



The Devil Soldier: The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China

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A courageous leader who became the first American mandarin, Frederick Townsend Ward won crucial victories for the Emperor of China during the Taiping Rebellion, history's bloodiest civil war. Carr's skills as historian and storyteller come to the fore in this thrilling account of the kind of adventurer the world no longer sees.

The Devil Soldier: The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China **Details**

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From Reader Review *The Devil Soldier: The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China* for online ebook

Raegan Butcher says

Fascinating true story of an american soldier of fortune who went to china during the taiping rebellion and made himself into the leader of the "Ever Victorious Army". I have a keen interest in men like this, men like Charles George Gordon (who inherited the Ever Victorious Army from Ward after he was killed in battle) James "Rajah" Brooke, real Lord Jim stuff and TRUE to boot. You can't beat it.

Beth Cato says

My reaction to this is mixed. First of all, that subtitle "The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China" is horribly cringe-worthy and misleading, and is contradicted by the explanation within the book. The publisher should not have used such a sensational subtitle.

The events here are absolutely fascinating: the true historical escapades of an American man who ventures to China as a freelance soldier, battled the rebellious pseudo-Christian Taipings on behalf of the Manchu government, and died in battle. Frederick Townsend Ward sounds like a truly intriguing fellow. The problem is, almost all the information about him has been destroyed. His family correspondence was purposely destroyed by his sister-in-law (gah!) and his shrine, grave, and written material in China was destroyed in waves through revolutions, the Japanese invasion, and then the Communist government. Carr still created a fascinating narrative, but it does often read as tedious with unavoidable gaps of data. The Chinese names used are a different transliteration than I am used to, so that made it more frustrated to keep track of who was who, and there are a lot of names thrown in here of Chinese, British and French soldiers, and Americans. At several points I debated whether to continue reading, but I kept on because I wanted to find out how events played out. I did make a few notes for my research interests, too.

Ensiform says

("The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China." A rather over-dramatic and not exactly true subtitle...) This often engrossing work is a biography of Frederick Townsend Ward, the first commander of the Ever Victorious Army. Carr does an excellent job, considering that the Chinese Communists downplayed Ward's role in history, even paving over his gravesite, and that a distant relative of Ward's destroyed all his personal papers after his death. Carr is no Sinologist and thus the Taipings' motives and actions are not adequately represented, but the Western side of the fighting (and the conniving that went on by the Manchu elite concerning foreign intervention) is well documented. The main focus is of course Ward, who is represented as a man of astonishing bravery and tactical skill, and who, after demonstrating said skill, was amazingly popular with Chinese soldiers and Western officers alike. If he hadn't been killed in battle, he may even have become a warlord in his own right.

John says

An intriguing bit of obscured history within a greater event largely forgotten in the west. I knew extremely little about the Taiping rebellion, and was utterly clueless that western officers played a notable role - let alone that Fredrick Townsend Ward raised, trained, and led a large force of Chinese soldiers in the western model which, operating independently, played a significant role in the downfall of the Taiping cause. I have enjoyed Caleb Carr's historical writing, as well as his fiction, but must admit this book did not hold my interest as thoroughly as other of his works. Perhaps it was a skosh too long; perhaps it is in the nature of the subject material. To wit, perhaps 1860 Shanghai and Jiangsu province are a little too much the analog of the three-dimensional chess game going on in Afghanistan-Pakistan now - colonial powers being unable to decide minute to minute whether to support crumbling and corrupt regimes, acquiesce or even aid in their overthrow and humiliation, and so end up doing some of both at the same time (as the British did here during the 2nd Opium War). It took a little effort occasionally to fully grasp the ebb and flow of the players in the shifting tides of Jiangsu as rebellion and counter-attack surged across Jiangsu.

Carr perhaps treats Ward with a light touch - but isn't afraid to highlight his flaws. And none can truly claim to know Ward's full thoughts and motivations, given the modest remaining records and their sometimes conflicting viewpoints and accounts. Nonetheless, Ward was clearly a remarkable individual who stepped into a pivotal moment in history to no small effect. The fact that Ward's achievements and those of his "Ever Victorious Army" are little remembered does not change that fact at all.

