Shadows of War:
Roger Fenton's Photographs of the Crimea, 1855

The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse 4 August – 26 November 2017

Among the most significant visual accounts of conflict ever produced, Roger Fenton's images of the Crimea gave birth to the genre of photographic war reporting. This first exhibition of Fenton's work in Scotland since 1856 explores the photographer's powerful images of the battlefield, and their impact on royal and public perceptions of war, through over 60 photographs acquired by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

The Crimean War saw Britain, France, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire allied against Russia's attempt to expand its influence into Ottoman territory and beyond. For the Victorian public accounts of war were limited, consisting of unillustrated reports in newspapers and prints of artistic depictions of battle. However, the conflict in the Crimea forever changed the public perception of war. Thanks to improved communications and the presence of war correspondents, reports from the field reached Britain within days rather than weeks, and the advent of photography allowed the British public to witness first-hand images of war for the first time.

As one of the leading photographers of the 19th century, Fenton was commissioned by the publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons to travel to the Crimea in February 1855 in order to photograph the officers and other people of interest during the conflict. Rather than being a complete account of the situation in the Crimea, his work was primarily intended for use as source material for an oil painting by the artist Thomas Barker.

Fenton arrived in the Crimea several months after the major battle of Balaklava and the famous Charge of the Light Brigade. Over a period of three months, he produced approximately 360 photographs in extremely difficult conditions, working in a mobile darkroom (a converted wine merchant’s wagon) to develop glass plates within minutes of their exposure. However, the limitations of 19th-century photographic techniques, coupled with Victorian sensibilities, excluded scenes of battle and death. The destruction of war was instead captured through haunting portraits of exhausted troops and desolate landscapes, including Fenton's most famous photograph, Valley of the Shadow of Death (23 April 1855). The subtle and poetic composition of the barren ravine, littered with cannonballs fired from the Russian defences, encapsulates the bleakness of the terrain on which so many had lost their lives.
Fenton also spent several weeks photographing the leading figures of the allied armies and their camps. The careful composition of these images captured the reality of life on the frontline, including living and cooking facilities, the mercenary troops and the various civilians who followed the war. The majority of these images were portraits of senior officers, including General Sir Colin Campbell, Commander of the Highland Brigade and one of Scotland’s greatest soldiers.

The Council of War (June 1855) shows the three commanders of the allied armies planning their successful assault on the Russian fortifications at Mamelon on the morning of the attack. The photograph of Lord Raglan, Maréchal Pélissier and Omar Pasha became one of Fenton’s best-known portraits and served as source material for a painting by Augustus Egg. Lord Raglan died on 28 June 1855, shortly after the image was taken, with news of his death reaching England before the portrait. In August 1855, Queen Victoria wrote in her journal that she had viewed some of Fenton’s work, commenting that the portrait was ‘one, most interesting, of poor Lord Raglan, Pélissier & Omar Pacha, sitting together on the morning, on which the Quarries were taken’.

Fenton’s portraits demonstrate his proficiency in creating powerful photographs without resorting to explicit imagery. Lord Balgonie (1855), one of his more disturbing images, shows the after-effects of serving on the battlefield and is the first visual record of someone suffering from ‘shell shock’. Balgonie was badly affected by the conflict and died in 1857 – his death at the time attributed to the war.

On Fenton’s return to Britain, the Crimean portraits and topographical views went on display at the Water Colour Society on Pall Mall in September 1855, the first of four London venues. The images brought the conditions endured by soldiers into public consciousness at a time when the wounded began to return home. Queen Victoria, who had commissioned Fenton to produce portraits of the royal family in 1854, before he left for the Crimea, took a personal interest in the conflict and the welfare of the soldiers. Keen that her concern for the troops was publicly known, she personally met wounded soldiers at Buckingham Palace and during visits to hospitals. She also instituted the Victoria Cross, which remains the highest award for gallantry in the British Armed Forces.

Ends

Shadows of War: Roger Fenton’s Photographs of the Crimea, 1855 is at The Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, 4 August – 26 November 2017.

Visitor information and tickets for The Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse: www.royalcollection.org.uk, T. +44 (0)30 3123 7301.

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