

# Dr. Richard Pankhurst - Historian

**By Indrias Getachew**

For most readers of Addis Tribune Dr. Richard Pankhurst is a very familiar name. He has been a regular contributor of features on various periods and aspects of Ethiopian history for the past six years. He is one of the steadfast pillars of this publication and we believe that this tribute is long overdue.

Although he is not an Ethiopian by birth or citizenship I believe that his contributions to our country are so extensive and enduring that he is deserving of some sort of honorary Ethiopian title. His career in Ethiopia has entered its fifth decade. Unlike most non-Ethiopian historians researching and writing on Ethiopia, Dr. Pankhurst lives and works in Ethiopia. He even named his son after one of his heroes, the Ethiopian patriot Ras Alula.

He has adopted Ethiopian causes and pursued them with admirable commitment and impressive tenacity. He is constantly drawing attention to international injustices committed against Ethiopia, injustices that can be compensated for even today. A simple example is his efforts alongside other concerned individuals to put pressure on the Italian government to return the Axum Obelisk taken during the Fascist Occupation, and which now stands in Rome. I doubt there would be much objection to granting him honorary Ethiopian citizenship!

Recorded Ethiopian history, the story of one of the earliest civilizations in the world, spans several millennia. The stele at Axum are some of the more conspicuous evidences of this rich past. The undisputed fact of an ancient civilization that has evolved and come down to modern times in all its richness and diversity is one of the principle sources of immense pride for all Ethiopians today. Things pass, events take place and time marches on. The fast-paced, often only forward-looking character of our modern twentieth century (approaching twenty first century) lives, the past is forgotten all too easily and it might be tempting to discount the value of historians. I believe that quite the opposite is true; historians are an indispensable part of modern society, and in Ethiopia they play a particularly important role. They remind us of who we were and where we came from, which is the only true way of understanding where we stand now. Our history is probably the best indication of how we should (and how we should not) proceed. We need many more historians to provide us with as much analysis and truth about the past such that our history is not hijacked and manipulated to further the political aims of individuals or groups; groups that, as evidenced by modern Ethiopian history, often do not have the ultimate best interests of Ethiopia in mind as they pursue their respective agendas. The general discourse



needs to be much broader and accessible to a larger public. And in this regard the achievements of Dr. Richard Pankhurst are indeed impressive.

Since the 1970's the international perception of Ethiopia has been by and large defined by the tremendously vicious repercussions of the Revolution and the ensuing Red Terror, and the ghastly images of famine in the 1980's. From my own experiences as a student in the United States I know that, at least in the US, there is very little knowledge of this, our ancient land. In fact most people are truly amazed and fascinated when they find out that the Ethiopia they associate so quickly with drought, famine, violence, and war, is actually the repository of such a unique history, of such brilliant cultures, traditions, and heritage that endure to this day.

Dr. Richard Pankhurst has authored or co-authored twenty two books on Ethiopia. He has either edited or compiled an additional seventeen. Over the past four and a half decades Dr. Pankhurst has produced several hundred articles on Ethiopia that have appeared in numerous academic journals throughout the world, and in magazines and newspapers. His most accessible writings are probably his articles for *Selamta*, the magazine of Ethiopian Airlines, and his newspaper articles for *Addis Tribune*, which are all available in the on-line archives of the paper. Dr. Pankhurst's writings have presented Ethiopian history, culture, and tradition not only to academics and students of history, but also to a wide spectrum of readers, both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian.

Dr. Richard Pankhurst was born in London, the son of the renowned Ethiopian activist E. Sylvia Pankhurst. His mother was one of the more vocal anti-Fascist activists in Europe during the 1920's and 1930's. Her anti-Fascist activities led her to take interest in Ethiopia. Speaking about his mother Dr. Pankhurst stated, "She saw the aggressive militaristic character of Fascism and was involved in anti-Fascist movements, regarding Italy as the first victim. She was involved in something called 'Friends of Italian Freedom.' Then the Wal-Wal incident was being followed in 1934 by the shipment of Italian troops to Eritrea and Somalia. She saw that Ethiopia would be the second victim and she wrote to lots of newspapers in defense of Ethiopia ... urging that the League of Nations should be stronger, should have teeth to establish proper sanctions that really would stop the aggression. She wanted to see the Suez Canal closed; she wanted the sanctions to include petrol. Mussolini later admitted to Hitler that if the League of Nations had extended sanctions to cover petrol, as he said, 'I would have had to abandon Abyssinia in a week.' By 1936 she begun to feel that it was no good writing articles to newspapers because as the international situation changed people would no longer be interested in Abyssinia ... and would move on to something else. So she founded a newspaper called *New Times and Ethiopia News* to concentrate on the question of Ethiopia."

