

If we see our enemies as inhuman, then we ourselves end up as savages

The present-day equivalent of the soldier in my father's book is Hollywood, with its poisonous, racist portrayal of Arabs and Muslims

By Robert Fisk - 08 May 2004

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Less than six months before the outbreak of the First World War, my grandmother, Margaret Fisk, gave my father William a 360-page book of imperial adventure, Tom Graham VC, A Story of the Afghan War. "Presented to Willie by his Mother," she wrote in thick pencil inside the front cover. "Willie" would have been almost 15 years old.

Only after my father's death in 1992 did I inherit this book, with its handsome, engraved hardboard cover embossed with a British Victoria Cross, and only last month did I read the book. An adventure by William Johnston and published in 1900, it tells the story of the son of a British mine-owner who grows up in the northern English port of Seaton and, forced to leave school and become an apprentice clerk because of his father's sudden impoverishment, joins the British Army underage. Tom Graham is posted to a British unit in County Cork in the south-west of Ireland - he even kisses the Blarney stone - and then travels to India and to the Second Afghan War where he is gazetted a Second Lieutenant in a Highland regiment. As he stands at his late father's grave in the local churchyard before leaving for the army, Tom vows that "he would lead a pure, clean and upright life".

The story is typical of my father's generation, a rip-roaring, racist story of British heroism and Muslim savagery. The real-life murder of the British embassy staff in Kabul in 1879 provoked a British military response and Tom Graham marches into Afghanistan with his regiment. Within days, Tom is driving his bayonet "up to the nozzle" into the chest of an Afghan, a "swarthy giant, his eyes glaring with hate". In the Kurram Valley, Graham fights off "infuriated tribesmen, drunk with lust and plunder". The author notes that whenever British troops fell into Afghan hands, "their bodies were dreadfully mutilated and dishonoured by those fiends in human form". Afghans are a "villainous" lot at one point in the text, "rascals" at another and, of course, "fiends in human form".

The text is not only racist but also anti-Islamic. "Boy readers," the author pontificates, "may not know that it was the sole object of every Afghan engaged in the war of 1878-80 to cut to pieces every heretic he could come

across. The more pieces cut out of the unfortunate Britisher the higher his summit of bliss in Paradise." After Graham is wounded in Kabul, the Afghans - in the words of his Irish-born army doctor - have become "murtherin villains, the black niggers". A British artillery officer urges his men to fire at close-packed Afghan tribesmen with the assurance that his cannon fire "will scatter the flies".

It's not difficult to see how easily my father's world of "pure, clean and upright" Britons bestialised its enemies. Though there are a few references to the "boldness" of Afghan tribesmen, no attempt is made to explain their actions. The notion that Afghans do not want foreigners invading and occupying their country does not exist in the story.

But, of course, history is not kind to latter-day liberals. For I have in my library another book of the period, a sensitive and thoughtful biography of Henry Mortimer Durand - the man who drew the "Durand Line" between Afghanistan and the British Raj - which includes a replica of an original letter sent by the real-life Durand to his biographer's sister. On 12 December 1879, he recalls, "Two Squadrons of the 9th Lancers were ordered to charge a large force of Afghans in the hope of saving our guns. The charge failed, and some of our dead were afterwards found dreadfully mutilated by Afghan knives... I saw it all."

The problem is clear. The Afghans really did chop bits off young Englishmen - later historical works would make it quite clear what bits these authors were talking about - just as Iraqis kicked the head off an American mercenary in Fallujah on 30 March this year and hanged his burned remains, along with those of a colleague, from the girder of an old British railway bridge over the Euphrates river. Our enemies are savages. So are we. First we learn to hate our enemies and bestialise them - and then we bellow our wrath and take our revenge when our enemies oblige us by behaving in exactly the way we expect them to. And then we torture them and humiliate them.

The present-day equivalent of Tom Graham VC is Hollywood, with its poisonous, racist portrayal of Arabs and Muslims. True to form, our enemies turned out, on 11 September 2001, to be as terrible as our movies made them out to be. One day, some serious research might be conducted into how far the pilot killers modelled themselves on Hollywood's version of their ruthlessness.

But it's not difficult to see how the American thugs at the Abu Ghraib prison acquired their cruelty. Born-again Christians who no doubt publicly wished to be seen upholding a "pure, clean and upright life" treated the Iraqis as if they were "fiends in human form", as "fanatics", as "flies". Hadn't the US consul in Iraq, Paul Bremer, described America's enemies as "dead-enders", "die-hards", "terrorists"? When the young woman involved in this torture expressed her surprise at all the fuss, I immediately understood why. Not because what she did was routine - though it clearly was - but because that is how she was told to treat these Iraqi prisoners. Hadn't they been killing American soldiers,

setting off car bombs, murdering schoolchildren? Hollywood turned into reality.

Now maybe you don't think that entertainment influences the young, that Tom Graham VC could no more influence a young Englishman than Hollywood could bend the mind of the American guards at Abu Ghraib. Well, you would be wrong. For Bill Fisk - the "Willie" of that dedication almost a century ago - was also taken from school in a northern English seaport because his father Edward could no longer support him. He was apprenticed to a clerk, in Birkenhead. In the few notes he left before his death, Bill recalled that he tried to join the British Army underage; he travelled to Fulwood Barracks in Preston to join the Royal Field Artillery on 15 August 1914, 11 days after the start of the First World War and almost exactly six months after his mother had given him Tom Graham. Successful in enlisting two years later, Bill Fisk, too, was sent to a British battalion in County Cork. I even have a pale sepia snapshot of him then, kissing the Blarney stone. Two years later, in France, my father was gazetted a Second Lieutenant in the King's Liverpool Regiment. Was he not consciously following the life of the fictional Tom Graham?

No, Bill Fisk didn't torture prisoners - at the end of the First World War, with great nobility, he refused to command a firing party ordered to execute an Australian soldier for murder. But don't tell me we aren't conditioned by what we read and what we see as a child. All his life, Bill Fisk talked about "niggers", demeaned the Irish and talked about the "Yellow Peril" - the Chinese - as the world's greatest danger. He was a man of the Victorian age. I fear the American torturers in Iraq are creatures of our century. For if you are taught to despise your enemy as inhuman, you will - if you get the chance - cease to be a human yourself.

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