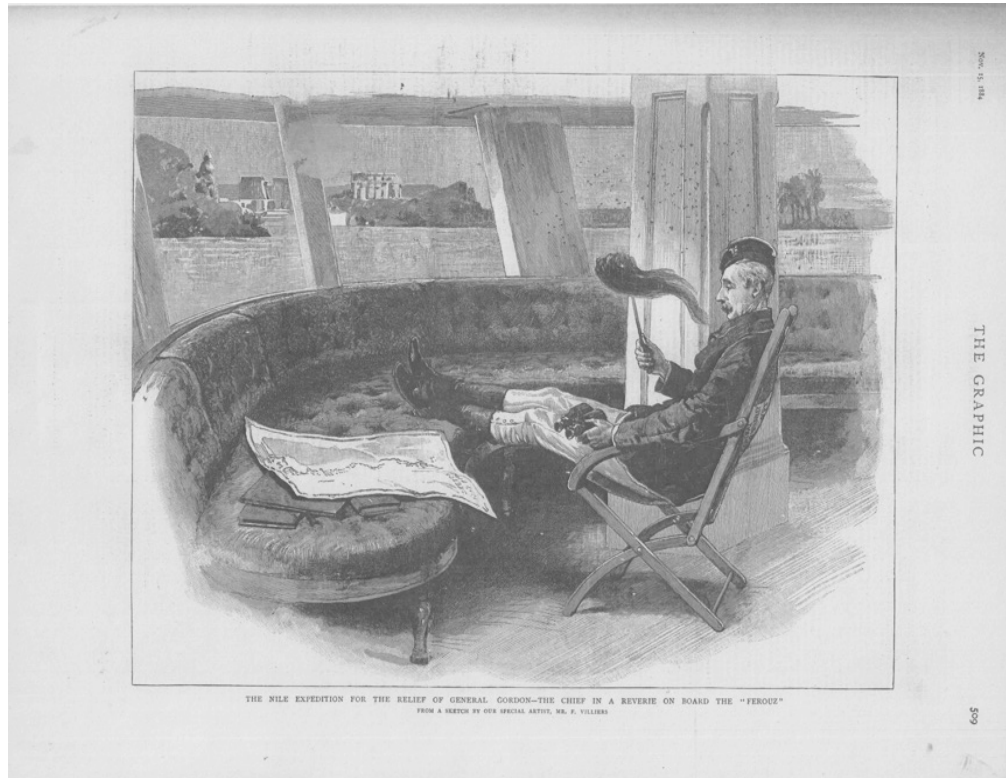


Military operations and the traveller in Egypt, 1882—1885

Paper read at the WaR-Net conference, *War, Travel, Travel Writing*, the University of East Anglia, 29 November 2014



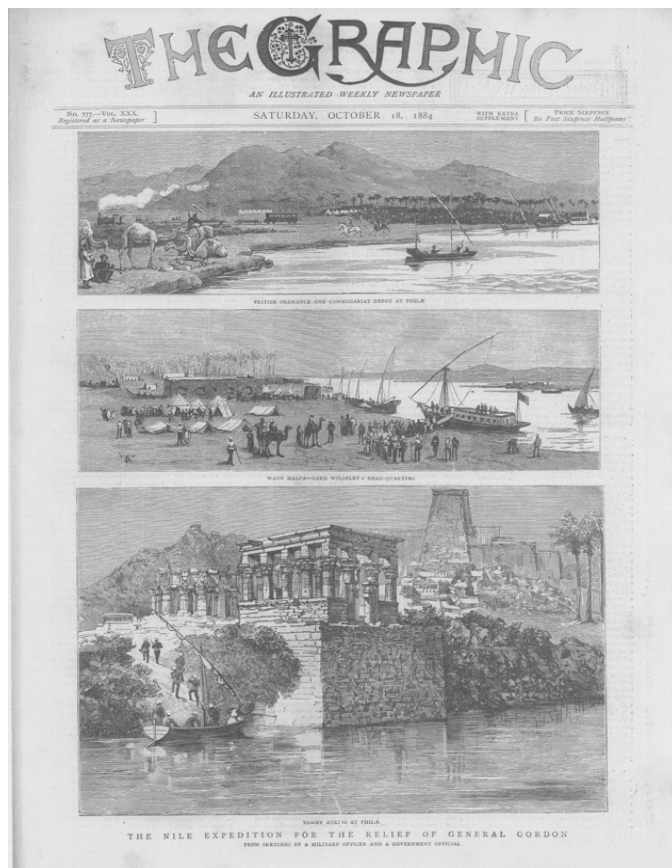
Frederic Villiers, *The Chief in a Reverie on Board The 'Ferooz'*, *The Graphic*, 15 November 1884

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

In a wood engraving published in the *Graphic* on 15 November 1884, General Wolseley, commander of the expedition mounted to extricate General Charles Gordon from besieged Khartoum, relaxes in the rear deck house of the *Ferooz*, the Khedive's personal *dahabieh*. Stern windows frame the ancient temple complex at Philae: Wolseley is headed south – up the Nile.

He wasn't the only soldier depicted admiring ancient ruins that autumn. The front page of that week's Saturday edition carried

three images worked up from sketches drawn in Egypt. Underneath wood engravings of the newly-laid railway, and of Wolseley's advanced headquarters at the Second Cataract at Wadi Halfa, *Tommy Atkins at Philae* depicts off-duty soldiers ascending from the riverbank, like countless European travellers before them.



Three Wood Engravings, *The Nile Expedition for the Relief of General Gordon*, From Sketches By a Military Officer and a Government Official, *The Graphic*, 18 October 1884
Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

Philae marked the southern limit of ancient Egypt, and the ruins at the First Cataract were the southern-most destination for European travellers too. But in November 1884 there was no turning back for the soldiers at Philae; not yet, at any rate: two months would pass before they retraced their steps, after Khartoum—and Gordon—had fallen to jihadist forces.

