

Obituary

Robert W. Thomson, FBA (London, 24 March 1934 – Oxford, 20 November 2018)

The passing of Robert William Thomson as the consequence of a stroke sustained eleven days earlier came as a shock. His indefatigable productivity came to a halt in mid-sentence, as it were. An e-mail message left unanswered, entirely contrary to his habitual punctuality, caused wonder. After all, the only thing that had changed since his retirement, he once remarked, was that he now read the morning papers at a more leisurely pace. The stream of publications, of books and contributions to volumes as well as journal articles that kept flowing from his pen proved how apt his observation was. It was noticeable also in the enthusiasm with which he continued to come to seminars and accepted invitations to participate in workshops and conferences, if family matters allowed it. Not long ago he even donned his Oxford sub-fusc, having accepted to examine for the MPhil in Oriental Studies in the University's Examination Schools. He clearly relished the occasion, remarking jokingly on his now all too yellowish white shirt, that should he be called upon again, he'd have to buy a new one. A problem with his knee required an operation and moving about with a stick for a while, but this was soon superfluous, and normality resumed. This changed only in the last few years, after he took upon himself the necessary care for Judith, with whom he had been married since 1962. Each book of Robert's voluminous oeuvre was dedicated to Judith, 'uxori dilectae', with the exception of one, his translation and commentary of Tovma Artsruni's *History of the House of the Artsrunik*, which he dedicated to their two children, Jasper and Crispin.

Robert Thomson graduated from Cambridge University in Classics, and spent a year in the Greek Halki Theological College in Istanbul, from where he undertook extensive travel throughout Turkey, visiting Ani and contributing to the restoration of the frescoes in the Hagia Sophia in Trebizond. He obtained a PhD from Cambridge with a study on the Armenian and Syriac versions of Athanasius of Alexandria's works. Between 1965 and 1977 this led to the publication in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO) with Peeters in Louvain of four volumes of editions with four accompanying volumes of translations of Syriac versions of Athanasius' works. Thomson had already learned Armenian in Vienna in 1958 when Professor Sirarpie Der Nersessian encouraged him to concentrate on the field. This happened while he spent the academic year 1960-1961 in Washington D.C. as a Junior Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks. He obtained a further degree with Professor Garitte in Louvain, in Christian Oriental Languages, offering Armenian, Arabic, and Georgian. In 1963 he took up an instructorship in Armenian at Harvard University, and in 1969 became the first Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at that University, a post he held until 1992. He was elected Senior Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks in 1979, and served as its Director from 1984 to 1989.

In 1992 he accepted the position of Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies in the University of Oxford, which he held until his retirement in 2001. In 1995 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy. Among his distinctions are the Saint Sahak and Saint Mesrop Medal, awarded to him by Katholikos of All

Armenians Vazgen I for his “great service to the scholarly study of the history of the Armenian people”. He served on the Board of the Society for Armenian Studies and on the Committee of the Association Internationale des Etudes Arméniennes, of which he was a Patron Member.

It is hard to overestimate Robert Thomson’s importance for Armenian Studies and their relationship with a variety of relevant fields, such as Patristics and Early Christian Studies, the study of Eastern Christianity, and Byzantine Studies. To colleagues working in these fields, and no less to academics whose main interests involved Armenian, Thomson opened up the textual wealth of Armenian historiography and Biblical commentary by means of an unsurpassed range of fluent translations and erudite commentaries, bringing into wider academic circulation the works of a sophisticated Christian tradition that had long remained a closed book to most outside Armenian studies. Almost singlehandedly he made available the Armenian historiographical tradition up to the thirteenth century, with a few exceptions only –mostly brilliantly filled by others-, with commentaries that drew attention to the literary and theological aspects of the texts. He showed what motivated their composition, warning against face-value interpretations by scholars in other fields, if they used what they considered to be the clear-cut Armenian evidence. This sometimes landed him in controversy, in particular over his cautioning against the dating to the fifth century, customary among scholars in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia as well as some outside Armenia, of the “Father of Armenian History”, Movses Khorenatsi, whereas a dating of the text as we have it to the eighth century is widely held to be more plausible. First published in the Introduction to his translation in 1978, he stood by this view in the second edition of 2006. Despite what must be called a so far generally reserved reception in the Republic of Armenia of his phenomenal contribution to the field, Thomson did eventually receive recognition there from individual scholars and institutions.

