EDWARD THOMPSON *Charles A. Noble*

Edward Arthur Thompson
1914–1994

I

EDWARD THOMPSON, classicist and ancient historian, was a pioneer in the study of Late Antiquity. The second half of the twentieth century, a period of huge expansion in academic activity, was also a time during which a growing number among students of history, of literature, thought and culture, especially in Britain, came to devote their attention to the post-classical period of the Roman world. Thompson was among the first of these. His contribution to the development of the subject has been considerable.

He was born in 1914 into an Irish family living at the time in Waterford. His father, Robert, was the son of a weaver. Before him, a great-grandfather had been a joiner, a craft which was still carried on in the family by an uncle and may have aroused Edward's lifelong interest in furniture. His mother, Margaret (née Murison) was of Scottish descent. Her parents had settled in Ireland, where her father had come to manage an estate of the Earl of Ormonde in Co. Kilkenny. As a young man Robert had moved to Dublin and eventually became a civil servant in Waterford, working in the administration of the National Health Insurance scheme introduced by Lloyd George. In 1922 he was transferred to Dublin where the family moved and continued to live. The family tradition was rigidly Presbyterian; they were not convinced that it was permissible to accompany hymns on the piano on the Sabbath. Edward's later liking for good food and drink (he wished his ashes to be scattered

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in the Liffey, so that, he said, he might end up in a glass of his favourite drink) was not acquired through his early upbringing.

Thompson learnt to read only at the age of eight, taught by his cousin during a summer vacation. Little is known of his school career. He must have flourished and done well at the High School, Dublin, with which he retained links sufficient to make him send a copy of his book on the Huns in 1948 to its then Headmaster, Dr John Bennet, who thanked him for it appreciatively, looking forward to reading it 'during the holidays'. Thompson subsequently maintained that at school he was chosen to specialise in Classics by chance: the Headmaster came into the classroom and reading from a list, called out names: 'the following boys will specialise in Classics: you . . ., you . . ., you . . .', pointing to each, among them to Thompson.

He was the first member of the family to enter higher education. It is not clear what decided his father to send Edward to Trinity College, Dublin. If it was the hope that he might enter the Presbyterian ministry, that hope was to be disappointed: his son turned sharply against the religious views and the puritanical traditions of his parents, while retaining a lifelong gratitude to them, unaffected by his rejection of their religion. He entered Trinity College with a Sizarship—a distinction he shared, as he always liked to point out, with Jonathan Swift—and graduated with First Class Honours in Classics in 1936. H. W. Parke's lively and interesting classes had aroused Thompson's interest in Ancient History. Parke had written a major work on Greek mercenaries and was an authority on oracles. Thompson continued working at Trinity for the degree of B.Litt. under his supervision, on the Arcadian League—a subject presumably suggested to him by Parke.

Thompson spent the academic year 1937–8 in Berlin, as an Exchange Student. It is not known what the development of his academic interests owed to his experience during this year; in other ways, however, the year proved to be of lasting importance. It helped Thompson to widen his outlook and to distance himself from the insular culture associated with his Irish presbyterian family background. Even more important, perhaps, was the first-hand experience he gained of Nazi militarism and brutality; he always recalled the horror of witnessing a Nazi mob smashing up a jeweller's shop, from which a beautiful young girl fled, while its old white-haired owner was beaten up by brown-shirted thugs. The de-romanticised view of the Germanic tribes which was to become so important a feature of Thompson's work must surely have been influenced by this experience. The nationalist, militarist, and racial view of early German tribes as the direct ancestors of modern Germans had a long history, by no means all

disreputable; but it played a central part in Nazi ideology. Thompson's approach to the history of the early Germans must, at least in part, have owed something to his reaction to what he had witnessed in Berlin.