This paper works out of the illustrated general interest weeklies, popular histories, and illustrated travel books. With reference to the history of ruin aesthetics, it examines how images of wartime destruction, and of ancient ruins associated with Nile travel, were implicated in generating accounts of British experience at war in Egypt in the 1880s.

Warfighting, Patrick Porter reminds us, is an expression of a protagonist's culture, mediated through contact with environment, inhabitants and opponents. So is travelling, including tourism, in equivalent ways.¹ Campaigning has been likened to travelling. Each demands access to salient sites, physically and imaginatively; each is predicated on an ability to handle organisational complexity, including the harnessing of modern technologies, a combination that, Douglas Porch notes in a recent introduction to Colonel Charles Callwell's 1898 *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, was mastered by European armies in the 1860s, when military railways were first deployed to enhance combat support operations; 'From then on,' Porch suggests, 'battle became almost incidental to the success of a campaign'.² An equivalent case can be made for the mass tourism championed by Thomas Cook. The steam ship, railway, and telegraph enabled predictable and sustainable travel: the near-certainties of mass tourism supplanted travelling on one's own initiative, at one's own risk.

Expeditionary operations and travel were similarly also reliant on exploiting established knowledge about peoples and places, and of developing it further to rhetorical and functional ends. Callwell's 'most important military lesson' was that 'In small wars the habits,

¹ Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes*, (London: Hurst & company, 2009), p. 1.

² Douglas Porch, in Charles Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd edn (Lincoln, Neb: Bison Books, 1996), p. xi.

the customs, and the mode of action on the battlefield of the enemy should be studied in advance'.³ The more you knew, the more your activities were assured.

I want to explore how cultural production that aimed to imagine, explain, or understand Egyptians and their environment for the benefit of the would-be traveller, also served as a platform for imagining, explaining, and understanding the conduct of military operations in Lower Egypt, even if its rhetorical utility extended only as far as the place where expeditionary forces advanced into unfamiliar terrain beyond the customary reach of travellers. Specifically, I will examine how the earlier handling of the aesthetics of architectural fragmentation and picturesque decline contributed to how the British advance as far as Wadi Halfa was represented in the illustrated general interest weeklies.

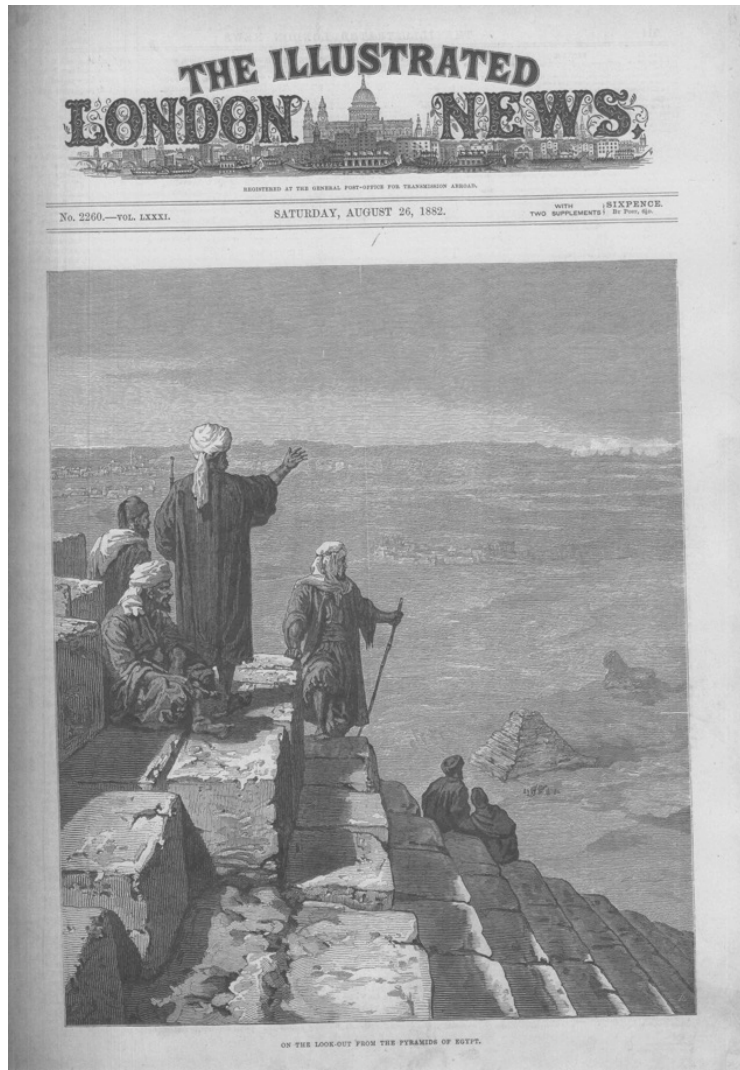
The picturesque and the war of 1882

The Nile Expedition was Britain's second recent operation in Egypt. In 1882, the so-called Urabi Revolt (or Revolution) had been defeated by a joint Royal Navy and Army expeditionary force. The opening phase of that operation had been characterised by two significant events: the suppression by naval bombardment of Alexandria's coastal defence batteries on 11 July; and the subsequent occupation of the town to curb widespread lawlessness.

Images of the aftermath of the bombardment offer a useful entry point for exploring how the contemporary pictorial values of ruination were activated across the categories 'war' and 'travel'. The 1882 war was fought against an Egyptian army organised on European lines. However modern the fighting, the campaign was

³ Callwell, p. 33.

nevertheless represented as occurring in a landscape made familiar since the 1830s by artists and photographers who had travelled to Egypt, and who exploited the dominant orientalist aesthetic privileging alterity, not modernity.



On the Lookout From The Pyramids of Egypt, The Illustrated London News, 26 August 1882

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

The *Illustrated London News* (ILN) of 26 August 1882, printed at the height of combat operations, carried the prestigious front-page wash drawing, *On The Look Out From The Pyramids of Egypt*. The reader-viewer is located on top of the Great Pyramid at Ghiza, at

the apex of Egypt's number one must-do traveller attraction. Angled lighting articulates the rough surfaces of weathered stone, the textures of oriental costume, and the volumes of place and space.

