"Like the End of the World": Samuel White Baker and Charles George Gordon in Central Africa*

Luisa Villa

Abstract
In the 1870s Samuel White Baker and Charles George Gordon wrote accounts of their explorations and military campaigns in the Upper Nile while in the pay of the Egyptian Khedive Ismail. Temperamentally they were very different and came from very different backgrounds, but in the impervious Central African regions they were supposed to "civilize" they were placed in, roughly, the same predicaments, and construed them by drawing, generally speaking, on the same conceptual-ideological baggage. In comparing their accounts, my article underscores how they articulate different attitudes on a number of issues related to territorial expansion and enforced modernization, showing what margins the Victorian imperialist doxa left for discursive dissent.
Key-words: Colonial Africa, Samuel White Baker, Charles George Gordon.

> This place, with its solitude, its stillness, and its depressing air seems like the end of the world.
>
> *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa 1874-1879*

1. Contextual and preliminary

Samuel White Baker's *Ismailïa* (1874) and Charles George Gordon's *Letters from Central Africa* (1881) are both accounts of their authors' explorations and military operations in Egypt's Equatorial province. Baker, an explorer, naturalist, and big-game hunter, was contracted by the Khedive of Egypt Ismail from 1869 to 1873 to open up a Khartoum-Lake Victoria fluvial route, to fight the slave trade and peg out claims in the region on behalf of the Egyptian government; Gordon, a

* This essay is a spin off of my research work on the representation of British military engagement in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, and draws upon its results (see especially Villa 2009: 3-31, for full bibliographical references and ampler contextualization).

distinguished British officer, replaced him as Governor of Equatoria from 1874 to 1876, later to become Governor of the whole Sudan – a position he resigned from in 1879, after joint British and French pressure had forced the bankrupt Ismail to abdicate in favour of his son Tewfik[1].

Given the climate, the geography and the ethnic-political features of the province, their office was hardly a sinecure: with its torrid deserts on the one hand and impenetrable forests on the other, its obstructed rivers, its malarious swamps and intractable natives (who understandably resisted being "annexed" and "civilized"), the well-armed gangs of slave-hunters that periodically ravaged its villages, and the local Ottoman-Egyptian authorities who connived with them, the upper reaches of the White Nile offered a full compendium of the negativities that Henry Morton Stanley (1909: 296) famously associated with "Fatal Africa". Indeed, the region rated as extreme even by Egyptian standards, given that disgraced officials and soldiers were routinely sent to work, and die, there.

Leaving aside the specifically political and military aspects of Baker's and Gordon's expeditions, this essay addresses their take on the natural asperities that confronted them and the objectives of their missions, showing how they discursively met the challenge posed by the inhospitable southern border of the Egyptian empire. The point of entrance into my argument is a passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* dealing with St. John Rivers and his missionary vocation. This serves, among other things, as an apt reminder of the unresolved tensions between the domestic (the centripetal pull of the nation-state) and the transnational (the centrifugal push of compulsory modernization and "expansion for expansion's sake") (Arendt 1976: 123-134) in the Victorian imagination. Their complex interplay in the discursive productions generated by imperialist ventures I have addressed elsewhere (Villa 2009). In this short and mainly descriptive essay I can only marginally suggest its relevance to the texts under scrutiny.

2. "Indefatigable Pioneers"

One reason why *Jane Eyre* comes in handy here is that it is so canonical

[1] For a thorough, but not especially insightful, account of Baker's and Gordon's professional engagement in Central Africa, see Moore-Harrell (2010); for a more concise and incisive account Pakenham (1992: 72-85).

a novel that we can take its plot for granted. We hardly need recall that its eponymous heroine – who repeatedly describes herself as impatient with domestic routine, and as yearning for "liberty" and the "wide" world (Brontë 2001: 72) – before settling down in conjugal happiness must meet, and measure up to, a masculine variation of herself (a "cousin") in the shape of a restless and imperious country parson yearning to do missionary work in India and to secure her as a help-mate. We all know that, after dutifully evaluating his claims, the plot dispatches him to his Oriental destiny, while the protagonist pursues a career as a wife and mother at home. What we are less likely to remember is that St. John has the very last words in the novel, while in the previous paragraph the first-person narrator pays homage to his choice for the heroic and the extraordinary (Beaty 2001):

