

The Poems of Elizabeth Campbell: Maternal Loss and the Crimean War

By Florence Boos

Only a small proportion of the writings that have come down to us from mid-nineteenth-century Scotland were composed by the genuinely poor, and even these have been mostly filtered through middle-class patrons, editors, and publishers. Even scarcer are the writings of impoverished nineteenth-century women, who suffered from lower levels of literacy than their male counterparts, and whose works faced censorship by male editors.¹ Among these, Elizabeth Duncan Campbell (1804–1878) was one of several Scottish working-class women poets, along with Jane Stevenson, Susanna Hawkins, Jane Adams, and Agnes McLintock.² Campbell's works are distinctive, however, in their firm views on political issues, and in particular, in their expressions of anguish and horror at the Crimean War and distrust of its leaders.

Also notable is that Campbell's poems exist in both self-published and edited form, providing a comparison between her earlier, direct, seemingly unedited responses, as expressed in a series of five self-issued pamphlets printed during the 1860s, and a later, edited volume of her poems, *Songs of My Pilgrimage*, published in 1875. Furthermore, Campbell was the mother of eight children, and although such a family size was common at the time,³ very few extant volumes of working-class poetry are by women known to have borne large families. The best-known exception was the redoubtable Janet Hamilton, the mother of ten children, at least half of whom outlived her. Campbell was relatively less fortunate, however, in that her poems mourn the deaths of four sons, a daughter, and grandchildren. And finally, in contrast to the highly patriotic response to the Crimean War of other contemporary poets such as Sydney Dobell, Alexander Smith, and Alfred Tennyson,⁴ Campbell's poems record

her personal anguish at the dangers faced by her son in the Crimea, as well as her doubts about both the morality and conduct of Britain's war. Her poems thus provide an arresting commentary on the patriotic pieties of the day, as well as reflecting the pain and resentment felt by a marginalised citizen faced with the consequences of her country's foreign policies.⁵

Campbell's life was marked by repeated loss. As recounted in 'The Life of My Childhood', an eight-page memoir affixed to her 1875 volume, when Elizabeth was three, her mother died after an eighteen-month illness: 'The morning she died my elder sister milked the cow, and gave us our porridge with the new milk out of doors by the side of the turf stack, and I have never thought any feast half so grand since.'⁶

Her father was a strict disciplinarian, and Elizabeth remembered with fondness the family's pet, 'Cherry', who 'was a cunning dog, and saved us children from many a beating. If my father laid a hand on us he was at him in a twinkling.' Employment as a servant at age seven brought isolation:

I could not treat any one's child as that woman treated me. [...] she beat me and pushed me out of doors into the dark, and called on the ghost of Brandy Den to take me. I was as unhappy as a banished convict in that ugly cot on the whinny moor [...].

After several positions as a servant, Elizabeth became a millworker, and at age thirty married her fellow textile worker William Campbell. Not mentioned in her account is her delivery of eight children, likely frightening experiences in a period of the absence of anaesthesia, high maternal mortality, and infant death.⁷ Unfortunately, William Campbell suffered an accident, rendering him unable to work for many years until his death in the late 1860s, and Campbell ends her account cryptically, 'My life has been

full of toil and sorrows so many and so deep that I never could tell them.’ We might speculate that some of those many and deep sorrows were related to William Campbell’s behaviour.

Campbell relates that ‘all of my sons are now in the grave’: two had died young; the third, a cavalry soldier, had been killed by a fall from a horse; and her son, Willie, had survived a period as a soldier in the Crimea, but after his return had become entangled in a hair-teasing machine used for making furniture while a foreman in the House of Refuge [a poorhouse/homeless shelter] in Aberdeen:

Oh! I cannot tell what a bitter and sad trial it was for me to go to identify the mangled remains of my poor son Willie. This was the greatest of the many sorrows of my life, and I have mourned sore, and still mourn, his untimely end.

