

# More About Flashman

By Mark Taha



The second Flashman book "Royal Flash" (1970) was also excellent. It's divided into two parts, the first, set in 1842-43 after his returning from Afghanistan, features his meeting a young Otto von Bismarck and the legendary courtesan Lola Montez, "one of the loveliest girls I have ever seen in my life. No, THE loveliest." He has a passionate affair with her - and is later instrumental in having her exposed as a fake and in tricking Bismarck into the ring with ex-champ John Gully.

The second part of the book, set in 1847-48, features Flashy being lured to Munich by Lola, and then finding himself in a pastiche of "The Prisoner of Zenda" (it seems that he gave Anthony Hope the plot), forced by Bismarck to impersonate a Danish Prince at his wedding. It's an excellent adventure story although Flashman's outlook on life was somewhat different from Rudolf Rassendyll's! The book's villains include the fictional Rudi von Starnberg, a German Flashman, only worse. The third book, "Flash for Freedom" (1971) begins with Flashy as a potential Tory MP. In his view "I could lie and dissemble with the best... Mark you, I've never been given to interfering in other folks' affairs..." However, an old enemy's cardsharpping results in a scandal, and Flashy is shipped abroad, in a slave ship commanded by a mad Classic-quoting ex-Oxford Don, John Charity Spring. His adventures this time include posing as a deceased Admiralty spy, having a fling with a Cockney madam - in New Orleans, slave-stealing on the "Underground Railroad", a job as a plantation overseer under the name Tom Arnold, nearly being sold as a slave, and making the acquaintance of a Congressman named Abraham Lincoln.

The fourth book, "Flashman at the Charge" (1973) is in my view the best of the lot. Early in 1854, flashy prudently contrives an appointment to the Board of Ordnance to keep himself out of the Crimean War. However, he's then put in charge of a German prince, rapidly promoted from Captain to Colonel, and finds himself in the Crimea. The descriptive passages and historical content are brilliant (this is the one I got the essay from); first the Alma, then Balaclava, in which Flashy becomes the only man to stand with the Thin Red Line, charge with the Heavy Brigade, and then lead the Light Brigade (poetic justice; he caused the charge). He's captured and then kept prisoner by a giant Cossack nobleman, and finds his old schoolfellow, East, his fellow-inmate. They find out about a Russian plot to invade India, and escape during a peasants' rising. Flashman gets recaptured, confined with two Afghan leaders and sprung, and winds up fighting the Russians like a hero, winning a battle much to his astonishment (it turns out he was drugged with hashish!). Apart from the aforementioned, the antagonist this time is a real-life cold-blooded Russian nobleman and agent, Count Ignatieff, who also appears in the next book.

"Flashman in the Great Game" (1975) sees our hero back in Britain, a greater hero than ever. He finds himself dispatched to India by Lord Palmerston to get Ignatieff, who's stirring things up there, and on a diplomatic mission. Flashy does well with the Ranees of Jhansi although unfortunately, Ignatieff nearly gets him. Our hero goes underground as a soldier in the Indian Army, at Meerut, where the Indian Mutiny begins. He escapes, and then he's at Cawnpore, Lucknow, and on a mission (which fails) to rescue the Ranees. He does indeed meet Ignatieff again, likewise East, and his old Afghan friend, Ilderim Khan, one of the few men he seems to have liked, both of them killed at Cawnpore.

The book ends with Flashy becoming Sir Harry Flashman, VC - and then having the euphoria somewhat reduced by reading "Tom Brown's Schooldays". At the same time, a



serial story in the "Daily Express" called "Flashman and the Tiger" appeared; set in 1894, it featured a 72-year-old Flashman planning to kill a fictional character, Conan Doyle's Col. Jack Sebastian Moran, to save his grand-daughter's somewhat dubious honour. The denouement involves two fictional characters called Holmes and Watson.

"Flashman's Lady" (1977) fills part of the gap in "Royal flash". Flashman meets Tom Brown again, plays in a cricket match, and winds up on a cruise with Elspeth and a disguised Borneo pirate who kidnaps her. He joins up with "White Rajah" James Brooke in a rescue mission, only to wind up in Madagascar, enslaved by the incredible-if-not-true Queen Ranavalona.

"Mr. American", a 1980 novel about an American outlaw turned British country squire, sees an old General Flashman appear several times. He's still chasing maids and calling the King "young Bertie" at 87, and scheming, plotting and opposing involvement in the First World War at 92.

"Flashman and the Redskins" (1982) is in two parts, the first, a sequel to "Flash for Freedom", in which our hero marries twice and becomes an Apache warrior, among other things; the second, set in 1876, has him surviving Little Big Horn! "Flashman and the Dragon" (1983) set in 1860, sees our hero involved in political intrigue and the Chinese civil war of 1853-64; Mr. Fraser certainly needs his footnotes this time, as nobody would believe his descriptions (e.g. of the magnificent Summer Palace) otherwise.

"Flashman and the Mountain of Light" (1990) fills in the 1840 gap. Flashy's involved in political intrigue and the first Sikh war of 1845-46, and with more stranger-than-fiction characters like the "Tartan Pathan" and the Sikh Army - the Khalsa - who lose a battle due to Flashy's being their commander's adviser.

What's Flashman's future? Mr. Fraser is, I believe, planning a book on the Zulu war and I've been yearning for years to read his account of the American Civil War, in which our hero served on the staffs of both sides!

Furthermore, various writers have written books centred on characters from Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories; while Mr. Fraser's real-life characters make fiction superfluous, I believe that Flashman spin-offs could be written around German Flashman Rudi von Starmnberg, Cockney new Orleans madam Suzie Willinck, John Charity Spring, Ilderim Khan, and Elspeth's diaries (quoted in "Flashman's Lady"). And the "Oxford Mail" once said "they'll have Flashy as a set book in school one day". And why not? He's stimulated my reading of history. I also enjoy casting Flashman films!



Good Wishes to all readers.

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Happy Christmas to all readers.

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