

**SOME ASPECTS OF  
BRITISH POLICY IN ETHIOPIA  
1847-1868**

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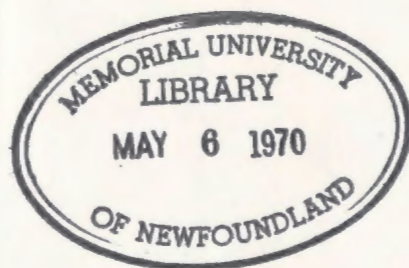
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SOME ASPECTS OF BRITISH POLICY  
IN ETHIOPIA 1847-1868

by

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## PREFACE

As the mythical kingdom of the Queen of Sheba and of Prester John, as the earliest African country to accept christianity, and lately as the only African country which escaped European rule in the nineteenth century, Ethiopia has attracted considerable attention to herself. From the beginning of the nineteenth century Britain became interested in Ethiopia, and in 1848 established diplomatic relations with her. Besides commercial and strategical interests, the mid-Victorian spirit of civilizing the underdeveloped peoples had taken Britain to "the Horn of Africa." However, by 1867 Britain's relations with Ethiopia had so much deteriorated that after conducting a successful military expedition she withdrew from that country without claiming for herself any advantages, either commercial or territorial.

In the following pages an attempt has been made to narrate and analyse some aspects of the Anglo-Ethiopian relations; this is by no means a complete study of British policy in Ethiopia as it does not deal with all aspects of British relations with that country. The emphasis is political, and an effort has been made to show how, from the beginning, the incompatible attitudes and

aspirations of the two countries constituted a stumbling block to the development of harmonious and mutually rewarding relations, and how the British government was compelled to send a military expedition to Ethiopia in 1867.

This study is mostly based on the British Parliamentary papers for the period and the extant secondary sources; and since there has been no opportunity to consult primary sources no pretention is made to thoroughness or complete originality.

I am much indebted to Dr. F. A. Hagar who gave me much guidance and encouragement during the initial stages of this research: much more I am indebted to Dr. L. Harris for having found time out of his busy schedule to go through this thesis to suggest corrections of syntax and style and to give me many invaluable suggestions about the organisation of my material. But for his unfailing support and encouragement it is difficult to see how I could ever have completed this work. I would also like to express my deep debt of gratitude to the staff of the Memorial University Library and to Dr. Mui and Professor Panting of the Dept. of History of the University for helping me in many ways.

K.Venkataram,

February, 1969.



### ABSTRACT

Though informal contacts between Britain and Ethiopia had existed from the eighteenth century, it was only in 1848 that Consular relations between the two powers were established. The need to counteract the growing French activity on the Red sea coast which seemed to threaten the sea route to India, the desire to extend British commerce in the region, and the mid-Victorian belief in civilizing underdeveloped people had prompted Britain to take the initiative.

While Britain considered the 1848 treaty with Ethiopia a means to promote these aims, the Ethiopians, being uninterested in trade, tried to use it as a lever to obtain British support against the Turks from whom they hoped to recover some territories that had been a part of the historic Ethiopian empire. In this they were disappointed as Britain would not antagonize the Ottoman empire through which passed the traditional overland routes to India. This led to unfortunate misunderstandings since the Ethiopians considered as their enemies all those who were on friendly terms with Turkey.

Since these positions were irreconcilable, Anglo-Ethiopian relations could hardly have been expected to fare better than they did. The actual rupture came

as a consequence of Theodore's imprisonment of the British Consul and his subsequent intransigent attitude towards British proposals which in turn forced the British government to send a military expedition in 1867 to free the captives and thus to restore the supposedly lost British prestige in the region.

Having achieved these objectives, without claiming any concessions for herself, Britain withdrew from Ethiopia. This was no great sacrifice since to safe guard her interests on the Red Sea coast, which was under the control of friendly Turkey, Britain had no need to rule Ethiopia. Moreover, since 1848 France had ceased to be active in Ethiopia, and this had removed the chief motive for Britain's presence there. Above all the race for the partition of Africa had not yet begun.

The two decades of British relations with Ethiopia seemed to be an exercise in futility.

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## CHAPTER I

Though Britain did not establish official relations with Ethiopia till the mid-nineteenth century, her connections with that country go back to much earlier times. In 1769, three decades before Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, the great Scottish traveller James Bruce visited Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> After Alvarez<sup>2</sup> he was the first European who attained a position of some importance in that country and has contributed valuable information to our knowledge of Ethiopia and her people.<sup>3</sup> Though George III graciously acceded to Bruce's request that the drawings made in Africa should be added to the royal collection<sup>4</sup> the British Government did not show interest in the African venture. At any rate Bruce's expedition did not lead to closer commercial or political relations with Ethiopia.

However this attitude of unconcern passed away with the eighteenth century, and Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt attracted British attention to the Red Sea coast

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1. At the time of Bruce's visit Takla Haimanot was the nominal emperor of Ethiopia; but Ras Michael Sehul was the virtual ruler.

2. Alvarez was the chaplain of the Portugese Embassy which visited Ethiopia in 1520, and he has left a valuable account of the country and its people.

3. Edward Ullendorff, The Ethiopians, (London; Ox.U.P., 1960), pp. 12.

4. David Mathew, Ethiopia (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1947), pp. 82.

Equally Britain's changing attitude towards slavery and commerce was at the root of her new interest in the 'Horn of Africa'. In varying degrees the English travellers who came to Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century were aware of these new interests.<sup>1</sup>

The first of this new class of visitors showing imperial consciousness was George Annesley, the Viscount Valentia. He thought of exploring the new avenues of commerce and "the commercial advantages which might attend the opening of Abyssinia appeared worthy of attention."<sup>2</sup> In 1804 he set out on a voyage of exploration, and on arriving at Massawa<sup>3</sup> sent his secretary and draughtsman Henry Salt "to explore the country and to negotiate commercial contracts with the rulers."<sup>4</sup> Accompanied by Nathaniel Pearce<sup>5</sup> Salt reached Antalo the capital of Ras Wolde Selassie, the ruler of Tigre, where after the initial suspicion of the Ras had been allayed they were treated well. Salt tried to impress upon the mind of the Ras the advantages of establishing commercial intercourse with the English who "are the uncontrolled masters of the sea."<sup>6</sup> But the idea of

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1. Ibid. pp. 104.

2. Lord Valentia's travels, p. 4, Quoted, Mathew, op.cit.

3. The Red Sea port of Ethiopia, at that time it was under the rule of the Turks.

4. Ullendorff, op. cit., pp.15.

5. Pearce, an Englishman, born in Middlesex, had an adventurous career. He met Salt in 1804, at Mocha, and accompanied him to Ethiopia. On Salt's departure he remained behind and took up service with Ras Wolde Selassie., where he continued till 1818. He reached Cairo in 1819 and died there in 1820. For details



peaceful commerce, at first, did not impress the Ras who also probably doubted the credentials of his visitors. "Even in the first conversation it was obvious while Salt was speaking of commerce the Viceroy was thinking of fire arms and war."<sup>1</sup> Although the Ras permitted the party to proceed to Gondar to meet with the Emperor, because of the difficulties of communication Salt abandoned the plan and returned to Massawa to join his master. Valentia prided himself on the fact that he had reopened communication with Ethiopia and returned home determined to establish direct trade relations with that country.

Though the Directors of the East India Company turned down Valentia's proposals for trading with Ethiopia as "chimerical", a Mssrs. Jacob & Co. agreed to give the plan a trial. Encouraged by this success Valentia approached Canning, the Foreign Secretary, to send an official mission to the Ethiopian emperor. He specially dwelt upon the political advantages of the contact to counterbalance the French intrigues among the Wahabis of Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Canning received the suggestion well, and on the recommendation of Valentia, commissioned Salt to carry

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6. (contd. from previous page). Salt's Narrative, quoted by Mathew, op. cit., p. 125.

1. Mathew op. cit., pp. 120.

2. Robbin Hallet, Penetration of Africa to 1815, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 390-91.

certain gifts and a letter from George III to the emperor of Ethiopia, and instructed him to do his best to ascertain the state of Ethiopian commerce.<sup>1</sup> However, it is significant, that Salt was not commissioned to negotiate either a commercial or political agreement with the ruler of Ethiopia. Probably the British Government's objective was limited to an exploration of new commercial avenues, and as yet they were not interested in establishing regular diplomatic or commercial relations.

As on the previous occasion, Salt arrived at Antalo and was well received by Wolde Selassie. The political condition of the country had not changed since his earlier visit in 1804. Because of the internal difficulties and revolts Salt could not visit Gondar to meet with the Emperor and presented the gifts intended for him, which included some pieces of artillery, to Wolde Selassie. The immensely pleased Ras ordered "that a prayer should be offered up weekly for the health of His Majesty, the King of Great Britain," and also expressed his gratitude to him for regarding the welfare of his country.<sup>2</sup> Though he expressed his

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1. Ibid.

2. Henry Salt, Voyages to Abyssinia, (London: 1814), pp. 209.



"utmost" wish to encourage intercourse with England, he did not fail to point out how the ignorance of his people, the unsettled state of the country and the Turkish control of the Ethiopian sea board constituted real hurdles to commerce, "could any plan, however, be arranged for obviating these difficulties...he would most readily concur in carrying it into effect."<sup>1</sup> Wolde Selassie was not deaf to Salt's description of England as the unconquered mistress of the sea; nor was he wanting in an appreciation of English artillery. However, it was not in Salt's power to propose any plan of cooperation, and a little later, with plenty of good will behind him, he returned to England.

Like Valentia, Salt was interested in promoting trade between the two countries. However, he considered the Turkish control of Massawa a hindrance to free commercial intercourse with Ethiopia, and thought that British occupation of any one point on the Ethiopian coast would remove this difficulty. This would not only create considerable demand for British Indian goods in Ethiopia,<sup>2</sup> but also ultimately lead to a diffusion of civilization in that quarter.<sup>3</sup> But the British

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1. Ibid, pp. 297.

2. Salt, op. cit, pp. 498.

3. Hallet, op. cit, pp.394.

Government did not act on these suggestions. The main reason for this appears to be the opposition of the East India Company which considered Ethiopia as its exclusive sphere of influence. For instance, in 1807 when William Jacob applied for leave to open up trading relations with Ethiopia, the Directors of the Company opposed it on the ground that it would interfere with the Company's monopoly in East Africa.<sup>1</sup> Finally, when the Bombay council, under the pressure of the British government agreed to Jacob's request, the Directors emphasized the fact that such an infringement of their monopoly was unknown in the annals of the Company.<sup>2</sup> Apart from this, the expenses of Salt's mission which reached a disagreeable sum of £2900 had shown the British government how expensive it was to maintain direct relations with Ethiopia. Naturally they must have thought of leaving the matter in the hands of the Bombay Government, and they made no further efforts to follow up Salt's mission.

Whatever the reasons for the disinterestedness of the Foreign Office, the Bombay government began to

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1. Jackson Haight, European Powers and South East Africa, 1795-1856, (New York: A. Praeger, 1967), pp. 147.

2. Quoted by Haight, *op. cit.*, pp. 147. I.O.R. Hom. Mis. Series, Vol. 494, 509, 16, 515, Ramsay-Fawcner, I, East India House, 24, Dec, 1807.



evinced greater interest in Ethiopia. The East India Company had established a factory at Mocha and had improved their trading prospects by concluding a treaty with Aden in 1802.<sup>1</sup> Bombay ships regularly visited the East African coast and traded with Massawa, the Somali coast and Mocha. The Directors of the East India Company were anxious to explore new commercial avenues and were urging the Bombay government "to increase by every practical endeavour the vend of woollens and other staples" in that region.<sup>2</sup> Political agents were told to collect information about conditions in Arabia, the Red Sea Coast and Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> The Bombay government lost no time in implementing the policy of the Directors of the Company, for, Coffin<sup>4</sup> tells us that on his arrival at Mocha, in 1809, Captain Rudland, the Agent of the Company "was obliging enough to disclose his orders from the Bombay government for opening commercial intercourse with Ethiopia."<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact Rudland informed

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1. Cambridge History of The British Empire, Vol XII, pp.568.
  2. I.O.R. Bombay Secret Letters, Vol.76, Bombay Council - The Court of Directors, Quoted by Haight, op.cit. pp.154.
  3. Bombay P & S proceedings 383, Vols, 2731, Presidents Minutes, March 16, 1809, para 6, quoted by Haight, op. cit., pp.154.
  4. An English traveller and adventurer who accompanied Henry Salt to Ethiopia. He served Sebaregis and Obeay of Tigre respectively and on their behalf conducted political missions to England in 1828 and 1841 respectively.
  5. Salt's Travels in Abyssinia, pp. 121, quoted, Mathews. op. cit., pp.133.

Wolde Selassie of the desire of the Bombay Government to keep up regular communication with Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>, and sent him a hand organ as a present.<sup>2</sup> Following this, in June 1809, Pearce was appointed as the East India Company's commercial agent in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> However Wolde Selassie was not enthusiastic about these approaches as he was convinced of the futility of these relations so long as the Turks controlled the Red Sea ports. Moreover, his country had not much to offer in exchange for goods.<sup>4</sup> Though Pearce remained in Ethiopia till 1818 no commercial advantages accrued from his efforts.

Despite this, intermittent political contacts were maintained between the two countries. In 1828 Sabargadis, who had succeeded Wolde Selassie in Tigre, sent through Coffin some presents to George III, and requested the British Government to send some horsemen, doctors, painters and other craftsmen to teach his people new methods of civilization. More importantly, he sought arms and ammunition to fight his internal enemies.<sup>5</sup> Lord Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary, ignored these requests,<sup>6</sup> but this attitude could not remain unchanged for long.

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1. Ibid.

2. Haight, op. cit., pp. 393.

3. Haight, op. cit., pp. 155.

4. Salt, op. cit., pp. 297.

5. Thomas. E. Marston, Britain's Imperial Role in The Red Sea, 1800-76, (Hamden; 1961), pp. 115.

6. This



By 1830 religious and strategical considerations had begun to challenge the old British attitudes towards Ethiopia. In that year the Church Missionary Society of London sent Samuel Gobat to spread the protestant faith in Ethiopia. But protestant teaching with its disregard for the traditional worship of the Virgin Mary antagonised the Ethiopians, and in 1832, Dezaj Oobeay of Tigre expelled Gobat from his territories. Undaunted by this reverse, the Church Missionary Society persisted in their effort, and sent Lewis Krapf<sup>1</sup> to continue the work started by Gobat. On his arrival in Tigre Krapf found two Roman Catholic missionaries, Arnold Abbadie and Thomas Abbadie, in the confidence of the Tigrean ruler. Finding the field favourable for the propagation of the Roman Catholic faith Thomas Abbadie went to Rome and with the support of Cardinal Franzini<sup>2</sup> procured the appointment of a Catholic mission to Ethiopia of which Justin De Jacobis was made the head. Abbadie also sought the assistance of Palmerston for his mission on the pretext that it would ultimately pave the way for commercial intercourse with Ethiopia. The Foreign Secretary helped the mission by procuring for it safe passage through Egypt and Massawa. He also sent a letter to Dezaj Oobeay promising

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1. A German missionary who later distinguished himself as the first European to visit Mt. Kilmanjaro.

2. The head of the Propoganda Department of the Vatican.

Britain's good offices in terminating the border difficulties with Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Though the Catholic mission under Jacobis at first, fared well, in the end it suffered as much as Gobat's protestant mission. Jacobis could not accomplish much because of his illconsidered interference in the local religious and political practice which brought upon him the hatred of the Ethiopian orthodox church.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, in the 1830's France's activity in Ethiopia and the Red Sea region caused great anxiety in Britain and led her to interfere actively in that region. In 1835 two Frenchmen, Combes and Tamasier, undertook a private expedition to Ethiopia and reached Shoa. As King Sahale Selassie of Shoa believed them to be capable of making weapons for him he reluctantly allowed them to leave his country. Their mission stirred the French government's interest in Ethiopia, and led them to send a scientific mission under Lt. Charlemagne Theophile Lefbvre to explore Ethiopia and the Red Sea coast. "This expedition appears to have been largely scientific in character although it was instructed to report on the possibilities of colonization in Abyssinia."<sup>3</sup> However

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1. This was a reply to Oobeay's letter which Abbadie had conveyed to the British Government.

2. This account is based on Marston's Britain's Imperial Role in the Red Sea. pp. 117-118.

3. Marston, op. cit., pp. 119.



it did not lead to any political results. A little later a young French man, Rochet De'Hericourt, set out on a private adventure and arrived in Shoa in 1839. He presented to Sahale Selassie a mill for making gun powder and influenced him in favour of France. Krapf who happened to be in Shoa on the invitation of the King kept the British Government informed of the Frenchman's alleged intriguing disposition. In October 1839, the French Ministry of Marine sent Ferret<sup>1</sup> and Galinier<sup>2</sup> (two French explorers) to explore Ethiopia.

The East India Company was so much disturbed by the French activity that on July 2, 1840, the Secret Committee of the India Board instructed Haines, their political Resident at Aden "to take such steps quietly as would secure for Great Britain a preference either in political or commercial points of view or both in that part of the African coast which is opposite Aden, as the settlement of any other European commercial agency or military station on the coast would be detrimental to British interests."<sup>3</sup> With a view to securing the control of the coast Haines purchased from a local chief, for 11,000 crowns, the Musa islands<sup>4</sup> at the head of the Bay of Tajura.<sup>5</sup> Since French military vessels continued to traverse the Red Sea region, the East India Company's

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1 and 2. Captains in the French Staff Corps.

3. BSC, Secret Committee - Haines, 7/2.40. Quoted by Marston, op. cit., p. 121.

4. Two tiny islands facing the Bay of Tajura in the Red Sea.

5. Marston, op. cit., pp. 127.

agents at Aden suspected that the French were aiming to establish a footing in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

In March 1840, Rochet d'Hericourt departed for France and it was rumoured that he had grandiose plans to establish firmly French influence in Shoa. Krapf advised the British government to seize the opportunity of Rochet's absence to increase their influence in Shoa and spoke enthusiastically of the Shoan ruler's desire to civilize his people.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he induced Sahale Selassie to seek help from the British Indian government. Accordingly, Sahale Selassie requested the Indian government to supply him with guns, cannons, medicines and doctors.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in view of the increased French activity, the Foreign Office, through the Board of Control, had advised the government of India to establish good relations with the King of Shoa. The latter assigned this task to the Government of Bombay who appointed Cornwallis Harris of the Bombay Engineers corps to lead a mission to Shoa.<sup>4</sup> Harris was instructed to enter into a convention with the King of Shoa, to make necessary scientific explorations, to obtain a geographical knowledge of the area, to search diligently for coal, to ascertain markets for British Indian manufactures, and to check slavery. The governor of Bombay emphasised the

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1. Marston, op. cit., pp. 112.

2. Ibid., pp. 127.

3. Marston, op. cit., pp. 128.

4. Ibid.



fact that the establishment of French influence in Ethiopia would prove prejudicial to British interests in the Red Sea region, and instructed Harris to use all legitimate means to counteract the schemes of French aggrandisement.<sup>1</sup>

The expedition sailed from Bombay towards the end of April 1841 and reached Ankobar, the capital of Shoa, in July 1841. Harris presented gifts to Sahale Selassie which included Cashmere shawls, Delhi scarves, and ornamental chiming clocks. The musical boxes were brought in and set to play "God Save the Queen". Three hundred muskets with fixed bayonets were carried forward and piled immediately in front of the royal stool. "God will reward you for I cannot,"<sup>2</sup> exclaimed the sovereign. Harris's mission impressed Sahale Selassie so much that, in November 1841, he signed a treaty of commerce and friendship with the British Indian government. Though friendship was established, and mutual good will had been expressed, because of the complex political situation in Shoa, no good came of the treaty. As to containing French influence Britain did not accomplish much. Even before Harris's departure from Shoa, Hericourt returned and influenced Sahale Selassie to sign a similar treaty with France. However, neither France nor Britain benefited from this, as the tribal wars within Shoa closed that

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1. LBSC, 1841, Bombay Government - Harris, Quoted Marston, op. cit., pp. 132.

2. Cornwallis Harris, The Highlands of Ethiopia, Vol. II pp. 40

province to all external trade, and in 1843 Sahale Selassie forbade all foreigners from entering his country.

In northern Ethiopia also, Anglo French rivalry continued unabated, and the East India Company's navy kept a constant watch on the French activity around Massawa<sup>1</sup> the strategical importance of which had increased for Britain since her occupation of Aden in 1832. In 1841, while the French were still struggling to build their influence in Tigre, the British had suffered considerable reverses in that region because of the unwise policy of the Foreign Office. In 1841 Dezaj Oobeay of Tigre being anxious to cultivate friendly relations with Britain had sent through Coffin some presents to the Queen. Lord Aberdeen had ignored Oobeay by not even sending him a reply, and when Coffin returned to Tigre with empty hands the infuriated Ras had threatened to imprison him. Although he did not carry out this threat it is clear that he was greatly displeased with the British.

Thus by 1842 British influence in northern Ethiopia was at a low ebb, and Shoa, for all practical purposes, had remained closed to them. The French were active in the Red Sea region and Britain was not prepared to see them entrenched there. It seemed time for a reconsideration of British policy in Ethiopia and the Red Sea coast. This task would be undertaken by Palmerston. Meanwhile it would be well to take a look at the changes in British

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1. For details see Marston, op. cit., pp. 169-73.



attitudes towards Africa in general, and the particular circumstances that led to the establishment of consular relations with Ethiopia.

## CHAPTER II.

From the time of Bruce's visit to Gondar in 1769 to that of Harris to Shoa in 1841 vast changes had occurred in British attitudes towards Africa. As the age of exploration proceeded the mystery surrounding Africa was being cleared up. The continent had become an object of study for geographical societies, missionaries, and the learned public. Several expeditions had been sent to West Africa with a view to discovering the sources of the Niger and the Congo. Mungo Park, Clapperton, Lander, MacGregor and Walter Oudney had contributed to Europe's knowledge, while many Britons had come to realize that the vast regions of Africa would provide an extensive field for their activities, be they religious or commercial.

In the mid-nineteenth century Britain was fast becoming the workshop of the world and she needed new markets for her manufactures and cheap raw materials for her industries. Her prosperity seemed to depend on the opening up of new markets in Asia and Africa, particularly since many in Britain thought that British goods were being excluded from European markets because of the rivalry of other European manufacturers.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Palmerston-Auckland, "n.d." Quoted by Charles Webster, The Foreign Policy of Palmerston, 1830-1841, 2 Vols. (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1951), Vol. 2, PP.751.



"The English merchant was crying for markets and customers.....The Grahamstown Journal in the 1830's and 1840's excitedly extolled the benefits to the English manufacturer, the merchant, and the colonial trader, if the artificial wants of the Africans in the interior were stimulated by the taste for European goods."<sup>1</sup>

The need for markets outside Europe, the U.S.A. and the British Empire, had been felt acutely during the Napoleonic and the Madison wars.<sup>2</sup> Palmerston who was convinced that the British should unremittingly endeavour to find in other parts of the world new vents for their produce was persistently working towards this end.<sup>3</sup> In May 1839, the British Government had concluded a convention of commerce with Zanzibar, and in 1840 with the ruler of Mocha in the Arabian peninsula. Likewise, Palmerston had opened up the Muslim states of North Africa for British trade and these had become useful fields of British business. He, therefore felt that it would be worthwhile to extend this experiment to the Horn of Africa as well.