Although the fate of her daughters is left unmentioned, these too may have brought sorrow, for in an autobiographical poem in Campbell’s 1875 *Songs*, ‘My Infant Day and My Hair Grown Gray’, the speaker notes the deaths of ‘[p]oor Margaret and her children three’ and exclaims,

*Alas! That e’er I should have wished
Of one whom God me gave
That cypress bough or deep green yew
Had shaded their early grave.*

Moreover, she recounts that, over the years, physical ailments have increasingly weakened her: ‘I have been long subject to the ague, and it often takes me badly, helping to wear out my frail body [...]’

Left motherless at age three, subject to periodic economic precarity, forced to bury five cherished offspring, and subject to unnamed ‘sorrows ... many and ... deep’, Campbell clearly suffered a succession of traumatic losses. It seems remarkable that a woman with no formal education at all – she recalls that she had received only ‘six weeks at the white seam’, that is, instruction in plain sewing – and with scant leisure or resources, should have struggled to present five small pamphlets and one longer volume of poetry (a total of 240-plus pages) to the world. Even more than by economic necessity, Campbell was likely driven to write by an urge to commemorate and anticipate her life’s disruptions, to contain the memory of multiple deaths within a larger pattern, or simply to preserve a sense of basic selfhood amid recurrent grief.

In her classic study of *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman defines psychological trauma as:

*an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force [...]. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.*⁸

According to the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, trauma inevitably triggers emotions of ‘intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation’⁹ Several of these emotions arguably pervade Campbell’s poetry, undergirding its alternately anxious, aggrieved, resistant, and fatalistic cast. Though twentieth- and twenty-first-century psychologists have focused on the harms of rape and direct participation in battle, Campbell’s verses exhibit the additional psychic damage caused by multiple familial deaths, war’s secondary effects, and (in the absence of modern communication) the rupture of ties through geographical dispersal.

A striking series of poems respond with anxiety and horror to the Crimean War. The 1862 booklet contains ‘The Attack on the Great Redan, and Fall of the Malakhoff’, ‘The Windmill of Sebastopol’, ‘The Mother’s Lament’, ‘The Absent Soldier’, and ‘Bill Arden’, clearly inspired by her anxiety for her son, who had been a soldier in the Crimea. Since the 1862 *Poems* appeared six years after the cessation of British-Russian hostilities, it is possible that some of these war-themed poems were written earlier, but they show the frenzied immediacy of her response to accounts of the Battle of Sebastopol at a time when she cannot have known whether her son had survived. In ‘The Attack on the Great Redan’ she imagines herself as an onlooker:

*What a scene, what a scene! No mortal can dream, —
 Forbid, O forbid such a one come again;
 As when great shells and balls flew in clouds o’er the walls,
 Tearing up churches and murdering men.*

*Guns roaring like thunder, the earth rocking under,
 Echoes resounding o’er mountain and plain,
 Smoke to the clouds bounding, the war trumpets sounding,
 Mixing with moans and screams of the slain. (3)*

Campbell focuses on individuals – some, such as Lord Aberdeen, have been traitors – but especially on those like herself who wait at home:

*Mothers of England, weep for the great Redan,
 Weep for your murdered sons there that were slain;
 [...]
 They thought of sweet home amid trickling rain,*

*Of red blood that rippled from gashes so gory,
Mixing [with] mud on the Russian plain.*

If Campbell's syntax occasionally falters, she manages to capture the battle's essential elements: mayhem, smoke, explosions, and carnage.

