LETTERS FROM MAGDALA AND MASSAWA

By A. M. HONEYMAN, B.Litt., Ph.D.

PROFESSOR OF HEBREW AND ORIENTAL LANGUAGES IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

In September 1918, a few months after the death of Lady Playfair,1 widow of Colonel Sir Robert Lambert Playfair, K.C.M.G., LL.D., 2 who died at 18 Queen's Gardens, St. Andrews, some nineteen years previously and was buried in the Cathedral Burying-Ground, their daughter-in-law, Mrs. Ernest Playfair 3 presented to the Library of the University of St. Andrews a collection of books from Sir Lambert Playfair's library.4 Among these books are the two volumes of Hormuzd Rassam's *Narrative of the British Mission to Theodore, King of Abyssinia* (1869), bearing Playfair's book-plate and on the fly-leaf of the first volume the inscription, "Colonel R. L. Playfair With the Author's kind regards". Both the volumes have been enriched in the manner described in the St. Andrews *Library Bulletin*.5 In volume II on the leaf immediately following the Index are pasted the two pages

1 Born 8 April 1832, died 2 May 1918.
2 Born 21 March 1828, died 18 February 1899.
4 "Accessions. . . . The principal donor during the quarter was Mrs. Ernest Playfair, London, who presented 154 volumes, most of which had formed part of the library of the late Sir R. Lambert Playfair, Consul-General for the territory of Algeria. Many of these volumes had been presentation copies to Sir Lambert, who has carefully preserved in them the letters which had accompanied them from their respective donors" (*Library Bulletin of the University of St. Andrews*, No. 72 (October 1918), viii. 213; cf. p. 240 where the donation of the two volumes here referred to is recorded). I am obliged to Miss E. B. S. Robertson of the staff of the University Library for drawing my attention to this notice of the donation and for producing the relevant volume and page of the manuscript register of accessions to the Library, to Mr. R. N. Smart, Cataloguer of Manuscripts, for checking my transcript and to the Librarian and Library Committee of the University Library for permission to publish the letters here discussed.
5 Cf. *supra* n. 4.
from the *Pall Mall Gazette* containing a letter from Rassam to the Editor, dated 5 May 1869 and annexing a self-exculpatory account of the incident of an Easter present from King Theodore of Abyssinia to the Commander-in-Chief of the British expeditionary force, Sir Robert Napier. At the beginning of the same volume two items have been added. The first is a printed obituary notice of the Reverend Henry Aaron Stern, D.D., dated June 1885 and cut from a journal of the missionary society with which he was associated. The second is an autograph signed letter of Lord Napier of Magdala, dated 23 January 1883 and giving Playfair information of his arrival in Malta and thanks for his assistance in Algiers.

3 At the date of the letter Playfair was in his sixteenth year as Consul-General in Algeria. Napier had retired from the Governorship of Gibraltar at the end of 1882 and had just been made a Field Marshal (1 January 1883). On demitting the Governorship he sailed to North Africa with the intention of visiting Malta and Tunis for the first time. The text of the letter runs,—

The Palace,  
Malta Jny. 23,  
1883.

My dear Playfair,

I send you a few lines to tell you that we had a capital passage and arrived here at about 1 a.m. on Monday, yesterday.

We found the Steamer not very comfortable as we had but one cabin for us both—and she was very dirty and untidy—with a strong smell from the hold—but otherwise satisfactory. The Captain and Steward most kind and attentive and the table excellent: good plain English cooking; clean and abundant.

I think Cap. Maunsell gained notwithstanding by waiting and I fear our going disappointed him of a passage only he was too shy to say so. Certainly I do not see how there could have been room for him.

We have had no rain here but the weather is exceedingly cold for the latitude—quite as cold or colder than Algiers, and very little sun. The place is very fine, and the remnants of the old Knights of St. John show that they were a grand Set. I do not know a good history of them but doubtless can find one here: I regret exceedingly that I lost the opportunity of Tunis but keep it in mind for some other opportunity which may perhaps come: I found an immense budget of letters here. I hope none have strayed to Tunis.

