Quiet Images From the Valley of Death

Crimean War photographer Roger Fenton focused on pomp and camp life

BY PAMELA D. TOLER

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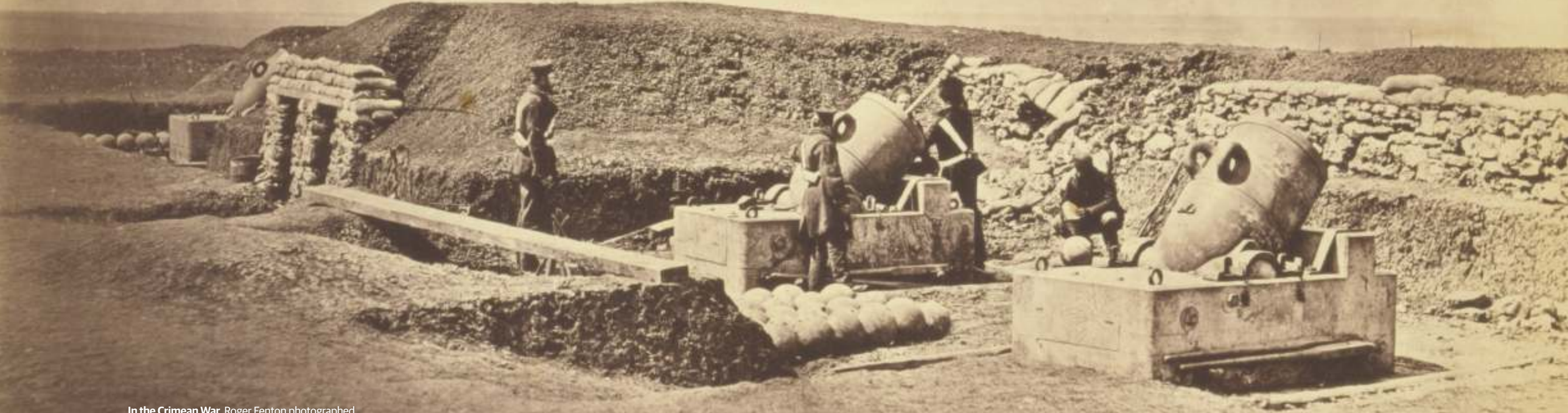
On February 20, 1855, seven years before Mathew Brady displayed pictures of the bloody battlefield of Antietam on the door of his New York photography studio, Roger Fenton sailed from London for the Crimea to photograph the British Army and its allies at war against Russia. ☆ Taking a camera into battle was a revolutionary idea, and photography itself was a relatively new art form. There was no demand for journalistic images; newspapers and popular journals employed sketch artists and engravers to produce illustrations. Except for portraits, art photographs were luxury items purchased as books of "views" by private collectors. ☆ Fenton was a major figure in British photography at the time. Born into an upper-middle-class family,



In the Crimean War, Roger Fenton photographed carefully staged tableaus, like this mortar battery and crew next to their bomb-proof shelter.

he studied painting in London and Paris in the 1840s. In 1852, he took up photography, perhaps in response to the photographic exhibition at the first World's Fair, at London's Crystal Palace in 1851.

A competent painter at best, he proved both a talented photographer and an innovative promoter of the art form. He helped organize popular exhibitions and created what would become the Royal Photographic Society. Several years before the Crimean War, he traveled to Russia, where he took the first known photographs of Moscow. He was also the favorite photographer of the royal family, taking pictures of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their children.

Fenton's photographic expedition to the Crimea was partly commercial and partly official. Publisher and print seller William Agnew financed the trip in exchange for the right to distribute Fenton's work. But it was the Duke of Newcastle, then secretary of war, who arranged Fenton's passage on the transport HMS *Hecla*. Prince Albert provided Fenton with letters of introduction to the British field commander, FitzRoy James Somerset, 1st Baron Raglan. Fenton's dual roles as a quasi-representative of Queen Victoria and commercial photographer in search of a salable portfolio would shape his experience of the war and his photographic compositions.

