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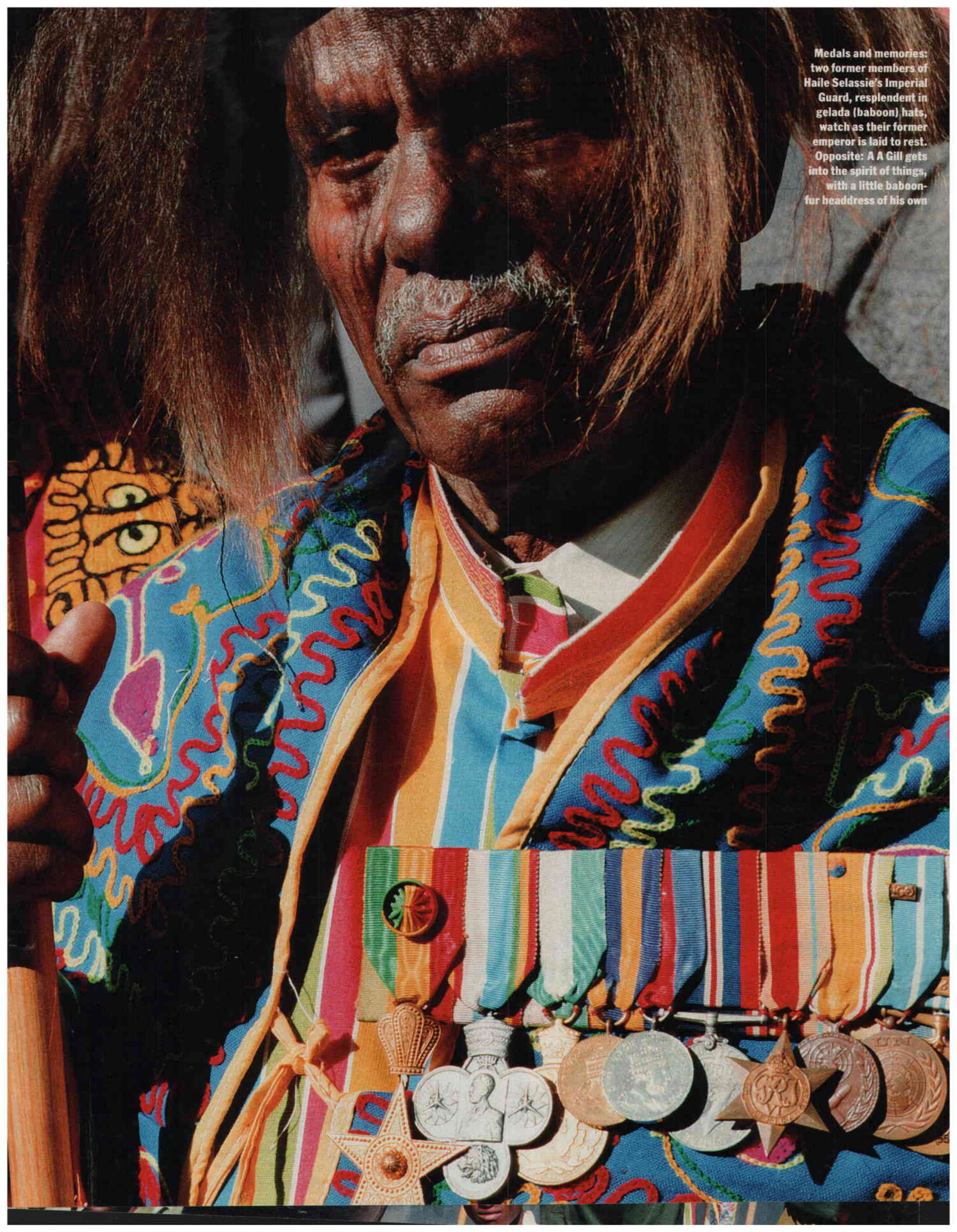
SELASSIE COME HOME

He was a 20th-century giant who died an ignominious death at the hands of his enemies. Three decades on, A A Gill journeys to Addis Ababa to witness the funeral of Ethiopia's last emperor

Photographs by Peter Marlow



Medals and memories: two former members of Haile Selassie's Imperial Guard, resplendent in gelada (baboon) hats, watch as their former emperor is laid to rest. Opposite: A A Gill gets into the spirit of things, with a little baboon-fur headdress of his own



First the good news. The long rains have finished and they were long enough, deep, thick and wet enough. Ethiopia is expecting a beneficent harvest, so that's a relief, or an absence of relief. You won't have to wear the T-shirt, listen to the bald rockers or be distressed by the news this year. Whoever thought you'd read: "No famine in Ethiopia"? Now the bad news. That doesn't mean they're not starving. Hardly anyone's got the cash for a mouldy banana. If you look at early maps of Africa, below the Sahara is a big, dark blank inscribed with just one name. Ethiopia. It floats in ignorance, stretching from the Horn to the Niger. The one African name known to Europe since the Middle Ages; the land of Prester John, the legendary Christian king who stood outside the western world. Ethiopia claims it was the first Christian country. Ethiopians say they have been Christians for 3,000 years, 1,000 with the Old Testament and 2,000 with the new. They also say they are one of the lost tribes of Israel, belonging to neither black nor Arab Africa, existing in Africa but not of it.

