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FLASHMAN OF THE BLUES

The controversial life & death of Colonel Frederick Burnaby of the Royal Horse Guards

Beyond a famous portrait by Tissot of Burnaby as a twenty-eight-year-old officer in The Blues, now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, his grisly end at the Battle of Abu Klea in 1885 and his memorial in Windsor's Garrison Church, he is, today, not widely known beyond the barracks of the Household Cavalry and students of nineteenth-century British imperial history.

On the face of it, Fred Burnaby was the quintessential Victorian hero: Flashman without the dubious moral compass, although the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, whilst noting that Burnaby was married, casts doubt on his sexuality.

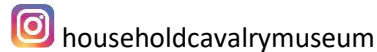
As a young man he was six feet four inches in height, had a forty-six-inch chest, weighed twenty stones and was reputed to be able to bend a poker with his bare hands, do gymnastics with a 1.5 cwt dumb-bell and carry a pony – presumably of the Shetland variety – under each arm. After school at Harrow and in Germany, his wealthy Church of England padre father bought the seventeen-year-old giant a commission in the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues). This was actually a poor choice for a man of action, as The Blues' principal preoccupations since the Battle of Waterloo had been to provide Mounted Escorts for the Sovereign and to adorn the salons of London Society.

It wasn't long before young Burnaby tired on poodle-faking in the capital of the Empire and sought more energetic outlets for his adventurous nature. So, in the six months of the year when he wasn't dancing attendance upon the monarch or making polite conversation in Mayfair drawing rooms, he travelled widely and often dangerously. His *wanderlust* took him to Central and South America in the 1860s; to North Africa in 1868, by which time he had advanced to the rank of Captain; in 1873-4, he travelled to war zones in Persia and Spain with his friend Lieutenant Colonel Valentine Baker, the Commanding Officer of the fashionable Tenth Hussars; and, at the end of 1874, he helped Colonel Charles Gordon, then on his first stint as the Governor of the Sudan, to suppress slavery in the region. To complete his adventures, during the winter of 1875-6 Burnaby rode from European Russia to Khiva in Central Asia, a three-hundred-mile journey that was extremely dangerous, not because of savage tribesmen along the way but because of the extreme cold on the *steppes*. His constitution was, as a result, badly damaged and, by the time he was forty-one years old, he was grossly over-weight and suffering from chronic lung and heart disease, either of which could have killed him at any moment.



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During each of his expeditions, Burnaby sent regular reports to *The Times* and later published accounts of his travels, tales which became best sellers and established his reputation as an intrepid Victorian adventurer. Despite these extended periods in the wilds, the first-ever cross-Channel trip in a hot air balloon and a brief foray in 1879-80 as a newly promoted Major into the equally dangerous world of politics, in 1881 Burnaby was appointed to command of The Blues, based in Windsor. Although very popular with the rank-and-file, he was disliked by his brother officers who despised his continuing journalistic output which had moved from travelogue to Society gossip. Meanwhile, 'events' were brewing in Egypt and the Sudan

Aside from the suppression of the slave trade, demanded by the British and executed by Colonel Gordon, the Sudan had not been of much concern to the British Government prior to 1884. It was not even particularly worried by an armed Islamic insurgency in the province, which started in June 1881 and was led by a Muslim fundamentalist, Muhammad Ahmad, who called himself The Mahdi or 'Chosen One'. The Sudan moved only a few pegs up the Whitehall agenda when, on 5th November 1883, an Egyptian Army commanded by an inept, retired British officer, Colonel William Hicks, was sent by the Khedive to suppress the insurgents. It was slaughtered by The Mahdi's Dervishes at the Battle of el Obeid, following which the southern half of Sudan fell under The Mahdi's control.

Although in late 1883 there was still scant British concern for the fate of the Sudan, Egypt was another matter altogether, as evidenced by Gladstone's uncharacteristic decision in 1882 to send to Egypt a British Expeditionary Force under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Garnet Wolseley to suppress a nationalist revolution led by Colonel Urabi. This force – despite Queen Victoria's opposition – included a Composite Regiment drawn from the three Regiments of the Household Cavalry. Due to his unpopularity in Whitehall, Burnaby was not – as he had hoped to be – given command.

