



Aethiopica 09 (2006)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

HANNA RUBINKOWSKA, Warsaw University

Review

FREDERIC A. SHARF (ed.), *Letters from Abyssinia 1916 and 1917: with supplementary Foreign Office Documents*

Aethiopica 09 (2006), 267–270

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

Das Buch ist hervorragend lesbar und vermittelt ein lebendiges Bild des Mannes und seiner Zeit, vor allem aber auch lebhaft Eindrücke vom Äthiopien des 18. Jahrhunderts und seiner inneren Kämpfe.

Ludwig Gerhardt, Universität Hamburg

FREDERIC A. SHARF (ed.), *Letters from Abyssinia 1916 and 1917: with supplemental Foreign Office Documents*, by Major Hugh Drummond Pearson, commentary and annotations by Richard Pankhurst, Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2004. 251 pp. Price: GBP 40. ISBN: 0-9748198-0-8.

Letters from Abyssinia is a book which reveals scenes from life of a British colonial society as well as some aspects of the situation in Africa in the beginning of the 20th century, through the eyes of a British officer and enriched by archival diplomatic documents. It is a collection of letters sent home by a British officer, Major Pearson, in 1916 and 1917. Most of the letters were sent not only from Ethiopia, as the title would suggest, but also from the Sudan.

Hugh Drummond Pearson (1873–1922) served the King and the Empire in the Royal Engineers. He started his work in India and continued in China. From 1902 Pearson served in Somali and Sierra Leone. In 1905, he was assigned to the Egyptian Army but his career developed when he took up a position as Director of Sudan Surveys; this involved him having responsibility for many British engineering works in this part of Africa. During World War I, Pearson was chosen to take charge of the Sudan Intelligence Office in Khartoum. Due to his work as Director of Sudan Surveys, Pearson was sent to Ethiopia or, as it was known at the time, Abyssinia. Following British efforts to survey the Blue Nile, he led a mission to the Tana Lake in 1916 with the aim of taking measurements so as to construct a dam. He returned to Ethiopia in April 1917 once, the official reason for this being to bestow the G.C.M.G. order¹ to *Ras Tāffāri*.

All the letters and documents date back to the time of the First World War. However, Pearson's expedition to the Tana Lake took place after the Suez Canal was defended by the British in 1915 and after Italy joined the Allies in

¹ G.C.M.G. – the most distinguished of three classes of the order of Saint Michael and Saint George, an order of chivalry founded in 1818 by George, Prince of Wales (later George IV). It is used to honour individuals who have rendered important services in relation to Commonwealth or foreign nations. The order is the sixth most senior in the British honours system.

the same year. Although the Ottoman Empire was still in power and, along with its allies doing quite well in protecting the Dardanelles and fighting the British at Baghdad, as far as Africa was concerned, the situation meant that the British could concentrate on their plans for the lake. 1916 and 1917 mark a turning point in Ethiopian history. When Emperor Menilek II fell ill in about 1910, *Abeto Iyasu* and his father, *Ras Mikael* of Wällo took power of the country. This change gave hope for Muslim inhabitants of Ethiopia as it provided an opportunity to stress their importance to make their mark in the Empire and develop an equal status in the country. During the *coup d'état* in 1916, Iyasu and his father lost power to Shäwan landlords who represented the interests of Christians in the Empire. That year as well as the following year, the securing of that power was witnessed, which was to survive until the end of Haylä Sellase's rule in 1974.

The publishing of Pearson's letters marks another step in the increasing interest in the period between the reigns of Menilek II (1889–1913) and Haylä Sellase I (1930–1974). *Abeto Iyasu's* reign (1910–1916) attracts growing interest from historians. The period which followed, namely the years of Empress Zäwditu's reign (1916–1930), until recently seemed to be beyond historians' major interest, if not for the purpose of researching the early years of building Haylä Sellase's power.²

The book is divided into seven chapters arranged on the basis of chronologically presented political events taking place in the Ethiopian Empire. The idea seems to follow more the title of the book than the content of Pearson's letters. His connection with the situation in Ethiopia refers to leading the Lake Tana Mission and his visit in the Empire whilst delivering the decoration to the Heir to the Throne, *Ras Täffäri Mäkonnen*. Even though the Lake Tana project was one of the most important issues in the British policy towards Ethiopia, it is actually not the impression one gets from the lecture of Pearson's letters, as the subject takes surprisingly little space in his private correspondence. After having completed the mission and having come back to Khartoum, Pearson was constantly waiting to be sent to Ethiopia again. The British hope for signing a treaty with the Ethiopian Government about building a dam on the lake, constituted the reason for this situation. As it eventually turned out, the British never fulfilled their hopes towards the lake.

