



The reburial of Sir Ralph Abercromby's coffin.  
PHOTO: RICHARD ELLIS.



Abercromby's monument in St Paul's Cathedral, London.



The Death of Sir Ralph Abercromby, unknown artist.

# Sir Ralph Abercromby: no peace in rest



CHRISTOPHER GRECH

Fate can be a fickle mistress, smiling upon some people and frowning upon others; even war heroes suffering similar deaths can sometimes be lionised or more often forgotten for no apparent reason. Take, for example, those two arch-enemies of Napoleon Bonaparte, admiral Lord Nelson and General Sir Ralph Abercromby. Each suffered fatal gunshot wounds in the heat of battle and yet Nelson is revered as a national hero and poor Abercromby lies forgotten, mouldering beneath a neglected marble slab. This article examines the fate suffered by the hapless general and explores the myth surrounding his death and disturbed afterlife.

From today's perspective one might be forgiven for thinking that these two officers were not held in equal regard in their own day; however, this was not the case; both were recognised for their martial skills (Nelson probably being better known for his supine conquests).

Abercromby's military career was equally successful. Born in Scotland in 1734, he initially studied law at Edinburgh University and then at Leipzig; however, he soon lost interest in law and decided on a military career. Although his father, a lawyer, was disappointed, he encouraged his son by purchasing him a cornetcy in the 3rd Dragoons Guards in March 1756. Ralph's three sons, John, James and Alexander, were to follow their father into the army.

The Seven Years' War began a few months later, and Abercromby accompanied his regiment on active service in Germany where he was impressed by Frederick the Great's military approach to discipline and care of the rank and file; lessons Abercromby learned and practised during his career.

Abercromby held positions of high command in both the Flanders and Helder campaigns (1793 and 1799 respectively) and although these were generally considered failures he achieved his military objectives and was praised for his leadership skills. His expedition against French

possessions in the West Indies (1795) were far more successful; there he captured St Lucia, Demerara and Trinidad.

In 1800, Abercromby was appointed commander of Britain's troops in the Mediterranean, and at the end of October of that year, two months after the French had surrendered, he was ordered to sail to Malta to prepare for an expedition to Egypt to expel or capture the French garrison there.

The British Expedition to Egypt landed at Abu Qir on March 8, 1801. Abercromby, fastidious in the preparation of his troops, had drilled his soldiers in disembarkation by boat. The practice, which served them well in the amphibious assault, ran like clockwork: a staggering 14,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry, and 600 gunners were landed successfully in a single day.

Although weather prevented Abercromby's force from landing immediately, which meant that the British lost the element of surprise, the French offered only token resistance at the water's edge, using their time to draw troops from Cairo and Upper Egypt to concentrate on a counter offensive on land. After fierce skirmishing on March 13, the French pulled back to a defensive position.

At dawn on March 21, the opposing sides met in a fierce battle which became known as the Battle of Alexandria. After heavy fighting the French were beaten back. They sustained 3,000 casualties to the British 1,376. The British also captured a much-prized French cavalry standard; however, the British commander had been wounded.

Although Abercromby was struck in the groin by a musket ball early in the action he remained in the field. It was not until he saw the enemy retreating and was sure of victory that he showed his pain and allowed himself to be examined. Exhausted by the action and loss of blood the 67-year-old general was carried to HMS Foudroyant where he was attended to. Abercromby died on board a week later.

News of the British victory at the Battle of Alexandria was treated with euphoria bordering on frenzy; a nation depressed by countless French victories on land could at last celebrate a significant victory over the Corsican tyrant. The fact that Abercromby, a popular and beloved commander, had also lost his life, caught the public's imagination and inspired many artists.

The myth perpetuated by artists was that Abercromby, felled from his horse, died in the heat of battle. A good many representations of 'The Death of Abercromby' show him thus, including his impressive monument in St Paul's Cathedral, London, sculpted by the esteemed sculptor Richard Westmacott (1775-1856).

