PLATE XVIII

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JAMES MATTHEW THOMPSON

REVEREND JAMES MATTHEW THOMPSON

1878–1956

THE REVEREND JAMES MATTHEW THOMPSON, born on 27 September 1878, was the son of the Reverend H. L. Thompson, rector of Iron Acton in Gloucestershire, and Catherine, eldest daughter of Sir James Paget, Bt., the celebrated surgeon. His father was a classical scholar, who had been a Student and Censor of Christ Church, Oxford. On his mother's side, Thompson was descended from the distinguished Paget family, whose fortunes were founded, during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, by Samuel Paget, a prosperous brewer and ship-owner, and, in 1817, mayor, of Great Yarmouth. In 1799 Samuel Paget had married Sarah Elizabeth, eldest daughter of Thomas Tolver of Chester. The result of this union was a family of seventeen children, nine of whom, including the first and last, reached maturity, and several of whom, despite the crash of the brewing and ship-owning business in the 1840's, achieved considerable academic and public distinction.[1] Sir James Paget, who was perhaps the most eminent of the sons, has described his mother as 'handsome, tall and graceful, somewhat hasty in temper, strong-willed, strong in speech'. He singles out, however, as her distinguishing characteristics, 'her intense love of the children, her marvellous activity and industry, her admiration of all that was beautiful in art and nature, her skill in writing, needlework and painting'.[2] She was a private pupil of John Crome and she and her husband acquired a notable collection of the works of the Norwich school of painters. It is perhaps not fanciful to suggest that some of Thompson's own personal attributes and particularly his industry, love of nature, and artistic skill may have been derived ultimately from this source.

Sarah's seventh child, and Thompson's great-uncle, was Sir George Edward Paget, K.C.B., F.R.S. (1809–92), who, as Regius Professor of Physic at Cambridge between 1872 and 1892, was

[1] There is a family tradition that one of Sarah's sons—Arthur—was the Arthur Pendennis of Thackeray. The two were certainly friends at Charterhouse and Cambridge. Sarah's eldest son, George, claimed that when he met Thackeray with Arthur in Paris, he had persuaded Thackeray to abandon the law for literature.

[2] Stephen Paget, *Memoirs and Letters of Sir James Paget*, 1912, p. 7.

said to have been the most distinguished of the occupants of that chair, apart from Francis Glisson, since its foundation in 1540.[1] It was, however, Thompson's grandfather, Sir James Paget, F.R.S., D.C.L., LL.D., F.R.C.S. (1814–99), who brought the family into the forefront of public life by becoming President of the Royal College of Surgeons (1875), Serjeant-Surgeon to Queen Victoria in 1877, and Vice-Chancellor of the University of London from 1883 to 1895. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Sir James's real contribution to surgical knowledge was to 'show how pathology might be applied successfully to elucidate clinical problems, when as yet there was no science of bacteriology'.[2]

Of Thompson's childhood and youth we fortunately possess his own mature recollections in the form of the long autobiographical poem, *My Apologia*, written in heroic couplets and privately published in 1940.[3] This was partly based on his own diaries—the first of which he started at the age of nine, on the prompting of his mother. The poem covers this phase of Thompson's early life in three sections headed 'Iron Acton', 'Radley', and 'Winchester'. The first gives a vivid picture of the secure and tranquil life of a country clergyman's family in the late afterglow of Victorian ease and prosperity and half ironically touches on the ethical and cultural standards of the Paget clan, which were apparently held up to the younger Thompsons as models. The second section, dealing with the years between 1887, when his father accepted the Wardenship of Radley College, and 1892, when James became a scholar of Winchester, pays a warm and appreciative tribute to his first school, the famous 'Dragon' preparatory school at Oxford. The third section gives us a glimpse of his boarding-school days at Winchester from 1892 to 1897.

The essential thesis of the poem is that the outwardly quiet and unadventurous life of an Oxford scholar might yet, in the 'mental strife' to which it could lead, be comparable, in its demands on moral integrity and force of character, with the more 'active' and bustling careers of men of practical affairs. Even Thompson, however, would have been the first to admit that his childhood had been sheltered and even privileged, and it may have been

[1] One of his main innovations was the institution in 1842 of bedside examinations for the Cambridge medical degree—and these were, in fact, the first regular clinical examinations held in this country.

[2] Vol. xxii, *Supplement*, pp. 112–14.

[3] In 1938, on his retirement as a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, Thompson had been given a dinner by his colleagues and had then promised to write his reminiscences in verse.

some such feeling which made him in his early manhood a critic of so many of the social and ethical codes of his Victorian elders and an iconoclast of their religious beliefs.

His memories of his birthplace were the happy ones of

> the church, the village green,
> The mulberry-shaded drive, the tunnelled walk,
> The white-verandahed Rectory, the fork
> Of the big chestnut tree (our robbers' den),
> The cave we picnicked in, the brook, the glen
> Below the mill—

of the usual boyish pursuits in summer and winter, of jaunts in the rectory wagonette with his father and his two younger brothers, Harry and Michael, to Bristol to watch the cricket at Clifton or to visit the zoo, and of periodical trips to his grandfather's house in Harewood Place in London. The highlights of these London visits for the Thompson children were the journey from Bristol by the broad-gauge express, Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors, Christy's and Maskelyne's Minstrels, 'the Transformation Scene at Drury Lane', and 'the Electric Organ at the Egyptian Hall'.

