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MISINFORMATION ABOUT 'THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE'

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I was 10 years old and it was around Christmas. On the television were two films that had me transfixed. In one of them, Gary Cooper was singlehandedly saving a town from an armed gang bent on taking it over while he, the retired and newlywed marshal, was off to a new life elsewhere. In the other, Errol Flynn was leading a futile cavalry charge against a Russian artillery battery.

So excited was I by the latter film that I obtained and learned off by heart Lord Tennyson's poem of the same name, and proudly recited it in front of my class at school:

*...Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd...*

Fast forward to March 2014 and on the front pages of the newspapers once again are the names Crimea, Balaclava, Sebastopol – even Florence Nightingale and – tarrantarra! - The Charge of the Light Brigade. This was the subject of a discussion on BBC's Radio 4 programme 'Today' (8.3.14) and listeners heard from a leading expert on the Crimean War, Professor Andrew Lambert of the War Studies Unit of Kings College, London. But...Oh dear! It seems that much of what we have come to believe about the charge is wrong.

It seems that the immediate source of information for the British public on the event was Mr William Howard Russell of the *Times*, the first dedicated war correspondent of any newspaper, who was able to take advantage of the new cable telegraph system to relay the news back to London where it was ready for announcement within the week. From the number of soldiers who mustered following the charge – 120 – it was surmised that most of the 600+ cavalrymen had been massacred, and Mr Russell duly reported this. However, many of those who did not muster were wounded, had lost their horses, or had been captured by the Russians, so the fatalities were far fewer – Professor Lambert put them as low as 120 (though most accounts give a higher figure). Moreover, according to the professor, notwithstanding the usual incompetence and lack of preparation displayed by the British during the campaign (and the fact that the charge was a mistake) he considers the action to have been successful; the Russians were too terrified to deploy their own cavalry again!

Also, according to the professor, Lord Tennyson was duly apprised of the revised casualty numbers but by that stage he had completed his poem and, as it was such a good one, he released it anyway.

Well, maybe other historians give a less sanguine take on this historical event than either Professor Lambert or the producers of the first film to bear its title.

High Noon remains one of my favourite films, but not *The Charge of the Light Brigade* for two reasons. The first is that it departs too widely from the historical facts. The second is that during the filming of the charge, the set was laced with trip wires to cause the horses to fall and dozens were killed. Unforgivable. Knowing this, maybe you will not want to view the charge sequence at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyqcZMsBOU4>.