

Book Review

When Eritreans Faced a Double Annexation

*By Asgede Hagos**

The Deluge: A Personal View of the End of Empire in the Middle East, by Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, IB Tauris publishers (New York, London). 2019. 319 pages ISBN: 978-1784538279.

Concerted efforts to bring about lasting peace to the troubled Horn of Africa today continue to face headwinds blowing from the past. Some of the roots of the ongoing instability and fragmentation in the region, for example, are traceable to the fateful decision made more than six decades ago to prevent the Eritrean people from exercising their right to author their own future—decisions which continue to adversely affect the region in countless ways.

The pain of that period is brought back to life in a recently-published memoir of one of the empire builders who served in Eritrea as a member of the British Military Administration that occupied the former Italian colony following the downfall of Mussolini's fascist regime in 1941. "What lies behind all these calamities [in the Horn] was Ethiopia's all too foreseeable contempt for the United Nation's decision and her high-handed liquidation" of Eritrea's autonomy, said the author, Sir Kennedy Trevaskis (p. 165). He also blames the United Nations for its "thoughtless handling of the Eritrean question...bring[ing] such chaos" to this sub-region of Africa (p. 166).

However, Trevaskis fails to see the critical role Great Britain played in not only enabling, but also actively cooperating with Ethiopia, the United Nations as well as others to abuse Eritrea and deny its people their fundamental rights. The memoir reveals in a stark way how the British colonial policy establishment at home and in Eritrea prepared the groundwork for their client state in Addis Ababa to annex the southern half of the territory and to incorporate the other northern half into their long-standing colony, the Sudan—in effect a double annexation—at the dawn of the decolonization era. The difference between the two is that the one to the south involved local expansionists as well as their external partners, while the other was solely driven by foreign actors. If this insidious plan had succeeded, it would have wiped Eritrea off the map as a socio-political and economic entity, shattering the bonds cementing the different national, ethnic and religious groups together as a people, the result of nearly six decades of shared experience under centralized colonial institutions.

Some readers may remember the name G. K. N. Trevaskis from his first book on the Red Sea territory, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-52*, published in 1960, two years before Ethiopia formally and forcibly abrogated Eritrea's U.N.-mandated federal status—something the author had strongly warned against. "The temptation to subject Eritrea firmly under her [Ethiopia's] own control will always be great," he said in his earlier book. "Should she try to do so, she will risk Eritrea's discontent and eventual revolt."¹

This was one year before the Eritrean war of independence started in 1961, and two years before the Ethiopian emperor formally 'liquidated,' as Trevaskis put it, the UN-mandated federal arrangement between the two countries and officially incorporated it into his antiquated empire, making it the 14th province of his realm; this sparked three decades of death and destruction in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Writing 30 years later, in the postscript of his memoir, published in 2019, Trevaskis, who died in 1990, one year before the revolt he accurately predicted and witnessed in Eritrea led to a triumphant end, said, "It remains to be said that Ethiopia, whose maltreatment of Eritrea is the principal cause of all these horrors [in the Horn], [and] is in the

¹ G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-1952*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1960, 131.

long-run likely to suffer most” (p. 166). Some of the damaging impact ‘these horrors’ brought about still linger today though there are new signs that indicate the two neighboring nations can work together and help bring durable peace to the region.

I.

This is the memoir of a dedicated British empire builder during the twilight years of the 500-year-old expansionist enterprise. Trevaskis, who served as a soldier and an administrator, devoted his life to build, expand and preserve the enterprise in Eritrea, in Northern Rhodesia (today’s Zambia) and what was called the South Arabia and Aden colony, where he almost lost his life in a grenade attack by a local rebel group in 1963, the first year of his three-year tenure there. However, the focus of this review is on his experience in Eritrea, where he served as district commissioner in the British administration.

That he was shuttled from one outpost of the empire to another at a time when the once mighty empire was on its last legs is at the heart of the book. In fact, the word *Deluge* in the title is intended to capture the impact, intensity and magnitude of the fast and furious anti-colonial forces he witnessed across the world—an outcome he devoted his lifetime to prevent. This had an almost daily impact on his own life. He said he began to encounter disrespect every time Britain was forced to let a former colony go. Among those who needled him about it in Eritrea was Ibrahim Sultan, the founding father of the Eritrean Muslim League, and one of the strongest leaders in the pro-independence movement at the time. “Ibrahim’s manner became perceptively more disrespectful after our loss of India and Pakistan” in the summer of 1947, he said, exposing the colonial arrogance evident among almost all of the empire building elite whose voices we hear in the memoir. “It was not his little digs at our imperial decline that bothered me so much as the offhand way in which he began to treat me” (p. 136).

