

## MENELIK THE GREAT OF ADWA

March 1st 1896 is the 117<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Adwa. The decisive victory at Adwa is a tale to be told every year on this day of its commemoration because it warms the heart and lifts the spirit of every black person in the world. Few places evoke stronger memories than places of triumphant victory or places of devastating defeat. Napoleon Bonaparte achieved his greatest fame at the battle of Austerlitz (now in Czech Republic) in 1805 where he decisively defeated the combined armies of the kings of Europe. Few defeats are as well registered as the defeat (by then Emperor) Napoleon, at the battle of Waterloo (now in Belgium, near Brussels) ten years later in 1815, where the Emperor after his army was defeated declared “flee those who can” and fled from the battlefield on horseback. Adwa, a dusty little village in Tigre, was put on the map of the world by the mighty and valiant Emperor Menelik who decidedly defeated the Italian army there by a brilliant strategy not unlike that of Napoleon at the battle of Austerlitz. So by that singular victory at ADWA, a place, a history, a legend and a myth of invincibility was born which throughout succeeding generations of black people everywhere, and Ethiopian people in particular, evoked a memory and a pride of staggering proportions. The new generation of black people now say “those were the days” We need not bother the chattering of the magpies who try to erase this memory emanating from a burning envy and a searing white hatred - an outcome of a monumental inferiority complex. People also shun and condemn defeat as could be discerned by the following couplet after the battle of Maichew and when Emperor Haile Selassie went into exile to Britain. ያልተገራ ፈረስ ጠቅል ብላችሁ ሄደ ገሥገሥ ባህር ገብላችሁ (an unbroken horse you named Tekil; but it galloped into the sea) This was an unkind comment because the battle of the Maichew front was fought continually for six months and it was led by the Emperor all the way. Moreover, Italy had far superior arms this time while Ethiopian armament was still primitive. We should rather recall the valiant stand the Emperor took at the League of Nations in Geneva and his prophetic predictions “today it is us tomorrow it could be you” And that was exactly what happened

Menelik was born in 1844 and was Emperor from 1889-1913. He was the greatest military general to emerge from Africa since Hannibal (247-183 B.C.) of Carthage (a place now in modern Tunisia) The Carthaginian military commander moved over the Alps with elephants, conquered Rome and occupied it for 15 years until he was recalled back to Africa. Menelik at 52 was a decade older than Hannibal when he marched to Adwa. Not only Ethiopians but the whole world associates Adwa with Menelik and not with the inhabitants who lived there at the time (much less with those who are living there now.) This is how history is born and no amount of back peddling or attempt at rewriting of history could ever change that! What makes Menelik great, besides his other considerable accomplishments, is his towering achievement at the victory of Adwa, which place name will forever be associated with him. He was a soldier's soldier, instinctively brave, fearless and lion-hearted. He was also a brilliant field commander and a military tactician. As an outstanding general he was able to evoke the absolute devotion and loyalty of his army. He did this by example. His move from Addis Ababa to Adwa hundreds of kilometers away is a journey of epic proportions. His army travelled by foot and the provisions of the army were carried by thousands of pack animals - mules horses and donkeys. Animal fodder has to be provisioned and secured, watering holes have to be identified beforehand, and food for the army has to be supplied endlessly.

Menelik was leading a multiethnic army which in most cases do not speak the same language but were tied together by their fervent belief in their overarching Ethiopian identity and above all, in their absolute confidence that Menelik was their God appointed leader to whom they bestowed their total love and devotion. Watching the vast army of Menelik on the move is like witnessing the whole movement of a town being created and dismantled overnight, a feat which is impossible to imagine even now. It is also like the movement of a huge meandering river from a distance. There were thousands of pack animals like donkeys and sturdy mules that carry food and drink, tents and firewood. Then there were the horses and mules for the leaders and commanders of the army. Menelik had thirty well bred horses and mules at the ready for his personal use and he transferred himself from one tired horse or mule to a fresh one without breaking a stride. Another army was led by his wife Itege Taitu and a smaller army led by his young and enthusiastic daughter Zewditu, the future Empress, a heroine of the war in her own right. Much has been told about Itege Taitu but almost nothing about Weizero Zewditu who was beside her step mother every step of the way during the heat of battle. It is sad that in order to glorify Emperor Haile Selassie her contributions even during her reign was totally eclipsed, the same way as that of Lij Eyasu where even his resting place is still unknown. During Eyasu's reign it was said

በ ኢያሱ ዳቦ ነው ትራሱ በዘውዲቱ ተደፋ ለማቱ በተፈረ ጠፋ ፍርፋሪ (during Eyasu's time bread became a pillow; during Zewditu' time the charger was overturned; during Teferi's time not even crumbs of bread were left)

