BAIRU TAFLA, Universität Hamburg

Personalia

_Sven Rubenson has turned ninety_

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Personalia

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“In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive ... if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways.”

(Edith Wharton, 1862–1937)

A ninety-year struggle seems to have hardly depressed the Swedish Ethiopisant who, though frail in body and yet still keen in mind, celebrated his birthday in October 2011 surrounded by his five children and their partners as well as his sixteen grandchildren. Only Britta was absent, “a wonderful wife”, as he put it in an interview which MediaETHIOPIA launched in honour of his 80th birthday. A quiet and hardworking lady, she was always by his side for more than 63 years and of all things her passing away in 2010 still agonises his mind.

Sven was born in Färingsofta, Sweden on 21 October 1921. When he was eight months old, his family moved to the United States for economic reasons and his father became a farmer and businessman in North Dakota. Life was hard there, as he once told the present writer many years ago, implying probably that he not only had to go to school but also help on the farm. By the time the family returned to Sweden for the same reason in 1931, Sven had spent his first ten years in the United States and that explains his mastery of the English language which became his primary medium of preaching, teaching and writing in Ethiopia.

How life in Sweden treated him in the next 15 years is unknown, though it is not difficult to imagine the life of a family with ten children in a continent more or less dilapidated by a six-year war.

After World War II, Sven once again had to go abroad, this time as a teacher and preacher. The Swedish Evangelical Mission assigned him to establish a mission station in Adwa, where Samuel Gobat and Carl Wilhelm Isenberg were frustrated a hundred years earlier. He was not expected to go

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1 This note of appreciation was intended to appear in AETHIOPICA 14 (2011) at about the same time as his celebration; but it was delayed by unexpected problems on the side of the writer.

2 www.mediaethiopia.com/interviews.
from village to village or from house to house and spread the Gospel. That had already been forbidden by an Ethiopian decree in 1944. His assignment was primarily to build a school and of course teach young boys and girls when the rooms became accessible. Without a doubt Sven had talent to execute his job; he was very energetic and hardworking; only he had not yet mastered the missionary wisdom of working with great patience and attracting people through conviction. Soon he ran into conflict with some young people who consequently tried to stone him. The mission administration transferred him to Addis Ababa to direct a well-established school.

He subsequently learnt the Amharic language as well as the culture of the country. He read a great deal on Ethiopia’s past and contacted knowledgeable elderly Ethiopians to learn more. All the time he jotted down new information and collected documents. A few years later he went back to Sweden to study at the University of Lund. Naturally his dissertation dealt with an aspect of 19th-century Ethiopia which he further pursued upon return to his adopted country, where he became more of an academic than a missionary, as some of his colleagues later stated in a book3 to him with the words: “To Professor Sven Rubenson, missionary and scholar, in deep appreciation – for his dedication to Ethiopian studies”.

As soon as he graduated in 1954, he returned to Ethiopia. This time he was appointed to supervise the construction of the Evangelical college at Däbrä Zäyt which was sponsored by three different Scandinavian Lutheran missions. He eventually became the director. He also took a part time job at the University College of Addis Ababa to teach Ethiopian history. How the Protestant missionary convinced the Canadian Jesuits who at the time ran the highest institution of learning is amazing, but a department of history was established for the first time integrating Ethiopian history in the late 1950s, and he became its head. Sven remained attached to this department until the mid-1970s when he was offered a position by the University of Lund. His academic field of specialization remained modern Ethiopian history, which he taught both in Addis Ababa and Lund; he attended almost all the International Conferences of Ethiopian Studies, the seventh of which he sponsored and organized in Lund in 1982. He also published several books and numerous articles on various aspects of Ethiopian history. Perhaps his best work is the one on the question of the centuries-long Ethiopian independence which was once admired as an impeccable work on foreign

relations by an academic reviewer: “On the subject of foreign relations in the first three-quarters of the 19th century, exhaustively treated in the bulk of the book (pp. 29–334), it will probably prove nearly definitive, and it certainly will become the principal reference work for a very long time to come. It is marvelously indexed and abundantly supplied with good maps.”

It has been difficult to compile all of his contributions. But it has been possible to select the outstanding ones in the following list:

A Partial List of Sven Rubenson’s Publications

N.b.: His publications in Swedish as well as his contributions in semi-academic magazines and the numerous reviews are excluded for want of time to compile them with accuracy.

Analytical Books

1964 *Wichalé XVII – the Attempt to Establish a Protectorate over Ethiopia* = Haile Sellassie I University Department of History: Historical Studies 1, Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University.

Editions and Translations


Articles Published in Academic Journals, Conference Proceedings and Collective Works


Bairu Tafla

1965 “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah: Christian Symbol and/or Imperial Title”, JES 3/2, pp. 75–85.
In memoriam Alessandro de Maigret
(1943–2011)

ALESSIO AGOSTINI, Sapienza Università di Roma

Alessandro de Maigret (born in Perugia, Italy, 14 August 1943) was among the archaeologists who contributed the most to the unveiling of Pre-Islamic history in Southern Arabia. This sad loss, at only 67 years of age, deprives us of a scholar who, without a doubt, could have still contributed greatly with more discoveries and historical reconstructions. He died on 14 February 2011 near Perugia after a long and courageous battle with his illness, the first symptoms of which were revealed just a few days before leaving on an archaeological mission to Yemen.

De Maigret arrived in Yemen for the first time in 1980, after his studies at the University “La Sapienza” of Rome, where he had been member of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Syria, which was digging at Ebla and Tell Afis (direction of P. Matthiae). After a period in London, where he expanded his knowledge of theoretical archaeology at the University College, he became aware of the great potential Yemen had for an archaeologist; the country was, in fact, still marginal within ancient Near Eastern studies. Since 1980 he had been an associate professor of Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology at the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples, the position he kept as full professor from 1990 until his retirement in 2010. With the support of Sabatino Moscati and under the sponsorship of the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente of Rome directed by G. Gnoli (IsIAO, at that time IsMEO), he set up the first exploratory mission to Yemen. From the beginning the first results were very encouraging: prospections of Ḥawlān at-Tiyāl region on the Highland,