

Ras Tafari International Consultants. Spanish Town

compliance unit **Magdala Inquiry** **ABYSSINIAN**

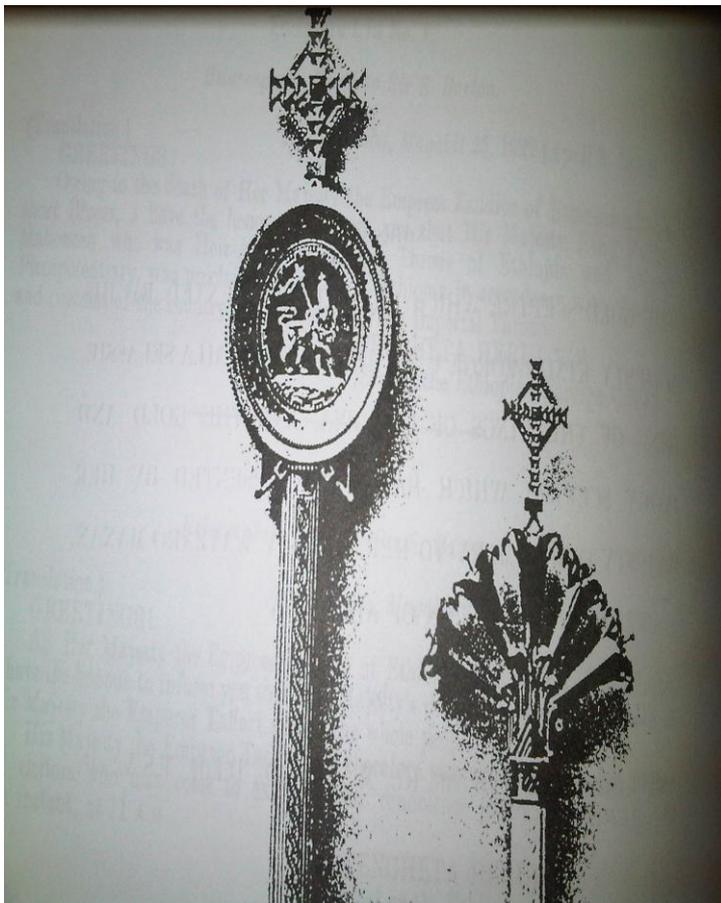
WAR—PRIZE—THE ABANA'S CROWN AND CHALICE. Contact
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MOTION FOR AN ADDRESS.

HC Deb 30 June 1871 vol 207 cc939-52

§ **COLONEL NORTH**



, in rising to move— That this House will, upon Monday next, resolve itself into a Committee to consider of an humble **Address to Her Majesty, praying that She will be graciously pleased to direct that the Abyssinian Abanas Crown and Chalice captured at Magdala by the force under General Lord Napier of Magdala, shall be purchased for the Nation,** and to assure Her Majesty that this House will make good the expense of the same, said, he brought forward the subject from no party considerations, still less from any hostility to the Government, but merely in the hope that justice might be done to a body of men who certainly deserved well of the country.

No Englishman could look back to the Abyssinian War without feelings of interest and admiration.

The War was undertaken in a country little known—hardly known at all—full of difficulty and danger; and almost the **whole of Europe** anticipated that the result would be disaster and disgrace to the Army; but, thanks to the courage, discipline, and unconquerable pluck of our soldiers, it was brought to a splendid termination, which added largely to the glory of this country.

When the Expedition was despatched the **British Museum sent a Mr. Holmes**, for the purpose of collecting any article of worth to add to the collection in the British Museum. After the assault and taking of **Magdala**, **Mr. Holmes applied to Lord**



Napier to retain the Abana's crown and chalice for the British Museum, and **Colonel Milward, R.A., with Colonel Fraser, V.C.**, deposited the articles at the British Museum. **On the 6th of July, 1868**, the correspondence commenced to which he wished to call the attention of the House.

The crown and chalice were to be sold as prize, the officers giving up their share for the benefit of the soldiers engaged in the expedition. They were offered to the Trustees of the British Museum for **£2,000**; but the Trustees having no funds at their disposal, being obliged to surrender the balances in their hands to the Exchequer, applied to the Treasury for funds to complete the purchase as soon as possible. About a year elapsed before any definite answer was received.



