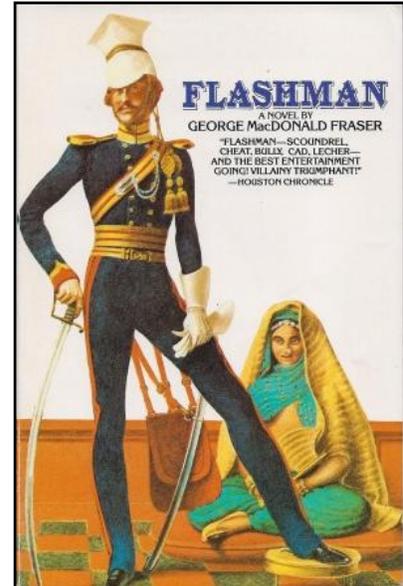


FLASHMAN AND THE FIRST AFGHAN WAR

A book review by Ken McNaughton

I love reading history books that attempt to get all the facts straight, but sometimes they are just too hard to read. On the other hand, fiction can seem so contrived. If an author spends time making up things, wouldn't he or she be better employed elucidating real events? These dueling extremes may explain why historical fiction is so popular, and sometimes works very well. Case in point—*Flashman*, a novel by George MacDonald Fraser (1925-2008).

The Houston Chronicle said about the book, “Flashman—Scoundrel, cheat, bully, cad, lecher—and the best entertainment going! Villainy triumphant!” *Time* magazine said “Soldier, lover, adventurer, he fought and wenched his way to glory (and lechery and skullduggery and conduct unbecoming a gentleman) ... Splendidly entertaining!” *Washington Post Book World* said “Demolishes bowdlerized history ... A view of our noble ancestors bottom up, so to speak, which is a view no civilized people ought to neglect. Bravo Flashman!”



Fraser was born to Scottish parents in Carlisle, England, and was educated at Glasgow Academy. During World War II he enlisted in The Border Regiment and was assigned to the Indian 17th Infantry Division. He gained a commission into the Gordon Highlanders and served in the Middle East and North Africa after the war. After discharge he worked for many years on the *Glasgow Herald* and held the titles deputy editor and acting editor between 1964 and 1969. At the end of the swinging sixties, the public wanted a good rip-roaring yarn but did not want heroes. Fraser came up with the idea of a central character who is a cad. For his first historical novel he picked the bully Flashman from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* who was expelled from Rugby by Doctor Arnold. Fraser imagined that Flashman wrote his memoirs, which were discovered in 1965.

This first novel, simply titled *Flashman*, takes our hero (?) from Rugby, into military service and to India. Here he is drafted into the great fiasco which is to become Britain's First Afghan War. Flashman's adventures may be fictitious, but Fraser's history is meticulous. He not only gives a first class account of what actually happened, he gives us the uncensored opinion of a British officer about how his superiors conducted the war—Sir William Macnaghten (whose name he misspells McNaghten), British envoy to Kabul, who loses his head; Lady Macnaghten, his wife; General Elphinstone, who led the 16,000 into the jaws of death, and various other characters, including the Afghans in all their treachery. Flashman gets into some terrible pickles, but somehow manages not only to survive, but to triumph, leaving a trail of bodies and scorned conquests behind.

Fraser wrote twelve Flashman novels, as well as other fiction and non-fiction works, including screenplays. He co-wrote *Octopussy* ((1983) and *Red Sonja* (1985). For a boring historical

account of The First Afghan War, see my article on the Clan Website
http://www.clanmacnaughton.net/docs_articles/SIR_WILLIAM_4rev-2.pdf

Ken McNaughton (kjmcn@comcast.net)