> As to St. John Rivers, he left England: he went to India. He entered on the path he had marked for himself; he pursues it still. A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers. Firm, faithful, and devoted; full of energy, and zeal, and truth, he labours for his race: he clears their painful way to improvement: he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it. He may be stern; he may be exacting: he may be ambitious yet; but his is the sternness of the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon. (Brontë 2001: 385)

This passage, relying explicitly on the traditional allegorical representation of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, displaces Bunyan's spiritual logistics and warfare onto a colonial setting where the pious and energetic Briton is confronted (mainly) with impervious nature. Given Brontë's well-known earlier fascination with tales of exploration and military expeditions in Africa (Meyer 1996: 29-59), this is not especially surprising; yet a number of considerations can be drawn from the way St. John's quest is portrayed.

The first have to do with the way Brontë's description translates cultural-political obstacles to modernization into natural obstructions, a rhetorical ruse which was frequently deployed in explorers' reports and travelogues from Central Africa – especially from the 1870s, when economic or political motives for exploration became paramount (Fabian 2000: 16). Liberal assumptions as to the superiority of (British) democratic institutions, the right of self-determination of peoples and the patriotic attachment to, and

respect for, the boundaries of one's own and other people's nation-state were cherished by the mid-Victorians, and uneasily cohabited with their equally fervent belief in the inherent goodness of free trade, utilitarianism, evangelical Christianity and anti-slavery – a set of values that were "universalist in application" and therefore "capable of mobilizing important sectors of the public opinion behind different forms of overseas expansion" (Darwin 1997: 627). Fiercely individualistic and patriotic as she is, Jane Eyre could easily be imagined, in a different context, as speaking up for the rights of small nations to repulse invasions and reject intrusions: shifting the focus of antagonism from human resistance to natural obstacles – one may surmise – helps negotiate the perplexities involved in the clash between conflicting allegiances in the Victorian middle-class ideological mix. Indeed, the more extreme the natural adversities (the more capable, that is, of eliciting the awe-struck reader's emotional response), the more rhetorically effective the blurring of the discursive fault-line: thus, lured by the accounts of their adventurous compatriots' moral stamina and muscular prowess, earnest liberal-minded Victorians of the pious Gladstonian brand – reluctant as they were to meddle with the internal affairs of foreign peoples – would end up by partaking in the expansionist ethos.

Brontë's passage is also interesting for the tight imbrication of the idea of progress ("improvement") and the idea of spatial penetration. The latter is implied in the "clearing" of the way of the backward Indians by the "hewing down" of massive trees representing superstition and iniquitous social organization. This metaphorical cluster taps into (and capitalizes on) the characteristic nineteenth-century urge to conquer and master space (Schivelbusch 1986: 194), the quasi-metaphysical craving to reach out to, and connect with, the most remote peripheries with its prodigious hold on the Victorian imagination. That efficient communications and transportation were crucial instruments of economic progress, that economic progress was the mainspring of civilization, and that nations placed higher up on the evolutionary scale should lead, cajole or compel their less enlightened neighbours to move up the ladder, were generally-held convictions at the time. The Ottoman-Egyptian rulers, no less than the Victorians, were keen on steam-ships, canals and railway lines and, in the 1860s and '70s, their ambitions, too, would feed the visionary dreams of European commentators with

the prospects of "gigantic undertakings", such as the Suez Canal, or the "driv[ing] of an iron road and a team of iron horses, not only to the confines of Nubia, but into the heart of Africa" (*Bradshaw's Railway Manual*, 1875, qtd. in Hill 1965: 15), or the sending of British emissaries up the Nile at the Egyptian taxpayer's huge expense[2].

