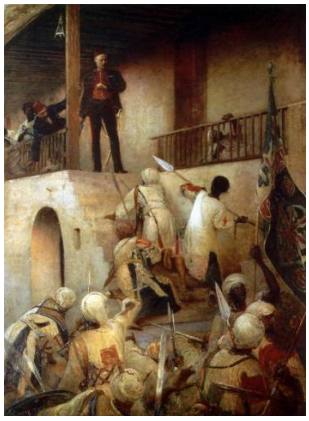
The Siege of Khartoum - Painting



This image depicts a famous painting called *The Siege of Khartoum*, by George William Joy (who created it during 1893). The subject of the work is General Gordon who was serving Her Majesty's government, in the Sudan, during 1885.

This is one of those paintings which demands a closer analysis (and a study into the facts behind the art work).

After waiting for relief, for a very long time, General Charles Gordon never did receive what he needed from the government which had sent him on a mission to the Sudan.

Before that mission, Gordon was held in high esteem by his countrymen. He'd given much of his life, bravely and courageously, to the British crown, its government and its Empire.

It would never do, in other words, for the British public to hear that their hero had been let down by the very people who'd sent him to do a very difficult job. But Gladstone's government did not respond to Gordon's repeated requests for aid. And ... on the 26th of January, 1885, an overwhelming force of rebels took his life.

If we look at this painting, it seems as though the attackers are in awe of General Gordon, their foe. Such was not the case.

When the rebels killed Gordon, they did so in a way which angered their leader, Muhammad Ahmed, the "Mahdi." It was too late, however, for the Mahdi to change the course of Gordon's fate.

Through an article, published by *The Independent* on May 12, 2006, we learn more about the real story of Gordon's defeat compared to the story told by Joy's painting:

The painting is a dramatic and enduring image, one which depicts extraordinary bravery at a crucial moment in the history of the British Empire. It shows the heroic figure of General Charles Gordon, tall and straight-backed, defiant to the last in the face of certain death from the massed spears of the rebels as they lay siege to Khartoum.

The rebels, the painting suggests, are frozen in awe at the sight of this great warrior-diplomat standing at the top of a flight of steps - the eternal symbol of the might of the Empire. Only their overwhelming numbers, it implies, will let them ... prevail.

Unfortunately, General Gordon's Last Stand, by George William Joy, now hanging in the Leeds City Art Gallery is a piece of Victorian myth-making. Iconic it may be, but the events it depicts may not have happened.

Athough there is some variation in the accounts, there is general agreement as to the circumstances under which General Gordon met his fate at Khartoum on 26 January, 1885. He was hacked to pieces and his head paraded through the town on the end of a pike. Which is not the kind of image the Victorian public really wanted, nor did they want to be reminded of the less palatable aspects of keeping an Empire under control.

But Joy's romanticised painting was more about pandering to public opinion, rather than a need to put a gloss on colonial adventures. During the siege of Khartoum, the decision by Gladstone's Government not to send troops to relieve General Gordon was greeted with widespread protests from a public for whom he was already a national hero.
...
One of the most famous sieges in history began on 13 March 1884. The city had supplies, there were still lines of communication and there were 8,000 local troops, commanded by Gordon and two other British officials.

When news of Gordon's plight reached Britain, there was public anger, with mass meetings in London and Manchester, calls for a public fund-raising campaign to send more troops or, as one person put it, "to bribe the tribes to secure the General's personal safety". Prayers were offered in churches and there was a vote of censure in the House of Commons.

"It is alarming," Queen Victoria wrote to Lord Hartington, the Secretary of State for War, "General Gordon is in danger; you are bound to try to save him ..." Gladstone was unmoved, maintaining that Gordon was not in real danger. It was not until August, when Lord Hartington threatened to resign, that Gladstone was persuaded to raise a relief force.

By this time, supplies in Khartoum had begun to run low. Gordon insisted on eating only the same rations as his troops. As the year wore on, Gordon wrote to a friend that he "feared treachery in the garrison". It came on 26 January 1885, when a traitor opened the gates to the city and let the rebels in.

Gordon, watching from a rooftop, quickly changed from his dressing gown into a white uniform, grabbed a revolver and a sword and went down to confront the hordes. He was killed, Khartoum fell, and the relief force arrived two days later...

At home, there was uproar. Gladstone was forced to attempt to re-assert his authority by investing heavily in another military campaign in the region. At this point, Gladstone was a Prime Minister embroiled in an unpopular conflict in a Middle Eastern country in whose affairs Britain had intervened with the promise that any involvement would be strictly short-term.

Sudan descended into turmoil as Islamic fundamentalists ran riot and rebel groups flocked to their cause. Plans to raise taxes to fund the venture were defeated by the House of Commons and Gladstone was thrown out of office, his political career destroyed by his refusal to help Gordon.

So now you know the story behind this famous painting. It raises an issue, though, doesn't it?

Like producers of modern movies, creators of paintings convey their own stories, or their own interpretation of historical facts. This means that we - the viewing public - have to do our own investigating ... to sort-out myth from facts, to separate romanticized history from reality.

Credits:

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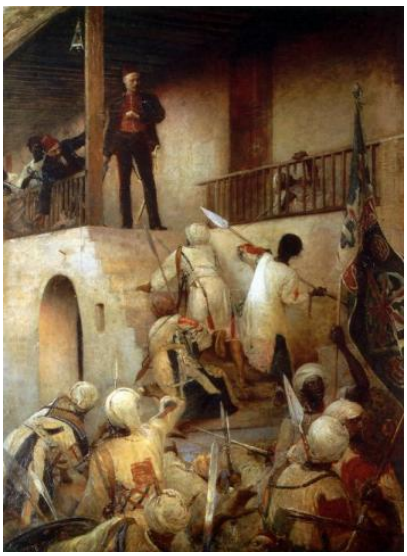

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