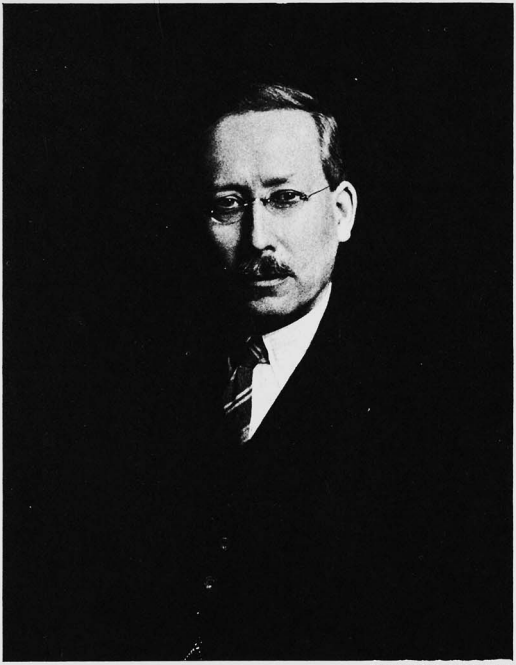
PLATE XV



Photograph by J. Russell & Sons

HENRY THOMAS, 1938

HENRY THOMAS

1878–1952

HENRY THOMAS was born at Eynsham, near Oxford, on 21 November 1878, as the second son of Alfred Charles Thomas, at the time minister of the local Irvingite congregation. His mother (*née* Friday) may have been of Huguenot stock. The family is said to have had its origin in south Wales but to have migrated to Coventry in the seventeenth century; most members of it practised the craft of silk weaving of which Coventry was long the centre. Henry's parents moved to Birmingham in 1883 and he himself began a connexion with that city which lasted all his life and of which he was always proud. A relative writes of his early days:

In Birmingham Henry attended a 'church school' and immediately attracted the attention of the head-master by his superior mental powers. On his recommendation he was allowed to take the King Edward VI Grammar School examination and passed into the Aston school with distinction, although at that time he knew no foreign languages. He later told the story that on his first day, when he found that he had been placed with lads who had already acquired some elementary knowledge of Latin and French, he burst into tears. But it was not long before he had caught up with the others. The head-master at that time was Mr. Temperley, a kind-hearted man who gave Henry much encouragement. This no doubt helped him to pass through the school with such distinction. Examinations presented no difficulty to him and he always came out at or very near the top.

It was as head of the school that Thomas matriculated at Mason College (later the University of Birmingham), where he had a brilliant academic career, distinguishing himself in French and the classical languages as well as in English philology; although his bent was mainly linguistic he was not without aptitude for mathematics. His knowledge of French was exceptionally thorough and accurate and he was the favourite pupil of his teacher, Professor C. Bévenot. So qualified, he had no difficulty in passing the examination for an assistantship in the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum. He entered upon his new duties in October 1903 and after he had gone through the beginner's stage of cataloguing current accessions of copyright and other books Alfred Pollard obtained his services on the *Catalogue of Books printed in the XVth Century now in the British Museum* which had recently started upon its protracted

career. Pollard and Thomas were quick to appreciate each other's qualities and Pollard always spoke of Thomas, both as a man and a bibliographer, with the highest regard. It was Pollard's considered opinion that the exact attention to detail involved in this work was the best possible bibliographical training, and Thomas certainly took the lessons of the incunabula to heart, although he did not actually contribute very much to the *Catalogue*, his share in it gradually dwindling and ceasing altogether about 1920. Meanwhile he had become ever more engrossed in the study of the literature and bibliography of the Iberian Peninsula. His first start on this brought him into contact with Harold Bell (later to become Keeper of Manuscripts and Sir Harold Bell) who had entered the British Museum at the same time. Both young assistants found themselves desiderating a knowledge of Spanish, Thomas for the special reason that he had been set to catalogue the extensive Cervantes collection bequeathed to the Museum by H. S. Ashbee. They accordingly took a course of lessons from a Spaniard, but whereas Bell proceeded to specialize in other fields Spanish rapidly became Thomas's chief interest and he made such brilliant progress in this branch of learning that by 1910 he had already achieved an international reputation as a Hispanologist and was ultimately acknowledged as an outstanding interpreter of Spanish culture in this country. Among the many honours which came to him here were those of Honorary Councillor in the Spanish Higher Council for Scientific Research and President of the Anglo-Spanish Society from 1931 to 1947, and when his monograph on *Spanish and Portuguese Romances of Chivalry* appeared in 1920 the Institut d'Estudis Catalans took cognizance of it by awarding him the Bonsoms prize and gold medal in the following year. Thomas's preface to this interesting and freshly written book remarks:

