

## Battlefields



Flight of the Khalifa after the Battle of Omdurman, 1898  
Robert George Talbot Kelly, ca. 1900

Just like the Crimean War, one of the historical backgrounds in *Beneath the Saffron Moon* and briefly mentioned in *Beyond the Nile*, the Mahdist Revolt has hardly left any traces in the consciousness of the Western world - except in that of the British, since Great Britain was the only European power involved.

If the name of the Mahdi is ever mentioned, it is mostly in relation to the second campaign of 1896-1899 – and then only referring to one lieutenant who took part in this campaign and who later on became famous by his political activities, by premier minister and last but not least by his eccentric character: Winston S. Churchill.



Mohammed Ahmad,  
the Mahdi

This second campaign though was an immediate consequence of the first campaign from 1881 to 1885, the historical backdrop of the novel.

Not all regiments dispatched to Egypt and Sudan were involved in every battle, and therefore the depiction of the revolt in the novel is guided by the perspective of the Royal Sussex, the regiment of Jeremy, Stephen, Leonard, Royston, and Simon.

A regiment that, after the suppression of the 'Urabi Revolt in Egypt and before its arrival at Khartoum, took part in three battles; one of them is only sketched briefly in the novel, while the other two are an extensive part of the storyline.

### **Battle of El-Teb: February 29<sup>th</sup>, 1884**

Strictly speaking, it should be called "the second Battle of El-Teb", since this battle occurred as revenge, on the same site where on February 4<sup>th</sup> the year before, an array of 3,500 Egyptian soldiers under General Valentine Baker was almost completely erased by Osman Digna's men.

3,342 men infantry, gunners and sappers and 864 men cavalry faced in this second battle an estimated 15,000 men of the Mahdi; 5 British officers and 24 soldiers lost their lives, 17 officers and 142 soldiers were wounded. On the side of the Mahdi, some 2,500 were killed; the number of wounded is unknown.



Battle of El-Teb - Le Monde Illustré, 1844

Like all battles between the British and the Mahdists El-Teb was also characterized by extreme brutality.

By order of the Mahdi, all non-Muslims in Sudan were to be killed – although this order was also applied to Egyptian and Turkish Muslims.

Any British soldier wounded in fight who wasn't immediately brought into safety by corpsmen, didn't survive the battle, nor did the cavalry men toppling from their horses. And the other way round, the British didn't take many prisoners as well.

That numerous Mahdists pretended to be dead in order to kill British soldiers from behind after the battle has ended – like depicted in the novel – , is a historical fact.

It is said that Osman Digna and his commanders withheld from their men that they would have to fight against British troops: they claimed the battle would be against Egyptians and Turks, in order to suppress any fears and to stimulate hate and militancy instead.

## Battle of Tamai: March 13th, 1884



Battle of Tamai - Melton Prior, 1884

In the novel, the Battle of Tamai played an somewhat ungrateful role after the Battle of El-Teb.

El-Teb was important for the story - since in the chronology of events, it was the first battle actively involving the Royal Sussex, confronting Jeremy, Leonard, Royston, Simon, and Stephen for the first time with deadly terror and killing.

But the Battle of Tamai also took place before the Battle of Abu Klea, up to the present day some kind of a legend in the British memory – and also the fateful battle for the five young men of our story.

In order not to overstretch the storyline, the Battle of Tamai is only mentioned in the novel, respectively outlined in the thoughts and writings of the young men.

Like in El-Teb, on the British side there were again roughly 3,500 infantry men, gunners and sappers and almost 900 cavalry men, facing ca. 8,000 Mahdists. Casualties on both sides were 6 British officers and 105 soldiers killed, 8 officers and 103 soldiers wounded. An estimated 2,000 Mahdists were killed, an unknown number was wounded.

It is a historical fact that among the Mahdist there were boys as young as ten or eleven, and Stephen's memory of a gravely wounded boy trying to kill British soldiers even after the battle had ended is also an episode historically documented.



Battle of Tamai - Geoffrey Douglas Giles, ca. 1885

### Battle of Abu Klea: January 17th, 1885

Compared to other battles of the Mahdist War, the death toll for the British troops was relatively small: out of 1,400 men, 71 men – among them 11 officers – were killed, 64 wounded; three soldiers were missing in action. An estimated 14,000 Mahdists fought on the other side, out of which roughly 3,000 were actively involved in battle with a death toll of about 50%.



Battle of Abu Klea - William Barnes Woollen, early 20th century

Nevertheless, Winston Churchill writes in his reminiscences of the Mahdist War, the Battle of Abu Klea was the bloodiest and most cruel skirmish ever for the British fighting in Sudan, and up to the present day, there are for British ears undertones of cruelty as well as heroism in the name of Abu Klea.



Battle of Abu Klea - Douglas Giles, 19th century

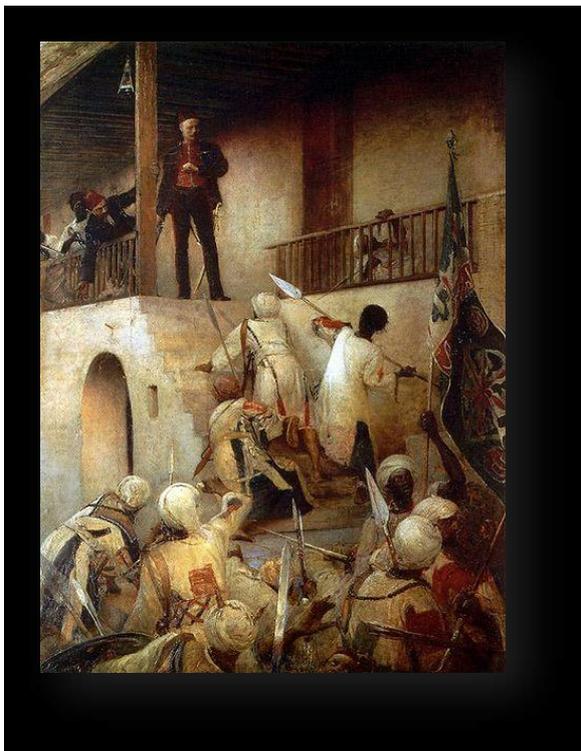
The unexpectedly violent assault of the Mahdists is the reason why this battle is still dramatically vivid in the British memory – how desperately officers and soldiers fought to retaliate this assault, with barely sufficient material and in total chaos after the infantry square, tried and tested for so long, had been broken.

For although the British finally carried off the victory, this image was what remained the symbol for the futility of this war, for the defeat at the end of the campaign: the destruction of the orderly and sober British infantry square by the chaotic and wild force of the Mahdists.



Khartoum - Colonel Colborne, 1880

After all, comparatively many officers were killed in this battle, literally the military élite, and due to the regiment's position within the infantry square, there were especially high casualties among the Royal Sussex – both facts contributing to burning this battle as particularly atrocious into the British mind.



*General Gordon's Last Stand*  
George W. Joy, 19<sup>th</sup> century



General Charles Gordon, ca. 1883

Besides, of course, the fact that the British in Abu Klea not only fought for their own survival, but also for reaching Khartoum in time, in order to free the beleaguered city.

Their morale, paired with the tragedy that their strife, their sacrifices would in the end prove to be futile, created a heroic myth.

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