Robert Thomson’s scholarly work, the result of seemingly effortless, quiet application sustained over more than half a century, is exceptional in its depth as well as its sheer volume. Many of his works represent landmarks in Armenian studies. After several journal articles published in the 1960s and the first volumes of Athanasius’ Syriac versions had seen the light, Robert Thomson published, in 1970, the English translation of *The Teaching of Saint Gregory*, together with an in-depth introduction and meticulous commentary. It would form the template for his approach to a text. This lengthy catechetical work, occupying almost half of Agathangelos’ *History of the Armenians* offers insight into fifth century Armenian theology. In the remainder of his *History*, Agathangelos relates the conversion of Armenia between 301 and 314 as if he were an eyewitness, while in fact he was writing in the 460s. Thomson published his translation in 1976, setting in train a series of publications of historiographical texts lasting some thirty-five years. In 1978 followed Movses Khorenatsi’s *History of the Armenians*, then Elishē’s *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (1982), Thomas Artsruni’s *History of the House of the Artsrunik* (1985), the “Anonymous Story-Teller (also known as Pseudo-Šapuh)” (1988-1989), the *Historical Compilation of Vardan Arewelc’i* (1989) and Łazar P’arpetsi’s *History of the Armenians* (1991).

In the nineteen seventies, Thomson was no less active in the development of teaching aids. His widely used, succinct *Introduction to Classical Armenian*, offering

grammar with exercises, a choice of texts and an extended word-list, was first published in 1975, saw a revised second edition in 1989, and was reprinted in 1993 and 1998; it is the only work of its kind in English and generations of students received their first training in the language through it. In 1977, together with Professor Kevork B. Bardakjian he published *A Textbook of Modern Western Armenian*, another introductory tool which answered a pressing need felt in academic teaching.

Thomson's command of a wide variety of languages allowed him to pursue comparative research and thereby significantly to advance our insight in early Christian literature. In 1983, in cooperation with Bridget Kendall, he published an English translation and commentary of the Armenian version (from the Greek original) of the late antique philosopher and head of the Alexandrian School David the Invincible Philosopher's (Davit' Anyak't's) *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy*. A further foray into the Hellenising style of Armenian translations from Greek represented his edition and translation of the corpus of Dionysius the Areopagite, published in two volumes in CSCO (1987). As the result of his interest in cosmologies and in order to set the record straight on the way Basil's *Hexaemeron* had found its way into Armenian, he published an edition and translation of *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea*, again in two volumes in CSCO (1995). This was followed in 2012 by *Saint Basil of Caesarea and Armenian Cosmology*, a study with translation of the Armenian version of Saint Basil's *Hexaemeron* and its influence on medieval Armenian views about the cosmos.

Returning to historiography, in 1996 he published another landmark work: *Rewriting Caucasian History. The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles. The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*. Presenting the translation of the thirteenth-century Armenian adaptation on the upper half of the page and the translation of the text of the Georgian Chronicles on the lower half, the work provides a fascinating insight in Armenian rewriting, by abbreviating the Georgian original and expanding it with Armenian material.

A cooperation with the Oxford Byzantine historian James Howard-Johnston assisted by the latter's (then) student Tim Greenwood resulted in the two-volume publication of a translation with literary commentary by Thomson, and a historical commentary by Howard-Johnston of the seventh century *History* ascribed to Sebēos (1999).

