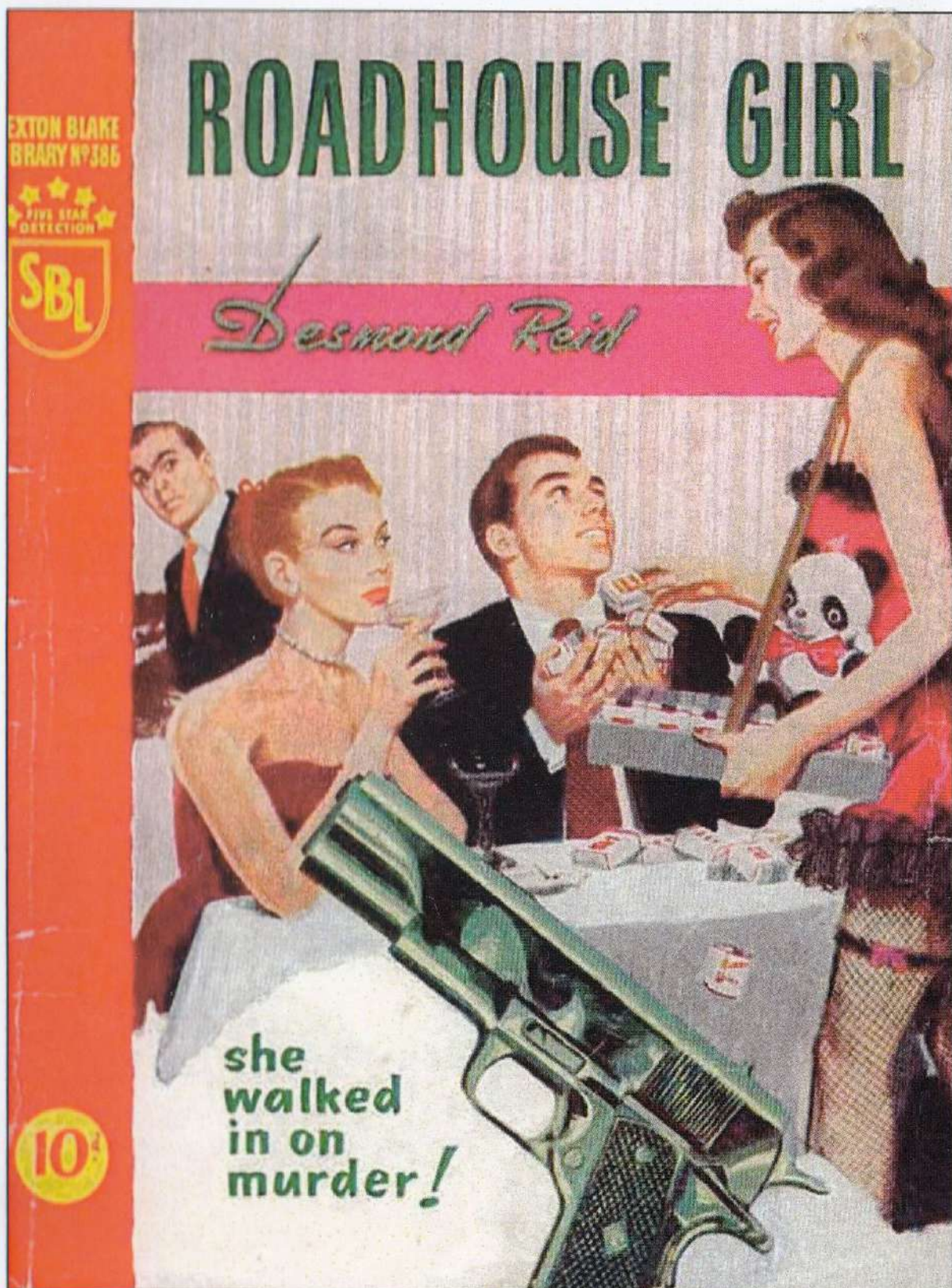


THE DUST JACKET

The Magazine of the London Old Boys' Book Club



DELIGHTFUL, JOYOUS AND VERY FUNNY: THE EXPLOITS OF MCAUSLAN

Mark Taha goes on manoeuvres with George MacDonald Fraser's military ne'er-do-well

