Major General Charles “Chinese” Gordon: Saintly Soldier and Devoted Diplomat

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History Senior Seminar
Fall 2008
Dr. Harris
November 28, 2008
The corrupt and wicked often use religious claims to propagate their own malicious intentions. Alternatively, on rare occasions individuals act based on religious moral codes for the benefit of others rather than for their own personal benefit. Charles George “Chinese” Gordon is one such anomalous historical figure whose life proves it is possible to be both a Christian and a warrior without compromising personal integrity. Gordon proved his value as a soldier from his first days as an engineering officer to his final stand at Khartoum. He furthered his reputation to include governorship and diplomacy working for the British government and its interests. He had the privilege of serving the British people at the height of the British Empire.

The British had immense influence across the globe during the Victorian era. The Gordon family ranked among the most powerful and influential of the Scottish nobility. The Gordon family also maintained a long and illustrious military tradition. Many of the noble families of Britain had military legacies even though the British social class system did not center on the military. Gordon’s family status gave him an advantage to accessing a military career path in much the same way many other officers from the noble and gentry classes sought commissions. Young men with the right connections and financial backing had many opportunities for advancement in British society via a military career. The influence of British imperialism upon Victorian British society and culture created and encouraged an elitist attitude amongst the British military.

Imperialist policies developed from the 16th and 17th centuries onward. The British Government officially united Scotland, England and Wales in 1707. The 1800 Act of Union officially joined the thrones of Ireland and Great Britain. The British government had major

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influence on the balance of power in Europe especially in light of British role in the Napoleonic Wars. Following the Napoleonic Wars, various Wars of Independence, and the Crimean War, the British people and government tried to live under the façade of “Splendid Isolation” claiming to stay out of European politics. The goal of “Splendid Isolation” could never be fully or legitimately realized considering the Great Britain’s position in the rise of European Imperialism. Great Britain had too many global interests and concerns to remain aloof of European power politics.

By Gordon’s birth in early 1833 the British Empire expanded economically and territorially so that it had a presence on every habitable continent as well as a naval presence on major maritime trade routes. British dominated global shipping by 1850. “Some 60% of the tonnage of the world’s ocean-going vessels was British, and perhaps one third of the world’s international trade involved British interests.”

British economic dominance only increased London’s prominence as a global financial center. British interests changed over the course of the 19th century as the global economy went into transition from predominately mercantilist policies to free-market capitalist policies. The British military’s priorities shifted from maintaining control of territory to protecting trade. The necessity of the Army lessened as the number of troops required to protect British interests decreased. It is logical to conclude that British concerns for naval supremacy outweighed concerns for the Army. Suffice it to say the British Army was not by any means overlooked or neglected even though naval matters took priority.

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4 Ibid.

The British Army suffered a great deal of neglect following the Napoleonic war. As Correlli Barnett describes it:

The [British] national sense of danger, the sense of struggle between nations, was atrophied. The mercenary army made possible Victorian Pacifistic optimism; it permitted the creation of the mental climate where the British were ready to project their own sense of law and civic docility into the jungle of international rivalry, and believe that a treaty between powers was as safe a guarantee as a British legal contract. Yet in Europe it was only the prestige conferred by Waterloo that provided British policy... with weight.\textsuperscript{6}

The British Army acted as the imperial whipping boy. The British people wanted to ignore the Army until they required its services. The Crimean war brought the unwarranted neglect of the Army to light eventually leading to reform in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{7} As with many major powers the army was put on the back shelf following the success and prestige of major victory. Gordon stands out as one of the few British Army officers who stood out in the public eye during the post-Napoleonic era.

