

Paul Fox

Egypt on the Thames

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire.

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness



James Gillray, *Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt; Destruction of Revolutionary Crocodiles;_or_The British Hero Cleansing the Mouth of the Nile*, 1798

© Trustees of the British Museum

Did you go to the exhibition *Bonaparte and the British: Prints and Propaganda in the Age of Napoleon* at the British Museum (until 16 August 2015)? If you did, you probably looked at this engraving by prominent satirist, James Gillray. Published in December, four months after the Battle of The Nile (1—3 August 1798), it depicts Horatio Nelson, who led the British fleet to victory, standing colossus-like in the estuary of the Nile with the Giza pyramids and city of Alexandria behind him. The battle is refought in the print: The British warships (Nelson) break into the French

fleet (crocodiles) in an aggressive manoeuvre that shatters French cohesion. One crocodile (the frigate *Sérieuse*) sinks, other ships flee, many are taken as prizes, while the French flagship, *Orient*, explodes.

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt triggered a military response putting British 'boots on the ground' during the first of many operations over the next century. A British expeditionary force finally expelled the French army from Egypt in 1802, but five years later the British Army briefly occupied Alexandria. In 1882 Britain intervened to crush a military coup in the Nile delta. Soon afterwards British forces were committed to countering a long-running Islamist insurgency that lasted until 1899. During the First World War large numbers of British and Empire troops trained in, and operated out of, Egyptian territory.

The material traces of those wars are scattered all over Britain today. Gillray took us all the way to the Nile to celebrate a major naval victory, so let's follow his example and head down to the river: the River Thames. There, on the Victoria Embankment and beyond, we can plot out how British wars in Egypt are remembered today.



Sir Reginald Blomfield (pylon) and William Reid Dick (sculpture), Royal Air Force Memorial, 1923

Whitehall Extension, Victoria Embankment Gardens

Photograph: author

Our journey begins in the riverside grounds outside the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall, where a large gilded eagle perches on a stone pylon between the trees on the Embankment, looking out across the Thames. This monument to the dawn of airpower commemorates the Royal Naval Air Service, the Royal Flying Corps, and, from April 1918, the Royal Air Force. It is, in part, a memorial to all those who

participated in operations in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean during the First World War.



Sir Hamo Thornycroft, *General Charles Gordon Memorial*, 1887 Victoria Embankment Gardens, Whitehall Extension

Photograph: Hāleh Anvari

Walk 100 metres or so to the junction with Horse Guards Avenue to find Hamo Thornycroft's *Gordon Memorial* by the entrance to the Whitehall Extension. Gordon's death in Khartoum in January 1885 sparked an outpouring of grief in Britain where he was lionised for his principled stance against slavery, and for his refusal to abandon Egyptian troops under his command to the forces of an Islamic insurgency. Thornycroft's statue stood in Trafalgar Square until 1943, when it was

removed to make way for wartime propaganda installations. It wasn't until 1953 that it was re-erected in its current, less prestigious, location.



Cecil Brown, *Imperial Camel Corps Memorial*, 1921

Victoria Embankment Gardens

Photograph: Hāleh Anvari

Leave the Whitehall Extension, and walk downstream to the section of Victoria Embankment Gardens just past Embankment Underground Station. Here you will find Cecil Brown's modest memorial to the members of the Imperial Camel Corps who served in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine during the First World War. You probably

thought you had finished with Gordon when you left him gazing down the Nile from the roof of the Governor's Palace in Khartoum; but did you know that the Camel Corps was raised in 1884 to provide mounted infantry to spearhead the (unsuccessful) Nile Expedition to rescue him from Khartoum?



Joseph Whitehead (drinking fountain) and Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm (medallion),
Herbert Stewart Memorial, 1887

Hans Place, London

Photograph: author

Gordon is very present in London. If you have time later catch the Tube to Knightsbridge to find the related memorial to General Herbert Stewart in Hans Place, behind the Harrods department store. In 1884 Stewart was a rising star in the British

Army. He had led the cavalry pursuit into Cairo in the closing phase of the 1882 Egypt campaign, and then secured his reputation as a battlefield commander during fighting around Suakin in early 1884. Later that year he led the Desert Column (Camel Corps and cavalry) in a desperate bid to cross the neck of the Great Bend in the Nile and reach Khartoum before it fell. The attempt failed and Stewart was mortally wounded during one of the most close-fought battles of the era.



