

PREPARING FOR WAR: COLONEL COLVILE'S NOTES ON ABEOKUTA

Mark Smith - Derbyshire Record Office

Colonel Sir Henry Edward Colvile (1852-1907) had a military career that took him across the globe. His entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography notes his role in campaigns in east and southern Africa in the 1880s and 1890s as well as a brief stint in Burma.

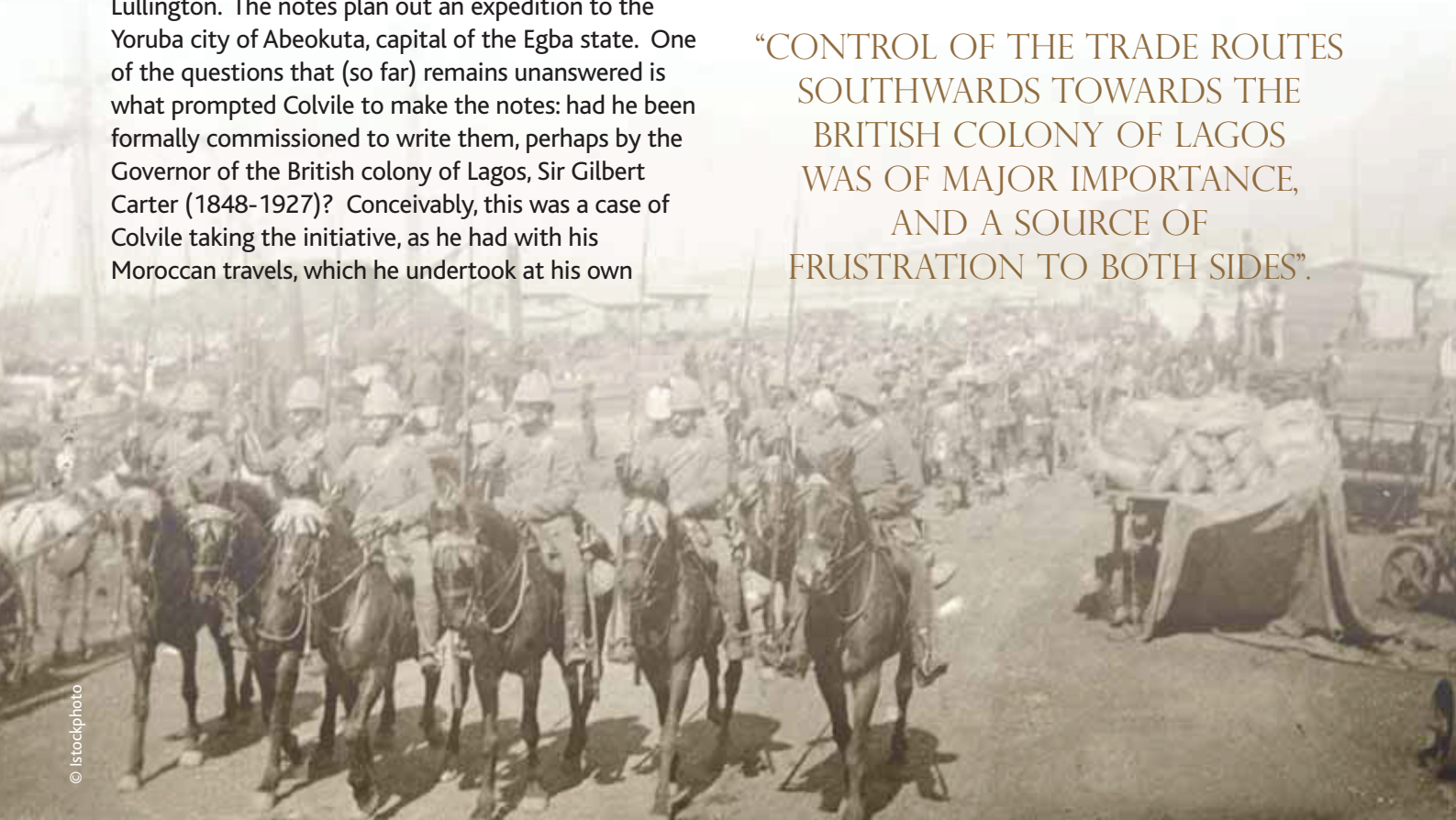
There is no mention of west Africa – yet he had sufficient experience of the area to prepare a document in 1892 entitled “Notes on an Expedition to Abeokuta” (now Nigeria), which is held at Derbyshire Record Office, alongside the records of his family’s estates near Lullington. The notes plan out an expedition to the Yoruba city of Abeokuta, capital of the Egba state. One of the questions that (so far) remains unanswered is what prompted Colvile to make the notes: had he been formally commissioned to write them, perhaps by the Governor of the British colony of Lagos, Sir Gilbert Carter (1848-1927)? Conceivably, this was a case of Colvile taking the initiative, as he had with his Moroccan travels, which he undertook at his own

expense (but presenting his findings to the Military Intelligence Department).

