

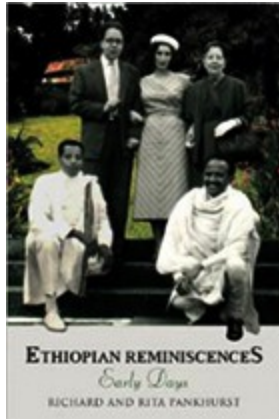
Ethiopian Reminiscences: Early Days

Author: Richard Pankhurst

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Review: Arefayné Fantahun

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Sylvia, Richard and Rita Pankhurst have long been renowned figures in Ethiopia “for their loyal championing of Ethiopia’s nationhood, their creative institution building, and their personal generosity”, as Donald Levine has stated in the blurb. Part memoir, part history, the book entitled “Ethiopian Reminiscences”, provides a gripping insiders’ view of the major public events of the 50s, 60s and 70s. The joint autobiography, which is the first part of the projected two-volume memoir, is filled with colourful anecdotes about their family, friends, and the men and women who played important roles in shaping the formative period of Ethiopian history. The story is illustrated with numerous photographs.

The book has ten chapters. The first three chapters provide a useful background while the remaining chapters are devoted to reminiscences of the country the authors have adopted. The authors mainly follow a straightforward narrative approach with the last chapter placing the events of the period in their longer historical context.

Richard, who went to the London School of Economics in the 1940s and wrote a critique of colonialism in his student days, counted among his acquaintances no less than the Emperor and many other eminent Ethiopian scholars, writers and educators. He provides numerous eyewitness accounts of notable people and events, including the political upheaval in Ethiopia that brought about the fall of Haile Selassie. Rita, who had studied French and Russian at Oxford, was later to join the National Library of Ethiopia. With Richard’s support, she organized a series of public lectures which contributed to the growth of Ethiopian consciousness of Africa. She became Librarian of the Haile Selassie I University, a post she held for a decade.

The authors tell us, with warmth and pride, the circumstances of their arrival in Ethiopia in 1956. Richard, with his mother Sylvia Pankhurst, arrived in July and Rita in

November. Sylvia had been their original link with Ethiopia and it was because of her that Rita and Richard originally came to the country. It was largely her Ethiopian friends, and their children, who had become their first Ethiopian friends.

The book portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance with which Sylvia devoted the last forty years of her life. After Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and Emperor Haile Selassie's forced exile in Britain, Sylvia wrote in support of Ethiopia to the British and international press. In 1936 she founded a weekly newspaper, the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, which she was to edit for 20 years. She became Emperor Haile Selassie's closest and most effective ally in promoting the Ethiopia's cause, writing more of the text, articles and editorials than any other single individual in her role as being the spokesman of the emperor.

At the age of 74, she accepted an invitation from the emperor to come, with her son, and make her home in Addis Ababa. She decided to edit her publication from Addis Ababa, replacing her politically oriented newspaper, the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, with a more substantial culture and development monthly magazine, the *Ethiopia Observer*. "The following days, I observed for the first time the family routine, which was governed by the production of the monthly *Ethiopia Observer*. It did not vary from year to year until Sylvia's death four years later. Sundays were no different from weekdays," Rita wrote.

The part about Sylvia's story which is sure to strike the reader is the way her passing affected her many admirers, Ethiopians and foreigners alike, and the tributes that poured in. She was buried in a formal orthodox ceremony in Addis Ababa, at the Selassie Cathedral, which is reserved for Ethiopians who have served the country in distinguished careers. She was given a name, *Welete-Krtistos*, or *Daughter of Christ*, as the token of the honour bestowed on her by the church. Interestingly, the British Embassy's Chancery in Addis Ababa, who could not be expected to take kindly to her criticism of their government policy over Eritrea and Somaliland, had to admit that "as far as we know, no other foreigner had been similarly honoured."

Richard and Rita stayed on in Ethiopia after Sylvia's death. Upon her death, Richard took over editorship, and in 1963 became a co-editor of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. He began teaching at Haile Selassie I University and founded its Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in 1962. He became its first director, a position he held until 1972. Rita had a serious role to perform and did it brilliantly. After working as a librarian in the National Library of Ethiopia from 1956 to 1962 she was appointed director of the University Library of the then Haile Selassie I University, serving from 1964 to 1975. Fascinated by Ethiopian life and culture, Rita has written several articles on Ethiopian women in history. She has been active in the civic life of Addis Ababa, serving on the boards of several institutions.