Daniel Farabaugh says

An interesting read although the parts about the Taiping Rebellion were better than the parts about the American military leader.

George says

Non-fiction. The story of Federick Townsend Ward, an American soldier of fortune in the 19th century, who founded and led into battle a private army of European, Filipino and Chinese mercenaries in Shanghai that became known as the Ever Victorious Army and helped end the Taiping Rebellion, the bloodiest war of era. Travelling in Asia and China in the mid-19th century, Ward missed the American Civil War, but became a central figure in the far bigger Taiping Rebellion. He eventually became a prince of imperial China and created the first modern Chinese army in history before his death in battle in 1863. A well written book about a forgotten American figure in Chinese history. One of the leading characters in "Flashman and the Dragon" by George MacDonald Fraser.

Jordan says

Very interesting story

Would recommend to history buffs. A fun, unique tale of a real life adventurer. I've never been very interested in Chinese history but Ward's tale, and the drama of the Taiping rebellion, were worth learning about.

Zeke Chase says

A fascinating biography one of the most interesting figures in the Taiping Rebellion, Frederick Townsend Ward. Ward was the American mercenary that formed the Ever Victorious Army in Shanghai and held the city by facing off against numbers several times his strength and became an indispensable piece of Li Hongzhang's Anhui Army that ultimately squeezed the Taipings back to Nanjing

I'm going to approach this review as though my reader has little knowledge of the Taiping. So, the Taiping Rebellion breaks out in 1850 led by a messianic madman claiming to be Jesus' younger brother and threatens to overthrow not just the ruling Qing Dynasty, but all established Confucian society. The Taiping rebels are iconoclastic, militaristic, theocratic and satirically puritanical (for a time, all sex was banned and punishable by execution). The ruling Qing Dynasty don't take the Rebellion seriously for a few reasons, namely the Emperor's libertine lifestyle in comfy Beijing. Xianfeng, the emperor, comes to power also in 1850, and proceeds to drink and eat and fuck himself to death. He dies of overindulgence in 1860, after a shameful defeat to the British in the Second Opium War. It is the Confucian general Zeng Guofan whom is ultimately responsible for quelling the Rebellion, by forming the provincial armies (Hunan Army under his command, Anhui Army under that of his student, Li Hongzhang), which forms a giant nutcracker to crunch from both east and west along the Yangtze River back to Nanjing. The Rebellion is put down in 1864, leaving a body count of 30 million, about twice the death toll of World War I. Shanghai, at the mouth of the Yangtze, holds out as a Qing enclave entirely surrounded by Taiping occupation and forms the base of operations for Li's Anhui Army and the port from which the West observes this war. Shanghai is held by an American mercenary, Frederick Townsend Ward, and his Ever Victorious Army.

This biography covers Ward specifically, and covers his childhood, his time as a ship's mate, a filibuster for William Walker during his Mexico campaign (Walker had the plan of forming his own kingdom or state in northern Mexico that could be admitted to the Union as Lower California, a slave state – Ward abandoned Walker after too long, not least because Ward was a diehard supporter of the North), his short campaign in the Crimean War, his service to the Mexican government and his eventual contracting in China. Banker Yang Fang and Taotai (basically a mayor) Wu Xu form a business arrangement to keep funds flowing for the defence of Shanghai. Carr is well aware that the average western reader has never heard of history's deadliest civil war, so he fills his reader in with a narrative following Loyal King Li Xuecheng, or the Chung Wang, the strategic genius of the latter half of the Rebellion. Through the Chung Wang, we get a sense of what is happening outside the Shanghai area and the religious politics that are driving the war.

