

## **“Whatever happens, we have got, the Maxim, and they have not”: The Conspicuous Absence of Machine Guns in British Imperialist Imagery**

*by Ramey Mize*

*“At first, before firing, one felt a little gun shy. I well remember the Instructor saying, ‘It can’t hurt you, the bullets will come out the other end.’”<sup>1</sup> –P. G. Ackrell*

In 1893 in Southern Africa, British colonial police slaughtered 1,500 Ndebele warriors, losing only four of their own men in the process.<sup>2</sup> This astronomical, almost unfathomable victory was earned not through superior strength, courage, or strategic skill, but because the British were armed with five machine guns and the Ndebele were not.<sup>3</sup> The invention and development of the machine gun by engineers such as Richard Gatling, William Gardner, and Hiram Maxim proved vital in the colonization and subjugation of Africa; although Zulu, Dervish, Herero, Ndebele, and Boer forces vastly outnumbered British settlers, all were rendered helpless in the face of the machine gun’s phenomenal firepower.<sup>4</sup> These brutal imperial campaigns were subsequently met with a “mountain of print and pictures” in order to satiate the interests of an eager British public.<sup>5</sup> Few artists contributed as prolifically as Richard Caton Woodville, Jr. to the wealth of war imagery that colored the widely circulated illustrated newspapers.<sup>6</sup> A self-professed “special war artist” of the 1880s and 1890s, albeit one who had never personally experienced battle,<sup>7</sup> Woodville submitted thousands of drawings to a wide variety of publications, covering almost every imperial crusade.<sup>8</sup> His illustrations, prints, and oil paintings incorporated the accepted motifs of high Victorian military art, such as the belief in great men and military heroes, the depiction of war as an inspiring adventure filled with “noble sacrifice,” and a compositional focus on hand-to-hand combat and glorious cavalry charges, fraught with soldiers courageously “lunging and thrusting with swords and bayonets.”<sup>9</sup> However, almost never does the machine gun, upon which the majority of these colonial “victories” were wholly dependent, make an appearance.

Woodville was not the only British military artist to ignore, fail to represent, or de-emphasize the machine gun’s influence in the context of colonial imagery.<sup>10</sup> It is the same story for most of his contemporaries, including John Charlton, Frederic Villiers, Elizabeth Thompson Butler, William Barnes Wollen, Melton Prior, and others.<sup>11</sup> Through a discussion of the machine gun’s technical workings and the shifting constructions of late nineteenth-century Victorian masculinity, I will establish the significance of the

deadly instrument's distinctive absence or minimization in selected works by Woodville. Indeed, the painter's conspicuous occlusion belies soldiers' attachment to, and identification with, the weapon that held such consequence in the colonial project. F. Norreys Connell, in his 1899 account *How Soldiers Fight*, comments on the inextricability of British manhood, guns, and military training: "Apart from his physique, the Britisher has no particular qualification as a cavalier, and he lacks the quick intelligence of the born artilleryman; but give him a rifle and a bayonet, and let him have two year's training to make a man of him, and yet two more *to remind him that he cannot be one without the other*."<sup>12</sup> In this estimation, the firearm is not simply an ancillary tool, but rather a constitutive agent in the making of the modern male soldier. Woodville's pictures, when examined through this lens, demonstrate that the machine gun's usage and physical mechanisms both analogize and reinscribe the volatile nature of constructions of masculinity at the turn of the century.

Although Richard Gatling had produced an early version of the machine gun in 1868, it was the American-born, London-based inventor Hiram Maxim who contributed the most "lasting and revolutionary" version of the gun in 1884, one capable of firing five hundred rounds a minute.<sup>13</sup> The Maxim gun was officially adopted by the British army in 1887 and was first wielded six years later in a battle against the Ndebele people.<sup>14</sup> Distinguishing the Maxim from earlier versions of the weapon was its productive harnessing of excess energy from the exploding charge towards the activation of the weapon's internal engine.<sup>15</sup> The ammunition belt constantly fed ammunition into the gun; the Maxim gun could fire automatically and continually as long as a soldier applied pressure to the trigger because the force of the initial shot was recycled, thereby activating another internal mechanism that lined up an additional, fresh round. The movement of the recoil spring then followed, driving another bullet forward.<sup>16</sup>

A common feature shared by all machine gun models was not only their provision of a staggering increase in firepower, but also their relative invulnerability on the colonial battlefield. By invulnerability, I refer to the fact that the effectiveness of the gun was impervious to mass casualties—as long as one man survived to aim a functional gun, the odds remained in his favor.<sup>17</sup> Manpower was rendered almost irrelevant, and the gun reigned supreme. As such, the machine gun was a "vitally useful tool in the colonization of Africa" and, as John Ellis chillingly pronounces, "Time and time again automatic fire enabled small groups of settlers or soldiers to stamp out any indigenous resistance to their activities and to extend their writ over vast areas of the African continent."<sup>18</sup> Yet, also according to Ellis, "In England and other countries, machine guns remained hidden until the very outbreak of World War I."<sup>19</sup> As previously mentioned, this is certainly corroborated by the machine gun's absence in popular war imagery and news



Fig. 1. Chromolithograph after Richard Caton Woodville, Jr. *'All That Was Left of Them', 17th Lancers Near Modderfontein, 17 September 1901*, 1902, published by Gilbert Whitehead and Company Limited, National Army Museum, London. Photograph courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

coverage. What might be the underlying reasons for such reluctance on the part of the army and special war artists to acknowledge the machine gun's influence in their campaigns? For one, to quote Ellis once more: "Where was the glory, where was the vicarious excitement for the readers back home, if one told the truth about the totally superior firepower? One couldn't pin a medal on a weapon."<sup>20</sup> The machine gun refuted the need for almost all forms of traditional Victorian military heroics—direct combat, cavalry charges, and the traditional British infantry square. As Ellis observes, "Europeans, particularly the British, were too concerned with trumpeting the virtues of their small squares of heroes to admit that much of the credit for these sickeningly total victories should go to the machine guns."<sup>21</sup>