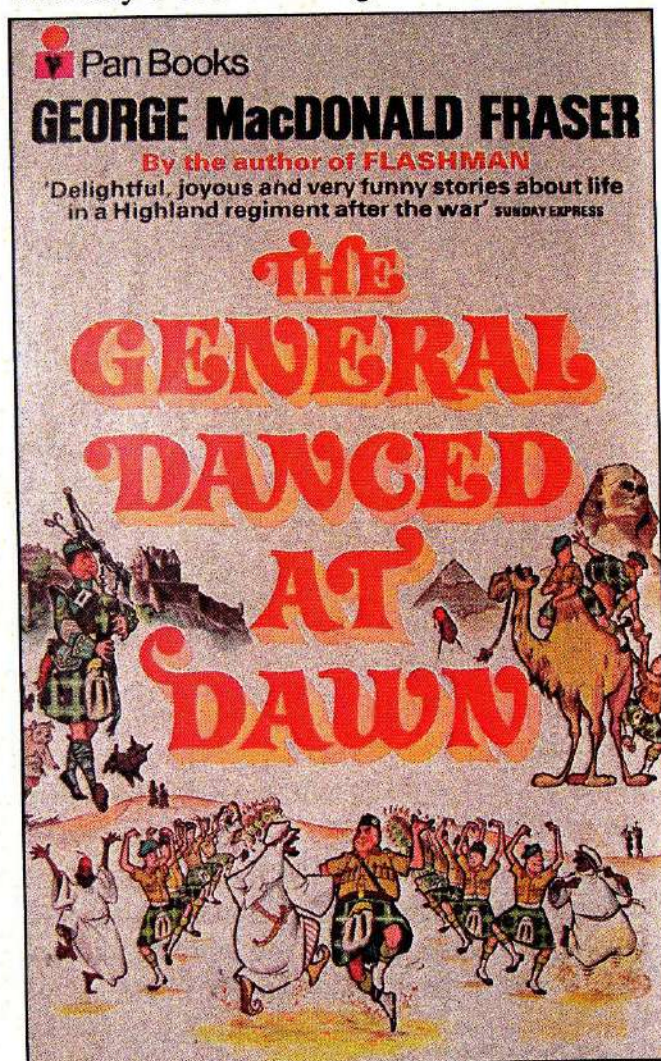
Readers will know my high opinion of George MacDonald Fraser's 'Flashman' books. I also highly recommend his autobiography; or, to be exact, his semi-autobiographical McAuslan stories, based on his experiences as a Lieutenant in the Gordon Highlanders in 1946-47. I also recommend reading them in private, unless you have no inhibitions about bursting out laughing in public; they are, in the words of one reviewer, 'delightful, joyous and very funny'.

There is, however, a serious side to them: you never lose sight of the fact that you're reading about a regiment who'd distinguished themselves during the war. The kindly Colonel, for instance, who has a game leg, as a result of its being broken by Japanese sadists—sorry, interrogators. There's upper-class twit Company Commander Bennett-Bruce, who 'had the Medaille Militaire... and the French don't hand that out for nothing'; and there's the Regimental Sergeant Major who was 'one of the two or three smartest and most expert parade-ground soldiers in the world'. I'd be inclined to surmise that Fraser's later strictures about the Americans in Vietnam, in his *The Hollywood History of the World*, were inspired to a large extent by his own experiences of real soldiers.