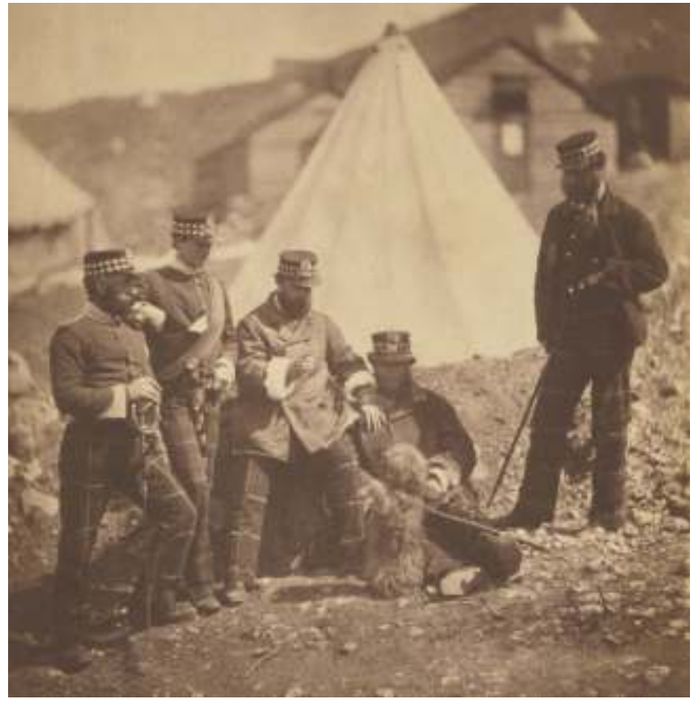
Fenton arrived at Balaklava Harbor, in what is now Ukraine, on March 8, 1855, with 2 assistants, 36 crates of supplies, 5 cameras, 700 glass slides packed in specially grooved wooden boxes, and a wine merchant's van that he had converted into a mobile home and darkroom.

Fenton took photographs under technically challenging conditions, using a cumbersome wet-plate photographic technique. His large box cameras with their glass-plate negatives were unwieldy, and the region's oppressive heat made the collodion on the plates dry too quickly, so Fenton couldn't range far from his darkroom. Dust spoiled many pictures; more still were ruined by the jostling of what he described as "the crowds of all sorts who flock round," each soldier hoping Fenton would take a portrait he could send home.

Royal patronage gave Fenton privileges not enjoyed by the correspondents and artists who came to the Crimea for the London papers, but it could not protect him from the realities of the war. He occasionally came under enemy fire, his van apparently mistaken for an ammunition wagon even though "Photographic Van" was painted on its side in large letters. He was at the front in late March when the Russians made four sorties against the British and French trenches.

He observed the French capture of the Mamelon on June 7 and the unsuccessful attack on the Redan on June 18. (Mamelon and the Redan were two of the Russian forts that protected Sevastopol.) He visited the field hospital, and his letters home give a vivid, if understated, sense of the battlefield. "He turned his glazing eyes upon us, then closed them, panting vainly for breath. He died in a few minutes," he wrote of one soldier who had been at the Redan. "News kept coming of well-known names henceforth only to be memories."

His photographs do not give such a sense. Unlike Brady and other war photographers who followed, Fenton did not take pictures of the dead and wounded. Explicit pictures of the horrors of war fit neither of his sponsored roles. Over the course of just



Fenton (left) enjoyed wearing a borrowed Zouave uniform while he was in the Crimea. He often photographed groups of men focused on some small action, like these officers playing with a dog (right) .

14 weeks, Fenton captured some 360 images that combine superb photographic technique and a painterly sensibility. With an eye toward historical importance and commercial viability, he took formal portraits of officers, occasionally in incongruous settings. He made studies of the more exotic troops who made up what he described as a "Noah's Ark" of an army: Zoaves, Croats, and Turks, not to mention highlanders in their kilts—the equivalent of Orientalist character studies by contemporary painters. He created panoramic landscapes, views of encampments and mortar batteries, and cheerful group portraits of the ordinary soldiers who helped move his van across the rutted battlefields.

