

# Into The Valley

An essay exploring the very essence of Roger Fenton's images of 'The Valley of The Shadow of Death', to shed some light on its mysteries that have laid shrouded in darkness for over a century and a half.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!” Was there a man dismay’d?

Not tho’ the soldier knew someone had blunder’d:

Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die:



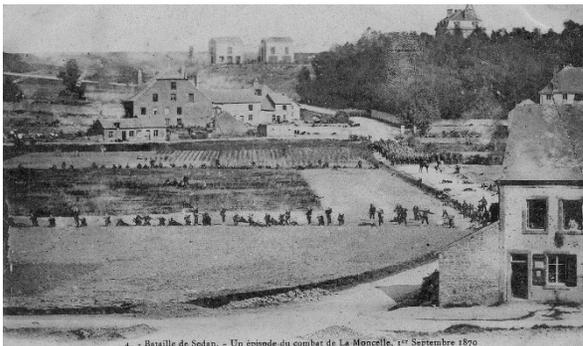
Photo Restoration by Dennis Purcell

**...Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred”**

(Tennyson, 1870)

Having served in the British army for a decade I learned to live and breathe the military, during a period of heightened tension and war on terrorism. Having been sent to both Iraq and Afghanistan, I struggle to compare those to the wars of yesteryear. The majority of wars that Britain has embarked upon over the last century have been with huge backing from the people, no matter the background. Wars that were noble and even romanticised. These were my reasons for enlisting back in 2003, as a clean faced twenty year old. However, reality of war is far from being romantic or honest, with campaigns of the modern world being debated for popularity by politicians, encouraged by tycoons and fought against by the people; with the media playing the roles of double agents. Warfare of the twenty first century has evolved into a business with hostile takeovers that make many lives redundant. But there are a few, like myself, that have to live with the conscience of this bitterly modern warfare. That can't be described nor be understood, as such I still find myself drawn to those romantic ideas as a child watching the classic war films, and how people's perceptions are defined. To that end I wish to expand my knowledge of war beyond my own experiences and opinions and learn the meaning behind its intentions upon the people.

When choosing this photograph I was looking for the first of its kind. However, when you google search the trend is of the American Civil War and Mathew Brady. Yet this was eight years after Fenton's visit to Crimea. While Brady showed battlefields scattered with the fallen, these were often posed or faked<sup>1</sup> by Brady and his staff. One may argue that the Mexican War of 1847 birthed the first photograph. A Daguerreotype showing American troops entering the city of Saltillo, I would argue that due to its long exposures this is again posed and lacks any emotions of war. Just a portrait of a troop on parade in some nondescript town in a time lost to the pages of history like its creator, with no story to tell nor to be heard. It's in 1870 that the



world gets to see the first images of a battle, during the Franco Prussian War. Two decades after Crimea photographic technologies had advanced enough to allow faster shutter speeds, allowing photographers to capture movement and document live action shots for the first time (Mallett, 2012). However its Fenton's 1855 photograph of 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'

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<sup>1</sup> Posed is to set the scene, of something seen or documented before and a fake is creating a scene from an imaginative mind.

that draws my attention. Taken when photography was still in its infancy, with shots limited to landscapes and portraits. Yet this handicap has made a photograph that “is devoid of any topographical detail that defines a particular place; it has become instead an image about the horror of all war and the mundane business of destruction. It suggests only the potential for sudden and indiscriminate death... has no precedent and no successors; it is a stark description of a dreadful subject. The first iconic photograph of war” (Pare, 2007). The lacking of any reference point, soldiers in period uniforms or landmarks, means that this image from a valley outside of Sevastopol in Crimea 1855 could just as easily be a valley of Afghanistan in 2015. Only the presence of cannonballs opposed to artillery shells differentiates the two, but only in the physical, the cold and lonely landscape remains.