This is the third book I've read on the Taiping Rebellion (the others being *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* by Stephen R. Platt and *God's Chinese Son* by Jonathan D. Spence), so it's hard to say if this is a good introduction to the war or not. Certainly there's enough in this war that an entirely encyclopedia could be written on it. For one to grasp the war without diving headlong into it, it's best done through using specific figures as looking glasses. Platt uses Hong Rengan and Zeng Guofan, Spence uses Hong Xiuquan. Carr uses Frederick Ward.

What I found fascinating about this book was that it explored, as much as possible, the notion that Ward perhaps had his own ambitions for a kingdom in China, or control of the entire empire. With the state of Chinese military technology at the time, a small force of say 25,000 (which Ward had hoped to accumulate) properly trained and equipped, probably could overthrow the ruling Manchus and establish a dynasty with Ward as emperor, or at the least a small kingdom in China with Ward as warlord. Sadly, Ward died in 1862 and whatever his inclinations were, he kept his ambitions quiet, so we get only a few glimpses of this notion through close confidants.

If there's criticism of this book, it's that reading about the loss and retaking of the same town around Shanghai again and again gets a little tedious. I understand that this is a biography and it wouldn't do Ward

justice to cut out the repetitiveness of his career, but it does start to feel like you're reading the same thing over again at times. I found myself bored in the battle sequences and more interested in the squabbling fears of the Manchus.

I'll note that this book uses the Wade-Giles system of transliteration instead of the more commonly accepted Pinyin. Wade-Giles is more phonetic, whereas Pinyin is more uniform. This means that, for example, Hong Xiuquan (Pinyin) becomes Hung Hsiu-ch'üan (Wade-Giles), Li Xuecheng becomes Li Hsiu-ch'eng, Zeng Guofan becomes Tseng Kuo-fan, Li Hongzhang becomes Li Hung-chang, Prince Gong becomes Prince Kung and so on. I understand why Carr chooses this older more archaic system of transliteration – because it's easier for a Western audience to pronounce, and it's clearly written for the West. The problem, therefore, that arises is that his *dramatis personae* is lacking. There are many characters missing from this appendix, not the least of which is Li Heng-sung, the commander of the Green Standard Braves in Shanghai and the principal Chinese defensive force prior to the arrival of Li Hung-chang. Do you see the problem? Now add Li Hsiu-ch'eng into the mix. If this is for a Western audience, Carr should have realised that the West is a little Anglo-centric and will probably confuse

Li Heng-sung

Li Hung-chang

Li Hsiu-ch'eng

when read in quick succession, especially if one is missing from the *dramatis personae*. I'm not complaining about the transliteration, merely the lacking appendix. I spent at least a portion of this novel confusing Li Heng-sung and Li Hung-chang as the same person, and wondering why the brilliant commander of the Anhui Army was such a corrupt tool.

But that's just nitpicking. Ultimately, a fine book on the Taiping and a great addition to my growing wealth of knowledge on the subject.

Bruce says

As civil wars go, the Taiping Rebellion was a more sordid, bloody mess than most. Pitting two corrupt, incompetent, ill-equipped, stumblebum regimes against one another, it dragged on for about 15 years in the mid-19th century and succeeded only in slaughtering tens of millions of Chinese peasants. Given this, it's but testament to mutual distrust that the Western colonial powers didn't conspire to carve up the Sino-shoreline into personal fiefdoms. Against this backdrop of anarchy and stalemate, it should come as no surprise that foreign adventurers would find a foothold as mercenaries and soldiers of fortune. I mean, if just anyone can loot and lop off the heads of entire village populations, why not get a piece of the action? You don't even have to learn the language.

It is this context that makes the history of Frederick Townsend Ward eminently forgettable. His accomplishments were personally remarkable: in the troubled Shanghai suburbs of the 1860's, the man successfully raised, trained, and led a modern, professional army. He inveigled funding and semi-official sanction from local Chinese authorities to procure legit weapons from Western manufacturers, and ultimately cadged the grudging participation of Western delegations in his various suburban Shanghai raids and skirmishes. A competent tactician, he built up, trained, drilled, and placed himself at the fore of a multiple-division corps that comprised 4-5,000 mostly native Chinese soldiers at the height of its influence (albeit led by foreign mercenary officers, of course). For about 3 1/2 years before falling victim to a Taiping musket ball in the abdomen, he built a resume that included the nearly single-handed capture, garrisoning, and fortification of a small provincial town (Sung-Chiang) all the while assisting in or leading what amounted to a series of victorious (if ultimately nondecisive) holding actions.

