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 This article can also be read as a PowerPoint with pictures.

The clash of cultures and civilisations, in the latter half of the 19th Century, was vividly seen in the conflict between the English Christian General Charles Gordon (or Gordon Pasha as he is remembered) and the Arab Muslim Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed ibn Abdullah, who established a Caliphate in Sudan. Their contrasting legacies continue to influence Sudan and the world, to this day.

Resourceful and Aggressive Engineer

Charles Gordon, whose life and death was destined to have such a great impact upon the history of Sudan, was born in England in 1833, the fourth son of a Royal Artillery officer who rose to be a lieutenant-general. Charles was described as a resourceful and aggressive youngster with a keen eye and fiery temper for injustice. At 16 he entered the Military Academy and at 19 began his training for the Royal Engineers, an elite professional corps in the 19th Century. It was the engineers who carried out reconnaissance work, led storming parties, demolished obstacles in assaults, carried out rear-guard actions in retreats and other hazardous tasks.

War in Crimea

Gordon first saw action in the Crimean War in southern Russia where he gained a reputation for fearlessly scouting of enemy positions under fire in the front line, always returning with accurate field sketches and useful intelligence. Gordon was critical of the general lack of offensive spirit and was disgusted by those whose zeal was less than his. He wrote of the "indescribable" excitement of war and how he enjoyed it "amazingly"! He was mentioned in Despatches and after the war was appointed assistant commissioner to an international commission to survey the new Russian-Turkish boundary. For three years this preoccupied him in Bessarabia and Armenia.

Campaign in China

Arial, sans-serif; font-size: 12pt;">Thereafter Captain Gordon was sent to China where he reconnoitred 400 miles of the Great Wall. He also began a charitable fund for paupers, contracted smallpox and began to seriously consider *"eternal things"*. At about this time Tien Wang (or the *"Heavenly King"* as he called himself) inaugurated a new *"Dynasty of Perpetual Peace"* by starting a vicious civil war. Hundreds of thousands died at the hands of these Taiping rebels - many by being beheaded, crucified or buried alive. Yet these so called *"freedom fighters"* received widespread support from British liberals with some missionaries writing ecstatic accounts of sober, God-fearing *Wangs* (the title given to Taiping rebel leaders).

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Turning the Tables on the Taipings

In 1863 Major Gordon was appointed as Commander of a Chinese mercenary force which had been optimistically named the *"Ever Victorious Army"* (EVA)! He took to this task of suppressing the extra-ordinarily successful Taiping Rebels with ingenuity. He turned the enemy's two greatest assets to his own advantage. Because the Taipings were better fighters than his own Chinese troops he spared prisoners' lives and enlisted captured Taiping into his EVA. The many intricate waterways which serve as obstacles to advances, Gordon turned into routes for supply and attack. He utilised a large flotilla of small ships to transport his artillery and infantry down the canals to outflank the Taipings and bring his guns to bear.

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Leading from the Front

Gordon conceived it to be the duty of a commanding officer to personally lead critical assaults. This he did with calm courage and competence. In 16 months he planned and executed 16 major offensives capturing or destroying most of the Taipings and their weaponry. Amidst the battles he rescued many an orphan. At the height of the Quinsan battle he was seen carrying a naked urchin who, educated at his protector's expense, grew up to be a senior police officer in Shanghai.

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Tough and Tenacious

Gordon succeeded in defeating the rebellion by aggressive leadership and indirect tactics, with little loss to his own forces. He earned the reputation of being extra-ordinarily tough, working day and night, a man of courage, resolution and, when necessary, ruthlessness.

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Refusing Riches

He ended up as a Marshall in the Imperial Chinese Army but

refused literally a roomful of gold as reward. In fact he refused any payments beyond his regular British Army pay. He returned in 1865 to England as a celebrity, lionised by the press as *"Chinese Gordon"*.