The memoir, edited with an introduction by Wm. Roger Louis, and a forward by The Right Hon Julian Amery, provides a vivid behind-the-scenes view of the expanded imperial foreign policy class at home and abroad that worked to dismember this former Italian colony and shows how much time, energy and resources they spent attempting to do so. Trevaskis, by his own admission, spent most of his time there working hard on the partition project. The plan was a huge land grab (*see map*)² disguised as an act of compassion to shield Eritrean Muslims of the western region from Ethiopian rule. However, the “rescue” was conveniently limited to that part of Eritrea Britain was hoping to incorporate into its Sudan Dominion, excluding Muslims in the part of the territory targeted for annexation by their client state to the south.

The British were mandated to temporarily administer the territory on behalf of the Allied Powers—United States, France, the Soviet Union and Great Britain itself. Some of the members of the colonial elite assigned to Eritrea even admit this critical part of their country’s mission. The first chief secretary of the military administration in Eritrea, Duncan Cumming (later Sir Duncan), told Trevaskis that they “were caretakers with the job of holding the Eritrean baby on behalf of our allies.” The second chief administrator for the territory, Brigadier Binoy, who was described as “a regular soldier,....never ambiguousalways to the point,” also told the author in even starker terms that:

There were two things we [the British] had to get firmly into our heads. First, Eritrea was not a British colony. We were caretakers and our job was to hand it over as we had found it. Nothing more, nothing less. Second, we had to play fair and keep our noses clean (p. 115).

² The Western Province was composed of what were traditionally known as Barka, Senhit and Sahel provinces, representing nearly 60% of the territory.

However, this was astonishing coming from some of the highest officials of an administration that tried right from the start, spearheaded by the first chief administrator, Brigadier Stephen Longrigg, to dice and slice the territory and hand over the pieces to the neighboring nations; and all that without the slightest concern about its implications for the people who had developed a common psychological makeup as Eritreans as a result of sharing a common experience for decades. In fact, at one point, Longrigg, who headed the administration from 1942 to 1944, wanted to partition it three ways. In a lecture to groups of foreign policy elites in London, he proposed that a) “the Dankali coast and Assab to be given to Ethiopia immediately”; b) “The Muslim area and ..south-west should be given to the adjoining ‘congenial’ Anglo-Egyptian Sudan”; and c) “The...Tigrigna speaking Plateau be placed under the sovereignty of the Emperor of Ethiopia, but its administration [to] be carried out by a Trustee Power selected by the United Nations Trusteeship Council.” In Longrigg’s plan, the last portion of the territory was to be administered “on behalf of the emperor of Ethiopia, and in his name”. This was to be turned over to him after Ethiopia “attained comparable standard of security and public service.”³

Even the administrator who said the British ought to leave Eritrea the way they found it was in fact the one who created what came to be known as the Western Province by merging two big administrative districts—as a first step toward dismemberment. Reacting to the merger, Trevaskis, who was the first administrator in charge of the consolidated province, said, he felt he “was over the moon” (p. 117).

II.

Trevaskis traces the genesis of the partition idea to the head of the British Sudan administration, General Douglas Newbold (later Sir Douglas), who mobilized many members of the British imperial elite at home to support the plan. However, it actually had a system-wide beginnings in a study produced in 1943 by the British Military Administration in Eritrea which “claimed that strategic and political necessities required *a new reallocation of Eritrea*, with its different parts going to Ethiopia and Sudan.”⁴ In the 1940s, partitioning colonized or occupied territories had become a staple in the British imperial playbook.

The idea received the full support of the administration that took over at home soon after the end of the war, especially of the new foreign minister, Ernest Bevin, who was in office during the years the issue was vociferously debated across several capitals from London, to Rome, to New York, and, of course, Asmara. Bevin worked hard to ensure international support for the project; he even convinced the Italian foreign minister of the time, Count Sforza, to support and co-sponsor the plan at the UN.