Charles “Chinese” Gordon stood out as a national hero in Victorian Britain because of his qualities, achievements, and legacy. A major part of Gordon’s legacy is the sheer volume of personal accounts and correspondence he left behind. In 1881 a London firm published Gordon’s \textit{Gordon in Central Africa, 1874-1879 : from original letters and documents}. Three books authored by Gordon were published in 1884. \textit{Reflections in Palestine: 1883}, \textit{General Gordon’s letters from the Crimea, the Danube and Armenia, August 16, 1884 to November 17, 1858}, and \textit{Text of proclamation of General Gordon to the inhabitants of the Soudan} were all published in 1884 just prior to Gordon’s death in early 1885. Gordon’s friends and allies in Britain hurried to have these works published in order to further sway public opinion. The books supplemented continuing articles and updates on Gordon’s predicament at Khartoum published

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., 273-274

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 273.
in *The Times*. Several other works and collections of correspondence published after Gordon’s death helped solidify public opinion of Gordon. *The journals of Major-Gen. C.G. Gordon, C.B., at Kartoum* and *General [Charles George] Gordon's private Diary of his exploits in China* published in 1885 further solidify Gordon’s status as a national hero in the public view. In 1888 Gordon’s sister also published a collection of letters from Gordon entitled: *Letters of general C.G. Gordon to his sister, M.A. Gordon*. In all Gordon’s writings cover the span of his entire career. Gordon leaves his own account and personal account from his years as a junior officer in the Crimean War to his death during the fall of Khartoum. Over the years Gordon’s writings have given scholars unprecedented accesses into his private thoughts and opinions and in effect minimize speculation over Gordon’s intentions and motives.

The first scholarly work on Gordon came from Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger. Boulger’s *The Life of Gordon*, stands out from other works on Gordon for several reasons. Boulger knew Gordon on a somewhat personal basis. Boulger actually asked Gordon’s permission to write a biography in 1881 to which Gordon’s “laughing reply was: “You know I shall never read it, but you can have all the papers now in the possession of my brother, Sir Henry Gordon”.” Boulger functioned as editor of *General Gordon’s Letters from the Crimea, The Danube and Armenia*, published in 1884. His introduction to the letters reflects his intent to rally the people and create public pressure to force Prime Minister Gladstone to relieve Gordon and end the siege at Khartoum. Boulger’s contribution to Gordon’s legacy is immeasurable. His connection to Gordon leaves scholars with a well focused survey of Gordon’s life in spite of any prejudices or preferences in the content of Boulger’s work. Other scholars and writers of the had considerably less access than Boulger.

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In 1899, a young British officer named Winston Spencer Churchill published his own account of the war in the Sudan. The first edition was printed less than three years after the publication of Boulger’s *The Life of Gordon*. Churchill’s *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* only discussed Gordon’s role in the Sudan briefly. Churchill recognized that Gordon would have a lasting impact on British history. Churchill provides a very vivid and elaborate portrayal even going to the extent of noting the juxtaposition of two idealistic and religious leaders, Gordon and the Mahdi.\(^9\) In Churchill’s own words: “It is impossible to study any part of Charles Gordon’s career without being drawn to all the rest.”\(^10\) He also portrays Gordon as a man “sustained by two great moral and mental stimulants: his honour as a man, his faith as a Christian.”\(^11\) The British people of the Victorian era claimed Gordon as a hero and a martyr.

Lytton Strachey considered Gordon to be one of the most distinguished people of the Victorian era. The section on Gordon in Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* has long been one of the standard scholarly works on Gordon. The book first published in 1918 makes it one of the first accounts written long enough after the fall of Khartoum to cut through some of the myth, legend and propaganda surrounding Gordon’s life. Strachey’s account like so many others portrays Gordon as an honorable man and a devout Christian.

As with any topic views and perceptions will change over time. In 1966 *Gordon of Khartoum: Martyr and Misfit*, by Anthony Nutting challenged the accepted view of Gordon. Nutting’s thesis is that Gordon was not a hero to be honored. Nutting proposes that Gordon


\(^10\) Ibid., 14.

\(^11\) Ibid., 56.
should be remembered more as a lunatic than as a leader. Nutting blames Gordon for the “disaster” at Khartoum instead of blaming Gladstone’s government. His work is particularly valuable because he questions what had previously been unquestionable. Scholarship is about scrutinizing and analyzing. Nutting’s scholarship reflects the “disillusioned” attitude and view held by many scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. He wrote in a time when culture emphasized questioning authority.

