

FLASHMAN AND THE ART OF THE FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Readers opening the pages of George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman* (1969) for the first time are met with something of a puzzle. The book purports to be an autobiography by Sir Harry Paget Flashman, someone who never existed, yet is written and edited with palpable *earnestness*. Amongst more recent works of neo-Victorian fiction this is perhaps nothing too unusual, as it is a genre that thrives on its ability to produce illusions that feel authentic, as Ann Heilmann has noted:

Neo-Victorianism is sustained by illusion: the fabrication of a 'plausible' version of the Victorian past and a 'credible' representation of the places, characters, and experiences depicted in the text or film. (18)

Flashman's mixing of fact and fiction warrants further critical attention: its artifices and devices serve not only to enhance its own 'illusory' effects, but also to reassess the Victorian period's own illusions. The novel's content is so uncharacteristic of the Victorian era that it would be problematic to suggest it was intended to pass as a genuine autobiography, and yet great pains were taken to reinforce its tone as a work of the utmost seriousness. Before *Flashman*'s narrative commences, there is an explanatory note that states the text's fictional origins:

The great mass of manuscript known as the Flashman Papers was discovered during a sale of household furniture at Ashby, Leicestershire, in 1965. The papers were subsequently claimed by Mr Paget Morrison, of Durban, South Africa, the nearest known living relative of their author. (7)

The text goes on to further explain the history of the papers, estimating that they were written between 1900 and 1905, describing how the family were unanimously opposed to their publication and recounting how they then were untouched for fifty years in a tea chest. None of it is true, of course, and yet these details seem to have been convincing

enough to make some reviewers think that they were reading an actual autobiography. An article in the *Watertown Daily Times* (13 August 1969) titled ‘Gen. Sir Harry Flashman and Aide Con the Experts; Old Adage Holds True: Never Judge Book By Cover’ states that ‘so far “Flashman” has had 34 reviews in the United States. Ten of these found the book to be genuine autobiography’. In treading a fine line between fantasy and genuine history, *Flashman* utilises both elements to their full potential, not only recreating fascinating events from the nineteenth century but also revelling in creating fiction to fill the figurative margins of history. This article aims to examine why *Flashman* is such an effective novel, what these specific effects achieve, how it compares with more traditional life writing, and what the novel offers in terms of commentary on Victorian society as a whole.

Flashman is the first book in what became a prolonged series, collectively referred to as *The Flashman Papers*. The plot of *Flashman* is developed through several stages. After his expulsion from Rugby School for drunkenness, Flashman begins what he hopes will be a safe and prosperous military career as part of the 11th Regiment of Light Dragoons, selected partly because ‘they were close to town’ (25). After gaining an initial reputation for prowess and bravery for winning a duel (through cheating), Flashman is posted to Scotland where he is caught romancing the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, pressured into marriage, and ultimately must resign the regiment for marrying below his station. Flashman is forced to earn his reputation in India where, to his dismay, his abilities in horse riding and learning new languages get him noticed and sent to what would soon become the Anglo-Afghan War. After continually demonstrating his habits of cowardliness, flattery, occasional cruelty and neglect of his duties, Flashman comes through the campaign alive and, with perfect timing to appear to be both brave and patriotic, is found clinging to the British flag in the ruins of a fallen fortress.

The events of the novel themselves, then, focus on the loss and gain of respectability and reputation but, equally importantly, demonstrate how they can be acquired undeservedly. The way *Flashman* and its sequels treat military conflict addresses this directly, and constitutes a revisionist manner of reassessing events. The series’ longevity can be ascribed in part to the amount of military conflicts that took place around the world throughout the Victorian period, particularly during the lifespan of the fictional Flashman: his unlikely presence has been recorded at battles and wars as diverse as the Charge of the Light Brigade (1854), the Indian Rebellion (1857), the second Opium War (1860), and the setting of the first story, the First Anglo-Afghan War and

