Winston Churchill graduated from the military academy at Sandhurst early in 1895 to take up his commission in the Fourth Hussars. Later the same year, on his twenty-first birthday, he received his baptism of fire in Cuba, where he was privily testing his mettle as an observer with the Spanish army. Over the next few years he found his way again and again to the battlefields of Queen Victoria's "little wars," capping his early military career in the not so little war against the Boers in South Africa. His first trial of combat with British troops was in the northern marches of India, where he distinguished himself in the struggle against contumacious frontier tribesmen called the Pathans. Having gone to the front as a journalist because there was no room for him as a regular officer, Churchill learned to combine the two professions. His dispatches from the front, which were warmly received in London, formed the basis for his first book, The Story of the Malakand Field Force,¹ which he penned in his Indian barracks after the 1897 campaign. This pairing of roles recurred in his next two wars, which took him to opposite ends of the African continent. Churchill's early career at arms is well known to readers of My Early Life, one of his most appealing books, which first appeared in 1930 and is still in print. The books that he wrote on his youthful campaigns are less often read today, but they add texture and context to the adventures retold in Churchill's autobiography.

This essay considers our author's accounts of the 1898 clash between antique and modern warriors on the upper reaches of the Nile, which he named "the river war." After helping to subdue the Pathans of the Himalayas, Churchill joined the march against the Dervish Empire of the Sudan. One must not think of the whirling dervishes, who try to free their souls from their earthly envelope in a graceful, dreamy dance that mimics the movement of the heavenly bodies. Churchill's foes were rougher characters—military monks attuned to fierce, martial songs, not to the gentle, ethereal music of the spheres. These fighting dervishes were Muslims prepared to march to their death; yet they might also free their souls from their earthly envelope if they died fighting for God. Young Churchill, newly steeped in the rationalism of books he had read in India, was more worldly in every way, but he had to move heaven and earth to get to the Sudan.

Though he was only a young fellow "deeply anxious to share" in an exciting campaign, Churchill began to attract the attention of "ill-informed and ill-disposed people." As they saw it, he was a "Medal-hunter" and a "Self-advertiser," and their reasoning ran like this:

Churchill finds it "melancholy to be forced to record these less amiable aspects of human nature," but the application he made to join the Anglo-Egyptian expedition against the dervishes was resisted. The difficulty arose in "the highest quarter": though recommended by the War Office, he had been refused by Sir Herbert Kitchener, the Sirdar of the Egyptian army (MEL 177). When his last expedition in India disbanded, Churchill went to London on leave, hoping to reverse the decision. Since the death of her husband in 1895, his mother, Lady Randolph Churchill, had devoted herself to advancing Winston's career. She wrote Kitchener to request that he find a place for her son, but to no avail. By then it was June 1898. The combined English and Egyptian force had already reached "the final phase" of operations (176), and it was almost too late for Churchill to join the advance on Khartoum before its climax.

But a book does not always disappear like a pebble thrown into the waves, and it was now his good fortune to be rescued by "a quite unexpected event." The prime minister, whose epigram on frontier wars had graced the title page of The Malakand Field Force (MFF iii), had "happened to read" Churchill's book and wanted to meet him (MEL 178). When Lord Salisbury received Churchill in his office in mid-July, he told him that his book had dispelled misunderstandings about the war on the Indian border: it had helped him "to form a truer picture of the kind of fighting that has been going on in these frontier valleys" in a way that the official documents he was obliged to read had not. He spoke of how much the young Churchill reminded him of Lord Randolph Churchill, who had been his colleague, and offered to help in any way he could (179). A few days later Churchill decided to ask, through an intermediary, whether the prime minister would be willing to send a telegram to Kitchener on his behalf. The telegram was sent, but the Sirdar replied in the negative.

A last effort of perseverance allowed Churchill his share "in the stirring episodes of the Battle of Omdurman" (181). Through a friend he learned that Sir Evelyn Wood, the Adjutant-General, was upset at Kitchener's indifference to the War Office recommendations on officers for the expeditionary force. When a friendly go-between told Sir Evelyn Wood that Kitchener had turned down an appeal from the prime minister, the Adjutant-General decided to "stand up for his prerogatives." Though the Egyptian army, under Kitchener's sole control, made up much the greater part of the force, the War Office was responsible for the small English contingent attached to it. Churchill was promptly appointed a "supernumerary Lieutenant" to the Twenty-first Lancers and directed to proceed to headquarters in Cairo at his own expense. Unchastened by criticism of officers who combined military and journalistic duties, and "feeling the force of Napoleon's maxim that 'war should support war,' " he arranged with his friend Oliver Borthwick that he should write letters on the campaign for his father's newspaper, the Morning Post (182; cf. RW I ix). Then he caught a train for Marseilles, whence his ship left for Cairo.

Churchill does not tell us exactly when he resolved to write the history of the war, but it must have been almost immediately. On August 10, in a letter to his mother from his boat "on the Nile," he described the letters he was writing for Borthwick "as foundations and as scaffolding for my book." 4 The dervish army was defeated at Omdurman early in September. The next month, when the Prince of Wales wrote suggesting that he write "a book with an account of the campaign," 5 Churchill was already hard at work. The Story of the Malakand Field Force, which he had compiled from dispatches in five

3. For intelligence of this reference see note 12 below.
4. For the letter, see WSC I C 961.
5. Letter of October 6, 1898, included in WSC I 420, I C 984.
weeks the year before, ran to 336 pages in its first edition; this new book, which he called *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, grew into a much longer and more ambitious project that would run to 961 pages when it appeared the following year, as Churchill explains in *My Early Life*:

This work was extending in scope. From being a mere chronicle of the Omdurman campaign, it grew backwards into what was almost a history of the ruin and rescue of the Soudan. I read scores of books, indeed everything that had been published upon the subject; and I now planned a couple of fat volumes. I affected a combination of the styles of Macaulay and Gibbon, the staccato antitheses of the former and the rolling sentences and genitival endings of the latter; and I stuck in a bit of my own from time to time. *(MEL 225)*

In the midst of this work, Churchill went to India, where he helped his regiment win the polo tournament. As he had before whilst he wrote his first book, again he managed to beguile the languid mid-day hours by writing. All the way out, aboard a boat which had two well-read copies of *The Malakand Field Force*, Churchill worked on the book. From Bangalore, he wrote to his mother that he was writing "all day & every day." On the way back to England, with the book half-finished, he stopped in Egypt to gather information and to interview some of the leading characters in his story.

As he wrote, the young author gave close attention to the building blocks of his art. His master at Harrow, Robert Somervell, had taught him "the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence" *(MEL 31)*; but it was Macaulay, "a master of paragraphing" *(225)*, who taught him how to write a paragraph:

> Justus the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode; and as sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so the paragraphs must fit on to one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages. Chapterization also began to dawn upon me. Each chapter must be self-contained. All the chapters should be of equal value and more or less of equal length. Some chapters define themselves naturally and obviously; but much more difficulty arises when a number of heterogeneous incidents none of which can be omitted have to be woven together into what looks like an integral theme. *(225-26)*

Churchill found it "great fun writing a book": the book became a constant companion, so that "there was never a moment when agreeable occupation was lacking." He likens himself to "a goldfish in a bowl; but in this case the
goldfish made his own bowl." He was always busy working on the book:

Either the glass had to be polished, or the structure extended or contracted, or the walls required strengthening. I have noticed in my life deep resemblances between many different kinds of things. Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture. The technique is different, the materials are different, but the principle is the same. The foundations have to be laid, the data assembled, and the premises must bear the weight of their conclusions. Ornaments or refinements may then be added. The whole when finished is only the successful presentation of a theme. (226)

Churchill compares writing a book not to fighting a battle but to planning it: the writer's art is more self-sufficient than that of the general. Whereas the writer lives in "an impalpable crystal sphere," the general finds that "in battles ... the other fellow interferes all the time and keeps upsetting things," so that "the best generals are those who arrive at the results of planning without being tied to plans" (226-27). Still, our author does not forget that any artisan practices his art for the benefit of the user. An author writes to intrigue his reader, and "earnestly" Churchill repeats to himself one of his "best French quotations, 'L'art d'être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire' " (226).

In a letter to his mother that winter, Churchill confided that he thought his new book "better than the M. F. F.": he was writing "every word twice & some parts three times. It ought to be good since it is the best I can do." As spring came to London in 1899, he was reading proofs. The River War was published that autumn with a dedication to Lord Salisbury, "during whose administration the reorganisation of Egypt has been mainly accomplished and upon whose advice Her Majesty determined to order the reconquest of the Soudan" (RW I). An author's copy went to Lord Wolseley, the Commander in Chief of the British army and himself author of a "deadly" book on Churchill's ancestor, the great duke of Marlborough; Lord Wolseley wrote back to thank him for the gift, declaring that it was "no light matter" to write a book of such importance. In 1933 The River War was reprinted with a new introduction by Churchill; who noted that "a generation has grown up which knows little of why we are in Egypt and the Sudan, and what our work there has been." He hoped that his story would offer some help and encouragement to those young men and women who have still confidence in the destiny of Britain in

7. Letters of December 22, 1898, and January 1, 1899, quoted in WSC I 427; printed in full, I C 995-98.
8. For intelligence of this reference see note 12 below.
the Orient. They may learn from it how much harder it is to build up and acquire, than to squander and cast away" (RWr 8-9). Now Britain's destiny in the Orient has been cast away, but Churchill's book remains as the least inconsiderable of his early works. *The River War* tells a grand story and by its themes, its characters, its judgments, and its prose amply justifies its length. For the modern reader, it still offers a definitive account of the reconquest of the Sudan and a good introduction to the problems of war and empire in the late Victorian era.

Unhappily the book is not easy to find. Though *The River War* has been reprinted many times and is currently in print, the full original text of the book is available only in the first edition-now quite rare. As his bibliographer tells us, Churchill was "an indefatigable reviser," who "took the opportunity to revise, polish or expand" almost every one of his books "that went into a second edition"; but in no other case did revision produce such a contraction. A revised version in one volume, published in 1902 three years after the first edition, brings the story up to date with a chapter on the demise of the Dervish Empire; yet it drops more than half a dozen chapters in whole or in part, leaving barely two-thirds of the original book. Later editions of *The River War*, including the one published in 1933, conform to the text of the 1902 version, which in fact is an abridgment, though never advertised as such. The reason for the radical excisions from the book is not evident from the account by Churchill's son in the official biography; but another biographer may be right to suggest that Churchill considered some of the "inconvenient truths" he had published about the Sudan campaign inappropriate for a man who had in the meantime become a Member of Parliament. The original version of the book is breathless and wordy, the revised version stately and reserved. Churchill's most famous omission, by no means the only important one, tactfully softens his criticism of Kitchener. Most of the other omissions have

10. For intelligence of this reference see note 12 below.
12. The first edition is Winston Spencer Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), hereinafter cited as RW, followed by volume and page (or simply by page if the volume is the same as for the previous citation). The revised version in one volume is *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902). This version was reprinted, with a new preface, as *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* (London: Eyre & Spottiswode, 1933), hereinafter cited as RWr. I cite the first edition only where Churchill's text is not retained in the revised version. Where the text of the first edition is retained in the revised version exactly or with only minor revisions, I cite the 1933 revised version. In the few cases when I refer to text added in the revised version, I mention the additions. Thus the reader may begin to ponder the changes that Churchill made in revising the book.
14. WSC II C 445 n. 2-the only discussion by Randolph Churchill of the revisions in the text of *The River War*. 
the effect of streamlining the book: observations on the road to Khartoum, colorful instances of the mores of the dervishes, wrangles in the British army, philosophical reflections that his fellow journalist G. W. Steevens considered too frequent (MEL 227-28)—all disappear like toads before the harrow. No doubt the book is brisker and less exceptionable for the editing, which in many ways evinces Churchill's growing maturity as an writer. His story reads more smoothly without fits and starts. Yet as the narrator's boon companion in the first version, one is glad to be a party even to his digressions and youthful indiscretions. There the narrator is the star, enlisting our sympathy by his fortunes and observations; three years afterwards he recedes almost in the manner of the impartial modern historian. In the original version we see everything up close; in the revised version the narrator holds us at arm's length. One cannot read the revision without feeling that something has been lost. Only by considering the entire work, the chapter added in 1902 as well as the chapters then subtracted, can we form a complete idea of what Churchill learned at war on the Nile.