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Conversion

His father's death in the year of his return to England revived his spiritual interests. It was from 1865 that he dated his true conversion to Christ. Before this he wrote that *he: "had a belief that Jesus was the Son of God and used to have feelings of deep depression on account of my faults"*. Now *"I know Jesus is my Saviour. God made me count the cost and conclude that His service should be all... the fruits of the Spirit could be had only by abiding in Christ..."*

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Compassion

Gordon gave himself wholeheartedly to Christian service in his community: visiting poor families, sick people and lonely people whom he befriended. For the rest of his life he was involved in the relief of the sick, the suffering, the poor and particularly the homeless orphans. His family mansion became a mission house. He ran a free school from his home where, every evening, he taught reading, writing, arithmetic and history. There was also cricket, chess and cheerful hymns. The *◆scuttlers◆* from the slums normally arrived filthy and were washed by Colonel Gordon. Planting the freshly cleaned and clothed boy in front of a mirror Gordon would say: *"Just as you see a new boy on the outside, I want you to be new inside as well!"* Gordon gave them a home, food, clothes, teaching and a knowledge of God and His Word. He also helped to find them employment.

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Equatoria

After eight years of such inner city missionary activity in England Gordon was invited to replace Samuel Baker as governor of Equatoria (the Southernmost province of Sudan). His mission would be to establish order and suppress the slave trade in over 200 000 square miles of thorn shrub and swamp. Like the Moses who despised the riches of Egypt Gordon refused the *◆10 000* a year which the Khedive of Egypt offered him. Gordon accepted the governorship for only *◆2 000* thus contributing to the growing belief that *"Chinese Gordon"* was not quite sane.

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Eradicating the Slave Trade

Sudan at that time was a colony of Egypt which in turn owed allegiance to the Turkish Empire. The Khedive Ismail (an Albanian Muslim) who ruled Egypt was himself a slave owner on a gigantic scale, as were most of his relatives, friends and ministers of state. But as this was bad for his

image in Europe, from where most of his investments came, Ismail instructed Gordon to stop the slave trade in Sudan. Thus the Khedive could continue to enjoy the services of innumerable slaves in Egypt and at the same time earn the reputation of an enlightened leader opposed to slavery!

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Against All Odds

As governor of Equatoria, Gordon soon learned that almost all of his Egyptian soldiers had been sent to Sudan as a punishment. Stunningly unmotivated, these ill-clothed, ill-fed, unpaid conscripts were never allowed leave lest they desert. Yet with such unpromising troops Gordon would suppress the slave trade, explore the Great Lakes and introduce law and order to Equatoria

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The Scourge of Slavery

The possession of slaves in Sudan was legal. It was the traffic in slaves that Gordon had to suppress. Slavery was easy money. Adventurers could obtain loans, boats and slave raiders in Khartoum, sail up the Nile River and, in partnership with some co-operative chief, the slavers would raid a few villages at dawn. A few would be shot or speared, the rest captured. The elders would be tortured to reveal their hidden ivory.

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Cruel Oppression

Adults were secured with a *sheizba* (a heavy forked pole) resting on the shoulders, the head secured by a cross-bar, hands tied to the pole. Of the survivors who reached Khartoum, females were allocated to concubines or domestic service. Most of the males became labourers or servants. The lucky ones became *Bazingers* (slave soldiers) to carry out slave raids on others. The unlucky males were castrated for household service (this operation, performed in unsanitary conditions, without anaesthetics, was often fatal).

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Slaves and Ivory

By-products of the slave trade were cattle and ivory captured or bartered, which were carried by the slaves. The average slaver could aim on capturing 400 to 500 slaves (worth 5 or 6 each) and 20,000 lbs of ivory (worth 4 000 in Khartoum) a year. The thriving, stinking, fly-swarmed city of Khartoum prospered on the twin trades of slaves and ivory.

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Muslim Justification of Slavery

There was hardly an official in Sudan who was not involved in these trades. It would have been hard to find a household in Khartoum so poor as to not own at least one slave. Even the most pious and humane Muslims were unable to see why the Christians made such a fuss about slavery. *"It might be wrong*

to enslave Muslims" went their argument, "but the economics of Sudan required a constant flow of fresh slaves and the vast majority of these were pagan blacks. Could any reasonable man deny that the life of a Negro, as a slave in Egypt, Turkey or Syria, was infinitely preferable to his life in Equatoria, or the Congo, where I was poor, nasty brutish and short!" So went the common rationalisations in defence of the Islamic slave trade.