Britain's close engagement with the decadent Government of the Khedive and its concern at the fate of his country was driven by self-interest: were Egypt to fall to nationalists or to The Mahdi, on his murderous pilgrimage to the Hagia Sophia mosque in Constantinople, there would be a significant risk to the control of the strategically important, Anglo-French owned, Suez Canal. This risk vexed the imperial-focussed Tory Opposition in London to a very considerable extent and gave them a handy weapon with which to ambush at every opportunity the domestically-focussed Liberal Government of William Gladstone. Tory sniping at the Government on the subject of the Sudan was intensified following Gladstone's reluctant decision to, in effect, instruct the Egyptians to abandon the province by getting the



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Khedive to once again appoint Gordon, who had been promoted to Major General in 1882, Governor of the Sudan with the limited objective of evacuating non-Sudanese nationals from Khartoum.

Tory sniping evolved into volley fire in the wake of another massacre of a British-led force. This time the hapless victims of The Mahdi's uprising were the seven thousand strong Egyptian Gendarmerie, under the command of the by-now-disgraced Colonel Valentine Baker (in 1875-6 he'd served a twelve-month prison term for attempted rape and then been cashiered), who were ambushed on 4th February 1884 by the troops of Osman Digna at the First Battle of el Teb, a Mahdist stronghold in north-eastern Sudan which was uncomfortably close to the Suez Canal.

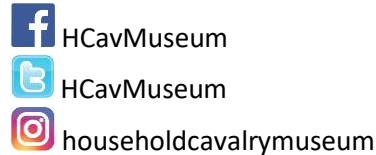
Under intense pressure from the Tories, the disaster at el Teb, which was on the doorstep of Egypt and the southern approach to the Suez Canal, forced Gladstone's hand. The Secretary of State for War ordered the diversion to Suakin (a British-held port within easy reach of el Teb) of two thousand five hundred British soldiers, under the command of Major General Gerald Graham VC, which rather conveniently happened to be sailing up the Red Sea *en route* home from India. This Brigade-strength force comprised units of the Gordon Highlanders, the Black Watch, the Royal Irish Fusiliers, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the York & Lancaster Regiment plus the Tenth and the 19th Hussars, who borrowed their mounts from what remained of the defeated and demoralised Egyptian Gendarmerie. This *ad hoc* British Army Brigade was bolstered with a hastily assembled Naval Brigade, under the command of the 'Fighting Admiral', Rear Admiral Sir William Hewett VC, comprising one hundred and sixty-two matelots and four hundred Royal Marines armed with two 9-pounder naval guns, three Gardner machine guns and three Gatling guns, drawn from HMS *Briton*, *Carysfort*, *Decoy*, *Dryad*, *Euryalas* (Hewett's Flagship), *Hecla*, *Humber*, *Ranger* and *Sphinx*, all anchored at the port of Suakin.

Meanwhile, following the successful suppression of the Urabi Revolt without him – and without War Office permission and whilst still in command of The Blues – Burnaby took an extended leave of absence from his Regiment and attached himself to the Egyptian Gendarmerie under the command of his old friend, Colonel Valentine Baker. Luckily for his reputation, Burnaby did not take part in Baker's disastrous first action at el Teb but, with the arrival of Graham's force, both Baker and Burnaby saw the opportunity for some action with real soldiers and joined the General's Staff. It was either in the Staff Mess tent at Trinkitat, or at a Staff conference prior to the advance on el Teb, that Burnaby met Commander Crawford Caffin RN, the only son of Admiral Sir James Crawford Caffin, from whom he borrowed a double-barrelled shotgun.



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After months ‘on the back foot’ politically, newspaper reports of the Second Battle of el Teb, fought on 29th February 1884, gave the Liberals what they thought was a chance to return fire on the Tories from the moral high ground. The facts of the matter, as reported in *The Times* and elsewhere, were straightforward. The battle had opened with an advance ‘in square’ by Graham’s troops towards Osman Digna’s headquarters at the fortified village of el Teb. Two hundred yards from these defences, the square was ordered to halt, the Naval Brigade’s machine guns were deployed in the front rank to suppress the fire from the enemy in the open and on the fortifications. This was followed by a conventional, if rather costly flanking cavalry charge by the Hussars against Osman Digna’s remaining men in front the village, after which the square resumed its advance to the barricades where it formed into line, fixed bayonets and charged. It was at this point that Lieutenant Colonel Fred Burnaby entered the story and, inadvertently, provided the Liberal Government with a weapon with which to attack the Tories.

