

## THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

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*“It will be a sad day when England is officered by men who know too well what they are doing. It smacks of murder.”*

**Mayor Blunt (Arthur Lowe)**

**Having successfully blown apart the conventions** of period drama with Tom Jones, Tony Richardson set his sights on the period war-movie five years later with *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. While something of a critical and box-office failure at the time—despite picking up seven BAFTA nominations—the harrowing, anger-rousing epic arguably now deserves to be ranked alongside Richardson’s finest achievements. Evoking Alfred Tennyson’s classic poem of the same name but drawing

heavily upon Cecil Woodham-Smith’s 1953 study *The Reason Why*—and puckishly punctuated with Punch-style expository animations by Richard Williams—the screenplay by seasoned military-man Charles Wood chronicles in near-forensic detail one of the most infamous and disastrous episodes in military history.

In circumstances which are unlikely to be ever satisfactorily explained in full, 110 men were killed in a cavalry-charge during the Battle of Balaclava, on 25th October 1854. This took place at the height of Crimean War (1853-6) which pitted the United Kingdom and France against an imperial, expansionist Russia keen to establish dominance over the Middle East via the occupation of Turkey—thus threatening Britain’s crucial “passage to India.”

Wood and his collaborators balance the grand historical sweep of the times with a gallery of flawed, sometimes heroic human protagonists, some of whose enmities and rivalries yielded such tragic results. The phrase “lions commanded by donkeys” is generally reckoned to date back to the Crimean War, and seldom has the cinema seen such asinine military bigwigs as the perpetually blustering Lord Cardigan (Trevor Howard) or his patrician, softly-spoken superior Lord Raglan (John Gielgud).

Emblematic of a sclerotic British Army which had not fought a land war in Europe for nearly four decades—and over whom the Duke of Wellington’s heroic shadow quite literally loomed large (a vast statue of the Duke has been temporarily stationed right outside Raglan’s window)—these old-schoolers stand in stark, unflattering contrast to the youthful officer presented as the personification of modernity. Dashing incarnated by David Hemmings, Captain Louis Nolan was a true internationalist—born in Canada, educated and trained in Austria—with ideas decades ahead of his time. Presented here in an illicit (and fictionalised) romantic triangle involving his best friend’s wife (a never-lovelier Vanessa Redgrave) back in England, Nolan is a fearless reformer whose guiding principle with his men—and horses—is “kindliness.”

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The decidedly Prince Albert-like Nolan is very much the hero of the film, but this is no hagiography—indeed, he is far from exonerated for his role in the murky chain of command and communication preceding the Charge which yielded such catastrophic consequences, not least for Nolan himself. The fact that Nolan was the very first man killed in the debacle—indeed, by the very first shot fired—may beggar belief, but it is actually supported by all reliable sources, including Lord Russell (T P McKenna) whose dispatches from the front lines were among the very first examples of modern-style war reporting.

It all ends in chaos, and bathos: a dead horse, buzzed around by flies. While Balaclava took place decades before the invention of the movie-camera, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*—several worlds away from Michael Curtiz’s highly fanciful Warner Brothers version from 1936 starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland—remains hard to beat in terms of sheer verisimilitude and the sense of immersion in a long-gone era.

David Watkin’s cinematography, especially during the England-set first half of the film, prefigures Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* in working such quiet miracles with natural, candle and refracted/reflected light. The future Oscar winner picked up a BAFTA nomination for his Vermeer-esque efforts, along with colleagues Edward Marshall (art direction) and David Walker (costumes), each of them crucial in evoking the correct Victorian ambience. “The costumes look like clothes washed and worn in a pre-detergent era,” wrote *The New York Times*, of a film hailed as “a scathing, cryptic, sometimes brilliantly detailed caricature.”