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The Colonial Train

edited by

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"Taming the Desert": Civilisation, Trains and Warfare in the Sudan*

Luisa Villa

Abstract

*This chapter surveys the British debate on colonial trains and railways in connection with Britain's military engagement in the Sudan in the 1880s-1890s. It draws on a large corpus of memoirs, reportage, articles published in periodicals, letters and fiction, and follows step by step the course of the events with the concomitant railway-planning and vicissitudes in railway-building. In so doing, it illustrates the role of the railway in discursive articulations of imperialism, touching on such issues as the overriding preoccupation with the conquest and mastery of space, the unquestioned conviction that improved communications were crucial to progress, economic and otherwise, or the way "native" rulers' involvement in railway-building (i.e. their participation in the civilising process) was construed by British commentators. Throughout, it highlights the strange and characteristic mixture of dreamy visionarism and matter-of-fact logistics that – according to Daniel Headrick (*Tools of Empire*, 1981) – connotes the "African railway imaginary" in the nineteenth century.*

> The Soudan must be regarded in the light of a rich country to which there is practically no access. It would be of the greatest value if developed by modern engineering, but it will remain as a mill-stone, upon the neck of Egypt, unless such means of transport [the railways] are encouraged without delay.
>
> Samuel W. Baker, "The Soudan and Its Future" (1884)

This essay is an offshoot of my extensive research work on the representations of the Anglo-Sudanese military conflict, from the early 1880s (with the rise of the Mahdi, the disastrous defeat of the Egyptian troops led by Hicks at Shaykan, the siege of Khartoum and its fall) to the late 1890s (with the slow

* I derive my title ("Taming the Desert") from the title of a chapter in George Warrington Steevens's *Egypt in 1898*, a book which, though surely relevant to my subject, I do not touch upon in this essay, for reasons of space and internal coherence.

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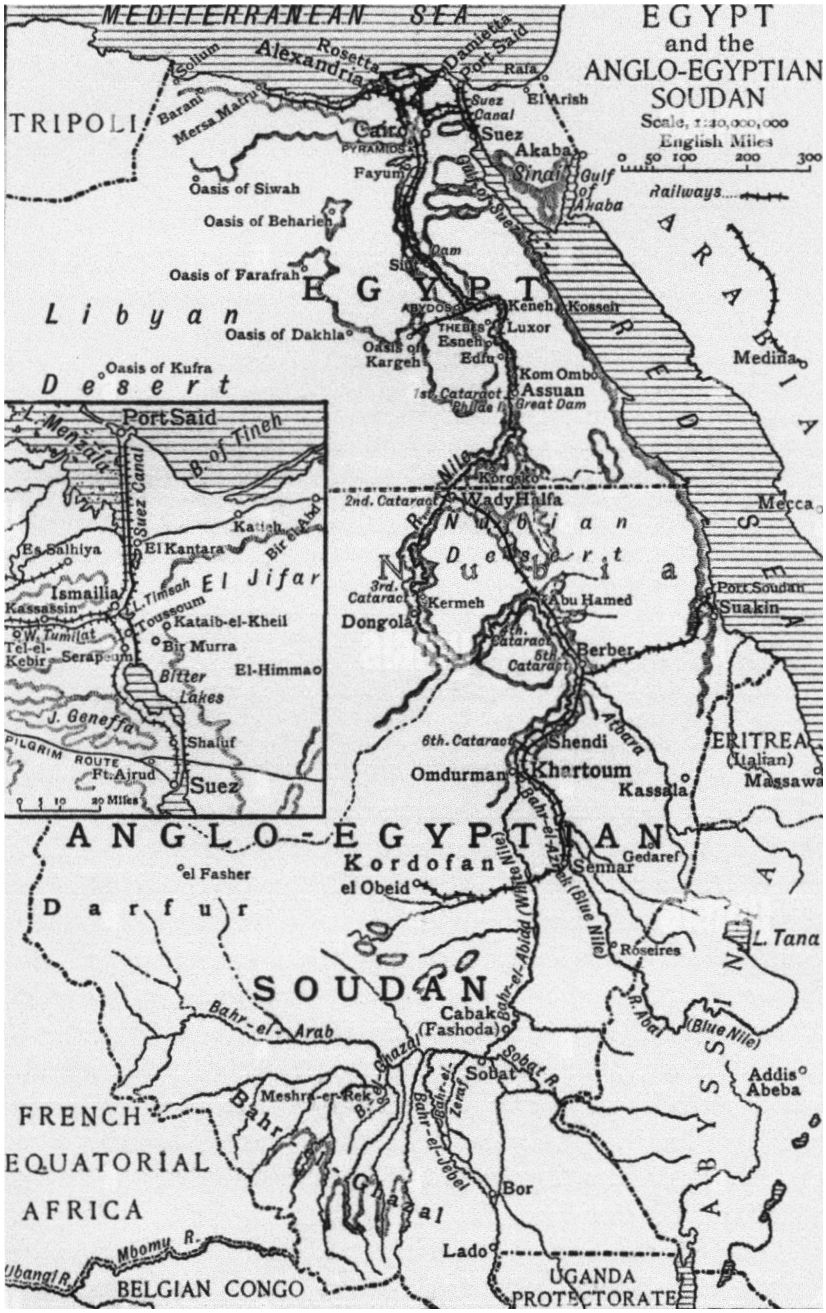


Fig. 1 – Map of Anglo-Egyptian Soudan (Grew 161)

advance of Kitchener's army through the desert and along the Nile culminating in the battle of Omdurman) (Villa 2009). My chosen aim here is not to provide new information on the building of the railways in the Sudan, nor to underscore the impact of the railway on the vicissitudes of the Sudan campaigns – this being the task, rather, of experts in military history and in infrastructure such as Sandes (1937) and Hill (1965), to whom I am indebted for much of the factual information deployed in this essay; nor to unravel the ideological and political complexities of British involvement in the area, itself the object of numberless specialist investigations;[1] nor to make any statement concerning the interests (economic, political, strategic) motivating the building of railways, or prompting aggressive foreign policies – the later being a well-known crux of the theory of nineteenth century imperialism and as such beyond the range of my professional expertise. As a cultural historian, what I want to provide is an overview of the terms of the debate on trains and rails in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In order to do so, I draw upon a number of primary sources, which include memoirs, reportage, articles published in periodicals, letters and fiction. Out of this textual material and the contextual information immediately relevant to its understanding, I weave a sort of (British) narrative of the Sudan railways covering the various stages of the British engagement in the area, and the issues they raised: the role of the railway in the debate on how to "civilise" the Sudanese that preceded and accompanied Gordon's mission to Khartoum; the aborted attempt of the Egyptian imperial administration in the 1870s to build a railway in the Sudan, which retrospectively was, for British commentators, a target for recrimination, and a proof of the inefficiency of Khedival Egypt as a "civilising" agent; the failure to build the Suakin-Berber railway at the time of the Gordon Relief Expedition, which became an emblem of the national failure to rescue General Gordon; and the successful completion of the Wadi Halfa-Abu Hamed military railway, which was decisive in tackling the logistics of the 1898 campaign

[1] Given the prominence of Egypt and the Sudan in the debate on late nineteenth-century British imperialism, and the iconic status of some of the chief actors in the Sudan crisis and ensuing events (General Gordon, Evelyn Baring-Lord Cromer, General Kitchener), it is impossible to provide adequate and comprehensive background reference to this essay. My choice throughout has been only to refer to specialist work by those historians whose findings and views have been decisive for the shaping of my specific argument relating to trains and modernisation in Egypt and the Sudan. For contextual information and factual clarification the uninitiated reader may be referred to Pakenham's classic study, *The Scramble for Africa* (1992), which devotes several chapters to Egypt and the Sudan (from Ismail's "dream of Empire" to the death of the Khalifa Abdullahi), and still provides a very reliable introduction to the subject in hand.

and came to be seen as the very embodiment of the relentless process of modernisation, which "rolled conquering South" and effortlessly wiped out the Dervish empire at Omdurman.

