

## **Severed heads: the spoils of war in the Egyptian Sudan**

### **Introduction**

Thirteen days after the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers' controversial charge at Omdurman on 2 September 1898, a private soldier wrote to relatives from the banks of the Nile:

My Dear Uncle and Aunt,  
...No doubt you have read of the fight at Omdurman & and the great victory & have seen the account of our regiment's work & the charge. Tom and me went through it all & I am glad to say "Thank God" came out all right it has been an awful campaign for us [...] I have got a spear & a couple of daggers which I will bring home with me all being well....  
Your loving nephew, Herbert John Robinson.<sup>1</sup>

Robinson was carrying loot—private property taken from an enemy in war—objects that in an anticipated future will serve as memory prompts, and affirm his status as a campaign veteran.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert John Robinson, 21st Lancers, 'Letter, Nile Expeditionary Force', (National Army Museum, 1898).



**Material culture: some (faded) Sudan texts, c.1898**

Left to right: *The English in Egypt*, 1885; Villiers, *Peaceful Personalities and Warriors Bold*, 1907; Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartoum*, 1898; Bennet, *The Downfall of the Dervishes*, 1898; Mason, *The Four Feathers*, 1902; Milner, *England in Egypt*, 1893; Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, 1895

In modern edition: Churchill, *The River War*, 1899; Alford and Sword, *The Egyptian Sudan*, 1898; Burleigh, *The Khartoum Campaign*, 1899; Prior, *Campaigns of a War Correspondent*, 1912

Photograph: author

With close reference to fine and graphic art practices; photography; and literature including popular histories, war fiction, and war journalism, this paper addresses the material culture of looting and trophy taking that accompanied Anglo-Egyptian operations in the Sudan between 1883 and 1898.<sup>2</sup> It explores how those practices played a role in making meaning from cross-cultural encounters

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes*, (London: Hurst & company, 2009), p. 2.

noting, after Patrick Porter, that 'armed conflict is an expression of identity as well as a means to an end'.<sup>3</sup>

Egypt and its material culture fascinated Europeans throughout the nineteenth century. Alfred Milner, until 1892 the Under-Secretary for Finance in Egypt, criticised the way the Great Powers appropriated Egypt's material and cultural wealth. His 1893 *England in Egypt*, begins:

More than two thousand years ago, [Herodotus] the Father of History, in his comprehensive survey of the then known world, singled out Egypt as pre-eminently the land of wonders. 'I speak at length about Egypt,' he says, 'because it contains more marvellous things than any other country, things too strange for words.'<sup>4</sup>

Milner's book is an account of reform spanning politics, economics, defence, international diplomacy, and more. But it is also a book about 'things': his Egypt remains a land with a compelling material culture.<sup>5</sup>

## **Looting**

Milner's thesis was that modern, reformed Egypt must never again be regarded as a resource ripe for appropriation. Yet British servicemen had been doing just that since 1882. The 1898 operation to recapture Khartoum was the culminating phase of a protracted campaign against the jihadist forces of the *Mahdīa*, an insurrection against Ottoman rule instigated in 1881 by Sufi scholar and self-proclaimed *Mahdi*, Muhammad Ahmad. The events that unfolded over 17 years, not least the death of General Charles Gordon in Khartoum in January 1885, ensured that developments

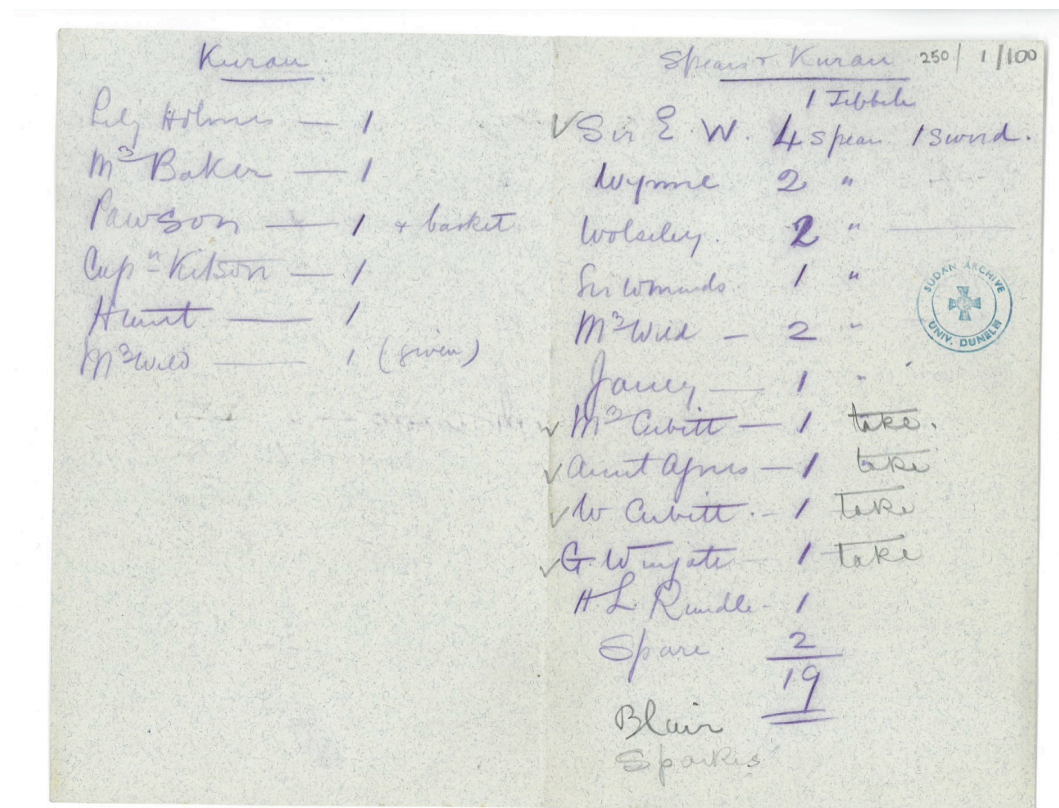
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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Milner, *England in Egypt*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1893), pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

