Note

PEACE-MINDED CRITICS OF TENNYSON'S *MAUD*

This note uncovers two important and previously unidentified responses to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's semi-autobiographical and highly controversial "war poem" *Maud*, first published by Edward Moxon in 1855 in *Maud, and Other Poems*.[1] The first response is from the Quaker and radical parliamentarian John Bright (1811–89), one of the most outspoken opponents of Britain's involvement in the Crimean War (1854–6) during which *Maud* appeared, and the individual whom many readers of the poem saw as being the target of its infamous line '[t]his broad-brim'd hawker of holy things'.[2] The second response is an anonymous review of the poem published in the monthly periodical organ of the Peace Society, the *Herald of Peace*, probably written by its editor, the pacifist Congregationalist minister, secretary of the Peace Society, and future Liberal MP for Merthyr Tydfil, Henry Richard.[3] The plot of Tennyson's poem is, of course, well-known: the speaker, a neurotic young man, falls in love with Maud, commits homicide and then descends into madness, only to be finally cured when he goes to fight in a righteous war. The critical reception of the poem is also well-known, with scholars having done much to illuminate the responses of various commentators in the newspaper and periodical press.[4] What remains underappreciated, however, is the fact that the poem's ostensible message that a morally justifiable war was the sole key to revivifying an enervated and corrupt society whose spirit had been corroded in peacetime by commercialism, selfish materialism, and Mammonism, became a significant point of contention between supporters of the Crimean War and its opponents—the most vocal of whom were part of a wider peace movement driven primarily by the Peace Society (established in 1816 by a group of Quakers and other pacifists) and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).[5] Scholars have revealed the voices of only some peace-minded critics, including that of Goldwin Smith who savaged the poem in the *Saturday Review* for supposedly extolling war and its blessings.[6] Yet the responses of John Bright and the *Herald of Peace* have escaped scholars' attention. This note offers the first scholarly examination and contextualisation of these two responses. In doing so, it demonstrates the nuances in the peace movement's reactions to *Maud*. As it shows, although critics of Britain's involvement in the Crimean War were united against the idea of war having a purifying and regenerative potential, their interpretations of the poet laureate's poem, which seemingly propounded this idea, diverged. More generally, this note offers new perspectives into the intense moral and ideological debates which Tennyson's controversial poem sparked in regard to war and its place in modern industrial society.

Victorians understood the conflict Britain and her allies fought against Russia between 1854 and 1856, which ended an almost forty-year period of relative European peace, as a morally justifiable war.[7] One idea which appeared to have taken root in contemporary wartime discourse was that Britain's decision to unsheathe the sword of justice could potentially regenerate the nation whose soul had been sapped by the selfish spirit of industrial capitalism, as well as by luxury, effeminacy, indolence, materialism, and Mammonism—things supposedly nurtured by a prolonged period of

[1] C. Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 1989), 233–4; M. Bevis, 'Fighting Talk: Victorian War Poetry', in T. Kendall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (Oxford, 2007), 17.

[2] I quote from the first edition of *Maud*: Alfred Tennyson, *Maud, and Other Poems* (London, 1855), 37. On Bright and his opposition to the war, see A.J.P. Taylor, 'John Bright and the Crimean War', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 36/2 (1954), 501–22.

[3] M. Cragoe, 'Richard, Henry (1812–1888), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (23 Sept. 2004), https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23527 [accessed 30 November 2024].

[4] E.F. Shannon Jr, 'The Critical Reception of Tennyson's "Maud"', *PMLA*, 68/3 (1953), 397–417.

[5] On the nineteenth-century peace movement, see M. Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730-1854* (Oxford, 1996); and idem, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford, 2000).

[6] Shannon, 'Critical Reception', 402.

[7] See O. Anderson, 'The Reactions of Church and Dissent towards the Crimean War', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 16/2 (1965), 209–20; and J. Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843-1945* (London and New York, NY, 1994), 119–21.

peace. As J.A. Froude observed one year after the conclusion of the war, there had been some

> who were weary of peace, who believed that the ancient English virtues were stagnating, who saw in war (so that it was just, or could be imagined to be just) a grand spirit of moral regeneration, an electric power which would turn "the snub-nosed rogue" behind the counter into a hero, and "his cheating yard wand" into a champion's sword.[8]

Indeed, this idea found many keen proponents during the war, especially clerical intellectuals.[9] '[N]ations', wrote Robert Vaughan, the Congregationalist minister and editor of the *British Quarterly Review*, 'have almost uniformly perished from the influence of the comfort-loving, pleasure-loving, and effeminate selfishness incident to a high state of civilization'; yet 'the results of war, when waged in the cause of right, have generally been to give strength and greatness to nations, by rendering them capable of deeds of generosity, self-sacrifice, and nobleness.'[10] Vaughan and other commentators thus believed that fighting against Russia's wrongdoing in a just war would enable Britain to revive her virtues forgotten in a 'comfort-loving', selfish, and materialist era of peace; to revivify herself; and ultimately to regain her lost moral grandeur.