Striking a balance

By the 1890s, Egba and its neighbour (and rival) Ijebu had become players in a highly lucrative trade in commodities such as palm oil. Control of the trade routes southwards towards the British colony of Lagos was of major importance, and a source of frustration to both sides. “All native produce had to be sold in their markets, and at their price”, the Governor of Lagos complained, “and upon the smallest provocation the roads were stopped and no produce was permitted to reach Lagos”. For the Yoruba states, there was a difficult balance to be

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struck: how could they negotiate the terms of trade without compromising their political and economic sovereignty?

In May 1892, British troops attacked and occupied Ijebu, to force the roads open. Colvile's notes, compiled in July, were in preparation for another war, this time against Egba. Before starting, he wrote, it would be necessary to build bridges, roads, rest camps and even hospitals for wounded troops. He estimated the amount of telegraph wire required for the mission's purposes at 80 miles. But who would assist such a massive undertaking? Colvile's suggestions on this demonstrate his prejudices: "bearing in mind the inveterate laziness of the male population, and their habit of having all their work done for them by women", he wrote, "I would suggest the enrolment of a large proportion of females for transport work". Yet, despite his low opinions of the men, Colvile was keen to "produce a lasting effect on the Egba tribe". "The terms of peace", he wrote, "should be dictated to it in its capital, Abeokuta; and as this (according to native ideas) is a strongly fortified place and has hitherto resisted all attacks of neighbouring tribes, it is probable that the enemy will then make his most determined stand in that place".

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In the event, it was a very different kind of expedition which made its way to the Egba capital: an invited one. Having seen Ijebu's defeat, the Egba authorities took the pragmatic decision to send an invitation to the Governor to visit Abeokuta. The treaty he signed there,



Lullington Hall, the Colvile family home (Derbyshire County Council, Derbyshire Record Office D258/54/4)



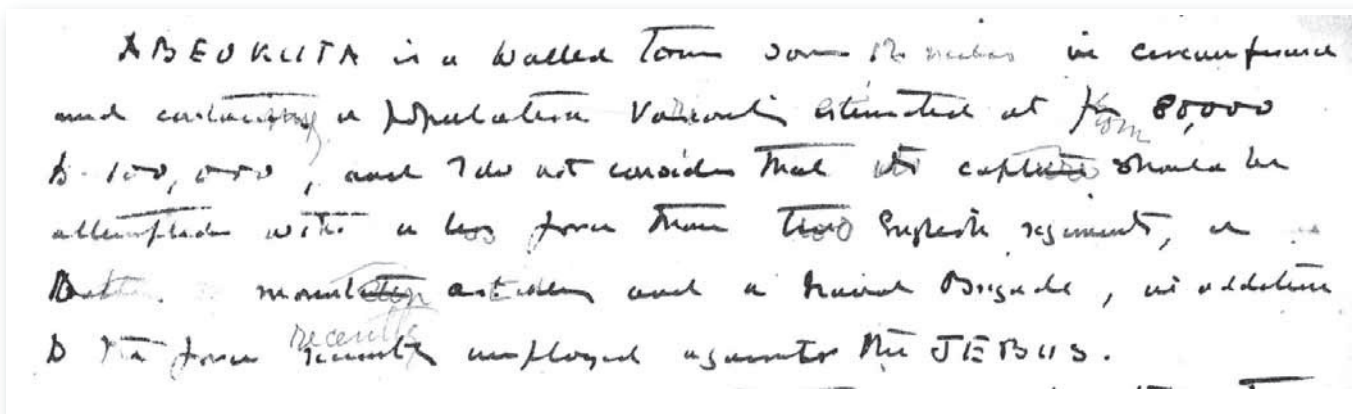
The Colvile Family Arms (from History of the Colvile Family, 1896)



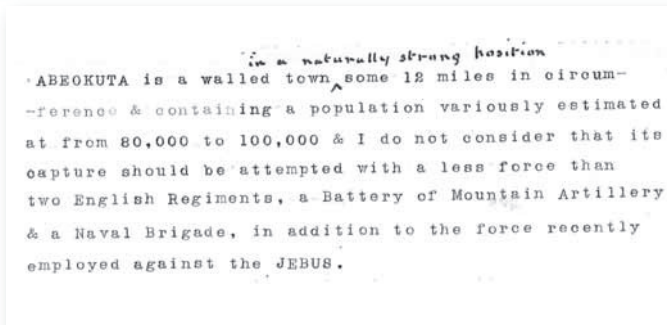
Henry Colvile, pictured as a boy, with his parents (D258/54/4)

on 18 January 1893, removed the barriers to trade, and left Egba with nominal independence.