1. *Civilising the Sudan*

In early January 1884, less than four weeks before General Gordon left London on his ill-starred mission to Khartoum, *The Contemporary Review* published "The Soudan and Its Future", the longish article by Sir Samuel White Baker that provides the point of entrance into my subject matter. Baker, it is worth recalling, had been in the pay of the Khedive Ismail, the Egyptian ruler of Turkish descent and imperial proclivities, who had made him Governor of Egypt's Equatorial Provinces (1869-1873) – the post in which Charles Gordon would succeed him in 1873, before becoming Governor-General of the entire Sudan (1877-1879). To turn Egypt and its southern provinces into a thoroughly respectable and modern imperial nation – like England or France – was Ismail's cherished objective, and the employment of distinguished foreigners as high officials and advisors was part of the scheme.

Baker's appointed task had been to fight the slave trade, and to open up the country to "legitimate commerce" – as "a great stride towards future civilization".[2] Given the climate, the geography and the ethnic-political features of the region, this had been far from a sinecure. Baker's remarkable energy and unquestioning commitment to the cause of modernisation had to be pitted against intractable nature (in the form, especially, of the *sudd* which obstructed navigation on longish tracts of the upper Nile), equally intractable natives (who understandably resisted being "annexed" and "civilised") and the slave-traders (whose lucrative traffic were protected by private armies and also by conniving Turk-Egyptian authorities). He had, however, discharged his obligations honourably enough, and his book *Ismailia* – which details his Herculean efforts on behalf of "civilisation" – had been a success in Britain. In the 1880s Baker still rated, very much like Gordon, as an expert on Sudanese matters – the sort of authority the informed reader would turn to for enlightenment in the crisis brought about by the recent military events in the Sudan. Indeed, it appears that Charles Gordon himself, in that eventful January 1884, felt he had to compare notes with Baker before embarking on his last adventure.[3]

[2] As the text of the Khedival *firman* (decree) pompously recited (qtd. in Baker 1874: 10).

[3] Gordon met Baker on January 11, 1884, at his house in Sandford Orleigh, as first

The news of the annihilation of Hicks's Egyptian expeditionary corps at the hands of the Mahdist army at Shaykan (4-5 November 1883), in the remote lands of Kordofan, had reached London just before Christmas, and in the days in which "The Soudan and Its Future" was hastily written and published, the British Government were making up their minds what measures should be taken. The Liberal and anti-imperialist Prime Minister Gladstone was adamant that Britain should avoid any direct military involvement in the region, and that Egypt (which was then nominally independent, though "temporarily" under British military occupation and budgetary tutelage) should evacuate its Khartoum-based garrisons and leave the boundless and unprofitable Sudan to itself.

But the Egyptians were reluctant to part with their southern imperial province, and – most decisively – there were pressures both from within the British Cabinet and from the outside (from the War Office and Lord Hartington, the Secretary of State for War; from prominent members of Army, such as General Wolsely; from the Anglo-Egyptian community; and from all those whose objective was the prospering of "Greater Britain"), that a different, less renunciatory policy should be adopted. According to the opinions held in such quarters, British troops should be sent out to quell the Mahdist uprising with a view to restoring at least the northern part of the Sudan to Egypt, or – even better, given Egypt's manifest inability to secure peace and prosperity in the region – to annexing it to Britain itself. Gordon's solitary mission to Khartoum, to report on the situation, oversee the evacuation of soldiers and civilians, and also establish "some rough form of Government which [would] prevent, as far as possible, anarchy and confusion arising on the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops"[4] was, by all accounts, a sort of compromise formation precipitated by the collision of the divergent intentions that criss-crossed the "official mind" of Britain, as well as British public opinion at large.

Baker's essay, however, was hardly troubled by doubts: it was quite clearly supporting the cause of military intervention in the Sudan, as a first step towards taking up direct responsibility in its administration. The essay did so by lamenting, on the one hand, Egypt's oppressive and inefficient rule of the country (the main cause of Sudan's economic backwardness and of the present political unrest), and by foreshadowing, on the other hand, the dire consequences of the Anglo-Egyptian evacuation of the region: the Sudan's relapse

narrated by his friend Reverend Reginald Barnes, who accompanied him on that occasion (see Barnes and Brown 1885: 72).

[4] Such was his task as summarised by Evelyn Baring, the British Consul General in Egypt, at that time. See his letter to Gordon, dated January 2nd, 1884 (qtd. in full in Blunt 1911: 195).

"into complete anarchy and savagedom", Baker (1884: 73) believed, would not only endanger Egypt (and British interests in Egypt), but also spread seeds of unrest all over the Islamic provinces of the British empire. That Britain should control the Sudan in order to control Egypt in order to control the Suez Canal and the route to India was, indeed, the main pro-war argument at this juncture. But, in Baker as well as in many others, it blended with strands of other discourses: for instance, that of the utilitarian exploitation of natural resources, or that of embattled insular patriotism. Thus, if, strategically speaking, Baker had the guarding of the Anglo-Indian corridor at heart, he was quite keen on stressing further reasons which might appeal to those sectors of British public opinion more inclined to look for domestic and/or moral advantages. His article, therefore, amply underscores the Sudan's potential for economic development, as if to show that military intervention would be amply worth its while in utilitarian terms, for Britain first of all, but also (universally) for the common good. Once properly managed and efficiently incorporated in the world market, the Sudan – Baker argued – would yield valuable and plentiful harvests: cotton could be not only produced, but "dried, cleaned and packed without a moment's hindrance from adverse weather; and, were communication established to Suakin, the crop would be shipped direct to Liverpool within three weeks by steamer" (Baker 1884a: 69); and wheat to feed a "hungry nation" like Britain could be easily secured and brought home, even in time of war, along the same route, which was now made safe by Britain controlling Cyprus, Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar.

Within this line of argument, modern technology (by which backward regions could be developed, geography modified, arid soils made moist and fertile, rivers made navigable all the year round, etc.) was of course very much in the forefront. Baker could turn visionary, and wax almost lyrical, over such matters, as he did in a subsequent article on the same subject, which is worth quoting at some length:

> The whole of that territory from Gillabat, throughout the course of the Rahad, Dinder and Blue Nile, can be converted into a vast field of cotton, sugar, wheat, flax, and the most valuable productions. A dam across the Atbara river, which would at the same time form the railway bridge, would control the waters, and prevent the sudden rush that exhausts the stream by its own impetuosity. Canals similar to those innumerable channels of Lower Egypt would irrigate the fertile land during the dry season, and would enable boats to bring down the produce to the railway stations. Upper Egypt thus constituted would become the granary for the supply of England, and cotton of the finest quality would be produced in quantities that would render us independent of other countries. Such a development would be almost instantly effected, should the means of transport be afforded by the construction of a railway. (Baker 1884b: 43)

In the case of the northern Sudan (a land of legendary barrenness), efficient irrigation (such as a network of canals, weirs and artificial lakes would secure by diverting, storing and distributing the water of the Nile floods) was, of course, a prerequisite; but improved transportation was to Baker even more crucial.

