GORDON OF KHARTOUM:

An Extraordinary Soldier

JOHN POLLOCK

CHRISTIAN FOCUS



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Note on Chinese and Arabic Names

The manuscript and printed sources of Gordon's time show no consistency in the transliteration of Chinese characters into Western script. I have therefore edited names to conform to postal use adopted in the later 19th century (e.g. Peking, not Pekin; Shanghai, not Shanghae). I have not used the recently adopted Pinyin forms (e.g. Beijing for Peking) as they tend to confuse Western readers.

For Arabic, I have used the form familiar in the West for famous names (e.g. Tel-el-Kebir; Ismail). For others I have tried to follow Richard Hill's *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan* (2nd edition, 1967) except for accents. With so much variety of transliteration in the sources I must confess to inconsistency which Arabic speakers will forgive. Zubair Pasha is spelt in three or four different ways in the manuscript letters and printed works of the period.

The word *and* is generally shown by a squiggle by Gordon and others writing at speed. I have usually spelt it out since the conventional printer's sign does not look like the squiggle and disrupts rather than eases the flow.





PROLOGUE:

'TOO LATE'

About seven-thirty on the morning of Wednesday 28 January 1885 the armed paddle-steamer *Bordein* passed below a steep hill on the west bank of the Nile without needing to fire her guns.

Crammed with Sudanese and Egyptian soldiers and sailors, and ten men of the Sussex Regiment in guardsmen's tunics to proclaim that the British were coming, she was racing upriver to reach Khartoum before it fell to the Mahdi's armies. Behind her, with more Sudanese and another ten Sussex men, steamed her slightly longer sister ship the *Tel el Howein*. They were no larger than Thames pleasure boats or 'penny steamers.'

As the hill and an empty village fell astern Colonel Sir Charles Wilson, standing in the *Bordein*'s armoured turret, lifted his field telescope. He could see in the far distance the buildings of Khartoum beyond the palm trees of Tuti Island. Since 12 March, 322 days before, his friend and brother officer of the Royal Engineers, Charlie Gordon ('Chinese' Gordon to the world) had been besieged. At first the Liberal Government in England had refused to recognize his danger. When Gladstone had at last agreed to a relief expedition General Wolseley's cautious strategy caused further delays. Gordon held on. Cut off from the outside world except for occasional spies, he became the most famous person on earth as the public in all countries waited and hoped and prayed, knowing that most of his garrison and the cosmopolitan population would be put to the sword if Khartoum fell.

Sir Charles Wilson had never expected to lead the rescue. One officer more senior had been killed in the great battle at the wells of Abu Klea as the relief column crossed the desert, cutting across a great loop of the Nile; another senior officer lay fatally wounded. Wilson, an expert in survey and intelligence who had never commanded in a campaign, had delayed four days after reaching Gordon's steamers at Gubat; Wilson had good tactical reasons but could be blamed for not risking a dash against all the odds when he had read Gordon's warning, in a letter dated five weeks earlier, that unless the expeditionary force arrived in ten days 'the town may fall.'

Gordon still held out when Wilson had started at last on 24 January. The steamers' four day race up the Nile had been slowed by mishaps. Wilson knew he could not raise the siege; like Havelock at Lucknow he could only bring supplies, more gun power, and the moral support which would enable the garrison to hold on until the main relief arrived. By this morning of 28 January, Gordon's fifty-second birthday, Wilson was within ten miles of success.

On the *Tel el Howein* Captain Edward Stuart-Wortley of the 60th was trying to attract Gordon's attention by flashing the heliograph. Then a Sudanese on the shore, of the friendly Shaggiah tribe, shouted to the men on the steamer that Khartoum had fallen two days before and Gordon was dead. They refused to believe it. Soon the *Bordein* came under heavy fire from both banks of the Nile, and Wilson's black riflemen and gunners fired back: the gunners, naked except for loin cloths, looked to Wilson 'more like demons than men in the thick smoke: and one huge giant was the very incarnation of savagery drunk with war.'[1]

The *Bordein* emerged unscathed into wider waters and now Wilson could see Gordon's Palace in the distance, its flat roof higher than surrounding buildings. Old Khashm el Mus, Gordon's friend and ally, the Melik or chief of the Shaggiahs, who was squatting below the parapet, urged Wilson to turn his telescope on the Palace flag pole. Wilson could see no flag. Khashm became

[1] Wilson, Sir C., *Korti to Khartoum* pp. 170-75.

anxious, saying that Gordon always kept the Egyptian flag flying: the place must be in the Mahdi's hands. Wilson would not believe it: 'at any rate we could not stop now until we were certain all was over.'

By the time they reached the sandspit at the junction of the two Niles, which gave Khartoum its name, 'Elephant's trunk,' the intense gun fire and rifle fire, and the hordes of the Mahdi's men waiting under their banners to oppose a landing, left no doubt. Wilson wrote later to Sir Henry Gordon, who never blamed him, 'It was a cruel disappointment to reach Khartoum on your brother's birthday and find I was too late. I went on as far as I could to the S. W. corner of Tuti Island: we were then under a cross fire of artillery from Omdurman and Tuti and I felt that if we turned the corner we should never have got back - I do not know how we escaped for the "penny steamers" as your brother calls them in his Journal had for nearly 4 miles to run the gauntlet of mountain guns, Krupps, Mitrailleuses and rifles.'[2]

When both steamers had begun their escape the black soldiers collapsed in grief, not only for their homes and families in Khartoum but even more for Gordon. In the words of Stuart-Wortley: 'They threw themselves down and sobbed...They said, "We have lost our families, our properties and everything belonging to us, that is the fortune of war: but Gordon is dead, by the will of God, all is finished," and they gave themselves up to despondency and it was all we could do to get them to even manage the steamers.' Stuart-Wortley saw 'the spontaneous outburst of grief on the part of the black troops as the greatest proof of the extraordinary affection in which General Gordon was held by those who had experienced, and had learnt to value his great qualities.'[3]

At 7 pm one week later, on 4 February, General Lord Wolseley, with his limp and his glass eye and other scars of war, was going to dinner in the base camp of the Relief Expedition at Korti on the Nile, 280 miles from Khartoum, when two letters, one enclosing

[2] Wilson to H., 11 March 85. 50401 f. 74.

[3] Waller to A., quoting E. Stuart-Wortley, 27 June 85. 51300 f. 138; and E. Stuart-Wortley to A., 11 Dec 85, ibid ff.173-76.

the other, were brought to him from Gubat across the desert: ' I was certainly knocked out of tune by the dreadful intelligence that *Khartoum* was taken by Mahdi's troops on 26 January and that Gordon's fate was uncertain but he was said to have been killed. I earnestly pray he may have been killed,' he wrote in his Journal, 'for to him death was always looked forward to as the beginning of a glorious and new life, whereas captivity would have been unbearable.'[4]

They had been friends since the Crimean trenches. Wolseley's persuasions had sent Gordon back to the Sudan; and Wolseley had begged for a relief expedition long before Gladstone saw the need.

'At one time I could almost feel Charlie Gordon's hand in mine: his relief seemed almost humanly speaking a certainty,' Wolseley told Sir Henry later;[5] and he described the 'sorrow and rage' of the troops at the news of the Fall: 'Sorrow for the gallant soul we had striven with might and main to save and rage at the Minister whose folly had prevented the effort to reach Khartoum from being undertaken earlier.

'Well, he is gone from amongst us and I shall never know his like again. Indeed many generations may come and go without producing a Charlie Gordon. His example will be one that fathers will hold up to their sons in England, and as long as any faith in God remains to us as a Nation, and that we continue to be manly enough to revere the highest form of courage and devotion to duty, so long will your brother be quoted and referred to as the human embodiment of all manly and Christian virtues...I never knew but two heroes; one has been dead many years, and your brother was the other.'[6]

That same night, early in the small hours of 5 February 1885 in London, a clerk in the War Office in Pall Mall began to decipher a long telegram from Wolseley; and sent the first sentences at once

[4] Preston, p.134.
[5] Wolseley to H., 11 March 85. 50401 f. 76.
[6] *ibid*. 5 March 85. ibid. f. 35.

to waken the Permanent Secretary, who immediately took a cab to Tilney Street in Mayfair and knocked up Reginald Brett, M.P., Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for War, the Marquess of Hartington. Gordon had been frequently at Tilney Street: Brett, as he dressed, could recall the last visit, when Gordon had walked up and down discussing the Sudan, cradling the infant Brett son and heir in his arms.

Brett jumped into the cab and they trotted through the ill-lit empty streets to collect the whole wire and then to Number Ten Downing Street. ' The blackest day since the horrible Phoenix Park murders[7],' wrote the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, Edward Hamilton, in his Diary. ' The news of the fall of Khartoum was brought to me by R. Brett at 2.30 this morning while I was peacefully sleeping.'[8]

Gladstone was in the North. He and Hartington were staying with Lord Hartington's father, the Duke of Devonshire, at Holker Hall in Cartmel, south of the Lake District. ' After 11 am I heard the sad news of the fall or betrayal of Khartoum,' wrote Gladstone in his Diary. ' The circumstances are sad and trying: it is one of the least points about them, that they may put an end to this Govt.'[9] The Gladstones and Hartington left for London by the first train.

At Osborne House in the Isle of Wight Queen Victoria woke to 'a fine morning, my cold somewhat better. Dreadful news after breakfast. Khartoum fallen, Gordon's fate uncertain! All greatly distressed. Sent for Sir H. Ponsonby, who was horrified. It is too fearful. The Govt is alone to blame, by refusing to send the expedition till it was too late.'[10] She then despatched her famous telegrams en clair to Gladstone, Hartington and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville: 'These news from Khartoum

[7]On 6 May 1882 Lord Frederick Cavendish, Chief Secretary of Ireland, and his Under-Secretary T. H. Burke, were knifed to death by Fenians (Irish Republicans) as they walked in Phoenix Park.
[8] Hamilton Diary, 5 Feb 85. 48639.
[9] Gladstone Diaries XI, p. 289.
[10] RA. QVJ, 5 Feb 85.

are frightful, and to think that all this might have been prevented and many precious lives saved by earlier action is too frightful.'[11] The Queen's displeasure was read by several telegraphists as they forwarded the wires from place to place.

Across the Solent, at 5 Rockstone Place, Southampton, Gordon's sister Augusta, eleven years the older but his closest friend and correspondent, opened a telegram at about 11 am from W. T. Stead, editor of the London evening paper, Pall Mall Gazette. He gave her the bad news, not yet public, to spare her the shock of placards or shouting newsboys. One year before, Stead had sat in her drawing room interviewing Gordon as the man who knew more about the Sudan than any other Englishman. The published interview and Stead's leading article had helped to force the Government's hand.

A few minutes later the parlour-maid brought another wire from Stead, and soon yet another, as Stead sent Augusta every fresh rumour, meaning to be kind: but when she read, 'Have just heard authentic news Mahdi informed Sir Charles Wilson that your brother is alive wearing Mahdi's uniform,'[12] she knew it must be false: Charlie would never convert to Islam.

At 1.41 pm a telegram reached Southampton from General Sir John Cowell, Gordon's brother officer in the Royal Engineers and fellow-enthusiast for the Holy Land, who was Comptroller of the Royal Household: 'I am on my way with my wife to see you from the Queen.'[13]

Back in London the Commander-in-Chief, H.R.H. the Duke of Cambridge, the Queen's first cousin, had heard 'the overwhelming news' immediately after breakfast. Early in the afternoon the placards of the first evening editions were all over London. 'It has produced a profound impression and is certainly a most overwhelming blow to the honour and interests of this country,' the Duke wrote in his Journal.[14] Cambridge could remember

[11] *ibid.* (copy pasted in.)
[12] Telegrams, 51300 f. 68
[13] Telegram, 51299 f. 147
[14] Duke of Cambridge's Journal, 5 Feb 85. FitzGeorge-Balfour Papers (Cambridge Journal).

Gordon as a child, had sometimes been annoyed by him as a man yet admired him; and Gordon had written to a fellow general a few months before: 'After such a lot of insubordinate behaviour I feel H.R.H. was exceedingly kind. He has always had my earnest prayers.'[15]

The Duke worked at the War Office all day on fresh plans for the crisis, then called on his mother at St. James's Palace. The Duchess and her lady in waiting, Lady Geraldine Somerset, had already seen the placards on their afternoon drive. 'Dark day of deep tribulation!' wrote Lady Geraldine in her Journal. 'One of the darkest, in shame and pain, of all England's history...Tea 6 1/4, 6 1/2 came the Duke! As distressed and depressed as was to be expected!'[16]

As the Duke wrote next day, 'Nothing can equal the intense interest and excitement raised by this grave event since the period of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny.'[17] The Cabinet met for three hours and authorized Wolseley to release Gordon if still alive or 'to smash up the Mahdi should he have fallen.'[18] The suspense made strangers stop in the street to ask each other for news. Wolseley still could not telegraph any certainties; and as General Sir Gerald Graham, V.C., one of Gordon's closest friends, who had been with him on the Nile for the first part of his journey to Khartoum, wrote to Sir Henry Gordon: 'I do not wish to lose faith in your brother's wonderful resource and power over his followers even in the face of this terrible news. He may yet be holding out in the citadel or be a prisoner in the Mahdi's hands.'[19]

All Europe was anxious, wrote another friend of Sir Henry's, 'for if there be one man especially revered of all ages and conditions, that man is your heroic brother, when so much is dark around us, it is refreshing to discover one gleam of light - universal respect and affection for a noble saint-like soldier.'[20]

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[15] G. to General Eyre, 6 March 84, Spiro Collection. A copy is in RA.
[16] RA Lady Geraldine Somerset's Journal, 5 Feb 85.
[17] Cambridge Journal, 6 Feb 85.
[18] *ibid*
[19] Sir Gerald Graham to H., 52399 f. 10
[20] Townshend Wilson to H. 5 Feb 95. 52399 f. 12.

At last, on 10 February, Wolseley wired his conviction that Gordon was dead. Gladstone was due to dine with Lord Dalhousie, followed by a play at the Criterion theatre. 'I told Mr G in the morning it was foolish,' wrote Edward Hamilton, 'and I ought to have written to Lady Dalhousie to give up the idea of the theatre under the circumstances, but it was thought it would fuss Mr G.'[21] Mr G. found The Candidate 'capitally acted'; but in Hamilton's words 'the gloom and rage of London knows no bounds' for Britain had gone into unofficial mourning of extraordinary intensity: long obituaries and leading articles, memorial services at Westminster Abbey and in churches all over the country, plans drawn up for the national memorial which became the Gordon Home for Boys. The Princesses and Peeresses of Britain sent Augusta an address of condolence; town councils and organizations of every kind passed resolutions of condolence and admiration, while in Gravesend, although fourteen years had passed since Gordon had lived there, a journalist found that 'he has left, especially among the poor, so passionate a clinging to his memory, that his loss is to them a reality which cannot be observed without sharing the pain.'[22]

Tributes poured in to the family. 'My admiration for your brother was unbounded,' wrote Major Herbert Kitchener, the future field marshal who was to avenge Gordon's death and bring nearly sixty years of peace to the Sudan, 'and the regret unceasing that more could not have been done for him.'[23]

'I knew him well,' wrote General Sir John Stokes, the Royal Engineers' chief at the War Office, 'and appreciated at their full value his constant and exalted Faith, his noble courage, his single minded devotion to duty - his unfailing unselfishness and open-handed generosity. His was a Nature too grand for this sordid prosaic generation. He was worthy to rank with the best and bravest of Elizabeth's heros (sic). The whole Corps, the whole of

[21] Hamilton Diary, 11 Feb 85. 48639 f. 49.
[22] Speech by George Arnold, Mayor, at unveiling of Gravesend Statue, 4 Oct 1893, Report, p. 10.
[23] Kitchener to A., 16 Oct 85. 51300 f. 156.

England, aye the whole civilized world mourn for him - a victim to indecision and half heartedness.'[24]

'Could he,' asked another Sapper, his grief for a close friend spilling into purple prose, 'have left behind him a more glorious memory - a larger example for our small selfish age? - or a better ringing record of great sacrifice and chivalry for the Christian and Mahomedan world that have reheard the sweet song of his life - from the basso booming of cannon and drums of his large brave deeds to the treble sweetness of his kindly nature to children and weak women and those who were in distress, but I am very sad...'[25]

Thus the first legend was born, of the Bayard '*sans peur et sans reproche*,' built up by sermons and books. And as W.T. Stead wrote to Augusta on the last day of 1885, 'Your brother's death has done more to make Christ real to people than if he had civilized a hundred Congos and smashed a thousand Mahdis.'[26]

