RICHARD LESLIE HILL  
1901—1996

Richard Leslie Hill, who died on 21 March 1996, was one of the great pioneers in the study of the modern history of the Sudan. Several of his works will remain standard reference works for many generations to come. He was not only an outstanding scholar, but also a far-sighted one, whose foresight has profoundly influenced the field.¹ He belongs to a generation that included Sir Harold MacMichael and Rev. Dr. A.J. Arkell, that is scholar/administrators, whose enthusiasm for the country and its people in which they served, led them to make profound contributions to our understanding of the Sudan and its history.

Richard Hill was born at Ramsbury, Wiltshire, in February 1901 into a family long-established there. In 1913 the family emigrated to New Zealand, where Richard received his education at Auckland Grammar School. He worked his way back to England and entered St. Augustine’s College, Canterbury, intending to become an Anglican Benedictine monk. St. Augustine’s sent him to Oxford, where he read history and took his B. Litt., later published as his first book, Toryism and the People (see bibliography below).

A series of chances took him to the Sudan in 1927, where he served for eighteen years in various positions in the Sudan Railways, retiring in 1945. His love for the institution was expressed in his Sudan Transport and in numerous articles. While working in Sudan Railways, he made friends with two amateur historians, who shared his passion for

¹ Several obituaries have appeared; Martin Daly in The Times, 5 April 1996 and Peter Holt, The Guardian, 19 April 1996.
Sudanese history; one was an Egyptian, al-Shāṭir Buṣaylī ʿAbd al-Jalīl, who wrote a number of interesting works, the other was Sudanese, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, bashkātib or secretary at the Sudan Railways Headquarters at Atbara, who was a pioneer in the collection of oral tradition in the Sudan long before the phrase became fashionable.

Upon his retirement from the Sudan Railways in 1945, Hill was appointed senior lecturer in history at University College, Khartoum (later, University of Khartoum). After four years at the College, he retired again and became lecturer in Near Eastern History at Durham University. It was at Durham that his far-sightedness led to the creation of a unique archive. Starting in 1957, just a year after the Sudan’s independence, he began a campaign, which was to last more or less the rest of his life, to gather together at Durham as much as possible of the surviving records of the British and others who had served in the Sudan. The result is the Sudan Archive, a unique collection of official and unofficial documentation, of photographs and films, now ably catalogued and preserved by the staff at Durham.

Thereafter Richard continued to write, had a number of visiting professorships (Santa Barbara, California; Simon Fraser, British Columbia and Ahmadu Bello, Kano) before retiring to Oxford. Much of his time in Oxford was devoted to helping his wife, Juliana, in her researches. His hospitality and generosity were unparalleled. The first time I went to see him in 1966, as a very young graduate student about to embark on the study of Darfur, he simply gave me all his notes on Darfur.

Richard Hill’s œuvre falls into three categories—and here I do not discuss his more ephemeral writings in local newspapers and journals, although they are undoubtedly of great interest—indispensable reference works, annotated translations of nineteenth-century European travel literature, and works of synthesis, of which Egypt in the Sudan is the
classic, closely followed by *On the Frontiers of Islam.*

Hill first laid the foundation for his, and others’, later studies with his *Bibliography of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.* The title conceals a massive body of investigative research. Precisely because the Sudan was ‘pacified’ by the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1820, it was open to European and other travellers much earlier than most of Africa south of the Sahara. The result was a plethora of accounts, some German or Swiss and scholarly, some French, and occasionally frivolous, by a variety of researchers, tourists, mountebanks, adventurers, and so on, who left records of the Sudan and the Sudanese. The *Bibliography* is a remarkably thorough account of this literature—published in 1937 long before ‘Inter-Library’ loan and the web. It remains the foundation for Sudanese historical bibliography. It also underlines a problem for younger researchers in Sudanese history, namely the need to be familiar with German, French and Italian in addition to English—Giovanni Battista Brocchi on Sinnār, Gustav Nachtigal on Darfur, Pierre Trémaux on the Blue Nile are but three examples.

The *Bibliography* is complemented by another reference work first published in 1951, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan,* which is, I suspect, the book of Richard Hill most frequently consulted by researchers on the Sudan. Few of us do not have it nearby. Richard himself lamented the lack of a proper Dictionary of National Biography already in the preface to his Biographical Dictionary, but although there have appeared since its publication several admirable works in Arabic, none replace Hill’s work. Hill, in a letter to me dated 21 November 1976 remarked, ‘It was [Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm] who, when I was depressed about ever

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2 Bibliographical details are given in the second part of this notice.
4 A term that seems effectively to have been coined by Hill.
getting ahead with [the Biographical Dictionary] encouraged me to persevere’.