After the family had moved to Radley James was sent, at the age of eleven, to the Oxford Preparatory School, as it was then called. Here under the Enlightened Despotism of the 'Skipper', he was 'disciplined', learnt to play games with zest, acted small parts in the school plays, acquired a lifelong devotion to bicycling, in the course of riding home at week-ends to Radley, and developed his artistic talent in the illustrated holiday diaries, which the headmaster encouraged all his boys to keep. He ended his time at the Dragon School as a gold-medallist, head of the school, captain of cricket, and winner of the eleventh scholarship to Winchester.

As a youth James accepted without question the uncomplicated moral precepts handed on by his father and, from his childhood days at Iron Acton, where he had blown the church organ for his mother and sung in the village choir, he had thought of the priesthood as his natural vocation. The prestige of the Paget connexion, his mother's cult of Browning, his father's classical learning, and the family taste for Pre-Raphaelite art and for Handel's oratorios made Thompson's cultural background typically Victorian in its conformity. Radley had supplied 'a hearth, but not a home' and, in so far as he had learnt from experience, an unsuccessful effort to protect a younger boy against a bully at his preparatory school had given him an unconquerable feeling for

the underdog, just as a holiday spent at Skelwith Bridge in the Lake District, at the age of thirteen, revealed to him a hitherto unsuspected world of natural beauty in the mountains and streams, which were always to be his solace and delight, whether in Wales or Switzerland. Looking back on this period in his retirement, and bearing in mind the crisis of conscience that had turned him from a theologian into an historian, Thompson could comment that Victorian morals were hardly more than 'sentiment served up with pi-jaw', and that unfettered experience, rather than parental admonition, would have offered a safer guide in his subsequent difficulties. As a man he had a passion for doing things his own way, and for finding out the truth as he saw it, not by any professional techniques, but by his own somewhat amateur methods. This settled habit and conviction was again a natural reaction against the way in which he had been brought up.

A more Spartan, but more emancipated, existence opened up at Winchester, where James was admitted in September 1892 at the same time as Raymond Asquith. If, at the Dragon School, he had learnt to submit to discipline and to relish outdoor sports, at Winchester he was taught:

> By the right use of freedom, to be free,
> To honour learning, not be learning's slave,
> To live content with simple fare, nor crave
> Riches and idleness.

The school gave him new friendships, some of which, such as that with A. E. Zimmern, were to be permanent. Thompson did not mix easily with his contemporaries, but this preference for the society of a few friends, or even occasionally for his own company, allowed him to enjoy the delights of the surrounding Hampshire countryside on foot or bicycle, to work out his own philosophy, and to mature his classical scholarship. On his own reckoning, his five years in college were hardly worth recording, yielding only moderate success in games and the Queen's Silver Medal for Latin Speech in 1897—the year in which he went up to Christ Church, Oxford, as an Open Scholar.

This was a move to a place where his family was well established, where his uncle, Francis Paget, was Dean of the 'House', until, in 1901, he became Bishop of Oxford, where his father had recently been appointed Vicar of St. Mary's, and where he himself was to make his home for the remainder of his life. The pattern of his career as an undergraduate followed closely that of his schooldays at Winchester—his studies for Honour Classical

Moderations even duplicating what he had already read at school and his interests and habits remaining also much the same. He had rooms in Meadow Buildings and found that several old friends of his father were still in residence as Christ Church dons. His diaries show him as working conscientiously, but without enthusiasm, sailing on the upper river, playing football against his old school, covering the countryside for miles around on his bicycle, reading the plays of Ibsen, Pinero, and Shaw in the 'Mermaid' society, and noting without comment the behaviour of the wilder spirits in the college. An entry for 5 November 1897 reads: '10–11. Fireworks and bonfire in Peck. Damage chiefly consisted of broken windows—72 in all.' Thompson never relished his studies for Honour Moderations, and though in the last weeks before his examinations in the Lent Term of 1899 he worked with a coach, who undertook to 'do' all Cicero and Demosthenes in thirty-six hours, and who in fact 'spotted' eleven of fourteen passages set from those texts, Thompson was placed in the Second Class. He found his real bent, however, in Literae Humaniores, studying Ancient History under F. J. Haverfield and Myres and philosophy with J. A. Stewart and Blunt. His vacations were spent mainly at Penmaenmawr in north Wales, where his father had, in 1892, bought a house built by Sir George Paget, or on bicycle tours of Normandy and Brittany. Penmaenmawr came to have a special significance for Thompson, for it was there, overlooked by Penmaenbach, Allt wen, and Moel Llys that he conceived his passion for rock and mountain climbing in Snowdonia, and there, too, that he was to meet the lady who became his wife. Thompson got the best out of these years at Oxford, working hard for the Schools, playing hockey, fives, and tennis, presiding at the 'Milton' literary society, bicycling over to Windsor for the Eton–Winchester cricket match, rowing to Henley for the regatta—'a very amiable and well dressed survival of the fittest'—and developing a growing interest in music and the theatre. He continued to sketch—mostly country churches—and his diaries show that he had already developed a painter's eye for the picturesque and a sense for the historic occasion.

