

Infantry square in nineteenth-century battle scene painting

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MICHAŁ RYCAJ · Kraków · <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4652-6326> · michal.rycaj@student.uj.edu.pl

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The hollow infantry square has gone down in military history as an extraordinary formation, and thanks to its visual aspects and rich and diverse semantic load that it carried, it also became a valuable subject for nineteenth-century battle scene painters. The use of the hollow square facilitated highlighting the contrast between the static infantry and the dynamic, attacking cavalry, as well as drawing the viewer's attention towards individual figures of soldiers in a compact formation. Although this was an interesting subject in visual terms, it was above all its semantic load – both in military circles and in the society at large – that had resonated most significantly in terms of its reception by viewers. For soldiers, maintaining a hollow square in the face of the enemy was a source of pride and proof of their martial art, as well as a paragon of discipline and high morale. Contrariwise, breaking the formation by the enemy was a dark spot in the history of any unit, and to recall such an event was treated as an insult.¹ In turn, for the average, “civilian” viewer, depictions of such indomitable formations could arouse a sense of pride in their native army, and even produce the impression of that army's invincibility.

The hollow infantry square was a motif present in battle scene painting throughout the nineteenth century. The process of moving away from panoramic and synthetic representations of battles in favour of more realistic depictions of war-time reality, which took place over the second half of the century,² reevaluated the role of this formation in art. Previously functioning mostly as a tactical detail of the battle landscape, in newer compositions it gained the rank of the main theme. The hollow square took on a special standing particularly in Victorian painting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, owing to its symbolic meaning in British military history, as well as thanks to the spectacular work by Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Butler) from 1875, entitled *The 28th Regiment at Quatre-Bras*. The emphasis on the figures of

¹ F. Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, London 1936, p. 23.

² J.M.W. Hichberger, *Images of the Army. The Military in British Art, 1815–1914*, Manchester 1988, p. 89.

ordinary soldiers was in line with British politics at the time,³ and showing the army's steadfastness in the face of defeat allowed artists to transform the setbacks and losses of the empire into a glorification of the sacrifices made by its defenders.

I

The hollow square was a standard formation used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century infantry to defend against an attack from the flank or from the rear, especially an attack by cavalry. The threatened unit, as part of a complex manoeuvre, would "wrap up" the flanks of the formation, creating a hollow square with the ranks facing outwards. Officers, non-commissioned officers and the standard remained inside the formation. The sides of the square were usually formed by three to six ranks of soldiers, whereas those in the front rank were kneeling down, with muskets resting their butts on the ground. This allowed all soldiers on a given side to fire simultaneously, and to create a wall of bayonets. Infantry squares were most often formed at the battalion level, consisting of several companies.⁴

The key to defending the square was for the soldiers to maintain a compact formation, preventing the enemy cavalry from breaking the battle array. This required maintaining strict discipline and high morale in the ranks of soldiers who were waiting for the charging cavalry. Since the unit forming the hollow square practically deprived itself of the ability to conduct maneuvers, the soldiers had to be ready to remain in the position without the possibility of retreat. This was all the more demanding because a broken square essentially lost the possibility of defending itself against cavalry, which consequently inflicted tremendous losses on the broken or disorganized infantry, and even annihilated entire units. The unique nature of cavalry was also particularly important in the era of the dominance of firearms on the battlefield. In the nineteenth century, cavalry relied not only on striking power, but also, and even above all, on the psychological factor, that is, on the fear that it aroused among infantrymen, particularly inexperienced ones. Whereas cavalry was typically ineffective against strongly formed and disciplined infantry, it could ruthlessly exploit any disruption of the formation caused by the disorientation of infantrymen or perpetuated by a drop in their morale or discipline. The aforementioned dependencies also demonstrate the numerous requirements that the soldiers who formed a hollow square would face. In addition to training and courage, they had to be distinguished by discipline and composure in the face of the enemy.⁵

An important role in the perception of the infantry square, mediated by battle scene painting, was also played by situations referred to as the last line of defence. Soldiers facing defeat, most often attacked from many sides at once, deprived of the possibility of retreat, and rejecting escape or capitulation, would form a hollow square, or a less compact formation resembling it. When analyzing the reception of representations of infantry squares in battle painting, two interpretative paths can be adopted. The first example is that of infantry squares illustrating soldier discipline, not only fitting into the soldier's *esprit de corps*, but also constituting a particular reflection of the generally accepted moral code of nineteenth-century

3 Ibidem, pp. 76–77.

4 R. Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, New Haven–London 2008, pp. 190–191.

5 Ibidem, pp. 192–197.



societies, Great Britain in particular. The second category of works includes paintings showing infantry squares formed by the units that had been surrounded by the enemy, as part of the aforementioned last line of defence.

