

Obituary: Edward Ullendorff, 1920–2011

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Edward Ullendorff was Professor of Ethiopian Studies at SOAS from 1964 until 1979, when he took over the Chair of Semitic Languages, which he held until his retirement in 1982. His aim in taking the latter was, he said, to preserve such an important position from extinction. Regrettably, neither chair survived his retirement. In recognition of both chairs, the university awarded him emeritus status in “Semitic Languages and Ethiopian Studies”.

Born of German parents in Zürich on 25 January 1920, as a child he showed a remarkable gift for languages such that a relative in Geneva once jokingly remarked that even as a young boy his abilities in both French and Italian alongside his native German rendered him eminently suitable for a job as a waiter. Thankfully for the academic world he did not pursue this line of career. His linguistic skills were more fittingly channelled and while still at school, at the famous Gymnasium Graues Kloster in Berlin, he taught himself both Hebrew and Arabic such that at the young age of 15 he was exceptionally granted permission to attend Arabic classes at the University of Berlin under the renowned Semitist Eugen Mittwoch. His introduction to the Semitic languages of Ethiopia came later when in 1938 he went to Palestine to undertake a course of study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem at Mount Scopus. His teachers included many great names, such as Martin Buber, D. H. Baneth, Gershom Scholem, H. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai), and not least H. J. Polotsky, the last of whom introduced him to the study of Ethiopian languages. He remained in regular contact with his former teacher until the latter’s death in 1991, holding the greatest admiration for him, and often referring to him simply as “maestro”. When Ullendorff left Jerusalem he received a reference from Polotsky which concluded with the words, “Mr. E. Ullendorff was my pupil. I have no complaints against him”, which was great praise indeed in Polotsky’s terms. It is one of those odd quirks of fate that his first home in Jerusalem was on Abyssinia Street near to the Ethiopian church and monastery. It was also in Jerusalem that he met Dina Noack, the daughter of a neighbour in the North Talpiot district, whom he married in Asmara in 1943, and who remained his lifelong companion and support.

The language skills acquired in Jerusalem led to various positions with the British Administration in Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1942 and 1946, including as chief examiner in the British Censorship in Eritrea, and later as assistant political secretary. From that period, however, he will be best remembered as the founder and editor of the first Tigrinya-language newspaper, the *Eritrean Weekly News*. Later, after a short period working in the Palestine Mandatary Government between 1947 and 1948, he moved to the United Kingdom where he began his academic career in Oxford, tutoring Colonial Service cadets in Arabic, from where he gained his DPhil with a thesis entitled the “Relationship of modern Ethiopian languages to Ge‘ez”, published in 1955 as *The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*. From Oxford he moved initially, in 1950,



to the University of St Andrews, where he held first the post of Lecturer and then Reader in Semitic Languages. Later, in 1959, he transferred to the University of Manchester to take up the Chair of Semitic Languages and Literatures. Both there and earlier in Scotland he had shown himself to be a prolific and gifted writer on a wide range of topics connected with both his General Semitic, in particular Biblical and Ugaritic, and his “éthiopsisant” fields of study, producing an impressive output not only of academic books, articles and reviews, but also of various shorter pieces, including many “letters to the editor”, a practice that was to continue throughout his life.

In 1964 he came to SOAS to take up the Chair of Ethiopian Studies that had been specially created for him, the first so named anywhere. Whilst he was at SOAS Ullendorff was a member of both the Africa Department, which he chaired from 1972 to 1977, and the Department of the Near and Middle East, perhaps a curious situation that reflected the “in-between” status that Ethiopian language studies occupied generally at that time. Throughout his career he felt strongly that a vital part of an academic’s task was to further his chosen field not merely through his own research and publications, but

just as importantly through actively nurturing the means of making others' research available, especially through the medium of academic journals. As such he had been joint editor of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* whilst at Manchester, and later at SOAS he was Chair of the *BSOAS* editorial board between 1968 and 1978. In this latter position he worked hard to maintain and advance the already high scholarly standards of the *Bulletin*. He encouraged the publication of articles by young scholars at the beginning of their careers, who he felt warranted the helping hand that could come through publication before the scholarly community in a journal of international reputation. By the same account he felt it his duty to guard the *Bulletin* from what he saw as the more maverick and scholarly less rigorous type of submissions that can sometimes appear. His association with the *Bulletin* did not cease with his retirement in 1982, but he continued in later years both to submit articles and short notes, as well as communicate with the editors on matters that were important to him.

His ever-present concern for the maintenance of scholarly rigour pervaded his relationship with all his students. He could at times be a daunting figure, particularly to young undergraduates, and he could quickly become frustrated with the average student who did not meet his expectations. It is no secret that he once said that he found teaching undergraduates uninspiring, but those students who showed promise and responded with the same scholarly standards and discipline that he had always placed on himself were readily rewarded with unfailing encouragement, care and advice. It was his and his wife's custom to invite students to their home, first in Wimbledon and later in Oxford. These would be very much working visits, with lunch both preceded and followed by an "extra" Saturday class, but the hospitality they both showed was always generous and warm.