Richard Caton Woodville's popular painting *'All That Was Left of Them', 17th Lancers Near Modderfontein* reflects this chronic denial, as it propagates the delusion that solely the defiant, collaborative strength of a minor contingent of soldiers could guarantee sweeping military success (Fig. 1). The picture commemorates an event that took place during the Second Boer War on September 17, 1901.<sup>22</sup> That day, a confrontation broke out between the Duke of Cambridge's 17th Lancers and General Jan Smuts's commando

at Modderfontein Farm near Johannesburg.<sup>23</sup> Although most members of the British squadron were killed, a single troop—the one pictured by Woodville—managed to escape, having been posted somewhat further away from the brunt of the combat and possessing a substantial supply of heavy ammunition, including rifles, a mountain gun, and a machine gun.<sup>24</sup> The machine gun is noticeably missing, however, from the Woodville's representation; the artist instead shifts the emphasis to the rifles, but even more so to the soldiers' fierce, overwrought facial expressions and postures that bristle with bravado. The central standing figure gazes masterfully forward, seemingly unaffected by the wounded or dying men and horses that surround him. The same may be said for his comrades, rendered by Woodville as equally stoic before their enemies. It is clear that their fearlessness would have been made possible primarily through the active engagement of their machine gun, but Woodville portrays a valor based on the major tenets of Victorian masculinity, which have been identified by Angus McLaren as "strength, military preparedness, courage, hardness, aggression, vitality, comradeship, and productivity."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Woodville posits the male body, rather than the machine gun, as the prime agent of influence, one that required only a very limited and select array of auxiliary equipment to emerge victorious.

In England at this time, there existed a pervasive fear that urbanization would undermine traditional and admirable masculine traits.<sup>26</sup> Robert Baden-Powell, leader of the Scout Movement, expressed such disquietude, lamenting that men were becoming "stunted, narrow-chested, easily wearied; yet voluble, excitable, with little ballast, stamina or endurance."<sup>27</sup> By way of remediation, society ennobled qualities like forcefulness and aggression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>28</sup> It was through this way of thinking that imperialism came to be heralded as a kind of antidote to the emasculating effects of industrialization.<sup>29</sup> Rudyard Kipling extensively disseminated this view; according to Preben Kaarsholm, "[Kipling's] tales from the outposts of Empire imply a criticism of contemporary over-civilized and 'degenerate' British society for which imperialism and the military life might provide a necessary cure for revitalization."<sup>30</sup> In this paradigm, it was not enough to rely on a machine gun to establish one's mettle. With the considerable advantage of their weaponry (as was the reality of the colonial context), the legitimacy of one's vigor, bravery and fortitude is called into question. Masculinity in this period was construed as adequate only if physically and rigorously earned. McLaren remarks, "To be a man required effort and labor that was not required of a woman. One did not goad a female by force to will her to 'be a woman,' she was born one."<sup>31</sup> To "be a man" involved profound exertion and activity.<sup>32</sup> Men were driven to perpetually construct their manhood in all phases of life, and the battlefield represented one of the more high-stakes settings in which this proving



of masculinity could transpire.<sup>33</sup> In order to align with these expectations fully, the acts that verified manliness were predicated upon virility, confrontation of dangers, robust strength, and brazen violence.<sup>34</sup>

The machine gun, however, negated most of these characteristics. Indeed, it obstructed any opportunity for legitimate confrontation when used against poorly armed opponents and rendered obsolete qualities like strength and skill in hand-to-hand combat. With these perceptions of acceptable masculinity in mind, it is no wonder that war imagery and documentary accounts avoided an outright identification of the genuine guarantor of British conquests. For, as we will continue to see in the example of Woodville's oeuvre, the skewed interpretations of imperial experiences were produced wholly in response to what Ellis calls a Victorian "demand for myth."<sup>35</sup> Following Britain's disastrous performance in the Crimean War, society at large exhibited an appetite for a new narrative of British ascendance that could counteract the effects of dampened national morale.<sup>36</sup> The domination of Africa fed this voracious national desire for supremacy, and artists recognized the necessity of attributing the outrageous casualty figures to men rather than machines in order to safeguard their victors' reputation.

A comparison of the paintings '*All That Was Left of Them*' by Woodville and *Quatre Bras* (1875) by Elizabeth Butler throws many conventions of Victorian battle art into sharp relief (Fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> Notable for our purposes is the fact that the square formation, a defensive strategy employed by the infantry against cavalry charges, was considered applicable and evocative for a representation of a skirmish that was part of the greater Battle of Waterloo in 1815 as well as a scene depicting the second Boer War in 1899.<sup>38</sup> Butler's painting *Quatre Bras*—which has received little critical analysis to date—is compositionally and emotionally complex, combining and projecting episodes of resistance, weariness, courage, fear, and especially aggressive defense. This is another laudatory picture, commemorating the bravery of the troops led by Wellington against the Napoleonic invasion, with a focus on the battle that took place on June 16, 1815—only two days before Waterloo.<sup>39</sup> Butler selects the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment as the composition's focus and represents them standing in a field of rye, braced against a ferocious, desperate charge led by French *cuirassiers* and Polish lancers. No two faces are alike, Butler assures us of this in her diary, proudly alleging the diversity of models she used.<sup>40</sup> Although each man is undoubtedly unique, the impression of the square is one of unity, uniformity, and compactness; the canvas teems with a dense mass of male bodies, all of whom brandish muskets fitted with glinting bayonets. The guns and the hands that clutch them further exude a sense of tightness and barely-contained energy. Woodville evokes a similar tautness amongst the figures in his smaller, but no less pugnacious, congregation. This comparison exposes the antiquarian nature of Woodville's visual approach, since the machine gun's involvement in colonial campaigns relegated the square tactic