Besides trade, humanitarian considerations drew Britain's attention to the Horn of Africa. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century Britain had been fighting against the slave trade on the West African coast, and she was anxious to put an end to this nefarious traffic

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1. M.V. Jackson, Haight, European Powers and South East Africa, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967) pp.248.
  2. Donald Southgate, "The Most English Minister" Policies & Politics of Palmerston, (London: Macmillan, 1966) pp.137.
  3. Palmerston-Auckland, "n.d." quoted by Webster, op. cit, pp. 751.

on the East African coast also. As early as 1822 she had concluded a treaty with the Sultan of Zanzibar for stopping the slave trade in his dominions, and this treaty had been renewed in 1840, and in 1845 the Sultan was induced to "put an absolute ban on the export of slaves from his African dominions."<sup>1</sup> However this did not stop the slave trade in the Horn of Africa and many helpless Sudanese and Ethiopians were being sold into slavery at Massawa, Jidda and Suakin. Palmerston believed that Britain had a special responsibility to free the slave and civilize him; that is to say he believed that "besides the negative duty of stopping the enslavement of Africans, there was the positive duty of helping them towards civilization and commerce."<sup>2</sup> One might go even farther and say that Palmerston, like many of his contemporaries, believed that legitimate trade was the sovereign remedy for the slave trade and that the underdeveloped peoples might be civilized by the general influence of commerce. Nor did he admit the right of any backward country to exclude European influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus God and mammon could be served simultaneously.

Apart from humanitarian and commercial considerations,

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1. Robinson, Gallagher with Denny, Africa and The Victorians (London: MacMillan & Co., 1965) pp. 16.

2. Southgate, op. cit., pp. 147.

3. Ibid. pp. 144-45.



strategical motives had also begun to attract Palmerston's attention to the East African coast. "Africa remained peripheral to the Mediterranean and, the Indian Empire, and the routes to the East."<sup>1</sup> After the acquisition of Aden in 1837, the Red sea coast facing Aden had assumed a new importance to Britain. But in the 1830's French influence had increased in Mohammed Ali's Egypt, and the French occupation of the islands of Nosse<sup>4</sup>be, and Mayolla between 1830 and 1843 suggested that they aspired to footholds on the Mainland at Mombasa, and even further north. Since 1840 France had been showing deep interest in Abyssinia, and if French influence there became a reality, and if Mohammed Ali co-operated with them, it would have certainly posed a challenge to British interests in the region. It was Palmerston's resolution that the "mistress of India cannot permit France to be the mistress directly or indirectly of the road to her Indian dominions."<sup>3</sup> Thus by the 1840's the British Government had sufficient reasons to become interested in Abyssinia. Britain's needs and necessities as much as her humanitarianism, made it desirable for her to enter into the Horn of Africa.

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1. Robinson, Gallagher with Denny, op. cit., pp. 17.

2. Ibid., pp. 43.

3. H. L. Hoskins, British Routes to India, (New York: Frank Cass & Co., Reprint, 1966.) pp. 268.

However Palmerston's decision to establish consular relations with Ethiopia was largely influenced by Walter Plowden.<sup>1</sup> During the course of his Ethiopian travels between 1842 and 1846, Plowden had been impressed by the natural wealth of the country, and saw great prospects for the extension of British trade in that region. The opportunity to convey his views to the British Government came in 1846 when Ras Ali, the defacto ruler of Ethiopia, asked him to be the bearer of certain presents to Queen Victoria.

On 16 October, 1846, Plowden wrote to Palmerston about the wish of Ras Ali to send some presents to Queen Victoria as a token of his friendship towards Britain. Plowden pointed out that the Ras had no political ends in view, but that in any case it would serve Britain well to encourage his approaches, since any rejection would be bound to irritate him, and render difficult the access to his "magnificent" country.<sup>2</sup> In this vein Plowden approached the Foreign Secretary, and Palmerston instructed him to proceed to England with the Ras's presents, and provided

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1. Plowden was the son of a Bengal civil servant. He was born in 1820. As a youth he joined the service of a Calcutta Anglo-Indian firm. As he did not like the sedentary life at Calcutta he decided to return to England. On his way to England, at Suez, he met John Bell, an Englishman who was in the service of Ras Ali. With the ambition of discovering the source of the White Nile, Plowden accompanied Bell to Ethiopia where he travelled extensively from 1842 to 1846.
  2. Great Britain, parliamentary papers; 1867-68, Vol. LXXII, Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868 (hereafter referred as "PP" - unless otherwise mentioned reference is to Vol. LXXII - p.2. Plowden-Palmerston, 15th October 1846



him with funds for the journey from Alexandria to London.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after his arrival in England, in August, 1847, Plowden submitted to the Foreign Office a memorandum on Abyssinia.<sup>2</sup> As his first report left many questions unanswered, Addington of the Foreign Office enquired of him whether British goods would find a ready market in Ethiopia, and whether the Red Sea route offered enough security to maintain permanent commercial contact with Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

In reply Plowden submitted another memorandum to the Foreign Office on 28 August, 1847 giving a fairly accurate picture of the Ethiopian economy. He explained that the export goods of Ethiopia - spices, musk and wax - were produced by the Galla provinces of Enarea, Kaffa Djimma, Gooraguay, and Jingera,<sup>4</sup> that much of the uncultivated land was favourable for the production of indigo and that the neighbourhood of Massawa in northern Ethiopia was particularly suitable for cotton cultivation; that in the Highlands of Ethiopia cattle flourished well and offered good prospects for developing trade in them: that western Ethiopia supplied gold and ivory and that he thought Ethiopia to be rich in Saltpeter, sulphur, iron, copper and gold. Furthermore he

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1. Marston, op. cit., pp. 176.

2. "P.P." LXXII p. 3-5, Plowden's Memorandum on Ethiopia, 13 August, 1847.

3. "P.P." p. 5, Addington-Plowden, 18 August, 1847.

4. These districts are in Western Ethiopia.

he thought that in Ethiopia there existed a demand for manufactured goods which Britain could fill; since the Abyssinians used mostly cottonwear a potential market existed for plain and printed calicoes and other varieties of textiles which could be supplied from Bombay with which port trade already existed. Also there was a demand for red Morocco, frankincense, bottles, mirrors and carpets. The Ethiopians liked English cutlery, and other British manufactures which Bombay merchants were already supplying to them.

Much of the Ethiopian produce was transported from Western Ethiopia by mules to the port of Massawa which was the main centre of Ethiopian foreign trade. Plowden estimated the duties levied on export goods at Massawa at about 70,000 dollars per annum. Considering the variety of Ethiopian produce, this was not an impressive sum; rather it showed the adverse conditions under which the commerce of a potentially wealthy country struggled.

Plowden recognised three major obstacles to Ethiopian trade; first of all, the Turks at Massawa created many bottlenecks which interfered with the smooth flow of commerce; secondly, the Ethiopians had only a vague and limited idea of the value of commerce and failed to adhere to their commercial contracts; thirdly, they lacked an organised system of imposts and duties which worked against the trader, as he had to pay heavy taxes on his



merchandise every time he passed through the territory of a different chief. Plowden was hopeful that if Britain helped remove these obstacles the Ethiopian trade would quadruple within a short time.<sup>1</sup>

Plowden also drew Palmerston's attention to the slave trade in Ethiopia whose christian subjects were being sold into slavery by the muslim merchants at Massawa. The Egyptian and the Turkish authorities also participated in this trade which was reluctantly permitted by the ruler of Tigre, for the sake of the revenues it brought him. But it was Plowden's contention that he could be induced to stop the slave trade if British influence were combined with evidence that other sources of revenue could be developed.<sup>2</sup>

But Plowden did not rely on the commercial arguments alone. He also raised the spectre of the French menace. He reported rumours that the French had bought an island named Edd on the Abyssinian coast, and that they were persistently endeavouring to establish their influence in the court of Tigre.<sup>3</sup> To substantiate the rumours he could point out that in 1846 the French Government had sent four different missions to the court of Tigre.<sup>4</sup> And he explained that because this would jeopardise the British

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1. "P.P", p. 5-8, The above account is based on Plowden's memoranda on Abyssinian trade dated 13 August, 1847 and 18 August 1847.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. "P.P", p. 3-5, 6-8, Plowden's Memorandum.

position if left unchecked he had advised Ras Oobeay, through Coffin not to enter into an understanding with the French before knowing the mind of Britain on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

Plowden thought that the possession of Massawa or any other convenient point on the Red Sea coast of Ethiopia by Britain, and the appointment of a consul in that place would help improve the situation. The consul would not only keep an eye on French activities but would also establish a friendly intercourse with Ethiopia which, in the long run, would lead to a vast improvement in the social and political life of that country.

However, the first step would be to establish closer and friendly ties with Ethiopia, and he advised the British Government to send a friendly reply to the Ras placing more emphasis on the superiority of Britain in arts and sciences and less on powers in war, as the councillors of the Ras had an unidentified jealousy on this point.<sup>2</sup> Plowden was optimistic that a friendly treaty with the Ras would ensure Britain access into all his dominions, while a resident at his court "might ensure with little tact his correspondence in all our views."<sup>3</sup> He felt that should the British Government let go this occasion to cultivate friendly relations with Ras Ali, perhaps it would be a source of regret.

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1. Ibid.

2. "P.P", p. 2, Plowden-Palmerston, Oct. 1846.

3. Plowden's Memorandum, ibid.



Plowden's report impressed Palmerston as it threw light on all three of the aspects of the situation in which he was interested. Ethiopia held out the prospects of an attractive market for British manufacturers, a market in which the East India Company was also interested. In any case the British Indian merchants at Massawa, who were trading with Ethiopia, needed constant protection, and Palmerston who believed it to be "the business of the Government to open and secure the roads to merchants", saw such an opportunity to open such a road into Ethiopia, a possibility which had occurred to him as early as 1840.<sup>1</sup> But Harris's treaty with the King of Shoa had shown that the mere conclusion of a commercial treaty with the native rulers would not lead to positive results. A British consul on the spot, however, would not only promote trade, but would also be more effective in counteracting French influence and in stopping slavery.

Other forces were also urging Palmerston to establish a consulate at Massawa. For instance, Murray, the British consul-General at Cairo wrote that:

"It is not only the encroachment of Egypt, but also the intrigues of France that require to be closely watched, on that coast, for if the independence of Abyssinia and the free egress of its produce be duly secured, it will afford a gradually increasing field for the extension of British commerce."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Webster, op. cit., pp. 751.

2. F.O. 78/708, Murray-Palmerston, 10.2.47.

At the same time Dr. Beke, a writer and a traveller, was urging Palmerston to open a consulate on the Red Sea coast of Abyssinia to promote trade and to watch the French activity.<sup>1</sup> Under these circumstances Palmerston decided to establish consular relations with Ethiopia. Having been interviewed and recommended by Hammond of the Foreign Office, Walter Plowden was appointed as British Consul to Ethiopia, though the consulate itself was to be established at Massawa.

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1. Marston, op. cit., pp. 174.



### CHAPTER III

In his letter of instructions to Plowden, Palmerston wrote that in establishing a consulate at Massawa the British government had no intention of acquiring territories in that part of Africa, and wished only to extend British commerce in that region. He instructed Plowden to report from Massawa the condition of that port, the state of the Abyssinian trade, the stability of the governments and rulers of that region, and then to proceed to the court of Ras Ali, the de facto ruler of Ethiopia, and to assure him of the earnest desire of the British Government to maintain the most friendly relations with him and his country, and to impress upon him the fact that the surest way of maintaining and strengthening such relations would be to encourage commercial dealings.<sup>1</sup> Palmerston was anxious to sign a treaty of commerce with Ethiopia without losing time, and he gave a draft treaty to Plowden for the consideration of the Ras should he find him interested in such a proposition. Palmerston himself addressed a letter to Ras Ali expressing the hope that he would perceive the great advantages which his country would derive by intimate connections 'with the sovereign of Britain whose dominions extend from the rising to the setting sun,'<sup>2</sup> and

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1. "P.P", p. 8b, Palmerston-Plowden, 3 Jan. 1848.

2. Palmerston-Ras Ali, Ibid, p. 9.

whose fleet are to be met with in every part of the sea which encompasses the earth.

Plowden arrived at Massawa in August 1848, and soon established the consulate at Mancullo, a village on the mainland. In the following December he left for the interior of Ethiopia, and a little later established fairly cordial relations with Dezaj Oobeay of Tigre who being anxious to cultivate good relations with Britain promised Plowden 'protection and convoy through his territories'.<sup>1</sup>

In February, 1849, Plowden arrived at Debra Tabor and delivered to Ras Ali Palmerston's letter and the presents from the Queen. The delighted Ras promised to do everything in his power to retain the friendship of the English nation,<sup>2</sup> and on 2 November, 1849, signed Palmerston's proposed treaty of friendship and commerce with Britain.

The treaty consisted of nineteen articles, and it began by expressing the mid-victorian belief that commerce was a great source of wealth, and that its fruits could only be realized when trading partners were firmly united in friendship. Article IV forbade the granting of a trading monopoly or exclusive privileges to any country. Articles XI and XII required the Ethiopian government to encourage the merchants of the interior of Africa to bring their produce to the Ethiopian markets, and to promote trade with other parts of the world. Articles IV, X and XI significantly

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1. "P.P.", pp. 25. Plowden-Palmerston, Jan 27, 1849.

2. "P.P." pp. 30. Plowden-Palmerston, March 3, 1849.



show Britain's belief in the Horn of Africa. However, this did not prevent her from trying to control the trade routes of Ethiopia, for, article XIII, by entrusting responsibility to keep open and secure the avenues of approach between the sea coast and Ethiopia to both the governments, virtually entrusted control over the trade routes to Britain. Article V aimed at protecting trade from excessive taxation by fixing duties at 5% on all imports and exports. Article XVII offered extra-territorial jurisdiction to British subjects by placing them under the jurisdiction of the British consul in that country.<sup>1</sup>

It is significant that Ras Ali did not propose changes in the draft treaty, and did not even object to article XVII, which could only mean that either he was insincere or indifferent, and indifference based on pessimism seems most likely. Certainly he had only a lukewarm interest in the trade<sup>2</sup> and his contributions to the negotiations were limited to a request for dollars wherewith to pay his soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Plowden reported to Palmerston that his remarks on reading the treaty were that the proposals were excellent, but probably in ten years on English merchant might trade to Gondar.<sup>4</sup> This mood of pessimism did not augur well for a prosperous trade between the two countries.

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1. Parliamentary Papers, 1867-68, Vol. LXXII, pp. 39-41.  
The Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Great Britain and Abyssinia, signed on 2 November, 1849.

2. Swen Rubenson, King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press., 1966), pp. 64.

3. "P.P." p. 45, Ras Ali-Victoria, "n.d." Plowden's despatch of 2 Jan, 1850.

4. "P.P.", pp. 69 Plowden-Palmerston, April 2, 1850.

From the beginning the commercial treaty had only a limited significance as Ras Ali's writ did not run throughout Ethiopia, and even his territories could not be reached without the previous permission of Dezaj Oobeay whose dominions bordered the Red Sea. Ali practically had no say in the administration of these vast regions by which Oobeay controlled every avenue to the interior of the country available for trade or policy. Hence Plowden realized the necessity of cultivating good relations with the Tigrean chief. This was also necessary to stamp out whatever French influence survived in Tigre by making Oobeay amenable to British influence. Fortunately for Plowden an opportunity occurred to accomplish this when Oobeay approached him for British help against the Turks. The Tigrean ruler being closer to the Turkish seats of power in the Red Sea region saw more clearly than Ras Ali the menace to Ethiopian independence in the persistently unreasonable treatment of Ethiopian merchants at Massawa, and much more so in the latest efforts of the Turks to establish their sovereignty over the Red Sea regions of Ethiopia. Since Oobeay lacked the requisite strength to force the Turks to behave properly, he was anxious to have Britain's support for his plans. Plowden transmitted these details to the Foreign Office.<sup>1</sup> However before this despatch could reach the Foreign Office, the increasing

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1. "P.P." pp. 69, Plowden-Palmerston, October 29, 1849.



Turkish menace forced Oobeay to march against them. The Turks who had legal rights over the port of Massawa only, in an attempt to extend their authority to the mainland, had overthrown the Naib of Arkeeko, a vassal of the Tigrean ruler. As this was an open challenge to Ethiopian sovereignty Oobeay could not remain indifferent, and he sent a force of eight to twelve thousand soldiers to dislodge the Turks and to re-establish his authority on the mainland of Massawa. His soldiers burnt and pillaged the region, and after collecting 13,000 German crowns from the Turks returned to Tigre.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this Oobeay did not insist that the Turks leave the island of Massawa, but only that they withdraw from the mainland, so that he could once again entrust its rule to his vassal. Transmitting these details to Palmerston, Plowden recommended that should Oobeay seek British intervention to decide the dispute, they should uphold his rights by refusing to recognise the Turkish sovereignty over the mainland of Massawa.<sup>2</sup> As expected by Plowden Oobeay applied for British help, and his letter to the Queen expresses Ethiopian expectations. He wrote:

"Formerly my ancestors were in possession of, and governed all the coast of the Red Sea and Massawa .....Recently the Turks took Massawa. You are a christian Queen and a friend of the christians. You are powerful and now I will request your friendship (and hope) that you will not permit the Mohammedans forces to ravage and occupy my territories, but insist on their remaining content with the island of Massawa (though that even they have no right) without setting their foot on the mainland, or interfering with the Naib that I

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1. "P.P.", pp. 26 Plowden-Palmerston, Jan. 28, 1849.

2. "P.P.", pp.26. Plowden-Palmerston, Jan 28, 1849.

appoint at Arkeeko and the coast - I wish much for the friendship of the English and trust that now you will show the sincerity of goodwill towards Abyssinia.<sup>1</sup>

Plowden urged Palmerston not to let down Oobeay as such an opportunity to increase British influence might not occur often.<sup>2</sup> But Palmerston took a different view of the situation and declined to interfere in the political affairs of Ethiopia. He did not like to offend Turkey whose co-operation was necessary to check the Russian expansion towards Constantinople and the main line of communication with India. Moreover an inimical Turkey could be as dangerous as Russia itself. In fact he had written to Sir William Temples at Naples that "Turkey is as good an occupier of roads as an active Arabian sovereign would be."<sup>3</sup> So he refused to interfere in the Abyssinian dispute and informed Oobeay that since the Sultan of Turkey was also a friend of the Queen it would be improper for the British Government to interfere in the matter without being asked to do so by both the dissentient parties.<sup>4</sup> This was a real damper on Oobeay who told Plowden that "you say you are friendly to us and to our religion, we dont see yet".<sup>5</sup>

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1. "P.P.", pp. 30 Ras Oobeay-Victoria, "n.d." incl. 49.

2. "P.P." pp. 29, Plowden-Palmerston, March 3, 1849.

3. Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy, Vol 2, pp.162.

4. "P.P." pp. 42, Palmerston-OObie, July 3, 1849.

5. "P.P.", pp. 42, Plowden-Palmerston, April 2, 1850.



Like Ali and Oobeay the King of Shoa was also keen on maintaining good relations with Britain. Indeed, in the light of the earlier interest they had shown in Shoa, he expected much from the British Government. In 1849 he sent, through Krapf, a few presents to the Queen, and in return he requested the British Government to send him one thousand five hundred dollars in gold coins.<sup>1</sup> A little later he requested the British political Agent at Aden to supply him with certain medicines and gun powder.<sup>2</sup> While Palmerston forwarded a box of 300 sovereigns to the Shoan King, he ordered the political Agent not to provide him with gun powder.<sup>3</sup> Not only was he disappointed by this but from this time began to suspect British intentions in Ethiopia. He feared that the English would deprive him of his territories, and he was convinced that they had the power to do so.<sup>4</sup> Palmerston tried to allay his fears by informing him through Plowden "that the British Government entertained no aggressive intentions whatsoever with respect to any portion of Abyssinia."<sup>5</sup>

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1. "P.P.", pp. 28, Letter of the Shoan King to the Queen.

2. "P.P.", pp. 32, King of Shoa - Political Agent at Aden, July 4, 1849.

3. "P.P.", pp. 56, Palmerston-Hobhouse, November 25, 1850.

4. "P.P.", p. 46, Plowden-Palmerston, Jan. 3, 1850.

5. "P.P." , pp. 51, Palmerston-Plowden, June 7, 1850.

Not only did Britain refuse to supply arms and ammunition to the Abyssinian chiefs and interfere in their disputes with the Turks, but also she withheld her official protection to Ethiopian pilgrims at Jerusalem. The Ethiopians to whom the church of Holy Sepulchre and the associated convent belonged were in intercommunion with Armenians and Copts. Each year a number of Ethiopians visited the Holy City. After 1838 they had fallen on evil days and the Turks illtreated them. Plowden evinced interest in the matter and requested Fin, the British Consul at Jerusalem, to give all possible assistance to Ethiopians at that place.<sup>1</sup> A little later the Ethiopian priests residing in the city applied to Consul Fin for help and protection and to restore to them the church which the Armenians had seized. Fin's effective intervention procured for them some of their rights<sup>2</sup> but though Palmerston approved Fin's action, it was understood that the Consul was to use his personal influence in such matters and not to commit the British Government officially.<sup>3</sup>

Palmerston's policy towards Ethiopia was one of commercial co-operation and political non-involvement. From the beginning Plowden doubted the effectiveness of this

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1. Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers 1867-68, Vol. LXXII (Correspondence on Abyssinia at Jerusalem), p. 1. Fin-Palmerston, November, 30, 1850.

2. Ibid, Fin-Palmerston.

3. Ibid, Palmerston-Plowden, 28, December, 1850.



policy as he believed that unless the British Government evinced more interest in Ethiopia, the Ethiopians would never appreciate the value of their association with Britain. Plowden thought that it was unreasonable to expect co-operation for Palmerston's policies from the disgruntled chiefs of Ethiopia, whose needs and aspirations were hardly appreciated by the British Government. However, this was only a side of the problem with which the new consul was struggling; he was to face a much more critical situation in his dealings with the Turks.

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CHAPTER IV

After concluding the treaty with Ras Ali, Plowden returned to Massawa, his official headquarters. Palmerston had chosen this place as the seat of the British consulate for many reasons: first of all, being a port, it was a place at which communication with London might be easily established and maintained; secondly, the British Indian merchants trading with Ethiopia resided in that place and one of the duties of the consul was to offer them protection; thirdly, the slave trade was centred at Massawa, and it was right that a consul should be stationed there to suppress it. Most important of all it was the gateway to Northern Ethiopia. At the same time it was a convenient place to watch French activities in that part of the Red Sea.

To discharge his manifold duties, the British consul would have required some local co-operation. However, from the beginning Plowden's position was not only anomalous but also critical, as he was not accredited to the porte, and this to a certain extent, impaired his effectiveness in discharging the duties entrusted to him.

Ethiopian commerce flowed through the Red Sea ports of Suakin, Zeila and Massawa; of these Suakin was far away from the main centres of production and only a small volume of the trade passed through that port. The produce of south and south-eastern Ethiopia passed through Zeila, but the lawless tribes residing between the sea coast and the centres



of production had rendered peaceful commerce in that part very difficult, if not impossible, so much so that the British and French commercial treaties of 1841 with Shoa had remained dead letters. The port of Massawa, a natural harbour, was far more important than either of the others. The net profits of the port, which largely accrued from the Ethiopian commerce, were about 40,000 dollars per annum,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that the trade brought them such good revenues, the Turks had been injuring it by their heavy duties, which were often as heavy as 30%. For instance, the Governor of Massawa levied what was ostensibly a 12% duty on mules which the Ethiopians exported to Mauritius. However, the system of collection<sup>2</sup> was such that the actual duty worked out to be 25% of the actual price of the animal.<sup>3</sup> Likewise the Turks collected a 25% duty on the butter which the Ethiopian merchants exported to Arabia. The persons weighing goods at the customs house charged the importing merchants 5% for performing this duty, while another 5% was collected by the Turkish officials towards their personal profit.<sup>4</sup> As though this dead weight was not enough, the Turks controlled the trade to suit their interests. For

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1. "P.P.", pp. 23, Plowden-Palmerston, Dec. 10, 1848.

2. The practice was, that the French captains who transported the animals to Bourbon bought the animals from Tigre through their agents. The Governor collected a 12% duty not on the actual price paid for the animal but the total expenses incurred by the Captain of the vessel.

3. "P.P.", pp. 18, Plowden-Palmerston, Sept. 17, 1848.

4. "P.P." pp.54, Plowden Palmerston, May 12, 1850.

instance they banned arms trade with Ethiopia, and refused passage at Massawa for arms entering that country.<sup>1</sup> Plowden feared that "at no distant date all the claims of Turkey to the sovereignty of Abyssinia would be revived so far at least as the levying of duties upon all articles of commerce,"<sup>2</sup> as if Ethiopia were a Turkish province. The behaviour of the Turkish governor at Massawa left no doubt in Plowden's mind as to their ultimate aims.