Mr Fraser renames himself Dand McNeill for these stories, although intriguingly one of his grandmothers is still called MacDonald. Since he writes in the first person, one does get confused at times; although I take it as read that the opinions on various issues expressed by 'I' are both Fraser's and McNeill's. The eponymous McAuslan is a member of his platoon: the dirtiest soldier in the world, permanently unkempt and incompetent, 'just wan o' nature's blunders', in the words of the platoon sergeant. The episodes involving him

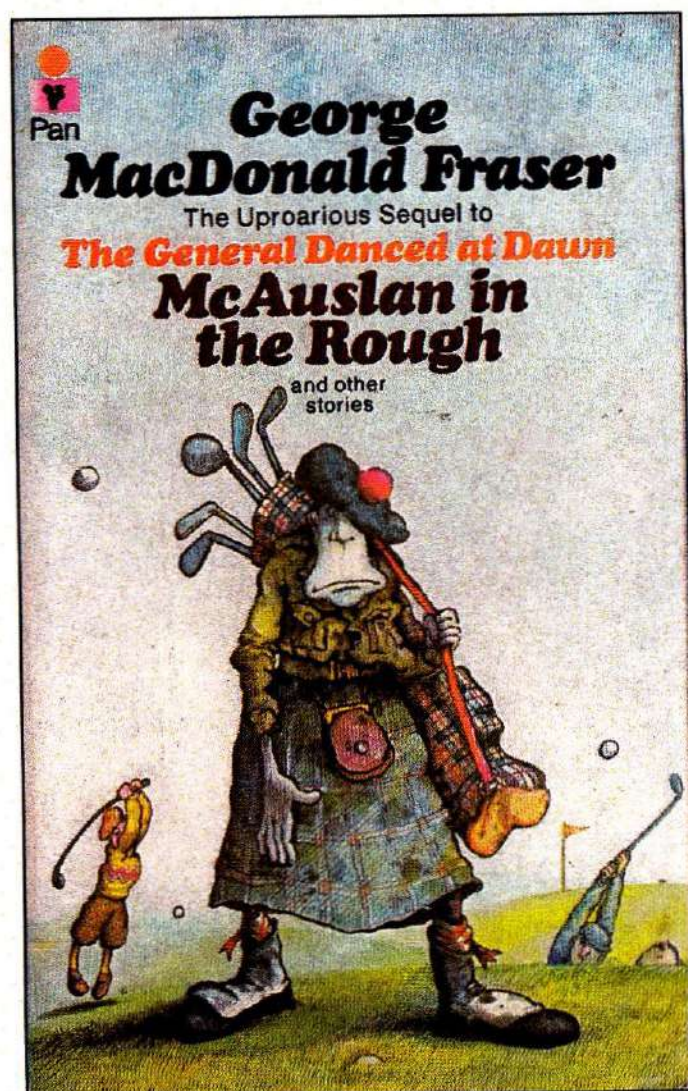
are mainly the ones which have you rolling in the aisles!

Each of the books is a collection of short stories. The first of them, *The General Danced at Dawn*, includes nine. The first, 'Monsoon Selection Board', features McNeill passing an officers' Selection Board, much to his own surprise, after losing his trousers on the assault course. The second, 'Silence in the Ranks', sees him taking command of his platoon in North Africa and gradually finding his feet, culminating in his finding out, after five of his men call on him on Hogmanay, who they'd been referring to as 'Darkie'. The



third, 'Play Up, Play Up and Get Tore In', has McNeill taking the battalion football team on tour and meeting a Welsh naval Lieutenant, of whom he says, 'I seemed to understand Sir Henry Morgan and Lloyd George better'. The title story features an irascible General on an inspection for which everything's specially prepared, so, of course, for which everything goes wrong. It ends up with Highland dancing—starting with four men performing a reel in the Mess, ending with 128 performing one on the parade ground at the General's instigation. 'Wee Wullie' deals with the regiment's public enemy number one: a six-foot six incorrigible drinker and brawler who's protected by the Colonel from court-martial because of his past record. McNeill leaves subduing him to the provost Sergeant, on the wise grounds that 'the fact that he would have been overwhelmed by remorse for plastering me all over the guardroom wall... [was] not much consolation'. In 'Night Run to Palestine', McNeill is in charge of a train from Cairo to Jerusalem and has to cope with an irascible Lieutenant-Colonel, a married couple with twins, ATS girls in need of a compartment and troops getting off to change their money on the black market. 'The Whisky and the Music' sees the Sergeants discussing a regimental legend. 'Guard at the Castle', set after the regiment's return to Scotland, puts McNeill in charge of the guard at Edinburgh Castle in front of royalty, winding up with McAuslan in the guard and having to salute left-handed to stop his kilt falling down. 'McAuslan's Court-Martial' sees our hero acquitted thanks to some very sharp practice (in which the RSM is conned into being a witness for the defence) by his defence officer.

