arrived in Crimea on November 15, 1854, just missing the battles of Balaklava and Inkerman. Many of his sketches were made at Sebastopol.**

better than icicles.” Simpson's unflinching drawings of such scenes played an important role in de-romanticizing the war for the British public.

Winter turned to spring, and with the warming temperatures came an outbreak of cholera. The military activity before Sebastopol was also hotting up, and Simpson went into the trenches to sketch the troops. He was frequently exposed to gunfire and recalled being dimly aware of objects falling around him as he sketched—often in dangerous positions. As Gen. Sir George Higginson later wrote: “He [Simpson] appeared indifferent to danger when engaged with pencil and brush and was a cheery and welcome companion.” In one scene, members of the 41st Regiment were present, and as the artist sketched them one soldier asked him: “Please, sir, put ‘forty-one’ on our caps so that our friends at home may see it, and they will know what we are doing here.” (Simpson did put the identifying number on the cap, in *Captured Russian Rifle Pit*.)

In May, Simpson went with Raglan on the expedition to Kertch, whose capture on May 24 gave the Allies naval control of the Sea of Azov, cut an important Russian line of communication from the mainland to the Crimea, and thus materially contributed to the fall of Sebastopol a few months later. At Kertch, Simpson sketched many of the inhabitants and buildings. He had planned to return home after the expedition, but the success of the publication of the first part of his Crimea se-

ries brought letters from the Colnaghis urging him to stay on. He returned to the front before Sebastopol in time for the Allied attack on June 18.

The attack was hardly a well-kept secret. “We all knew of the assault that was to be made next morning,” wrote Simpson. On the night of June 17, he crawled out of a trench and found a hole from which he would be able to advance as the attack progressed—but he fell asleep, and by the time he awoke, the fight had begun. “It was a wild orchestra of sound, never to be forgotten,” he wrote. The attack failed to gain a foothold, and the siege of Sebastopol resumed yet again.

Later in the summer Simpson witnessed the closing stages of the battle of Tchernaya “just as the Russians were retreating,” and his notes describe vividly the dead and dying on the field. Shortly after that, he watched the final bombardment and fall of Sebastopol on September 8, 1855, where he was one of the first civilians to enter the captured stronghold known as the Redan, which he quickly sketched before moving off to another strong point, the Malakoff. The fall of Sebastopol was the climax of the war (a peace treaty would be signed in Paris six months later), and Simpson left for England in late autumn.

Twenty thousand British soldiers died in the Crimea, the majority from disease brought on by the deplorable living conditions, poor sanitation, and primitive medical facilities. The war ended because of an even *more* massive toll in lives being paid by the Russians, who were losing more than 3,000 men a day in Sebastopol toward the end of the Allied bombardment.

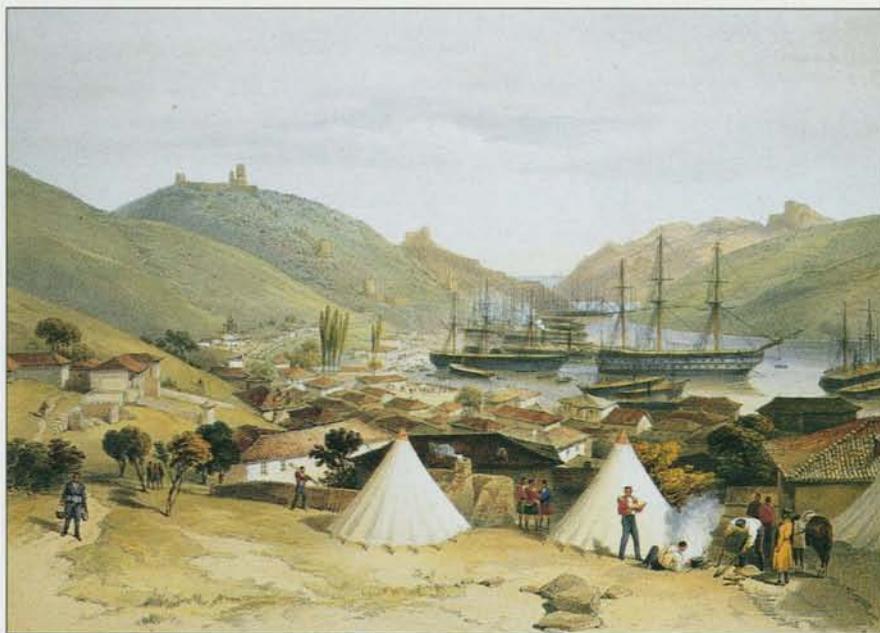
When Simpson's watercolors arrived at various intervals throughout 1855 at the London premises of the Colnaghis, the images were transferred to stone by Day and Son, and lithographic plates were made. To obtain color, a separate stone was used for each tone. In several cases, outline keys were created to guide the audience in what they were seeing, and a number of letters sent by Simpson to the company were reproduced in facsimile and sold with the sets of prints. The original drawings

