

Gen. Sir Harry Flashman And Aide Con the Experts

By ALDEN WHITMAN

Never judge a book by its cover, runs the adage. It is an adage whose current aptness has been illustrated by "Flashman: From the Flashman Papers 1839-42," recently published by the World Publishing Company.

The 256-page book, whose title page says that it was "edited and arranged" by George MacDonald Fraser, proclaims itself to be the memoirs of Brig. Gen. Sir Harry Paget Flashman, V.C. (Victorian Cross), K.C.B. (Knight Commander Order of the Bath), K.C.I.E. (Knight Commander Order of the Indian Empire) and Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, a celebrated Victorian soldier. Sir Harry is also identified as the Flashman who in Thomas Hughes's "Tom Brown's Schooldays" was expelled from Rugby after a drunken brawl.

Covering chiefly Sir Harry's service in India and Afghanistan, 1840-42, for which he won the thanks of Parliament and Queen Victoria, the book carries an introduction giving its manuscript provenance as well as scholarly notes and a glossary.

Distinguished Believers

Although Sir Harry lived into the early years of the 20th century, his candid account of his military and sexual adventures is printed without pictures. The book's jacket, however, is largely taken up with a painting of a dashing battlefield hero against a backdrop of fetching odalisques.

So far, "Flashman" has had 34 reviews in the United States. Ten of these found the book to be genuine autobiography.

"Flashman's account of the bloody fighting in Kabul and of the murder of Sir Alexander Burnes, the British Resident in the Afghan capital, and his two brothers, and of Flashman's own escape, bear the stamp of authenticity," wrote Prof. André Michalopoulos for King Features Syndicate. The professor teaches Greek, Latin

and Renaissance literature at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

In the same vein, Dr. C. Richard King, associate professor of journalism at the University of Texas in Austin, said:

"Wrapped in oilskin covers, the papers [the book's manuscript], which had been stored in a tea chest, contain Flashman's account of his expulsion from Rugby School for drunkenness—the incident which made him a character in the Hughes novel. . . . Accounts of these adventures are in his own words."

'Almost Unbelievable'

According to J. V. Nielson Jr., writing for The News and Courier of Charleston, S. C., the Flashman papers "rank with Samuel Pepys Diary and the Boswell papers." Roy Newquist praised the book in Chicago Today: "As irreverent and as picaresque as 'Tom Jones,' always more dramatic and often funnier, Flashman has proved a one-man demolition squad as far as the glory of empress and empire are concerned."