> The following chapters represent, in an extended form, a course of six lectures . . . delivered as the Norman MacColl Lectures in the University of Cambridge during the spring of 1917. Their chief object is to provide a comprehensive review of a remarkable popular literary movement which began in the Spanish Peninsula about the turn of the fifteenth century, spread over Western Europe, including our own country, and having flourished and exercised a considerable influence for a time, died out so completely as to be well-nigh forgotten nowadays except by students.

Cervantes, however, was his first love in Spanish and for Cervantine studies he always had a special regard, contributing

to them, among other things, a bibliography of the minor works of Cervantes which is still in manuscript. His work on the Ashbee Cervantes collection had caused him to realize how much was still wanting to complete the sequence of editions of the English translations of *Don Quixote* at the British Museum. Many of them could be obtained at no great cost from the antiquarian booksellers, and Thomas, keeping a watchful eye on their catalogues, accumulated a substantial row of these books, which he presented to the Museum after his retirement. His wider interests in the language are exemplified by verse translations of *La Estrella de Sevilla*, an anonymous drama of the seventeenth century, and of J. E. Hartzenbusch's *Los Amantes de Teruel*, much of these versions being done at odd moments or on the daily journeys between Wandsworth Common (on the outskirts of which were his lodgings) and Bloomsbury. He also edited the original text of the earlier play and this, like the translation, went into a second edition. Early in 1936 the only known copy of a contemporary Portuguese account of the discovery of Abyssinia was presented by the Friends of the National Libraries to the British Museum and made the subject of an official publication by the Trustees, to which Thomas contributed an admirably clear and informative introduction, an English translation, and short notes (*The Discovery of Abyssinia by the Portuguese in 1520*, London, 1938).

Long before this, however, Thomas had begun to make himself responsible for a series of Museum publications of great bibliographical usefulness. The first of these, completed in 1921, was a *Short-title Catalogue of Spanish Books printed before 1601 in the British Museum* which broke new ground as far as the national collection was concerned. In view of the large number of titles involved—not less than 2,500—it was essential that their bulk should be reduced to the minimum consistent with intelligibility and Thomas carefully worked out the scheme for ensuring this which he explains in his preface. The high standard of accuracy of the entries and the clear typographical layout made an outstanding success of the volume, which contrived not to exceed the compass of 101 pages, and it was followed by catalogues on the same lines of the early French books ('12,000 editions in a single handy volume') in 1924, of the early Portuguese books in 1940, and of the Spanish-American books in 1944.[1] Unofficially Thomas found time to write a *History of Spanish Printing in the*

[1] Catalogues of the early German and Italian books on the same plan are in preparation at the Museum at the time of writing.

16th Century for the series 'Periods of Typography' edited by Stanley Morison (1926) and a paper on *Spanish Copperplate Engraving* and a volume on *Early Spanish Bookbindings of the XI–XV Centuries* (1939) for the Bibliographical Society, of which he was President in 1936–8. The latter book forms no. xxiii of the Society's 'Illustrated Monographs' and is remarkable for the admirable illustrations made from photographs which Thomas himself took in the course of his many visits to Spain.