The problem with the Sudan (its poverty, its lack of entrepreneurial spirit, its liability to "relapse" into barbarism) was, to him, largely due to the country's inaccessibility. Hence, its development into an efficient agricultural producer was largely dependent "on the construction of a railway", which would "almost instantly" effect the desired transformation. Baker warned, therefore, that much thought should be given to the enterprise of building the first railway: "The first railway will be the parent of all other lines, and the harmony of the whole system will depend upon a careful plan that shall have been rearranged, to include irrigation and canal traffic as feeders to the main artery" (1884a: 72). The carefully planned (artificially contrived, and highly integrated) order of modern transportation-irrigation aimed at efficient land exploitation is meant by Baker to replace the haphazard and inefficient order of African nature. In so doing, it takes on a quasi-natural aspect (with the mother-railway line that begets, or parents, the others) as canals and iron lines interconnect effortlessly, metaphorically providing a surrogate blood-system to the economic life of the country. All of this, to be sure, would go hand in hand with progress at the social, or human, level. To transform a desert region into an agricultural paradise necessarily implies "humanising" its inhabitants, "converting the nomad into a useful citizen" (Baker 1884b: 44). Baker has thought it all out:

> The Arabs who are now in insurrection are pastoral people, and are nomadic from necessity, as they wander with their flocks over an enormous area in search of the scarce pasturage which desert valleys afford their numerous herds. These people are wild because they live and die in desert places; they dislike all government, and become dangerous rebels in times of civil disturbance. They are independent and warlike from the fact that they have no fixed abode, and nothing which would be imperilled by their absence; no property beyond their animals, which can be quickly marched from the reach of all authority. A good government would endeavour to alter these untoward conditions. (Baker 1884b: 44)

2. *Ismail's discontinued railway: the Wadi Halfa-Kerma line*

Though Baker was more knowledgeable than most on these matters and more sanguine than at least some commentators as regards the northern Sudan's prospects for development, he was not, of course, very original in his

views, or even in his use of "biophysiological" metaphors. Indeed, "circulation" is a key concept that, in the nineteenth century, often articulated "the preoccupation with the conquest and mastery of space" (Schivelbusch 1986: 194-195). That efficient communications, steam transportation and especially trains were the master-tools of economic progress, that economic progress was the mainspring of civilisation, and that nations placed on a higher rung on the evolutionary scale should lead, cajole or constrain their more backward neighbours to move up the ladder, had been generally-held convictions for quite a while, in Britain and abroad. In nineteenth-century Egypt, the Ottoman ruling class had been largely guided by the same philosophy in their attempts to run the country on principles of efficiency and profitability. Effective transportation and communication would inevitably entail progress on a social, or human, level. Thus, the Khedives had been the main propellers of modernisation, and increasingly relying on foreign loans, foreign contractors and foreign expertise, they had endowed the region of the Delta with considerable infrastructure, which placed Egypt at the very forefront of colonial modernity. The first Egyptian railway joining Alexandria and Cairo – the first in Africa and the East – had been built by the British engineer Robert Stephenson under the Khedive Abbas and had opened in September 1856, soon to branch off to Zagazig, Ismailia and Suez, to cater to passengers travelling along the Overland route to and from India. In 1868, this line counted among its passengers a two-year old Rudyard Kipling, who in later years would reminisce about a "very small boy [...] lifted out of a railway-carriage and set down beneath a whitewashed wall under naked stars in an illimitable emptiness because, they told him, the train was on fire. [...] So all his life, the word 'Zagazig' carried memories of a brick shed, the flicker of an oil-lamp's floating wick, a sky full of eyes, and an engine coughing in a desert at the world's end" (Kipling 1970: 247).

It is important to underscore that, together with substantial tax-exemptions and a variety of other privileges granted to foreigners, railways, canals and harbour facilities had made Egypt all too hospitable to international business interests. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had marked the culmination of such developments, perfecting the country's involvement in the world economy. This was not, of course, an unmixed blessing. The opening of the Canal irreversibly embedded the region in the Anglo-Indian system of communications and made it an obvious target of British expansionist politics, the Anglo-Indian lobby being the most powerful and aggressive of the British imperial agencies; besides, by amply outweighing the Khedive Ismail's finances, its building helped increase the country's foreign debt, thus tightening the grip of international finance on Egypt, and eventually making it insolvent (1876). All of this ended up by precipitating, in July 1882, the bombardment

of Alexandria – Britain's first full-scale involvement in the "scramble for Africa" – and the subsequent military occupation of Egypt, which enmeshed it more firmly in what historians have dubbed the "informal empire".[5]

With regard to the Sudan, its conquest in 1827 under Muhammad Ali, the founder of the Khedival house which ruled Egypt in the nineteenth century, together with the charting out of this immense newly acquired province and subsequent attempts at colonising it, were part of the imperialist politics of the Egyptian-Ottoman rulers (Powell 2003). The Khedives, who were all more or less sensitive to the problem of territorial control and efficient communication, toyed with the idea of a Sudan railway as early as in 1837, and had started seriously to consider the building of a railway line connecting Lower Egypt to Khartoum roughly a decade before they sent off Baker to explore and annex the Equatorial Nile (Hill 1965: 8-12). In 1860 the Khedive Said appointed one of his foreign consultants, the French engineer Mouguel, previously entrusted with the construction of a graving dock at Alexandria and with the building of a Nile barrage, to report on the feasibility of the project. Mouguel's estimate of the cost involved in the building of the desert railway was so exorbitant that the project was put aside (Sandes 1937: 365 ff). But it was resumed and perfected a few years later under the Khedive Ismail. Relying on British advisors and British contractors (the London firm of Appelby Brothers was to supply track and rolling stock), and as part of his pharaoh-like schemes for the modernisation of his country, Khedive Ismail eventually approved, in 1873, the building of the first one hundred miles of the Sudan railway, from Wadi Halfa to Kerma at the head of the Third Cataract. These developments were saluted with satisfaction by British specialist commentators:

> The Viceroy of Egypt has actually commenced one of the most gigantic undertakings ever attempted in his territory – that of connecting Upper and Lower Egypt by rail. At the terminal point of all ancient and modern conquest, where the Persian and the Roman invaders found the desert an impassable barrier, the Khedive, assisted by an army of English engineers and navvies, is preparing to drive an iron road and a team of iron horses, not only to the confines of Nubia, but into the heart of Africa. (*Bradshaw's Railway Manual*, 1875, qtd. in Hill 1965: 15)

[5] The bibliography on Khedival Egypt, its (largely endogenous) modernisation, the financial crisis of the 1870s, and what brought about its military occupation by Britain, is of course very extensive. In my argument I am relying especially on Timothy Mitchell (1988), A. G. Hopkins (1989) and Cole (1999), and for a very useful contextual overview of the "dynamics" of Britain's "territorial expansion" on Darwin (1997).

