



Flashman at the Charge

George MacDonald Fraser

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The fourth volume of memoirs in which Harry Flashman confronts destiny with Lord Cardigan and the Light Brigade. Part of the FLASHMAN series, comprising FLASHMAN, ROYAL FLASH and FLASH FOR FREEDOM, which explores the successful though scandalous later career of the bully in TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL DAYS.

Flashman at the Charge Details

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From Reader Review Flashman at the Charge for online ebook

Edoardo Albert says

It was PG Wodehouse who likened his first reading of Flashman to Keats' experience of reading Homer in Chapman's translation, although I can safely say that Flashy is unlikely to ever hold his silence, even on a peak in Darien - he'd be looking for a likely woman or an escape route. The whole point of Flashman is that, despite his being a cad, a bounder, a coward and a cheat, yet, in the madness of the Crimean War, his cowardice takes on a certain honesty. Indeed, given the fact that Flashman contrives to take part in the charges of both the Heavy and the Light brigades - the latter with his bowels erupting in a fanfare of farts - there is a case for calling him the bravest man there: one who knows fear and yet still carries on. Thankfully, just when it seems like Flashy might be turning into a proper hero, he does something truly appalling and the reader breathes a huge sigh of relief.

Fuzzy Gerdes says

OK, I'm going to stop protesting about how disturbed I am by Flashman and all of his terrible, terrible behavior, because obviously something is keeping me reading the series. I can't tell if Fraser has toned down Flashman's terribleness, or if I'm just getting used to him. *Flashman at the Charge* finds our (anti-)hero in the Crimean war and eventually at the battle immortalized in Tennyson's The Charge of the Light Brigade. And when I say immortalized, you know of course that I mean I'd *heard* of the poem and assumed it referred to a battle, but had never read the whole thing nor really knew that much about that whole war, so if nothing else these books are getting me somewhat educated.

Zuberino says

Approaching my Russian reading from an unusual but no less entertaining angle, this time it's the turn of the one and only Flashman to stampede through the vast and benighted lands of Mother Russia. Within the first 10 pages of this book (the fourth in the series), the phrase that started to, erm, flash repeatedly through my head was "sui generis". That's the scale of GMF's achievement, here and in the rest of the series, although by all accounts he was a reactionary bastard, and just how much I found out from an Australian interview earlier this week.

Coming to the book itself, I'm halfway done and already Flashman has ridden through the Valley of Death in the company of the Light Brigade, reluctantly taking part in the most famous cavalry charge in history. At the moment, he's knee-deep in the medieval barbarities that were visited regularly and quite casually on Russia's serfs pre-1861. GMF's research is, as always, impeccable and I for one am grateful to him for shedding light on this aspect of Russian society and history that seems to get short shrift pretty much everywhere else. Onward!

*

A WEEK LATER: Well, that turned out to be a hell of a romp! Flashy eavesdropping on Czar Nicholas I himself as the latter formulates plans to invade India, midnight sleigh chases through the Ukrainian steppes,

Flashy pursued by wolves AND cavalry and then gallantly throwing out a saucy Ukrainian blonde just to lighten the load (!!!)... a Kazakh rebel spreadeagled and airborne, hanging by his chains alone in the dust and gloom of a Central Asian dungeon, Flashy shagging a bald Chinese beauty who fights like an Amazon and talks to her kitten, and lastly sinking Russian warships in the middle of the Aral Sea with an early version of the Stinger rocket - it's all there in the latter half of this book - Flashy funking, fucking, and fighting away in inimitable, hilarious style.

Above it all looms the cruel figure of Count Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatieff, Russian nobleman and Flashy's tormentor, whose great-grandson is none other than Michael Ignatieff, Booker Prize-nominated novelist, Iraq War advocate and recently defeated leader of the Canadian Liberal Party! Believe me, it's all true.

Ray says

This is the first Flashman book i ever read, picked up at random in the school library. It lead me to the whole series.

