

British major-general  
charles george  
gordon



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BUSTER**

What did Charles George Gordon do to earn the view that he was an Imperial Hero and was it justified? When discussing heroes the first things that would come to mind are selfless individuals, they would show a tremendous amount of bravery in the face of certain defeat and have the courage and determination to beat overwhelming odds. The dictionary definitions of heroes are “ a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength and ability” or “ a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities”.

Charles George Gordon has gone down in history as a an imperial hero, during this essay I will ascertain what it was Charles Gordon did to earn this title and whether or not it was justified. Gordon was the son of a Royal Artillery officer and born in 1833. He was part of a large family with five sisters and five brothers. It would be from one his sisters that Gordon would inspiration for his strong religious views as his life went on. Gordon followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in the military, he joined the Royal Engineers as an officer.

Gordon thrived in the Engineers with the nature of the work perfectly suited to his personality; they were posted all over the world building bridges, siege work and buildings all over the world. One of his first postings was to Pembroke Dock in Wales, here Gordon converted to Christianity. Although this wasn't the beginning of the Gospel spreading Gordon we know today, he was still indifferent with regards to his religion he was not actively spreading the Christian word.

By the time of his death, Gordon was a devout Christian, he did not fear death for he genuinely felt that death would lead him to a better place. By

1854 Gordon had become a very religious man, a lot of the can be attributed to his older sister Augusta. He wrote to her often almost thanking her for her spiritual guidance whilst also keeping her updated with his religious journey " You know I was never confirmed. When I was a cadet, I thought it was a useless sin as I did not intend to alter (not that it was in my power to be converted when I chose).

I however, took my first sacrament on Easter day, and have communed ever since. "(Churchill, 2009, p95) I feel that his change in religious views ultimately would have a huge affect in how we was remembered and thought of. Religion was a huge part of the Empire, although the main stimulants for empire were to expand lands and capture natural resources, there was an aspect that by colonising lands it would also spread the message of God. Civilise and educate the savages of foreign lands. At the height of the imperial age church people liked to argue that religion and the British empire were inseparable- that the visible, commercial and political empire was woven into the fabric of another, invisible country- a spiritual empire' (Carey, 2008, p1). Charles Gordon was given many different political roles within the British Empire whilst serving in the army, however it is the Sudan that he is renowned for. In 1874 was appointed the full Governor of the Sudan. In typical Gordon style he launched himself into his new role, paying particular attention to the curbing and stopping of the slave trade.

This was the sort of impossible task that Gordon relished. Gordon despised the slave trade, and he wrote often about it, voicing his disgust frequently in his letters. " I am a fool, I dare say, but I cannot see the sufferings of these peoples without tears in my eyes.... ". (2010, Moore-Hall) Alice Moore-Hall

writes that despite his hero label, Gordon didn't successfully complete his objectives. Gordon essentially brought the area under the control of Egypt, however Moore-Hall explains that this was only really the case when Gordon or his representatives were present in the region.

He was extremely successful at reducing the slave trade within the Sudan, a somewhat difficult task considering the affect that it had on the economy of the area. He did not however completely stop it, something that Moore-Hall attributes to the locals within Gordon's expedition due to the participation of peoples under his command partaking in the enterprises they were in fact charged with stopping. The economic interest, political stability and social relations brought into question by the slave trade made it a practice that even the likes of Gordon would fail to eradicate.

So the question remains, was it his efforts in Sudan that brought him heroic status within the empire, it wasn't a finished job, there was no real glory or great British achievement within Gordon's actions on his first trip to the Sudan, he wasn't even working for the British military at the time. Gordon left the Sudan in 1879 with the intention of becoming the Private Secretary to the Viceroy of India amongst other things such as visiting Palestine, South Africa and Ireland. None of the positions he undertook following the Sudan were of any great importance highlighting the lack of trust in him from the British War Office.

When looking at the roles which Gordon undertook, it is reasonable to question why it was exactly that he was the man sent to the Sudan when trouble was arising? The British Government, led by Gladstone had viciously attacked Disraeli and the previous government's foreign policies, yet by

1882 an invasion of Egypt was sanctioned in order to protect the Suez Canal. This led to further involvement with the Sudan due to its ties with Egypt. A self proclaimed leader of Muslims, intent on holy war and cleansing the Muslim religion had succeeded in uniting the various groupings within the Sudan.