Plowden realized that unless these bottle-necks to the Ethiopian trade were removed, the commercial treaty with Ras Ali would remain useless. The Ethiopian chiefs possessed neither the means nor the strength to force the Turks to behave differently; since the commercial treaty had imposed equal obligation on Britain "to keep open and secure the avenues of trade", Plowden proceeded to find a solution to the problem. He saw three lines of action open to him: first of all to exert influence on the Turks to adopt reasonable policies towards the Ethiopian trade at Massawa; secondly, failing this, to endeavour to bring the Ethiopian merchants at Massawa under British protection which would force the Turks to accord them equal treatment with other British subjects; thirdly, to secure an independent

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1. Ibid, Plowden Palmerston, May 12, 1850.

2. "P.P." pp. 93, Plowden-Palmerston, August 16, 1848.

3. "P.P." pp. 18, Plowden-Palmerston, Sept. 17, 1848.



port on the Ethiopian coast which would remove for ever the Turkish menace to Abyssinian commerce.

In pursuit of the first of these, Plowden, after informing him of the destructive policies of the Turks towards the Ethiopian merchants, urged Palmerston to prevail upon the Porte to instruct the governor of Massawa not to collect transit duties exceeding 5% on goods passing through his jurisdiction, and to stop all illegal exactions.<sup>1</sup> Palmerston, in turn, informed the Egyptian government that Ethiopia was an independent country and that the Turkish officials had no right to tax Ethiopian goods exorbitantly.<sup>2</sup> He drew Cairo's attention to the Anglo-Turkish commercial treaty which prescribed duties at 5% on all imported goods.<sup>3</sup> This did not improve the situation and Plowden continued to complain of the injurious effects produced on trade by the Turks and urged Palmerston to take some other steps for throwing open "the commerce of this portion of Africa for our colonies".<sup>4</sup> On Palmerston's instructions, Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador at Constantinople, made several representations to the Porte to follow a more lenient policy towards Ethiopia. But the Turks, who kept their trade agreements with Britain by taxing British goods at 5%,

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1. "P.P.", pp. 18, Plowden-Palmerston, Sept. 17, 1848.

2. Temporarily, between 1846 and 1849, Massawa was under Egyptian administration.

3. "P.P.", pp. 21, Palmerston-Murray, Feb. 17, 1849.

4. "P.P.", pp. 53, Plowden-Palmerston, May 12, 1850.

did not give up their exacting policy towards the Ethiopian merchants whose grievances Plowden could do little to alleviate because of the unfriendly and often hostile relations existing between himself and the Turkish officials at Massawa.

The reasons for the Turkish animosity are not far to seek; Palmerston most certainly was to blame for keeping the Turks in the dark about Plowden's appointment as consul to Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> The British consulate at Massawa was established secretly, and Plowden had not been accredited to the Porte. This having given rise to a rumour that Britain had secretly occupied Massawa, in turn, had made it necessary for Stratford Canning to do some difficult explaining to the Porte when he admitted freely their right to Massawa and Suakin.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless Turkish suspicion regarding British intentions communicated itself to Massawa, and made Plowden's position extremely critical.

The Turkish authorities at Massawa treated Plowden with unconcealed hostility, by intercepting his correspondence and threatening his messengers. He requested Palmerston to send an "energetic message" to Massawa warning the Turks against such hostile attitude.<sup>3</sup> The Foreign Secretary, through the British ambassador at Constantinople,

1. "P.P., pp. 8, Palmerston-Cowley, Jan 3, 1848.

2. Marston, op. cit., pp. 187.

3. "P.P.", pp. 26, Plowden-Palmerston, Jan 27, 1849.



procured and forwarded to Plowden the Vazirial instructions for the protection of his correspondence.<sup>1</sup> However, this did not alleviate the situation, and Plowden complained of the difficulty of protecting himself "from the insults daily and studiously" offered him by the Turkish authorities. The Turks had made it impossible for him to live in a "manner becoming an officer of Her Majesty's Government".<sup>2</sup>

Analysing the reasons for the hostile behaviour of the Turks Plowden wrote that "this conduct is aimed at my connection with the Abyssinian chiefs and adopted to persuade them that the English nation is no longer of any weight and virtually declares that if possible that the English government shall not appoint any officers in that country..... Abyssinians will be convinced that our tolerance arises from our weakness."<sup>3</sup> On Palmerston's instructions, Canning once again took the matter up with the Porte who instructed the Governor of Massawa to treat Plowden well.<sup>4</sup> Though the matter was temporarily thus settled, the British consul had little faith in the Turks, as it was evident from the hostilities existing between the Turks and the Ethiopians that the former would always regard with jealousy British friendship and influence with the latter.<sup>5</sup> The Governor of

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1. "P.P." pp. 27, Palmerston-Canning, April 23, 1849.  
 "P.P.", pp. 33, Canning-Palmerston, June 19, 1849.

2. "P.P.", pp. 43, Plowden-Palmerston, April, 12, 1850.

3. "P.P.", pp. 53, Plowden-Palmerston, April 4, 1850.

4. "P.P.", pp. 52, Palmerston-Plowden, June 7, 1850.

5. "P.P.", pp. 56, Plowden-Palmerston, Dec. 15, 1850.

Massawa proved Plowden right by ignoring the Porte's instructions.

This so much infuriated Palmerston that he instructed Canning to state to the Turkish Government that a British war ship would be sent to Massawa to chastise the Governor if he did not behave properly towards the British consul.<sup>1</sup> Neither threats nor persuasion seems to have had any effect on the obdurate Turkish officials who held the opinion that Ethiopia constituted a part of the Sultan's empire, and the British presence there was a threat to Turkish interests. Nothing would force them to alter their hostile attitude towards Plowden and the latter realized how futile it was to seek their co-operation in promoting Ethiopian interests at Massawa.

Simultaneously, Plowden, pursuing a second line of attack endeavoured to procure an independent sea port for Ethiopia. In his memorandum of August 1847 he had stated that British occupation of the island of Massawa would be the most effectual means of establishing a permanent and valuable intercourse with Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> Obviously there were many difficulties in implimenting this proposal as it was unlikely that the Turks would have favoured it and any wrong move by Britain would have certainly strained Anglo-Turkish relations. Plowden being aware of these difficulties placed an alternative before Palmerston. The Turks exercised

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1. "P.P.", pp. 62, Palmerston-Canning, May 27, 1851.

2. "P.P.", pp. 7, Plowden-Palmerston, August 20, 1847.



sovereignty over the mainland of Massawa only, and they had no legal rights to the surrounding territories belonging to the Naib of Arkeeko, an independent ruler, whose relations with the Turks had suffered lately. Plowden was hopeful that the Naib might be induced to sell a portion of the territory around the Bay of Arkeeko to the British, and possibly the Turks might not object to such a plan. However his preference was for Massawa and he advised the British government not to lose sight of it.<sup>1</sup>

Palmerston was reluctant to offend Turkey in any way, and enquired of Plowden whether any port besides Massawa was suited for commerce.<sup>2</sup> Plowden thought that Amphylla<sup>3</sup> could be developed into a port, and a year later informed Palmerston that a certain Italian had planned such a development and enquired whether the British Government would support him.<sup>4</sup> Palmerston was anxious to have further information on this<sup>5</sup>, but as the Italian had vanished from the scene, Plowden urged the British government to take up the matter themselves.

He expressed the hope that if the British Government developed Amphylla into a port, the ruler of Tigre would do his part in opening the road to the interior, and recommended

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1. "P.P.", pp. 18 Plowden-Palmerston, August 23, 1847.

2. "P.P.", pp. 5-8, Addington-Plowden, August 18, 1847.

3. A Bay to the south of Massawa on the Red Sea coast.

4. "P.P.", pp. 18, Plowden-Palmerston, August 17, 1848.

5. "P.P.", pp. 18, Palmerston-Plowden, Oct. 14, 1848.

that a detailed survey of the place be undertaken.<sup>1</sup> Palmerston requested the Lord commissioners of the Admiralty to undertake a survey of the port<sup>2</sup>, but the Board at the time had no surveyors in the East Indies and suggested that the East India Company might be approached for the task. Thereupon the Foreign Secretary assigned the task to Hobhouse, the president of the Board of Control,<sup>3</sup> who forwarded to him a report on the matter which observed, "while it (Amphylla) was viewed as a most central place for the trade with Gallas, Tigre and Shoa it was represented to be one of the most miserable places on the coast."<sup>4</sup> Palmerston concluded that Amphylla was no port and that no further survey was necessary, and so informed Plowden.<sup>5</sup> Palmerston did not take further steps to acquire an independent sea port on the Red Sea coast, and the Earl of Malmesbury, his successor in the Foreign Office, did not evince interest in the matter; consequently the situation remained unaltered.

Now Plowden turned to the third of the alternatives, that of protecting the Ethiopian merchants from Turkish exactions by urging Palmerston to place them under British protection.<sup>6</sup> Certainly the merchants were eager to have

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1. "P.P.", pp. 18, Plowden-Palmerston, Dec. 10, 1848.

2. "P.P.", pp. 24, Addington - The Board of The Admiralty, March, 10, 1848.

3. "P.P.", pp. 24, Palmerston-Hobhouse, March 28, 1849.

4. "P.P.", pp. 38, The Secret Committee's report to Hobhouse, March 28, 1850.

5. "P.P.", pp. 38, Palmerston-Plowden, April 4, 1850.

6. "P.P." pp. 23, Plowden-Palmerston, Dec. 10, 1848.



British protection, and it appears that Dezaj Oobeay and Ras Ali were in favour of this solution.<sup>1</sup> Palmerston, however, refused to accord official protection to the Ethiopian merchants at Massawa with a view to avoiding "many difficulties and embarrassing discussions with the Turks."<sup>2</sup>

While the situation at Massawa was discouraging enough, conditions within Ethiopia were no better. Though three years had passed since the conclusion of the commercial treaty with Ali, nothing had happened in the meanwhile to show its effectiveness. Plowden got an opportunity to find out the causes for this during his visit to Ethiopia in 1851 to hand over the ratification of the treaty to Ras Ali. Plowden remained with the Ras till February, 1852, and although the former was friendly towards Plowden, and expressed his desire for good relations with Britain, he had only a lukewarm interest in trade and lacked power to ensure the operation of the commercial treaty of 1848.

Indeed, Ethiopia at this time, suffered from the want of a strong central government. Ras Ali's power was on the decline, and civil war among the Ethiopian chiefs was continuing unabated. The differences between Ras Ali and Dezaj Oobeay had passed beyond any possibility of compromise and the latter who was fully committed to open rebellion had an army ready to launch an attack on the Ras.

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1. "P.P.", pp. 25, Plowden-Palmerston, Jan 27, 1849.

2. "P.P.", pp. 25, Palmerston-Plowden, April 6, 1849.

Under these circumstances, Oobeay reluctantly allowed Plowden to pass through his territories to Ras Ali. After his arrival at Bichana, the Ras's camp, Plowden was robbed of his papers including the ratification, apparently by Dezaj Oobeay's spies.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile a new element of complexity had been introduced into the political situation by the emergence of Kassa as a contender to the supreme power in the country.

The political conditions of the country had their disastrous effects on economic life. Agriculture suffered because of the continual troop movements, and trade suffered because of the insatiable thirst of the warring chiefs for plunder. In many parts of the country there was no constituted authority for supervising the collection of imposts and duties, and no fixed rates to guide the collectors where such functionaries existed. Each local chief levied duties on merchandise passing through his territories, and the merchants had to pay duties on the same merchandise at several points. Frequent quarrels and deaths occurred at custom houses which were guarded by armed men. Only at important towns like Gondar and Adwa did an officer known as Negadesh Ras collect taxes. He paid a fixed sum to Ras Ali or Oobeay, and extracted as much as possible from the merchants for his own profit.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Marston, op. cit., pp. 190.

2. "P.P.", pp. 68, Plowden's Memorandum on Abyssinia of 20 July, 1852.



The lack of communications was a great obstacle to the growth of trade. "Their most important districts of production " wrote Plowden "are so far away from the coast that no European merchant could risk so hazardous journey."<sup>1</sup> As Plowden certainly knew, it was dangerous enough even for the Ethiopian merchants to travel to the coast, unless effectively armed. Added to this was the high cost of transportation. Richard Burton observed that when he visited Harar "the price per parcel of twenty seven pounds of (coffee) was a quarter of dollar, and the hire of a camel carrying twelve parcels to Berbera was five dollars; the profit did not repay labour and risk."<sup>2</sup> What Burton wrote of Harar was equally true of other parts of Ethiopia. These difficulties had existed for decades, and the commercial treaty of 1848 had not removed them in any way. The trade report which Plowden submitted to the Foreign Office, soon after his return to Massawa in 1852, supports this view.

The total value of Ethiopian trade passing through Massawa, in 1852, was approximately £48,000. Plowden thought that this could have been taken as the average for any of the preceeding years since 1848. The important items of Ethiopian export were butter, gold, slaves, while some trade also existed in mules and coffee. Of these, Arabia

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1. "P.P." pp. 98-130, Plowden's Memorandum on Abyssinia, 9 July, 1854.

2. Richard Burton, First Foot Steps in East Africa, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966) pp. 194.

provided a market for butter which constituted a third of the total export. The trade in coffee, an important produce of Ethiopia, amounted to a thousand pounds only, while that in hides and skins, contrary to Plowden's expectations had not grown at all.

The volume and value of Ethiopian imports was equally negligible. The British Indian merchants at Massawa supplied Ethiopia with Indian goods valued at £28,000, of which textiles amounted to 80%. Tobacco, Zinc, canvas and nails constituted the remaining 20% of imports from India, Egypt and Arabia supplied cutlery, soap, paper, scents and oil valued at £14,400.<sup>1</sup> The commercial treaty had not added to either the value or the volume of the Ethiopian trade.

While the overall situation in Ethiopia was discouraging, Plowden's abilities to do any good were limited. He needed some proof to convince the disappointed Ethiopian chiefs that Britain was interested in them; but in this he was disappointed. British policy in Ethiopia lacked force and did not please any one. For instance, in 1852, when Oobeay and Ras Ali appealed to the British Government to grant official protection to Ethiopians at Jerusalem, Malmesbury refused to comply and ordered Fin, the British Consul-General at that place, to use only his personal influence to protect the Ethiopian pilgrims and not to commit

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1. "P.P.", pp. 132, Plowden's trade report for 1852. encls. 1, 2 and 3 in No. 132.



the British government officially.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, he advised Bishop Gobat<sup>2</sup> to restrict his interference on behalf of Ethiopians visiting Jerusalem "exclusively to spiritual matters."<sup>3</sup> Similarly the British Government did nothing to raise the Turkish embargo on arms bound for Ethiopia. The Turks so indiscreetly enforced this policy that it was impossible for Plowden to obtain through Massawa a piece of mounted cannon which he intended to present as a gift to Oobeay. Of course, there was no possibility of complying with the repeated requests of Oobeay for some muskets and rifles.<sup>4</sup> Plowden's innumerable letters to the Foreign Office urging them to take effective action to call a halt to the hostile Turkish policies had not borne fruit. Plowden knew that "it was not reasonable to expect anything for nothing from the Ethiopian chiefs" and wrote in despair to the Foreign Office either to reciprocate the friendship which the British government had demanded of the Ethiopians, or 'to abandon the idea as useless'. No reply was forthcoming: Malmesbury, at the Foreign Office, did not appear to be interested in Ethiopia at all. In fact, Plowden who had sent a series of despatches to the Foreign Secretary complained

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1. "P.P." pp.187-68 Correspondence on Abyssinia at Jerusalem Jerusalem, Vol, LXXII, p. 6, Malmesbury-Fin, July 10, 1852.

2. First Protestant Bishop at Jerusalem.

3. Malmesbury-Gobat, July 10, 1852, Ibid.

4. "P.P." Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868, Vol. LXXII pp. 54. Plowden-Palmerston, May 12, 1850.

in March 1853 that he had received no reply to them, and requested the Foreign Secretary to instruct him on the policy.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this delay can be explained by the fact that during the short span of two years, from the exit of Palmerston to the coming of Clarendon, into the Foreign Office, Britain had three Foreign Secretaries: Grenville, Malmesbury and Russell. These quick changes were probably responsible for the failure of the British government to formulate any effective policy towards Ethiopia. However, with the coming of Clarendon into the Foreign Office more interest came to be evinced towards Ethiopian affairs, and bold policies were formulated and implemented.

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1. "P.P.", 1867-68, Vol LXXII, pp. 71, Plowden-Malmesbury, 23 March 1853.



## CHAPTER V

Clarendon's entry into the Foreign Office led to a change in British policy in Ethiopia which became more purposive, dynamic and forceful. The Foreign Secretary evinced deep interest in Ethiopian affairs, and after an initial period of observation, began supporting Plowden in his plans and activities.

The first thing that drew Clarendon's attention was the correspondence of Plowden which reflected a mood of disappointment. The consul's high expectations about the Ethiopian trade had been shattered, and the internal situation of that country coupled with Turkish animosity at Massawa had robbed him of much hope for the future. Plowden must have been very unhappy for he had reached the conclusion that there was no need for him to continue as consul in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Clarendon did not concur with this conclusion and admonished Plowden by writing:

"Her Majesty's government were led by the representations formerly made by you to expect that advantages would result to British interest from the conclusion of a treaty with the rulers of Abyssinia, and from the establishment of a British consulate. It appears, however, from your reports before me that there is little reason to expect such will be the case. Nevertheless Her Majesty's government having concluded a treaty and established the consulate are reluctant to renounce all hopes of benefit for these measures.<sup>2</sup>

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1. "P.P.", pp. 76. Plowden-Clarendon, May 28, 1853.

2. "P.P.", pp. 76, Clarendon-Plowden, October 3, 1853.

Probably Clarendon thought more in terms of the future than of the present. While Plowden's commercial report of 1852 was disappointing, the sources from which goods flowed into Ethiopia were encouraging. India contributed the largest share of Ethiopian imports, but Arabia also supplied goods, and the East India Company's trading factory at Mocha, in Arabia, had a chance to capture and develop this trade. This indicated at least a possibility for development, and held out a hope for the future.

Secondly, there was a reasonable expectation that with the establishment of political stability in Ethiopia, prospects for trade would improve. Plowden had created this expectation in the Foreign Office by his glowing reports of the rising Ethiopian chief Kassa, the future Theodore. In July, 1853, Plowden wrote that Dezaj Kassa had shown a more generous disposition than was usually found in an Abyssinian, and appeared to encourage strangers.<sup>1</sup> In September, 1853, he wrote more hopefully that, "if Dezaj Kassa obtains complete mastery over the whole country, as he is a man of talent, there will be some prospects of increasing our intercourse."<sup>2</sup>

These reports holding out a hope for the future,

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1. "P.P." pp. 76, Plowden-Clarendon, July 25, 1853.

2. "P.P." pp. 79, Plowden-Clarendon, September 28, 1853.



must have influenced Clarendon to continue to maintain consular relations with Ethiopia. But political stability within Ethiopia was a prerequisite for any rewarding commercial activity, and this would only be ~~est~~ablished if a strong chief like Kassa rose to power. However, Clarendon would not interfere in the domestic affairs of Ethiopia to bring about the desired condition, and preferred to wait hoping that it would come to pass in the normal course of the events. In any case, he was reluctant to withdraw and thus lose whatever influence Britain had so far gained; moreover, the severing of British relations with Ethiopia would have created a political as well as a commercial vacuum, and this was not desirable. Also Clarendon was willing to attempt to resolve some of the difficulties confronting Ethiopian commerce. He would not give up before he had tried.

Once Clarendon's determination to maintain consular relations with Ethiopia became known, Plowden began looking at the brighter side of the situation. He set out to revive the British Government's interest in acquiring a sea port for Ethiopia, and with renewed enthusiasm prepared a new report on Ethiopia which he addressed to the Foreign Office in July 1854.

Plowden wrote that the plains of Waggera and Gojjam<sup>1</sup> were fitted for all the productions of the northern

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1. Districts in Western Ethiopia.

latitude. The temperate provinces of Ethiopia were suited for the cultivation of pepper, other spices and coffee, and the hot coastal regions for cultivating cotton, beans, peas, oats and other pulses. The palm, the orange, the lemon and the pear grew wild in the jungle. The country was rich in minerals, and he thought that a search for coal would succeed. Unfortunately the people had not realized how generously nature had endowed them. He concluded that in a country "which combines mineral resources, delightful climate, and tropical luxuriance with such general salubrity, no waste of European life can be apprehended by frequenting it."<sup>1</sup> Plowden was unhappy that this wealth would remain unexploited unless something was done to remove the obstacles in the way of progress.

Meanwhile Plowden's attention had been attracted by other problems. At Senahait, about 120 miles from Massawa, lived a tribe known as Bogos who owed allegiance to the ruler of Tigre. They were christians and had nothing to do with the Egyptian government. In 1854 the Bey of Taka<sup>2</sup> ravaged Senahait and carried into slavery three hundred of its inhabitants. His intention was to convert them into Islam, failing which to sell them into slavery. These helpless people, being on friendly terms with Plowden, applied for British protection declaring that they would rather

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1. "P.P." pp. 98-140 Plowden's memorandum, July 9, 1854.

2. Egyptian outpost on the Ethio-Sudanese border.



abandon their country than accept Islam, and requested him to procure the release of their wives and children from the Bey's captivity. They requested him to establish a consulate in their district and to place them under British protection.<sup>1</sup> Plowden requested the British Consul-General at Alexandria to procure orders from the Pasha of Egypt to prevent further incidents on the border.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the Bey continued to send messages to the Bogos offering them the choice of the Koran or sword. Plowden saw a great menace in these insidious approaches of the Egyptian government to the conquest of Tigre<sup>3</sup>, particularly so, as the Bey held the opinion that Ethiopia was 'the property of his master, the Pasha of Egypt". He had already succeeded in converting some adjoining provinces to Islam by violence.

Plowden undertook a tour of the affected areas, and asked the Bey to release the people whom he had carried into captivity. The latter not only remained obdurate and refused to release the captives without orders from Cairo, but also intercepted Plowden's correspondence and obstructed his communications. Plowden requested Clarendon to check the Egyptian aggression on Ethiopia, and to send effective orders to the Bey to behave properly.<sup>4</sup>

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"PP", pp. 83

1. People of Bogos-Plowden, incl. 161,

2. "P.P." pp. 83, Plowden-Clarendon, March 15, 1854,

3. "P.P." pp. 83, Plowden-Clarendon, March 29, 1854.

4. "P.P." pp. 86, Plowden-Clarendon, April 18, 1854.

Clarendon instructed the British Consul-General at Cairo to inform the Viceroy of Egypt that the British government would not remain indifferent to the fate of the christians of Senahait, and expected the Egyptian government to prevent the Bey from persecuting helpless Ethiopians and to set free the christian captives.<sup>1</sup> Bruce promptly took the matter up with Abbas Pasha who appointed an officer to investigate the conduct of the Bey, and promised to send orders 'for the restitution of women and children taken prisoner.'<sup>2</sup> Not being completely satisfied with the outcome, Clarendon advised Bruce to ask for the dismissal of the Bey, and to state to the Pasha that the British government would not acquiesce in the Egyptian or the Turkish assumption of sovereignty over Ethiopia, and that they would watch over the interests of the christian Ethiopians by protecting them from the ill treatment of their Mohammedan neighbours.<sup>3</sup> On Bruce's representation the new viceroy, Syed Pasha, ordered the restitution of the captives and later acquiesced in the wish of Clarendon by dismissing the Bey of Taka from the Egyptian service.<sup>4</sup> However, there was no doubt that the dismissed Bey had been acting on the orders of the deceased Viceroy, Abbas Pasha;<sup>5</sup> Clarendon's firm policy alone prevented the continuation of Egyptian aggression on Ethiopia.

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1. "P.P." pp. 89, Clarendon-Plowden, June 26, 1854.

2. "P.P." pp. 89, Bruce-Clarendon, June 16, 1854.

3. "P.P." pp. 89, Clarendon-Bruce, June 30, 1854.