'Reading ruins was a literary journey', Claire Lyons claims; even archaeological publications were 'part travelogue, part personal diary, and part official record.'⁴ Five years earlier Amelia Edwards had described in *A Thousand Miles Up The Nile*, how:

The first excursion one makes on returning to Cairo, the last one makes before leaving [the country], is to Geezeh.... We left Cairo early..then comes the half-way tomb nestled in greenery...and then once more comes the sandy slope, and the cavernous ridge of ancient yellow rock.

[...]Rugged and huge as are the blocks, there is scarcely one upon which it is not possible to find a half-way rest for the toe of one's boot, so as to divide the distance.⁵

The impulse to visit Ghiza as the traveller stands on the threshold of the return to Western civilisation's remorseless presentness, is noteworthy.

Brian Dillon suggests that:

Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of, a portal into, the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. [...] At the same time,

⁴ See *The Art and Science of Antiquity in Nineteenth-Century Photography*, in John Papopoulos Claire Lyons, Lindsey Stewart, Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, *Antiquity & Photography: Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites*, (Thames & Hudson, 2005), p. 40.

⁵ Amelia B Edwards, *A Thousand Miles up the Nile: With Upwards of Seventy Illustrations Engraved on Wood by G. Pearson after Finished Drawings Executed on the Spot by the Author*, (London: Longmans, Green, Ltd, 1877), pp. 714-15.

the ruin casts us forward in time; it predicts a future...the ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us.⁶

Edwards' description of the view from the top conjures a landscape familiar to anyone who enjoyed travel books:

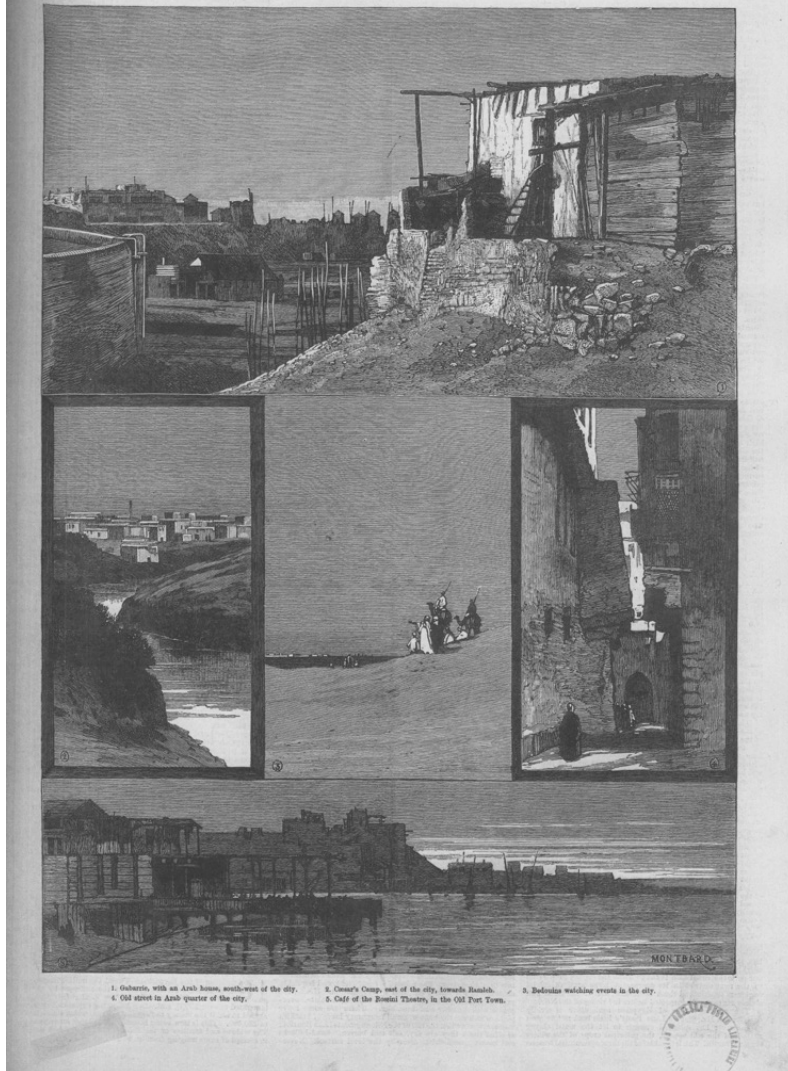
To the West and South, all is desert. It begins here at our feet—a rolling wilderness of valleys, and slopes, and rivers, and seas of sand, broken here and there by abrupt ridges of rock, and mounds of ruined masonry, and open graves.⁷

Reader-viewers were here brought to a temporal encounter through the aesthetics of the picturesque inclining into the sublime in image and word.

⁶ Brian Dillon, *Introduction: A Short History of Decay*, in Brian Dillon, 'Ruins', (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011), (p. 11).

⁷ Edwards, p. 720.

ALEXANDRIA AND ITS SUBURBS: SKETCHES BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST.



