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THE LIGHT BRIGADE,
ENGLAND'S CHARGE BORNE ON IRELAND'S BACK

More than a century ago Alfred Lord Tennyson's epic poem graphically described the destiny of those who rode with the Light Brigade against the Russian batteries positioned on the heights above Balaclava in the Crimea. Of them he wrote:

> Forward, the Light Brigade!
> Was there a man dismay'd?
> Not tho' the soldier knew
> Some one had blunder'd:
> There's not to make reply,
> There's not to reason why,
> Their's but to do and die:
> Into the valley of Death
> Rode the six hundred.

Wars have seldom been fought for reasons which afterward merit the intensity of human suffering involved. Some are recognized to be of even less meaningful than others in producing justifiable effects. This battle, in this war, has always been for me a tremendous historical curiousity because of the emotion evoked by Tennyson's words and a strange appeal to an inner adventurist portion of my character not satisfied by life in the technological society. Poetry, however, lacks the essential quality of detail required for thorough understanding. For a thorough treatment of how the Light Brigade came to its tragic circumstance, British historian Cecil Woodham-Smith offered this passage in a 1953 study entitled "The Reason Why":

> The charge had lasted twenty minutes from the moment the trumpet sounded the advance to the return of the last survivor ... Some 700 horsemen had charged down the valley, and 195 had returned. The 17th Lancers were reduced to thirty-seven troopers, the 13th Light Dragoons could muster only two officers and eight mounted men; 500 horses had been killed.

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Perhaps the most explicit passage in this book is that detailing the fate of a high-spirited cavalry officer named Nolan, who, after delivering the "attack" order to Lord Lucan (commander of the Light Brigade) joined the rank of the 17th Lancers -- and rode to his death in the charge. Again, Cecil Woodham-Smith:

> Before the Light Brigade had advanced fifty yards ... the Russian guns crashed out, and great clouds of smoke rose at the end of the valley ... The advance was proceeding at a steady trot when suddenly Nolan ... urged on his horse and began to gallop diagonally across the front ... he crossed in front of Lord Cardigan and, turning in his saddle, shouted and waved his sword as if he would address the Brigade, but the guns were firing with great crashes, and not a word could be heard. At that moment a Russian shell burst on the right of Lord Cardigan, and a fragment tore its way into Nolan's breast, exposing his heart. The sword fell from his hand, but his arm was still erect, and his body remained rigid in the saddle. His horse wheeled and began to gallop back through the advancing Brigade, and then from the body there burst a strange and appalling cry, a shriek so unearthly as to freeze the blood of all who heard him. The terrified horse carried the body, still shrieking, through the 4th Light Dragoons, and then at last Nolan fell from the saddle, dead.

The battle fought (and the lives lost), the politics of defeat arose as senior British military officers squirmed to absolve themselves from responsibility for the debacle. And so, the question must be asked: WHERE DOES THE RESPONSIBILITY LIE?

England and Empire, synonymous terms during the nineteenth century. England stood unchallenged as the world's military power. That military predominance, explained Cecil Woodham-Smith, evolved out of a system which guaranteed the loyalty of the nation's landed aristocracy by dictating the purchase of commissions. George Charles Bingham, the third Earl of Lucan and lieutenant-general commanding the Light Brigade, was, in fact, a glowing product of the "purchase" system.

As soldiers of fortune under Queen Elizabeth, the third Earl of Lucan's ancestors acquired vast Irish lands once the Irish had been defeated. Richard Bingham was appointed military governor in the province of Connaught; and, as Cecil Woodham-Smith described, "the ferocity of his rule became a legend, and to this day (1953) is execrated in the west of Ireland". Empire was then in its initial stages of formation, and the English conquerers:

> regarded their Irish estates merely as the source which produced money to pay for English pleasures ... their great grey fortress, Castlebar House, was seldom occupied.

Richard Bingham's sense of compassion also included the execution of all Spaniards shipwrecked on the coast of Ireland following the destruction of the Armada. Time and wealth, however, brought to the Binghams respectability in English society of the late eighteenth century. In 1795, Charles Bingham became the first Earl of Lucan; his grandson was George Charles Bingham, later the third Earl of Lucan. George was commissioned into the army at age sixteen, rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel by age 26 and "purchased" command of the 17th Lancers. In reality, Ireland paid the price.

