

# Count Du Bisson's Expedition 1863-Eritrea

Count Raoul Du Bisson's Expedition to Koufit-mutiny of the 4th regiment at Kassala in 1865-  
The murder of the Powell family

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THE HISTORY OF KASSALA AND THE PROVINCE OF TAKA  
(continued from Volume XX, Part I)  
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## CHAPTER VII

P 29-39 The year 1875 marked the peak of Ismail Pasha's efforts to make a success of the Sudan. Before examining the unhappy events that accompanied and followed Egypt's war with Abyssinia, one must recall three other incidents that occurred in or near Kassala while Ismail Pasha's star was still in the ascendant.

On the south-east of Kassala, populating on both sides of the Gash as far south as the River Settit, live the Baria and Baza (or Kunama) tribes. These aboriginal negroids, isolated from the Nilotic tribes to which they are akin, were at this period living in autonomous and discordant village communities which formed, in agglomeration, a buffer state between the Sudan and Abyssinia. In this capacity they were obliged to repel raids from north and south: only their courage and the skilful tactical use they made of their hilly and broken country enabled them to survive. The Baza in particular were warriors of such ruthlessness that their name was feared in the eastern Sudan (1).

The Beni Amer had levied a sort of Dane-geld on the Baria for many years before the Egyptians arrived but this was diverted to Kassala in 1840. Egypt, however, established no permanent post in the Baria country until 1852 when a small defended camp was built at Koufit a place some 40 miles due east of Kassala on the main route to Keren and Massawa.

The presence of the troops restored some order among the various sections of the tribe and put an end to the more extensive of the Beja raids : the country even became safe enough for a market to be established at Mogello. But the Baza, living to the south of the Baria, received no protection and found themselves the prey both of Egyptian tax-collecting expeditions and the raids of the Abyssinian ruler at Addi-Abo. Making a virtue of necessity they threw in their lot with the latter.

Said Pasha visited the Sudan in 1857, he ordered the abandonment of Koufit and as a result the Baria were left in no better state than the Baza, for although Egypt abandoned Koufit as a permanent post and ceased to provide any real protection from the Beja and Abyssinian raiders, a body of Egyptian troops returned each year to levy tribute.

This was the lot of the Baria when, in 1864, they became momentarily involved in an adventure of a most romantic but venal kind (2). It began at Paris where in July 1863, M. Palmero, a wealthy contractor and his son-in-law, Comte Raoul du Bisson, approached the French Foreign Office with a request for a letter of introduction to the French representative in Egypt.

They said that they wanted to start a cotton plantation in Upper Egypt and since the American Civil War was then at its height and the resultant shortage of cotton had led to a widespread search for other sources of supply, the request did not appear to be unreasonable: it was merely unusual in that they proposed to take French colonists with them.

The recommendation was given and when M. Palmero and his son-in-law landed at Alexandria they were met by the French Consul-General bearing a summons to an audience with the Viceroy in Cairo together with an order that their baggage should be exempt from Custom dues. But the examination of the baggage revealed some surprizes for the various packing cases contained among other things, 400 muskets, 4 cannons, 400 kilos of powder, and a large assortment of armaments ranging from swords to blunderbusses.

The Count visited Ismail Pasha he explained that the expedition was merely a scheme for furthering the agricultural development of Central Africa which he felt sure would command His Highness's sympathy and support.

Ismail Pasha was interested but there were certain aspects of the scheme that needed fuller examination and he suggested for instance that the Count might be carrying out some sort of secret mission of an imperial nature for the French Government. Du Bisson admitted at once that the expedition had indeed another side to it, that of establishing a military post on the Abyssinian frontier from which they hoped to be able to rescue M. Lejean, the French Consul at Massawa who had fallen into the hands of King Theodore. But " he added, his mission was so secret that if it was disclosed he would at once be denounced by those who had authorized it.