Tennyson's *Maud*, which appeared in July 1855 at the height of the Crimean War, ventilated the same idea. A literary scholar has claimed that the poem was 'a conservative writing wildly out of control.'[11] This is a misleading view. *Maud* echoed—though did not necessarily endorse—ideas which Victorian society in general debated whilst the war was raging.[12] Indeed, the poem's speaker's exaltation of war and his diatribe against peace found several enthusiastic supporters,[13] but many more vociferous critics, to the consternation of Tennyson and his wife.[14] 'Why do they prate of the blessings of Peace?', asks the poem's speaker; 'we/have made them a curse'.[15] Fighting in a righteous war, the speaker resolves, is the only solution to heal the ulcer which peace had caused: 'For the long, long canker of peace is over and done'.[16] There was—and there still is—a debate about Tennyson's views and whether they reflected those of his speaker.[17] Most Victorian readers thought that this was the case: i.e., that the speaker's bellicosity echoed that of the poet. Crucially, for the purposes of this note, contemporary readers tended to assume that the poem's lines '[t]his broad-brim'd hawker of holy things,/ Whose ear is stuff'd with his cotton, and rings/ Even in dreams to the chink of his pence,/This huckster put down war!', referred to John Bright who passionately opposed Britain's involvement in the Crimean War, and who—because of his Quakerism—would often be portrayed wearing the Quaker broad-brimmed hat.[18] The fact that Bright's name was also associated with cotton given his family's involvement in the cotton-spinning business, only served to reinforce the interpretation that the 'broad-brim'd hawker […] [w]hose ear is stuff'd with his cotton' was a reference to the Quaker parliamentarian. In an anonymous review of the poem in the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot disapproved the manner whereby Tennyson 'denounced' Bright, and

[8] [J.A. Froude], 'The Four Empires', *Westminster Review*, 68/134 (Oct. 1857), 417. It is worth noting that Froude borrowed the phrases in quotation marks from *Maud*.

[9] J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006), 218–19.

[10] [Robert Vaughan], 'The War – Its Ethics and its Object', *British Quarterly Review*, 23/45 (Jan. 1856), 219.

[11] I. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, 2nd edn (London and New York, NY, 2019), 250.

[12] See S. Shatto (ed.), *Tennyson's Maud: A Definitive Edition* (London, 1986).

[13] Some of the poem's admirers included Tennyson's friend, Robert James Mann, who published a vindication of the poem; Benjamin Jowett; John Ruskin; and Charles Kingsley: Robert James Mann, *Tennyson's "Maud" Vindicated: An Explanatory Essay* (London, [1856]); J.O. Hoge, Jr., 'Jowett on Tennyson's "Maud": A New Letter', *Notes & Queries*, 24/1 (1977), 16–18; [Charles Kingsley], 'Tennyson's Maud', *Fraser's Magazine*, 52/309 (Sept. 1855), 264–73; V. Purton, 'John Ruskin and Tennyson', *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 11/3 (2019), 278–80.

[14] Emily Tennyson, *The Letters of Emily Lady Tennyson*, ed. J.O. Hoge (University Park, PENN, and London, 1974), 84.

[15] Tennyson, *Maud, and Other Poems*, 4.

[16] Ibid, 99.

[17] See Tai-Chun Ho, *The Crimean War in Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 2021), 203-4; R.B. Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford, 1980), 387–89; and J.R. Bennett, 'The Historical Abuse of Literature: Tennyson's *Maud: A Monodrama* and the Crimean War', *English Studies*, 62/1 (1981), 34–45.