Retreat from Kabul (1842). It may seem improbable for one person to have taken part in so many terrible conflicts, but Flashman's cowardice and willingness to violate ethical boundaries to avoid death enables him to survive each battle and usually emerge with a greater reputation. One example of Flashman's cowardice and awareness of the need to maintain appearances takes place in Britain. After he is struck by a fellow officer, Flashman pretends to be keen to fight him, as his peers would expect. Flashman's own narrative reveals the sham: 'Truth is, I was nearly sick with fear, for the murder was out now. The best shot in the regiment had hit me' (44). Flashman is similarly coerced when he is sent to India. Despite the fears of death and disease facing him, Flashman informs us it is again cowardice that stops him refusing to go:

I felt myself damnably ill-used, and if I had had the courage I would have told my father to go the devil. But he had me, and he knew it. (72)

From these examples, it is clear that Fraser's series is an apt interrogation of the Victorian military and, more generally, society. Not only is the series comprehensive in its subject matter, but the narrator is also unusual and does not conform to the Victorian ideal of a soldier or a gentleman in terms of bravery or conduct. Flashman purports to be honest in his narrative, delivered 'in the interests of strict truth' (13), yet is dishonest and cowardly in his conduct, and so Fraser presents Victorian society through the eyes of a character he would have us believe was one of their own non-conformists.

The chief reason that events depicted in the story may seem like credible examples of autobiography is their honesty and tell-all nature. The text arrives in front of the reader supposedly unadulterated. Although Fraser is credited as editing and arranging the papers, the preface states that 'beyond correcting some minor spelling errors, there has been no editing to do' (8). Fraser seems to have been thorough with his historical research, and while Flashman offers us a different perspective, the events themselves rarely differ from historical fact. As Fraser himself states in his guise as editor:

I have no reason to doubt that it is a completely truthful account; where Flashman touches on historical fact he is almost invariably accurate, and readers can judge whether or not he is to be believed or not on more personal matters. (7)

What makes *Flashman* particularly interesting is that, far from defending its protagonist, both the editor and Flashman's own narration accept that it is, in the character's own words, 'the portrait of a scoundrel, a liar, a cheat, a thief, a coward—and, oh yes, a toady' (13). Flashman is the portrait of a severely flawed character: perhaps nothing too unusual in literature, but combined with its serious biographical tone and the subject matter of Victorian colonial wars it makes for an original and interesting reflection on the typical stereotype of the Victorian soldier. The novel calls for a reassessment of history: it exposes the flaws in gaining historical knowledge through secondary sources. For instance, speaking about the leadership of Lord Elphinstone during the Retreat from Kabul, perhaps one of the greatest British military disasters of all time,¹ Flashman states:

Even now, after a lifetime of consideration, I am at a loss for words to describe the superhuman stupidity, the truly monumental incompetence, and the bland blindness to reason of Elphy Bey and his advisers. (186)

The facts themselves do not change, but instead of respectfully reflecting on the tragic event, or commending the bravery and sacrifice of those who died, Flashman denounces the stupidity and ineffectuality that led to a needless catastrophe. This is typical of what makes Flashman such a valuable narrator. Flashman eschews conventions such as respect for the dead and military rank to inform the reader that no one could have ruined the situation quicker if they had been trying, even emphasising this remark was not added as an insult through his assurance '—and I mean it seriously' (186). Perhaps the most damning remark Flashman adds is the short sentence, 'And he believed he was doing his duty' (186). *Flashman* juxtaposes the conventional attitude that Bey was doing his duty with the resultant aftermath of just what this duty had wrought, demonstrating how meaningless the idea of duty really is. Flashman is thus able to recognise the disparity between adherence to 'duty' and how harmful this can potentially be. The reader is aware from the beginning that Flashman is a self-confessed 'scoundrel' (13) and thus assumes he is being equally honest when discussing the flaws of others. This reinterpretation of reputation demonstrated in figures like Bey is reflected in the character of Flashman. Throughout the novel, Flashman's negative actions and attributes can only be read alongside his rapidly establishing reputation as a hero. It is the secret life of an increasingly renowned hero that is central to *Flashman*'s status as a

compelling fictional autobiography: that knowing something only by reputation is shown to have ample room for error and misinterpretation.

