

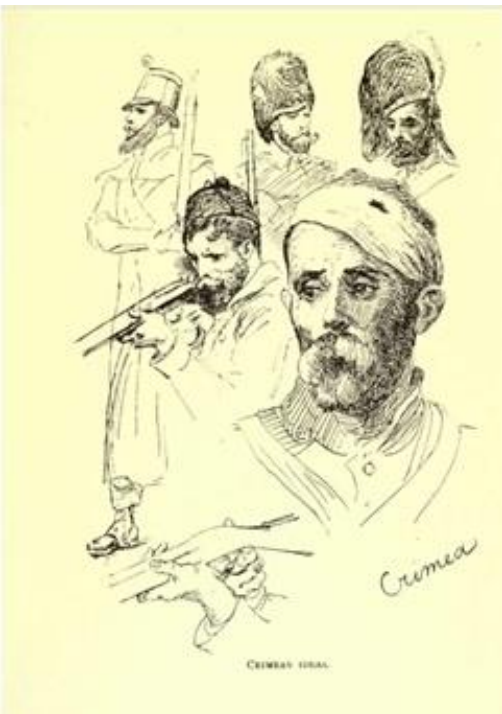
**Elizabeth Thompson: *I awoke this morning and found myself famous***

In 1874 Elizabeth Thompson became one of the most famous women in England when her painting *The Roll Call* was exhibited at the Royal Academy. She and her sister Alice had a somewhat bohemian upbringing; their mother was a concert pianist, and their father, who had inherited a small fortune from his grandfather, devoted his time to the education of his daughters. The family travelled widely in Europe, but settled in Bonchurch and Ventnor in the early 1860s and 1870s, and were living here when Elizabeth suddenly became famous.

She was just establishing herself as an artist, having trained in London and Italy, and had been commissioned to produce a Crimean War painting. She spent weeks sketching soldiers and researching army uniform in a studio rented in London - some of her sketches are shown below. After putting the final finishing touches to the painting, Elizabeth wrote in her diary: *While at home at Ventnor I received extraordinary rumours of the stir the picture was making in London. How it was 'the talk of the clubs' and spoken of as 'the coming picture of the year'.*



The Roll Call became a national sensation - so popular that a policeman had to be stationed before it to hold back the crowds. Painted in subdued colours, it shows a scene from the Crimean war, a battalion of Grenadier Guards, exhausted and wounded in the aftermath of a battle. The artist William Holman Hunt said it touched the nation's heart as few pictures have ever done. Queen Victoria had it brought to the Palace for a private viewing, and the man who had commissioned and paid for the work was persuaded to allow her to buy it.



Elizabeth wrote in her diary: *I awoke this morning and found myself famous.* She described her discomfort at having 'publicity' photographs taken: *Nowadays one is snapshotted whether one likes it or not, but it wasn't so bad in those days; one's consent was asked, at any rate. I refused. However . . . my grandfather simply walked into the shop of the first people that had asked me, in Regent Street, and calmly made the appointment. I was so cross on being dragged there that the result was as I expected - a rather harassed and coerced young woman, and the worst of it was that this particular photograph was the one most widely published.*

In 1879 Elizabeth came within two votes of becoming the first female member of the Royal Academy, but it was decided that since its rules said only 'men of fair moral character' were eligible for membership, she would have been disqualified by her sex.

By the twentieth century the public appetite for huge battle scenes was waning. Once one of the three most famous women in Britain, featuring on cigarette cards like this one, she is now little known, although her 'battle paintings' are in art galleries all over the country - and the world.

Her paintings reflected Victorian pride and romanticism for Empire, but they were realistic in detail, showing confusion, mud and exhaustion. In her own words, *I never painted for the glory of war, but to portray its pathos and heroism.*

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). Sources: Society Collection and Elizabeth's autobiography *An Autobiography* by Elizabeth Butler.