Even recent writers continue to belittle the reign of Empress Zewditu. Suffice it to say that Ethiopia joined the League of Nations during her reign and she was an active partner of Ras Tafari in the modernization of Ethiopia. After all she was the daughter of Menelik the greatest modernizer of them all, who has inspired all his followers. The wisdom of Menelik is

his ability to revive the ancient polity of multi-ethnic Ethiopia which was lost during the dark days of Zemene Mesafint. Atse Tewodros, his mentor and prisoner, has tried but failed and Atse Yohannes has partly abandoned the quest. Menelik chose leaders by their ability and quality of character and NOT by their pedigree OR tribal origin. Menelik was a Shewan Amara and an Orthodox Christian. His trusted generals were also Muslims and non Amaras. Menelik was born in the beautiful village of Angolela and his most illustrious Oromo general, Ras Gobena was born in Mendida a few miles away at the edge of the escarpment. He used to be a loyal follower of King Haile Meleket, the father of Menelik. Menelik has the uncanny ability to identify talent early and nurture it. Among the army commanders who went to Adwa there was a small army commanded by the young Ato Habtegiorgis, who many years later became a Fitawrari and War Minister and close confidant of Menelik. So also was Dejach Balcha who grew up in Menelik's court who later became an illustrious warrior and there were many, many more from all parts of Ethiopia. Berkley in his excellent book *The Campaign of Adawa and the Rise of Menelik (1902)* written shortly after battle of Adwa, has a map of battle zones where he puts Ato Habtegiorgis and his troops to left of the Emperor's army. The Emperor had a secret informant or a spy in the name of the enterprising Awalom who had penetrated the command post of General Baratrieri, the Italian commander and brought valuable information to Menelik. The families Awalom fled from their village when the Italian army returned to Ethiopia following the same route 40 years later. The Fascists had vowed to exact a revenge on the remnants of the family. During this war, to crown their achievements, the Fascist built a gigantic bust of Mussolini at Adwa at the very spot where they were defeated - a bust which was said could be seen from miles away. This bust has been reproduced in some books written at the time (I have seen the pictures even though I could not remember which book) Five years later it was said that the British artillery unit blew it to pieces. This is how history marches through time.

The battle of Adwa ended with a decisive victory for Ethiopia, and due to the exhaustion of the army and dwindling of provisions Menelik did not push the Italians across the seas. Hundreds of Italian war prisoners were dispatched post haste to Addis Ababa before him. In a celebration of the victory of Adwa at Jan Meda, the prisoners were paraded before him and the conquering army. They were, however, humanely treated, and returned to Italy after an impassioned appeal by the Vatican. Menelik was humane, magnanimous and generous to a fault. We may recall that JAN MEA (or Janhoy Meda meaning "the Emperors field") was the first open space which Menelik designated for the new Addis Ababa. Sadly more than a century later it remains as the ONLY public space in Addis Ababa. The city singularly lacks competent city planners and engineers. A succession of so called "engineers" had completely cut down the gigantic trees of the city (*shoals, zigbas, girars shrubs* etc) which had given it an endearing beauty and which even we knew at a young age) and left it completely bare even affecting the famous mild climate. They have also built roads with absolutely no sidewalks to speak of, and this in a city where 90% of the inhabitants have no car! A case of supreme ignorance which is even manifested to this day. The Addis-Djibouti railway was also was the ONLY one in the country for a hundred years until it was permanently derailed and abandoned during the time of the Derg In 1986 an estimated one thousand Ethiopians perished when the train went into a ravine at Awash. This is the greatest train disaster in Africa until this day. The insanely criminal and illiterate Derg **forbade any news of the accident to leak out** or any relatives to travel to the accident place. The brutal Derg controlled the news and only tidbits of it travelled by word of mouth. The incident came close to me when my neighbor's son who was in the train during the accident was lucky to survive but lost part of his left leg.

The victory of Adwa had immediate repercussions around the World, beginning at the citadel of the Italian Army, Rome. There were spontaneous demonstration carrying placards which read VIVA MENELIK and DOWN WITH CRISPI (the Prime Minister of Italy at the time.) The most spectacular was what happened in far away Brazil which has the largest Black population outside Africa. The only black newspaper immediately changed its name to MENELIK. In distant South Africa the new Ethiopiawinnet movement was born. Later spin offs were the Abyssinian church in Harlem, US and the Ras Tafari movement in Jamaica. Menelik went into battle with a) the Ethiopian tri colored flag b) a quote from the Bible written on an emblem of the monarch which portrayed a crowned lion carrying the Ethiopian flag and read: THE LION OF JUDAH HAS PREVALED (which in the Bible is a reference to Christ) It is not the later adulteration of this phrase which became: "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah." And c) Menelik had also another emblem with the famous quotation from the Bible, a phrase which has given comfort to Christian Ethiopians throughout the ages and it read: "ETHIOPIA STRETCHES HER HANDS UNTO GOD" With these three standards he marched onward to victory. The only monument erected for Menelik by his grateful daughter was the equestrian statue at Arada in Addis Ababa It is the FIRST equestrian statue of its kind. The legs of the horse had a connection with the pedestal. (the second statue of its type is that of Simon Bolivar) It was dismantled and buried by Italian Fascists in the dead of night. They were afraid about the reaction of the Ethiopian people. The place of burial was later identified, dug out and put in its original place. By contrast, the current Fascists, the TPLF leaders who have a visceral hatred of Menelik and what he represents, want to destroy it forever. Memories live forever, statues can be rebuilt. They may melt this statue and make it into ornaments for themselves and their family thinking that they have got rid of Menelik forever. However, history never dies. No other monument exists for the heroes of Adwa. The only structure, an internationally famous hotel in Arada named after Itegeu Taitu, called

