

MICHIEL HORN, FRSC

Archibald Paton Thornton
1921-2004



With Archibald Paton Thornton, who died after a brief illness at his home in Toronto on February 19, 2004, the world of historical scholarship lost an important figure. Thornton was a renowned student of modern imperialism and for a quarter century a mainstay of the University of Toronto history department. Endowed with an excellent sense of humour, the ability to coin a memorable phrase, and a prose style for which the word 'superb' seems too feeble, he will be long remembered by those who knew him, and especially by those of us who took his courses and read his books.

Born in Glasgow on 21 October 1921, youngest of the three sons of John Joseph Thornton, a businessman with broad cultural interests, and Margaret Paton, young Archie Thornton attended Kelvinside Academy in Glasgow. Upon graduating in 1939 he entered the University of Glasgow, at much the same time that Germany invaded Poland and Great Britain declared war on Germany. In 1941, aged 19, he interrupted his studies to join the East Riding Yeomanry, a Yorkshire tank regiment that formed part of the Royal Armoured Corps. In time he reached the rank of captain. He went ashore with his unit in Normandy on D-Day, an occasion that, not surprisingly, stayed with him for the rest of his life. On the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary on June 6, 1994, he contributed a heartfelt and humorous short piece to the *Globe and Mail*, 'Crossing the Channel on a summer's day'.

He fought in North-West Europe until V-E Day, returning to the University of Glasgow in 1945. When he left it again in 1947, this time permanently, he had a Master of Arts degree with first class honours in History. The next three years he spent at Trinity College, Oxford, where he obtained the D.Phil. degree and began his teaching career. He joined the academic staff of the University of Aberdeen in 1950 as Lecturer in British Imperial and Commonwealth History. His son Roderick Charles Stuart was born that same year. Thornton had married Janet Joan Mowat in 1948; their younger son, Andrew Rohan George, was born in 1953.

During his seven years at Aberdeen, Thornton completed his first book, based on his doctoral dissertation, *West-India Policy under the Restoration* (Clarendon Press, 1956). Even before he left Aberdeen in 1957 to become Professor and Chairman of the Department of History of the University College of the West Indies, Jamaica, he had begun work on his first important work of synthesis, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies: A Study in British Power*. Published by Macmillan in 1959, it at once gained recognition as a major contribution to the subject, and it appeared in a second edition in 1985.

One of the book's points was that human beings are shaped not only by material circumstances, but by ideas and the forms of behaviour that they bring about. 'The world as we know it today is the product of a series of imperialisms,' Thornton wrote in a key passage: 'It lies in the shadow of other men's victories and defeats, won and lost yesterday. We use a spiritual and intellectual currency we did not ourselves mint. And this is what Rousseau so exclaims against, in his celebrated outburst that man is born free and is everywhere in chains. It is not a political system, it is life, he is railing against. Man is not born free. He is born into a family and into a society, into a time and into a place; and if he finds none of these propitious, he is bound to call them chains.'

In his third and final year at the University College of the West Indies, Thornton was Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He then joined the University of Toronto as Professor of History, teaching there

until his retirement. Always productive as a scholar, he was particularly so during the 1960s, which saw the publication of *Doctrines of Imperialism* (1965) and *The Habit of Authority: Paternalism in British History* (1966). The year 1968 saw the publication of *For the File on Empire*, a collection of his essays and reviews published in various journals since 1950. By this time he was widely recognized as one of the pre-eminent authorities on the history of the British Empire and as the possessor of a truly elegant prose style. Economy and clarity of language were his hallmarks in the classroom as well.

While on sabbatical in 1965-66, he was the Smuts Fellow at Cambridge University, and the Commonwealth Fellow at St John's College, Cambridge. In 1966 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Upon his return to Toronto, he served as Chairman of the History Department from 1967 to 1972. From then on he focused his energies on teaching and writing. In his teaching he was fair-minded and analytical, and evidently in full command of his subjects of imperialism in general and British imperialism in particular. 'The essence of empire is control,' I can hear him say in his inimitable Scottish burr, as he discussed the fall of the British Empire after the Second World War. (Like many of his remarks, this has wider application.) A fount of helpful advice, he was readily accessible to students wishing to consult him. The high esteem in which colleagues and former students held him was evident in his election to the Royal Society of Canada, Academy II, in 1977, and in the Festschrift presented to him in 1986, edited by Gordon Martel and introduced by Nicholas Mansergh: *Studies in British Imperial History: Essays in Honour of A.P. Thornton*.

He retired from the University of Toronto in 1987, having spent part of his final teaching year as a visiting Fellow at the Sackler Institute at Tel Aviv University. This gave him an opportunity to observe at first hand the accuracy of a remark made while addressing the Graduate Students' History Society in the Upper Library of Massey College in 1964 or 1965. Commenting on Great Britain's policy towards Palestine, and how it foreshadowed the embattled condition of Israel after 1948, he made another statement with wider application: 'Two wrongs don't make a right, and two rights make nothing but trouble.'

Thornton continued to write and to speak publicly until just before his death. His 1987 statement, 'South Africa: The Divestment Issue,' recommending that the University of Toronto divest itself of investments in South Africa, was characteristically epigrammatic and humane. His contribution to volume 5 of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* (1999), 'The Shaping of Imperial History', showed him undiminished in his ability to deal lucidly with complex subjects.

He was predeceased by his wife and survived by his two sons and his long-time companion Nancy Gottschalk. A lover of books, theatre, film, chess, good conversation, and single malt whisky, he will live on in the memories of those who are fortunate enough to have known him and to have learned from him.

*Michiel Horn, FRSC
Professor Emeritus of History
Glendon College of York University*

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)