Charles Chenevix Trench went even further than Nutting in challenging the traditional view of Gordon. Trench’s work *Charley Gordon: An Eminent Victorian Reassessed* goes so far to accuse Gordon of being the most unworthy hero in history. He writes what many would consider to be a very overly-critical portrayal of Gordon. Trench portrays Gordon as a flippant, half-mad, chain smoking, heavy drinker. This perspective seems very odd considering Gordon’s accolades. Gordon attained the ranks of: Major-General in the British Army, Field-Marshall in the Turkish Army, and Titu (Field Marshal) in the Chinese Army. In addition to his military ranks he received several honors. Queen Victoria knighted him Companion of the Order of Bath, a British Order of Chivalry. The Turks entitled him Grand Cordon Medjidie the highest designation of the Medjidie a knightly order of the Turkish Empire. The Turkish sultan also granted Gordon the title Pasha which is the equivalent to the British usage of the title Lord. The Emperor of China granted him the coveted Huang Ma Gua (yellow riding jacket) for exemplary service. Trench proposes a valid argument. However had he made the argument in 1890 most people would probably thought him as made as he tries to portray Gordon. Thankfully scholarship on Gordon does not end with Nutting or Trench. Gordon’s legacy does not exist solely on overly-critical scholarship.

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13 Boulger, iii.
The negative and pessimistic scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s challenged traditional views on Gordon. In 1993 John Pollock revived a more traditional view of Gordon. While Pollock acknowledges Gordon’s flaws while at the same time honoring a great man. Pollock approaches Gordon with shrewdness rather than trying to overanalyze the man. In Pollock’s own words: “The true Gordon has been smothered by layers of interpretation and assessment: I therefore tell the story straight, in the context of the times…”14 Pollock brings to light a mistake often made by scholars. There is a fine line between analysis and over-analysis. Heroes must stand up to the test of scrutiny. Men can make the gravest mistakes with the best of intentions. In the end a hero is not judged by their flaws and failures but by their actions, decisions and values.

The foundation for Gordon’s career came as much from his family as from any personal choice. Gordon’s father Henry William Gordon held the rank of Major-General. Many viewed Henry William Gordon as an excellent officer and a strict disciplinarian.15 His father’s emphasis on discipline no doubt influenced Gordon’s exacting sense of morality and honor. As fourth son Charles had little reason to expect any great inheritance from his father. At the age of ten Gordon left his fathers household to study at Taunton.16 At ten he also faced the daunting challenge of dealing with the death of his 16 year old sister Emily. Gordon’s eldest sister Augusta developed a close relationship with Gordon following the death of their sister. She also helped start Gordon on a path toward developing his great zeal and faith in Jesus Christ.17

15 Boulger, 3.
16 Ibid., 4.
legacy Gordon leaves begins with the influence of his family. Gordon followed the path laid out for him by his father.

Gordon directly traced his military heritage back at least three generations. His great-grandfather served as a lieutenant in the Jacobite rising of 1745. His grandfather William August Gordon fought in North America during the Seven Years War also known as the French and Indian War. Following the war he attained the rank of captain in 1770 and retired in 1776. Gordon’s father William Henry Gordon entered the Royal Artillery. W. H. Gordon achieved the rank of Lieutenant General before his death in 1865. Gordon was set to follow in his father’s path via the Royal Artillery by entering the Royal Military Academy in 1848. Gordon did not maintain enough discipline however and fell back in his studies. He finally graduated in 1852 with the rank of second lieutenant in the Corp of Royal Engineers. The Royal Engineers maintained a rather haughty view considering “themselves the professional elite of the British army”. This rather high self view among engineers would validate some of the scholars that claim Gordon had a higher opinion of himself than he should have. His position in the Royal Engineers gave him a much wider range of opportunities. The army sent engineering officers all over the world to build and construct railways, bridges, buildings, docks and siege works. The engineers offered far more excitement and adventure than any other branch of the army.