Soon after his return from Germany he sent a paper (on the Arcadians in the fourth century BC) resulting from his work for the B.Litt. for publication in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, in 1940, just as the bombing of London was starting. In 1951 he received an answer from its Editor, which began 'Thank you for the article which you sent us eleven years ago'. He had published several short papers on various topics of Greek history, but by this time, he had lost interest in the subject, and withdrew it. His interests had taken a different direction. The Latin Prose Unseen set in the examination Thompson took for a Fellowship of Trinity College was a passage from the fourth-century Latin historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, describing the manners of the fourth-century Roman aristocracy. Its extraordinary liveliness—and, perhaps, the sharply critical attitude displayed towards its subject—made a powerful impression on Thompson, and gave a new turn to his interests. Henceforward all his work was to centre on the later Roman Empire. Though failing to get the Fellowship for which he had competed, he was appointed as Lecturer in Classics for a year, and in the event, when this was renewed—albeit at a reduced salary—Thompson stayed on at Trinity College for another year. When this appointment expired in the summer of 1941 there were no suitable openings on any visible horizon. Thompson agreed with a fellow-graduate (R. J. Harvey) that if no academic appointment came their way by the end of the year, they would both enlist in the British Army. It was at this low point of his career that Ben Farrington, Professor of Classics at Swansea, asked Trinity College to send him someone who could teach Greek; all his staff had been called up. Somehow Thompson was chosen, and went.

Thompson's association with Farrington was to be one of the most decisive influences he underwent. Farrington, recently widowed, invited Thompson to share his house in order to avoid having someone else billeted on him. The offer was gratefully accepted. Thompson found Farrington's company agreeable and his conversation fascinating; the arrangement lasted until Farrington's re-marriage. The two men became very close friends. Farrington's avowed Marxism appealed to Thompson, whose revulsion from Nazism and turning away from the Christianity of his family combined to make him receptive to the Marxism very widespread among young intellectuals in the 1930s. Not long before he had been introduced by a cousin to a young Marxist poet, Roger Roughton

(who committed suicide in 1941), who greatly impressed both the young men. Thompson joined the Communist Party and remained a member until the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Though remaining passionately interested in politics, he was to take no further active part in political life. Of Marxist literature it was Friedrich Engels's book, *The origin of the family, private property and the state* that made the deepest impression on his mind. Thompson always looked back on his time in Swansea as a happy time during which he learned most.

At the end of the War Thompson was appointed to a lectureship in Classics at King's College, London. Here he was a colleague of the distinguished and already well-known Byzantinist Norman Baynes. Despite their very different views on religion and politics, they got on well, and Thompson received much help from Baynes. Thompson used to recall an occasion when they met in wartime London (they must have met before his appointment at King's) to discuss his work on Ammianus. They had just parted in a blacked-out Piccadilly, when Baynes's disembodied voice came reverberating from the dark and the distance: 'Learn Armenian, Thompson, learn Armenian'—a command he ruefully confessed he failed to obey. It was while at King's that Thompson met his first wife, Thelma Phelps, with whom he had two children. The marriage failed and they separated in 1958. In 1964 he married Hazel Casken, with whom he had a daughter and lived happily until his death.

In 1948 Thompson was appointed to the Chair of Classics at Nottingham. The College had just received (20 August 1948) its Charter as a university, and its first Vice-Chancellor (until 1965), Bertrand Hallward, was also a Classicist by training. The first fifteen years or so of Thompson's time in Nottingham was the period of the new university's development as an independent academic institution. Thompson was its first Professor of Classics and until his retirement in 1979 Head of the Department of Classics, which he had a decisive part in shaping, at a time when it was substantially enlarged. With the collaboration of a group of long-serving colleagues, including W. Chalmers, Harold Mattingly, G. R. Watson, Mollie Whittaker, and later A. H. Sommerstein, and J. W. Rich, the department became a respectable middle-sized Classics department. It provided a traditional diet of Greek and Latin language and literature, with Ancient History. Archaeology remained under its wing until the seventies. Thompson ran his department more by friendship than by anything that could be called administration. He took his share in teaching the major classical authors, Homer, Virgil, Thucydides, and Tacitus. His warm humanity, genial good humour and ready wit made him a valued

colleague and his pupils enjoyed his terse, lucid lectures and the classes, always to the point, never over-long.

