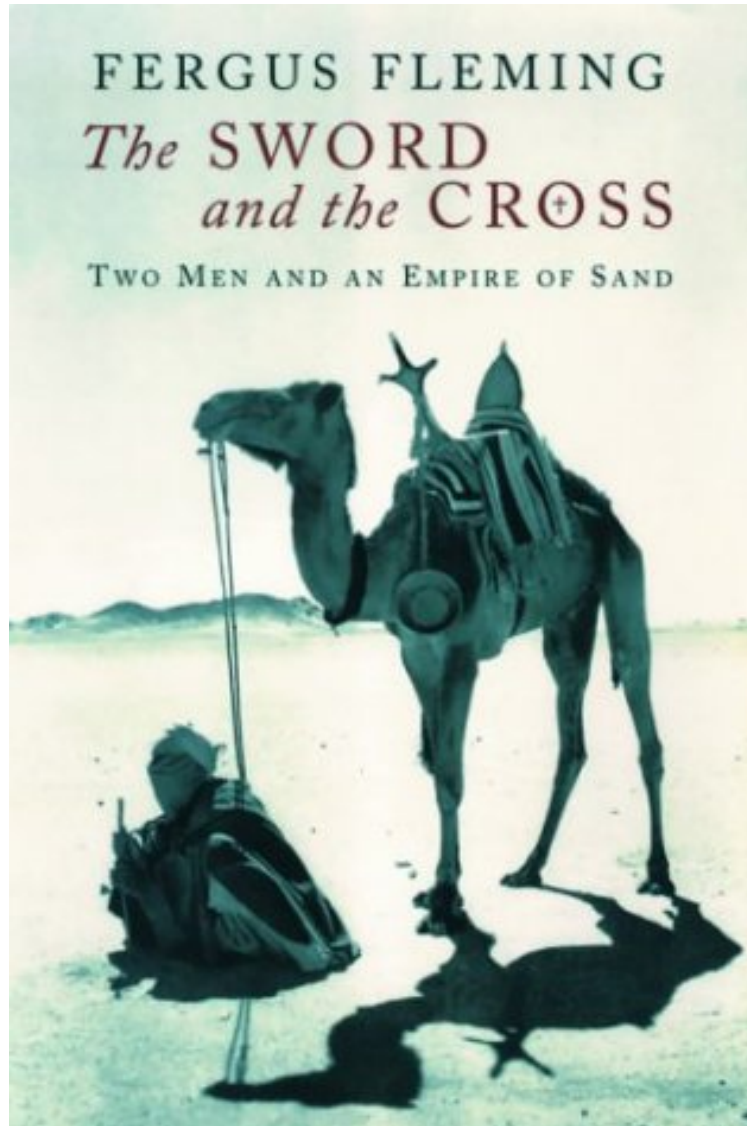


[Free pdf] The Sword and the Cross: Two Men and an Empire of Sand

The Sword and the Cross: Two Men and an Empire of Sand

Fergus Fleming

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#3931610 in Books Grove Press 2003-11Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 1.25 x 6.34 x 9.34l, #File Name: 080211752X400 pages | File size: 46.Mb

Fergus Fleming : The Sword and the Cross: Two Men and an Empire of Sand before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Sword and the Cross: Two Men and an Empire of Sand:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Personification of the French Colonial Experience...By John P. Jones III
Neil Sheehan did it, and so did Barbara Tuchman. Both quite successfully in my opinion. Sheehan chose the life of John Paul Vann to personify so much of the American experience in Vietnam, in "A Bright Shining Lie"; Tuchman did the same with "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, to examine the early relationship between China and the United