Thompson sat his examinations for Classical 'Greats' early in June 1901. To fill in the waiting period before the results were announced, he paid a flying visit to London to attend the Christ Church Mission in Poplar and his uncle's consecration as Bishop of Oxford and then, in July, made an extended bicycle tour of the Cotswolds and Midlands. At the end of the month he

received the news at Penmaenmawr that he had been awarded First Class Honours in 'Greats', modestly celebrated, as his diary records, by 'illuminations and croquet by candlelight after dinner'. This confirmed his plan, made possible by his election as Liddon Student at Christ Church, to spend a further year at Oxford reading for a theological degree, and then to seek ordination. Second Class Honours in Theology in 1902 led him to spend the winter months of that year at the Christ Church Mission in Poplar, where he had his first taste of social and missionary work in the slums. After two terms, instead of the usual two years, at Cuddesdon Theological College, Thompson was ordained deacon in 1903 and took up a curacy at St. Frideswide's, Poplar. His stay in the East End of London was, however, short; for in the following year, after taking priest's orders, he was offered and accepted a fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford.

This decision was taken, partly on the advice of his friends, but also because an Oxford fellowship would afford him the chance of deepening his theological inquiries. His initial tutorial duties were slight—Pass men read him essays on assorted subjects and he lectured on ethics. Thompson fitted easily into the common-room life and found his colleagues congenial. His probationary year passed quickly, and, on 20 July 1905, he was elected full Fellow, and on 1 November he was admitted Dean of Divinity and took up his new duties in the following January. This office was intended to be a pastorate, its holder, under the college by-laws of 1888, being required 'to give to the undergraduate members of the college, being members of the Church of England, religious and theological instruction'.[1] As Dean, Thompson also had charge of the services in the college chapel and of the famous Magdalen choir. With these increasing responsibilities in college, he flung himself, from 1906 onwards, into numerous university commitments—as secretary of the Christian Social Union, a keen supporter of the Student Christian Movement, and author of an annotated psalter published by the Oxford press. It is not surprising that he often worked a twelve-hour day. At this time his religious sympathies were with the High Church, and he regularly said or heard early mass at Manor House, the Convent in

[1] This was a statutory obligation which, before 1885, when the first lay President had been elected, had been fulfilled by a clerical President. In 1888 this duty had been transferred to the Dean, who under the same by-laws, was required to obtain, as previous Presidents had done, a licence to exercise a cure of souls within the college from the Bishop of Winchester, the college's Visitor and Ordinary.

Cowley, though he found the ritual at St. Barnabas too pronounced. He still maintained his contacts with the Poplar mission and renewed these in vacations. Another of his absorbing interests, after the Liberal Government had come to power, was the subject of university reform. The select band of younger dons who took up this question and forced it on the attention of Lord Curzon as Chancellor—W. H. Fyfe, R. W. Livingstone, J. L. Myres, A. E. Zimmern, and William Temple—were most of them personal friends of Thompson, and he was caught up in their deliberations and helped in their propagandist activities. The opposition to the 'Young Reformers', as they called themselves, inside the University was, however, too strongly entrenched and too skilfully organized for more than minor administrative changes to be effected, but Thompson's association with this progressive group in university politics and his interest in Fabian socialism were not without their effects in allying him more and more, as his studies progressed, with the Oxford protagonists of liberal theology.

It was in these busy years, in fact, that Thompson became a Modernist in his theological views. The process that was to lead him to virtual agnosticism may well, however, have begun shortly after his ordination, when he realized that he had become a cleric largely as a result of his early upbringing without adequate self-examination. In retrospect, he suggested that the time spent at Cuddesdon as an ordinand had been too short to afford him an adequate theological training. He had, nevertheless, embarked on his ministry with a true sense of dedication, and without the slightest suspicion that further theological study might unsettle his doctrinal views. He had read widely in the works of English, American, and continental theologians and biblical critics. As early as March 1903, for example, he had read William James's influential Gifford lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, though he apparently considered the book 'irrelevant to Anglican proprieties'. As his knowledge of the results of modern biblical criticism deepened, he began to interest himself in the synoptic problem. In his *Apologia* Thompson mentions two books as having coloured his theological outlook—Loisy's *Gospel and the Church*, which showed him that Modernism could affect Catholic as well as Protestant thought, and Armitage Robinson's *Study of the Gospels*. It was the latter, read in June 1903, which revealed to him the methods which he applied in his own work on the gospels.

The atmosphere of free theological discussion which he

breathed at Oxford, the 'Holy Lunches' which he regularly attended on Tuesdays from 1906 onwards, and the select Theological Group, of which he was a member from its foundation in October 1910, also encouraged him to set down his own evolving rationalist views.[1] The firstfruits of these studies and discussions were *Jesus according to St. Mark* and the *Synoptic Gospels*, both published in 1910. These were written from the strictly orthodox position and contained no hint of his subsequent theological difficulties. It is not surprising, therefore, that Thompson's views did not attract any general attention till the appearance, in May 1911, of his *Miracles in the New Testament*. With this work Thompson became, for a few years, a central figure in the battle between Modernism and Orthodoxy. The book was regarded by the public as a challenge to traditionalist views and for the Church authorities it also raised an issue of ecclesiastical discipline. The author, however, merely intended to state the truth as he saw it and was surprised by the acute controversy which his conclusions provoked.

