Unacceptable Reality

An analysis of George MacDonald Fraser‘s Flashman

B.A. Essay

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Summary

This essay analyzes the novel Flashman by George MacDonald Fraser. By analyzing the novel the relevance of satire in historical literature is questioned as well as the accuracy of accepted historical “truths”. Through further examination of the novel I also hope to show that the novel despite being satire has a lot more to offer the reader with regard to historical analysis than may first be apparent. Having been published 43 years ago the novels importance has only increased with the overwhelming amount of politically correct censorship that threatens to distort and even change history, the consequences of which could be disastrous. The skill with which Fraser blends fiction with reality is itself a clear indicator of the possibility for historical whitewashing or alteration. Furthermore, the very fact that it is satire allows it to transgress accepted bounds of political correctness to offer a far more realistic experience of history than many other historical books may offer. Subjects such as class inequality, the place of women, racism and the British military will be examined through the viewpoint of the novels narrator Flashman, and in doing so I will show how all these subjects are bound by a common link. This link is what gives relevance to the novel outside the realm of fiction or pure entertainment. Besides the subject matter of the novel other factors such as style of writing, use of words and interplay of historical fact and fiction make Flashman quite a unique read.
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Introduction

Undoubtedly one of the more controversial and debated chapters in European history today is the subject of colonialism and the effects it has had on the world whether good or bad. Countless books from all over the world, both fictional and non-fiction have been written on the subject, some in pure condemnation whereas others have tried to maintain a more neutral position regarding its ethical dimensions. Broaching such a complex subject with generalizations might be criticized as futile and inconsequential in terms of gaining any insight into the causes and consequences of such historically significant events. On the other hand, losing oneself in the myriad of stories, details and special circumstances might also cause a person to lose sight of the “big picture”, as it were. Unfortunately when it comes to the study of history, as revealing and relevant as such single human experiences are in themselves, they can only act as supplements to the study of the whole. Therefore the historical analyst or fiction writer must tread a very fine line to venture an opinion considered worthy of any study or discussion.

Despite first appearances the novel Flashman written by George Macdonald Fraser does exactly this. In Flashman, a fictional character named Harry Paget Flashman is placed into a historically accurate novel and somehow gets caught up, through no fault of his own, in a myriad of historically conspicuous events. Fraser's stance on history is what makes the reading of Flashman so essential. Despite being a fictional satire of only 252 pages, the novel delivers to the reader an indifferent perspective of history that is fast becoming extinct. In Flashman, Fraser's critique ranges from such varied topics as class disparity, the subjugation and degradation of women and finally the impetus behind colonialism and the military that made such Empire building possible. Nevertheless, despite the variety of topics in the novel there is throughout the book one underlying theme which permeates the story. This theme is that of the universality of human oppression and its creation and reinforcement by men. Flashman, being fiction, allows Fraser to transcend the boundaries of impartiality and political correctness that now seem to dominate the field of historical literature. Fraser's is one of a few who have escaped
the literary myopia that seems to afflict a great number of writers and intellectuals today and what he offers instead is an unpalatable truth rather than a delicious lie. His dedication to historical reality in a work of fiction is an interesting paradox in itself but it is this that is at the heart of Fraser's criticism and what makes *Flashman* such an essential read. By analyzing major events and characters in the novel I hope to bring this common theme to light whilst also showing just how relevant satire can be.
Uncomfortable Truths

George Macdonald Fraser was born in England to Scottish parents in 1925. At the age of 18 he enlisted in the army and was shipped off with the Indian 17th Infantry Division to Burma to fight the Japanese. Having survived the war he later served in the Middle East and North Africa. Fraser had the peculiar advantage of witnessing the birth and evolution of modern western political correctness and, as can be seen in his books, was vehemently against it. Having served as a foot soldier in the British Army he held no illusions as to the brutal realities of war and the nature of mankind. Nevertheless, despite his experiences in war his loyalties to Britain remained strong and to his dying day he refused to accept the new moral realities he saw being forged around him where the predominantly white, western powers were being cast as the evil and corrupting aggressor and the rest of the world as the helpless, innocent victims of aggression. As Fraser stated: “Political correctness is about denial, usually in the weasel circumlocutory jargon which distorts and evades and seldom stands up to honest analysis”.

Fraser's experiences and the perspective engendered by them were undoubtedly very valuable to him as a writer, in particular concerning the creation of the first in a series of his most famous novels: Flashman (1969). Fraser's Flashman owes his origins to a character from Thomas Hughes 1857 semi-autobiographical account Tom Brown's School Days, also the first in a series of popular adventure stories for boys. In Hughes' book Flashman is the protagonist's nemesis, the school bully who makes everybody's life miserable until he gets dismissed for drunkenness. Fraser hijacks this character; the discarded villain of Hughes' novel and through him offers the reader a savage critique on certain aspects of British culture, British society, colonialist policies and the army that made them possible.

