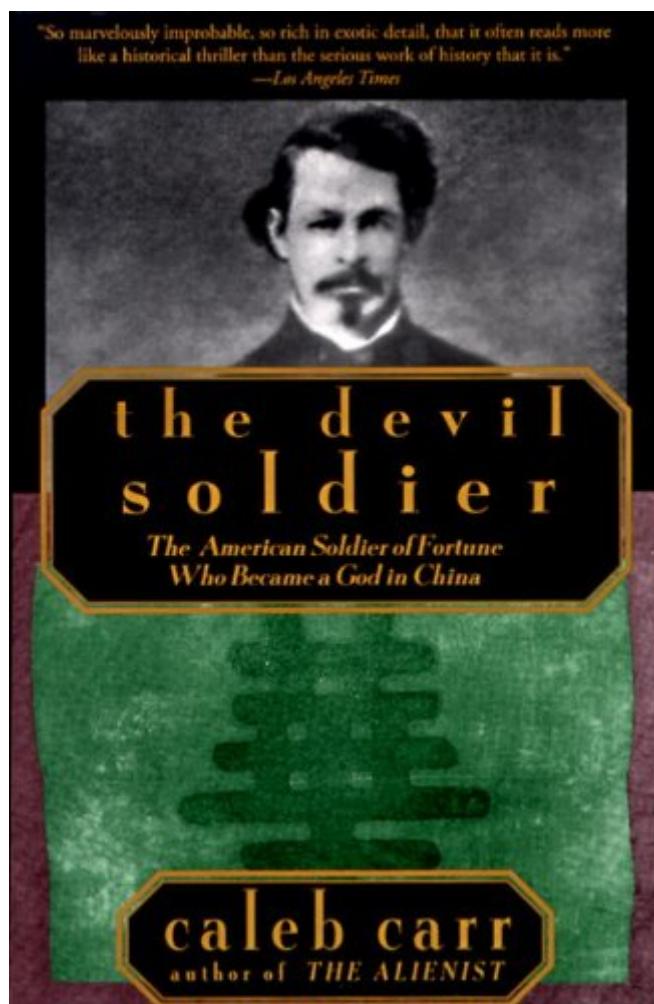


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The Devil Soldier: The American Soldier Of Fortune Who Became A God In China



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

Caleb Carr's portrait of Fredrick Townsend Ward, an obscure American mercenary who rose to prominence during China's bloody Taiping rebellion, offers a fascinating look at a civil war that took place at the same time as the battle between the States, but in a completely different world. A far cry from Carr's previous thrillers, his historical work is still infused with the authors' powerful descriptive narrative. Readers will find themselves immersed in the Shanghai of the 1850's and 60's as quickly and totally as Carr plunged them into turn of the century New York, awash in the quasi-Christian Taiping rebellion, a massive and bloody attempt to wrestle power from millennia old Imperial China. Indeed, the city on the Huang-Pu river is as much a character in the story as any of the soldiers, rebels, merchants, peasants and Imperial Courtiers that lived in that turbulent time and

place. Using western officers, often mercenaries, to train and lead Chinese troops in the western style of warfare, Ward raised up the "Ever Victorious Army" and turned the tide against the rebellion. He led his troops into battle in scenes as gripping as any taking place half a world away in our own Civil War, using battle strategies that would have held him in high rank amongst Grant, Sherman and Lee. In doing so he was awarded the status of Mandarin, the first westerner to ever enter the upper caste of the Confucian order. An epic tale of a long forgotten adventurer that offers a window into a remarkable time and place. It's too bad that Mr. Carr's success with fiction will most likely rob us of one of our most compelling and adept biographers.

The Taiping Rebellion in China was a very bloody affair. It cost the lives of over 25 million people. In addition it helped set the stage for the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the whole Dynastic System which ruled China for 1000's of years. Though also a biography, the Devil Soldier is an interesting overview of the Rebellion and its eventual defeat. This book is much more readable than Spence's "Gods Chinese Son." Carr is a great writer, his novels are great historical mysteries of early NYC. This book benefits from Carr's ability to write and tell a story. Anyone interesting in this time period will enjoy this book. Again it is much better than the one on basically the same topic by Spence.

In 1859 a 28 year-old sailing officer from Salem Massachusetts took service under the Chinese Empire to defend it from mortal danger. When this young man died in battle in 1863 he had put down the largest and bloodiest civil war in human history (the American Civil War raging at the same time pales in comparison), he had been made a general and a mandarin, he had married a Chinese princess, and he was interred in his own temple. Perhaps most impressively was the fact that he did all of this while retaining the reputation among his friends and foes of being a man of decency, fairness, honor and incorruptibility. And yet for all this, he is nearly forgotten in both his native and adopted country. Frederick Townsend Ward's history was erased largely because he was feared by both his Manchu masters and by the European powers that were seeking to dismember China for their own mercenary ends. The author speculates that due to his contempt for the cruelty and corruption of the Manchu's, that had he survived, he might have turned the instrument of his "Ever Victorious Army" against them in order to restore the Ming Dynasty. Had that happened, the history of China could have far different in the century that followed. It is clear that Ward found the concept of ending the Empire as unthinkable- which is why the later republic never honored his memory. One other thing struck me while reading this book: Ward wanted to attend West Point but was not able to obtain an appointment because he lacked "connections." In the long

run this didn't seem to hurt him too much.... If this story were fiction it would surely be dismissed as too far-fetched to ever be believed.

It seems fitting that one of the most implausible films ever made should be based "loosely" on a book about one of the most implausible real-life figures of history. Frederick Townsend Ward, the Devil Soldier, had nothing to do with the civil war in Japan; neither did any other American officer. But Ward did play a huge role in the defense of the Manchu imperial government against the forces of Chun Wang, the syncretic Sino-Christian rebel, in the Taiping civil war, supposedly the bloodiest conflict of the 19th Century. My five-star rating of this book is contingent upon also reading Jonathan Spence's book about the Taipings, God's Chinese Son. Otherwise you will have less than half the story. Caleb Carr writes very well, but this is not a novel, and as a history it is far too partial. In his prologue, Carr declares: "No man's life can be truly understood out of context, but in Ward's case the context is especially vital." No kidding, Caleb! In Ward's case, the context is virtually all we have, since nothing of Ward's own letters or thoughts has survived. Thus Carr is writing a biography so much as a social history of a moment in time, that moment when the vast culture of China first "discovered" the West. Carr's short moment of importance was his organization and training of the "Ever Victorious Army" of Chinese soldiers using Western military training and tactics. For better or worse, Ward's model army became the nucleus of the forces that destroyed the Taipings, though the man who replaced Ward as commander after Ward was killed, the scoundrel known as Chinese Gordon, has replaced him in historical memory also. More novelist than historian, Caleb Carr might fairly be criticized for overdrawing his sources, or for not maintaining sufficient academic reserve. It would be wrong to ignore this book, however, if you have any interest in the history of modern China, in which FT Ward was a meteor in the sky, an omen of things to come.

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