
Edward Ullendorff was one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of Semitic studies in the second half of the twentieth century.

He was born in Berlin, on 25 January 1920. Between 1930 and 1938 he was educated at the Gymnasium Zum Grauen Kloster. In 1938 he left Berlin for Palestine to pursue a course in Semitic languages at the recently founded Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He studied an impressively wide range of Semitic languages in a course that served as the model for the degree in Semitic languages that he himself was later to teach at the School of Oriental and African Studies. It was in Jerusalem that he met Dina, who was to become his devoted wife and lifelong support.

During the Second World War he was appointed to various posts in the British Military Administration in Eritrea, in which he played a key role due to his knowledge of Ethiopian Semitic languages. He served as the Chief Examiner in the British Censorship in Eritrea from 1942 to 1943 and as Assistant Political Secretary from 1945 to 1946. In Asmara he founded and edited the first Tigrinya-language newspaper, known as the *Eritrean Weekly News*. He had a close relationship with Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie.

After a brief spell in the British mandatary administration in Palestine after the war, he moved to England. He was awarded a D. Phil. in Oxford for a thesis entitled ‘The relationship of modern Ethiopian languages to Gǝʾǝz’ and subsequently began a distinguished academic career in various British universities. Between 1956 and 1959 he was Reader in Semitic Languages in St. Andrews University. While still in his 30s he was appointed as Professor of Semitic Languages and Literatures at Manchester (1959-1964). Thereafter he moved to the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, where a chair of Ethiopian Studies was created specially for him. In 1979 his chair was given the title of Professor of Semitic Languages. He retired from the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1982.

During his academic career, he has played a leading role in the academic bodies of his field, serving as Chairman of the Association of British Orientalists (1963-1964), President of the Society for Old Testament Study (1971) and Vice-President of the
Royal Asiatic Society (1975-1979, 1981-1985), to name but a few. From 1975 to 1983 he sat on the Advisory Board of the British Library. He devoted himself for many years to the development of two of the most important British journals in his field. During his time in Manchester he was joint editor of *Journal of Semitic Studies* and in London he was Chairman of the Editorial Board of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* between 1968 and 1978. He has received numerous honours and awards. These include the Imperial Ethiopian Gold Medallion (1960) and the Haile Selassie International Prize for Ethiopian Studies (1972). He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1965 and served as its Vice-President from 1980 to 1982. In 1998 he became one of the few British scholars to be made a Foreign Fellow of the Accademia dei Lincei at Rome.

Edward Ullendorff has made numerous important contributions to research on Semitic languages and on the associated cultures. A large proportion of his scholarly oeuvre has been devoted to the languages and culture of Ethiopia. His D.Phil. thesis in Oxford formed the basis of his book *The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia* (London 1955) and this was followed by works on the individual Ethiopian Semitic languages, such as *An Amharic Chrestomathy* (Oxford 1965) and *A Tigrinya Chrestomathy* (Stuttgart 1985), and on the history and culture of Ethiopia, such as *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (Oxford 1960), reprinted in many editions, *Ethiopia and the Bible—The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy* (London 1968), *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch* (Oxford 1978, together with M.A. Knibb), as well as catalogues of Ethiopian manuscript collections in the Bodleian Library and Cambridge University Library. His English translation of the autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellassie (Oxford 1976) is of importance for historians and students of Amharic. His productive scholarly output included also publications concerning languages from other branches of the Semitic family, especially Hebrew, Ugaritic and Arabic. Hebrew of all periods has been of particular interest to him, his publications ranging from studies on Biblical Hebrew and its Ancient Near Eastern background, such as his thought-provoking article ‘Is Biblical Hebrew a language?’, (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34, 1971) to the medieval Hebrew letters attributed to Prester John (Oxford 1982) and ‘Modern Hebrew as a subject of linguistic investigation’ (*Journal of Semitic Studies* 2, 1957). He has also written several studies in the field of comparative Semitics, which include his often quoted article ‘What is a Semitic language?’ (*Orientalia* 27, 1958) and his important
contribution to An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages (Wiesbaden 1964).

His widow, Dina, has generously endowed the Ullendorff lecture series in Semitic Philology at the University of Cambridge and the Ullendorff medal for Semitic Languages or Ethiopian Studies, which is granted annually by the British Academy.