I

Even today the Sudan is known to most Westerners as a faraway land touched by famine and strife, where the deserts across from Europe's southern fringe eventually give way to the moister mysteries of black Africa. In 1898 it was still more unfamiliar and remote. Yet the British government found that the nation's honor was at stake there, as well as its interest, and organized an expedition to defeat the Dervish Empire and reconquer the country. For centuries, since Arabs appeared in the northern Sudan as victorious votaries of the new faith propounded by Mohammed, subduing the aboriginal black inhabitants of the country, two races had shared the land, blurring without quite obscuring their separate features. The indigenous tribes "were negroes as black as coal," who "lived as we may imagine prehistoric men," with barbaric virtues to be sure, but tracing an unwritten history that was only "a confused legend of strife and misery" (RWr 21-22). The stronger and more civilized Arabs had some success in converting the native inhabitants to Islam. They also captured blacks and sold them to slave traders, who carried them "to the great slave-market at Jedda" to be sold (23). This melancholy and insular history was interrupted in 1819, when the Egyptian ruler Mohammed Ali, imitating the imperial conquests of the European powers, sent an army up the Nile and conquered the Sudan. Egyptian rule, which lasted until 1883, aspired to a European standard, but its greedy officers and grasping troops were a scourge to the country. Though the conquerors gave lip service to suppressing the slave trade, their new taxes actually forced the Arabs to intensify it. The slender resources of the land could barely support its inhabitants without the depredations of the new
regime, and for all their show of legality, "the Egyptians had only pressed upon the tortured face of the Soudan the bland mask of an organised Government" (RW 1 21).

By the 1860s, the country was ripe for rebellion. The grievances of the people were real; but two essential "moral forces" were wanting: "the knowledge that better things existed" and "a spirit of combination" (RWr 27). Before long, the missing elements were supplied. First, the eyes of the Sudanese people were opened by the efforts of Charles Gordon, an English general who was appointed governor of the Equatorial Province of the Sudan in 1874 to show Egyptian determination to end the slave trade. Though the rulers of Egypt intended his appointment as a face-saving measure, he made a real attack on the traffic by opposing Zubehr, "the most notorious slave dealer Africa has ever produced." Several years before, Zubehr had convinced his fellow slave dealers not to pay their taxes, and the Cairene authorities sent an armed force to break him. Unfortunately their troops were found wanting: "they came, they saw, they ran away" (29). Afterwards the Egyptian government had patronized Zubehr and even made him a pasha. But in 1877 Gordon convinced the wily slave dealer to go north to Cairo, and the hospitable Egyptians never allowed their guest to depart. More than twenty years later, when Churchill was in Cairo gathering information for his book, he was able to interview Zubehr, who was still held under close arrest (RW 1 29 n.). By 1879 Gordon had quashed a revolt organized by Zubehr's son and broken up the organized slave trade. His method was unorthodox. He bought slaves at the local market and formed them into the army that defeated the slave dealers. Since "slavery was the greatest institution in the land," Gordon unsettled "the whole social system" by attacking it; and the Sudan seethed as "oppressed yet ferocious races" awoke to the thought "that they had rights" (RWr 30).

They were still in want of the second "moral force," which Churchill calls the "spirit of combination," but that they found in Muslim fanaticism. Our author is quick to explain that religion was not the cause of the revolution but rather a pretext. The Sudanese had ample reason for revolt, and he thinks it would be no more sensible to ascribe their rising to fanaticism than to attribute the French Revolution to Rousseau's Social Contract (RW 1 35). But religious zeal helped the Sudanese people to concert: for in such a rising "it gives men something which they think is sublime to fight for, and this serves them as an excuse for wars which it is desirable to begin for totally different reasons" (RWr 31). Churchill thinks of religious fanaticism as a weapon, like the horn of the rhinoceros or the sting of the wasp. The man who forged that weapon for the Sudan was a lonely prophet, Mohammed Ahmed, who evinced his holiness by denouncing his own teacher. When that holy sheik offered a dispensation from sins to merry-makers at his son's circumcision festival, his disciple objected that dispensation could come only from God. Forsaken by
his teacher, he struck out for himself and began to attract followers of his own. Many were convinced that this austere man was the Mahdi—a long-awaited "second great Prophet" who would throw off the yoke of the conquerors. Among them was Abdullah, a man less devout than ambitious, who sought "to free the Soudan of foreigners, and to rule it himself" (36). Having secured the confidence of the Mahdi, in his worldly way he began a conspiracy against Egyptian rule. At length the authorities resolved to crush him; but their troops divided, fired on each other, and were finally bested in detail by the rebels. Then a larger army came out of Egypt, and the Mahdi was forced to retreat; but because of the rebels' success at arms his trip became "a triumphal progress" (39). The Egyptian army, lullèd by contempt for the rebels, were surprised in their sleep one morning by the Mahdi's soldiers, who "rushed upon them, and slew them to a man" (40). Thereupon the success of the revolution was complete. The lesser Egyptian garrisons were massacred, the greater ones were blockaded, and the Mahdi and his men assumed the highest power in the state.

Meanwhile, there was also a revolt downriver in Egypt. The people rose under Arabi Pasha against the misgovernment of the Ottomans, and the rising was put down only by the reluctant decision of William Gladstone's government to send gunboats to Alexandria and a powerful British army to restore order to the country. The Egyptians were defeated, "and Great Britain assumed the direction of Egyptian affairs," though an Egyptian remained nominally at the helm as the Khedive (41). Another expedition was organized to retake the Sudan. What "was perhaps the worst army that has ever marched to war" assembled at the Egyptian garrison in Khartoum and pursued the Mahdi into the open country to the southwest (RWr 41). The army of the Mahdi attacked and gained a complete victory; not one man in ten among the Egyptians remained alive after the battle. The Mahdi's rule was now uncontested. Though the Sudanese revolutionary is often denounced in the West as a false prophet, Churchill does not know "how a genuine may be distinguished from a spurious Prophet, except by the measure of his success." He argues that the Mahdi, who "put life and soul into the hearts of his countrymen, and freed his native land of foreigners," deserves not simply opprobrium for having spilt the blood of thousands—the bad rulers who prepared his revolution must share the blame for that—but also a measure of respect for his achievements. Churchill predicts that if ever the Sudan recovers its prosperity and develops learning enough to produce an Arab historian to tell the story of its recent past, he "will not forget, foremost among the heroes of his race, to write the name of Mohammed Ahmed" (43-44).

The Egyptian administration, on the unambiguous advice of the British,
now gave up all hopes of reconquering the Sudan and concerned itself only with extricating the remaining garrisons from that country. For this ticklish assignment the British government proposed to send Gordon to Khartoum. Their agents in Egypt, judging that Gordon's Christianity might be a liability and that the situation was desperate, recommended Zubehr instead. Gladstone's government forbade any dealings with the slave dealer, and this scrupulous insistence increased their obligation to assist the withdrawal by other means. Gordon went to Khartoum to superintend the evacuation of the garrisons and was received with rejoicing by the citizens. The Mahdi's camp was alarmed by the prospect that a British army would follow, but their foreboding gave way to grim resolve when they saw that no support for Gordon was forthcoming. Gordon's behavior was mercurial. After asking that Zubehr be deported to Cyprus, he changed his mind and sought his help in Khartoum. Again Gladstone's government refused the request on the ground "that great States cannot stoop to employ such agents" (RW I 71). Gordon always claimed that with Zubehr's help his mission would have succeeded. Later he made other proposals to the British government, all of which were refused. Churchill argues that that government began with no obligation `to extricate the Egyptian garrisons—they owed no more than "commiseration" to Egypt—but that when they refused to work with Zubehr out of "a high moral attitude," then they assumed that responsibility (RWr 52). Gordon himself considered that his honor was implicated in the evacuation and refused to leave Khartoum until his mission was completed.

A difficult situation impended. The British government, which wanted to have nothing to do with the Sudan, was tied down there by the very man they had sent to untie them from their burden. Their Egyptian agent, Sir Evelyn Baring, urged a small military expedition to effect the forcible rescue of the envoy, and Sir Herbert Stewart agreed to command it. While a flying column sent to Khartoum might have achieved this object, a larger expedition seemed safer, but this the government definitely refused. By this time the rebels had increased in impudence, and Khartoum was under siege. For almost a year Gordon directed the resistance with vigilance and resolve, sustained by "his honour as a man" and "his faith as a Christian" (61). His plight was not forgotten in England. In the House of Commons, Lord Randolph Churchill asked the government whether they would do anything to relieve their envoy. But Gladstone was obdurate. Though he is usually thought to have looked upon Gordon with benevolent weakness, our author suggests another explanation: that Gladstone did not feel justified in involving the nation in operations in the heart of the Soudan for the purpose, not of saving the life of the envoy—for Gordon had but to embark on his steamers and come home—but simply in order to vindicate the personal honour of a man. And it is possible that a feeling of
resentment against the officer whose intractable nature was bringing such odium upon the Government may have coloured his resolution with a darker tinge.  \( 64; \text{ cf. } LRC 271-73 \)

At last the prime minister had to give way, and a rescue expedition was organized. Its commander made leisurely preparations for his mission, even bringing in Canadian voyageurs to pilot boats up the Nile. The slow advance of the British troops gave the Mahdi time to gather his followers to oppose them. A sharp battle-"the most savage and bloody action ever fought in the Soudan by British troops"-took place at Abu Klea in which the dervishes were driven from the field, but only after inflicting casualties on the British amounting to "10 per cent. of the entire force" (RWr 67). This victory opened the way to Khartoum and the rescue of Gordon, but the advance of the British troops was delayed for three days, probably for good reasons. The Mahdi saw the need to make an immediate advance on Khartoum. The city fell, and Gordon was slain by a mob of dervishes. His head was presented to the Mahdi as a trophy. The rescue expedition, having failed in its mission, turned away from Khartoum and disbanded. Britain acquired a martyr but suffered "a profound feeling of despondency"; the nation's credibility on the Continent was severely shaken, and "in a hopeless way" even Englishmen thought that their humiliation in the Sudan might be "the beginning of the end" (RW I 109).

The Dervish Empire became a military regime, "probably the worst" that history records; for it "developed no virtue except courage, a quality more admirable than rare." The Mahdi built himself an impressive new capital at Omdurman, across the river from Khartoum, and gave himself up to sensual pleasures. But then the God "whom he had served, not unfaithfully, and who had given him whatever he had asked, required of Mohammed Ahmed his soul; and so all that he had won by his brains and bravery became of no more account to him" (RWr 73-74). The Mahdi's remains were buried with great reverence, and according to his last wish, the faithful Abdullah succeeded him as caliph. Abdullah set out to consolidate his rule. His subjects were "a turbulent people who had learnt their power, tigers who had tasted blood" (RW I 117). From 1885 to 1898 the Sudan was governed by "this strong, capable ruler," who "shrank from nothing" that would shore up his rule. Churchill doubts "that any complete history of these events will ever be written in a form and style which will interest a later generation": the chronicler would be deterred by outlandish names, imperfect records, squalid scenes, and ignorant actors. But he provides instances of the caliph's methods of preserving himself, which were chiefly three:

First, he removed or rendered innocuous all real or potential rivals. Second, he pursued what Sir Alfred Milner has called "a well-considered policy of military concentration." Thirdly, he maintained among the desert
and riverain peoples a balance of power on the side of his own tribe. (RWr 76-77)

Rival armies were reduced to token forces of fifty men each, and their leaders forced to support his government. He invited his clansmen to settle in the capital, generously encouraging them to dispossess those whom they displaced, and they became fiercely loyal to him. He managed to defeat the Abyssinians, which Churchill accounts "his greatest triumph," though his armies were so weakened afterwards that they never again attained their former fighting strength (79, 84). He even sent the army of one of his rivals to a hopeless fight against the Egyptians, whom the dervishes called the "Turks," perhaps foreseeing some benefit even if they were destroyed. For more than thirteen years he ruled his country, "stern and solitary" above the fray, his composure disturbed only by hints that "war-clouds" were gathering to the north (76, 88).