A year and a-half after the articles had been placed in the British Museum application was made for payment in a letter dated **December 13, 1869**; the date of the first letter which the Treasury was pleased to send, was **January 22, 1870**; and in it their Lordships stated that they declined to authorize the purchase.

Colonel Milward then wrote that, under the circumstances, the Prize Agents must hold the Trustees of the Museum responsible for the value of the articles. He would remind hon. Members that this was entirely a private soldiers' question, and they all knew how **touchy soldiers were on the subject of money**; moreover, it would appear that the Army believed they would receive that money, and that with that single exception each soldier had received his prize money.

§ **Notice taken, that 40 Members were not present; House counted, and 40 Members being found present,**

§ *COLONEL NORTH*

resumed, and said that in the course of further correspondence it was represented that, had the refusal of the Treasury been communicated earlier, the Prize Agents



might have been bound by it; but the detention of the articles for so long a period must be interpreted into a virtual agreement to purchase them.

Then the Treasury asked **Colonel Milward** to refer them to the letter, from which it was inferred that the Treasury had sanctioned the purchase; and, in reply, the Treasury was referred to the letter from the Trustees making application for a special grant. The

result was that, after the lapse of two years, **the Treasury**, in a letter, stated they could not admit there existed, or had existed, any undertaking or promise on the part of the Government for purchasing the **crown and chalice**, and they saw no reason to alter that decision.



The Government did not take the slightest notice, for **19 months**, of a letter that was addressed to them, and that was what he had to find fault with, because the opportunity of selling the articles were thereby lost. A letter was subsequently received by **Colonel Milward**, asking where he wished the **crown and chalice** to be delivered.

§ Notice taken, that 40 Members were not present; House counted and 40 Members being found present,

§ **COLONEL NORTH**

resumed. An application was next made to the right hon. Gentleman the **Secretary of State for War** to urge the **justice** of the claims upon the Treasury, who promptly replied

that he had no power to compel either the Trustees of the British Museum or the Treasury to authorize the payment in question, and did not feel himself entitled to interfere with their decisions respectively; but the Army would hear with deep regret that the man to whom they had a right to look to assist them in obtaining justice had entirely and absolutely refused to do so.

Lord Napier of Magdala, in a Minute which he drew up on the **27th of August, 1868**, attributed **political importance to the possession of that Crown.**

Lord Napier said the best way of treating the crown and chalice would be for the State to purchase them and deposit them in the British Museum until an opportunity

offered for **restoring them**; and that opportunity would arrive when a Government was established in Abyssinia with some prospect of stability.



Their selection of the party to whom they should give the crown and chalice would be an indication that they regarded them as the rightful rulers of the Empire.

He (Colonel North) thought Her Majesty's Treasury might have found time from the **7th of July, 1869**, until the **15th of June, 1870**, to reply to the various letters that had been written to them urging the purchase for the nation of the **crown and chalice**.

In speaking of the **Abyssinian Expedition**, the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Buckinghamshire (**Mr. Disraeli**) highly extolled both the officers and the men engaged in it.



The present Prime Minister, on the same occasion, was equally liberal in his praise of those troops. In "**another place**" similar compliments were paid to them. Not only was the **expedition to Abyssinia** a most exceptional and wonderful feat of arms, **but all Europe** was astonished that they should have retired from that country after having accomplished the objects of the war in a manner that showed that they were actuated by motives entirely devoid of ambition. In conclusion, **he begged to move the Resolution of which he had given Notice.**

SIR JOHN HAY

, in seconding the Motion, urged upon the Government the propriety of at once acceding to its terms, and of paying the sum realized by the sale of the articles in question to the Army. The sum to be realized by the sale would only amount to about **£2,000**, which was a very small amount to divide among such a large number of soldiers, and the officers had at once declined to receive any portion of it, while the soldiers proposed to devote it to the orphans of the whole of the

Army. That House had been occupied day after day in discussing how many millions ought to be given to the officers of the Army, and it was strange if they should refuse to pay this small sum to the private soldiers to whom it was due.