1. Suburbs, with an Arab house, south-west of the city.

4. Old street in Arab quarter of the city.

2. Omar's Camp, east of the city, towards Bahig.

5. Gate of the Basmali Theatre, in the Old Port Town.

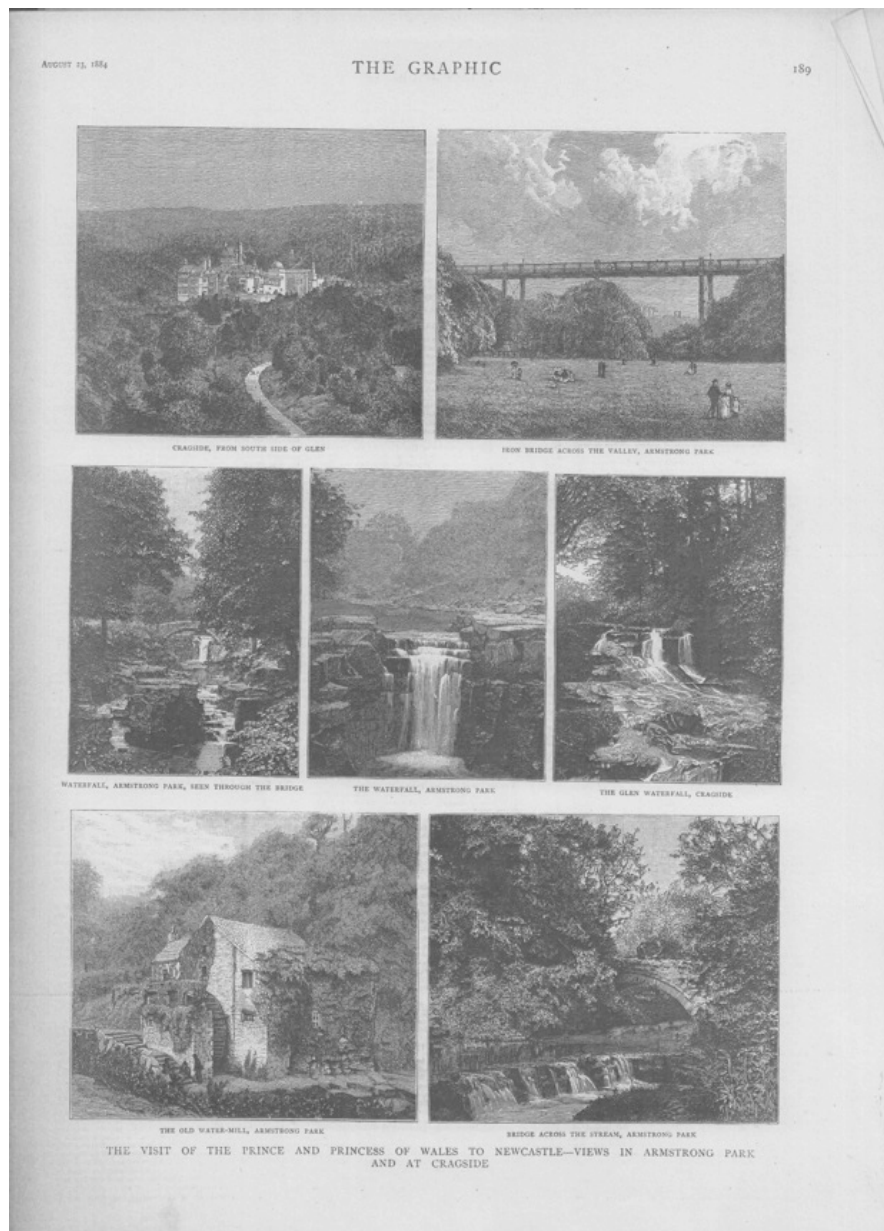
3. Bedouins watching events in the city.

George Montbard (Charles Auguste Loyer), *Alexandria and its Suburbs: Sketches By Our Special Artist, Supplement to the Illustrated London News, 22 July 1882*

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

Editors of illustrated titles had drawn on their stock images of Egypt throughout the 1882 campaign. The ILN war supplement of 22 July offered a montage of landscapes by George Montbard, for example, and the *Graphic* of 7 October included *The War in Egypt-The Slave Market, Cairo*.

Using the top image in the Montbard as a case study, I want to suggest that these images depicting decayed structures were presented to the viewer because they parade the values of the Imperial Picturesque. The British picturesque, as theorised by Thomas Gilpin and Uvedale Price, had been established as an aesthetic category in visual culture in the late eighteenth century.



Seven Wood Engravings, *The Visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to Newcastle—Views in Armstrong Park and at Cragside*, *The Graphic*, 23 August 1884

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

According to Gilpin, compositions should pivot around architecture, ruins and figures, in pursuit of 'ruggedness'. A formula was necessary to achieve this effect: there should be a 'leading subject', typically a ruined building or a mountain, and side views to lend variety to pictorial space. A landscape must be replete with trees and untended growth, and contain bucolic figures. Stone walls also served as a catalyst of formal meaning through signs of their decay.⁸

This page from a supplement to the ILN of 5 August 1882 suggests how the picturesque sustained its appeal throughout the nineteenth century. The term came to be used loosely to define any scene depicting objects in the process of decay. James Hicks has recently argued that visual production in the picturesque tradition post-1815 'denoted an untheorised but tacitly recognised mutation of the term's meaning.'⁹

The picturesque sold copy: reader-viewers who identified with its values could claim a heightened aesthetic sensibility. Freed from the shackles of Gilpin's tight formulation, its easy appeal rendered it available for appropriation in contexts beyond Britain, in circumstances including both war and tourism. In Egypt, all that was necessary was to substitute drifting sand and weathered rock for untended vegetation.

The Montbard parades these values: the composition addresses architecture, the leading subject is in a dilapidated state. The variegated textures of walls, stone, and rocky scree merge with that

⁸ Wolfgang and Joyce Rheuban Kemp, 'Images of Decay: Photography in the Picturesque Tradition', *October*, 54 (1990), 115.

⁹ James Hicks, 'David Roberts' Egypt and Nubia as Imperial Picturesque Landscape', (University of Hertfordshire, 2010), p. find page number.

of unintended growth, while the side view to the left adds yet more tonal and compositional variety. If exotic figures are absent, the Bedouin camel drivers in the central panel redress this omission.

The Imperial Picturesque was regarded as an accurate descriptive mode. In 1835 Colonel Julian Jackson of the Royal Geographic Society, claimed that picturesque representation was a vital component of geographical inquiry because the pre-existing pictorial frame helped to convey the 'correct idea', or essence, of a location. The Imperial Picturesque was simultaneously picturesque *and* accurate, a significant factor when it came to representing Egypt to a domestic audience that would never travel to Egypt, or deploy on military operations.