As Dean of the Faculty of Arts in the mid-1950s Thompson was involved in running a fast developing faculty at that time not yet overshadowed by scientific, medical, or business schools. A former Registrar, Alfred Plumb, comments: 'It would be hard to imagine anyone more quiet, more calm, more equable, less given to excitement than Edward. . . . I remember him as unassumingly efficient, always on time, never flustered or agitated. I don't think I ever saw him angry or heard him raise his voice. If he was annoyed or irritated about anything, he might show it with a dry, ironic witticism in his usual even, emotionless Irish brogue.' He recalls Thompson asking at an Arts Faculty Examiners' Board, too generously passing candidates whose marks fell below the pass-mark: 'How many papers does a candidate have to fail in order to pass the examination?' Administration, either of the faculty or of his department, were not among Thompson's greatest interests or his highest priorities. He is said to have presided over the shortest meeting of the Arts Faculty Board ever held. I recall being accompanied by Thompson to the first meeting of the University Senate I attended. Thompson had undertaken to initiate me into the Senate business; after some forty minutes he left, muttering 'I find a little of this goes a long way.' Nevertheless, he could be an excellent chairman, aided, perhaps, by his love of brevity in business proceedings. He was the first Chairman of the Editorial Board of *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, founded by Lewis Thorpe in 1957. He continued in this office until his retirement in 1979, and published many of his papers in the journal. Their regular appearance in its pages contributed to the rapid establishment of its reputation as far more than a house journal.

He greatly enjoyed his two spells in the USA as Visiting Professor, in the Universities of Wisconsin and of Michigan respectively; but for his wife's reluctance he might well have stayed in the USA. In 1964 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, the first member of his University to be so honoured. He succeeded A. H. M. Jones on his death as Chairman of the Academy's committee supervising the project of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*.

II

Thompson's first book, *The historical work of Ammianus Marcellinus*, was published in 1947. In the Preface, he mentioned the central problem

anyone writing in this field in the English-speaking world inevitably encountered: 'students of the fourth century AD are not as numerous as they might be, so that a newcomer to this field is largely deprived of the assistance of his friends and colleagues'.[1] Several of his reviewers also drew attention to the under-cultivation of the field. Thus Harold Mattingly, reviewing the book in the leading English journal of ancient history, observed: 'The main obstacle to the fame of Ammianus Marcellinus has been the fact that he lived in the wrong period, far removed from the set periods of our University courses and frequented now only by a handful of modern students.'[2] Late Antiquity was, quite simply, not on the standard maps of academic study. Since Mommsen's time it had never quite disappeared from the scene in Germany; thanks to the renown of, among others, Wilamowitz, Seeck, Harnack, and Schwartz, Late Antiquity kept a place within the spectrum of the study of Ancient history. In France, Henri-Irénée Marrou had published his *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* in 1938, which, republished together with his *Retractatio* in 1949, did more than any other work to stimulate scholarly interest in Late Antiquity. In Britain, before the appearance of Thompson's book, Late Antiquity had a marginal place in historical studies. Apart from Baynes's work in what he liked to call 'East Roman' rather than 'Byzantine' history, Late Antiquity had been the object of sustained study only in the work of J. B. Bury. Though encompassed in wider studies such as A. H. M. Jones's of the cities of the Eastern Empire, it had not become a recognisable area of mainstream scholarship. By the time of Thompson's death, it had become almost a 'cottage industry', attracting a considerable number of the ablest scholars, and popular with graduate and undergraduate students both sides of the Atlantic.

If this book was of considerable importance in beginning to re-direct interest towards Late Antiquity, it also made a decisive contribution to the study of Ammianus. It has been very largely responsible for turning interest away from the sterile hunt for sources, which dominated most of the older research. The insistence that Ammianus's history was based very largely on his own experience and enquiries was fundamental. For some forty years Thompson's book remained the best general account of Ammianus's work and has continued to stimulate new work on him. Though he would certainly not have gone as far as some more recent

[1] *The historical work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (1947), vii. Baynes—thanked for his help, both here and in later books—was one of the few exceptions.
[2] *J. Roman St*., lxii (1948), 84–6, at 84.

critics who have preferred to see Ammianus's work as imaginative literature, Thompson's Ammianus book can certainly not be accused of taking an uncritical approach to his work. The book also displays some of the qualities that were to distinguish all Thompson's writings. It is written in a pithily direct, easily readable and forceful English, not without splashes of irony. It also contains many fine examples of the meticulously careful detective work that was to become a feature of all Thompson's writings: the construction of as coherent a narrative as the evidence permitted, based on searching attention to what the text says, what it does not say, what it implies or presupposes, and what it leaves in doubt or in impenetrable darkness.