It is important to note that *Flashman* is not the character's first appearance in literature, and those familiar with Victorian children's fiction will recognise the name as the school bully from Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). Hughes' novel is, in its own way, a mixture of biography and fiction, and his schoolboy story seems to follow an autobiographical format. Hughes' schoolboy story drew heavily upon his own school days, something typical of the genre as 'a large proportion of the great public school stories are autobiographical' (Richards 5). The protagonist, Tom Brown, has been recognised as a fictionalised version of Hughes, as many of their acquaintances and experiences are comparable. Like Brown, 'in time Tom Hughes became, as captain of "Bigside" at football and head of the cricket eleven, an old Brooke himself' (Mack 19). The novel follows Brown from his childhood through to his position as an upstanding and responsible young man at Rugby school. As a consequence the novel is deeply prescriptive, advocating certain values above others. For instance, when pondering on what advice to give his son, Tom's father realises that: 'If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman and a Christian, that's all I want' (63). This sentiment carries the implication that *Tom Brown's Schooldays* is not actually about what Tom learns academically, but rather about whether or not he will become the right sort of man. While this is widely known, it has an additional significance when considering Fraser's choice of protagonist. *Tom Brown's Schooldays* remains a familiar and well-known novel but, unlike many other neo-Victorian retellings and pastiches, *Flashman's* engagement with Hughes' book is unconventional. Instead of directly interacting with the events of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Fraser's *Flashman* is such a departure from *Tom Brown* that the novel appears to benefit little from its original source, and yet both *Flashman* and Fraser's narratives have a preoccupation with it, for instance opening with the assertion that 'Hughes got it wrong' (13). The question that follows, then: what is it about the character of *Flashman* that made Fraser choose him for an extended textual afterlife, so long after Hughes' book? It seems as though it is *Flashman's* origins as an antagonist in such a morally prescriptive novel that make him so well suited for these continuing adventures. The fact Hughes' own experiences are so intrinsically bound up with *Tom Brown's Schooldays* helps Fraser emulate that same authenticity, but also, in continuing the exploits of the antagonist, *Flashman* and its sequels, question the values and virtues Hughes held as paramount.

In *Flashman*, the character continues to transgress the same Victorian values seen in Tom Brown's schooldays, showing that he is, unrepentantly, not the 'right sort of man'. Referring to *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Jeffrey Richards states: 'Hughes was well aware of the boy's need to assert and demonstrate his masculinity, and his book therefore sought to advocate a particular form of manliness' (32). Rugby school, and its headmaster Dr Arnold in particular, became famous for extolling this form of manliness: Arnold 'regarded Christianity as indispensable to all forms of human endeavour, his chief educational aim was to make Rugby a Christian school producing Christian gentlemen' (Reeve). Arnold extolled many of the same values Tom's father does, as Arnold himself says: 'What we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principle; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability' (qtd. in Strachey 171). This form of Christian belief tempered with gentlemanly conduct and physical activity has since become known as 'muscular Christianity'. Tony Collins' *A Social History of English Rugby Union* (2009) emphasises that this form of Christianity was about action, not contemplation: 'Muscular Christianity gave British middle-class men of action at home and abroad a moral framework in which to justify their work' (7). As might be expected, these values were not confined to the schoolroom or even Victorian Britain itself; a further statement from Collins links these schoolboy values to the wider colonial ambitions of Empire:

This sense of Britishness also encompassed an increased awareness of military responsibilities overseas. This was partly because of the growing newspaper coverage of Britain's frequent wars, most notably in William Russell's despatches from the Crimean War in *The Times*, but also because Britain's increasing international influence necessarily meant increased vigilance as its reach extended across the world. (4)

The parallels between the Flashman of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and Flashman's own series of adventures can be seen clearly in this context. In both the schoolroom and the battlefield the often unrealistic aims of muscular Christian values were pervasive: indeed, in many ways it seems as though one is the extension of the other. This is evidenced by Flashman's own obsession with his schooldays. The first pages of the novel offer an extract from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* that details Flashman's expulsion, accompanied by an explanation: 'The quotation

from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was pasted to the top page of the first packet; it had evidently been cut from the original edition of 1856' (8). Discussing the 'school story' genre more widely, Richards notes that 'there is a tendency in mass culture to promote uniformity and standardisation which affects not only dress and vocabulary but also more subtly attitude and world view' (4). Flashman, therefore, is more than just an antagonist to Tom Brown: he stands as an antithesis of the values the book was praising. Flashman is an example of someone who not only declines to help themselves to the benefits of the muscular-Christian public school system, but also stands against its general attitudes and worldview. Furthermore, he takes this non-conformist stance with him when confronted by the Victorian military system.