It also served to represent Egypt as a developmentally poor, if benign, state. Montbard's drawing is grounded in an established *topos* conveying the apparently corrupt nature of Islamic societies, their sensuality, lethargy, and backwardness on a sliding scale of societal development. His work draws the reader-viewer's attention away from the modern political crisis unfolding in the metropolitan cities of the Delta, and redirects it towards locales that apparently conveyed Egypt's true essence.

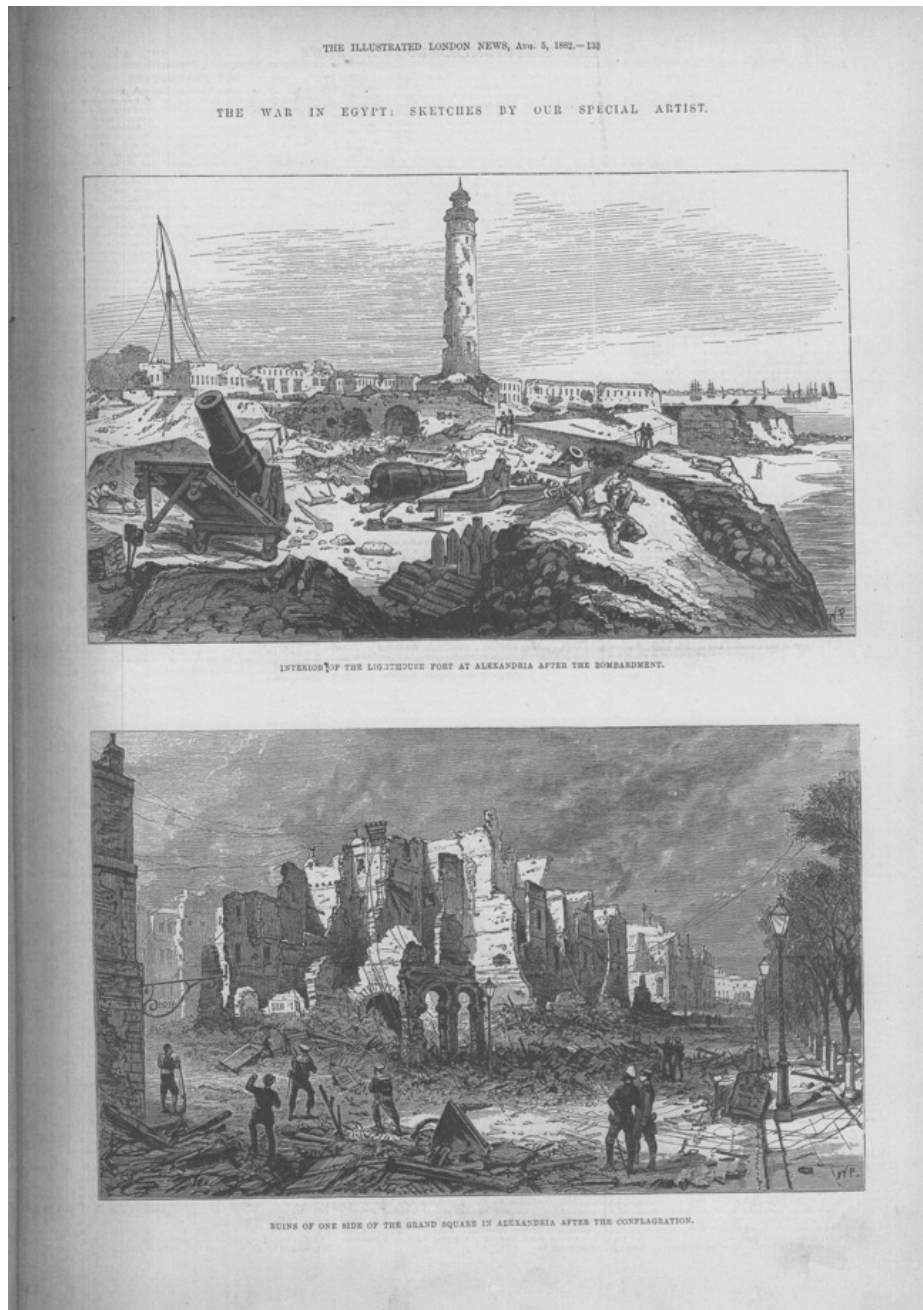
The bombardment of Alexandria created opportunities for rehearsing the picturesque, nevertheless. Gilpin had suggested that:

Should we wish to give [a building] picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other.¹⁰

In 1882 the Royal Navy and the inhabitants of Lower Egypt obliged

¹⁰ William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape*, (London: R Blamire, 1794), p. 7.

him in full measure. Some shells overflow their target and caused collateral damage. Empty streets and a lack of law enforcement stimulated a wave of murder, arson and looting in the European quarter. The Illustrated London News' special artist, Melton Prior, sketched the ruinous scars caused by the bombardment.