Fig. 2. Elizabeth Thompson Butler, *The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras, 16 June 1815*, 1875, oil on canvas. 38.2 x 85.1 inches (97.2 x 216.2 cm). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

to a position of inconsequence. With that said, the infantry square could also be seen as a kind of precursor to the machine gun's dehumanizing and automatic firepower. After all, the work of many firearms triggered simultaneously and en masse, whether muskets or rifles, simulates (to a certain extent) the mechanized, rapid-fire propulsion of bullets from implements like the Maxim gun. Notice, for example, the attention paid by both Butler and Woodville to the actual firing process in their respective pictures. Each artist renders the flashes of active discharge in great detail, with the muskets in *Quatre Bras* streaming forth smoke and the rifles in *'All That was Left of Them'* erupting fiery orange spurts. The infantry square may be likened, therefore, to a kind of human machine gun, with each soldier functioning as a discrete, component round of fire. War's increasing mechanization is thus reflected, indeed embedded, in these Victorian images, whether or not the machine gun appears.

The two compositions are similar in more ways than just the square tactic; both canvases also incorporate a heavy emphasis on the inspirational heroics of the British military, the omission of bodily mutilation and death, as well as an immediate perspective on an intricately-packed assemblage of seething male bodies. The frontal viewpoint contributes to the theatrical nature of the paintings, with each presenting their soldiers as objects of

scrutiny, celebration, and awe. Critics recognized this detail, specifically in relation to Woodville's work, with one observing that "his combatants appear to be on a stage rather than a battlefield, each strenuously exerting himself with voice and weapon at the same moment in order to make as much tumult as possible."<sup>41</sup> If the battlefield more closely resembles a stage in these paintings, it follows that the male actor-soldier's body deserves the viewer's attention more than his accompanying props/guns. Joseph Kestner identifies this as a common feature in Victorian military art: "Victorian imperial battle painting represents the intensification of the male body as the site for negotiating masculinity through empowering political, economic, and racist programmes."<sup>42</sup>

The 1901 photogravure after an original painting by Woodville, entitled *A Chip Off the Old Block: Charge of C Squadron 5th Lancers at Elandslaagte*, provides further visual evidence of the male body's preeminence over the



Fig. 3. Photogravure after Richard Caton Woodville, Jr., *A Chip Off the Old Block: Charge of C Squadron 5th Lancers at Elandslaagte*, 1901, published by Henry Graves, London. National Army Museum, London. Photograph courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

machine gun in the colonial military context (Fig. 3).<sup>43</sup> Here, Woodville represents another Boer War event, specifically the cavalry charge of the 5th Lancers' C squadron. The picture highlights the central figure of the boy trumpeter, Bugler Shurlock, who reportedly took down several Boers with the aid of merely a single revolver and stouthearted courage.<sup>44</sup> Woodville portrays Shurlock in the midst of the deed, actively firing while his horse vaults forward and his Boer victim collapses. The frenzy of battle is depicted in lurid detail in the composition's middle ground; an unfortunate soldier is shown trampled by the onslaught, a man screams before being slashed by a cavalryman's rapier, and spears undulate through the fray. A machine gun appears in the bottom left-hand corner, but in this rare example of the instrument being included in a composition at all, Woodville emphatically downplays



its utility. Although the weapon is technically manned by the Boer who crouches beside it, a British soldier on horseback menaces above him, leveling his spear with murderous intent. Clearly, the confrontation's result will not favor the gunner. In fact, with the exception of Shurlock, none of the British soldiers brandish firearms. By elevating the mounted troops over the machine gun, Woodville establishes a misleading visual hierarchy that distinguishes the outmoded tactic of the cavalry charge as more expedient in battle.



Fig. 4. Richard Caton Woodville, Jr., *Maiwand: Saving the Guns*, 1882, oil on canvas. 52 x 78 inches (133 x 199 cm). National Army Museum, London. Photograph courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

In 1882, Woodville produced one of his most popular works, *Maiwand: Saving the Guns* (Fig. 4), which employs a similar visual rhetoric to that of *A Chip Off the Old Block*. The artist selected as his subject a celebrated incident during the battle of Maiwand, one of the decisive episodes of the Second Anglo-Afghan War. The original painting, as well as the subsequent print, focuses on the moment when Afghan tribesmen broke through the British infantry line in an attempt to capture the machine guns of the E/B Battery Royal Horse Artillery (RHA).<sup>45</sup> Horses and their British riders race at a break-neck pace across an arid plain; their collective speed is somehow so rapid that the four steeds in the foreground are shown in mid-air, without a single hoof grazing the ground. Ultimately, the British gunners managed to



fend off the Afghan troops, but Woodville again ascribes their salvation to the cavalry's efforts and implies a greater vulnerability with regards to the firearms than pure physical fortitude. Even the title suggests as much—it is the guns that require saving, rather than the mounted troops. Nevertheless, the artist's projection of dauntless grit does not completely hold. A telltale array of debris litters the lower register, including a saber, saddle, and saddlebag emblazoned with the RHA logo. The random disposal of these objects echoes the disturbing arbitrariness of war itself, as does the state of the rider shown at the far right. He leans backward, the rapier falls from his hand, and the stirrup slips from his foot; he has been shot, a fact that is evident from the slightest hint of crimson on his forehead. Although Woodville often pictures careening bodies tumbling towards imminent death (as seen in the unfortunate horseman to the far left in this image), he rarely includes the gore that inevitably results from those bullets that find their marks, whether from machine guns or any other type of firearm. Here, even the faintest suggestion of blood signifies a slight, yet telling, fissure in the intended visual narrative. For all his effort to circumvent the machine gun's lethal presence and to deflect popular awareness of the gun's necessity in British imperialist campaigns, the belabored insistence of this denial suggests just the opposite. As a closer look at *Maiwand: Saving the Guns* indicates, Woodville ultimately lets slip the reality of the British cavalry's vulnerability in spite of his best efforts.