I think I may by and by ask you to send me some more of Madame Benami’s pretty things if I find my samples approved of. I must express
More important than any of these items is the insertion at
the beginning of volume I, comprising a letter to Playfair from
Massawa, dated 2 March 1865, written and signed by the author
of the book. The letter is in ink on thin green sheets 20.4 cm.
by 13 cm. lightly ruled in both directions and covers nine sides
of five sheets; apart from a horizontal tear in the first sheet the
letter is intact.

The general background of the letter is well known and has
been frequently narrated. Shortly after his arrival as British
Consul at Massawa on 10 February 1862 Captain Charles
Duncan Cameron journeyed to the camp of King Theodore II
(1855-68) at Gondar to present gifts from Queen Victoria. In
return the king gave him a letter in his own hand for delivery to
Her Majesty with a request that as a Christian monarch she
should enable him in the face of Turkish obstruction on the coast
my obligation for your kind assistance and attention during our visit. It
made it quite a different affair to what it must have been without you: I
regret that I was so far suffering from the effects of my cold that I could not
profit by the friendly disposition of the members of the Society who offered
civilities—I think... Mal de Grandry proper if you think, so please to
forward it. Pray give my kindest remembrances to Miss Playfair and with
many thanks and kindest regards.

Believe me,
My dear Colonel,
most sincerely yours,
Napier of Magdala.

The penultimate sentence of Napier’s letter seems to imply that Playfair, with
his customary bibliographical resourcefulness, had drawn Napier’s attention to
a small pamphlet that would be bound to interest him, Commandant du Grandry,
Du Matériel et de la tactique de l’artillerie de campagne à propos des manoeuvres
d’automne de l’armée anglaise en 1872. Entretien fait à la Réunion des officiers le
1er avril 1873. Paris, 1873 (21 pp.). Before the name of Mal de Grandry is an
illegible word of about four letters; Mr. Smart suggests “slim”.

1 The Annual Register for the Year 1865, pp. 73 ff.; Rassam, op. cit. vol. i,
chaps. I-III; C. R. Markham, History of the Abyssinian Expedition (1869), chap.
III; H. M. Hozier, The British Expedition to Abyssinia (1869), chap. I; E. A.
Wallis Budge, History of Ethiopia, ii (1928), 501 ff.; E. Ullendorff, The
245-58.

2 Entered the army in 1846, died 1870. Some of the dates given by H.
Manners Chichester in the D.N.B. are corrected by F. A. Edwards in Notes and
Queries, cxlvii (1924), 160.
to send an embassy to Great Britain. The letter reached the Foreign Office on 12 February 1863. Meanwhile Cameron, instead of returning directly to Massawa, had gone to investigate the condition of the Christian Bogos in the north-east who were being oppressed by the Muslims. Cameron was peremptorily reminded by a dispatch from the Foreign Office early in 1864 of his instructions to remain in Massawa and not to meddle in local affairs. There was, however, no reply to the king’s letter, and the pusillanimity of the Foreign Office was not unnaturally construed by the king as an act of contempt towards himself and his country. His annoyance at the discourtesy was exacerbated by Cameron’s ill-advised peregrinations, his attempts to negotiate with the Turks and his subsequent inactivity at Massawa, by the British failure to secure the protection of the Abyssinians in Jerusalem and finally by the presence and proselytizing activities of European missionaries who had established themselves in the land in an effort to convert the Falashas from their alleged Judaism to evangelical Christianity, and one of whom had had the temerity to publish a book in which he had insulted the king and denounced his ferocity. Unable to restrain himself and anxious to assert his authority over all within his borders the king placed Cameron, members of his party and some missionaries in prison at Magdala. The British Government thereupon prepared a reply to the king’s letter, had it signed by Queen Victoria, and directed Mr. Hormuzd Rassam, First Assistant Political Resident at Aden, to cross to Abyssinia and to present the letter to the king. Rassam and his party arrived at Massawa on 22 July 1864 and sent a message to the king requesting permission to present the royal reply and asking for the release of the prisoners. To this message and to another of the same tenor dispatched on 17 October no reply was received, and this state of affairs continued throughout the winter. Thus it was after seven months of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty that Rassam sent to Playfair, who had been his colleague in Aden and who had been political agent in Zanzibar from 17 December

