

SIR EDWARD MAUNDE THOMPSON

1840-1929

EDWARD MAUNDE THOMPSON, one of the active founders and first members of the Academy, and President from June 1907 to July 1909, was born in Jamaica on 4 May 1840. His family connexions for some generations back were with the West Indies, where his father held the post of Custos of Clarendon, Jamaica. He was sent to England for education, and was at Rugby under Goulburn and Temple from 1854 to 1859, and at University College, Oxford, from 1859 to 1861. An unfortunate change in his father's financial affairs compelled him to leave Oxford prematurely, without taking a degree, and in 1861 he obtained an appointment as an Assistant in the British Museum, to which institution the whole of his main life-work was devoted.

Thompson entered the Museum under the rule of Panizzi, and was at first employed in the Principal Librarian's office, which is concerned with the routine work of administration. An opportunity soon arose for his transfer to the Department of Manuscripts. Sir Frederic Madden, then Keeper of the Department, was inclined to magnify the difficulty of mastering the mysteries of palaeography, but Panizzi made light of them and encouraged acceptance; and in a good hour for palaeography and the Museum Thompson entered the Department. Madden himself was a good palaeographer and a hard worker, but the standard of industry in the Department, and indeed in the Museum generally, was not high. Of one member of the staff a colleague, himself even less regular and productive, wrote the following lines, which were not entirely destitute of foundation:

How doth the little busy—
Pass idly hour by hour:
Begin to work at half-past three
And work till nearly four.

There was a notable exception, however, in the person of Edward Bond, Assistant Keeper since 1854; and when in 1866 Madden retired and Bond succeeded him as Keeper, an association between him and Thompson began which was of vital importance to the Department. In 1871, after only ten years' service, Thompson was appointed Assistant Keeper; and in the same year G. F. Warner (now Sir George, and our Fellow) entered the service, to become the third member of the triumvirate which was to do so much for the science of palaeography. Meanwhile, it may be noted that in 1863 (perhaps in some discontent with the Department) Thompson had entered at the Middle Temple, and was called to the bar in 1867; but by this time he probably saw his way to useful work in the Museum and he never practised.

Thompson served his apprenticeship in two very heavy pieces of work, which gave him a wide insight into the contents of the Department. When Bond succeeded to the Keepership, the cataloguing of accessions was greatly in arrear. The last volume, published in 1864, only included the accessions up to 1847. A volume produced in 1868 brought the record up to 1853, but then the work was partially suspended in order to undertake the Herculean task of the Class Catalogue. This was in effect a Subject Catalogue of all the contents of the Department, formed by cutting up the existing catalogues of the Cottonian, Harleian, Sloane, Royal, Lansdowne, Arundel, and Additional MSS., and pasting down the entries under subject-headings in a series of large volumes. The organization of this great work was Bond's, but Thompson took a large share in its execution, which involved the re-examination of a large proportion of the manuscripts; he was in particular responsible for the sections dealing with history and with illuminated MSS. The Class Catalogue has many imperfections, for the materials of which it was composed (the old catalogues) were themselves imperfect, and different parts of the work were executed with different success; but it has provided a very

useful tool for students in the Manuscript Department, and those who made it necessarily obtained a very comprehensive knowledge of the parts of the collections with which they were concerned. Thompson's acquaintance with medieval chronicles¹ and illuminated manuscripts and his experience in dating handwritings were unquestionably acquired in this way.

The Class Catalogue being completed, the work of clearing off arrears in the cataloguing of accessions was vigorously resumed. Two stout volumes covering the period from 1854 to 1875 were produced in 1875 and 1877, and a huge index to them appeared in 1880; so that when, in 1878, Bond became Principal Librarian and Thompson succeeded him as Keeper of Manuscripts, he took over a Department in which the catalogues were up to date. Thenceforward, up to the outbreak of the Great War, quinquennial Catalogues of Additions appeared punctually within a year, or at most two, after the completion of each period, even when huge collections of papers, such as the Newcastle and Hardwicke Papers, had to be dealt with.

Meanwhile, much other work of importance had been on hand. In 1873 Bond and Thompson founded the Palaeographical Society. It was the first application on a large scale of photography to the science of palaeography. It placed before students trustworthy specimens of all the most important Greek and Latin MSS., classical and medieval, and it provided solid materials than had hitherto existed for the scientific study of handwritings. Of recent years photographic reproductions of MSS. have been greatly multiplied, and scholars such as Traube, Lindsay, Lowe, and their pupils have broadened and deepened the methods of research; but the pioneer work of the Palaeographical Society, from 1873 to 1895, continued by the

¹ Sir George Warner mentions that an admirable concise article by him on English Chronicles is buried in the *English Encyclopaedia* (Arts and Sciences Supplement, 1873), together with an equally good article on Romances by H. L. D. Ward.