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18 Boulger, 2-3.
20 Boulger, 3.
21 Mersh.
22 Ibid.
Gordon’s First assignments as an Officer in the Royal Engineers did not live up to the exotic and distant assignment possibilities the Corps had to offer. He was assigned to construction duty at the Pembroke Docks in Wales. While serving at Pembroke his religious sentiments grow and develop as Gordon learns more about god through the ministry of a fellow officer in the Engineers.\textsuperscript{23} Most people would find it odd that a man finds God serving in the army. As an officer and a gentleman in the service of the Queen’s army Gordon did indeed find his faith. His correspondence reveals his increased interest in spirituality.\textsuperscript{24} Gordon’s letters to his sister Augusta reveal a great deal of concern for “his soul and his desire to “subdue the flesh”.”\textsuperscript{25} Although some scholars cannot seem to understand religious based avoidance of certain “instinctual desires” Gordon is at least one case that proves mental and spiritual discipline can overcome the impulses of the body. While Gordon retains good relationships with his parents and siblings he never seems to desire a family of his own. This choice is either preferential or religious in nature with the possibility of dual influence. His correspondence with Augusta also reveals his desire to be with God in heaven.\textsuperscript{26} While some scholars such as Nutting or Trench would indicate this as a sign of Gordon’s possible insanity or eccentricity there is a far simpler explanation. Gordon is realizing his faith in Jesus Christ. The teachings of the holy bible tell him that heaven is a wonderful place free of pain and suffering. His desire to Die and go to heaven is not so much a death wish as much it is a wish for a better life. Gordon is not suicidal at this point in his life or any point of his life for that matter. His religious beliefs give him peace and freedom from fear of death. From a secular view point Gordon’s sentiments

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Boulger, 8.
\textsuperscript{25} Mersh.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
toward death seem slightly suicidal and fanatical. From a Christian perspective Gordon simply
comes to terms with basic Christian theology. Gordon had no real exposure to personal risk of
life before he left the Pembroke docks in 1853. During his service in the Crimean War death
surrounded his daily life.

Gordon’s arrived in a very indistinctive manner on the Crimean Peninsula at Balaclava
on January 1, 1855. His anonymity soon faded as he gained a reputation from his inferiors,
peers, and superiors. His unit built huts at Balaclava to house troops landing there. Gordon
eagerly awaited the opportunity for real combat. In the middle of the Siege of Sebastopol Gordon
describes the city as the prettiest city he had ever seen, and the surrounding countryside as
picturesque.27 Gordon managed to get the most dangerous front line an Engineer officer could
get in the front lines a Sebastopol. The casualty rates of both dead and wounded engineer junior
officers mapping the Russian trenches and positions were staggering. Gordon had a very curious
attitude toward the whole ordeal. As Paul Mersh puts it: “To do this job he had to look over the
parapet and then draw what he could see, many young engineer officers were killed doing this,
Gordon was surprised and somewhat disappointed that he wasn’t.”28 Gordon certainly left the
impression he was a very odd and slightly eccentric junior officer.

His attitude and eagerness is well noted by his peers and superiors. Sir Charles Staveley
served with Gordon as a junior officer and had a very interesting adventure with Gordon one
night:

I happened to mention to Charlie Gordon that I was field officer for the day for command
in the trenches next day, and , having only just returned from sick leave, that I was
ignorant of the geography of our left attack. He said at once, “Oh! Come down with me

27 Charles George Gordon, and D. C. de K. Boulger, General Gordon's Letters from the Crimea, the
Danube, and Armenia, Aug. 18, 1854, to Nov. 17, 1858, (Elibron classics. [S.l.]: Elibron Classics, Adamant Media
Corp, 2005), 13-14.

