

**A Victorian Paradox:
Elizabeth Thompson, Lady Butler**

Background notes

Carol Orchard - 19 October 2016



Calling the Roll after an Engagement, Crimea
(1874) HM The Queen



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“Thank God I never painted for the glory of war, but to portray its pathos and heroism.”

The popularity of the arts - including the visual arts - increased enormously in England during the 19th century. As the middle classes expanded and became more prosperous, their appetite for art grew. Galleries opened, attracting queues of enthusiasts, and prints of popular paintings sold in their thousands.

Art schools sprang up and, for the first time (in Britain, at least), began opening their doors to women, thus removing one of the main barriers to the profession for them. It was still unusual, but no longer unthinkable, for women to train as artists.

Elizabeth Thompson, born to English parents in Lausanne, brought up largely in Italy, and educated at home by her father, was an early beneficiary of this liberalisation.

She chose a genre - battle painting - which was highly esteemed in France but largely unexploited in England, and her success was almost immediate. An early commission - ‘Calling the Roll after an Engagement, Crimea’ - became such a sensation at the Royal Academy show in 1874 that policemen were needed to control the crowds. It then went on a national tour and was the subject of a bidding war between the Queen and the businessman who had originally bought it.

Thompson herself said that she never intended to glorify war, but her battle paintings clearly caught aspects of the public mood (eg. a taste for pathos and a tendency to ‘patriotic bellicosity’) during a time when Britain confined itself to sabre-rattling in Europe but employed military power (among other things) to expand its vast and heterogeneous empire. The skill, imagination and humanity with which she illustrated the courage and stoicism of ordinary soldiers made her ‘perhaps the last European painter to catch the imagination of the masses’ (Greer).

Her artistic career began to fade soon after her marriage to an up-and-coming army officer and Irish nationalist, William Butler. Motherhood and travel made it difficult for her to develop her considerable talent and other (male) artists were by now successfully competing in her chosen genre.

Before long, battle painting was in any case being eclipsed by the rise of Modernism, which, as one writer puts it, ‘was to a considerable extent built upon the rejection of History Painting... All other genres [were] deemed capable of entering, in one form or another, the ‘pantheon’ of modernity ..., but History Painting [was] excluded” (Barlow).

Today, few of Butler's paintings are on show in national galleries. The Tate has one ('Remnants of an Army'), which it used to publicise a recent exhibition on 'Art and Empire'. Others can be found in the National Army Museum (when it reopens) or in provincial galleries: 'Scotland the Brave' is on show in Leeds and still in print, but 'The Roll Call' (in Sandhurst) can only be seen on appointment, and 'Quatre Bras' is in Australia. Few of her later works found buyers.

This seems sad. Her biographers go so far as to claim that 'the standard representation of the ordinary British soldier in the period leading up to the First World War, as the perfect embodiment of stoic virtue, even in the midst of danger and adversity, is largely her invention'. And feminists should applaud an artist who chose to compete with men on their own terms and, for a time, emerged the winner.

List of images

William Frederick Yeames, *And when did you last see your father?* (1878, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)

Sir Luke Fildes, *Applicants for admission to a casual ward* (1874, Tate Gallery)

Elizabeth Butler, *The Roll Call - Calling the Roll after an engagement, Crimea* (1874, HM The Queen)

Elizabeth Butler, *The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras* (1875, National Gallery of Victoria, NSW)

John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852, Tate Gallery)

Elizabeth Butler, *Balaclava* (1876, Manchester City Art Galleries)

Rosa Bonheur, *The Horse Fair* (1852-5, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Gertrude Jekyll, Hestercombe Gardens

Ernst Meissonier, *1814, Campagne de France - Napoleon and his staff returning from Soissons after the Battle of Laon* (1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

Ernst Meissonier, *1807, Friedland* (1861-75, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Ernst Meissonier, *Voyager* (Palais des Beaux Arts, Lille)

Elizabeth Butler, *The Return from Inkerman* (1877, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull)

Elizabeth Butler, *Enlisted for the Connaught Rangers - Recruiting in Ireland* (1878, Bury Art Gallery & Museum)

Elizabeth Butler, *The Remnants of an Army - Jellalabad, January 13th 1842* (1879, Tate Britain)

Elizabeth Butler, *The defence of Rorke's Drift* (1879, HM The Queen)

Elizabeth Butler, *Scotland for Ever!* (1881, Leeds City Art Galleries)

Elizabeth Butler, *Evicted* (1890, University College, Dublin)

Charles Edwin Fripp, *The Battle of Isandhlwana* (1885, National Army Museum, London)

William Barnes Wollen, *The last stand of the 44th at Gandamuck, 1842* (1898, National Army Museum, London)

Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863, Musee d'Orsay, Paris)

Claude Monet, *Impression, Soleil Levant* (1872, Musee d'Orsay, Paris)

Elizabeth Butler, *The Royal Horse Guards Retreat from Mons* (1927, Royal Hospital, Chelsea)

CRW Nevinson, *La Mitrailleuse* (1915, Tate Gallery)

CWR Nevinson, *Paths of Glory* (1917, Imperial War Museum)

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