Some of his most engaging photographs are carefully staged scenes of soldiers in camp—essentially historical genre paintings created with film. Using the compositional rules of a neoclassical painter, he created seemingly casual groupings, each focused on a slight action: hussars gathering around their cook fire, men playing with a dog, an officer relaxing with a glass of wine. He used the limitations of his medium to great effect, turning out-of-focus tents into a theatrical backdrop behind a shallow foreground and using the contrasts of the strong southern light to create bold geometric forms. The resulting scenes have the immediacy of snapshots despite their long exposure times and artful construction.

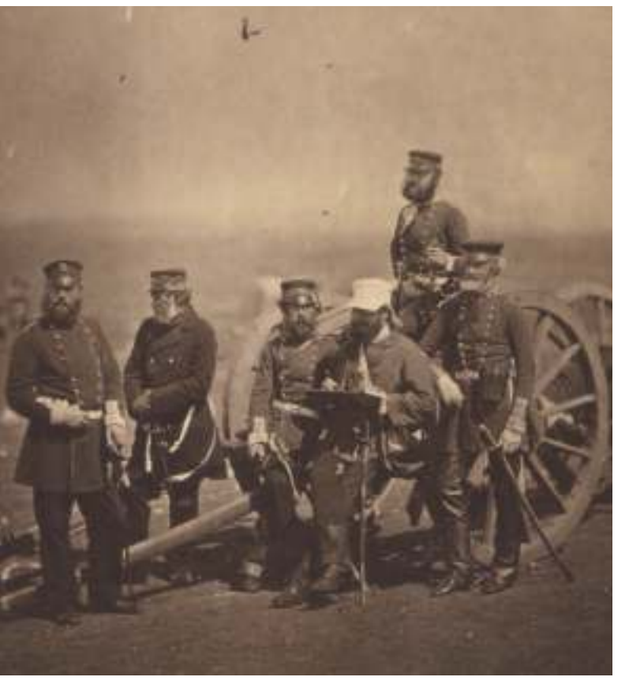
In addition to photographing the British Army and its allies, Fenton found a visual expression of the destruction of war in the barren landscape of the Crimea, which defied the picturesque conventions of English landscape art. His most famous photograph, "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," became the iconic image of the war. The subject was a ravine given that name by soldiers because of frequent Russian shelling. The photograph is desolate rather than bloody. A painter would have presented the ravine at its dramatic height, under fire and complete with the lifeless bodies that Fenton eschewed. The photographer shows only what the warring armies left behind: a scattering of cannonballs on a road that seems to lead nowhere under a bleak sky.

On June 26, ill with cholera, depressed by the death of friends at the Redan, and running low on photographic supplies, Fenton sailed for England, two months before Sevastopol fell to Britain and its allies. After the war, Fenton continued to photograph various subjects, including some critically acclaimed still lifes.