II

For many years the British people heard nothing to encourage them about their new imperial possession in Egypt, and they averted their eyes from the scene of earlier disappointments. But capable agents were quietly working to improve the situation of the country, and by the 1890s its "regeneration" began to claim public attention for Egypt again. It was above all the work of Sir Alfred Milner, *England in Egypt,"* that created an eager audience in England for the work of Englishmen in Cairo. Milner taught them to think of a British empire in Egypt to match the grandeur of the British Raj in India. Churchill passes over the economic and agricultural renewal of the country to talk about the reform of Egypt's army, which is crucial to his story. The old Egyptian army "was disbanded by a single sentence of a British decree" in 1882. Everyone agreed that the Egyptian was "not a fighting animal": so great were the doubts about forming a competent army of Egyptians that "all sorts of schemes for the employment of foreign legions or Turkish janissaries were devised." Churchill describes the quandary faced by the British agents: "To try to make soldiers of the Egyptians seemed a task better suited to the students of Laputa than to ordinary men. It appeared easier to draw sunbeams out of cucumbers than to put courage into the fellah." Nonetheless it was resolved to form an army of Egyptians, and the work was directed by Sir Evelyn Wood, who "became the first British Sirdar of the Egyptian army." Those who remembered the old Egyptian army soon noticed that the new army was completely different:

In the first place, it was paid. The recruits were treated with justice. Their rations were not stolen by the officers. The men were given leave to go to their villages from time to time. When they fell sick, they were sent to hospital instead of being flogged. In short, the European system was substituted for the Oriental.

With the aid of decent treatment and constant training, the Egyptian troops began to show some military virtues: if not fierceness, at least a kind of "courage which bears pain and hardship in patience, which confronts ill-fortune with indifference, and which looks on death with apathetic composure" (RWr 90-91, RW I 151–52). To the Egyptian recruits the British officer -"rich, strange, sharp-spoken, just, and always apparently fearless- seemed a splendid demi-god." Their confidence increased when he paid them one indispensable compliment: he allowed no one to diminish his Egyptian troops, and "those who abused the fellah soldier were reminded that they insulted English gentlemen." Churchill points out that only "this moral factor" made possible such "extraordinary" results as the creation of an Egyptian army that was a proud fighting force. "All men," he writes, "improve under a generous treatment"; and when "the timid recruit began to perceive that the splendid stranger was actually proud of him," he rose to the challenge of his military duties (RWr 91-92, RW I 407-12).

Though Abdullah had full control of the Sudanese Arabs, over the blacks in the Sudan his hold was less firm. To the Egyptian battalions the British officers soon added battalions of black Sudanese troops-men of a very different character. The Sudanese soldier was weaker than the Egyptian and more prone to disorder:

Always excitable and often insubordinate, he required the strictest discipline. At once slovenly and uxorious, he detested his drills and loved his wives with equal earnestness; and altogether "Sambo"-for such is the Soudanese equivalent of "Tommy"-was a lazy, fierce, disreputable child, but he possessed two tremendous military virtues. To the faithful loyalty of a dog he added the heart of a lion, He loved his officer, and feared nothing in the world.

The addition of these troops made the Egyptian army "formidable," and by "chance or design" they were always placed in the front ranks of battle, where they incurred losses disproportionate to their numbers (RWr 92). Over the course of the next decade the army was toughened by the privations imposed by "a pitiless economy" and by occasional border clashes with the dervishes (93). There remained to be added only the man who would lead it to victory, and he appeared in the person of Horatio Herbert Kitchener.

As a cadet at Woolwich, Kitchener had distinguished himself neither "by promise in study" nor by "prowess in athletics" (RW I 159). He served for ten
years without giving any sign of unusual talent. The only curiosity in his record was that he had served in Cyprus and Palestine, "and in the latter country he learned Arabic." When the British fleet appeared before Alexandria, however, his linguistic ability suddenly made him a rare prize. It is an interesting coincidence that at this moment Kitchener did just as Churchill would have done: "securing leave of absence, he hurried to the scene of crisis" (RW 93-94). Delays "devoured his leave," and after extending it once he found himself in danger of having to return "to the crushing routine of ordinary duty." In the first edition of The River War, Churchill reconstructs Kitchener's dilemma:

On a steamer in the harbour the future martinet meditated disobedience of orders. Should he break his leave or not? As a last chance he applied for a further extension. He felt that it would be refused, and it was at the suggestion of a newspaper correspondent that he added that he would assume it granted unless he was recalled by telegraph. The telegram came with promptness, but it fell into the hands of the friendly newspaper correspondent, who did not manage to deliver it until the weekly Cyprus mail had left, and compliance with its orders was for the time being impossible, (RW I 160-61)

Before the week was out the fleet had shelled Alexandria, and everyone could see that "an officer who could speak Arabic was indispensable" (RW 94). But Churchill finds it remarkable that Kitchener, who proved so unsympathetic to "the enterprising subaltern, should have based his success upon an act of pardonable indiscipline," and he suggests that his work may bear examination better than his character (RW I 161).

Thus began the career of the man who "will occupy certainly the third, and possibly even the second place"-in the 1902 revision Churchill allows that "Kitchener will certainly occupy the second place"-in "the marvellous work" of regenerating Egypt (162, RW 94). Kitchener joined the new Egyptian army "as one of the original twenty-six officers" (94). After a stint as governor of the Red Sea outpost of Suakin, during which he instituted a more offensive policy against the surrounding tribes than the British government was able to encourage, he returned to the War Office in Cairo and served as Adjutant-General of the Egyptian army. When the Sirdar, or chief commander, of the army resigned in 1892, Kitchener was promoted to the post through the influence of Sir Evelyn Baring, who became Lord Cromer. His appointment was made "to the astonishment-indeed, to the disgust-of the Egyptian army": for "he had been a failure in civil administration, and was moreover little known to and less liked by his brother officers" (RW I 165; cf. RW 95-96). But "Lord Cromer had found the military officer whom he considered capable of reconquering the Soudan when the opportunity should come" (RW 96). He went on to support him through every difficulty, and Churchill concludes "that time has justified his choice" (RW I 165).
In their first brushes with the Dervish Empire the Egyptian authorities were handicapped by "the general ignorance of the Soudan and its peoples." But throughout "the years of preparation" the Egyptian intelligence branch, under the direction of Reginald Wingate, methodically gathered information about "the history, climate, geography, and inhabitants" of that country that would make it possible for Kitchener to form his plans with sure knowledge. Egyptian spies were at work even in the household of the caliph. By Wingate's direction "every important Emir was watched and located, every garrison estimated, and even the endless intrigues and brawls in Omdurman were carefully recorded." Two Europeans who escaped from the dervishes in the 1890s, the missionary Father Ohrwalder and the caliph's confidant Rudolph Slatin, provided an accurate assessment of the weakening of the Dervish Empire. Ohrwalder offered "much valuable information," and Slatin actually went to work for the intelligence branch "with the rank of Pasha" (RWr 96-97). But it was their books which made the greatest impression, for they were eagerly read both in Egypt and in Britain, where outrage at the caliph's cruelty encouraged a public wish for reconquest of the Sudan. Support for such a policy came also from the military, who were anxious to "restore the honour and extend the frontiers of the Empire" (RW I 168). Christians, to whom the pious Gordon had become a martyr, sought to avenge his death; and philanthropists were eager for the destruction of the dervish power. In 1895, the new Conservative and Unionist administration in Britain adopted the reconquest of the Sudan as their goal. For Egypt it would have been more convenient to undertake this project several years later, when the country's recuperation might be more complete; but Lord Cromer knew that "while the historian may easily mark what would have been the best possible moment for any great undertaking, a good moment must content the administrator" (RWr 98).

Thereupon the war began, and while "the man in the street" believed it was fought "to avenge General Gordon," British statesmen had another motive. European rivalries extended even to the Sudan. Just as Britain apprehended Russian influence on the Indian frontier, so she feared "the increasing possibility of French intrigues upon the Upper Nile" (RW I 173, RWr 98). Indeed, although the vindication of those fears appears only much later in Churchill's story, the French tried to clear the field for their own African designs by preventing the expedition at the outset. The national finances of Egypt when Britain assumed its advisory role in administration were in such

a woeful state that an international debt commission had been established to superintend them, on which France had a seat. The Egyptian administration was perforce conducted on a very slender budget. The authorities had to secure permission from the debt commission to incur the extra expense that would be required for the war, and the permission was granted, although France voted against it. But then, with the expedition already underway, France appealed the decision to the Mixed Tribunals, an international court on which she preponderated, claiming that funds for the war should come only from the regular budget. Whatever the legal implausibility of the claim that a war to retake lost territory was a regular rather than an extra expense, the Mixed Tribunals ordered that the funds already voted by the debt commission be repaid with interest. Not only did this decision bid fair to end the expedition—it also promised to throw the recovering Egyptian finances into complete disorder, for a part of the money had already been spent. Then, when it seemed that French diplomacy had triumphed, Britain's deep pockets saved the day. Lord Salisbury assured Lord Cromer that Britain would lend Egypt the money to repay the debt commission and to prosecute the war; and later this loan was turned into a gift. Since these events occurred at the time of year when taxes had recently been paid and the Egyptian treasury was full, on the strength of this assurance Egypt was able to astound the financiers and confound the French by returning the money, with interest, forthwith. The star of Britain was in the ascendant as the army of Egypt marched upriver towards the foe.

III

The reconquest of the Sudan was not a lightning campaign, but a carefully planned, methodical, lengthy, and often tedious operation well suited to the temper and talents of the Sirdar who commanded it. On March 12, 1896—as Churchill, at twenty-one, had just returned from his observations in Cuba, and more than two years before he would join the British troops at the climax of the Sudan campaign—Lord Cromer gave Kitchener the order to enter the Dongola Province in northern Sudan. The public learned of the order in a way which evinces both the power and the delicacy of the British advisors in Egypt. Lord Cromer had his order, of course, from the British cabinet in London. The news there appeared in The Times the following morning, "ostensibly as coming from its correspondent in Cairo," where "the Egyptian Cabinet was convened to give a formal assent by voting the decree" (103). Thenceforth Egyptian troops under Kitchener's command marched south to do the bidding of their government, traversing first the boulder-strewn Desert of the Belly of Stones, always following the route of the Nile. The long campaign depended entirely on the river, as Churchill points out to his reader by christening it "The River War" (RW I vii). It was Lord Rosebery, echoing
Herodotus, who truly said, "The Nile is Egypt, and Egypt is the Nile" (RW II 251). Only the river gives the country an opening for its commerce and allows the civilization of Europe to penetrate the "inner darkness": for "the Soudan is joined to Egypt by the Nile, as a diver is connected with the surface by his air-pipe." The headwaters of the river are in "the real Soudan, known to the statesman and the explorer," which "lies far to the south-moist, undulating, and exuberant" (RWr 17). Churchill delights in describing "the stately elephant" of the Equatorial Province, along with "the fierce rhinoceros," the "serpents of peculiar venom," and the "melancholy swamps" in which "huge hippopotami, crocodiles, and buffaloes prosper and increase" (21). But the River War takes place to the northward in the desert country that he calls "The Military Soudan." Here there is nothing but the sun and the wind and the driven sand, which falls and hangs on the rocks like Alpine snow—"only it is a fiery snow, such as might fall in hell." In this country only the Nile with its fringe of date-palms "protests that Nature is not always mischievous and cruel"; and "the traveller clings to the strong river as to an old friend" (18). If he loses his way and strays from the river, he returns to it with grateful thanks to "the God he worships, that when He made the world, He also made the Nile" (RW I 7-8).