In this respect, we could hardly imagine a more fitting context to Brontë's passage – and St. John's giant-like efforts – than that provided by Baker's and Gordon's accounts of their "opening up" the Upper Nile basin and the great Central African lakes to steam navigation; Baker's especially, since much of the pleasure that may be derived from *Ismailïa* depends on the reader's willingness to share – page after page – the author's unbounded enthusiasm at the prospect of the material *Aufklärung* he is engaged in bringing about by amazing feats of physical resilience, engineering skills and logistical prowess against impervious African nature. Admittedly, Baker's victories over natural obstacles were not achieved single-handedly, but with the support of a fully equipped expeditionary corps of roughly 1650 men, mainly Egyptians and Sudanese, plus a retinue of servants and wives (inclusive of the intrepid young Mrs Baker), and fifty-eight vessels carrying provisions, weapons, tools, seeds, medicines, "Manchester goods" for presents and exchange, and even dismantled steamships to be reassembled upstream. This fact is duly underscored in *Ismailïa*, but certainly not to the detriment of its protagonist; only his planning abilities, imperious will and moral courage – it is implied – could have dragged that large and often reluctant cortege through such asperities and dangers.

All this is best epitomized by Baker's fight against the *sudd,* the intricate masses of papyrus vegetation that – much to his chagrin – he found obstructing navigation along the Bahr Giraffe. There, at the very inception of its journey, the expedition got stuck in the midst of a "frightful stinking morass" (Baker 1874: I, 48). It was a veritable "Slough of Despond" (I, p. 76), which the Victorians – inveterate readers of Bunyan as they were – would immediately associate with its description as a "place that cannot be mended", the "miry Slough" where "the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run" (Bunyan 1909: 20). Caught in this

[2] On Egyptian imperial/colonial proclivities, my main references here are Mitchell (1988) and Powell (2003).

material and at the same time spiritual nightmare, Baker's men had to cut their way through the impenetrable swamp, pull the steamers over interminable shallows, or even – on a further stretch of marshes – "make a dam behind the vessels" to raise the water level and eventually allow the fleet (which was "hard and fast aground") to "merrily" resume navigation (Baker 1874: I, 204-207). Baker seems to have genuinely found stillness "painful" and activity "merry", and his African nature left to itself is not at all a pre-lapsarian Eden: much rather, it is a primordial quagmire ante-dating creation such as he evokes by paraphrasing Genesis 1 ("the entire country was a perfect chaos, where the spirit of God apparently had not moved upon the waters") (I, p. 50), a stagnating putrescence awaiting redemption in the guise of an energetic white man, himself shaped in the image of his "moving" god.

Thus, drawing on biblical sublime and Bunyanesque allegorical settings, the "indefatigable pioneer" could make such environmental extremities as the *sudd*-obstructed Upper Nile, and his feelings thereon, imaginable to domestic readers. He did so, very much like countless Evangelical missionaries stranded in the most remote outposts of the earth (Hofmeyer 2002: 98ff.). Like them, Baker certainly assumed divine Providence to be on his side and believed that with the reclaiming of the region from the slave trade, and the coming of peace, order and legitimate commerce, the conversion of its inhabitants to Christianity would be just a question of time. But – unlike Brontë's St. John – he was not especially pious: his gospel was mainly utilitarian-humanitarian, and his view of progress was eminently material. Benefit from his efforts to incorporate such remote peripheries of the world into the great "family of nations" would eventually accrue to "humanity" at large, but more immediately to the newly emancipated regions (in terms of more orderly and peaceful life-styles), and even more to British traders and entrepreneurs. In following this line of argument, he characteristically indulged in delirious (and wholly unabashed) visions of British commercial profit, where "opening up" Central Africa to steam-navigation and suppressing the slave trade allow "Manchester goods and various other articles" to flood "an enormous extent of country", finding "a ready market in exchange for ivory at a prodigious profit, as in those newly-discovered regions ivory has a merely nominal value" (Baker 1874: II, 502). With natives

willing to sell ivory "in exchange for all kinds of trifles", "free trade" would be "thoroughly established" and "the future […] tinged with a golden hue" (II, p. 251).