States, in "Stilwell and The American Experience in China." Fergus Fleming chose two individuals who typified the forces behind the French colonial experience in North Africa: Henri Laperrine and Viscomte Charles de Foucauld. Laperrine was the military man, and De Foucauld was the ideologue, the sword and the cross as the title expressed it. I found Fleming's approach equally successful. Algeria was different; different from the colonial experience of any other European power, and it was different from any other colonial possession of France itself, including Vietnam. At the beginning of Algeria's war of independence, in 1954, 10% of the population of the country was of European origins, and they called themselves "Algerians." More so than even Britain's relationship with the "crown jewel of their empire," India, France considered Algeria an integral part of metropolitan France, "the Hexagon." In large measure, this book explains the origins of this relationship. De Foucauld, like others who became religious ascetics, Thomas Merton, St. Augustine, St Paul, started by leading a full and worldly life. Laperrine was a straight line military man, who saw his opportunity for "glory." The story starts in 1880, and ends with the death of Laperrine in 1920 (De Foucauld died in 1916.) Key themes of the colonial experience are universal. It starts with ideologues, "religious men," those who want to convert the natives to their way of thinking, be it bringing them "civilization," as the French liked to put it, Christianity, as many others did, or, as we put it today, "democracy," and "nation building." Inevitably, the ideologues run into trouble with some recalcitrant natives, and military intervention is the "only solution." Fleming states the obvious, missed by so many: "What only a very few French understood was that the people of North Africa honestly did not want to become French" (p 265). Or: "Circular arguments, false enticements, and a feeling that France was letting things slip, fuelled the imperialist urge (p 73). In terms of the personification of those urges, Fleming writes with incisive clarity: "Ever since the death of his parents, Foucauld had existed on a cocktail of impulse, innocence and optimism and had suffered the inevitable disappointments" (p 129). At this book has garnered a number of negative reviews. And unlike many such, these are thoughtful negative reviews. I simply disagree with their main premises. One is that since the principal characters are not sympathetic (and indeed, each is profoundly flawed), then the book is of limited merit. With that logic, Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" is utterly worthless. Another reviewer sad that Fleming's style was flat, but consider: "According to Tuareg mythology, God had created the world's mountains by throwing stones at the globe as it spun by. Eventually, tiring of the game, he had emptied his hand into the desert: the resultant jumble of rock was the Hoggar." Or, concerning Foucauld's "singular vision": "Today, cynics might call it the power of fanaticism. In medieval times it would have been called a halo" (p 237). Overall, I feel that Fleming has written an excellent historical account of an area and era that is not well-understood in the English-speaking world, and that he chose the right two men to "personify" the origins of the French push into the North Africa. It can be read for its own sake, certainly, but more importantly for an American reader, whose country is engaged in similar efforts today, it can be read for the parallels with events now. Concerning efforts to overcome the divisions caused by tribal loyalties or religion, consider: "The respect that Laperrine commanded was awesome. Shortly after Djanet, Herisson asked his Arab batman what he would do if there was holy war between the West and Islam. "Cut your throat," the man replied. Herisson then asked him why he served France at all. His answer was that he did not serve France; he served men like Laperrine and Nieger, men who were warriors and who understood the Sahara." I'm pleased to give the book its first 5-star rating. 12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Disappointing Book From One Of My Favorite Writers By Bruce Loveitt I'd previously read, and enjoyed, both "Barrow's Boys" and "Killing Dragons." So, I fully expected to enjoy "The Sword And The Cross." Alas, it was not meant to be. The first hundred pages or so held my interest. After that, I just kept reading for the sake of finishing the book. Not a pleasant experience. So, what happened? Mr. Fleming wanted to tell us about the history of the French colonial experience in Algeria and the Sahara. He chose to do this by primarily concentrating on two people: Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine. Unfortunately, the first fellow was so bizarre that it was impossible to sympathize with him. He was a hedonist turned religious fanatic. He was a masochist. Where others travelled by camel in desert temperatures of 120 degrees fahrenheit, Foucauld chose to walk. He ate almost nothing. He refused to indulge himself with creature comforts. He longed for death. (I'm not guessing about this or playing armchair psychiatrist. Fleming quotes several times from Foucauld's journal concerning his lifelong deathwish.) Foucauld wanted to convert Moslems to Christianity and set himself up as an example of a person living a Christian life. However, he really had no interest in other people and longed for solitude. Not surprisingly, he failed to gain converts. Despite espousing Christian principles, he was very inconsiderate of his long-suffering manservant and he spent much of his lifetime gathering intelligence to pass on to the French military. Mr. Fleming quotes many people who looked upon Foucauld as a holy-man. It is clear that, in person, he possessed "a certain something" which caused people to look upon him that way. Unfortunately, it doesn't come across on the page. One gets only the impression of an egocentric, unhappy, and self-destructive "nut." We wind up not caring about what he does or what happens to him. With Laperrine we have a different problem. Not much is known about him and he wasn't big on self-publicity. Hence, he floats in and out of the narrative and we never get a handle on who he is and what he wants, other than that he wanted France to be successful in the colonization of the Sahara. One of Fleming's major themes is that the French really had no compelling reason to be in the Sahara. It was sort of, "well, everybody else has colonies, so we want some too...even if we are talking about thousands of miles of desert." At one point, Fleming enjoys writing about one "native notable" who agreed to go to

