

Osmaston left his soul in the Rwenzoris

By Raphael Okello

AFTER working for over 13 years as a District Forest Officer in Uganda from 1949, Dr. Henry Osmaston's soul remained in the Rwenzori mountains, many years after he had returned to England.

Recently, his sentiments for the Rwenzori and its Bakonjo natives culminated in the completion of one of his outstanding ambitions — the latest guide to the Rwenzori "Mountains of the Moon".

When he held the first finished copies of the guide, the fruits of what had taken half a century of research and hard work, he was pleased. In a way, it represented the highlight of his life in Uganda; and perhaps even a spiritual link with the Rwenzori.

Unfortunately, a week after seeing the first copies of his guidebook, Osmaston, 83, died in a London hospital on the morning of Tuesday, June 27, 2006.

Anna Osmaston, his wife, wrote in an email, "He had been feeling unwell for a short while but as he was improving, he had a massive heart attack and died."

She said Osmaston was "very busy and active until his last moment". She described Osmaston's time in Uganda.

After joining the Uganda Forest Department in 1949, Osmaston was always busy and active. His spirit sanctioned him to serve in almost every Ugandan district as a forest officer. But Osmaston, then stationed in Fort Portal, seems to have left deeper footprints in the Rwenzori during which time all forests in the west were in his custody.

A forestry graduate from Oxford, Osmaston directed his energy to nature conservation, research and development projects. He actively contributed to the writing of three publications and several scientific papers about Uganda's vegetation.

A History of Uganda

Forest Department and The Vegetation of Uganda, are such publications

"After all these years, since its publication, *The Vegetation of Uganda*, is still the standard reference for the vegetation of Uganda," said Prof. Derek Pomeroy of the National Biodiversity Data Bank, Makerere Institute of Environment and Natural Resources (MIENR).

In 1952, Osmaston was part of the joint British-Ugandan-Belgian scientific expedition, which scaled the Rwenzori Mountains, covering both the Uganda and Congo sides.

From that expedition, he engaged in the construction of bridges and huts in the Rwenzoris. These are the facilities that existed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a time when Osmaston also served as president of the Uganda Mountain Club.

Even on his deathbed, Osmaston's heart reached out to the Rwenzori, a place he initially left soon

after Uganda's independence in 1962. He requested that any contributions, donations and sales from his latest guidebook be sent to the Rwenzori Trust. Under taker on The Ashes, Cartmel Fell, Grange over Sands, LA11 6NU.

The Rwenzori Trust is a charity with an aim of supporting scientific research, environmental survey and developmental projects on the Rwenzori and for advancement of education in mountaineering in Uganda.

Osmaston requested Tom Stacey, Osmaston's friend, who climbed the Rwenzori in 1954, to bring the first 27 copies of the guide to Prof. Pomeroy at MIENR where they can be purchased.

The guide is a detailed work of art. It provides useful health precautions, historic and present literature and pictures of Rwenzori peaks, glaciers and trails. It also emphasises the need to conserve the Rwenzori's fragile environment.

When he resigned and



MOUNTAIN MAN: Osmaston on a yak in the Himalayas

left Uganda with his wife, Osmaston took a doctorate at Oxford in 1965. He studied the past glaciation and climate of the East African mountains. This secured him a post as lecturer in geography at Bristol University, England. Osmaston later retired to live in the Lake District.

Since his departure, Osmaston, exalted as one of the world's leading experts in high altitude tropical forest management, kept in touch with Ugandan forestry affairs.

Occasionally, he returned

to revise and update management plans for some of the key natural forests like Budongo. Osmaston was a Life Member of the Uganda Society and by the time of his death, he was chairman of UK Branch of Uganda Society. Fay, a close friend of Osmaston said, "Uganda was very dear to Henry and he supported it in many ways."

Osmaston climbed and worked in many mountains including the Himalayas and Tibet. He last visited the Rwenzori, for which he was an honorary warden in 2005.