



Aethiopia 20 (2017)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

SHIFERAW BEKELE, Addis Ababa University

Personalia

In memoriam Richard Pankhurst (1927–2017)

Aethiopia 20 (2017), 256–263

ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

Shiferaw Bekele

In memoriam Richard Pankhurst (1927–2017)

SHIFERAW BEKELE, Addis Ababa University

Richard Keith Pethick Pankhurst is arguably the most prolific scholar in the field of Ethiopian studies. The two bibliographies of his publications, published in 2002 and 2007 amount to a total of 485 titles.¹ Since 2007, he continued to publish, though at a reduced tempo, until 2016. It is fair to estimate the total at well over five hundred publications, most of which are scholarly articles. Twenty-five of them are books based on research. If we include the many popular pieces he wrote for different newspapers and magazines in Ethiopia and Britain over the years (some are actually original pieces based on new material), his output would number in the thousands. In addition, he co-edited two very successful—and influential—journals: *Ethiopia Observer*, 1961 to 1974, and *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1963 to 1975. An equally extraordinary achievement is the areas of Ethiopian history that he covered: they ranged from Late Antiquity to contemporary times; thematically, they touch upon most aspects of historical inquiry ‘with the sole exception’, in the words of Edward Ullendorff, ‘of that concerned with languages’.² As for publishing sources, an activity for which he is not usually given great credit, he has an impressive record that includes the pioneering—and very useful—work of reprinting many engravings from travellers’ accounts in *Ethiopia Engraved: An Illustrated Catalogue of Engravings by Foreign Travellers from 1681 to 1900* (London–New York: Kegan Paul International, 1988), which he put together with Leila Ingrams; in *Ethiopia Photographed: Historic Photographs of the Country and Its People, taken between 1867 and 1935* (London–New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), which he compiled together with Denis Gérard, he brought together both published and unpublished photographs. But this is not the whole story of his life.

¹ R. Pankhurst, ‘Bibliography of Publications written, edited, or annotated by Richard Pankhurst’, *Aethiopia*, 5 (2002), 15–41; R. Pankhurst, ‘Richard Pankhurst: Bibliography of Published Writings since 2000’, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 40/1–2 (2007, pub. 2010 = Heran Sereke-Brhan, Baye Yimam, and Gebre Yntiso, eds, *Festschrift Dedicated in Honour of Prof. Richard Pankhurst & Mrs. Rita Pankhurst* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 2007, pub. 2010)), 361–370.

² E. Ullendorff, ‘Richard Pankhurst’, *Aethiopia*, 5 (2002), 7–9, in particular p. 8.

Richard was born on 3 December 1927 in Woodford Green, North-east London of two left-wing parents, Silvio Corio, an Italian anarchist refugee in England, and Sylvia Pankhurst, the famous suffragette campaigner, who belonged to a distinguished family that had struggled for women's rights. His early boyhood years coincided with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, which his mother, a committed anti-fascist, condemned and campaigned against. In early 1936, very soon after the outbreak of the war, she started a newspaper, *New Times and Ethiopia News* that was dedicated to the struggle. Refugees came from Ethiopia, including the emperor and his family, and Sylvia Pankhurst brought some of them to her home. Young Richard came to know many of them, made friends with those of his age, took part in demonstrations, participated in fundraising campaigns, and helped his mother with her work on the newspaper. The outbreak of World War II led to many more activities and campaigns in support of the European victims of the war.

The end of the war saw Richard in the London School of Economics where he read economic history. After his first degree, he went on to do his doctorate in political science in the same school. He completed his studies with a thesis on the thoughts of an early nineteenth-century Irish socialist, which was published in the same year under the title *William Thompson (1775–1833): Britain's Pioneer Socialist, Feminist and Co-operator* (London: Watts, 1954). His college years were also partially devoted to helping his mother with her newspaper to which he contributed many articles on different issues, not always related to Ethiopia. The young Richard adopted a very firm and consistent anti-colonial position, which led him to write several articles on the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau Rebellion by the British rulers in the colony of Kenya. These pieces were brought together and published under the title *Kenya, the History of Two Nations* (London: Independent Publishing Company, 1954).