Baker's utilitarian argument was wide-ranging in application, and articulated a general dislike for "waste", and for what he perceived as neglected opportunities to exploit natural resources to the hilt. This attitude is apparent in his enthusiasm at the thought that "civilization" will increase opportunities for ivory trade ("Ivory would be almost inexhaustible, as it would flow from both east and west…") (Baker 1874: II, 251), with no qualms whatsoever about the extermination of elephants; and on a different plane, in his firm belief that the southern Sudan could be reclaimed and made profitable by means of agriculture. In the aftermath of the American Civil War the prospect of cheap African cotton was especially appealing to British textile entrepreneurs, and the introduction of "the cultivation of cotton on an extensive scale" was prominent among the declared objectives of his mission as advertised through the British daily press[3]. Baker was fully convinced that "[w]ith a good government, this fertile land might produce enormous wealth in the cultivation of cotton and corn" (I, p. 104), and turning nomadic warrior tribes into industrious agricultural communities was his recipe for "civilization". Indeed, he rather enjoyed compelling people (or the prospect of compelling people) to work the land[4]. This was good for the economy, for law and order, and for physical and mental health, since – he maintained – "nothing is so cheering in a wild country as the sight of well-arranged green fields that are flourishing in the centre of the neglected wilderness" (I, p. 134). Ethical approval and aesthetic appreciation often seem to merge as he waxes almost lyrical at the sight of the transformations undergone by the African

[3] "To introduce the cultivation of cotton on an extensive scale, so that the natives will have a valuable production to exchange for Manchester goods, &c" was one of the main objectives of his expedition, which he listed in a letter, extracts from which were published by the *The Morning Post*, 10 November 1869, p. 5.

[4] "I arranged that the sailors should cultivate a piece of ground with corn, while the soldiers should be employed in a similar manner in another position. The sailors were all Nubians, or the natives of Dongola, Berber, and the countries bordering the Nile in the Soudan. These people were of the same class as the slave-hunter companies, men who hated work and preferred a life of indolence, lounging sleepily about their vessels" (Baker 1874: I, 134).

landscape as a consequence of human agency. Nothing, indeed, makes him more despondent than wasted resources (such as the hundreds of lemons rotting on the ground in the orchard of the abandoned Austrian mission near Gondokoro) (I, p. 222); nothing makes him more cheerful than newly established order and industry where wilderness and silence have hitherto reigned undisturbed:

> in a few weeks after our first arrival in this uninhabited wilderness, the change appeared magical. In addition to the long rows of white tents, and the permanent iron magazines, were hundreds of neat huts arranged in exact lines; a large iron workshop containing lathes, drilling machines, and a small vertical saw machine; next to this the blacksmith's bellows roared; and the constant sound of the hammer and anvil betokened a new life in the silent forests of the White Nile. (Baker 1874: I, 109)

or nooks of the "dark continent" turned into a veritable image of "home sweet home":

> My own little station was the picture of neatness. I had two acres of the finest Egyptian cotton (galleen). Every inch of the knoll was highly cultivated, the lawn was closely cut, and the diahbeeah, which was our home, lay snugly alongside the bank, close to which was a little summer-house, surrounded by a prolific garden. This was a little gem of civilization set in the middle of savage Africa. (I, p. 357)

The fact that Baker's narration was written as a public statement dedicated to the Khedive partly explains why it reads, at times, as a prospectus meant to cajole British investors and politicians into Egyptian-Sudanese ventures; and given its overwhelmingly positive take on "progress", it is no surprise that it should be so unperturbed by contradictions and doubts. He was ready, for instance, to admit that "in the abstract" the resistance of natives to being "civilized" was perfectly legitimate; but he was quick to add that, had the principle of territorial integrity been respected throughout history, "there would have been no progress" (Baker 1874: I, 237). Likewise, he was unruffled by the incongruity, when – in spite of his proclaimed satisfaction in "civilizing" Africa – he underscored the blessings of life in his little pacified kingdom in the Upper Nile, far from the complexities of modern civilization (Baker 1874: II, 458-59, 473). Faced with the same conundrums relating to

the aims and consequences of his mission in the pay of the Egyptian government, Gordon would give vent to deep moral concern and heart-felt perplexities.

3. Equatorial blues

Charles George Gordon's letters from Central Africa were originally addressed to his family and close acquaintances: given his zeal for self-scrutiny and truth-telling, this circumstance resulted in a much less triumphal tone and in an unembarrassed exhibition of incoherence and contradiction, which he was aware of ("You will say I am most inconsistent, and so I am…") (Gordon 1885: 115) and the editor of the book seems to have done little to mitigate[5]. He was not so eccentric, however, as not to share the conviction that free-trade was an index (and a carrier) of civilization, and even made it a point to instruct the natives in the use of money and in the ways of modern commercial practice (p. 49). This was to show them "they can stand on their own feet" (p. 49), and eventually emancipate them from their condition of feudal subjection to their monopolistic chiefs. It was also his declared aim "[to] open the country to merchants" (p. 164), though he realized that this clashed with the plans of the Khedive, who would rather keep the newly annexed regions as Egyptian preserves.