Even with an acute awareness of the machine gun's destructive power, the majority of gunners experienced a fierce loyalty and intimate connection to the device.<sup>46</sup> As Major Frank William Arthur Hobart alleged: "However much one may deplore the use of force, it must be admitted that men who are trained to become expert in the use of the reliable and effective Machine Gun and have used it in war develop a real affection for it."<sup>47</sup> During a battle that took place at Abu Klea in Sudan in 1884, the Naval Brigade employed machine guns in an attempt to relieve General Charles George Gordon in Khartoum. John Ellis narrates the events that followed: "The British immediately formed a square with the Gardner [machine gun] in the middle and managed to fight off the Dervish assaults. In fact the Gardner only managed to fire seventy rounds before jamming, but even so its effect was most heartening."<sup>48</sup> In this episode, the machine gun, at once faulty and confidence-boosting, merited a paradoxical combination of protection and praise by those who wielded it. In the end, however, the mechanism contributed to the grisly demise of its proponents; following an infiltration by Dervish opponents, "the entire complement of the naval party [was] killed as they successively tried to get the gun working again."<sup>49</sup>

This example suggests a compulsion to remain in physical contact with the machine gun—a compulsion so irresistible that numerous deaths in the gun's defense were evidently not too dear a cost.<sup>50</sup> This phenome-

non raises the question: Who, or what, is in control? Is the gunner the true authority, or does the weapon exert a psychological force that is greater than the gunner's own instincts for survival?<sup>51</sup> If we consider period-specific notions of the ideal machine gunner, prescriptions that dictated that he be a "manly man" in possession of a "good physique, willpower and determination, initiative, and a mechanical turn of mind," we may note a discrepancy: to be so fiercely protective of the machine gun denies logic and undermines the notion of the gunner's own "willpower" in relation to the machine.<sup>52</sup> Later, in 1915, the *Illustrated London News* explicated the relationship between man and machine gun in a featured article (Fig. 5). The piece includes photographs of men interacting with and using the gun, as well as images and diagrams of the Maxim gun's intricate, composite parts. In the lower section of the spread detailing the instrument's components, the author included the following label: "A sign of perfect construction: the many

gauges used to test the parts of a Maxim Machine-Gun." This report bears significance with regards to the general question of an interrelationship between the male body and the body of the gun, or the bonds that emerged between man and machine. For one, the diagram and the caption both suggest an immense esteem for the astonishing complexity of the Maxim's intricacy. Interestingly, this feature also signifies that the machine gun is perhaps even more imposing when dismantled or exposed. The inimitable nature of the gun, in other words, is quite literally premised on its assembly, peerless in both bound and unbound states. Other diagrams convey similar messages, such as the illustration of the internal mechanisms of a Maxim Machine Gun included in *The Machine Gunner's Handbook* of 1911 (Fig. 6). The gun's durable encasement sheathes the volatile process of firing that occurs within, and the elaborate, almost delicate nature of its steely

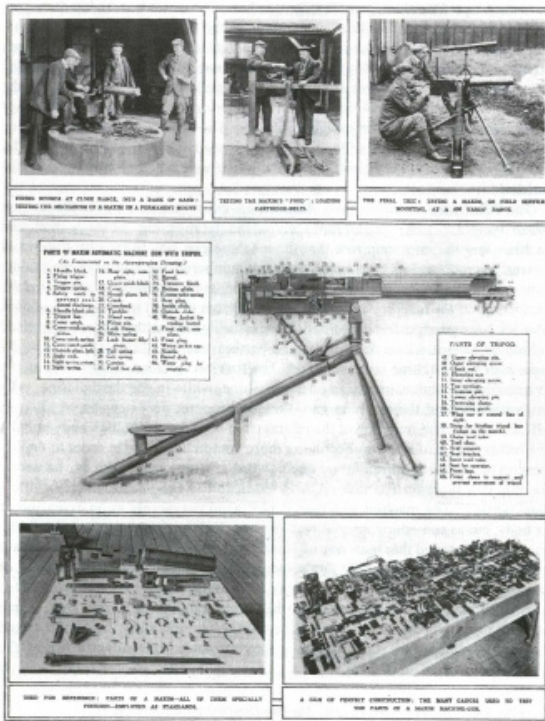


Fig. 5. Artist Unknown, "The Machine Gun," in *Illustrated London News*. July 1, 1915.

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innards, laid out piecemeal or revealed in a cross-section, recalls the display of body parts upon an anatomy table. When assembled, however, the gun's design attains deadly proportions, and its "perfection" is synonymous with lethality.

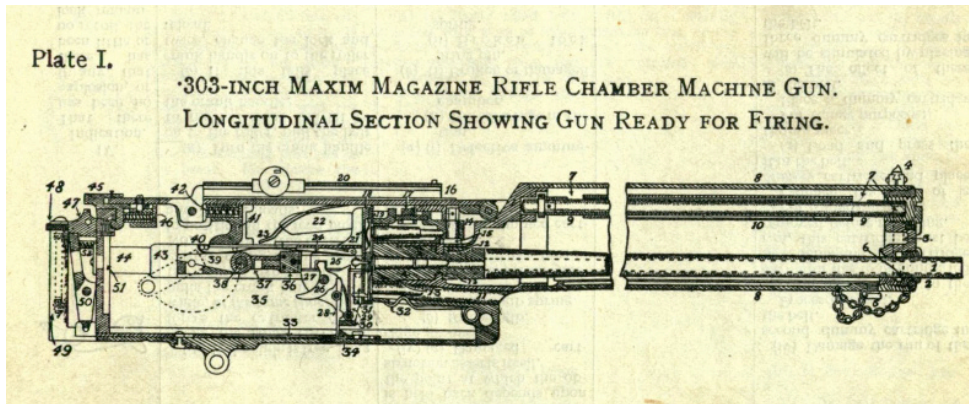


Fig. 6. Artist Unknown, "Maxim Magazine Rifle Chamber Machine Gun. Longitudinal Section Showing Gun Ready for Firing," in J. Bostock, *The Machine Gunner's Handbook*. Including the Vickers, Maxim, Lewis and Colt Automatic Machine Guns, London: W. H. Smith & Son, 1916, 62.