28 Mersh.
to-night after dark, and I will show you over the trenches.” He drew me out a very clear sketch of the lines (which I have now), and down I went accordingly. He explained every nook and corner, and took me along outside our most advance trench, the bouquets (volleys of small shells fired from mortars) and other missiles flying about us in, to me, a Very unpleasant manner, he taking the matter remarkably coolly.\textsuperscript{29}

Gordon’s character is revealed in many ways via this seemingly anecdotal narrative. Gordon always sought to help and serve his fellow soldiers. He did not fear death, almost to the point of seeking it. He paid very close attention to detail in his work, accounting for the smallest detail of information he needed. Gordon stood tall when other officers dove for cover. His faith explains his seemingly odd behavior perfectly. As Gordon walked through the valley of the shadow of death, he feared no evil as he knew the Lord was with him. Gordon’s faith based courage and undaunted devotion to duty made his superiors take special notice of him. As Sir George Chesney described Gordon:

In his humble position as an Engineer subaltern he attracted the notice of his superiors, not merely by his energy and activity, but by a special aptitude for war, developing itself amid the trench work before Sebastopol in a personal knowledge of the enemy’s movements such as no other officer attained. We used to send him to find out what new move the Russians were making.\textsuperscript{30}

Gordon lived according to his beliefs and values during the Crimean war. He did not allow his beliefs to conflict or hinder the performance of his duties. In many ways Gordon did not consider his duties to conflict with his faith. If anything his faith made him a better more confident officer. Nothing could be more powerful on the battlefield than the sense that it was a win/win situation. In all of Gordon’s daring exploits he only had two possible outcomes. On one hand he had nothing to fear because god would protect him to continue to perform his duties another day. On the other hand if he died he got to go spend eternity with God in Heaven. What on the surface seems like lunacy or eccentricity is truly the rational action of a faithful Christian

\textsuperscript{29} Boulger, 19.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
believer. In all of his correspondence with his brother he makes little to no mention of concern for his own life or personal safety. The adventurous life on the front lines ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1856.

Gordon’s abilities as a surveyor brought him an assignment in the Danube and Armenia. As Assistant Boundary Commissioner Gordon had the very dull task of defining and mapping the newly designated border of Russia and Turkey. In his letter to his brother dated September 10, 1858, Gordon writes:

Since my last letter we have not done much beyond replacing the temporary boundary marks I erected last year by stone pyramids. The Turk, Yarif Bey, has been ill ever since he left the Koblian river, although the climate is excellent. I expect there is a little shamming in it. The Russian commissioner and he are always bickering about trifles, and I am pretty tired of my post of peacemaker, for which I am naturally not well adapted… Our life is very monotonous.

Gordon’s view of life seems to fade while his life is not on the line. The same man who describes a town under siege the prettiest town he had ever seen describes his life in peace time as the epitome of boredom and monotony. Still Gordon ever the soldier completes his assignment and returned to England.

On April 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1859, Gordon officially attained the rank of Captain. Gordon received a new assignment in addition to his promotion. The British army entrusted Gordon to train the next generation of Engineer officers as Field-Work Instructor and Adjutant at Chatham. Gordon could not resist the call to arms even in light of his noble task of passing on his knowledge to the next generation. The Army accepted his volunteer for active service and on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of July,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Gordon, \textit{General Gordon's Letters from the Crimea}.
\item Mersh.
\item Gordon, \textit{General Gordon's Letters from the Crimea}, 198-199.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
1860, Gordon sailed for China. The Second Opium War did not wait for Gordon to arrive. The Second Opium War actually started long before Gordon ever left Great Britain. Once again the French and the British found themselves allied in a common cause. The Second Opium War pitted the Anglo-French alliance against the Imperial forces of China. The war had purely imperialistic intentions. Confusion constantly factored into the war. The majority of the British troops were native Indian regiments made up of Sikhs, Punjabis, and Pathans. In addition the British recruited local troops and even commanded the loyalty of the Chinese governors of Kowloon and Shanghai. Gordon volunteered relatively late in the conflict. By Gordon’s arrival in China the Second Opium War had already ended. Fortunately Gordon’s travel did not go to waste as the Chinese Emperor soon turned to his former adversaries to help crush a religious rebellion.

