



**Fred: The Collected Letters and Speeches of Colonel Frederick Gustavus Burnaby**

Volume 1 1842-1878  
 Edited and introduced by John W. Hawkins  
 Helion (£35)



Colonel Fred Burnaby became a legend in his own Victorian lifetime which was cut short at the age of 42. He was killed in the Sudan by a spear through the throat on 17 January 1885 while serving as a senior commander in the famous, ultimately abortive expeditionary force sent to rescue General Gordon, besieged in Khartoum by fanatical Muslims led by the Osama bin Laden of his day. Deep national grief

was expressed in songs and poems, some of which are included in this fascinating book. The world's worst ever poet, the notorious William McGonagall, provided a characteristically dreadful contribution: "Oh! It was an exciting and terrible sight/ To see Colonel Burnaby engaged in the fight/ With sword in hand, fighting with might and main/ Until killed by a spear-thrust in the jugular vein".

Burnaby could have stepped from the pages of one of G. A. Henty's tales of swashbuckling and derring-do which all good public schoolboys used to read approvingly. Some have questioned his heroic character and sought to recast him as a model for Flashman, but he was no cad and certainly no coward. A man of

immense physical strength, his party tricks are said to have included vaulting over billiard tables and twisting pokers into knots with bare hands. In 1882 a flock of French sheep in Normandy looked up to see him descending from the skies, the first man to cross the Channel by balloon.

He was drawn like a magnet to risk and peril. On hearing news of Burnaby's death, Lord Derby, who served in both Conservative and Liberal Cabinets, commented in his diary, "Almost a giant, an athlete from boyhood, his pleasure was in rough and dangerous adventure with no special object except the excitement & perhaps the consequent notoriety...[He] missed no opportunity that offered of getting himself killed".

The world's trouble spots were irresistible to him. First came Spain, torn by civil war. Later he turned up in Egypt, Turkey, the Balkans and Central Asia. He was master of seven languages, including Russian, which proved useful during long solo 1000-mile expeditions on horseback, one of which took him to the borders of Afghanistan. Books based on his bizarre experiences became page-turning bestsellers.

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Not content with the fame that his overseas exploits brought him, he also sought a career in politics as a Conservative MP. The delighted Tories sent him into battle against the heavily fortified radical stronghold that Joe Chamberlain had created in Birmingham. At the 1880 election he cut Chamberlain's majority to under 4,000. The battered

radical leader complained that “nothing can exceed the virulence with which the Tories have attacked me. No slander has been too gross, no calumny too improbable”.

Burnaby found an ideal political partner in Winston Churchill's father, Lord Randolph, who shared his love of risk-taking. Together they planned a fresh assault on Birmingham, assisted by a formidable new Tory organisation, the Primrose League, founded by them and others in 1883, which provided them with a private army of dedicated women canvassers, the first ever seen in Britain. But Burnaby's death on the Nile put paid to this alliance of rising Tory stars.

Instead of producing a conventional biography, John Hawkins, a successful

financial adviser turned dedicated historian, had the happy idea of gathering together Burnaby's own extensive and vigorous journalism, his speeches and as much of his private correspondence as could be located. He has tracked down an impressive amount of material, including a short fragment of a letter from Disraeli, who wrote in 1877 to tell Burnaby that “I am reading your book with much interest, and I think everybody will do the same”. That goes for this book too, which brings us a vivid account of an extraordinary Victorian in his own words. The words are redolent of the late nineteenth century imperialism that was to provide the foundation for a string of Tory election victories which Burnaby did not live to see. Dr Hawkins guides us expertly along the way. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian. His publications include *A Gift from the Churchills: The Primrose League 1883-2004*

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