Melton Prior, *The War in Egypt: Sketches By Our Special Artist*, *The Illustrated London News*, 5 August 1882

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

According to Andrew Herscher:

Architecture fulfills a representational function not only through its construction, but also through its destruction. Damage is a form of design, and the traces of damage inflicted by political violence...are at least as significant as any of the elements from which buildings are constructed for living, for the living.¹¹

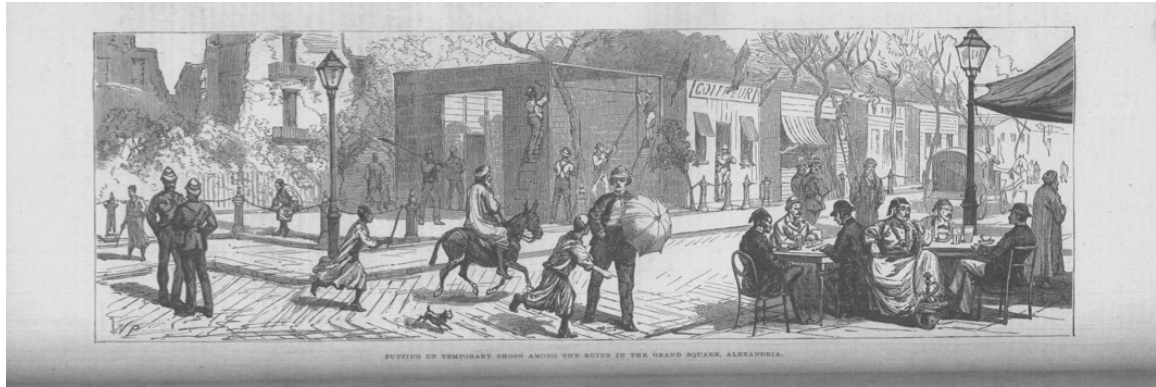
These damaged buildings testified to human agency, not natural decay. After-battle images signified an aberrant reality: the 'real' Egypt—that of Montbard's drawings, the object of fascination for travellers, tourists, and armchair reader-viewers—is compromised by violence.

What is suggested in its place is the Egypt described by ethnographer A. H. Keane, during the 1884 war. Keane advanced the view that Arab culture, and Islam in particular, was responsible for the moral degradation of Egypt:

this is...the disturbing element, but for the presence of which there would be no fanaticism, no slave-dealers, no Mahdis, no "Egyptian question".... Proud, ignorant, bigoted, and insolent, these Arab tribes "are for the most part nomads or wanderers. [...] The Arab...is essentially a hunter, a robber, and a warrior."¹²

¹¹ Andrew Herscher, 'The Language of Damage', *Grey Room*, 7 (2002), 69.

¹² A. H. Keane, *Ethnology of Egyptian Sudan*, (London: Edward Stanford, 1884), p. 7.



Melton Prior, *Putting Up Temporary Shops in the Ruins of the Grand Square, Alexandria*, *The Illustrated London News*, 19 August 1882
Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

Only days later, however, the picturesque was restored to the reader-viewer. Affluent Alexandrian society meets, drinks coffee and gets a haircut under the supervisory gaze of on-duty British military personnel. The empty shells of burnt-out buildings are glimpsed in pictorial depth, no longer gaunt and angular, but softer, their ruggedness blending into the environment.

The tentative return of the picturesque signalled the recession of the sublime moment of their destruction, the return to the social *status quo ante*, and to the established mode of imagining what one would truly see if one travelled to Egypt – even if only in one's imagination.

So long as Egyptians passively maintained their station on the putative trajectory from savagery to civilisation, that was unproblematic – desirable, even. But the riots had apparently demonstrated that Egyptian society was also demonstrably violent, cruel, and avaricious. The Imperial Picturesque masked a deeper, darker truth. Egypt's urban spaces, conceived of in European terms for Europeans, were in reality liminal zones where a veneer of modernity obtained under a political and social order so fragile that

sailors and soldiers were required to tackle the barbarism that might yet threaten to engulf everything understood as progress.

The Nile Expedition

Two years later Britain's armed forces returned to wage a 'small war' against a Sudanese Islamic insurgency led by Muhammad Ahmed, the self-proclaimed *Mahdi*. The Mahdists were members of tribes whose palpable capacity for war fighting was predicated on local competition for scarce economic and human resources.

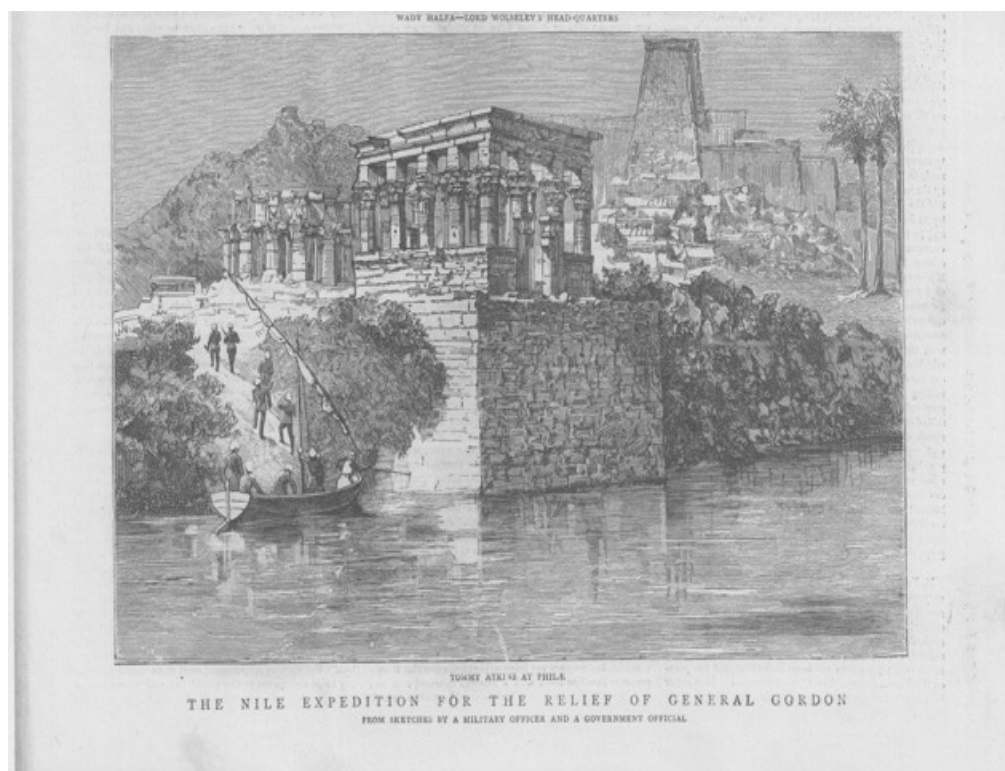
In late 1883 the Egyptian government ceded the Sudan to the insurrection. Alfred Milner, formerly the Under-Secretary for Finance in Egypt, would later draw attention to the impact of this decision:

