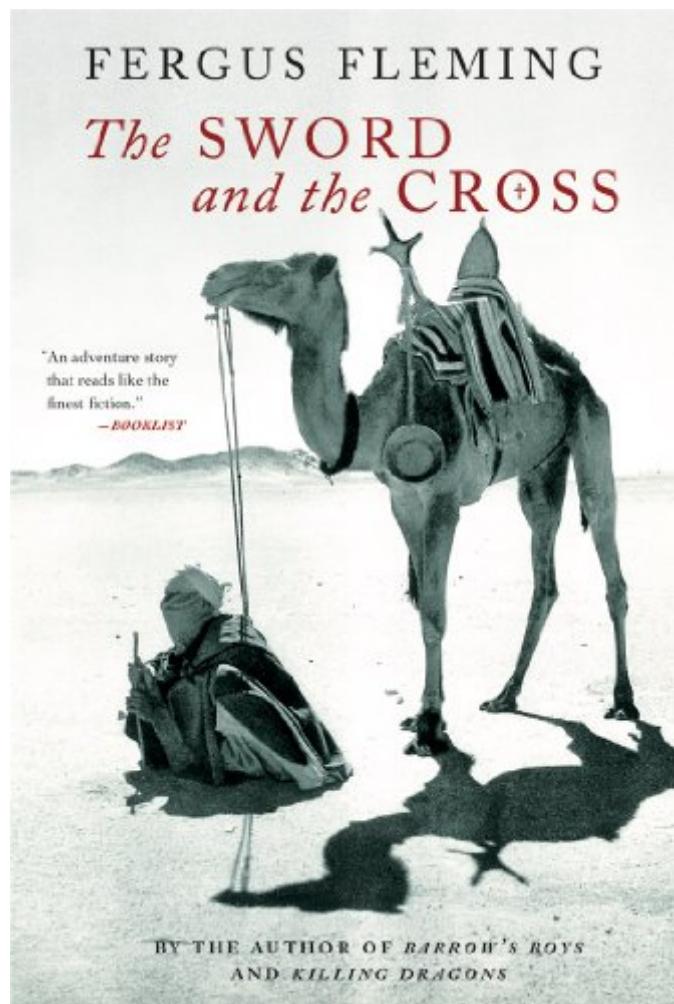


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The Sword And The Cross: Two Men And An Empire Of Sand



Synopsis

Whether writing of the Alps, the high seas, or the North Pole, Fergus Fleming has won acclaim as one of today's most vivid and engaging historians of adventure and exploration. *The Sword and the Cross* takes us to the Sahara at the end of the nineteenth century, when France had designs on a hostile wilderness dominated by deadly Tuareg nomads. Two fanatical adventurers, Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine, rose to the cause of their country's national honor. Abandoning his decadent lifestyle as a sensualist and womanizer, Foucauld founded a monastic order so severe that during his lifetime it never had a membership of more than one. Yet he remained a committed imperialist and from his remote hermitage continued to assist the military. The stern career soldier Laperrine, meanwhile, founded a camel corps whose exploits became legendary. During World War I the Sahara's fragile peace crumbled. In the desert mountains Foucauld paid a tragic price for his role as imperial pawn. Laperrine, by then recalled to the Western Front, returned to avenge his friend.

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Customer Reviews

I'd previously read, and enjoyed, both "Barrow's Boys" and "Killing Dragons." So, I fully expected to enjoy "The Sword And The Cross." Alas, it was not meant to be. The first hundred pages or so held

my interest. After that, I just kept reading for the sake of finishing the book. Not a pleasant experience. So, what happened? Mr. Fleming wanted to tell us about the history of the French colonial experience in Algeria and the Sahara. He chose to do this by primarily concentrating on two people: Charles de Foucauld and Henri Laperrine. Unfortunately, the first fellow was so bizarre that it was impossible to sympathize with him. He was a hedonist turned religious fanatic. He was a masochist. Where others travelled by camel in desert temperatures of 120 degrees farenheit, Foucauld chose to walk. He ate almost nothing. He refused to indulge himself with creature comforts. He longed for death. (I'm not guessing about this or playing armchair psychiatrist. Fleming quotes several times from Foucauld's journal concerning his lifelong deathwish.) Foucauld wanted to convert Moslems to Christianity and set himself up as an example of a person living a Christian life. However, he really had no interest in other people and longed for solitude. Not surprisingly, he failed to gain converts. Despite espousing Christian principles, he was very inconsiderate of his long-suffering manservant and he spent much of his lifetime gathering intelligence to pass on to the French military. Mr. Fleming quotes many people who looked upon Foucauld as a holy-man. It is clear that, in person, he possessed "a certain something" which caused people to look upon him that way. Unfortunately, it doesn't come across on the page. One gets only the impression of an egocentric, unhappy, and self-destructive "nut."

Usually, Fergus Fleming books make for very good reading; he writes in an accessible manner, and the enthusiasm for the subject matter shines through. This is what I have found about the previous books I have read by this author, Barrow's Boys and 90 Degrees North. However, this time, Fleming's knack for snagging me as a reader and pulling me into the story has deserted him. The Sword and the Cross, which should have been a riveting tale of Saharan exploration, ended up being dull and listless, and it was a relief to finally finish the book. The Sword and the Cross is nominally about two Frenchmen - Henri Laperrine, a career soldier, and Viscomte Charles de Foucauld, once a Parisian layabout, but now a fanatical monk, having divested himself of all his world possessions and trappings, both men forging reputations in the Algerian desert. The backdrop to the tale of these two characters is set against the French colonization of Algeria, which later fell apart in the 1950s as Algeria sought independence from its French masters. It is an interesting premise to contrast the differing motivations behind the lead characters. Laperrine is a dedicated military man, who established a French Camel Corp to combat the native Taureg raiders in the desert. Foucauld tried to spread Christianity through his wanderings of the desert, although he was remarkably unsuccessful, attracting only one member to his harsh order. Together, each man

played significant roles in establishing the French colony, Foucauld as a spy who provided intelligence on the leading Arab personalities, and Laperrine as the enforcer and soldier.

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