OBITUARIES

Photo: Joya Hairs

JOHN ERIC SIDNEY THOMPSON
1898-1975

Sir Eric Thompson died on the 9th of September, 1975, leaving many friends to mourn his loss. After a half century of labor that won him recognition as the most eminent of Mayanists, his life was brought to a close by a six-months' struggle with cancer. Mercifully this caused him little pain. He died a committed Christian, and is buried at Ashdon, the village in Essex, England, where he lived during the last 17 years of his life. He is survived by his widow, Florence, and their son Donald E. Thompson, a Peruvianist and professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin.

John Eric Sidney Thompson was born on the 31st of December, 1898, into an Anglo-Argentinian family. His great-grandfather had settled in Argentina in the 1820s, and the family is still represented there. His father, George W. Thompson, was born and brought up in Argentina, went to medical school in Edinburgh and Paris, but then discovered on returning home that some regulation prevented him practicing there. He thereupon went to London and established a successful practice as a surgeon in Harley Street. Eric was born in England, but used to say that he was at least conceived in Latin America.

Eric, like his elder brother, was sent to Winchester College, the ancient preparatory school to whose founder, William of Wykeham, Eric was pleased to do homage in the preface to one of his books. In 1915, however, Eric, after only three years at Winchester, cut short his schooling in order to join the army. This he successfully accomplished, giving his age as 19, but soon his parents retrieved him. He was not to be thwarted, and enlisted again, this time in the London Scottish Regiment using the pseudonym Neil Winslow (the name Neil he took from a vaudeville theater marquee, and Winslow was the village in Buckinghamshire where he had often stayed in the holidays). For further security he stated that he was from British Guiana, the son of a planter settled on some fictitious river. He then wrote to his parents telling them he would disclose his *nom de guerre* and address if they would promise not to betray his age, and would let him know their decision through the "personal" column of the *Times*. They had little choice but to agree!

Soon he was in another kind of trouble as the result of an escapade with fellow soldiers in London. A few of them were arrested and taken to the Tower of London (in retrospect Thompson was rather sorry not to have been a prisoner in the Tower himself), but retribution awaited him on return to camp, and it was as one of a group of prisoners guarded with fixed bayonets that he disembarked in France en route to the front.

Later, his unit was transferred to Palestine, only to be sent back to France after a while—to Thompson's regret this was before the fall of Jerusalem. At Vimy Ridge he was wounded. While recovering, he received a commission in the Coldstream Guards, and returned to France in the autumn of 1918.

After the war, Thompson spent four years in Argentina working on a ranch, but this was work he had little aptitude for, and did not enjoy. So he returned to England, "crammed" the necessary Latin and other subjects for Cambridge, and there took his B.A., with Diploma in Archaeology. During his time at Cambridge the dominant influence on his studies was Alfred C. Haddon, and there, in 1925, he saw Maudslay receive his honorary Sc.D.

By the year of his graduation Thompson had already taught himself the essentials

of the Maya calendar; enough, at least, for Morley to be favorably impressed upon receiving his inquiry about the possibility of joining the Carnegie Institution's Chichen Itza Project. After being vetted by the Ricketsons, who were conveniently in London, he was accepted, and thus in January 1926 came to step ashore in Yucatan for the first time.

His first assignment was to undertake the reconstruction of the bas-relief bands of the Temple of the Warriors from their scattered elements. In that season also he made no less than three visits to Coba, during the second of which he discovered the Macanxoc group with its eight carved stelae. After this a third visit had to be arranged, for the purpose of showing Morley the new monuments. During the expedition Thompson's friendship with Morley must surely have taken root; in later years he was to cherish "Vay" with great affection.

The next year saw him with the British Museum expedition to Lubaantun, British Honduras. From Lubaantun he made other arduous journeys in search of ruins, on one of which an important site, Pusilha, was discovered.

Following his appointment to the Field Museum, Chicago, Thompson was back in the colony in 1928 and in 1929, excavating at Camp 6 and at Mountain Cow. Although a principal motive for these expeditions was to obtain artifacts for exhibition, Thompson's desire to work on a small site was respected. As he was to write later of San José, he was hoping to gain insights into "the cultural and physical background against which the average man played his simple part." This was, in fact, the first such attempt in the Maya area.