Flashman's continued rejection and critique of muscular Christianity is one of the novel's primary functions. This is further evidenced through Flashman dwelling on his past as a school bully, seemingly able to perceive hypocrisy in the concept of muscular Christianity. Despite his expulsion from Rugby school for failing to represent its values, once he has become a renowned figure they celebrate him, and say nothing of his past:

I never much cared for the place, and the supposed disgrace of expulsion I didn't even think about. (They had me back a few years ago to present prizes; nothing was said about expulsion *then*, which shows that they are just as big hypocrites now as they were in Arnold's day). (16–17)

Not only is this significant due to explicitly recognising the hypocrisy of Victorian society, but it also suggests that people who knew of Flashman's true nature chose to remain quiet. Even at his greatest moment of triumph in the first novel—receiving recognition from the Queen for patriotic acts of heroism that never look place—Flashman ruminates on what Arnold would make of him:

Strange, but as the coach won clear and we rattled off down the Mall with the cheers dying behind us, I could hear Arnold's voice saying, 'There *is* good in you, Flashman', and I imagined how he would have supposed himself vindicated at this moment, and preach on 'Courage' in chapel, and pretend to rejoice in the redeemed prodigal—but all the time he would know in his hypocrite heart that I was a rotter still. (289)

The implication here is that these bastions of Victorian virtue are content to continue the muscular Christian myth, even whilst suspecting it is not true. This hypocrisy can also be seen in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Victorian society may be shown to have strict rules of conduct, but these rules also protect the reputations of those who break that conduct. For instance, Flashman's actions against Tom Brown go unreported; again, quoting Richards, 'The boys' code is seen in force with Tom admired for not sneaking to the masters about his ill treatment by Flashman' (32).

The device of the 'honest', tell-all autobiography here acts as a probe into an era where maintaining a respectable reputation was a vital social skill—one that Flashman has mastered. What makes Flashman 'a formidable enemy for small boys' (123) is also what makes him a successful soldier and respectable figure in society: he does not have a reputation for being a bully, nor any outspoken enemies to rule against him. As the narrator in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* states, 'he had managed to make himself, not only tolerated, but rather popular amongst his own contemporaries' (123). This is one aspect of his character that feeds into Fraser's works. Flashman consciously *protects* his reputation, realising how dangerous it would be to be despised or denigrated in a society that is in many ways a cult of personality. This is acknowledged by Flashman himself in the text. As Flashman instructs a horrified friend to rig a duel by not loading the other pistol, essentially murder, he is able to reassure his friend that he will be above suspicion because 'You're an officer and a gentleman' (46). Flashman, however, only *appears* to conform to the code of ethics that other soldiers and schoolboys take to heart. Evidence of this being applied to a wider Victorian military context can be found when Flashman is called a 'plunger' by a veteran soldier, and given the explanation that:

A plunger is a fellow who makes a great turnout...and leaves cards at the best houses, and is sought by the mamas, and strolls in the Park very languid, and is just a hell of a swell generally. Sometimes they even condescend to soldier a little—when it doesn't interfere with their social life. (36)

While this describes aspects of Flashman exactly, he manages to exceed even this derogatory label in his conduct and cowardice. Importantly, however, this gives an indication of the type of soldier Flashman hoped to be when joining the military system, as well as ascribing the problems of reputation Flashman typifies to a wider class of soldiers. The 'Indian

officers' seemingly recognise that generating a reputation is at the cost of genuine soldiering. Although he tries to hide it, Flashman is essentially non-conformist, not holding himself to the standards his peers advocate. It is this characteristic that provides the conflict and drama in the Flashman books. It is not that Flashman is ashamed of showing fear, but rather that he recognises that doing so would cost him his reputation and social standing, and he is motivated to prevent this. The novel subtly shows how easily the image Victorians projected of themselves can be challenged: Flashman's secret life and his public persona could not be more different. In finding these plausible examples of discrepancy between public and personal lives, the novel creates room for reinterpretation and revision of Victorian society.