Having read them all I still think that this is the best one. I love the mix of history, caddishness and non PC - which is absolutely wonderful. It is certainly not highbrow literature, just a good rollicking read.

Recommend to all.

Philip Higgins says

Just re-read this book thirty years after first enjoying it. It's still fantastic. In this adventure our roguish narrator accidentally leads the charge of the Light Brigade, experiences the joys of Tsarist Russia and amazingly leads a daring rebel raid (it's a long story...) Of course he finds time for gambling, rubbing shoulders with royalty and rumpy-pumpy galore.

Amid the fun there's the usual excellent historical detail. The author pulls no punches when it comes to portraying war and the less-than-stellar performance of Britain's generals. As well as a terrific description of the Crimean campaign, the passages on Russia's brutal Eurasian conquest are a real eye opener (nothing ever changes). The ending is surprisingly poignant too.

These books are a sheer joy & will outlive nondescript 'literary' efforts ("Booker prize winning" is usually shorthand for "pretentious anodyne pap"). I used to think "Flashman's Lady" was my favourite, or "Flashman And The Great Game"...I might have to add this to the list. Genuinely funny (I often sniggered out loud) exciting and the history is top notch. They should be set reading for students of the nineteenth century. I know he's a lecherous adulterous coward but we're rooting for Flashy every step of the way.

Raegan Butcher says

Harry Flashman turns up in Balaclava and get himself mixed up in the Charge of the Light Brigade! Another excellent blend of humor and history. These books are the greatest!

Paul says

One of the most magnificent cad/bounder scenes in literary history takes place during an "escape by sleigh" scene. Bravissimo, you despicable wretch!

And, as always for the Flashman books, a very well drawn look at a place and time: Russia, in this case.

Additional goodness: the Charge of the Light Brigade section was quite thrilling. It's hard to adequately portray chaos in prose, but this was well done. My favorite Flashman book to date (I've read the 1st four).

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4:

Renowned cad Sir Harry Flashman is sent terrified to the frozen wastes of the Crimea.

Riding onwards, cowardly cad Sir Harry Flashman must face the might of Imperial Russia.

Stars Angus Wright and Joss Ackland.

Alan Smith says

Just about all of George MacDonald Fraser's "Flashman" books are magnificently entertaining, and really you can safely pick up any of them and be assured of a great read. Fraser's cowardly, lecherous, cynical anti-hero seems to have been present at just about every significant event in 19th century history, usually looking for a place to hide trembling in terror or get it on with some beautiful, willing woman. However, he is not entirely without virtues - his total honesty about his own shortcomings and his ability to make present a cynical twist on just about every "heroic" event or person in British history make these books highly entertaining reading.

This time the reluctant Flashy is dragged out of retirement to babysit a certain royal personage through the disastrous Crimean campaign, and resplendent in the pink breeches of Lord Cardigan's ill-fated Light Dragoons manages to take part in the "Charge of the Heavy Brigade" "The Thin Red Line" and the famous, ill-fated "Charge of the Light Brigade", while letting off gigantic farts the whole time. But that's just the start of Flashy's problems... by the end of it, he's on the North-west frontier of her majesty's Indian possessions, saving the empire yet again, as usual more by luck than judgement!

A hilarious story, featuring walk-on parts by some of the most fascinating real-life figures of the times, this - or any Flashman book, really - should be compulsive reading. History boring? Not when Flashy gets hold of it!

Tamara says

This was pretty fun, but i'm disappointed that dear old Flashman seems to be softening up somewhat. The particular charm of the first book was that he truly is a true scumbag, but ends up a hero because he's a member of an enterprise so corrupt, incompetent and immoral that lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, raping and betraying his way through it is a natural course of action. You end up feeling sympathy neither for Flashman nor for the British Empire, but do gain a certain satisfaction from seeing them end up together, in a those-two-deserve-eachother sort of way.