During those first seasons in British Honduras Thompson had direct experience of the abundant store of ancient beliefs and practices of the Maya, and quickly became convinced of the potential value of such information to epigraphers. He therefore took pains to collect what data he could from his laborers and other Maya with whom he came into contact; later, for the specific purpose of studying the ethnology of the Mopan Maya, he stayed for some weeks in the village of San Antonio.

His gleanings in this field were published in 1930 (Thompson 1930). This was an important year for Thompson, because in Chicago, early in the year, he married his English bride, Florence L. Keens. Part of their honeymoon was spent in Yucatan, Thompson having offered his services during the winter vacation to the Carnegie Institution. The consequence was another trip to Coba, accompanied by his wife and Harry Pollock; Eric's judgment that his bride would endure her abrupt introduction to the rigors of the bush without trauma seems to have been well founded.

In 1931 Thompson began to excavate another small site in British Honduras, San José. Here he hoped to establish a ceramic sequence extending through the Classic period and into the Postclassic, thereby obtaining evidence that would favor one or another of the rival correlations between the Maya and Christian calendars. Work was resumed in 1934 under joint Field/Carnegie sponsorship, and ended with a brief season in 1936, by which time Thompson had left Chicago and joined the Carnegie Institution. Thompson's excavations at San José and his report on them (1939) represented a notable advance on anything previously done in the Maya area.

Thompson's other fieldwork includes a reconnaissance trip through southern Campeche and Quintana Roo, following the successful forays of Ruppert and Denison; excavations at Benque Viejo in 1938 (Thompson 1940), and at El Baúl in 1941 (Thompson 1948); participation in the first study of Bonampak in 1947; and excavation of house mounds at Mayapan jointly with his son Donald in 1953-55 (Pollock et al. 1962).

Thompson's greatest achievements lay, of course, in the field of epigraphy. Appropriately, his first published paper (1925) was on a Maya calendric theme, although it was not a fruitful offering. Four years later came his first important contribution (Thompson 1929), the explanation of Glyph G of the Lunar Series as a set of nine different glyphs identifying the nine Lords of the Night. Then came another influential paper (1935), his review of the various calendrical correlations that had been proposed; from then on, Thompson's variant of the correlation due originally to J. T. Goodman came to be adopted with near unanimity.

Contributions too numerous to mention were now coming from Thompson's pen. One (1944) was of outstanding importance in that it gave fresh impetus to the study of Maya epigraphy, which in truth had become rather stagnant. Thompson, having isolated parallel passages between the chronological sections of the books of Chilam Balam and hieroglyphic texts, was able to identify a commonly occurring affix as the Maya locative *ti*; following this, other glyphic elements representing particles of speech, prepositions, adjectives, etc., have come to be read. And he interpreted a glyph having

the form of a fish as standing for the concept of counting, via two homonyms of the Maya word *xoc*—the first known instance of the rebus in Maya writing.

Thompson now began looking for insights into the writing of the Maya by studying their mythology, language structure, religious beliefs, etc., and the phraseology of modern Maya prayers. At the same time he began to plan the preparation of a four-part study of Maya writing, to consist of an introductory volume, a dictionary (this became the *Catalog* [1962]), a commentary on the Dresden Codex, and another volume the planned contents of which are unclear. Originally, all four were to appear under a single title.

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction (Thompson 1950), far from being a compilation of material already published, contains a large amount of original work, much of it based on a synthesis of data brought together from a very wide range of sources. Furthermore, by employing the solid comparative method that Beyer pioneered, Thompson waa able to add greatly to our understanding of the general structure of this writing.

In 1952 Yuri Knorosov announced his discovery of a structural principle of phonetic writing employed by the Maya. In Thompson's view there were serious fundamental objections to this approach, and these he set forth in two reviews (e.g., Thompson 1959); the uncharacteristically scathing tone of them was elicited partly by the jibes that Knorosov had gratuitously directed against bourgeois Western scholars, but far more so by the arbitrary manipulations that had been performed in order to obtain the published decipherments. Thompson never accepted that there could be syllabic elements in Maya writing, and took a skeptical view of many readings offered in recent years, on the grounds that they had been reached in disregard of certain principles or rules which he conceived to be basic (these principles he enunciated in Chapter 3 of the *Dresden Codex*).