1. E. Thompson, *The 28th Regiment at Quatre-Bras, 1815*, Wikimedia Commons

II

Discipline was crucial for the effectiveness of the infantry square on the battlefield. It was indispensable – on par with proper training – for the soldiers' quickly forming and maintaining formation in the face of the enemy's highly mobile cavalry.⁶ Oftentimes, the discipline that soldiers needed to follow could also be seen in the context of the broader moral code of nineteenth-century society. This was especially true of the Victorian British Empire, which could perceive in the steadfastness of its "red jackets" a reflection of the virtues that allowed it to rule over a quarter of the globe. The most celebrated events in the history of the British army, immortalized in painting, include the battles, which ended the Napoleonic era, namely the Battle of Quatre-Bras, and of the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815.

The prime example belonging to this category is the monumental painting by Lady Butler mentioned earlier in the article. The work, painted in 1875, shows an infantry square of the English 28th Regiment of Foot, repelling attacks by French cuirassiers and Marshal Ney's lancers.⁷ The depicted battle took place in the early evening of 16 June 1815 and was the prologue to the later Battle of Waterloo. Even though the confrontation at Quatre-Bras did not have a clear outcome, the steadfastness of the British infantry, who withstood the furious attacks of the French cavalry, ultimately allowed the anti-Napoleonic coalition to emerge victorious two days later. The composition is clearly dominated by English soldiers; in front of them stretches only a narrow strip of ground on which several dead or wounded French cavalrymen lie. The upper part of the canvas, above the wall of "red jackets" obscuring the horizon, is occupied by clouds enveloping the sky, intertwining,

6 Ibidem.

7 W. Siborne, *History of the War in France and Belgium, in 1815*, vol. 1, London 1848, pp. 83–85.

as it were, with the clouds of gunpowder smoke stretching across the battlefield. The apparent absence of French cavalry is striking. In the left part of the painting, there is a lone lancer, who has just been hit by one of the British bullets. On the right-hand side, the painter depicted five French cuirassiers – three of them lie dead or wounded at the feet of British soldiers, and the other two charge towards the enemy, doomed to failure. Behind them, in the furthest plane of the composition, there is a larger unit of cuirassiers visible, charging at the rear ranks of the infantry square, which are beyond the frame of the painting. In this way, the artist achieved an extraordinary effect – by showing the unit during a clash with the enemy, at the climax of the battle, she left no doubt that the coalition forces would win. The English infantry square, whose walls prevent the enemy from reaching the two banners standing out against the smoke and the sky, turns into a sort of British fortress on Belgian soil.

Another important aspect of the work is the way Lady Butler depicted the British rank-and-file soldiers. Although there are English officers in the painting, they seem to disappear among the unit they command. Two of those officers are shown on horseback, behind the infantrymen forming the corner of the square, but despite their elevated position, which emphasizes their rank, although important, they are not the main protagonists of the work. The third and last officer, who is standing in the middle of the corner, occupies the near-centre of the composition, pointing with his sword at the enemy hiding beyond the edge of the canvas; and yet, without a head covering, he seems to be an equal figure to the sergeant and the privates surrounding him. It is his subordinates, especially those forming the corner of the square, who appear to be the main focus of the work. The group of soldiers is depicted in a highly detailed manner, and they are not obscured by clouds of smoke or by enemy cavalry. This allowed the painter not only to accurately present their uniforms and muskets, but above all to show their attitudes and emotions. They typically display a fierce determination in the face of the advancing enemy, and that determination unites individual men and makes them into a collective “unit” – to the same extent as identical uniforms or an even formation will do. The infantrymen look straight ahead, trusting their comrades to their right and left. This attitude emphasizes the most important qualities that the soldiers could demonstrate in this situation – a sense of discipline and duty.