Thompson's second book, *A history of Attila and the Huns*, grew out of the work he had done on Ammianus, and was published soon after.[3] Its essential core is an account of the Huns in contact with the Roman world in the later fourth century and the first half of the fifth; it touches on their origins and pre-history only lightly. Some important work published subsequently (summarised by Dr Peter Heather in his valuable Afterword to the posthumously published revised edition of the book) has suggested qualifications to some of Thompson's judgements, but has left the central core of his book largely intact, as still the best full account of Huns while in contact with the Empire. Thompson was, of course, very conscious of the need for caution in relying on even as honest and careful a historian as Ammianus, and well aware of the dangers of mistaking literary *topoi* for factual information. He discussed the problem carefully, especially in relation to Ammianus's famous ethnographic account of the Huns. Nevertheless, Thompson's description of the structure of Hun society has been criticised for relying unduly on the clichés of Roman ethnographic literature. Even his critics, however, would accept his central contention, that Hunnic society underwent drastic change during the eighty years of its contact with the Empire, and mainly as a result of it. Its original structure may have been less egalitarian than Thompson thought, but there is no doubt that it underwent considerable differentiation in rank, power, and wealth in the course of the few decades of its diplomatic and military relations with the Roman Empire. Even though he thought the Marxist model somewhat rigid and schematic, Thompson's account of this development displays his insight into the

[3] Oxford, 1948. Reprinted, revised and with an Afterword by Peter Heather as *The Huns* in the series *The peoples of Europe* (Oxford, 1996). In my assessment of the book I have drawn gratefully on Dr Heather's Afterword.

dynamics of social change, shaped by the underlying influence of Engels's *Origins of the family*. Those with an eye to such things will not find it hard to detect Marxist ideology at work, in directing Thompson's interest towards some of the subjects to which he devoted his attention in the 1950s: peasant revolts, slavery, the evolution of Germanic societies, the nature of warfare and military relations between Roman and Barbarian. But the momentum of his first two books would naturally have carried Thompson towards these areas.

It is thus not difficult to see why the work of the Roman inventor and reformer who wrote the treatise *De rebus bellicis*, should have fascinated Thompson. It is likely that Farrington's influence helped to turn his attention towards the anonymous author who, among other things, proposed to save the emperor money through technical inventions. Thompson edited and translated the work and published it with an Introduction in 1951.[4] This helped to put the work on the map, bringing it to the attention especially of English historians. Important work in subsequent studies has built on the foundations laid by Thompson.[5]

At the same time the early history of the Germanic tribes and the history of the provinces in which they settled, was becoming the major field towards which Thompson's interests were turning, by a kind of natural progression, after the completion of his work on Ammianus and on the Huns. Large-scale research in this field too, as in Late Antiquity in general, had been scarce in English-language scholarship; Ludwig Schmitt's extensive work in Germany in the 1930s had been heavily politico-military in orientation. Problems about the genesis of tribal and national identities which were to preoccupy a subsequent generation of scholars had not yet arisen for Thompson. He turned to their investigation as one would study the society of any historical people, without heavy ideological ballast. Engels's model of social development was to play an unobtrusive but important part in shaping his account of early Germanic societies. *The early Germans*, published in 1965, is largely concerned with the changing structure of Germanic society between the reports that we have from Julius Caesar in the first century BC, and Tacitus, in the first century AD. Thompson traces the growth of differences in wealth and power between the leading men and the rank and file of the

[4] *A Roman reformer and inventor. Being a new text of the treatise* De rebus bellicis *with a translation and Introduction* (Oxford, 1952; reprinted, 1979).

[5] One testimony: *Aspects of the* De rebus bellicis. *Papers presented to Professor E. A. Thompson*. Ed. M. W. C. Hassall (British Archaeological Reports. International Series, 63, 1979).

warriors with the consequent emergence of a tribal nobility with retinues (*comitatus*) and the shift in the location of political authority and military leadership. He attributed the emergence of a much less egalitarian type of social structure in large part to the impact of Roman diplomacy and subsidies on Germanic groups. The interests of the new ruling classes came to dominate their relations to Rome, to whose support they looked to guarantee the social position they claimed for themselves. Relations with the Roman government were thus among the dominating issues in the internal, as well as the external, affairs of many Germanic peoples.

