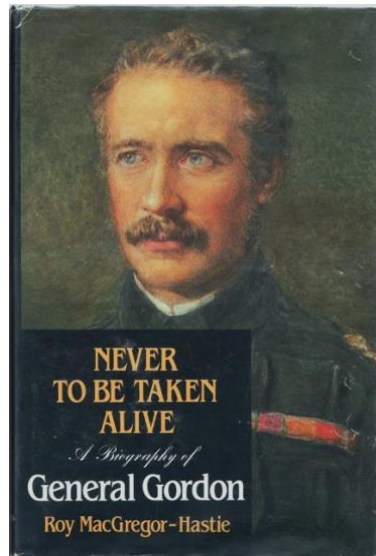


## The In & Out Club Library

29 October 2020

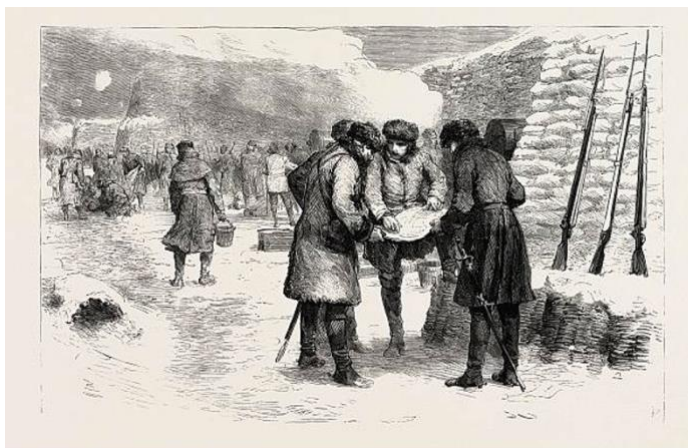


Roy MacGregor-Hastie's book on General Gordon, *Never to be taken alive*, was published in 1985 – but don't let that put you off. You have only to open it at the foreword and read the very first sentence to be drawn in, and before you know it you're halfway through chapter one.

'Of all the men whom Queen Victoria hated,' it starts, '-and she was a good and frequent hater – none aroused her wrath as easily and as often as William Ewart Gladstone.'

The list of his sins which follows (not respectful to Prince Albert, unkind to Disraeli, ironic on her empress-ship) is topped by his not rescuing Gordon from death in Khartoum, which brought the Queen out in passionate underlinings in her letter to Gordon's sister. Two paragraphs further on we learn that he was an Egyptian civil servant, a high-ranking officer in the Turkish and Chinese armies, and laden with decorations by these powers and by France, whilst the British army had seen him retire as a major-general, with only minor awards.

He was mysterious, enigmatic, suspicious of money; a man who saw the world 'in black and white, more often than not in terms of human geography, of people who were right or wrong, which for him was black and white.' His memorial service 'was conducted by Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist chaplains in concert, just to make sure that the right words were said over the unquiet spirit.'



Gordon in the Crimea

As a small child his family had moved from Scotland to Dublin, where his experience of the rural (starving) poor lodged in his mind as a problem to be solved. He was sent to school at Taunton, where he was terrorized by cricket, and then to the new and rather experimental military school at Carshalton House, Croydon, where he disdained authority, and was bullied, finally getting into the Royal Engineers rather in spite of himself. His first posting was to the Crimea, where war had broken out in 1854, and where he met his best friend, a half Armenian Italian called Romolo Gessi, who introduced him to the complexities of Balkan and Ottoman politics. Gordon was employed to redraw the Russian–Turkish border, discovered the horrors of the slave trade (Russians, enslaved by Turks), and amused himself with wolf-hunting.



Gordon in Shanghai

By 1860 he was in Shanghai, where the opium wars were smouldering, and the French had, to his disgust, looted the Summer Palace at Peking. He got on well with the Chinese, having taken pains to learn Mandarin, and this eventually caused him to be put in charge of the Chinese (or ‘Ever-Victorious’) army, which was confronting the rebels in its borders; he re-organized it and drilled it, creating (as Cromwell had done) a ‘New Model Army’, and helping to end the Taiping Rebellion.



Statue of Gordon in Gravesend



Gordon as Governor of the Sudan

In the same way, when he was reposted to the Royal Engineers at Gravesend, he set about organizing help for the hundreds of 'waifs and strays' in the area, teaching at the local Ragged School, and giving away most of his possessions to fund clothes for them. Over five years, he taught around 500 boys, more than 200 of whom were then able to find jobs. He then moved on to Egypt, but found there was little to do from an imperial point of view, and so in 1873 he left the British Army for the Egyptians, and then for the Governorship of the Sudan – a path which led inexorably to his death at the hands of rebels.



George William Joy,  
*General Gordon's last stand*,  
1893, Leeds Museum & Art

The portrait painted of him in this book is of an unusually upright man, who constantly questioned the meaning of life and his place in creation, and strove to help the poor and trammelled. It's a particularly readable account of the life of a man who was a hero to many, and who still appears (if mercurial) unfashionably heroic.



Memorial to Gordon, Royal Engineers Museum, made from a stone from the steps of his palace Collection in Khartoum, where he was reported to have been cut down.



Photo of Gordon with pressed roses from his garden in Khartoum, Royal