France for a visit. Upon returning home to Africa, he was mystified as to why people who "had Paris" would want to come to the desert. Fleming's point is that there was no point - after the initial contacts, the French presence just sort of snowballed. The book is filled with numerous trips through the desert by the French military, as they try to prove to the Arabs and Tuaregs that they are in control. But, since the whole thing is so pointless, we wind up not caring about any of this. Frankly, it is monotonous and boring to read about. I am a Francophile, and Mr. Fleming is a very good writer, but I couldn't get worked up about any of this. I suppose that if you are French, this background to what became the "Algerian Nightmare" of the mid-20th century (a military quagmire with terrorist attacks, to boot) might be of some scholarly interest. Otherwise, for the general reader, I just can't recommend this book.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Uncharacteristically dull

By Jared M

Usually, Fergus Fleming books make for very good reading; he writes in an accessible manner, and the enthusiasm for the subject matter shines through. This is what I have found about the previous books I have read by this author, *Barrow's Boys* and *90 Degrees North*. However, this time, Fleming's knack for snagging me as a reader and pulling me into the story has deserted him. *The Sword and the Cross*, which should have been a riveting tale of Saharan exploration, ended up being dull and listless, and it was a relief to finally finish the book.

The Sword and the Cross is nominally about two Frenchmen - Henri Laperrine, a career soldier, and Viscomte Charles de Foucauld, once a Parisian layabout, but now a fanatical monk, having divested himself of all his worldly possessions and trappings, both men forging reputations in the Algerian desert. The backdrop to the tale of these two characters is set against the French colonization of Algeria, which later fell apart in the 1950s as Algeria sought independence from its French masters. It is an interesting premise to contrast the differing motivations behind the lead characters. Laperrine is a dedicated military man, who established a French Camel Corp to combat the native Tuareg raiders in the desert. Foucauld tried to spread Christianity through his wanderings of the desert, although he was remarkably unsuccessful, attracting only one member to his harsh order. Together, each man played significant roles in establishing the French colony, Foucauld as a spy who provided intelligence on the leading Arab personalities, and Laperrine as the enforcer and soldier.

Part of the problem for me with the book is that Foucauld, as revealed through his writings and subsequent events, is actually a rather unpleasant character, given to constant bouts of moaning. It is extremely difficult to empathize with him through his self-inflicted hardships. The enduring perception of the man is that it seems that he was closer to lunacy than to God. Not much is revealed about Laperrine as an individual, as there is nowhere as much literature about him as there is about Foucauld. Another niggly aspect is the lack of plates in the book - although there are portraits of Foucauld and Laperrine on the endpapers, there are no other photographic images provided which is a shame. There are a couple of maps for the reader covering the regions traveled. Whether it is the story itself, the characters (which I feel is the main failing), or the writing, *The Cross and the Sword* unfortunately does not capture and enthrall the reader in the same manner as Fleming's past books have. Despite this, the book is a useful addition to the history and exploration of Northern Africa. If you are interested in this subject, then you may still find *The Cross and the Sword* worthwhile reading. But if you are looking for an enjoyable and interesting story of human challenge and endurance, this is not it.

