

Review of The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon by Fergus Nicholl, Sutton Publishing Limited, Gloucestershire, England, 2004, 323 pages.

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Nicholl is a journalist with the BBC, and his account of the rise of the Mahdi in Sudan in the 1880s is quick and vivid. The book has a number of shortcomings, pointed out below, but in truth the book does fill an important void. An accessible book on the life of the Mahdi is indispensable for introducing students and the general public to this singular personage. Nicholl has done a serviceable job in that regard.

The book is not intended to be cutting edge scholarly work. Nicholl concentrates on events, with little attention devoted to analyses about what the Mahdiyya was really about as a social movement, or what could have happened if different actors had made different choices, or psychohistory of the motivations of the actors. The various periods of the rise of the Mahdi are described quite well, punctuated by lengthy but relevant extracts from the Mahdi's widely disseminated letters and proclamations. The cast of characters is kept to an essential top echelon. There are no 'voices' of ordinary people here, though the memoirs of Babiker Bedri are relied upon to some degree.

The book is marred by an apparently unintentional but almost immediately apparent bias to cater to the British book market. The jacket of the book features two photos, both from the 1898 expedition-fourteen years after the death of the Mahdi. The biography of the Mahdi is subtitled with an extra, "and the death of General Gordon", though Gordon figures in a mere handful of pages of the book. Most unfortunately, the book's introduction actually opens with a paragraph on Gordon! The photo plates inside the book tastelessly reproduce the photos of the dead Khalifa Abdullahi, the Mahdi's successor, and his soldiers. Photos of dead people on battlefields are taken by armies, and are intended to serve particular purposes. An author should be careful about reproducing them- are they there merely to provoke a prurient second-look in the airport bookstand?

Little care seems to have been taken in asking the question of how a biography of the Mahdi could be even-handed if many of the British sources were plainly biased propaganda pieces. There is one discussion of the role of Reginald Wingate in writing some of the propaganda pieces, but otherwise Nicholl treats all sources as equally plausible, especially when a good quote is needed.

What this reviewer found most disturbing about the book was a consistent 'othering' of the Sudanese. The Mahdi's forces are always "slaughtering", and seem to travel in "hordes"; they "scream" during their dawn attacks instead of "yell". Everyone had to be stereotyped- the same way the British stereotyped their subjects in the colonial period. Hamdan Abu-Anja is referred to as a "half-breed"! The Khalifa Abdullahi cannot escape his "Baggara" identity- he must be a wild and crazy guy, according to Nicholl, because he is a Baggara. The possibility that a Baggara who spent most of his life studying the Koran and then leading a large social movement and army was probably more like a Reginald Wingate in character seems so improbable as to not even be worth considering.

The Mahdi himself, since he did not have access to a European-style education of the modern world, must have a slow, creaking, illogical mind. Nicholl would deny this, and consider his a flattering portrait, but consider his (uncharacteristically awfully) sole venture into psychobabble, where he tries to reproduce an interior monologue of the Mahdi's decision to continue on to attack Khartoum after the spectacular success at El Obeid (p. 174): "Khartoum had to be destroyed. Surely it was now ripe for the taking. Its mighty army was destroyed; its outposts either already looted and burning or so demoralised as to pose no danger; its administrators rendered rudderless ... Khartoum must be destroyed!" One can

imagine Sir Laurence Olivier delivering the words to an empty tent outside of El Obeid.

Every biography should try to situate the importance of its subject in contemporary life. Nicholl tries in the beginning chapters to add scattered portraits of current Ansar and locations important to the Mahdi, but he abandons the effort. So the Mahdi's legacy remains completely unrevealed. What do contemporary Sudanese think about the Mahdi? How have his descendants and political and religious heirs fared under the current military rulers? Where is his name invoked in popular culture? In the education curriculum? These are interesting questions that should have merited attention.

Lastly, a striking similarity between the foreign entanglements of the Mahdist period must surely have struck Nicholl, a current affairs writer, as having echoes in the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. The British and Egyptian indecision over how to rule Sudan, indeed over why to rule in the first place, is revealed by primary source documents in language that could have come from a contemporary oped piece. The eventual crushing of the Mahdist movement, and subsequent 'pacification' of northern Sudan, is also food for thought for the contemporary situation.