[18] The popular satirical magazine *Punch, or the London Charivari*, often showed in its famous cartoons Bright wearing a broad-brimmed hat: see Punch, *Rt. Hon. John Bright, M.P.: Cartoons from the Collection of 'Mr. Punch'* ([London], 1878). It should be noted, however, that by the time of the Crimean War Bright had already stopped wearing Quaker clothing, and that he had never worn the Quaker hat: G.M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913), 107, n. 2.

expressed the hope that in a second edition of the poem these lines would be omitted.[19] Tennyson read Eliot's review, later leaving some notes to his son in which he sought to defend himself against the review's criticisms. 'The *Westminster Review*', he stated in a rather disingenuous way, 'said this was an attack on John Bright. I did not know at the time that he was a Quaker.'[20] The editor of Bright's diaries, R.A.J. Walling, and Bright's first major biographer, G.M Trevelyan, later made the same assumption about the 'broad-brim'd hawker' being a reference to Bright.[21] So what did Bright think about the poem and the aspersions it seemingly cast on him?

Shortly after the publication of the poem, Bright's friend and political partner, the peace-minded parliamentarian Richard Cobden, complained about a review in the *Athenaeum* which praised the poem's glorification of war.[22] 'What an atrocious article there is in the *Athenaeum* of last Saturday upon Tennyson's poems. War is in itself a blessing and the mother of blessings.'[23] Quakers were equally offended by the poem.[24] Bright's response came a few months later in a soiree held at Manchester's Corn Exchange on 28 January 1856 in honour of the city's two MPs: himself and Milner Gibson. Although it was nearing its conclusion, the Crimean War continued to rage, and Bright decided to speak about the manifold losses Britain was facing. These losses were not just material, but also moral. For instance, he bemoaned the bellicosity exhibited by established and dissenting ministers, who instead of preaching from their pulpits the message of the Prince of Peace, 'descanted in tones of jubilation on the war'.[25] Yet religion was not the only 'sphere' which witnessed a moral degradation as a result of the war. Another 'sphere' was that of poetry. Bright admitted that he had met the poet laureate only once by accident, but he knew him to be 'a gentleman of great refinement of manner and of mind who has written poetry in our language that will live as long as the language'.[26] But even this man of genius, declared Bright, did not remain impervious to that 'pestilent influence of these scenes of carnage', leading him to 'put forward a poem which his friends are anxious should never be spoken of.'[27] Bright did not specify the title of the poem, but it is clear that he was thinking of *Maud*. He, of course, exaggerated the negative reception of the poem for dramatic effect. Bright then compared Tennyson's poem to *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, published around the same time. Whereas Longfellow produced an 'exquisite' poem, Tennyson 'descend [ed] to slang of almost the coarsest character.'[28] It seems clear that Bright was upset because of Tennyson's tirade against peace, but most importantly because of the poet laureate's apparent invectives directed against him. Tennyson's poem's vituperations seem to have been the last straw for Bright, since shortly after the Manchester soiree he experienced a nervous breakdown, worn out by his detractors' relentless attacks and the long and arduous home-front 'war' of words and ideas he and other peace-minded individuals fought in and out of parliament.[29]

A few months prior to the Manchester soiree, the Peace Society's monthly periodical organ, the *Herald of Peace*, published an anonymous review of Tennyson's poem, entitled 'Effects of the War on our Literature'.[30] The review was probably penned by the journal's editor and secretary of the Peace Society, Henry Richard. The *Herald* has received almost no scholarly attention, and little is known about its readership or cultural impact. What is definitely known, however, is that it was first published in 1819 to disseminate the principles of the Peace Society. Its orientation was primarily religious: the universality of its religious message of peace was reflected in two epigraphs

[19] [George Eliot], 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, 64/126 (Oct. 1855), 599–600.

[20] Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son*, vol. I (London, 1897), 403.

[21] John Bright, *The Diaries of John Bright*, ed. R.A.J. Walling (London, 1930), 152, n. 1; Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, 225.

[22] 'Peace', wrote the *Athenaeum*'s reviewer, 'corrupts. In a stagnant atmosphere man declines. […] Nor can it be denied that it is chiefly in days of war and suffering the human mind makes it springs of progress. […] Mr. Tennyson tells us, in his allegory of "Maud," that we are rotting with Peace.': [Hepworth Dixon], 'Maud, and other Poems', *The Athenaeum*, 1149 (Aug. 1855), 893.

[23] J. Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden* (2 vols, London, 1908), ii, 149.

[24] See the review of the poem in the Quaker periodical *The Friend*, XIII/154 (10th month, 1855), 195.

[25] 'Soiree at Manchester, Last Night', *Liverpool Daily Post* (29 Jan. 1856), 3.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, 251–5.