In essentials the book restated the case for a 'non-miraculous view of Christianity'. Thompson's own later explanation was that the work 'was not a profound or philosophical treatment of the "supernatural", but a simple statement of the critical and historical case against the literal truth of the miracle-stories of the Gospels'. All that seemed to him new in this was 'the insistence, against the apologists of the *Lux Mundi* school, that *all* the miracle-stories stood or fell together' and the attempt to show that 'the rejection of them left the essentials of Christian faith intact'.[2] This is perhaps an incomplete account of Thompson's position at the height of the controversy in the summer of 1911. That position really rested on three strongly held convictions. The first of these was the essential need to provide a defence of Christianity which would be found intellectually convincing by

[1] For 'Holy Lunches' see Dean Iremonger's *Life of William Temple*, p. 89. The later Theological Group consisted of an inner circle of which the original members were B. H. Streeter, R. Brook (later Bishop of St. Edmondsbury and Ipswich), R. G. Parsons (later Bishop of Hereford), W. H. Moberly (subsequently Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester), and J. M. Thompson. Later N. S. Talbot and A. E. J. Rawlinson (future Bishop of Derby) were added. See Thompson's article on 'Oxford Modernism, 1910–1914', *Oxford Magazine*, 28 Oct. 1948.

[2] See J. M. Thompson, 'Modernism and Post-Modernism', *Modern Churchman*, vol. xxxix (June 1949), pp. 81–84. This open letter to the editor is a most valuable analysis of the evolution of Thompson's theological views from his early Modernism to his final agnosticism.

the 'modern educated man'.[1] The second was the 'need to give the modern critic a fair hearing'.[2] The third was the persuasion that the true appeal of Christianity for ordinary men and women lay not in the Gospel miracles, but in the story of Calvary.[3] We must accept his own testimony given at the time that: 'I have written plainly; but without the intention, and, I hope, without the effect, of hurting the real faith of the least of Christ's children.'[4]

Though Thompson announced his belief in the Incarnation and in the symbolical Resurrection, and though he approached the problem of miracles from the purely evidential standpoint of the textual critic, his conclusions made it inevitable that the book should be regarded as a piece of destructive criticism, rather than as a work of apologetics. He divided miracles into three main categories—Visions, Cures, and Wonders. The first two classes he found were explicable in terms of 'religious psychology and faith-healing'. Wonders, on the other hand, such as the restoration of the dead to life, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on the water, the changing of water into wine—were quite outside the range of ordinary human experience and contrary to the known laws of natural science. Either these events were miracles, or they had never happened. Thompson concluded that they had never happened.[5] A careful survey of the evidence in the Gospels also pointed in the same direction, and again the author considered that the stories of Jesus' 'wonders' or 'mighty works' were only 'misunderstandings or misrepresentations of natural events'.[6] The miraculous element in the Gospels belonged, in his view, not to the original events, but to the later interpretations of them, being 'not fact, but fiction'. He found the explanation of all miracles either in 'an uneducated, unscientific, perhaps superstitious and excited state of public

[1] 'The modern educated man' would presumably be acquainted both with recent scientific triumphs and the findings of biblical criticism of the nineteenth century. In one sense, such a man would be the 'intelligent agnostic', for whom, in R. M. Knox's view, most Modernist theology was intended. Iremonger, *William Temple*, p. 160.

[2] Thompson claimed that the method he had adopted in his book was 'the ordinary method of New Testament criticism', which was in use not only at Oxford, but in all the universities of the world.

[3] 'The supreme moment of our Lord's life, for myself, is Calvary; its one perfect symbol, the crucifix—and it is without a touch of miracle.' Letter on 'Miracles', *Church Guardian*, 1 Sept. 1911.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Miracles in the New Testament*, p. 207.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 208.

opinion', or in a 'particularly striking personality, or holy place, or thing or critical occasion'. A 'wiser and manlier faith' would now reject the belief in miracles as one of those 'childish things' which belonged to the age of primitive Christianity, but which had no reference to the modern world.[1]

In line with this general thesis, Thompson went on to reject the miracles of the Virgin Birth and the bodily Resurrection of Jesus and thus involved himself in a denial of essential articles of the creeds. Friends had warned him against taking such an irretrievable step without lifelong reflection, but he had already committed himself to the rationalist view that miracles could not and did not happen and from that position he felt he could not honestly recede.

Miracles in the New Testament appeared early in May 1911 and almost immediately created a sensation. Though its message was addressed primarily to the 'modern educated man', its impact was on the Church. It roused the opposition of orthodox theologians and it shocked and scandalized devout believers and ordinary parish priests. The first to draw attention to the book was the Reverend W. Sanday, D.D., Canon of Christ Church and Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. In the concluding passages of a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge on 7 May, Sanday attempted to differentiate Thompson's views on miracles from those which he himself held as a moderate theologian. The first part of the sermon was a scrupulously fair attempt to bridge the gap between the Modernists' 'non-miraculous' view of Christianity and the Orthodox position. Sanday suggested, however, that Thompson, like other Modernists, had read too much into the idea of miracles as not merely above, but directly contrary to natural law, and that he had considerably underestimated the strength of the historical evidence in support of the Virgin Birth and the physical Resurrection. He also took exception to Thompson's sweeping rejection of all miracles and pointed out that, sooner or later, the author would have to redefine his position relatively to the creeds.[2]

The theological and doctrinal issues thus posed were discussed at length in the columns of the church magazines, in the periodical press, in pulpits, and in episcopal charges. Thompson had his

[1] *Church Guardian*, 1 Sept. 1911.