The British government more than likely would have been happy with abandoning the Sudan, perhaps even Egypt. It is believed by Historians such as Michael Asher that Gladstone felt inclined to intervene in the Sudan due to his beliefs that the Sudanese were struggling to be free. By the end of 1883, Army Officers, clergymen, Egyptian Experts and even Queen Victoria herself were lobbying for Government intervention, more importantly, for Gordon. Gladstone reportedly had an intense dislike for Gordon, he felt that he was both rash and irresponsible.

The media and public however did not feel the same way. W T Stead of the Pall Mall Gazette wrote " We cannot send a regiment to Khartoum, but we can send a man who on similar circumstances than an entire army. Why not send Chinese Gordon with full powers to Khartoum, to assume absolute control for the territory, to treat with the Mahdi, to relieve the garrisons , and do what he can to save what can be saved from the wreck of the Sudan? " (Asher (2003) p4). This attitude was enthusiastically backed up Stead with their backing of Gordon.

This wave of support pushed the government into acting quickly. This public support tells us that Gordon was held in high regard prior to his second visit to the Sudan. He had proven to the empire his skills, he held religion in extremely high regard and previous form tells us he achieved results. He

gained an international reputation as an effective commander of armed forces not as skilled as the British. Particularly in China, he was rewarded by both the Chinese and the British for his efforts in quashing a rebellion.

Surely he was the perfect man for the job. By the December of 1883, the British had ordered the Egyptians to order their troops to retreat and abandon the Sudan along with civilians and families. Gordon was sent with the intention of assisting the plans for evacuation. Gordon arrived in February the following year and immediately began to evacuate the women, children sick and wounded back to Egypt. It didn't take long for Mahdi's forces closed in the Sudanese capital following astounding defeats of the Egyptian forces.

By April the British Forces had all withdrawn from Garrisons in the Sudan effectively leaving Gordon and his men abandoned. Gordon was not sent to the Sudan to fight the Ma'hdi, far from it and when the news had travelled that Gordon was in Sudan, he received little sympathy from the British Government. Gladstone did not act swiftly in sending a rescue party. It is believed by historians such as Dennis Judd, that the delay in this relief party was down to the Governments lack of interest in spending money abroad and annoyance that Gordon had not done what he was asked.

The government dragged and the public rallied. Public Opinion in the end was too strong for the government and in the end an order was given to relieve Gordon in Khartoum, unfortunately for Gordon, and the government, it was too late. In the early hours of January 26th 1885 Gordon was murdered by Ma'hdi forces. There were various accounts of his death, varying in

details. However the one that captured the Victorian peoples imaginations. Gordon immaculately dressed fighting to the end.

When addressing what it was that made Gordon the imperial hero he was is an interesting one, he was not your stereotypical Imperial hero. What he did do was heroically defend Khartoum, save thousands of women and children with his evacuation. For this it is fair that he is acclaimed a hero. But with regards to a hero of empire, it is harder to justify. He rallied against colonial rule, he didn't obey his orders with regards to the evacuation of Sudan and he severely undermined the British government of the time. Yet he captured the hearts of a nation and perhaps most importantly, a queen. Dear Miss Gordon - How shall I write to you, or how shall I attempt to express what I feel! To think of your dear, noble, heroic Brother who served his Country and his Queen so truly, so heroically" (Churchill, S (2009) p112). this extract from a letter to Gordon's sister captures not only the true thoughts of a queen, but perhaps a nation. Statues were erected and schools were named after him as well as books, journals and biographies written to celebrate a nations hero. In my opinion I find it very hard to describe Gordon as a hero of the empire.

He was as a Christian Martyr foremost, he believed in honour, fairness and god before all else. His life was captured after his death and used to promote jingoistic ideals, the hijackers in fact were the following government, Disraeli jumped aboard promoting an empire of Enlightenment was exactly what the country wanted following the death of Gordon. However, despite the stories and support he received post-mortem the fact was he never conquered a

single mile of land for the Queen, and spent the majority of his career working for foreign governments and not in fact the British Army.

He was a hero for his achievements, moral code and was someone to look up to and aspire to be but he was not an imperial hero. Churchill, S (2009). General Gordon: A Christian Hero. London: Trediton. Judd, D (1997). Empire. Great Britain: Basicbooks. Pollock, J (1993). Gordon, The man behind the Legend. London: Constable. Asher, M (2003). Khartoum. 2nd ed. London: Penquin. Carey, H (2008). Empires of Religion. New Zealand: Macmillan. Moore-Hall, A (2010). Egypt's Africa Empire: Samuel Baker, Charles Gordon ; the Creation of Equatoria. Sussex: SussexAcademicPress