4. "P.P." pp. 159, Bruce-Clarendon, March 2, 1856.

5. "P.P." pp. 90, Bruce-Clarendon, July 30, 1854.



At the same time the Turks were also increasing their pressure on Ethiopia. The Governor of Massawa never concealed his aggressive designs on Ethiopia, and now claimed from the ruler of Tigre the salt plains of Taltal<sup>1</sup> (100 miles away from Massawa) on which the Ethiopian economy largely depended. A few months later he sent down a contingent of Turkish soldiers to ravage the Hamesyan province which was not only christian 'but more indisputably the property of the ruler of Tigre than Wallachia could be of the Porte'<sup>2</sup> Dezaj Oobeay of Tigre who was anxious to strike back at the Turks, refrained from such measures in deference to the wishes of the British government. Plowden had reached the conclusion that this state of affairs could only be ended if the Porte was made to recognise Ethiopian independence distinctly, and if the borders of Ethiopia were demarcated properly. He considered it the duty of the British Government to uphold the only christian state of Africa which had preserved its independence through the centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The Turkish officials at Massawa burned with rage at Plowden's intervention in what they considered to be their affair. There is no reason to suppose that the Porte held a different opinion on the matter. While the Porte was unable to resist openly British activities at Massawa, they were unprepared to tolerate it, and their official

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1. "P.P.", pp. 92, Plowden-Clarendon, June 30, 1854.

2. "P.P.", pp. 134 Plowden-Clarendon, November 28, 1854.

3. "P.P.", pp. 98, Plowden-Clarendon, July 1, 1854.

instructions to the governor of Massawa, issued under the pressure of the British government, were in contradiction with their policies and practises aimed at making the British consul know that his presence at Massawa was not to their liking.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the governor of Massawa made Plowden uncomfortable by flogging and imprisoning his servants, by preventing the repairs of his residence, and withholding his parcels. Plowden thought that the governor would never have pursued such a hostile policy had the orders to the contrary been given in good faith by the Porte.<sup>2</sup> Plowden thought that the governor should not have been allowed to offer such indignities to an officer of the Crown, and advised the Foreign Secretary to procure the dismissal of the governor.<sup>3</sup>

On Clarendon's advice Sir Stratford Radcliffe strongly protested to the Porte against the bigoted and unenlightened policy of the Governor of Massawa and hoped that "the Porte had too much wisdom not to perceive the imprudence of placing its allies in contradiction with themselves". He warned that the British Government would not, for ever, look with indifference upon the groundless pretensions of the Porte to the sovereignty of Ethiopia

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1. "P.P.", pp. 83, Plowden-Clarendon, March 17, 1854.

2. "P.P.", pp. 98, Plowden-Clarendon, June 30, 1854.

3. Ibid.



which was injurious to the dignity and freedom of a friendly country, and also asked for immediate redress of the greivances of the British consul.<sup>1</sup> Clarendon approved the content and the tone of the letter<sup>2</sup> which obviously had some effect for the Sultan ordered the Governor of Massawa to show the utmost consideration to British and French consuls on pain of dismissal and imprisonment for any lapse in the implimentation of the orders.<sup>3</sup> Even then, Clarendon and Radcliffe thought that this was by no means a frank disavowal of the Porte's pretensions to the Ethiopian sovereignty, and concluded that further steps would have to be taken to achieve the desired results.<sup>4</sup>

Clarendon's fears were not unfounded; for in January, 1855, at the instigation of the Turks, a brother of the Naib of Arkeeko raided Mensa, an Ethiopian district, and the christian inhabitants after fleeing from their homes requested Plowden's intervention.<sup>5</sup> Plowden visited the districts of Mensa and Bogos, and forced the Naib's brother to withdraw from that area. Though the inhabitants, once again expressed their desire to be placed under British protection,<sup>6</sup> the Foreign Office was not prepared to assume

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1. "P.P.", pp. 137, Radcliffe-Clarendon, March 9, 1855.

2. "P.P.", pp. 139, Clarendon-Radcliffe, March 28, 1855.

3. "P.P.", pp. 142, Portes instructions to the Governor of Massawa, indouser 209,

4. "P.P.", pp. 148, Radcliffe-Clarendon, April 12, 1855.  
Clarendon-Radcliffe, April 27, 1855, ibid.

5. "P.P.", pp. 1867-68. Vol. LXXII, Stella-Plowden, Jan.2, 1855

6. "P.P.", pp. 146, Plowden-Clarendon, March 4, 1855.

further responsibility for them.

Meanwhile, the Turks continued their raids into the Ethiopian territory, which only indicated that they had no intention of relinquishing their supposed sovereignty over Ethiopia. They continued to harass Plowden who complained to the Foreign Secretary of the continued and determined opposition of the Ottoman government to his mission in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> While the British government were aware of the basic opposition of the Ottoman and the Egyptian governments to British policy in Ethiopia, they were not prepared to change their policy at the cost of Ethiopian independence. At the same time they were equally unprepared to offend their friends - Egypt and Turkey - by supporting Ethiopian ambitions in the Ottoman territories.

The Turkish threat was only one aspect of the Ethiopian difficulty; much more serious was her political instability. Ras Ali's power was on the decline, and as Plowden explained, there was an absence of "sovereign authority". "It was difficult to build up lasting political influence in a country whose political system lacked true foundations.

However, despite the lack of a strong political authority, the vivisection of the country into almost autonomous political units, and the ephemeral character of the political power of their rulers, the Ethiopians were

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1. "P.P.", pp. 146, Plowden-Clarendon, April 22, 1855.



held together by their church. Their ecclesiastical superior, Abuna Salama, was favourably disposed towards Britain and was anxious to seek British protection for his emissaries and property at Massawa and Jerusalem. In return he was prepared to lend his powerful support to the British in Ethiopia. Plowden thought that irrespective of political changes Abuna would be revered both by the people and their rulers, and his influence would be of paramount significance in a country so ignorant and superstitious as Ethiopia. He requested the Foreign Secretary to consider favourably the Abuna's proposals.<sup>1</sup> Clarendon authorised Plowden to offer the benefit of his advice and assistance to the Abuna without officially committing himself or the British Government.<sup>2</sup>

While working for long range objectives, Plowden was not neglectful of the present. Within Ethiopia important developments were taking place; Dezaj Kassa, the future Theodore, had defeated Ras Ali's forces in many minor engagements and a final contest for power was in sight. Plowden expected that Ras Ali would seek British assistance, and in such an event Britain could not remain indifferent, for, if she did not respond favourably, and Ras Ali restored his power he would set little value on the British alliance. Thus Plowden requested Clarendon to authorise him to spend

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1. "P.P.", pp. 77, Plowden-Russell, July 28, 1853.

2. "P.P.", pp. 78, Clarendon-Plowden, November 4, 1853.

£200 for the benefit of the Ras which met with the latter's approval.<sup>1</sup> This shows a change in British policy since the British Government had till then shown aversion to any interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia. However, Ras Ali did not seek British assistance; in 1855, he fell from power and Kassa ascended the throne under the title of Theodore.

At first Plowden was uncertain of the new ruler, and informed Clarendon that Theodore's fanatical zeal, vehement character, and pride engendered by his success made it difficult to foresee how he would receive European advances. He also foresaw that Britain's friendly relations with Turkey and Egypt would certainly add to the difficulties.<sup>2</sup> This was one of the most cautious readings of Theodore's character which Plowden ever reported to the Foreign Office. Had he continued to be equally guarded in his observations, probably the Foreign Secretary could have been spared the result of over optimism about Theodore. However, being impressed by Theodore's early zeal for reform, and his burning ambition to ~~resuscitate~~ Ethiopia, Plowden gave the impression to the Foreign Secretary that Britain could not have hoped for a better ruler to ascend the throne. In fact, he went to the length of stating that should Theodore fail to hold power there would be a small prospect for negotiating with success in Ethiopia. He reported that

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1. "P.P.", pp. 82, Clarendon-Plowden, April 15, 1854.

2. "P.P.", pp. 133, Plowden-Clarendon, November 6, 1854.



Theodore had a disposition to encourage foreigners, and wondered whether Clarendon would not want to assist him in his views and in establishing his government on a firm basis.<sup>1</sup>

However this optimism was ill-founded, and Plowden realized this when he met with Theodore in 1855. During the course of the discussions the King disclaimed any knowledge of what Ras Ali had done, and refused to recognise the commercial treaty with Britain. Theodore also refused to allow the establishment of a consulate in his country, which he thought to be alien to its spirit and institutions. However, he held out a hope for the future in that he promised to receive a consul whenever it suited him.<sup>2</sup> Plowden thought that Theodore's reluctance was the result of a suspicion caused by Roman Catholic missionaries in Tigre who obstinately persisted in usurping the functions of Abuna and the Ethiopian clergy. Theodore suspected that the British in like manner would usurp his rights, and his counsellors had persuaded him to this effect.<sup>3</sup> Moreover the commercial treaty by allowing extra-territorial jurisdiction to British subjects in Ethiopia had infringed upon Ethiopian sovereignty. This did not fit in with Theodore's conception of sovereignty and the constitution of his country.<sup>4</sup> Clarendon concurred with this view and

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1. "EP", pp. 133, Plowden-Clarendon, November 6, 1854.

2. "P.P.", pp. 164, Plowden-Clarendon, June 25, 1855.

3. "P.P.", pp. 163, Plowden-Clarendon, June 25, 1855.

4. "P.P.", pp. 164, Same to same, August 5, 1856.

wondered whether Theodore would not want to propose modifications in the treaty. Otherwise, he instructed Plowden to impress upon the King the need to honour the contracted obligations in good faith.<sup>1</sup> Plowden assured Clarendon that Theodore's refusal was hardly a refusal and, sooner or later, he would accede to all reasonable requests through "the pressure of reason and not of fear." As a matter of fact Theodore himself had told Plowden that he had hoped to be able to offer protection to Englishmen who might visit his country once he was through the Galla wars. More importantly he had spoken of his friendship for Britain and had proposed an embassy to the Queen.

Whatever Theodore's professions of friendship towards Britain, Plowden could not have missed the point. The King considered the Turks as his implacable enemies and spoke of recovering from them the lost territories of Ethiopia. Plowden wrote, "he wishes to reclaim all the provinces lately conquered by Egypt along his northern frontier: even Khartoum, as by his right. Nor does his military order hesitate to dream of the conquest of Egypt and a triumphant march to the Holy Sepulchre."<sup>2</sup> Obviously Theodore had in his mind thoughts of war on Turkey and expected help from the christian powers of Europe in realizing his ambition. He spoke of sending embassies to great European powers to treat with them on these matters.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "P.P." p. 175, Clarendon-Plowden, March 3, 1857.

2. "P.P." pp. 148, Plowden-Clarendon, June 25, 1855.

3. Sven Rubenson, op. cit, pp. 65.



In fact Plowden seems to have met the envoy selected to go to Russia, at Adwa, while travelling inland himself.<sup>1</sup> This was hardly welcome news to Plowden for England had decided in concert with France to enter the Crimean war on the side of Turkey against Russia. For Theodore, Russia and any other christian power prepared to fight the Turks and liberate Jerusalem were the obvious allies.<sup>2</sup>

Theodore's policies caused much anxiety to Plowden who sent a memorandum to the Foreign Office analysing the Ethiopian situation, and proposing three different courses of action: first of all to wait and see the outcome of Theodore's conflict with Egypt and Turkey when he would probably recognise the value of Britain's friendly proposals and seek to renew them; secondly, to withdraw altogether from Ethiopia and to cease all communications with that country; thirdly, to accept Theodore's proposals of sending ambassadors to England, who impressed by the greatness of Britain, on their return would induce the King to accord all that Britain might wish. Plowden himself was in favour of the last of these proposals<sup>3</sup> and asked Clarendon to arrive at a decision on the matter. The Foreign Secretary replied that the British government were convinced of the need for friendly and intimate relations with Ethiopia, and that they would receive with due honours Theodore's ambassadors if he

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1. "P.P.", pp. 143, Plowden-Clarendon, April 7, 1855.

2. Rubenson, op. cit, pp. 65.

3. "P.P.", pp. 153, Plowden-Clarendon, June 25, 1855.

renounced all ideas of conquest in Egypt and Turkey. This was necessary as the British government had strongly remonstrated to the Turks against their aggressive intentions on Ethiopia, and they (the British government) would expose themselves to grave suspicion if they received his ambassadors while he nurtured aggressive plans on those powers.<sup>1</sup>

When Plowden communicated these proposals to Theodore, the King protested that he had given no provocation to Egypt, but while he reserved for himself the right to reclaim the lost territories from them, he promised to take no hostile action until he received a reply from the British government. While Plowden considered this to be a fair reply, he warned the British government that unless they gave effective arms aid to him, Theodore might be convinced of the futility of British friendship, and might not seek it.<sup>2</sup> While refusing to aid Theodore with arms, Clarendon wished to know how Britain could prove her good will towards the King.<sup>3</sup> As Theodore would not say how Britain could be of help, Plowden on his own, requested Clarendon to send the King some percussion muskets, powder, and percussion caps as an expression of good will.<sup>4</sup> The consul still hoped to place Anglo-Ethiopian relations on a solid footing.

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1. "P.P.", pp. 154, Clarendon-Plowden, November 28, 1855.

2. "P.P.", pp. 173, Plowden-Clarendon, November 12, 1856.

3. "P.P.", pp. 175, Clarendon-Plowden, March 24, 1857.

4. "P.P.", pp. 177, Plowden-Clarendon, Nov. 25, 1857.



Simultaneously Plowden had been endeavouring to promote Ethiopian economic interests. He believed that protection of Ethiopian commerce on the coast would lead to an increase in their trade, and the resultant prosperity, by diverting their attention from fratricidal wars to the production of wealth, would bring about vast changes in their social and economic organisations as well. This meant that Ethiopia needed a sea port of her own.

Plowden explained to Clarendon that the Ethiopian chiefs were not strong enough to acquire such a sea port, and unless the British Government helped them to overcome this difficulty, British relations with Ethiopia would not lead to profitable or lasting results.<sup>1</sup> Clarendon enquired of the consul what measures would have to be taken by the British Government to "supply a sea port to Abyssinia,"<sup>2</sup> to which Plowden replied that the Turkish presence at Massawa was an obstacle to commerce and civilisation, and that they should be prevailed upon to transfer that port to Theodore, if he consented to have a British consul stationed in his country.<sup>3</sup> Bruce the British consul at Cairo, supported the plan as it would place the Ethiopians in contact with civilization, and also increase British influence with Theodore.<sup>4</sup> This argument appeared convincing to Clarendon

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"P.P.", pp. 94.

1. Plowden-Clarendon, July 10, 1854.

2. "P.P.", pp. 96, Clarendon-Plowden, Nov. 1, 1854.

3. "P.P.", pp. 163, Plowden-Clarendon, Feb. 17, 1856.

4. "P.P.", pp. 158, Bruce-Stratford Radcliffe, Feb. 16, 1856.

as it assured all the advantages to Britain, in that it would have not only increased British influence in Ethiopia, but also put Theodore under a moral obligation to recognise and endorse the commercial treaty which Ras Ali had signed. Moreover, it would have ensured a preponderance of British power on the Red Sea coast.

Clarendon thought that the time was now ripe to take up the matter of the transfer with the Porte whose territorial integrity had been protected by Britain. He therefore instructed Stratford Radcliffe, the British ambassador at Constantinople, to advise the Porte to enter into an agreement for the transfer of Massawa.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Clarendon issued these instructions while attending the Paris peace conference of 1856. (After the conclusion of the Crimean war). But nothing seems to have come from these moves, and during the next two years of Clarendon's tenure at the Foreign Office, this matter does not appear in his correspondence. Probably, Theodore's tactless dealings with the British were as much responsible for this sudden loss of interest as the reluctance of the Turks to part with Massawa.

Within Ethiopia matters had not improved either. Theodore had remained as reluctant as ever on the question of reviving the commercial treaty. In spite of the irritation caused by his stubbornness, Plowden sympathised with his

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1. P.P.", pp. 160, Clarendon-Radcliffe, March 7, 1856.



internal difficulties and consoled himself with the fact that the King had almost overthrown the local fuedatories, established one government and was not unfavourably disposed towards Britain. Theodore had been planning to send an embassy to Britain which would provide an opportunity to the British government to examine the value of his alliance, and to decide the status of the British consul in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Theodore had written to the queen telling her that he had received Plowden in a spirit of friendship, and that he would send an embassy to her to discuss matters of mutual interest. However, he avoided calling Plowden a consul, and the latter commented that Theodore would not consent to the residence of a British consul in Ethiopia, or to the planting of a British flag in any part of his dominions.<sup>2</sup> All the same, Plowden was determined to establish British influence in Ethiopia, by any means, fair or otherwise. As a matter of fact he wrote to the Foreign Secretary that it would be an excellent idea to have in that part of Africa a powerful christian sovereign friendly to Britain, and if Theodore tried to exclude Britain from his country, his resistance could be broken by allowing Egypt to attack him.<sup>3</sup> As yet there was no need to act on these lines as there was some hope that matters could be settled amicably.

Theodore promised to send the proposed embassy after the termination of the war with the Gallas. As he

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1. "P.P." p. 183, Plowden-Clarendon, May 20, 1857.

2. "P.P." p. 183, Plowden-Clarendon, Nov. 25, 1857.

3. "P.P.", p. 187, Plowden-Malmesbury, Nov. 20, 1858.

wished Plowden to accompany the embassy he was reluctant to allow him to leave Ethiopia earlier. Plowden acquiesced in the wish of the King hoping to see the consummation of his efforts. However, Theodore's enemies remained formidable, and the war with the Gallas continued unabated. Plowden's patience was coming to an end. In view of his long absence from the consulate at Massawa, Plowden sought Theodore's permission to take leave of him. He had concluded, that he could do no better than await in England the conclusion of the Ethiopian struggle for power, after which the negotiations could be resumed with certainty. Meanwhile Russell, who had entered the Foreign Office, thinking that no advantage would accrue from Plowden's stay in Ethiopia had ordered him to return to Massawa at once.<sup>1</sup> On his way to Massawa, Plowden died of a severe wound inflicted by one of the followers of a rebel chief named Negoose, a rival of Theodore.

So died Plowden in the hope of placing Anglo-Ethiopian relations on a solid footing. The twelve year period of relations, from 1848 to 1860, bears the stamp of his personality. Plowden had a deep attachment to Ethiopia, loved its picturesque scenery, and valued its' wealth. He wanted Ethiopia to become an appendage of Britain, With innate tact, good sense and understanding he was able to win the people, gain their confidence and largely influence developments the way he wished. He had a grasp of the

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1. "P.P.", pp. 192, Russell-Plowden, Jan 8, 1860.



Ethiopian situation, and the confidence of the Foreign Office. Through Palmerston's period of non-involvement and Malmesbury's era of disinterestedness to Clarendon's time of genuine interest in Ethiopia, Plowden steadfastly worked to promote Anglo-Ethiopian relations. Lord Clarendon and Plowden formed a perfect team, and great consequences could have ensued from their efforts but for the complexities of the Ethiopian political situation, the implacable hatred of the Turks and the incomprehensible behaviour of Theodore. With the death of Plowden one chapter of Anglo-Ethiopian relations, a period of hope for better results and closer ties, ended. It was soon to be followed by another chapter of misunderstandings, despair and disillusionment. It fell to the lot of consul Cameron, the successor of Plowden, to participate in this drama on the Ethiopian Highlands.

## CHAPTER VI

The death of Walter Plowden set the stage for the next act in the drama of Anglo-Ethiopian relations. Theodore's position had become extremely critical. Though he had nearly established his authority over Ethiopia, the Gallas in the south-west continued to defy him, and he could not rest in peace until they had been subjugated. Constant rumours of hostile Turkish activities on the coast reached him. Though Syed pasha of Egypt had sent an embassy with rich presents, it was by no means certain that Egypt had relenquished aggressive designs on Ethiopia. Egyptian troop movements were frequently reported near Matemma, on the Ethio-Sudanese frontier, and this made it impossible for Theodore not to be ready to meet the possible Egyptian invasion. But the Turks had placed an embargo upon all arms entering Ethiopia, and Theodore could not have survived without some active aid from outside. He was not sure of France's reaction to his appeal for friendship, and he had not forgotten her dealings with his late rival, Negoose. For these reasons he hoped for assistance from Britain. He therefore decided to take the initiative in the matter of sending an embassy to Britain. In pursuance of



this aim he wrote to Barroni<sup>1</sup> noting that he had avenged Plowden's death by defeating and killing 1500 followers of Negoose one of whose retainers had killed Plowden, and summoning him to Adwa<sup>2</sup> 'being anxious to despatch some of his servants to the queen' to inform her of all that had happened.<sup>3</sup> Barroni sent this letter to the Foreign office in February 1861, but it was misplaced by one of the clerks and remained unanswered for a long time.

Meanwhile the British government appointed Duncan Cameron<sup>4</sup> as consul in Ethiopia with instructions not to become the partizan of either of the contending parties there, and to abstain from all intrigues to set up an exclusive British influence in that country; rather he was asked to promote amicable relations among the rival candidates for power, as British interests could be promoted only if peace prevailed. Cameron was advised to watch closely any proceedings that might alter "the state of possession either on the sea coast or in the interior of the country."<sup>5</sup> The Foreign secretary did not supply him

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1. British Vice-Consul at Maseawa.

2. A town in Tigre, - northern Ethiopia.

3. "P.P.", p.200, Theodore's letter to Barroni, Jan 23, 1861.

4. He had served in India army, and served in Kaffir wars.

5. "P.P.", p.209, Russell-Cameron, Feb 2, 1861.

with instructions on the proposed embassy of Theodore, one point on which the king was so anxious. It appears that Russell, the new Foreign secretary, was more interested in the maintenance of the status quo in the Red sea region than getting into further involvements in Ethiopia. He did not imagine the extent of disappointment this attitude would cause Theodore.

In spite of the cautious attitude of Russell circumstances seemed favourable for forging closer relations with Theodore. Plowden's death had provided an occasion for both parties to express their mutual feelings of friendship. Theodore had repaid one thousand dollars to the merchants of gondar who had paid it to the rebels as a ransom for Plowden. Though the Bombay government had wished to reimburse Theodore, he had refused to accept the reimbursement for something he had done because of his friendship for the late Plowden, and for Britain. The Bombay government, being impressed by Theodore's behaviour, were planning to send some suitable presents "in acknowledgment of his liberal and friendly conduct."<sup>1</sup> The Governor-General of India in Council also had conveyed their acknowledgments to Theodore for his friendly conduct<sup>2</sup> and the Queen also let Theodore know that

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1. "P.P.", p.203, the chief Secretary to the Government of Bombay to Brig.O.Coghlen, Feb 12, 1861.
  2. "P.P.", p.205, the Under Secretary, the Govt.of India - The chief Sec,Govt.of Bombay, Feb 27, 1861.



she was appreciative of the kindness shown by him to one of her officers. Lord Russell sent a pair of revolvers and a rifle to the king as an expression of the friendliness of the British Government.<sup>1</sup> All this indicated a fund of good feeling in official circles towards Theodore which led Cameron to approach his task with optimism.

After inordinate delays, on 9 February, 1862, Cameron arrived in Massawa and took charge of the consulate from Barroni. Soon he informed Theodore of his arrival and of the various presents which the British Government had sent for him. However, before proceeding to the interior, Cameron noted with concern the latest Turkish moves on the Red sea coast. They had occupied the island of Desse and were planning to control the entire Red sea coast up to the Bab-El-Mandeb. They had appointed governors at Edd<sup>2</sup> and Adulis<sup>3</sup>, and the governor of Massawa was planning to establish Turkish colonies on the Ethiopian frontier, to furnish the Mohammedan residents with fire arms, and thus to advance the Turkish cause at the expense of the Ethiopians. The Turks were also planning to cripple the Ethiopian economy by taking over the salt mines at Taltal, and the sulphur mines in its

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1. "P.P.", p.205, Russell-Cameron, November 13, 1861.

