

**F.M.L. [MICHAEL] THOMPSON (1925-2017):
HIS INTELLECTUAL OUTLOOK¹**

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Worldview:

Michael Thompson (F.M.L. Thompson) was a classic liberal, braced by a strong strand of Quaker egalitarianism. By ‘liberal’, I don’t mean what is today called a ‘neo-liberal’ follower of Frederick Hayek and the members of the Adam Smith Institute, who are dedicated to shrinking or abolishing the state. Michael Thompson strongly opposed such a viewpoint.² Nor by ‘liberal’ do I mean someone who could be described as a ‘bleeding-heart liberal’. Michael Thompson certainly deplored a range of the hardships and injustices of this world. But he was a deeply reticent person, never one to express his emotions publicly, or indeed to spell out his worldview.

Nonetheless, he was quietly and straightforwardly a classic John-Stuart-Mill sort of liberal. So Michael Thompson believed in values such as fair play (he was, after all, a cricket lover); free speech; equal rights; equal opportunities; equal respect between fellow citizens; and so forth.

Liberal views like these appealed both to his intellect and his temperament. At the same time, another important substratum of commitment came from his staunchly Quaker background, on both sides of his family.

Michael Thompson appreciated the value of the Quakers' readiness to sit together in 'holy silence'. That experience suited a man whose conversation was punctuated not only by gales of laughter but also by very long silences, which could unnerve the unwary.

And, above all, he had deeply internalised the Quaker stress upon spiritual egalitarianism. He felt a genuine kinship with all his fellow humans: 'We are all one in the eyes of the Lord'. Although not himself a religious man, he held strongly to a secular version of that belief – and he showed that conviction in his way of life. Michael Thompson had no 'side'; he never pulled rank or puffed up his chest; or asked people if they knew who he was. Instead, he treated everyone, whether high or low, equally – and with the same simple dignity. In that way, his personality, his views, and his lifestyle all dovetailed to denote Michael Thompson as a classic liberal, braced by Quaker egalitarianism.

Methodology:

Michael Thompson was as generally reluctant to talk about his methodology as a historian as he was to talk about his deeply-held views. Again, however, it is not hard to detect his approach. He was a liberal empiricist to his core. He hated all loose and erroneous pseudo-historical generalisations that claimed to have the answer to everything. And he hated them even more if and when such general nostrums were adopted by politicians as an excuse to meddle in the content of education – and even more so if and when these generalised and inaccurate claims were cited as grounds for bashing the Universities (for example, for not being 'enterprising' enough).

Against any such sweeping and pre-determined views, Michael Thompson appealed to the value of evidence. It took detailed research to compile relevant data to challenge and test all loose generalisations. But that's what has to be done. At the very start of his Ford Lectures, Michael Thompson

positively exulted in the power of ‘doggedly persistent empirical research’.³ And that’s what he did, all his life.

At the same time, however, Michael Thompson knew, as all historians know, that historians cannot simply approach the sources, whatever form they take (literary, quantitative, visual, archaeological or whatever), with blank minds. There have to be some pertinent questions to pose; some relevant issues to explore; and some germane framework assumptions to bear in mind. In his case, Michael Thompson rejected the view that unfolding history was (and is) the product of nothing more than a series of *ad hoc* accidents and contingencies. He also denied that history was (and is) generated by many great men (and a few great women), operating in some sort of through-time vacuum, outside any specific historical context.

Instead, Michael Thompson’s writings highlight the interaction of both deep long-term ‘structures’ or impersonal forces *and* immediate human ‘agencies’. Such structures influence and shape the lives of individuals, whilst at the same time generation after generation of individuals influence and reshape the structures⁴. For example, material circumstances might affect a given society’s cultural attitudes – whilst cultural attitudes might in turn affect economic performance. The linkages run both ways. And causation may flow both ways too, with intricate feedbacks, so that trends may constitute both part-cause and part-effect.