[2] *Ibid.*, 12 May 1911. Later Sanday privately announced that he had lost his faith in the miraculous element in the Gospel and in the Virgin Birth and bodily resurrection: R. Lloyd, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century*, i. 94.

defenders as well as his critics, but his protagonists were comparatively few and, for the most part, Modernists like himself. Among the most distinguished of them were Professor Kirsopp Lake, with whom he had studied Acts at Oxford, Dr. Hastings Rashdall, who felt the necessity of championing freedom of discussion in the Church, the Reverend A. V. Emmett, who took up the cudgels in support of this principle in the *Nineteenth Century*, and the Reverend Hensley Henson, who gave Thompson an opportunity of explaining his views in the pulpit of St. Margaret's, Westminster, in the following year.[1] On the other side were ranged the leading representatives of orthodox theology—the Warden of Keble College, Oxford (the Reverend Walter Lock, D.D.), the Principal of King's College, London (the Reverend A. C. Headlam, D.D.), and the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity (the Reverend Henry Scott Holland, D.D.).[2] Thompson's friends and colleagues in the Oxford Theological Faculty—B. H. Streeter of Queen's, N. S. Talbot of Balliol, A. E. J. Rawlinson of Keble—took up an intermediate position, offering their sympathy and yet underlining their reservations.[3] Thompson himself did not intervene in this public debate, except to clarify his views in a letter to the *Church Guardian* of 1 September 1911.[4]

It soon became clear, however, that disciplinary action would be taken against Thompson by his ecclesiastical superiors. For a time it was uncertain what form this would take. Early in July Gore, the Bishop of Birmingham, advocated that this new 'challenge' should be answered by some concerted episcopal pronouncement in the upper house of Convocation—on the ground that a sharp check was needed to the increasing professions of Modernism on the part of Anglican clergymen.[5] The blow fell, however, when the newly instituted Bishop of Winchester, Dr. Talbot, after some private correspondence with Thompson and an interview with the President of Magdalen, withdrew the

[1] Among Thompson's supporters was the *Modern Churchman*, which in two editorial articles in 1911 deplored the attacks on his book and counselled a policy of unprejudiced and open-minded reconsideration of the question of miracles.

[2] Between 21 July and 25 August these and other theologians published a series of critical articles in the *Church Guardian*, which were subsequently reprinted in book form under the title of *Miracles*, with a prefatory note by H. Scott Holland (1911).

[3] Their views were mostly expressed in private letters to Thompson.

[4] *Church Guardian*, 1 Sept. 1911, p. 1137.

[5] *Ibid.*, 7 July 1911, quoting from Gore's *Diocesan Magazine*.

former's licence to exercise a cure of souls within the college.[1] In this step the bishop claimed to have acted not as Visitor of the College, but as its Ordinary. The decision was taken on the bishop's own initiative, though his action was later welcomed by some of his episcopal colleagues who wished to avoid the extreme measures proposed by Gore. Dr. Talbot did not inhibit Thompson from preaching or officiating in the college and he was aware that his withdrawal of the licence would not necessarily affect Thompson's tenure of his tutorial fellowship. The point of his intervention was simply to deprive Thompson of the office of Dean of Divinity. Thompson's first thought was to appeal against this episcopal act to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he wisely rejected this course of action on the advice of Dr. Rashdall. Instead, he fell back on the argument that the loss of his licence did not legally disturb his tenure of the deanship, and that the action of the bishop was *ultra vires*. More generally, he also contended that, if he submitted to this episcopal discipline, he would surrender the vital principle of the academic freedom to teach within the university. Though opinion among the fellows upon Thompson's theological views was divided, support for him rallied inside the governing body of the college on the issues of episcopal interference and academic *Lehrfreiheit*. As the bishop had expressly left the question of freedom of teaching for decision by 'academical persons or bodies', the fellows had no compunction in this matter in taking sides with Thompson.

When Thompson's position was discussed in a college meeting on 19 July, he was re-elected to his tutorial fellowship and the question of the deanship was deferred till October, so that counsel's opinion could be obtained on the precise legal effect of the withdrawal of the episcopal licence. The ruling given by the authorities on ecclesiastical law was that, though Thompson's retention of the deanship was legal, he could no longer perform some of the clerical duties assigned to that office under the existing by-laws. Special arrangements were accordingly made to relieve Thompson of these obligations and he continued to function as Dean of Divinity in the college until 1915. On this narrower ground he may be considered to have won, with the college's support, a temporary victory over the bishop.

[1] The bishop's letter to Thompson withdrawing the licence was printed in the *Church Guardian* on 15 Sept. 1911. In this the chief gravamen was that Thompson had repudiated central articles of the creed and had done so while holding 'a responsible pastoral position under licence from Church authority'.

The ecclesiastical storm over Thompson's theological views, however, was not so easily abated and from this struggle he emerged, unrepentant and undismayed, but on the defensive, and with a growing sense of the instability of his religious beliefs. He had felt compelled to resign his position as examining chaplain to the Bishop of Gloucester and, though his uncle, the Bishop of Oxford, had shown him every sign of consideration and kindly understanding, the latter had died in August 1911 and had been succeeded by Gore. Gore was less inclined to make concessions and soon inhibited Thompson from preaching in his diocese, while Winnington Ingram, as Bishop of London, took sides strongly against him. During Lent 1912 Thompson availed himself of the opportunity, given by Hensley Henson as Rector of St. Margaret's, Westminster, to redefine his theological views in a series of lectures entitled 'Miracles and the Christian Faith'.[1] In these addresses Thompson was able to develop the theological and constructive side of his argument against miracles, but could do little to overcome the popular prejudices which had, in the interval, been excited against his opinions. Even more painful was the fact that, when the group of Oxford liberal theologians and laymen with whom he had been most closely associated published a symposium of their views in 1912 under the title of *Foundations*, Thompson was not invited to be a contributor.[2] Gradually, under the stress of the crisis through which he was passing, the ties that held him to his Christian beliefs slackened. While the theological controversy was at its height, Thompson had stood his ground with the greatest courage and determination, but after it had passed conscientious scruples finally deprived him of the right to recite the creeds and to administer the sacraments.