The two years after college were filled with activities of which some had enduring consequences for his life. To begin with, he continued his studies of the socialists of the nineteenth century at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, now broadening his scope to include French utopian thinkers, resulting in the volume *The Saint Simonians, Mill and Carlyle: A Preface to Modern Thought*, Lalibela Books (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1957). His first job was to give evening classes on the economic and social history of Britain in the University of London, Department of Extra-Mural Studies. He also taught at Toynbee Hall, a well-known adult education school in the East End of London. In his own words, "Toynbee

Hall was important to me also, as it was there that I met my future beloved wife Rita Eldon, who also taught there'.³

In the summer of 1956, Sylvia, Richard and Rita went to Ethiopia and settled there for good. Sylvia worked on their journal *Ethiopia Observer*, founded soon after their arrival and replacing her *New Times and Ethiopia News*; Richard taught economic history at the Addis Ababa University College (later Haile Selassie I University and still later Addis Ababa University) and did research in the economic history of Ethiopia; and Rita worked for the National Library. Richard and Rita were married on 17 September 1957. The research into economic history that Richard launched soon after his arrival was very wide in scope, including social and medical issues, and in time, ranging from Aksumite times to the twentieth century. Much later in life, he recalls the guiding principles he set for himself at that time for his research and writings: 'Because of the absence or non-availability of basic texts, I saw my task as bringing together primary information, rather than interpreting it: the interpretation, I felt, could come out later.'⁴ Successive generations of scholars criticized him for this style of presentation, but the majority of his works were pioneering studies in different fields of Ethiopian studies, especially in economic, medical, social, and cultural history. In any case, publications followed in great numbers, most of them appearing in *Ethiopia Observer* but he also started to publish widely in international journals. *An Introduction to The Economic History of Ethiopia from early times to 1800* (London: Lalibela House, 1961) came out soon, quickly followed by no less than three original and two edited books in only two years (1965–1967): *State and Land in Ethiopian History*, Monographs in Ethiopian Land Tenure, 3 (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies–Faculty of Law, Haile Sellassie I University–Oxford University Press, 1966), *An Introduction to the History of the Ethiopian Army* (Addis Ababa: Imperial Ethiopian Air Force, 101st Training Centre, 1959 EC = 1966/1967 CE), and *Primitive Money, Money and Banking in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam H.S.I. Printing Press, 1967) as well as *Travellers in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) and *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles* (Addis Ababa–Nairobi–Lusaka–London: Oxford University Press, 1967). This productive decade culminated in the appearance of the massive (772 pages)—and much used—*Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press, 1968).

³ Richard and Rita Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Reminiscences, Early Days* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2013), 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

The 1960s were very busy years for Richard. The decade started with the passing away of his mother (27 September 1960), which was a big loss to him for he had been very close to her. Together with Rita, he went on to edit and publish *Ethiopia Observer* that continued until the Revolution of 1974. In order to carry out their official duties, to do the extensive research, publish the journal, and attend the many cultural events in Addis Abāba, the couple had to work late into the night for many months of the year. Richard was appointed as the first director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in early 1963, which, together with his long-time colleague, Stanislaw Chojnacki, he established and developed. Very quickly, the institute acquired a good Ethiopian library, an impressive historical art gallery, and an ethnographic museum. The government considered the institution to be well-organized, and encouraged some of the heads of state, who came for the founding conference of the Organization of African Unity (May 1963) to visit it. The tradition continued long afterwards when heads of states and governments came to the country on visits, with the emperor often accompanying the distinguished guests. In the year of its foundation, together with Chojnacki, Richard launched the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. The two scholars co-edited the journal for the next ten years and made it an important international forum for scholarly exchange, and a major platform for the research of Ethiopia-based scholars. The contributions of the IES to research have been widely recognized by Ethiopianists from Europe and the United States. Thus, under the leadership of Richard, the institute emerged as a premier institution of research in Ethiopia and as a flagship unit of Haile Selassie I University (later Addis Ababa University).