Though the idea had no support among Eritreans, the colonial officials had predicted if Eritrean Muslims were given a choice between Muslim Sudan and “Christian” Ethiopia, “they would tumble over themselves” to take the first option (p. 70). But, they found out that for Eritrean Muslims, both options were equally unacceptable. Reacting to the plan, Ibrahim Sultan of the Eritrean Muslim League told Trevaskis that “it was out of the question.” Trevaskis tried hard to convince him, however, “Ibrahim remained unmoved,” he said. That was when Trevaskis realized that this British obsession “was going to be impossible to sell” to Eritreans. “Everyone knew what they [the Muslims] did not want: Ethiopian rule and partition were out,” he wrote (p. 129).

³ U.S. Department of State (USDOS) 865D.00/11-1446), “Brigadier Longrigg’s Lecture on Eritrea,” Nov. 14, 1946; cable from London to the Department of State.

⁴ Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991, 61. [*Emphasis added*]

However, that did not deter the British foreign minister and the rest of the foreign policy establishment from pursuing the case. They took it to the UN. The Bevin-Sforza plan was in fact briefly approved by the General Assembly before it was thrown out when the body couldn't agree on a similar plan for Libya. John Spencer, who served as the Ethiopian emperor's chief American advisor on Eritrea, says, "annexation of the Western Province by the Sudan was defeated by the Latin American and Soviet blocs." Adding, he said, "It was a totally unexpected vote switch by one member of the Latin American bloc—Haiti—in the vote on Tripolitania that led to the defeat of the entire original position of returning Italy to all her colonies without exception, and Ambassador Chauvel announced that France, too, would vote against the entire proposal."⁵

Expressing his reaction to the unpleasant outcome at the UN, Trevaskis said, he "could hardly believe that Providence could be so cruel" (p. 152).⁶ One of the individuals he blamed for its failure was a fellow Brit, Frank Stafford, who wore different hats in the multi-pronged conspiracy to dismember the territory. "Stafford, as I now saw," says Trevaskis, "had never cared for partition, maybe because his stint as an advisor to the Ethiopian government and the Ethiopian friends in high places he had thus acquired had left him with a sympathy with Ethiopian pretensions" (p. 163). Stafford, who also served as a commissioner with the British administration in Asmara, and as a liaison officer for the United Nations Commission of Inquiry for Eritrea, which visited the territory from February 14 to April 6, 1950 to determine the wishes of the people, was involved in other damaging and more consequential deeds on behalf of the Ethiopian regime. These include undermining the Eritrean resistance movement by creating and orchestrating misinformation about the independence bloc of eight parties as well as its individual member organizations and their leaders. He openly bragged in his reports to the Foreign Office at home about his plans to break up some of these parties and influence the members of the UN Commission to support Ethiopia's claims over the territory.⁷ Trevaskis, who describes Stafford as "the back room architect" of the federation idea, was not "surprised that [Stafford] should discreetly but persistently encourage" the delegates of Burma, South Africa, and Norway "in their belief that there could be no stability if Ethiopia remained unsatisfied." The representatives of the three nations "lapped [the federation idea] up as a happy compromise between independence and union with Ethiopia" (p.163). A federation usually implies a structure of governance that includes the two federating units and a third supra unit, the federal government. However, the final shape of the UN resolution turned the Ethiopian government and the federal structure into one and the same. Stafford was also instrumental in pushing the UN didn't have any say in the federation once it was enacted.⁸

III.

At its core, the partition plan was an expression of entitlement for a share of the spoils of war. As soon as Trevaskis arrived in Eritrea from what was then called Northern Rhodesia, today's Zambia, he had an early encounter with a fellow Brit, a major in the intelligence

⁵ John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2006, 211.

⁶ Though this brought an end to the Sudan annexation part of the plan, the lingering effect of their narratives resonated with other opponents of Eritrea's independence. For example, Ethiopia's ultranationalists regurgitated the same arguments to question Eritrea's viability as a nation for decades after the British left the region.

⁷ See Michela Wrong, *I Didn't Do It For You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation*, New York: Fourth Estate, 2005, 163-166.

⁸ Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 236-237.

division, who bragged about his country's achievements in the Horn of Africa at that time, including recovering British Somaliland, occupying Eritrea as well as Italian Somaliland and parts of Ethiopia. "What would happen to these spoils of war?" the major asks rhetorically. What would happen to Eritrea and Somaliland? "What we would do and should do were two very different things," he told Trevaskis. "What we should do was obvious. We should hand them over to the Emperor."