In My Early Life Churchill remembers "how delicious it was in the evenings when, the infantry having reached and ordered their bivouac, the cavalry screen was withdrawn, and we filed down in gold and purple twilight to drink and drink and drink again from the swift abundant Nile" (MEL 188). Though the accidents of the campaign were so balanced between good and ill that one may disclaim any debt to fortune for good success (RWr 133), one may not affect the same independence of the benevolent blue stripe that runs through the desert:

In the account of the River War the Nile is naturally supreme. It is the great melody that recurs throughout the whole opera... It is the life of the lands through which it flows. It is the cause of the war: the means by which we fight; the end at which we aim. Imagination should paint the river through every page in the story. It glitters between the palm-trees during the actions. It is the explanation of nearly every military movement. By its banks the armies camp at night. Backed or flanked on its unfordable stream they offer or accept battle by day. To its brink, morning and evening, long lines of camels, horses, mules, and slaughter cattle hurry eagerly. Emir and Dervish, officer and soldier, friend and foe, kneel alike to this god of ancient Egypt and draw each day their daily water in goatskin or canteen. Without the river none would have started. Without it none might have continued. Without it none could ever have returned. (19)

Though the river is fringed with caustic plants as well as the date-palms, though "its soft yet fateful waters" are the conduit for fever as well as
revivification, though its annual floods bring destruction as well as renewal, even a modern man unwittingly feels a "mystic reverence" for the Nile, which reminds soldiers in the desert of their dependence on something mightier than men (RW I 10; cf. RWr 135-37).

The initial concentration of the Egyptian army in Akasha, which demonstrated "Kitchener's strange powers of rapid and comprehensive arrangement" (RW I 187), was undisturbed by the dervish army at Firket nearby. "Obstinate and fatuous to the last, they dallied and paltered," watching "in senseless apathy the deliberate, machine-like preparations for their destruction" (RWr 120-21). After a distracting skirmish at Suakin, later garrisoned by Indian troops who pled in vain for a share in the campaign, the army at Akasha advanced on Firket. The dervish reconnaissance, deceived by a dust storm, had failed to detect the signs of an impending attack, and reported that "the Turks lay quiet" (124). When the "Turks" attacked the next day, they completely surprised their enemy: only after the dervishes had beaten the morning call to prayer with the Sirdar's army in earshot did they discover their presence. After marching most of the night, the Egyptians now attacked with great eagerness; "for what is more thrilling than the sudden and swift development of an attack at dawn?" (127). The fire of the dervishes was irregular, and they were outnumbered by three men to one. Quickly they gave ground and were penned up by the river. Though the Egyptian troops which surrounded them left a path by the riverbank unblocked, by which many of the dervishes managed to escape, hundreds fought to the death, and their losses were heavy. Several men were killed in the Egyptian cavalry and camelry, and one British officer was wounded. "A special clasp" was struck to commemorate the action, but Churchill allows that "the reader will have formed his own estimate of the magnitude and severity of the fight" (130).

In the autumn of 1896, after the action at Firket, the logistics of bringing the army further upriver occupied the Sirdar's time and attention. The operation was dogged by bad luck. The railroad had to be repaired and extended, and supplies had to be carried upstream. Unusual south winds prevented small supply boats from making headway up the Nile. The river rose later than usual, delaying the gunboats that had to be brought upstream. Cholera crept upriver from Cairo and made the time one of trial, almost of terror:

The Egyptians, in spite of their fatalistic creed, manifested profound depression. The English soldiers were moody and ill-tempered. Even the light-hearted Soudanese lost their spirits; their merry grins were seen no longer; their laughter and their drums were stilled. Only the British officers preserved a stony cheerfulness, and ceaselessly endeavoured by energy and example to sustain the courage of their men. (136-37)

After the epidemic subsided, the troops marched south by a route that left the
river to avoid a long bend. As the first battalions of Sudanese troops set out across the desert, they had only the water they could carry in bottles: a "pitiless economy" had ruled out the provision of extra water carried by camel. Twenty-nine men suffered heatstroke, and two of them died. The next desert crossing was even worse. Three freak thunderstorms of terrible force scattered the troops in what they remembered afterwards as "The Death March," and nine more men were killed (140, RW I 251). The storms washed away long stretches of the railroad bed and knocked out the telegraph. "A hideous delay" seemed unavoidable. But now, "in this serious emergency, which threatened to wreck his schemes, the Sirdar's organising talents shone more brilliantly than at any other moment in this account." Knowing "the exact position of every soldier, coolie, camel, or donkey at his disposal," and putting them all to work, he managed to repair the damage in only a week (RW I 141). Still he had not exhausted his measure of the season's ill luck: his most powerful gunboat burst a cylinder on her maiden voyage and was put out of action indefinitely.

In all these vicissitudes, the dervishes have almost disappeared from the story. It is as if the Egyptians had no enemy but their own bad luck, and indeed the dervishes "were the smallest part of the Sirdar's difficulties." But Churchill does not forget them, "for although it was certain that, once the army was within striking distance, their destruction or rout would follow, they add a pleasing excitement to the labours of the troops and a romantic interest to the account of the campaign." Indeed it would be hard "to find a better type of Arab" than Wad Bishara, who commanded the northern dervish forces. A member of the same clan as the caliph Abdullah, he had "undoubted" courage and neglected no military precautions (RW I 256-59). As the Egyptians approached his position at Kerma, he prudently decided to withdraw half a mile south to Hafir. There he neatly took his forces across the river, where they entrenched themselves behind a long line of barricades. The Egyptians watched the "thrilling" scene: "beyond the flood waters of the river, backed against a sky of staring blue and in the blazing sunlight, the whole of the enemy's position was plainly visible" (RW I 145). Though the dervishes suffered heavy casualties, the only Egyptian losses were aboard the gunboats: on the water, dervish fire was so hot that the boats eventually withdrew. But then they found that they could safely run by the dervish posts at Hafir and steam on downriver to Dongola. Under cover of night Bishara, concerned lest his line of retreat be blocked, retired to the south. Despite the minuscule Egyptian casualties, "this picturesque and bloodless affair has been solemnly called the 'Battle of Hafir' - the most outstanding 'of all the instances of cheaply bought glory which the military history of recent years affords'" (147; cf. RW II 362-69). The army pushed on, and the outnumbered dervishes again retired from Dongola, leaving the Egyptians in possession of the province. Handsome medals were struck to commemorate the campaign.
While the army busied itself with the challenge of bringing the war further south into the country of the dervishes, no further battles were fought for almost a year. So long a pause might provoke the impatience of the reader, whose attention is naturally drawn to scenes of battle, where "the fierce glory that plays on red, triumphant bayonets dazzles the observer. Yet Churchill also inspects "the stem" that supports "the beautiful, bright-coloured flower" of victory-transport (RW\textsuperscript{1} 151). The river, of course, was the broad highway that opened the south to the invaders. Yet its course was broken by impassable cataracts, which required a tedious sequence of disembarkation, transport by camel, and re-embarkation. Rapid concentration of supplies for a large army became possible when camels were replaced by rail on the overland parts of the journey. The army that conquered the dervishes at Omdurman received its supplies by a combination of river and rail transport. In a considerate description of \textit{The River War}, Peter de Mendelssohn has remarked that "unlike others" Churchill saw the "romance" in the technical side of war, so that the pages concerning the desert railway, "which could easily have become the driest part of the book, are in fact the most vivid."\textsuperscript{18} The building of the railway becomes a romance, which Churchill commends to "the pen of Rudyard Kipling," because it was the most difficult part of the campaign (RW 1 277). He admits that even the best "strategy or organisation" cannot control the result of a battle:

\begin{quote}
The scheme may be well planned, the troops well fed, the ammunition plentiful, and the enemy entangled, famished, or numerically inferior. The glorious uncertainties of the field can yet reverse everything. The human element—in defiance of experience and probability—may produce a wholly irrational result, and a starving, out-maneuvered army win food, safety, and honour by their bravery.
\end{quote}

But a fair chance for both armies requires equal "equipment and discipline," and in a war against civilized troops, the only thing that gave the dervishes an even chance was their remoteness. Once that difficulty was overcome, the result of the war could no longer be in doubt. The chapter on the desert railway is the most exciting part of the book—save only the cavalry charge at Omdurman—because "fighting the Dervishes was primarily a matter of transport": the caliph "was conquered on the railway" (RW\textsuperscript{1} 151–52; cf. \textit{MEL} 183). Once it had been built, "it remained only to pluck the fruit in the most convenient hour, with the least trouble and at the smallest cost" (RW\textsuperscript{1} 168).

To reach Dongola, the expedition had to extend and repair an old railway

\textsuperscript{18} Mendelssohn, \textit{The Age of Churchill}, 129.
connecting two navigable stretches of the river. The northernmost section of
the railway remained intact; the middle section had been destroyed by the
dervishes, who had even prised up one rail for an improvised gallows, but at
least the embankments were in place; and the southernmost section was
completely new (105, 153-54, RW I 183-84). The equipment was old and
needed constant repair. Since "no trained staff or skilled workmen were
available," a "Railway Battalion" was hastily recruited from "men of varied
race and language, but of equal inexperience." Lieutenant Edouard Girouard
directed this "motley" group, whose labors proved at first "ridiculous rather
than important"; but the energy which he and his fellow subalterns brought
to the task soon produced impressive results. Though a few civilian foremen
were brought in from lower Egypt, they proved less capable than men newly
trained on the job. Schools were established to teach railway clerks to read and
write, and the students' zeal made learning grow "beneath the palm-trees
more quickly perhaps than in the magnificent schools of civilisation" (RWr
154-55). After repairing the damage caused by the great storms described
earlier, the crew completed the southernmost section of the railway. Mean-
while the Nile had fallen, rendering a further stretch of river impassable. The
railway had to be extended to the south through newly conquered, unmapped
territory, more than half of it desert. To feed the advancing army, which
depended on supplies conveyed by rail to the end of the line and thence by
camel, while maintaining the pace of supplies for construction, was a problem
"of extraordinary intricacy and difficulty" (156). Nonetheless the new section
was completed, affording rapid transport by river and rail all the way to
Dongola.

When the Sirdar received permission for a further advance in 1897, it was
imperative to extend the railway to support it. But below Dongola the river
makes a great bend, and where it curves back to the north its banks are
irregular and ill-suited for a railway. Moreover, the stringency of Egyptian
finances and fears of French activity in the southern Sudan encouraged
Kitchener to look for a cheaper and faster shortcut. He had to choose between
"three daring and ambitious schemes," two of them cutting off bends in the
Nile to avoid the difficult section and the last connecting the river above that
section directly to the Red Sea port of Suakin. This question "involved the
whole strategy of the war. No more important decision was ever taken by Sir
Herbert Kitchener, whether in office or in action" (157). The eventual
southern terminus of the railway would have to be secured by troops before
the connection could be completed, yet no large army could be maintained
without support from the railway. The way out of this circular argument was
to choose as the southern terminus a site only lightly defended by the
dervishes, which could therefore be captured and held by a small force
operating without supplies from the railway. This consideration determined
Kitchener's choice, for only the northernmost route met this condition. But
the favored route stretched for more than two hundred miles across the Nubian desert. The question remained of whether the desert railway was possible:

Eminent railway engineers in England were consulted. They replied with unanimity that, having due regard to the circumstances, and remembering the conditions of war under which the work must be executed, it was impossible to construct such a line. Distinguished soldiers were approached on the subject. They replied that the scheme was not only impossible, but absurd. Many other persons who were not consulted volunteered the opinion that the whole idea was that of a lunatic, and predicted ruin and disaster to the expedition. Having received this advice, and reflected on it duly, the Sirdar ordered the railway to be constructed without more delay.