All authors to some extent voice their own personal opinions and experiences through the characters they create and know that they are to some degree held

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1 Fraser, Quartered Safe Out There.
2 Ibid. 337-344.
3 Ibid.
accountable for what they write, but interestingly enough Fraser adds an explanatory note at the beginning of *Flashman*\(^4\) in which he ascribes the novel completely to his own fictional creation and describes his role as the simple editor and overseer of the newly “discovered” memoirs of the late Sir Harry Paget Flashman. This is a bit unusual but considering the themes of the novel it is also very clever in a number of ways. First, by giving all accountability to the fictional Flashman, Fraser manages to distance himself even further from the themes and topics in this novel, which are quite sensitive and controversial. Fraser has, through his use of sarcasm and humor and by using a fictional writer as a buffer, gone out of his way not to be taken seriously. The reason behind this might today be mistaken as a way to absolve himself of the numerous sexist and racist remarks in the book. However, it must be remembered that the book was published in 1969 and at that time Apartheid was still in full force in South Africa, only four years had passed since segregation was declared illegal in the United States and only two years had passed since abortion was made legal in Britain. Things were changing, but at that time no great public outcry at satirical novel that was slightly offensive to women or minorities could be expected.

Fraser himself never did acknowledge what he deemed to be politically correct visions of the past, and certainly would never have apologized to any who felt offended by his writing\(^5\). As Fraser stated: “I think little of people who will deny their history because it doesn't present the picture they would like”\(^6\). This leads me to believe that it was possibly Fraser's attempt to highlight the glaringly obvious problem of ever being fully certain about the veracity of recorded history. Furthermore, Fraser's use of real historical names, dates, events and characters lends an even more historically authentic feeling to a book that is inherently fictional. The message Fraser was sending the world could not have been clearer: can such a subjective term as “true” ever be used in the context of historical literature, especially if history is now being viewed through the lens of political correctness?

\(^4\) Fraser, *Flashman*. 
\(^5\) Fraser, “The Last Testament of Flashman's Creator: How Britain Destroyed Itself”. 
\(^6\) Ibid.
Flashman is the embodiment of and witness to a way of thinking that many today believe belonged only to a distant past, and with regard to certain peculiar cultural differences of the time they may be partly right. However, despite the major social and political changes which occurred in Britain in the 20th century, the very fact that Fraser's critique is still as relevant in Britain today as it was 43 years ago with regard to class disparity, war and the subjugation of women shows that there is still a prevailing mindset and culture in Britain that has a lot more in common with 19th century Britain than many would like to admit. Through Flashman's eyes Fraser wants to tear away the sentimental and idealistic notions that have so often been used to justify war and oppression, but without new illusions instantly replacing the old. These new illusions cast the British as the evil aggressors, and to some extent dehumanize the British people with a completely unjust assessment of their past. At the same time they attempt to obscure, erase or excuse the bad traits and complicity of those that were colonized by the British.

“The selective distortions of history, so beloved by New Labour, denigrating Britain's past with such propaganda as hopelessly unbalanced accounts of the slave trade, laying all the blame on the white races, but carefully censoring the truth that not a slave could have come out of Africa without the active assistance of black slavers, and that the trade was only finally suppressed by the Royal Navy virtually single-handed.”

Fraser's focus is on his own people's and country's past because this is what he has knowledge and experience of and he is not afraid to condemn what he feels deserves condemnation any more than he is of defending that which is worth defending. Fraser does not apologize or take sides and treats history for what it is: subjective, complex and human.

Natural Oppression

Flashman is a self confessed coward, rapist, opportunist and scoundrel, and yet somehow this very same man, who by all accounts should make the reader give up reading about

\cite{Ibid}
him, instead slowly garners the reader's steady bemusement, interest and even support. To begin with, Flashman is raised in a society where class inequality is rampant and accepted. In 19th century Britain, the result of continued industrialization brought with it mass migration of laborers from rural Ireland, Scotland and England to the cities. This massive influx of desperate workers that were willing to work long hours for little pay in horrible conditions was certainly crucial to the smooth functioning of the industrial machine and to the economy of Britain, but also brought with it enormous social changes that made Britain's rulers very anxious: “In early Victorian Britain the strains and tensions of adjustment were very great, and the fear of a complete break-down resulting in revolution, as in France, haunted contemporaries”\(^8\). The co-mingling of peoples from different cultural backgrounds also created a unifying factor among them, their “working class” status. Besides factory work one of a few occupations that was readily available for the working class males was to serve in the military\(^9\).

Flashman is born outside this experience and into luxury known only by the very few and privileged and is taught from an early age to scorn others, especially those “lower born” than himself. Flashman, however, is keenly aware that his grandfather was a pirate and slave trader and that it was only through his mother's family that any noble heritage was added to his name. This knowledge does not create any sympathy for the poorer or less noble in Flashman, but rather only seems to encourage him to act even more aloof, perhaps in order to distance himself from his grandfather's past. His education at Rugby is little more than a Spartan like training ground where physical conditioning and blind obedience to authority are prized above all\(^10\). Needless to say Fraser's Flashman claims that he is not at all taken in by any of this idealistic moral nonsense being taught at Rugby and when he can he acts the scoundrel that he is\(^11\). Yet, despite Flashman's inherently cynical perspective on life he cannot help but emerge from his youth completely at ease with the inequity of his culture, seeing as he is at the top of the pecking order. Being a white male of noble birth he is the oppressor, not the

\(^8\) Harrison 146-177.
\(^9\) Ibid. 55-86.
\(^10\) Mohanram 4.
\(^11\) Fraser, Flashman 13.
oppressed. And having been taught from birth, in an almost Darwinist approach to the
matter, that if life is about the survival of the fittest then surely the ruling classes are
better than the lower orders. Therefore the very nature of the class system reinforces this
notion of a natural, immutable order being upheld.