The nineteen-nineties further saw the publication of an important collection of his articles in the aptly titled Variorum volume *Studies in Armenian Literature and Christianity* (1994), followed by an example of one of his many other services to scholarship, *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD* (1995), supplemented in 2007 by a sixty-page sequel in *Le Muséon*.

In the first decennium of the twenty-first century Thomson translated and commented upon two Armenian adaptations of historical works originally written in Greek, that had played an important role at various moments in the perception of Armenian history, the two versions of *The Armenian Adaptation of the Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* (2001), and "The Armenian Versions of the 'Life of Sylvester'" (2005), which is transmitted only with the second version of the former. Thomson returned to earlier work with the completely revised

translation, a much amplified commentary and partly new introduction of the *Teaching of Saint Gregory* (2001). He likewise revised and amplified with additional commentary and bibliography his translation of Movses Khorenatsi's *History of the Armenians*, which saw the light in 2006. What turned out to have been his final contribution to the study of Armenian historiography was his fine comparative work, *The Lives of Saint Gregory*, where the Armenian, Greek, Arabic and Syriac versions of the *History* attributed to Agathangelos are set side by side, preceded by a hundred-page Introduction dedicated to a comparison of the two recensions, to Gregory in Armenian sources, Gregory's reception with Armenian theologians, and a chapter on Gregory and apocalyptic themes.

Apart from the introductions and commentaries to the translated works, Thomson devoted separate studies to a number of historians he had translated, and others that he had not. After his 1994 volume of collected articles, he continued to make incisive contributions on the place of Armenia, its politics, culture and religion in the wider Caucasus, its relationship with Byzantium, and with Iran, as well as on the Christianization, on Armenia's historiography and its literary tradition. Noteworthy is also his interest in Armenian law, which resulted in a translation of Mkhitar Gosh's influential late twelfth-century *Lawcode*, as usual accompanied by a fundamental introduction and extensive commentary, published in 2000.

A further survey article, published in 2009 in the *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* under the title "Armenian Biblical Commentaries: The State of Research", represents another strand of Robert Thomson's scholarship, which is as fertile as his other endeavours have been. It followed shortly upon his question "Is There An Armenian Tradition of Exegesis?", posed in *Studia Patristica* (2006). Already in 1983 he had published a translation of Gregory of Narek's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. At the turn of the millennium he published a *Homily on the Passion of our Lord*, attributed to Eḡišē, while an article of the same year (2000) studies its relation with the fourth-century Syrian theologian-poet Saint Ephrem. Thomson published a whole range of books and lengthy articles dedicated to Biblical commentary and homilies in Armenian: in 2005, *Hamam. Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, soon followed by "Mambrē and His Homilies" (2005-2007), *Nerses of Lambron. Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*, in 2007, then, in 2008-2009, "A Commentary on Joshua and Judges Attributed to Eḡišē" and in 2014, the volume *Nonnus of Nisibis, Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, a text which is lost in the original Arabic. In the same year he published a study on Arabic in Armenia before the tenth century. His most recent book-length work brings into full daylight a work not widely known among Armenian scholars, an edition with translation, introduction and commentary of Nersēs of Lambron's *Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John* (2017). At the time of his death, Robert's translation of a further, voluminous, commentary was so far advanced, that he had begun to look for a publisher.

The wealth of insight and wisdom that Robert Thomson imparted to scholarship will long resonate. He was very much sought after by students, whose questions he had great pleasure in answering, both for their academic quality and because the contact appealed to the gregarious side of his character. He was very fond of music and played the piano. He relished the opportunity when he was Director at

Dumbarton Oaks, to organize concerts and influence the programme, just as he enjoyed in Oxford the somewhat unexpected responsibility for the college silver as Pembroke's Silver Fellow. A dinner with friends and colleagues was also much welcomed, in particular when accompanied by a good glass of wine. Robert loved life and scholarship and the extent of his contribution to both, in particular the latter will become ever more apparent in the years to come. We have lost an exceptional scholar, colleague, friend, and human being.
Lux perpetua luceat ei.

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