§ Amendment proposed, To leave out from the word "**That**" to the end of the Question, in order to add the words "this House will, upon Monday next, resolve itself into a Committee to consider of **an humble Address to Her Majesty, praying that She will be graciously pleased to direct that the Abyssinian Abanas Crown and Chalice captured at Magdala by the force under General Lord Napier of Magdala,** shall be purchased for the Nation, and to assure Her Majesty that this House will make good the expense of the same,"— (Colonel North,) —instead thereof.



§ Question proposed, "**That the words proposed to be left out stand part of the Question.**"

§ **THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER**

said, that the Motion of the hon. and gallant Member for Oxfordshire (Colonel North) was of a rather unusual character, it being to require Her Majesty's Government to purchase for the nation

the **crown and chalice captured in Abyssinia.**

Now, a purchase was usually a free transaction, and not carried out at the dictation of a higher power. Another peculiarity of the Motion was that it ordered the Government to purchase these articles at a price higher than they would fetch in the open market. **What were the grounds upon which the Motion was supported?**

Putting aside any general praise of the British Army, he came at once to the question why the Government was to be called upon to purchase articles which, in their opinion, ought not to be purchased, and to give for them a price which they would not fetch in the open market. The Government were asked to purchase these articles out of the money which belonged to the British Museum, **because they were connected with the Abyssinian War.**

Now, he could imagine no greater misconception of the duties of the Trustees **of the British Museum.**

They were intrusted with large sums of public money for the purchase of various articles, and he must say that the purchases had been made with great judgment and discretion.



The principles which should guide the Trustees was the obtaining of articles calculated to promote art, and which were admirable in point of workmanship.

But the fact was, that the articles in question, independently of their associations, were not fit objects to be purchased for the British Museum; he was informed by competent authorities that they possessed no artistic merit whatever.

They consisted of large masses of gold which had a certain intrinsic value in themselves, and whatever sum they would sell for in the open market might be realized and distributed among those who were entitled to it.



Lord Napier proposed that the articles, having been purchased with the money granted to the British Museum, they should be deposited in that building until they were restored to the individual who proved to be the strongest in that country; but with all deference to that distinguished officer, he **(the Chancellor of the Exchequer)** did not think the British Museum was intended for a temporary storehouse for the reception of **barbaric spoils of war**, nor did he think it was right that public money, intended for a totally different purpose, should be applied in purchasing articles to be given away whenever a convenient opportunity should arise.

But there was another ground which the hon. and gallant Gentleman had put forward in support of his Motion that was entitled to much more attention—he meant the delay in the affair that had occurred. It was quite true that these articles had been placed in the British Museum in **July, 1868**, and that it was not until

January, 1870—that was to may, not until one year and a half afterwards—that a definitive refusal to purchase them was given by the Government.

The circumstance was, however, easily to be explained. From the time when the articles were first deposited in the Museum until the following December, when the late Government left office, **Colonel Milward** was unceasing in his applications to the Government to purchase them; but to those applications no reply was given.



When the late Government left office, curiously enough all the papers connected with this subject also disappeared, and it was not until **July, 1869**, that similar applications were made for the first time to the present Government; but, owing to some neglect, those applications were not brought to his knowledge until **January, 1870**, when he at once declined to purchase the articles.

Under these circumstances, he was not to blame for the delay that had occurred in the matter. He could not think that it was the wish of the House that public money should be spent in the purchase of those articles, which were not exactly such spoil as it became an Army who had scarcely met with any resistance to bring away from the country they had attacked. **However, here they were, and the best thing that could be done was to sell them,** and to distribute their proceeds among the captors who were entitled to the prize. All he asked was, that the Government should not be forced to expend the money of the British Museum in purchasing such property, for, as he said before, they were not worthy the attention of the Trustees.

§ SIR STAFFORD NORTHCOTE



said, the observation that had fallen from the right hon. Gentleman the **Chancellor of the Exchequer**, respecting the fact that their troops encountered **no great amount of resistance in Abyssinia** was scarcely worthy of him, and it was to a great extent owing to their extremely good conduct and the care they took to avoid giving any unnecessary provocation to the people among whom they were.