on the extreme periphery of the Anglo-Egyptian sphere of influence remained topical in Britain.



Unknown officer, *List of looted items assigned to staff officers returning from the 1884-85 Nile Expedition, 1885*

SAD.250/1.100

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Raffi Gregorian considers that 'looting was endemic to most if not all [western] armies of the nineteenth century'.<sup>6</sup> Others disagree. Richard Davies considers that a new moral vision of looting emerged in the late nineteenth-century, one that enabled 'looting to be displaced entirely onto others: other races, other classes, and

<sup>6</sup> Raffi Gregorian, 'Unfit for Service: British Law and Looting in India in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 13 (1990), 84.

other previous conquerors'.<sup>7</sup> However the evidence is unequivocal. It includes, for example, a sheet of notepaper listing the spears and Qu'urans assigned to staff officers returning from the 1884-85 Nile Expedition. And a letter written to Reginald Wingate, then commanding the military intelligence operation out of the advanced headquarters at Wadi Halfa, by an officer returned from the campaign:

Fourstones  
Northumberland  
2.11.96

My dear Wingate

[...]

Can you tell me what has become of the [Battle of] Firket trophies [collected?] at Halfa. My name was put on several things that I wished to buy and it has occurred to me that the value of the stores which I left at Halfa with Neqhib Effendi for Smyth to take over for your mess might go towards the purchase of the trophies. If this will do please give instructions for them to be sent to me here, & let me know the balance I owe you. [...] Mortimer will send them to me if handed over to him, but if not well packed they are liable—as you know—to be looted.

Can you & Slatin spare me a photo? I would like Slatin in Dervish dress if he has any left.

[...]

Love to Slatin

Yours ever

G W Bentham<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Davis, 'Three Styles in Looting India', *History and Anthropology*, 6 (1994), 311.

<sup>8</sup> SAD. 263/1/102. The Battle of Firket on 7 June 1896 was the first offensive move of the two-year campaign to reconquer the Sudan. An all-Egyptian force, led by British officers, attacked and defeated the Dervish defenders of the village. It was therefore the first occasion since 1885 to offer a large-scale opportunity to collect trophies and loot a former enemy position.



Heyman Studio, Photographic portrait of Rudolph von Slatin posing with a spear, sword and rifle, and wearing a patched jibbah, the costume of a mulazim of the Khalifa 'Abdallahi, 1895  
SAD.13/4/1

The photograph Bentham refers to is surely this well-known studio portrait. Rudolph Slatin, to whom we shall return, escaped from 16 years in captivity in Omdurman in 1895. His status as one of the few Europeans to have witnessed events in the Mahdist Sudan is reflected in his decision to be photographed in Dervish clothing, epitomized by the jibba, or patched cotton shirt, that signified the piety of the wearer, and his allegiance to the Mahdi. Everything worn and carried by Slatin in this photographic portrait had been recovered by Anglo-Egyptian soldiers from recent battlefields.