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Exploitation

It was estimated that seven-eighths of the Black population of Sudan were slaves!

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Strategic

Gordon's first action against the slave trade was to nationalise the ivory trade, which denied slavers much of their profit. Then he closed the Nile River to slavers. This unfortunately had the unforeseen result of immeasurably increasing the sufferings of the slaves. Instead of being crammed like sardines into boats down the Nile the slaves were now marched across the pitiless desert! Gordon improved communications down the Nile, multiplied military outposts throughout Equatoria and set about introducing the rule of law.

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Swift Justice

It was a very personal administration. Justice was swift. Criminals were flogged. It was effective. It was popular with the people. However, it only worked because of Gordon's impartiality. With anyone less fair and conscientious it would have doubtless been abused. Gordon's was the first example of a foreign rule which could be fair, conscientious and incorruptible. Gradually movement became easier in Equatoria. The people began to see that they could receive justice even against the Governor's own servants.

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Confronting Cannibals and Witchdoctors

At Rejal over 100 armed men of the Niam Niam tribe, who were reportedly occasional cannibals, surrounded Gordon and after drumming all night advanced threateningly on him. Gordon drew two guns and ordered them: "Now, go!" They went and left him alone. On another occasion a mob of hostile Bari men threatened Gordon. As the witch-doctors seemed to be performing some cursing ceremony on him, Gordon fired a shot into the ground beside them. This ended the ceremony and the threat.

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Restoring Respect for Life

When Gordon began his work in Equatoria its only exports were ivory and slaves. Slavers operated with impunity. A healthy young woman could be purchased

from her parents for a packet of needles. By the time Gordon left, a respect for human life had once again returned to Equatoria.

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Governor of Sudan

As the slave routes had now moved across the desert to Bahr-el-Ghazal, Gordon wrote to the Khedive requesting the position of Governor-General of the whole of Sudan. This was granted. Gordon's Sudan was 1,640 miles long and about 660 miles wide. His first task as Governor General was to see the whole Sudan, and to be seen by it.

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 Campaign by Camel

Within five months Gordon rode over 5,000 miles by camel across the scorching desert sand, stony steppes, wooded uplands and steamy swamps. He used thoroughbred racing camels capable of long journeys at an average of 7 miles an hour. He owned a team of 5 camels so as not to wear them out and he read books while riding at a trot. The desert strengthened the tendencies towards asceticism and mysticism already strong within him. As others before him had been prepared for their life work in the desert, so too Gordon became even more spiritually attuned. Gordon enjoyed the drama of swooping down like an avenging angel upon a lethargic garrison of a remote desert outpost, leaning forward in the high saddle, legs pressing on the camel's shoulders, as he was depicted in the famous statue later erected in Khartoum.

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Defeating the Slave Traders

During this camel tour of Sudan, Gordon suppressed a revolt, and the robber chieftains of Bahr-el-Ghazal cowered into submission. He neutralised the largest and most dangerous slave trader, Suleiman Zebeyr, disbanded half his slave army and took the rest into his army, all without firing a shot. Gordon succeeded in breaking the back of the slave trade in Sudan with prayer, pressure, persuasion and his overwhelming personality. These experiences convinced him that there were no limits to what he could achieve by audacity and faith in God.

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Wholehearted

In one of his writings, Gordon rebuked Christians for lacking in self-denial and devotion. *"A man must give up everything, understand everything, for Christ."*

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Ruthless and Decisive

Gordon was ruthless with

incompetent officials. He sacked many lethargic and corrupt officials and created momentous upheavals and disruptions in the administration. When he investigated the prisons he found them to be dens of injustice with many prisoners detained for years without trial. Gordon somehow found the time to look into every case. Corruption, false testimony and incompetence had led to many miscarriages of justice which he endeavoured to reverse. He summarily had a notorious murderer hung and the city was quieter for it. He had a man hanged for castrating a slave. Many unjustly detained without trial were released.

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Setting Captives Free

In just two months Gordon captured 12 slave caravans. One of these, after crossing 500 miles of desert, had only 90 out of the original 400 slaves surviving. Few were over 16 years, some of the girls had babies and there were many small children.