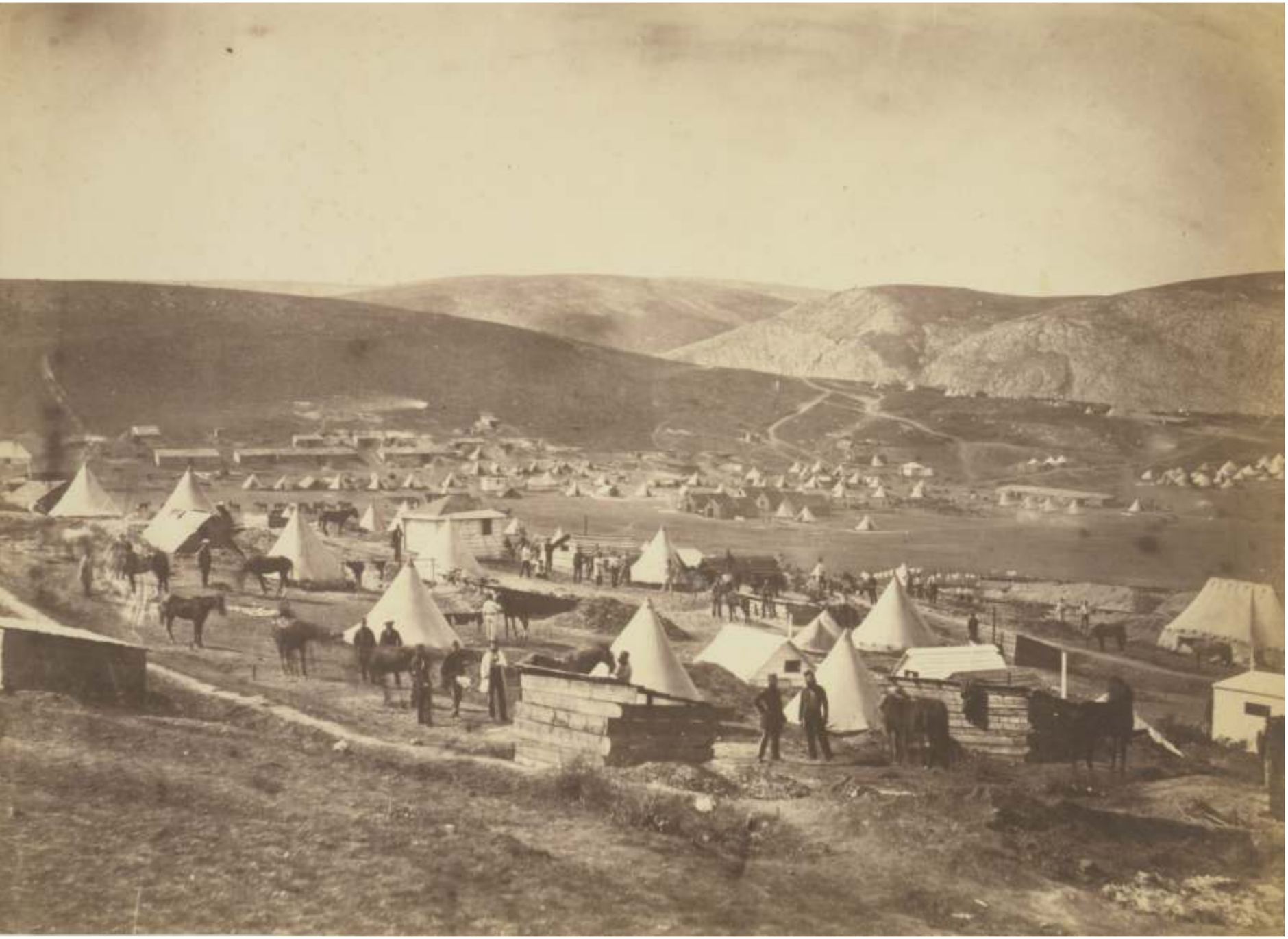
But in 1862, after just 11 years behind the camera, during which he became "one of the most prolific and versatile photographers of the 19th century," according to one biographer, he shocked the art world by quitting and returning to the practice of law. He died after a brief illness in 1869, aged 50.

Victorian audiences found an immediacy in Fenton's war photographs that is lost to us today, obsessed as we are with action and casualties of war. Dr. W. J. Thoms, editor of the journal *Notes and Queries*, wrote of them in 1855, "The stern reality stands revealed to the spectator. Camp life with all its hardships, mixed occasionally with some rough and ready enjoyments, is realized as if one stood face to face with it."