Being a professional soldier, however, Gordon had no real interest in commerce, and – unlike Baker – much doubted that the "opening up" of Central Africa could be profitable to anyone. He was not even confident that – once the slave trade that plagued the region had been suppressed – the natives would have much to gain from being "civilized" (i.e. "annexed" and "taxed") by the Egyptians or even by anyone else. "God permits me to open the road to the interior", – he piously reflected – "but, humanly speaking, I see

[5] Gordon's writings from Central Africa are long extracts from often very long letters to his siblings and friends and were edited so as to create a continuous narrative in the form of a diary, by an indirect acquaintance, George Birkbeck Hill (1835-1903). Gordon had authorized him reluctantly to publish what he thought fit, refusing to proof-read or have anything to do with the publication: "The book is mine – the perplexed Hill explained in his preface to the first edition – and I must answer for it, just as much as if he were dead, and I his literary executor" (Gordon 1885: vi).

nothing to encourage the hope that this occupation of these lands will be of any advantage towards civilizing them" (Gordon 1885: 15); and he eventually concluded that "the best way is to let them [the local populations] alone, and not to be philanthropic to those who do not need it" (p. 436). Last but not least, though he was the self-denying yet spiritually ambitious type epitomized by Brontë's St. John, and an admirer of genuine missionary work, he was unwilling to foist his own religion onto the natives, greatly respected Africans who embraced Islam, and fully believed that "[t]o the Black man the same shrouded Being presents Himself, and we do not know how He reveals Himself…; but it is the same Godhead, and it has the same attributes, whether known or unknown" (p. 173).

All of this made it somewhat paradoxical that he should be acting among the natural and human extremities of the region as the spearhead of modernization, and probably added to his remarkable aptitude for looking at the advance of "progress" through the eyes of those upon whom it was inflicted:

> To-day on a bare rock a mile off stood a man with two attendants. He held his hands clasped together at the back of his head, and turned to all quarters, putting them down sometimes straight to his sides. I watched him with my glass. "Come curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me!" […]. I can quite enter into these poor people's misery at their impotency. "We do not want beads; we do not want to see the Pasha" […]. "We want our lands, and you to go away". Their poor minds never conceived such a trial as this before. Rain was their only care before, now *civilisation* (?) is to begin with them; they are to be brought into the family of nations. (Gordon 1885: 120)

Gordon's disenchantment at the prospective consequences of his expedition stemmed in part from his being in the pay of the Ottoman-Egyptian rulers, whose humanitarian proclamations were up to nineteenth-century standards[6], but whose progressive

[6] As shown by the *firman* (decree) that conferred Baker quasi-governatorial prerogatives over the region, the Khedival administration had mastered the rhetorical tools by means of which projects of territorial expansion could be described as furthering progress and civilization: "We, Ismail, Khedive of Egypt, considering the savage condition of the tribes which inhabit the Nile basin; Considering that neither government, nor laws, nor security exists in those

credentials were notoriously shaky, the Khartoum authorities having leased out whole districts of the Upper Nile to "entrepreneurs" who looted and pillaged the province with their own private armies. Both Baker and Gordon were fully aware of this; and it is no surprise that Gordon should have had qualms about his mission in Central Africa: "I think what right have I to coax the natives to be quiet, for them to fall into the hands of a rapacious pasha after my departure?" (Gordon 1885: 93). His perplexities were, in that respect, basically the same as would be entertained – a few years later – by other European professionals (for instance, Roger Casement and Józef Korzeniowski) in such embarrassing cases as King Leopold's Societée Anonyme in the Congo or Cecil Rhodes's Chartered Company. Like them, he gained first-hand experience of the contradiction between the theory and the practice of imperial domination, and had to acknowledge that he was a consenting party in "a pillaging horde of brigands" (p. 143).