The beginning of this essay stressed the anxious precariousness underlying late nineteenth-century British constructions of masculinity, and the ways in which this instability may be identified in contemporary visual representations of the machine gun (or lack thereof). Images that scrupulously document multiple views of the gun, such as those examined above, elucidate the ambivalent role played by the weapon in this paradigm. Caroline Arscott posits an important connection in the following observation:

The gun is a body that is already penetrated with metal parts . . . . As the body of the gun is pieced together, there is a reversal of the tearing apart, pieces are joined rather than sun-dered. The gun is the double of the fallen soldier, the torn fragments reassembled; this is to make the body of the gun not an intact, unspoiled living body but a dead-alive body.<sup>53</sup>

Death is thus at the core of the gun-body, but because the weapon remains capable of functioning, it is also considered "alive." The machine gun is thus akin to a kind of ideal "double"—its impenetrable metal carapace both conceals and contains the volatile combustion that occurs within. In this way, guns demonstrated a function that surpassed man's ability; as Hal Foster eloquently surmises, "They can discharge and still remain whole."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Arscott's indication of a male desire for bodily coherence, even in the

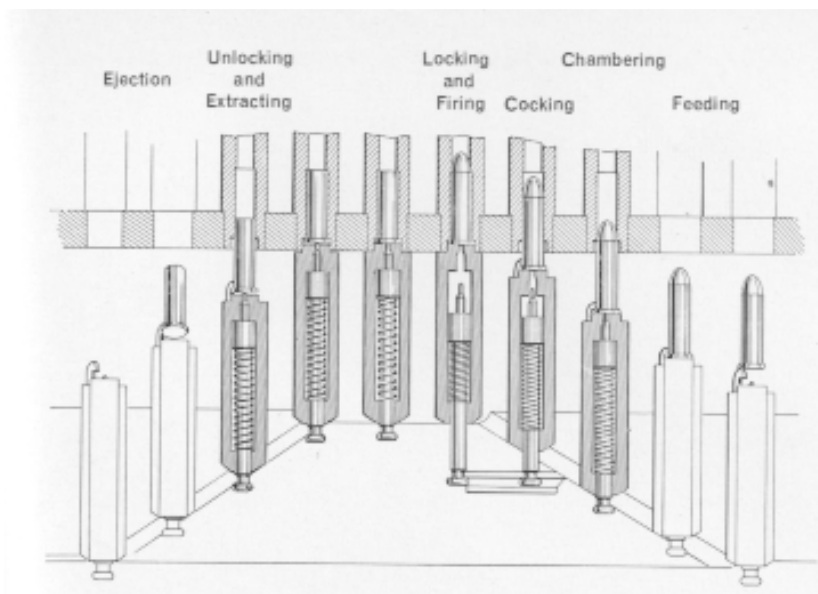


Fig. 7. Artist Unknown, "The Action of the Gatling Gun." In F. W. A. Hobart's *A Pictorial History of the Machine Gun*. London: Ian Allan, 1971.



Fig. 8. Artist Unknown, *Maxim Gun Detachment of the 1st Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, Chitral Expedition, 1895*, gelatin silver print. National Army Museum, London. Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.



midst of violent rupture enabled by the machine gun's incredible destructiveness, aligns with modern notions of embodiment. Ian Burkitt describes this development as one involving "the closed body of modernity, where the emphasis is placed on the body's surfaces rather than its openings to the world."<sup>55</sup> For Burkitt, the modern body is not only a "communicative" entity, but also "a signifying surface that exposes but at the same time conceals part of itself behind its armoring."<sup>56</sup> In this formulation, the body itself is seen to harden into a seamless, iron-clad "surface" in an uncanny approximation of the gun-body that so transfixed its users.

It is thus possible to pinpoint a distinctly modern, masculine affinity with the dissonant dynamics between the gun's form and fiery release. Bostock, author of *The Machine Gunner's Handbook*, succinctly describes the mechanics of the discharge process: "The machine gun is divided into two portions, the non-recoiling and the recoiling, and when firing the gun is worked automatically by two forces: the explosion, which forces the recoiling portion backwards and opens the breech, and the fuse spring, which carries it forward and closes the breech."<sup>57</sup> A diagram entitled "The Action of the Gatling Gun," included in Hobart's *A Pictorial History of the Machine Gun*, depicts the intricate steps of this firing cycle, from chambering to feeding (Fig. 7).<sup>58</sup> A comparison of Hobart's diagram and a photograph from 1895 entitled *Maxim Gun Detachment of the 1st Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, Chitral Expedition* illustrates the ways in which male soldiers exhibited a mechanization that parallels the inner components of the machine gun—in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of the infantry square discussed earlier (Fig. 8).<sup>59</sup> The men, all of whom were members of Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Low's Chitral Relief Force, are expertly posed in uniform precision. On the right, six soldiers aim their Lee-Metford Magazine Rifles toward an unseen enemy, while on the left, a trio demonstrates the proper drill formation required for operating a Maxim gun: the standing soldier located enemy targets, the gunner held the trigger, and the third man fed the ammunition belt through the gun to facilitate continuous firing.<sup>60</sup> At least three people were required to properly activate and wield the gun, and this image underscores the ways in which the machine fastened them together, physically and mentally. The gun acts as a conduit to the enemy, and its direction dictates their actions and attention: it is the locus of their homosocial bond.<sup>61</sup>