It's the start of March Madness as I write this, so perhaps a basketball analogy would be in order. "General" Ward's track record can best be likened to that of some mid-major basketball college. You know, the kind that goes 22-8 on the season, gets a 7- or a 10-seed in the NCAAs, and manages to string together enough wins to make the Sweet Sixteen. Not too shabby, but no big deal in the grand scheme of things.

The pathetic Manchus were too xenophobic and diffuse a power to adopt or implement Ward's military innovations, which primarily consisted of competence, discipline, contemporary equipment, and regular pay (so... with the possible exception of access to modern ordnance, low-hanging fruit, you'd think). Nor did Ward's exploits materially affect or alter the selfish designs of Britain, France, Russia, etc. in China. Thanks to his sister-in-law's deliberate incineration of his surviving cache of correspondence, little personal record of the man remains. His childless Chinese widow died in isolation and apparent paternal abandonment a year after Ward passed, so the petty warlord's legacy amounted to a big fat zero.

Oo-rah. None of this is the author's fault. Carr does an honest job of pulling together a traceable history from this deservedly obscure period of time. The one illuminating element: somewhere in the muddle of all the mayhem that threatened (or at least sporadically interrupted) trade in China's burgeoning Western eastern port cities, the would-be colonial powers eventually grew weary of imperial negligence/impotence. These impatient, inconvenienced profiteers began to bandy about the idea of "free" cities (to be administered by the Western powers, of course). Again, mutual distrust was probably the main disincentive to the sort of opportunistic wars of exploitation and aggression that might otherwise have dotted the Chinese coastline with an interconnected grid of Hong Kong-style city state protectorates. At least, it never happened for Shanghai.

Kim says

The Devil Soldier is a biography of an American soldier of fortune, Frederick Townsend Ward, who commanded an army for the imperial Chinese government during the savage civil war known as the Taiping rebellion. As I was reading, I found Ward's story to be both exciting and inspiring; the odds that he faced were astounding, and as a result his achievements were remarkable. As one customer on Amazon wrote, "If this story were fiction it would surely be dismissed as too far-fetched to ever be believed." Regarding the man himself, it would be difficult not to like the portrait of Ward that Mr. Carr painted. In fact, I believe that I even developed some sort of affection for "the small man in the blue coat." I actually put off finishing the last chapter simply because I knew that his death was coming; it somehow felt wrong to read about this brave, determined, and energetic young man - he was only 30 years old at the time - finally being defeated.

In terms of the text, speaking as someone without any useful background knowledge of military history, it was well-written and easy to read. In saying that, in order to fully appreciate what I was reading, I did end up spending a fair bit of time searching for supplementary information on firearms and tactical manoeuvres, something that I never thought I would find myself doing. I now know more than I ever thought I would want to know about how the firing mechanisms of various muskets, pistols, and rifles work, and I understand useful tidbits like why employing "flying columns" can be an effective strategy. Along these same lines, I found the cast of characters and maps included in the book to be indispensable, although regarding the latter, I think that more detail would have been useful; there were times when a town or river was named in the text that I was unable to find on any of the maps.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed *The Devil Soldier* and I highly recommend it. Even if military history isn't something you normally read, leave your comfort zone and challenge yourself. This book is worth it.

Stuart Malcolm says

An exhaustively researched book about a period of history I knew very little about. It is an interesting read but needed much better editing - there are way too many detailed descriptions of essentially identical military actions; and a lot of repetition in the descriptions of Ward by others, and the author second guessing Ward's motivations. A shame as it could have been a really excellent popular history book.