Gordon, however, persevered in his mandate, doing his best to thwart the slave-traders and open up a route to Lake Victoria. As a Royal-Engineer, his main professional interest was logistics, and the struggle with natural asperities for the establishment of communications seems to have been the one aspect of his mission as to which he was most in line with the prevailing doxa: he associates the "light" of civilization with efficient roads connecting metropolitan centres and far-off peripheries ("They told me harrowing tales of the sufferings of the poor natives of Kordofan – it is dreadful. The only remedy I can see is the establishment of a good road to this place from Cairo. This would let light in …", Gordon 1885: 173), cheers himself up at the prospect of "letters" travelling "between Albert Lake and England in two months" (p. 117), and, downcast at the sight of the "beautiful large river" "quite deserted" ("you do not see a boat from month's end to month's end"), opines that a "government like ours" would enliven the place with "regular

countries; Considering that humanity enforces the suppression of the slave-hunters who occupy those countries in great numbers; Considering that the establishment of legitimate commerce throughout the countries will be a great stride towards future civilization, and will result in the opening to steam navigation of the great equatorial lakes of Central Africa, and in the establishment of a permanent government […]" (qtd. in Baker 1874: I, 6-7).

steamers and plenty of traffic" (p. 32). Like Baker, he laments the laziness of the natives and the incompetence of the troops assigned to him by the Khedive, and deprecates inactivity, blaming it for illness and depression ("never be idle, or you will mope and succumb") (p. 134). And more than Baker, he experiences gloom and depression (which he calls "the doles") (p. 132) in the "solemn silence" and the unpopulated stretches of Central African forests: "The vast extent of rank jungle grass, the look-out where you see no living thing, all tends to make a man sombre" (pp. 132-133). Then the Biblical similitude comes in handy: "A dead, mournful spot this is, with a heavy damp dew penetrating everywhere. It is as if the Angel Azrael had spread his wings over the land" (p. 179).

Gordon did not have to fight the *sudd* on the Bahr Gazelle because it had just been broken into by the Egyptian army when he reached Khartoum in March 1874; but – on proceeding on his partly fluvial, partly terrestrial route – he had all sorts of natural obstacles to contend with, such as rocky cataracts (where boats had to be hauled by means of ropes from the river banks), "fifties of miles of grass six feet high" (which one could vanquish, with great caution, only by fire in the very few dry weather spells), stretches of "fearful jungle", insalubrious marshy lands, and even seemingly "nice green waving grass" armed with "silicious delicate hairs on it like spun glass and quite as sharp", which, if you "plucked a tuft", could "cut your finger to the bone" (Gordon 1885: 167). Plus, needless to say, the pestiferous insects, and the illnesses – "Out of sorts again, with bleeding from the nose (not plague); nearly suffocated, last night, with the blood" (p. 156) – and the painful deaths, one after the other, of the European and Egyptian officers, servants, doctors and interpreters, who succumbed to the unhealthy climate of the region: "The sufferings human nature undergoes in these parts is terrible" (p. 145).

The issue of suffering nature, human or animal, is indeed one on which Gordon diverges more clearly from Baker. In Gordon's letters there are plenty of details of physical discomfort, touching glimpses of frail humanity, at its barest and most exposed (such as that of the very young African mother, "[a] wretched sister of yours ... struggling up the road" and reduced to "such a wisp of bones that the wind threatens to overthrow her") (Gordon 1885: 27), and much evidence of his sensitivity towards animals, which makes

him feel ill at ease when shooting them: "I have killed two more hippopotamuses… It seems cruel to kill these animals, but we want food" (p. 73). Even the opening of the *sudd*, which had come to him as a god-send and he did not witness, is reported by hearsay foregrounding its "terrible" impact on the eco-system, the screaming and snorting and whirling and dying of the living creatures dragged downstream and "crushed by the mass" (p. 7); while the trading of ivory, a luxury material whose practical value appeared to him to be not "commensurate" with its cost in terms of animal life, makes him lament the "number of poor beasts [that] have died for this ivory! It is of slow growth, and there are numbers of very little tusks…" (p. 136).

