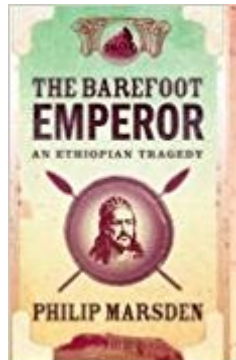


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The Barefoot Emperor: An Ethiopian Tragedy



Synopsis

Philip Marsden's rollicking history of Tewodros II, emperor of Ethiopia, powers along with all the drama of a finely honed thriller. A fascinating narrative excursion into a bizarre episode in 19th century Ethiopian and British imperial history featuring a remote African despot and his European-built gun.

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Customer Reviews

Philip Marsden's rollicking history of Tewodros II, emperor of Ethiopia, powers along with all the drama of a finely honed thriller. A fascinating narrative excursion into a bizarre episode in 19th century Ethiopian and British imperial history featuring a remote African despot and his European-built gun.

It is obvious that Marsden has done a lot of research in the relevant archives pertaining to his subject, the enigmatic and tragic hero of Ethiopian history, Emperor Tewodros. Part of Marsden's research included an incredible journey into Ethiopia and tracing some of the movements of Emperor Tewodros's last great campaign to his mountain top fortress Meqdela. Marsden's writing style is easy to read and his chapters are short and only a few pages, which helps the reader maintain a certain momentum. His literary style is excellent. It is not clear whether Marsden wrote this semi fictional account for the consumption of European readers with interest in Ethiopian history or whether he believed Ethiopians will also be interested in reading his book about 19th century personality about whom there is a large body of historical material which include travelogues by

European visitors as well as others who knew Tewodros the man and parts of his story very well. From reading his book it is not clear if Marsden consulted existing Ethiopian manuscripts of the time written by local historians and others written about him by later Ethiopian authors. Nevertheless, it is an interesting book to read for both Ethiopians and others interested in this sara and about his particular individual and his times. However, the author does not seem to pay too much attention in the correct spelling of common local words and terms. It is not clear whether he thought it was better to choose euphemistic replacements of these local words to fit a Western audience's predilection to be struck by strange nomenclature that fits with a preconception of strangeness or not. He is more or less correct about the major historical details of the time, but after a certain chapter it seems that he was taking Tewodros into a mad rampage and spree of cruelty until his final tragic suicide. The quality and readability becomes rather stale with such terrible details and written in a rather hasty style that begs whether he just wanted to get over with it by piling atrocity over atrocity. Tewodros is an obliging subject in this arena, but it does not mean that this was all that there was to the story after that. If Marsden had maintained the almost poetic quality of the contents of the latter chapters and he did not jumble things up for the sake of completeness in the last half of the book, his work would have been a classic that would have qualified as a teaching piece in academic institutions at least in Ethiopia. But it is difficult for an Ethiopian to be too critical of an Englishman who was greatly interested in one of the heroes of one's own country and would like to thank Marsden for having taken the time and effort to write a readable book.

The author, no doubt, has an incredible writing skill. Technically the book meets the basic standards of a novel in terms of plot and structure. In his attempt to paint the lead (Tewodros) as a mass murderer, the author crossed the line of decency. Tewodros never ordered the massacre of 5,000 of his own soldiers for example. He was never on a wonton massacre spree as the author tried to paint him. In his determination to end the "Reign of the Princes" a period which threw the country into lawlessness and fragmentation, Tewodros had to subdue the numerous princes (Mesafint) and usher normalcy to Ethiopia. Such a mission could only have been accomplished through force that results in death and destruction to property. Such was the cost of forming nations in Europe and elsewhere. Tewodros never ordered the burning down of his capital Debre Tabor and Gondar and inserting such a wonton fiction in the book is preposterous even by historical fiction standards. I would even go further and say that the author is disrespectful to the people of Ethiopia who regard Tewodros in the highest of esteem. He witnessed, first hand, the incredible popularity of Tewodros in the cross section of the population and during his discussions with notable Ethiopian professors and

writers. My daughter, who is a great lover of books, told me she has no respect for writers who do not respect the history and value of other cutlers. How right she is, I have very little respect for Philip Marsden.

I make no complaint on the physical quality of this book or on the method of deliver since on these areas it was fine. I like our Emperor Teodros and his great contribution to Ethiopia, but one cannot judge a book by its cover and that is what I mean. I did not find substance in the book.

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