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Rooting Out Corruption

He caught many of his own officials and soldiers involved in the slave trade. Gordon ordered that the governor of any district through which a captured slave-train was proved to have passed should forfeit 3 months' pay. When a Royal Navy vessel captured a large slave ship off-shore of Massawa, Gordon solemnly handed over 3 months of his own salary.

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Dealing with Slavers

At Shaka he expelled 100 slave dealers, 4 who were proven guilty of a massacre were shot. Fourteen slaves were rescued from a small party of 3 slavers whom Gordon had flogged and dismissed. To tighten the blockade of Bahr-el-Ghazal, Gordon authorised the Baggara tribe to arrest slavers.

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Replaced

Financial problems in Cairo precipitated a change in government. The ousted Khedive Ismail was replaced by Khedive Tewik, a Turk. This led to Gordon being replaced as Governor General of Sudan. Yet Gordon left behind a transformed Sudan. He had abolished the *Courbach* (whipping the soles of the feet for not paying one's taxes), stamped out corruption, freed many who had been unjustly imprisoned and freed many slaves. He had also remitted back taxes and provided piped water for Khartoum.

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Respected and Feared

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sans-serif; font-size: 12pt;">He was popular in Equatoria as the man who had, at least temporarily, freed them from the Muslim North. However he was resented, though respected, by the Arab North. His prestige was higher than his popularity. Most Sudanese value the courage of a warrior very highly and Gordon's courage was unquestioned. They may have resented having a Christian govern them but they respected his piety and devotion. They may have deplored his attacks on the slave trade but they also appreciated his zeal, energy and integrity. Gordon was admired more for who he was than for what he had done.

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The Mahdi

While Gordon was leaving Sudan, another leader was living as a hermit on the island of Aba, 200 miles up the White Nile from Khartoum. In May 1881, at the age of thirty-eight, Mohammad Ahmed ibn Abdullah proclaimed himself the Mahdi. This was after years spent in prayer, fasting, Quranic study and contemplation of the decay of Islam.

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The Sufi

The Sufi sect, which predominated in Sudan widely believed in the coming of the Mahdi (the Expected One - an eschatological figure whose advent foreshadowed the end of the world). The Sufi leaders and teachers known as fakis and their dervish disciples widely believed that in the year 1300 of the Hegira (1882 of the Christian Calendar) the Mahdi would reveal himself. They were therefore predisposed to accept the claims of Mohammed Ahmed who was a member of the Sammani order of Sufis. He came from the west of the Muslim world, not as had been predicted from the East, but otherwise he was everything the Mahdi should be: devout, learned, descended from the Prophet and he carried the sign of a mole on his right cheek. There had been others claiming to be the Mahdi but none came as close as he did to matching the prophecy.

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Uprising

As the successor of the Prophet, the Mahdi claimed temporal authority over all Muslims and spiritual authority to restore the purity of Islam. He had chosen an opportune time to announce his uprising. There was widespread resentment of Turkish (foreign) rule and many thousands had been bankrupted by the suppression of the slave trade. The fakis and dervishes responded to his religious appeal, the riverine tribes desired the return of the lucrative slave trade and the Baggara nomads were basically against any government (which meant taxes). When the Mahdi forbade the paying of taxes to Khartoum and announced a return to the slave trade his popularity was assured.

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Rebellion Spreads

Imitating Muhammad, the

Mahdi made his Hegira retreat to the Jebel Quadir in the Nuba Mountains of Kordofan. The Baggara joined him by the thousands. Three punitive expeditions against the Mahdists were annihilated and the rebellion flourished.

War in Egypt



Meanwhile there had been a military coup in Cairo. And a massacre of Christians in Alexandria led to a British Naval bombardment and an expedition under (Gordon's lifelong military friend) General Wolseley to protect the Khedive against his army and foreigners against the mob. On 13 September 1882, Wolseley routed the Egyptian army at Tel-el-Kebir. This began Britain's occupation of Egypt, which although it was meant to be brief lasted for 70 years.