The theme of the relations between Romans and barbarians retained its fascination for Thompson throughout its three different phases: the first, the period during which the Germanic peoples were outside the Roman frontiers, as the 'free Germans' not subject to Roman authority, had been dealt with mainly in *The early Germans*. The second, after the entry of the Germans into imperial territory and in the course of their settlement under arrangements authorised by the Roman government, shifted Thompson's attention to a later time, the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries, the time of Ammianus Marcellinus, Attila, and after, where he was already well at home. In a series of studies, some of them re-published in book form as *The Visigoths in the time of Ulfila* (Oxford, 1966), others in *Romans and barbarians. The decline of the Western Empire* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1982), Thompson pursued the study of the relationships between barbarians and the Romans among whom they lived and over whom their rulers were to assume authority, and their effect in transforming the structure of barbarian society. An outstanding paper, 'The Visigoths from Fritigern to Euric'[6] rapidly became a classic study of the development of a Germanic people in the course of its settlement in Roman territory, of the nature of its relations with Roman authority, and of the conflicts generated within the nation in consequence of the ways in which these relations affected its social structure. As Thompson wrote here: 'The interests of the leaders [in this case, among the Visigoths] lay in maintaining Roman society and in improving their own position within it, whereas the aim of the rank and file of their followers and their allies was to overthrow Roman society altogether.'[7] In his interpretation, the struggles within the Visigothic kingdom tended to reflect these conflicting interests; and he made a strong case for a similar analysis of the Ostrogothic regime in Italy.

[6] Originally in *Historia*, 12 (1963), 105–26; reprinted in *Romans and barbarians*, 38–57.
[7] *Romans and barbarians*, 42.

This remained a dominant theme of Thompson's work. Naturally, it was also an important thread in his studies of Roman–barbarian relations in their third phase, after the consolidation of Germanic settlements and in the course of their emergence as independent kingdoms within formerly Roman provinces. A further series of studies, in the main gathered in *Romans and barbarians*, broadened out into a full-scale study of the history, society, politics, law, institutions, and religion of the Visigothic kingdom, culminating in the substantial book *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford, 1969). This was the first major study of Visigothic Spain in English, using the laws to reconstruct the organisation of the society. In many ways it remains unsurpassed.

Thompson always recognised that religion was an important facet of the relations between Romans and barbarians in all their phases. He devoted a good deal of his attention to the investigation of the conversion of the Germanic peoples to Christianity, to their Christianisation and to the persistence of the division between Germanic Arian Christianity face to face with the Catholic orthodoxy of the Roman population. It was as a part of this larger web of the relationships between two societies, either closely linked geographically or co-existent within the same territory but culturally distinct, that Thompson treated the religious history of Roman and barbarian. As a reviewer of *The Visigoths in the time of Ulfila* wrote: 'The centre of interest in this book is not Ulfila: it is Visigothic society on the eve of its entry into the Roman Empire. Ulfila emerges not a whit diminished in stature. But his activity took place inside *Romania*.'[8] Not only was Gothic Arianism shaped by the Arianism still strongly established as a respectable option among Christians living within the Roman frontiers, notably in the Danubian provinces; but, as Thompson argued compellingly, the Goths adopted their Christianity in the course of their settlement within Roman territory and as a result of the weakening of ancient social bonds and ritual traditions consequent on their detribalisation. Their continued adherence to an Arian form of Christianity after their settlement within Roman provinces must be seen as part of their response to an inhospitable society in which religion came to harden the barriers that separated Roman and barbarian. Naturally, in *The Goths in Spain* Thompson interpreted the conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism late in the sixth century within the general context of their growing romanisation. Some of his views have been criticised for giving too little weight 'to religion as an influence on men's actions' and for

[8] Peter Brown in *History*, 54 (1969), 79–80, at 79.

underestimating 'the sway of religious beliefs over sixth-century minds',[9] but the book has nevertheless established itself as an extremely useful synthesis.

