

Harold William Thompson

June 5, 1891 — February 21, 1964

The academic world has lost a vigorous, wise, and popular teacher of English and American literature; an internationally recognized scholar; a talented musician as organist, composer, and critic; and a folklorist who by his teaching, lecturing, and writing did perhaps more than any other man of his time to develop the interest of New Yorkers in their lore and traditions. Few men have managed so successfully as Harold William Thompson, Goldwin Smith Professor of English, Emeritus, to achieve distinction in the pursuit of so wide a variety of interests.

Of second-generation Scotch-Irish extraction, Thompson was born in Buffalo, New York, the son of Samuel Joseph and Katherine (Kernahan) Thompson. Until he was ten he lived chiefly near New York City; but, upon the death of his father, his mother moved her family of three children to the home of his paternal grandfather in Westfield, New York. The Thompson family roots were and are in Westfield, and, though Harold Thompson lived there only from the age of ten until he entered Hamilton College, Westfield was always home to him and he chose finally to be buried there.

The influence of Hamilton College was strong in the village, and there was probably little thought of choosing any other college when Thompson was graduated from the Westfield high school in 1908. Hamilton, a “classical” college of about two hundred students, in those years was presided over by a dynamic personality, the Reverend Melancthon Woolsey Stryker, whose twenty-five year presidency has been called “a despotism tempered by epigram.” Something of the vigor of expression and manner of the “Old Prex” may well have had effect on Thompson. His association with Stryker was close, since throughout his four college years Thompson was the organist at the seven-day-a-week chapel at which the president was both preacher and choir leader.

Thompson’s Hamilton years were busy. He directed a village choir, sang first tenor in the Glee Club, won prizes for excellence in German and oratory, and was elected to the senior honorary society. Though suffering from a lifelong handicap, extreme nearsightedness, he never allowed the handicap, then or subsequently, to prevent omnivorous reading and intensive scholarly work. He was graduated as Bachelor of Philosophy in 1912 and chosen valedictorian of his class.

Thompson went on to graduate work in English at Harvard University, which had at that time perhaps the most distinguished English department any university has ever gathered together. George Lyman Kittredge, Ernest Bernbaum, George Pierce Baker, Fred Norris Robinson, William Allan Neilson, Bliss Perry, and Barrett Wendell

are still names to conjure with in American literary scholarship. Neilson and Perry supervised Thompson's doctoral dissertation on Henry Mackenzie, which was completed with distinction and dispatch in 1915.

He began his career as a teacher in the New York State College for Teachers at Albany, which had recently been changed into a liberal arts college for the training of high school teachers. Here his advancement was rapid. After only six years he was promoted to a position created by a special act of the Legislature—"Professor of American Literature and Public Address." In spite of the limitations of this title, he regularly taught a large course in Shakespeare and courses in eighteenth-century English literature and in Scottish literature. His popular courses in folklore were a later development. From 1920 to 1924 he served also as head of the Department of Music, and for some years he directed a chorus, as well as serving as organist of the First Presbyterian Church of Albany. He coached debating teams and was a leader in the development of the intercollegiate New York State Debate Assembly.

The early years of his career left little time for scholarship, but the urge to writing and research persisted. Finally in 1925 the award of one of the first fifteen Guggenheim Fellowships gave him the opportunity to go to Scotland and complete the work on Henry Mackenzie he had begun at Harvard. As the first American candidate for the degree of Doctor of Letters at Edinburgh University, he worked under the supervision of Professor (later Sir) Herbert J. C. Grierson. Thompson's efforts to locate the long-unpublished manuscript of Henry Mackenzie's "Anecdotes and Egotisms" were successful, and in 1927 the Oxford University Press published his edition of the work. It is still a model of editing, accurately rendered and annotated with judgment and restraint. Edinburgh awarded Thompson the degree of Doctor of Letters, and he was elected a Fellow both of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The most important result of his studies in Scotland was the completion of his work on Mackenzie and his times, published in 1931 by the Oxford University Press with the title *A Scottish Man of Feeling: Some Account of Henry Mackenzie, Esq., of Edinburgh, and of the Golden Age of Burns and Scott*. This was a pioneering work. *The London Times Literary Supplement* hailed it as more than a biography, as "a book that no critic of modern letters can afford to leave unread."