New Palaeographical Society (now approaching its end) from 1903 to 1930, was of inestimable value to students. Thompson was one of the editors from the first to the last, and was revising proofs of the final part up to within a short time of his death. He had an exceptionally good eye for a manuscript and a first-rate judgement, and (as a result largely of his work for the Palaeographical Society) he made himself the best palaeographer of his day.

An early test of his quality was provided by the controversy about the date of the famous Utrecht Psalter in 1872-4. Duffus Hardy, of the Record Office, had given it as his opinion that it was as early as the sixth century; and the fact that it contained a text of the Athanasian Creed invested this opinion as to its early date with some interest. Bond and Thompson, however, maintained that it was not earlier than the late eighth or ninth century, and proved their case so conclusively that it has never since been questioned. It was the investigation of this question that impressed them with the need of published materials for comparison, and so led to the foundation of the Palaeographical Society.

In 1885 Thompson contributed the article on Palaeography to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (revised and reprinted in the eleventh edition, 1911); and this was subsequently expanded into his *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palaeography*, which was published in the International Scientific Series in 1893. It is still the best short introduction to the subject, although at the time when it was written the materials for a detailed study of Greek papyri did not exist, and the minute study of Latin minuscules and of charter hands had not been carried so far as it has been since. As a guide to the different types of Greek and Latin writing and their chronological sequence the student to-day still has nothing better on a small scale to aid him.

It will be convenient to complete here the survey of Thompson's contributions to palaeography and its kindred subject, the study of illuminated manuscripts, which, as time went on, and as photography improved, came to take

an increasingly important part in the publications of the Palaeographical and New Palaeographical Societies. In 1893-5 he was persuaded by his junior colleague and friend, Mr. A. W. Pollard, to contribute a series of articles on illuminated manuscripts to that sumptuous periodical, *Bibliographica*; and these were republished under the title of *English Illuminated Manuscripts* in 1895. He also contributed to subsequent parts articles on 'The Grotesque and Humorous in Illuminations of the Middle Ages', 'Calligraphy in the Middle Ages', and 'A Manuscript of the *Biblia Pauperum*'. After his retirement from the Museum he set himself to rewrite his *Handbook* on a larger scale, and this, lavishly supplied with facsimiles, appeared in 1912 as *An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography*. In this full use is made of the Greek papyri which since the date of the *Handbook* had added a new chapter to the history of Greek writing; and the book remains the standard work on the subject in the English language. His contributions to the study of the handwritings of the Elizabethan age will be mentioned later.

Meanwhile, in unofficial hours, Thompson was occupied with a considerable amount of historical work, which grew out of his acquaintance with manuscripts. To the Rolls Series he contributed in 1874 an edition of the anonymous *St. Alban's Chronicle* for the years 1328-88, written by a bitter opponent of John of Gaunt, and of special importance for the critical period 1376-7; and in 1889 the *Continuatio Chronicorum* of Adam Murimuth and Robert Avesbury's *De gestis mirabilibus regis Edwardi tertii*. For the Royal Society of Literature he edited the *Chronicle of Adam of Usk*, the unique manuscript of which he had discovered in the Museum at the end of a copy of Higden's *Polychronicon* (1876; 2nd ed., embodying the conclusion, discovered meanwhile in a loft at Belvoir, 1904); for the Camden Society the *Letters of Humphrey Prideaux to John Ellis, 1674-1722* (1875), and the *Correspondence of the Family of Hatton, 1601-1704* (1878); for the Hakluyt Society the

Diary of Richard Cocks, 1615-1622 (1883); and for the Henry Bradshaw Society the *Customary of the Benedictine Monasteries of St. Augustine, Canterbury, and St. Peter, Westminster* (1902). The *Chronicon* of Geoffrey Le Baker de Swynebroke was a separate publication in 1889; while he contributed several articles to *Archaeologia* and the *Burlington Magazine*, and catalogued the manuscripts in the Cathedral Library of Salisbury. Of all his historical works his edition of Geoffrey Le Baker gave him the greatest satisfaction, and it received warm commendation from so eminent an authority for the period as the late Professor Tout. His accuracy of mind and his unequalled skill in the reading of medieval manuscripts gave complete trustworthiness to his editions of texts; and if he was not a professional historian, his knowledge of medieval chronicles was both wide and deep.