J. T. Tussaud, *The Mahdi Group*, after 1885

© Madame Tussaud's

Did you know that Gordon's 'portrait', or wax work, was a popular exhibit at Madame Tussaud's for over 40 years? Madame Tussaud's business model (and she was a formidable business woman) included collecting as many 'authentic' 'relics' to clothe, equip and accompany the wax figures as the company could get its hands on. Unfortunately, the building you visit today was gutted by fire in 1925. Almost everything on display was destroyed, including Gordon's very own camel harness;

but photographs of earlier exhibition displays have survived. In this one we see four Egyptian Sudan ‘portraits’ grouped together. From the left: General William Hicks, General Charles Gordon, Muhammad Ahmed (the self-proclaimed Mahdi), and Gordon’s aide, Colonel John Stewart. All three British officers were killed by Ahmed’s jihadist forces on different occasions between September 1883 and January 1885. The ‘Mahdi’ himself died of typhus six months later. At the base of this popular shrine to British martyrs, visitors were able to gaze at ‘relics’ associated with their lives and the military campaign in the Egyptian Sudan, including swords, helmets and items of equipment.



Obelisk of Tuthmosis III ('Cleopatra's Needle'), c.1450 BCE

Victoria Embankment, originally at Heliopolis, Egypt

Photograph: Hāleh Anvari

Returning to the Embankment, however, turn away from the Camel Corps Memorial and take the path through the nearby café that leads onto the Embankment itself. Look across the road and slightly to your left to locate '*Cleopatra's Needle*' and its associated bronze sphinxes, an object associated with the British campaign against Napoleon in Egypt and the Mediterranean. The British army had tried to transport it to Britain in 1802 and even constructed a specially-designed wharf, but it proved too difficult to move. In 1877 it was lifted into a specially designed floating iron cylinder to be towed to Britain. The cylinder had to be cut adrift during a storm in the Bay of Biscay. Luckily, fishermen found it four days later, and the obelisk finally made it up the Thames on 21 January 1878.

The principal inscription on its new base reads:

This obelisk

Prostrate for centuries

On the sands of Alexandria

Was presented to the British nation A.D. 1819 by

Mahommed Ali Viceroy of Egypt

A worthy memorial of our distinguished countrymen

Nelson and Abercromby



George John Vulliamy, *Sphinx*, 1878

Victoria Embankment

Photograph: Hāleh Anvari

Two bronze sphinxes flank the Needle and Egyptian motifs feature on the Embankment's street furniture. Note how the upstream Sphinx was damaged by shrapnel during the first aircraft bombing raid on London on the evening of 4 September 1917.



Benches with Sphinx Motifs

Victoria Embankment

Photograph: Hāleh Anvari

British entanglement with Egypt's ancient and modern histories is especially present at this site, which today is hidden by the canopies of neighbouring trees, and more recent monuments compete for attention along this stretch of the river. It wasn't always like that; William Wyllie represents the Needle as dominating the sweep of the Victoria Embankment shortly after being installed.



William Wyllie, *Charing Cross Bridge*, after 1878.