Ireland was, after all, the source of Lord Lucan's wealth. And yet that wealth belonged not at all to the Irish people. Cecil Woodham-Smith:

> In 1844 Ireland presented the extraordinary spectacle of a country in which wages and employment, practically speaking, did not exist. There were no industries; there were very few towns; there were almost no farms large enough to employ labour. The country was a country of holdings so small as to be mere patches. The people inhabited huts of mud mingled with a few stones ... destitute of furniture, where animals and human beings slept together on the mud floor ...

And yet, the English landlords and politicians could take refuge in the still echoing analysis of poverty put forth by Thomas Malthus; because, strangely, Ireland's population was growing uncontrollably. Cecil Woodham-Smith took a closer look in 1953 at this aspect of Ireland's poverty:

> This increase was linked with the adoption of the potato as the staple, indeed the sole, food of Ireland. The people, in their desperate poverty, lacked land, implements, barns. Potatoes require only one-third of the acreage of wheat, flourish anywhere, need the minimum of cultivation ... As Ireland became a potato country, the shadow of starvation lifted slightly and the character of the people made itself felt. The Irish people were religious, their family affections strong, their women proverbially chaste. Early marriages became invariable .. and by their early thirties women were grandmothers. Thus the population spread with the rapidity of an epidemic. For these people, swarming in the cabins and the fields, there was no employment, no means of earning wages, no possibility of escaping starvation, except the land -- and land became like gold in Ireland.
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> It was human existence on the lowest scale ... As the population increased, the continual subdivision of farms into patches brought the landlord higher and still higher rents, and the potato patches in Ireland first equalled what the rich farmlands of England fetched in rent, and then went higher. Men bid against each other in desperation, and on paper the landlords of Ireland grew rich; but the rents were not paid -- could not be paid.

When the potato crops began to fail, tenants were evicted by "consolidating landlords" in an effort to create workable farms. Cecil Woodham-Smith reported that an 1830 Land Commission concluded that "the poverty and distress of Ireland were principally due to the neglect and indifference of landlords". More specifically:

> Large tracts were in the possession of individuals whose extensive estates in England made them regardless and neglectful of their properties in Ireland. It was not the practice of Irish landlords to build, repair, or drain; they took no view either of their interest or their duties which caused them to improve the condition of their tenants or their land.

Although the third Earl of Lucan proved himself "exceptional in being prepared to invest in the land, to forgo and reduce his income, to tie up capital in barns, houses, drainage schemes, and machinery", his efforts were largely unsuccessful. "Between the Irish tenant and the Irish landlord not only was

there no hereditary attachment, there was hereditary hatred. Ireland was a country the English had subdued by force, and Irish estates were lands seized from a conquered people by force or confiscation." Further evidence of England's "Irish policy" existed in the laws imposed by England on the conquered Irish, as described by John Stuart Mill:

> In Ireland alone the whole agricultural population can be evicted by the mere will of the landlord, either at the expiration of a lease, or, in the far more common case of their having no lease, at six months' notice. In Ireland alone, the bulk of a population wholly dependent on the land cannot look forward to a single year's occupation of it.

And, more on the subject from Cecil Woodham-Smith:

> The power of the landlord was absolute ... the tenant had no rights. All improvements became the property of the landlord without compensation. Should a tenant erect buildings, should he improve the fertility of his land by drainage, his only reward was eviction or an immediately increased rent, on account of the improvements he himself had laboured to produce.

Given this prolonged and protracted relationship between those denied access to the land which offers the source of all that sustains life, and those, like George Charles Bingham, who forcefully maintained the cruel imbalance, there could be no peaceful resolution. Today, hidden by centuries of emotion, the same struggle continues in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Cecil Woodham-Smith concluded that "though his Irish tenants might cherish an herediatry hatred for him, (Lord Lucan) cherished an equally powerful contempt for them. From the bottom of his heart he despised them -- swarming, half starving, ignorant, shiftless, and Roman Catholics into the bargain. It is doubtful if he considered the Irish as human beings at all".

> Boldly they rode, and well
> Into the jaws of Death.
> Rode the 600, noble 600,
> Some one had blunder'd.