Commandant of the Cape Colony

During this time Gordon was promoted to Major-General and appointed Commandant General of the forces in the Cape Colony in South Africa. Gordon soon made his strong and unpopular opinions known. The Boers who had recently thrashed the British Army at Majuba were men after his own heart, brave, frugal and pious. As for the natives, they had been badly treated and promises made to them had been broken.

Incorruptible

Gordon visited the exiled Zulu king, Cetshwayo, who was his prisoner at the Castle, in Cape Town, and spoke with him of spiritual matters. Neither did Gordon neglect the spiritual welfare of the Boers. He had one of his tracts translated into Dutch and distributed quantities around the countryside for the God-fearing burghers to study. Gordon's prime responsibility was to settle the Basuto border question. During this time he had dealings with Cecil Rhodes who found him an extra-ordinary man, one who was disinterested in money! Finally Gordon resigned complaining that it was "not possible to do anything with such a weak, vacillating government" as that in Cape Town.

Explorations in Palestine

Gordon then took long leave and fulfilled his cherished ambition to spend a year of research in the Holy Land. He declared it to be the happiest year of his life, a routine of prayer, Bible study and examining Jerusalem and other historic sites where Jesus had ministered. He set out to resolve through investigation the site of the crucifixion, the place of the Holy Sepulchre (the empty tomb) and other Biblical issues. His book "Reflections in Palestine" was, to him, his most prized achievement. Today Protestants recognise the sites Gordon identified as Golgotha and the Garden Tomb as the true

Biblical sites.

Disaster

On 8 September 1883 a British Colonel Hicks, in command of an Egyptian force of 10,000 unmotivated soldiers, marched into Kordofan in search of the *Mahdi*. On 5 December his rabble was annihilated along with himself and all his officers. This military disaster placed Khartoum itself at risk.

Mission to Sudan

As Britain was occupying Egypt, it was now also responsible for Sudan. However, after Britain's humiliating defeats at the hands of the Zulus at Isandlwana (1879) and by the Boers at Majuba (1881) the liberal government wanted to get out of Egypt and stay out of Sudan. Unwilling to send an army to relieve Khartoum, the prime minister, Gladstone, agreed to send General Gordon. A total of 21,000 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers scattered throughout Sudan were confronted by 300,000 dervish (Mahdist) rebels armed with modern rifles and artillery captured from Hicks.

Mission Impossible

Without a British army it seemed impossible that Gordon could put down such a vastly superior force as that led by the Mahdi. Yet General Gordon felt duty bound to rally to the support of Sudan in its time of crisis.

Decisive Action

Appointed Governor General of Sudan and ordered to evacuate all foreigners, Gordon arrived to an enthusiastic welcome in Khartoum. He immediately halved taxes and abolished tax arrears making a huge bonfire of tax records. He also announced the independence of Sudan from Egypt, appointing a council to rule under himself as Commissioner of Her Majesty's Government. He then sought to have Britain declare Sudan its protectorate. Being surrounded by the Mahdi's forces he reported that an evacuation was impossible and requested a relief column.

Preparing Khartoum for Siege

Once their land routes were cut off and even the telegraph was cut, Gordon ceased being a politician and concentrated on being a soldier. He brought immense reserves of courage, determination, and invention into improving the defences of Khartoum. Whilst negotiating with the Mahdi by letter, he strengthened the fortifications of Khartoum with a ditch, rampart, land mines and wire entanglements. He also abolished customs duties and the pass system at the gates of

Khartoum. This was to encourage villagers to bring more produce into the market, which they did.

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Aggressive Defence

Gordon converted the steamships into armoured warships with cannons. These steamers were used for sorties to break up enemy concentrations, for raids to capture cattle and excursions to buy grain. Gordon's defence was active, imaginative and aggressive. Gordon himself engaged in sharpshooting to take out enemy snipers. As the siege tightened artillery duels were fought.

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Outrage in England

During all this time a groundswell of public outrage was brewing in Britain. Newspaper editorials denounced the government's indecisiveness, evasiveness and dishonesty. *The Times* called for prayers for "General Gordon in imminent peril at Khartoum". Even Queen Victoria added her voice to the public demand for the British government to send a relief column. The outcry was perhaps motivated by humanitarian concern, commercial interests, admiration for Gordon's courage and dedication to duty, hatred of the slave trade, national pride offended by being defeated by the dervishes and even evangelical missionary fervour. Finally, the British government felt compelled to send a relief column under General Wolseley, but under serious restrictions which unnecessarily delayed their progress.