A particularly dramatic rendering shows a senseless Abercromby, still on horseback, falling backwards into the arms of attendant officers. This was pure drama. Other depictions show Abercromby expiring on the battlefield surrounded by his fellow officers, among whom are his protégés Generals Charles Stuart, John Moore and Hildebrand Oakes (later Civil Commissioner in Malta). Of course, while these fantasies elevate the mundane to the sublime, helping to celebrate the selfless heroics of the great general, they were quite inaccurate. As is often the case, the truth was more prosaic.

**"Abercromby's body was brought to Malta where he was given a State funeral. He was buried within the outer, northeast curtain of Fort St Elmo"**

Poor Abercromby was carried in a hammock to his berth on HMS Foudroyant. There he languished in pain for a week. His doctors, after a considerable amount of probing, realised that the musket ball had penetrated his thigh and buried itself deep into the bone. They tried a number of times, without success, to extract the ball, and in doing so only enlarged the wound, thus encouraging the contamination and infection which brought about his death.

After his death, the ship's surgeon examined Abercromby's body and, finding the musket ball so deeply lodged in the thigh bone, he had to resort to using a trephine (a circular surgical saw) to extract a portion of bone from which he smashed the musket ball free.

One of the finest engravings produced to celebrate the Egyptian campaign was based on a drawing by Philippe James Loucherbourg, RA. This was a more measured reflection on the whole expedition and its various contributors; the almost whimsical composition shows a stylised pyramid on which soldiers, sailors and marines decorate the portraits of the officers on Abercromby's staff with a medallion of Abercromby himself at its apex. This is a skillful composition celebrating both the officers and the soldiers who participated in the expedition. Some of the latter are easily identified; for example, the seated soldier at the base of the pyramid is Antoine Lutz, of the 96th Regiment, who captured the French cavalry standard shown draped across his lap.

Literary artists were not to be outdone by visual artists, and so poets too sang Abercromby's praises. A staggering number of epic poems and eulogies were composed; many were mediocre; however, a few were readable and can still be appreciated today. Here are excerpts from one such example:

*A courier from t' Egyptian coast  
The mournful tidings lately bore,  
That Abercromby, Britain's boast,  
By battle's fate was now no more.*

*Hist'ry with wonder shall relate  
Your great exploit on Egypt's coast;  
When Gaul's fam'd legion self defeat,  
And her unconquer'd standard lost.*

*Your brave companions oft shall tell  
How you the fatal wound conceal'd;  
How your soul triumph'd, when you fell,  
To see them masters of the field.*

*For us remains no mote, great shade!  
But now to give you honours due;  
By every bard let these be paid,  
By every sage, and hero too!*

Abercromby's body was brought to Malta where he was given a State funeral. He was buried in the outer, northeast curtain of Fort St Elmo in a specially prepared vault within the bastion of St John looking out to the open sea, as portrayed romantically by the accompanying engraving.

His mortal remains were not permitted to enjoy eternal rest in their original location.



The Grave of Abercrombie, unknown artist.

In 1871, the Royal Engineers altered the bastion to accommodate new, heavier armaments. As excavations proceeded, the coffin containing Abercromby's remains was found lying in its original vault.

Reports confirmed that the outer wooden coffin had deteriorated; however, the inner leaden coffin survived more or less intact except for some slight decay at the edges. The metal plate bearing Abercromby's name and age also survived. In the same vault the excavators also found the cask in which, like Nelson, Abercromby's body had been immersed in spirits to preserve it while it was transported to Malta.

In the course of the reworking of the bastion, Abercromby's coffin was re-cased and reinterred in a new vault behind the old one. We are fortunate that photographer Richard Ellis was on hand to record this event. The accompanying photograph appears to be taken just before the coffin was reburied to enjoy continued eternal rest in Malta's vaults of chivalry.

Brave Abercromby stamped his British name,  
Where Alexander trac'd the path to fame.  
On the last pyramid late time shall find  
His glorious name with gallant Nelson's joined.  
While Keith his corpse, with each sad sailor's praise,  
To Malta's vaults of chivalry conveys.



Monument to Sir Ralph Abercromby and his Staff, engraving by Anthony Cardon.