Courtesy of National Maritime Museum

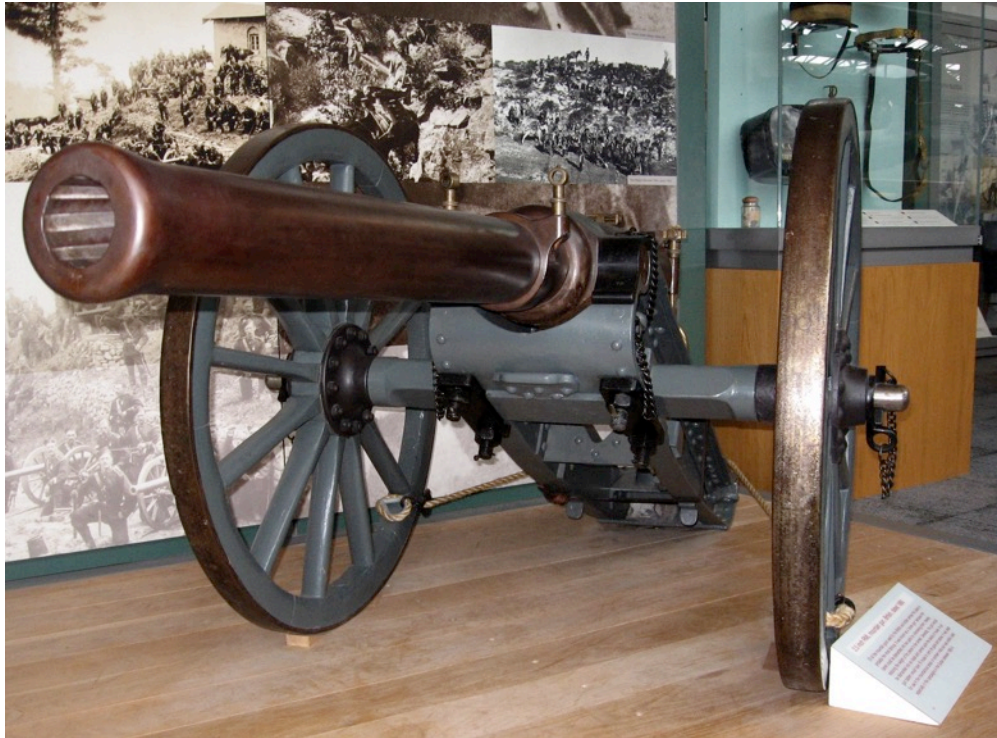
Walk back up the Embankment and take a river boat from the pier just below Charing Cross Bridge (you can see it Wyllie's work) to Greenwich, and follow the signs to the National Maritime Museum. Make your way to the top floor exhibition, 'Nelson, Navy, Nation'. Here you will discover just how significant the Battle of the Nile was at the time, and still is to our popular understanding of the Napoleonic wars.



Main Royal Masthead from French Flagship 'L'Orient', c.1795.

Courtesy of National Maritime Museum

The masthead of the *Orient* was pulled from the sea after the ship exploded during the Battle of the Nile. It was acquired by Nelson, who placed it on display in his house at Merton. Today it is valued as a significant relic associated with the life of Nelson in an exhibition in what is, in effect, a shrine (yes, another one) to Nelson in a national museum.