Early on in Ullendorff's time at SOAS the teaching of Amharic received the position in the curriculum that it enjoys still today, though it had been taught sporadically since the late 1930s, first together with Ge'ez under the distinguished tutelage of Hərüy Wäldä Səllase, and then between 1948 and 1951 by R. C. Abraham. Under Ullendorff, however, and A. K. Irvine, who had been at St Andrews in Ullendorff's time there, and who had joined the academic staff of SOAS a little before him, Amharic began to be taught as part of a regular degree programme, initially in combination with linguistics or social anthropology, with the first intake of students in 1967. The range of his erudition was prodigious and far outstretched what the average undergraduate might have, whose ignorance sometimes annoyed him, but more often both puzzled and amused him. He would expect undergraduates studying Amharic with him to learn Italian "when [they] had a spare weekend", a necessary skill for an "éthiopisant", however young. He was, however, more at home with the supervision of research students with whom the level of informed and sometimes heated scholarly dialogue he so loved was more possible. He said on more than one occasion that he felt that such a specialized institution as SOAS should be exclusively a research institution, and in the 1970s he tried to persuade the then Director, Sir Cyril Philips, of this. Amongst his former research students are a number of internationally renowned academics, both within the United Kingdom and abroad, who constitute his abiding legacy in such fields as

Semitic linguistics, Biblical studies and Ethiopian studies, and who owe him a profound debt for the tradition of scholarship that he passed on to them.

It has to be said that, in the years that followed his retirement from SOAS, Ullendorff often expressed concern at the direction in which universities were moving. Much of the university world of today outwardly bears little resemblance to the quiet and studied scholarly calm that was typical during so much of his career. There were no league tables, no research assessment exercises, no teaching quality assessments, and certainly no sense of career focused urgency about students. When discussing these developments with him in later years, the perplexity he would express was sometimes sharpened by the comment, “[academics] should have stood up and not let it happen”. For Ullendorff, a university’s first objective was research and the fostering of research by others – unhurried and painstaking, first-class and autonomous research; he often expressed admiration for his former teacher, H. J. Polotsky, that he had published so little during such a long academic career because after writing an article he would not submit it for publication for some considerable time, weighing over and rethinking each word and turn of phrase and letting the article mature like a great wine. Ullendorff’s own publications are also skilfully written in a style and language that show the hand of a master. It was not uncommon that his command of English was better than that of some of his native English-speaking students, and he took delight in the more recondite and obscure nuances and subtleties of the language. It was Ullendorff’s habit always to draft and correct his writing long-hand, whether books, articles or letters, and to get his wife, Dina, to type them as necessary. He never ventured into the world of computers, which in later years necessitated the indulgence of some editors who expected submissions in electronic format.

Although he would sometimes complain of university duties that took him away from research, both his own and the supervision of others’ work, he was conscious of the other components of academic life. Consequently, alongside committee duties at SOAS, Ullendorff played an active role in many major bodies, for instance as Chairman of the British Association of Orientalists from 1963 to 1964, or as president of the Society for Old Testament Study in 1971, then as vice-president of the Royal Asiatic Society, first from 1975 to 1979 and then again from 1981 to 1985, and also as a member of the Advisory Board of the British Library from 1975 to 1983. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1965 and served as its vice-president from 1980 to 1982, as well as serving on such committees as the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* and chairing the Oriental Documents Committee, and latterly continuing to provide an active voice in Academy business well into his retirement. In addition, he received several international academic honours, both the Ethiopian Gold Medallion in 1960 and the Haile Selassie International Prize for Ethiopian Studies in 1972. The one honour of which he was immensely proud was to be one of the few British scholars to be elected, in 1998, a Foreign Fellow of the prestigious *Accademia dei Lincei*, which dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century and counts as former members such illustrious names as Galileo Galilei, Louis Pasteur and Albert Einstein.

Ullendorff’s publication record is impressive. His bibliography contains around 600 items, including around a dozen books (not counting revised

editions or collections of re-published pieces), around 70 articles, including review articles, over 300 book reviews, and many shorter pieces, notes, marginalia, newspaper pieces and letters to the editor, produced over more than 60 years of publications. Many of his articles were republished in four volumes of collected papers, and a catalogue of his publications appeared in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, first in 1989 in a volume dedicated to him, and then in a later issue brought up to 1999.¹ It will not go unnoticed that over half of his publications are reviews, reflecting what he rightly saw as an important part of an academic's task, to provide a vigorous and critical peer review of what is being published in one's field. For Ullendorff, however, writing reviews and review articles was not merely a duty, but something which he clearly greatly enjoyed, and which he performed with consummate skill.