Having said that, in this unified image of the British rank, some soldiers stand out significantly. One of the kneeling infantrymen in the first row, on the left-hand side of the soldier marking the center of the corner, is distinguished by his almost deathly pallor and a face filled with suffering. Bleeding profusely from a wound on his head, without a shako, he clutches the lapel of one of his comrades' uniform with his right hand. Everything points to the fact that this must be a seriously, perhaps mortally wounded soldier, who is overcome by pain and losing his strength; yet with a last-ditch effort he is holding on to his place in the ranks. However, one detail of this figure makes it into something more than just a representation of a wounded or dying soldier, like the other two infantrymen who fell in front of the ranks. The wounded man kneeling within the ranks still holds his musket in his left hand, the stock resting on the grass as it should, with the bayonet pointed towards the advancing cavalry. Even though he is staggering from pain and loss of blood, this British soldier holds on to his position, without breaking the wall of muskets against which the following attacks of the French cavalry will crash. Arguably, among all

the British soldiers, it is this private who exemplifies to the highest degree the timeless spirit of the British army, captured by Lady Butler in the work here described. Another soldier who stands out from the ranks – albeit in a completely different manner – is the private on the right side of the soldier who advanced furthest ahead. His face reveals an almost bizarre expression – in the context this dramatic situation – namely, one of amusement. His colleague, standing behind him, visible over his right shoulder, echoes this mood. The two privates seem to be laughing at a joke they have just heard, with a carefree, cavalier approach towards the many hours-long fight to the death that is happening there and then. Irrational as this attitude may seem, it found its emblematic and documented reflection in reality, only four years after Lady Butler completed her work. During the Battle of Isandlwana, one of the most catastrophic defeats in the colonial history of the British Empire, British soldiers clashed with a much larger army of Zulus. Although the battle ultimately brought about the destruction of the British troops, in its earlier phase, the British soldiers, convinced that defeating the Zulus, who were mostly armed with bladed weapons, should be a formality, told each other jokes in-between salvos. This episode was recounted first-hand, by one of the five surviving officers.⁸

The Athenaeum, while pointing to the variety of attitudes presented in Lady Butler's painting as the greatest advantage of the work, considered the soldiers' laughter as an expression of battle frenzy.⁹ The variety of soldier images in the work was emphasized by the artist herself, who mentioned that "no head in the picture was repeated."¹⁰ The novelty of this approach can be seen by comparing Lady Butler's painting with Meissonier's work completed in the same year, the famous *1807*, which prompted Henry Houssaye to ask about the sense of "imprinting the same type of blond Alsatian on the heads of all the cuirassiers", and again, to quip: "we did not realise that Napoleon selected soldiers for his squadrons according to their type and hair colour."¹¹

Finally, let us direct our attention to a detail located outside the pictorial field. The large gilded frame in which the work is set bears a series of inscriptions referring to battles from the regiment's history. Two of those, placed centrally at the bottom and top of the frame, have been highlighted. The first inscription, reading "Quatre-Bras 1815", located in the lower part, is obviously used to identify the depicted episode from the last campaign of the Napoleonic Wars. The second inscription, in the upper part of the frame, containing just a single word "Egypt", refers to the words spoken to the soldiers of the 28th Regiment of Foot by General Thomas Picton, who was accompanying them. While the infantry square was preparing to repel the charge of the French cavalry, Picton called to the soldiers "Twenty-eighth! Remember Egypt!", to which the infantrymen responded with a loud cheer – and proceeded to successfully fend off the French charge.¹² The general used these words to recall a glorious episode from the regiment's military history. During the Battle

8 E. Yorke, *Isandlwana 1879. Further reflections on the ammunition controversy*, "Journal of the Society for the Army Historical Research", 72, 1994, no. 292, p. 210.

9 "The Athenaeum Journal of Literature, Science, the Fine Arts, Music, and the Drama. January to June 1875", p. 756.

10 E. Butler, *An Autobiography*, London–Mumbai–Sydney 1922, p. 126.

11 H. Houssaye, *La Peinture de batailles – Le nouveau tableau de M. Meissonier et l'exposition des œuvres de Pils*, "Revue des Deux Mondes", 13, 1876, p. 883.

