

IS THE SUCCESSFUL MILITARY RESISTANCE
TO EUROPEAN COLONIALISM IN LATE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ETHIOPIA STILL
SIGNIFICANT TODAY?

doi:10.1017/S0021853707003015

The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory against European Colonialism. Edited by PAULOS MILKIAS and GETACHEW METAFERIA. New York: Algora Publishing, 2005. Pp. xv + 320. \$26.95, paperback (ISBN 0-87586-413-9).
KEY WORDS: Ethiopia, military, politics/political, resistance.

The 1896 Battle of Adwa was a significant example of successful military resistance to European colonialism and the only one in this era in which the African country in question maintained its independence. Ethiopia's victory has long been celebrated inside the country and in the African diaspora, but usually only referred to in passing elsewhere. Only a few thorough, scholarly studies that analyze the background as well as the battle itself come to mind, including especially books by Sven Rubenson and Richard Caulk.

The present book is meant 'not for Africanist pundits but for the casual reader' (p. 15). Indeed, this book is essentially a collection of 'reflections' and interpretations of the significance of Adwa for the divisive present politics of Ethiopia. As such, it makes an important contribution to that issue, but it is not in sum a new analysis of the conflict itself, and is based on only a limited selection of the rich primary sources available.

The book begins with an elaborate preliminary apparatus, including a Preface, Summary, Introduction and Prologue. Chapter 1 by the political scientist, Theodore Vestal, a leading critic of the post-Mengistu era after 1991, really summarizes the perspective of the book itself: 'Reflections on the Battle of Adwa and Its Significance for Today'. The significance is that a 'unified Greater Ethiopia' (p. 21) made possible the defeat of Italy and that the country needs to be reunified today.

Chapter 2 by Paulos Milkias provides an overview of Italian imperial desires, the diplomacy leading to the battle – including the infamous Article 17 of the Treaty of Wechale – and a description of the battle itself. The chapter includes several pages of analysis as to why Menilek did not attempt to end the Italian occupation of Eritrea after his victory, but concludes all the reasons given 'cannot justify' Menilek's failure to advance against Eritrea (p. 74). Carrying his reflections up to the present, Milkias argues that Emperor Hayla Sellase's attempted federation with Eritrea in the 1950s cannot be interpreted as colonialism, and that the 1993 independence of Eritrea that 'artificially divided brotherly peoples' (p. 74) may eventually be reversed.

Chapter 3 by Zewde Gabre-Selassie, the distinguished scholar, diplomat and descendant of Emperor Yohannes (r. 1872–89), analyzes the diplomatic background to the conflict. Though the author's life-long effort to highlight the significance of his ancestor's effort to defend Ethiopia is important, his apparent view that Menilek was essentially an ally of Italy up to 1889, in opposition to Yohannes (p. 105), is overstated. In contrast, Chapter 4 by Negussay Ayele is critical of Yohannes for not following through on his threatened attack on Italian forces slowly advancing up the escarpment from Massawa, particularly in the 1888 confrontation at Sahati (pp. 141–2). The main point of this chapter is made exceedingly clear in the author's answer to the question, 'Adwa 1896: Who was Civilized and Who was Savage?' And the author is adamant in his assertion that the legacy of Adwa should be celebrated by 'all

Ethiopians qua Ethiopians' (p. 179), and not parceled out among various ethnic groups.

The intent of Chapter 5 by Getachew Metafaria is clear: Ethiopia's history is ancient and the country has served as a stimulus for Pan-African unity for at least the past century, since the victory of Adwa. Thus the aim of the present minority ruling Ethiopia – to create the 'ethnicization and fragmentation of the country along ethnic lines' – is a serious mistake that he hopes will be seen as 'an aberration and will be short lived' (p. 215). The following two chapters are very short and to the point by the standards of this book. Richard Pankhurst analyzes the British view of Italy's defeat as seen in *The Times* of London, effectively showing British support for Italy before the war and sympathy after their defeat. Chapter 7, by the late Harold Marcus, is a very interesting statement whose themes and sources were first developed in an article in *Archiv Orientalni* in 1971, and which appeared again in its present form in the volume of proceedings of a conference on the centenary of Adwa held in Addis Ababa in 1996, published in 1998. It is a fascinating account of the mixture of positive, negative and half-positive views of Ethiopia held by a variety of European travelers and missionaries to the country, most of whom 'regarded Ethiopia as a country half-way between savagery and civilization' (p. 237).

The focus of Chapter 8 by Mesfin Araya brings forth the most explicit statement of the purpose of the book as a whole: 'The current divisive politics of ethnicity is indeed largely the making of Ethiopia's contemporary political elites whose self-reference seems alien to the spirit of Adwa' (p. 242). In the end, Mesfin sees the only hope for better relations between contemporary Ethiopia and Eritrea to lie in the gradual democratization of each country and in the need 'to invoke the moral fiber that spawned the remarkable triumph at Adwa' (p. 252). The final chapter by Maimire Mennasemay – 'Ethiopian History and Critical Theory: The Case of Adwa' – is the most innovative in the book. He calls for a thorough-going self-analysis of Ethiopian society by Ethiopians for the purpose of overcoming the 'internal and external adversities that keep them in bondage' (p. 298). Judging from at least some of the chapters in this book, such a process is already well underway. Though this volume has its weaknesses of documentation and presentation, one may hope it will help to lead to a rethinking of the problems and possible solutions to the Ethiopian–Eritrean, and indeed, Horn of Africa, conundrum.

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SHORTER NOTICES

doi:10.1017/S0021853707003027

Historical Dictionary of Gabon. Third edition. By DAVID E. GARDINIER and DOUGLAS A. YATES. Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006. Pp. ix + 455. £79 (ISBN 0-8108-4918-6).

KEY WORDS: Gabon, dictionaries.

Gabon remains one of the least-researched countries in Africa and this historical dictionary aims to provide general reference information to audiences outside of Gabon. The book includes maps; a timeline of Gabon's history from 1472 to 2006; an introductory essay that provides a brief political history of Gabon over several centuries; over 300 pages of reference entries; appendices of French governors, Gabonese presidents and prime ministers, Roman Catholic bishops, and economic statistics; and a comprehensive bibliography of 1,400 French and English works. This third edition of the book incorporates recent research and includes