This perspective becomes quite clear during Flashman's posting at Paisley in
Scotland, where he describes his utter disdain for and apparent complete disinterest in the
plight of the factory workers and describes the workers' protests for higher wages and
better working conditions as simply being that the “poor folk were mutinous and wanted
to do less work for more money”\(^\text{12}\). The very necessity of the military presence in Paisley
to protect the factory owners from their own workers is indicative of the culture of
oppression inherent in 19th century Britain and of the realization by its rulers of the
injustices being done to the workers resulting in various safety measures being taken as a
result\(^\text{13}\). When an accident occurs in one of the mills and a crowd forms to protest against
their working conditions Flashman expresses no sympathy\(^\text{14}\) and has such a low opinion
of the factory workers that he does not even consider them a threat. He calls the men
rascals and then goes on to mock Mr. John Morrison the factory owner, for worrying
about their discontent. Mr. Morrison in turn despises the arrogance of Flashman\(^\text{15}\) and
despite his accumulated wealth is keenly aware of his “modest” origins. Notwithstanding
being himself the subject of discrimination and prejudice of the upper class English, as a
Scotsman Mr. Morrison seems to view his own countrymen with more embarrassment
than pride. Despite sharing a common background and culture with his workers he seems
to simultaneously fear and loathe them and exhibits the same dehumanizing sentiments
towards them as Flashman does towards him: “I would have half of them in Australia this
minute if it was left to me!”\(^\text{16}\).

A critical character that provides insight into the utterly unapologetic and blind
belief in the justification of class inequality of Victorian England is Flashman's first

\(^{12}\) Ibid. 48.
\(^{13}\) Stevenson 229-244.
\(^{14}\) Fraser, *Flashman* 52.
\(^{15}\) Ibid. 50.
\(^{16}\) Ibid. 50, 53 (“Oh, they hate me Mr Flashman, damn them all!”).
regiment commander James Brudenell, Earl of Cardigan, also referred to as Lord Cardigan\textsuperscript{17}. After Flashman's forced marriage to Elspeth\textsuperscript{18}, Lord Cardigan responds by demanding Flashman's resignation from his regiment\textsuperscript{19}. Lord Cardigan finds the very idea of class mingling so repulsive that he receives the news of his officer's marriage almost as a personal insult: “The lady, I have no doubt, is an excellent young woman, but she is-nobody”\textsuperscript{20}. In this instance Flashman finds himself on the receiving end of class discrimination and finds it most unfair\textsuperscript{21}, but like with Mr. Morrison before him the poetic justice is lost on him.

Another example of Flashman's unsympathetic sentiments towards those poorer and less fortunate than him is his treatment and opinion of his servant Basset. Upon their meeting Flashman beats him and describes his relationship to Basset as being that of a master to his dog\textsuperscript{22}. The reader cannot help but feel some sympathy for this man who must endure servitude under Flashman. This sympathy, however, does not last long as upon their arrival together in India, as head of the household Basset visits the same miseries upon the native workers that Flashman does upon him\textsuperscript{23}. There is a noticeable lack of empathy that permeates throughout the entire society in which Flashman lives, a coldness of heart and failure to recognize the suffering of those that are in some way different. This indifference to those that are different is apparent in all the classes and is reflected back to the reader through Flashman's own selfish, calculating and pragmatic mind.

**A culture of misogyny**

Another serious issue prevalent in *Flashman* is the subject of sexism and the role of women. Flashman believes women are only good for one thing and either finds them to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 28.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 58.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 60.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 60 (“I was not going to have his nose turned up at me”).
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 33.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 66 (“Basset kept the others at it with his tongue and his boot”).
\end{itemize}
be simple minded idiots like his wife Elspeth\textsuperscript{24} or “tall graceful creatures”\textsuperscript{25} in the case of the Afghan women. Having had no mother around\textsuperscript{26} and a womanizing drunkard for a father, from whom he seems to have inherited much of his perspective on women\textsuperscript{27}, Flashman claims he has never been in love and only a fool would ever fall victim to such folly\textsuperscript{28}. Despite these claims he contradicts himself with regard to his wife Elspeth, as can be seen here: “I wondered if I was falling in love with her, and decided that I was, and that I didn't care anyway—which is a sure sign.”\textsuperscript{29} This self contradiction, which doesn't come until page 231, is interesting in that it raises a lot of questions regarding Flashman's account of himself, his motivations and actions and calls into account the veracity of his personal condemnations and most importantly opens up the possibility that he might, after all, be human.

To understand why he might maintain such virulent opinions of hatred regarding kind emotions and women one must again look at the culture Flashman is raised in. Educated at an all-boy's school that encourages the virtues of physical strength and martial vigor, Flashman is raised in a culture steeped in the very worst of male characteristics. It is a telling clue that even when a woman ruled the British Empire, the male dominated hierarchy did not diminish but rather flourished. Women were for the most part still treated as second class citizens, their choices in life were very limited and often decided upon by the men and their abilities, no matter how superior, were always viewed as inferior to that of men. Yet, despite this, the women, like the Queen, willingly partake in a system of gross social and racial injustice and in this way they mimic the men. One example of the lack of empathy that the Queen felt for other women less fortunate than herself is evident in her opposition to the 10 hour Act or Factory Act of 1847 which lowered the number of working hours that women and children could legally be made to work\textsuperscript{30}. Another telling clue regarding the Queen's outlook regarding women

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 50, 51, 54.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 83.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 13.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 19.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 231.
\textsuperscript{30} Longford 195.
is perhaps best described by Elizabeth Longford in her book *Victoria*:

> “The children's formal education did not yet cause the Queen any anxiety, but one lesson she was determined to teach them: that their dearest Papa was head of the family. If she treated the Prince as her lord and master her children would do the same.”