The Pankhursts lived in Ethiopia in the most significant years of the Haile Selassie era. They saw first-hand how the Emperor operated, how he spoke, and how he ran the country. They share their many memories of Haile Selassie from their early days, when

the Emperor would drive or walk around the city every evening, inspecting things and greeting people. It was on one of those nights that Richard's office door opened while he happened to be taking notes on the history of Harar. "After greeting me he asked, in French, what I was doing. I told him that I was studying the five great gates of Harar, and was trying to ascertain what they were called at various historical periods by the local people i.e. during the Egyptian occupation, in the late nineteenth century, and during the time when his father, Ras Mekonnin, was Governor, etc. He smiled and asked "What are they called in my time?" he recalled.

The Pankhursts were able to join a small handful of distinguished scholars who significantly contributed to our understanding of Ethiopian history and culture. Among the others are, most notably, Harold Marcus, Wolf Lesalu and Donald Levine. Harold Marcus, who shared an office with Richard, was described as "a young American historian" who "contributed to a livelier intellectual atmosphere in the College". Richard wrote "Knowing that he took an inordinate interest in my visitors, particularly at a time of political tension, I once put a note on my desk stating "the General will come at 7 p.m." That evening I had occasion to stay late and was amused to see Harold, who usually left early, remain in our office well past 7pm".

One story they shared is about Donald Levine, the young American social anthropologist who was driving in the town on the first morning of the abortive Coup of the 1960, when he chanced to see a fellow graduate of Chicago University and mutual Ethiopian friend, Lemma Fre-Hiywet, whose cousins, the brothers Mengestu and Girmame Niway, had organized the coup. Lemma allegedly asked Donald what had happened to which Levine replied, "Your cousin has just seized power."

The book narrates many tales of these friendships with Ethiopians and expats alike. Firstly it was dedicated to the memory of Mengistu Lemma and Afewerk Tekle, best men at their wedding, with whom they maintained life-long friendships. Of Afewerk Tekle, the famous Ethiopian artist and Richard's friend from student days, Rita writes, "A charming, helpful and generous guest", who was their first house guest at a time when he was building his Gondar-style house. He took up residence with them, with his maid, which made Rita think of "the old days in Europe when gentlemen travelled with their valet."

Mengistu, Richard's closet friend, whom he had known since students in England was naturally the person he thought to pick as best man, but an interesting thing happened. "First of all Mengestu had not taken seriously our request that he be one of our witnesses and was nowhere to be seen on the day. Fortunately his house was on the way to the Embassy, so that Afewerk, impeccably turned out in national dress, helped to get Mengistu hastily dressed, he, too in traditional white Ethiopian clothes."

One of the Ethiopian personalities that has been excellently characterized and for whom Richard manifestly carries great admiration is Aebebe Retta, a pre-World War II student in Scotland, who later joined the Ethiopian government service and was appointed Ambassador to the UK. "A conformed patriot he wrote anonymously in New Times and

Ethiopia News, as an “Ethiopian correspondent” immediately after the country’s liberation, to denounce proposals to curtail Ethiopia’s independence. A scholar no less than a Minister and diplomat he roamed the London bookshops in quest of second-hand books about his country, and built up an important personal library”.

Rita is unstinting in her praise of, and admiration for, Princess Hirut Desta, who was one of the volunteers at the Library. Rita found her “obliging, unassuming and helpful”, while Richard remarks upon Zewde Gebre Selassie’s “warmth, and progressive views,” his inspirational self-confidence and his grasp of the larger picture. Rita’s portrait of Kebede Mikael, who has been responsible for the Library, reaffirms many peoples depiction of him, as being more interested in his creative writing than in all the other responsibilities he assumed. “His visits were therefore infrequent. He seldom answered letters and often forgot appointments.”

The Eritrean, Berekt-ab Habte Silasse, who was most active in the Ethiopian student movement, was subsequently involved in drafting the constitution of independent Eritrea. Richard writes that “much later he confessed, in a mood of nostalgia, that he had succeeded in becoming persona non grata in both Eritrea and Ethiopia”.

They have kind thoughts for Lij Mikael Imru, who had read Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford and who was described as looking like a don, with a thin, long neck and a mass of burly hair. There is an interesting anecdote about Siniddu Gebru, the Ethiopian woman parliamentarian, who gave a male chauvinist a good slap in the face, after he referred to her in the Chamber as Ato Siniddu, i.e “Mister Siniddu”.

Engagingly written from a personal perspective, this book will be of value to historians and scholars, and to others interested in the country’s past. It offers a credible account of the intimacy the Pankhurst family developed with Ethiopia. It is richly supplemented with accounts of personal relationships with ordinary and prominent Ethiopians, accompanied by some historic photographs. One wishes that the book were translated into Amharic and widely disseminated to the wider public.

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