'The Windmill of Sebastopol' evokes a series of desolate scenes – wandering soldiers fearing a nighttime attack, a sentinel surveying a lonely ruin, a father who lies wounded on the battlefield longing for his loved ones while his distraught wife fears for his death – all associated with the homely image of a deserted windmill:

*And war has made the old mill dumb,
Stilled its clattering tongue,
Rust[ed] its wheel and drum, this heavy time. . . .*

*With its battered walls, and its flails torn,
Stood the old mill forlorn, beating the winter storm,
Where sweet peace once hailed the morn
That land within. (19)*

Again, Campbell's disjointed imaginings and insistent, uneven meters emphasise the war zone's bleakness. And in what in this context seems an unexpected extension of empathy, she notes the grief of the similarly displaced Russian soldiers (an estimated five-hundred thousand Russians were killed in the Crimean War as opposed to twenty-thousand British):¹⁰

*Deep did the Russians mourn for their broad fields of yellow corn,
 Home by the reapers borne, when peace was the theme;
 Now deserted in cot and town,
 Away are the inmates flown,
 And a hundred thousand cut down
 Of that unhappy band. (19)*

Here and in other Crimean War poems Campbell returns obsessively to the pain of separation: in ‘The Amber Cloud’, uncertain of her son Willie’s whereabouts, she remembers the dangers he had faced at Sebastopol, and in ‘The Mother’s Lament’:

*I leaned against a wooden rail,
 And sighed beside the sea,
 And wondered, if ye were in life,
 If ye remembered me.
 Ah, there I stood and wept aloud,
 And call’d aloud to thee,
 As if through the horizon,
 Or up out of the sea,
 Ye like a vision in a dream,
 Would come and speak to me.*

The successive booklets of *Poems* (series two, 1863; series three, 1865; and series four, 1867) evoke similar themes of the terror of war mixed with a sense of immediate loss. The speaker of the 1863 ‘A Dream’ imagines that she hears the rush of cannon balls, where ‘my two sons, my only sons, / Were fiercely fighting there’ (6); when she advances in terror through the battlefield, in the dream logic she is distracted by her

attempt to save an unprotected female child whom she sees toiling over the field, but in vain: ‘I never reached the orphan child, / That did my pity claim’ (8). Attracted by an astronomical wonder, the speaker of the ‘The Comet’ (1863) also notes that it flashes ‘o’er lands afar / Shin[ing] on bloody fields of war’ (9). The speaker of the 1865 ‘The Wreck of the Dalhousie’ imagines the emotions of those facing death by shipwreck; ‘Malta’s Isle’ offers the hope that her soldier son, Willie, may return from the Mediterranean; ‘I Stood by the Wooden Rail’ records her continued sorrow for the deaths of her sons; and ‘The Absent Soldier’ grieves for another generation that suffers a similar loss, as her married daughter is also bereft of her soldier husband’s presence through war.

Allusions to the pain of close attachments ruptured by war and death intrude throughout the final 1867 series (e.g. ‘The Uncle and Nephew’s Grave’), appearing even in unexpected contexts: in ‘Sleep’, the speaker beseeches its oblivion to comfort the weary, those in hospitals, and ‘those on the battle-field bathed in blood’; when gazing on birds flying over a calm sea she notes that these seek their food ‘Above the watery graves’ (‘The Half Moon’); and in ‘The Planten of Findowry’ loving memories of her youthful home also record her early loss: ‘My mother to her dust had gone, / And could not hear my childish moan.’ Her pain for the absent Willie continues in ‘The Amber Cloud’, as the speaker is enveloped by a transcendent mist, ‘Like an amber molten flood’, and although she prays earnestly for his safety, she is denied answer or redress from ‘that gorgeous flaming bay’ (7).

Most striking, however, is Campbell’s reprise of a long-familiar theme in the 1867 ‘The Crimean War’, now viewed at somewhat greater distance after the lapse of several years:

*I think it's a pity that kings go to war,
 And carry their murd'rous inventions so far;
 Since Adam did blunder such blunders have been,
 And I weep for those that's the victims of kings.
 I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave,
 I weep for the monarch, I weep for the slave,
 I weep for all those that in battle are slain;
 I've a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men. (24)*

The speaker's breaks in syntax and logic emphasise the intensity and universality of her appeal. Again she conjures up the aftermath of the siege of Sebastopol:

*Sebastopol of guns was full,
 To shed the blood of sage and fool,
 To wash that far-famed city;
 And many more will feel Death's chill,
 Ere Vengeance'[s] cup be towering full,
 Or hardened men feel pity.
 There many [a] mother lost her son
 Before Sebastopol was won. (25–26)*

If, predictably, the speaker remembers the pain of British mothers, less predictably her final concern extends to a truly despised and marginalised group – war deserters.

