

THE MAHDI: PAST AND PRESENT

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The Mahdi: Past and Present by James Darmesteter

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JAMES DARMESTETER

**THE MAHDI: PAST
AND PRESENT**



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MAHDI

PAST AND PRESENT

BY
PROFESSOR JAMES DARMESTETER
COLLEGE OF FRANCE



London
T FISHER UNWIN
26 PATERNOSTER SQUARE
1885

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

IN introducing this little volume to the English-reading public I am performing a pleasant duty. Not being its author, I may be allowed to say that the book is not only interesting, but also useful. Sketching as it does the origin and strength of the belief in the Mahdi, it illustrates a point of very great importance in regard to our Egyptian policy. History repeats itself so closely among the Mussulmans, that to recount the adventures of former Mahdis is to tell the past, present, and probable future history of the Mahdi who has been giving us so much trouble of late. He is no more the first of his kind than he will be the last; for, from the dawn of Islamism, a Mahdi has always been expected, and he will be looked for as

long as a single Mussulman remains. The failure of one Mahdi to successfully demonstrate his heavenly mission has always been followed by the uprising of another, his defeat having proved him to be the false prophet who, according to tradition, is to precede and herald the approach of the true one.* In the following pages M. Darmesteter traces the history of the Mahdi from the first year of the Mahometan era (622 A.D.) to the year of grace 1885—1302 of the Hegira.

In the present volume the reader may learn a lesson concerning Mussulman character which should not fail to make a deep impression upon him, and the perusal of its pages will convince him more than any words of mine could possibly do of the necessity of adapting our foreign policy to suit the peculiarities of the peoples with whom we come in contact.

If a lady may be allowed to express an opinion on political matters, I would observe that one of the greatest faults to be found with English action in the Soudan is

* See Appendix A.

that it is not guided by a knowledge of Arab character. We English are too apt to consider that all people are constituted alike, and can be treated on precisely the same principles of fairness and honesty; we do not take sufficiently into consideration the habits, prejudices, rooted beliefs, and the wiliness and treachery of our brothers in the East, if indeed we can call those brothers whose very natures differ so widely from our own. This ignorance of the mental constitutions of those with whom we come in contact cannot but be disastrous. It was a powerful factor in producing the horrors of the Indian Mutiny, and without it Khartoum would not have fallen, and Gordon might now have been alive.

I have endeavoured in my translation to adhere to the original as closely as possible, but if my friend M. Darmesteter should find here and there that an allusion has been omitted,*

* M. Darmesteter's *brochure* was originally delivered as a lecture before the Scientific Association of France, at the Sorbonne, on February 28, 1885. It contains many allusions to French politics, parties, and literature, of more interest to the French audience than they would be to the English reader.

or that my rendering is not quite literal, he will, I feel sure, pardon me, on the grounds that I was more anxious to give "the spirit" than "the letter" of his work, and that on the principle stated above I have tried to adapt it to the idiosyncrasies of the people for whom I have prepared it.

I am responsible only for those notes which are signed with my initials, and for the Appendix in which I give some of the most reliable information I have been able to obtain about the present Mahdi and the fall of Khartoum, although I cannot vouch for the authenticity of everything therein published.

ADA S. BALLIN.

14, TAVISTOCK SQUARE, W.C.

May 4, 1885.