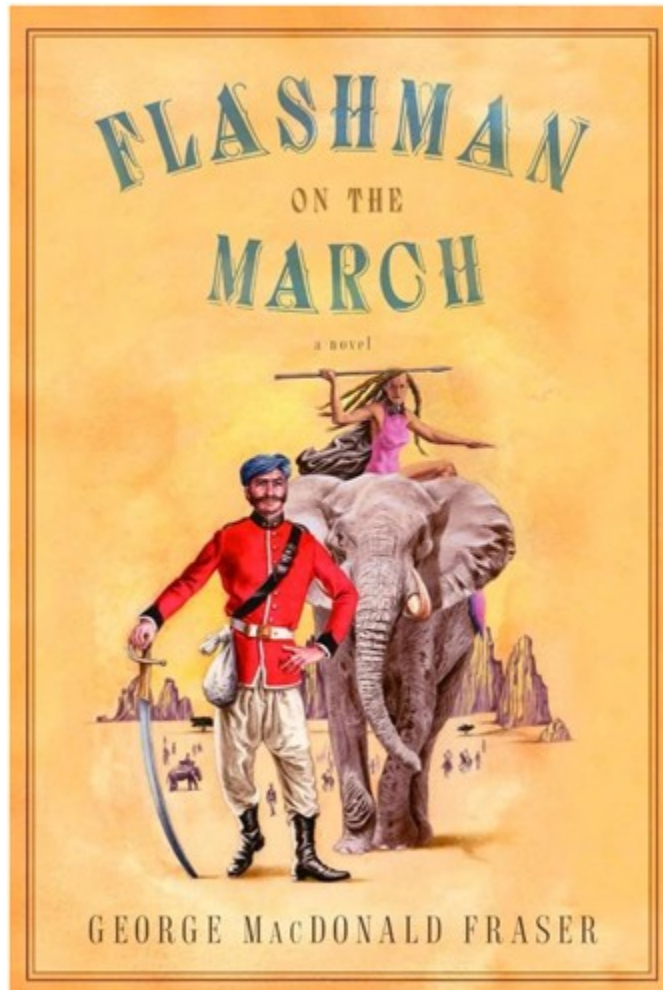


Book Review

Flashman on the March, George MacDonald Fraser

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This is the last of a series of twelve “autobiographies” of the celebrated Brigadier-General Sir Harry Paget Flashman VC KCB KCIE. I won't go into the manufactured origins of this fictional hero, but only to warn you that many readers have been so taken in by Fraser's fine hand and quick mind as to believe every episode in this rascal's life was lifted from reality.

After a fashion, it was. Fraser's finest talent, after composing a brilliantly readable historical scandal, is in its authenticity to the events Flashman is thrust into. I choose the word thrust quite deliberately, because Flashman, the hero of the Light Brigade, the only white survivor of Little Big Horn, is an utter coward and womanizer. This should be obvious from the cover art.

Each and every novel is immersed with the intricate details of history, but the details do not arrive laden with the layers of museum dust. The narrative in *On the March* is grounded in the

1868 expedition of General Robert Napier into Abyssinia to rescue the Crown's representatives who had been taken prisoner by Emperor Theodore II. The logistics, politics, and social milieu of the period are woven into this story like a bazaar carpet illustrating a grand expanse of north African intrigue and adventure. The story flows like the Blue Nile, at once lazily rolling through the green jungle to suddenly pitch over the rugged boulders of a cataract – which Harry Flashman is the only man to have ever survived to tell the tale of that plunge. It would be hazardous to describe this book as a clever travelogue. As much as Fraser immerses you in the scenery, he also quick marches you into the pitch of battle and escape. However, these are the bookends to his craft of characterizations that brings to life the history of Abyssinia, its rivaling tribes, and its emperor. And then, of course, there are the women that impel, compel and then propel Harry Flashman across Abyssinia.

Fraser never restrains our hero from that pursuit, but he also doesn't descend into the mechanics of sex, but rather the politics of sex. This approach may appear to be a 1960s sensibility insofar as Harry's vulgar randiness, but it is balanced more with a 1930s candor and equality of the sexes where the humor engages with irony.