Despite being located in the centre of the square with the rest of the Graham’s Staff, Burnaby, whose horse had been shot from under him, was actually the first man to reach the enemy’s defences at el Teb where, with the shotgun borrowed from Commander Crawford Caffin, he clambered onto the parapet. Burnaby was immediately surrounded by half-a-dozen of the enemy whom he dispatched by firing at point-blank range both barrels of his Paton-made shotgun, which he’d loaded with pig shot. The Blues’ Commanding Officer followed up this slaughter by clearing out Osman Digna’s forces in an adjacent stone building. When he ran out of cartridges, he used the shotgun’s stock as a club until he was wounded in the arm. About to be killed by tribesmen, Burnaby was saved by the point of a Highlander’s bayonet. Accounts differ as to the number of Osman Digna’s men whom Burnaby dispatched to Paradise, and the tally of shotgun cartridges he had needed to achieve that score. However, Commander Caffin would later assert that Burnaby had killed thirteen men with twenty-three cartridges and that is the count which has entered the history books.

Back in England there was outrage in the liberal media:

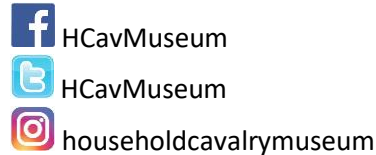
*Colonel Burnaby’s massive form was the first I saw over the parapet, firing with a double-barrelled gun into the little cluster of rebels, whinged the Liberal-inclined newspaper, *The Observer*, on 2nd March.*

This was countered the following day by the more jingoistic British newspapers, which hailed Burnaby as a hero:



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Colonel Burnaby did good work with a double-barrelled gun and slugs, finishing ten men with twenty cartridges, thundered The Times, to which The Standard added:

With the double-barrelled fowling piece he [Colonel Burnaby] carries, he knocks over the Arabs who assail him.

A two-pronged attack on the Tories by the Liberal Government started on 15th March when Sir Charles Dilke MP, a Liberal Minister and President of the Local Government Board, made a speech in the House of Commons in which he both questioned Burnaby's presence on Graham's Staff and disparaged his actions at el Teb. On the following Monday, 17th March, the Tories went on the counter-attack in Parliament during which Sir Charles Dilke for the Government said:

'... Colonel Burnaby was under no military necessity to take part in the military operations by firing on the Arabs with a shotgun.'

This was the nub of the matter and led to an extended exchange of increasingly heated questions and answers across the floor of the House of Commons, most of which were focussed on the allegations that Burnaby's use of a shotgun had been, at best, inappropriate and, at worst, contrary to the 'usages & practices of war'. Curiously, none of the parliamentarians saw fit to mention the screamingly obvious fact that infinitely more damage had been inflicted on the fuzzy-wuzzies by the Naval Brigade's murderous machine guns than by Burnaby's use of a shotgun...

In any event, the fire only died down when Lord Hartington stated, in answer to a question from Mr Buchanan:

'... I may, however, add that, even assuming that the newspaper accounts of the matter are accurate, I am not aware that Colonel Burnaby did anything contrary to the usages of war. I do not, therefore, propose to take any further steps in the matter.'

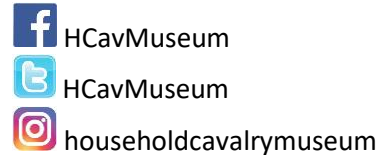
In the aftermath of el Teb, Burnaby returned to England with the official Dispatches and his arm in a sling. He received a hero's welcome in the Tory press and the London salons. Meanwhile, Caffin returned to his ship. Three years younger than Burnaby, Caffin died aged just forty-six in Nice on 16th March 1891. A quite different fate awaited Burnaby. The year after el Teb, the Commanding Officer of The Blues, recently promoted to Colonel, was once again in the Sudan.

When General the Lord Wolseley was ordered to lead the Nile Expedition to relieve Gordon, Burnaby was one of the senior officers whom he chose for his Staff. However, Burnaby's



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ongoing unpopularity with the ‘powers-that-be’ ensured that the appointment was blocked by the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal HRH The Duke of Cambridge. Undeterred, Burnaby determined to follow up his earlier action against The Mahdi by mounting a one-man mission to rescue his former colleague. Knowing full-well that if his intention was discovered by the War Office he would be recalled, he let it be known that he was heading to Bechuanaland for some big game hunting.