Fifteen years ago it was as safe to go to Khartum...as it was to go to Wadi Halfa and Sarras. Between Alexandria and Sarras there is perfect security still, but south of Sarras, and hence onward to the Equator, there is now no security whatever....I do not suppose there is another point in all the world where the line of demarcation between civilization and the most savage barbarism is more sharply marked.¹³

In 1882 a wave of barbarism had washed into Alexandria's European quarter, compromising a location well known to travellers, until stemmed by military force. During 1883—84 a tidal wave of barbarism had spread across the 'region of storm-swept desert and treacherous scrub', as Milner imagined it, encroaching almost up to the southern-most Anglo-Egyptian outposts at Wadi Halfa, behind which Nile tourism continued to flourish.

¹³ Alfred Milner, *England in Egypt*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1893), p. 195.

If the values of the picturesque were employed to mount 'truthful' accounts of the 'real' Egypt before, during, and after the 1882 crisis, was the picturesque used again as a bulwark against the military sublime in 1884-85, to articulate the boundaries between peace and war, barbarism and civilisation? And, if so, to what extent did this practice borrow from the visual culture of travel and tourism?



Returning to *Tommy Atkins at Philae*, we now observe the compositional values of the Imperial Picturesque at work. Loosened and fallen masonry, weather stains, and vegetative matter have compromised the building's former unity that might otherwise advance a claim to beauty. Some of the structure is beaten down, the remainder defaced, as Gilpin had it; a smooth building has been turned into a rough ruin; by nature, but also by the artist.

Images of ruined temples had played a central role in the visual representation of the Nile valley since Vivant Denon published his 1802 *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte*. Paintings, sketches, prints and photographs of ancient sites were consumed widely as art objects and as illustrations in travel literature from the 1840s. This body of professional and amateur work has been studied comprehensively, so I will limit my address to two prominent examples that suggest the importance of the Imperial Picturesque to meaning production.



Louis Haghe, lithograph after David Roberts, *The Hypaethral Temple at Philae called the Bed of Pharoah*, after 1842

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David_Roberts_Hypaethral_Temple_Philae.jpg

Artist David Roberts moved to capitalise on the popularity of oriental imagery in the 1840s. The introduction to his multi-volume *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia*, affirms his

artistic integrity on the basis that he had 'authentic' travel experience:

From Cairo Mr Roberts, with an Arab servant, ascended the Nile in a boat.... He was entirely master of the party, and carried the British flag at the mast-head. He thus ascended to the second cataract, Wady Halfa, and before he returned to Cairo, had made drawings of almost every edifice from the extremity of Nubia to the Mediterranean.¹⁴

Of Philae, Roberts is quoted as saying:

It is...a paradise in the midst of desolation. Its ruins, even at a distance, are more picturesque than any I have seen. To me it brought recollections of my fatherland--I know not why; I thought of the first descent upon Roslin Castle....¹⁵

Roberts' work advances a claim to both generality and acuity. The buildings are drawn with precision; aspect and lighting provide access to architectural detailing, but his approach to landscape is formulaic on terms we have already discussed. Roberts exploited the material properties of the Nile valley and its ancient ruins in pursuit of the picturesque.

Like Roberts, photographer Francis Frith capitalised on the burgeoning tourist industry by publishing 'my impressions of foreign lands, illustrated by photographic views', in an album of large format prints accompanied by text positioning Frith as travel

¹⁴ David Roberts, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia, from Drawings Made on the Spot by David Roberts R.A., with Historical Descriptions by Rev. George Croley, Lithographed by Louis Haghe*, (London: F G Moon, 1842-49), p. unpaginated.

¹⁵ David Roberts, *Egypt and Nubia, from Drawings Made on the Spot by David Roberts R.A., with Historical Descriptions by William Brockedon F.R.S., Lithographed by Louis Haghe*, (London: F G Moon, 1849).

guide.¹⁶ Frith's ultimate target audience was the armchair traveller, to whom he advances a claim to truth, after Jackson:

But, indeed, I hold it to be impossible, by any means, fully and truthfully to inform the mind of scenes which are wholly foreign to the eye. There is no effectual substitute for actual travel; but it is my ambition to provide for those to whom circumstances forbid that luxury, *faithful* representations of the scenes I have witnessed, and I shall endeavour to make the simple truthfulness of the Camera a guide for my Pen.

[...]

But few, I fear, can tolerate simple truthfulness: there is not enough excitement in it. Even Englishmen relish a little of that pleasant hyperbole which Orientals stretch to its limit of tension.¹⁷

If the unvarnished truth is dull, or opaque, it is the picturesque, by implication, that allows the viewer to indulge in a little British hyperbole: *The Approach to Philae* is, Frith claims, 'one of the few views which a photograph can render without, perhaps, greatly detracting from its artistic fame'.¹⁸

Frith suggests that his compositional choices, emphasising water and eroded rocks, and a side view that adds variety and denies uniformity, conveys a sense of ruggedness, of untamed nature. This photograph, he claims, is picture-like; picturesque in the revised, Imperial genre. As such, it offers what was understood as a *faithful* representation of a witnessed scene. Viewing *this* image closed the distance between *traveller* and armchair reader-viewer.

¹⁶ Francis Frith, *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*, (London: James S. Virtue, 1858), pp. Introduction, unpaginated.

¹⁷ Ibid.