The name itself was given by the Greeks and means "sunburnt people". Abyssinia, its other name, is Arabic and means "mixed people". Ethiopia is a loose, conflicting collection of shifting tribes and cities half as old as time. There are Christians who circumcise their children, and animist tribes who castrate other people. In the north there are hermits who spend decades living alone in caves, in the south there are sun worshippers who wear metal wigs and terracotta plates in their lips. It has some of the oldest churches carved out of solid stone and the third holiest city of Islam. It has more than 64m people, 86 distinct languages, and hundreds of dialects. The official lingo is Amharic, one of the earliest written languages and the only phonetic one that reads from left to right, though it started from right to left, then bizarrely went both right and left in a zigzag like a man ploughing a field.

In Ethiopia, nothing is quite what it seems. You only believe half of what you hear and it's usually the other half that's true. Ethiopia is a country that elides fact and myth, where everything seems to come as part of an illusion. It's the alleged home of the Ark of the Covenant and the true cross. There are 13 months in its year, so a lucky few have no star sign. Its 12-hour clock begins at dawn, so world-time 7 o'clock is Ethiopian-time 1 o'clock. When people make appointments they rarely stipulate which watch they're using, so they are regularly six hours late, which is nothing to the rest of us being three years early. Ethiopia still uses the Julian calendar. They haven't even begun to think about building their millennium dome yet. They've barely thought about building the 20th century. Ethiopia is the home of coffee. The Blue Nile rises here. Ethiopia grows *teff*, a grass eaten nowhere else, which makes a soggy, fermented bread that looks like a cross between grey foam rubber and tripe. It is rolled up in the manner of airline face flannels.

But, singularly and importantly, Ethiopia is the only African country that was never a European colony. Its borders were not drawn with a lazy arbitration in the foreign offices of London, Paris or Brussels, but were carved out by fearsome warriors with spear and serpentine sword. Central to Ethiopia's pride, and indeed Africa's, is the fact that it boasts the only African army that ever decisively beat a European one, at the battle of Adwa in 1896. Not quite the only one, but the first since Hannibal. Coincidentally, also against the Italians. Finally, and most opaquely, it has an extraordinary number of people with little wads of tissue paper shoved up one nostril.

Addis Ababa (which means "new flower") lounges like a rotten wreath over a series of hills, in turn surrounded by the impressive curve of the Entoto mountains. It's a relatively modern city, just over 100 years old, built round hot springs. It's also 8,000ft above sea level, so every flight of stairs is a consultation with a breathless amateur cardiologist, and every Ethiopian is a middle-distance runner. The city is generously, panoramically free of any smidgen of ➤



Left: the dead monarch stares out of every portrait with the same stiff expression. Right: the coffin containing Haile Selassie, draped in the imperial flag, is transported to the cathedral graveyard, 25 years after his death







Above: Rita Marley, the widow of the Rastafarian singer Bob. **Right:** the anointed heir, His Imperial Highness Prince Zara Yaqov, and the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church sit out the ceremony



beauty, but not without a fearsome charm and noisome excitement. It's a black-rap Dickensian stew. The indigenous juniper forests that once shaded it were cut down for firewood generations ago, and replaced with antipodean eucalyptus trees that drink like Australians and are good for nothing much more than admiring and burning. Every night, straggling lines of folded old ladies carry vast bundles of firewood down from the hills. The women carry them because they're just too big and heavy for the donkeys.