After all as the Queen herself reveals to Flashman, “I know what it means to be a devoted wife.”

Perhaps the most important female character in the novel is Elspeth, Flashman's doting wife. Described by Flashman as “truly stupid”“, brainless beyond description” and “a beautiful fool”, it is clear that Flashman’s interests lie purely in her physical attributes. His opinion and overwhelming smug sense of superiority towards women reveal to the reader Flashman's actual naivety with regard to women. He truly believes that his sleeping with Elspeth for the first time is some sort of a conquest, a proof of his irresistibility and power. Yet it does not occur to him, even when she “accidentally” reveals to her family the details of their little affair that it is Elspeth who is really in control. Thanks to her intimidating uncle Abercrombie's proposal, death or marriage, Flashman is stuck with a Scottish wife from a wealthy but common family and subsequently loses his position in Lord Cardigan's regiment and is forced to go to India, whereas Elspeth gains a British husband of noble heritage and residence in London. Small clues at the end of the novel also further reinforce the idea that perhaps Elspeth is no more a fool than Flashman is a hero. Upon his gallant return home, Flashman has suddenly become financially dependent on his wife and furthermore he is confronted with the very real possibility that his wife has been just as adulterous during his absence as he himself has been. This realization is almost too much for Flashman's ego to bear so he

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31 Ibid. 185.
32 Fraser, *Flashman* 52, 246.
33 Ibid. 50.
34 Ibid. 51.
35 Ibid. 54.
36 Ibid. 55.
37 Ibid. 55-56.
38 Ibid. 240.
quickly suppresses any notion of it telling himself “No, it couldn't be true...”\(^{39}\). In a society where women have little other than their cunning and looks to bargain with, Elspeth uses the male prejudices of the time to her own advantage most successfully and there is no question as to who really has the power in this particular marriage.

The language used by Flashman about women and his actions in the novel towards them again reflects the violence and oppression inherent to the male dominated culture from which he comes. Early in the story he sleeps with his father's mistress Judy and then later assaults her when she will not sleep with him again\(^{40}\). Having tried force unsuccessfully he then resorts to feigning regret and guilt over the incident\(^{41}\). This proves just as unsuccessful but reveals the lengths to which he is willing to go to have his way. Furthermore, whilst awaiting assignment in India he buys a 16-year-old Indian girl named Fetnab\(^{42}\), whom he treats only as a sex object and if displeased he has no reservations about beating her\(^{43}\). To Flashman she is not human, merely a disposable sex toy.

Flashman is also a self-confessed rapist but relates to the reader that this was not a pleasant experience if only because of the added nuisance involved if the woman is unwilling\(^{44}\). The only rape that Flashman admits to having had to commit, as if the act itself was unavoidable, is that of the Afghan dancing girl Narreeman. During Flashman's visit to the Afghan chieftain Sher Afzul he is given this woman to do with as he pleases. The description of the rape is repugnant, not only because of the act itself, but rather because of the cold detached and unapologetic manner in which Flashman tells it: “I hauled her away from the door, and after a vicious struggle, I managed to rape her, the only time in my life I have found it necessary, by the way... It has its points”\(^{45}\). Later in the novel the tables have turned and Flashman, now her captive, meets his rape-victim

\(^{39}\) Ibid. 252.
\(^{40}\) Ibid. 20-21.
\(^{41}\) Ibid. 24-27.
\(^{42}\) Ibid. 66.
\(^{43}\) Ibid. 73.
\(^{44}\) Ibid. 91.
\(^{45}\) Ibid. 91.
again. Here the once bold Flashman pleads for mercy and has no understanding of the fairness in the woman wanting retribution. He learns no lesson from his near castration and once he has the upper hand, were it not for a lack of time and the presence of Sergeant Hudson, Flashman would most likely have raped and beaten her to death.

An equally revealing remark is the one made by Sir Willoughby Cotton when, upon being asked, Flashman recounts the reason for his expulsion from Rugby as having been due to drunkenness. To this Cotton replies incredulously “Who'd have believed they would kick you out for that? They'll be expellin' for rape next!” as if the very thought of rape being any sort of crime was beyond his comprehension. This one sentence sums up quite neatly the prevailing mindset of the male culture with regard to rape and women's rights. Flashman has no qualms about visiting this most vile and intrusive of degrading violence upon another human being, but sobs and pleads when faced with a similar fate.

Throughout the novel, Flashman is only interested in women if he believes he can sleep with them and beyond the confines of the sexual sphere he finds them to be tiresome and brainless. During the march from Kabul he does admit a certain grudging acknowledgement of Lady Sale as being “a tough old bitch”, but as far as Flashman goes, that is about as good a compliment as any woman or man could expect to get from him. This patriarchal way of thinking, both in Flashman and most of the other men in the novel is not innate to any race, religion, country or continent, rather, it is an innate characteristic of the male need to dominate and objectify the female which studies have shown repeatedly: “The higher relative level of social dominance orientation among males is one of the most well documented empirical findings generated by research on Social Dominance Theory (SDT)”.