But the triumphal conquest of the Sudan by rail was sooner enthused upon than actually performed. In 1877 the railway had reached Sarras, only 33 miles down the proposed line; soon after another 21 miles were added which pushed the rail-head eight miles short of Ambigol – in the Nubian desert and, to all intents and purposes, between nowhere and nowhere. The building of that pitiful tract had cost the enormous sum of £450.000, and Charles Gordon, at the time Governor-General of the Sudan and much worried by shortage of cash, had advised that the building of the railway "on the grand scale" should be discontinued, to be replaced by a cheaper (and slower) system of steamers, supplemented by tram-lines to carry passengers and goods where the Nile cataracts obstructed navigation. The Khedive himself was by then in dire financial straits and, on the instigation of the French and British Governments, would soon be deposed by the Sultan, to be succeeded by his son Tewfik. As a consequence, the short railway tract was left to rot in the desert, as E. W. C. Sandes recalls in his monumental history of the Royal Engineers' achievements in Egypt and the Sudan: "the establishment dwindled to a dozen mechanics; the buildings fell to ruin; sand drifted over the rails; and the only result achieved by a mint of squandered money, was a weekly train that meandered slowly over the uneven rails when a locomotive could be found which was capable of drawing it" (Sandes 1937: 100-101).[6]

In foundering in the desert, the Wadi Halfa-Kerma line went the way of many a railroad planned and partly realised in Africa, where railways were not meant (as in Europe) to take on a substantial traffic of passengers and goods between existent urban and industrial centres, but were planned on the basis of "dreamy speculations about future profit", or for "completely uneconomic reasons" (Headrick 1981: 193) – such as were Ismail's schemes of national aggrandisement and imperial control of the Upper Nile. However, to the British who reported from the region, that stump of a railway did not engender reflection on the rationale of the modernisation of Africa, or on the "impossible economics" of African railways.[7] Rather, as a product of Ismail's ambitions,

[6] What remained of the line would be repaired, and pushed on to Kerma, in 1896, during the Dongola campaign, which (logistically and otherwise) provided Kitchener and his entourage with a testing ground before the final advance on Khartoum in 1897-1898 (Sandes 1937: 147-172). Part of the Wadi Halfa-Kerma line would be dismantled in order to build, with the same materials, the Sudan Military Railway across the Nubian desert (see below, section V).

[7] Given the great financial outlay necessary to build its infrastructure, the railway requires considerable traffic to become remunerative. In late nineteenth-century Africa there were no urban centres inland, and therefore no need for railways to link them, and railways were envisaged primarily as "feeder lines for the shipping compa-

and as a patent failure, it provided evidence that "Oriental" or "native" rulers were unreliable when it came to leading backward countries like the Sudan towards prosperity and civilisation. As an apt reminder of the shortcomings of pre-1882 Egyptian administration, the Wadi Halfa-Kerma railway appears in Steevens's *With Kitchener to Khartum* (1898). The famous best-selling account of Kitchener's campaign to re-conquer the Sudan opens up with a chapter where "Wadi Halfa tells its story": "[o]n its buildings and up and down its sandy, windy streets we may trace all the stages of the first conquest, the loss, the bitter failures to recover, the slow recommencement, the presage of final victory" (Steevens 1898: 1). In this context, the reader is directed, first of all, to look at "the Egyptian military hospital", a building "not unlike a railway-station", which is

> just what it was meant to be. That was the northern terminus of Ismail Pasha's great railway to Khartoum, which was to have run up-river to Dongola and Debbeh, and thence across the Bayuda, by Jakdul and Abu Klea to Metemmeh. The scheme fell short, like all Ismail's grandiose ambitions; Gordon stopped it, and paid for his unforesight with his life. The railway never reached the Third Cataract. The upper part of it was torn to pieces by the Dervishes, who chopped the sleepers into firewood, and twisted the telegraph-wires to spear heads; the part nearer Halfa lay half-derelict for many years, till it was aroused at length to play its part in the later act of the tragedy of the Sudan. (Steevens 1898: 2)

In this passage, the failure of "Ismail's grandiose ambitions" is coupled with the desert's successful resistance to penetration by outsiders. Here such resistance is given a more clearly political connotation than in Sandes, since the paraphernalia of civilised transportation and communication are not just re-annexed by the drifting sands, but are appropriated, and turned to backward and barbaric usage by the enemy. This state of affairs probably evoked in the British reader at the time the memory of gruesome acts of savage warfare, such as were associated with the Mahdist warriors – for instance, "the Hadendowa tribesmen", the Fuzzy-Wuzzy that Kipling had celebrated in his famous ballad, who "sometimes tied an unfortunate linesman to a telegraph pole and burnt him, first placing the ends of the cut wires in the victim's ears in the hope that they would make him 'talk like the telegraph' and so disclose the British plans" (Sandes 1937: 104).

Steevens's passage, however, shows that by 1898 the discontinued railway

nies that carried off to Europe the products of the African soil". Colonialists were therefore "caught between their own pressing transportation needs, and the impossible economics of the railroad" (Headrick 1981: 192).

had become, in retrospect, also an index of General Gordon's lack of foresight, as compared to Kitchener's more thorough understanding of the logistic problems posed by the region. Gordon's austere management of the Egyptian-Sudanese Treasury, though justified in purely financial terms and evidence of his personal integrity, had turned out to be very bad economy. Failing to complete the Wadi Halfa-Kerma railway had become, in other words, the evidence of a (sort of) generation gap between the days of Gordon, Gladstone and Wolseley (days of valour and earnestness, but also of political hesitation, miserly calculation of losses and profits, and strategic blunders) when Khartoum was lost and the Sudan was allowed to relapse into barbarism, and the days of Salisbury, Chamberlain and Kitchener, when a more business-like approach to warfare coupled with a less inhibited expansionist foreign policy had made the "re-conquest" possible.

3. *Of boats, trains and national failure: the Suakin-Berber line*

In the days of Gordon, Gladstone and Wolseley – in 1884-1885 at the time of the siege of Khartoum and of the Gordon Relief Expedition – it was, however, the project of another railway line that attracted the most attention, and that eventually became the symbol of the inefficient management of the Sudan crisis both by the Cabinet and by the Army. This was a railway line that was to be built by the British army and/or British contractors in order to reach the Nile at Berber from the port of Suakin on the Red Sea. Among the line's first supporters there was Samuel Baker himself, whose article on the "future of the Sudan" mentions it as the "parent" line from which the whole system of Sudanese communication was to be derived. In fact, Baker disagreed with placing the terminus of the railway at Berber; it should, in his opinion, reach Shendy, above the last cataract of the Nile, the last obstacle on the fluvial way to Khartoum, and not below it. But he agreed that this was the first line that had to be built, since it would grant the Upper Nile regions the quickest access to the sea. General Gordon himself, in 1882, seems to have shared this view: "There can be not the least doubt but that the route, Suakin to Berber, is the true natural route to be opened".[8]

Baker was thinking, primarily, of the future economic advantages to be derived from the building of such a railway, while Gordon and the Anti-Slavery Society aimed at the suppression of the slave trade and the welfare of the natives, being persuaded that "[t]he hidden misery of peoples in the dark places

[8] G. C. Gordon, Letter to A. B. Wylde, 17 December 1882 (Anon. 1885: 335).

of the Soudan exists because no light is thrown on those lands, which light this railway would give".[9] Nonetheless, such prospective benefits were, at that time, hardly distinguishable from the military advantages which easier penetration of the Sudan from the Red Sea littoral would have given the British and the Egyptian army in the current crisis. Nothing was done, however, as to the building of the railway in the early months of 1884: though the military operations in the area (with the famous battles of El Teb and Tamai) were in their way successful, the Liberal Government opted, in April, for the withdrawal of the British troops, leaving a small contingent to defend Suakin and Gordon to fend for himself in Khartoum. As the Mahdists closed in on the city, however, the telegraph lines were cut, and the prospect started to look really bleak, the possibility of using the Suakin-Berber route to rescue Gordon was very much debated, and was set aside only towards the end of August 1884, when the Nile route was chosen for the Gordon Relief Expedition. This choice was controversial at the time, and it grew even more controversial after the failure of the expedition and the fall of Khartoum, when it became a matter of (easy) recrimination that Gordon could have been rescued by sending troops to Khartoum from the Red Sea via Berber (by far the shortest route, though waterless and dangerous), rather than along the safer (though much longer) route of the Nile Valley. Retrospectively, it very much became a question of Wolseley's misguided preference for (old fashioned, and slow) river navigation as opposed to (faster and more reliable) transportation by rail.

