

Contexts: two men and a boat

Xavier Edwards stumbles on a boat from 'Fashoda', 1898

EVERY GENERATION is born within a phase of communication's development. Thus it can be said that today's teenagers are 'iPod students'. That we take for granted the world into which we are born is illustrated by the story of the old lady who said 'If God had wanted us to fly He would not have given us the trains'.

Trains excited people in the later nineteenth century. The German General Staff's mastery of train timetables (and sound education for its soldiers) was soon recognised as important for the outcome of the Franco Prussian War, 1870-1. Trains that supplanted carriage by turnpike coach, cart and canal were a British invention and developed from the work of George Stephenson, among others, and the Stockton-Darlington railway, 1825. The second half of the nineteenth century was the era for extensive railway construction in many countries in Europe, the Americas and the East. The plans for a Berlin Baghdad railway, 1888, exercised the British Foreign Office because of its strategic implications.

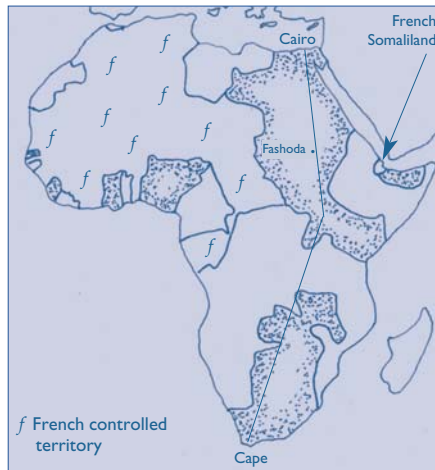
The importance of communication by railway, for strategic control and for trade, was an indirect issue in a major incident during the later phase of the 'scramble for Africa', the actions of European powers to colonise African lands. Cecil Rhodes, who went to South Africa for reasons of health when he left school in Hertfordshire in 1870 and who founded the De Beers Mining Company, 1880, supported the Cape to Cairo railway project to link British colonies the length of Africa, from the Cape (in South Africa) to the Egyptian capital and chief port, Cairo, a North South axis. France had extensive colonies in West Africa and sought to link them to French Somaliland on the horn of Africa in a West East axis. The ambitions of the British and French crossed in Upper Sudan.

Following Disraeli's 1875 Suez Canal share purchase and Gladstone's Egyptian intervention, 1882, Britain had sought to extend Egyptian authority to the Upper Nile in Sudan, thereby to enhance the security of Egypt and the Suez Canal. Kitchener had avenged the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885 by the battle of Omdurman (nearby) in September 1898, when some 10,000 Sudanese were killed and 13,000 wounded as against British casualties of 48 killed and 382 wounded. Churchill,



Marchand (top left) and Kitchener (right). Below, the TSS Melik, an Army ship, as seen by the Nile in 2000. The Melik, described 'as deadly as a cruise missile [is today]' was one of the 'state of the art' Nile ships that helped secure the Sudan for Anglo-Egyptian interests

present at the battle as a news reporter, was greatly impressed by the encounter. Kitchener had, it seemed, by the enhancement of the Egyptian Khedive's authority achieved his objective but events



soon took a turn. Within days of the Omdurman victory, Kitchener received reports of the arrival of French troops up stream on the River Nile. Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand reached the Nile fort of Fashoda in July 1898 at the end of an epic 2,000-mile journey, much through unexplored wilderness, across the breadth of Africa. He had left Gabon in May 1987 with 150 men taking with him a disassembled steamer, the *Faidherbe*, its engine rolled on logs. Upon arrival, Marchand repaired the fort and established good relations with the local Sudanese. In September, Kitchener, with 2,000 men and with gunboats, arrived.

David Thomson captures the mood of the encounter between Marchand and Kitchener in *Europe Since Napoleon* (1957).

'I must hoist the Egyptian flag here,' said Kitchener.

'Why, I myself will help you to hoist it - over the village,' replied Marchand.

'Over the fort.'

'No, that I shall resist.'

'Do you know, Major, that this affair may set France and England at war?'

'I bowed,' records Marchand, 'without replying.'

News of the standoff in the remote African outpost reached Britain and France and public opinion in both countries, fuelled by increased readership of the relatively recent 'popular press' (the *Daily Mail* was founded in 1896, for example), was hot for war. In the event, statesmanship, guided by European strategic considerations, defused popular passions. Rather than another Anglo-French clash of empires to follow the struggle for North America (the Seven Years' War, 1756-63) the rights to Sudan and the Upper Nile were settled by diplomacy in 1899.

In retrospect, we see that the peaceful settlement of the Fashoda crisis was a step toward the *Entente Cordiale*, the Anglo French agreement of 1904, and that understanding, in turn, fostered the British agreement with France's ally, and another British colonial competitor, Russia in 1908. Thereby, the alignment of states that went to war with Germany in 1914 was formed and a war unfolded that scarred a generation in Europe and beyond and, to a not inconsiderable extent, molded the twentieth century.

Illustration acknowledgements, Vol 12, No 2, Dec 2006.

Courtesy of Dr Susan Barton, pages 4, 5, 6 and 7; Sempringham Archive, front cover (left) and pages 2 (left) and 22 (top two); *Illustrated London News*, front cover (right) and page 2 (right); the cartoons on pages 12 and 14 were sourced from works by Dr Roy Douglas.

Correction to Vol 12, No 1, September 2006.

The picture on page 9 was not as specified in the caption but the Congress of Vienna, 1815. To print the correct picture, go to the start page of our website ([history-ontheweb](http://www.history-ontheweb.com)) and [SiteNEWS](#) (below 'Comments on how to use this site ...') with the url address http://www.history-ontheweb.co.uk/new_pers/explore_study_centre.htm and print from news item number 12. We apologise for the error.