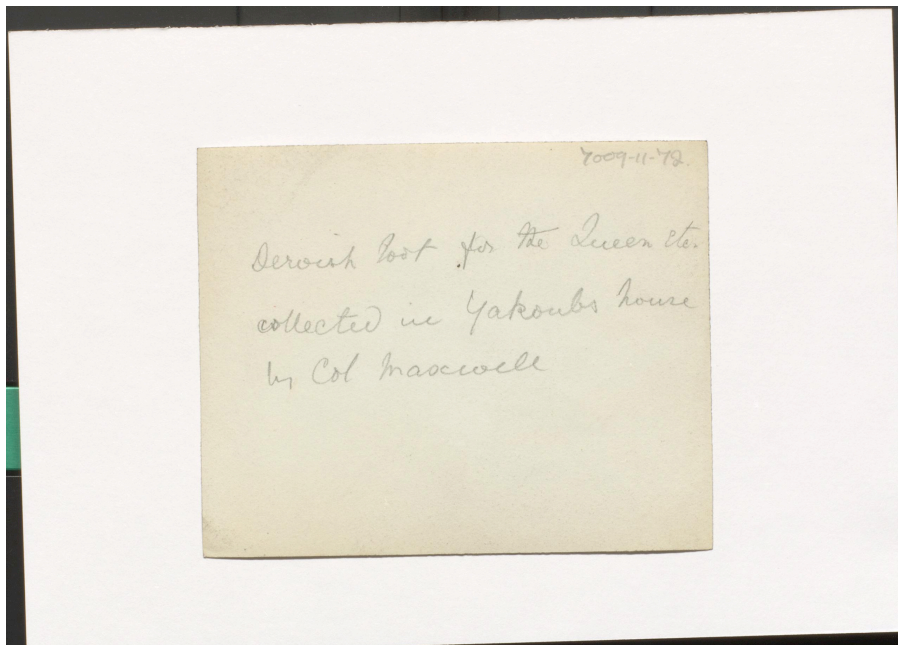




Francis Gregson, Officers and a soldier of No. 5 Company, Grenadier Guards, in camp. From left to right: Lieutenant Sir R. Filmer, Major G. Legh, Lieutenant S. Clive and Private F. C. Jones, 1898  
SAD.A27/194

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In this photograph of three officers of the Grenadier Guards, Lieutenant Filmer, on the left, sits behind a Dervish animal hide shield recovered from the Omdurman battlefield. It is neither privileged in the photograph, nor concealed, testifying to a relaxed, quotidian attitude to looting.



Lt Edward Loch photograph album, 'Dervish loot for the Queen etc., collected in Yakoub's house by Col. Maxwell', 1898  
NAM 7009-11-72

Reproduced with kind permission of the National Army Museum

Finally, this album print suggests that coordinated attempts were made to secure loot with a view to capitalizing on its social and political currency.



The acquisition of spoils was manifestly regarded as a legitimate practice in which all ranks actively indulged. Despoliation provides a way to think about the Anglo-Egyptian counter-insurgency campaign as a continuous series of cross-cultural encounters: with Egyptian military allies; with local peoples; with the natural world and the built environment; and with the enemy. Looting and trophy taking influenced how Egypt and the Soudan were perceived and understood in Britain—and how Britons perceived and understood themselves.

## Trophies



Unknown artists and engravers, *The 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars Charging the Enemy at El Teb*, *The Graphic*, February 1884

'The Sudanese did not bolt, but struck at the troopers as they rode through them....'.

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

In late 1883 British troops encountered Hadendowa tribesmen and their allies under Osman Digna for the first time, and it came as a shock. Digna's troops attacked aggressively and with tactical

dexterity, punishing Anglo-Egyptian mistakes, despite their lack of modern weapons. This double page wood engraving for the *Graphic* provides evidence of the way the Dervish warrior—the ‘fuzzy-wuzzy’—assumed mythic status in British popular culture as a formidable opponent.

Everything Dervish men carried into battle—from war drums to prayer beads—was avidly collected. But looting and trophy taking was a facet of Sudanese tribal cultures too. Rudolf Carl von Slatin’s autobiographical account of his duties as the Egyptian Governor of Dara in southwest Darfur in 1881 sets out what participants in inter-tribal conflicts regarded as suitable for appropriation, including woman and children, crops and flocks, and weapons and equipment. Their capture from, and denial to, their adversaries was as symbolic as it was instrumental.



Francis Gregson, *Egyptian Soldiers Looting Dead and Wounded Mahdists on the Battlefield at Karari during the Battle of Omdurman*, 2 September 1884

NAM.1970-09-11

Reproduced with kind permission of the National Army Museum

Egyptians, Britons and Sudanese all practiced looting, each in accordance with their cultural norms. It is possible to talk here, after Fred Myers, of the existence of multiple, coexisting 'regimes of value' around the practice of spoliation.<sup>9</sup>

Slatin was just one of many colonial administrators who learned on the job how local leaders manipulated cross-cultural regimes of value to their political advantage. He recounts village Sheikh Muslem Wad Kabbashi's conditional appreciation of Charles Gordon, whom he remembered for his bravery in battle, but also for the way that:

when he [Gordon] divided the spoil, no one was forgotten, and he kept nothing for himself. He was very tender-hearted about women and children, and never allowed them to be distributed, as is our custom in war; [...] One day, continued the Sheikh, "without letting him know, we put some women aside, but if he had found us out, we should have had a bad time of it".<sup>10</sup>

Annette Weiner suggests that articulating notions of authority and ownership are fundamental to the determination of what she calls the "'dense" sociocultural meaning and value' assigned to objects that make up a society's material culture.<sup>11</sup> Slatin's memoir, translated and edited by Wingate in pursuit of impression management in Britain, is tendentious.<sup>12</sup> But it nevertheless

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<sup>9</sup> Fred R. Myers, 'The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture', (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press; James Currey, Oxford, 2001), (p. 6).