It is not a British man who sells Fetnab to Flashman and it is not a British man who “gives” Flashman a dancing girl to rape.

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46 Ibid. 193.
47 Ibid. 204 (“It was a pity there wasn't time and leisure, or I'd have served her as I had once before ”).
48 Ibid. 79.
49 Ibid. 178.
50 Sidanius and Pratto 267.
51 Fraser, Flashman 66.
52 Ibid. 91.
The Afghans and Indians view women with the same eyes as the British, where women are a prize, a possession to be traded, sold, stolen and fought over.

**Docile, humble slaves**

When it comes to the subject of racism in *Flashman*, class and gender further complicate an already difficult subject, especially with regard to analyzing Flashman's reasons or motivations for acting a certain way. Flashman's scorn and loathing seem to be reserved for no one group in particular and are freely and amply dispensed to all that he feels deserving of it. However, his own views do seem to be intrinsically linked to the disposition adopted by each people towards their British “masters”, himself included.

We can begin with Flashman's views on the Scottish. In the novel he describes them as being rude and hostile\(^{53}\) but generally does not go into further details besides mentioning that he found their women to be too masculine for his taste\(^{54}\). Whether he means in spirit or in body is unclear since his own wife was according to him most beautiful, though Scottish. What is clear is that Flashman does not find the Scottish meek and subservient enough and he accordingly decides to understand this pride and defiance as insolence.

When stationed in India, Flashman again mentions the Scottish, and relates how much better he likes the Indians, as they are much humbler and meeker slaves with an easier language\(^{55}\). With the Scottish there existed certain barriers of culture and language which permitted Flashman a restricted amount of insolence and authority, but with the added barrier of skin color Flashman revels in this newfound power of the Victorian age which had so far eluded him, the absolute power of the white man over the black. Flashman is ruthless to his servants and beats them whenever he desires, with no repercussions\(^{56}\). There are no reasons given for this abuse, he does not beat his servants because they are black anymore than he beats women because they are female. The

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\(^{53}\) Ibid. 48.
\(^{54}\) Ibid. 48.
\(^{55}\) Ibid. 64 (“docile, humble set of slaves”).
\(^{56}\) Ibid. 66, 73.
reason behind his actions is a simple one, he does what he does simply because he enjoys
it and he can get away with it.

The Indian social hierarchy, consisting of a complex caste system that existed at
the time of colonization, could in many respects be compared to the medieval British
system with serfs at the bottom, the nobles in the middle and the kings at the top57. The
Indian sub-continent was divided into regions and no unifying sense of nationality or
empire existed at that time. This made things considerably easier for the East India
Company and then later the British government to employ the tactic of “divide and
conquer” until gradually they gained control of the whole of India58.

This culture of subservience and lack of any cohesive unifier meant that those
from lower castes had become so used to oppression from their own rulers that foreign
oppression by the British was perhaps deemed to be no worse or better and was therefore,
for the time being, endured. This might explain why Flashman's treatment of low caste
natives was felt to warrant no reaction and Flashman, safe in this knowledge, acts with
impunity.

In complete contrast with Flashman's treatment and opinion of the Indians is his
view on the Afghans. To Flashman the Afghans are “lean, ugly, Jewish-looking
creatures”59. However, despite such remarks there is also a grudging, forced respect for
the Afghan people by Flashman as well as some in the British Army, such as General
Nott who seems to be one of only a few leaders in the army to recognize the very real
military threat represented by the Afghans as he remarks: “you're outnumbered fifty to
one by one of the fiercest warrior nations in the world”60. It would seem that it was only
through fearlessness and brutality that the Afghans could hope to impress the British, and
cultural or intellectual achievements would not win their admiration, as is clear from
Shelton's remark about those few officers who attempted to learn about the Afghan
culture and mindset as being like: “young pups gadding about the hills playing at

57 Kulke and Rothermund 211-212.
58 Ibid. 256 (see map on page).
59 Fraser, Flashman 76.
60 Ibid. 80 (“one of the fiercest warrior nations in the world”).
The Afghan warrior culture and tribalism stands in stark opposition to the meek, ordered and servile culture in the Indian provinces and Flashman, recognizing the danger, is careful to show only his most charming side to the Afghans.

The Afghans themselves have their own tribal conflicts and racial pecking order; this is evident by their use of black slaves. Gul Shah's casual murder of a black slave to test a gun\textsuperscript{62} shows the Afghan disposition towards the African race to be no better than that of the British. Later in the novel the slaughter of the thousands of army camp followers, women and children included, further emphasizes that this cultural lack of empathy for the "other" seems not to be solely a British cultural tradition but rather a cross cultural male trait.

For most of the novel, in so far as human emotions go, sympathy and love do not seem to exist in Flashman, excepting when it comes to himself. This is an important point and a subtle reflection upon how Flashman reflects the male military culture and the mindset among many British men of the time. The majority of British men were taught from birth and truly believed in their inherent superiority both to women and foreigners, both white and black. As long as this order was upheld in their favor, Britain with her industry, law and order and religion, could seem to espouse the very finest of virtues and civility, but underneath the facade ruled a culture of dominance, oppression and violence.