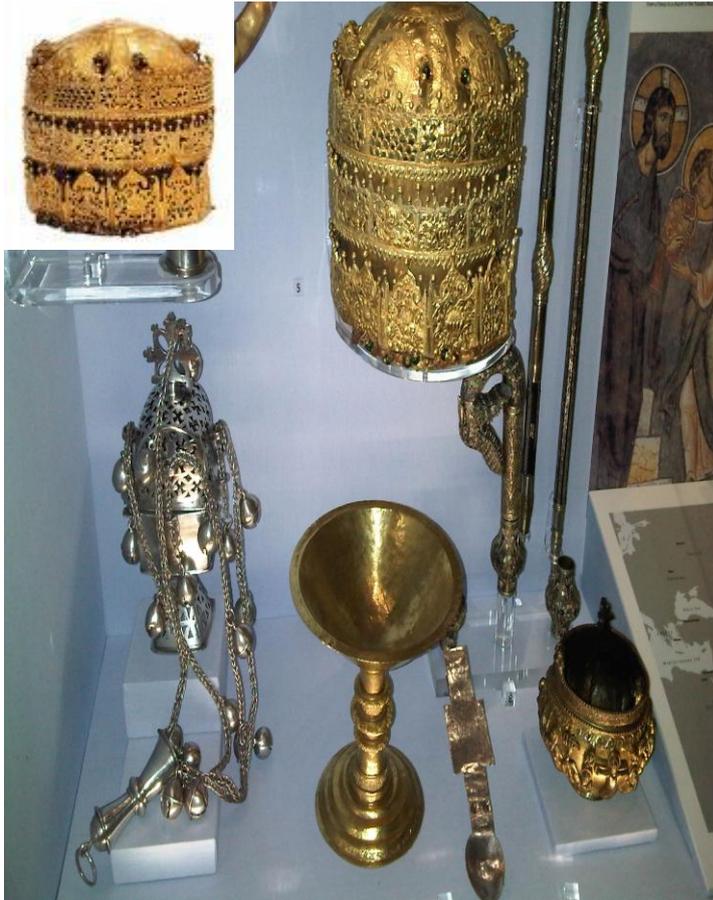
Army prize was in a great degree given as a reward for the forbearance shown by men who, in the heat of action or in the

excitement of the moment, might be tempted to appropriate to themselves articles of value belonging to the enemy; and in that case, though their soldiers did not meet with much resistance, they had to endure a good deal of severe hardship and trial.



Although he had not seen them personally, the articles in question had been described in a way that led one to suppose they were of considerable historical value and antiquarian interest, **like many of the articles now possessed by the British Museum.**

Moreover, he thought the British Museum was not, like the Museum at South Kensington, an institution merely for the promotion of art and of taste, but a collection of works interesting to the nation for various reasons; and he thought that was evidenced by the fact that an officer despatched from that very Museum accompanied the expedition for the express purpose of observing whether any of the articles which the Army came across were such as it would be desirable to secure for national purposes; and the claim that these particular articles should be reserved was in the first instance put forward, not by the Army, but **by Mr. Holmes,** who on first seeing them thought they should be sent to the British Museum.



From the correspondence on the subject it appeared that the Trustees of the **British Museum**, who should be the best judges of such a matter, had acknowledged **£2,000** to be the fair value of those articles, and that they would have paid that sum for them if they had had the money at their disposal. Again, it was admitted that the delay which had arisen in connection with that question had borne hardly on their soldiers, who did not now make a peremptory demand, but only such a statement, couched in a respectful spirit, of the hardship which they felt they laboured under in that case, as might receive public attention and secure reasonable and just consideration for the claim they put forward in respect to articles

which were impounded by an officer of the **British Museum** at a time when they might have fetched a considerable price, and which, after much delay, **the Treasury declined to purchase.**

§ MAJOR ARBUTHNOT

said, he was present when those articles were captured, and thought it expedient that they should be bought for the nation, because in addition to their intrinsic worth they possessed an historical value and interest which would increase with the lapse of time. He admitted that the sum asked for them was a fancy price, but then everything connected with the Abyssinian Expedition fetched a fancy price.