The appointment of General Wolseley to command the Gordon Relief Expedition had itself been an object of controversy, as he had been preferred to General Frederick Stephenson, the other candidate to the post who had the support of Evelyn Baring, the Consul General in Egypt, and who had the additional advantage of knowing the Sudan. Stephenson – as well as other distinguished officers like Gerald Graham, who commanded operations on the Red Sea littoral – favoured the Suakin-Berber line of action, but Wolseley managed to impress the Government with the advantages of the Nile route, as by far the safer option. This required preparations on a grand scale (with the building of hundreds of whalers, and their transportation from Britain to

[9] The quote is from Gordon's letter cited above. In the same article which includes the letter, Gordon's correspondent, Mr Wylde, is quoted as stating: "At present Osman Digna and his people, who are inveterate Slave-traders, find that human merchandise, which can not only transport itself across the desert, but carry the goods and chattels of its owners, is almost the only trade that can pay. Give them another outlet for their energies, help them to make money otherwise than by dealing in black ivory, and we shall see the Slave-trade extirpated where it has hitherto defied all attempts at its repression" (Anon. 1885: 335).

Fig. 2 – "The Suakin-Berber Railway—and what will come of it", *Funny Folks*, 21 March 1885, p. 91

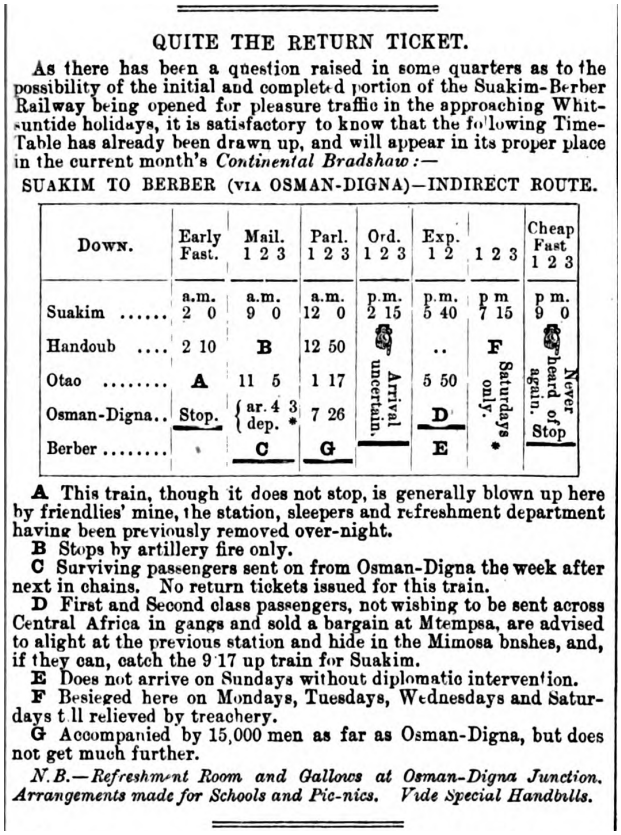
Egypt) and a long navigation upstream, which would carry through the Cataracts soldiers, weapons and provisions. It also seemed to promise a bloodless advance, a sort of "gigantic ferrying service, a contest against time and nature rather than against men", as well as a "truly Homeric spectacle" such as was likely to guarantee the ambitious General immortal glory, and (more mundanely) a promotion to the command of the Indian army (Preston 1978: 256). This option appeared, in short, to entail a harmless display of strength and logistic skills, and few casualties, which would appeal to a Liberal Government reluctant to authorise blood-shedding campaigns in foreign countries. Besides, Wolseley had successfully deployed the same strategy in his Red River Expedition (Canada, 1870), had vanquished the Ashanti in 1874 and the Egyptians at Tel el Kebir in 1882, and could rely on a trusty and experienced entourage. The chances seemed to be all on his side.

It was only when things did not turn out quite as expected, and the expedition failed, that military operations were resumed on the Red Sea littoral, in an

attempt to take pressure off the expeditionary corps which was fighting (and retreating) along the Nile. In those frantic days between the fall of Khartoum and the final withdrawal of the British troops from the Sudan, the building of the Suakin-Berber railway began as if in earnest in March, only to be discontinued in early May. It was a veritable fiasco, due to the military prowess of the Fuzzy Wuzzies – the Beja tribesmen who relentlessly obstructed the building of the railway line – and also to lack of efficient coordination between the contractor (Messr. Lucas and Aird, a leading British civil engineering firm of the time) and the Royal Engineers: thus, the line "was carried no farther than Otao, 18 ¾ miles from the coast" and "cost the Government more than £865,000". In fact, "the ships laden with the material were sent back to England and the line dismantled as the troops retired" (Sandes 1937: 78).[10] Only many years later, after the Sudan had been re-conquered and "pacified", would a Nile-Red Sea railway be built (by the Royal Engineers), on a slightly different route than the one originally envisaged. This line was opened in January 1906, its Nile terminus being at the Atbara, some thirty miles upstream from Berber, and its maritime terminus at Port Sudan, which was purpose-built sixty miles north of Suakin and was soon to become the Sudan's main commercial port.

Though the Suakin-Berber railway never actually existed, and the construction of its initial tract played such a marginal role in the military operations, it did figure prominently in the debate over the war in the 1880s and – as I said before – came to represent the rejected option which might have made it possible to rescue Gordon and Khartoum. The clearest and most articulate expression of this thesis is to be found in Major Emilius Albert De Cosson's book of memoirs of the 1885 campaign on the Red Sea littoral, published in 1886. De Cosson was an experienced traveller and a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, a (minor) authority on the Upper Nile himself, and in October 1884 had published an article on the "Future of the Soudan" in the *Fortnightly Review*, where – while criticising the conduct of the war in the preceding months, stating his hope that the Sudan should be "severed

[10] A fuller account of the building of this fragment of the railway, and of the decision to discontinue its construction, is provided by Richard Hill (1937). According to Hill's authoritative account, the Suakin-Berber railway's "merits" and "folly" "were fiercely debated in Parliament, and it was one of the principal causes which brought Mr Gladstone's Second Administration to its fall" (107). Hill points out that "From every point of view except perhaps the humorist's the Suakin-Berber Railway was a failure" (107), thus alluding to the publication of satirical articles and vignettes stimulated by the news from the Sudan and the concomitant political debate [see Figures 2 and 3].