2.)  
& } Ports on the Western coast of the Red Sea.  
3.)

neighbourhood. The Ethiopians depended on these mines to manufacture gun powder. Theodore's officers watched these Turkish movements with jealousy and reported to him; nor could he be expected to remain quite. A clash between the Turks and the Ethiopians seemed unavoidable.

Cameron advised the Foreign Secretary to check the pretensions of Turkey and to hold her in proper bounds with the avowed object of preventing a collision with Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> In a subsequent despatch he warned the British government that their silence would be misunderstood by the Turks who "calculated on a certain approval of their proceedings by the British Government," and asked Russell to warn them against encroaching on the salt and sulphur mines near Taltal.<sup>2</sup> Acting upon the instructions of Lord Russell, Lytton, the British ambassador to the Porte, cautioned the latter against aggressive actions in the Red sea region. The Porte assured the British government that they had no intention of raising any question that might lead to a collision with Theodore.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "P.P.", p.209, Cameron-Russell, March 20, 1862.

2. "P.P.", p.211, Cameron-Hammond, May 27, 1862.

3. "P.P.", p.211, Bulwar Lytton-Russell, Sept.7,62.



Having thus temporarily arranged the affairs on the coast, Cameron proceeded to Ethiopia to establish personal contacts with Theodore and to deliver him the presents from the British government. He could not immediately meet with him as he was away campaigning in the Galla country. However, Theodore had ordered his officers to receive and treat Cameron with all the courtesy due to a foreign envoy, and the reception went so well that Cameron wrote Russell that, "I can have no doubt from the manner that I have been treated that he (Theodore) is both anxious for our friendship and feels that he may stand in need of our future support."<sup>1</sup> Reporting on the Ethiopian attitude towards the Turkish encroachment Cameron informed Russell that Theodore had ordered the governor of Hamasyen<sup>2</sup> to collect tribute from all those tribes who were once under Ethiopian sovereignty, but who had lately passed under the control of the Turks, and to keep a watch on the movements of the Turks; he had further instructed him not to offer any provocation to the Turks but to retaliate in the event of aggression. Cameron was convinced that Theodore would not regard with indifference the Turkish aggression on the Red sea coast and probably would strike at them the moment he was free from the galla campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "P.P.", p.210, Cameron-Russell, April 26, 63.

2. Northern most province of Ethiopia.

3. "P.P.", p.210, Cameron-Russell, April 26, 1863.

After a long and indecisive campaign against the Gallas Theodore returned to Gojjam<sup>1</sup> where he received Cameron with a salute of twelve guns and an escort of six thousand infantry, cavalry and match-lock men, one of the best receptions which he ever accorded to a foreign envoy. Cameron reciprocated as best as he could by presenting the gifts from the British Government, and Lord Russell's letter.

Theodore was immensely pleased with this attention, and told Cameron how he had avenged Plowden's death for the sake of his friendship for Britain. He expressed his desire to buy arms and ammunition from Britain. Theodore renewed his invectives against the Turks and talked of what he could do if he was assured of British support on the coast. He made it quite clear that he expected great things from Britain,<sup>2</sup> and that there could be no doubt that his own disposition towards her would largely depend on the assistance that would be forthcoming from her.

Cameron's task was a very delicate one. Theodore was eager to secure British aid for his projects, and his anxiety was understandable. But the British government had not given any specific instructions on this matter to Cameron, and he was not in a position to make any promises to Theodore. But, at the same time, he was expected not to encourage

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1. A province in western Ethiopia.

2. "P.P.", p.218, Cameron-Russell, October 31, 1863.



Theodore in his grandiose projects of conquests against the Turks and the Egyptians. In fact, during Plowden's time, the British government had emphatically told Theodore that the reception of his proposed embassy to the Queen would depend on the relenquishment of his aggressive intentions against Turkey and Egypt. In the absence of new instructions to the contrary it was Cameron's duty to emphasize this point, and in doing so he created an unpleasant image of himself in the mind of Theodore which was to have many unhappy results at a later date.

Theodore used every conceivable argument to impress upon Cameron the fact that peace would not be possible with the Turks. He complained that they were slowly encircling his kingdom, and that his empire and religion were in danger of being crushed, and that he would fight to the death in their defence; he said that he would despatch envoys to various christian powers in the west to justify his conduct and solicit their aid in his impending crusade against the Turks. The most he could promise the British was not to strike the Turks until he had received replies to his proposals from the British government. He wished to know for certain where the British Government stood on the matter.<sup>1</sup> Cameron thanked Theodore for his assurance not to wage a war on the Turks until the reply had arrived, and he promised to refer the issue to the Foreign Secretary.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

Theodore did not receive well Cameron's statements; he at once concluded that the British Government did not care for his interests, and that the new consul had been sent to safeguard whatever British interests existed in that quarter; nor did he hesitate to express his displeasure. He neglected Cameron altogether for a while which caused the new consul not a little anxiety. He wrote Russell "I waited for several days in the expectation of a private audience. My food became scant and bad."<sup>1</sup> However under the pressure of circumstances Theodore ordered him to proceed to Massawa with a view to communicate with his Government, and to send him a reply whether his embassy would be received in London or not.

As Lord Russell observed later it would have been better had Cameron acquiesced in the wish of Theodore and left for the coast immediately. At least he could have communicated to the Foreign Secretary about the mood and expectation of Theodore and awaited further instructions. But Cameron acted like a prosaic Foreign office official and though it was his duty to press Theodore to take a decision on the question of revising the defunct treaty with his country, and of establishing a British consulate. Cameron thought that these questions were interrelated and it would

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1. Ibid.



be difficult for the British government to formulate any effective policy towards Ethiopia without having Theodore's answers for them. While there may have been some justification for his thinking on those lines, he failed to understand the complexities of the Ethiopian situation. Thus, instead of leaving for Massawa at once, Cameron wrote a detailed letter to Theodore setting forth his views. After reiterating the British position on the proposed embassy, he suggested that the British government should be briefed in advance about the size, the objectives and the composition of the mission. He desired the embassy to be headed by a person "who would give a favourable impression of the intelligence and civilization of his people, and of Theodore's character, both of which had been greatly misrepresented by his enemies."<sup>1</sup> He suggested that a draft treaty between Theodore and England should be drawn in advance and be sent with his ambassadors for the approval of the British Government. At the same time he pointed out the necessity of Theodore accepting a British consul in his country, as such an arrangement would be necessary if he wished to maintain friendly relations with Britain. Cameron concluded sharply, writing, "it would be well if your Majesty gives a frank decision on the subject as Your Majesty had many years to

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1. "P.P.", p.222, Cameron- Theodore, October 22, 1862.

think it over."<sup>1</sup>

In view of Theodore's stubbornness it is not unlikely that Cameron's reply would have led to fatal results. However, this was prevented by the timely communication of the British consul-general at Cairo assuring Theodore of the steps the British Government would take to prevent the Porte's aggression on Ethiopia. At the same time the British consul-General at Jerusalem had let Theodore know that he was offering protection to the Ethiopian nationals at Jerusalem. This news had a mollifying effect on Theodore who had lately been much agitated by the rumours of diplomatic activity between Turkey, France and Russia. In this context he sent a message to Cameron entreating him to observe the peril he was in from two powerful enemies and begging him to act sincerely by him.<sup>2</sup>

Thereupon Cameron requested the British Consul-General at Alexandria to do his utmost to preserve the peace, but above all to report signs of aggression against Ethiopia, and suggested to Theodore that he should be allowed to visit Matemma, a town on the Ethio-Sudanese border, to watch the Egyptian activity against Ethiopia. But Theodore opposed the idea.

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1. Ibid.

2. Great Britain, parliamentary papers, 1868, vol.LVIII,  
pp.1025 Cameron-Russell, October 31, 1862.



Nevertheless as a sign that Cameron was now back in his good grace, he presented him with a silk shirt which was a sign of unusual distinction in Ethiopia, and a purse of a thousand dollars for his expense. He also informed him that he had well considered the subject of a treaty about which there would be no difficulty although he left the actual drafting for future consideration. He also gave assurance that if matters went well he would be glad to receive a British consul in his country.<sup>1</sup> Finally he asked Cameron to proceed to Massawa at once to despatch his letter to the Queen and to await her reply.

Theodore's letter to the Queen was very polite. After thanking her for the presents, he spoke of his friendship for Britain, and explained how the Turks on the coast prevented him from sending envoys to England. He requested her to arrange for the safe conduct of his ambassadors and concluded by writing "I wish to have an answer to this letter by consul Cameron and that he may conduct my embassy to England. See how Islam oppresses the Christian."<sup>2</sup>

Forwarding this letter to the Foreign Office, Cameron urged Russell to accept Theodore's promises in good faith, and to receive his embassy. He advised him that an invitation for the embassy written by the Queen herself

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1. Ibid.

2. "P.P.", vol.LXXII p.225, Theodore-Queen, incl.in 343.

would have a good effect. Cameron sympathetically analysed Theodore's position and gave the opinion that a resident envoy would suit Theodore better than a consul, for if he allowed a consul to England he might find it difficult to refuse one to France, and such a situation were better avoided. Further more, he pressed for the conclusion of a new treaty with Theodore.<sup>1</sup> It was a tragedy that Russell did not act on these suggestions promptly, and thus placed consul Cameron in a very difficult position.

After despatching Theodore's letter, Cameron decided to leave for the border areas instead of Massawa, for he had learnt that the people of Bogos<sup>2</sup> who had enjoyed British protection during Plowden's time were in trouble. Roman Catholic missionaries at Bogos had abandoned that place in apprehension of an invasion from Egypt, and now that fresh inroads were threatened Cameron hoped to keep the Arab tribes in check, and thus to help the christians of Bogos.<sup>3</sup> He wrote to Theodore advising him to establish a regular government there. His interference was an act of doubtful wisdom since the territory claimed its independence and was in fact a no man's land between Egyptian

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1. "P.P.", pp.222-23, Cameron-Russell, November 1, 62.

2. A province in the extreme north east of Ethiopia whose people were christians and owed allegiance to the ruler of Tigre.

3. "P.P.", p.240, Cameron-Russell, Jan.8, 1863.



territory, the Pashalic of Jidda and Ethiopia, all three powers collecting some tribute from it. Cameron's desire to reinforce whatever British influence there was in that quarter, did not receive the sympathetic consideration of Colquhoun<sup>1</sup> who wrote to Russell that if British protection were officially offered to the Bogos, it might justify pretensions on the part of other powers who were eager to secure a footing in or near Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> It was felt that Cameron, guided by a mistaken notion of responsibility, was committing the British government unnecessarily.

From Bogos Cameron went to Kassala, the capital of the Egyptian pasahalic of the Sudan, as he had heard that the Turkish troops on their way to Ethiopia, had attacked the neighbouring Shangallas.<sup>3</sup> Cameron feared that such irregular attacks would give a pretext for more formal hostilities between the Turks and the Ethiopians, and wished to prevent them as they would have come in the way of the proposed Ethiopian embassy to England. He asked the Pasha of Kassala to abstain from attacking Ethiopian territories and made a similar appeal to Theodore to abstain from attacking the Turks.<sup>4</sup> He met with many frontier chiefs and remonstrated against their

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1. The British consul general at Alexandria.

2. "P.P.", p.243, Colquhoun-Russell, August 17, 63.

3. The Negro tribes on the western border of Ethiopia.

4. "P.P.", p.229, Cameron-Russell, April 22, 1863.

lawlessness. He urged the British government to appoint a commissioner at Bogos to prevent the border clashes, and to protect the inhabitants from molestation by the Turks.<sup>1</sup> After visiting Matemma, with a view to acquaint himself with the situation on the Ethio-Egyptian border, Cameron returned to Gondar in October, 1863.

Cameron's activities had caused much concern to the Foreign office who thought that he had exceeded their instructions, and were afraid that he would place the British government in an embarrassing situation. Russell disapproved of his action by writing that "it was not desirable for Her Majesty's agent to meddle in the affairs of Abyssinia."<sup>2</sup> But this warning dated April, 1863, did not reach Cameron until after he had returned from his tour to Gondar. As a matter of fact Cameron's actions had raised Turkish opposition to the supposed intentions of the consul with regard to the Turkish possessions on the Ethiopian border<sup>3</sup>, and the British government had to do some difficult explaining to allay their suspicions.<sup>4</sup> They also strongly reprimanded Cameron for his activities and ordered him to remain at his post in Massawa.<sup>5</sup>

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1. "P.P.", p.240, Cameron-Colquhoun, May 20, 1863.

2. "P.P.", p.229, Russell-Cameron, April 22, 1863.

3. "P.P.", p.243, Bulwar-Lytton, -Russell, Sept.19, 63.

4. Ibid.

5. "P.P.", p.243, Russell-Cameron, September 8, 63.



During Cameron's absence certain unfortunate events had taken place in Ethiopia which had hardened Theodore's attitude towards Europeans in general. Early in 1863, Theodore with the hope of cultivating closer relations with France, and soliciting her support for his plans against the Turks, had sent a letter to Napoleon III. But Napoleon's response was not only disappointing but also offending. The bearer of the letter had not been well received in the French court, and he had been sent back with a letter which had no royal seal or signature, and which merely advised Theodore to grant toleration to the Roman catholics in Ethiopia. Theodore felt slighted and he was extremely furious.<sup>1</sup> However, before the return of Theodore's envoy from France, the French consul at Massawa had arrived in Ethiopia and presented Theodore with gifts from the French government and a letter from the French Foreign minister. As Theodore refused him permission to leave the country before the return of his envoy from Paris, the French consul accompanied the king in his expedition against Gojjam. Being weary of the Ethiopian way of life, Le Jean, the consul, decided to demand permission to leave the country. When Theodore refused to see him, Le Jean decided to force his way into Theodore's camp, whereupon he was put in chains. He was, however, later released and

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1. Henry Blank, Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia, London: Smith & Elders Co., 1868, p.34.

sent to Gaffat.<sup>1</sup> After the return of Bardel, the bearer of his letter to Napoleon III, Theodore ordered Le Jean to quit the country immediately,<sup>2</sup> and when he replied that he had instructions from his government to discuss certain matters with the king and wished to meet him, Theodore declared that he had not applied as a mendicant to Napoleon III; he had wanted christian friendship as from one king to another. It had been refused and Le Jean might return to his master.<sup>3</sup>

Theodore's bitterness had been intensified by another occurrence. At about this time, Count De'Bisson, a self styled French adventurer, arrived with sixty well armed soldiers in Egypt planning to establish a military colony in Ethiopia. He told the viceroy of Egypt that this was in retaliation for the conduct of Theodore towards Le Jean, and boasted that he was acting with the knowledge of the French government. The Egyptian ambassador at Paris, however, informed his government that the French Government denied any knowledge of Bisson's activity<sup>4</sup>. As a matter of fact they had no idea of obtaining any satisfaction from Theodore for imprisoning the French consul as they had come

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1. A town in Ethiopia where Theodore had established a work shop.
  2. Holland & Hoizier, A Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia, 2 vols, London, 1870, p.12.
  3. "P.P.", p.250, Cameron-Russell, October 2, 63.
  4. "P.P.", p.246, Colquhoun-Bulwar Lytton, Nov 8, 63.



to the conclusion that nothing effective could be done in this respect.<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime the Viceroy had given certain facilities to Bisson and ordered the Governor of the Sudan to treat the party civilly and to assist them so long as they were in Egyptian territory. Colquhoun protested to the Viceroy for giving aid to Bisson and advised Russell to warn the Egyptian government against harassing their neighbour (Ethiopia) by allowing foreigners to create troubles on the frontier.<sup>2</sup> Colquhoun was afraid that these incidents, unless checked in time, would give rise to many troubles between Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile Bisson's party, had reached the Sudan, and it was reported to be heading towards Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> There was no doubt that Moosa Pasha the governor of the Province was actively supporting Bisson.<sup>5</sup> Colquhoun could not view the situation with equanimity and he, at once, warned the Viceroy of Egypt that the British Government would not tolerate any action that would give "just offence to Theodore."<sup>6</sup> The British government also took the matter

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1. "P.P.", p.247, Cowley-Russell, November 14, 63.

2. "P.P.", p.248, Colquhoun-Russell, November 63.

3. "P.P.", p.246, Colquhoun-Russell, November 11, 1863.

4. "P.P.", p.249, Colquhoun-Russell, Jan 11, 64.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

up with the French, whereupon, Droyun De Lhy's, the French Foreign minister assured them that neither the emperor nor the French Foreign office had any knowledge of Bisson and his project.<sup>1</sup> Indeed Bisson's plan, which seems to have been a purely private one by a soldier of fortune, ended ignominiously.

However, Bisson's activities had unfortunate effects on the suspicious mind of Theodore. As Cameron's visit to the Ethio-Egyptian border preceded Bisson's arrival there, it is likely that Theodore suspected some kind of intrigue between England, France and Turkey. The growing Turkish menace on the sea coast, the reported Egyptian activity on his western borders, the offending French behaviour, and the lack of response from the British government to his letters must have strengthened such suspicion, and increased his dislike of all foreigners. It is a pity that Cameron was made to pay for all this.

Though he could not be exactly described as a prisoner, since his return to Ethiopia in September 1863, Theodore had placed restrictions on Cameron's movements and he was no longer in the good grace of Theodore. After learning of Cameron's position Colquhoun advised him to leave Ethiopia for Massawa immediately.<sup>2</sup> But Cameron had lost the

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1. "P.P.", p.254, Cowley-Russell, Feb.23, 1864.

2. "P.P.", p.254, Colquhoun-Russell, Jan 23, 1864.



freedom to do so.

Within Ethippia itself affairs had taken a crucial turn. Theodore had become intolerant, despotic and reckless. The death of his beloved wife and his adviser, Bell<sup>1</sup>, had removed all the restraining influences on him, and the continuing Galla wars had weakened his position. All his endeavours to win British and French assistance for his plans appeared to have failed dismally, and this had increased his hatred of them. For instance, in October 1863, he flogged and imprisoned Rev. Stern of the London Jewish society on the charge of publishing some articles in Europe supposed to be derogatory to him. In this connection Cameron sought an audience with Theodore with a view to effect a reconciliation, and unable to get one, appealed to Theodore in the name of friendship between England and Ethiopia. Theodore questioned "where are the signs of friendship?", meaning that the British government had not replied to his letter.

On November 12, Lawrence Kerans, a young British officer arrived at Gondar to joining Captain Cameron as private Secretary. He brought a pack of letters to Cameron but they contained no reply to Theodore. On the contrary, they contained Russell's instructions ordering Cameron to return to Massawa at once. This strengthened Theodore's

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1. Bell, an Englishman, was in the service of Theodore. He died in 1860 while trying to save the life of Theodore in one of the latter's campaigns against the rebel chief Nechose.

suspicion of Britain's complicity with the Turks, his enemies. He placed Cameron in a state of semi-imprisonment. At last Cameron requested Theodore to permit him to proceed to Massawa in deference to the wish of his government. A day later Theodore summoned Cameron, his retinue, and other Europeans to his presence and asked him to explain why the British Government had not replied to his letter, why he had gone to his enemies, the Turks, and whether he was a real consul or not. Cameron's explanations did not alter Theodore's views. He shouted out, "I will keep you a prisoner until I get an answer and see if you are a consul or not". On that he was badly handled and imprisoned.<sup>1</sup>

It is indeed very difficult to explain what led Theodore to imprison Consul Cameron. Clement Markham in his History of the Abyssinian Expedition observes that, "it does not appear that the conduct of consul Cameron in the course of these transactions is open to censure.... The discourteous omission to answer the letter was perfectly a just reason for Theodore's anger; and there can be no doubt, if he had received a civil reply which would have had the effect of explaining Cameron's visit to the Turks there would never have been any reason for spending several millions on an Abyssinian expedition."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand Rassam, the envoy

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1. Blanck, op.cit., p.45.

2. Clement Markham, A History of the Abyssinian Expedition, [London: MacMillan & Co., 1869] p.83.



who was sent to procure the release of Cameron observed, "I believe that extra-ordinary expedition (Bisson's) stirred up the wrath of the king against all Europeans and made him feel jealous of their movements. It also proved most probably the main cause of the apprehension, and the imprisonment of captain Cameron and the missionaries."<sup>1</sup> Whatever the contradictory opinions, there can be no doubt that Cameron's indiscretion, the British Foreign Office's ineptitude, Russell's policy of gradual withdrawal from Ethiopia, the irresponsible behaviour of certain Europeans in Ethiopia, and Theodore's impetuosity and suspicion coalesced to bring about an explosive situation. In imprisoning Cameron Theodore had violated international law, and this ill-considered act set in motion certain forces which led to the Napier expedition in 1867-68.

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1. "P.P.", p.297, Rassam-Merewether, December 2, 64.

## CHAPTER VII

The news of Cameron's imprisonment reached Patheric, the British consul at Khartoum, through Rev. Hausmann<sup>1</sup> who claimed that the failure of the Foreign Office to reply to Theodore's letter had led to this unfortunate consequence, and nothing but a letter from the Queen would mollify him. He warned against the use of force to procure the release of the prisoners as it was likely to endanger their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Colquhoun communicating this news to Lord Russell advised him to instruct the Political Agent at Aden to send a person in his confidence to obtain immediate release of Cameron.<sup>3</sup> In his initial anger Russell asked the political Agent at Aden to warn Theodore that if he failed to release the Captives he would incur the very serious displeasure of the British Government.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile Cameron himself had sent a message affirming Hausmann's opinion that there would be no release until a civil reply to the King's letter had arrived.<sup>5</sup> Despite his initial outburst, Russell soon settled into a more

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1. A German missionary.

2. "P.P.", p.257, Hausmann-Patheric, Feb.24, 1864.

3. "P.P.", p.257, Russell-Colquhoun, March 9, 64.

4. Ibid.

5. "P.P.", p.263, Cameron-Speedy, Feb.14, 1864.



peaceful mood, and directed his energies towards obtaining the release of the captives through peaceful means which included sending a mission to Theodore.

An explosive situation had now developed; a situation whose difficulties had been compounded by the inefficiency of a Foreign Office clerk who had mislaid Theodore's letter, and by the failure of the Foreign Secretary to understand the aspiration and character of Theodore. Theodore was sensitive to any development that infringed upon his power, prestige or sovereignty. He was unpredictable, autocratic, and quixotic. Having grown up in a world of intrigue and suspicion he frequently made his decisions on the rumours reaching him from Massawa or Matemma. Lacking an understanding of the intricate world of European diplomacy, either he could not or would not appreciate the diplomatic code of conduct so familiar to the Western world.

It was not easy to deal with such an unpredictable ruler, and the success of the proposed mission would depend upon the tact and abilities of the person heading it; despite the challenge, or because of it, many were anxious for the leadership the most persistent and conspicuous among them being a Dr. Beke who considered himself an authority on Ethiopian affairs. However, on the advise of Layard,<sup>1</sup> Russell offered the post to Harmuzd Rassam<sup>2</sup>, the Assistant political

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1. Then parliamentary under-secretary for foreign affairs.

2. Rassam had shown great tact in dealing with the Arab Amirates.

Resident at Aden. Perhaps it was thought that a wily oriental would be the best man to handle Theodore, perhaps it was only because Rassam was on the spot and Merewether (British Political Resident at Aden) supported him.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Blanc of the Bombay Medical Corps and Lt. Prideaux of the Bombay Army were attached to the mission.

The Foreign Office drafted a letter to Theodore expressing the Queen's pleasure for the early good treatment of Cameron, and her surprise at the turn of events of late. It declared that no better proof of Theodore's friendship for England could be shown than the release of the captives, and once this was done, promised a good reception to his proposed embassy. Further it asked Theodore to receive Rassam well and give credit to what he would say.<sup>2</sup> This letter was reinforced by two letters from the Patriarch of Alexandria, one to Theodore and the other to the Abuna<sup>3</sup> both of which pleaded for the release of the prisoners in the name of christianity. While cautioning Rassam against placing himself in a position which might cause further embarrassment to the British government, Russell placed full reliance in him and looked forward to the success of the mission.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Moorhead, op.cit., p.212

2. "P.P.", p.273, Queen Victoria-Theodone, May 26, 1861.

3. The Head of the Ethiopian Church.

4. "P.P.", p.284, Russell-Merewether, 24 July, 1864.