Here, however, Flashman isn't nearly as despicable, and he mostly just comes off as the only sane man in the asylum. He sensibly tries to wriggle out of doing insanely dangerous life threatening things, fails, and then does them fairly commendably anyway, and spends the rest of his time feeling bad for downtrodden peasants and common soldiers. It's not nearly as interesting.

Evan Leach says

George MacDonald Fraser's agent believed *Flashman at the Charge* to be the best of the *Flashman* novels, and it's an awfully good selection. This fourth *Flashman* book has it all: gripping suspense, hilarious (and raunchy) humor, and well-researched historical elements that make the story as informative as it is entertaining. While personally I would put the first and third *Flashman* novels ahead of this one in pride of place, this is definitely one of the stronger entries in a series full of excellent books.

Per the *Flashman* formula, the story starts with our hero (or anti-hero, if you will) trying desperately to avoid a dangerous situation, in this case the Crimean War. I thought this was one of the very best opening sections in the entire series, featuring a funny situation where Flashman's bullying behavior results in a very appropriate comeuppance. But the fireworks really begin when Flashy is shipped off to the Crimea. Now, I'll admit that when I started this book I couldn't pick the Crimea out from Croatia on a map, and I had no idea who the participants in the Crimean War were or what they were fighting about. I actually ended up learning quite a lot about 19th century history during the course of Flashy's adventures here, thanks to Fraser's meticulous historical research, which is one of my favorite things about this series. Flashman finds himself embroiled in some of the war's most famous campaigns, from the Battle of Alma to the Charge of the Heavy Brigade and The Thin Red Line. This is all building to the main event, the famous Charge of the Light Brigade. Suffice to say Fraser does this major scene full justice, although Flashman's recollection is quite different from Tennyson's version of the event.

Somehow Flashman manages to survive the slaughter and is taken as a prisoner of war. This sets the stage for the second part of the book, a very funny story (with some great suspense mixed in) about Flashman's life as a POW. There's less specific history to be learned here, although readers get a good look at what life must have been like in Czarist Russia. I won't spoil the plot by going into what happens from here; I'll just note that there are some twists and turns which lead into a rather unexpected third act. While I thought this book was 5-star material up to this point, the last third didn't *quite* click with me and was enough to dock it a half-star. Not bad, but didn't completely fit with the story leading up to it (it almost felt like another story

mashed onto the back half of the main plot).

Still, it's easy to see how readers could pick this book as their favorite from the series. This is classic Flashman, and I thoroughly enjoyed it from start to (mostly) finish. **4.5 stars**, highly recommended!

Tristan says

FLASHMAN: NERVOUS FLATULENCE UNDER FIRE

*"Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell.
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.*

*When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!"*

- Taken from 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', by Alfred Tennyson

The not wholly untalented Alfie certainly had an uncanny knack for turning a phrase, making the hearts of his fellow countrymen collectively swell with pride for their boys' comportment during the lowest point in the Crimean debacle. But!

Would he still have put it this way, had he hypothetically been afforded the opportunity to catch up on the memoirs - however fictitious they might be - of that highly decorated British horseman, Harry Flashman? Why, that, my friends, would take some doing.

For while the gent was whistling Dixie like nobody's business, everyone's favorite scoundrel is considerably less concerned with putting an ennobling sheen on the often tawdry reality of military engagements. In fact, he does his utmost to shatter any and all illusions, not in the least the ones about himself, a man who's viewed as a valiant hero by all back in Albion:

"It was an inferno of bursting shell and whistling fragments, of orange flame and choking

smoke; a trooper alongside me was plucked from his saddle as though by an invisible hand, and I found myself drenched in a shower of blood. My little mare went surging ahead, crazy with pain. [...] even in that hell of death and gunfire, I remember, my stomach was asserting itself again, and I rode yelling with panic and farting furiously at the same time. I couldn't hold my horse at all; it was all I could do to stay aboard as we raced onwards, and as I stared wildly ahead I saw that we were a bare few hundred yards from the Russian batteries.