(158)

The complications of gathering all of the necessary supplies on site resembled those of manufacturing in Earth orbit a century later. In rapid succession, Churchill lists thirty-one questions that had to be answered and spares his reader many more. Yet Lieutenant Girouard planned the construction so thoroughly "that the working parties were never delayed by the want even of a piece of brass wire" (159).

Construction of the desert railway would have been a formidable task "in any circumstances"; but five further requirements made it more difficult:

It had to be executed with military precautions. There was apparently no water along the line. The feeding of 2,000 platelayers in a barren desert was a problem in itself. The work had to be completed before the winter. And, finally, the money voted was not to be outrun. The Sirdar attended to the last condition. (159)

As the railhead moved further into the desert, the engines had to pull increasing amounts of water for their own propulsion, and extra water cars were attached and connected to the engines by hoses. A moving village of twenty-five hundred men, "connected with the living world of men and ideas by two parallel iron streaks, three feet six inches apart," built the railway. The village was visited each day by two trains, appearing as black specks "in the remote nothingness and then "growing larger and clearer," one carrying construction materials and the other "the letters, newspapers, sausages, jam, whisky, soda-water, and cigarettes which enable the Briton to conquer the world without discomfort," This "strange and lonely town" lived on a schedule of "machine-like regularity": every man had his job and returned to camp only "when it was finished" (160-61). At night the workers chatted and hoped there would be no dervish attack.

Halfway across the desert work on the railway was interrupted until the crew learned that Abu Hamed, the village on the Nile which was to be the
southern terminus of the railway, had been seized by a flying column under Sir Archibald Hunter. The operation had been kept secret in order to prevent any concentration by the dervishes. Almost at the last minute, the enemy had discovered the column on the march and had attempted to send relief to their outpost at Abu Hamed, which was only lightly defended. But by a relentless schedule of march through "the dark rocks and sandy shoals of the Monassir Desert-the most barren and dismal" section of the Nile (RW I 316)-the column had reached Abu Hamed ahead of the dervish reinforcements and carried the village at the point of the bayonet. Construction then resumed, "accelerated by nearly a month through the fortunate discovery of water" in two places where "friendly Arabs scoffed" at finding it (RWr 162). The Sirdar took a personal interest in the railway and won "the affection of the subalterns." He deserved their confidence, but whether "he reciprocated the affection is more doubtful" (163, RW I 297). The railway would reach Abu Hamed on November 1. A journey which had taken ten days before could then be made in little more than half a day, with the aid of new American engines which ran faster than the British ones (297-99). Troops were able to reach the front further up the Nile by hurrying back downriver on boats and trains to the northern terminus of the new desert railway, which carried them speedily to Abu Hamed (RWr 194).

Even before the railway reached the river, however, friendly tribesmen sent word to Kitchener that they had captured Berber, the town south of Abu Hamed where the camel route from Suakin met the Nile. The Sirdar had to decide whether or not to move forward from Abu Hamed and occupy the town. Though the advance would put his army closer to Omdurman, they would have to expect a general action against the dervishes without a finished supply line. In spite of this danger, Kitchener ordered the occupation of Berber. A general stockpile began to grow at a point south of Berber near the confluence of the Atbara River with the Nile, which was called the Atbara Fort. Soon Egyptian gunboats were bombarding dervish outposts even further south-work that proved "no less enjoyable than exciting" (188). To the Sirdar's relief, the dervishes made no general attack; and the railway, after it reached the Nile, was extended south towards Berber. He made a side-trip to the eastern Sudan to arrange the retrocession of the fort at Kassala, which the Italians had seized from the dervishes in a more prosperous year but now wished to return to Egypt, and then returned to his army amid rumors that the dervishes were planning to attack. In London the War Office, which remembered the defeats of 1884 and 1885 and had no wish to repeat them, sent British troops under the command of General W. F. Gatacre to strengthen the army. They quickly arrived at the front and underwent "a most severe and rigorous training" (RW I 365). Just as the troops began to fear that the dervishes had decided to remain on the defensive, which would have postponed hostilities until the Nile flood enabled Kitchener's army to advance,
word came that Mahmud, the caliph's lieutenant, was approaching the confluence of the rivers with perhaps twenty thousand men. By this time Kitchener's new positions were strongly held and fully supplied, and there remained to the troops but little of the danger earlier apprehended from a dervish advance. The prospect of battle was therefore greeted with pleasant anticipation.

Mahmud planned to outflank the Sirdar's army by circling around it to the east through the desert and re-occupying Berber, cutting its supply line. Kitchener reacted by advancing southeast up the Atbara River, forcing the dervishes to make an even longer circuit in order to turn his army's flank. Mahmud, who wished to keep a prudent distance, was forced to go too far east for his army to be able to reach Berber with the water they could carry, and there were no wells. Short of supplies, he sat down behind a zeriba, or thorn entrenchment. His rear supply depot was captured by an Egyptian raiding party with the help of friendly Arab tribes. His hard-pressed army, subsisting on no other food than the nuts of the dōm-palm, began to melt away. For several days the Egyptian horse made a thorough reconnaissance of the dervish encampment, remarkable for the skill with which the Egyptian troopers disengaged themselves afterwards from a stronger pursuing force. On the evening of April 7, 1898, the Anglo-Egyptian army set out for Mahmud's encampment, planning to attack at dawn. The night march was not without its risks. "No operation of war is more critical," for in the gloom the shape and aspect of the ground are altered. Places well known by daylight appear strange and unrecognisable.... The effect of the gloom upon the nerves of the soldiers is not less than on the features of the country. Each man tries to walk quietly, and hence all are listening for the slightest sound. . . . In such hours doubts and fears come unbidden to the brain, and the marching men wonder anxiously whether all will be well with the army, and whether they themselves will survive the event. And if suddenly out of the black silence there burst the jagged glare of rifles and the crash of a volley followed by the yell of an attacking foe, the steadiest troops may be thrown into confusion. . . . Nevertheless, so paramount is the necessity of attacking at dawn, with all the day to finish the fight, that in spite of the recorded disasters and the known dangers, the night-march is a frequent operation. (RWr 211-12)

Kitchener's advance was led by an officer familiar with the ground and protected by "careful patrolling" (RW 1 418). As dawn broke over the desert, the army looked down on the dervish encampment from a ridge. They were ready, "yet everything was very quiet, and in the stillness of the dawn it almost seemed that Nature held her breath" (RWr 214).

The battle took little more than two hours. At 6:15 on the morning of April 8, an artillery bombardment began against the closely packed dervish defend-
ers. Many of the new British troops had their first taste of war and eagerly watched the shells to see how much execution they did; but before long "the strange sight became monotonous," and they grew impatient for "further developments and 'some new thing'" (215). Churchill judges that this impatience was misplaced, for the bombardment did serious damage to the ranks of the enemy before the attacking army came within range of dervish fire. "Civilized troops," he writes,

should take full advantage of their weapons; and the spectacle of the assaulting columns advancing on the entrenchments after an insufficient artillery preparation, and disdaining to open fire till they were within a range when their rifles were on an equality with those of the Dervishes, however magnificent it may be, suggests the hog-hunter who dismounted from his horse, flung away his spear, then dealt the boar a tremendous kick in the throat, and eventually made an end of him with his hands. (RW I 460)

A longer bombardment before the general advance would have saved lives in the Sirdar's army. But modern weapons were put to good use in making a cavalry battle unnecessary: "the tat-tat-tat-tat" of the Maxim guns (424)-described only as "noise" in the revised edition (RWr 215)-discouraged the dervish horse from harassing the flank. At 7:40 the general advance began, as "large solid columns of men, preceded by a long double line, with the sunlight flashing on their bayonets and displaying their ensigns, marched to the assault in regular and precise array" (216). Dervish fire felled many of the attackers, but the leading companies approached the zeriba in good order. The Sudanese brigades charged "with a wild and furious shout," but the more phlegmatic Cameron Highlanders "marched slowly and in disdainful silence up to the thorn fence" and, reaching it, paused to pull it methodically apart (RW I 430). Through the gaps poured the troops to the rear, and from all sides dervishes sprang out of their trenches. They fought fiercely and bravely, and many gaps opened in the advancing lines as the defenders' rifles and spears took their toll. But the remaining men advanced in good order and irresistibly smote down the dervishes or drove them past the dry riverbed and into the scrub beyond. The attackers' wave swept all before it, and the dervish musketry "was as little able to stop the advance as the pebbles which a child might throw at rising waters" (432). Yet the defenders "disdained to run" (RWr 218), and many fought bravely to the end.

By 8:25, the victory was won, and what was left of the dervish army melted into the tangled country beyond the Atbara. Mahmud himself was captured and brought before the Sirdar, who presumed to ask the defeated dervish why he had "come into my country to burn and kill" (220). With some dignity Mahmud returned an unrepentant answer. Churchill allows that

perhaps to these savages, with their vile customs and brutal ideas, we
appeared as barbarous aggressors. The British subaltern, with his jokes, his cigarettes, his meat lozenges, and his Sparldet soda-water, was to them a more ferocious creature than any Emir or fanatic in Omdurman. The Highlanders in their kilts, the white loopholed gunboats, the brown-clad soldiery, and the Lyddite shells were elements of destruction which must all have looked ugly when viewed from the opposite side. (RW II 44)

Discerning in the dervish captain "a fine specimen of proud brutality," our author allows that he would be "worthy perhaps of some better fate than to linger indefinitely in the gaol" (RW2 220). But Kitchener showed no such understanding, binding his enemy's hands and arranging for him to march behind "an enormous flag, on which was inscribed in Arabic characters, 'This is Mahmud, who said he would take Berber' " (RW I 462). After the battle the Sirdar's army had to await the annual rise in the river. They moved into summer quarters, and as the first volume of The River War ends, the troops are suffering acutely from the flies, the heat, the boredom, and the guinea-worms.

Hurrying forward from Alexandria as an officer newly attached to the Twenty-first Lancers, Churchill avoided the tedium of the summer encampment but arrived in time for the final advance on Omdurman. The second volume of The River War is a "personal narrative": our author invites the reader, who "has watched the drama from the auditorium," to join him on "the stage and take an actor's interest in the final scenes" (RW II 1-2). He describes soldiers climbing into the trains at their barracks in Cairo, "arrayed in what they call 'Christmas Tree order,' and dangling from every part of their bodies with water-bottles, havresacks, canteen-straps, cloaks, swords, and carbines" (5). In My Early Life he recalls that his own regiment's movement "1,400 miles into the heart of Africa was effected with the swiftness, smoothness and punctuality which in those days characterized all Kitchener's arrangements" (MEL 183). He stopped near Aswan to tour the Temple of Philae, which he viewed with "hostility." The development of Egyptian agriculture required a steady water supply, and financing for the Aswan dam had already been arranged. But the desire not to submerge the temple threatened to limit the height of the dam, which would more than halve the volume of its reservoir. Taking issue with archaeologists who sought to save the temple, Churchill bids "a rational and utilitarian generation" to ignore the urgings of "a few persons whose functions are far removed from those which may benefit mankind-profitless chippers of stone, rummagers in the dust-heaps of the past" (RW II 9, 18-19; cf. 250-51). From Aswan he continued south with the cavalry squadron, boarding the desert railway at Wady Halfa. As he crossed the
desert, Churchill was struck by its desolation, writing in *The River War* that "the whole countenance of the land is terrible" (23); but a more distant memory invests the trip with romance, and in *My Early Life* he remembers that "the journey was delightful." Unfortunately, he travelled with "a profound, unrelenting fear" that the Sirdar, upset with "the over-riding by the War Office of his wishes" about Churchill's appointment, might succeed in having it cancelled or order him to sit out the battle in the rear. He could only hope that Kitchener "might find something else to occupy his mind and forget to put a spoke in the wheel of an unfortunate subaltern." By the time he stepped off the train at the confluence of the Atbara and the Nile, still without meeting any obstacle, his fears had receded; and later he discovered that the Sirdar, when notified of his appointment, "had simply shrugged his shoulders and passed on to what were after all matters of greater concern" (*MEL* 183-85).