In July 1864, on arriving at Massawa Rassam discovered that the whole population of that place including the Turkish officials disliked Britain's peaceful parleys with Theodore. The European residents particularly wished to see the overthrow of Theodore so that they might continue their activities in Ethiopia unhindered. Though the Governor of Massawa advised Rassam to reflect before placing himself in the power of Theodore, the governor's deputy volunteered his services in obtaining the necessary information about Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

On July 24, Rassam sent a very polite letter to Theodore expressing his wish to meet him and to hand over the Queen's letter. At the same time he repeated the British Government's offer to receive an Ethiopian embassy and promised to send them to England in safety. After making the objective of his own mission clear to Theodore, Rassam proposed that in the event of his unpreparedness to receive the mission, he should nevertheless release the captives and send some one to receive the Queen's letter from him.<sup>2</sup> In the normal course Rassam's messengers could not have returned from Theodore's court in less than six weeks, and in the meantime he could only wait in a state of hopeful expectation.

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1. "P.P.", p.284, Rassam-Merewether, 19 August, 1864.

2. "P.P.", p.284, Rassam-Theodore, July 24, 1864.

But Massawa was not a pleasant place to wait, infested as it was with tropical diseases and exposed to very high temperatures. While weeks passed into months his messengers did not return, and this caused him much anxiety. Under the circumstances Rassam sent a second letter to Theodore requesting him to state his intentions regarding the reception of his mission. This too failed to produce results.<sup>1</sup>

While many explanations are possible, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of Theodore's delay in acknowledging Rassam's letters. Massawa was a hot bed of rumours and speculations regarding European activities, and Theodore's agents from that place sent him reports about the supposed evil designs of the British governments towards him, and it is likely that he misunderstood British intentions and needed time to make up his mind about Rassam's mission. It was widely believed that thousands of British soldiers were ready to proceed to Ethiopia<sup>2</sup> and Rassam suspected "that some evilly disposed persons had been deceiving Theodore" about the object of his mission.<sup>3</sup> This was corroborated later by one of Rassam's messengers who reported that king Theodore enquired of him whether Rassam had any troops with him.<sup>4</sup> The

1. "P.P.", p.293, Rassam-Merewether, 12 Oct.1864.

2. "P.P.", p.293, Rassam-Merewether, Oct.12, 64.

3. Ibid., p.296.

4. "P.P.", p.389, Statement of Mohammed Syed, incl.8/529.



king had heard from Massawa that the British Government intended to fight him, and Franks had planned to occupy Hammaseyn.<sup>1</sup> Flad, the German missionary, reported that Theodore had told his European workmen that he would first see what the British at Massawa and the French at Bogos would do, and possibly enter into friendship with them later.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the cordial treatment which the Turks had given Rassam, and the prevailing rumour about the withdrawal of the British protection to the Ethiopians at Jerusalem would have strengthened Theodore's suspicions about Britain's complicity with the Turks. So it is possible that Theodore suspected British intentions, and wished to satisfy himself concerning those intentions before receiving Rassam's mission.

Secondly, Britain's reliance upon the influence of the clerics on Theodore seems to have been misplaced. Theodore suspected the patriarch of Alexandria to be a spy of the Turks, and considered the Abuna to be his arch enemy. Indeed at the time of Rassam's visit to Massawa the Abuna was a virtual prisoner at the hands of Theodore. Ignorant of these facts, Rassam had forwarded the Patriarch's letter to the Abuna, and this had turned out to be a grave mistake.

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1. A northern province of Ethiopia.

2. "P.P.", p.299, Rassam's despatch, October 11, 64.

Rassam wrote later that on receipt of his letter the king remarked with reference to him, "so he has already made friends with my enemies, the priests".<sup>1</sup> Possibly Theodore suspected some kind of British intrigue with the Abuna, and his imaginative mind would not have failed to see some triangular relationship between the clericals in Ethiopia, the Turks, and the British, however unreasonable this may look to us at this distance of time.

Moreover, the king had a bad opinion of the foreign visitors who came to his country, and he was critical of their behaviour. Very much later, during Rassam's stay in Ethiopia, Theodore told him that since Plowden's death the Europeans who visited his country "proved insincere, ill mannered and ill tempered." "Probably Theodore did not expect anything different from the British mission. There is no doubt that these personal impressions and considerations interfered with his conduct, and Rassam wrote later that, "it has been proved to me beyond doubt that the king had not the slightest intention of giving me the leave to enter his country until an Abyssinian merchant Walde Sealassie .... gave him a good account of me and convinced him that I was going up for the sole purpose of cultivating his friendship .... otherwise, I should have been told to return with Her Majesty's letter

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1. Rassam, Narrative on The British Mission to Theodore  
2 Vols. [London: John Murray, 1869] Vol.2, p.7.



to Aden."<sup>1</sup>

Probably the more important reason for Theodore's delay in responding to Rassam was his inability to ensure safe passage to the British mission through Tigre in which lay the most direct route from the coast to his capital. Tigre province was, at that time, in revolt, a fact which pride alone made him conceal. This was endorsed by an Ethiopian, named Ibrahim, who visited Rassam towards the end of April 1865.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Theodore later asked Rassam's party to travel to his capital through Matemma, in Sudan, lends support to this view.

It may also be that Theodore deliberately delayed in retaliation for the behaviour of the Foreign Office towards him. Any one, or all of these factors together, might have influenced his conduct which in any case strained the patience of Rassam who was still waiting at Massawa.

Meanwhile the British Government was continuing its efforts to settle the issues with Theodore peacefully, and seized whatever opportunities came its way to do so. Thus, when a servant of Abuna Salama arrived at Cairo with a proposal that his master would intercede and procure the release of the captives if the British government promised not to

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1. Great Britain, parliamentary papers, 1868, vol.LVIII, papers on imprisonment of British subjects, Rassam's Report, p.667.

2. "P.P.", Vol.LXXII, p.332, Rassam-Merewether, April 10, 65.

demand reparations from Theodore<sup>1</sup>, Russell not only accepted the offer but on Colquhoun's recommendation instructed him to inform the Abuna of this and also pledged to maintain friendly relations with Theodore.<sup>2</sup> Colquhoun while communicating these views to Abuna sent him many costly gifts, and hoped that his intercession would lead to successful results.<sup>3</sup> But this hope was in vain since the Abuna's position was not better than that of the captives. Nevertheless Russell continued to hope that a peaceful solution could be found, and was willing if it would produce results, to go so far as to send a gift of 500 muskets to Theodore. But he left it to Rassam's discretion whether he would make the concession known to the king.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile the captives at Magdala continued to secretly report their pitiable situation, and in one of these messages Cameron declared that the only way to settle the matter was to write strongly to Theodore, and to act if further writing was of no use.<sup>5</sup> Nor was Cameron alone in his impatience. In Britain public opinion was growing in favour of stronger measures against Theodore. Letters of the captives to their

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1. "P.P.", p.313, Colquhoun-Russell, Feb.14, 65.

2. "P.P.", p.315, Russell-Colquhoun, Feb.27, 65.

3. "P.P.", p.325, Colquhoun-Abuna, March 1865.

4. "P.P.", Vol.LXXII, p.308, Layard-Rassam, Feb.17, 1865.

5. "P.P.", p.350, Rassam-Merewether, May 12, 65.



friends and relatives frequently found their way to the press, and their misfortune and difficulty elicited much public sympathy for them. Theodore's offending attitude and Rassam's fruitless and prolonged stay at Massawa were frequently cited to prove the ineffectiveness of the Government measures. Many adventurers, and some of those who considered themselves abler than Rassam, volunteered their services to the Foreign Office to go on a mission to Theodore to settle the issues successfully: of all these Dr. Beke deserves notice. Believing himself to be "without presumption the person best qualified to undertake the mission" he asked the Foreign Office to send him on an official mission to Theodore, which they politely declined. But the irrepressible Beke supported by many of his admirers and the friends and relatives of the captives decided to go on an independent mission to Ethiopia as he found no other way of relieving the government from their difficulty.<sup>1</sup> Layard warned him that the British Government would not undertake any responsibility for his safety or authorise him to negotiate on their behalf.<sup>2</sup> The British press also condemned the peaceful policy of the government, and the Pall Mall Gazette after publishing a letter from Rev. Stern went on to comment, "this letter

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1. "P.P.", p.365, Beke-Russell, July 7, 65.

2. Ibid., Layard-Beke, July 13, 65.

Mr. Layard may as well extract and lay in darkness with other documents.<sup>1</sup>" The public pressure for stronger measures was becoming irresistible.

Rassam's patience was wearing down and in a mood of dejection he concluded that "the madcap (Theodore) does not intend to release the prisoners, and his desire of receiving a reply from the queen is almost forgotten."<sup>2</sup> However on Merwether's advice he informed Theodore that while the British government would deplore any unfriendly feeling between the two countries, he would return to Aden if he did not receive his reply within a reasonable period of time.<sup>3</sup> When no reply arrived from Theodore, Rassam told Merwether that he had lost all hopes of gaining the release of the captives through conciliatory means.

Under these circumstances Russell decided to replace Rassam by Gilford Palgrave<sup>4</sup>, and instructed the latter to seek the liberation of the captives by assuring Theodore of the most friendly intentions of the British Government towards him. On Russell's advice Palgrave proceeded to Egypt to receive further instructions from the British consul General.<sup>5</sup>

1. "P.P.", vol.LXXII, incl.471, p.327.

2. "P.P.", vol.LXXII, Rassam-Merwether, May, 12, 1865,

3. "P.P.", p.366, Rassam-Merwether, June 23, 65.

4. A traveller of Arabian fame.

5. "P.P.", p.367, Russell-Stanton, July 21, 65.



As yet there was confusion in the government as to whether Rassam should be recalled.

Even as Palgrave arrived in Egypt, Theodore's invitation reached Rassam asking him to arrive at his court through the Sudan, as the alternate route through Tigre had been blocked by the rebels. Though the invitation was neither courteous nor becoming, Rassam could not but communicate his willingness to travel to Theodore's capital the moment it became possible.<sup>1</sup>

Soon afterwards with a view to seeking further instructions from the government, and to buy presents for Theodore, Rassam arrived in Cairo where he learnt of Palgrave's mission, and learnt as well that certain officials, including the Acting Consul General at Alexandria, were strongly in the favour of Palgrave. This was most disappointing since after waiting so long he had finally got Theodore's permission to visit him. Were he to be replaced by Palgrave the chance of negotiation with Theodore having to be reinitiated were great. A little wire pulling by Merwether straightened out the matter<sup>2</sup>, and Rassam was ordered to go at once to Theodore with the Queen's letter.<sup>3</sup>

Russell wished to resolve the problem peacefully<sup>4</sup>;

1. "P.P.", p.391, Rassam-Theodore, August 25, 1865.

2. Moorhead, op.cit. p.214.

3. "P.P.", p.382, Russell-Stanton, Sept.1, 65.

4. Russell-Queen Victoria, 5 Feb.1865, Buckle, Letters of Queen Victoria, 1862-1869, second series, 2 vols. (London; John Murray, 1826) 1 vol, p.250.

at this juncture, it seems he hoped that he could extricate himself from the Ethiopian difficulty without further complications, and without further loss of prestige. Thus he was prepared to go to some lengths to meet Theodore's demands. It is illuminating to follow the trend of his thought in his own words. He wrote Col. Stanton:

Rassam should set off as soon as possible; he should ask king Theodore only as a favour to release the missionaries, but cannot insist upon their release; that he should inform the king that if His Majesty wishes to send an embassy, Her Majesty's government will endeavour [to obtain safe passage.] Rassam to inform Theodore that Her Majesty's consul in Jerusalem will be instructed to give Abyssinian subjects the same good offices as were offered to them by his predecessors."<sup>1</sup> On September 22 he

wrote,

"Rassam may explain to the king Theodore that no orders have been given to consul Cameron to interfere in the internal affairs of Abyssinia or in any question that might arise between him and the Viceroy of Egypt."<sup>2</sup>

This meant that Lord Russell was prepared to concede on two important points which the British Government had refused till then: that Theodore's embassy would be received without the conditions attached to it by Clarendon, and that official protection would be granted to the Ethiopian nationals at Jerusalem a responsibility which Great Britain had declined to accept till then.

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1. "P.P.", p.382, Russell-Stanton, Sept.1, 65.
  2. "P.P.", p.393, Russell-Stanton, Sept.22, 65.



But unfortunately these concessions had come a little too late. They were concessions made under duress, and designed to extricate the British Government from a difficult situation in which British prestige was involved. Theodore, having accidentally achieved a very strong bargaining position was in a mood to play for high stakes. Inspired by the vision of his prophetic role, and elated by his first diplomatic victory over a mighty power, Theodore was prepared to gain as much advantage as he could from the situation. It was at this Juncture that Rassam was called upon to play the role of a consummate diplomat.

CHAPTER VII - 2

On the eve of Rassam's departure for Ethiopia Theodore had written to the Naib of Arkeeko that, "God willing when he comes all his requests will be granted."<sup>1</sup> This substantiated the evidence of messengers returning from Theodore's court that he had of late become better disposed towards the British.<sup>2</sup> The accommodating attitude of the Foreign Secretary, and the apparently softened attitude of Theodore gave Rassam some hope for the success of his mission.

After receiving Russell's instructions, Rassam accompanied by Dr. Blanck and Lt. Prideaux arrived at Massawa in October 1865, and a little later left for Matemma on the Sudan border. The Turkish and the Egyptian authorities at Massawa and Kassala<sup>3</sup> gave much assistance to him, and the Egyptian governor of Taka received the mission with a guard of Honour consisting of a regiment of Sudan infantry and 150 Bashi Bazaik cavalry.<sup>4</sup> Rassam continued to get good news from Ethiopia. For instance Epperle, one of the lay missionaries, returning from Theodore's camp, and Flad, a friendly

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1. "P.P.", p.387, Theodore-Naib, incl.529.

2. Ibid.

3. An Egyptian frontier town.

4. "P.P.", p.427, Rassam-Merwether, November 27, 1865.



German missionary advised him of a general feeling in Ethippia that Theodore would come to terms when he had the Queen's letter.<sup>1</sup>

Having received these reports Rassam informed Theodore of his arrival at the appointed place, and requested permission to proceed to his presence.<sup>2</sup> Theodore informed Rassam that he had ordered all the chiefs enroute to provide for the needs of the mission, and an escort was on the way to fetch them to the Lake Dembea where the royal audience would be given.<sup>3</sup> This friendly reply prompted Rassam to write his government that "Theodore's letter could not have been more friendly and civil."<sup>4</sup> All this tended to raise the hopes of the British officials who concluded that the progress of the mission was most promising.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed Theodore received Rassam and his party with all the respect due to a foreign embassy, and accepted the gifts from the queen as a token from a friendly power whose renewed friendship he was happy to acknowledge.<sup>6</sup> Though he

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1. "P.P.", p.428, Rassam-Merwether, Nov.27, 65.

2. Blanck, op.cit. p.107.

3. "P.P.", p.440, Theodore-Rassam, incl.2, in 524.

4. "P.P.", p.439, Rassam-Merwether, Dec.27, 65.

5. "P.P.", p.445, Merwether-Clarendon, March 17, 1866.

6. Blanck, op.cit., p.130, Markham, op.cit. p.99.

gave vent to his rage at the supposed misdeeds of Cameron and the European missionaries, he assured Rassam that for the sake of his friendship for the Queen he would release the captives.<sup>1</sup> As an expression of gratitude Theodore planned to send a letter to the Queen in which he described himself as an ignorant Ethiopian and implored her to pardon his offences.<sup>2</sup> After presenting Rassam with 5000 dollars and promising to allow the mission to leave the country in honour and safety<sup>3</sup> Theodore ordered them to proceed to Korata<sup>4</sup> to await the arrival of the captives whose release had been ordered already.<sup>5</sup> All rejoiced at the happy turn of events, and Dr. Blanck wrote later, "all smiled upon us, and we rejoiced beyond expression by the complete success of our mission."<sup>6</sup>

On 12 March, 1865, Consul Cameron, Kerens, the missionaries Stern and Rosenthal joined the British mission whose relations with Theodore were extremely cordial. Theodore was embarrassingly polite and magnanimous towards Rassam, giving him abundant supplies and money, writing courteous letters thanking him for restoring happy relations between the two countries and requesting him to convey his sincere

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1. Blanck, op.cit., p.130.

2. "P.P.", p.459, Theodore-Queen, incl.1/593.

3. Blanck, op.cit., p.130.

4. A village on the South east of the Lake Tana.

5. Blanck, op.cit., p.130.

6. Ibid.



friendship for the queen.<sup>1</sup> The mission had completely succeeded in its undertaking and anticipating no further troubles was hoping to leave for England any moment.

However this was not to be: to every one's great surprise Theodore now demanded a justification of his former conduct, and with characteristic cunning asked Rassam to conduct a public trial of the captives to decide who had been in the wrong - whether he or the captives? Rassam knew that the sensible thing to do was to let the king have what he wished, and on his advice, after a sham trial the captives confessed to their supposed faults and begged Theodore's pardon.<sup>2</sup>

After this, in anticipation of getting a final clearance, Rassam met with Theodore and it was agreed that Came on and the other captives would leave the country at once, while the members of the British mission would join them after meeting Theodore at Zagwe to exchange farewell. Accordingly on April 13, 1866 Cameron and the other ex-captives proceeded to Gondar, while Rassam, Blanck and Prideaux went to Zagwe to take leave of Theodore. As usual, high-ranking Ethiopian officers conducted them to the royal tent. But to their dismay Theodore was absent and the Ethiopian grandees

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1. "P.P.", p.457, Rassam-Merwether, Feb.3, 1866.

2. Blanck, op.cit., p.146.

stood in terrifying silence on either side of his empty throne. Even before Rassam and his friends had a moment to realize the meaning of this drama, Ethiopian soldiers seized and chained them. They had been imprisoned, and it did not take them long to learn that the advancing party of Cameron had been reimprisoned, and were being brought to Zage.

The next day Theodore conducted a sham trial charging Rassam with taking away Cameron and others without effecting a reconciliation. No rational explanation satisfied the monarch who had engineered the whole affair. "After some blasphemous parleying the king bowed his head and begged forgiveness from all whom he had wronged."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Blank's and Rassam's account of Theodore leads one to the conclusion that either he was demented or else was being clever. The latter seems to be the case.

Though it was rumoured at that time that Theodore did not allow the captives to leave his country because he feared possible reprisals from the British Government once the Captives were safe, this does not appear to be the case. Theodore was a soldier of great daring and courage, and it is unlikely that he was afraid of Britain. Cameron wrote of him that he cared nothing for European alliances and believed himself to be a match to Britain.<sup>2</sup> Plowden's description of

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1. Blanck, op.cit.,

2. "P.P.", p.404, Cameron-Hertslet, July 14, 65.



his character, and his later behaviour support this view. Theodore had certain objectives and he was determined to reach them whatever the crudeness of the methods he might have felt obliged to employ.

Theodore was a great moderniser and wanted to strengthen his country, both militarily and otherwise. He knew that many fissiparous tendencies were weakening his government, and the local chiefs being anxious to be independent were disdaining the central authority. In his first meeting Theodore had told Rassam that his country men were wicked, always ready to reject a good government and always in revolt. Moreover, the aspirations of both the Turks and the Egyptians had increased his difficulties. He needed superior arms in large quantity to put down internal revolts and checkmate external aggression. With the Turks in control of the Red sea ports the import of munition was difficult, and the British who might have helped him in this respect were loath to jeopardise their relations with Turkey. Thus Theodore sought a devise by which he could compel Britain to accommodate him.

As early as 1855 Theodore had begun the task of acquiring modern armaments for his army. In that year a group of protestant missionaries who had been trained in the technical arts at Basle had arrived in Ethiopia for propogating religion. Theodore told them that he did not need religious instructors

in his country but workmen who could make munitions of war. Having won them over to his wishes, Theodore not only showered many benefits on them, but also encouraged them to marry Ethiopian girls and settle down in his country. He found a work shop for them at Gaffat and asked them to cast cannons, and build mortars and shells. In all they cast at least twelve bronze cannons, including the famous 500 ton Cannon "Sebastapool".<sup>1</sup> The manufacture of such weapons was of considerable psychological importance, the more so as Theodore's attempt at unifying the country made necessary a series of military operations in the principal provinces.

But though Theodore had learnt that he could manufacture arms in his own country he was not satisfied with the production of the missionaries alone, and revived the idea of obtaining craftsman from Britain. Cameron, before his imprisonment, had supported this policy; but as we have seen the Foreign Office preferred to avoid entanglements with Ethiopia and did not even reply politely to his letters. Meanwhile the episode of Cameron's imprisonment had revealed to Theodore his strength and had put in his hands a new weapon to force Britain's acquiescence to his wishes. Fortified in his mountainous country he could persuade Britain to yield to him <sup>this</sup> on point. Cameron's imprisonment had produced immediate

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1. The above account is based on Richard Pankhurst's article, "Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia", Tarik, Vol.1, no.4, 1967 pp.15-25.



results; a British mission had waited on him, and British intransigence with regard to the reception of his ambassadors had been broken. Why not go a step further to realize a dream that had been so close to his heart? Why not use Rassam?

As a matter of fact Theodore had expected Rassam to raise the question of helping him with arms and artisans, and in this expectation he had treated the British mission very generously. But there was no indication this was paying off in any way as Rassam had maintained complete silence on the matter. Dr. Blanck thought that "the Emperor was put out for Rassam had not mentioned the object he had so dear to his heart, the artisans and instruments."<sup>1</sup> At this juncture his European workmen suggested to Theodore that he ought to take advantage of Rassam's presence to obtain whatever he liked from Britain,<sup>2</sup> and he lost no time in implementing the suggestions, an echo of his own feelings and thoughts.

Theodore was not acting on whims and fancies. He set the stage by exploiting the anxiety of the captives to leave the country, and had obtained from them a confession of their wrong deeds. The offended monarch needed to be compensated. But he did not demand this at once, since he had given his word of honour to Rassam to send him and the

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1. Blanck, op.cit., p.192.

2. Ibid. p.148.

captives on their way without delay. He did not wish to violate his promise openly as he did not wish to appear as an offender before his people. At the same time he could not think of sending Rassam and his party from his country, for, though the British government had promised to receive his embassy and to act in good faith he was not certain that they would do so. Moreover by detaining Rassam he could force the British government to supply him with machinery, artisans and workmen.

However Theodore was not insensible to the magnitude of disappointment he had caused to Rassam and the others. With a view to soften them he effected an emotional reconciliation with them. But Theodore never lost sight of his objectives for a moment. He told Rassam that in spite of all that had happened he would treat them generously and send them home provided they got him satisfaction. He did not need gold or silver, but people who would "open his eyes."<sup>1</sup> Rassam and his party would remain in Ethiopia until the British Government had sent him workmen. On his request, Rassam, who felt that he had no alternative, appealed to Clarendon to supply Theodore with a few artisans and technicians for instructing his people in the art of casting cannon, muskets and shots. These were to arrive with their instruments and

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1. "P.P.", p.467, Rassam-Clarendon, April 18, 1866.



after they had instructed the Ethiopians might return to England. Further he requested the Foreign Secretary to send a gift of 10,000 percussion caps, rifles and gun powder to Theodore.<sup>1</sup>

Simultaneously Theodore sent a letter to the Queen making a similar request. He wrote:

We the people of Ethiopia are blind and beg of your Majesty that you should give light to our eyes and so you may receive light in the kingdom of Heaven".<sup>2</sup>

Flad, the German missionary was chosen by the king to carry those letters to London.

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., Theodore-Queen, April 17, 66.

CHAPTER VII - 3

Before the arrival of Flad at Aden, the British officials there who had come to believe that the Ethiopian difficulty was at an end were daily expecting the arrival of Rassam. Col. Merwether had even drafted a letter to Theodore inviting him to send an embassy to England along with some of his young men who would remain in England to be educated. Col. Stanton at Alexandria had forwarded this draft for the approval of the Foreign Secretary.<sup>1</sup> In fact the British officials were in an expansive and generous mood and were prepared, once the captives were out of Ethiopia, to make up for their past indifference to the king. But Flad's tidings on Rassam's detention upset their calculation and introduced new complexities into the situation.