Akin to and arising out of his work for the Palaeographical Society were the facsimile editions of three important manuscripts—the Utrecht Psalter (1874), the Codex Alexandrinus of the Greek Bible (1879-83), and the Laurentian manuscript of Sophocles (1885), of the last of which he was joint-editor with Sir Richard Jebb. With Sir George Warner he produced the *Catalogue of Ancient Manuscripts in the British Museum* (Greek, 1881; Latin, 1884), containing detailed accounts, with many facsimiles, of all the manuscripts earlier than the year 900.

In 1888 Thompson was appointed Principal Librarian in succession to Bond, a post which (with the added title of Director in 1898) he held for twenty-one years. Thenceforward, though (as the dates given above show) his palaeographical and historical output did not wholly cease, he was mainly occupied with administrative work. Here his industry, his accuracy, his high sense of duty, and his strength of character had full scope, and left a deep mark on the standards and traditions of the Museum. His whole heart was in the Museum; with the exception of the Academy, he did not take much part, as many Museum officers have done, in the work of learned societies with

kindred activities; and he was not fond of making speeches or appearing at public meetings. Hence his reputation was mainly confined to scholars and persons acquainted with his Museum work; but among them it was great. He was emphatically a strong administrator. He knew his own mind, and was not backward in enforcing his will. He had the full confidence of the Board of Trustees whom he served; not least of King Edward, who, as Prince of Wales, took an active interest in the affairs of the Museum. Those of his colleagues and subordinates to whom he gave his friendship and confidence were devoted to him; those with whom he failed to sympathize no doubt found him at times difficult and severe. He was a constant friend and a formidable adversary; and he did not easily change his opinions or his estimate of a man. His test was the readiness of a man to do his job and to serve the Museum, and in this respect he was a good and quick judge of character. A suspicion of self-seeking or a love of advertisement invariably repelled him; but he could be tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies if he was satisfied that they were sincere. Mr. A. W. Pollard quotes, in illustration of this characteristic, his treatment of 'that rebellious genius, Robert Proctor. When, during an epidemic of small-pox, Proctor refused to obey the order to be vaccinated (because it was an order), Thompson put it to him that he must submit, not for his own sake, but lest he should infect others. Proctor succumbed, and ever after spoke of him affectionately as 'Tommy'. And when Proctor was lost on a glacier in the Austrian Tirol and his old mother had no one to send out to make inquiries, Thompson risked (and incurred) the wrath of the Treasury by persuading the Trustees to dispatch at their expense a member of the staff who knew the district, and did all that could be done.'

This incident illustrates a feature of Thompson's character for which he did not always get sufficient credit—his real kindness of heart. He had warm sympathies with those in distress; and in private life he was genial, natural, and

hospitable, with a lively sense of humour. In his official relations he was engaged in more than one controversy; and there could be no doubt of the vigour with which he fought his fight. But his fights were never for personal ends. He was entirely devoid of the vanity which seeks for personal distinctions; and the object for which he fought was always the good administration of the Museum, never personal aggrandizement.

Personal distinctions came to him, however, naturally in due course. He was nominated C.B. in 1893, K.C.B. in 1895, I.S.O. in 1904 (shortly after the foundation of that Order), and G.C.B. on his retirement in 1909. He was a Corresponding Member of the Institut de France and of the Berlin Academy, an Officer of the Crown of Italy, and he had honorary degrees from Oxford, Durham, St. Andrews, and Manchester. Also (a compliment which he greatly valued) he became an Honorary Fellow of University College, Oxford, where his career as an undergraduate had been curtailed through no fault of his own. At Cambridge he was Sandars Reader in Bibliography in 1895-6 and 1905-6.

The official life of a Director of the British Museum is made up of a number of minor episodes, interesting and often of some importance, with a few major events. Only the latter can be briefly mentioned here. They fall into four principal categories: the structural extension of the Museum, the improvement of the status and remuneration of the staff, the popularization of the Museum in its appeal both to students and to the public, and the encouragement of research and excavations abroad.

In 1894 provision was made for the future needs of the Museum by the acquisition of the land adjoining it on the west, north, and east. For this wise forethought the credit must be divided between the Director who imagined and advocated it, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sir William Harcourt), who found the money for it, and the Duke of Bedford, who allowed the Trustees to acquire the land for

a sum (£200,000) less by one-sixth than the amount at which it had been valued thirty-five years before. The greater part of this site still remains available for future use, being occupied by the houses in Bedford Square, Bloomsbury Street, and Montague Street; but the central part of the land on the north, in Montague Place, was used for the erection of King Edward the Seventh's Galleries, which occupied the latter years of Thompson's period of office. The occasion for it was given by a bequest of £50,000 from Mr. Vincent Stuckey Lean—an example of unostentatious public service, for during his life Mr. Lean, though a constant reader, had never made known his intention of testifying so munificently to his interest in the Museum. To this sum £150,000 was added by the Government in 1903, and work on the building was begun in 1906. When Thompson retired in 1909 the skeleton of the building was approximately complete, but its furnishing was left to his successor. Thompson took the keenest interest in the plans, familiarized himself with all the details of ventilation, heating, and lighting, worked harmoniously with the architect, and skirmished vigorously with the Treasury and the Office of Works.

Another extension of the Museum accommodation was obtained by the erection in 1902 of a building at Hendon to contain newspapers and other printed material not often required. Only a small portion of the building ultimately contemplated was actually erected, but ample land was secured for further extensions (now fortunately imminent).

The welfare of the staff occupied a considerable portion of Thompson's attention, and when once he had taken the task in hand he engaged in long and arduous campaigns to secure an improvement in their remuneration. In 1898 he secured the appointment of a Treasury Committee, composed of three very eminent Civil Servants (Sir F. Mowatt, Sir E. Hamilton, and Sir G. Murray), to investigate the intellectual and scientific output of the Museum, as the result of which considerable improvements were made

in the status and pay of the higher staff. It was in this connexion that the title of Thompson's office was changed to Director and Principal Librarian. Subsequently he procured a similar reorganization of the lower staff, which had passed through all but the last formal stages at the date of his retirement. The net result of his exertions was to secure an increase of from 6 to 11 per cent. in the remuneration of those members of the staff whose salaries exceeded £250 a year, and from 20 to 25 per cent. in the case of those below that level.

In developing the educational usefulness of the Museum Thompson was carrying on work begun by his predecessor. There was a time when the Museum presented the appearance of miscellaneous collections of antiquities, often of priceless value in themselves, but with little attempt to make them intelligible or attractive to the public. Some of Thompson's most distinguished colleagues frankly were not interested in the public, and cared only to acquire fresh treasures and to gloat over them with like-minded specialists and friends. Such men did service of the first importance to scholarship and learning. Thompson, though a specialist of the first rank in his own province, as an administrator devoted himself to the interests of the public. This took the form in his time of improvements in exhibition and labelling, and in the provision of departmental guide-books, serving as illustrated handbooks of their respective subjects, which are now a well-recognized and highly valued portion of the Museum's publications. In the production of these guide-books he took a close personal interest. At the same time he stimulated the output of the detailed scientific catalogues, which are the first duty of a Museum and its most important service, in the way of publications, to scholarship.

For the increase of the Museum's possessions Thompson was always ready to encourage excavations abroad. The example had been set by the work of Layard and Rawlinson in Mesopotamia, Fellows and Newton in Asia Minor, Wood

at Ephesus, Smith and Porcher in Cyrene, to which the Museum is indebted for some of its most precious examples of ancient sculpture. Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Egypt were the regions in which excavations were conducted under Thompson's reign. Officers of the Museum were sent out on frequent missions to dig at Nineveh and to complete the study of the Behistun Inscription; others visited Egypt to collect antiquities, or were lent to the Egypt Exploration Fund to conduct excavations. An expedition was sent to Cyprus with the aid of a timely bequest, and did valuable work there until it was made impossible by a short-sighted and ill-advised Law of Antiquities passed by the local legislature. Excavations were conducted at Ephesus for the Museum by Mr. D. G. Hogarth; and the first steps were taken which ultimately led to the excavations at Carchemish by the same scholar. The Museum also took a share in Sir Aurel Stein's second expedition to Central Asia, from which it reaped a priceless harvest of early Chinese manuscripts and paintings.

Thompson did not, as a rule, take an active share in work outside the Museum and the Palaeographical Society; but he was in the inner circle of persons concerned in the foundation of our Academy. The history of that foundation can probably never be fully written, because no one person is acquainted with all the different influences and attempts that led up to it. When, however, the project seemed to be really maturing into something practical, Thompson was actively concerned, along with Jebb, Ilbert, Bywater, and others, in bringing it about. The meeting which resolved on its foundation, substantially in the form in which it actually came into being, was held at the British Museum on his invitation on 28 June 1901, as also was the meeting in November of the same year in which the Academy was brought into existence as an unincorporated body, for which it was resolved to apply for a Royal Charter. Thompson was naturally one of the original members named in the Charter and a member of the first Council,

and remained so until his election as second President of the Academy in June 1907. He was interested in securing contributions to the Academy's proceedings, and took an active part in the discussion of the somewhat difficult questions of procedure and by-laws which attended the early years of the new body. As President he delivered two annual addresses, surveying the work and progress of the Academy, and it was during his term of office that the Academy took a leading part in the celebration of the Tercentenary of Milton; but in July 1909 the failure in health which led to his retirement from the Museum compelled him also to resign the Presidency. The Academy had still hardly achieved an assured position in the eyes of scholars and the public, and it was far from possessing the financial means to enable it to render all the services to learning of which it was capable; but it was characteristic of Thompson that his last words from the Presidential chair were: 'If there is one word that I would choose for the motto of our Academy, that word is "Courage".'

In the winter of 1908-9 Thompson had a serious breakdown in health. Anxieties connected with the new building then in process of erection, and a prolonged and trying controversy in connexion with the administration of the Natural History Museum, combined with advancing years to shake his generally robust constitution; and in the spring of 1909 he tendered his resignation of the Directorship of the Museum, finally retiring in August after a twenty-one years' tenure of the post and forty-eight years of service in the Museum. Thenceforward he lived out of London. He was never easy to please in his choice of a residence, and he tried several places in turn: Mayfield in Sussex, where he had previously had a country home; Wells, where the society of the Deanery and the use of the Cathedral Library were attractions; Worthing, Tunbridge Wells, and finally Mayfield again. His health was never fully re-established, but after a few months' rest he rallied wonderfully, and his mind remained as vigorous as ever.

He did not long remain idle. His first task was the enlargement of his *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palaeography* into the far more imposing *Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography*, which was published by the Clarendon Press in 1912. Then, in connexion with a composite work which the same Press was preparing for the celebration of the Shakespeare Tercentenary (a celebration much curtailed by the war), he undertook a study of *Shakespeare's Handwriting*, which appeared as a chapter in *Shakespeare's England* in 1916, and was enlarged into a separate volume in the same year. In the course of these studies he satisfied himself that a certain well-known scene in the Elizabethan play of *Sir Thomas More*, the Shakespearian quality of which had previously been noticed, was (in the original manuscript in the British Museum) actually in the autograph of Shakespeare. Both in *Shakespeare's Handwriting* and in a chapter contributed in 1923 to *Shakespeare's Hand in Sir Thomas More* (edited by A. W. Pollard) he analysed minutely Shakespeare's known signatures and the *More* script. His conclusion has not passed unchallenged, and some of his arguments may be open to question; but Thompson had an unequalled eye for palaeographical detail, and the concurrence of the Shakespearian character of the handwriting with the Shakespearian quality of the verse constitutes a cumulative argument of a very powerful nature, which to the present writer at any rate is convincing. These works showed that in the years round about eighty his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated.

His mind remained vigorous almost to the very last, but his bodily strength decayed. There was always danger of heart trouble, and at last, on 14 September 1929, he died peacefully in the house which he had lately built for himself and his daughter at Mayfield. His grave is in Brookwood Cemetery.

Thompson married in 1864 Georgina, daughter of Mr. George Mackenzie, of Frankfield, Jamaica, by whom he had three sons and a daughter. Lady Thompson, who

for many years was unable to live in London on account of asthma, died in 1917; after which time his daughter was his constant companion.

A fine portrait, painted on his retirement by his friend, Sir Edward Poynter, P.R.A., hangs in the Board Room of the British Museum.

Sir George Warner, who has contributed some details and corrections to the foregoing notice, adds the following description:

When I first knew him, he was a strikingly handsome man, with fine features, dark hair, and light-blue eyes, and an erect carriage. In contrast with Bond, who was rather shy and reserved, he was full of life, high spirits, and geniality. He cared for no form of physical exercise except walking, but as a walker in many a long day's tramp with him over the Surrey hills and the Sussex downs I found him indefatigable. Strenuous himself in all that he did, he was at little pains to conceal his dislike of slackness and superficiality in others. On this account, and from an occasional brusqueness of speech or manner, he was not universally popular, but even his detractors could not deny that he was an exceptionally strong Keeper. He has been accused of scorning advice and resenting criticism. This was not my personal experience of him. Even when he was Director he continued to give me his confidence both in official and other matters, and I always found him ready to listen to any suggestions that he thought would be to the good of the Museum *R.I.P.*

F. G. KENYON