Strangely enough Gordon’s fate led him to lead pagan and mercenary forces against Chinese Christians fighting to establish their own “New Jerusalem”. The Taiping rebels led by Hong Xiuquan cannot be considered run of the mill Christians. Taiping rebels share more theological ideas with Mormons than they do with catholic or protestant Christians. Hong Xiuquan took the texts he obtained from devoted protestant missionaries a little too literally. He believed that the Bible texts and Christian doctrines he read convinced him he was the younger brother of Jesus. Xiuquan believed that his father, God, gave him the task of ethnically cleansing China to remove the Manchu race and establish an earthly paradise. The Taiping Rebellion began in earnest in early 1851. By the time of Gordon’s arrival in 1860 the Imperial Chinese

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34 Boulger, 45.

35 Mersh.

36 Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria’s Little Wars*, (New York: Norton, 1985), 139-140.

forces neared the breaking point due to the combination of European pressure and the rising popularity of the Taiping Rebellion. As the European forces turned south to deal with the rebels Gordon joined the British command staff as Engineer Officer. The British forces under General Staveley in cooperation with a native mercenary army led by American General Ward and the French contingent moved south to protect the European settlements at Shanghai. Staveley thought very highly of Gordon. He told Gordon’s brother, Sir Henry that Gordon “was in these operations of the greatest use…especially in reconnoitering the enemy’s defenses, and arranging for ladder-parties crossing the moats, and escalading. He was also a source of much anxiety to me from the daring manner he approached the enemy’s works to acquire information.” Yet again Gordon proved his valor and competence as a subordinate officer.

Gordon finally had the opportunity for a real command of his own following the death of General Ward. The so called “Ever Victorious Army” needed stricter discipline. Contrary to their name the E.V.A. lost many engagements prior to Gordon’s command. Gordon inherited a motley assortment or irascibles. The officer core of the E.V.A. consisted of any European in shanghai willing to volunteer. The call for volunteers produced a rag tag collection of fiends and inexperienced amateurs. The Chinese recruits flocked to the promise of pay double that of what they would receive in the Imperial army. The E.V.A. needed good leadership to make up for the lax discipline and inexperienced junior officers. Gordon acted quickly to reverse policies of barbaric pillaging practices. Morale increased with each new victory after Gordon took

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38 Pollock, 53-54.
39 Ibid., 54.
40 Ibid., 55.
41 Ibid., 54-55.
measures to bring regular army discipline into the E.V.A. Gordon successfully reorganized and retrained the Ever Victorious Army transforming it into a disciplined and effective fighting force. Gordon quickly gained notoriety in the British press with all the victories he achieved while commanding the Ever Victorious Army. He earned his moniker Charles “Chinese” Gordon in the hearts of the British people. Gordon devoted his command to maintaining discipline and morality unusual for the era. He set high standards for the men under his command. All the training and discipline he established amounted to nothing if not for his exceptional leadership capabilities. An article in *The Times* compares Gordon to General Robert E. Lee and General George Meade. In China Gordon proved himself not only as a valuable subaltern but as a field commander as well.

Gordon enjoyed an international reputation as an affect of the accounts of his Exploits in China. In 1872 Gordon had a chance encounter with the Prime Minister of Egypt while en route to inspect British military cemeteries in the Crimean. In 1873 the Khedive (ruler) of Egypt sent Gordon an official offer. It was not uncommon for British Army Officers to be given employment offers from foreign governments. Gordon stands out as being particularly uncommon because when the Khedive offered him £10,000 he refused to accept more than £2,000 a year. Gordon preferred to live by comparably more modest means than he could have. What he did not need for his own expenses he often gave to either his family or to charities. Gordon explains his decision on purely religious terms stating: “My object is to show the Khedive and his people that gold and silver idols are not worshipped by all the world. They are powerful gods, but not so powerful as our God.” Gordon had a simple mission from the

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43 *The Times*: “Chinese Gordon.” – Sir Charles Staveley, now, Jul 18, 1873; pg. 5; issue 27745; col E.