Generations of Ethiopian academics have benefited from its resources. The IES built up a research section made up of young scholars recruited both from those who had completed their studies abroad and from graduates of the language and history departments of the university. The young graduates went to Europe for doctoral studies and returned, upon completion, to work in the same institution. The 1960s saw the government implementing a policy of Ethiopianization (systematically replacing expatriates in executive positions with Ethiopians) in various departments of the state, in parastatals (e.g. banks, Ethiopian Airlines, telecommunications), in secondary schools, and in the university itself. The IES in its way helped this trend by contributing to the ‘Ethiopianization’ of Ethiopian studies. A new generation of highly trained (Ethiopian) Ethiopianists emerged in this decade and the institute served as a hub. Richard hosted, together with some of these scholars, the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in 1966, an event of considerable significance in the process of Ethiopianizing the field. He also coordinated the participation of Ethiopian scholars in

the next conference held in Rome in 1972 that saw an impressive presence of participants from the country. Moreover, Richard organized, together with the Department of History, a conference on Current Research Trends in Ethiopian History (1970),⁵ and hosted the first and second conferences of the Historical Society of Ethiopia (1971 and 1973 respectively).⁶

The 1960s were exciting years in art, literature, and culture. Some of the leading painters of twentieth-century Ethiopia (Afäwärk Täkle, Gäbrä Krästos Dästa, and Äskändär Bøghossian, to name but a few of them) and literary figures (Mängästu Lämna, Şaggaye Gäbrä Mädhən, and Bä°alu Gərma, among several others) established themselves in this decade; they were busy producing paintings, plays, novels, and poetry. A good number of them were very close personal friends of the Pankhursts, their friendships going back to Richard's student days in London. Major exhibitions were held in the city. Richard and Rita did not miss these important cultural events, particularly painting exhibitions, and generally devoted issues of the *Ethiopia Observer* to them. Richard himself wrote on the emerging modernist arts; Chojnacki and Sälomon Däressa published extensive reviews of the paintings. Even if Richard and Rita's command of Amharic left something to be desired, they still followed what was going on in the field of Amharic literature and reported its progress in their journal. Thus, *Ethiopia Observer* is today the most valuable source of—and a rare window to—exciting developments in painting, literature, and the performing arts in the 1960s. Richard's scholarly productions and the sum total of his work in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies were recognized by the prestigious Haile Selassie I Prize Trust, which awarded him the Ethiopian studies prize for 1973, the last prize that the trust awarded. The Revolution of 1974 broke out some months later and things changed dramatically. The turmoil and chaos that ensued led many expatriate staff to leave the country immediately. Richard and Rita decided to stay on for as long as they could; however, by 1976, it was getting too difficult and dangerous to work in the country, and so they left for London.

The London years were also fruitful. Richard enjoyed an appointment as a research fellow in his alma mater, the London School of Economics, and in the School of Oriental and African Studies. He then moved to the Royal Asiatic Society as a librarian where he also carried out research. Some of his findings were published in the much-cited *Tax Records and Inventories of*

⁵ The proceedings were published in the American journal *Rural Africana*, 11 (1970).

⁶ The proceedings were published in the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 10/2 (1972) and 13/1 (1975).

Emperor Téwodros of Ethiopia (1855~1868), *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, Series Aethiopica, 1 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1979), which he wrote together with Gərma Šállase Asfaw. Further publications in which these findings appeared include the two-volume *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the early Nineteenth Century*, *Äthiopistische Forschungen*, 8 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1982) and *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to 1935* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1985); and other monographs such as *The History of Famine and Epidemics Prior to the Twentieth Century* (Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1985), and *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers (Early and Mid-Nineteenth Century) Preserved in The British Library, The Public Record Office, Lambeth Palace, The National Army Museum, India Office Library and Records, Oriental Documents*, 9 (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), annotated by Richard Pankhurst and translated by D. L. Appleyard and A. K. Irvine. An enduring institutional contribution of the London years was the initiative that he took with Rita in 1986 to convene in London the First International Conference on Ethiopian Art. These conferences have continued until today, serving as a platform for art historians and critics to report their findings and to establish contacts. The proceedings, which further our knowledge of Ethiopian arts and cultural history in general, are published as a matter of principle.