QUITE THE RETURN TICKET.

As there has been a question raised in some quarters as to the possibility of the initial and completed portion of the Suakim-Berber Railway being opened for pleasure traffic in the approaching Whitsuntide holidays, it is satisfactory to know that the following Time-Table has already been drawn up, and will appear in its proper place in the current month's *Continental Bradshaw*:—

SUAKIM TO BERBER (VIA OSMAN-DIGNA)—INDIRECT ROUTE.

Down.	Early Fast.	Mail. 1 2 3	Parl. 1 2 3	Ord. 1 2 3	Exp. 1 2	1 2 3	Cheap Fast 1 2 3
	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	p.m.	p m	p m.
Suakim	2 0	9 0	12 0	2 15	5 40	7 15	9 0
Handoub	2 10	B	12 50	G	..	F	G
Otao	A	11 5	1 17	Arrival uncertain.	5 50	Saturdays only.	Never heard of again.
Osman-Digna..	Stop.	{ ar. 4 3 dep. *	7 26		D		Stop
Berber		C	G		E	*	

A This train, though it does not stop, is generally blown up here by friendlies' mine, the station, sleepers and refreshment department having been previously removed over-night.

B Stops by artillery fire only.

C Surviving passengers sent on from Osman-Digna the week after next in chains. No return tickets issued for this train.

D First and Second class passengers, not wishing to be sent across Central Africa in gangs and sold a bargain at Mtempsa, are advised to alight at the previous station and hide in the Mimosa bushes, and, if they can, catch the 9·17 up train for Suakim.

E Does not arrive on Sundays without diplomatic intervention.

F Besieged here on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays till relieved by treachery.

G Accompanied by 15,000 men as far as Osman-Digna, but does not get much further.

N.B.—Refreshment Room and Gallows at Osman-Digna Junction. Arrangements made for Schools and Pic-nics. Vide Special Handbills.

Fig. 3 – "Quite the return ticket", *Punch*, 9 May 1885, p. 317

from Egypt", and wishing the Gordon Relief expedition the best success – he had warmly supported the project of the Suakin-Berber railway. To De Cosson, very much as to Baker, the geographical isolation of the Sudan was the cause of its backwardness, and therefore the building of one such railway would do wonders to improve the economic and moral condition of the country, and possibly of all Equatorial Africa:

> Mr Stanley has already shown that it is possible to establish communication between the Congo and Khartoum. Join Khartoum and the Red Sea by means of steam, and what a dazzling prospect is open to the eyes of the philanthropist and the pioneer. (De Cosson 1884: 526)

Here, very much as in Baker, we find the odd mixture of dreamy visionarism and matter-of-fact logistics which – according to Headrick (1981: 192-

203) – connotes the African railway imaginary in the nineteenth-century. Contrary to Baker, however, De Cosson did not favour the annexation of the Sudan, the practice of military annexation appearing to him a form of autocratic conquest more suitable to Oriental potentates than to civilised British authorities. He firmly believed in free trade as the instrument to spread civilisation, and he thought that the true conquest of the Sudan should be effected "not by slaying people, or by annexing distant provinces, like Ismail Pasha", but by "proceeding step by step on the path of civilisation – making railways, opening communications, encouraging colonisation, and establishing fair and friendly intercourse with the people of the soil" (De Cosson 1884: 527). He was, in short, a representative of a brand of Victorian mentality which was becoming old-fashioned in the 1880s, when jingoism had started to take the upper hand. This is not necessarily to say that he was an anti-imperialist: the discourse of free trade, and that of "anti-slavery" humanitarianism – which also figures prominently in De Cosson's article – being "universal" in their application, did support an attitude that was, in its way, as "aggressively interventionist" as late-nineteenth century "imperialist" ideologies (Darwin 1997: 627). His enthusiastic support of railway building, by which "stagnant" retrograde communities could be dragged into the vitalising bustle of the world market, is evidence of this.

In his essay of October 1884, De Cosson expressed no doubts as to the ultimate success of the Gordon Relief Expedition, and did not overtly criticise the choice of the Nile route. However, after the fall of Khartoum, and his own personal service with General Graham's Field Force in the Suakin area in March-April 1885, De Cosson felt entitled to express his own views on the subject, to which he devoted the concluding chapter ("The Road to Khartoum") of his book of memoirs. Here he frankly voices the conviction that the choice of the Nile route had been a blunder, made by the War Office who, instead of listening to those who (like himself) knew the region well, relied on the opinions of a bunch of "old sportsmen" "accustomed to Canadian rivers", and prone to underestimating the problems posed by the Nile cataracts (De Cosson 1886: 321). In order to support this thesis, and though he was no engineer, De Cosson devotes several pages to showing in painstaking detail how Khartoum could have been reached in time if the Suakin-Berber route had been chosen instead, and the actual advance of the troops had been flanked and supported by the construction of the one-metre gauge railway, "progressing at the average rate of two miles a day" up to Wasi Haratri, and then "at the rate of *one* mile a day beyond that place" (De Cosson 1886: 335). A steam-engine, De Cosson underlined, "is not like a camel or a man rowing in a boat" – which were the antiquated means of transport used by Wolseley on the Nile route: "it can work all night, as well as all day, without getting tired, and only

a limited number of men need be kept to look after it" (*Ibidem*). Such considerations – De Cosson concluded – should be taken into account "if in the future Khartoum is considered worth capturing", since "the heart of the Soudan will always remain inaccessible until the direct and natural route from the Red Sea to the Nile has been opened" (De Cosson 1886: 342). Again, the building of a railway is represented as an artificial, though at the same time *natural*, improvement on faulty African nature. And again, it is presented as a question of joint commercial, political and strategic advantage, as General Wolseley himself had granted:

> "In addition to the commercial advantages which it will eventually confer, this railway cannot fail to have the greatest political influence upon the Soudan, while its strategic importance cannot be overestimated. At present this country is cut off from the civilised world by hundreds of miles of desert on all sides, and if the Power ruling at Khartoum has to be assisted from without, it is both very difficult and very costly to send troops to its aid. A railway would do away with this isolation. Had Berber been joined to Suakin by a line of rail when the Mahdi first took up arms against the Egyptian Government, his power would long since have been disposed of". (Wolseley qtd. in De Cosson 1886: 343)

That any future attempt to avenge the death of Gordon, and re-conquer Khartoum, would have to rely on the Suakin-Berber route, and the Suakin-Berber railway, remained a widespread conviction till the mid-1890s, when – as we shall see – Kitchener would contradict the "experts" and choose another route.