This plan appealed to Ismail Pasha partly because he admired and a partly because it gave him an opportunity for laying at the door of a European power some of the responsibility for incidents on the Abyssinian frontier which his policy in the Sudan was likely to provoke. He therefore wrote to Musa Pasha amdi, the Governor-General of the Sudan, ordering him to concert his plans with those of the Count, and to take the opportunity of accompanying him if he crossed the Sudan frontier into Abyssinia. The Viceroy also ordered the expenses of the expedition to be defrayed by the Egyptian treasury.

Du Bisson, who had by now taken entire charge of the expedition, left Cairo on the 8th of October 1863 accompanied by his father-in-law, his wife, about forty Frenchmen, and some sixty other colonists collected from the riff-raff of the cafés of Alexandria and Cairo. If further evidence of his eccentricity were required it was provided during his journey up the Nile : at Korosko, where he was kept waiting for the 160 camels he required, he threatened to claim 20,000 francs compensation from the Egyptian government for the delay caused to his expedition. But the journey across the desert to Abu Hamad sorely tried the spirits of his colonists: the promised land was still distant and appearances in the neighbourhood of Berber discouraging. They demanded further information about both the destination and the object of the expedition.

To this M. du Bisson could do no better than reply with an offer to change their original agricultural contracts into contracts for military service for three years with pay of 15 francs a month and a promise of an allotment of land on their discharge. When this did not appease the colonists he told them that they were going to Abyssinia and that they were only the advance guard for two other contingents.

On their arrival they would divide into two corps, one, under the direction of M. Palméro, would be employed on agricultural schemes: the other, under his own command, would act as a military force to keep the enemy at bay.

The profits of the agricultural schemes and the booty from the military enterprises were to be divided between all the members of the expeditions according to the services rendered and the rank of each individual until all had attained a position of relative wealth. Having no means of returning home the weary colonists accepted his promises and signed the contracts: nearly all elected to join the military branch of the expedition.

In the meantime some embarrassing evidence had come to light in Egypt. Du Bisson's medical officer, a retired Italian army doctor, had been delayed in Europe and on his arrival in Alexandria he went to the French Consul-General to borrow money. He produced the contract he had been given by du Bisson.

In addition to a salary of £E. 1000 it stipulated that the doctor should receive 60 hectares "of extremely fertile land " with beasts and implements for cultivating it, land capable of yielding annually between twenty-five and thirty thousand Pounds sterling, situated near a railway that was under construction and a port.

Moreover the Viceroy had been informed that the French Government knew nothing of du Bisson and his intentions and the British Consul-General had protested against the support that Egypt was giving to a French expedition against Abyssinia only a few months after the British government had advised King Theodore to abandon his aggressive attitude towards the Sudan.

The Viceroy therefore hastened to change his orders to Musa Pasha. We attach, he wrote on the 15th October 1863 a letter for the Count informing him that it was impossible for you to accompany him beyond our frontiers. If he insists you should make the excuse that the Viceroy has ordered you to go as far as the frontier and no further.

If he wishes to build a fortress or strong-hold on the frontier ask him to explain its object and if he replies that it is for security, tell him that our troops are posted for his protection and that we shall take care of him. But try to divert him from his project by advice and diplomacy.

If the Count insists on crossing the frontier put at his disposal the arms, water skins, and camels he requires and if he or any of his companions wish to establish themselves on our territory appoint an official to guard them and provide them with the necessities of life; but at the same time make it clear to the troops that they must not cross the frontier."

When du Bisson had been handed the enclosure to this despatch and after he had satisfied himself that Musa Pasha was not to be deceived, he gave yet another version of his intentions. He had learnt, he said, from the Lazarist priests at Keren that there were 60,000 feddans of cultivable land in that vicinity which the natives wished to dispose of.

His expedition was therefore primarily an agricultural project but the French government, hearing that he was about to leave for northern Abyssinia, had asked him to do what he could to rescue the captured French Consul(3). Musa Pasha had rightly foreseen by this time that in the end du Bisson would present the Egyptian government with a heavy bill for damages on the grounds that his agricultural scheme had been ruined, after the Count himself had

provided the means for its ruin. It was not the first, and certainly not the last time that this sort of trick was to be played on Ismail Pasha.