Although this essay is to focus on one photograph and its meaning, the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ comes as a set of two. Most may not be aware that Fenton took two photos of the valley, neither did I at first. One showing the valley road littered with cannonballs and the other with the road void of cannonballs. There have been many theories in the 160 years since these iconic photos were taken, mainly on which came first. Many come to a conclusion based on their beliefs then dug for supporting evidence, usually based on opinions of Fenton’s persona and characteristics, as Errol Morris eludes to in his third instalment to the New York Times article ‘Which Came First the Chicken or the Egg?’ (Morris, 2007). But what can we learn about Fenton to be able to determine how someone from the 19<sup>th</sup> century behaved and thought?



Roger Fenton born in March 1819 in Bury, Lancashire, to a family of bankers and cotton merchants. Leaving University College, London to study as a painter with Charles Lucy. In 1841 he entered into the studio of Paul Delaroche, in Paris. Here he was encouraged by Delaroche to take up the Daguerreotype. After the closer of the studio in 1843 Fenton returned to London and university, qualifying as a solicitor after four years and was called to the bar after another four years. Art never left him and he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1849 and 1851. During this time he was active in the Calotype Society. In January 1853 after another study period in Paris with Gustave Le Gray, he became the honorary secretary of the newly established Photographic Society. It was while with the society that he met and befriended Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. After the outbreak of war in 1854 with Russia, he was commissioned by the print dealer and publisher, Thomas Agnew, to document the war (McCauley, 2007). Fenton travelled to Crimea in December of the same year armed with a letter of introduction from Prince Albert and his photographic van (Turner, 1987. p113).

To answer one's own question can we judge and characterise Fenton, like Morris refers to in part one of his article for the New York Times, when making a case study from Susan Sontag's book 'Regarding the Pains of Others' (Morris, 2007). No we can't, we have no ideas of what was going through his mind that day, had something happened? Had he been affected by the war? This we will never know, but we do know he was no coward. As through his letters we know he went to the Valley named after the soldiers that survived it, not once but twice, on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1855. Also his own assistant, Sparling, demanded to have his portrait taken on the later visit as he was sure he was not going to return from this valley (Morris, 2007).

We know this was indeed a very dangerous place and not a faked idea, this was a place Fenton was told of by the soldiers that escaped the valleys deathly grip to tell of its tales. Yet we presume he and his assistant spent an hour and a half there, playing with the cannonballs, while coming under fire. Fenton writes of this in a letter to his wife composed the day after.

*"I took the van down nearly as far as I intended it to go & then went forward to find out the chosen spot. I had scarcely started when a dash of dust behind the battery before us showed something was on the road towards us..."* (Fenton, 1855)

This can also be seen in the picture with the cannonballs on the road, as a puff of white smoke in the top left where the valley sides meet. This would count for the extra balls in ditch than compared to the photograph before with no cannonballs on the road. I say before as this has been the presumption for decades and that Fenton placed the balls on the road after.

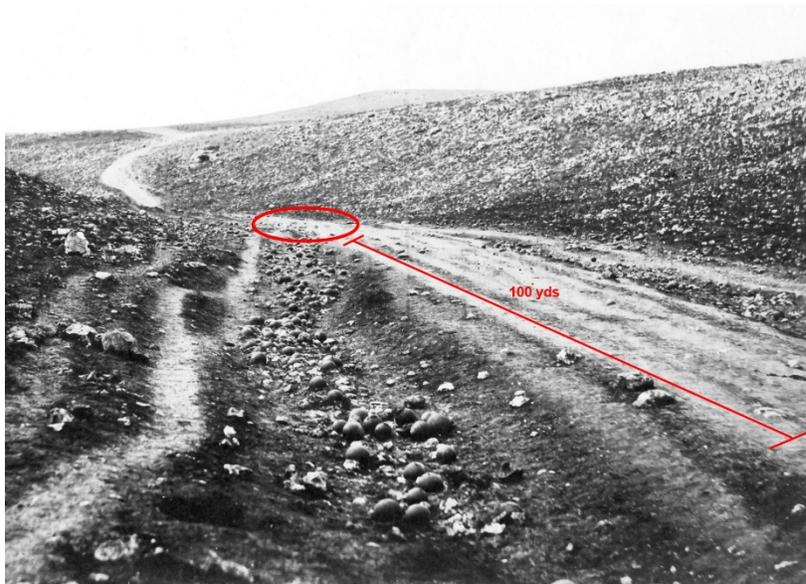


*First image shows valley with no balls on the road the second with, showing plume of gun smoke.*

