

Obituary

EDWARD Joseph Thomas, M.A. (B.A. 1905), died on 11 February, 1958 at the age of eighty-eight. He was born on 30 July 1869. His father was gardener at Thornhill Rectory in Yorkshire, during the incumbency of the Reverend Joshua Ingham Brooke, a man of some wealth, part of which it was his pleasure to spend in assisting promising local boys to a grammar school education. But E. J. Thomas was not one of them, though he was of a studious turn, and almost as early as he could remember used to save his pennies till they would buy something at the secondhand bookshops in the adjacent towns. At fourteen he left school and went to work as a gardener for the next twelve years ; but we should be wrong in interpreting this as a reluctant apprenticeship to his father's trade ; despite an unlucky handicap of colourblindness he retained all his life a profound love of flowers and gardening ; and he did well at it. But he busied himself in other ways too ; for when in 1894 he went to spend a year as a student gardener at Kew he already had the London Matriculation Certificate (1st Division) in Botany, Mechanics, Latin, Greek, English and Mathematics. While there he obtained certificates in Elementary Physics and Chemistry and in various branches of Botany. It was presumably during this period that he decided to devote himself to linguistic studies. In 1896 he entered the University of St. Andrews, where under John Burnet as Professor of Greek he eventually graduated M.A. (1900-01) with first class honours in Classics. His other subjects of examination were Mathematics, Moral Philosophy, and Modern Greek. In this last, which foreshadows his subsequent philological learning, he was a pupil of A. N. Jannaris, author of what is still perhaps the only scholarly dictionary of English and Modern Greek. In 1903, at the age of thirty-four, when with most men the zeal and capacity for learning have begun to wane, Thomas came to Emmanuel as an Advanced Student, drawn, possibly, by the already wide repute of Peter Giles ; at all events, philology was his special subject in the Classical Tripos Part II, which in 1905 gave him his Cambridge B.A. It was by this course that he came to the study of Sanskrit and Pali, and so of the Buddhist scriptures and religion, on which he became in time the most eminent English-speaking authority ; and by his appointment in 1909 as an Under-Librarian at the University Library, Cambridge became his home for the remainder of his long life. For a long time he was in charge there of all foreign books, and his knowledge of languages continued to grow pheno-

menally in all directions : any book in an unrecognised tongue would be referred to him, and he could usually identify it ; but for the latter part of his time at the University Library he was head of the Oriental Languages Department, and when he "retired" in 1940, he was almost at once asked to take charge of the Library of the Oriental Faculty, where he worked till about 1950. Though his publications included an edition of Plautus's *Aulularia* (1913) and a Danish conversation-grammar (1926) his really important works were all concerned with Buddhism ; they included *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (1927, revised 1949), a *History of Buddhist Thought* (1933), and a number of volumes of translations of Buddhist scriptures, the latest of which were published as recently as 1952. In this field Thomas was the master scholar, not only in Cambridge, but throughout Europe and beyond ; even in his eighty-sixth year and later he was in demand, examining research theses, reviewing books, and corresponding with scholars from Holland to India who sought his advice or his contributions to learned publications. He was a Litt.D. of his old University of St. Andrews ; the London School of Oriental and African Studies made him an Honorary Fellow ; as erudite a man as Professor Hector Chadwick could declare that Thomas was the most learned man in Cambridge ; but there were very few who were even capable of knowing how much he knew, and he would have been the last man in the world even to dream of telling them. He was indeed a most modest, shy, and retiring man ; knowing so many foreign tongues he was yet never heard to utter a sentence in any of them ; even in his own he asked to be excused when invited to speak at a Library Staff Annual Dinner. But when asked for information or advice, whether in the Library or elsewhere (and if he had his bowler on he was not officially there), he was unfailingly kind and helpful ; he still knew the British flora by heart ; but in far more unexpected subjects he could give an answer ; on almost all he could set the enquirer in the way of finding it. He examined for authorities as far apart as Dublin and Ceylon ; perhaps he really did more teaching than if he had been formally a lecturer or professor ; and it was done effectively because so modestly. Professor Dasgupta's preface to his *History of Indian Philosophy* reveals one who was indebted to his help ; and there must have been hundreds more. Those who as undergraduates have had him among the audience for their papers at the Emmanuel Classical Society would have been appalled to know before what massive learning they delivered themselves ; but he never let on. He was signally silent in company but could take a quiet pleasure in such occasions as the "E" Book Club auction, or a river-outing of the Library staff, when his favourite shag (carried sometimes in a paper bag) took the place of small-talk. He had married, but his wife (who was German) died

OBITUARY

in the 1920's after an unhappy illness. So for many years he lived quietly in lodgings, or later with a housekeeper, childless, but very fond of children, whose society he cultivated, like flowers, with a happy devotion. A friend once found him at his desk near Room Theta in the Old Library doing something strange with a sheet of paper ; he was making a square,* to be worn by the guy at a Guy Fawkes party he was holding for his intimates. Some of them retained his confidence into later life ; those of us who only met him occasionally may well wish now that we had really known him. He was born in a world that is gone, and learning such as his is hardly allowed in the one that has replaced it. (From The Emmanuel College Magazine, Vol. XL, 1957-58, pp. 106-8.)

Dr Edward Joseph Thomas, M.A., formerly Head of the Department of Oriental Languages of the University of Cambridge and Librarian of the Library of the Oriental Faculty died on 11th February 1958.

Before his death he had bequeathed his entire library to the University of Ceylon. It is but fitting that the memory of such a generous benefactor should be preserved in permanent form.

No better could be found than publication in our Review, of the Obituary notice contributed to the Emmanuel College Magazine by Dr F. H. Stubbings. It is reproduced in these pages by courtesy of the editor.

S. C. BLOK
Librarian

* "Square" is the mortar-board, the square head-gear with a tassel, part of the academic costume.