Addis is 70% slum, a lurching, teetering stack of shanties – rusty corrugated iron, slimy plastic sheeting, mud reeking of eucalyptus gum, dung and smoke, rather like a long-haul economy toilet. They creep and elbow amid the crumbling, cheap concrete buildings like live Polyfilla. Addis boasts Africa's largest market, the Mercato, a sprawling dark compost of rickety shops, stalls and livid life. There are streets of tailors sewing rags on ancient Singers, alleys of people weaving sweet-smelling grass, making traditional dining plates with coned covers. There's a labyrinthine spice market with precipitous, bright peaks of turmeric and chilli, cumin, coriander and poppy seeds and ground roots with only indigenous names, whose scents are mysteriously, tantalisingly divorced from any western flavour. There are tiny tables selling handmade newspaper pokes of incense for the elaborate coffee ceremony that all families have once a week; steeples of gauzy wool and cotton shawls with delicate silk borders. Lorries deliver man-sized bound sheafs of chat, the mildly speedy drug that many poor chew as an escape, a solace and a hunger depressant. Addicts roam the streets with bloodshot eyes, wild hair and cupped palms. What you rarely see is anyone buying anything. No bag-laden women arguing over fruit or veg. Just thousands of young men loitering and waiting.

Even by African standards, the bothering and begging are exhaustive and unremitting, and the beggars world-beating in their decrepitude and infirmity. Here are the legless, armless, eyeless and toothless; the polio-crippled, the mine-maimed, the buboed and leprous, the self-mutilated and the plain mad. And the pickpockets. In one morning I was dipped three times, and marvelled at their consummate, prestidigious professionalism. Addis is potless poor, too poor even for advertising. None of the painted walls flogging Coca-Cola and Sportsman cigarettes that decorate the rest of Africa. You want to know how

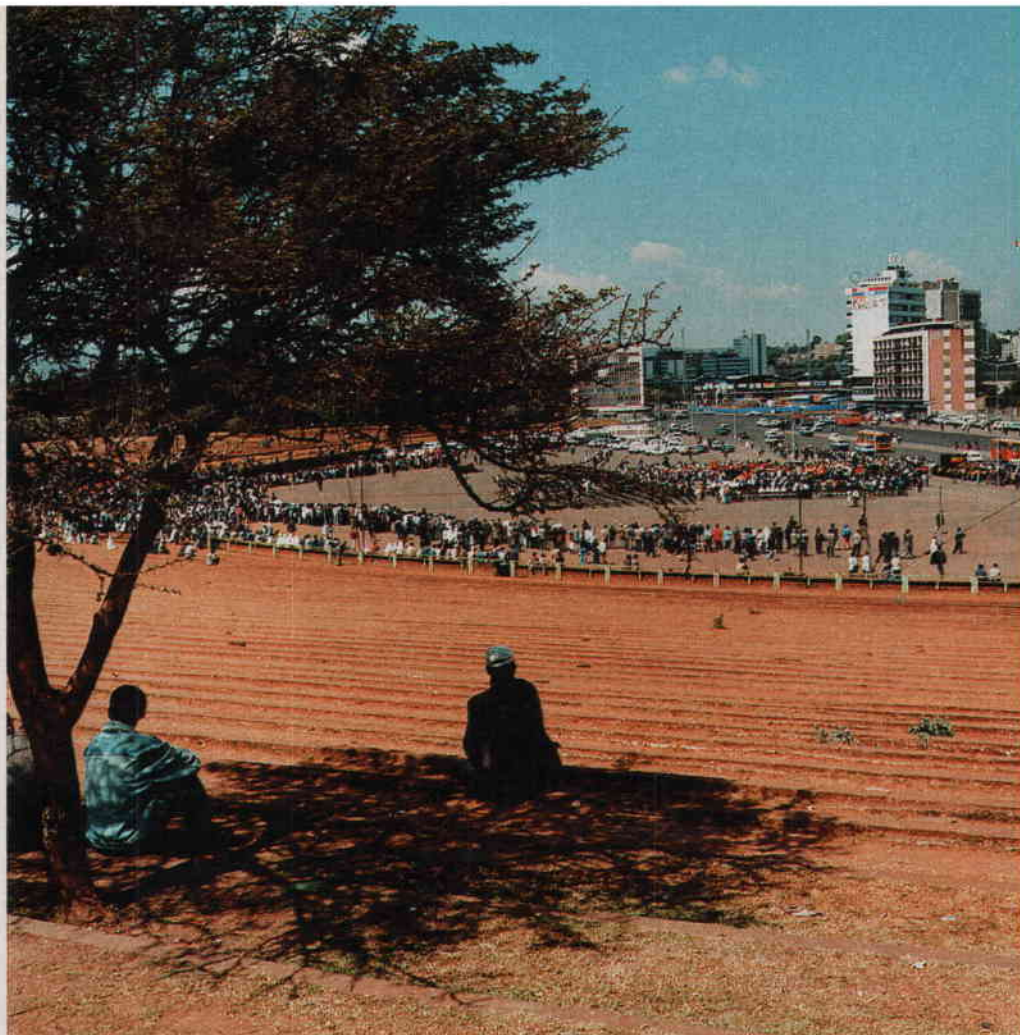
broke it is? It's too broke to even afford rubbish. The meagrest scrap has a value until it vanishes. But it does have filth, gratis from Dame Nature.