44 Boulger, 140.
Egyptian government. Gordon faced the challenge of combating and eliminating the slave trade in the Sudan and the Darfur region.\textsuperscript{46} For four years Gordon struggled to end the slave trade with great success but little recognition. He describes his term as lieutenant governor and later governor of the Sudan as exciting but tiring. His Ideas and plans for the Sudan were considered to radical to be supported by the British Government. Gordon proposed native rule and had used rather unconventional means to end the slave trade at its base.\textsuperscript{47} He resigned his post in 1879 and returned for England.

Gordon did not wait long for new opportunities to present themselves. The British Governmental circles began to treat Gordon as a black sheep. Gordon the “Eminent Victorian” supported the cause of home rule in many different countries including Botswana, South Africa and Ireland.\textsuperscript{48} If there is one thing Victorian British society generally disliked it would the thought of giving Ireland home rule. He arrived back in London in 1880 with offers of appointment from the King of Belgium and the newly appointed governor-general of India. Although he chose to accept the Governor of India’s offer to act as a private secretary he resigned rather quickly.\textsuperscript{49} Gordon then accepted an offer from the inspector-general of customs in China, but again quickly resigned shortly after arriving in Beijing. Eventually Gordon decided to travel to the Holy Land and visit the holy sites at Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{50} It seems rather odd that a man as religious as Gordon with the means to travel would hold off pilgrimage until age fifty.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Marsh.

\textsuperscript{47} Boulger, 201.

\textsuperscript{48} Marsh.

\textsuperscript{49} Pollock, 191-192.

\textsuperscript{50} Trench, 180-183.
Any one in Palestine could easily mistake General Gordon for a simple European tourist. For one year Gordon remained in Palestine using the bible to attempt to locate various important religious sites. Even in his most pious moments he persisted as an Engineer. Gordon’s put others before himself on a constant basis. Gordon gave away an estimated 90% of his officer’s salary to the less fortunate. His devotion to Christianity is unquestionable in spite of the fact that he never committed to place one denomination over another. Gordon maintained friendly relationships with ministers ranging from Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and Catholics alike. The way Gordon saw it “the church is like the British Army, one army but many regiments.” Gordon refused to succumb to societies attempts to force a separation between religious life and secular life. Gordon saw no difference or separation between his career and his faith. His faith made him strong. His devotion brought him respect. The British government called on Gordon again almost immediately upon his return from Palestine in 1883.

The Mahdi revolt representing the first subsequent jihad in modern history created a rather complex international crisis. The British controlled the Suez Canal which significantly decreased the distant to India and the pacific colonies. Any revolt or civil unrest in the region therefore constituted a threat to British national and imperial security. The Government under Prime Minister William Gladstone remained reluctant to commit British military force to put down the Mahdi’s revolt. The British government did not have the luxury of inaction in the

52 Marsh.
53 Ibid.
54 Barnett, 321.
Sudanese situation. The British government sent orders to the Egyptians to abandon the Sudan. The Egyptians remained unsatisfied to simply allow the Sudan to break away. Prime Minister Gladstone requested that Gordon return to oversee the evacuation of all Egyptians and Europeans from the Sudan as a gesture of British commitment to the region.\footnote{Ibid., 90.} Gordon agreed to return to the Sudan much to the surprise of many prominent political figures.

Gordon believed he knew more about the situation than Gladstone’s government did. Gordon’s journey along the Nile from Cairo brought him to Khartoum just in time. Gordon landed at Khartoum February 18, 1884. A month later on March 18, 1884, the Mahdi’s forces began the siege of Khartoum.\footnote{Ibid., 90-120.} Some scholars claim Gordon’s command was inhibited by near-madness. They claim Gordon changed his plans flippantly or irrationally.\footnote{Trench, 9.} Gordon did have a certain eccentricity about him but he was not irrational. In many ways such scholars have overlooked a major part of Gordon’s personality. In many ways Gordon’s refusal to leave Khartoum shows his deep devotion to his core values of service to others.