Looking upon the history of internal strife and war in Britain, ranging from the Roman invasions then by the later Viking invasions then the Norman invasions followed by the subsequent civil wars of the 17th century, it becomes clear that British culture was forged through domestic war and oppression and these traits were subsequently firmly ingrained long before colonization began\textsuperscript{63}. It was not something that appeared as a result of the cultural and ethnic differences between the colonial powers and the natives of the colonies and it most certainly was not something that any of the populations of Europe had not at some time already suffered from. That is not to say that British culture was wholly lacking in other more redeeming qualities but rather that these traits of

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. 101.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 89.
\textsuperscript{63} Strong, \textit{The Story of Britain: A People's History}. 
dominance, violence and prejudice were indeed the core qualities of the British armed forces and through colonization it was these traits that would come to overshadow the rest as Britain consolidated her empire during Flashman’s lifetime. These qualities would at first be exported to the colonies through the armed merchants and later, as the economic prospects of colonization became clear to the rulers in Britain, the armies\textsuperscript{64}.

It must not be construed that prejudice, oppression and sexism did not exist in the colonies before the arrival of the Europeans. However, the distinguishing factor of the British culture of oppression compared to that of other peoples was not necessarily the nature and scope of their ambition and blind belief in the justice of their cause, for many other Empires from all over the world had harbored similar ambitions. Rather, it was the devastating ability of the relatively small British army to see these desires through by the use of military and financial cunning\textsuperscript{65}. This set the British apart from the rest, and from reading \textit{Flashman}, it is this establishment which Fraser seemed to have particular grievances against.

**Poor, bloody fools**

It is the British army in which Flashman serves that brings to India and Afghanistan the very worst that western culture has to offer the world. The army is the embodiment of oppression and through its rule it helped to create and perpetuate the racial ideology of the time. The military establishment not only served to prove to the British the superiority of their own race through its conquests and by the reputation of its invincibility, but in effect, much like the Roman war machine had done in its day for the Romans, with it's modern weaponry, tactics and singular purpose it both created and nurtured this sense of racial worth in the British\textsuperscript{66}. Despite this the principles upon which the army operated were the same as those of the industrial factories and British systems of governance. The poor and uneducated working classes made up the bulk of the army and its officers and generals came from the same social sphere as the British nobility and political leaders. In

\textsuperscript{64} Kulke and Rothermund 245.  
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. 236-243.  
\textsuperscript{66} Strong 7.
essence the system of oppression inherent to British society had been militarized, and most effectively at that.

Flashman's first experience of the army is in the 11th Light Dragoons. His rank as officer is bought by his father and he treats all those of lower social standing or rank with scorn. His army life consists mostly of parades and playing cards and it is not until his posting to India that he comes into contact with the infantry class and “real” army life. Flashman, unlike the majority of the soldiers, has the means to rent his own house but deigns to visit the army-mess hall once, on which occasion he comments that the food is not fit for human consumption. The soldiers reply “We stomach it, ain't we human beings?”, to which Flashman replies “You know best about that”. This remark, despite once again showing Flashman's remarkable talent for witty insolence, is indicative of Flashman's ignorance. Having had such a privileged upbringing, he cannot understand the acceptance of such living conditions by these men and although Flashman may not sympathize with the situation of the common soldier he does at least acknowledge their suffering. As Allan Ramsey states in his article on Flashman: “If there is a part of MacDonald Fraser which is Flashman, it is in his feel for the ordinary soldier”. Unlike Flashman, the majority of the soldiers have, most likely, been born into the various impoverished classes of Britain where their society has taught and conditioned them to obey and to accept the horrible conditions imposed upon them by the army without protest. This is what made up the bulk of the army: the uneducated infantryman who more often than not had neither the ability nor education necessary to question the means or motives of the oppressive institution in which he served. Flashman, for all his pragmatic cowardice and lack of any feeling of duty, is quite at a loss as to the sheer stupidity of army life. However, despite his pampered ignorance, it is through his contact with Sergeant Hudson that Flashman and the reader manage to gain an insight into the mindset and character of the regular infantryman of the British army.

Sergeant Hudson is first introduced to the reader when Flashman is sent to meet

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68 Ibid. 32-33.
69 Ibid. 65.
70 Ramsey 367.
the Afghan chief, Sher Afzul and is described by Flashman as a “steady and capable man”\textsuperscript{71}, but little else notice is taken of Hudson because, as Flashman himself says, “After all, why should one notice one's men very much?”\textsuperscript{72}. This description becomes quite different near the end of the novel when Hudson has discovered the true nature of Flashman\textsuperscript{73}, and Flashman in turn has discovered that Hudson is a man of all those qualities which he lacks and despises as he remarks: “One meets them, of course. I've known hundreds. Give them a chance to do what they call their duty, let them see a hope of martyrdom-they'll fight their way on the cross and bawl for the man with the hammer and nails”\textsuperscript{74}. It is precisely because of these traits, which Flashman mocks, that Hudson saves them from Gul Shah and then later Narreeman from Flashman's wrath. He drags the unwilling Flashman on towards Jallalabad and at the cost of his own life he unwittingly catapults the cowardly Flashman into the role of hero. Despite all his valor and sense of duty Hudson's reward is that of anonymity and death and Flashman's is all the glory.