By categorising Flashman as a work of neo-Victorian fiction, readers can see Fraser's preoccupation with reputation in a new light. Flashman's fame is a meta-textual method of creating a plausible discrepancy between history and revisionist history, between the cosy images the Victorians used to describe themselves, and the recognition of the dark, often ignored, underside of society. In this case, reputation allowed for the coexistence of an idealised image of a noble heroic soldier and a cynical portrayal of a cheating coward who repeatedly gets lucky. *Flashman* uses the conventions of autobiography to emphasise the double standard of Victorian society. Heilmann has stated that:

The condition of estrangement which haunts the neo-Victorian novel offers an apt reflection on the instabilities of our contemporary relationship to the Victorian past, a past deceptively familiar to us...yet always ultimately intangible, and utterly remote from our experience. (74)

It is this intangibility that is perhaps the ultimate legacy of Flashman: it is an autobiography that has to be fictional because these kinds of autobiography do not get written. It provides a pervasive insight into an era that remains essentially unknowable, posing fundamental questions about the way we view a time that we only know through the materials left for us. *Flashman* carefully toys with schoolboy hero worship by creating, or rather adopting, a character who, to the outside world, appears to be the manly Christian soldier public schools strove to create, but is at heart a villain who has none of these virtues: Flashman speaks of his medals as helping to 'disguise a cowardly scoundrel as a heroic veteran' (288). The neo-Victorian has a preoccupation with rewriting

and investigating the past beyond widely-held Victorian conceptions. Challenging preconceived ideas of who the Victorians *were* makes the genre perfectly suited to uncovering underlying truths, not only with regards to personal histories but also to Victorian culture and society. The novel is unfairly overlooked amongst other neo-Victorian texts, as it is a relatively early example of the genre; published the same year as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and just three years after *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), both often recognised for their roles in the genesis of the genre. Flashman's manipulation of his own reputation allows for the discrepancy between different images of the Victorian past. This illusion is a recreation of the past through contemporary fiction, or the artificiality of writing 'Victorian' fiction in the twentieth century. The themes of *Flashman* and its use of reputation, however, speak to Victorian society's own created illusion: the nobility of their military, their virtues, their sobriety, chastity, Christianity and honesty, all of which are challenged by Flashman in his autobiography, but upheld through his reputation as, as Queen Victoria calls him, 'a very gallant gentleman' (287).

Ultimately, *Flashman* engages in a revisionist account of Victorian military disasters. Fraser rewrites history without the patriotism and morality, from the perspective of a cowardly soldier, and in doing so creates a gap between reputation and reality that allows for a new Victorian narrative that simply could not have existed at the time. Flashman's reappraisal of what makes a good soldier is cutting, stating that 'some human faults are military virtues, like stupidity and arrogance, and narrow mindedness' (32). While other writers utilise the neo-Victorian mode to broach subjects that have previously been left untouched, Fraser pushes his novels further, writing an autobiography that tells a truth so honest that it borders on the preposterous. Flashman may be a coward, but he is always viewed as conforming to his contemporaries' codes of conduct: he fundamentally challenges the image of Victorian manliness by suggesting that these codes of conduct could have been entered into unwillingly. Through *Flashman*, Fraser raises the suggestion that Victorian society forced compliance and elevated a set of muscular Christian values to prominence that were not only fraught with double standards, but were concerned primarily with outward appearance: together, Flashman and Fraser show that it can never be clear to what degree they were taken to heart.

NOTES

¹ A quotation from Johnson demonstrates the extent of British losses: ‘Almost the entire force of seven hundred European troops, thirty-eight hundred Sepoys and Sowars (Indian infantry and cavalry), and twelve thousand civilians and camp followers was wiped out in the retreat to the Jagdalak Pass’ (‘Russians at the Gates of India’ 699).

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