With an unbelievable collective self-restraint, it's safe, probably safer than most European capitals, but there is a prickling sense of tension, a muttered, in-your-face, eyeballing exasperation. Some of the most bellicose tribes who ever lived came from hereabouts. A chap couldn't get married until he was a proven, motiveless murderer. Addis feels like the squall before the storm, like it's waiting for something. A spark, an excuse. What it and I are also waiting for is the funeral of Haile Selassie. Like most things here, it's late – 25 years, two regimes, three wars and pair of famines late. To finally lay to rest the conquering lion of the tribe of Judah, the king of kings, the direct descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the only new god of the modern era, will be to finally tie up one of the last loose ends of the 20th century.

While history is written by western white men, its chief protagonists will always be western white men. Selassie drifts through the convulsive modern age like a small, dark, topped ghost. He was the 20th century's Zelig. Most people only know of him as the faintly ridiculous deity of the Rastafarians, seen in the yellow, red and green of the Ethiopian flag on T-shirts with Bob Marley and a joint. Yet if you shift the eyeline of history from its well-oiled western axis and look up from the hot, ancient south, Selassie is a monumental, titanic figure, a catalyst and central protagonist in the story not just of Africa, but of the entire modern world order. He came to power in a confusing internecine struggle in the century's first decades and was murdered by communist revolutionaries known as the Derg. His 54-year reign descended into a static feudal mire of oligarchic intrigue, corruption and fear. So powerful were his image and aura that they physically, as well as symbolically, had to smother him to death. The king of kings was secretly interred under President Mengistu's personal lavatory. Even as a corpse he could frighten the pants off his subjects. ➤➤➤

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Top right: the rains have been good in Ethiopia this year, and the harvest looks promising. Below right: youngsters trying to emulate their hero, the Olympic 10,000-metres gold-medallist Haile Gebrselassie, train at dawn in the old Revolution Square, now renamed Maskel Square. Far right: a straggling crowd watches as the funeral gets under way there



Look at photographs. All his life he seems to have had only one impervious sarcophagal expression, a granite stare that glares at posterity with all the regal confidence of a heritage that disappears back into the mist of fairy tales. He was the head of the only independent African country. He led Ethiopia into the League of Nations, and witnessed its demise. In Geneva he made a speech that echoed round the world in defence of the independence of small countries. It is one of the great pieces of 20th-century oratory and as relevant today as it was then. It could have been said of Kuwait or Kosovo or East Timor.

The Italian invasion turned Ethiopia into the Spain of the Third World. The old colonial powers' shameful self-interest, the demeaning, secret Hoare-Laval pact between French and British foreign ministers, tacitly allowed Mussolini to carve up a new Roman empire, proving that for all its brave words and olive-branch ambitions, the league would never confront a western power. The dates for the start of the second world war tend to be arbitrary, dependent on individual countries' experiences. Actually it began in Ethiopia in 1935, with mustard gas dropped on a lion-maned army armed with spears and leather shields. The appeasement of France and Britain, and Mussolini's trumped-up border incidents, were the green light for Hitler's piecemeal annexations. Selassie's Ethiopia was the first country to fall to fascism and the first to be liberated.

The British intelligence officer Charles Orde Wingate and a messianic collection of repressed homosexuals, tortured explorers, noble-savage worshippers and eccentric misfits, along with guerrilla patriots, brilliantly outmanoeuvred the Italians and restored the emperor to his throne in 1941. Post-war Ethiopia under Selassie was one of the founding countries of the United Nations. He was a prime instigator of the Organisation of African Unity, which still has its headquarters in Addis. At home he was Victorianly enthusiastic for selective modernism, particularly in education, though anyone who had read a book or gained a degree was likely to find themselves a political prisoner. His predecessor Menelik sent his army officers to be trained in imperial Russia. Foolishly, Selassie continued the practice *après* Lenin and found himself a medieval ruler with a nascent, educated middle class frustrated by no prospects, an officer class who were hard-line communists, and a pampered, venal family who intrigued at every opportunity. And a country that was slipping into famine. Selassie was caught on film feeding fresh meat to his Abyssinian lions (now extinct) as his nation starved. It was all bound to end in tears.