Ullendorff's contribution to Semitic studies should not be underestimated. When he entered academic life British Semitic studies were dominated either by Biblical philology, Classical Hebrew and Assyriology, or by the vast field of Arabic. Ethiopian Semitic languages and Modern Hebrew were for the most part "also rans". Yet these two, along with Ugaritic and Aramaic, were subjects that were central to his research and writing. In his introduction to the issue of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* dedicated to him, C. E. Bosworth said that Ullendorff did more than any other scholar to change the face of Semitic studies in Britain. Though in the first instance a Semitic philologist and linguist, his profound knowledge of Old Testament studies enabled him to write authoritatively on several occasions about the overtly Judaic features in Ethiopian Christianity and the place of the Old Testament in Ethiopian Orthodox culture and history. One of his book-length publications that has had several reprints and which will certainly remain a seminal work in the field, his collection of British Academy Schweich Lectures which appeared as *Ethiopia and the Bible* (1968), is here ample testimony to the depth and breadth of his scholarship.

A full bibliography of Ullendorff's writings up to 1999 has appeared elsewhere, as noted above, but it seems fitting to mention here some of his works, both from amongst his major publications and from the smaller pieces. Reference has already been made to *Ethiopia and the Bible*, and another important study that links Ethiopian Christianity and the Bible is *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch* (1978, with M. A. Knibb).² As text books for the study of Ethiopian languages his two collections of texts drawn from a wide range of printed and other written sources, *An Amharic Chrestomathy* (1965) and *A Tigrinya (Təgrəñña) Chrestomathy* (1985) remain valuable resources, sparing the student the task of searching amongst obscure and now near-unobtainable sources. His translation of the first volume of Emperor Haile Selassie's autobiography, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress (1892–1937)* (1976), was in many respects a labour of love, having as he did abiding admiration for the Emperor and espousing the cause of members of the imperial family when they first sought refuge in Britain after the events of 1974. Earlier, in 1972, when the University of London

1 S. Hopkins, "Bibliography of the writings of Professor Edward Ullendorff", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34/2, 1989, 253–89. Dina Ullendorff, "Bibliography of the writings of Professor Edward Ullendorff (1988–99)", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 45/1, 2000, 131–6.

2 It was typical of Ullendorff to have authorship noted as "... in consultation with E.U."

awarded the Emperor an honorary doctorate, he had proudly headed the delegation to Claridge's hotel in London where the Emperor was staying. Of a lighter nature, but no less meticulous in its scholarship, is *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (1960), which has again seen several reprints. He once remarked that he wrote the book virtually in a single sitting in a little under two months, but it shows no sign of being written in haste and is both lucid and informative, even though in the past fifty years Ethiopia has changed vastly from the land with which Ullendorff was familiar and is now understood in terms of more than its Amhara-Christian heritage. No account of his publications, however summary, can fail to mention his description of life in pre-war Palestine and his experience of Eritrea from 1941 to 1946, followed by reflections on Ethiopia up to 1974. This very personal book, *The Two Zions: Reminiscences of Jerusalem and Ethiopia* (1988), is clearly written from the heart and includes portraits of numerous individuals, scholars as well as colonial officials and others, and provides an intriguing insight into not only the events of the times but also Ullendorff's own view of those events.

There are of course many other writings that deserve mention: his editions of Amharic documents and the so-called Hebrew letters of Prester John, his collections of letters and documents of Mittwoch and H. J. Polotsky, but the list is too long for here. This summary cannot, however, conclude without mention of a few pieces that illustrate Ullendorff's fascination with perhaps the more arcane corners of his fields of study: for example, we may recall his articles "The Bawdy Bible" (1979, which examines the sexually suggestive or explicit passages in the Bible, and "Ethiopian good food guides" (1980), which discusses Amharic cookery books. Equally fascinating is his short piece entitled "An Ethiopic inscription in Westminster Abbey" (1992), which describes a curious late seventeenth-century monument with an inscription in Ge'ez and admirably recounts the detective work involved in discovering the circumstances of its unexpected presence. Ullendorff relished this kind of painstaking research, which is also illustrated in his short communication on "Queen Victoria's phonograph message to the Emperor Menilek of Ethiopia" (1973), which records notes of correspondence regarding the message the Queen was to send, which was sadly later destroyed on her instructions, though the recording of Menilek's reply still survives.

Tall and with a slight scholar's stoop, Edward Ullendorff cast a dignified figure who always made an impression on those whom he met. He retained throughout his life a profound sense of civilized standards and behaviour in his personal and scholarly relations. Though perhaps inevitably tensions arose along the way, and in the human way of things personal antagonisms could and did surface, he usually tried to maintain and apply a sense of fairness. He will be remembered by many who knew him not only as a conscientious and meticulous teacher and colleague, but also as a generous friend. Wherever he taught, at St Andrews, at Manchester, and latterly at SOAS, he received the respect of students and colleagues alike and will be remembered for generations to come.

Edward Ullendorff died on 6 March 2011, and is survived by his wife Dina.