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Amanda Kay McVety. "The 1903 Skinner Mission: Images of Ethiopia in the Progressive Era."

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Review by **Cyrus Veese**, Bentley University

This interesting article is really two essays in one. As her title suggests, Amanda Kay McVety provides a detailed study of the Progressive Era trade mission to Ethiopia led by the American diplomat Robert Skinner. These sections of the article are conventional diplomatic history, well researched and well presented. Coverage of the Skinner mission alternates with reflections on the larger significance of Ethiopia in American, and particularly African-American, thought. The twain do not quite meet, yet this remains a useful study of a little-known episode in U.S. economic foreign policy as well as a thoughtful rumination on American "Ethiopianism."

The author begins with a suggestive temporal coincidence: the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* validating the separation of races in May 1896, which came only a few months after Menelik II turned racial assumptions about Africans upside down by routing a European army at Adwa. The defeat of the Italian forces at Adwa pushed back European encroachment on Ethiopia, at the time the only independent nation in Africa besides Liberia. As McVety explains, the Ethiopian victory astonished Europeans and Americans, yet held very different significance for white and black observers. Pan-Africanists in the United States saw Adwa as a turning point in black history; whites argued that Menelik's victory proved that Ethiopians were Semites, not Negroes. The racial revisionism was instantaneous: less than two months after Adwa an article in the *New York Times* called Ethiopia "the Switzerland of Africa" and insisted that Ethiopians "are not black, but are of Caucasian descent as pure as the Anglo-Saxon."¹

¹ "The Most Gifted of Africans," *New York Times*, 19 April 1896, 29.

McVety returns to the Negro-versus-Semite argument later in the article, but first turns her attention to Robert Skinner, a white American counsel at Marseilles and an irrepressible advocate of opening trade with Ethiopia to preempt European overtures to Menelik. Like other American non-imperialist expansionists, Skinner was convinced that trade with the United States would have “the power to transform Ethiopia” while incidentally promoting U.S. exports. (190) The Skinner mission to Ethiopia was contemporaneous with John Hay’s Open Door notes about China and U.S. trade inroads in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean and represented a similar impulse toward what has been called free-trade imperialism or informal empire. As McVety points out, the fact that Ethiopia had successfully defended its independence fit perfectly with the American vision—“Menelik’s nation was not so barbaric that it needed to be dominated by an outside power for it to move into a new stage of social development.” (196)

Exactly *how* trade with the United States would advance civilization is not a topic McVety goes into, but Skinner was apparently not so different from British colonial officials at the time who reasoned that Africans were inert and unproductive because they had so few “wants.” Only by turning African peasants into consumers would steady work become the norm for them, British officials noted. The effect of “civilization” on the African would thus be to “develop his acquisitive faculty and give him nobler tastes and larger wants.”² A decade and a half after the Skinner mission another U.S. trade delegation to Ethiopia noted that “the present purchasing power of the Abyssinians is undoubtedly small, but . . . as their desire for foreign manufactured goods is educated and increased, they have only to plant larger crops and raise more animals to secure an increase in their supply of dollars.”³ The increased trade that American boosters like Skinner blithely supported, in other words, implied a social and economic revolution in which largely self-sufficient farmers would be transformed into profit-driven small producers. Menelik and his wife, the Empress Taytu, understood the implications of such a transformation. “Where will our poor country find the resources to satisfy the needs you create?” Taytu reportedly demanded of a group of European railroad promoters.⁴

Though Skinner hoped American trade would work miracles in Ethiopia, in fact the Europeans had arrived first. The British got a bank concession, while the French built the railroad that carried Skinner part of the way to Addis Ababa.⁵ Menelik’s genius was not

² “Native Labour in South Africa” in *Pamphlets and Leaflets for 1903* (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1904), 11.

³ U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Special Consular Report No. 81, *Abyssinia: Present Commercial Status of the Country with Special Reference to the Possibilities for American Trade* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), 7.

⁴ Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menilek: Ethiopia 1883-1910* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1986),

⁵ On the diplomacy of Menelik’s concessions, see Charles Schaefer, “The Politics of Banking: The Bank of Abyssinia, 1905-1931,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25: 2 (1992).

only military—he parceled out concessions strategically among the Great Powers to maintain a useful tension among them. McVety notes that Menelik “embraced the same technologies that had girded America’s earlier expansion: roads, railroads, telegraphs, and telephones.” (p. 200) True enough, but Menelik was no Muhammad Ali. He needed technology, mostly weapons, to keep the Europeans at bay, but had no intention of bringing an industrial revolution to Ethiopia. The American trade mission already mentioned found in 1918 that there were “no important manufacturing industries” in Ethiopia apart from a few sawmills, soap factories, tanneries, flour mills, and one electrical plant.⁶ Menelik was well aware of the social dislocation that would accompany rapid modernization and thus, encouraged by Taytu, moved cautiously toward “Ethiopia’s future as a consuming nation,” as McVety puts it. (203) The railroad to Addis Ababa was not even completed during his lifetime.