[Laughter.] Hon. Gentlemen might laugh, but it was only because they had grudged no expense for its execution, **that the Abyssinian Expedition had been so successfully carried through.** On several critical occasions the willingness and ability to pay turned the scale in our favour.

If the money claimed for these articles was now withheld a breach of faith would be committed towards their soldiers, because they were sequestered, and not put up to auction like the rest of the prize property sold for the benefit of the non-commissioned officers and men, merely because it was believed that the agent of the British Museum was virtually the agent of the Government, and that what he

undertook to do would be afterwards performed by the Trustees of the **British Museum** or by the Government.



The effect on the discipline of the Army of not fulfilling that engagement would be very serious, because it would encourage our soldiers in any future war to act on a rule which in civil life was perhaps a wholesome one—namely, to get all that they could and to keep to all that they got. It had been said during the debate, by the **Chancellor of the**

Exchequer, that the dissatisfaction arising in connection with these proceedings had come about in consequence of the papers having been mislaid—a cause precisely similar to the cause of the war itself. And then the **Chancellor of the Exchequer** talked superciliously of the proceedings of the Army.

It was true it was not a very bloody campaign; but there was a good deal of hard work, and on the occasion when the Vote of Thanks was proposed in the House the present **Prime Minister spoke in glowing terms**, not only of the conduct of the Army, but of the Government which had planned the expedition. Perhaps as **the Chancellor of the Exchequer** did not then contemplate occupying his present position he did not participate in the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Gentleman.

§ MR. CANDLISH

said, he sympathized with the Motion of the hon. and gallant Member for Oxfordshire (Colonel North). That there had been great delay somewhere was evident, from the fact that it appeared the first application was, after 12 months, followed by a second, which remained unanswered for six months more, and then after another three months a final answer was given.



The officers of superior rank who went in the Expedition had been handsomely considered and rewarded for their great exploits, and no one grudged them the honour conferred upon them; but while the rank and file had had their toils and hardships, they had been the heirs of very small proceeds. **Mr. Holmes** doubtless went to Abyssinia with the consent of the Government, and contributed to make up the **£9,000,000** which had been thrown away. If the hon. and gallant Member divided he should certainly go with him into the lobby, because it seemed to him that those men who had

not shown an ungenerous spirit should be dealt with in no **niggardly spirit**.

§ COLONEL BARTELOT

said, he would appeal to the Government to accede to the Motion of the hon. and gallant Member for Oxfordshire (Colonel North). **It appeared that the prize was deposited in the British Museum at the recommendation of Mr. Holmes**, and having been detained there for 18 months he thought they ought to be paid for. Soldiers did not reason very closely, and they would expect that a great nation which sent its soldiers into every part of the world to risk their lives would not **haggle** over a matter like this.



§ MR. EASTWICK

said, he trusted it was not too late for the Government to make some concession with regard to that question before the House went to a division. He would not inquire how far the British Museum was or was not a proper place for depositing these relics; what he would urge on Ministers was, **that it was not worth while for so paltry a sum**, as was here in dispute, to leave a cause of discontent to irritate the Army.

His idea was that those articles should be purchased, **and given back on a proper opportunity to the Abyssinian Government.**



A time would very likely soon come when they would be desirous of making some present to that Government, and there was nothing of our own manufacture which would be so acceptable to the Abyssinians as those things.

Although the Abana from whom they were taken was dead, there was, or would be, another Abana in his place, and to him let those articles be given. In that way they would obtain a double advantage—**they would conciliate the people of Abyssinia,** and they would remove out of the way a matter which would for a long time to come rankle in the minds of the soldiers, and make them dissatisfied and discontented.



§ MR. SPENCER WALPOLE

said, he wished to state how the case actually stood. **Mr. Holmes**, as an officer of the British Museum, **accompanied the Abyssinian Expedition**, and among the things secured for the Army Prize Fund were those articles which Mr. Holmes thought it would be for the advantage of the public that the British Museum should possess. **Mr. Holmes**, had however, no authority to bind the trustees except provisionally, for the trustees of the British Museum were powerless until they obtained the **sanction of Parliament**; and the only way they could purchase such articles would be by application to the Government and obtaining their sanction.