Gouty says

This is the biography of Frederick Townsend Ward. He was one of the truly larger than life characters of the Victorian era. As a young man he got his start as a filibuster with Walker in Mexico. In later life he went to China where he was hired by the Emperor as a mercenary to put down the Tai-Ping rebellion (in which 20 million people were killed, 2nd only to WWII, and nobody ever mentions it). It is a fascinating book about an incredible time and place. A look at a slice of history not many people know about.

Matthew says

This is an incredible account of an almost forgotten aspect of history. It is well written and an enjoyable read. The amount of research that the author needed to do in order to write it is awe inspiring.

David Buchan says

Interesting account of Frederick Townsend Ward's formation, training and leadership of China's Ever Victorious Army. While it never exceeded 6,000 soldiers due to Manchu paranoia, their adoption of western weapons and tactics allowed them to defeat much larger forces of poorly armed and led rebels. Working with British, French and Imperial Chinese troops, Ward cleared a 30 mile buffer zone around Shanghai, thwarting the Taiping Rebellion's last chance to gain a seaport as a vital source of supplies.

Ward was wounded many times and clearly believed he led a charmed life until the bullet that gut shot him.

Ward's Corps was never as independently successful after his death, even under Gordon of Khartoum.

Ward never became a god. After becoming a Chinese citizen, he was promoted to a Mandarin and made a kind of saint for ancestor worship on his death. Such rewards reflected Manchu politics, being designed to impress colonial Western powers in the years before the Boxer rebellion marked their abandonment of diplomacy.

Ward is a fascinating character whose life is obscured by the lack of reliable contemporary sources.

Patrick says

Well researched and well written. Caleb Carr has written a couple of well known historical crime novels, *THE ANGEL IN DARKNESS* and *The ALIENIST*. However, prior to writing those he was best known as a military historian, and this book on an American mercenary operating in Imperial China during the 1860's falls in that category. Fans of his two novels mentioned above may not enjoy this book.

That said, this is an enjoyable read. Frederick Ward Townsend was a controversial figure in his own day who was involved in a number of foreign adventures before landing in Shanghai in the 1860's. Sizing up the reason for the lack of success that the Manchu Imperial Forces were having in putting down the Taiping Rebellion, he volunteered to raise a small army and fight on behalf of the Manchus. Despite some initial setbacks and a lot of hostility from the majority of the Westerners in China at the time, he eventually was able to recruit, equip, train, and fight successfully with a force of about 4000 Chinese "peasants," although the officers of this force were still Westerners. During his life his force, eventually named the Ever Victorious Army, was renowned as the most disciplined Imperial military organization in China, and he won several victories in a short period against much larger Taiping forces. Of course, this being China, the story ends tragically -- that's not a total spoiler, since the author foreshadows that right from the start of the book.

To Carr, Ward represents a lost opportunity for China and also for American and Western relations with that country. Ward's real accomplishment was in slowly getting Chinese leaders to see that Western values, technology, and organizational concepts could be adapted and accepted by the Chinese people, and that this could be used to strengthen China in standing up to the Western powers. In addition, for those Westerners who knew him well, he was able to develop in them a new respect for the potential of the Chinese soldier, which in time might have translated into better treatment of China's government and its people. But, with Ward's death, the Westerners and the Imperial forces quickly returned to their former ways, and this eventually led to the Boxer Rebellion about forty years later.

A couple of notes on the book:

This is a military history, and while the edition I had contained some basic maps in the frontpiece and endpiece, more maps throughout the book would have helped. Most of the "action" in book consists of military forces moving from one location to another to attack or defend, and it gets confusing as to who was going where, even with the maps that are included.

Second issue, about which really nothing can be done...Chinese place names and person names, when translated into English, all have a tendency to look very similar. That can get pretty frustrating and confusing. Caleb Carr includes an appendix with the names and descriptions of the major characters...you may want to read that first, as I would have found it helpful. What worked for me was reading the book without much regard to the locations, and just paying attention to the actions and motivations of the characters and the organizations being described.

In summary, a pretty good book. If you're a fan of Chinese or military history, you will probably enjoy it.