"And what we would do?" the major continued. "We would hang on to them.... We still had the imperialist itch" (p. 50).

To soothe their expansionist itch in the region, the empire warriors deployed a multi-faceted scheme whose central objective was to show that this former Italian colony was neither economically viable nor socially cohesive to aspire to be an independent nation. They looked at ethnic or national diversity as a disqualifier for such a status in global politics. They tried to use the multinational, multi-lingual and multi-religious nature of the Eritrean society as a reason to argue in favor of partition. Trevaskis and most of the other Britons whose voices we hear in his memoir tried to present this postcolonial reality in Eritrea as an exception rather than the rule in colonial and post-colonial Africa and the rest of what came to be known as the Third World. Wm. Roger Louis, in his introduction to the memoir, says, "Eritrea in the 1940s could be summed up in the words used by Trevaskis, as a mosaic of people and communities [that] had little in common other than Italian conquest and rule until 1941" (p. xvi). The first chief secretary of the administration, Duncan Cumming, also told Trevaskis that "neither Eritrea nor any piece of it had ever been a country before the Italians came along.it was of exclusive Italian manufacture" (p. 51).

A charitable reading may see the above statements as a simple misreading of the territory's colonial and post-colonial history. Trevaskis must have seen that Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia), where he was posted twice, had twice as many major ethnic groups and many more subgroups than Eritrea's nine nationalities. In the Horn region, between their colony Kenya and their client state Ethiopia, there were more than 150 ethnic groups. Today, this is the reality in nearly 40 of the 54 African states. That is why it is difficult not to see the colonial elite's words and actions with regards to Eritrea as an attempt to contort the reality to justify their partitioning agenda. In Eritrea as in the rest of most of the continent and other developing regions, colonialism broke down many of the barriers that had left the different nationalities and cultural groups separated. As a result, it formed and developed the citizens' psychological makeup as one people with a common destiny living within defined and recognized borders. The transplanted centralized institutions "inevitably engendered over the long run among the inhabitants....the concept of a nation and the budding of a kind of nationalism" and the colonialists were very much aware "that they were laying the foundation of nationhood in their artificially created territories."⁹

Trevaskis's memoir also chronicles part of the campaign designed to challenge the economic viability of the territory. During the first British administration, there was an industrial expansion that saw the establishment of hundreds of new factories. When Britain took over of the territory in 1942, Trevaskis says, Eritrea enjoyed a "light industrial revolution" which "transformed" it. As a result, he said, "the country we had taken over was not only viable, it was flourishing." The first secretary of that administration, Duncan Cumming, said, after 1935, Eritrea "was converted into [Africa's] most modern and go-ahead country outside Algeria, Egypt and the Union [of South Africa]" (p. 52). In fact, in December 1943, the second year of their

⁹ Nzungola-Ntalaja, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Africa: Essays in Contemporary Politics*, London: Institute for African Alternatives, Zed Books Ltd. 1987, 47

occupation of the territory, the administration held an industrial exhibition in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, showcasing the products of Eritrea's flourishing factories, hoping to tap into the regional market. However, at the same time, the core of the elite, led by Longrigg, began to question the economic viability of the territory to advance their partition scheme. In the end, to convince public opinion that the territory was too poor to stand on its own as an independent nation, they openly began to devitalize the economic sector and sell industrial and other assets in the open market in the region. Two of the five-member nations of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea that supported independence for the territory—i.e. Pakistani and Guatemalan—“openly accused the [British Military] Administration of preventing economic development as a means of furthering British hope of partition.”¹⁰

IV.