1 Cf. Ullendorff in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, i (1956), 254 ff.
2 The above-mentioned H. A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (1862), pp. 63, 128, 145, etc.
1862 and consul since 13 July 1863, the following personal letter, giving first-hand news from the prisoners in Magdala, together with his own reflections on the situation:

Massawah 2nd March 1865

My Dear Playfair

On the 8th Ultimo I despatched you a tremendously long letter by the Royal Navy Steamer "Pantaloon". I gave the letter to Purvis her Commander to deliver to you as he told me that after touching at Aden he would go to Zanzibar and hoped to see you in the beginning of this month. I suppose he is not very far from Zanzibar now. Up to this date affairs remain as they were seven months ago—no answer as yet from the King! But I am glad to say that I have at last managed to communicate with the European prisoners. The private Messenger whom I had sent up to Abyssinia on the 28th of November succeeded in delivering the rice, sugar, and money, which I had intrusted him with for Cameron and he brought me down two notes from the latter; one from Stern addressed to his wife, and the fourth from Mrs. Rosenthal to her mother. The notes are merely scraps of paper which were sewed in the Messenger's shoes and amulet as the prisoners were afraid lest they fall into the possession of the King. I do not think I can do better than to copy for you Cameron's notes word for word, as I know they will interest you especially as your name figures in both. They are almost alike. They were given to the messenger to put one in his shoes and the other in the charm that in case one was lost the other would reach me. They are as follows.

"Magdala 17/1/65
"We have received the Memo about the letter from England [Queen's letter] your two letters [I wrote to the King] have reached. We thought that the second [sent through the Nayab of Harkieko] had obtained an answer. Mr

1 The inverted commas and square brackets are reproduced as they appear in the letter.
2 Cf. Rassam, op. cit. i. 61.
3 Ibid. pp. 29, 60.
4 Ibid. p. 48, cf. pp. 43 f. The messenger was Wald-Māryam, a former employee of the Consul's, who was subsequently discovered to be utterly untrustworthy.
5 H. A. Stern, the missionary referred to above; cf. Rassam, op. cit. i. 63.
6 The European wife of one of Stern's colleagues who was imprisoned along with her husband. Cf. Markham, op. cit. p. 75.
7 Sc. the king; the reference is to the letters of about 24 July and of 17 October 1864 (Rassam, op. cit. i. 5, 41-2).
8 I.e. Muḥammad b. 'Abd ar-Raḥîm, the nāʿīb of the town of Harkiko at the head of Massawa Bay, who had been seconded by the Ottoman qaymaqām of Massawa subordinate to the wālī of the Hijaz to give Rassam whatever assistance he required and who supplied the messenger for the first letter and himself offered to carry the second letter to the king, an offer which Rassam prudently declined (cf. his Mission, i. 5, 37 ff., 41).
"and Mrs Rosenthal and child, Stern, M'Kelvie,π Bardeλ,μ Macriere,ν David "Pietro" and Kerans are here. The bearer will give particulars. We are all "well thank God and have been supplied with the means of livelihood from "Gaffat [Mr Flad, a German Missionary assisted them every now and then with "the necessaries of life] so that we have had no suffering to speak of on that "score. Kerans was ill all the winter. But strong again now. Write to his "father Dr Kerans of Galway to say he is all right. Things here baffle all "calculation. You will get all news elsewhere. We must keep on hoping the "best I suppose. Thanks dear R for everything. Remember me to dear Playfair "and write a line to Hertslet [of the Foreign Office] to say I am still alive and. "Reward the people who accompany your messenger.

(signed) Your's siny C. D. C.

The second note is as follows:

Magdala 17/1/65

"We have received the note. We thought that your second letter had had an "answer. Mr. and Mrs. Rosenthal (the latter not in chains) Stern, M'Kelvie, 1 A young Irishman who had been employed by Cameron as servant (Mission, ii. 112, 145; Markham, op. cit. 82).

2 A discharged French servant of Cameron's who at the time of the second imprisonment delated to the king a proposed attempt at escape (Mission, ii. 261; Markham, op. cit. 75, 292).

3 The name is spelt Macraire in Mission, Mackerer by Markham and Makerer by Hozier; he was a discharged French soldier who, like Bardel, had attached himself as an adventurer to the suite of the king (Markham, op. cit. p. 75; Hozier, op. cit. p. 27).