Today you can reach the royals on their website, www.ethiopiancrown.org. His Imperial Highness, Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie, president of the Crown Council. Through the miracle of e-mail, I have arranged to have dinner with him. Ironically, in Addis's best Italian restaurant (established 1946). It's to be a small, informal briefing, so I've also invited Dr Richard Pankhurst, the grandson of the suffragette and a world expert on Ethiopia. To actually break bread with a direct descendant of Solomon will be quite something. It

makes our own dear royal family's lumpen Kraut origins seem rather dowdy. Regally an hour and a half late, Ermias arrives with a train of 20 family members, bodyguards and aides. I suddenly feel that I'm hosting royal Band Aid. It's an embarrassment of seeds of Solomon. So embarrassing that I haven't enough cash to pay for them all and have to make arrangements with the jolly Italian owner, who waves his hands and invites me back for dinner on the house. Ermias is a one-man charm offensive. All Ethiopians have infinite reserves of charm. Talking to them is like having your secret places softly massaged with warm butter. He says he's nervous. Indeed, his weakly handsome eyes look frankly terrified, and with good reason. This is the first time in 26 years that all Selassie's descendants have returned, after fleeing the Derg, with its self-named Red Terror and its Cambodian-style mass murders, including asking school-children where they lived, taking them home, then shooting them in front of their parents. The regime lasted 17 years, until overthrown by the slightly rosier-red Tigré People's Liberation Front, part of the regime that is still in power. Nobody knows why they've allowed this burial to take place, how they

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will react, or indeed if anyone will turn up. Will it be tens, or tens of thousands? Selassie's name has been expunged from school books and public life for a generation. Will they remember? His grandchildren are dotted around the world – England, Canada, Greece, Italy, the United States. They are Italian businessmen, Midwestern social workers, Greek hairdressers.

Ermias lives in Washington, DC. He does a little bit of this and a bit of that and a lot of philanthropy. The American capital boasts a large Ethiopian refugee community, mostly taxi drivers. In his Italian suit with his seamless small talk, Ermias seems further from Ethiopia than even Washington. Yes, of course, he'll give an interview and pose for a picture, though he must be discreet, you understand. Would he mind if I joined the family the next morning in the church service to mark the start of three days of mourning and celebrate the 70th anniversary of Selassie's coronation? Of course, I'd be very welcome. A waiter leans purposefully across the table. Ermias's eyes blink with fear. The man jabs a finger and talks rapid, emphatic Amharic. He will be at the funeral. The late emperor was a great man. Ermias shows me his best Washington politician's face: "I'm very touched by the reverence of the common people."

Six o'clock in the morning, and there's still a chill in the air as dawn breaks over Selassie's square, domed cathedral. We take off our shoes and carry them with us inside. They are too valuable to be left at the door. Priests, acolytes and choirboys pad round a central tent that represents the holy of holies, the ➤➤➤

The Mercato in Addis Ababa, Africa's largest market: a sprawling, dark compost of rickety shops, stalls and livid lives



spiritual home of the Ark. Leaning against it are sacred paintings done in the Ethiopian manner, with their pale skin and mournful wide brown eyes. The women stand on one side, men on the other. Young servants in white cassocks and broad shawls pile carpets on top of carpets for our comfort. The priests process round the church, swinging clouds of incense, carrying their elaborate silver Ethiopian crosses and richly bound Bibles. There's much genuflecting and kissing and we are given T-shaped croziers to lean on. The congregation looks like an ethnic heat for One Man and His Dog. We are an odd bunch. The royal family confused and nervous in black, some of the granddaughters sobbing behind their veils. A couple of big-haired and elaborately shrouded Rastafarians, including Bob Marley's widow, the very laid-back Rita. And then beside me, a porcine pink gent in a pinstripe suit with polished socks and a large signet ring, who could only be English and turns out to be Sir Conrad Swann, KCVO, PhD, FSA, Garter Principal, King of Arms Emeritus. What on earth is he doing here? The service is long, over three hours, delivered in monotonous Amharic and an older ecclesiastical language like Latin, called Ge'ez. It makes the hair stand up on your neck and dries the mouth. When they start singing, the bishop intones a Gregorian-style chant that sounds both ortho-

The conquering lions of Judah are simply the scum line left on the bathtub of history

dox and Arab and the choir provides a deep rhythmic descant that is unmistakably African. A sonorous, liquid-black, speechlessly sad rise and fall. This is perhaps the oldest Christian service in the world, largely unchanged for 1,700 years. It's as close as any of us will come this side of the grave to knowing how the apostles prayed. Halfway through, Selassie's throne is produced from behind a screen.