In 1987, Richard and Rita returned to Ethiopia for good. The IES gladly took Richard back as a research fellow. He resumed his activities in the field of research and in building the organization as a research institution. One of the major problems that the institute had faced from the very beginning was lack (or shortage) of funds to buy books and manuscripts, art objects, and other heritage items. In order to cope with this perennial problem, Chojnacki had taken the initiative, back in 1968, to found the Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (SOFIES), whose members were drawn from the foreign community and from well-to-do Ethiopians. Richard was an active supporter of this organization. Funds were raised that led to the acquisition of valuable icons and other artefacts as well as of books and manuscripts from the medieval and post-medieval periods. But SOFIES was disbanded following the outbreak of the revolution. On his return, Richard resuscitated it and made it a valuable arm of the IES for many years. A stream of articles, books, and newspaper pieces continued to flow from his pen. Suffice it to cite two of the most important publications of this period: *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Téwodros II* (Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 1990), and *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Es-*

says in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century (Lawrenceville, NJ–Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1997). His last book is perhaps the work that he co-authored with Rita, *Ethiopian Reminiscences, Early Days* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2013), a charming memoir of their life together until the death of his mother in 1960.

One issue that absorbed much of his energy after his return to Addis Abäba was the question of the return of the Aksum obelisk and of other objects and manuscripts looted or unlawfully taken from Ethiopia during the occupation of the country from 1936 to 1941 and by the Napier expedition of 1867/1868. He campaigned ceaselessly through the press, by organizing demonstrations in Addis Abäba as well as in cities in Europe and the US, by collecting signatures from Ethiopianists and others from Ethiopia and abroad, and by enlisting the help of prominent Italians and other Europeans for the cause. As the campaign progressed, enthusiastic support came from Ethiopians from different walks of life, and from the government, and, eventually, this led to the return of the obelisk in 2005. More than anything else, this campaign engraved Richard in the minds of many Ethiopians, a fact we were able to see in the public outpourings of grief following his death.

His campaigns, however, were not focused on the obelisk to the exclusion of other stolen items. He relentlessly wrote for the return of other objects that were stolen during the Italian occupation, particularly for the repatriation of a small plane assembled in Ethiopia before the war. His efforts for the return of the manuscripts and artefacts looted by the British Army during the 1867/1868 expedition into Ethiopia were expressed through an organization that he set up with like-minded Ethiopians and Britons, which they called the Association for the Return of The Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET). The Association succeeded in getting back some objects like the amulets of Tewodros and, more notably, the *tabot* taken from the church of Mädhane ʿAläm built by the king himself on mount Mäqdäla. In addition to all this, he campaigned successfully for the construction of a new building to house the ever-growing library of the IES, which is now nearing completion.

Richard's active life and contributions were recognised by Ethiopian institutions and individuals in various ways. Addis Ababa University awarded him an honorary doctorate (doctor of letters *honoris causa*) in 2004 for his scholarly work as well as for all his cultural activities. In the same year, the government of the United Kingdom awarded him the Order of the British Empire (OBE). Civil society organizations also recognized his life-time contributions to the promotion of the Ethiopian heritage and culture and of Ethiopian studies. His death on 16 February 2017 saw nation-wide expres-

Personalia

sions of grief, and praise for his work for Ethiopia. FM radio stations, TV channels, newspapers, social media platforms poured out their grief and homage to the man whom they acclaimed as ‘more Ethiopian than [many] Ethiopians’, ‘a great friend of Ethiopia’, ‘an Ethiopian patriot’, and the like. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in its communiqué, issued on the occasion, that he was ‘one of the greatest friends of Ethiopia’. He was given a state funeral, and it was also decided that he would be interred in the grave of his mother (as befits an old Ethiopian tradition) in the grounds of the Holy Trinity Cathedral. The funeral took place on 21 February in the presence of the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, other high ranking government officials, archbishops, and a huge crowd. Funeral orations were delivered by the representative of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Culture, the State Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Ambassador of the United Kingdom, the President of Addis Ababa University, Dr Alula Pankhurst, and the present reviewer. The religious ceremony was officiated by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāḥədo Church. Richard is survived by his wife, Rita, and his children, Alula and Helen.