When the Twenty-first Lancers left Atbara, Churchill remained behind "to hand over surplus stores," and he set off just before sunset to catch up with them. He made a detour into the desert to avoid the scrub along the bank of the Nile and, when the sky clouded over and obscured the Big Dipper and the North Star, he found himself lost and unable to find his way back to the river. For some hours he felt "a horrible sensation of powerlessness"; but at half-past three "the glorious constellation of Orion came into view" and guided him back to the river, where he and his pony drank their fill. When he reached his column's campground, they had already moved on; but a villager nearby, in return for "Backsheesh," furnished him with dates, dirty milk, and directions (*RW* II 34-39) He reached the column at its next campground and with them completed the march to Shabluka, "the last strong position between the army and the Dervish capital" (49). There the Egyptian cavalry came forward to help water the horses and pitch the tents of the British troopers, and the grateful soldiers decided "that 'them Egyptians' (they would never call them 'Gippies') were 'good enough, despite their 'ides' " (50). When the column moved on, their line of march left the Nile to go around the Shabluka Ridge. The heat in the desert was intense: "in spite of thick clothes, spine-pads, broad-brimmed pith helmets, one felt the sun leaning down upon one and piercing our bodies with his burning rays" (*MEL* 188). The ridge was a fine defensive position from which the dervishes could have harassed their enemy and inflicted considerable damage; but they did not defend it, and the Anglo-Egyptian army moved in perfect tranquillity toward the great collision. "It was a strange war"—certainly different from the fighting that Churchill had seen on the Indian frontier. Unlike the Pathans, the dervishes disdained any sniping or preliminary skirmishes. The green troops almost reached the battlefield before they had "disabused their minds of the idea that they would do wrong to kill a man" (*RW* II 52-53, 69; cf. 323-33). Yet every march took the army closer to Omdurman.
Meanwhile, the enemy were beset by comic misfortunes. They fashioned a crude mine of gunpowder packed in an iron boiler and lowered it into the river, hoping to sink the Egyptian gunboats; but the mine exploded instantly and sank their own boat. A second mine was laid by a more cautious dervish captain, who took care to dampen the powder before lowering it over the side. The Sirdar also had his misfortunes: with no assistance from the dervishes, his chief gunboat was wrecked before it reached Omdurman. But he had allowed a margin of error and was not unduly concerned about the loss. The remaining gunboats steamed upriver to Omdurman and inflicted great damage by shelling the walls and houses of the city, and especially the Mahdi's tomb. The British cavalry had begun to fear that the dervishes would decamp into the desert without a battle. But at length, on September 1, Churchill's troop of the Twenty-first Lancers climbed the Kerreri Hills, from which they surveyed the whole dervish encampment near the confluence of the Blue and the White Niles at Omdurman. Some few dervishes were visible on the desert; but then what had seemed to be the zeriba began to move, and then "the whole side of the hill" (RWr 234). The dervish army was advancing on the infidels with a numerical advantage of more than two to one. Churchill calls it "the impression of a lifetime; nor do I expect ever again to see such an awe-inspiring or formidable sight" (RW II 87). His squadron leader sent him to report to Kitchener on the movements of the dervish army. He approached the Sirdar with some trepidation but delivered his report. Kitchener asked him how long it would take the dervishes to reach his army, and Churchill judged that it would be at least an hour. Then he went off to have some lunch before the battle, and "it was like a race luncheon before the Derby" or a modern tailgate party (MEL 193; cf. RWr 98, RW II 169). The dervishes, however, soon halted their advance, and the army had to prepare for the terrors of a night attack.

These "little wars of Britain in those vanished light-hearted days" were "full of fascinating thrills," as Churchill remembers with some nostalgia in My Early Life. Strolling by the river with another officer, he was hailed, by a passing gunboat eager for news of the cavalry reconnaissance. After some conversation the naval officers asked, "How are you off for drinks? We have got everything in the world on board here. Can you catch?" and almost immediately a large bottle of champagne was thrown from the gunboat to the shore." Churchill rescued it from the river, where it had fallen, and carried it happily back to the cavalry mess. Altogether it was "a jolly life," and "nobody expected to be killed." But it was almost the last war in which death seemed "a sporting element in a splendid game":

Most of us were fated to see a war where the hazards were reversed, where death was the general expectation and severe wounds were counted as lucky escapes, where whole brigades were shorn away under the steel flail of
artillery and machine-guns, where the survivors of one tornado knew that they would certainly be consumed in the next or the next after that. Everything depends upon the scale of events. We young men who lay down to sleep that night within three miles of 60,000 well-armed fanatical Dervishes, expecting every moment their violent onset or inrush and sure of fighting at latest with the dawn—we may perhaps be pardoned if we thought we were at grips with real war. (MEL 188, 195-96)

The Anglo-Egyptian troops could lie awake imagining "a multitude of fierce swordsmen" attacking by night, "cutting and slashing at every living thing" (RW II 102). The dervishes too had an anxious night, their sleep troubled by the demonic glare of a British searchlight (100).

The next morning, September 2, 1898, the British and Egyptian troops awoke before dawn. Churchill galloped up Surgham Hill with a party of officers from the Twenty-first Lancers to determine the position of the dervish army. The sun rising behind him disclosed the enemy coming on in force, cheering. As he watched from the hill, "a tremendous roar came up in waves of intense sound, like the tumult of the rising wind and sea before a storm" (RW II 244). "All the pride and might of the Dervish Empire" were arrayed under the banners of its captains "on this last great day of its existence" (245). Having sent his messages and tarried almost too long-for "the wonder of the scene exercised a dangerous fascination" (RW II 111)-he left his "coign of vantage" and galloped to safer ground. Here he could see the Anglo-Egyptian army with their powerful batteries and gunboats. The dervishes, under the command of Osman Azrak, appeared firing on the crest of the hill, and immediately a tremendous cannonade broke upon them. The caliph's plan of attack was "complex and ingenious," but it was "based on an extraordinary miscalculation of the power of modern weapons" (RW II 248). Churchill watched through field glasses as the first ranks of the dervish advance were thinned by exploding shells. Their demise "was a matter of machinery"; but "it was a terrible sight, for as yet they had not hurt us at all, and it seemed an unfair advantage to strike thus cruelly when they could not reply." Soon the cavalry cleared the front and returned behind the ranks of the gunners, who "darted about as they busied themselves in their complicated process of destruction" (246-47). With abated ranks but unabated courage the dervishes came on, heedless of the fire. As they came within range of the fire of the Sirdar's infantry, a great fusillade broke out; and soon more than twelve thousand men "were engaged in that mechanical scattering of death which the polite nations of the earth have brought to such monstrous perfection" (RW II 118-19). At length, about eight hundred yards from the British division and even closer to the Sudanese, who were armed with older

19. The phrase is from his letter to Colonel Ian Hamilton on September 16, 1898, reprinted in WSC I C 976-80.
rifles, the dervish advance faltered and stopped. Osman had met his end. "The surviving Dervishes lay down on the ground" and opened a ragged fire upon the opposing lines. The British artillery methodically sought out their positions in the folds of the land rising from the river, and they rose to fly. Again infantry fire drove them to ground, and again the shells persuaded them to retreat—now less numerous than before. Some made good their escape, and "some, notwithstanding the vices of which they have been accused and the perils with which they were encompassed, gloriously carried off their injured comrades" (RWr 253).

Abdullah had kept back three strong armies. Two of these armies remained in reserve, while the third, under his son Osman Sheikh-ed-Din, was ordered to reach around the right flank of the enemy. If the frontal attack failed and the infidels sallied forth from their zeriba onto the plain, then Osman's army was to fall upon them from the north and the other two armies from the west, driving them into the river. Colonel Broadwood had been ordered, with nine cavalry squadrons and the Camel Corps, to support the Egyptian troops who were holding the front against the dervish left. After he deployed on the Kerreri Ridge, his camelry were imperilled by the much more numerous dervish army. A British gunboat, steaming downriver in the nick of time, halted the dervish pursuit with its cannon fire. Broadwood was ordered to retire, but instead of obeying the order he lured Osman further north. "This beneficial disobedience," which was possible only because of "the good understanding which existed between the Sirdar and his trusted cavalry leader," disordered Abdullah's plan (R W I I 127); for Broadwood's mounted troops "played with their powerful antagonist,, as the banderillo teases the bull" (RWr 252), until they drew Osman and his army too far from the battle to join the second attack intended by the caliph. As Osman disappeared far to the north, the first phase of the Battle of Omdurman ended.

Kitchener was anxious to occupy Omdurman before the dervish army could re-form and return to the city, knowing that it would be much easier to seize the city promptly than after its defenders were in place. He ordered the Lancers to reconnoiter the intervening ground and to clear it of dervishes so that the army could advance. To the left, stretching towards Omdurman, were scattered parties of dervishes—a sight "sufficient to excite the fiercest instincts of cavalry" (254). A reconnaissance party under Lieutenant R. G. Grenfell returned to report "a formed body of Dervishes about 1,000 strong" drawn up in a shallow khor, or gully, on the way to Omdurman, and the decision was made to advance (255). In the interim, however, the dervishes in the khor had been joined by another two thousand men. In My Early Life Churchill remembers how it looked as he approached:

Bright flags appeared as if by magic, and I saw arriving from nowhere Emirs on horseback among and around the mass of the enemy. The Dervishes appeared to be ten or twelve deep at the thickest, a great grey mass gleaming
with steel, filling the dry watercourse. (MEL 205)

But the Lancers discovered the reinforcement too late to retire. The Colonel ordered the trumpet to sound "Right wheel into line" and Churchill galloped forward in the last British cavalry charge in war. The charge lasted only a few seconds. There was a tremendous collision in the khor, in which "nearly thirty Lancers" were overthrown, and then the-troopers scrambled out on the other side, "leaving a score" of their own, including Lieutenant Grenfell, behind (RWr 257). Churchill found himself quite alone but still firmly in the saddle. Quickly he rejoined his troop. A wounded dervish staggered towards him brandishing a spear, and Churchill shot him dead "at less than a yard" (MEL 208).