The priests step forward and usher a prince to sit in it. The Abun, the patriarch of the Ethiopian Church, is a kingmaker. A pivotal politician. His blessing is essential to any pretender, and the man he's placed on the throne is not Ermias. It's a tall, bald someone else. My prince is three down the pecking order, looking characteristically worried. Damn, I fed the wrong royal. As the service finishes, the carpets are rolled back and a trap door opened. We all squeeze into the crypt and there, finally, he is. The last of the line of Judah. Behind a glass partition like a sweet shop window. His coffin is draped in a white and silver net curtain with a photograph propped on it. It looks like a small piano. In two days a procession will move him from here to the cathedral, and there lowered into a marble sarcophagus beside the altar. We all stare at the little box, not really knowing what to think.

The Sheraton hotel rises out of the shanty slum like a huge taupe palace. It is by some way the grandest building in Addis. I wouldn't normally mention it, except it's without doubt also the grandest hotel in Africa. Every capital has its hubristic, tourist-enticing, foreign-built splendido, but none come close to the magnificence of this place. For a start, everything works. The fax in your room, the ranks of fountains, the staff, your own butler, drinks come when you order them. The numerous restaurants serve decent imported food and the clean pool has underwater Muzak. This would be a very grand hotel in Hollywood. In Africa it's unimaginable. I also mention it because for a brief time it becomes the royal court. A huge Gormenghast of intrigue, rumours and factions. The royal family effortlessly pick up where they left off and, as a confused foreign observer, I find myself the recipient of a steady stream of off-the-record briefings, debriefings, unbriefings, points of order and just straightforward lies. The players stalk the bars and lounges, knots of retainers huddle and whisper with

slidy eyes. All is not well in the court of Selassie. The first thing that happens is that my blessed prince disappears. I call to confirm my interview and he's gone. Where? His aide, an implausibly smooth chap who probably has a double first in the novels of John Grisham and Raymond Chandler, says he's hiding and asks me to come to his suite. The phones are not safe. He tells me the prince was being followed, they'd had to change cars. The government's putting out aggressive signals (an article in the English-language paper written in 1970s cold-warese; fraternal, peace-loving people, feudal capitalist stooges, etc, accusing Haile Selassie of funnelling wealth abroad, which is unlikely as he was famously ascetic except when it came to uniforms).

While we're talking, another man enters the room and silently loiters. Let's talk in here, says the aide, and opens a door. It's a closet. He ushers me in among the swinging coat hangers, he tells me that if I'm inclined to mention a split in the royal family, I'll just make a fool of myself, and he can tell I'm no fool because I ask such naive questions, pretending to be stupid. I'm obviously a very clever journalist, he chuckles conspiratorially. No, no, I really do know nothing. I really am a very stupid journalist. For instance, I'm pressed up against a svelte Ethiopian whispering in a cupboard. Back in the bar, where the piano player tinkles out golden movie moments, I try to make some sense out of the royal family, but it's like juggling mud. Yet another prince shimmies over and french-polishes my bottom. Then, in an aside, mentions that of course I know there's a man pretending to be me in the Hilton hotel: "He says he's a reporter from The Sunday Times." Oh, good grief. I can't work out who any of you are. Now I have to find out who I am. And here he, or I, is. Across the lobby rolls one plump young Englishman, dressed in thick bird's-eye worsted. To an Ethiopian eye he is the epitome of a Brit gent abroad, but to me he looks utterly fictional. The plummy voice has just a hint of suburban cul-de-sac. The coolness a sheen of cold sweat. He hands me a card. Anthony Bailey, MIPR, MIPRA, managing director, Eligo International Ltd. Berlin, Brussels, London, Lugano, Madrid, Milan, Paris, Sofia. "I am," he says, dropping heavily into a chair, "the press secretary to His Majesty, the Crown Prince Zara Yaqov." The man in the throne? "Yes." Can we talk to him? "Ah now, that may be difficult. He's not very well. You could put some questions through me and I'll give you written answers."

"We have just received a letter from Her Majesty the Queen." Of the United Kingdom? "Of course." Sorry, it's just that there are so many monarchs about. "You know you once stitched me up over the King of Greece." No I didn't. I've never met the King of Greece. "Oh yes you did." I'm pretty sure I didn't. "Maybe it was A N Wilson, then." I'm not him either. It turns out that Crown Prince Zara lives in straitened circumstances in Manchester and is looked after by Rastafarians who are trying to get him interested in breeding another heir (as if there weren't enough already). Among all the subterfuge and rumour I'm pretty sure that's a fact, because frankly you just couldn't make it up. I also discover the reason for Sir Conrad Swann's presence. Ermias and the Crown Council have set up a nice little business in conjunction with Spink's, the medal people, handing out decorations. The Order of Solomon's Seal, second class. That sort of thing. In exchange for philanthropic donations and services to Ethiopia, Washington gala ball matrons pin them to their Dior.