The key relevance of this (largely imaginary) railway line in the discursive productions generated by the Sudan military campaigns of 1884-1885 is evident in the role it plays in Kipling's *The Light That Failed* (1891). In this novel Kipling represents the historical trauma the British nation had experienced at the fall of Khartoum as the protagonist's blindness – the consequence of an injury undergone in a scuffle with the enemy by the Nile, at the time of the Gordon Relief Expedition (Villa 2009: 130 ff.). Likewise, his longing to go back to the Sudan, at the end of the novel, may be taken – on a collective level – as the national yearning to avenge the humiliation undergone and to "re-conquer" Khartoum. Though the blind hero dies on his arrival at the front, the Suakin-Berber railway, which is shown to be under construction, seems to foreshadow better things to come. In fact, the armoured train in the desert is the setting of one of the most memorable scenes in this rather rudimentary piece of fiction. Work on the railway has been resumed, and the war correspondent Torpenhow, blind Dick Heldar's bosom friend, is out in the desert, with the column that is protecting the fledgling line. There are only seven miles of track, and it reaches the fictional camp of Tanai el Hassan. Dick, who is travelling on his own while trying to reach his friend, manages to board the train

in Suakin, and has an exciting brush with truly masculine adventure at night, while crossing the desert in the "bogie-truck" together with the soldiers entrusted with the defence of the railway from the attacks of the Fuzzy Wuzzy:

> "*Hrrmph!*" said the machine-gun through all its five noses as the subaltern drew the lever home. The empty cartridges clashed on the floor and the smoke blew back through the truck. There was indiscriminate firing at the rear of the train, a return fire from the darkness without and unlimited howling. Dick stretched himself on the floor, wild with delight at the sounds and smells.
> "God is very good – I never thought I'd hear this again. Give 'em hell, men. Oh. Give 'em hell!", he cried. (Kipling 1992: 201)

Contrary to Baker, De Cosson, and even Wolseley, the young and disenchanted Kipling of *The Light That Failed* felt no need to enthuse over the economic (that is, civilising) potential of the Suakin-Berber railway. To him it was quite frankly a war machine, by means of which, in relative safety, the frustrated British male's thirst for revenge and bloodshed could be quenched.

4. *Taming the desert: the Sudan Military Railway*

If the story of how the British lost Gordon and Khartoum can be told as the story of how they failed to build a railway line, the story of how they managed to "smash" the "Dervish empire" and re-conquer the Sudan, tallies even more explicitly with the story of how, between January and October 1897, they managed to build a railway on the sands of the Nubian desert from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed, cutting down the eighteen days required by the upstream navigation of the corresponding stretch (it is, in fact, a grand bend) of the river Nile to a mere 24-hour train ride. This line was known as the Sudan Military Railway (or, more confidentially, "the S. M. R."), and – to contemporary commentators – it appeared as "the deadliest weapon that Britain has ever used against Mahdism" (Steevens 1898: 22). With a further tract built along the Nile and completed by early July 1898, the S.M.R. allowed troops, weapons, provisions and ammunition in overpowering quantities to reach the confluence of the Nile with the Atbara, a location that was (so to speak) within walking distance of the enemy's headquarters at Omdurman. Indeed, it was from the Atbara that the British and Egyptian battalions and gunboats closed in on Omdurman later that summer for the decisive confrontation with the Khalifa's army on the plain of Karari. Churchill tried to sum it all up nicely with a botanical similitude: "Victory is the bright-coloured flower. Transport is the stem without which it could never have blossomed" (Churchill 1902: 162).

Indeed, the role of efficient transportation in modern warfare had never

been so apparent as in the 1898 campaign; it went hand in hand with the role of state-of-the-art weaponry (the ponderous Maxim guns, the howitzer batteries, the lyddite shells...), telegraphic communications (with cables crossing the desert and flanking, of course, the railway line) and sundry other modern devices (such as gunboats travelling "in sections" on the railway, to be reassembled at destination, or powerful searchlights, that swept the Mahdist camp at night, terrifying the brave but superstitious enemy) – all of which were deployed in the Sudan, against warriors of legendary physical courage who, though in possession of some fire arms, greatly preferred swords, spears and hand-to-hand fighting. At Omdurman, nobody could deny it, technology and logistic skills made the "human element" and the "glorious uncertainties of the field" wholly irrelevant; and whether a military victory so clearly due to technological superiority – the inevitable outcome of "progress" – was deemed reassuring because it bore witness to Britain's superiority in evolutionary terms, or embarrassing because it was so obviously "unfair", it very much depended on the specific ideological orientation of the commentators (Villa 2009: 73-113). "In savage warfare in a flat country", Churchill had to admit with some regret:

> the power of modern machinery is such that flesh and blood can scarcely prevail, and the chances of battle are reduced to a minimun. Fighting the Dervishes was primarily a matter of transport. The Khalifa was conquered on the railway. (Churchill 1902: 162-163)

Steevens, who was less sentimental about the traditional aristocratic notions of military prowess and fair play, underlined the fact that

> In the existence of the [Sudan Military Railway] lay all the difference between the extempore, amateur scrambles of Wolseley's campaign and the machine-like precision of Kitchener's. When civilisation fights with barbarism it must fight with civilised weapons; for with his own arts on his own ground the barbarian is almost certain to be the better man. To go into the Sudan without complete transport and certain communications is as near madness as to go with spears and shields. (Steevens 1898: 22)

Of course, "amateur scrambles" were more picturesque than "scientific warfare", and the correspondents' articles on the 1898 campaign could not match the excitement and the pathos generated by the descriptions of the whale-boats dragged by hand and rope up the Nile cataracts, or of the broken "squares", the hand-to-hand fighting and the more conventional deeds of valour associated with the Sudan military operations of 1884-1885 (Villa 2007). In fact, those who reported on the "reconquest" of the Sudan had to find the "vivid scenes" and the "moving incidents" of battle (Churchill 1902: 162) mainly in the description of the heroic deaths of the enemies, mowed down at

long range by rifles, machine guns and heavy artillery, while they tried vainly to reach the British lines. To the same type of sado-masochistic titillation, one may associate the reporter's description of the thrills of the railway journey through the desert, with its "haunting beauty" and the sense of profanation brought about by the intrusion of trains, rails, wayside stations, and onlookers, passively dragged along "into the heart of the Nubian desert, two years ago a sanctuary of inviolable silence, where no blade of green ever sprang, where possibly no foot trod, since the birth of the world [...]" (Steevens 1898: 28-29). The spectacle of the tamed desert, its subjection to the machine-like regularity of the railway, its penetrability by alien people and its invasion by incongruous objects ("a string of empty trucks", "a tent, a little hut made of sleeper baulks, a tank, points and a board with the inscription [Station] 'N. 5'") (*Ibid.*), feeds the bitter-sweet emotion typically experienced by the standard-bearers of "progress", where satisfaction in the advancement of civilisation is laced with regret at the loss of the world as it once was, when none of its original "bloom" had been "rubbed off".[11]

Some additional pathos, however, could be extracted from the work of the men engaged in the building and maintenance of the desert railway: the men who had laid the tracks in the desert, for instance, "the daring pioneers of modern war", who had marched "through the wilderness, dragging their railway behind them", and had camped at the desolate rail-head in the desert,

> […] only connected with the living world of men and ideas by two parallel iron streaks, three feet six inches apart, growing dim and narrower in a long perspective until they were twisted and blurred by the mirage, and vanished in the indefinite distance. (Churchill 1902: 172)

Or the "little colony of British engine-drivers", posted at Station No. 6 of the S.M.R. (a veritable "Swindon in the desert"), a hundred miles further on:

> There they swelter and smoke and spit and look out at the winking rails and red-hot sand, and wait till their turn comes to take the train. They don't love the life – who would? – but they stick to it like Britons, and take the trains out

[11] The young Winston Churchill travelling on the same railway was more negative about the desert which he found overwhelmingly depressing ("The full force of that abomination of desolation smote one when the landscape was viewed from the window"). Thus, he represents with unmixed delight the civilising presence of the train in the desert, very much as he is comforted by the sight of the telegraph line along the Nile: "Looking at the slender poles and white insulators […,] it is impossible not to experience a glow of confidence in the power of science which can thus link the most desolate regions of the earth with its greatest city and keep the modern pioneer ever within hail of home" (Churchill 1972: 81, 78).