The great black muzzles were staring me in the face, smoke wreathing up around them, but even as I saw the flame belching from them I couldn't hear the crash of their discharge—it was all lost in the fearful continuous reverberating cannonade that surrounded us. There was no stopping my mad career, and I found myself roaring pleas for mercy to the distant Russian gunners, crying stop, stop, for God's sake, cease fire, damn you, and let me alone.”

A coward's honesty, even if repellent at first glance and yes, even when we are firmly aware these memoirs were only meant to be found after Flashy's death, is honesty nonetheless. It's this that makes the character so absolutely refreshing, even if he's a scumbag of the highest order, drenched in sleaze. He's a callous, lecherous egotist, but at least he knows it, intimately so, and doesn't mind categorically telling us, over and over again.

To more critical readers, the Flashman novels would soon appear formulaic, and they'd be right, but by God are they masterfully put together little pleasures. Fraser's control of this particular flavour of fast-paced, high-octane, fun adventure writing with romantic flourishes is undeniable, and -thus far - reaches something of a high note with 'Flashman at the Charge'. A seemingly impossible task to achieve, given what a triumph 'Flash for Freedom' was. Could it get even better, I wonder?

Harking back to the very beginning of the Flashman saga, actual warfare – as always vividly rendered, making you smell the cordite drifting in the air- once again makes up a substantial part of the book, and introduces a great antagonist for Flashman, the particularly vicious Count Ignatieff, a thoroughly bad egg even by his standards, which to be sure he will be forced to "break" at a later time. Perhaps it will involve Ignatieff's preferred instrument for the torture/execution of his "useless" serfs, a rather nasty piece of equipment called the Russian knout.

"I'd be hard pressed to call myself a man who abides by moral principles, but few things are sweeter than poetic justice, don't you find?", I can already hear Flashman exclaim, while he's enthusiastically swinging to-and-fro.

There's a void of sorts in my life, left after our haughty hussar (oh, how he utterly redefined the very concept of a bastard in that first book..) was somewhat softened by Fraser, most likely to make him more palatable to audiences.

However, without any reservations I'll gallop along with him, to whatever realm, whatever historical conflagration he decides to plunge Flashman into next.

Lead the way, old bean.

Michele says

This is the best Flashman by far, for my money: fast, funny, outrageous. Flashy is at the top of his game, surviving not only the Charge of the Light Brigade (and the Heavy Brigade, for that matter) but also a hashish-fuelled berserker raid to blow up two barges loaded with weapons and ammunition to prevent the "Ruskis" from taking India away from the British. I laughed until I cried at his account of farting his way through the hail of bullets and cannon at Balaclava, and I have absolutely no doubt that Count Ignatieff will surface someday like a bad penny, and probably try to kill him again :D

I'm reminded of Capt. Edmund Blackadder's attempt to get out of "the big push" during WWI by calling in a favor owed him by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, for having saved Haig's life from a pygmy Watusi woman armed with "a viciously sharp slice of mango." Heh heh. I can just picture old Flashy sticking pencils up his nose and going "Wibble."

Nick Gibson says

You either love Flashie or you don't. If you do, this one is excellent. Wide-ranging and never dull.

Jan-Maat says

As everybody knows, there are only two types of people in the world, those who share your sense of humour and those who don't. I had expected this book to be funny, or at least humorous, and maybe it was a mistake reading it when I was sober, but in any case through reading this book I established that the author and I aren't kin by humour.

It is divided into three awkward, distinct parts, starting with a plot sequence set during the Crimean War with Flashman taking part in the Charge of the Light Brigade. Then there is a section set in Russia and finally the third part takes place in Central Asia. The transition from the first part to the second is mildly plausible but the transition to the third part is bad with a genuine hero-wakes-up- in-a-dungeon-to-find-himself-imprisoned-with-useful-allies-who-conveniently- then-get-rescued scene.

Neither serious nor demanding, this is a good rainy day novel.