In great secrecy Burnaby made his way to Korti in north-central Sudan, where – dressed in an astrakhan-trimmed patrol jacket, butcher boots and, at that point, riding a donkey (Burnaby never mastered the art of riding a camel) – he met up with Wolseley’s Expeditionary Force *en route* to Khartoum. Wolseley clearly recognised an unstoppable force when he saw one and, in defiance of the War Office but forbidding The Blue to use the shotguns he had in his kit, he appointed Burnaby a supernumerary Staff officer.

When it became clear that Gordon’s plight was critical, Wolseley dispatched Major General Sir Herbert Stewart’s camel-mounted Desert Column across the Bayuda Desert, along with Burnaby who was brandishing a pair of Lancaster four-barrelled pistols in place of his shotguns. A few days later, the Commanding Officer of The Blues had his rendezvous with Fate at the wells of Abu Klea. This fifteen-minute engagement was an attempt by The Mahdi’s warriors to halt Stewart’s Desert Column, which was sprinting at a camel’s walking pace across the Sudanese sand in a last-minute dash to Khartoum. Although the blocking move by the insurgent Dervish and Baggara horsemen failed, the minor battle included a major British military embarrassment when the Column’s invincible defensive formation, ‘the square’, broke.

Since the 17th January 1885, a great deal of military-historical debate has been expended analysing exactly what happened to the rear-left corner of the British square at Abu Klea. The consensus view now is that The Mahdi’s men managed to penetrate the text book formation, which had halted half-way up a slope, following an unfortunate sequence of events that started with a mounted assault by The Mahdi’s tribesmen on the British left-rear flank.

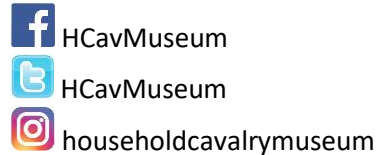
Under normal circumstances such an attack would have been broken up with volley fire, but there was a screen of dismounted skirmishers in front of the ranks of dismounted men of the Heavy Camel Regiment, who formed the square’s left-rear quadrant. To support the skirmishers’ withdrawal back within the safety of the square, Stewart ordered the deployment of the Column’s Gardner (not Gatling) machine gun. This cumbersome weapon, which was manned by a Royal Navy contingent under the command of Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN, was inside the square and so had to be wheeled into the front rank of the Heavies.

Unfortunately, it went too far forward of the dismounted heavy cavalrymen, fired, jammed and was quickly overwhelmed by spear-wielding tribesmen. In order to save Lord Beresford from almost certain death, Burnaby spurred his horse through the ranks of the Heavies and was quickly cut down by the tribesmen. There is, however, some recently discovered first-hand evidence that Burnaby’s initial wound was inflicted by friendly fire from the square,



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whose leading ranks (formed by the Guards Camel Regiment) had effected an ‘About Turn’ in order to bring down fire on the Dervishes over the heads of their comrades below them at the rear of the square. Either way, Burnaby’s gallant but unwise action in riding to his friend’s rescue opened up a gap which allowed a number of The Mahdi’s nimble-footed tribesmen to enter the formation. The ranks closed behind them and they were quickly dispatched: but the fact remained that the square had broken and the blame should have fallen squarely on Burnaby’s broad shoulders.

When news of Burnaby’s death reached England, the public reaction was profound: music in The Blues’ barracks at Windsor was forbidden, the NCO’s Ball was cancelled and the Regiment practically went into mourning. Meanwhile, the press published lengthy obituaries, eulogising the oversized soldier and his overblown reputation. Sensitive to the media-driven public mood, the War Office quietly drew a discreet curtain over the fact that the Hero of Abu Klea had not only been the architect of his own demise but had also been the cause of the ‘square that broke’, a blot on the British Army’s reputation which remains to the present day.

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‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry
written and recorded by
Regimental Historian, Christopher Joll, formerly of The Life Guards**

**These anecdotes are drawn from
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***The Drum Horse in the Fountain: Tales of the Heroes & Rogues in the Guards*
&
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