This early exposure to Ethiopia through the activities of his mother led to a general interest in Ethiopia as a whole. Dr Pankhurst recalls, "I knew the children of Hakim Workneh, who was the Ethiopian Minister in London, and later when the first Ethiopian students came to Britain after the war of the liberation, I knew many of them. I had friends such as Mengistu Lemma, Afewerk Tekle, Habte Bahru, Michael Imru ... and when I finished my studies at the London School of Economics, having visited Ethiopia once, I decided to come and teach."

Dr. Pankhurst received his Ph.D. in Economic History and moved to Ethiopia in 1956 and began teaching at the University College of Addis Ababa. In 1962 Dr. Pankhurst founded the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, located on the grounds of Addis Ababa University, and was the first Director of it. This is perhaps one of his more prominent contributions to Ethiopia as the Institute continues as the foremost center of research and learning on Ethiopia in the world today. I asked Dr. Pankhurst about the Institute, and after suggesting that I speak with the current Director he explained, "The Institute consists of three things: the Institute Library, which is the largest library on Ethiopia in the world... Then there is the Museum which has a remarkably good ethnological collection plus the best collection of Ethiopian art in the world... The third thing is a small research unit with people doing research of whom I am one. The Institute also processes foreign visitors, scholars. It gets their visas, letters of introduction, and so forth."

In 1968 The Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies was formed to raise money to purchase the extensive collections at the Institute. "The Institute was acquiring plows and tables and baskets for the museum which could be done at very low cost, then suddenly he (the curator) found vast numbers of icons and manuscripts and crosses coming on the market and were being exported, taken by tourists, foreign visitors, diplomats, and so forth and ending up in the auction houses of Europe. Faced with that situation we established the Society of Friends of the Institute to raise money - because for these artistic items you can't just buy them for five birr as you would a plow, for example. We needed bigger money, and of course we could only buy a tiny fraction of what was going on the market ... but what we wanted to do was to build up representative collections of Ethiopian icons, manuscripts, crosses, and so forth, so that we could see the evolution of these things - the majority would go out of the country, we couldn't control that, but at least we would have a few things so that Ethiopia wouldn't end up a cultural desert with all the antiquities coming out of the country. We would be able to show in the museum something, and indeed we built the finest collection of Ethiopian art in the world at the Institute Museum. And we are still trying to do that because in the last three or four years a new crisis has developed with large numbers of things being taken out of the country." The Society of Friends holds regular lectures on a variety of topics which are open to the public.

Dr. Pankhurst worked as director of the Institute until 1972/73. He stayed on at the University doing research and teaching until in 1976, following the Ethiopian revolution, Dr. Pankhurst and his family left Ethiopia and returned to England. During his decade back in England Dr. Pankhurst worked as librarian at the Royal Asiatic Society. He and his family returned to Ethiopia in 1986. He has been conducting research at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies since, and is an adviser and resource person for graduate students at the University. Dr. Pankhurst is currently in the process of updating his book on the "Social History of Ethiopia," which ends with Emperor Tewodros, to include more recent times. He is also going through his mother's papers with the intention of writing something on the period in which she was involved.

As a constant champion of causes Ethiopian, Dr. Pankhurst has earned the respect and admiration of many in Ethiopia and abroad. Further to his active participation in the National Committee for the return of the Axum Obelisk, Dr. Pankhurst is currently among a group of concerned professionals forming a national committee for the return of treasures looted by the British Expeditionary Force sent to free British Prisoners from Meqdella in 1868. Speaking about the Meqdella loot Dr. Pankhurst stated, "it seems to me that because Tewodros had a dispute

with the British Government this does not justify the looting of Mekdella.... For example, if when the British and Americans were involved in Iraq, if they had started looting Iraq at that time, bringing back treasures, the whole world would have cried out against it because moral views have changed. We now have to look at the Mekdella situation with these moral views. And I feel that in the same way that African countries won their territorial independence, they should also win their looted articles taken abroad." Discounting the argument that these items might be safer, or better taken care of in England, Dr. Pankhurst quickly points to the fact that Windsor Castle, where some of the items are stored, almost burned to the ground several years back.

Dr. Richard Pankhurst has become a prominent establishment in his own right in Ethiopia. We are fortunate to have him here and look forward to more products of his research.