*'Twas well for those that found a grave
 Aside those walls when fighting brave,
 It many a mother's tears did save*

*From seeing her son a British slave,
Tied up and get a flogging;
'Neath Britain's boasted Freedom's flag,
Deserters out their life must drag,
White fear their footsteps dogging. (26–27)*

If Campbell's politics were not quite consistent – she clearly viewed Britain's war as both a righteous cause and tragic error – her poems witness the power of what one might call 'secondary trauma', the little-regarded anguish of those who suffer vicariously and from a distance.

Maternal Loss

In Campbell's third series of *Poems*, issued in 1865, the final selection, 'The Bereaved Mother', directly confronts the grim issue of repeated child death. The speaker warns a young mother that her happiness may be limited, after which the menacing figure of Death himself intervenes, in a twelve-stanza prophecy of his future onslaughts upon her children:

*O loving mother hark, lo, I come an angel dark,
With a sword that's ever sharp,
To shear branches from your tree, ...*

*And in my time's all lasting route
I'll come again for thee.*

*I gather in the human race,
They all must cross my line;
O this is my first call to thee, I'll come again in time: ... (35)*

The loss of the mother's little daughter and son are then evoked in more detail, and although the mother/speaker's faith binds her to believe that her dead children are in heaven and thus cannot miss their mother, her own loss remains:

*Away your darling Mary's gone,
To where she canna hear your moan;
Now sound she sleeps, and the secret keeps
That fain the world would know. (36)*

Even though the thought of God frequently provides some closure for the poet's distress, here (and elsewhere) his presence seems to operate only in a realm of death.

In 1875, Campbell's *Songs of My Pilgrimage* appeared under the respectable imprint of the publisher Andrew Elliot, Edinburgh, with a commendatory preface by the noted critic George Gilfillan. The volume's contents are markedly different from those of Campbell's short pamphlets, however, and according to Charlotte Lauder, a researcher for the [Piston, Pen, and Press database](#), they were edited by 'local civil servant' Peter Whytock. Gilfillan quotes the opinions of 'a literary gentleman, who has read her Autobiography and her poems' (iv) – possibly Whytock?: 'How her head and heart have kept so sound and strong under such tragic pressure of circumstances is a priceless tribute to human truth' (v).

Whytock/Campbell's verses are indeed more flowing and rhetorically consistent, but also more conventional and abstract. Less frequent are angry or grieving references to marginalised persons or groups, and the poems of sorrow are softened, as it were, by the presence of others on lighter themes – 'The Bees', 'The Fairy King's Wedding', 'The Man in Satin Shoon – A Ballad'. The later/edited Campbell is also more confidently pious, expanding on the Christian references in her earlier poems; for example, 'The Cot by the Moor' concludes with the assurance: 'But what although changed be our earthly abode, / What a mansion eternal was given us by God' (53). Her final poem on the Crimean War, the 1875 'The Battle of Alma', markedly retreats from the speaker's previous anguished immediacy of tone into (inaccurate) celebratory patriotism:

*How fast away their thousands flew
 Before a handful tried and true,
 Who Britain's fame did well renew
 At the battle of the Alma. (68)*

Campbell would not have been true to herself, however, had the speaker not concluded with some regrets:

*But o'er that glory falls a shade,
 For many in the Highland plaid
 To sleep their last long sleep were laid
 On the bloody hill of Alma! (68)*