There are certain characteristics which Hudson possesses such as bravery and compassion that separate him from Flashman and, despite Flashman's best efforts, would not in themselves be criticized by many people, no matter what their background. Then there are other traits such as nationalism, loyalty to the army and belief in the cause which are more deserving of Flashman's criticism. Hudson is clearly not lacking in intelligence and ingenuity\textsuperscript{75}, yet he completely buys into these false ideals and is willing to kill and die for nothing more than the ensured economic profits of an oppressive Empire. Indicating just how conditioned to obey Hudson really is, long after discovering what Flashman is really like, he retains a courteous and respectful attitude towards him even whilst witnessing Flashman's murderous intentions towards Narreeman. “I'm going to cut that bitch to pieces”, says Flashman, “Here now, sir” says Hudson, “You can't do

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. 86.  
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. 184.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. 209.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. 212.  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. 183-184.
that\textsuperscript{76}. It is not until he faces certain death that Hudson feels able to dispense with the polite obedience that has been so deeply ingrained in his psyche:

“I half knew it from the minute we left Kabul, and I was near sure back in that cellar, the way you carried on. But I was double certain when you wanted to kill that poor Afghan bitch-men don't do that. But I couldn't ever say so. You're an officer and a gentleman, as they say. But it doesn't matter now sir, does it? We're both going, so I can speak my mind”\textsuperscript{77}.

Unlike Flashman, Hudson does not question the real reasons responsible for their predicament, as is evident when they watch the destruction of the 44th regiment at Gandamack. Hudson seems to view the event as being an unlucky turn of events, where the valiant British soldiers are defending their lives and the colors from the evil, barbarous and treacherous Afghans. Flashman, however, sees men being killed for no other reason than military incompetence, profits, pride and the selfish whims of British politicians\textsuperscript{78}. Hudson is the archetypal soldier and it is through the needless destruction of this man that Fraser manages to further expose the oppressive nature of the army. To the army, these men are expendable: driven on by poverty and a lack of options in life, or having to decide between jail or the army, they are shipped off to distant lands to ensure the continued prosperity and power of an elite few. The very same class which through the propagation of gross social injustices ensures the cycle of poverty continues to maintain the status quo. Brought up to believe in and defend the very system that oppresses them, they in turn are transformed by the army into the oppressors of others. Armies have always represented the very worst in human nature, or male nature to be more precise. This need to dominate, destroy and subjugate is inherent to the male species and similar dispositions are only very rarely to be found in women\textsuperscript{79}. In \textit{Flashman}, all the ideals and notions of the honorable and noble warrior are stripped away as the army is shown to be merely an extension of Britain's domestic system of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid. 203.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid. 211.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid. 186-187.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Sidanius and Pratto 267.
\end{itemize}
oppression and injustice.

The realities of war

It cannot be said that Harry Paget Flashman is a simple character, a character that can be easily classified and easily dismissed. Outwardly Flashman bears all those traits inherent to the stereotypical British officer of his time, yet on the inside he is, despite his many flaws, more pragmatic and honest than most of the other characters in the novel. Flashman, by having exposed, to our best knowledge, the dreadful truth of his own character gains a certain leeway to expose the truth behind war, nationalism, class inequality and female subjugation. This critique on war and the idealism surrounding it is perhaps most effectively emphasized when it comes to his description of the destruction of the army during its march from Kabul and the perception of these events by the British public compared the gory reality.

The march from Kabul is perhaps one of the most gripping and emotional chapters in the novel. In these few pages Fraser captures an essence of war that has not been masked or censored with idealism so that the racist, sexist and the general selfish nature of man are utterly exposed. The British, in their desperation and fear, show no regard for the thousands of their Indian camp followers, consisting of men, women and children, as no provisions are made for them with regard to food, shelter or safety. Only the generals, officers and some of the British soldiers along with the thirty odd white women and their children, with their food and shelter stand any chance of survival. Following a night of bitter cold a large part of the Indian camp followers have frozen to death: “everywhere there were brown corpses lying stiff.” As if this disregard for the welfare of the Indians were not bad enough the Afghans then mercilessly attack the convoy killing not only the men but also the women and children. Paradoxically the Afghans are described by the British as being barbarians for making no moral distinction between killing a child or a well armed man. But the British in turn feel no compunction to save the Indian children from the cold or the Afghans. Neatly mirroring the inequality

80 Fraser, Flashman 163.
81 Ibid. 169.
of the British social hierarchy, it is the Indians that suffer the most. At the mercy of an army that will not protect them and facing annihilation by a ferocious enemy, these people are the first to succumb to the freezing cold and deadly Afghan warriors.

With little to no tactical or common sense amongst the commanders on the march the next victims are of course the sepoys and the regular soldiers. The regular soldiers low class status ensures that their worth is treated in the same manner, as it would be in Britain. The sepoys on the other hand, being Indian, are on a rung lower than even the regular white soldiers, but in the end both seem readily expendable by their superiors. The British soldiers, blindly following a leader with no tactical plan and without proper clothing suffer severely from the cold and constant attacks, furthermore, the Indian regiments are so poorly looked after that they do not even have boots to wear in the freezing cold, “their naked feet churning up the slush”82. Flashman recounts how the sepoys were so badly debilitated by cold that they were for practically frozen alive, “half the sepoys were too frost bitten to be able to lift their muskets”83. The reward for those sepoys foolish enough to stay with the army is to be flogged by the same men that they are giving up their lives to protect84.

Another aspect that the desperate circumstances of the march bring to the surface are the differences between the men and the women. At first an Afghan offer to take the British families as hostages is treated with contempt and suspicion85, then later on amidst the chaos and death of the march the same men who before had spoken so vehemently against it now agree in order to increase their own chances of survival86. Amidst the biting cold and constant death all order is lost and the basic animal instinct to survive takes over the army: “it was every man and woman for himself”87. In such a situation, all the man-made social constructs and ideals vanish and only the strongest survive. The men leave women and children to die whilst they desperately try to make their escape and in doing so the very rationale for their social dominance as protectors and guardians is

82 Ibid. 163.
83 Ibid. 169.
84 Ibid. 170.
85 Ibid. 151.
86 Ibid. 179.
87 Ibid. 177.
shown to be as empty as their bravery. The destruction of the army portrays the real horrors of warfare. It is true that the soldiers do die; however, ultimately it is the civilians, namely the women and children, who suffer the most. The men who thought they were superior to all others show themselves to be no better or worse, just human, and therefore not deserving of any such authority. By entrusting their fate to these men, the soldiers and camp followers have all virtually committed suicide.

After surviving the march and the siege of Jallalabad, Flashman and a few Indian sepoys are all that remains of the defenders. The army, fully aware of the damage that has been done to their reputation, is looking for some story or event that will reinforce the myth of British valor, bravery and honor and that will keep the British public from asking what they were doing there in the first place. Continuing along the racist and class discriminative lines, they attribute the successful defense of Jallalabad not to Sergeant Hudson or the Indian sepoys but rather to the British officer who, in actuality, stayed weeping inside with fear whilst the others fought.\(^{88}\) Fighting for their lives, the men's desperation is turned into bravery by the army propaganda machine and their lack of any other option but to fight on are warped into a steadfast determination and belief in British military ideals, and once again the truth is cast away to support the facade of war.

Flashman sees no glory in war. He does not believe in any of the predominant nationalistic or militaristic sentiments of his time. The same cannot be said for the British public, who view the slaughter of General Elphinstone's army as a most outrageous and evil act of aggression, not as an offensive action against an invading army.\(^{89}\) Truth and reality have no place in war, and if used they would shatter those half-truths and false ideals used to excuse it. For these reasons the defeat is turned into a victory and Flashman is made the hero of the hour. Flashman, the opportunist that he is, seizes the opportunity and revels in the hero worship as much as he can.

This glorification of war is a curious human phenomenon that seems to permeate all societies. In the novel, Flashman receives a letter from his wife Elspeth wherein she likens him to ancient Greek warriors such as Ajax and Achilles. Flashman remarks that

\(^{88}\) Ibid. 220-222.
\(^{89}\) Ibid. 226-227.
women always see their soldiers as “Greek heroes, instead of the whore-mongering, drunken clowns most of them were”\textsuperscript{90}. This is why the making of Flashman into a hero is so fitting, in that it exposes the bigger lie about war, whilst at the same time revealing the incredible amount of undeserved reverence reserved for war. Even those who disdain Flashman seem to fall victim to this reasoning wherein “In England, you can't be a hero, and bad”\textsuperscript{91}. Upon his return to England, Flashman proves that by being thought to possess martial prowess and having defended the nations honor in the face of a “savage, beastly enemy”, all of his past sins are forgiven and he is given a clean slate even by those who already got a glimpse of the real Flashman in his pre-war days. All of the romantic ideals and notions of honor and duty are shown to be as equally false and misleading as the heroes’ facade that Flashman carries off so exceedingly well.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid. 155.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. 248.
Conclusion

George Macdonald Fraser's *Flashman* is pure fiction yet it does not take much of a stretch of the imagination to see, considering the manner in which Fraser wrote the novel, how easily a person could be fooled into thinking that Flashman really did exist. When it comes to the subject of historical truth factual historical events are much easier to verify and analyze than complex and subjective sociological and cultural phenomena, for example questions about the moral nature of colonialism. *Flashman* is entertaining satire filled with sex, humor, violence and an interesting storyline, and if that is all that a reader is looking for then *Flashman* is the perfect novel. However, through further study of the novel some very serious questions arise regarding its subject matter as well as the manner in which it is written. Through his own meticulous historical research, Fraser makes a mockery of history and historical writing, showing how easily events and facts can be manipulated and misunderstood. Furthermore, by showing the reader a certain reality devoid of idealism through Flashman's perspective he quite effectively attacks the British military establishment and the inherently oppressive patriarchal institutions of Britain. Flashman stands as quite a unique character in the literary world and the myriad of books and adventures written about him has allowed Fraser to comment upon and criticize many of the world's great powers, Britain included. From reading *Flashman* it could be construed that Fraser's main targets are the Afghans, the Scottish or the Indians, but this is not so. In this novel it is the British for whom he reserves most of his scorn and ridicule as he articulates to the reader a perspective devoid of political correctness or historical neutrality. With Flashman Fraser puts a mirror up to British society and although many upon seeing the image would like to deny or excuse what they see, there is an inherent truth throughout this fiction that cannot be ignored. Flashman is the coward, the selfish oppressor that exists in all of us and the only question is whether we can accept this and try to change ourselves and the world, or if we simply close the book and think "what nonsense".
Sources