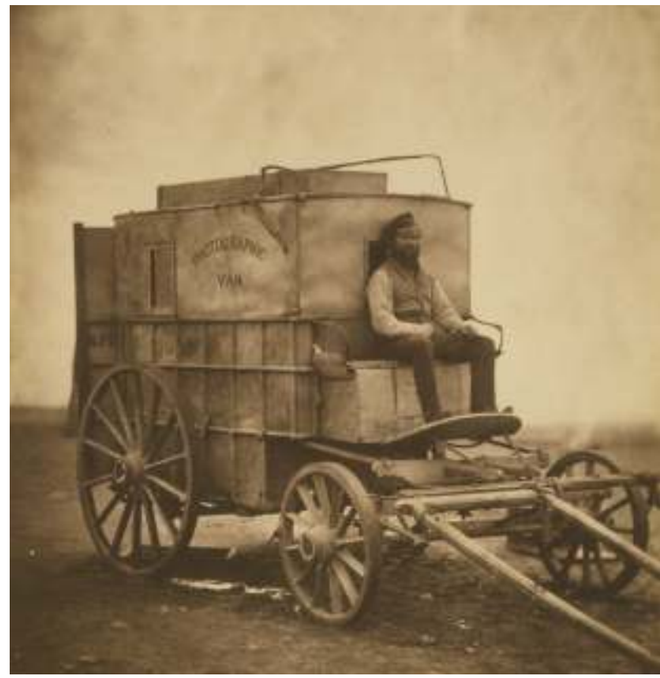
Fenton's photographs, like the Crimean War itself, teetered on the border between the past and modernity, abandoning the romanticism of history painting without yet reaching Brady's bloodied realism. A prescient review in the September 1855 issue of the journal *Athenaeum* predicted that Fenton's photographs were the first step on a new road: "As photographers grow stronger in nerve and cooler in head, we shall have not merely the bivouac and the foraging party, but the battle itself painted." ➤

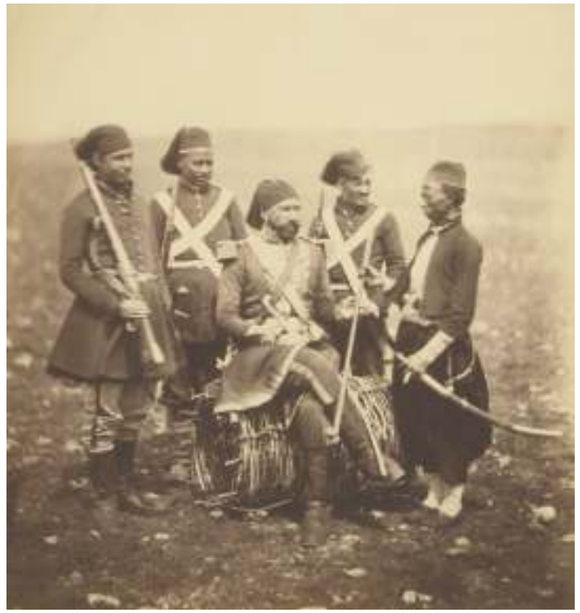


Grizzled officers, one seemingly taking notes, strike nonchalant poses on a caisson (left). Subjects who moved even slightly during the 3- to 20-second exposures, like the officer at top right, could blur the details. Fenton was often obliged to make portraits of top officers such as British Lt. Gen. George de Lacy Evans (right) or risk losing their help transporting his photographic van around the front.

