



Major General Charles Gordon: Anatomy of a Hero

David Green, Oct 7, 2009

Major-General Charles George Gordon was a true hero, whether this was good or not is another matter. He was born, 28th January 1833, in Woolwich, London to a military family, his father was Major General Henry Gordon. He went to school in Somerset and then attended the Royal Woolwich Military Academy, graduating with a commission as 2nd Lieutenant in the Engineers in 1852, achieving the rank of full Lieutenant in 1854 after further training at Chatham.

His first assignment was to improve the defences of Milford Haven in West Wales, you may wonder where the threat of attack was from but this was at the peak of the fear that the Irish may rise up or that a European power might try to sneak in the 'back door'. It was around this time that he became an evangelical, much of his later actions seem to be predicated on the belief that he had divine guidance. Indeed his ideas became increasingly strange, the world was encapsulated in an orb with the Throne of God directly above the Temple of Jerusalem, I'm surprised Buzz Aldrin never saw it. The Devil apparently lived on the other side (quite near Pitcairn Island in fact, the geographical Antipode of Jerusalem). A short man, 5 feet 5 inches, he is probably a prime example of the 'Napoleon Complex'.

His Homeland Security work was soon put on hold as the Crimean War broke out. Gordon was sent to Balaklava in January 1855 and soon became involved in the Siege of Sevastopol. The Crimean was noted for the terrible conditions, soldiers froze to death in winter and died like flies with dysentery, cholera and gangrene through the short steamy summer, but Gordon was a hardy sort and survived unscathed. He was, in fact, appointed to the boundary commission, surveying and demarcating both the European and Asian boundaries of the Ottoman Empire with Russia; finally returning to Chatham in 1858 where he was promoted to Captain.

Charles was not really a stay-at-home type, within two years, sensing an opportunity for glory and dispelling the forces of darkness he volunteered to help open the doors to 'free-trade' and enlightenment by joining the British army in China during the second Opium War. The war was the result of Britain reaching the apex of sanctimonious hypocritical Imperial posturing; having achieved a monopoly of poppy growing at the beginning of the century in Bengal, they then pressed the indigenous population into servitude as they created an assembly line of opium production. China had had the nerve to decline British trade advances, insisting that silk and tea was to be paid for with silver, a commodity that Britain was singularly short of. To counter this recalcitrance the British, quite literally, foisted their opium onto the Chinese, more efficiently than any drug cartel as they had state backing; when the Chinese kicked up a fuss about the increasing addiction of it's population Britain went to war. As always, the British salved their conscience, and became incredibly wealthy, by claiming they were civilizing the ungrateful Chinese. A perfect scenario for Gordon. China, of course, was none to happy about this state of affairs, leading to the First Opium War. Unfortunately (for the Chinese), they had adopted an insular policy some 400 years before, initially manifesting itself by getting rid of what had been the world's supreme navy, a sort of 'if I close my eyes then you're not there' approach. In addition there was considerable unrest amongst the Chinese, the current dynasty was Manchu who ruled the majority Han population inflexibly and oppressively.

The Second Opium War had started after the Qing government had boarded a pirate ship which turned out to be under the British flag. Seizing the opportunity the British, with Gordon sacked the Summer Palace, occupied Beijing and only withdrew to Shanghai when the Taiping Rebellion crept further east 1862. Shanghai had raised a militia, at least the foreign residents had, but the rebel advance was so slow that they took the fight to the rebels. Under the very able command of Fredrick Ward, an American this initially ragtag army was drilled and organized into a well-oiled machine. The object was to clear out pockets of rebels from the hinterland, the army proved so successful that they were termed the 'Ever Victorious Army. Unfortunately Ward was killed at the Battle of Cixi. The Chinese governor did not like the chosen replacement and requested that an Englishman be appointed instead. Gordon was proposed and quickly approved by the British government and took over command in March 1863.

Ever victorious, the army, straight-away, rode to the relief of Chansu, a nearby town. The liberation was successful and probably due to Ward's innovative military strategies that he had implemented. Gordon now had a chance to relax and reorganize his troops to the way he was more accustomed. The army then advanced on Quinsan, another rebel-held town, which they finally relieved with considerable casualties. One is left to ponder whether the toll would have been as high if he had not tinkered with the command structure and organization of his troops. On a roll now, the army liberated town after town until, in November, they joined up with the Imperial army and took back the city of Suzhou. There now followed a hiatus in the prosecution of the rebellion showing another facet of Gordon's character; his inability to follow orders through a self-righteous belief in his autonomy. It was his way or no way. Specifically there was dissension over the treatment of the captured rebels between the provincial governor, Li Hongzhang, who was at least his nominal superior. Gordon went off to Quinsan with his army and sulked for over three months until he and the governor made up. They then joined forces and overran the rebel headquarters at Changzhou. Here another Gordon trait becomes apparent, self-promotion. The Emperor promoted him to the position of Provincial Military Commander, appointed him a Viscount second class and awarded him the Yellow Jacket, honorary regalia which distinguished him as a Chinese hero. Why Gordon should have been chosen for this plethora of accolades rather than the British commander, Staveland, the provincial governor or any of the other passed-over participants reveals as much about Gordon's view of the benighted natives as their view of him. Not to be outdone, the British promptly promoted him to Lieutenant-Colonel and made him a Companion of the Bath. All this earned him the sobriquet 'Chinese Gordon'.

Back in dear 'Old Blighty', flush with success, Gordon was placed in charge of the fortification of the River Thames near Gravesend, on the southern bank near the mouth. During this period he found time to do good works, visiting the sick and elderly and founding a boys club, this latter was to call into question some of his proclivities. This charitable streak was peculiarly Victorian, Gladstone hobnobbing with fallen women, Dickens touring the slums with his friend the heiress Baroness and so

forth. But Gordon's actions did raise questions about his predilection for young boys, Stanley Weintraub, in his epic biography of Victoria says "Gordon was not the marrying kind and preferred street urchins." In any case, his next appointment, in 1871, was to the international commission charged with ensuring the navigability of the mouth of the Danube. The following year he was sent to inspect the cemeteries at the Crimea. On his way there, at Istanbul, he dropped by the Sublime Porte and again displayed his talent for self-aggrandizement by bringing Gordon to the notice of the Prime Minister of Egypt who, presumably at Gordon's behest, began negotiations to install himself in the service of the Khedive Ishmael Pasha. Receiving a definite offer for what today would be considered his mercenary services, in 1873, Gordon went to Egypt the following January and was appointed colonel in the Egyptian army. We now have the strange situation whereby Gordon outranked himself in two national armies other than the one he had joined and still, purportedly, served in.

Egypt was nominally under the auspices of the Ottoman Empire but had a deal of autonomy. To the south lay the vast (a million square miles) waste of Sudan and then the jungle and savannah of Uganda. The region had piqued the interest of the West through the mystery surrounding the source of the Nile and the talk of snow-capped mountains at the Equator. To the Egyptians, the only interest lay in the slave-trade, a commerce the Victorians were dedicated to eradicating (at least that was what they said they were doing while they were colonizing and pillaging). Gordon's job was to organize the area and to his credit he did considerably better than his predecessor, Sir Samuel Baker. Taking a leaf out of past colonial experiences he set up a series of posts, or depots, up the Nile from Khartoum to the Ugandan frontier.

The Nile became increasingly difficult to navigate in its upper reaches; cataracts and swamps meant boats spent more time being carried over difficult terrain than floating on water. Gordon built a station at Dufile so that steamships could be assembled to explore what the Victorians called Lake Albert. With missionary zeal he also set about suppressing the slave trade which went overland from Uganda through the province of Darfur, this was actually the start of their troubles, we are still trying to resolve the mess 150 years later! Arab traders had taken over Darfur to facilitate this trade, greasing palms in Khartoum as well as Cairo. Thus Gordon's efforts, although entirely laudable, cut into one of Egypt's main sources of revenue; the Khedive had not expected him to be quite so effective in stifling a lucrative business. It was over this subject that the next disagreement arose. The governor of Sudan and Gordon disagreed over the elimination of this loathsome traffic and the Khedive, although not openly supporting the trade, prevaricated in his support for Gordon. Unable to get his way Gordon threw a tantrum and stomped off to London.

The Khedive must have been desperate for British support for no sooner had Gordon arrived home than he received a letter reminding him of his promise to return which Gordon promptly did, negotiating his appointment as Governor-General of all the Sudanese provinces. The whole affair has the tone of a childish spat. In fact the Khedive was desperate; during Gordon's first tenure Egypt and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) had gone to war resulting in Egypt suffering two humiliating defeats. Arriving back in Khartoum in 1877, Gordon promptly went south to negotiate peace with the Abyssinian king. The king was away fighting the Shoa. The next two years were spent racing around his territory; negotiating peace with the insurgents in Darfur, a quick check on two neighbouring provinces, Berber and Dongola, back to the Abyssinian frontier and then returning to Khartoum where he promptly took a round trip to Cairo at the Khedive's behest. All this before air travel; indeed the journeys were long, arduous camel treks, often arriving to find the reported situation totally changed. In 1879 the Khedive was deposed and succeeded by his son, this seems to have had little effect on Gordon however. He went south to Harrar province, fired the governor for incompetence and corruption, went back to Khartoum and on to Darfur where, once again the slave-trading warlords had risen up. This time they were defeated in battle and Gordon returned to the Abyssinian border to deal with that problem. The Abyssinians were not impressed, however, instead they imprisoned him in Massawa where he was finally released and returned to Cairo to resign his position in early 1880.

Gordon was exhausted, or so he claimed; the problems of the world had enervated him, no matter that he actively sought those burdens. He retired for some R & R to Lausanne, recuperating on the lake,

soothing the stress with the peace of the Alpine peaks. For three weeks; at least that is how long it took before he was cutting a deal with King Leopold of Belgium. I find it hard to believe the king was just wandering by so Gordon must have contacted him. The deal was to run what was then termed the Belgian Congo.

The Congo was one of the great disgraces of the Imperialist 19th century. The Belgian throne had been offered as a sop to one of Victoria's close relatives with the effect that the king had ideas above his station, hey, everybody else was getting a piece of Africa, why couldn't he. With an amused tolerance, like dealing with a spoiled child, he was allowed to get a large piece of jungle pretty much slap in the middle, not a piece anybody else hankered after (at least not until the diamonds were discovered), and seen by the other powers as a useful buffer between France, Germany and Britain. The country was run as the worst sort of plantation, Conrad's book, 'Heart of Africa', exposed a lot of the atrocities, tens of thousands starved or were worked to death in appalling conditions, and of course, some of the natives were unappreciative. Gordon was offered the job of sorting out the Congo Free State - as it was laughingly called - by King Leopold. A month later, in April, Gordon was offered the position of Commandant in the Cape Colony (South Africa) and then in May the Marquis of Ripon, just appointed Governor-General of India, the jewel of the British Empire, offered him the role of private secretary! I can only imagine his reputation became self-fulfilling. Each offer proved his ability and meant everybody else wanted him to sort out there colonial headaches.

Pondering this plethora of offers, he chose the last, setting sail for India. He had hardly arrived, however, when he promptly resigned, yet another childish tantrum - maybe he didn't like the food. Anybody else would have been shipped home and shelved but instead he was invited to China by Sir Robert Hart, the inspector-general of customs. Once in Beijing he renewed old contacts - a Victorian networking, and did a little shuttle diplomacy between China and Russia to stop an outbreak of hostilities. Having staved off war he returned to England where he was quickly dispatched to Mauritius in the Indian Ocean as Commander of the Royal Engineers. Amazingly he stayed put on the island for a whole year. Promoted to Major-General, Gordon was sent to the Cape to 'sort out' Basutoland. By this time he was pretty much the super-envoy, sent wherever there was a problem with the indigenous people (problem being defined by the colonial power, of course). Returning to London in the summer of 1882 he found a lull in the native insurrections so he took a sabbatical of a year to travel to Palestine, the Holy Land at the 'centre of the world'.

As soon as Gordon got back the King of Belgium reinstated his offer of command of the Congo which Gordon agreed to and started packing. The situation in Sudan, meanwhile, had become a major British headache. The people of Sudan had risen up to follow a religious leader, Mohammed Ahmed. He proclaimed himself the Mahdi, a prophesied leader who would destroy the slave trade and give the people a pure, Sharia run state. One would have thought this would please the missionary zeal of Victorian England but it proved rather too popular and threatened to spread to Egypt. The next thing the natives would begin to think they could rule themselves. The Egyptians, or at least the Khedive, had fallen into financial turmoil to which England, then under Disraeli, had responded by bailing them out and installing a team of 'advisers' who, under Sir Evelyn Baring, effectively governed Egypt. By the end of 1883 the Mahdi was close to controlling most of Sudan and Britain ordered Egypt to withdraw all troops, a difficult task as there were thousands occupying the various forts and garrisons around the country, many cut off. Clearly there was only one man who could save the situation and Victoria pressed the Prime Minister, Gladstone, to let Gordon do his thing. It should be stressed that Gladstone was reluctant, he knew that Gordon was a loose cannon and his brief was, specifically, only to go to the Sudan and assess the best way of achieving the evacuation of the troops, civilians and dependants with the minimum loss of life.

Meeting with Sir Evelyn in Cairo at the beginning of 1884 Gordon both misrepresented his orders and argued forcefully that he could not go a thousand miles into the desert with his hands tied. The result was that he was appointed governor with executive powers and arrived in Khartoum on February 18th. Sir Evelyn Baring was a very able official who became iconic. A member of the banking family, he steered Egypt into the twentieth century as well as any foreign oppressor could but, on this occasion, he

does seem to have misread his ability to control Gordon. Faced with a country in open revolt Gordon immediately offered the leading slave-trader, Sebehr Rahma, release from the prison in which he had placed him during his earlier tenure, and materiel to raise an army to defeat the Mahdi. A remarkable action for an Evangelist. The Egyptian army was more concerned with an uprising led by an army colonel in Alexandria and thus the main body of troops was deployed in the north. Just prior to Gordon's arrival, however, the Mahdi's army, known as the Ansar, meaning helpers, and referred to as dervishes in the West, had overrun 4000 Egyptian troops on the Egyptian border. Armed only with spears or swords they helped themselves to the rifles and ammo. They then went on to defeat another force of 8000, led by William Hicks, an Englishman. With over 40000 armed men the Mahdi now controlled Western Sudan. In the Eastern part of the country a parallel insurrection by the Hadendoa were so enthused by the Mahdist victories that they overwhelmed yet another Egyptian force, this time commanded by Colonel Valentine Baker, near the Red Sea, effectively leaving only a tenuous connection between Khartoum and Cairo to the north.

Probably inspired by his reception, many of the local tribes thought Gordon was their saviour, he determined, against orders, to fight back, theorizing that Sebehr Rahma still commanded enough loyalty to win back Darfur. The telegraph lines were still open so he dispatched his ideas to London where they were summarily turned down and his original orders to evacuate were reinforced. Unfortunately the Beja, to the north, now joined in the general melee, making evacuation too dangerous, at least in Gordon's view. Over 2000 of the sick, wounded, women and children had managed to get out but a contingent of Egyptian troops sent to clear the route deserted after firing one round. He asked for reinforcements (not forthcoming) and began to fortify, the siege beginning in a somewhat desultory fashion on March 18th 1884. Under his command was an able officer, Colonel Stewart, who initially led sorties of 200 or so native soldiers as a counter-offensive but the troops ran as soon as they got near the enemy, cited as cowardice on their part it was more likely empathy.

Gordon had surrounded the city with mines which kept the Ansar from mounting an attack while Stewart effectively utilized the few remaining steamers as gunboats to go on forays against the camped Ansar army. Gordon, both by example and oratory, did manage to inspire the populace to manufacture gunpowder, arms and defences; but, as with any siege, their main enemy was the dwindling supply of food. As the year wore with no relief from Egypt or Britain Stewart went further abroad, at one point recapturing Berber. Unfortunately he was killed in a later skirmish while trying to retake Dongola, a fact that the Mahdi was kind enough to write to Gordon of, with a certain relish and anticipation no doubt.

Back in England public opinion, including Queen Victoria, was building up a head of steam. The people felt, encouraged by anti-government press, that Gordon had been abandoned; there was agitation for an expeditionary force to be sent for his relief. Gladstone and the Liberal government, on the other hand, took the view that Gordon had disobeyed instructions. Gordon had been dispatched to oversee the evacuation, instead he had turned the episode into a personal crusade. The British government's view was one of logic; why become embroiled in a religious war in a country they did not want to free, at great expense in money and lives, a man that had got himself in trouble. But heroes are not formed from logic. The siege dragged on through the summer until, finally Gladstone bowed to public (and regal) pressure and ordered Field Marshal Garnet Wolseley to form a Nile Expeditionary Force. Wolseley was in Alexandria, left over from the successful squashing of the colonel's abortive insurrection, but it still took them until November to get themselves together. Was this on Gladstone's orders? Ambling through Egypt they finally reached the Sudan towards the end of the year where they sent a forward column of camel troops to 'rush' to Gordon's relief. At Metemma, on January 20th 1885, they found four steamships that Gordon had sent at the beginning of the siege. They also received conflicting reports; initially of the dire need for haste and then, two days later, a runner came to say that Gordon could hold out for a year if necessary. We do not know what motivated this last message; supreme confidence, morale building or misinformation on the grounds that the messenger would be intercepted. In any case when they arrived at Khartoum on the 28th it was to find that they were 2 days too late.

The city was in the hands of the Mahdi, along with Gordon's head which was stuck on a spear

in a tree to serve as an inspiration to his followers "...where all who passed it could look in disdain, children could throw stones at it and the hawks of the desert could sweep and circle above." The British were upset at this unsportsmanlike behaviour and attacked with rapidity. The Mahdi's army was destroyed and Khartoum retaken while, back in Britain, Gordon was beatified, an icon for all that was great in Victorian England. He died two days before his 52nd birthday to be immediately eulogized in the fantastic painting by William Joy, 'General Gordon's Last Stand'. Which, perhaps, exemplifies heroism, not what is but what we want to believe, and the rendition sums up the beliefs of a nation and an era.

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