The Lancers had undergone their first charge in war. "The glamour of a cavalry charge impresses a wide public"; but Churchill submits that in the Lancers' charge at Omdurman there was "nothing splendid, nothing magnificent, nothing that the disciplined cavalry of any European nation might not reasonably be expected to perform" (RW 11 232, 235). "The heroic element" appeared only later, in "the extraordinary celerity with which the squadrons re-formed, the soldierly eagerness of the troopers to charge again, their steady and effective musketry when they were presently dismounted," which "showed that a loss of more than fifteen per cent. had not in the least impaired their morale or disturbed their equanimity. The observer might realise in a small way 'that strength and majesty with which the British soldier fights'" (236). These were mature British soldiers who thought for themselves and "exhibited the discipline of a pack of hounds, not that of a flock of sheep," and their example might give the Empire "confidence in the present and high hope in the future" (237). Now the Lancers prepared for a second charge. The men who remained were ready to return to the field, but "they all looked serious," whereupon Churchill asked his second sergeant "if he had enjoyed himself. His answer was 'Well, I don't exactly say I enjoyed it, Sir; but I think I'll get more used to it next time.' At this the whole troop laughed" (MEL 208). 20 The fear we feel in the face of death is not original with our generation. But the great cost of the charge -began to come home to the survivors. Though the dervishes, to their credit, had attempted "no artistic mutilations" (RWr 258), from the direction of the khor came "a succession of grisly apparitions; horses spouting blood, struggling on three legs, men staggering on foot, men bleeding from terrible wounds, fish-hook spears stuck right through them, arms and faces cut to pieces, bowels protruding, men gasping, crying, collapsing, expiring" (MEL 208). An accident that had weakened Churchill's

20. For all that we respect life, we still respect even more a man who is not too fearful about losing it, showing his mettle by his detachment from pain and by humor. When President Reagan was shot, for once the media image dissolved, giving us a window into his soul. While the media made themselves ridiculous, we thought we saw courage in his jokes, and rightly so. Nothing made him more formidable.
shoulder in India prevented him from wielding a sword with full force, and he had chosen instead to arm himself for the charge with a pistol. After the battle he concluded, with apologies to tradition, that the whole cavalry regiment should have used pistols rather than swords (RW II 347-52). Now the Lancers, who had hitherto fought with sword and lance, opened fire upon the dervishes and drove them from the khor.

The Sirdar, seeing his way clear into Omdurman, ordered his whole army to advance on the city. But his order was premature, for Abdullah's remaining armies were still undefeated. Though Osman was out of range to the north, the other two armies attacked the British and Egyptian troops as they left the protection of the zeriba. Kitchener, realizing that the battle was not yet over, "began to throw his brigades about as if they were companies" (151). The redeployment, which turned the army northwest to face the dervish assault, did not prevent Lieutenant-Colonel MacDonald's brigade, on the extreme right, from sustaining the assaults of two dervish armies attacking from different directions. One of his battalions—the only one "in the army not commanded by a British officer"—began to waver; but "their morale" returned when reinforcements were sent "to march up behind them with fixed bayonets" (153). The attacks were delivered consecutively rather than simultaneously, giving MacDonald just time to execute a difficult turning movement to face the second attack after he had repulsed the first. The Sudanese soldiers of the Tenth Battalion fought with a bravery "no less conspicuous than the wildness of their musketry" (RWII 267). British soldiers of the Lincolnshire Regiment, formerly called the Tenth Foot, had adopted the Tenth Soudanese as their "`black battalion'-to the intense delight of those military savages"—and now, at the critical moment, "their own English regiment" rushed to their aid (RWII 160). The dervish cavalry, which could no longer hope to prevail, nonetheless rode on "unflinchingly to certain death" (RWII 268). Some have discounted their courage as the result of "mad fanaticism," but Churchill objects to the "cruel injustice" of regarding "as madness in the savage what would be sublime in civilised men." The battle was over, and the dervishes who remained alive began to retire from the field. The Sirdar, putting his binoculars back into their case, remarked "that he thought the enemy had been given a good dusting" and ordered the army "to resume their interrupted march on Omdurman" (RWII 162). The battle was "the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science—over barbarians": in five hours the dervishes had been destroyed and dispersed, with hardly any difficulty, comparatively small risk, and insignificant loss to the victors (RWII 269). Yet all who lived through the Battle of Omdurman had the memory of friends who were less fortunate, and Churchill realized that what Kipling had written of the ocean was also true of war on the Nile: "If blood be the price of Admiralty,/Lord God, we ha' paid it in" (quoted at RWII 243).
The Sirdar rode through the suburbs of Omdurman and informed the leading Emir, "in Arabic, that he would spare all who should lay down their arms" (173). His announcement was greeted with relief and rejoicing which some mistook for popular pleasure at their deliverance from the dervish power. Kitchener's army took possession of the city and then made camp outside the walls, leaving only one brigade "to complete the establishment of law and order-a business which was fortunately hidden by the shades of night" (RW 275-76). The caliph escaped with the remnants of his army, and pursuit was unavailing because of the dearth of cavalry. The wounded dervishes still upon the field were less fortunate. Though the Sirdar had given orders before the Battle of Atbara to spare the wounded among the enemy, the order was not republished before the Battle of Omdurman; and "there was a very general impression that the fewer the prisoners, the greater would be the satisfaction of the commander" (RW II 195). This mistaken impression encouraged those who sought to exact vengeance for the death of General Gordon, and many wounded dervishes were killed; especially by Egyptian and Sudanese troops. Looking back on the battle, "the mind turns with disgust from the spectacle of unequal slaughter," and Churchill predicts that the 'glory of Omdurman' will seem to any who may five years hence read this book a very absurd expression" (197). For the campaign as a whole he admits a useful result, which justifies the sacrifices of "those who had paid the bill for all the fun and glory of the game": for

the destruction of a state of society which had long become an anachronism—an insult as well as a danger to civilisation; the liberation of the great waterway; perhaps the foundation of an African India; certainly the settlement of a long dispute; these are cenotaphs which will scarcely be unregarded during the present generation.

After the battle, the flags of Egypt and Britain were raised over Khartoum, and the soldiers gave "three cheers for Her Majesty. Churchill "devoted leisure to repose" but had he been present would have raised his "voice and helmet in honour of that persevering British people who-often affronted, often checked, often delayed-usually get their own way in the end. Obsequies for the English dead were celebrated to "the solemn words of the English Prayer-book" in the same garden where Gordon's body had been decapitated by savages. The soldiers sang Gordon's favorite hymn, "Abide with Me," as "a gunboat on the river crashed out the salute" with live shells, having no blank ammunition (204-205).

Churchill toured the city, recognizing in the caliph's house "the abode of one who must have possessed civilized qualities." He had less confidence that
his own commander possessed them. He visited the tomb of the Mahdi, much damaged by shelling, which

had been for more than ten years the most sacred and holy thing that the people of the Soudan knew. Their miserable lives had perhaps been brightened, perhaps in some way ennobled by the contemplation of something which they did not quite understand, but which they believed exerted a protecting influence. (211-12)

Afterwards, as Churchill wrote in the original version of *The River War*, Kitchener ordered the tomb "profaned and razed to the ground." The Mahdi's corpse was dug up and decapitated; the trunk was thrown into the Nile, and the head, "to quote the official explanation, 'preserved for future disposal'-a phrase which must in this case be understood to mean, that it was passed from hand to hand till it reached Cairo," where a disapproving Lord Cromer ordered it to be reinterred at Wady Halfa. Churchill describes the Mahdi as "a man of considerable nobility of character," giving instances of his mercy and kindness (212-13). He doubts the argument of those who seek to justify the destruction of his tomb by claiming that "the people of the Soudan cared no more for the Mahdi," pointing out that more than 50,000 had fought hard only a week before to assert their respect and belief; but if the tomb was no longer of any moment, then it was merely "Vandalism" to level it. If, as seems more likely, "the people of the Soudan still venerated the memory of the Mahdi," then "to destroy what was sacred and holy to them was a wicked act, of which the true Christian, no less than the philosopher, must express his abhorrence" (214). He contrasts the respectful treatment of indigenous religions by the Indian administration, which causes British rule to be accepted by the mass of the people" there, with Kitchener's behavior and concludes that "if such conduct is to be characteristic" of British rule in the Sudan, "then it would be better if Gordon had never given his life nor Kitchener won his victories" (215).

Churchill intends a larger moral. The expansion of British dominion meant that British arms were repeatedly turned against "odd and bizarre potentates," whose names are now forgotten by all but a few historians:

They pass in a long procession:-The Akhund of Swat; Cetewayo, brandishing an assegai as naked as himself; Kruger, singing a psalm of victory; Osman Digna, the Immortal and the Irretrievable; Theebaw, with his Umbrella; Lobengula, gazing fondly at the pages of *Truth*; Prempeh, abasing himself in the dust; the Mad Mullah, on his white ass; and, latest of all, the Khalifa in his coach of state.

Each of them was instantly famous-for fifteen minutes, as Andy Warhol said-and marched "from the dark wings of barbarism up to the bright
footlights of civilisation." Once defeated, each was fast forgotten (217-18). But if the British dominion is to be not merely less ephemeral, but also deservedly so, then that empire must show its superiority to these characters not just in force, but also in justice, In My Early Life, Churchill recalls that he was "scandalised" by Kitchener's desecration of the tomb and by "the barbarous manner in which he had carried off the Mahdi's head in a kerosene-can as a trophy" (MEL 242). The Sirdar's vengeance, which lowered him to the standard of the Arab mob that killed Gordon, recalls Macaulay's warning about the strength of civilisation without its mercy.

The chapter describing the sequel to the victory, which Churchill deleted from the revised version of The River War, also includes his tour of the field of Omdurman with Lord Tullibardine three days after the battle. On his own side the dead had been buried, and he tried "to gild war" by reflecting "that a soldier's death for a cause that he believes in will count for much, whatever maybe beyond this world." Yet the dead among the dervishes, "as brave men as ever walked the earth," remained on the field. Their bodies had "swollen to almost gigantic proportions" in the hot sun, and the horror of the appalling sight was "redoubled" by the smell. In some places men's bodies lay "three deep"; in others, they lay mingled with those of their mounts. "At such sights," Churchill discovered, "the triumph of victory faded on the mind, and a mournful feeling of disgust grew stronger" (RW II 220-22). Despite the deficiencies of the arrangements imposed by the Sirdar's indifference and the economies he imposed (361-62), the wounded conquerors had been removed to field hospitals; but many wounded dervishes remained upon the field. Churchill's companion "had a large water-bottle" and offered them drinks until it was empty (223). These sorry fellows crawled painfully towards the thorn bushes to get out of the sun, or towards the river to have a last drink. Some got help from the women, "but it was bad for the man who had come from far and had no friends. At any rate, Churchill saw that "the statement that the wounded Dervishes received every delicacy and attention' is so utterly devoid of truth that it transcends the limits of mendacity and passes into the realms of the ridiculous" (225). Thinking perhaps of the critique he had read of Leontius's fascination with dead bodies in Plato's Republic, 21 he hurried away from the battlefield. Though "it may be," he writes, "that vengeance is sweet, and that the gods forbade vengeance to men because they reserved for themselves so delicious and intoxicating a drink," still "no one should drain the cup to the bottom": for "the dregs are often filthy-tasting" Again, when one takes the long view, the British do better to pride themselves on their justice, when they can, than on the permanence of their rule. The dervish dominion was destroyed by science, yet their demise "only anticipates that of the victors: for Time, which laughs at science, as science laughs at

valour, will in due course contemptuously brush both combatants away" (RW II 226).