A little later Flad arrived in London and gave to the Foreign Office a detailed account of affairs in Ethiopia until the time of his departure. He reported his belief that the failure of the Foreign Office to reply to Theodore's letter had been largely responsible for all that had occurred and spoke highly of Rassam's abilities and character.<sup>2</sup> He advised the Foreign Secretary to comply with the request of

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1. F.O.1, Stanton, F.O. 5/22/66, quoted, Marston, op.cit., p.312.

2. "P.P.", p.469, Flad-Clarendon, incl.in 610.



Theodore for artisans and machinery, and deprecated the use of force as he feared it would endanger the lives of the captives.

Before Clarendon could give consideration to these facts and suggestions the liberal government of Russell fell and the conservatives led by Derby came to power. The new Foreign Secretary, Stanley, had a long talk with Flad, and received from Co. Merwether a memorandum on Ethiopian affairs in which he argued that the best course of action would be to satisfy the king by showing a liberal disposition. He suggested that the Queen should write a polite letter to Theodore asking him to send the much discussed embassy to England so that they could see the progressive civilization of England and discover for themselves the advantages of a friendly association with Britain.<sup>1</sup>

These arguments fell on the willing ears of Lord Stanley who was opposed to any form of military action, and believed that no reasonable means should be neglected for obtaining the release of the captives. So he ordered that the artizans and the articles ordered by the king should be sent at the public expense.<sup>2</sup> Merwether himself recruited seven workmen who were to accompany Flad to Ethiopia. Messrs. Easton & Co. designed a twelve horse power steam engine to

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1. "P.P.", p.493, Merewether's memorandum, August 16, 66, incl.638.

2. "P.P.", p.496, Murray-The Secretary of The Treasury, Aug. 18, 66.

meet with the requirements of Theodore for whom Merwether bought a number of presents. The cost of all these items exceeded £3900<sup>1</sup>, an insignificant trifle compared to the probable cost of a military campaign in Ethiopia.

Meanwhile rumours were afloat that Egypt would attack Ethiopia, and Flad who feared its probable effect on the British captives requested the Foreign Secretary to take immediate steps to check Egypt.<sup>2</sup> On the advice of the Foreign Office, Col. Stanton of Alexandria, took the matter up with the Viceroy of Egypt who assured him that he had not the slightest intention of attacking Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> Flad also requested the British government to endeavour to restore the convent at Jerusalem to Ethiopian monks as he thought such a move would convince Theodore of Britain's friendship. Though no serious thought was given to this suggestion, the British Government went as far as they could to satisfy Theodore meeting provocation with restraint and demonstrating a genuine desire to avoid the use of force. They had as ever used their influence to restrain Egypt's aggressive intentions in Ethiopia, and were obviously anxious to make amends for previous errors of omission and commission towards the offended monarch. On September 1, Flad informed

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1. "P.P.", p.522, Merwether-The F.O.

2. "P.P.", p.476, Flad-Stanley, incl.613.

3. "P.P.", p.482, Stanton-Stanley, July 23, 66.



Theodore of the complete success of his mission, and also of the Queen's friendly disposition towards him. Flad hoped to return to Ethiopia with artisans and machinery by the end of October.<sup>1</sup>

In Ethiopia, meanwhile, everything seemed to be going well. Theodore allowed Rassam and his party to move about freely. Detention no longer meant fetters. The king as if in compensation for his former rude behaviour showered many presents on the captives including saddles inlaid with gold, a special sign of his favour. He even planned to create new Orders of Merit, and to confer higher distinctions on Rassam, Blanck and Prideaux. On May 24, the Queen's birthday, he ordered a 21 gun salute and a feast as a token of his respect for her. He took Rassam and his friends on hunting expeditions and spoke frequently of his friendship towards England.<sup>2</sup> Had this phase continued a little longer it is probable that the Ethiopian affair could still have ended gracefully. But the inconsistent Theodore not knowing what was happening in England, for Flad's letter had not yet reached him, accepted rumours about Britain's treachery towards him and suddenly turned completely about and assumed an attitude of hostility towards the captives.

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1. "P.P.", p.503, Flad-Theodore, 1 September 1866, incl.

2. "P.P.", p.484, Rassam-Clarendon, May 27, 1866. A detailed account of Theodore's conduct towards the British mission can be found in Blanc's "Narrative" and Rassam's "Narrative of the British Mission".

On June 25, he asked Rassam and his party to face a political trial during which he brought many charges against them. He burst out with uncontrollable rage on the supposed duplicity of Britain, and announced that he had received secret intelligence regarding the complicity of Britain with Turkey, and accused her of building a Railway for the conveyance of troops to Ethiopia. He revived his old complaint that Jerusalem was his inheritance, but that England had been supporting Turkish sovereignty over that place. Later he placed Rassam and his party under strict detention,<sup>1</sup> and though Rassam was able to get occasional messages to Theodore, he was unable to impress upon him the consequences to which he was exposing himself by his rude behaviour.<sup>2</sup> A few days later Rassam and his party were conveyed to the Fort of Magdala where they were to spend long days of hope and anguish until their rescue came at the hands of Napier.

News of Rassam's imprisonment reached the Foreign Office towards the end of August 1866. This shattered the confidence of Merwether and Flad in the professed friendship of Theodore. Flad conveyed his opinion to the Foreign Office that no good would result by Britain's compliance with Theodore's request and advised them to take stronger measures against him.<sup>3</sup> Merwether who strongly supported this opinion

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1. "P.P.", p.503, Rassam-Merwether, July 26, 66.

2. Markham, op.cit., pp.111-113.

3. "P.P.", p.508, Flad-Merewether, 19 September 1866.



submitted a new memorandum to the Foreign Office explaining the need to follow a more virile policy towards Theodore. He considered the imprisonment as a gross outrage and insult to the British Government and maintained that "such a barbarous conduct" should not be tolerated. He advised the British Government to demand from Theodore the immediate release of the captives and urged that, this demand failing in its purpose, an expedition should be sent to accomplish the rescue. He argued that the greater part of Ethiopia was in rebellion against the king and that there could be no doubt but that the local rulers and the people of Ethiopia would cooperate with the British once it was made clear that the expedition would not continue in Ethiopia after liberating the captives and that the British Government had no ulterior aims.<sup>1</sup> The cabinet however rejected Merwether's plan as they still clung to the hope of avoiding the necessity of sending a military expedition and resolved to persevere in their original conciliatory measures.<sup>2</sup>

Merwether was much disappointed with this decision as he had reached the conclusion that only the use of force would bring the desired results. However it was decided to send Flad back with a polite but firm letter from the Queen

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1. "P.P.", pp.509-11, Merwether's memorandum on Ethiopia, Sept.25, 66.

2. "P.P.", p.514, Merewether-Murray 1 October 1866.

which pointed to the contradiction between Theodore's professions of friendship and his actions, and which indicted him for imprisoning ambassadors whose persons were held to be sacred by all nations "assuming to be civilized." The letter went on to ask Theodore to give effect to his promises by releasing the captives, after which the British Government would send him the articles and artisans.<sup>1</sup>

Flad was instructed to tell Theodore that he had destroyed the British Government's confidence by imprisoning the British mission; that Britain had no wish to encourage Egypt against Ethiopia; but that in return for British good will Ethiopia had to give substantial proof of her friendship towards Britain, and the release of the captives would be such proof.<sup>2</sup> Thus a hint of threat was also conveyed. But the whole correspondence makes it clear that the British government was extremely reluctant to send a military expedition against Ethiopia, and that they wished till the end to escape from that country, peacefully, and with their prestige intact.

Flad, on arriving at Massawa, sent the Queen's letter to Theodore who was not influenced by it in the least. On the contrary, he sent Rassam a draft of his reply which very firmly declared that although he had "loved England exceedingly" and sincerely desired for her friendship, he had

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1. "P.P.", pp.514-15, Queen-Theodore, October 4, 66.

2. "P.P.", p.516, Instructions to Flad, October 8, 66.



heard of her complicity with the Turks and had changed his attitude.<sup>1</sup> But this letter was never sent and soon we find him again changing his tactics and writing an imploring note to Rassam declaring that the moment the workmen arrived in his country that he would send him away, and that he was prepared to fall at the feet of the Queen for this favour.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile Flad arrived at Debra Tabor and during his interview with the king implored him to release the captives and even politely pointed out that if he were to antagonize England he would have a war on his hands not only with that country but also with France and Egypt. Theodore remained undisturbed by this as he had some how reached the conclusion that he could get nothing except by the coercion of England whose natural sympathies he believed to be with his enemies. He told Flad that since England had refused him her friendship, he was willing to fight her.

It is indeed very difficult to understand Theodore whose intransigence and lack of foresight appear to defy understanding. It was a tragedy that the British Government had created an impression in his mind that they would yield only to pressure and force of circumstances. In 1866, the internal condition of Ethiopia was anything but happy.

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1. "P.P.", p. Theodore-Rassam, Jan.67.

2. "P.P.", p.570, Theodore-Rassam, Jan.8, 67.

Rebellion was the order of the day. Theodore's long and protracted wars against the Mohammedan Gallas had left him exhausted, and had corroded his authority. Wagsum Gobaze was becoming stronger in western Ethiopia, and Menelek, since his escape from Theodore's prison, was growing powerful in Shoa. The rebel chief Kassa was practically independent in Tigre. Theodore's sovereignty was more nominal than real, his authority being limited to the central parts of the empire. His army had been reduced to a mere rabble and his merciless behaviour towards prisoners, his predatory expeditions including the sack of Gondar, and his attitude towards the clericals had alienated the sympathies of his subjects. Under these circumstances Theodore probably felt that he needed a diplomatic victory over the mighty English to prove to his people his strength. As Rassam pointed out his very figure frightened rebels, and this timely victory would add to his reputation. More importantly he needed mechanics and artisans to build his armaments so that he could assert his power over the rebels and thus consolidate his position. At the same time he did not possess or pursue any policy as Europeans understood it. Probably Cameron was correct in observing that "as to policy he knew nothing, his maxim was to defy everybody depending on the Holy Trinity whose instrument he believed himself to be". Thus blinded by an irrational belief in his ultimate victory, and an erraneous understanding of British policies and attitudes, Theodore turned deaf ear



to the British suggestions and continued to keep Rassam and his party in fetters thus leaving Britain no alternative but the use of force to accomplish her objective.

## CHAPTER VIII

With the failure of Flad's mission the Ethiopian question assumed a serious character. Though two more ineffective efforts were made to procure the release of the captives<sup>1</sup> there was no doubt regarding the only means available to achieve this objective. Every one familiar with the Ethiopian situation - the captives at Magdala, Col. Merwether at Aden, and the leading members of both the Tory and the Whig parties - came to conclude that further peaceful approaches would not bring the desired results, and that Theodore would not release the captives unless forced to do so.

As early as May 1864, the question of Cameron's imprisonment had been discussed by Parliament, and on May 23, Chelmsford moved for the placing of the Ethiopian papers in Parliament. On June 30, 1865, a debate took place in the Commons on the Government's Ethiopian policy when they came under sever criticism for their negligence in replying to Theodore. Russell and Layard tried to defend themselves by making Cameron a scapegoat.

Meanwhile the British officials at Cairo and Aden were getting impatient of the Government's pacific policy. Tired of waiting with the workers and artisans at Massawa in

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1. In 1867 the Khedive of Egypt and the patriarch of Jerusalem made separate appeals to Theodore to release the captives; obviously these had no effect on Theodore.



anticipation of Theodore's reply, Merwether warned the Foreign Secretary of the effects of further insults from Theodore on British prestige, and urged him to adopt a firm and bold attitude towards the king.<sup>1</sup> Col. Stanton, at Alexandria, supported this view.<sup>2</sup> Even the pacific Stanley had slowly reached the conclusion that peaceful relations was not the object of Theodore and wrote a strongly worded letter warning him that if he did not release the captives within three months friendly relations with Ethiopia would cease, and force would be employed against him.<sup>3</sup> On the same day, transmitting this news to Merwether, Stanley wrote that he was in consultation with the India Office about the probable military expedition against Theodore, although he himself was much in favour of a peaceful solution of the question. To many in the India Office Stanley's pacific moves were a disappointment, and Sir. Stafford Northcote wrote John Lawrence that "the inclination of the council here is to abstain from action of a military character .... and I think it probable that this will be the ultimate decision of the Government .... it is very little to our credit."<sup>4</sup>

It is probable that many in England were in agreement with the view of Sir Stafford. Even amidst all the

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1. "P.P.", p.514, Merwether-Murray, October 1, 66.

2. "P.P.", p.547, Stanton;-Stanley, Feb.1, 67.

3. "P.P.", p.610, Stanley-Theodore, April 16, 67.

4. Northcote-Lawrence, May 10, 67, Quoted by Andrew Lang, Life & Letters of Sir Stafford Northcote [2 vols., London: 1890] Vol.1, p.308.

excitement about the Reform Act, the Newspapers kept alive the Ethiopian issue and the Pall Mall Gazette with its strong conservative leanings never stopped writing about the need for a more vigorous Ethiopian policy and warned the government "of the stigma on our power of having been unable to cope with the resolute chief of Abyssinia [and also pointed out that] the effect would not be lost on Egypt, or along the shores of the Red sea [and indeed] it might have its influence on India."<sup>1</sup>

The Foreign Secretary had been under constant parliamentary pressure to take stronger measures, and on May 14, 1867 in the Commons Mr. Wylds asked him to explain whether further measures had been taken to release the captives.<sup>2</sup> On June 21, Stratford Radcliffe raised the same question in the Lords and argued that the Ethiopian question involved national honour, and warned the government against further indignities at the hands of Theodore.<sup>3</sup> On July 19 Lord Cochrane took the matter up in the Lords and wondered whether there was any hope of the liberation of the captives.<sup>4</sup> On 26 July, Henry Seymour told the commons that great interest in the captives had been excited throughout England and that it was the general opinion

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1. "P.P.", p.632, quoted by Beke in his letter of 13 June, 67 to Stanley.
  2. Hansard, 3rd series, Vol.CXC, p.524.
  3. Hansard, 3rd series, Vol.CLXXXVII, p.239.
  4. Hansard, 3rd series, Vol.CLXXXVIII, p.1723.



that the country was disgraced in allowing them to remain so long in captivity and that a show of force would be necessary to restore prestige.<sup>1</sup> Henry Rawlinson warned against a miserable example of moral cowardice and military weakness<sup>2</sup> and argued that prestige in politics was like credit in finance; that it had enabled Great Britain with very small means to do great things. As a matter of fact the whole British position in the East depended on it. It was the foundation of the Empire and a talisman which had helped Great Britain to do great things and every step must be taken to preserve it intact.<sup>3</sup> Henry Layard supported this view and wondered whether the honour and the credit of Great Britain did not render a military expedition against Ethiopia absolutely necessary.<sup>4</sup>

As the parliamentary pressure for stronger measures was mounting the woeful tale of the captives was making it very difficult for the Government to persevere in their peaceful policy towards Theodore. Both Cameron and Dr. Blanck wrote the Foreign Office that nothing but an army could secure their release from Theodore's fetters. Rassam who had been held in high esteem by the Government sent a secret message to Merwether reading, "Action for us is life and delay death." Merwether

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1. Hansard, 3rd series, Vol.CLXXXXIX, p.237.

2. Ibid., p.242.

3. Ibid.

4. Hansard, 3rd series, Vol.CLXXXXIX, p.242.

who had sent the artisans back to England in view of Theodore's haughty silence considered that since Theodore had ignored the government's ultimatum they were bound to take military measures against him, and urged Stanley to make preparations for war.<sup>1</sup> Thus the missionaries, the captives, the officials and the leaders of both political parties had come to conclude that they had been wronged. They also held that prestige was the foundation of the empire and whatever the loss of life involved, and whatever the expenses, that no one should ever be allowed to offend it with impunity. In view of these feelings and circumstances, and in view of the expiry of the three months ultimatum served to Theodore, the British government decided to send an expeditionary force to Ethiopia to release the captives and to restore honour.<sup>2</sup> On September 9, 1867 Stanley informed Theodore of this decision and warned him that he alone would be held responsible for all the consequences.<sup>3</sup>

In November 1867 when the Government approached parliament for money to undertake the military expedition, the Ethiopian question was once again debated. Queen Victoria informed parliament that she had ordered the expedition to release the captives from unjust imprisonment and to vindicate

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1. "P.P.", p.653, Merewether-Stanley, June 18, 67.

2. "P.P.", p.653, Stanley-Merewether, June 15, 67.

3. "P.P.", Vol.XLIII, p.186, Stanley-Merewether, August 18, 67.



cate the honour of the crown.<sup>1</sup> Lord Stanley thought that Britain's prestige would have suffered throughout the world had the government allowed Her Majesty's crown and dignity to be offended by a semi-barbarous potentate.<sup>2</sup> He went on to say that "we rest our position there on what is vaguely called prestige .... We cannot accept an insult from an uncivilized power and merely say we are sorry for it".<sup>3</sup> He pondered how Britain, irrespective of material consideration, had always fought to safeguard her prestige and asked the commons rhetorically what was the origin of the Bhootan war and answered that it was precisely the same, the detention of, and the insult to, the British envoy. Even Gladstone<sup>4</sup>, Disraeli and the Earl of Ellenborough felt that justice was on the side of Britain, and war with Theodore had become a necessity in order to maintain British prestige untarnished.

But prestige was not a mere emotive word. As Lord Stanley told parliament the British government had decided to send an expedition to Ethiopia under a strong sense of imperial necessity. For it was argued that the Ethiopian affair would certainly have repercussions on the Indian people. And if Britain left the captives at Magdala to their

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1. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.3, Queen's address, Nov.17, 67.
  2. Ibid., p.35, Lord Derby, Nov.19, 67.
  3. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.212, Stanley in the Commons, 26 Nov.67.
  4. Hansard, 3rd servies, CXC, p.296.

fate, the Indians would consider it as a sign of weakness of Britain and would not be slow to challenge the British government in India. Layard went a step further and told the Commons that it was an imperial question and not limited to India alone.<sup>1</sup> Henry Rawlinson joined the choruses and argued that British prestige had to be restored for greater needs. The Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Northcote, went on to the extent of declaring in the Commons, that "if it were not for India it would be a matter of grave consideration whether the expedition was necessary at all."<sup>2</sup> Later, writing to the Viceroy of India, Northcote wondered "Whether Indian envoys to Muscat and Zanzibar would have found it to their advantage to have it commonly reported that England did not trouble herself to rescue her servants."<sup>3</sup> The Secretary of State for India was particularly anxious that the recognised conduct as to the inviolability of diplomatic personnel be upheld even at the cost of blood and treasure.<sup>4</sup> Cranborne supported this view.

At the same time both the Whigs and the Tories were unswerving in their opposition to any annexation of territories in Ethiopia, despite the fact that proposals to this effect were not lacking. Walley, an M.P. objected to

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1. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.274.

2. Ibid., p.374.

3. Northcote-Lawrence, quoted by Lang, op.cit.p.311.

4. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.371.



any prior commitment excluding the occupation of any Ethiopian territory.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Krapf, a missionary, suggested that the British Government should not overlook the opportunity of securing a strong position in the Red sea region, along the avnue to India.<sup>2</sup> Some in India were only too enthusiastic to occupy parts of Ethiopia. But these suggestions fell on the deaf ears of the government. The Earl of Derby stated in parliament that "suggestions for occupying Abyssinia for sanitorial and other purposes-God knows what - have been made to Her Majesty's government. But it has never crossed our minds to go one step further than to obtain the release of the prisoners."<sup>3</sup> Earl Russell, the leader of the opposition expressed satisfaction at the assurance of the Government that no territorial acquisitions would be made.<sup>4</sup> Layard was happy at the Queen's "distinct" assurance to the same effect.<sup>5</sup> Gladstone hoped that as soon as the object of the expedition was accomplished Britain would withdraw from Ethiopia and never again mix herself with the affairs of that or similar countries. Disraeli assured the commons that Britain was going to war not to obtain territory, not to secure commercial advantages, but

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1. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.97.

2. "P.P.", p.513, Krapf-Stanley, Oct.1, 66.

3. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.44,

4. Ibid., p.17.

5. Ibid., p.277.

for high moral causes, and moral causes alone.<sup>1</sup>

The Foreign Secretary told the Commons that "the sooner we are again out of the country [Ethiopia] and the less we have to do with it in the future the better. We can do well without Abyssinians, and the Abyssinians must learn to do without us,"<sup>2</sup> In fact the position taken by the government in public was completely in accord with their private instructions to Napier, "that he was not sent to overthrow one ruler and set up another, to extend British territory or increase British influence."<sup>3</sup>

Thus it is clear that the British government had no desire to acquire any territory in Ethiopia or to establish any influence. She had waited patiently in the hope that Theodore would release the captives; but this had not happened. But slowly when the British realized that their prestige had been at stake they reacted strongly. It was prestige and prestige alone, which in the end led to Napier's expedition to Magdala.

Parliament was almost unanimous on this issue and the two political parties acted with perfect understanding under the circumstances. Earl Russell the leader of the opposition felt "that parliament was bound to extend every consideration and forbearance to the government".<sup>4</sup>

1. Hansard, VolCXC, p.190.

2. Ibid., p.217.

3. F.O.1/21, F.O.S.S.for India - Napier 10/9/1867.

4. Hansard, Vol.CXC, p.590.



## CHAPTER IX

It is not the object of this research to go into the various details of Napier's expedition to Ethiopia. Once the decision was made to liberate the captives by force, the responsibility of organising the whole expedition was transferred to the India Office. Sir. Stafford Northcote meticulously performed his duties. The government took no chance and enormous amounts of money - over nine million pounds - was spent on the expedition. As far as possible every contingency was foreseen and adequate provisions were made to meet the same.

The Bombay government was instructed to make all the necessary local arrangements<sup>1</sup> for the departure of the expeditionary force which, on the recommendation of Napier, had been fixed at 13,000. The British diplomatic agents for the Middle East and Spain were instructed to buy the needed package animals.<sup>2</sup> Forty four elephants were sent from India to carry the heavy guns on the march. A railway complete with locomotives and some twenty miles of track was laid across the coastal line. At Zula, the landing place, large piers, light houses and warehouses were established. Two condensers to convert salt water into fresh water, and three ships with hospital facilities were sent.<sup>3</sup> Then,

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1. For more details see, Holland & Hoizier, A Record of The Expedition to Abyssinia, 2 vols. LONDON; 1870.
  2. P.Papers; 1867-68, Vol.XLIII, pp.57. Papers connected with The Abyssinian Expedition, Under Secretary of State for War - Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs; August 27, 1867.
  3. "P.P.", Vol, XLIII, pp.56,  
The Secretary of State for India - Governor of Bombay  
August 27, 1867.

with the help of the Imperial Mint at Vienna, 50,000, Maria Theresa dollars, which was the only acceptable currency in Ethiopia, was obtained to pay for Ethiopian goods.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, permission was obtained from the Khedive for the passage of the expedition through Egyptian territory.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it took a little effort and tact to convince Khedive Ismail to restrain his excessive enthusiasm to co-operate with Britain,<sup>3</sup> for any sign of collaboration with the Egyptians, who were the traditional enemies of Ethiopia, would have made British progress in Ethiopia very difficult. However, with grace, the Khedive acceded to the British request. Permission of the Ottoman and Persian governments were procured to use the overland telegraph routes.

The force's intelligence corps under Col. Merwethere contained many interesting personalities, among whom may be mentioned John Krapf, "who was the first European to see the snows of Mt. Kenya", and the New York Herald's war correspondent, Henry Morton Stanley of later African fame. A geographer, a zoologist and a representative of the British Museum, were among the members of the expedition. Observers were sent by the French, Prussian, Italian, Dutch, Austrian, and Spanish governments.

1. "P.P.", vol, XLIII, pp.258  
The Under Secretary to The Government of India -  
The Deputy Governor of The Bank of England, October 3,  
1867.
2. "P.P.", vol, XLIII, pp.85,  
Memorandum of the Under Secretary of State for  
Foreign Affairs, September 8, 1867.
3. "P.P.", vol, XLIII, pp.335  
The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs - The  
Acting Consul General of Alexandria, October 10, 1867.



