

Silences and Omissions

By Michael Lieven

As important, in the long term, as the mythologizing of the heroism of war, were the silences and omissions that followed that version of colonial warfare to flourish in Britain. Such silences are highlighted by the case of William Russell who was employed by *The Daily Telegraph* to report the later stages of the war. Russell, who had made his reputation in the Crimean War twenty five years earlier, travelled to South Africa in the troopship which carried General Wolseley and his staff. His relationship with the general nicely illustrates the ties between the military and the correspondents, the helpfulness of the former tacitly assuming a reciprocal partiality in the reporting of the latter. The public image of mutual respect is belied by Wolseley's journal in which his comments on Russell are consistently so hostile that they cannot be dismissed simply as examples of the general's notoriously venomous feelings for which his journal provided an outlet and a therapy. Russell is 'a mean spirited bore', 'the lowest class of cunning and witty Irishman' who Wolseley had 'hated' in the Crimea 'for his lying account of events there' and 'always loathed... for his low ways and vulgarity'.¹ Despite this barrage of loathing, Wolseley courted and pampered Russell until a volcanic row erupted between them. Russell reported that there had been various incidents in which drunken troops had insulted and robbed local citizens and Wolseley angrily defended the reputation of the troops under his command. 'What a contemptible character he is! A low sycophantic toady of royalty and of men above his humble origin and rank in life, and yet the writer of sensational articles on the shortcomings of every British force he has ever been associated with as a sort of camp follower'.² As far as Wolseley was concerned, the tacit deal which he understood to exist between himself and the journalist, by which the latter's privileged access constrained him to write well of his benefactor, had been reneged on by Russell.

Russell, for all his social conservatism, retained his professional commitment to serious investigation and was consistent in his attitude to the war, unlike his colleagues who combined general criticism with reporting which celebrated the heroism of war. Russell had noted in his journal that 'the wonderful way in which Sir Bartle Frere is involved in the shedding of blood and cattle lifting excites my imagination. I observe we always punish others for our own faults... We are forever talking of the peace and order which prevail under a government which is forever at war somewhere or other'.³ He later commented in his diary that 'Queen Victoria's reign has been an incessant record of bloodshed'.⁴ Russell arrived in South Africa with a reputation for exposing army abuses and a strong dislike of what he saw as an unjust war: it was also the case that he badly needed to maintain that journalistic reputation and his high profile among the newspaper public which was being eclipsed by younger, more active men. The argument between the two men was very public, was commented on at the time, and seemed to confirm Russell's reputation for fearless reporting even at the cost of alienating important sources and powerful acquaintances.

Although the incident appeared to raise serious issues and was the subject of questions in parliament and telegrams between London and South Africa, it nevertheless has an air of irrelevance about it as Russell himself partly recognized. For while Russell and the army did battle on the subject of whether or not British troops had drunkenly robbed the hen coops of provincial worthies in a remote colony, the British Army was, in Russell's opinion, engaged in the systematic destruction of a society and culture and in massacres which disgraced the 'higher civilization' which it claimed to represent and which it was trying to impose on ungrateful savages. Russell did comment on this and he wrote to the Duke of Cambridge, the commander-in-chief, expressing his opinions forcibly; 'Sir Bartle Frere has caused more men and women killing and blood shedding in a few months if he be responsible for this war than Cetshwayo did in all his reign, and the murders of the wounded prisoners are too horrible to think of'.⁵ But the killing of the wounded and the refusal to take prisoners were only tangentially commented on by Russell in his reporting and, though even this caused some resentment in the army, they were neither properly investigated nor fully reported on by the correspondents. 'I'm glad that I didn't hear of for my pen couldn't have been stayed no matter what'.⁶ His pen was however, stayed as were those of other correspondents.

References

1. Adrian Preston *The South African journal of Sir Garnet Wolseley* Cape Town 1973. pp 112 - 113
2. Ibid . p 245
3. John Black Atkins *The Life of Sir William Russell* London 1911 p 280
4. Ibid p 245
5. Russell's diary (26 Aug 1879) quoted in Hankinson *Man of Wars* p247.
6. Ibid p 145