McVety describes at some length President Theodore Roosevelt’s fascination with Ethiopia and his belief, along with other white Americans, that Ethiopians were of “semitic stock.” She connects his thinking to “pseudo-scientific race dogma” and environmental determinism that struggled to explain Ethiopian exceptionalism, “which challenged the accepted paradigm of the inevitable triumph of Western civilization.” (193) Roosevelt, of course, created a similar category of exception for the Japanese, who alone among Asian peoples he frankly admired.⁷ It was no coincidence that the Ethiopians and Japanese had both earned Western respect—the trick in each case was defeating a European army. War-making, it seemed, was the acid test of civilization.

The nuances, such as they were, of Roosevelt’s racial thinking are not taken up here. Nor is the fact that Menelik II and many of his people were Christians given much attention, although religion as well as race certainly influenced Euro-American views of Ethiopia. What does get attention is the transhistorical significance of Ethiopia to African Americans, from Phyllis Wheatley in the eighteenth century to David Walker and Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth and W.E.B. Du Bois and Pauline Hopkins in the early twentieth century. For these intellectuals, Ethiopia symbolized all of Africa and the diaspora as well. They valued Ethiopia “not for its potential usefulness as a minor trading partner with the United States, but as a symbol of African power and African promise.” (198) For whites, on the other hand, Ethiopia’s prominence was exceptional, and ephemeral. The honorary whiteness won by Menelik II at Adwa was lost, 40 years later, when Mussolini conquered Ethiopia. “Under occupation,” writes McVety, “Ethiopia . . . became black.” (209)

⁶ U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 30.

⁷ Roosevelt admired the Japanese, although he worried about their geopolitical ambitions. During the Russo-Japanese War he wrote privately, “The Japs interest me and I like them. I am perfectly well aware that if they win out it may possibly mean a struggle between them and us in the future; but I hope not and believe not I am not much affected by the statement that the Japanese are of an utterly different race from ourselves and that the Russians are of the same race.” Roosevelt to Cecil Spring-Rice, 13 June 1904, in *Theodore Roosevelt, Letters and Speeches* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 336-37.

The discourses of Ethiopianism and expansionism that McVety examines remained almost entirely in separate spheres. Even William Ellis, a successful African American businessman who visited Menelik and thanked John Hay for encouraging trade with Ethiopia, remained marginal to the world of policymakers. McVety acknowledges as much when she writes, “denied equal participation in the political arena, pan-Africanists spread their message of hope through vibrant, compelling works of literature and art.” (207)

Only Frederick Douglass moved between the two realms. As U.S. minister to Haiti at the end of his life, Douglass found himself at the crossroads of pan-Africanism and U.S. expansionism when the State Department directed him to negotiate the lease of Môle St. Nicolas as a coaling station for the navy. Douglass tried to persuade Haiti’s president Florvil Hyppolite that ceding the harbor at Môle St. Nicolas “was in the line of good neighborhood and advanced civilization, and in every way consistent with the autonomy of Haiti.” Even that was not enough for Secretary of State James G. Blaine and Rear Admiral Bancroft Gherardi. When Gherardi threatened to seize the harbor, Douglass objected that he could “not accept this as a foundation on which I could base my diplomacy.”⁸ The Haitians refused to negotiate further, and Douglass gave his official support to that refusal. U.S. newspapers blamed Douglass for standing in the way of America’s “manifest destiny” in the Caribbean. Out of favor in Washington, Douglass resigned.⁹

In the end, the divorce of Ethiopianism and expansionism in this article is an accurate reflection of the world it describes.

Cyrus Veesser is the author of *A World Safe for Capitalism* (Columbia, 2002) and *Great Leaps Forward* (Pearson 2010). His current research examines the use of forced labor to modernize European colonies in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. He is also editing a collected volume on the ways that less-developed countries have attempted to modernize by granting concessions to foreign investors. He teaches U.S. foreign policy and Latin American history at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

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⁸ Quoted in William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 349-350.

⁹ McFeely, 355-56.