Love says

Flashman at the Charge is the fourth book in the Flashman series. This time he takes part in the Crimean War including the battle of Balaclava, gets captured and spends time as a prisoner in Russia and gets dragged along through Central Asia for a failed Russian invasion of British India, they never get farther than Tajikistan.

I'm a bit split about this book, I found the retelling of the battle of Balaclava to be mostly confusing and hard to follow, yet I loved the later parts of the book where Flashman describes and comments on Russian society and especially Russian serfdom. With his background as a slave trader and a member of the English aristocracy he has some interesting opinions on how Russia works.

V. says

This is probably the best of the series so far, but I've been a bit disappointed with these books and no change here.

This one starts quite slow, lots of build up in England to set up how Flash ends up in the Crimea. Almost a bedroom farce at times and about as funny.

Once he gets to the Crimea, there's a lot of detail (and I mean A LOT) on that particular conflict, from how the soldiers behaved, how they acted, the geography, the politics, the way messages were sent from one platoon to another, the weapons and manoeuvres used and on and on. The charge of the Light Brigade itself is presented in quite a realistic and plausible manner, i.e. not much fun. If you're a military history buff you might enjoy it. The author certainly is and he wants you to know it. He's practically bursting at the seams to show-off his great knowledge.

This is one of the problems I have with his style of writing. At least the use of "nigger" is kept to under double figures in this one, and no rapes (hooray!). It often feels like he goes out of his way to use that kind of language and behaviour to make a point, and once the point is made, he keeps making it. In a word, he comes across a smug.

Who me? Politically incorrect? No, no, that's just how it was in those days. I'm just being honest.

Frankly I just don't like Flashman. I wanted to, I like anti-heroes, cads and dark humour (Terry-Thomas FTW!), and I've given him a bloody good go of it, but the writer's so pleased with himself, both for his historical knowledge and his 'daring' to fly in the face of good taste, that I ended up more tired than amused. And his adventures don't satisfy, Flashy is far too reliant on luck (every book so far has hinged on events miraculously leaving him alive and all those that know what a coward he is dead).

Having said that, the third part of the book is where it shows a glimpse of what could have been. Flashy's capture and imprisonment by the Russians, and his consequent escape and saving India for the Empire is both very exciting and very funny. Unburdened by having to conform to historical fact (and his own hubris) things move along at a much more entertaining clip. Sadly it didn't make up for the tedious first two-thirds.

My expectations may have been set too high, but they're mine to place where I wish, and to judge harshly those that fall short (unfairly or otherwise), so won't be reading the rest of the series.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in January 2000.

The fourth Flashman novel tells of his involvement in the Crimean War, with the Charge of the Light Brigade as its centrepiece. Great play is made on the contrast between Tennyson's heroic poem and Flashman on the back cover ("Was there a man dismay'd? Yes, one - Flashman"). It is one of the most fun of the series, though it does have a darker side in the stupidity of the commanders at Balaclava and the Russian brutality towards their serfs.

Mikhail says

A very good book of a genre that I don't usually care much for. If you're the sort of person who enjoys military fiction, this is easily five stars. Anyway, of Fraser's many virtues as a writer, I shan't comment -- they're well known.

Instead, I'll talk a little about something more in my wheelhouse, which is how Fraser uses history. Namely, he uses it very, *very* well. He takes a piece of history that in the US is rather less known (the Crimean War), combines it with another piece of history that is virtually unknown all over (Yakub Beg), and spins a fascinating and insightful look into the past out of it. I suppose that, as a Russian-American, I ought to be slightly offended at how Fraser talks about Russia, but his critiques are entirely just, and it's not as if Flashman isn't hilariously bigoted against every single color, creed, and country under the sun.

Anyway, very fun book.

Kelly says

The continuing adventures of Harry Flashman in which he joins the charge of the Light Brigade and has adventures in Russia and Afghanistan. This novel (the fourth in the series) is definitely a contender for my favorite book thus far. Fast-paced and enjoyable even if I can't really recommend it in good moral conscience.