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Carl von Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan: A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes, 1879-1895*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1935), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Annette Weiner, \*\*, in Myers, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Johnson has examined how Wingate 'had a major role in the writing and publication of both Fr. Ohrwalder's [1892] *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*, and Slatin's [1896] *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*.' He has argued that: 'The publication of the accounts of the two escaped prisoners along with his own

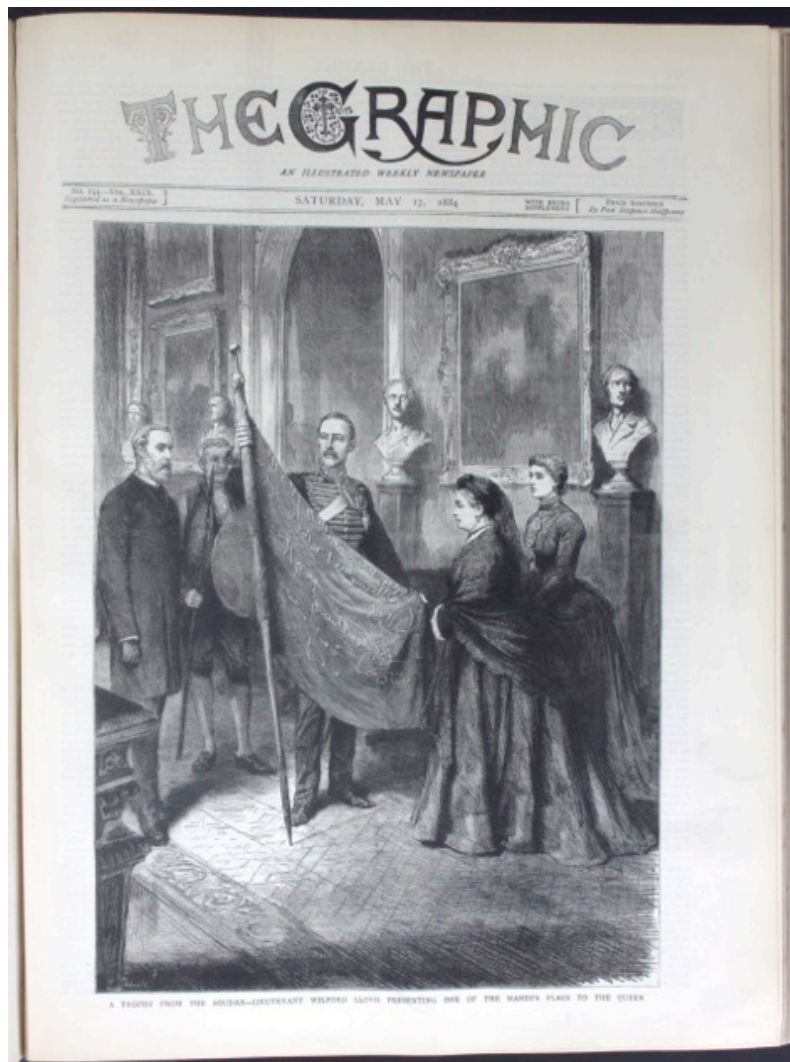
suggests how displays of authority and ownership were fundamental to the way Kabbashi, Gordon, Slatin, and others too, sustained their political legitimacy and social prestige. Each of them rehearsed what they regarded as their implicitly superior values and beliefs by determining how the spoils of war should be treated.

## **Beheading**

What marks armed conflict apart in the context of the relationship between an object's value and the manner of its acquisition, is the notion that what is at stake is the worth assigned not to objects produced *in* a given society, but acquired *by* it by force. The most extreme example of the relationship between the display of authority and the violent acquisitive act is beheading, and the subsequent display of body parts as the ultimate war trophy.

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book [1891 *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*] was part of Wingate's programme to propagate a particular view of events in the Sudan, the view of the British military in Egypt. [...] Through them he displayed many of his own views about the Mahdia, its leaders and their motives, and he began to suggest that the ultimate solution to Mahdist 'despotism' was the reconquest of the Sudan. Wingate treated information coming out of the Sudan quite differently in his confidential intelligence reports, but the war-propaganda he produced for the British public was sensational in style, high coloured and frequently inaccurate. Douglas Johnson, 'The Death of Gordon: A Victorian Myth', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 10 (1982), 288.