went on exhibition around London, and a reviewer of the show at the Graphic Society in February 1855, reflecting on the large numbers of soldiers who had succumbed to disease, commented poignantly: "All looked with painful interest at views of the spots . . . where the flower of England, unscathed by fire, unsmitten and unhurt [in battle], rotted away, with their faces turned towards England. For them, there will be no victory, no rejoicing—for them, no open arms and happy faces, no flags waving or jubilee of bells—but in their stead, cold, narrow graves, in an enemy's country, on a spot . . . [marked] by a great nation's greatest and most terrible disgrace."

Newspaper advertisements in May 1855 stated that the first series of forty plates were still available for six pounds, twelve shillings for plain prints, or ten pounds, twelve shillings for colored (a steep price for the majority of people). To stimulate the appetite of buyers, the Colnaghis were quick to reprint and circulate favorable press reviews of the first series. The *Observer* had lauded them as "prints which may be fairly classed under the denomination of military fine art," while the *Morning Herald* commented, "One great recommendation of all these War Prints published by Colnaghi is their perfect authenticity."

In June, it was announced that Simpson's second series would be offered in ten parts, each with four plates. (The first series had already been published in January 1855.) In the end, the Colnaghis had produced two large portfolios of Simpson's colored lithographs, more than eighty plates in all, in what was (for them at least) a rousing commercial success. Two thousand copies of the complete set, entitled *The Seat of the War in the East*, were printed. The Colnaghi company made clear profits of £12,000, while Simpson made very little from the endeavor. He was paid twenty pounds for each watercolor, and had to provide for his own living expenses. But the work did bring him fame.

Many felt Simpson had captured the Crimean War in all its horrors. The *Art*



**Balaklava, Looking Towards the Sea was one of Simpson's first sketches of the war in the Crimea. The busy Allied military port was now free from Russian harassing fire.**

*Journal* hailed the prints as the best pictorial series of the war and went on: "'Grim-visag'd War' has . . . assumed his ugliest frown; and it is impossible, as one looks at these pictures, all of them more or less indicative of the stern realities of giant contest, to do so without saddened feelings, mingled, nevertheless, with admiration of the fortitude and heroism that have marked the conduct of our noble fellows of the United Services of England."

Through his powerful war art, "Crimean Simpson," as he affectionately became known, had achieved instant recognition. He dedicated *The Seat of the War in the East* to Queen Victoria, whose patronage he enjoyed for the rest of his life, and he became the toast of London society. There was even a motion introduced in the House of Commons in March 1856 to purchase the original drawings for the nation. (This came to nothing and the pictures were sold by the Colnaghis, who "no doubt received as much as they gave me for them," Simpson observed.) The last copies of the print set were produced in late 1856. Then all the lithographic stones were destroyed.

After the war, Simpson joined the staff of the *Illustrated London News* and spent the next thirty years as the quintessential Victorian adventurer,

covering events around the world. These included the war between the British and the Abyssinians in 1868, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the U.S. Army's struggle with California's Modoc Indians in 1873, and the British campaign in Afghanistan in 1878, as well as numerous state weddings, coronations, and other important events. He died in London in 1899.

In the following year, an exhibition of Simpson works was held at the premises of Henry Graves, the London printmaker. The introduction to the catalog aptly summed up the artist's life: "His tireless energy and indefatigable labour, combined with the excellence of his work, whether executed under temperatures below zero, malarial climes, or the fire of an enemy, afloat or ashore, can only be a subject of admiration and wonder." His Crimean images, which launched his impressive career, are more than vibrant documents of another era. They are still fresh today—and just as powerful in bringing home to the viewer the unsentimental realities of war.

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## A War Imagined

William Simpson landed in the Crimea following the early battles, with instructions to sketch them after the fact. Once he had walked the battlefields, he painted their landscapes. To determine the placement of figures and actual action, he interviewed both witnesses and participants, and showed his preliminary sketches to them for critique of content. Generally, their input made his work more accurate, but in at least one notable case, the opposite occurred. Lord Cardigan rejected initial sketches of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* until he was portrayed leading the attack more conspicuously than he actually had (below). Since Simpson had yet to experience battle conditions firsthand, most of his early work tended to idealize the war. *The Charge of the Heavy Brigade* (below right) shows British cavalry racing toward similarly perfect formations of enemy horsemen. And in the romanticized *The Defence of Kars* (right), a woman from that Turkish city weeps over the body of her dead baby while her son begs for help from British officers who seem to have stepped out of a daguerreotype. The officers had been captured in the one major Russian victory of the war—which, however, occurred outside the Crimea.