I call the British embassy to see if they're having anything to do with all this. After an age the phone is picked up. "Wrong number," an angry voice shouts. But I haven't said who I'm calling. Is that the British embassy? "Well, yes," comes the grudging reply. "You'd better speak to Deirdre."

"Hello," says Deirdre, in a voice that's pure John Betjeman. "You want to speak to my husband. He's playing tennis at the moment. I'll get him to call you back." He doesn't. The next morning Bailey slips the text of Her Majesty's letter (our one) under my door. She is very pleased "that at long last, Emperor Haile Selassie the First is being accorded a proper burial". Which is nice.

Crown Prince Zara's question and answer is a double dose of Mogadon. With it comes a tart note: "As I have not heard from you as we agreed, I have cancelled today's appointment with Empress Work and the crown prince." But we never agreed. There never was a meeting. And who is this Empress Work?

"You weren't supposed to be told that His Royal Highness was unwell," yet another prince tells me in the corridor. This is getting like a pantomime audition. Why, what's the matter with him? "I can't tell you. But you should find out." Thanks. The closet aide asks me to go to a safe phone in the lobby and dial a number. It's my prince. He's fearful for his life. It's terribly sad. He doesn't want to be the cause of any danger for his people. He's in Rome.

When power and prestige slip down the plughole, this black farce is what you're left with. The conquering lions of Judah are just the scum line left on the bathtub of history. It's funny, but it's not as funny as it's pathetic.

The funeral starts early, at 4am. I get to the cathedral an hour after dawn. It's already hot. It's going to be scorching. The coffin, draped in the Ethiopian flag, rests on the steps, surrounded by a patriotic guard of old warriors in baboon-fur alice bands and long, bright tabards with a lion embroidered on the back. They carry boiled-leather shields and blackened spears. On one side of ➤➤➤➤

Jamaicans saw the only black man from Africa who had ever defeated the whites

the bier sits the royal family and on the other the Abun, priests, and monks of the church, dressed in the rich panoply of their calling. Bright togas and robes, coruscating coronets and mitres all thickly encrusted and decorated.

Their croziers and huge silver crosses are garlanded with ribbons; acolytes hold aloft velvet and silk sunshades intricately embroidered with stars and suns and images of Christ, like the serried domes of a visionary city. Stretching along each side are lines of choirboys and girls in bright surplices, holding flags and honey-scented tapers. They sing Latin dirges and sway like a gentle ocean. On a gold throne is the patriarch, swathed in burgundy velvet, barnacled and filigreed with gold, wearing a multistorey crown. This steeping tableau is like something dreamt by a black Velázquez. It beggars anything contrived by the Vatican. Here in scabrous Africa it's truly a vision of unimaginal splendour, dignity and ancient pomp.

Slightly apart stand a thin line of khaki-clad men, ancients with grizzled beards and yellow, rheumy eyes, dressed in tattered uniforms and battered solar tops. They are survivors of the war against the Italians. Their medals, paid for with the philanthropy of blood, droop on thin chests. Some carry faded photographs of Selassie or themselves in their martial prime. One stands stiffly erect in worn rubber flip-flops.

The coffin is lifted onto a flat-bed truck swathed in the flag. The guards surround it, spears at attention. The procession, slowly and with much confusion, makes its way through the slums, to Revolution Square. A flat, featureless area that recently held a million people to welcome home Ethiopia's Olympic runners. Now the ranks of waiting metal chairs are mostly empty. A few dozen officials and Anthony Bailey sit pucely steaming in the sun. There are perhaps three or four thousand Ethiopians watching with a sullen, nothing-better-to-do interest.

Over a crackling loudspeaker there are ponderous speeches. The sun and the boredom climb. The coffin is manhandled back on the truck and heads off through the otherwise-engaged streets towards the cathedral graveyard, where, three hours later, the crowd has grown dense and patient. Perched on gravestones and monuments, it's mostly old men and women who must remember Selassie and his empire with fondness. For all his stiffness and faults, his people were materially a lot better off than they are now; it's the price of bread that matters most. But the government can relax. This is not a popular demonstration of dissent. It's all about the past, not the future. There will be no trouble. Another service, more tapers and hymns, more speeches and, in front of the coffin, white-robed choristers chant and rhythmically shake silver rattles.