Unknown artist(s) and engraver(s), *A trophy from the Soudan-Lieutenant Wilford Lloyd presenting one of the Mahdi's flags to the Queen*, *The Graphic*, 17 May 1884

Courtesy of Kensington and Chelsea Public Libraries

The unlikely subject of this wood engraving for the front page of the 17 May 1884 edition of the *Graphic*, is beheading. Victoria is depicted inspecting a flag recently captured during combat operations along Sudan's Red Sea littoral. In Sudanese, Egyptian, and British culture, flags were regarded as significant military artefacts.





*Regimental Colour, 10th Sudanese Battalion, from 1883*  
 NAM. 1979-08-59-1

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*Pennant, 1st (British) Brigade, from 1896*  
 NAM. 1992-04-7-1

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The dense sociocultural value assigned to them rested on their operational function, which was to mark the location of senior commanders; flags signified the function of command and, by extension, the commander's moral authority. Loss of one's flag signified, metonymically, the loss of one's head.

In his account of the 1884 Nile Expedition Colonel William Butler describes how he moved to secure a Dervish flag when his advance guard overran a hastily abandoned campsite:

At the further side of the level ground stood a group of eight or ten Dervish standards of many colours.... In the khor, by the river, about a hundred donkeys and a few camels were standing or lying around. [...]  
I sent my staff-officer back at once to carry the General the largest and best of the standards, and...we began to collect the captured animals.<sup>13</sup>

In *A Trophy from the Soudan*, the Queen reaches out to hold the enemy flag. The moral meaning of the image is located in the dance of acquisition Butler describes, and Victoria's grasp completes: from Dervish commander's standard bearer, to British soldier, to monarch. But in that moment this meaning was illusory: the recent campaign to check Osman Digna had failed to secure its political objectives: far from losing his head, Digna consolidated his control of the Eastern Sudan.

Unfortunately for Britain and Egypt, it was Charles Gordon who lost his head, when Khartoum fell.<sup>14</sup> The disaster was sensationalised by

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<sup>13</sup> Sir W. F. Butler, *The Campaign of the Cataracts: Being a Personal Narrative of the Great Nile Expedition of 1884-5, with Illustrations from Drawings by Lady Butler: Also a Map of the Nile from the Mediterranean to the Equatorial Lakes*, (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1887), p. 339.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon wasn't the first British officer to be beheaded. On 4 November 1883 the Hicks Expedition, whose mission was to reconquer Kordofan, was massacred.

survivors testimony, not least when appropriated by Wingate in pursuit of his own agenda concerning the reconquest of the Sudan: a national hero had died violently, and the head had been hacked from his corpse.<sup>15</sup> Ensuing calls for retribution testify to the density of the sociocultural meaning assigned to this event in Britain. Wingate received this letter in April 1885:

71 Hope St  
Liverpool

Major F. R. Wingate R.E., Cairo

Dear Sir

[...] my last letter was only as far as I recollect to urge you to not let anyone be in front of you in regard to recovering the head at least of Gordon - I feel that I can be confident that that will be your share of the work. [...]

Yours faithfully

H. R. Squires<sup>16</sup>

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Afterwards, 'The heads of Baron Seckendorff...and General Hicks were cut off and sent to the Mahdi.' von Slatin, pp. 133-34.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Harrison, in his work on the cultural symbolism of trophy taking, argues that the taking of heads as trophies was a specifically racialised form of violence conducted by Europeans and those in their service exclusively against enemies whom they positioned as belonging to 'races' other than their own. What he calls it 'expeditionary trophy-taking' was characterized by 'a sharply defined distinction between close and distant enemies', whereby only close enemies were regarded as fully human or similar in nature to themselves. Simon Harrison, *Dark Trophies : Hunting and the Enemy Body in Modern War*, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2012), pp. 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> H. L. Squires, 'Gordon's Head'. SAD 261/1/25



BRINGING GORDON'S HEAD TO SLATIN.

Robert Talbot Kelly, *Bringing Gordon's Head to Slatin*, photomechanical screen relief print from wash drawing, in Rudolf Carl von Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, 1895, opposite p. 206  
Digital scan: author

When Wingate eventually managed to facilitate Slatin's escape, the former prisoner's testimony (edited by Wingate) added to the longed-for eyewitness testimony used to authenticate subsequent public accounts of events surrounding Gordon's death, including Robert Kelly's art works commissioned for Slatin's book:<sup>17</sup>

I crawled out of my tent.... In front, marched three Black soldiers; one named Shatta...carried in his hands a bloody cloth in which something was wrapped up, and behind him followed a crowd of people weeping.... Shatta undid the cloth and showed me the head of General Gordon! [...] I gazed silently at this ghastly spectacle. His blue eyes were half-opened; the mouth was perfectly natural; the hair of his head, and his short whiskers, were almost quite white.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert George Talbot Kelly was an established Orientalist landscape and genre painter who had moved to Egypt in 1883, spoke Arabic fluently, and frequently lived in indigenous communities. His deep immersion and empathic engagement with local people complemented Slatin's career. Kelly's art works and Slatin's narrative account therefore mutually reinforced their joint claim to truth-telling.