The Sword and the Cross takes us to the Sahara at the end of the nineteenth century, when the desert remained largely unexplored by Europeans. But France, which had seized Algeria in 1830, had designs on this hostile wilderness. Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine, two friends, were part of this conquest. The one a layabout and womanizer, the other a stern career soldier, each found his vocation in the desert. Foucauld abandoned his decadent lifestyle and founded a severe monastic order. Living off dates and barley, the gourmand became a sun-baked scarecrow, thought by many to be a saint. Yet he remained a committed imperialist, and continued to assist the military. Laperrine founded a camel corps whose exploits became legendary. Surviving on dates and water, he led his men across the desert as Foucauld, guide and interpreter, trudged along reciting prayers. When the Sahara's fragile peace crumbled during World War I, Foucauld paid a tragic price for his role as imperial pawn. Laperrine, by then recalled to the Western Front, returned to avenge his friend. A haunting narrative of a forgotten period in Europe's colonial crusade, this is also a story of hatred and friendship, discovery and delusion.

From Publishers Weekly

Adventure writer and historian Fleming (*Barrow's Boys*, etc.) turns to French colonial Africa for his latest chronicle of historical (mis)adventure. His meticulous research and fascination with the physical hardships faced by men bent on discovery and conquest are on impressive display. Following the sometimes parallel, sometimes intertwining biographies of Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine, Fleming reconstructs the French colonial crusade in northern Africa that began with France's conquest of Algeria in 1830. Following a series of disgraces in the imperialist race, France needed the Sahara to resurrect its honor on the world's stage. Fleming concludes, "France was conquering Africa just for the sake of it." Foucauld and Laperrine met as soldiers during the Bou-Amama war in Algeria in 1881, and while Laperrine became a career soldier and Foucauld matured from a hedonistic womanizer into an evangelical ascetic, they remained friends until Foucauld's assassination by Muslim fundamentalists in 1916. Until their deaths (Laperrine died of thirst amid the dunes after a plane crash), the two men dedicated themselves to France's cause with zeal. As Fleming writes, "Evangelization was the mortar that imperialists

hoped would turn the desert from conquered territory to complaisant colony," and while Foucauld became "a pawn in the colonial game," Fleming recognizes that most likely "he used the military as much as they used him." What emerges most notably from this dense, detailed history is Fleming's description of the colonialists flirting time and time again with a desert seemingly inimical to human life. As Fleming concludes, "The tragedy of their existences lay not so much in time as in landscape... the Sahara was the same after their deaths as before." 3 maps. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Fleming's chronicle of France's fight to cross the Sahara to colonize North Africa focuses on two men, Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine. De Foucauld is described as an aristocratic playboy turned hermit and monk. Laperrine, a shadowy figure, was the creator of the Camel Corps and was seen as a pragmatic man, violent and scheming. This story of "two extraordinary men who lived in an extraordinary place at an extraordinary time" follows Laperrine's travels across the desert between 1904 and 1909 with de Foucauld as his guide and interpreter. Drawing on many of de Foucauld's letters and other writings, Fleming describes building a cabin of palm branches, then constructing one with stones and mud; de Foucauld bitten by a horned viper (taking a month to walk again); the shortage of food and water presenting a serious problem; and a lack of hygiene causing concern. When the camels lagged, Laperrine told his men to eat them. "It was a question of sacrificing men or animals. I did not hesitate." This adventure story reads like the finest fiction. George Cohen Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "[Fleming's] meticulous research and fascination with the physical hardships faced by men bent on discovery and conquest are on impressive display."