In the immediate aftermath Thompson found support and consolation in the protection afforded him by his college from the worldly penalties of clerical unorthodoxy and in the love and companionship of a happy marriage.[3]

Hardly, however, had he recovered his equilibrium in this way, than the outbreak of the First World War further and finally undermined what remained of his Christian beliefs and

[1] After revision, these were published in 1912 with the title of *Through Facts to Faith*.

[2] It is significant that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth was omitted from the symposium.

[3] He married Mari Meredyth, daughter of the Reverend David Jones, Vicar of Penmaenmawr, in 1913.

diverted his energies into other channels.[1] For Thompson the war years were a time of disillusionment and dispersed effort and may be passed over briefly. In 1914 he was university representative on the Oxford City Council and continued this work into 1915, thus commencing the active interest in municipal affairs, to which he was to return in his retirement. He volunteered to serve as a chaplain in the forces, but this offer was not accepted, and though in the summer of 1915 he spent six weeks as a member of a Red Cross Searchers' Unit at Wimereux, near Boulogne, and later worked in the Geographical Section of the Naval Intelligence Department at the Admiralty, he found no settled war-work to absorb his energies. In 1916–17 he acted as Senior Proctor at Oxford and in the last two years of the war taught as a master at Eton College. When he returned to the University after the war he was over forty and had to turn his hand and brain to a new, though at last an engrossing and congenial, task —that of becoming an historian.

Though Thompson, in one sense, became an historian by accident and though he remained for some time an amateur, in another sense it could be said that he was an historian by temperament and by preference. In his theological studies he had relied, not merely on textual criticism but also on the historical method, and his interest in history was well known to his colleagues when, in 1920, they appointed him to a tutorial fellowship in this subject at Magdalen. The Honours School of Modern History at Oxford after the First World War was one of the most popular of the Arts' courses, and Thompson soon found himself lecturing to large audiences of first-year undergraduates preparing for their First Public Examination. He chose, from 1921 to 1924, to lecture on modern European history and his first historical publication, *Lectures on Foreign History, 1494–1789* (1925), was composed in this way. Vivid, stimulating, and original in its manner of presentation, it soon established itself as a best-seller among undergraduates and in the schools. This was followed by a complementary study—an *Historical Geography of Europe, 800–1789*, published in 1929, designed for the same audience. Both these initial essays displayed the author's very considerable literary gifts, but were 'popular' and, to some extent, 'amateurish'. Thompson's passion for learning for himself and his belief in the direct method of bringing personal experience to bear on academic pursuits are perhaps more evident in these early works than in his later and more accomplished

[1] He did not resign his orders, out of consideration for his mother's feelings.

studies, though he did not abandon and made no attempt to conceal this bias, when his rapidly expanding scholarship made this approach less necessary.[1]

In 1929 there also appeared *Leaders of the French Revolution*—his first work in a field that he was to cultivate intensively later and in a genre well suited to his imaginative insight into character. These biographical sketches were hardly more than *vignettes* and contained numerous errors of fact which indicated that Thompson's grasp of French revolutionary history was, as yet, far from secure. The book is, nevertheless, interesting as Thompson's initial experiment in what he called 'the method of history by personal interview', an approach which he was gradually to perfect and to which he remained faithful throughout his working career as an historian.

In 1931 his election to a university lecturership in French History enabled him to concentrate his attention on the revolutionary period and shortly afterwards an added inducement to do so was the restoration to the Oxford history syllabus of a Special Subject on the French Revolution. For this purpose in 1933 he produced and edited a most useful collection of printed official documents covering the period 1789–94, derived mainly from Buchez and Roux's *Histoire parlementaire*. By this time he was corresponding with Professor Georges Lefebvre of the University of Strasbourg—who was shortly to succeed Mathiez in the chair of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne. Lefebvre, who was glad to welcome this latest English recruit to revolutionary studies, gave Thompson every encouragement to devote himself to research in this chosen field.[2] It was possibly as a result of this contact that Thompson wrote for the main French historical journal concerned with the subject one of his all too rare learned articles—on the organization of the Committee of Public Safety.[3] This was followed, in 1934, by a scholarly investigation of the problems presented by Jean-

[1] In recommending this empirical approach in his preface to the *Historical Geography*, Thompson indicates how he himself had proceeded: 'Every time you plan a bicycle ride on the map "to avoid the hills"; every time you steer your way, by map and compass, through a mountain mist; every time you try to visualize from the map, a district you are visiting for the first time, you are being introduced to the historical geography of Europe.'

[2] A letter from Lefebvre dated 1 Jan. 1932 in answer to one from Thompson of 25 Dec. 1931 seems to indicate the beginning of what was to become a real personal friendship.

[3] 'L'organisation du travail du Comité de salut public', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (1934), pp. 454–60.

Paul Marat's residence in England between 1767 and 1777 and a selection of Napoleon I's letters, which Thompson translated and edited.[1] His main achievement in these years, however, was a biography of Robespierre published in 1935 in two volumes—a work which revealed for the first time the author's masterly command of the original printed sources and of the historiography of Robespierre studies. The subject was well chosen, since Robespierre's career epitomized the whole history of the revolution and because Thompson could bring to an assessment of the statesman an understanding less committed than that of Mathiez and more sympathetic than that of Aulard. The result was a masterpiece, which still holds the field as 'the best life of Robespierre in any language'.[2] Thompson was also now reviewing regularly works on the revolutionary and Napoleonic period for the *English Historical Review* and by the time of his retirement from his active work as a college tutor at Magdalen at the age of sixty, in 1938, he had established his reputation as the leading English authority on the revolution.

