

Professor F. M. L. Thompson

1925–2017

It is with great sadness that the Society announces the death of Professor F. M. L. (Michael) Thompson on 23 August at the age of 92. The Society offers its condolences to his widow, Anne and to his family.

Michael Thompson was a distinguished and intellectually formidable economic historian, much of whose work was devoted to elucidating the experience of the English landed classes in the nineteenth and twentieth century. He never limited himself to agricultural history, or indeed economic history. Members of the Society often know best his book on *English landed society in the nineteenth century* (1963) but this represents only a small part of his contribution to our discipline. But if there was Thompson the agricultural historian, there was also Thompson the urban historian, Thompson the social historian, Thompson the historian of the English landed classes and industrial entrepreneurs. He wrote generally about the nature of English society from a perspective that was more middle class than Marxist: calling more on notions of respectability than class conflict. His collected essays appeared shortly before his death.

Thompson was of an age that he was at school before the war (he recalled being taught by W. H. Auden at prep school), undertook military service during the War and only then went to Oxford to read History. From 1951 he was appointed to the staff of University College London: until his retirement he worked entirely in the colleges of the University of London, latterly as Director of the Institute of Historical Research from 1977 to 1990.

Michael Thompson received many honours. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1979 and gave the Ford Lectures at Oxford in 1994 (published as *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain 1780–1980*). His distinction was such that he is the only individual to date – and probably always will be – to serve as President of the Royal Historical Society, the Economic History Society and our own society. Thompson served on the Executive Committee of the Society from 1968 to 1999. (Society legend has it that he was proposed and elected, and only subsequently found not to be a member of the Society.) He was chairman of the Executive Committee from 1980 to 1983 and our President in 1989–92. In 2005 the Society honoured him by holding the Winter Conference as a celebration of his eightieth birthday. Michael Turner and John Beckett gave a paper which challenged a Thompsonian interpretation made forty years earlier. However, even at that stage of life, Thompson's mastery of the field was such that he was able to respond by producing a paper that mounted a sturdy and convincing defence of his earlier assessment. When this came to be published in the *Review*, it was, he noted in the text he submitted for 'Notes on Contributors', the only time he had published there except as a reviewer. He was for many years a constant presence at the Society's meetings and conferences and many in the Society will recall his joviality and generosity of spirit.

Michael Thompson lived through and contributed to a period when Economic History was seen as a central part of the undergraduate History curriculum. He used no advanced statistics, no econometric modelling. His forte was the adroitness with which he handled figures whilst deploying a historian's humanity, insight and perspective to address issues which he believed important and revealing of the past. He was instantly recognisable both in person and by his initials: in more ways than one, there will be no FMLT in the future.