

A Victorian Gentleman & Ethiopian Nationalist: the life and times of Hakim Warqenah, Dr Charles Martin

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Peter Garretson's biography of Warqenah Eshete – Ethiopian statesman, diplomat and occasional businessman – is nothing if not meticulous: drawing extensively on Warqenah's own autobiography and diary, Garretson succeeds in gathering an enormous amount of detail on the myriad stages of the man's life and doings, personal and professional. And it was quite a life – bizarre and individual in some ways, representative of his time and place in others. Warqenah was born in 1865 – or 1864, according to Bahru Zewde (1) – to highland Ethiopian nobility, and spent his infancy in imprisonment at the hands of the emperor Tewodros who in the final years of his reign was distrustful of many such old aristocratic families. His 'liberation' was an ambiguous one: abandoned (apparently inadvertently) by his parents on the field of battle in the face of the famous British assault on Tewodros' stronghold in 1868, he was picked up by a British officer and taken to India. The boy was shifted from guardian to guardian, ending up at the Church Missionary Society station at Amritsar, where he was named Charles Martin, an amalgam of the names of the two men who had been most important in his 'rescue' and resettlement. He went on, as Garretson chronicles in painstaking detail, to become a denizen of the British Empire, living (and serving as a colonial official) in Burma, and studying to become a medical doctor in Britain, but also spending increasing amounts of time in Ethiopia, the place of his birth but a place, too, with which he had not unproblematic relations. In Ethiopia in the 1920s, he became close to Ras Tafari – the future Haile Selassie – and served as political and economic advisor, regional administrator (in Charchar province), and ultimately as diplomat, the highpoint in his career coming during Ethiopia's nadir, the Italian invasion and occupation in the second half of the 1930s. During that period, he was Ethiopia's ambassador to Britain and one of its chief overseas activists and fundraisers. Yet he was by no means immune from the vagaries of the personalised politics

which characterised Haile Selassie's court, and fell from the Emperor's favour in the course of the 1940s. He died, in Addis Ababa, in 1952.

His was a remarkable life, and yet his footprint in much of the mainstream Ethiopian scholarship is faint. In recent years the major treatment of Warqenah has been in Bahru Zewde's work on Ethiopian 'reformist intellectuals', of which he is posited as one of the most important – more on which below.⁽²⁾ Richard Pankhurst awarded Warqenah considerable significance in his study of Ethiopian economic history⁽³⁾, while in Paul Henze's survey of the Ethiopian past, he is reduced to a footnote, albeit quite a substantial one.⁽⁴⁾ Otherwise, he makes fleeting appearances in more 'popular' histories of the Ethiopian-Italian war of 1935–6, where he is known by his English name, Charles Martin.⁽⁵⁾ In terms of contemporary sources, he appears in the *Daily Mail* journalist Geoffrey Harmsworth's account of the 1935 crisis, in which the 'Ethiopian Minister in London' is incorrectly (and rather bizarrely) described as someone completely detached from the land of his birth and who had 'only revisited Abyssinia once or twice during the last thirty years'.⁽⁶⁾ The explorer Wilfred Thesiger, who dealt with Warqenah while the latter was governor of Charchar, recalled him as a man whose 'European background made him easier than most Abyssinian officials for foreigners to deal with'.⁽⁷⁾ Rather more interestingly, Emperor Haile Selassie himself, in an autobiography dictated in exile in 1937, mentions Warqenah only once, as his representative in London and special envoy to the US.⁽⁸⁾ Warqenah's relative invisibility is a little puzzling, given his supposed importance as Haile Selassie's advisor and representative overseas, although relations between the two would indeed deteriorate through the late 1930s, over money (or more precisely the Emperor's lack of it).