Given the role played by hunting and the exploitation of animal resources in the imperial imaginary (Mackenzie 1988), Gordon's reluctance to kill and his fledgling ecological awareness mark perhaps his most significant shift from what is most commonly associated with the Victorian imperial doxa, and colour his take on the advent of "civilization" in the southern Sudan in a depressive-dysphoric hue, markedly at variance with Baker's more euphoric-exuberant perspective. This is not to say that Gordon's account of his expedition should be read as "anti-imperialistic"; much rather, I would argue that it shares in what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) memorably dubbed "imperialist nostalgia", a well-known strand within the discursive attitudes bred by late nineteenth century imperialism that articulates the coloniser's regretful stance at the inevitable destruction of native environments and societies brought about by his very activity on behalf of modernisation. Such an attitude often involves pronounced perplexities regarding individual agency (the feeling of being the tool by means of which fate or chance, or impersonal historical forces, or "the Great Game" operate), the attendant dangerous weakening of the sense of personal moral responsibility, and the splitting of the image of the "indefatigable pioneer" into the sedulous professional (who sticks to his job, no matter what) and the *übermenschlich* criminal adventurer – as in the emblematic Conradian duo in *Heart of Darkness* (Arendt 1976: 189 ff., 207-21; Bivona 1998).

Gordon's letters register their author's puzzled perception of such complexities besetting his predicament, inclusive of the fear of being carried off – like Conrad's Kurtz – by the intoxicating mix of power

and impunity experienced by Europeans serving as administrators or high army officers in such "Oriental" lands as the Sudan: "The varnish of civilised life is very thin, and only superficial", he reflects: "Man does not know what he is capable of in circumstances of this sort" (Gordon 1885: 171). In this context he represents faith (his "loadstar") as the only antidote to moral degeneration, and discursively overcomes his difficulties in religious-providential terms. Thus, the more he doubts, and questions himself and his task, the more he rebounds on God and his inscrutable will: "Here I am, a lump of clay; thou art the Potter. Mould me as Thou in Thy wisdom wilt. Never mind my cries. Cut my life off – so be it; prolong it – so be it. Just as Thou wilt" (p. 156). In this classic mystic script, the implacable process of expansion and compulsory modernization that urges the Victorians to penetrate places that "seem like the end of the world" is construed as a mysteriously providential design ("It is, however, all written, and is only unrolling", p. 117) to which Gordon portrays himself as a passive and unworthy instrument: "*I am a chisel that cuts the wood; the Carpenter directs it*" (p. 175).

4. Winding up

No doubt Samuel White Baker and Charles George Gordon belonged to the same brood of restless Victorians as Charlotte Brontë's St. John Rivers: domestic parlours were emphatically not their "sphere", and it was "in scenes of strife and danger" (such as "the Himalayan ridge, or Caffre bush, even the plague-cursed Guinea Coast swamp") – "where courage is proved, and energy exercised, and fortitude asked" – that their "faculties" would not "stagnate" and could "develop and appear to advantage" (Brontë 2001: 235). Increasingly, in the course of the century, the Victorians would concur with Jane Eyre that the apt sphere for the strivings of their most exceptional contemporaries lay beyond national boundaries, in exotic, backward and inhospitable lands, where they would achieve distinction by performing outmoded feats of derring-do, Herculean assertions of physical supremacy and moral strength over intractable nature and natives, or even martyrdom encountered in the performance of duty – to God, to their country, or to the cause of "humanity" at large. Full-fledged civilization did not know what to do with them, apart from voraciously consuming

the accounts of their adventures, and they – quite frankly – felt more at ease elsewhere.

It was, then, the crucial paradox inherent in Baker's and Gordon's predicament in the Upper Nile that the "civilizing" process in which they were involved was aimed at taming the very alterity/extremity that had attracted them there in the first place. But they were, temperamentally, very different men; they came from different professional experiences and milieus; and the narratives of their explorations and military operations bear their very different imprints. They drew, roughly, on the same conceptual-ideological baggage, but the latter was by no means monolithic, the discursive articulation of expansionist ventures abroad being the result of ample and vigorous debate at home, which allowed for a significant range of divergent political positions and personal inflections. Both Baker's euphoric take on modernization, and Gordon's more sombre and thoughtful perspective, fell within the available spectrum.

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