Lord Cromer, whom Gordon knew as Sir Evelyn Baring, British Agent and Consul General in Egypt, deleted from the printed version of his memoirs (1908) a comment which highlights both Gordon and his age: 'During this stage of national hysteria,' he wrote, any critic of Gordon 'would have been regarded with a dislike somewhat akin to that which is felt for any one who is heard talking flippantly in public of the truths of the Christian religion.'[27]

Cromer did not know Gordon well. They had quarrelled in Cairo in 1878 over the finances of Egypt, which Gordon wished to reform for the benefit of the Egyptians and Sudanese while Baring, as was his duty, put first the demands of England and other debtors. Five years later, after Baring had agreed reluctantly to Gordon's mission, they were together again in Cairo for three days, and in touch by telegraph for a further seven weeks before the line was cut.

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[24] General Sir J. Stokes to H., 16 Feb 85. 52399 f. 162.
[25] Col. Thomas Owen Jones to H., 7 Feb 85. 52399 ff. 44-45.
[26] W. T. Stead to A., 31 Dec 85. 51399 f. 178.
[27] Lord Cromer, typescript of draft Memoirs, 44904 f. 147. See *Modern Egypt*, p. 430.

The Fall of Khartoum was Cromer's one failure. As the years passed he transferred his bitterness from the Liberal Cabinet of 1884-5 which had included a cousin and several friends, to Gordon himself. The young Winston Churchill in 1900 found Cromer 'very bitter' about Gordon 'and begged me not to pander to the popular belief on the subject. Of course there is no doubt that Gordon as a political figure was absolutely hopeless. He was so erratic, capricious, utterly unreliable, his mood changed so often, his temper was abominable, he was frequently drunk, and yet with all he had a tremendous sense of honour and great abilities, and a still greater obstinacy.'[28]

Cromer spread the rumour privately that Gordon drank. It reached Lieut-Colonel Louis Gordon, Sir Henry's son, in India. Concerned and puzzled, for he had known his uncle well and proudly displayed the 'magic wand' of 'Chinese Gordon's' victories, he wrote to Cromer. The reply is lost but it set Louis Gordon's mind at rest. Nevertheless Cromer wrote to Lord Knutsford in 1912: 'that Gordon was mad or semi-mad there is not the smallest doubt; also there is not in reality the least doubt that he drank deeply.'[29]

In 1918 Lytton Strachey published in *Eminent Victorians*, his brilliant though flawed essay on Gordon. Surviving relatives and brother officers were outraged by what they considered a barely recognizable literary caricature; yet despite later scholarly biographies, using some of the family papers, Strachey's tarnished Gordon remains lodged in the public mind. Authors, film producers, radio and television programme makers have tended to exaggerate a few facets of Gordon's character or build up an interpretation based on selective use of the printed versions of his vast correspondence, often taken out of context and supported by fiction. Thus the second legend replaced the first.

The real Gordon can now be recovered.

In 1963 his nephew Colonel Frederick Moffitt left to the British Museum the huge collection of Gordon's letters to his sister Augusta

[28] Randolph S. Churchill, *Churchill*, I, p. 426.
[29] Cromer to Viscount Knutsford in 1912, sold at Sotheby's 4 Oct 1977. Quoted *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 Sept 77.

and the papers he had put in her care. Later that year two descendants of Sir Henry Gordon, the late Mrs Rose Bell and Mr David Gordon, gave the Museum Sir Henry's equally large collection of manuscript material, including much private and official correspondence. The Moffitt and Bell collections total forty-five volumes. Together with manuscripts already in the Museum a great deposit of Gordon Papers, running to many thousands of items and many millions of words became available in what is now the British Library.

This has been consulted or part-researched by some biographers and ignored by others. The present book may fairly claim to be the first to research the entire collection. I have also used many other collections in Britain, Ireland and America, including some which are now dispersed.

The result, I contend, is a fresh and believable story of a highly original man. The true Gordon has been smothered by layers of interpretation and assessment: I therefore tell the story straight, in the context of the times, leaving the reader to form his or her conclusions.

Gordon's relatives had long formed theirs. 'I think,' wrote his niece Margaret in 1885, 'everyone who ever saw Uncle Charlie loved him and when he talked to you, you could feel how much he loved God and was looking out for an opportunity to serve him.'[30]

[30] Margaret Gordon to H., 16 Feb., 16 Feb (85) 52399 ff. 164-65.