The emphatic stiffness of the group's pose and uniforms is analogous to the very structure of the weapons they wield. Through a comparison of the soldiers' repeating, erect postures with the equally erect bullets in corresponding barrels of Hobart's Gatling gun diagram, it is possible to conclude that the men and the bullets both connote tightly-coiled energy and phallic verticality. A surprising and striking visual similarity emerges, one that drives home Klaus Theweleit's observation that "the weapon is never external to the soldier body."<sup>62</sup> The gun is pictured as inextricably integrated with

the male form, and even psyche, in the military context. Indeed, the guns are so closely linked to the male figures, so visually similar in their pillar-like forms, that the body itself is imbued with a rigid instrumentality, recalling this sentiment discovered by Theweleit in the memoirs of a fascist *Freikorps* member: "It was as if I myself could feel every jolt that shook the metal parts of the gun as a bullet slicing into warm, living human bodies. A wicked pleasure: was I now perhaps one with the weapon? Was I not machine—cold metal?"<sup>63</sup> As we have seen, this notion of human mechanization as a pre-requisite for machine gun usage is promoted and codified in *The Machine Gunner's Handbook*, a manual that mandates "above all, a mechanical turn of mind."<sup>64</sup> These instructions imply that it is imperative not only to wield the machine, but to embody it as well.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, the allusions to man-machine melding in the visual culture of this moment foreshadow the more pronounced cyborgian dogmas and interests that came to define later artistic movements, such as Futurism and Dadaism.<sup>66</sup> In other words, the disquieting affiliation briefly assessed here was to form the crux of entire aesthetic manifestos just a few years later, with roots evident in nineteenth-century documents—technical, photographic, painterly, and otherwise—that are easily overlooked.

Throughout this article, multiple manifestations of tension and volatility reflect and refract each other, evident in paradoxical constructions of Victorian masculinity, in the impulse behind the persistent obfuscation of the machine gun's fundamental role in the colonial theater, and in the explosive recoil within the obdurate shell of the weapon itself. Around the turn of the century, a wide range of visual material, including battle paintings, drill formation photographs, and technological diagrams, exhibits an uneasy awareness of the machine gun's lethal, precarious proportions—as well as man's fraught relationship to them. Here lies the key to the machine gun's absence in British imperialist imagery by artists such as Richard Caton Woodville. The sinister, sing-song phrase, "Whatever happens, we have got, the Maxim, and they have not," coined by Hilaire Belloc in his 1898 account *The Modern Traveler*, betrays the very presumption upon which Western claims to preeminence rest.<sup>67</sup> Behind the boastings of the British soldiers' physical and racial superiority over their colonial conquests, whether in Africa, China, or India, lurked the knowledge that the machine could lay waste to them all; any person, regardless of race, class, or nationality was capable of pulling a trigger.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. P. G. Ackrell, *My Life in the Machine Gun Corps* (Devon: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1966), 7.

2. This grisly episode, known as the Battle of Shangani River, took place at the beginning of the First Matabele War, fought between the British South Africa Company and the Ndebele Kingdom from 1893 to 1894, in what is now Zimbabwe. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 188.

3. Roger Pauly, *Firearms: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 123–124.

4. John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (Suffolk: The Cresset Library, 1987), 18.

5. Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3. According to Attridge, the four main areas of publication that covered the British Imperial campaigns were “the press, juvenile literature, educational texts, and documentary accounts,” 43.

6. These illustrated journals were largely a Victorian innovation. See Roger T. Stearn, “Boer War Image-Maker: Richard Caton Woodville,” in John Gooch, ed., *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 216. Woodville was described in 1896 as “one of the many distinguished painters who have first made their reputation in the illustrated journals,” J. Anon, “Artists and Their Work,” *Pearson’s Magazine* 1 (January 1896): 6. For additional articles on Woodville’s output and critical reception, see T. H. Latey, “Richard Caton Woodville and His Work,” *Illustrated London News* 7 (December 1895) and Athol Mayhew, “Battle Painters of the Nineteenth Century I: Richard Caton Woodville,” *Illustrated Naval and Military Magazine* 1 (July 1884). A collection of his personal memoirs, entitled *Random Recollections*, represents the main source of information on Woodville’s personal life, although a significant portion of this autobiography is likely misleading and exaggerated. See Richard Caton Woodville, *Random Recollections* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1914).

7. Although Woodville experienced some overseas assignments, he was not, in fact, a true “special war artist” like some of his contemporaries, among

them Frederic Villiers or Melton Prior. Villiers even alleged that “[Woodville] never witnessed a shot fired in anger.” See Frederic Villiers, *Peaceful Personalities and Warriors Bold* (London: Harper, 1907), 24.

8. These publications included the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, *Boy's Own Paper*, *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, *Illustrated Naval and Military Magazine*, *Black and White*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Sketch*, *Sphere*, *Windsor Magazine*, *Harp-er's Magazine*, *English Illustrated Magazine*, and *Pearson's Magazine*. Founded in 1842 by Herbert Ingram, the original and most popular of these was *The Illustrated London News*, which served as Woodville's employer throughout most of his career. Roger T. Stearn elaborates the details of Woodville's professional development in “Boer War Image-Maker,” 216. Tom Gretton provides a probing account of the ways in which the development of photographic illustrations in the *Illustrated London News* later affected Woodville's role as a “news picture-maker” for the publication. See Gretton, “Richard Caton Woodville (1856–1927) at the *Illustrated London News*,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48 (Spring 2015): 87–120. <https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2015.0006>.

