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Obituary: Rex Seán O’Fahey (1943-2019)

By Rüdiger Seesemann (University of Bayreuth, Germany)

The world of Sudan studies mourns the passing of one of its icons, Professor Rex Seán O’Fahey, in Oslo (Norway) on April 9th, 2019. He held a BA from the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS, London; 1967) and a PhD from the same institution in 1973. Although based in Bergen (where he held a professorship in history) for almost four decades, Seán O’Fahey was a cosmopolitan, who spent many years in Kenya, Sudan, and the United States dedicated to his studies, teaching, and research. Widely known for his pioneering work on the history of Darfur, he also took a keen interest in the Arabic literary production of Sudan and the writings of the Muslims peoples of East Africa and the Horn. His numerous publications in these fields (see the list below) will remain a prime reference for future scholarship.

I feel compelled to include a personal note here. I still vividly recall my first encounter with Professor O’Fahey back in 1994, when I, a freshly baked PhD holder, visited the University of Bergen due to my interest in doing research in Darfur. Prepared for a sobering encounter with a stern academic, I was surprised to find a warm and welcoming person who took me on a tour of Bergen’s nightlife. The following day, he introduced me to his vast collection of precious materials gathered over the course of thirty years of research in Sudan and, at the time, kept in a large archive room at the History Department. After explaining the order in which the collection was organized, he simply handed over the key to me and said, “Feel free to enter any time and help yourself!”

This is just one example of how Seán O’Fahey generously shared his time, resources, and knowledge with others who were eager to study what he was passionate about: the history of Sudan, especially Darfur, but also Arabic literature of eastern Africa and nineteenth-century Sufism. His research acquaintances, such as the Sudanese academic and Sufi leader Hasan al-Fatih Qariballah, the polymath Awn al-Sharif Qasim, the charismatic Shaykh Ibrahim Sidi from El Fasher, or Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim, the long-time director of the National Records Office in Khartoum, not only shared his passions, but also became personal friends. He knew his material, and he also knew what he was talking about out of first-hand encounters and experience.

Professor O’Fahey could also come across as terse when he thought that someone failed to attain what he considered the proper research standard. I remember him being present when I gave a lecture in front of a large audience on the development of Islamic educational institutions in coastal Kenya in the twentieth century. Time constraints forced me to treat the topic in a rather cursory manner, and after the talk was over he raised his hand and said, “I am appalled to hear a paper on Islamic education in Kenya where the name of Alamin Mazrui is not mentioned.” His own interventions were usually based on mastery of the material and the setting; therefore, he expected others to attain a similar level of academic scrutiny and love for details.

O’Fahey’s many research projects, as well as those of his students (who became eminent academics in their own right, such as Anders Bjørkelo, Ali Salih Karrar, Knut Vikør, Albrecht Hofheinz, Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, and Anne Bang), mirror this perfectionist attitude. His work on Ahmad ibn Idris helped revise the earlier concept of “Neo-Sufism”; his studies of Sudanese history are priceless; his bibliographical reference works constitute unique scholarly resources.

The latter developed as an extension of the work he started at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Bergen in the 1980s with John Hunwick (Northwestern University Evanston, IL). In 1985 they established the *Bulletin of Arabic Literature in Africa*, which they edited along with Hunwick's earlier *Fontes Historiae Africanae – Bulletin of Information*, both important publishing venues for bibliographical research and works on Arabic sources. The *Fontes* later evolved into *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* (1990-2005), where Knut Vikør eventually took over as the main editor. Building on this foundation, O'Fahey and Hunwick subsequently embarked on the monumental task of compiling the equivalent of Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* for the Arabic literary production in sub-Saharan Africa that appeared in E.J. Brill's *Arabic Literature in Africa* series. Later, O'Fahey teamed up once again with Hunwick to set up the *Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa* (ISITA) at Northwestern University, the first of its kind in North America, which was instrumental in changing the perception of Islam in Africa.

The eruption of the Darfur civil war in 2003 came as a shock, though not as a surprise to Professor O'Fahey. Darfur, this remote and widely ignored area, suddenly moved into the limelight of international news headlines. The issues that lay at the root of the civil war—land, race, ethnicity, social and political organization, as well as the legacies of domination (whether by British colonialism or the modern Sudanese nation state)—were all topics O'Fahey had studied in his earlier work. Accordingly, his historical studies gained unexpected relevance for the understanding of the protracted conflict, and his expertise was very much sought after in international diplomacy.

For those who knew Professor O'Fahey, there can be no doubt that he was one of a kind. For those who did not, his publications and his vast collection of historical materials - a catalogue of which will soon become available (see <https://www.uib.no/en/rg/smi/90567/r-sean-afahey-collection>) - will remain a veritable treasure for decades to come.

Rex Seán O'Fahey's most important book publications include

(in chronological order):

1974: *Kingdoms of the Sudan*. London: Methuen & Co. (with Jay Spaulding).

1980: *State and Society in Dar Fur*. London: Hurst.

1983: *Land in Dar Fur. Charters and Related Documents from the Dar Fur Sultanate*. London: Cambridge University Press (with Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim).

1990: *Enigmatic Saint. Ahmad ibn Idris and the Idrisi Tradition*. London: Hurst.

1993: *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa*, compiled by R.S. O'Fahey *et al.* (Vol. 1 of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, ed. John O. Hunwick & R.S. O'Fahey). Leiden: Brill.

2000: *The Exoteric Ahmad ibn Idris. A Sufi's Critique of the Madhahib & the Wahhabis*. Leiden: Brill (with Bernd Radtke, John O'Kane & Knut S. Vikør)

2003: *The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa*, compiled by R.S. O'Fahey *et al.*, (Vol. 3, fasc. A of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, ed. John O. Hunwick & R.S. O'Fahey). Leiden: Brill.

2009: *The Darfur Sultanate*. London: Hurst.

2016: *Darfur and the British. A Sourcebook*. London: Hurst.

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