The siege of Khartoum was as much a battle of willpower between Gladstone and Gordon as it is a battle of willpower between the Mahdi and Gordon. Gladstone ordered Gordon to evacuate under any circumstances. Gordon did not believe in abandoning the Sudanese loyalists in Khartoum.\footnote{Butler, 124-125.} The Mahdi sought to purify Islam cleansing it by fire if necessary.\footnote{Ibid., 24-30.} The Mahdi posed a physical threat to Gordon at Khartoum and Gladstone posed a moral threat. Public support and outcry for Gordon’s relief spread through all of Great Britain. \textit{The Times}

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published letters from concerned citizens calling for the government to rush aid to Gordon.  

Various private organizations raised funds and held rallies to spur Gladstone’s government into action. Gordon’s supporters achieved their progress slowly. Gladstone finally folded under the immense pressure and public outcry in October of 1884. Timing and preparations took far too long. The relief column reached Khartoum on January 26, 1885 two days after it fell to the Mahdi’s forces. Gordon died and his enemies severed his head as a trophy. Major-General Gordon’s relief came two days too late.

The public outcry astonished Gladstone and his government. Many scholars consider the failure to relieve Gordon in time as Gladstone’s greatest mistake. *The Times* published a lengthy article covering the details of the Siege and fall of Khartoum as well as describing Gordon’s career at length. The Public mourned the loss of their great hero. No sooner had news of Gordon’s death arrived than talk circulated concerning the construction of monuments, parks and schools in honor of Major General Charles “Chinese” George Gordon. Many blamed Gladstone to the extent of changing a common acronym for Gladstone, the Grand Old Man, to Gordon’s Own Murderer. Gladstone resigned later that year. Gladstone’s political career did not completely die and he eventually won re-election. Needless to say the memory of Gordon haunted his career like a ghost.

Gordon’s legacy as a Christian and a soldier remains clear. He devoted his life to serving the less fortunate and the men under his command. While there are scholars who detract and

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61 *The Times: General Gordon’s Mission*, Jan 31, 1884; pg. 4; issue 31044; col B.

62 *The Times: The Abandonment of General Gordon*, May 06, 1884; pg. 10; issue 31126; col C.

63 Marsh.

64 *The Times: General Gordon*, Feb 12, 1885; pg. 5

attempt to disparage and even vilify Gordon, his actions speak louder than their words. As a
government official he tried to better the situation of those under his charge. He gave away a
considerable percentage of his own resources to philanthropic causes. Lord Tennyson writes an
excellent summary of the man behind the legend in a very succinct and sincere epitaph in
Westminster Abbey on General Gordon. History shall indeed remember Gordon as:

    Warrior of God, Man’s friend, not here below,
    But somewhere dead far in the waste Soudan;
    Thou livest in all hearts, for all men know
    This earth hath borne no simpler, nobler man.\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Exploits in China}, xi.}

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\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Exploits in China}, xi.}
Primary Sources


*The Times*

Secondary Sources


This source is used because of the lack of information elsewhere concerning the military career of Charles George Gordon’s Grandfather, William Augustus Gordon. While this information may seem superfluous it is intended to relay the importance of Gordon’s military heritage and because this was the only source with information on W. A. Gordon readily available it will have to suffice.


The Victorian Web. www.victorianweb.org

This source is used mostly as a general reference and for areas not covered sufficiently in the other sources. This Website is a valid source because it is written by teachers and scholars focusing on the various fields of their topics. The Site also provides a wonderful selection of primary source material.


World-Cat Database. www.worldcat.org

This website is used to obtain publishing dates for the various work written by General Gordon. It has a wonderful catalog of sources available from all over the world. It was also used to help find other sources.