<sup>18</sup> von Slatin, p. 206.

In the Sudan, Muhammad Ahmad's prestige soared. Gordon's head was displayed in Omdurman, where it signified the moral supremacy of the *Mahdīa*. Britain suffered a loss of prestige in inverse proportion. Gordon's head remained painfully on display in Britain, too: Kelly does not hold back when he presents it to Slatin's reader, for example: there it is, for us to look at—and look at it we must.

If the expedition to rescue Gordon had been a military failure (too little, too late, and at great cost in blood and treasure), the consequent ceding of the Sudan to the insurrection was a political disaster. Public support for reconquest was motivated by the perceived need to recover personal, institutional, and national honour. The taking of trophies and their display would prove fundamental to narrative accounts of a job well done and moral order re-established.

Even after the reconquest, aftershocks of neurotic anxiety about the loss of prestige touched British nerves. A. E. W. Mason's 1902 novel, *The Four Feathers*, for example, reprises the mood. The protagonist, Lieutenant Harry Feversham, succumbs to his fears and resigns his commission rather than go to war. Three of his colleagues, aghast at his willingness to undermine the prestige of the regiment, each send him a white feather. When his fiancée, Ethne, finds out, she too regards it as a moral dereliction of duty: as Gordon was let down by the nation, so the nation is let down by Feversham:

"Were they justly sent?" [Ethne] asked.



'Yes', said Harry.<sup>19</sup>

"All my life I have been afraid that some day I should play the coward, and from the very first I knew that I was destined for the army. I kept my fear to myself. There was no one to whom I could tell it. My mother was dead, and my father---." [Feversham] could imagine him dreaming of honours and distinctions worthy of the Fevershams to be gained immediately by his son in the Egyptian campaign.<sup>20</sup>

"These...are yours. Will you please take them?" She was pointing with her fan to the feathers on the table....

'There are four!' he said.

Ethne did not reply, and looking at her fan Feversham understood. [...] She had broken off one of [its] feathers and added it on her own account to the three.

The thing which she had done was cruel, no doubt. But she wished to make an end—a complete and irrevocable end; though her voice was steady and her face, despite its pallor, calm, she was really tortured with humiliation and pain.<sup>21</sup>

Feversham takes up his feathers—the first 'trophy' to be secured during the campaign. Devastated, the sensitive, liberal-minded Feversham resolves to turn away from Ethne, man-up, and prove himself worthy of the respect of the feather-givers, on their terms. So begins an epic 'quest romance' in search of redemption in the testing environment of the cross-cultural encounter with barbarism in the Soudan.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A. E. W. Mason, *The Four Feathers*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1906), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 49-50.

<sup>22</sup> *The Four Feathers* is an example of what Elaine Showalter calls a 'fin de siècle quest romance', a literary genre that, she argues, was symptomatic of a crisis in masculinity. She notes how fears 'of racial intermingling, crossbreeding, and intermarriage, fuelled scientific and political interest in establishing clear lines of demarcation between black and white, East and West. After General Gordon's defeat by an Islamic fundamentalist, the Mahdi, at Khartoum in 1885, many saw signs that the Empire was being undermined by racial degeneration and the rebellion of the "lower" races. These anxieties prompted 'the intensified valorization of male power, and expressions of anxiety about waning virility...connecting imperialist politics with an image of robust masculinity'. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle*, (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1990), pp. 5, 10 and 83.



Unknown artist and engraver(s), *The Palace Where Gordon Lived, Khartoum*, wood engraving, in *Pictorial Records of the English in Egypt: With a Full and Descriptive Life of General Gordon, the Hero of Khartoum*, 1885, p. 145  
Digital scan: author

## Architecture

In the years after 1885, British images of two public buildings, each associated with beheading, served to negotiate humiliation, pain, and the prospect of redemption: the Governor's Palace in Khartoum, and the Mahdi's Tomb in Omdurman.

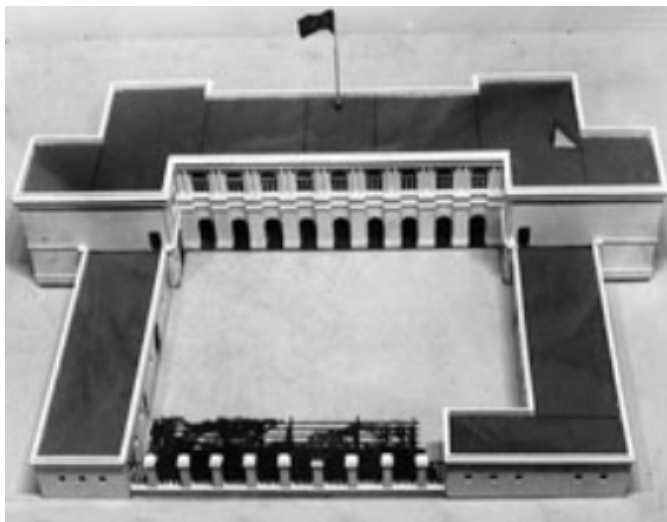
According to Andrew Herscher's theory of the language of damage:

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.<sup>23</sup>

His argument relates directly to the way images of these structures were employed to rhetorical effect in Britain. (We only have time to consider images of the Palace.)