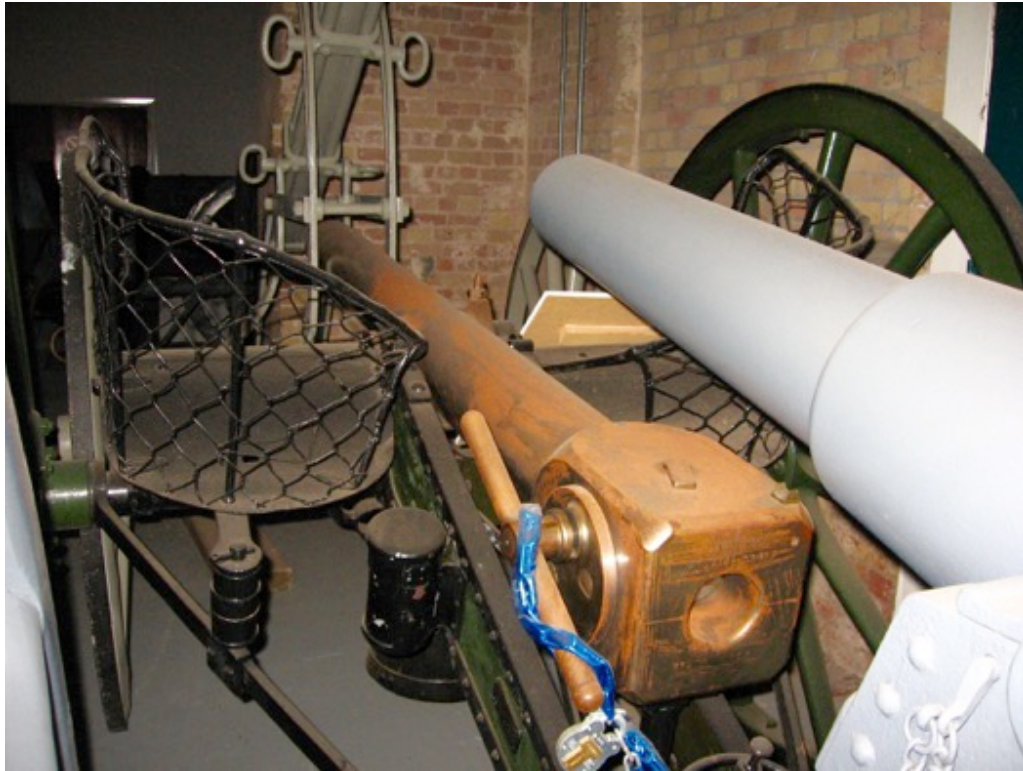


2.5 Inch RML Mountain Gun, c.1880

Courtesy of Firepower, Royal Artillery Museum

Photograph: author

If you want to see examples of military equipment used by the British armed forces, or taken as trophies, during wars in Egypt, take the Tube or river ferry to Woolwich Arsenal and follow the signs to Firepower, The Royal Artillery Museum, on the south bank of the Thames. The label accompanying the 2.5 Inch RML Mountain Gun on public display informs the visitor that this type of weapon ‘was widely used, especially in the campaigns in the [Egyptian] Sudan between 1883—84’.



Krupp C73 Field Gun, Captured at Tel-el-Kebir, 1882

Courtesy of Royal Artillery Museum

Photograph: author

Unfortunately, the object of greatest interest to us is a German-made Krupp C73 Field Gun currently in storage. In 1882 a joint Royal Navy and Army expeditionary force checked the ambitions of Egyptian nationalist Ahmed Urabi, restored the established political order, and secured British interests in the region. The short campaign culminated in British victory at Tel-el-Kebir, after which several captured Krupp guns were shipped to Britain. Like Gordon's statue originally sited in Trafalgar Square, and the obelisk obscured by foliage on the Embankment, the C73 has been relegated to the margins of the museum – and our historical consciousness.



Reconquest of the Sudan Display Case

Courtesy of The Royal Engineers Museum

Photograph: author

If you are motivated to follow the trail still further down the Thames, take a train to Chatham and visit the museum of the Corps of Royal Engineers, which also contains material removed to Britain after Egyptian campaigns. As befitting an organisation whose role includes construction as well as destruction, the display case representing the 1898 Nile expedition to recapture the Egyptian Sudan includes a salvaged tile from the roof of Gordon's residency (No. 12 on the above photograph) next to a section of the top rail removed from the Mahdi's tomb in Khartoum shortly after the battle of Omdurman (No. 8).



Onslow Ford, *Gordon Memorial*, 1890

Brompton Barracks, Chatham

Photograph: author

Complete your tour by exiting the museum to find Onslow Ford's memorial to Gordon, unveiled by the Prince of Wales on 19 May 1890 in the presence of Field Marshal Sir Garnet Wolseley and many others who had taken part in operations in Egypt and Sudan over the previous 50 years.



Album photograph, *Unveiling Ceremony, Gordon Memorial, 1890*

Courtesy of the Royal Engineers Museum

Photograph: author

This walk, which has traced the British memory of campaigns in Egypt, begins and ends with statues of Gordon. After his death Gordon was represented as an exemplary character: a successful imperial warrior and a Christian martyr who had placed principle before political expediency. He became, as we might say today, a ‘national treasure’. But after the First World War, Gordon and the ‘small wars’ of empire began to recede into the distance. The marginal status accorded many of the memorials we have encountered on this walk suggests how the dominant political and social memory of the two World Wars has eclipsed that of earlier conflicts, including the Napoleonic wars, and those of Britain’s imperial era. The campaigns in Egypt may not resonate strongly in British culture today, but the material traces of what were once deemed significant historical events are nevertheless woven into the fabric of metropolitan memorialisation. They remind us of what we chose to remember and what we elect (almost) to forget.

Citation

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