ITEGUE HOTEL was given another name by the ignorant Derg but when they realized that it was named after Itegue Taitu and NOT itegue Menen, the renamed it the mundane name "Taitu Hotel". The original name has to be restored to its glorious past as ITEGUE HOTEL and not Taitu which can mean anything without the title. But this hotel as well as Menelik's palace are in state of ruin. The palace has leaking ceilings and creaking stairs and floors and may collapse any day. Neither its former tenant Mengistu who desecrated the place repeatedly or the late Meles ever cared about Menelik's palace except for its symbolism. Mengistu in particular has a strange affinity to Menelik. Strange because no two people could be so further apart. He also used the palace as a prison (I was imprisoned there.)

Menelik's mausoleum is in the Church of Be'ata. There, within the church compound, Mengistu and his partner in crime in the Derg, the notorious henchman Captain Mengistu Gemechu, had two adjacent villas built for them. – another sacrilegious desecration of our church by the godless criminals. Why they did so is only known to them and their close associates. To say the least it was bizarre. The victory of the battle of Adwa had prompted one anonymous person to write a prophetic couplet which captures what would have happened had Ethiopia lost the war, and here it is:

ምኒልክ ተወልዶ ባያነሳ ጋሻ ግብሩ እንቁላል ነበር ይህን ጊዜ አበሻ

[If Menelik has not been born to raise his shield (in defense of his country); the taxation of the Habesha (Ethiopians) would have been to supply eggs]

Forty years later, when Fascist Italy came to Ethiopia that was exactly what they demanded from the occupied people. Deliver eggs and lots of them! I may digress here to say that almost all of our post-Liberation, early entrepreneurs started their carriers as supplies of eggs and chicken during the Fascist era. After the victory of Adwa the British, as was their practice, immediately named Menelik as THE GREAT. They have also done so to Shaka Zulu the great warrior of South Africa. But in Menelik's case the affix was withdrawn a few years later with the intense lobbying of Italy which argued convincingly that calling Menelik "the great" will forever humiliate not only Italy but the entire White Race. European Powers of the time also know the decisive and still secret role played by Menelik earlier during the debacle at Fashoda in 1987 when British and French force confronted each other. The fascinating story is recounted in a book *The Race to Fashoda: European Colonialism and African Resistance in the Scramble for Africa* by David Levering Lewis, (Weidenfeld&Nicolson, 1987). When I was in College there were two professors who had an intensive interest in Ethiopian history. One was Rubenson, a Swede, who was an admirer of Tewedros and the other was Marcus, an American, whose obsession was Menelik. Both had subsequently written seminal studies about their heroes. Of course for our young minds Tewedros was the more romantic. "I have intended to conquer the whole world if God has so decreed, and it is my intention to die if my wishes could not be fulfilled" so declared Tewedros. He forced the few foreigners to build a foundry from scratch to cast cannon in Gafat which he called "Sevastopol" The cannon was dragged to this mountain fortress in Mekdela on the eve of battle. Unfortunately it exploded at its first try when enthusiastic soldiers fed it two cannon balls instead of one. The cannon is still there. Pankhurst called Tewedros's attempt with tongue in cheek as "the abortive industrial revolution of Ethiopia" Tewedros also resolved to free Jerusalem from the infidels on any given Friday: ... እርብ እርብ ይሸበራል ኢየሩሳሌም (every Friday Jerusalem is in a state of agitation) The anecdotes of Marcus about Menelik were a wealth of information which delighted us with their inexhaustible wisdom. Menelik's sturdy voice is preserved for posterity in the British Museum. It is a message he sent to Queen Victoria. During my elementary school at TMS our Canadian Jesuit teachers were admiring Abraham Lincoln and I remember that in my fourth or fifth grade, myself as well as my classmates, committed Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" to memory and were able recite it by rote . I still remember part of it so many years later.

So whenever March 1st comes let us celebrate the glory that is Adwa and the great leader Menelik. Let it be told over and over again to our children and succeeding generations. He is the pride of the black race. A gem of a human being who had the ability to bring all the ancient people of Ethiopia together and to reaffirm the Glory that was Ethiopia, revered both in the Bible and the Koran and all the ancient manuscripts and artifacts. Menelik grew up in Ankober and became a king there before became Emperor of Ethiopia. He was an Orthodox Christian and a Shewan Amara which the TPLF and its Woyane adherents have an undying hatred. As the famous Iranian poet Omar Khayyam (b.1048) said "*The moving finger writes and having Writ moves on; Nor all thy piety nor Wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line*"

Ethiopia stretches her hands to God