This book is a significant correction to this seeming neglect in the historical record, and certainly reconstructs Warqenah's life in exhaustive detail. There are some fascinating insights into the man's career, into critical passages of Ethiopian history, and into Ethiopian political culture. An otherwise highly descriptive third chapter, dealing with adventures in the Ogaden and a return to Burma, is punctuated (pp. 44–7) by a discussion of Warqenah's personal relations with some of the key Ethiopian figures of the age, including Emperor Menelik and his redoubtable wife Taitu. This section offers some fascinating insights into the political culture of the age – a culture based so much on sound personal connections, at which Warqenah worked assiduously. In chapter four there are intriguing glimpses into palace life, and the burgeoning town of Addis Ababa, in the early 1900s. Chapter five, dealing with his growing stature in Ethiopia, contains some useful material on the precarious nature of political favour in and around the imperial court. On pp.77–9, the description of Warqenah building his house in Addis Ababa illuminates the importance, again, of political connections, and offers some nice detail on the logistical challenges involved in getting hold of construction materials in Ethiopia in the 1910s. Amidst a fair amount of strictly narrative detail in chapter six, there are again some useful insights into political life in what was a volatile and uncertain period in Ethiopian history. On pp. 115–23 we are offered an excellent account of Warqenah's role as an advisor to *Ras* Tafari, and of the latter's 1924 trip to Europe, in which Warqenah played a major part. Students of Haile Selassie's early regime, in the first half of the 1930s, will find the discussion of Warqenah's governorship of Charchar, and of the various political personalities of the era, especially valuable; there are insights, too, into the operation of the slave trade and the institution of slavery, to the abolition of which Warqenah dedicated much of his time in the 1920s.

Arguably the most interesting section, and with perhaps the widest appeal, is that dealing with Warqenah's role as ambassador to London in 1935–6, and thereafter as one of the main protagonists in raising Ethiopia's profile during the Italian occupation. Some excellent detail is provided on the nature of the pro-Ethiopian lobby in London. Inevitably, there was collaboration with the passionate Ethiophile Sylvia Pankhurst in London. There was much unsuccessful lobbying of the British Foreign Office, but some support was mobilised from Nazi Germany (Hitler wanted Italy to win, but not too quickly, and was keen to see Mussolini's attention diverted for a time from European affairs). This period is presented as the 'climax' of Warqenah's career, yet it was a tragic time for him and his family: the Italians executed two of his sons in 1937 in the clampdown following an assassination attempt on Graziani. Notably, both men had left the guerrilla struggle, returned to Addis Ababa, and become (like many Ethiopians) reconciled to Italian rule. Indeed, while his family in Addis undoubtedly experienced great trauma, many of them ended up 'less anti-

Italian than their father' (p. 255) – a rather guarded phrase, and a theme which surely begs closer examination. In the end, Warqenah fell out of favour with the capricious Haile Selassie, as the latter struggled to come to terms with impoverished exile and apparently blamed Warqenah for his reduced circumstances. And the accusation was not entirely unfounded, it seems, for when Warqenah sold a house at Prince's Gate in London – supposedly for the use of the Ethiopian cause – he kept the money for himself. Even Garretson – sympathetic to his subject throughout – is compelled to note that Haile Selassie's eventual granting of forgiveness was 'magnanimous' (p. 245).

There is certainly plenty here to get to grips with, in terms of Warqenah's various challenges, projects and achievements; his unhappy childhood; his struggles with identity and belonging. In some ways, however, this book is a reminder that good biography can be a tricky thing to pull off. At times the story is rather flat in the telling; there is much detailed description but often little in the way of analysis or reflection. In terms of context – the world which Warqenah inhabited – much is implied, but rarely is substantial analysis provided. In some respects the author has missed an opportunity to explore the imperial world in which his subject lived; even the Ethiopian politics and culture of the era are only occasionally, and at times seemingly inadvertently, glimpsed through the basic narrative. Opportunities to expand and reflect are often overlooked – for example an early encounter with racism (p. 27), or the young Warqenah's striking sense of his own foreignness when he first returns to the embryonic but expanding settlement of Addis Ababa in the late 1890s (p. 28). This reviewer found especially frustrating the silence on Warqenah's dealings with the India Office in London: What were colonial attitudes toward him? How was he perceived in official circles? It would have been delightful to have more detail on his and his wife Qatsala's life in Burma during the First World War (pp. 98–9). In the intellectual realm, the man was clearly a pragmatist – his views on 'practical' education for the 'native' echoed that of his erstwhile colonial employers – but his writings on various subjects (pp.260–8) are presented in a rather summary and piecemeal form, and needed to be developed a little more carefully, if indeed the author believes these writings to be worthy of notice.

