

What does Russell say?

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At the time, he was still a novice. Battlefield reporting was an art that neither he nor anyone else of the day had yet perfected. Nevertheless, William Howard Russell, later called the First Professional War Correspondent, landed in Gallipoli in 1854 in order to report on the war for The Times of London. Up until then, Russell had been cooling his heels reporting parliamentary news and the ever-present Irish troubles. Not satisfied with his present assignment, he could not have dreamt that in front of him lay a career as a world-renowned Special Correspondent. Nor would Billy Russell have been able to guess extent of his influence on public opinion in the years to come, so much so that when an event of major national or international importance occurred, people just naturally asked, "What will Russell say?"

It was far more understandable for the young Russell, who was born in Ireland in 1819, to continue on the Irish "beat". Russell came from an Anglo-Irish family, whose father was Anglican and whose mother was Catholic. Mostly raised by his paternal grandfather, Captain John Russell, the young boy was converted to Protestantism by his grandfather because he thought, as such, Billy would get further in life. He attended Trinity College in Dublin and when his cousin, Robert Russell, was sent by **The Times** to cover the Irish elections, he commandeered Billy and some of his fellow students at Trinity to help him - at the generous stipend of one pound a day.

Editor John Delane was impressed with a series of articles Russell had written on the Irish Potato Famine and offered him part-time employment at the paper. Eagerly, the young man left Trinity, without graduating, and made his way to London to accept the offer. Eventually, he was retained full-time, covering the Houses of Parliament, more specifically, the House of Commons, and writing the occasional article on Ireland. Russell was not necessarily happy with this assignment; however, he was now a young husband with a growing family and grateful for the job.

In 1850, he was assigned to the Schleswig-Holstein War. Without getting into the issues, which were confusing even to the parties involved, Russell was in his element reporting the military action. His account of the Battle of Idstedt, was particularly exciting and brought him into the spotlight back home. At that point, he became extremely popular with **The Time's** readers. In his zeal to get the story, accurate and on the spot, Russell was wounded – perhaps the first war correspondent to be so injured in the line of duty.

Besides being called the First Professional War Correspondent, he would most definitely be called the First Modern Correspondent. The reasons for his renown were easy to see. He was, first and foremost, completely dedicated to seizing the story with speed and

accuracy. To his Victorian readers "war ceased to be an objective undertaking taking place in some far off field. Russell brought war to the...breakfast table." (1)

In addition, his style was readable and his descriptions were photographic -- in fact, in many cases: better than photographic. Moreover, his writing style was far from elitist and his words were accessible to all. Thus began Russell's career as a Special Correspondent, which, in the course of the next fifty-odd years, would literally take him from one end of the globe to the other. He reported the Indian Mutiny of 1858, the American Civil War in 1861, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and his last comments were of the Boer War in 1899. However, the most famous of these assignments was Russell's reposing of the Crimean War.



War had been declared in March of 1854, and in April Russell was sent by **The Times** to Gallipoli. The reporter remained in the area for nearly two years. For the first time, Russell was reporting a war in which his country, Great Britain, was one of the antagonists. Because of this, he began questioning himself deeply about exactly what he should communicate to his readers. Should he, for example, report the sufferings of the common man in the army, or perhaps the blunderings of the officers who had paid for their commissions? Should he question the decision of putting a merely competent man like Lord Raglan in command, who had been sitting in a desk for nearly forty years at the War Office? Should he describe the state of the wounded men, the lack of medical supplies, and the wretched conditions under which they were "nursed"? What about the "obvious utter incompetence" of the British Army?(2) Would this be thought of as unpatriotic or giving aid and comfort to the enemy? It took him very little time to see that it was his obligation to answer all these questions with a resounding "Yes" no matter what the consequences might be. As a result a brutally honest, often scathing, but brilliant and complete picture emerged. When describing the camps in Gallipoli, Russell wrote: "The privations to which the men were at first exposed became greater...and...the inefficiency of our arrangements more evident" (3) And further, "the men suffer exceedingly from the cold. Some of them, officers as well as privates, had no beds to lie upon" (4) All, he wrote, had the ration of one blanket, and even the sick could claim no special care. That was until an intrepid band of nurses landed at Scutari, just across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, where they found "a place then about to acquire a sad notoriety as the headquarters of death and sickness and an immortal interest as the principal scene of the devoted

labors..." of Miss Florence Nightingale.(5) This was, then, perhaps, his greatest contribution, and one long remembered the appeal for nursing aid.

Disease was rampant in the soldiers' camp, especially dysentery and the dreaded cholera, the result of a deplorable lack of sanitation. Thousands of soldiers perished from these epidemics, particularly during the summer months. Russell's pleas inspired the indefatigable Miss Nightingale to organize a group of trained nurses to relieve the graphically described wretchedness at Scutari. (6) This was, most certainly, not sugar-coating it for the readers at home.



The most famous and hard-hitting of these articles were written during the cold winter of 1854-55, when the British soldier "had no shelter, no rest, and no defense against the weather, [their tents] continually drenched in by torrents of rain" (7) and included a simple and heart-rending account of the Battle of Balaklava. "We could scarcely believe the evidence of our senses. Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position...A more fearful

spectacle was never witnessed than by those who, without the power to aid, beheld their heroic countrymen rushing to the arms of death."(8)It was this that is reputed to have inspired Alfred, Lord Tennyson to compose "The Charge of the Light brigade."

Naturally, Russell's probity in reporting did not endear him to the British Headquarters Staff who prevented him from drawing rations. Luckily, Russell's friendliness and well-known charm prevailed and he was able to depend on his friends and acquaintances for food and clothing.

Additionally, his articles were said to have caused the fall of Lord Aberdeen's government; certainly the first time a correspondent caused such a government upheaval.(9) Russell however, never felt like a casual observer. In a letter, filled with pain, he told his wife Mary, "The kind good friends I have lost, the dear companions of many a ride and walk and lonely hour."(10) An emotional man who often wrote in the heat of moral indignation, he cursed all that delighted in war.

It is interesting to note that George Washburn Smalley of the New York Tribune, another great war correspondent and writer, described Russell's Crimean accomplishments in this way: "The one great triumph of English journalism in the Crimea...was due to the genius and courage of one man, Dr. Russell.... It never will be, till another Russell appears to rescue another British Army.... That great exploit was not primarily journalistic but personal."(11)

Russell, however, was not so self-laudatory as others might have been in these circumstances, and completely ready to suffer whatever consequences resulted in his honest portrayal. He wrote to his foreign manager at **The Times** Mowbray Morris: "I have incurred the hostility of powerful classes in England who have never forgiven and never will forgive the course I took during the war in the Crimea. And I have reason to know that among them was poor Prince Albert and no doubt the Queen herself." (12)

Like the American Civil War, which Russell, too, reported for one year, it was the first war, for the British, that was written about by contemporaries in such earnest and deadly honest detail. In the end, there was little doubt that **The Times** and Russell made history, since it was from the paper itself that the British government learned of the Russian Peace Proposals that ended that war.

Source Notes

- 1 . Furneaux, 12.
2. Mathews, 66.
3. Bentley, 31.
4. Ibid. 38.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. 151.
8. Ibid. 127.
9. Lee, 242.
10. Russell to Mary Russell, November 8, 1854, quoted in Hankinson, 76
- 11 . Furneaux, 12.
12. Letter from Russell to Morris, dated February 16, 1862, quoted in Hankinson jlm.

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