After Gordon's death, the Governor's Palace lay in ruins. But in the British imagination it remained as it once was: intact, in the moment before it became the site of martyrdom and despoliation.



Plywood model of the Governor's Palace in Khartoum, 1884  
NAM 1905-02-183-1

Reproduced with kind permission of the National Army Museum

The National Army Museum archive includes a model of the Palace made at the time of siege. If the Palace itself had once been the architectural expression of Anglo-Egyptian power, in January 1885 its simulacrum—the model—functioned as a site of humiliation and pain. That being so, it also gave onto the prospect of its recovery, and the promise of prestige regained, signified by its reconstruction.

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Herscher, 'The Language of Damage', *Grey Room*, 7 (2002), 69.



Coloured board game, *Gordon-Kitchener*, after 1884

NAM. 1995-01-290

Reproduced with kind permission of the National Army Museum

The longed-for moment of recovery and reconstruction is the goal of the board game, *Gordon-Kitchener*, played like *Snakes and Ladders*. Players throw a pair of die to inch their way up the Nile towards Khartoum, passing representations of Anglo-Egyptian victories since 1883. The unlucky ones meet with reversals, sliding back down the board before struggling upriver again. The winner is the player who attracts prestige and honour by landing first on Khartoum to secure victory.



George Joy, *The Death of General Gordon, Khartoum, Jan. 26, 1885*, 1893

© Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery); courtesy Bridgeman

Players of *Gordon-Kitchener* were given another chance to arrive in Khartoum when they viewed George Joy's popular 1893 painting, *The Death of General Gordon*, whose meaning is grounded in the pathos of Gordon's last stand against barbarism.

Compositionally, the Gordon figure occupies a higher, but paradoxically subordinate position in pictorial depth, behind the Dervish figure group. The narrow tonal range Joy employs flattens the narrow body, merging it with the shadows above. While the



architectural form of the Palace orders space into a series of angled geometric planes, Gordon's principled determination not to abandon the garrison of Khartoum finds expression in the upright timber support to his right. The verticality established by post and body is mirrored up the right edge of the painting, where the only Mahdist facing the viewer gazes up at the captured flag he holds aloft: the act of decapitation has already begun.



Madame Tussauds, *Mahdi Group*, 1885  
© Madame Tussauds Archive

The commercially astute Madame Tussauds was quick to profit from Gordon mania by transporting its customers to Khartoum. Soon after Gordon's death it displayed a group of four 'portraits'

comprising three British martyrs and their nemesis, Muhammad Ahmad. Gordon is rear left; far left is Colonel William Hicks, killed and decapitated earlier in the war; on the right is Colonel John Stewart, killed attempting to leave Khartoum in late 1884. 'Relics', including a helmet once used by Gordon, were grouped at the base of the display, a common strategy at Madame Tussauds, where their presence claimed to guarantee the proximity of the visitor experience to actual events.



John Theodore Tussaud et al., *Death of General Gordon*, Tableau, 1897

© Madame Tussauds Archive

John Tussaud later made a significant commercial investment in a tableau depicting the north west corner of the Palace, after Joy. Here too, the Palace existed for visitors as it once was: intact—tangible, even. 'Relics' authenticating the tableau were now invested in the Dervish figure group, which was attired and equipped using artefacts looted from Sudan's battlefields. Tussauds

even bought Joy's painting and hung it nearby, adding yet another layer of 'evidence'. Gordon and the site of his martyrdom was nowhere more present in the popular British imagination than at Madame Tussauds, where the material culture of war in the Sudan was deeply layered, in the run up to the reconquest.

### **Victory and the architectural trophy**

On 4 September 1898, two days after the conclusive victory at Omdurman, the Sirdar (Commander-in-Chief), General Herbert Kitchener, seized that longed-for moment. The culminating point of the past 14 years was not to be a battle, but a multi-denominational Christian service of remembrance that was also a media opportunity.



Lt Edward Loch lantern slide, *Ruins of Governor's Palace, Khartoum, Gordon Memorial Service, 4 September 1898.*

NAM. 1970-09-11-20

Reproduced with kind permission of the National Army Museum

British and Egyptian troops were assembled under the Palace's ruined river wall. Kitchener acted as chief mourner, watched by the special (war) correspondents whose presence he had, uncharacteristically, facilitated. As Kitchener intended, the event was comprehensively sketched and written about by soldiers and civilians, some of whom also used their Kodak portable camera.