12 W. Siborne, *History of War*, pp. 86–87.



2. E. Thompson, *The 28th Regiment at Quatre-Bras (with frame) 1875*, Wikimedia Commons

of Alexandria, fought on 21 March 1801 during Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, the soldiers who had been attacked from two sides managed to keep their cool, maintain their formation, and repel two simultaneous attacks. The inscription, together with the figure of the sphinx decorating it, is based on the officer's badge of the 28th Regiment, commemorating that Egyptian leaf in the book of the unit's history.¹³ The inclusion of the above episode in Lady Butler's work goes to show how significant the military history of individual units was for the morale, and testifies that the memory of it remained alive, and not only among the soldiers.

Like Lady Butler's earlier work, *Roll Call*, in 1874, the *28th Regiment of Infantry at Quatre-Bras* became an instant sensation at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition.¹⁴ It was praised, among others, by John Ruskin, who called it "the first good Pre-Raphaelite battle picture" as well as "the work of an Amazon warrior."¹⁵ Butler's work also gained recognition in the highest circles of the monarchy and the army, who offered her support in the creative process as well as their patronage. To some extent, this was a result of the processes that took place after the Crimean War, of putting ordinary soldiers on a pedestal alongside officers, as well as efforts to awaken patriotic spirit in society, that would condition and nurture loyalty to the crown in the British "age of imperialism."¹⁶

Although Lady Butler's painting is probably the most outstanding work presenting the British infantry square during Napoleon's Hundred Days, there is another example that falls within the discussed subject matter. William Barnes Wollen's

13 R.M. Grazebrook, *The back badge of the Gloucestershire Regiment*, "Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research", 24, 1946, no. 99, pp. 112–113.

14 E. Butler, *An Autobiography*, p. 135.

15 J. Ruskin, *Academy Notes. Notes on Prout and Hunt, and Other Art Criticisms, 1855–1888*, London 1904, p. 308.

16 J.M.W. Hichberger, *Images*, pp. 76–78.



painting, *The Black Watch at Quatre-Bras* from 1894, depicts the famous 42nd Scottish Highlander Regiment of Foot, attacked by French lancers. The artist depicted the dramatic moment when the cavalymen charged the still-forming square, and consequently some of them managed to get inside it. As a result of this charge, the commander of the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Macara, was killed. Despite this fact, the Black Watch managed to close ranks, which is a testament to the extraordinary martial art of the Scottish soldiers, and the lancers surrounded inside the square were either killed or taken prisoner. When narrating the event, William Siborne described the Scots' feat to have been accomplished "as if by magic."¹⁷

Wollen strengthened the impact of his work by showing several soldiers gathered around a dismounted officer, trying to close the ranks while being attacked by cavalymen. The infantrymen shown in the foreground are surrounded by lancers, two of whom have already penetrated the interior of the hollow square. The juxtaposition and distinction of these two interpenetrating, small groups of fighting soldiers, despite the other ranks and the charging cavalry, emphasizes the chaotic and dramatic nature of the clash. Wollen thus showed not so much the imperturbability of the square, but rather the personal courage of the soldiers, which, combined with discipline, allowed them to win. The artist also illustrated an important psychological issue related to the infantry square. Since each line had its back to the other, the soldiers had to trust each other, being sure that all sides of the formation would hold their ground.¹⁸

3. W.B. Wollen, *The Black Watch at Quatre-Bras*, 1894, Wikimedia Commons

17 W. Siborne, *History of War*, p. 79.

18 R. Muir, *Tactics*, pp. 191–192.



4. E. Poynter, *Faithful Unto Death*, 1865, Wikimedia Commons

III

To recapitulate the significance of the above works for the Victorian audience, we can point to further examples and incidents that illustrate the importance of discipline to British society, especially in the military sense. Sir Edward Poynter's 1865 painting, *Faithful Unto Death*, depicts a Roman sentry at Pompeii during the destruction of the city by the eruption of Vesuvius. During an eighteenth-century excavation, the skeleton of a soldier was discovered, which revealed that the man had been holding a spear until his death. It has been speculated that the soldier was determined to hold his post until the end, even in the face of impending doom.¹⁹ The image of that scene was later used in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's popular novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii* from 1834.²⁰ Poynter thus continued the motif of the ancient soldier, who fit into the Victorian mentality as an example of discipline and readiness for sacrifice²¹ – attributes that are key in the case of soldiers forming a hollow square.²²