All in all, Trevaskis' memoir does provide a historically useful window into the political players who adversely influenced the fate of not only Eritrea and Ethiopia but also the rest of the Horn of Africa. It is a unique addition to the literature on Eritrean studies as well as those of the rest of the region. It sheds light into some dark corners of that critical period of Cold War history when Eritrea was on the global diplomatic chopping block. It also updates certain relevant issues or cases the author had raised or failed to develop in his earlier book on the territory. Eritrean writer Alemseged Tesfai looked at Trevaskis's pre-publication manuscripts of the memoir and has included updated data pertaining to partition, the emancipation movement in the western lowlands and the emergence of the Eritrean Muslim League in the supplement section of his 2016 book covering the second half of the ten-year sham Eritrea-Ethiopia federation. He also made note of the condescending and racist tone that pervades the book.¹¹ Out of the emancipation movement of the Tigre-speaking serfs of the western lowlands came out one of the strongest pro-independence political parties, the Muslim League, which was born in December 1946. The League pushed the demands of the serfs for land, forcing the aristocrats to seek protection from the feudal regime in Ethiopia and the British administration in Eritrea. This was how Trevaskis tried to justify the administration's support of the aristocracy: "...unless we supported them—feudal warts and all—their authority would disintegrate and that would mean anarchy" (p. 117).

However, Travaskis failed to shed light into some other critical issues he had mentioned but not elaborated on in his earlier work. For example, In *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-52*, Trevaskis, trying to explain the decision making process that led three out of the five-member nations of the UN Commission—i.e. Norway, Burma and South Africa—to support Ethiopia's claim partially because they “agreed that Eritrea couldn't be economically viable.” They came to that conclusion “on the basis of data and statistics prepared by a member of the South African delegation, Dr. F. Van Biljoen.”¹² Given the significant role the researcher and his study played in the final disposition of the territory, Trevaskis could have filled the gaps left unanswered about the study, its author and his role as a member of the South African delegation. Or even how South Africa—a country that was in open violations of UN resolutions in its defiant attempt to annex its neighbor Namibia (South West Africa)—came to be a member of a UN commission of inquiry sent to decide on the fate of another colony in a similar situation. It is

¹⁰ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, 100.

¹¹ ኣለምሰገጽ ተስፋይ. ኤርትራ: ካብ ፈደራሽን ናብ ጉብጣን 1956-1962. ኣስመራ :ኣሕተምቲ ሕጻሪ, 2016, 673-688. Alemseged Tesfai, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation: 1956-1962*, Asmara, Eritrea: Hidri Publishers, 2016, 673-688.

¹² Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, 100.

also important to note that before it joined the UN Commission, South Africa was decidedly against linking Eritrea to Ethiopia because of its implications for its apartheid policy as this would mean Italian settlers in Eritrea would be coming under black (Ethiopian) rule.¹³

What is also missing by and large in the memoir is the voice of Eritreans. The memoir is a string of conversations or dialogues the author had with fellow Britons that were coming in and out of Eritrea, the Sudan and other imperial outposts nearby. However, in general, we do not hear much from Eritreans directly in the memoir.

V.

In closing, it might be interesting to consider in this intensive interplay between author and his subject (Eritrea), if the latter left a mark on the former. Angus Mitchell, in a recent assessment of the work, said that the cause of the Eritrean struggle for freedom was “close to [Trevaskis’s] heart.”¹⁴ Right from the start, despite his country’s unqualified support for Ethiopia’s claims, Trevaskis saw Eritrea and Ethiopia as being incompatible. Louis, in his introduction to the book, said, Trevaskis “always regarded Ethiopia as a medieval colonial power” (p. xx). The author even criticized fellow Britons who bought Ethiopia’s claims over Eritrea hook, line and sinker and pushed for full and immediate annexation. After one of his mentors tried to rationalize the plan to hand over the southern and eastern parts of the territory to the Ethiopian emperor, the author wondered: “Was it really conceivable that the Allies would be mad enough to hand neat, well-ordered Eritrea over to the medieval bear garden that was Ethiopia?” (p. 69) Furthermore, the author was suspicious that the emperor might not respect the restrictions the UN put in place to ensure Eritrea’s autonomous status. And his suspicions proved true. There are also indications that in retirement he paid attention to the bitter struggle the Eritreans had to go through to have their rights restored. While he was working on the final touches of his memoir before his death in 1990, he noted in the postscript of his memoir that “the Eritrean revolutionaries have remained as full of fight as ever” (p. 165), probably referring to the historic victories the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front was scoring around the time he was putting this memoir to bed. Mitchell, writing in the *Dublin Review of Books*, said, “Years in Eritrea led to his lifelong support of the Eritrean independence struggle against Ethiopia’s irredentist claims to the country.” Adding, he said, “Although Trevaskis left Eritrea in the early fifties, *his involvement in the Eritrean cause remained an issue close to his heart.*”¹⁵