During the inter-war years Thompson had also given yeoman service to his college in various administrative offices, first as Home Bursar, between 1920 and 1927, and then as Vice-President, from 1935 to 1937. He had proved himself a discerning and much appreciated examiner in the Final Honours School of History and had served as external examiner in Part II of the Cambridge History Tripos. Above all, however, he had found contentment and peace of mind in his happy home life in north Oxford, in his frequent continental holidays, and in his various hobbies. In many respects he was an ideal college tutor—unsparing in his attentions to his pupils, modest, unassuming, patient, and understanding. It is not surprising that he inspired a very real affection and devotion in his pupils who valued his human qualities, even more than his scholarship. One of these who followed him into academic life writes as follows:

I find it very difficult to analyse the nature of the impression that J. M. Thompson made on me. The impression itself was real enough

[1] 'Le Maître, alias Mara', *English Historical Review*, xlix (1934), pp. 55–73. One of these problems was whether Marat had at one time been on the staff of Dissenting Academy at Warrington. After an exhaustive examination of the available evidence, Thompson reached the Scottish verdict of 'not proven', though for him the probability was strong. Recently this fact has been established—see *Manchester Guardian*, article on 'Warrington—an origin of new traditions in Education', 19 Oct. 1957.

[2] A. J. P. Taylor, 'Obituary Appreciation', *History Today*.

and not the sort of thing that one forgets. Going to a tutorial in his home had a kind of excitement that no other tutorial ever generated. He always appeared as a guide into another world—not a guide who pointed out the approved sights and the recognised emotions, but a man who had the key to locked doors which he opened for your benefit without intruding his own personality into your enjoyment of the secret rooms.

I suppose the secret lay in the fact that he could make the revolutionary world as real as surrounding North Oxford. Its characters were real people for him—he could illustrate an episode in a man's career by a casual reference to his upbringing and early life that made a living person out of a revolutionary figure.

One felt that all this was real for J. M. T. and that it mattered. Without a hint of ostentatious erudition on his part, one felt that he had an infinite reserve of knowledge about the Revolution, which he could summon to mind as effortlessly and as colourfully as though he had been talking of his own childhood. He had the charming habit of reading your essays to you. When you became aware that you had written something peculiarly silly, he would pause for a moment, produce a brilliant defence of your point of view, say, 'Ah, yes, I see what you mean' and go on to the next point.

After I left Oxford I was always aware that his advice and help were at my disposal. Alone of all my tutors he gave me the impression of being, in his eyes, an individual rather than a representative of a rapidly receding university generation. It was only after I had begun original work on the Revolution myself that I really came to appreciate the intense humanity of his scholarship, but the humanity of the man himself was unmistakable after the shortest acquaintance with him.[1]

In the eighteen years that were left to him after his retirement in 1938 Thompson enjoyed, despite the trials and privations of the Second World War on the home front, and despite serious illness after 1945, an Indian summer of intellectual rejuvenation. The challenge offered to the values of Western civilization by the Nazi menace provoked in him, at a time of life when most men are content to leave the going to the younger generation, a response, which brought to the surface and crystallized all that was finest in his shy and reticent nature. Whereas in the First World War he had seemed to lose his moorings, during the second German war he found firm spiritual anchorage and rode out the storm as a civilian with confidence and zest. It was in these years that he gave his time and perseverance unstintingly to the local government of Oxford as Trustee and Convener of the Preservation Trust (1938–55), that he enlisted and served with distinction

[1] I am indebted for this appreciation to Dr. N. Hampson, of the University of Manchester, who was one of Thompson's pupils at University College, Oxford.

in the Oxford Special Constabulary (1939–44), resumed his tutoring to help University College, and garnered the finest fruits of his historical learning.[1] His sensibility seems to have been sharpened by the stark moral issues of the war until it flowered with true poetic feeling. His *Apologia* (1940), or versified reminiscences, it is true, were written to redeem a promise given to his colleagues at Magdalen, on his retirement, but his *Collected Verse, 1939–1946*, published originally in the *Oxford Magazine* and dedicated to his wife, gave the true measure of his poetic gifts. Some of the verses dealt with the contemporary scene in wartime Oxford, some with mountaineering in Wales (always one of his passions), and others, and the finest, with the larger problems of human doubt and destiny. One of his friends—an experienced and sensitive critic—considers that some of the latter, particularly 'The Choice', 'The Cage', and 'Elsfield' are likely to stand the test of time. It was characteristic of their author that he regarded this activity as mere rhyming, but some of his 'verses' in their philosophic content and the felicity of their expression rank as fine contemporary poetry.