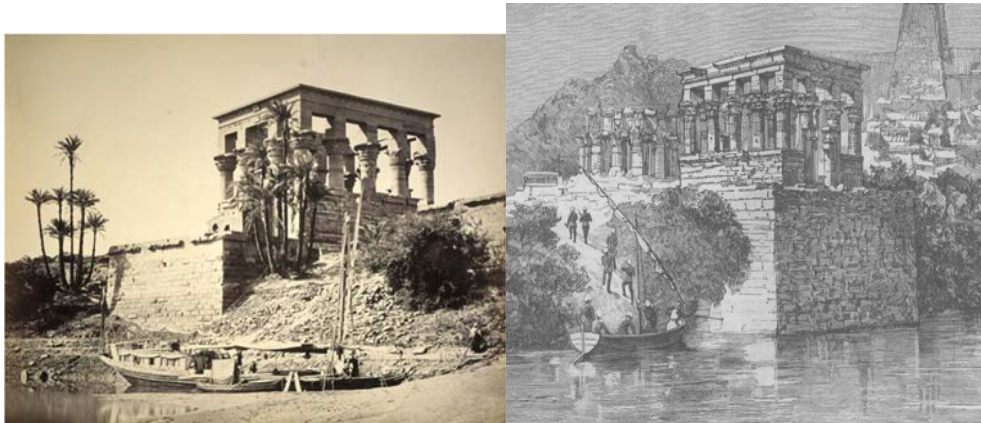
¹⁸ Ibid. John Murray published popular travel guides. Frith suggests that his own readers were likely to be at least aware of the existence of Murray's 1847 *Handbook for Travellers in Egypt*. See John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Egypt*, (London: J. Murray, 1847).



Francis Frith, *The Hypaethral Temple, Philae*, 1857

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hypaethral_Temple_Philae.jpg

The qualities he valorises are even more discernable in his *Hypaethral Temple, Philae*, a photograph that bears such a remarkable affinity to the wood-engraving in the *ILLN* that its influence on London's engravers cannot easily be discounted.



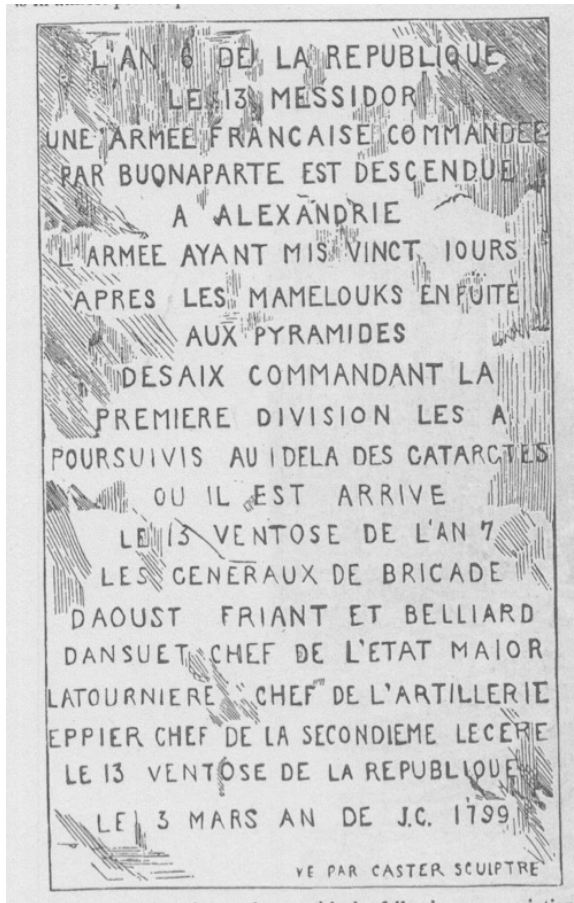
Viewing this latter image closed the distance between *soldier* and reader-viewer.

I have suggested that picturesque values employed in visual representations of ruins, including Philae, the portal to the Egyptian Soudan, had previously served to connote political stability and peacetime normality: the picturesque existed for travellers. In such conditions travellers and reader-viewers might use the aesthetic of ruination as an invitation to condense ideas about past and present, civilisation and barbarism in benign contexts that did not challenge underlying assumptions about race and entitlement, for example.

But the temple complex at Philae also served as a concrete reminder of the passage of time for Wolseley, his expeditionary force, and the reader-viewers of the illustrated weeklies at the threshold of a major counter-insurgency operation. In the autumn of 1884 images of Philae presented the temple complex as a material bulwark signposting the high water mark of civilisation and contested liminal space, beyond which lay Khartoum and Gordon himself.

Yet, the 'dual valence of the ruin as image or reality...its capacity to place us at the end of a historical continuum or cast us forward into the future ruin of our own present', as Dillon puts it, activated the site's rhetorical potential concerning its military past, and the challenge that would shortly confront Wolseley.¹⁹

¹⁹ Dillon, p. 13.



Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

Roberts had been alive to the temporal implications of ruin aesthetics when he visited Philae. He noted, with reference to the habits of travellers, how:

The Island of Philae was the boundary of the conquests of the French army in Egypt. Desaix, who commanded the first division, pursued the Mamalouks beyond the Cataract, and left an inscription on the doorway of the great pylon at the end of the avenue, to record the event: it bears date the "13 Ventôse, 3 Mars, An 7 de la République, de Jés. Chr. 1799." How is it that no Englishman, with the scribbling propensities of which he is so often accused, has yet added to this record,—*Expelled* from the land of Egypt by an English army, September 2d, 1801?²⁰

²⁰ Roberts, p. unpaginated.

In the autumn of 1884, with the campaign scarcely underway, the temporal implications of ruins aesthetics and the poetics of the picturesque existed in a state of dynamic tension. The picturesque might foreshadow a return to pre-insurgency political and social normality at the successful conclusion of the campaign, but success was in no way assured. The viewer of this body of images in contemporary circulation was surely aware that, as Callwell, puts it:

‘Campaigns for the subjugation of insurrections... involve struggles against guerrillas and banditti. [...] in remote regions peopled by half-civilised races or wholly savage tribes, such campaigns are most difficult to bring to a satisfactory conclusion.’²¹

Images from the *Illustrated London News* and *Graphic* courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries.

²¹ Callwell, p. 26.

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