The book established Thompson's reputation as an authority on eighteenth-century literature. Many a scholar would have remained content to plow further in that field; he was not. After 1931 he increasingly became absorbed in American literature and folklore. His audience as a folklorist grew beyond State College; beginning in 1932 he taught every summer huge courses in the Cornell Summer Session. In 1935 he instituted a radio program on

folklore over Station WGY. No teacher in the East was so successful in interesting students in the legends and history of their communities, in tracking down stories and ballads, tall tales and epitaphs, unpublished manuscripts and broadside ballads. Many of his students turned up material that might otherwise have been irretrievably lost. Such, for instance, was the manuscript of Robert Coffin's adventures in the South Pacific, which Thompson edited and published in 1941 under the title *The Last of the "Logan."*

In time his filing cases bulged with lore he and his students had collected. Much of the material for his big, bursting book on New York State folklore, *Body, Boots and Britches* (1939), came from those files, but the book was no mere compilation; it bears throughout the impress of his own personality and his love for his subject. He enjoyed doing the book, and others have enjoyed reading it ever since.

Thompson joined the Cornell Faculty as Professor of English in 1940. The transplanting from State College, though late, was eminently successful. He quickly became one of the most popular professors in the University. Students flocked to his courses in American literature and folklore. He was in constant demand as a speaker to student and other groups, some years delivering as many as fifty addresses in and outside the University. In the crowded postwar Cornell he sometimes taught more than five hundred students a term. In his nineteen years at Cornell he directed over a hundred dissertations of candidates for advanced degrees. Many of his students have made important contributions to the knowledge of both American literature and folklore. Thompson continued vigorously his own work in folklore; he was president of the American Folklore Society (1942) and of the New York Folklore Society (1943-1949); he was a member of the Council of the Pennsylvania Society and founded (1945) the *New York Folklore Quarterly*, which he edited from 1950 to 1955.

He was at the height of his busy career when in 1950 he suffered what at first threatened to be a crippling stroke. With courage and patience he faced bravely the much more restricted life he henceforth had to lead. He by no means shelved himself, however; Cornell recognized that by appointing him Goldwin Smith Professor of English in 1951. He continued to teach, until his retirement in 1959, his ever-popular course "American Folklore" and a series of advanced courses in American literature. He had to relinquish the column on ecclesiastical music that he had conducted for *The Diapason* since 1918, but he did not give up other writing. In 1958 Cornell University Press published his edition of *A Pioneer Songster*, and he completed a volume of autobiographical recollections which is as yet unpublished.

Over the years he acquired a number of honors and distinctions in addition to those already mentioned: honorary degrees, Doctor of Music (Hamilton College), and Doctor of Humane Letters (Union College); election as a trustee of Hamilton, 1937-1941. He was at one point Dean of the American Guild of Organists. He was a member of the Modern Language Association, the Scottish History Society, the New York State Historical Association, the St. Andrews Society of Albany, and the Savage Club.

In 1916 he married Jean Alma Saunders; they had a son, Arthur, and a daughter, Katherine (De Porte), who was graduated from Cornell in 1943. In 1942, he married Marion Chesebrough (Ph.D., Cornell, 1953), who is a Professor of English at the State College in Cortland. The year after his retirement, he moved to Cortland. He died in that city on February 21, 1964, after a prolonged illness.

His friends and students at Cornell, honoring him for his distinguished career as teacher and scholar, will also long remember him as a man—a man of intense loyalties, a friendly colleague, a generous supporter of many good causes, a genial host and raconteur, a wise and kindly friend and adviser of students. He always gave of himself without stint, and the lives of many are richer because of what he gave.

Harry Caplan, Walter H. French, Francis E. Mineka