It’s important to stress, furthermore, that Michael Thompson did not define ‘structures’ in a simplistic or monolithic way. Not for him the over-glib assumption that ‘it’s all really economics’; or ‘it’s all really a Marxist-style class struggle’; or ‘it’s all really geography’ – or geo-history à la Fernand Braudel; or ‘it’s all really language’ – or discourse theory à la Michel Foucault. Certainly not. Michael Thompson took a pluralist view. He saw many deep historical structures, including not only economic factors but the institutions of church and state; and educational opportunities (or lack of the same). In

particular, he noted the importance of property ownership; land uses; systems of tenure; and people's access (or lack of access) to material resources.⁵ Michael Thompson devoted a lot of research attention to such humdrum factors. This component of his research was never fashionable. And it became less so during Michael Thompson's long career. It represented, however, his determination to give full weight to all the varied structures with which humans interact.

Outcomes:

In the very long term, Michael Thompson was, deep in his heart, a liberal ameliorist. He believed that things would get better for the mass of the population, through forces such as the power of education, political rights, and technological innovation.

On the other hand, Michael Thompson was never one to let his beliefs override the empirical evidence produced by historical researchers. He was aware of reverses and losses in history. He did not expect to announce the sudden arrival of 'heaven on earth' today or tomorrow. Nor, equally, did he spend his time sighing over the vanished glories of the day-before-yesterday.

As already indicated, he disliked all simple generalisations, especially when applied as simplified historical causes.⁶ In response to any glib assertions, Michael Thompson applied his singularly penetrating intellect. He was good at picking big arguments apart. He could show how far they were based upon a grain of truth – or upon several large grains of truth – or upon no real historical validity at all. He was equally quick to see flaws in statistical material. Usually, he was the soul of considered courtesy in all such debates. On one occasion, however, he had a flash of unThompsonian irritation, when he wrote that oversimplifications about the negative economic impact of Britain's public schools and Universities were simply 'pathetic'.⁷

Michael Thompson himself interpreted history as a case of organised complexity. The interlocking picture, containing continuities and change, was

not so overwhelmingly complex that it was unintelligible. It was not just ‘chaos’. But history was (and is) a process of great long-term complexity – which deserves to be studied respectfully as such.⁸

Coda: Between the Extremes

The Labour politician Nye Bevan once remarked – famously – that the fate of the ‘man in the middle of the road’ was to be run over. Well, as I have argued, Michael Thompson was indeed a man who worked in the intellectual middle-ground and avoided the analytical extremes.

He was, however, an extremely difficult historian to combat. Indeed, he would have responded to Bevan’s assertion with silence followed by a cool riposte: ‘ahem, well, let’s just think about it. Is it actually true that people in the middle of the road do always get run over?’ They could always stand on a traffic island or take some other evasive action.

Michael Thompson’s method was to build a citadel. His own contributions to history were magisterial, with penetrating insights and interpretations buttressed by copious evidence. So there is another, different way of looking at the intellectual middle ground. It is not automatically disastrous for all concerned. It can be seen instead as representing the Aristotelian ‘Golden Mean’. Certainly, that applied to Michael Thompson. His Quaker silences were as golden as are his histories.

ENDNOTES:

¹ This notice is the written text of an oral appreciation, given at London University’s Institute of Historical Research on 9 November 2017, to a commemorative meeting in honour of Michael Thompson [F.M.L.T]. The comments are based upon intermittent conversations with F.M.L.T. over many years. A further source is the published text of his 1994 Oxford Ford Lectures, *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain, 1780-1980* (Oxford, 2001), which, unusually for F.M.L.T., directly discusses best-

practice research methodologies and the dangers of loose pseudo-historical generalisations.

² For a sniffy comment on ‘right-wing ideas factories’, see F.M.L.T., *Gentrification*, p. 75; and p. 155, for opposition to Thatcherite economic policies.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8. See also F.M.L.T., *Hampstead: Building a Borough, 1650-1964* (1974), pp. ix-x, 454.

⁶ F.M.L.T., *Gentrification*, p. 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁸ F.M.L.T.’s major works as sole author include: *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (1963; 1971); *Chartered Surveyors: The Growth of a Profession* (1968); *Hampstead: Building a Borough, 1650-1964* (1974); *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (1988; 2016); and *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain, 1780-1980* (2001).