4 An Italian servant (Markham, op. cit. p. 82).

5 A young Irishman, son of a Galway doctor, whom Cameron had appointed as his secretary, and who was the bearer of the dispatches from Britain received at Massawa at the beginning of 1864 (Markham, op. cit. p. 81).

6 Johann Martin Flad (1831-1915) was engaged with Bishop Gobat's lay missionaries at Gafat just north of Debra Tabor to the east of Lake Tana (Markham, op. cit. p. 75). Besides sending provisions to the fortress of Magdala 100 miles to the east he sought to help in other ways. He gave Rassam warning that the release of the prisoners could not be hoped for until the queen's reply was in the king's hands (Mission, i. 50) and that without a firm safe-conduct from the king the journey into the interior would be fraught with peril (Mission, i. 75). Subsequent events suggest that he enjoyed a measure of respect and confidence from the king and he was not imprisoned (cf. Ullendorff, The Ethiopians, p. 87). In 1869 he published Zwölf Jahre in Abessinien with his reminiscences and a translation of part of the Amharic Chronicle of Theodore. He also translated Dr. C. G. Barth's Bible-stories into Amharic (1892) and saw Gebra Giyorgis Terfe's Amharic translation of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress through the press. See also Notes and Queries, cxlvii (1924), 193-4.

7 Sir Edward Hertslet, K.C.B. (1824-1902), youngest son of Lewis Hertslet (1787-1870), who was Librarian and Keeper of the papers at the Foreign Office from 1801 till 1857. The son succeeded the father as Librarian from 1857 to 1896 and was also agent for members of the diplomatic and consular services from 1857 till 1870.
"Bardell, Macriere, David Pietro, and Kerans, are here. Mrs R's Child is well. We are all in good health, and have had the means of obtaining food from "Gaffat. Write to Kerans' father Dr. Kerans of Galway to say his son strong "again. He was ill during the winter. The climate here is good so all hope "the best, but it is wearing work. Remember me to Playfair and write to Hertslet "to tell him that I am well and doing my best to hold on to the end. Let Dr "Kerans write to M'Kelvie's friends to say I am taking care of him. He is in "strong health. God bless you dear R. Your's ever C. D. C.

As all the notes were sent open to me I read Stern's; and as there are two passages in it which may interest you I will give them to you in verbatim—"August 19th 1864 a letter arrived from the British Government [doubtless he "alludes to my first letter I sent to King Theodorus on my arrival here] and as "it was couched in most friendly terms¹ we thought that it would satisfy the "King and effect our liberation. Our hopes were, however, doomed to dis­"appointment"... "Mrs Rosenthal though regarded as a prisoner has no "fetters, but every one else has from 15 to 20 pounds of chain attached to his "legs.

I have also received important communications from two Germans at Gaffat near Dabartabool, named Flad & Schimper² to whom I had written for intelli­gence. They say that the release of the prisoners depends upon the receipt of the Queen's letter—a thing which has always been talked about but never comes to pass! The King knows very well that the letter has been waiting here for his reception for the last seven months and he might have sent for it any day.³ If he has really made up his mind not to release the prisoners before he receives that reply then he will never do so that he may be able to keep the poor prisoners in confinement till doomsday! Then Mr Flad says that when the Europeans at Gaffat went to the King to intercede for the release of the prisoners, he told them in reply that "I will first see what the English at Massawah, and the French in the Bogos⁴ will do to me—if it is possible I will make friends again". The

¹ A somewhat inapposite description, for in the circumstances there was little room for friendliness. Rassam's letter, the translation of which is given in Mission, i. 5-6, was marked by courtesy and a desire to meet the king's wishes in whatever manner might most effectively and promptly secure the liberation of the hostages.

² Schimper, a botanist, was a colleague of Flad, on whom see p. 355, n. 6. Rassam states that it was on 26 December 1864 that he first heard of the kindness of Flad and Schimper to the captives and wrote to ask their advice (Mission, i. 52) and that he received their reply on 16 February 1865 (ibid. i. 62).

