

Extract from the '**The Battle of Magdala**', By *Thomas Keyes* Mar. 25, 2005

In 1864 Emperor Téwodros sent a letter to Queen Victoria offering an alliance, but, when, after two years, Victoria had not replied, Téwodros took offense and jailed the British consul and other Englishmen. Victoria sent an envoy to investigate the situation in Magdala where Téwodros had his capital. Téwodros jailed the envoy and about 60 in his party. So Victoria decided on a punitive military expedition.

Robert Napier, a Ceylon-born British military man, was appointed to lead the Abyssinian expedition. Sailing from India, with a contingent of men, horses and elephants, he landed at Zula, Abyssinia, in Annesley Bay, on October 30, 1867. A railroad was built from Zula to the coast, where piers were erected for the receipt of provisions and reinforcements. It took several months to assure a supply of food, water and clothes for the troops, as well as to outfit a transport corps to make the march upcountry. On January 25 1868, British forces began the 420- mile march into the cool Ethiopian highlands. The terrain was so rugged that some of the elephants, carrying cannon and other heavy supplies, lay down and refused to work, whereupon they were shot.

Forewarned of the British advance, the Ethiopians, with the help of German artisans founded a huge cannon that would shoot a 30-inch cannonball, perhaps the largest cannon ever built. It exploded the first time it was fired at British troops. The ensuing fight is known as the Battle of Magdala. Hundreds of Ethiopians were slain. Others fled. Emperor Téwodros had maintained a storehouse, which was loaded with weapons, rare sabers, artwork, liquor, silks, spices and other valuables. The British looted this, seizing everything, distributing some to those Ethiopians who had collaborated with them and keeping some for themselves. Emperor Téwodros committed suicide by shooting a pistol into his mouth.

For his efforts, Robert Napier, till then a commoner, was ennobled by Queen Victoria, and thereafter was known as Lord Robert Napier of Magdala, a baron. This is considered a great disgrace among Ethiopians. Of course, it was entirely unnecessary. If Queen Victoria had simply been gracious enough to reply to Téwodros' letter in the first place, all the carnage and waste might have been avoided. It's hard to rue the passing of the British Empire.