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PETER GARRETSON

Review

REIDULF K. MOLVAER, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers*

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REIDULF K. MOLVAER, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers*. Lawrenceville, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, 1997. 426 pp. Price US\$ 21.95.

I found this to be a fascinating, rewarding and uneven book. There is a great deal of raw information about the history of modern literary figures in Ethiopia, but some of the information is insufficiently digested and in many cases sources are inadequately cited. Nonetheless, I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.

There are thirty two biographies in REIDULF MOLVAER's latest book and most of the major literary figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are covered. These include figures like Hiruy Welde-Sillasé, Girmacchew Tekle-Hawariyat, Kebede Mikaél, Mekonnin Indalkacchew, Ras Imru, and Haddis Alemayyehu of an earlier generation. But the overall emphasis is on the more recent generation of authors like Tseggayé Gebre-Medhin, Abbé Gubennya, Mammo Widdineh, Mengistu Lemma, Dannyachew Werqu, Berhanu Zerihun, Sibhat Gebre-Igziabihér and Be'alu Girma. One might quibble, wondering why someone like Ylma Deréssa was left out, but the range of figures covered and the volume of information is truly impressive. Clearly, REIDULF MOLVAER has very efficiently and thoroughly read virtually all the major works of the authors he describes. Furthermore, he has carried out a vast number of oral interviews with most of the authors, and one would think with as many as was possible, as well as many of their friends and acquaintances. The information is voluminous and fascinating. This is a remarkable piece of work. However, an historian might very well question the documentation of his sources. These are not always clearly identified and are rarely cited in systematic footnotes. Many primary sources, other than each author's works seem to have been rarely consulted, especially archival sources. For instance Dr. "Weckman" is cited on page 86 and he is a figure that appears regularly in British dispatches from Addis Ababa as Dr Wakeman.

One of the major strengths, but also significant weaknesses of this book grows out of, perhaps, its great reliance on oral interviews. From these sources one is able to glean a great deal about the atmosphere and flavour of the individuals' milieu, something that is generally impossible to achieve in a dry historical account. Yet, a professional historian is often left concerned as to the exact provenance of the information imparted. One often has the feeling while reading that you have suddenly been transported back to Ethiopia and that you have had a sudden insight of real importance but are left uneasy because a hard source is not cited. Other, less significant problems are the lack of map, which would be helpful in locating places mentioned in the text, especially the more obscure birthplaces of

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this wide array of authors. The reader should also be warned that the English, though always comprehensible, is at times idiosyncratic and entries are at times repetitive.

Finally, let me emphasize how much I enjoyed reading *Black Lions* and how fascinating members of the local Ethiopian community in Tallahassee have found the book. The Red Sea Press has performed a most important service to the English speaking Ethiopian diaspora in printing this and other works. REIDULF MOLVAER in *Black Lions* gives a truly unique view of modern Ethiopian literary figures unavailable elsewhere in English.

Peter Garretson

TADDESSE ADERA and ALI JIMALE AHMED (eds.), *Silence is not Golden. A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*. Lawrenceville, NJ.: The Red Sea Press, Inc. 1995. 214 pp. US\$ 16.95 (paperback).

This book is a welcome introduction to the field of Ethiopian literature, relatively unknown and little-studied abroad. In fact, it is one of the very few of its kind, and unfortunately it shows the weaknesses of such a pioneering effort. It seems to be a rather hastily gathered and hardly edited collection of very diverse pieces which creates some confusion in the mind of a reader not well-versed in the various genres of Ethiopian literature (dating back many centuries) and modern fiction writing (dating from 1908). Indeed, there is little unity of format or purpose. Though the introduction to the book is helpful up to a point, it does not offer a good and balanced overview of the field and gets lost sometimes in erudite but excessive references. The book is a somewhat curious sample of studies or comments related to Ethiopian creative literature, without an attempt at critical evaluation of trends and developments. There is neither any editor's afterword to do this.

The title of this book is also puzzling: the first part is not explained anywhere, though it presumably means that to speak out and express oneself is an art as well as a necessity in Ethiopia, and the sub-title is not correct: the book is not an anthology of but on Ethiopian literature: when we expect a collection of some good creative fiction from Ethiopia we are disappointed. Nevertheless, a series of critical studies on Ethiopian literary works is also very useful and indeed necessary, given the fact that Ethiopian creative writing and