> and home. They, too, are not the meanest of the conquerors of the Sudan. (Steevens 1898: 29-30)

Or the heroic engineers who, against all odds, had managed the construction of the line, among them, the legendary "Bimbashi" Girouard, a young Canadian and the most trusty and resilient of Kitchener's "boys", who successfully supervised the construction of the railways in the Dongola (1896) and Omdurman campaigns. With his perfect mixture of "French audacity of imagination, American ingenuity, and British doggedness in execution", his strong individuality ("He never loses his head nor forgets his own mind: he is credited with being the one man in the Egyptian army who is unaffectedly unafraid of the Sirdar") and his brilliant career (he was just a subaltern in the army, but, after "finish[ing] the S. M. R. to the Atbara", he had been made Director-General of all the Egyptian railways, "with all but Cabinet rank, and £2000 a-year!") (Steevens 1898: 26-27), he is the closest approximation to a heroic young man of Henty's adventure novels one can get while reading the rather dull and matter-of-fact annals of the military operations that brought about the "re-conquest" of the Sudan in 1898.[12]

As to the Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, that is Major-General Kitchener himself, though he was by no means lacking in personal charisma, he represented a wholly new type of military leader, characterised by efficiency, logistic skills, and managerial qualities more than strategic genius or traditional valour. Like Gordon, he came from the ranks of the Royal Engineers, the less glamorous and most brainy branch of the British army ("They were expected to be not gallant or chivalrous, but technical, business-like, practical, entrepreneurial") (Hendrickson 1998: 133) – but he definitely belonged to a different generation from his famous predecessor in the Sudan. Gordon had been notoriously unpredictable, his impeccable professional qualifications as a military engineer, practical skills and clear-headedness being strangely coupled with uneven tempers, unpredictability and mystic proclivities ("The spiritual mystic and the sapper-measurer met in his mind") (Butler 1889: 187). Kitchener was so cool and methodical that Steevens felt he could be more easily compared to a machine (in fact, basically to a train) than to anything else:

> His precision is so inhumanly unerring, he is more like a machine than a man. You feel that he ought to be patented and shown with pride at the Paris International Exhibition. British Empire: Exhibit n. I, *hors concours*, the Sudan Machine.
> […]

[12] On Girouard, and his work in the Sudan, see also MacLaren (1978: 142-160).

> The real fighting power of the Sudan lies in the country itself – in its barrenness which refuses food, and its vastness which paralyses transport. The Sudan machine obviates barrenness and vastness: the bayonet action stands still until the railway action has piled the camp with supplies or the steamer action can run with a full Nile. [...] Patient and swift, certain and relentless, the Sudan machine rolls conquering southward. (Steevens 1898: 46, 49)

Though the Sirdar chapter in *With Kitchener to Khartoum* seems at times to verge on irony,[13] Steevens had a genuine admiration for "the man who has cut out his human heart and made himself a machine to retake Khartum" (Steevens 1898: 52). And the image of the train-like General, relentlessly rolling southward and crushing the Dervishes, does indeed stand out as a very fit epitome of the 1898 campaign, a sort of culmination and accomplishment of previous, less efficient, attempts at taming the Sudanese desert: "Others had thought of the desert route: the Sirdar [...] used it. Others had projected desert railways: the Sirdar made one" (Steevens 1898: 47-48).

Kitchener, steady and passionless as he seemed, abhorred rashness, imprudence and romantic enthusiasm. He was an army man, soberly professional, but he had, of course, his own dreams and ambitions, which sustained him along the many years of preparation of the Omdurman campaign, and affected some of his decisions. With regard to the actual construction of the desert railway, Kitchener had delegated much to Lieutenant Girouard, who was, in fact, a more experienced railway engineer than his General. But he had, of course, the last word on all decisive strategic aspects, such as the route (which differed from all those previously suggested), and the gauge. The debate on whether the gauge adopted for colonial railways should be the metre gauge or the larger 3 feet 6 inches gauge was longstanding, and – in relation to the Sudan – it had been ongoing since the 1880s. De Cosson, for instance, had supported the metre gauge option for the Suakin-Berber line, as "best suited to the country and rapid construction" (De Cosson 1886: 335), an opinion that in the late 1890s was shared by the Egyptian railways authority as well as by Lord Cromer, Britain's redoubtable Consul General in Egypt. He urged that the metre gauge should be employed for the S. M. R. "for practical and pecu-

[13] "It was aptly said of him by one who had closely watched him in his office, and in the field, and at mess, that he is the sort of feller that ought to be made manager of the Army and Navy Store. The aphorist's tastes lay perhaps in the direction of those more genial virtues which the Sirdar does not possess, yet the judgement summed him up perfectly. He would be a splendid manager of the Army and Navy Store. [...] He would be a splendid manager of the War Office. He would be the splendid manager of anything" (Steevens 1898: 46).

Fig. 4 – "The Rhodes Colossus", *Punch*, 10 Decembre 1892

niary reasons", since "Egypt had abundant reserves of metre-gauge sleepers, and could supply locomotives and rolling-stock of that gauge" (Sandes 1937: 226); besides, the Uganda railway was then being constructed on the metre gauge and it seemed sensible that the Sudan railway should conform (Hill 1965: 21). Though himself "a rigid economist" (Baring 1908, vol. II: 87), Kitchener chose the larger and more expensive 3 feet 6 inches gauge. He had of course good reasons. He was, first of all, reluctant to break the gauge at Wadi Halfa, where the S. M. R. joined the railway towards Dongola, which had been built in 1896 reviving, so to speak, Ismail's Wadi Halfa-Kerma line. He also had, "at Wadi Halfa depot four or five locomotives and over 60 wagons, and a stretch of 3ft. 6 ins. track as far as 'Akasha", which he "could hardly have thrown away" (Hill 1965: 21). But he also hoped, it seems (Sandes 1937: 266), that the S. M. R. would one day be incorporated in the Cape to Cairo transcontinental line, which, it was generally thought, would be speedily realised once the Sudan's resistance to penetration should be vanquished. On

this issue Kitchener's long-cherished ambition to reconquer Khartoum and avenge Gordon joined hands with the ultimate African railway fantasy – "the dream of a red English through-traffic line from Cairo to Cape Town" (Burleigh 1899: 333) conceived by the "transcendental imperialist" Cecil Rhodes, the chief of the British votaries of "expanding for expansion's sake" (Wallace 1899: 797), who notoriously would have annexed "the planets" if he could [Figure 4]. Thus Kitchener's military railway – crossing the Nubian desert, flanking the Nile down to the Atbara, poised to cross it and reach Khartoum, Sennar, and what next[14] – looked forward to South Africa, its 3ft 6in railways, and the Anglo-Boer War, another armed conflict on behalf of "civilisation", where trains and the train-like general would play a decisive (though not quite so glorious) role.

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[14] The bridge on the Atbara, itself an interesting object of controversy after Omdurman, was built in 1899; the railway was brought to Halfaya (on the bank of the Blue Nile, opposite Khartoum) by the end of the same year, and soon became the terminus for tourist trips in the area. Though it later reached Sennar and El Obeid, it never went further south.

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