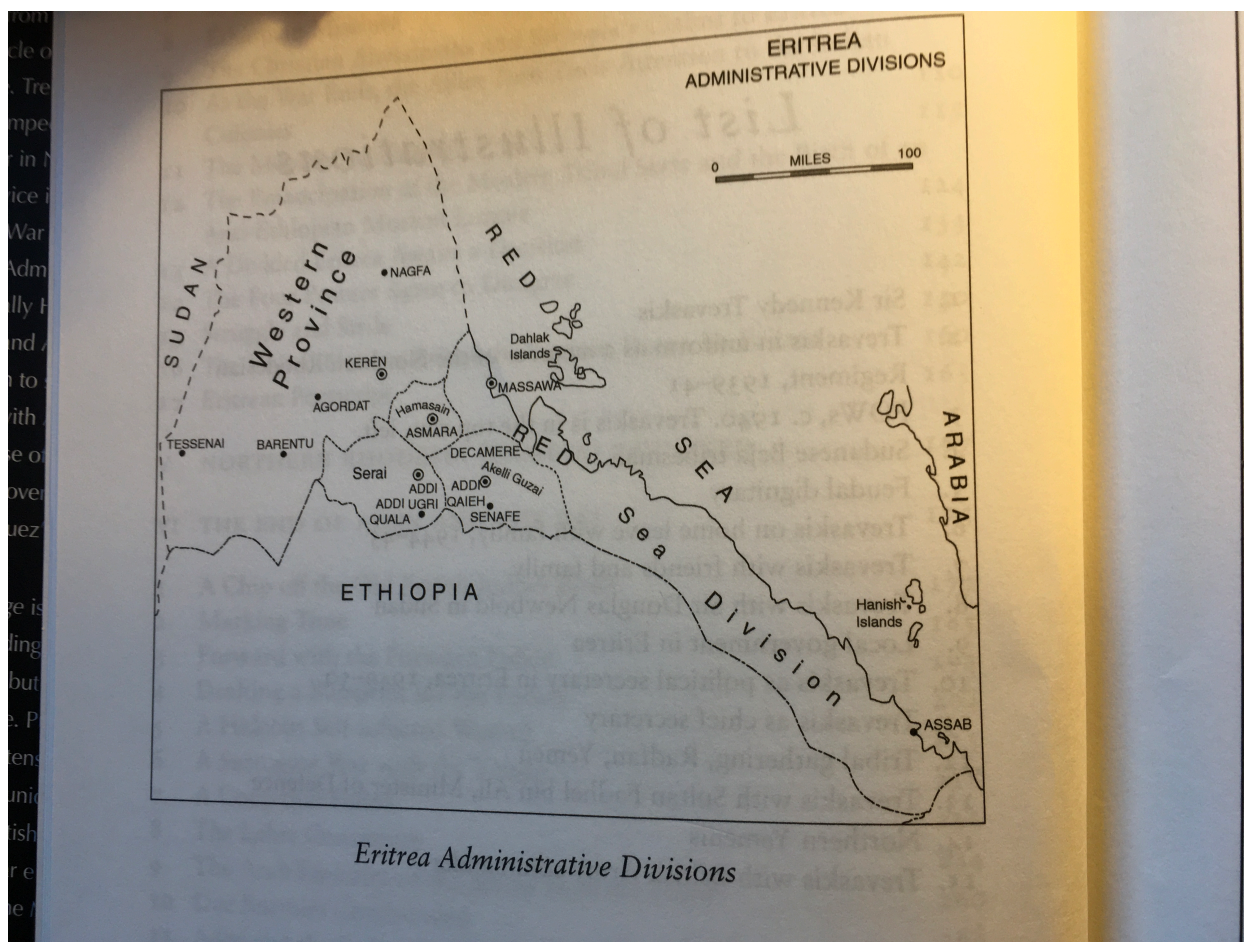
Maybe that was his way of atoning for himself and the country he represented for acting as if the rights and lives of colonized peoples did not matter and for the damage they left behind which continues to haunt the Horn of Africa region.

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¹³ Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 128.

¹⁴ See Angus Mitchell, “Imperial Warrior,” in *Dublin Review of Books*, January 1, 2020, at <https://www.drbb.ie/essays/imperial-warrior>, retrieved 1/20/2021

¹⁵ Ibid (*Emphasis added*).



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