Col. Merwether had taken great care to maintain close relations with the local chiefs through whose territory the British army had to pass to Magdala<sup>1</sup>. Even before the commencement of the campaign King Menelek of Shoa had opened correspondence with Col. Merwether at Aden, and the latter had arranged to have him sent certain presents and a friendly reply. But, even more important were the relations with Kassai of Tigre who had now asserted his independent position. He rendered invaluable assistance to the British army, by helping them to procure the needed supplies of food and fodder, and by preventing sporadic attacks on the caravan of supplies. These arrangements, effected by Merwether, played a very important role in the success of the expedition.

In October, 1867, the first advance guard arrived at Zula, and by the end of the year most of the force had arrived at that port. With the arrival of Sir Charles Napier at Zyla, in January 1868, commenced the long march of the army to Magdala.

Meanwhile, Napier had issued an ultimatum to Theodore asking him to release the captives and avert the final catastrophe. He stated:

My sovereign has no desire to deprive you of any part of your dominions, nor to subvert your authority, although it is obvious that such would in all probability be the result of hostilities.

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1. Holland and Hoizier, op.cit., pp.317.
  2. "P.P." 1868, vol.XLIII, pp.28. Further Papers on The Abyssinian Expedition Memorandum by Sir Robert Napier, February 7, 1868.
  3. Napier's ultimatum to Theodore, Holland and Hoizier, op.cit. pp. 352.

This note never reached Theodore for Rassam destroyed it suspecting that it would infuriate the King and thus endanger the lives of the captives.<sup>1</sup>

A proclamation was also issued to the people on the objectives of the expedition, and it was emphatically stated that there was no intention of occupying any portion of the Ethiopian territory, or of interfering with the government of the country. Rewards and punishments were held out for all depending on their co-operation or opposition to the British expedition.<sup>2</sup>

Conscious of the strength of the British force<sup>3</sup> Theodore did not make any attempt to check its progress; also he had no control over the coastal areas (which were under the effective authority of Kassai who was actively assisting the British) through which the British army was marching. Moreover, he seems to have had a blind faith that he would emerge as a stronger man destined to give Ethiopia a millenium of peace and prosperity. Till the end, he cared for no human assistance at all, as he believed in a current Ethiopian prophecy that an European king would meet an Ethiopian sovereign, and afterwards a king would reign in Ethiopia greater than any before him. Theodore was thus hopeful "that a king would come to treat with a king"<sup>4</sup>.

1. Blanck, op.cit., pp.380.

2. Napier's proclamation to the people of Ethiopia, January 18, 1868.  
"P.P.", vol.XLIII, pp.34, Further Papers on the Abyssinian Expedition.

3. Blanck, op.cit.pp.351.

4. Blanck, op.cit.pp.197.



All the same, he was not prepared to surrender, even if everything went bad for him. At that time, his army of 10,000, was no more than a rabble and he, naturally, decided to defend himself, what was until then the impregnable fort of Magdala, where his possessions had been preserved and the captives had been held. In March, 1868, Theodore reached Magdala along with his monster cannon, "Sebastapool". He ordered the removal of fetters from the captives and behaved in a friendly manner towards them. He told Rassam that he had lost all Ethiopia, but that he would wait there so that God's will might be done.<sup>1</sup>

As Theodore had known, his army was not a match for the disciplined and well-equipped British force. On the 10 April, in the first action Theodore's army was beaten. Theodore asked Rassam to reconcile him with the British commander; whereupon, Napier commended Theodore for his bravery, and told him that his army had fallen before a superior force and assured him of honourable treatment, if he were to release the prisoners and submit himself to the Queen.<sup>2</sup> After this, Theodore released the captives and sent a thousand cows to Napier as a sign of friendship. But, Napier could not allow Theodore to continue to rule Ethiopia since he had instructions to take him a prisoner to Bombay, and hence demanded his surrender. Theodore would not even consider such a proposal, and the hostilities were renewed. A small action took place on April 13, when the fort of Magdala fell into the hands

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1. Ibid.

2. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.734, Napier-Theodore, April 1868.

of the British; Theodore committed suicide, and the British army found only his dead body.

The British commander arranged a decent burial for Theodore, bombarded the fort and left it "a blackened rock as a warning to all who injure the subjects of Her Majesty the Queen of England".<sup>1</sup> He did not assume any responsibility for creating an administrative fabric for Ethiopia, and soon started on his return march. By June the army reached the coast, and on the 10 June Napier left for England. Britain's prestige had been restored!

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1. "P.P." 1867-68, vol. LXIII, (3955/5) p.13, Further Papers Connected with The Abyssinian Expedition.  
Napier-Menelek, 28 April 1868.



## CHAPTER X

The conduct of Robert Napier towards the chiefs of Ethiopia bears eloquent testimony to the disinterestedness of the British Government in seeking any influence in Ethiopia, and to their reluctance to interfere in the domestic politics of that country. At the time of the British intervention in 1867-68, there were three important chiefs in Ethiopia all of whom were interested in seeking British assistance in promoting their own plans. In the north was Kassai who was struggling to consolidate his position in Tigre; in the west was Wakshoom Gobaze who was in command of an army of 30,000, and was awaiting the time when he could proclaim his sovereignty over Ethiopia; in the south was Menelek of Shoa, who since his escape from Theodore's fetters at Magdala, had grown strong and was not devoid of imperial ambitions. Each of these chiefs welcomed the British intervention, since each was interested in the fall of Theodore. Though they were anxious to see the end of the tyrannical rule of Theodore they had not dared to attack the despot, for even in his declining days Theodore's very name created mortal terror in their hearts.<sup>1</sup> But all these chiefs were one in thinking that after overthrowing Theodore the British should withdraw from Ethiopia as soon as possible.

Not only inclination but circumstances also favoured a British policy of friendship towards these chiefs as their

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1. "P.P.", 1867-68 vol, XLIII pp.28, Further Papers on Abyssinian Expedition. Napier's Memorandum February 7, 1868.

co-operation was absolutely necessary for a quick and successful conclusion of the campaign. But the British government was determined not to get mixed up with the wishes and aspirations of these provincial rulers; within this frame work, Napier tried to follow a policy of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of Ethiopia, maintenance of a balance of power among the local chiefs, and repudiation of any responsibility for the administration of the country after the fall of Theodore.

Of the three Ethiopian chiefs, Menelek of Shoa was in contact with the British Resident at Aden, even before the beginning of the expedition, and had declared his genuine desire for Britain's friendship.<sup>1</sup>

Kassai of Tigre also had sent a messenger to Merwether expressing his faith in the declared objectives of Britain in invading Ethiopia and desiring true friendship with Britain.<sup>2</sup> Kassai equally saw the importance of forging closer ties with the invading army with a view to boosting his own prestige and if possible to getting their assistance in consolidating his authority over Tigre; more so in checking his only great rival Gobaze. But when he wrote a friendly letter to Merwether and Napier calling himself "the head of the chiefs of Ethiopia",<sup>3</sup> he received a courteous but noncommittal reply. In his memorandum

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1. "P.P.", 1867-68, vol. XLIII, pp.38, Papers Connected with the Abyssinian Expedition, Stanley-Menelek, August 19, 1867.

2. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.564, Merwether-Napier, December 19, 1867.

3. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.569, Napier's Memorandum.



on the subject, Napier, referring to the pretensions of Kassa wrote of the need for vigilance in "intercourse with the Abyssinian chiefs and to avoid being involved in the internal disputes of Abyssinia".<sup>1</sup> On 23 February 1868, a meeting took place between Kassai and Napier at which the former asked that the British army should undertake to guarantee his dominions against any invasion by his rival Wagshoom Gobaze. This, Robert Napier unhesitatingly refused, on the ground that England would not interfere in the domestic affairs of the country.<sup>2</sup> However, Merwether was quick to appreciate the importance of maintaining closer ties with Kassai through whose territory the army had to pass to Magdala.

Wagshoom Gobaze was not less anxious for British assistance against Kassai. He wrote to Napier explaining how he was obstructing their common enemy, Theodore. But the central theme of the letter was quite clear. He wrote "if he (Kassai) tells you Tigre belongs to me from my father, you must not take it for the truth".<sup>3</sup> Merewether replied that the commander in chief would have nothing to do with the internal affairs of Ethiopia, and he would treat all as friends, and no more.<sup>4</sup>

After the fall of Magdala and the death of Theodore Napier thought of restoring some balance in the country among the rival chiefs, though he was committed to the policy of noninter-

1. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.569, Napier's Memorandum January 20 1868. Blanck, op.cit. pp.415.

2. Napier's Memorandum, Ibid.

3. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.613, Gobaze-Napier.

4. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.614, Merewether-Gobaze.

vention in their affairs. He planned to hand over the strong fort of Magdala to Gobaze in proof of his sincerity.<sup>1</sup> Wagshoom's deputy was sent for to receive the possession of the fort which he declined to accept. However, the commander presented him with 200 of Theodore's muskets.<sup>2</sup> Even then Gobaze, in spite of the desire of Napier, avoided meeting him as he felt that he had nothing more to expect from him.

Without a knowledge of Theodore's fate and death, Menelek of Shoa in a friendly letter to Napier offered his help.<sup>3</sup> Napier communicated the happy news of Theodore's death and informed Menelek that the British army, having attained its objective, was on a return march.<sup>4</sup>

Almost in identical language Napier wrote to Kassai about the death of Theodore and desired to meet him on the eve of his departure. On 25 May, 1868, Kassai with his principal chiefs was in attendance to take leave of the general. Napier presented him with a battery of mountain guns and mortars, and muskets for one regiment.<sup>5</sup> It was intended to help Kassai to defend himself against enemies, both from within and without.<sup>6</sup>

Though the Foreign Secretary had written that the British

1. "P.P.", vol, XLIII, pp.739, Napier-Gobaze, April 15, 1868.

2. Markham, op.cit. pp.366.

3. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.739, Menelek-Napier.

4. Napier-Menelek, April 28, 1868, Ibid.

5. Markham, op.cit. pp.381-82.

6. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.806, Napier - The S.S. of India, June 9, 1868



government had no concern with what might happen to Ethiopia by the removal of Theodore, Napier did not take the instructions verbatim. Being genuinely interested in the welfare of the Ethiopians, he did try to exert moral influence on the chiefs with a view to stabilizing the internal political situation of that country. Napier was of the opinion that, in the past, most of the Ethiopian difficulties had arisen as a result of one man's ambition to rule over all; in his belief this had led to internal dissensions, and in turn had invited external aggression also. Napier thought that the best hope for Ethiopia lay in the territorial status quo and the mutual co-operation of the great chiefs. So he persuaded both Kassai and Gobaze to leave in peace and work for the progress of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after the fall of Magdala a number of Ethiopian chiefs wished to transfer their allegiance to Britain.<sup>2</sup> Had Napier intended to establish British influence in Ethiopia opportunities were not lacking. But he not only refused to exploit the situation, but advised the chiefs to refrain from senseless politics and warfare.<sup>3</sup> A little later, Haste Yohannes, one of the nominal emperors of Ethiopia wandered into the British camp, but the commander treated him with scant ceremony as he had no intention of meddling with the issue of the succession to the

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1. "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp. 812, Napier-Gobaze, May 28, 1868.

2. Markham, op.cit. pp.363.  
 "P.P.", vol. XLIII, pp.810, Napier - The Secretary of State for India, June 18, 1868.

3. Ibid.

throne.<sup>1</sup>

The British government was equally firm on this issue. Bridgtower, an Englishman living in Italy, claimed descent from the Solomonoid line and requested the Foreign Secretary to support his claim to the Ethiopian throne.<sup>2</sup> The British Government replied that they had no intention of interfering with the succession to the throne of Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> Thus there was absolutely neither any intention nor effort on the part of the British Government to establish their influence in Ethiopia. Napier's letter to Sir Stafford Northcote brings out clearly the spirit of Britain in her dealings with Ethiopia. In a characteristic Victorian spirit it reads:

I think it may be said that the object of the expedition has been accomplished without the rights of the princes or the chiefs of the country having been interfered with by us: and that the prospect of Abyssinia enjoying tranquility is, at this day, fairer than it was at the date when our army landed on the coast.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Markham, op.cit. pp.364.
  2. "P.P.", 1867-68, vol. XLIII, pp.188, Bridgtower - Hammond, September 13, 1867.
  3. Ibid, pp.188, The Under Secretary for the Foreign Office - Bridgtower, September 18, 1867.
  4. "P.P.", 1867-68, vol. (3955/VI), pp.54, Napier-Northcote, June 18, 1868.



## CHAPTER XI

In 1848 Palmerston had talked optimistically of the advantages that might accrue to Britain and Ethiopia from closer friendly and commercial relations. In 1867 Stanley had reached the conclusion that they could do better without such ties. No doubt the intervening period being one of frustrated hopes, had brought about disillusionment to both powers. Devoid of unity of purpose, and failing to understand each other, they could have hardly fared better. But, for us to understand what happened, we must necessarily undertake an analysis and appreciation of British and Ethiopian aims which were mostly irreconcilable and often ran counter to each other.

One of the important British objectives in Ethiopia was the extension of trade. Consul Plowden had been highly optimistic about this as he believed that it would quadruple within a short time if the British government helped the Ethiopians to exploit the immense and undeveloped natural wealth of their country, and to protect their trade from the Turkish exactions at Massawa. He had also hoped that a long period of commercial intercourse would stimulate the Ethiopian economy, and that the resultant prosperity would create a further demand for manufactured goods. It is with this end in view that the British Government endeavoured to procure an independent sea port for Ethiopia.

Unfortunately, this policy did not find a congenial environment for execution in Ethiopia, because of the peculiar social and economic attitudes of the people. First of all the christian Ethiopians, who constituted a majority of the population, looked down upon the trader whose position was considered inferior to that of the soldier or the priest. Indeed, it was difficult to convince them that trade and commerce had an important contribution to make towards national progress, and that the trading class was as important as any other professional class. Such conservative attitudes did not help matters in the least. Secondly, the Ethiopian economy was very primitive and the need of the people for manufactured goods, as also their ability to pay for them, was very limited. For instance, Ethiopian productions were mostly agricultural and, except for coffee, they had not much with an export value. Though northern Ethiopia was suitable for cotton production, the staple was neither extensively cultivated nor had its commercial importance been realized by the people. By the time Britain began to consider the possibility of promoting the cultivation and trade of this staple, her relations with Ethiopia had so much deteriorated, that it was no longer possible for her to pursue commercial objectives.

To the Victorians, trade was not an end in itself; it was also a means to civilize underdeveloped people. But to the disappointment of the "civilizers" the Ethiopians remained unreceptive to the idea. There was not an Ethiopian of any consequence who was genuinely interested in improving



himself or his country through British association, though this is not to suggest that they were ignorant of such possibilities. Some Ethiopian chiefs had a vague notion of the progress which Britain had made and frequently requested the British government to supply them with artisans and builders to cast cannons and build churches. They sought Britain's assistance in acquiring arms and ammunition. Partly because of negligence, but mostly because of ignorance they did not think of reforming their government, or their tax system, or of improving the lot of their people by exploiting and developing their internal resources. Where they did, as in the case of Theodore, their approach to reform did not correspond with that of Britain. Also, the absence of similar outlook, the constant civil war, and the suspicion of Ethiopian's towards foreigners frustrated the British hopes of reforming Ethiopia.

As to the stopping of the slave trade, though a fair measure of agreement existed between the Ethiopian rulers and the British government, not much could be accomplished. Though Theodore prohibited the slave trade, because of his constant preoccupation, with wars and lack of resources, he could not suppress it. The Muslim merchants continued to sell christian Ethiopians into slavery at the Turkish ports of Jidda, Massawa, and Suakin, and Britain could only protest against it to the Porte. As the Islamic law permitted the slave trade, and the Turkish officials were much in its favour, the Porte was in no serious frame of mind to take effective steps to suppress it to please the christian conscience of their

doubtful ally. In the 1860's through Massawa and Suakin alone, each year, about 10,000 Ethiopians were exported to the Middle-East and other places, and this was very distressing to the British Government.

More importantly Britain had entered Ethiopia to counteract French activity in the Red sea region, and to safeguard from possible French menace, the sea route to India. However, it did not take long for Britain to realize that her suspicions regarding French intentions lacked substance. In fact, from 1848 to 1860, there was hardly any French activity in Ethiopia as Napoleon III had been busy playing for higher stakes elsewhere. Thus, once the French fear was removed, Britain had no reason to be very active in Ethiopia.

Whatever the reactions of Britain to this changed situation, as far as the Ethiopians were concerned the situation had changed. Great expectations had been raised in them by Britain's friendly approaches. While the British government considered the commercial treaty as a means to promote material ends, the Ethiopians thought of it as a means to procure British assistance against the Turks from whom they hoped to recover certain territories which had been a part of the historic Ethiopian empire. They hoped that Britain, as a christian power, would help them against their Muslim rivals.

However, Britain, as a world power with global interests, did not always take into consideration religious sentiments in her political relations. During the nineteenth century British policy was to uphold the integrity of the Ottoman empire and this was necessary to check Russian expansion towards



Constantinople which commanded the traditional overland routes to India. She was equally keen to maintain good relations with Egypt in view of the strategical importance of the Alexandria-Suez overland route. Moreover, any weakening of British influence in Egypt and Turkey was likely to be followed by an increase in French influence, and such a development was not to Britain's liking. Hence, Britain needed to be on friendly terms with both powers. Understandably, Britain neither supported the Ethiopian ambitions against Turkey, nor prevailed upon the Turks to raise their arms embargo against Ethiopia. This policy led to a serious friction between Britain and Ethiopia, for the Ethiopians considered as their enemies all those who were on friendly terms with Turkey.

Whatever the Ethiopian reaction, Britain did endeavour to preserve Ethiopian independence by thwarting the Turkish and Egyptian ambitions against her. This policy did not always make for happy relations with Turkey who at first suspected and later detested Britain's relations with Ethiopia. Particularly the Turkish authorities at Massawa were determined in their opposition as they feared that Britain's intervention in Ethiopia would put an end to the slave trade which brought them such good profits. They were equally embittered by the view that Britain had no right to interfere in Ethiopia which they held to be a part of the Sultan's domain. In spite of these difficulties Britain persisted in maintaining friendly relations with all the three powers without sacrificing her political influence with one or the other, a difficult task indeed.

Whatever the indiscretions of Consul Cameron, and the

excesses of Theodore, the basic contradictions in the British and Ethiopian policies and attitudes would have led to a clash between them sooner or later. But the more important question is whether it was necessary for Britain to send an expedition of 13,000 men to release the captives from Theodore's fetters? All available evidence suggests that Britain wanted to war with Ethiopia to restore her prestige, and thus to retrieve her position in the Red sea region and elsewhere, and, naturally, the lives of the captives mattered much to her. Certainly, there cannot be any doubt as to the objectives or results of the expedition. Napier's expedition, which left the fortress of Magdala a "blackened stone", did heal the wounded pride of Britain.

But why did Britain choose to withdraw from Ethiopia without seeking for herself commercial or territorial benefits there? Ever since the establishment of consular relations with Ethiopia the British Government had disclaimed any territorial ambitions in that country, and reiterated this assurance to Parliament on the eve of the departure of the expeditionary force from Bombay. One reason for this would appear to be that the period of the partition of Africa had not set in; it was still in the future. So long as Britain was assured of informal influence, there was no need for her to saddle herself with responsibility for administering backward territories. After Napier's successful expedition, Britain's prestige in that region had gone up. The Ethiopian chiefs had come to admire not only the prowess of British arms and their superiority, but also the sincerity of her professions. As they were friendly and well



disposed towards Britain there was no need for her to go to the trouble of ruling that country.

Moreover Napier's victory had been made possible by the co-operation of the Ethiopian chiefs who were not only anxious to see the fall of Theodore, but also determined to maintain the independence of their country. They had co-operated on the distinct assurance of Britain that she would withdraw from Ethiopia soon after the captives had been released. Any step contrary to the undertaking would have provoked the hostilities of the chiefs and exposed Britain to countless troubles. Also, Britain, wished Ethiopia to be independent as the trouble of ruling such proud and recalcitrant people was not worth the returns. Even had Britain desired territory, as Lord Stanley told parliament, Ethiopia was not the place to look for it.

More importantly, Britain was interested in the Red Sea coast of Ethiopia, and this was in Turkish hands. As long as a friendly Turkey could be trusted with the coast there was no need to occupy Ethiopia. Whenever the status Quo was threatened by a foreign power Britain was impelled to move into the area, and as a matter of fact British policy became active in Ethiopia only whenever the French showed signs of activity in that region. So long as France kept away from active interference Britain would do likewise. In 1867-68 there was not much danger from France, and hence no need for Britain to saddle herself with the administration of Ethiopia. Moreover, a wave of anti-imperialism was sweeping Britain, and no more India's were desired on the African coast.

There is, therefore, no wonder that Britain withdrew from Ethiopia and that Disraeli took the opportunity to assert the purity of purpose which had taken her to that country.

Thus two decades of British relations with Ethiopia had not brought about any radical changes in the situation. Britain's commercial expectations had not been fulfilled; reforms had not been introduced in Ethiopia, and all hopes of modernization had been given up. The Victorians had been shocked by the way the two decades of their relations with Ethiopia had ended. As Robinson and Gallagher observe, "the imperialism of Free trade among non European people were disappointing...no westernizing collaborators had been found. Their response had not been what the political economists had foretold; no waves of regeneration as Palmerston or Buxton had dreamed had rolled along the trade routes of tropical Africa."<sup>1</sup> British experience in Ethiopia was no exception to this pattern.

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1. Robinson & Gallagher, Op.Cit, P.5-6.



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Addendum

In this supplement I would like to deal with those points which are either insufficiently emphasized in the preface or not at all raised there. As stated in the preface, this is a thesis on Anglo-Ethiopian relations from 1846 to 1868, and as the aim was to examine how Britain became interested in Ethiopia and why she failed to establish successful relations with her, the emphasis had to be political. While some aspects of British policy like commerce, the balance of power in the Red Sea region and Anglo-Turkish relations, which were found integral to the thesis are discussed in some detail, other aspects like British attitudes towards slavery and reform are omitted.

One might wonder whether more should not have been said about British public and parliamentary opinion that helped bring about the 1867 expedition and the part played in it by religious and commercial groups of the time; but it must be remembered that the religious and commercial groups which, as handmaids of modern imperialism, played such an effective role after the 1880's, had not yet acquired great importance in the 1860's and we do not have any evidence of their having a hand in bringing about the 1867 expedition. Likewise, in the 1860's the agencies shaping public opinion were relatively few, nevertheless, had I had an opportunity to conduct an extensive study of the newspapers and journals of the time I could have elaborated the chapter on public opinion, though it is doubtful if the conclusions presented in the thesis and based on careful study of parliamentary papers and debates would have been altered.



Now a few words about the authenticity of the source material: British parliamentary papers on Ethiopia 1846-68. At the outset two questions offer themselves: how acceptable is this source, and would it be possible to compensate for the factors of bias? The veracity and historical value of these papers could be evaluated fairly by an analysis of the intention of the government presenting them and the circumstances in which they were presented. In this instance, the conservative government of Derby, which presented the papers to parliament through 1866-69, needed no justification to send an expeditionary force to Ethiopia as British public opinion was already demanding such a measure. The government had no need to suppress any vital information or distort it while presenting the previous twenty years correspondence on Ethiopia with which it had very little to do. Even the opposition in parliament was in agreement with the government. The papers seemed to me a dependable source, and wherever it was thought otherwise efforts were made to compare it with other sources. For instance, the papers do not reveal clearly one of the important reasons for establishing consular relations with Ethiopia: the fear of possible French preponderance in Ethiopia and the Red Sea region. Probably the government with an eye on good relations with the French Empire avoided spotlighting the correspondence on such a recent phase of Anglo-French rivalry in the region. A careful examination of other sources helped to restore the balance. But for the want of space many instances could be cited showing how the material was evaluated critically. I am hopeful this thesis would be borne out by the original correspondence of the Foreign Office.

K.V.R.