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Abu Klea

Incredibly several hundred of the Mahdi's soldiers deserted and came over to join Gordon's starving besieged garrison! The British relief column smashed the Mahdi's force of 10 000 dervishes at Abu Klea on 17 January 1885 causing much fear in the *Mahdi's* camp.

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Overwhelmed

Just after midnight on 26 January 1885 over 60,000 dervishes attacked Khartoum, swarming across the defences, overwhelming the thin line of weakened troops. The Mahdists poured into Khartoum slaughtering both soldiers and unarmed civilians indiscriminately.

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Killed in Action

There are two main accounts of Gordon's death. The first account to reach Cairo, by one who never claimed to be an eyewitness, had Gordon, calmly and unresisting, being speared to death. As this was the first version to be published and as it has been immortalised in a famous painting it has been generally accepted. However, two key eye-witness accounts, one by a bodyguard of Gordon and the other by a dervish warrior, agree that Gordon went down fighting: As the Mahdists broke into the palace

As with any great man, Gordon has received some vicious criticism from detractors who hate what he stood for and choose to assail his character. Some have depicted him as a drunkard, yet no one ever saw him drunk. He did drink (yet never in the field or *"on safari"* as he put it), but was reportedly never immoderate in his consumption of alcohol. He also gave up alcohol regularly. It is extremely improbable that he could have been a habitual drinker. At the cracking pace he worked, with as little sleep as he had, in the harsh climates he travelled and with as many enemies as he had, neither his health, nor his work nor his reputation in the Sudan could have endured it.

Character Assassins

Others have attempted to portray him as a homosexual. This completely unsubstantiated slander is part of the homosexual community's strategy of claiming as many respected figures of the past as their own in order to gain some respectability by way of association. The fact that Gordon never married and that he devoted much of his time to rescuing orphaned boys from the streets is hardly evidence of homosexuality, yet on this basis there has been much speculation. Yet, Gordon was a strict Victorian Christian gentleman who wrote scathingly against *"the effeminate"*. He was appalled by the *"reprehensible"* *"sin of Sodom and Gomorrah"*. Again with all the many enemies he had it is remarkable that not once in his 51 years did anyone of his contemporaries suggest the slightest bit of scandal, aside from his disdain for money!

Intense

One criticism, which is true, is that Gordon had a fiery temper. He did not tolerate incompetence, indolence or dishonesty. He was a tiresome perfectionist. Yet as he was quick to wound so he was quick to apologise. He never lost his power to compel love, fear and obedience from those around him. He had his faults, yet there is no doubt that he was a devout and sincere Christian, a courageous soldier and a compassionate leader who cared for the poor and the helpless. His legacy is still seen in Equatoria where Christian soldiers strive



Gordon's Tomb at St. Pauls

In St. Pauls Cathedral in London is the memorial to Major General Charles Gordon, who was once the Commandant General at the Castle in Cape Town, and is most famous for his campaign to end the slave trade in Sudan. It was his year of archaeological

research and Bible study in Palestine that identified the garden tomb and the site of Golgotha. The memorial to Major Gordon, which shows him with his hand on a Bible, declares: **"Who at all times and everywhere gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God. Gordon was born at Woolwich, 28 January 1833 and slain in Khartoum, 26 January 1885. He saved an empire by his war-like genius. He ruled vast provinces with justice, wisdom and power. Lastly he was obedient to his sovereigns command, he died in the heroic attempt to save men, women and children from imminent and deadly peril. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'.** (St. John XV.13)

Faith Under Fire in Sudan is also available as an **E-Book**.

See also: [What is a Caliphate?](http://www.frontline.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1780:what-is-a-caliphate&catid=24:persecution-cat&Itemid=200)

[The Martyrs Prayer](http://www.frontline.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1782:the-martyrs-prayer&catid=15:missions-cat&Itemid=198)

[War Against Christians Intensifies](http://www.frontline.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1776:war-against-christians-intensifies&catid=24:persecution-cat&Itemid=200)

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