After a short stay in Khartoum, where du Bisson re-equipped himself at the expense of the Egyptian treasury, the party set out for Kassala. At Berber M. Palméro died of fever after expressing emphatic disapproval of his son-in-law's conduct, and at Kassala, du Bisson found that the French Consul he had intended to rescue had already arrived in the town. Moreover the Governor of Kassala showed no disposition to further his designs so that he decided for the time being to abandon his plans for going to Keren and to stay on Egyptian territory instead.

The abandoned fort at Koufit was suggested to him as a suitable place for his purposes, so it was for this place that he set out with his colonists, escorted, in accordance with the Viceroy's instructions, by ninety Sudanese soldiers.

The scene was indeed remarkable. "About a hundred town Arabs were induced to join the European party a useless set of vagabonds, who adorned themselves with regimental uniforms, accepted the rifle, pistol, and sword, drew their rations, were punctual in their attendance and always ready to salaam, but showed much dislike to the drill and other civilized notions the Comte and his officers endeavored to impress upon them.

Their departure from Kassala for the land flowing with milk and honey was quite theatrical; in front rode on a camel, a gallant captain (who had taken his discharge from the Austrian service) playing on the bugle a parting "fanfare"; behind him, the second in command, mounted on a prancing charger, and followed by the European part of the force, who with military step, and shoulder to shoulder, marched as men for whom victory is their slave.

Behind came le Comte himself, clad in general's uniform, his breast covered with many decorations which sovereigns had been only too proud to confer on such a noble spirit; next to him rode gracefully his beautiful wife, looking handsomer still in the picturesque kepi and red uniform of a French zouave; behind, closing the march, the well-knit Arabs, with plunder written in their dark bright eyes, marched with quick elastic step and as much regularity as could be expected from men who abhorred order and had been drilled- for so short a time.

(4) The expedition passed through the low hills to the east of Kassala at Sabderat and at Dagga it received a reinforcement of 120 regular soldiers. On 12th April it arrived at Koufit which proved to be a valley between low hills with a 'khor' flanked by dom palms running along it.

The breadth of the valley was about 16 kilometres: half of it was uncultivable and half was covered with stones or sandy soil. Close to the wells in the 'khor' was the large 'Zeriba,' embracing some huts, which had served as the Egyptian post until 1857, and which was now occupied annually after the rains by the tax-gathering expedition. Du Bisson took over the 'Zeriba' and had a shelter built around the wells for his own residence.

On the day after his arrival he sent his interpreter to the Baria sheikhs with the following message: 'A new ruler has arrived who wishes to live with you, a just Pasha who asks nothing of you on the contrary, he will give instead of take, he will protect you against the Turks and Abyssinians, and you will pay no more tribute either to the one or the other from the moment you came under his protection?.'

In response to this fifteen Baria and four Basa sheikhs visited him. Each was asked how many warriors he could put in the field, each was expected to co-operate in suppressing 'rebels' and in defying the neighbouring Abyssinian chiefs. The wily Mohammed Nur of the Gadein forthwith denounced the Bilein as 'rebels' and obtained the Count's permission to raid their country, but the Egyptian authorities intervened and prevented him from taking advantage of his heaven-sent opportunity.

As for the agricultural side of the scheme it advanced very slowly The Courts collected between sixty and seventy tribesmen to clear the ground of stones and thorns but after a day's work they never returned. For the rest he constructed a rough stone fort near the 'khor' with a gun position commanding the approach to the wells, and a long wall joining it to the 'eriba'.

This was the state of affairs found by Bimbashi Khattab Eff, who was engaged in the collection of tribute from the Baria when he visited Koufit. Khattab Eff. Had also been given the responsibility of guarding du Bisson's expedition as far as the frontier but, after giving him some reinforcements he had returned to Kassala with the 'durra' which du Bisson thought had been collected for the use of his party.