Another, more obvious example is the event that gave rise to the naval concept of the *Birkenhead drill*, which over time was transformed into the principle of “women and children first.” In 1852, the HMS *Birkenhead*, a ship transporting British soldiers and officers' families, sank off the coast of South Africa. Due to the poor condition of the lifeboats, the officers decided that only women and children would occupy them. The soldiers were to remain on board the sinking ship during this time, maintaining an orderly formation. After the lifeboats were launched, although the captain of the ship ordered the soldiers to save themselves, their commander, Colonel Seton, and other officers convinced them to remain on the ship until it sank, so as not to endanger the lifeboats from capsizing. Only three soldiers broke ranks at that time. All the women and children survived the disaster, while only one hundred and seventy-four of about six hundred soldiers and sailors survived.²³ The sacrifice of British soldiers and sailors was legendary (in Prussia, soldiers were taught to see their British counterparts

19 “Scientific American”, 36, 26 May 1877, issue 21, p. 326.

20 E. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, London 1850, p. 286.

21 R. Barrow, *Faithful unto death: Militarism, masculinity and national identity in Victorian Britain*, [in:] *Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Idea of Nationalism in the 19th Century: Case Studies*, T. Fögen, R. Warren (eds.), Berlin–Boston 2016, pp. 135–137.

22 R. Muir, *Tactics*, pp. 191–192.

23 *The Annual Register, or a View of the History and Politics of the Year 1852*, London 1853, pp. 470–473.

as an example of excellent discipline and heroism) and served to emphasise the exceptional nature of British heroism, which was based on self-discipline and a sense of duty.²⁴

IV

The second interpretation of the infantry square in battle painting are paintings showing units in a hopeless situation, using the formation in question as part of the last line of defence. In English, this situation – and most of the works described in this paper will again concern the British army – is sometimes referred to poetically as the *last stand*.²⁵ The most famous example of a unit fighting a doomed battle to the end is undoubtedly the last infantry square of the French Old Guard at Waterloo – the swan song of Napoleon’s Flight of the Eagle. The Old Guards formed the hollow square in the face of the hopeless situation in which the French army found itself after the Prussian troops reached the battlefield. The heroic resistance of Napoleon’s soldiers reached its climax when the English decided to offer them the possibility of surrender. In response, as legend has dictated, they were to hear the memorable “word of Cambronne”, which allowed Victor Hugo, years later, to make the Napoleonic officer the only victor of Waterloo.²⁶

The death of the Guard was immortalized in an artwork by Charles Edouard Armand-Dumaresq. The canvas, painted in 1867, depicts a lonely, sparse infantry

5. Ch.E. Armand-Dumaresq, *Cambronne at Waterloo*, 1867, Wikimedia Commons

5



24 L. Delap, “Thus does man prove his fitness to be the master of things.” *Shipwrecks, chivalry and masculinities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain*, “Cultural and Social History”, 3, 2006, pp. 49–50.

25 J.M.W. Hichberger, p. 101.

26 V. Hugo, *Nędznicy* [*Les Misérables*], Warszawa 1900, p. 553.

square, standing on a battlefield that is turning into a ruin. The only dominant element of the battlefield scene consists of six banners topped with Napoleon's golden Eagles, some of which are already falling, ending their last, hundred-day Flight. At the right-hand side of the canvas, there is an area strewn with bodies and debris, but no enemy in sight. On the opposite side, ready-to-fire British cannons await – a firing squad of the Guard and a Napoleonic epic tale. Two officers stand before the sturdy grenadiers in tall, bear-like caps. On the right, a British officer throws up his hands, trying to convince the Guard to surrender. Cambronne replies, his body still turned towards the enemy visible on the left, directing a glance over his shoulder at the parliamentarian, with his raised hand ready to scorn the offered mercy. In front of the Old Guard lie the fallen and wounded French and English soldiers, and the entire scene is enveloped in the gathering twilight. Unlike Lady Butler's work, the ranks of the last infantry square, numbering only a few guards, do not extend to the edge of the canvas. On the contrary, the landscape ravaged by the battle seems to close around the Old Guard, emphasizing the hopelessness of their situation. The motionless soldiers in bearskin hats do not bring to mind an immovable wall; instead, they resemble shadows that will soon disappear into the coming darkness. Some of them stoically reload their muskets, knowing what the answer of their last commander would be even before he gives it to the parliamentarian. The message of the work leaves no doubt as to the approaching end of the Guard, that "living redoubt" as Hugo described it, whose "four walls" were about to collapse.²⁷