*The Defence of Kars, 1855*



*The Charge of the Heavy Brigade, Balaklava, October 25, 1854*

*The Charge of the Light Brigade, Balaklava, October 25, 1854*

*Huts and Warm Clothing for the Army*



*Commissariat Difficulties*

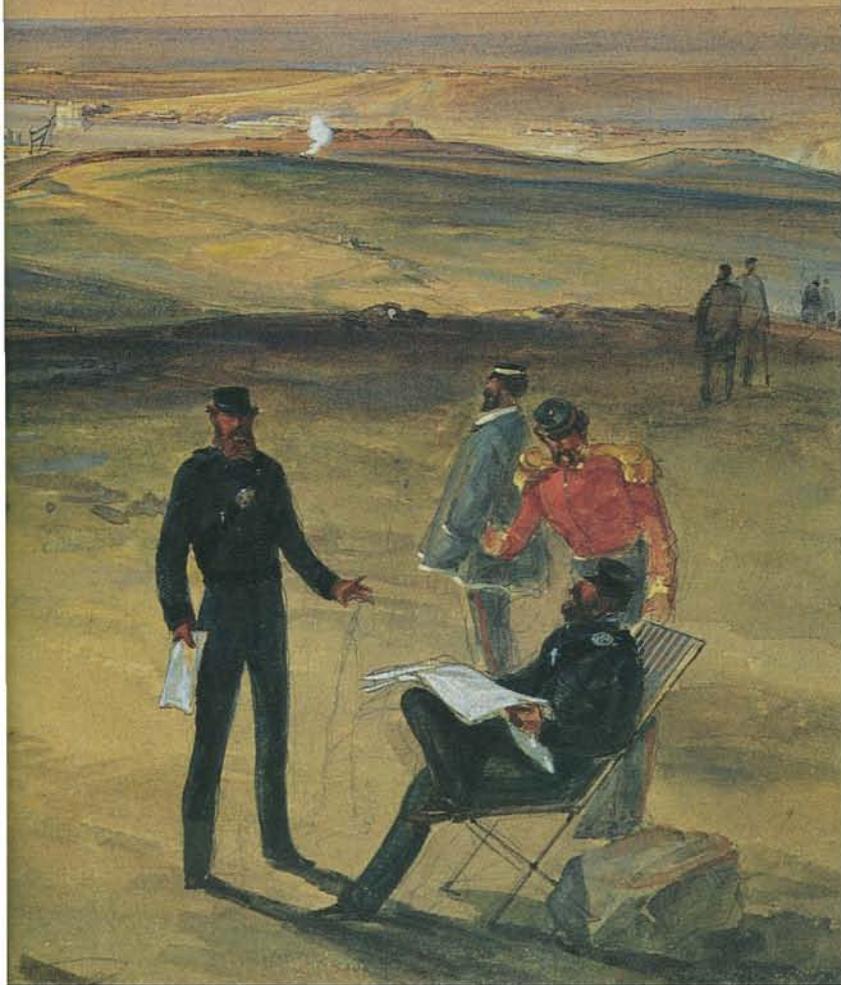




*A Christmas Dinner on the Heights Before Sebastopol*

## The Gulf Between Ranks

During the winter and spring of 1855, as Simpson began to see the realities of war close up, his sketches changed dramatically. Although he continued to live in the comfort of officers' quarters, he was not inured to the grim conditions that afflicted the common soldier. *Huts and Warm Clothing for the Army* (opposite) shows British troops numbly marching past half-built barracks in the bitter cold. In *Commissariat Difficulties* (opposite), horses and oxen become mired in mud as they haul supplies; dead animals litter their route. These sketches are in stark contrast to Simpson's portrayal of the officers' lives. In *A Christmas Dinner on the Heights Before Sebastopol*, they enjoy wine and roast—holiday fare denied to the common soldier. And *British Officers in Camp Before Sebastopol* depicts a casual ease and relative luxury that were not often the lot of the enlisted man.



*British Officers in Camp Before Sebastopol*



*Captured Russian Rifle Pit,*  
top left



*A Hot Day in the Batteries,*  
bottom left



## The Last Act

Simpson sketched in the trenches during the failed Allied attack on Sebastopol in June 1855, and he would work under fire again as the Crimean War reached its climax that summer. In *Captured Russian Rifle Pit* (top left), some men guard the parapet, while others fill sandbags or relax with newspapers from home. Upon request of the troops in the picture, Simpson painted a barely discernible “41” on their caps so that their families and friends would recognize them as members of the 41st Regiment. *A Hot Day in the Batteries* (bottom left) shows trench mortars bombarding Sebastopol. In early September, Simpson sketched the final bombardment and fall of the port city, recording the capture of the Malakoff, a Russian strong point, by French troops (right)—an event memorialized by a Paris avenue.



*The Attack on the Malakoff, September 8, 1855*