These articles were, therefore, deposited at the British Museum by **Colonel Milward**, who represented the Army Prize Fund, until the price could be ascertained. **[Colonel NORTH: No!]** That was the fact. The trustees took the matter into consideration, and they thought that there were circumstances connected with the Expedition giving an historical value to the articles which might make it advisable to purchase them. A representation to that

effect was made to the Government, but no notice was taken of it.

On Colonel Milward applying again, that representation was made to the Government, but no reply was sent. Another Government came into office, and a fresh application was made, and his right hon. Friend the **Chancellor of the Exchequer**, in answering it, did not imply that the Government had no intention of purchasing the articles, but rather that they would not pay the price. If the matter had been dealt with in **1868**, there would not have been much difficulty about purchasing these things. He quite agreed that the value of the articles was not what it had been thought then.



But the historical interest was not diminished, and therefore the matter stood on the same footing as when they were deposited with the **British Museum**. Unfortunately there had been this delay, and in consequence there had been created the impression on the mind of those interested in the Army Prize Fund that the Government were considering the matter, and would certainly purchase these articles for some sum or other,

because the answer of the **Chancellor of the Exchequer** was that he would not pay the amount asked. If that view was adopted, it would not be worthwhile to disappoint the Army for the sake of a few hundreds more or less; and it would be a gracious act if they allowed these articles to be purchased, after doing which they might take their time in considering how and where they should dispose of them.

MR. GLADSTONE



said, he rose in obedience to the appeal which had been made to him by the hon. and gallant Member for Oxfordshire (Colonel North), although he answered him with the greatest regret, because of the unsatisfactory state of the question from first to last. **He (Mr. Gladstone) deeply regretted that those articles were over brought from Abyssinia**, and could not conceive why they were so brought.



They were never at war with the people or the churches of Abyssinia. They were at war with Theodore, who personally had inflicted on them an outrage and a wrong; and he deeply lamented, for the sake of the country, and for the sake of all concerned, that those articles, to us insignificant, though probably to the Abyssinians sacred and imposing symbols, or at least

hallowed by association, were thought fit to be brought away by a British Army.

He admitted that the Trustees of the British Museum had done their duty by dealing promptly with the application made to them; but he entirely dissented from the conclusion at which they arrived. In the first place, the Trustees in their letter had apparently, through the use of an unguarded expression, gone far to sustain the declaration that these articles were impounded.

The expression was that the articles were "**secured**" by **Mr. Holmes**. Inasmuch as **Mr. Holmes** had no authority to "secure" them, he, no doubt, merely suggested that the articles should be sent to the Museum, in order that the Trustees should have an opportunity of considering whether they should be acquired for the nation or not. Still, the term was most unfortunate, and so also was the conclusion of the Trustees. **Mr. Holmes was truly described as an archæologist sent to Abyssinia.**



He perfectly remembered the discussion at the meeting of the Trustees, when it was determined to send out **Mr. Holmes**, whose mission was with respect to really ancient remains, and had nothing whatever to do with uncertified unexamined articles, as to which there was not a word in the letter of the Trustees tending to **fix their value, their age, their country, or their manufacture.**

The Trustees said they would **constitute a permanent record** of the most remarkable event of the present time—certainly a highly-coloured description when they considered what events had lately marked the 19th century. But was it the business of the Museum to accumulate records of the most remarkable events of the present time?

In his (Mr. Gladstone's) opinion, it was the business of the Museum to do everything else almost except that. It was the business of the British Museum to acquire objects which would serve as sources of instruction, and tend to elevate the taste of the people. It was also the business of the Museum to accumulate objects of historic interest and instruction. **Under which description did these articles fall? Who made them? When and where were they made?**



Not a word of information was supplied on these and other points, but the Trustees of the Museum said they would serve as a permanent record of the most remarkable events of the present time; and, if we could acquire a piece of the ruins of the Column in the Place Vendôme, that would be another such record. As to the delay which was complained of, his right hon. Friend (**Sir Stafford Northcote**) had not explained why the Government which received this explanation kept it six months without replying to it.