6. Ch.E. Fripp, *Battle of Isandlwana*, 1885, Wikimedia Commons

Similar episodes, although perhaps less known and less spectacular, also took place in the history of British colonial wars. They are immortalized in two works.



²⁷ Ibidem, p. 556.

The first concerns the aforementioned Battle of Isandlwana in 1879. The *Last Stand of the 24th Regiment at Isandlwana*, painted by Charles Edwin Fripp in 1885, shows the last surviving soldiers of the 24th Regiment of Foot surrounded by the victorious Zulus.²⁸ The crowds of warriors armed with spears and shields are blurred in the dust and smoke rising from the battlefield. A few “red jackets” stand out among them, but they are surrounded by the Zulus, with no chance of survival. A dozen or so British soldiers, gathered around a wounded sergeant and a standard, form a small, irregular infantry square. Despite the inclusion of Zulu troops in the work, the painter has brought the handful of British soldiers to the forefront, emphasizing their heroic resistance. An important detail of the painting is the attitude of the sergeant commanding the infantry square, and the gesture with which he calms the young drummer, shaken by the horror and hopelessness of the situation. The cruelty of the fighting is especially emphasized by the fierce duels between individual British and Zulu warriors visible in the background, during which the wounded of both sides are finished off with no mercy.

The stoicism of the NCO in the face of complete defeat is an unquestionable source of inspiration for the audience and a model of military virtues. In a way, the senior NCO, who had been promoted for merit, personifies the qualities that society could see in the soldiers’ ranks.²⁹ The heroic sense of duty is also visible in the posture of the wounded soldier, supported on the ground at the feet of the sergeant. With the last of his strength, he hands the NCO a single cartridge – a gesture that is practically meaningless in the face of the scale of the defeat, but clearly shows the sacrifice of the British soldier. The banner wavering over the British unit will soon become a Zulu war trophy – but the artist clearly emphasized that this would only happen after the death of the last of its defenders, who performed their soldierly duty to even the most terrible end. “The Scotsman” described the soldiers’ perseverance and self-control, highlighted by Fripp, as “the only redeeming aspect of the whole sad story.”³⁰

Another painting by William Barnes Wollen, *The Last Stand of the 44th Regiment of Foot at Gandamak* from 1898, depicts the tragic end of the British retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad in 1842. The column of 16,000 soldiers and civilians was virtually annihilated by the Afghan warriors, largely because of the extremely hostile terrain. One of the last moments of organized British resistance occurred on a hill near the town of Gandamak. Several dozen officers and men, mostly from the 44th Regiment of Foot, fought off successive Afghan attacks. After the battle ended, only a few British soldiers were taken prisoner, including Lieutenant Souter, who had tied a banner around his waist before the battle.³¹

In his work, Wollen depicted the moment when a dozen or so surviving soldiers, surrounded by their fallen and dying comrades, await the final advance of the enemy. The British soldiers, most of them wounded and staggering, occupy the center of a small, rocky elevation. On either side of the Brits are the attacking

28 M. Lieven, *The British soldiery and the ideology of empire: Letters from Zululand*, “Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research”, 80, 2002, no. 322, p. 129.

29 J.W.M. Hichberger, *Images*, pp. 101–102.

30 “The Scotsman”, 20 May 1885, p. 7.

31 Photocopy of a Typescript of a Letter Written by Lieutenant Thomas Alexander Souter, 44th (East Essex) Regiment of Foot, to his wife describing the retreat from Kabul, 1842, National Army Museum, <<https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1969-12-6-2>> (as of 1 June 2024).