³ If by this Rassam means that at any time he chose he could have sent for it, then Rassam is probably over-estimating the firmness of the king's control of his lines of communication. But he had been warned of the insecurity of parts of the country and may mean no more than that the arrival of an envoy to arrange for the handing over of the letter had been daily expected.

⁴ The Bogos or Bilen are a group of two Agaw tribes occupying the northern Abyssinian plateau in the region of Keren, a two days' march from Massawah; it was here that Munzinger, the French acting vice-consul, had his summer residence. See Mission, i. 23; Ullendorff, The Ethiopians, p. 39; and the following note.
party of that brute Count du Bisson\textsuperscript{1} is at the bottom of all the mischief. To him the King must have alluded when he spoke about the French in the Bogos. I know not whether I have ever told you that this Belgian renegade, who called himself “French General” came to Abyssinia with 40 European adventurers and tried to establish a colony on the border of Northern Abyssinia and after much scheming and intriguing he was obliged to quit the country with disgrace and left his followers to find their way back to their country in the best way they could. Well, this soi-disant [I am very glad that old Muff General Honner\textsuperscript{2} is not here as he might have objected to my using this French word] General on returning to Egypt he sends a bill through the French Consulate against the Egyptian Government for 2,000,000 of Francs which he asserted to have lost by theft and plunder in the Egyptian Territory on the confines of Abyssinia. The Viceroy after getting bullied by the frog eaters he sends a Commission with Count du Bisson and some French officials from the Consulate at Alexandria to inquire into the complaint of that imposter the Count—hence King Theodorus’ remark about the French in the Bogos. With regard to the “English” at Massawah if he is a fool to believe false reports about the object of my mission it is his fault for he has only to send for me and then he will be able to learn what our designs are.

Cameron told the messenger to inform me that I was on no account to go up to Abyssinia before I received an answer from the King, and even then I have to use my discretion in the matter; “Otherwise” he said (looking down at his fetters) “he will have to endure such as these”. All the prisoners are now chained singly and their fetters have been transferred from the wrists to the legs.

I have sent up the messenger again to Cameron, and have sent with him different articles which he told me that the prisoners required, and also 250 dollars in cash. I have moreover written to Flad to authorize him to draw upon me for three hundred dollars to pay himself for any expenses which he might have incurred on behalf of the prisoners or which he might be able to spend hereafter for the benefit of Cameron and his fellow prisoners.\textsuperscript{3}

I am getting quite sick of my stay here; and if I am not relieved by Government before the next hot weather I fear I shall either go crazy or break my heart—“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick”.

The King is still in Shoa\textsuperscript{4} and has not been heard of for a long time. Perhaps he has “kicked the bucket”! When I hear of his demise I shall go into deep

\textsuperscript{1} A French—or according to this letter a Belgian—adventurer styling himself “General Count du Bisson”, who in the latter part of 1863 had led a party of some forty Europeans collected in Egypt to found a colony in Ethiopian territory, was reported in November 1864 to have returned with the same purpose and to have established himself in the highlands of Hamasen in the region of Asmara. Cf. Mission, i. 44-45; Hooker, op. cit. 255.

\textsuperscript{2} Major-General Robert William Honner, C.B., later Sir Robert W. Honner, K.C.B., of the Bombay General Staff, was in command of the Scinde Division from 28 March 1863 till 25 May 1866. He entered the service of the Indian Army in 1820, was appointed Major-General on 17 September 1861, and died in the latter part of 1868. Rassam may have met him in Aden. \textsuperscript{3} Mission, i. 63-64.

\textsuperscript{3} A southern province of Abyssinia in the region of the modern capital of Addis Ababa; King Theodore had gone there towards the end of 1864 to quell a rebellion. Cf. Mission, i. 50.
mourning!! for my love is great for him; his having very kindly allowed me to spend such a pleasant time here!!

I am going to send the "Victoria"1 to Aden (she starts to-morrow morning) for the purpose of carrying dispatches to Col. Merewether2—I think it is but right that the relatives and friends of the poor Captives should know as soon as possible in what a state they were in up to the 17th of January last.3 You cannot conceive how delighted I was to see the writing of poor Cameron again, as I began to fear that something dreadful had happened to him—How glad I shall be when I see his face once more, not in chains but at large! I do not think I shall have the chance to see him in the former position unless I am sent to Magdala to share his fate! Government will have to send you then to release us all—I do not wish you such bad luck unless King Theodorus will be cured of his madness.

I must say now good bye as I find I have no more news to communicate. Pray give my kindest regards to your wife and love to the "sweet lamb". I suppose the latter4 has now grown into a "duck"! Remember me kindly to the Swards5 and say I hope that their child is growing fast in that delightful climate of Zanzibar. We expect an increase to the mission hourly, as Mrs Blanc6 is very near her confinement.

Believe me
Ever Your's most Sincerely
H. Rassam

1 The "Victoria" was a transport steamer of the late Indian navy, commanded by Lieut. Carpendale and used for supplying Rassam's mission from Aden. The sailing on 3 March 1865 is recorded in Mission, i. 64.
2 Lieut.-Col. (afterwards Sir) William Lockyer Merewether (1825-80) came from the Military Secretaryship to the Government of Bombay, which he had held since 1861, to be Political Agent at Aden in 1864; he was thus directly responsible, under the Secretary of State for India, for the Rassam mission, and later he commanded the pioneer force sent from Bombay in September 1867 against King Theodore.
3 The date of Cameron's two letters quoted above.
4 Presumably Agnes Mary (Minnie), elder daughter of Playfair and his wife, who was then about twelve years old.
5 J. E. Seward, whose name does not appear in the Medical Register for 1865, was Agency Surgeon at H.B.M.'s Consulate in Zanzibar and on Playfair's departure became acting Consul there.
6 When Rassam set off for Massawa on his mission to convey Queen Victoria's letter to King Theodore, he took with him, at his own request and with the approval of Merewether and the Government of India, Dr. Henry Blanc, who was stationed at Aden. Blanc returned briefly to Aden on the provision boat for a change of climate, and on his return on 16 November 1864 he brought his wife with him, and they took up residence at the French Consulate at Monculu on the mainland opposite Massawa, the climate there being more salubrious (Mission, i. 2, 44-48). When the prisoners were re-arrested on 13 July 1866, Rassam, Dr. Blanc and Lt. Prideaux were also arrested and put into fetters (Mission, ii. 160), and Blanc in 1868 published an account under the title The Story of the Captives—A Narrative of the Events of Mr. Rassam's Mission to Abyssinia.
In the main Rassam's letter simply confirms the record he has set down in more impersonal terms in the pages of his *Mission*. In particular it affords a vivid and immediate picture of the uncomplaining fortitude with which Cameron and his companions endured their imprisonment, and of their concern that Rassam's mission should not imperil itself by plunging inland without full assurances and adequate guarantees. It reflects the rumours, direct and indirect, true and untrue, that circulated up and down the country. It barely conceals Rassam's perplexity as to how to evaluate these rumours—in this respect he seems more at sea than Cameron's motley group with their previous acquaintance with the country and its people—his amazement that an African ruler should set himself to defy the queen and to abuse her representative, his reluctance to believe that the delay was not due to deliberate obstructiveness on the part of the king, and his underlying concern to overcome whatever obstructions impeded the release of the prisoners. The letter adds a little to what we know about the curious and irresponsible "Count du Bisson" and his endeavours to participate in the scramble for Africa. It shows a government servant who is at once candid to a colleague and loyal to a government which was at a loss as to how to cope with an unusual situation that was largely of its own making. But perhaps its greatest interest lies in the revelation it affords of Rassam himself,—his dislike of the climate of Massawa, here expressed more unreservedly than in the *Mission*, his asides on such personalities as Honner and du Bisson, his sour humour regarding the king and his warm feeling for the prisoners. The vigour of his pen is such as to make one wish that the unpublished manuscript autobiography, used by T. G. Pinches for his account of Rassam in the *Second Supplement* to the *Dictionary of National Biography* and since lost, might yet be recovered.

1 "... The best thing to be done at present was to wait for further advices respecting King Theodore's intentions, whether as to the release of the prisoners, or as to receiving a mission with the Queen's letter and presents. At all events we were not going to undertake a war in the matter" (The *Annual Register* for 1865 [75-6]).

2 Cf. *Notes and Queries*, ccvi, no. 3 (June 1961), 231.