His alarm at finding du Bisson in friendly conclave with the Baria sheikhs making presentations of firearms, welcoming complainants and building entrenchments around the Egyptian zeriba, was so ill-disguised that du Bisson hastened to denounce him direct to the Governor-General before the Bimbashi could give his report in Kassala.

The escort he had received, he complained, had been left without rations: they were so discontented and mutinous that he had had to send back all but fifty of them. Moreover the rains were approaching and he had been obliged to construct some huts and provide himself with some minor defensive works. "The intentions of His Highness and yourself have not been fulfilled" he continued, " You are my friend, you have too noble a heart and you are too great, a warrior to allow His Highness's and your own friend to be treated with such indignity.

My life is in peril-that is the lot of a soldier and it does not worry me: but I think of my wife and must make every effort to ensure that she is not murdered. The Bisha have given us land to cultivate. They have helped us and they want reward. By dint of ingenuity and gifts I have won the friendship of the Baria and Basa.

It is a question of life or death in the position I am now in. I have, it is true, given each sheikh a flint-lock but they are mere toys. The Abyssinians wish to attack us? and I am prepared to receive them. I know, of course, that my defensive measures do not please the Bimbashi who is the enemy of all Europeans .... God's will be done, but I demand satisfaction of Bimbashi Khattab Eff. and if I did not rely on your justice I would have him soundly flogged."

Our knowledge of Khattab Eff's subsequent career leads one to think that the Count had some grounds for his protestations but events had gone too far. Ismail Pasha had already withdrawn his support as soon as he had received news from the Governor-General that du Bisson intended to go to Keren.

Such a step might lead to the establishment of French influence there and, although he had recently informed the British Consul-General that Egypt had no right to the occupation of that

area, by a complete volte face he ordered the Governor-General to send a representative there, as secretly as possible to confirm its dependence to Egypt.

The Deputy Governor of Kassala was given the task of conveying the Viceroy's decision to the Count and also of putting an end to any further construction of fortifications at Koufit. Du Bisson's account of what followed was dramatic: At about 9 a.m. of May 3rd I heard the distant sound of drum and fife. The two Egyptian companies encamped with us take up their arms, go out, draw up in order of battle, not as troops who want to fight, but as soldiers who are meeting their comrades.

Only at this moment does Mohammed Agha (Commander of the escort) deign to inform me officially of the arrival of the Deputy Governor Suliman Eff. and his troops .... I estimate that there are about 800 men apart from the two companies already with us.

Suliman Eff. tells me Musa Pasha, Governor-General of the Sudan, in the name of the Viceroy of Egypt has sent the following orders: You will turn out the French from the lands they occupy: you will not let them stay there any longer; you will prevent them from cultivating, building, trading, pitching their camp. Such are my instructions." Suliman adds that he has 1000 men in the camp .... All resistance is impossible ...

He returns to his troops and orders them to enlarge one side of the camp by breaking it down and settles down there. His soldiers invade the barracks of my colonists, steal all our wood and material for their comfort. Lacking animals, they slaughter ours. Some scuffles occur: our officers intervene. During the night, all my flocks of sheep in the folds outside the camp disappear.

" The Turkish officers do not tire of telling us that on their departure from Kassala they received orders to attack us if we did not submit and to butcher us to the last man ... They and their men are eager to mingle with our native supporters accusing them of cowardice and treason. They call it a crime to serve Christian dogs, they provoke mutiny. A French N.C.O. is insulted by the Muslim soldiers, another sees the hand of a corporal raised to strike him . . .

Finally a certain Abdulla, the most active instigator of the mutiny, after an attempt to murder a French officer, deserts with the arms and equipment and wishes to kill a sous-directeur who opposes his purpose."

M. du Bisson went as far as to condemn this Abdulla to be shot but he reprieved him in the face of the firing squad. " Since then, more mutiny.