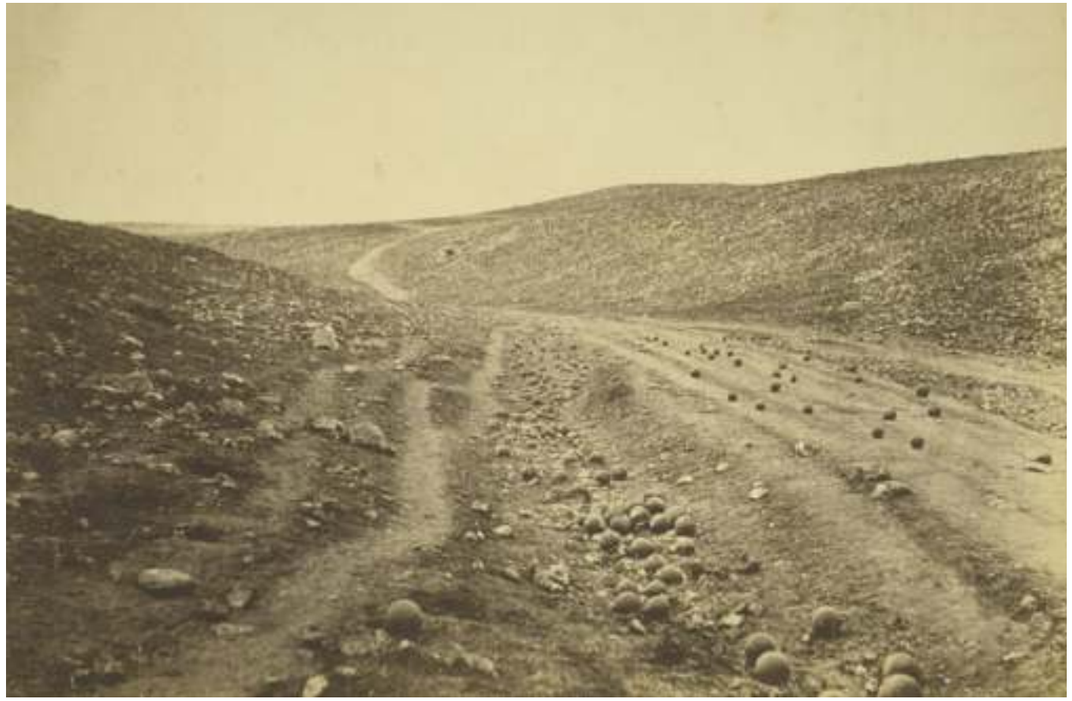


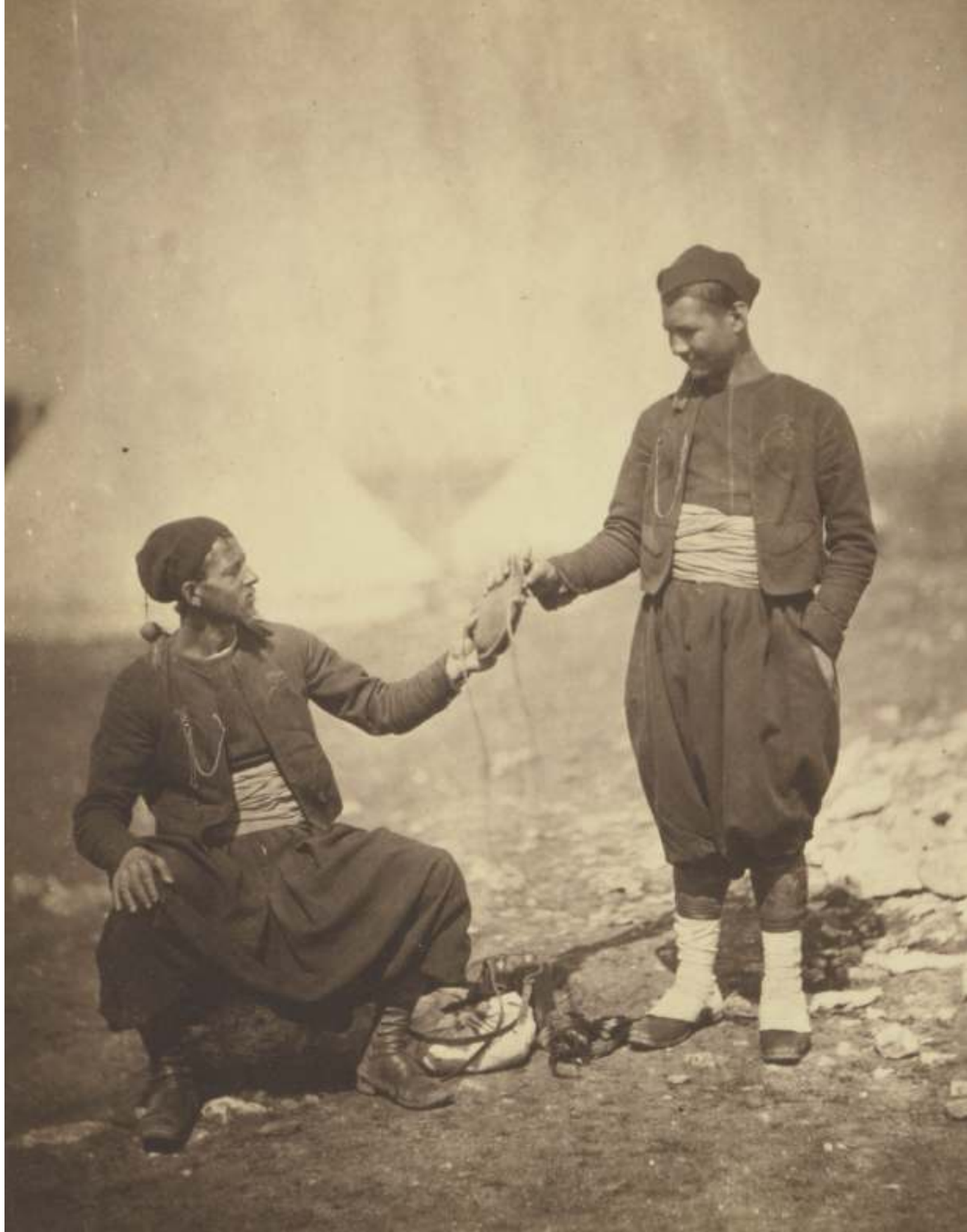
Trained as a painter, Fenton brought an eye for composition to his landscape war photography, often incorporating bold geometric forms (note tents, left) to sharpen an otherwise soft scene. He and his assistants roamed the front in their mobile darkroom (below).