Although the narrative sources, legal texts, and the *Acta* of ecclesiastical councils are very limited even for this period, the later history of the Goths, they are abundant in comparison with the scarcity of written sources for earlier periods. Thompson's peculiar strengths as a historian came more into their own where the texts were frustratingly few and tantalisingly obscure or of a highly problematic nature. This was the case, above all, in respect of Roman Britain, its last period and its end—including figures such as St Patrick, St Germanus, and Gildas—which was the subject of sporadic papers beginning with one on St Patrick published in 1952,[10] broadening into a steady flow in the late 1970s which one of his editors described as having 'challenged assumptions and interpretations dear to students of British history',[11] until the book on St Patrick,[12] Thompson's last major publication. In this body of work he gives a new lease of life to views which the labours of archaeologists and of place-name scholars have rendered unfashionable. He does not call into question, of course, the archaeological, linguistic, and place name evidence. Although he always preferred to recall archaeologists to the evidence furnished by texts, he could not fail to take this kind of evidence explicitly into account. What he did insist on is that it be seen in the correct perspective, and that the literary evidence, if properly and critically assessed, provides such a perspective. What he challenged are the assumptions which are apt to be encouraged by too uncritical an interpretation of the constantly growing body of evidence for continuity between British and Anglo-Saxon, Roman and Germanic. In the post-Roman Britain which he describes, the instances of continuity and survival tend to become the exceptional and the isolated, when placed within the context of a region drastically disrupted by war, famine, bloodshed, and especially, the large-scale break-down of public authority, security and urban life. 'Nothing in all this contradicts the view of archaeologists who assure us that city-life continued in several places into the middle of the fifth century,' as he remarked.[13]

[9] Quoted from a review of *The Goths in Spain* by J. N. Hillgarth, in *Speculum*, 48 (1973), 591–3, at 592.

[10] 'A note on St Patrick in Gaul', *Hermathena*, 79 (1952), 22–9.

[11] David Dumville, in the 'General Editor's Foreword' to *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the end of Roman Britain* (Studies in Celtic History VI, Woodbridge, 1984), vii.

[12] *Who was St Patrick?* (Woodbridge, 1985)

[13] *St Germanus of Auxerre*, 106.

Drawing on his extensive knowledge of the conditions in other Roman provinces, Thompson was able to place the evidence from Britain into a wider context. He stressed the absence in Britain of a continuing framework of Roman order such as could secure a controlled settlement, carried out in accordance with established procedures. Thus the ever-growing body of evidence for continuity of settlement, for the survival of pockets of urban life and for isolated Christian communities in pagan Saxon Britain could never, in his view, disguise the fundamental rupture between Roman and Germanic Britain. Scepticism about the evidence provided by Gildas should not deter us from pondering the salutary reminder of Thompson's closing words in his book on St Germanus: 'The most frightening feature in the picture drawn by Gildas is not the destruction of city-life in Britain or the break-up of the Imperial system with its guarantee of peaceful life, but rather the destruction of knowledge itself. Knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men's minds.'[14]

Even if he occasionally seems to read too much out of too little, Thompson's work on Gildas, Germanus, and Patrick, more even than his other writings, shows the power of his close reading of the texts, his ability to bring fresh eyes to look on problems and fresh air to conventional views. It has, however, also been open to the reproach that it fails to take account of the nature of the particular texts, especially hagiographical texts—for which he had no feeling—and that he sometimes used these in ways which they cannot sustain. As a reviewer of his *Who was St Patrick?* remarked, 'Thompson's strengths lie in asking basic questions about down-to-earth matters, rather than in the sphere of intellectual history. Unfortunately this leads not just to a neglect of such subjects as Patrick's spirituality, and how he would have understood his mission to the Irish. . . . It also leads to a rather simplistic approach to written sources.'[15] The obverse of his determination to get the last ounce of information out of exiguous and often recalcitrant texts was a frequent disregard for nuances and ambiguities; and a certain brusqueness in rejecting texts he regarded as late or unreliable, without troubling himself with patient analysis of what valid traditions they might contain. His severe and exclusive concentration on extracting reliable factual information from the texts limited the range of his interests. Much that the nature

[14] *St Germanus of Auxerre*, 115.

[15] Published in 1985. Review by Clare Stancliffe, in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 31 (1987) 125–32, quoted from p. 106.

of the sources he was using would have provided rich material to explore was, in consequence, often left in the shadows.