On the 6th" he continues, eighteen French lost courage. In the face of this unprovoked attack they despaired of the result and asked to be released from their engagements. I agreed and they left for Massawa." The Count then gave Suliman Eff. a letter of protest signed by all the colonists and declared that he had submitted to force.

But, according to du Bisson, the general pillage of the camp followed and so, within a month of its arrival at Koufit the party returned to Kassala. " We covered 50 leagues of desert, without food, without water, on foot; women, children a prey to every kind of suffering. As soon as we were out of sight the Egyptians abandoned themselves without fear to every act of brigandage and rapine.

The Deputy Governor seized the sheikhs, the Baria who had accompanied us ... Then he ordered the demolition of our fortifications, the devastation of our work; everything was plundered, and razed: the wells poisoned and filled in".

The Count's account did not however tally with that given by one of his followers nor with the facts as revealed to a commission, consisting of M. Garnier, the dragoman of the French Consul-General at Alexandria and an Egyptian Kaimakam, which visited Kassala in the following year to hold any inquiry.

The troops in Taka were far from being properly disciplined, as events in the same year were to reveal with some violence, but on this occasion they had acted with reasonable moderation. The country was not as hostile as the Count had pretended, nor had he been deprived of food and transport during, his return to Kassala. Shortly afterwards the real purpose of the expedition appeared in the form of a claim for compensation a claim so accurately predicted by Musa Pasha.

Item: loss of revenue from 12,000 feddans of land purchased from the Baria sheikhs for three Marie-Theresa dollars per feddan, being the estimated value of the harvest of indigo and cotton, 360,000 francs for the year 1864.

Item: compensation for 800 Europeans engaged on contract to replace an equal number of natives, 2,500,000 francs.

Item: cost of transport of the said Europeans, 880,000 francs.

Item: cost of 100 ploughs and teams, 30,000 francs.

Item: cancelled contracts, purchases of ivory, gold, coffee and capital advanced, about 80,000 francs.

Item: loss for one year on salaries, daily wages and rewards, damage to goodwill and credit 5,830,955 francs.

The total was the immodest sum of about twelve millions of francs.

It is hardly necessary to add that Ismail Pasha refused to countenance 'this fantastic claim. He had withdrawn any support as soon as he had found out that du Bisson had deceived him over the true purpose of his expedition.

Moreover, to examine his claim in detail, du Bisson had not bought any land from the Baria ; he had not arranged for any further colonists to join him, and he had not purchased any of the articles mentioned. And so the adventurous Count had to return in ignomy to Kassala where some of his men at least proved their courage during the great military mutiny of 1864. The Count himself returned to France where he gave his life in the defence of Paris against the Prussian besiegers in 1872.

## FOOTNOTES

1. See Alberto Pollera's *I Baria e I Cunama*. Rome 1913.

2. The best account of this incident is in Douin's *Histoire du Règne du Khedive Ismail*, Tome III, Ire. Partie, Chapitre II, 2. passim. Most of the contemporary travellers make some mention of it. Extracts from official correspondence and reports are from Douin.

3. cf. Rassam, loc. cit. Vol .I. P, 44. A report reached Massawa that a 'French General' -a ' Count du Bisson' -had arrived on the northern border of Abyssinia with a large body of followers, intending to establish themselves in Hamasen, an Abyssinian district to the north of Tigre . . . .

Some of the Count's letters at that period, about 'Theodore and Abyssinian affairs generally, which appeared in a French Journal, and alleged to be founded on information received from strange officers of high rank in that country, afforded us a fund of amusement, owing to the stupid and barefaced inventions which formed the staple of the correspondence .... the report that he had comeback into the neighbourhood of Hamasien afforded Theodore with a good excuse at the time, as we subsequently heard, for retracting the promise which he had made to his European artisans at Gaffat to release Consul Cameron and the Missionaries.

4. Blanc, H. A. A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia. London 1868.

Source: Carolina Rediviva University Library, Uppsala - Sweden

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