For a Sudan buff, it is Hill’s most entertaining work; its pithy style is unsurpassed; an example is his notice of the French left-wing journalist Olivier Pain (1843-84) who sought an interview with the Mahdi. Hill notes, ‘He travelled to Dongola and over the Bayūda to al-UBaiyiḥ in August 1884 with the intention of obtaining an exclusive interview with the Mahdi … The Mahdi, failing to comprehend his mission, kept him captive … He died while accompanying the Mahdist army … His death provoked a violent anti-British outcry in France where the gutter press attributed his death to British intrigue’.

In 1958 Hill published Egypt in the Sudan; on the surface, it is a plain and factual account of the occupation and administration of the Sudan by Egypt from 1820 until the fall of Khartoum in 1885. It is actually rather more than that in that it charts the complex interaction between a modernizing state, Egypt, and a hinterland, the Sudan, where that modernization was to lead to very different results. The parallels between the Egypt of Khedive Ismā‘īl and President Ḥusnī Mubārak and the Sudan of the Mahdi and Ḥasan al-Ṭurābī are striking. What Hill documents in Egypt in the Sudan is the growth of a separateness between Egypt and the Sudan, a separateness that was to be consolidated under the Condominium, which in effect legitimated the Mahdist revolution. Much has been written on the Turkiyya since, but Egypt in the Sudan remains the standard work.

His last book, An African Corps d’elite, maintains his interest in the Turkiyya, but in Mexico, being the story, entertainingly told, of the Sudanese troops lent to the French by Muhammad Saʿīd Pasha of Egypt to fight on behalf of Maximilian, a Hapsburg the French were trying establish as emperor of Mexico.

Another important aspect of Richard’s work was the translation and annotation of travel accounts from the nineteenth century. Together with various collaborators, he
published a number of volumes containing rare accounts which he had discovered. My own favourite is *On the Frontiers of Islam*, which includes a scandalous account of a brothel in Wad Madanī run by a scion of the Funj royal family, the Lady Nāṣra. One of Richard’s schemes in the late 1960s was the republication of a series of ‘pseudo-travellers’, that is travellers who did not travel. The scheme, as he notes, never got off the ground, but he wrote a brochure that is gem of scholarship lightly worn.

Richard’s last gift to the field was to present his diaries and papers to the Archive that he had established. An important point to note is that he in the 1960s and 70s saw and made notes on documents in the Egyptian National Archives that have subsequently disappeared in the course of the various moves of the National Archives. As a consequence, Hill’s notes are in many instances the only record that we have of these documents.

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His Writings

The following is based on a handwritten list prepared by Richard Hill (we reproduce a page to celebrate his inimitable handwriting). He himself notes, ‘This includes everything except juvenelgia, three trivial letters to obscure journals, all in 1924, written in the process of growing up’. Actually, Richard forgot a number of articles and I have endeavoured to make what follows as comprehensive as possible. I would draw attention especially to his book reviews which are often exceptionally informative. I have included most of Richard’s own comments. Richard’s œuvre spans seventy-one years.

1924 ‘St. Augustine’s Monastery, Canterbury’, *St. Mary Abbot’s Parish Magazine*, July, 9-10.
1924 ‘L’infelice Lodovico Petrucci Cavaliere’, *St. Edmund

1929 Toryism and the People, 1832-1846 (with a Foreword by Keith Fielding), London: Constable 1929 [based on a thesis for B.Litt, Oxford 1928].


1939 ‘Sudan Railways pioneers’, Railway Bulletin, Atbara [headquarters of the Sudan Railways], April; repr. in Railway Bulletin, 4, January 1950.


1939 ‘Recent Italian literature concerning the Sudan’, SNR, xxii, 1, 167-9.


1940 Review of E. Anchieri, Storia della politica inglese nel Sudan, in SNR, xxiii, 2, 368.

Bibliography—Richard

This includes everything except juvenilia, three trivial letters to obscure journals, all in 1924. In the process of growing up.


Hill notes, ‘1940-1942 Seconded to War Office, Khartoum, with rank of Bimbashi, railway liaison officer. No leisure and no inclination to write’. Nevertheless:


1943 *Christianity and Politics*. Pamphlet no. 2 in All Saints Cathedral, Khartoum, series, 144 pp. Hill notes that no. 1 in the series was by Douglas Newbold.


Hill notes of the following items that the titles from *Sudan Star* were the work of the newspaper’s editor.

1943 Juliana Hill, ‘Sudan parents and Palestine leave’, *Sudan Star*, 7 August.5

1943 ‘Sudanese explorers’, *Sudan Star*, 4 September.

1943 ‘Sawbones in the old Sudan’, *Sudan Star*, 27 September.

