

Sylvia Pankhurst: Her Life's Work and Achievements

*Address by Professor Richard Pankhurst, read by Mrs Rita Pankhurst,
in front of Sellasse Cathedral, near the grave of Sylvia Pankhurst,
Addis Ababa, 17/10/2010*

My mother Sylvia Pankhurst was born in Manchester, England in 1882, on 5 May, that, by coincidence, was later to be Ethiopia's Liberation Day.

Sylvia, who came from a liberal-socialist, internationally-minded family (which, incidentally, opposed the British Boer War in South Africa), won several art scholarships, one of which took her to Venice, Italy, to study mosaics. With her mother Emmeline and her sister Christabel she played an important role in the Suffragette struggle for votes for women in Britain, as described in her book *The Suffragette Movement*. Many times she undertook hunger and thirst strikes – and was forcibly fed. She also engaged in humanitarian work among the poor of London's East End, as she relates in her book *The Home Front*. Opposing the First World War, she welcomed the Russian Revolution, and travelled, illegally, to Moscow, where she debated with Lenin. She was later highly critical of Stalin, especially for his show trials, the inadequacy of his support for the legitimate Spanish Government in its confrontation with Franco's rebellion, and his notorious Pact with Hitler. She gave much of her time to helping Spanish, Italian, Austrian, and other refugees.

Deeply interested in Italy as a result of her art studies in Venice, she was shocked by the advent of Italian Fascism. To oppose it, she founded the Women's International Matteotti Committee, called after an Italian Parliamentarian assassinated on Mussolini's orders. Closely following events in Italy, she was quick to see that he was preparing to invade Ethiopia. She worked with Italian anti-fascists in agitating against that aggression.

She later wrote to the British and international press and addressed public meetings. She condemned the invasion and the fascist use of poison gas, and demanded resolute League of Nations support for Ethiopia. On 9 May 1936 she founded the London-based weekly newspaper *New Times and Ethiopia News* to publicise the resistance of the Ethiopian people. It published many eloquent articles by the Ethiopian representative in London, Hakim Workeneh, also known as Dr Martin, as well as news provided by Ethiopian refugees in Jibouti, Kenya and Sudan. She published the paper continuously for twenty years. At least on one occasion she also produced an Amharic news-sheet which was smuggled

into occupied Ethiopia. (Long afterwards, when I was Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, I received on behalf of its Library, from an old Gojjame patriot, a much-folded copy of this Amharic news-sheet, which he had carefully preserved for decades).

My mother was attacked by Mussolini in one of his articles, received two death threats, one from an Italian Fascist in London, and another from a British Nazi; and was listed for arrest in the event of a German occupation of Britain, which, happily, never took place!

After Mussolini's entry into the European War in June 1940, she urged that Ethiopia should be recognised as an Ally and that her independence be assured. She opposed Italy's return to her former empire, denounced British colonial attempts to partition the country, and supported Eritrean Reunion with Ethiopia.

After Ethiopia's Liberation my mother was awarded the Patriots' Medal, granted to supporters of the Patriots, as well as to actual combatants. Her medal had five palm-leaves, each representing one year of service during the five years of Italian occupation. A street in Addis Ababa was named after her.

My mother visited Ethiopia in 1944 and 1951, inspecting schools and other institutions. She developed a keen interest in Ethiopian history and culture. Her principal hero was Ras Alula, whom she regarded as the most patriotic Ethiopian leader of his time. Though in poor health, she spent many days travelling to the British Library to consult looted Ethiopian manuscripts. She had earlier been to Romania, admiring its church paintings – and, with the help of a Romanian scholar, had translated poems by the national poet, Mihai Eminescu.

Besides editing her newspaper, she wrote many works on the country. These included her massive scholarly volume *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* – in which the section on poetry owed much to her collaboration with our friend Menghistu Lemma, then a student in England – and the polemical *Why are We Destroying the Eritrean Ports?* – a critique of the then British Military Administration of the ex-colony. A committed anti-colonialist she was in contact with African freedom-fighters, and Pan-Africanists, among them Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Mbiyu Koinange.

She founded, and spent years raising funds for, Ethiopia's first teaching hospital in Addis Ababa, the Princess Tsehai Memorial Hospital, today the General Army Hospital.

My mother settled in Ethiopia in July 1956 at the age of 74, and, working hard as ever, inaugurated the monthly journal *Ethiopia Observer*, which took her to different parts of the country. Many of its illustrations were produced by artist Afewerk Tekle, who was later to be well known as the Most Honourable Maître Artiste World Laureate. He had been sent to England to study mining engineering, but, having seen his early sketches, she had persuaded the Ethiopian Government to permit him to study art.

She edited the *Observer* for four years until her death.

My mother also devoted herself to the establishment of one of Ethiopia's earliest welfare organisations, the Social Service Society, whose active leaders included today's President Girma Wolde Giorgis.

She died in Ethiopia in 1960, at the age of 78, on 27 September (Masqal Day) which, by another coincidence, was two years to the day before our son Alula was born. She was buried here at Sellassie Cathedral, the following day under the name of Walata Christos, beside other Patriots, in the presence of Emperor Haile Sellassie and many Ethiopian and other friends.

It remains finally to thank Dr Kidane Alemayehu of Dallas, Texas, for initiating commemorations of this fiftieth anniversary of my mother's death in Ethiopian Orthodox Churches in Europe, America and the Middle East, as well as in Ethiopia. She would have been much touched. The anniversary is being used to spearhead a non-profit, charitable project in her name, in the field of education or public health, with special reference to women, near to her heart.

On behalf of my family I should like to express our profound thanks to Ellene Mocria, Chair of the Ethiopian Organizing Committee, and to the other Committee members, for initiating this commemoration, and for beginning work on the project, shortly to be announced. Thank you all for coming.

NB. Memorial ceremonies for Sylvia Pankhurst have been held in a number of sites, including London, Washington, Boston, Atlanta, Minnesota, Dallas, Tampa and Dubai. Addresses at the Addis Ababa event were given by University President Professor Andreas Eshete, and Artist Afewerk Tekle, and a message was read from State President Girma Welde Giorgis.

The Ethiopian Patriarch Pawlos V also spoke and gave his blessing.