The more syntactically correct and coherent poems in Campbell's later, edited *Songs of My Pilgrimage* thus highlight, by contrast, the distinctive features of the earlier,

self-published verses of an uneducated and impoverished woman of her time. Within the constraints of Campbell's limited access to formal learning and information, these early pamphlets reveal an attempt to piece together the moral inconsistencies of her world; a ready understanding of pain and grief in its many forms, with emphasis on the emotions of motherhood; an image of herself as permanently scarred by loss; and a determination to bear witness to her losses through poetry. The features adduced by psychologists as endemic to trauma – constant awareness of possible danger, repeated memories of painful or violent events, and a constriction of one's life and preoccupations – thus both propel and infuse Campbell's writings.

In Campbell's case, and doubtless that of many others, her trauma was her truth, and authorship may have enabled her to preserve a sense of self throughout repeated external defeats. It also provided her an independent, if hard-won, view of the major political issue of her time – Britain's military engagements in the service of its commercial and imperial ambitions.¹¹ The publication history of her verses also suggests the extent to which the writings of other working-class or self-taught poets may have been routinely edited to defuse expressions of political or social nonconformity, and confirm the need to examine the surviving writings of the minimally literate underclass for glimpses of their elusive, if often resistant, insights.

1. For comments on editorial patronage, see my ‘[The “Homely Muse” in her Diurnal Setting: “Marie,” Janet Hamilton, and Fanny Forrester in the Periodical Press](#),’ *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2001), pp. 255–85.
For literacy, see David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Polity, 2000), pp. 9–10. According to Vincent, with literacy defined as the ability to sign one’s name in a marriage register, in 1800 60% of English women and 40% of English men were illiterate; by 1855, when Scottish rates were tabulated separately, the rate for women was c. 22% and for men, c. 10%.
2. Florence Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology* (Broadview, 2008); this includes a bibliography, “Some Little-Educated or Working-Class Victorian Women Poets Who Published Books Not Included in this Anthology,” pp. 350–51.
3. According to R. Sauer, *Population Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (March 1978), p. 81, although no official statistics were gathered until 1838, demographers generally agree that the average completed family in the early nineteenth-century contained about five children.
4. Tai-Chun Ho, *The Crimean War in Victorian Poetry* (Peter Lang, 2021).
5. Historians agree that a major motive for the Crimean War was to protect the Ottoman Empire and British commercial interests allied with its survival; according to Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War* (Henry Holt, 2011), p. xxii, ‘The British claimed they went to war to defend Turkey against Russia’s bullying, but in fact they were more concerned to strike a blow against the Russian Empire, which they feared as a rival in Asia, and to use the war to advance their free-trade and religious interests in the Ottoman Empire. ... For the British and the French, this was a crusade for the survival of European civilization, against the barbaric and despotic menace of Russia...’.
6. *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (Andrew Eliot, 1875), p. xi; the following quotations are from pp. xi, xii, xiii, and xvii.
7. As of 1850, when statistics on UK maternal mortality were first published, the rate of maternal death exceeded 5 per hundred births (obviously multiple births would increase the danger). See Irvine Loudon, ‘Obstetric Care, Social Class, and Maternal Mortality’, *British Medical Journal*, 293 (6 Sept. 1986).

8. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* [1992] (Basic Books, 2015) p. 33.
9. *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, eds H. I. Kaplan and B. J. Sadock, 4th ed. (Williams and Wilkins, 1985), p. 241, n. 2.
10. Figes, p. xix.
11. Other similar or related nineteenth-century conflicts in the middle east included the 1807–12 Anglo-Russian War; the 1839–42 First Anglo-Afghan War [East India Company vs. Afghanistan, intended to preclude the Russian invasion of India]; the 1856–57 Anglo-Persian War; the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War [the “Eastern Question”]; the 1878–1880 Second Anglo-Afghan War, the 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War [British invasion of upper Egypt]; and the 1896–98 expedition against Mahdi, defeated at Omdurman.