Now Thompson turned his attention to the *Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* (1962). Compiling it was tedious, and also taxing, because of the recurrent need to base decisions on poor photographs of weathered texts. The *Catalog* was ten years in the making, with relief from it found in writing *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (1954) and other works. The last volume of the trilogy (as it became) was *A Commentary on the Dresden Codex* (1972). In this masterly work Thompson was able to supply the sense, if not always the exact terms, for a surprisingly large proportion of the text.

One final work must be mentioned: *Maya History and Religion* (1970). This collection of articles, some of them worked up from earlier published versions, was issued rather surprisingly as a trade book. The most important section is that dealing with Putun-Maya expansion; it is a brilliant reworking into a historical framework of the ethnohistorical material published by Scholes and Roys.

Thompson's approach was always primarily historical, and he admitted to having little interest in the formal study of cultural evolution. He seems to have come through the Kluckhohn/Taylor/Kidder perturbation relatively unscathed; it might even be said that Taylor praised him with faint damns! (Taylor 1948). Certainly the peasant-revolt theory of the Maya collapse that Thompson formulated at about this time was a complex economic and sociopolitical hypothesis that has stimulated later scientific studies.

Eric Thompson's contributions to scholarship came to receive due recognition in his many appointments and honors, and through his popular books, written with characteristic literary grace, his work became familiar to all amateurs of Mesoamerican archaeology. But it was through a television film made by the BBC in 1972, "The Lost World of the Maya," that Thompson was able to convey his enthusiasm for the subject of his lifelong study to a wide audience in several countries. Although he had never been more than an occasional lecturer, he took to the role of filmed expositor with evident pleasure, and it is satisfactory to know that this record of him remains. Having been present at the making of one section of the film, I can testify to his astonishing energy and good humor even under rather trying conditions: a reflection, I think, of his love of life and lack of pompousness.

Eric was, indeed, a marvelous companion, and an equally lively correspondent. Many of his letters from Ashdon were packed with information, with which he was always generous, and of those addressed to his friends it is probably true that almost all were enlivened here and there with fun, and echoes of old shared jokes. Of course he had a keen appreciation of character, relishing the quirks as much as the strengths of his colleagues, past and present. And what a marvelously varied lot they have been: Waldeck, for example, and Stephens, Maudslay, Maler, Gann, Tozzer, Morley! (See Thompson 1963.) This is not to say that he was

never galled by the pretensions or wrongheadedness of a colleague. But he was never, I believe, discourteous in his exchanges.

When the Carnegie Institution closed its Department of Archaeology in 1958 the Thompsons moved back to England, settling in Ashdon, some 20 km. south of Cambridge, first in one house and then in another smaller one, both of them given the name Harvard after the Massachusetts township where they had lived for 20 years. But to call the ensuing years retirement would be absurd, in view of the flow of papers that came from Thompson's study, above all the *Commentary on the Dresden Codex*. For all that, Thompson did occasionally confess to feeling, as he put it, a bit like Ovid, longing for news of Rome in his exile by the Black Sea. Visiting Americanists were therefore assured of a particularly warm welcome at Ashdon.

Thompson's work after his return to England would scarcely have been possible without the library that he had assembled. Under the terms of his will, this now goes to the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum, where it will be kept as a unit. A large proportion of the books bear Thompson's annotations, or have photographs or letters pasted into them. One most important element of the library is the card file, which I hope the Museum may consider publishing, in microfiche or some other reprographic form.

On New Year's Day, 1975, only three months before the onset of his final illness, Thompson was honored with a knighthood. This he accepted with unconcealed pleasure, tinged only with regret that Maudslay never received the same honor. Six weeks later he was in Mexico, invited by the Governor of Yucatan to assist at his reception of the Queen at Uxmal, half hoping (but in vain!) that she would dub him knight in the Nunnery quadrangle.

Eric Thompson's last years brought him happiness and honors, and spared him the least decline in mental powers. There must be many who take comfort in these small mercies, while lamenting the loss of a great scholar, and a friend.

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