In two other respects also Thompson's intellectual achievement in these last years was impressive. From May 1945 to December 1947 he was editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, and when a second coronary thrombosis forced him to relinquish this task, he continued as review editor until April 1956. As editor he resumed the role which he had played in university politics before 1914 and energetically used the *Magazine*, not merely as a 'forum of opinion', but as a forcing-house for the formulation of policy in the reform of university institutions and legislative procedure in Congregation. He himself had done a great deal of reviewing for the *Magazine* before he became editor, and not merely of historical works. Some of his longer literary articles, particularly one on 'Shaw's Prefaces' (30 November 1950), were outstanding pieces of literary criticism.[2]

[1] An excerpt from the records of the Preservation Trust reads: 'Mr. Thompson played a great part in persuading his fellow Trustees to recognise the value to the city of South Park, which was purchased with the help financially of the Pilgrim Trust and David and Joanna Randall McIver. Without this stimulus, there is likelihood that this beauty spot of some 56 acres would never have been preserved for the benefit of the citizens. In similar matters of preservation, at Boar's Hill, Shotover, and elsewhere, he took an active part, and to the last maintained his interest and keen concern in the future of Oxford.' In 1942 Thompson was presented with the Special Constabulary Medal for meritorious service.

[2] One of his Oxford friends, in a private letter to Thompson (28 Nov. 1949),

After he had retired Thompson's productivity as an historian continued unchecked, and brought him the recognition both at home and abroad which it so thoroughly merited.[1] The year 1943 saw the publication of his general history of the French Revolution, which was immediately recognized for what it was, and is likely long to remain, the best standard history of the subject in English.[2] A biography of Napoleon I, based mainly on the original printed correspondence, appeared in 1951, and two years before his death Thompson crowned his life work in French history with a first-rate study of Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire. This achievement is all the more remarkable in that he did little or no original work in the French archives and rarely visited Paris. He was not particularly interested in diplomatic history, and sometimes showed impatience with the duller aspects of financial or economic history, though he kept fully abreast of the latest French researches in these fields. Where he excelled was in the vivid presentation of the larger historical settings, in the psychological interpretations of motive, in ironic judgement on persons and policy, and in the real grasp of the limiting factors governing the exercise of statesmanship. It was these qualities combined with real literary craftsmanship, which gave distinction and lasting value to his historical writing. One of his colleagues at Magdalen has said of him with justice: 'Taking him all round, in scholarship, in integrity, in achievement, Thompson will stand comparison with any historian of the age.'[3]

Few men of our time have possessed so many gifts and talents as Thompson. A natural athlete with a fine physique and presence, he played most out-door games with ease and enjoyment in youth and squash when over sixty. He was a good rock-climber but not a skilled mountaineer. Throughout his life he was a connoisseur of good music and the drama, loved birds and mountain scenery, and in retirement showed himself a romantic, humorous, and ironic poet, a superb literary critic, and a jealous custodian of Oxford's natural and architectural beauties. Not all

gave it as his opinion that: 'if the Mag. appeared all the year round, published in London, I think it would be (thanks mainly to you) the best literary journal going. None of these London papers has reviews so competent and well written.'

[1] In 1944 Thompson was elected by Magdalen to an Honorary Fellowship and in 1947 to an ordinary Fellowship of the British Academy.

[2] Shortly afterwards he presented the bulk of his library on the French revolutionary and Napoleonic period to the Bodleian Library.

[3] A. J. P. Taylor in an obituary appreciation of Thompson in *History Today*.

his friends, and few of his fellow historians, knew that he could paint in water-colour with a sureness of touch and delicacy of feeling worthy of a Rowlandson.[1] The final impression of Thompson, however, is not that of the distinguished historian which he undoubtedly was, nor of the refinement of his mind and manner, though he was a true Wykehamist in that respect, but rather what remains in the memory is his quiet firmness of character and the unshakable integrity of his behaviour. His career had been broken or interrupted more than once, but he never complained. As a theologian he had encountered on the part of his critics misunderstanding and even misrepresentation, but he endured this with his usual dignity and never cast himself, as some of his sympathizers did, for the role of martyr to religious obscurantism. Most of his friends and associates had won greater prizes in life than he did, but he never resented this, for he himself had never thought of success for its own sake. General recognition of his scholarship had only come to him after his retirement, but the Honorary Fellowship of Magdalen and his Fellowship of the British Academy were distinctions which he greatly valued. True humility of spirit, real generosity to others, fearless independence of thought and patient acceptance of what life brought him in the way of trials and disappointments made him a man whom all respected and whom his friends and pupils will long remember with admiration and affection. His fortitude in his last illness was maintained to the end, which came on 8 October 1956.[2]

He had written his own *Epitaph* in his *Collected Verses*, but few would accept it as doing him justice. Christian creeds he had abandoned, but he had his own creed from which he never deviated.

—Life
Was meant for living, man was born for strife;
His hands were made to grasp, his feet to climb.
His senses, that can measure space and time,

[1] He never attempted ambitious landscapes, but his thumb-nail sketches and impressions in his holiday diaries and journals are gems of their kind. Between 1919 and 1930 Thompson assisted the 'Skipper' in painting almost all of the sets for the Dragon School annual performances of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas.

[2] My thanks are due for much patient assistance in the preparation of this memoir, and for the loan of her late husband's diaries, letters, and papers, to Mrs. M. Thompson and, for his advice and guidance, to Professor G. R. Driver, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

His memory and imagining, are tools
Of finest workmanship, not fit for fools
To put aside with indolent excuses,
Or damage with dull imitation uses,
But to experiment, invent, explore,
Having some light, and always seeking more.
All things are free: any taboo is treason
To a truth-seeker who has tasted reason:
He won't draw back, diverted from his mission,
Because some Church has posted 'No admission';
He scorns preserves, and knows no private road;
There is no trespassing, when truth's abroad.[1]

A. GOODWIN

[1] For 'An Epitaph' see *Collected Verses*, pp. 157–8. The final quotation is from *My Apologia*, p. 110.