9. Stearn, “Boer War Image-Maker,” 214–219.

10. In this essay, I will make no attempt to explicate the complex history of British imperialist expansion. As such, I will not focus on any particular battle, colony or war. Instead, I will explore the machine gun's capacity and meaning within the general context of colonialism, drawing on a wide range of images and events as examples and evidence. For a thorough introduction to the historiography of British imperialism, the reader is advised to refer to Richard Johnson, *British Imperialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). For a broad assessment of firearms and their intersection with empire, see Karen R. Jones, Giacomo Macola, and David Welch, eds., *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

11. This conclusion is based largely on the comprehensive source of British nineteenth-century war imagery by Peter Harrington in *British Artists and War: The Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints, 1700–1914* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993).

12. F. Norreys Connell, *How Soldiers Fight: An Attempt to Depict for the Popular Understanding of the Waging of War and the Soldier's Share in it* (London: James Bowden, 1899), 171–172. Emphasis added.

13. F. W. A. Hobart, *A Pictorial History of the Machine Gun*, (London: Ian Allan, 1971), 10. According to Major H. B. C. Pollard: “Mr. Maxim was visiting the exhibition of Electricity at Paris in 1881, and proceeded to Vienna, where he



met an American, who exclaimed, 'Hang your chemistry and electricity! If you wish to make a pile of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each other's throats with greater facility.'" See Major H. B. C. Pollard, *A History of Firearms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1930), 230. For more information on Hiram Maxim's biography, see his memoir *My Life* (London: Methuen, 1915).

14. H. B. C. Pollard, *History of Firearms*, 230. For a discussion of the significant technological developments and innovations that impacted both the British army and the navy in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see John M. MacKenzie, ed., *The Victorian Vision: Inventing New Britain* (London: Victoria & Albert Publications, 2001).

15. Roger Pauly, *Firearms: The Life Story of a Technology*, 122. This automatic system replaced the gun's dependence on the motion supplied by the hand crank. The "excess energy" refers to what was previously known as the "recoil" or "mule kick" of the gun, set off by the explosion of the propellant within the barrel. The hand crank operating system was the predominant feature of the Gatling gun, which fired 200 rounds per minute. Earlier, in 1854, Sir Henry Bessemer patented a self-acting breech-loading gun that utilized steam to operate the gun's mechanisms of feeding, locking, and firing. See John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, 17.

16. Pauly, *Firearms: The Life Story of a Technology*, 123.

17. Here I consider the gun's usage on a colonial battlefield only; of course, the invulnerability of the machine gun deteriorates quickly if one's opponent wields them as well. Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Seton Hutchison observes, in his *Machine Guns: Their History and Tactical Employment*, "[T]he efficiency of the gun is not affected in action by severe casualties. With a body of infantry of the equivalent firepower, at a minimum of fifty men, the loss of the officer commanding may destroy, or will certainly militate severely against effective fire-control. . . . [D]arkness has always prevented the rifleman from anything but haphazard fire. The machine gun, by nature, is affected by none of these things, and, by the use of various devices, can be made effective in darkness as in light. While one man of a gun team survives even the most exacting of casualties, the gun is capable of remaining in action to the maximum of its firepower. No other weapon is possessed of such power and facilities for battle action." In Hutchison's remark, the machine gun is elevated to divine proportions, "possessed of such power," deadly in "darkness as in light."

18. Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, 101.

19. Ibid., 18.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid. For more information on British military tactics of this time, see Anne Summers, "Militarism in Britain before the First World War," *History Workshop Journal* 1 (1976): 104–123. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/2.1.104>.

22. In 1902, the Boer War became the most prolifically represented conflict in England's history. According to Roger Stearn, the event "can fairly claim to be the world's first 'media war.'" See Stearn, "Boer War Image-Maker: Richard Caton Woodville," 216.

23. Peter Harrington, *British Artists and War*, 297.

24. "'All that was left of them', 17th Lancers near Modderfontein, 17 September 1901," National Army Museum, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.nam.ac.uk/online-collection/detail>.

25. Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 36.

26. Ibid.

27. Robert Baden-Powell qtd. in *ibid.*, 34.

28. Ibid., 111.

29. Imperialism and militarism were also viewed as moralizing institutions. Colonel Henry Knollys, a respected commentator on military issues, strongly endorsed military control over soldiers' personal lives, including drinking and eating habits and even marriage plans and prospects. Knollys proclaimed this control as a positive force, arguing that it yielded soldiers of "higher moral calibre." See Knollys, "English Officers and Soldiers—As They Will Be," *Blackwoods*, February 1896, 196–211.

30. It is important to stress that Kipling's writings and sentiments enjoyed popularity with a mass audience in England. Kaarsholm describes his influence as a "powerful, ideological force." See Preben Kaarsholm, "Kiping, Imperialism and the Crisis of Victorian Masculinity," in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 217–218.

31. Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1990), 66. For further study into the increasing importance placed on health and strength as emblems of robust masculinity, see Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) and Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

32. McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity*, 34. For additional discussion on this topic, see David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

33. Joshua Goldstein, in his sociological study *War and Gender*, provides a diverse range of case studies that support this claim. Goldstein concludes: "Men are made, not born. Across a broad sweep of cultures, this central theme recurs with stunning regularity. Unlike women, men must take actions, undergo ordeals, or pass tests to become men. They are told to "be a man," and a surprising number of cultures converge in their treatment of masculinity as something that must be created by individual or collective will against the force of instinct." See Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 264.

34. For an account of the acceptable forms of violence within late nineteenth-century society, such as the duel, see Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a period account of desirable traits in British soldiers, see Henry Knollys, *The Recruiting Question* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1891). For more contemporary examples, see Kenneth Polk, *When Men Kill: Scenarios of Masculine Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and M. F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Man and Aggression* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

35. Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, 107.

36. Ibid.

37. For a nuanced and comprehensive examination of Victorian battle art conventions, see Stearn, "Boer War Image-Maker," 194.