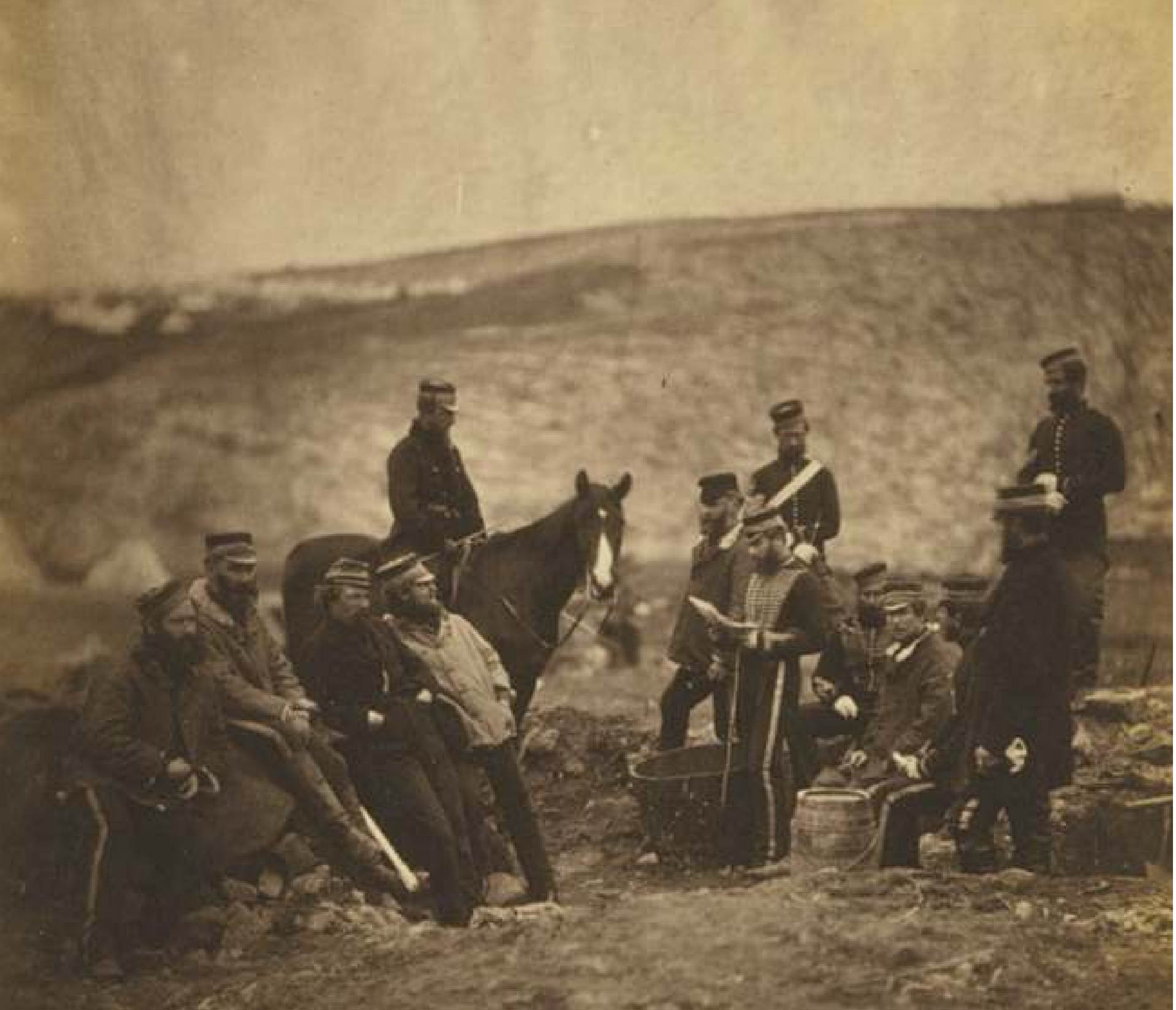


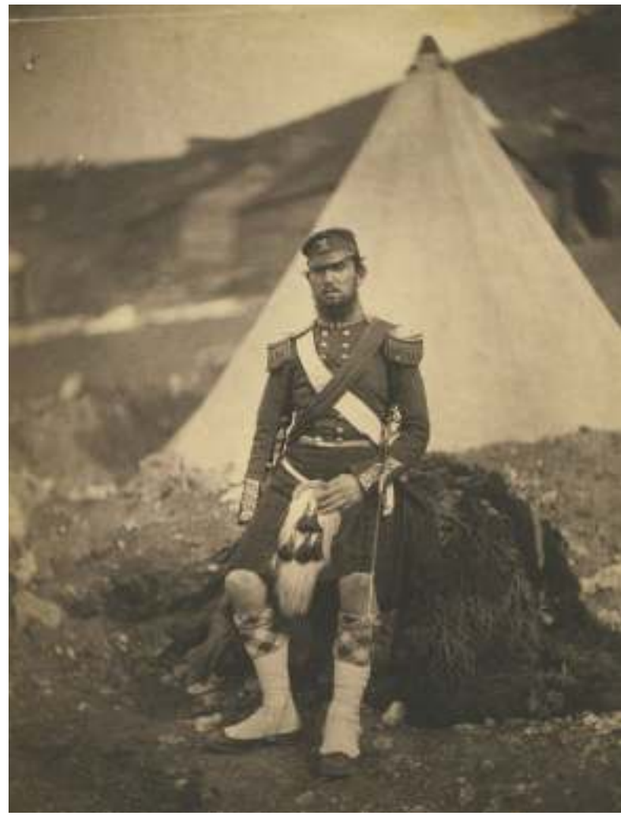


Fenton knew his patrons preferred shots of "exotic" Turks (right) and Zouaves (opposite) to images of death and destruction. The closest he came to those themes was in his classic depiction of a cannonball-strewn battlefield under a bleak sky that he called "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (below).









During his three months in the Crimea, Fenton shot 360 images, including cavalrymen (left) and kilted highlanders (above), that would become an enduring photographic record of men at war, albeit behind the lines and very much alive.

ALL IMAGES: ROGER FENTON/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS