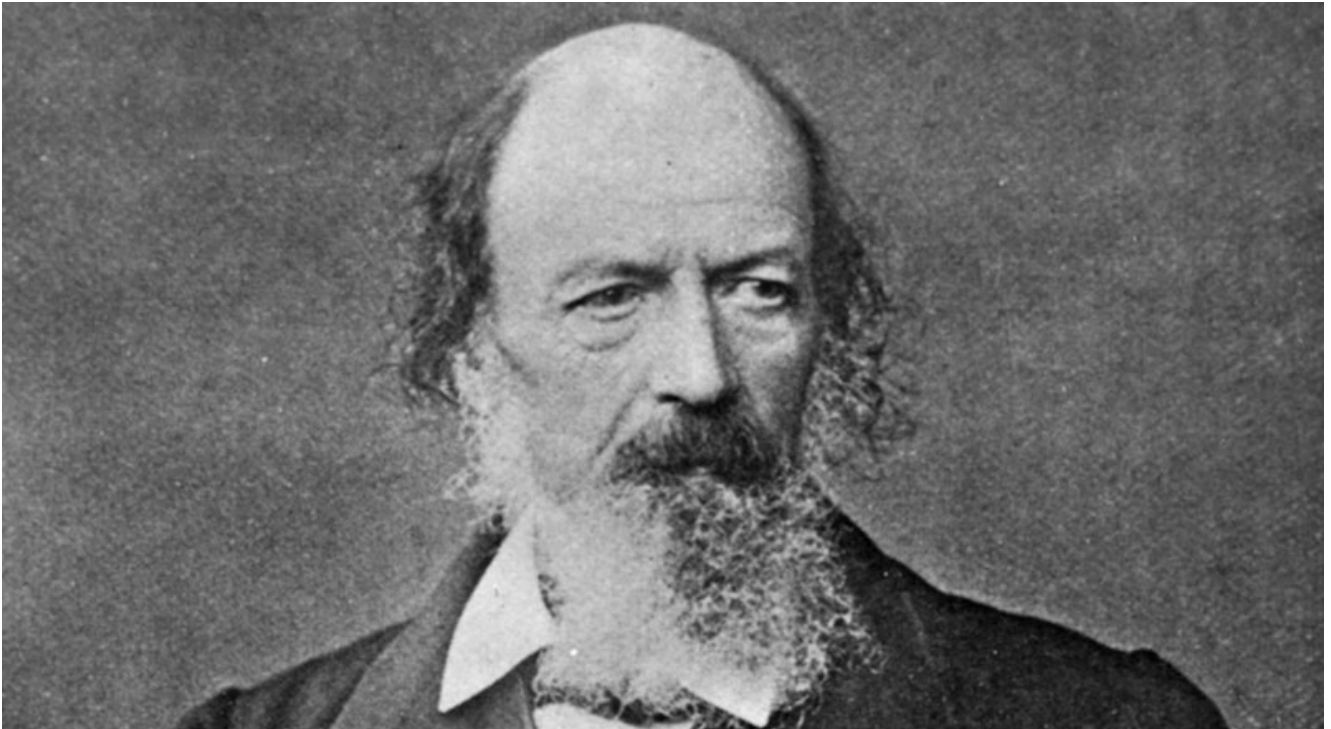


NORTHERN WARS



by Ralph Berry

*'For the peace, that I deem'd no peace, is over and done,
And now by the side of the Black and the Baltic deep,
And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire.
Let it flame or fade, and the war roll down like a wind...'*

Tennyson, in 'Maud; a Monodrama' (1855) seems to have had as good a grasp of the future as the present, for Russia's 'military special operation' is now turning into war. The Crimean War which so excited him and led to his great poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', has now returned with additional personnel but the same basic cast. Russia and Britain remain key protagonists, with France present on stage. Turkey is off-stage now but a nearby presence. I still have the Turkish medal awarded to my great-great

grandfather for his service in the British Army during the siege and capture of Sevastopol. These echoes persist in our times.

To the present. The fog of war is not much dissipated by the fearless propaganda of the warring parties. We take for granted the mendacities of the Russians and are less inclined to question the Ukrainians and their allies. Britain especially is seized by what used to be called 'jingoism' and is remarkably insouciant about the dangers it is courting. Boris Johnson says that Russia must fail and must be seen to fail. Liz Truss, the Foreign Secretary, says: 'We are doubling down. We will keep going further and faster to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine' as though all it needs is for a bouncer to throw out a troublemaker from the premises. And what form would this muscular bouncer, good at pushing, take? War? Surely not with British participation? But it has already started. A British volunteer, most probably with another missing colleague, has been killed in Ukraine by bombing, and two more captured and paraded on Russian TV. In all, five Britons are reported captured. A US ex-Marine, working in the country with a private military contracting company, has been confirmed dead. (*Telegraph*, 30 April). There is a clear risk of Britain being sucked further into the vortex, as it was with the Crimean War.

Fortunately, there are other European powers which are less star-struck by the Ukrainian leadership. France now has a re-elected President with full powers. Palmerston's dictum was that French policy is to discover, if they can, the aim of British policy, and then to thwart it. Macron has a better than decent chance of achieving that aim, which will involve cutting Johnson down to size. A top priority for Macron will be revenge for the AUKUS pact, at which it was revealed that France was blackballed at the insiders' club. Germany is not about to give up the sweet deal it has with Russian oil and gas. 'European unity', which the commentariat has just

discovered, is a transformation invisible to me but which if real would evoke in Russia the great German fear in the run-up to 1914, encirclement. The further expansion of NATO would be the worst possible development. America has reverted to the 'arsenal of democracy' line of F.D. Roosevelt, though it is not clear how its weaponry is to be transported to the front. It will not be waved through by Russia.

I expect the conflict to be settled by artillery, the great killer of WW1 and the decisive factor today. Ukraine is being reduced to rubble, and while post-war funding will flow the population will not regain its pre-war numbers. To restore the birth rate you need women, and women with children are by far the largest group to have left Ukraine. Many exiles will not return from the countries that have welcomed them, and where they and their children feel comfortable. So, Russia and Ukraine need peace equally: I hope they get it, and soon.