One of the key issues here is that Garretson has essentially re-packaged Warqenah's own autobiography and his extensive diary, and seems rarely to move beyond what is to be found in these two core sources. Almost the whole of chapter four, for example, is based on Warqenah's diary, with apparently little deviation and only the most basic elaboration. At times, indeed, this reviewer wondered if it might not have been better to present an annotated and translated edition of Warqenah's own work. The man himself remains oddly elusive: there is little on his personality, his strengths and weaknesses, and the reader reaches the end of Warqenah's life appreciative of the fascinating journey which that life represented, but with strangely little sense of *who* he actually was – despite the considerable detail, for example, on his various spousal relationships. Much is made in the early part of the narrative of Warqenah's 'evangelical Christian morals' (p. 55) – but he certainly does not appear to have been 'evangelical', and in truth he seems at times to have interpreted his Christian morals pretty loosely. On p. 241 we are told that he could be 'stubborn' – a remarkably rare glimpse into his otherwise largely absent personality. Perhaps this is asking too much of the source material, although presumably interviews of family members might have filled in some of the gaps; but in the end, the story feels a little colourless.

On a rather more mundane note, the prose occasionally leaves something to be desired: the book sometimes reads like a first draft, complete with the grammatical slippages and clumsy expression associated with rough early versions of text. The prose is episodically lazy, and the author reverts to cliché: relationships go through 'highs and lows'; there are numerous 'turning points' in Warqenah's life; events and periods are frequently referred to as 'significant' and 'important', without ever really being reflected upon at any length. Oddities in the text, which appear to have been missed at copyedit stage, include the repetition of abbreviated forms of key sources at the beginning of each chapter.

As for the subject matter itself: how noteworthy a figure was Warqenah Eshete? Garretson describes an extremely busy man, involved in a dizzying number of projects, often simultaneously advising the future Haile Selassie on the abolition of slavery, representing Ethiopia overseas and building schools. In the latter half of the 1920s, he is a judge, a businessman, a political advisor. He spreads himself pretty thin, and so congested does his life appear to be that one wonders about the level of his actual involvement in these

various projects. But there is a somewhat larger issue here, which is the degree to which the biographer ends up consciously or otherwise promoting his subject. There are points in the narrative where this book borders on hagiography: Warqenah is the exemplar of the energetic, multi-talented reformer, involved in just about all the important issues of the day and quite a lot else besides. Readers interested in human failure will find relatively little to edify them here; there are few warts, other than those inadvertently and implicitly revealed, in this telling of the story. On pp.184–91, indeed, the author simply lays out all the various reforms and achievements worthy of note. Elsewhere, we are repeatedly reminded in the bluntest of terms just how much Warqenah ‘played a key role’. Sometimes this is presented in a rather odd fashion, as on pp. 233ff, when we jump lightly from Warqenah’s ‘key role’ during the period of Italy’s aggression to his importance in the RSPCA and the Masons. Garretson does seem, at times, to play the role of advocate rather than critical assessor, or even critical friend.