Governor Carter believed that it was only by witnessing the defeat of Ijebu that the Egba authorities were "brought to reason", and that the subsequent occupation of key areas in Yoruba land was the only thing preventing "the recurrence of the inter-tribal wars which so seriously interfere with trade and the general prosperity of the country". The wars between the competing Yoruba states had certainly been a longstanding problem in the region, and it was Carter's opinion that the conflict persisted with "the sole object on either side being the maintenance of the slave trade". The continuing illegal slave trade provided Britain with its best propaganda in favour of imperial expansion. The only remedy for the traffic in ►►



The notes are handwritten and typed. Here is the same section from each version of the text. (Derbyshire County Council, Derbyshire Record Office D461/6)



human beings, it was argued, was to provide "legitimate" trade as a substitute – and by force if necessary. The force exerted against Ijebu clearly had a major impact on the decisions made by Egba's political leaders.

Dissenting monarchs

The treaty that followed Carter's expedition was signed on behalf of the "King and the Egba authorities". This is something of an anomaly because, although the various sections of the Egba people had long-established leaders, none enjoyed universal recognition as monarch. However, the British preferred, wherever possible, to deal with African populations through a single ruler, and within a few years, one claimant, the Alake of Abeokuta, was designated "paramount" chief. This position remains one of the most important "traditional" offices in Nigeria, even though the accompanying status is still controversial. In March 2008, *The Punch* (Lagos) reported that "dissenting monarchs" in Abeokuta were refusing to accept the supremacy of the Alake, and that the state governor would have to intervene. Clearly, the decisions made by both sides in Carter's day have continued resonance.

In Wole Soyinka's fictionalised accounts of his father's life and times in Abeokuta four decades later, these events are never far from the surface. At a key juncture in the book, an elder of Soyinka's town wallows in his memories of 1892/3:

[Carter] had demanded a powerful delegation to bring the humiliation of Ijebu to him and sign a treaty which

declared the routes open to every Christian ruffraff and company agent. Ten sheep they took, [but] it only boosted Carter's pride, and what a tongue-lashing he had given them! Insults. Abuse. And then, most daring of all, his soldiers had pointed guns at them and ordered them to put their thumbs on the paper. What was in it? They could not read it. And anyway they did not care. Their mission which he ... had agreed to, and only with the greatest reluctance, was to present their peace offering and assure [Carter] that no one had wish to insult his king.

The reference to sheep is not from the author's imagination: the Times reported news of Abeokuta's representatives bringing "a number of sheep as presents in token of friendliness towards the Governor, and in acknowledgement of his kindness and regard towards the authorities of Abeokuta".

Principle of effectivity

As Colville observed, gaining control of Abeokuta would make a big impression. But why were the British so keen to advertise their presence? In short, because of the Principle of Effectivity established at the 1884/5 Berlin Conference. At the Conference, the European powers worked out the principles by which they

might formalise authority over their respective “spheres of influence” in Africa, without sparking off wars among themselves. If one of the powers could demonstrate that it had effective control of an area (by means of treaties of protection), then the others were bound to abandon any claims they had.

The Scramble for Africa is often portrayed as a series of conquests, involving nothing more complicated than the weak (in this case, the African polities) being beaten by the strong (the industrialised nations of Europe). While it is true that the British had overwhelming firepower at their disposal, expeditions such as that sketched out by Colvile were expensive, and resources finite. Far better to become an established power by carving out a role as arbiter in an existing set of conflicts. Even after the Union Flag had been raised, the local leaders were far from mere appointees. The relationship may have been unequal, but there was still give and take.

In Soyinka’s work, the protagonists are alive to the dangers of mishandling their relationship with the new colonial power. Facing a community sharply divided over the choice of a new chief, the character based on Soyinka’s father urges his peers to consider the consequences of allowing the British to settle the matter for them. “Remind them of Carter’s war against the Ijebu,” he says. “If we use our own hands to open the gates to an army of occupation, our ancestors will curse us from their graves”. ■

References:

- The Punch (Lagos), 7 March 2008
- The Times (London), 20 November 1896 (Carter’s letter to the editor) and 18 January 1893 (the invitation of the Governor to Abeokuta)
- Wole Soyinka *Ìsarà: a voyage around Essay* (London: Minerva, 1994) p422, p438