With the capture of the city, the British contingent dropped quickly back down the Nile towards home, and Churchill returned to London. Yet the caliph and his dervish army were yet unsubdued, and the Egyptian army remained to complete the reconquest of the Sudan. They had first to deal with a surprising diversion. Soon after the victory at Omdurman, their attention was arrested by rumors of a European presence upriver at Fashoda. Perhaps the British decision to complete the reconquest of the Sudan had been hastened by fears of French opportunism. It was known that almost two years before, while the Egyptian army was completing the reconquest of the northern province, a French expedition under Major Marchand had pushed eastward from the Atlantic into the heart of Africa. No one at Omdurman knew for certain that the foreigners downriver were the major and his men; but, whoever they might be, the British captains of the Egyptian army looked forward to driving them out of the country. They steamed upriver, and as their gunboats neared Fashoda on September 18, a Senegalese sergeant and two men greeted them "with a letter from Major Marchand announcing the arrival of the French troops and their formal occupation of the Soudan. It, moreover, congratulated the Sirdar on his victory, and welcomed him to Fashoda in the name of France" (RW 284). The French outpost was stranded, almost out of ammunition, and expecting a dervish attack. The Frenchmen were relieved to see a European force; and "the Sirdar and his officers on their part were thrilled with admiration at the wonderful achievements of this small band of heroic men," who had braved fever and war, forest and gloom, mountain and swamp to reach Fashoda. Kitchener disembarked and congratulated Marchand on his achievement. The Frenchman replied that the success of his expedition was not his own doing but that of his soldiers. When Kitchener told the story later, he "remarked, ‘Then I knew he was a gentleman.’ " The Sirdar politely overlooked the French flag but "hoisted the British and Egyptian colours with all due ceremony" (285). Appointing Colonel Jackson to command in Fashoda, he sailed further south and then returned to Omdurman.

The revelation of French machinations on the upper Nile had excited a very unanimous resolve on the part of the British "to have Fashoda or fight" (287). The French had thought to steal a march on Britain by profiting from Egypt's misfortune in losing the Sudan. They had been willing to seize the country by the back door. As they were not willing to fight, however, their withdrawal was now inevitable. Colonel Jackson, who spoke French, established a warm relation with Major Marchand; but later, in the major's absence, his second-in-command pursued a provocative policy that risked war between Britain and France. At length Marchand returned to Fashoda with instructions to abandon the post, reproved his overzealous subordinate, and led his disappointed men away through Abyssinia. French and British diplomats
drafted an agreement whereby France recognized British interests in the drainage system of the Nile, while Britain recognized French aspirations in the rest of north Africa not yet occupied by European powers. Britain and Egypt were left in undisputed possession of the Sudan. The legal status of the country had still to be defined. The reversion of the Sudan to Egypt would have subjected the country to all the onerous regulations that fettered its own administration. Direct annexation by Britain "would have been an injustice to Egypt," which had provided most of the army for the reconquest (291). The situation called for the ingenuity of Lord Cromer, who drafted a document establishing "a diplomatic `Fourth Dimension'' not hitherto "known to the law of Europe," specifying that Egypt and Britain would be "joint-possessors" of the conquered Sudan-an arrangement that endured until independence in 1956 (292).

The caliph remained abroad to the west near Kordofan, whither he had retired with the remnant of his army. One of his lieutenants was defeated at an island on the Blue Nile in the Battle of Rosaires. The Tenth Sudanese-Churchill calls them "demons who would not be denied" (308)-led the attack on the dervishes, advancing in order "over a bare plain and under a searching fire both in front and flank," changing direction to pursue the foe, calmly receiving a counter-attack, and then pushing the dervishes into the river. Churchill judges that theirs was a finer military achievement "than the charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman" and that they "rank with the best troops, British or native, among the armed forces of the Empire" (RW II 286-87). After this success the Sirdar decided to try to capture Abdullah, and a Kordofan Field Force under his homonymous subordinate, Colonel Kitchener, was organized. The force set out southwest through the desert on January 23, 1899, and little water was available along the way: accordingly, "nothing was neglected which could increase the water carried or diminish the number of drinkers" (RWr 313). The column succeeded in tracking Abdullah to his retreat at Shirkela but found him much stronger than expected. The order was given to retire in haste, and the disappointed column toiled back towards the river, undergoing great privations:

Nothing more was essayed that season, and the caliph remained "supreme in Kordofan, reorganising his adherents and plundering the country" (316). Late in the summer of 1898, however, the government received certain intelligence of his movements which allowed them to move against him. As the first version of The River War went to press, lamenting the fact that Abdullah was still abroad but discounting him as a serious danger (RW II 298-300), an expedition was organized in October under Sir Reginald Wingate. As Churchill explains in the chapter added to the revised version of this book, "The End of the Khalifa," Abdullah withdrew out of range into the desert, and Wingate's expedition had to be abandoned. In November, however, came the astonishing news that the dervishes, heartened by the two failed expeditions
against them, were preparing to attack. Another force was quickly collected under Wingate. After defeating the dervishes under one of Abdullah's lieutenants in a sharp action at Abu Aadel, Wingate marched to Gedid to catch up to the caliph. The dervishes were found posted in a wood. Wingate opened fire at dawn, and the dervishes advanced shouting; but the fire was too hot for them to come out of the forest. The Egyptians advanced and rapidly "drove the enemy through the trees into the camp about a mile and a half away," where they surrendered at "the first light of the morning." The caliph's son Osman had made good his escape after being wounded; but Wingate found that Abdullah himself, sitting his ground "with a dramatic dignity sometimes denied to more civilised warriors," had perished in the Egyptian fusillade (RW 321).

VII

With the fall of the Dervish Empire, the Sirdar's standing soared, notwithstanding the "inconvenient truths" about him that Churchill would publish in The River War, and Kitchener was appointed Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. So great was his prestige among his countrymen that when he appealed for contributions to found a college at Khartoum in memory of General Gordon, they soon subscribed more than a hundred thousand pounds for the project. Churchill takes cooler notice of the college, remarking that "education has not been altogether a blessing in India" (RW II 378, 402-403). In the last chapter of the first edition of The River War, which is omitted from the revised version, he considers the future of the land reclaimed from the dervishes. He begins by arguing that the war was justified neither "to avenge General Gordon" nor "to punish the wickedness" of the dervishes, but for "a plain and honest reason." The Sudan is to Egypt as the trunk of a tree is to its branches and fruit. The Dervish Empire had sundered two lands that belonged to each other, and the war was fought "to unite territories that could not indefinitely have continued divided; to combine peoples whose future welfare is inseparably intermingled; to collect energies which, concentrated, may promote a common interest; to join together what could not improve apart" (RW II 390, 393-96). But he argues that years of Egyptian rapacity and Abdullah's depredations have depopulated the country, wasted its natural resources, and destroyed its human improvements. The Sudan needs time to recover. Churchill warns against imitation of the excessive legalism of the Indian administration, which breeds a litigious spirit and would be altogether unsuited to the people of the Sudan. "Personal rule

22. The phrase is from Wilfrid Blunt's diary, quoted by Mendelssohn, The Age of Churchill, 131.
of selected military officers," though abhorred by civilized peoples, will for a few years be most appropriate there. Talented civil servants must be encouraged to devote their lives to the Sudanese administration by "high pay, high honours, extensive powers, and great responsibility" (400-401). Missionaries and speculators should be excluded lest their schemes disturb the country's recovery, but individual Egyptian businessmen may be encouraged to resume trade with the Sudan.

The next need of the country, after peace, is water. Broken water-wheels and water-scoops could be rebuilt with the help of government loans, and wells might be sunk for villages with unreliable water supplies. The future may be filled with brilliant plans for irrigating the desert. A dam on the Blue Nile could provide water for a winter wheat crop. But since in the summer only the flow of water from the lakes that give birth to the Blue Nile prevents the river from running dry in Egypt, a summer wheat crop would threaten Egypt: and "not for this has Egypt conquered the Soudan" (407). Churchill propounds an ambitious solution. If the flow of water into marshes along the White Nile were reduced by confining the river to one channel, the flow of the river to Egypt might be increased by half. Water recaptured from the White Nile would then free water for diversion from the Blue, permitting a summer crop. In his enthusiasm Churchill suggests "even mightier schemes" of civil engineering to use "nearly every drop of water which drains into the whole valley of the Nile," so that "the Nile itself, flowing for three thousand miles through smiling countries, shall perish gloriously and never reach the sea" (411). The deleterious effects that these diversions might have on wetlands and on the Mediterranean Sea are not considered.

Churchill foresees a Cape to Cairo Railway, but he allows that the extension of Sudan's railway system to the Red Sea is more urgent. He admits, too, that the immediate prospects for Egypt and the Sudan are "scarcely inviting" because of the stringencies of the Egyptian economy, aggravated by impending payments for the Aswan dam and the heavy charges of the war (413). The recovery of Egypt and the Sudan will be a slow process; but knowledgeable men "are united in their opinion of the course to be pursued. To `persevere and trust Cromer' is the watchword of the Englishman in Egypt" (414). Churchill had conversations with Lord Cromer at the British Agency when he returned to Cairo in 1899 after the polo championship to gather information for The River War. In My Early Life, Churchill praises "his knowledge and wisdom," explaining that,

he represented in an intense degree that phlegm and composure which used to be associated with high British administrators in the East. I was reminded of one of my best French quotations "On ne regne sur les âmes que par le calme." He was never in a hurry, never anxious to make an effect or sensation. He sat still and men came to him. He watched events until their combination enabled him to intervene smoothly and decisively. He could
wait a year as easily as a week, and he had often waited four or five years before getting his way.

The British Agent "rejected all high-sounding titles... His status was indefinite; he might be nothing; he was in fact everything" (*MEL* 229-30). The Sirdar seems to have imitated his patron in his own administration: a large Egyptian flag flew over his tent, with only "a small Union Jack," throughout the Omdurman campaign until he finally hoisted the flags over the captured dervish capital, and then "the little red flag of the Khedive and a great Union Jack-four times as big-were run up the staffs" (*RW* II 27, 204).

Despite his responsibility for "every department of the Egyptian administration and every aspect of its policy," Lord Cromer made time to see Churchill repeatedly. In a fit of pique, which Churchill does not mention, Kitchener had forbidden his subordinates to provide him with any documents for the book; Churchill managed to circumvent the prohibition by interviewing them instead. The Sirdar's ill will was more than offset by the good will of his chief. Lord Cromer agreed to read the early chapters of *The River War*. He devoted "an immense amount of trouble" to Churchill's "screed" and sent it back in a few days "slashed about with blue pencil with a vigour which recalled the treatment my Latin exercises used to meet with at Harrow." His criticisms were full and even scathing, but he meant them in a friendly way. As he wrote Churchill,

> I did for you what I have over and over again asked others to do for myself. *I* always invite criticism from friends before *I* write or do anything important. It is very much better to have one's weak points indicated by friendly critics before one acts, rather than by hostile critics when it is too late to alter. I hope your book will be a success and I think it will. One of the very few things which still interest me in life is to see young men get on. (*MEL* 229)

Churchill completed work on *The River War* and eagerly awaited the day in autumn when "the two massive volumes, my *magnum opus* (up to date), upon which I had lavished a whole year of my life, should be launched upon an expectant public" (242). That spring he did not foresee that by then he would already be on his way to South Africa, swept up in the excitement of Britain's next war.

But he never forgot Lord Cromer's example of friendliness to young men, and with the passing of years Churchill began to take pleasure himself in seeing "young men get on." Three decades after he served on the Nile, when he wrote *My Early Life*, he addressed the book "to a new generation" (7).

More sympathetic to aspirations in the young than to complacency in the old, he gave this advice to "young men, all over the world":

Don't be content with things as they are. "The earth is yours and the fulness thereof." Enter upon your inheritance, accept your responsibilities. Raise the glorious flags again, advance them upon the new enemies, who constantly gather upon the front of the human army, and have only to be assaulted to be overthrown. Don’t take No for an answer. Never submit to failure. Do not be fobbed off with mere personal success or acceptance. You will make all kinds of mistakes; but as long as you are generous and true, and also fierce, you cannot hurt the world or even seriously distress her. She was made to be wooed and won by youth. She has lived and thrived only by repeated subjugations. (74)

Churchill knew that he would never have shared in the cavalry charge at Omdurman and the end of the Dervish Empire without his own push and perseverance, but he also knew how much he owed to older men who smiled upon his endeavors. In their generosity, they had offered him one of the great gifts that young men receive from the old-encouragement.

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