38. As Mark Adkin suggests, "The price for not being in a square when attacked by cavalry was extremely high." See Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion: The Complete Guide to History's Most Famous Land Battle* (London: Aurum

Press, 2001), 172. Major-General B. P. Hughes expands upon the reasons for this, stating, "The length of time taken in reloading the musket made it essential for small groups of men to be able to fire successive volleys under strict control so that each face of the square could constantly deliver some fire while the remainder presented a wall of bayonets to the attacker." Hughes, *Firepower: Weapons' Effectiveness on the Battlefield, 1630–1850* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1974), 100.

39. For a close analysis of the military history of the strategic battle at Quatre Bras, see Albert A. Nofi, *The Waterloo Campaign* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993). According to Nofi and other military historians, the results of the battle at Quatre Bras were unclear—both the French and the British suffered some losses and achieved some success. As a result, the conflict has generally been deemed a tactical draw.

40. Elizabeth Butler, *An Autobiography* (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1922), 124.

41. C. Reginald Grundy, "Current Art Notes," *The Connoisseur* 47 (1918): 110.

42. Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), 189. Roger Stearn draws a similar conclusion: "The male body becomes the signifier of an empowered masculinity which, in the special example of imperial iconography, can become the signifier of cultural Caucasian superiority." See "Boer-War Image Maker," 194.

43. The location for the original painting upon which the chromolithograph is based is unknown. However, the original print of the painting was included in a 1990 publication by Henry Graves & Co. I am indebted to both Peter Harrington, Curator of the Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University, as well as Pip Dodd, Senior Collections Content Curator at the National Army Museum, for their assistance regarding the provenance of this particular work.

44. Harrington, *British Artists and War*, 277.

45. Ibid.

46. Certain accounts even asserted the racist view that Europeans' possession of superior weapons was a God-given gift and therefore evidence of the fact that Europeans represented the superior race. V. A. Majendie wrote, in regards to the machine gun and racial superiority, "The tide of invention has developed the 'infernal machine' of Fieschi into the mitrailleuse and Gatling



Battery of our own day—this stream took its rise in the God-like quality of reason.” See Sir Vivian Dering Majendie, *The Arms and Ammunition of British Service* (London: Cassell, 1872), viii.

47. Hobart, *A Pictorial History of the Machine Gun*, 1.

48. Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, 101.

49. Ibid.

50. Similarly, four Gatling guns also accompanied an expedition into the Zulu Kingdom led by Lord Chelmsford in 1879. The Navy had supplied one of these guns, manned by Midshipman Lewis Cadwallar Coker. Coker’s extreme dedication to the gun ultimately contributed to his death, though not from battle: he died of disease in the field, disease that was exacerbated because “to the last he had insisted on sleeping in the open beside his beloved Gatling gun.” At the Battle of Ulundi, the climax of Chelmsford’s second campaign, the machine gunner was hit in the thigh and “pour[ed] blood all over the frame that held the chattering barrels. He waved the litter bearers aside, and sank down beside the gun to help load the drums of ammunition.” See *ibid.*, 102.

51. Gabriel Koureas investigates this question in *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity in British Visual Culture, 1914–1930: A Study of ‘Unconquerable Manhood,’* (London: Ashgate, 2007), 99.

52. J. Bostock, *The Machine Gunner’s Handbook Including the Maxim, Lewis and Colt Automatic Machine Guns* (London: W. H. Smith & Son, 1916), 1.

53. Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 79.

54. Hal Foster, “Armour Fou,” in *Visions and Textuality*, ed. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (London: Macmillan, 1995), 75.

55. Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity, and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999), 65.

56. Ibid.

57. Bostock, *The Machine Gunner’s Handbook*, 1.

58. Hobart, *Pictorial History of the Machine Gun*, 35.

59. There is no known photographer of this image.

60. P.G. Ackrell describes the process in greater detail: "The gun was fed by a second man on the right who pushed the tag of the belt through the feed block when No. 1., the man who fired the gun, pulled the belt-tag until the cartridge was located in the breach and ready for firing. The belts held 250 cartridges. To fire, No. 1. had to lift the safety catch and press the thumb piece. This set the first bullet away, which automatically set off the remainder. This would continue until the gunner released pressure from the thumb piece or all the rounds were expended. Usually there were six men to a team who took it in turns to fire when in action, if possible, and there were casualties." See Ackrell, *My Life in the Machine Gun Corps*, 6.

61. As Ackrell states in the note included above, the men would take turns firing the machine gun when embroiled in active combat. This equal and staggered interaction with the gun recalls Klaus Theweleit's observation of the homosocial nature and sexual undertones of gun usage: "The gun is the good whore—one man is permitted to take the first turn, then the other; they remain friends, indeed become friends in the process; and the barrel dutifully emits its steam." See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Chris Turner and Erica Carter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 184.

62. *Ibid.*, 283.

63. *Ibid.*, 179.

64. Bostock, *The Machine Gunner's Handbook* 1. Burkitt expands on this conclusion in his reading of modernization of the body: "In modernity, the body becomes a machine, or like the different bits of various machines, internally fragmented and separated from the public world of others by layers and barriers." See Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought*, 131.

65. For further study of the motivations and consequences of mechanized warfare, see Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

66. For more on these particular movements, consult Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) and Jed Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice: Dada and the Unmaking of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

67. Hilaire Belloc, *The Modern Traveller* (London: E. Arnold, 1898), n.p.

68. George Crile draws a similar conclusion: "Whatever the future may bring, however, man today betrays at every turn that he is in reality a red-handed glutton whose phylogenetic action patterns are facilitated for the killing of his own and of other species; that with all of his beneficent control of the forces, he has also created vast forces for his own destruction, so vast that civilized man is today in a death struggle with a Frankenstein of his own creation; that, although he controls a world of limitless force and endless machinery, he yet fails to control that all-important mechanism—himself." See Crile, *A Mechanistic View of War and Peace* (Philadelphia: Macmillan Company, 1916), 95–96.