The second collection, *McAuslan in the Rough*, includes 'Bo Geesty', in which the platoon, stationed at a remote fort, find 100 million lire in unfortunately useless notes. 'Johnnie Cope in the Morning' focuses on the pipe band's practising outside officers' quarters at six a.m., terminated by the Colonel's staying there overnight; newly-joined



subalterns were hardly in a position to raise objections. 'General Knowledge, Private Information' sees McAuslan as the only man able to answer the tiebreaker in an inter-regimental quiz, the question being: how can a footballer score three successive goals with nobody else touching the ball in between? In 'Parfit Gentil Knight, But' McAuslan helps out the garrison beauty and winds up asking her to marry him. 'Fly Man' features McNeill unwittingly conning a deserter, and getting a 'reputation'. The colonel comments 'took me about twenty years... you've managed it in about six months'. The title story features a golf match with another regiment in which McAuslan, caddying for the RSM, helps him win by giving him the wrong club. In the more serious 'His Majesty Says Good-Day', McNeill and McAuslan get demobbed together—McAuslan taking his bayonet with

him. McNeill writes of his mixed feelings and agrees with Dr Johnson that 'the man who hasn't soldiered envies the man who has'. He ends the story by again helping McAuslan out of a jam.

The third book, *The Sheikh and the Dustbin*, starts with 'The Servant Problem', in which McNeill has a variety of batmen, including McAuslan. On pre-demob leave after three years, he visits various comrades' families, including the aristocratic Lieutenant MacKenzie's, whose footman can best be described as Jeeves-come-true, and on the way back is looked after by a giant Prussian POW, one look at whom makes him wonder: 'How the hell did we ever beat this lot?'



My own favourite story is 'Captain Errol'. Its eponymous hero can best be described as Errol Flynn in uniform. He is good-looking, self-confident, stylish and has a total contempt for convention and authority on the one hand, but is an authentic war hero on the other. He caps it all by beating a savage mob by sheer bluff and by being absent when their leader is mysteriously shot. He eventually winds up as a Congo mercenary ('no place for

people like Errol in a normal peacetime world... But I wonder if we'd have won the war without them'.) He also, of course, 'attracted [women] like a magnet'. 'The Constipation of O'Brien' has the officer lecturing the platoon in an 'Education Period'; for instance, 'How to get civilian employment when you are demobilised'—delivered by an officer who'd never held a steady job in his life to a platoon who'd spent most of their lives on the dole. It leads into a night exercise, with McAuslan and Wee Wullie partners, having to fight their way through a company. The title story centres on the regiment having to hold an elderly Arab rebel leader until the French pick him up, much against the Colonel's wishes. The regiment grow to admire him as a fighting man who'd given the French hell for decades, escaped from Devil's Island, and fought on our side during the war. 'McAuslan, Lance-Corporal' is a sequel to 'General Knowledge, Private Information' and is summed up by the title—and the Colonel 'hadn't been so shaken by a question since the Japanese interrogated him'. And what one might call the last story, 'The Gordon Women', sees McNeill on a mission near his aunt's place with McAuslan as one of the escorts. They get mixed up with poaching and she gets them off, 'apparently concealing the combined talents of the Scarlet Pimpernel and a Mafia godmother'.

There are two more short pieces: 'Ye Mind Jie Dee, Fletcher?', with Fraser imagining McAuslan's reaction to Scotland's failure in the 1978 World Cup, and 'Extraduction', in which he meets his old Colonel again at a book signing and they discuss how accurate the stories are. It seems they're 'a lot of fact and a bit of fiction... bits people think are fictitious... usually truest'.

Not only do I recommend these stories—twenty years ago, 'Guard at the Castle' was turned into a one-off TV programme—but I believe they should be turned into a full-blooded series. I honestly think they'd get near the top of the ratings.