In the Ethiopian context, much is made of the Warqenah generation as comprising ‘reformers’ and ‘modernisers’. Bahru Zewde’s work, again, has characterised Warqenah and a number of his prominent contemporaries as ‘pioneers of change’.⁽⁹⁾ This reviewer has often struggled to understand quite how true this description is. Warqenah and many of his peers were fascinated by some of the accoutrements of modernity, but it takes a leap of the imagination to see them as genuine ‘reformers’. In the title of chapter six, he is referred to as a ‘progressive’ (p.101), but in truth Warqenah was a rather unconvincing ‘progressive’. His intellectual life was fairly restricted, and he was, in Garretson’s own words, ‘quite conservative and traditional’ (p. 264). Warqenah and his contemporaries tinkered with bits of the system, but in the end were implicated in the steady strengthening of neo-Solomonic power, a highly personalised and profoundly unstable system of which many of the ‘reformers’ – Warqenah included – themselves fell foul, at one time or another. Much vaunted anti-slavery activism aside, it is difficult to appreciate what Warqenah and his peers actually achieved in terms of profound and enduring ‘reform’. There was always an eye for the main chance, certainly – the occasional railway or mining concession, some business on the side, the building of large houses. One is left with the sense, perhaps unfairly, that while Warqenah was indeed something of a patriotic entrepreneur – political, social and economic – much of his frenetic activity was self-serving, and he was a rather self-possessed individual. One of the causes of his rift with Haile Selassie during the Second World War, as noted earlier, was that he appeared to be feathering his own nest by keeping the profits from a house sale – with rather tarnishes the image of the great patriot. He was certainly personally ambitious, and keenly aware of his own status in Ethiopian society. For sure, the sharpening up of local administration, for example, might well involve some wider public benefit. Yet one might argue that it was precisely the *failure* of that generation to achieve serious political or economic reform which meant that it was left to a later generation, coming of age a decade or so after Warqenah’s death in 1952, to lay their lives on the line in order to effect change, for better or worse.⁽¹⁰⁾

Biography is an ill-developed genre in the field of African history, certainly in the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The few that exist are firmly in the 'life and times' tradition: in the Ethiopian region, one might point to Harold Marcus on Emperor Menelik, or Haggai Erlich on *Ras Alula* (11); elsewhere in eastern Africa, examples include Norman Bennett on Mirambo, in nineteenth-century Tanzania (12), and Michael Twaddle's study of the Ugandan soldier and administrator, Kakungulu. (13) Otherwise, the relative lack of a biographical tradition in African historiography can be ascribed to some extent to methodological obstacles – there is often simply not enough source material to facilitate full-length biographical studies of individual Africans – although in fact sources for this period (between, say, c.1860 and c.1940) are actually reasonably good. Moreover, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a sharp turn toward 'history from below', in African history as elsewhere, which meant that there was a shift away from the study of 'great men'. In that sense, the book under review represents something of a refreshing anomaly. The real value of this story is the light it sheds on the ways in which exposure to outrageous fortune, education and putative 'modernity' opened up interesting choices for men like Warqenah Eshete. Although he remains something of an enigma throughout this biography, and while one might have wished that the author had gone further in elaborating upon the 'times' as well as the 'life', this detailed and occasionally insightful narrative illustrates much that is important about this turbulent period in Ethiopian, and indeed global, history.

Notes

1. Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: the Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002) p.36.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ibid.*, pp.36–42.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa, 1968), for example pp. 648–9. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Henze, *Layers of Time: a History of Ethiopia* (London, 2000) pp. 202–3.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See for example T. M. Coffey, *Lion by the Tail: the Story of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (London, 1974), p. 144; A. Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War: the Italian-Ethiopian campaign, 1935–41* (London, 1984) p. 150.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. G. Harmsworth, *Abyssinian Adventure* (London, 1935) p. 191.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. W. Thesiger, *The Danakil Diary: Journeys through Abyssinia, 1930–34* (London, 1998), p. 87.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, 1892–1937: the Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I*, ed. and tr. E. Ullendorff (London, 1976), p. 144.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia*.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See for example Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974* (Rochester, NY, 2008).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. H. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844–1913* (Oxford, 1975); H. Erlich, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa: a Political Biography. Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1875–1897* (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1996).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. N. R. Bennett, *Mirambo of Tanzania, 1840?–1884* (London, 1971).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. M. Twaddle, *Kakungulu and the Creation of Uganda, 1868–1928* (London, 1993).[Back to \(13\)](#)

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