As part of the narrative of Roman–barbarian relations, the history of Christianisation was, of course, an essential constituent of the cluster of themes to which Thompson devoted his attention. In other respects religious or cultural history failed to engage his curiosity. He was not touched by the wave of interest in religious and cultural history which accompanied, in many quarters, the revival of interest in the study of Late Antiquity. In an important and much-quoted paper on 'Christianity and the Northern barbarians'[16] he showed that until late in the sixth century there was an almost complete lack of concern among Roman bishops for the evangelisation of their Germanic neighbours. It is entirely characteristic of Thompson that having established this, he did not go on to enquire into the religious, cultural, and ideological reasons for this lack of missionary enterprise. Similarly, the *Life* of St Germanus by Constantius, which Thompson used so effectively to reconstruct a coherent account of conditions at the end of Roman Britain, also provides evidence for the nature of Pelagianism and of orthodoxy, both in Britain and in continental Europe; but these Thompson left unexplored. These are the characteristic limitations of his interests and the consequence of his way with texts.

Thompson was not reluctant to embrace views which he knew would be controversial. Controversy, however, was never his aim. Although he did not refrain from good natured but often hard-hitting criticism of others' views, he was always delightfully detached from his own conclusions and opinions. His total lack of any 'defensive sensitivity with regard to his own work'[17] struck and charmed many of those who crossed swords with him. He went where the texts took him, and had no stake in the conclusions he reached. The Marxist ideology he had embraced as a young man helped to direct his interests in certain directions and provided him with some of the intellectual tools with which he could approach the analysis of social change, but it never influenced his conclusions. In later life he came to sit ever more lightly to it.

It is not, however, the Marxist orientation that distinguished Thompson's work from that of the growing bulk of work on Late Antiquity. His most distinctive contribution lay in the determination to keep close to the texts. His comparative lack of interest in intellectual,

[16] Originally in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 1 (1957) 3–21; reprinted in *The conflict between paganism and Christianity in the fourth century*, ed. A. D. Momigliano (Oxford, 1963), 56–78.
[17] Peter Heather, in his Afterword in *The Huns*, 219.

religious, or cultural history sometimes exposed him to the risk of misunderstanding the nature of the documents, especially those of a hagiographical nature. Occasionally the reader is left with nagging doubts as to whether a text will bear the full rigour of being put to the question with something like the severity of a late Roman magistrate towards one of the *humiliores* not protected against judicial torture. Thompson's determination to get the texts to tell what happened or did not happen at a given time or place made him impatient with ambiguity, even when ambiguity was inherent in the conditions of the time. His way of working was not well suited to exploring the ambiguities of, for instance, the conditions engendered by the arrangements for settling barbarian groups in Roman provinces. The legal, social, and political conditions of *hospitium* were not designed to produce clarity in the minds of those involved; and Thompson would not tolerate confusion. His relentless quest for clarity made it difficult for him to deal with this kind of ambiguity. His great, and pioneering, contribution to the study of Late Antiquity must be sought elsewhere.

His overriding concern to discover what the texts have to tell us is refreshing in an age when the very notion of a 'text' has come to be problematic in many quarters. It has distanced Thompson not only from the critical theorists who have subjected the concept of 'text' to radical questioning, but also from much of the mainstream of the work of his fellow-historians of Late Antiquity. The decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, during which Thompson published the bulk of his work, were also the time when the study of Late Antiquity came into its own. It did so at a time when the tradition of historical studies associated with *Annales*, especially with the history of *mentalités* practised by many of its more recent adherents, left a deep imprint on much of the best work in the study of Late Antiquity. Thompson took a different turning, which led him away from the strong concentration on the intellectual, moral, and religious worlds of Late Antiquity. His work constitutes a milestone in the study of the social history of barbarian nations and their relations with Romania, and it has stimulated a mass of subsequent work. It has, moreover, provided a welcome reminder of the absolute necessity for a coherent account of events. It has helped to shape such accounts, notably for some of the areas which remain most opaque to historical unravelling. And when, on occasion, his interpretation of the texts failed to convince, it never failed to give new impetus to their study.

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The issue of *Nottingham Medieval Studies* dedicated to Thompson (see above), pp. 11–18 contains a Bibliography of Thompson's publications to 1988 compiled by J. W. Rich.