‘Americans of the old days in the Sudan’, *Sudan Star*. Hill does not give a date for this article.

1943 ‘The ladies of the old Sudan’, *Sudan Star*, 18 October.

1943 ‘Newspapermen in the Old Sudan’, *Sudan Star*, 14

5 During the Second World War a number of the families of Sudan Government British personnel were evacuated to Palestine.
December.
1943 ‘The future of culture in the Sudan’, Sudan Star, 18 December.
1943 ‘They planned a railway from Suakin to Berber’, Sudan Star, 22 December.
1943 ‘Eagles over the Sudan’, Sudan Star, 4 November.
1944 ‘Engineers of the old Sudan’, Sudan Star, 1 February.
1944 ‘On faking history’, Sudan Star, 2 March.
1944 ‘Travel in the old Sudan’, Sudan Star, 2 October.
1944 ‘Those dreadful nursery rhymes’ [editor’s competition followed], Sudan Star, 9 and 12 December.
1944 ‘£10 competition for topical nursery rhyme’, Sudan Star, 23 December.
1945 ‘Eccentrics of the old Sudan’, Sudan Star, 10 February.
1945 ‘Mumtaz—the man behind Sudan cotton’, Sudan Star, 1 May.
1945 ‘Grand Hotel, or the future of the Sudan novel’, Sudan Star, 29 November.
1945 ‘70 Years’, Sudan Railways Bulletin, 70th anniversary issue, February.
1945 ‘Sudan Railways 70 years old today’, Sudan Star, 15 February.
1946 ‘Sudan is the old soldier’s bivvy’, Sudan Star, 15 April.
1947 Review of āpAbd al-Rahmān Zakī, Aʿlām al-jaysh waʾl-baḥriyya fī Miṣr, Cairo, in Sudan Star [Hill does not give a date].
1947 ‘An unpublished itinerary to Kordofan, 1824-1825’,


1951 ‘Rulers of the Sudan, 1820-1885’, *SNR*, xxxii, 1, 85-95.


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6 Hill notes that attempts by Martin Daly and the present writer, and by Daly and Sikainji to prepare a third edition died *in utero.*
1958 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the following articles:
- Fa-hsien
- Foa, Edouard
- Garner, Marie-Joseph-François
- Holub, Emil
- Hué, E.R.
- Junker, Wilhelm
- Leo, Johannes
- Selous, Fredrick Courtney
- ʿAbbâs I
- ʿAbbâs II (ʿAbbâs Hîlmî Pasha)
- ʿArâbî Pasha [properly Aḥmad ʿUrâbî Pasha]
- Ayyûbid dynasty
- Azharî, Ismâʾîl al-
- Baybars I
- Browne, William George
- Cromer, Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl
- Egypt [Muslim conquest to 1918]
- Gessi, Romolo
- Hsuan Tsang
- Ibrahim Pasha [al-wâlî]
- Ismâʾîl Pasha [Khedive]
- Khalifa, the [ʿAbdallâhi b. Muḥammad]
- Mameluke
- Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdî
- Muḥammad ʿAlî Pasha
- Muṣṭafâ Kâmil
- Nubar Pasha [Nubarian]
- Osman Diqna
- Polo, Marco
- Saʿîd Pasha [Muḥammad Saʿîd Pasha]
- Sudan, Republic of the
- Suez Canal,
• Tewfik Pasha [Muḥammad Tawfīq Pasha]
• Wingate, Sir F.R.
• al-Zubayr Pasha Raḥma Maṣūr

1959 ‘Baladiyya: the Arab East’, Encyclopaedia of Islam (2) i, 975-6.
1959 ‘Death of a Governor-General (Ahmad Pasha Abu Adhan)’, SNR, xxxix, 83-7.
1960 ‘Sudan’, Annual Register of World Events 1959.
1962 ‘Historical writing on the Sudan since 1820’, in B. Lewis and P.M. Holt (eds.), Historians of the Middle East, London.
1965 ‘Government and Christian missions in the Anglo-
Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1914’, *Middle East Studies*.  
1967 *Pseudo-Travellers: a catalogue of fraudulent and unauthenticated travel, facsimile reprints from*, Cornmarket Press [1967? A Cornmarket Press Catalogue of a project which, alas, failed to ‘catch’ on with the booksellers. Fortunately for the enterprising publishers, the proposal did not get beyond the prospectus stage].  


1984 (ed.) *The Sudan Memoirs of Carl Christian Giegler Pasha, 1873-1883*. Transl. from the German by Thirza Küpper, with a forword by the Pasha’s great-grand-daughter, Heidi Groha, London: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy (Union Academique Internationale, Fontes Historiae Africanae, series varia, II)


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Photograph courtesy of David Hutchinson, University of Durham