His right hon. Friend the **Chancellor of the Exchequer** was not to blame, because for some

months after the new Government came into office he had no Papers whatever, and all records of the transaction had disappeared. **When in January, 1870**, his right hon. Friend became acquainted with the facts, only a few days elapsed before he sent a perfectly explicit reply, to the effect that it was impossible the nation should pay a fancy price for articles of a very moderate intrinsic value. It was true he did not close the door altogether to any dealings upon another footing; but no modification or mitigation of the terms were offered, and he consequently declined to enter into the matter.

There was one element in this affair which was more agreeable—namely, **Lord Napier's letter.**

With that just and kindly spirit which belonged to him, Lord Napier said these articles, whatever the claim of the Army, ought not to be placed among the national treasures, and said they ought to be held in deposit till they could be returned to Abyssinia.



It was rather a painful confession, because, if they ought to be returned, it seemed to follow that they ought not to have been brought from Abyssinia; but he must say that he agreed with Lord Napier.

He saw in the Correspondence that mention was made of a probable reference **to Lord Napier**, and that might account for much of the delay, while the disappearance of the Papers might have been accidental.

He could not consent, after consulting with his Colleagues, to the Address moved by the hon. and gallant Gentleman, because it contemplated the execution of the arrangement originally contemplated—that these articles should be purchased for the nation; **and whatever became the property of the nation, to be added to the national treasures, could not, according to the law, be alienated to any other purpose.**

If those articles were acquired it should be upon the basis described by Lord Napier, with the view of their being held only until they could be restored. He hoped the hon. and gallant Gentleman would be satisfied with the undertaking that they would look into the matter, with the object of doing that which was fair and equitable. He might have seemed to censure more severely than was justifiable some of those who had taken part in this matter; but such was not



his intention. By a complication of accidents expectations had been raised which they could not fairly overlook.

§ COLONEL NORTH

said, he was perfectly satisfied with the answer of the right hon. Gentleman; but wished to observe that the troops who brought

away these articles had no means of leaving them in the charge of **anybody in Abyssinia.**

§ *MR. SCLATER-BOOTH*



explained that having been Secretary to the Board of Treasury, the original application on this matter was made to him in **July, 1868.** **The then First Lord expressed a desire to communicate with Lord Napier on the subject,** and viewing the transaction as a matter of expenditure it was worth consideration. As large donations in the way of batta had been made to the soldiers of the Expedition, there did not seem to be any ground for demanding a payment in excess of the intrinsic value of the articles. He was glad of a postponement until the conference had taken place. The second application was made in the October following, and although the letter was not addressed to him, he admitted that it would have been better to have given a definite answer.



But he was then the only political officer in attendance at the Treasury, for a **General Election** was impending; and at the time the Revenue was in an unsatisfactory state. In view of possible contingencies, it was also undesirable that any expenditure should be incurred which could hereafter be called in question; and under such peculiar circumstances it did not seem unreasonable that the matter should stand over for a few weeks longer. He had nothing to say as to the subsequent delay, which he believed had been

explained to have been of a more or less accidental character.

§ *COLONEL NORTH*

asked if he was to understand that the **£2,000** which were to have been given for the reliefs would be paid to the soldiers, but in another way?

MR. HENLEY

said, he was glad to hear that the Prime Minister wished to send these things back to Abyssinia, for it looked very much as if the collector of curiosities had put the soldiers up to doing something very near robbing a church.



From the description given, it seemed that one of these articles had been consecrated to the Altar, and he considered that neither of them should have been brought from Abyssinia.

MR. GLADSTONE

, in reply to the hon. and gallant Gentleman (Colonel North), said, he had not pledged himself, as the hon. and gallant Colonel supposed; **but he undertook,**

on the part of the Government, to look into the matter, and endeavour to settle it in the spirit of what he had said.

§ Amendment, by leave, withdrawn. **Ras Tafari International Consultants Magdala Inquiry: Spanish Town compliance unit: Jamaica-British Diamond and Golden Jubilee.** Contact seymour31@hotmail.co.uk