I myself thought the opposite then flipped back and forth, and finding evidence to support my ideas then finding more evidence to disprove them. As I started reading many texts for this essay my logic told me the balls on the road came first, as Fenton would have met the balls and then had to clear them to progress down the road. Once again I returned to his letters.

*“...so very reluctantly I put up with another reach of the valley about 100 yds short of the best point. I brought the camera & while leveling it another ball came in...”* (Fenton, 1855)

This explains that he didn't get his camera ready till he was forced to retreat from the place he wished to photograph from. This is also visible in the photographs, showing that the road had been clear or cleared forward of a distance of about 100 yards.



So if both pictures were taken after the retreat back up the valley, where did the Cannonballs come from? One explanation as described in Morris's New York Times article, in which he discusses the idea that the balls were being harvested for re-use with Gordon Baldwin, Former curator of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. This recycling of balls has been documented but not in relation to this location or time in which these photographs have been taken, however, we cannot discount the possibility. As they discuss how in Fenton's April 24<sup>th</sup> letter that he writes of using Army mules instead of horses to pull his photographic van, mules were often accompanied by one or more soldiers each (Morris, 2007). This is a sound theory as during my ten year service in the army, I and all other soldiers would collect brass casings after live firing. But it's the fashion in which we would place our collected casings together at the edge of the firing positions for someone else in the group to come down the line bagging them up for removal. This accounts for why we can see extra cannonballs in the ditch and on the road, this contradicts the arguments that Fenton staged

the shot with the cannon balls by placing them on the road. As if this were true he would have fetched the balls out the ditch and arranged them on the road, not from further afield. These balls are cast iron and not light, so there is no reason for him to have done this. Then these two photographs are indeed real and document both the aftermath of battle and that of the logistics and ingenuity that come from war. However the lack of soldiers and the physical collection only aid in discounting what the photographs may in fact be showing.

If this were the case, we would presume that Fenton's first image would be that of the empty road and the image with the balls on the road being the second. As logic would have it that the addition to the balls in the ditch would come after. Yet it could just as well be a reverse of that and Fenton documented the harvesting first then when the valley was clear captured the scene with no obstructions. We just can't see what is beyond the edges for the photographs, and there are no accounts of what took place that day. I, like all the academics before and that will come, have strong theories and will pick out the evidence to support those ideas. I too have my own theories aside from my acknowledgement of the harvesting, in which I will continue my research further.

One true fact remains constant no matter which image you look at, the presence of cannonballs, which would not be there if it were not an act of war. Every one of those balls were hand delivered from an unseen enemy to each person that entered the 'Valley of the Shadow of Death'. 25,000 Brits, 100,000 French and almost 1,000,000 Russian soldiers' families received their telegrams (Lambert, 2011). Imagine how the parents of Private Smith would have felt opening the paper over breakfast, seeing this photograph. Not seeing anything other than a cold foreboding valley littered with cannonballs, but no little Jonny anywhere to be seen safe and sound. This is the equivalent of us looking at the downed flight over The Ukraine. Today Commonwealth soldiers can be awarded the Victoria Cross, which is the highest decoration for gallantry. Made from what was believed to be two captured guns from the very place that 'the valley of the shadow of death' lead to, Sevastopol (Lambert, 2011). And again Russia is in the Crimea, while Turkey remains an apex for trouble. Not so much the thorn in the side of Europe, than the last kid to be picked for footie in the playground at school. Weak and unable but eager to impress, missing the chances to shine while trying too hard.

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