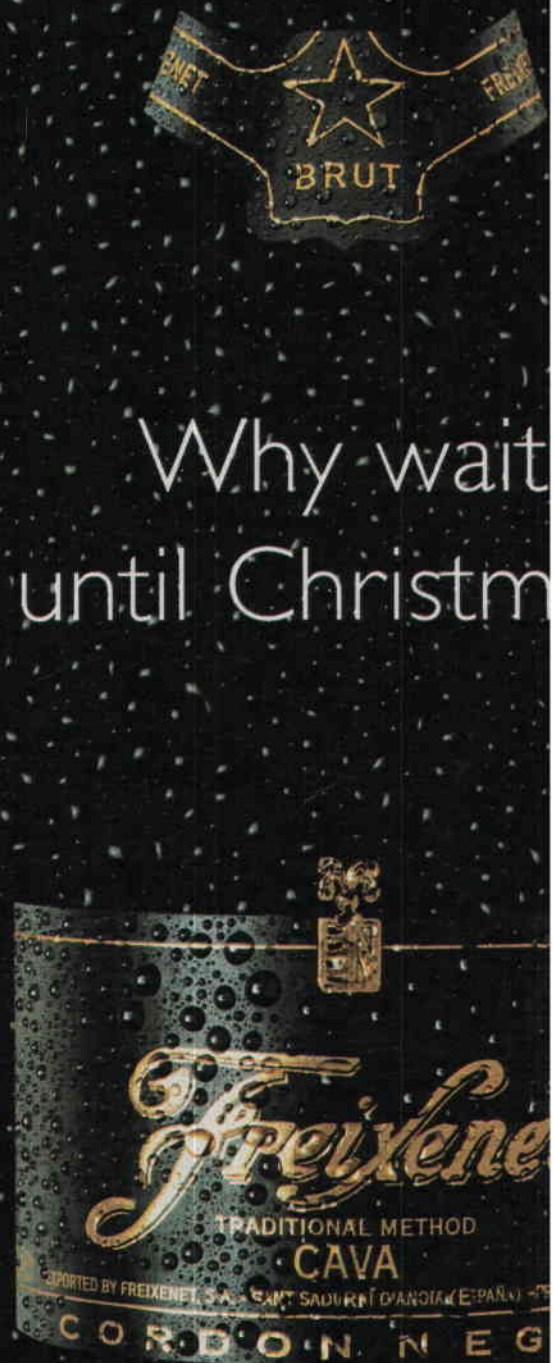
Then the great Ethiopian war drum is banged, beaten to send Selassie to his marble grave. A voice behind me says: "The last time I heard that drum was in 1935." It's Bill Deedes – Lord Deedes – the most venerable of all correspondents, who was here with Evelyn Waugh and is the model for Boot, the hero of *Scoop*, the funniest book ever written about journalism; one I feel I have been unintentionally plagiarising. His presence somehow closes the circle, and he's about to have his pockets picked and his camera nicked.

Surprisingly few Rastafarians have come to bury their god, but then I hear one say: "I-and-I know he still lives." Of course: he's immortal. This is not his funeral. Selassie is alive somewhere in the vastness to the south, preparing a land for his chosen people. In the West we tend to sneer and snigger at the Rastas with their drugs and knitwear and belief that a small black Third World dictator could possibly be a deity. But Jamaicans saw the only black man from Africa who had ever defeated the whites; who stood in solitary, righteous splendour in an otherwise enslaved continent. An emperor obliquely mentioned in the Bible, a black man whose status didn't derive from running faster or punching other black men harder. And who is to say that the conquering lion of the tribe of Judah, the descendant of Solomon, is any sillier an object of worship than a carpenter from Nazareth? Only time can give religion dignity.

The prince who told me to find out about Zara Yaqov sidles up. "Come, I will show you what's wrong with His Highness." We slip through the crowds until I have a good view. He's sitting with a look of benign incomprehension. His weak mouth is slightly open; his eyes dull, unfocused. "You understand now?" he hisses. Indeed I do. From here it looks as if he's two Christmas singles short of a telethon.

The heir has retreated into a quiet, safe, simpler nursery in his own head where voices talk of cabbages and kings. Ethiopia's salvation isn't going to be found in the house of Selassie. He's pulled to his feet and stands vacantly and unhelpfully behind the coffin as it seesaws up the steps, carried by the royal family, in a confusion of priests and cameramen. Slowly it makes its way from the sunlight into the cool, dark shadows; the heavy iron doors clang shut. The last emperor has made his final journey from lavatory to cathedral.

Later I ask yet another royal how he liked the service. "It was terrible, the family was distraught. The crowd should have been prostrate, the women ululating. It wasn't fitting. It was so sad." Perhaps, but nothing like as profoundly sad as the lives eked out on every street corner. I'm told, in strict confidence, naturally, that the coffin didn't fit its grave, but is propped up in a corner. In death as in life, Haile Selassie was a bigger man than he appeared ■



Why wait
until Christmas

Too much fun to be taken se