The life of Major Pearson is described in the introduction (pp. 1-7), whilst the first chapter (pp. 8-18), written by Richard Pankhurst, sheds light on the

² A recent attempt to analyse the years of Empress Zäwditu's reign was carried out by the author of the review in her Doctoral Thesis: "Zäwditu – the Empress of Ethiopia (1916-1930)", unpublished Ph. D., Department of History, Warsaw University, Warszawa 2005.

history of Addis Abäba, the capital of Ethiopia. It provides a good introduction on what an European could experience while staying in the city. A description of Pearson's expedition in the western area of the country where the Tana Lake is located, was described in Pearson's own report published in one of the appendixes to the book (Appendix B: Report on Lake Tana Mission [F.O. 371/2593], pp. 185-214).

The following chapters, from two to seven (pp.19-170), present Pearson's letters together with the Foreign Office documents. They deal with the proposed Ethiopian-British Lake Tana Treaty, the British party preparations for the expedition to Ethiopia and the mission itself, events of the Arab revolt in Hijaz in 1916, Pearson's stay in Jedda as Wingate's envoy, the Ethiopian *coup d'état* in 1916 when Pearson stayed in Khartoum and finally the second Pearson expedition to Ethiopia in 1917 aimed at delivering the British order to Ras Tāffāri Mākwonnen. In separate chapters additional information presenting a background of the events mentioned in Pearson's letters is included. In Appendixes A to D (pp.171–231) a choice of more documents is published. In addition to the previously mentioned Pearson's report, appendix D also contains his report regarding the mission to Addis Abäba. Appendix E presents a note on titles of Abyssinian dignitaries (p. 232) and Appendix F provides biographical information (p. 233–238). The book includes notes (p. 239–245), a bibliography (p. 246–248) and an index (p. 249–251). It also contains photographs and illustrations which are a valuable historical source. However, the book lacks more detailed maps as only two general ones are included (pp. VI, 18). This is emphasized by the fact that the Foreign Office archive holds a number of maps of the Tana Lake and its surrounding area.

For those interested in Ethiopian history, Pearson's letters do not bring much remarkable information and may indeed be slightly disappointing. However, they provide a reason for publishing some of the British documents as they refer in detail to the political situation in the country and hence are an excellent piece of information. The letters provide a source for historians in order to research British activity in the Ethiopian Empire. Also, as the majority of the published letters were sent not from Abyssinia but from Khartoum in the Sudan, as well as some other parts of the world, the book offers new material for wider research; it includes colonial history of the British Empire, history of the Horn of Africa and, what seems particularly interesting, British attitude towards other cultures. Unfortunately, for those interested in the political history of the area, the most fascinating information could not be included in private letters, as censorship restrictions did not allow it. Pearson's regret about this merely serves to enhance the reader's disappointment.

There is also another aspect of the book, which in my opinion should attract a reader's attention. As is always the case when letters are edited, they present history from a human perspective and thus bring it closer to a reader and add to the value of the book. The letters also allow a reader to put together an official picture of the successful British colonial officer from his own letters. Basic information regarding the life and career of Major Pearson is given in his obituaries (p. 7). A different picture can be found in the letters sent by Pearson to his mother and sister; according to these, during the war, he turned into a disappointed man who was not given a chance to prove his abilities neither his patriotism. Expected to stay in Africa without the chance of participating in the war as a soldier, he listened to news from home about others being decorated with medals and given ranks higher than his own. Whilst serving in the Sudan, Pearson was a protégé of General Sir Reginald Wingate, Sirdar of the Egyptian Army and Governor-General of the Sudan. This helped him to develop his career in the colonies, and possibly saved his life during the war, as Wingate did not allow Pearson to leave his office and fight in the frontline. On the other hand, Pearson's relationship with the General shielded him from honour on the battlefield. Instead, he spent this time playing golf and entertaining British Society in Khartoum. A description of these activities together with others, including obtaining proper hats for the British residents in Addis Abäba, takes a lot of space in Pearson's letters. The climax of his disappointment came when he was supposed to attend the Empress Zäwditu's coronation in February 1917 and was stopped en route. In times of death and heroes, Pearson was not even given a chance to participate in important diplomatic events. Instead, he was forced to spend his days playing golf and polo and decide on the hat styles which gave him the only ground for success.

The *Letters from Abyssinia* is an interesting choice of documents. In my opinion, it is a splendid idea to publish Pearson's letters together with the official Foreign Office reports, which creates a highly detailed picture of the British perspective of Ethiopian events. The choice of documents also draws attention to the unpublished but easily accessible sources of African and, particularly, Ethiopian history. The book provides us both with a good source of different aspects of 1920s history, as well as giving it a distinctly human perspective.

Hanna Rubinkowska, Warsaw University