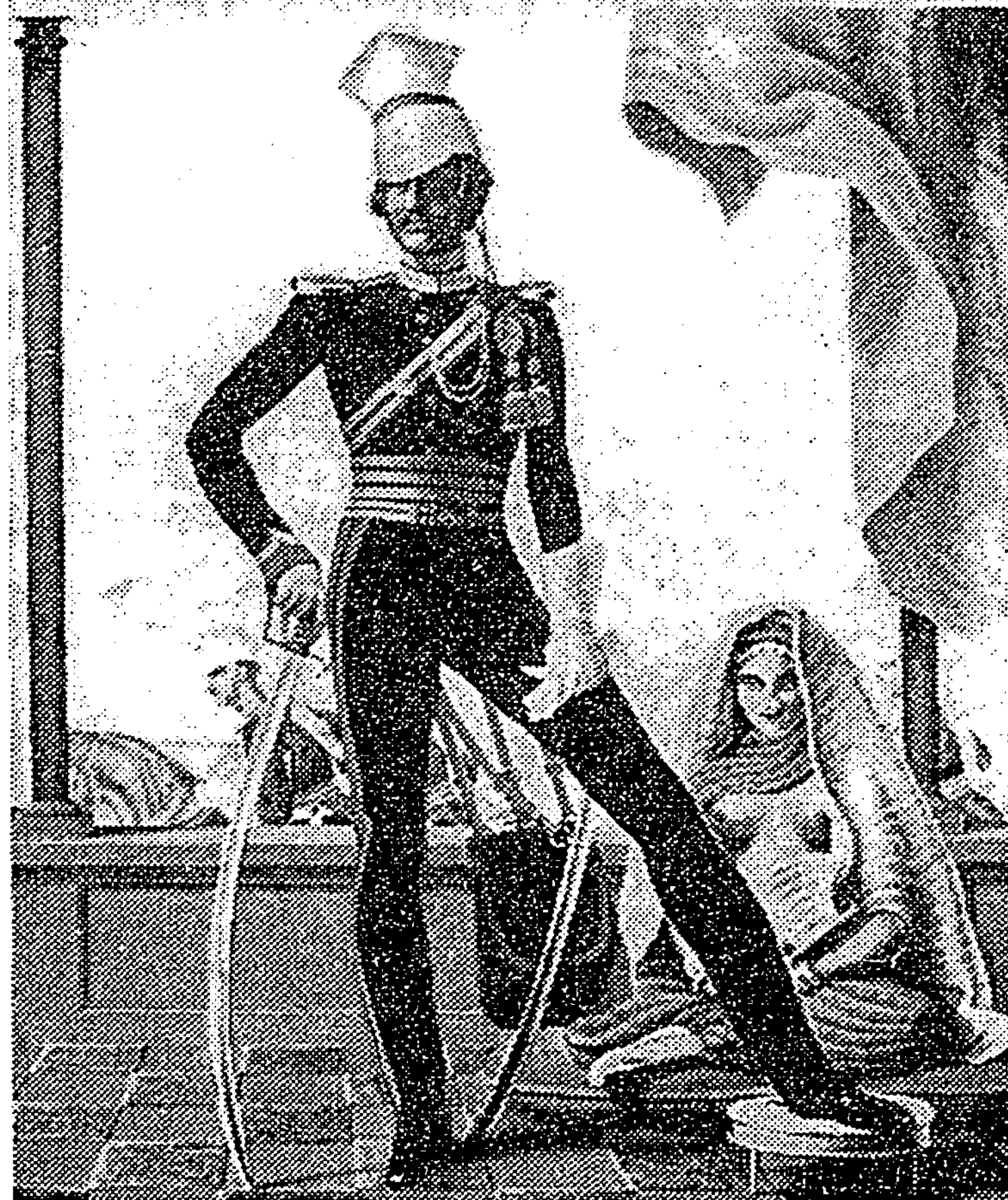
Prof. Ralph A. Wooster, head of the history department at Lamar State College in Texas, found that "the memoirs show the swash-buckling hero of the Victorian era to have been an almost unbelievable rake." The professor, however, said that "the reader must judge for himself" the detailed truth of Flashman's accounts.

Carol Miller, in The Times-Herald of Newport News, Va., reviewed "Flashman" as the McCoy, as did Larry Ketchum of The Hawaii Tribune-Herald of Hilo. And so did Prof. W. Keith Kraus of Shippensburg State College in Pennsylvania.

The 'Rarest' of Finds

Writing in Best Sellers, a periodical distributed to librarians and booksellers, Professor Kraus said:

"The Flashman papers is the diary of a minor historical figure . . . and [it] is the rarest of all manuscript-in-the-old-trunk discoveries—



The dust jacket of "Flashman," the "memoirs" of a Victorian rake, "edited" by George MacDonald Fraser.

the recovery of a refreshingly funny and ribald adventure story told by a rogue who is a cross between Byron's Don Juan and Fielding's Tom Jones."

The only difficulty with these encomiums for Sir Harry Flashman is that he is a complete fiction. There was indeed a Flashman—the character in "Tom Brown's Schooldays"—but the Flashman of Mr. Fraser, a British writer, is all a put-on.

That is made clear not only in publicity for the book, which calls it a novel, but also in a "Who's Who" summary of Sir Harry's "career," which immediately precedes the start of his "narrative." This lists the distinguished general as serving both as a major in the Union Army in the American Civil War and

as a colonel in the Army of the Confederacy.

A corollary to the adage about a book and its cover appears in order: Never underestimate the power of a parody.

This was a corollary that at least one of the reviewers subscribed to yesterday. Conceding that he was fooled, Professor Michalopoulos said yesterday, "I took the book at face value, but that was a bit of a blunder, wasn't it?"

The other reviewers could not be reached immediately for comment.

The extent of the put-on has astonished World, the book's publisher, which disclosed yesterday the number of reviewers who had played the novel as history. A spokesman said the publisher was motivated solely by a desire to set the record aright.