George Steevens, who had represented the *Daily Mail*, later described the backdrop of the service:

You could see that it had once been a handsome edifice.... Now the upper storey was clean gone; the blind windows were filled with bricks; the stucco was all scars, and you could walk up to the roof on rubble. [...] There was no need to tell us we were at a grave. In that forlorn ruin...the bones of murdered civilisation lay before us. [...] Then on the roof—almost on the very spot where Gordon fell...we were aware of two flagstaves.<sup>24</sup>

Veteran correspondent for the *Westminster Gazette*, Bennet Burleigh, described a definitive cross-cultural moment:

Then the Egyptian band played their quaint funeral march, and the native men and women, understanding that, and who it was played for, raised their prolonged, shrill, wailing cry. Count Calderai, the Italian Military Attaché, who stood near the Sirdar, was deeply affected, whilst Count von Tiedmann, the German Attaché...was even more keenly impressed, a soldier's tears coursing down his cheeks. But there! Other eyes were wet, and cheeks too, as well as his, and bronzed veterans were not ashamed of it either.<sup>25</sup>

In that moment, the raising of the flags promised the remaking of the Palace, of the Egyptian Sudan, of British military prestige—and of Gordon, too.

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<sup>24</sup> George Warrington Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum*, 8 edn (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1898), p. 312.

<sup>25</sup> Bennet Burleigh, *The Khartoum Campaign: A Special Correspondent's View of the Reconquest of the Sudan by British and Egyptian Forces under Kitchener-1898*, (London: Leonaur, 2008), p. 192.



Francis Gregson, *Lieutenant Murray-Threipland, Grenadier Guards, holding two of Gordon's glass candle sconces in the ruins of the Governor-General's Palace, 1898*

SAD.A27/148

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Gordon's enduring presence was expressed in photography depicting items salvaged from a ruin that was already made less so by soldiers who invested in affirming its multi-layered cultural significance by posing for the camera.



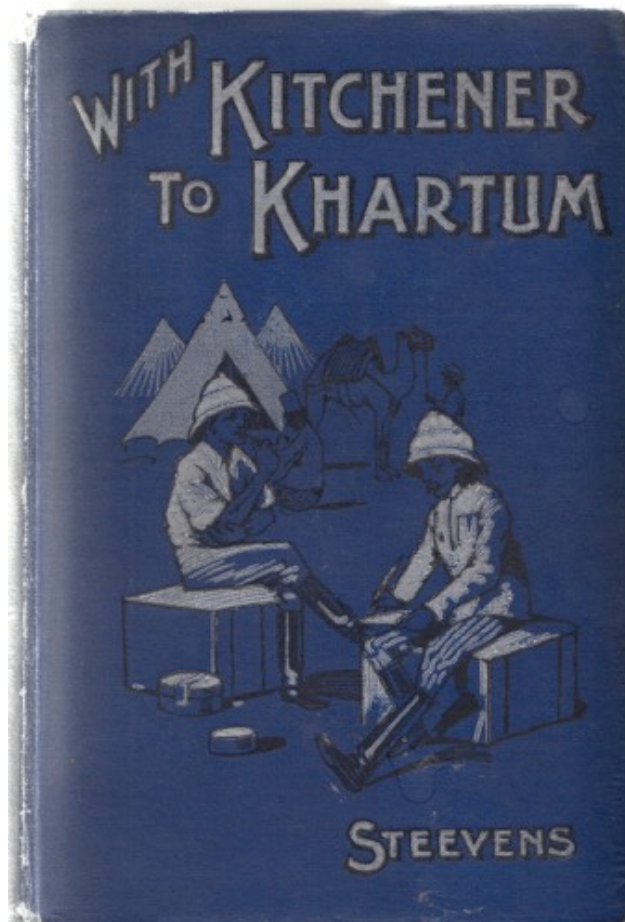


Francis Gregson, *View from the roof of the Governor-General's palace, where Gordon watched for the arrival of the relief expedition, 1898*

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The remaking of abandoned, martyred, and beheaded Gordon is signified most poignantly in this photograph of the Nile. War correspondent Francis Gregson positioned himself close to where he imagined Gordon had stood every day for ten months, watching for the relieving force. The almost featureless expanse of water downstream of the palace is suggestive of the political and military failure to reach Gordon. But the photograph also includes the bridge of the *Melik*, and the flag flying at the gunboat's prow, together signifying that Gordon was abandoned no longer.



George Warrington Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum*, 1898  
Digital scan: author

Steevens tells his readers that after the Palace had been reclaimed for Britain and Egypt, 'We left Gordon alone again—but alone in majesty under the conquering ensign of his own people.'<sup>26</sup> His book was a run-away best seller that Christmas, and no wonder; he appealed to the dominant sentiment in Britain when he wrote, invoking the language of trophy-taking: 'The vindication of our self-respect was the great treasure we won at Khartum, and it was worth the price we paid for it.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Steevens, p. 316.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 318.

**Archives**

SAD: Durham University Sudan Archive

NAM: National Army Museum

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