[30] [Henry Richard?], 'Effects of the War on our Literature', *Herald of Peace*, III/LXIII, new ser. (Sept. 1855), [243]–6.

printed on the front page of its issues, drawn from both the Old and New Testaments.[31] By 1851, when the peace movement had gained 'the ear of a large section of the public', the *Herald's* circulation increased significantly.[32] But the Crimean War only a few years later threw the Peace Society and its periodical organ into a crisis. Nonetheless, the *Herald* launched a campaign to counter the nation's inflamed passions and to expose fallacies in the arguments of the pro-war contingent.

Profoundly disconcerted by the notion that a morally justifiable war could aid in social regeneration, the *Herald* published an article in February 1855 denouncing such 'elaborate apologies for war'.[33] '[T]o suppose', it stated, 'that such a population is now, or is likely to become, so emasculated and nerveless as to need to be indurated by the brutal violence of war, is one of the most absurd and fantastic dreams that ever troubled the mind of a dyspeptic philosopher.'[34] Shortly after the publication of Tennyson's *Maud* and the uproar it caused, the *Herald* deemed it necessary to respond to its apparent faith in the invigorating qualities of war. Published in September 1855, the *Herald's* rejoinder took the form of a review-essay which critically examined the war's effect on contemporary literature. The *Herald's* review opened with a lament about the war's 'corrupting influence' on literary minds. Novelists such as Charles Kingsley, for example, were 'prostituting their noble endowments to what appear[ed] to [be] base and brutalizing purposes.'[35] The review then turned to *Maud*. Yet unlike Bright and other peace-minded critics, the *Herald* understood the poem as a thinly veiled critique of war and its apologists. It was possible, observed the *Herald's* review, that *Maud* actually sought 'to brand with the most withering contempt the fashionable advocates of war.'[36] The reason for this was that Tennyson put the idea of the revitalizing potential of a righteous war into the mouth of his 'moon-struck hero':

> It is in the mouth of this moping, maundering, diseased hero, that Mr. Tennyson has put those sentiments in deprecation of peace and in favour of war, which have been so greedily cited and circulated by the newspapers, as if they were his own; though we presume, he is no more responsible for them than Milton is for the blasphemies he has ascribed to Satan, or Shakespeare for the drivellings of Mr. Justice Shallow.[37]

The review concluded that Tennyson was in reality mocking his pro-war compatriots:

> And it is scarcely possible to conceive a subtler and keener stroke of satire upon the shallow and bellicose declaimers of our own time than Mr. Tennyson has inflicted, in thus putting their despicable poison-froth as to the evils of peace and the blessings of war in the lips of this half-maniac, nursing his own wrongs, and eating his own heart in a solitude haunted by such bloody memories.[38]

Maud was thus nothing but an elaborate satire of the wildest claims made by defenders of the Crimean War. It was impossible to 'believe that [Tennyson] intended to father this nauseous and contemptible cant, which he has put so fittingly in the mouth of his hypochondriac hero'. The *Herald's* review also refused to accept that such a man of genius and sterling qualities of character as Tennyson would attack Bright in his poem in lines 'conceived in a spirit so mean, and expressed in language so coarse and scurrilous'.[39] If that were the case, then this would bring utter dishonour to Tennyson. Two months later the *Herald* would resume its attack on those propounding this 'fantastic philosophy, which glorifies war as the great civilizer and sanctifier of humanity'—without mentioning Tennyson's name again.[40]

Though Bright and the majority of peace-minded contemporaries castigated Tennyson for promulgating through *Maud* the idea of war having a purifying and regenerative potential, the

[31] Matt. 26:52: 'Put up thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword'; Isa. 2:4: 'They shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'

[32] Charles S. Miall, *Henry Richard, M.P. A Biography* (London, 1889), 84.

[33] [Henry Richard?], 'Pleas for War Examined', *Herald of Peace*, III/LVI, new ser. (Feb. 1855), 164.

[34] Ibid., 165.

[35] [Richard?], 'Effects of the War', [243].

[36] Ibid., 244.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 246.

[40] [Henry Richard?], 'The Blessings of War', *Herald of Peace*, III/LXV, new ser. (Nov. 1855), 268.

Herald, which was equally if not more critical of this idea, interpreted the poem in a radically different way. Through these previously unidentified responses, we can therefore gain a new understanding of the nuances in the peace movement's reactions to Tennyson's poem. This can potentially provide valuable insights to both literary scholars and historians working on the wartime literary and intellectual culture of the mid-Victorian era.

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