7. W.B. Wollen, *Last Stand of the 44th Regiment of Foot at Gandamak*, 1898, Wikimedia Commons

Afghans, but – rather like in Lady Butler’s painting described earlier – their presence is not clearly marked. What seems to be much more significant is the rugged Afghan mountains that are surrounding the soldiers, which were the cause and the setting of the British defeat. Dressed in dark coats, the British visually merge with the surroundings, disappearing into the landscape that had previously swallowed thousands of their comrades-in-arms. However, as in the aforementioned works, none of them tries to save themselves by fleeing; instead, they maintain a grim determination in the face of the approaching destruction. One of the soldiers leans over his fallen comrade, searching his ammunition pouch for another round. A single, perhaps the last, shot fired by another soldier, hidden at the back of the formation, hits the Afghan standard-bearer, in the act of fighting to the end. The splendour that the Victorian reader could see in the work is perfectly reflected in the summary of the battle, contained in the review of the work in “The Daily News”: “After six days of marching and fighting, all who remained of the 44th Regiment took up their position on a rugged hill, to show with what magnificent courage the English could die.”³²

V

The works described above fit into the nineteenth-century paradigm, according to which soldiers, even when in a hopeless situation, were expected to remain stoic and unshaken in their willingness to self-sacrifice and to do their duty, regardless of the sacrifices made. Alfred Lord Tennyson’s famous poetic description of the heroic but hopeless charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava most clearly

³² “The Daily News”, 12 March 1898, p. 5.

shows the way in which the role of the nineteenth-century soldier was perceived. Although the protagonists of the following verses were British cavalymen in Crimea, the poem can be applied to all those who fought and died on the battlefields of the nineteenth century.

Their's not to reason why,
Their's not to make reply,
Their's but to do and die.³³

The infantry square played a special role on the battlefield, but also as a subject of battle painting. Both as a source of pride for veterans and as an example of military virtues that resonated in the wider society, it was abundantly charged with varied meanings. By holding their position, the formation emphatically demonstrated the courage and discipline of soldiers, which could inspire a similar devotion to their homeland in the viewers. The paintings mentioned in the article and the outline of the broader context in which they functioned show that the nineteenth-century perception of the infantry square, those “four living walls”,³⁴ went far beyond the simple illustration of battlefield tactics.

This military formation, almost emblematic in the second half of the nineteenth century, was associated with many new and important artistic solutions. The aforementioned distinction of ordinary soldiers meant that they became role models for the whole of society, instead of officers who came from its high strata. It was the infantry square formed by privates and non-commissioned officers that most eloquently illustrated the new role of the latter. The relatively small formation also allowed for the visual emphasis of the tragedy of the units surrounded by the enemy, while simultaneously highlighting their steadfastness and determination, and possibly locating the scene amidst a historically significant landscape. Finally, the dramatic nature of battles fought by a stationary formation, whether against cavalry or an overwhelming enemy force, meant that the infantry square was a characteristic and significant episode of larger battles, often being their key or climactic moment. Lady Butler wrote about war that it “evokes the noblest and the basest impulses of human nature”.³⁵ The infantry square in nineteenth-century battle painting undoubtedly exemplified precisely these “most noble outbursts” of the soldier’s spirit.

Abstract

The infantry square in nineteenth-century battle painting

The article attempts to describe and characterize the infantry square as a theme in nineteenth-century battle painting. This issue, hitherto not thoroughly addressed in art history literature, is associated with a number of outstanding works by leading battle painters of the nineteenth century. The analysis of paintings, as well as the literary works and historical events influencing their perception, aims to reconstruct the perception of the infantry square in broader society, especially in Britain. A key

33 A. Tennyson, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, [in]: idem, *Maud, and Other Poems*, London 1855, p. 151.

34 V. Hugo, *Nędznicy*, p. 536.

35 E. Butler, *An Autobiography*, pp. 46–47.

KEYWORDS:

infantry square, cavalry,
military art, nineteenth-
-century art, Elizabeth
Thompson, battle of
Quatre-Bras

example and starting point for further discussion is Elizabeth Thompson's 28th *Regiment at Quatre-Bras*. An important element of the article is the discussion of the methods used by artists to honour the heroism of soldiers while reflecting on their most important attributes. Demonstrating the complexity of the meanings associated with the infantry square reveals that its role in nineteenth-century painting far exceeded merely illustrating the formation on the battlefield.

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