These visits, which were a great satisfaction and refreshment to him, began about 1910, when he journeyed by sea to Algeciras and thence through Spain from south to north. His capacity for associating with all sorts of people, his reasonableness, and his freedom from insular prejudice made him friends wherever he went; his independence of character was a quality which Spaniards could well appreciate and they must quickly have realized that he was very different from the conventional Englishman of tradition. He came into contact with all the principal bookmen of Spain, and one of the chief friendships of his life was with Eduardo Toda y Güell, a bibliographer and collector who lived in the castle of Escornalbou, near Reus in Catalonia; Thomas always spoke with particular pleasure of the days passed there. Toda translated into Catalan one of his shorter pieces entitled *Monster and Miracle*, which tells with quiet humour and easy learning a miracle story current among medieval pilgrims to the shrine of St. James at Compostella. The English original, privately printed for the author in 1935, was enlivened with photographs of the town connected with the story taken by his younger brother Charles, who was often his travelling companion. With him Thomas retraced on foot the famous pilgrimage to Santiago and was able in consequence to suggest certain corrections of the accepted itinerary of the pilgrims. The Spanish Civil War and Hitler's War which followed put a stop to these excursions and when Thomas was able to resume his visits he was much concerned to counteract the misunderstandings which had arisen between Spain and his own country in the meanwhile. He was indeed haunted by the bitterness which the civil war had engendered and by the loss under more or less tragic circumstances of too many of his friends and acquaintances. At home his generosity to exiles and refugees from the Peninsula was as great as his reluctance to speak of it. He broadcast to Spain several times in 'La Voz de Londres' and his last two journeys to the country were undertaken as the guest of the Spanish government, that of 1947 being connected with the

elaborate celebrations in honour of the fourth centenary of the birth of Cervantes.

In 1943 Thomas became Principal Keeper of Printed Books at the Museum. He had already reached the normal retiring age, which is extended in certain cases, and his health was not what it should have been, but he was much interested in the work, both as it dealt with post-war reconstruction and as it brought him into contact with staff problems. The time, however, was not propitious to developing any new policy and he had to be in the main content with restoring the Department to normal routine. After his retirment in 1947 he plunged with new ardour into the Spanish studies which his official preoccupations had so often forced him to put temporarily aside, but it was at further cost to his health, already affected by the strenuous nature of his last visits to Spain. His changed appearance had for some time been causing concern to his friends when in the autumn of 1950 he had a seizure. This was followed by others, painfully aggravating a skin trouble which had distressed him for several years, and it was as a friend that death came to him on 21 July 1952.

Thomas was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1936 and was knighted in 1946. He held the degrees of D.Litt. and Hon. LL.D. of Birmingham University and that of D.Lit. of London University, and he was a member, corresponding or honorary, of numerous academies of Spain, Portugal, and South America.

However remarkable his record as a scholar, it was nevertheless by his personal qualities first and foremost that Thomas impressed. His integrity was absolute and as he was incapable of any action in the slightest degree equivocal, so he could be stern in his condemnation of bad faith in others. His ordinary manner was calm and self-possessed, but it needed only a short acquaintance to show that it masked an extremely kind heart and great delicacy of feeling. He was an entirely loyal friend and could be relied on for ungrudging help, given as though a matter of course, in any emergency. At the same time Alfred Pollard was well justified in describing him as 'a first-class fighting man'. He combined sound judgement with determination and presence of mind to an exceptional degree and those who challenged him risked a defeat which was the more impressive for being so quietly inflicted. He was devoted to his family at Birmingham and was very fond of children and young things generally, but he never married.

Spain and the British Museum were far from exhausting Thomas's interests, hard worker though he was. He had his own opinions on current topics and liked to set them out gravely and in measured terms. His all too frequent bouts of sickness gave occasion for medical disquisitions which sometimes made him appear a valetudinarian, whereas in fact he faced his increasing infirmities with almost impersonal courage; he once remarked to the present writer that he had sometimes thought of taking up medicine as a study. His skill as a photographer has already been mentioned, and when between the wars he took to motoring he acquired a good practical knowledge of the car's mechanism. It is probable that his keen eye for defects in a blue print prevented an important room in the Department of Printed Books from being reconstructed without adequate lighting, while on an occasion when the working of an old-time printing press was being demonstrated to a group of visitors, Thomas, who was one of the audience, quietly and lucidly set right the confused account of which the demonstrator had been delivering himself. In his younger days he acquired some skill in singing and regularly attended the musical evenings of the Oxford and Cambridge Musical Club in Bedford Square, as well as publishing an essay on *Musical Settings of Horace's Lyric Poems* in the Proceedings of the Musical Association.

V. SCHOLDERER

Mr. Stanley Morison has contributed some more personal reminiscences of Thomas in the following pages:

Dr. Scholderer has asked one who, though often seen with him in the Museum, was never a professional scholar nor a civil servant, to contribute a note about Thomas the man rather than the academician.

The man I knew blended to a conspicuous degree observation and discrimination with precision and thoroughness. His great powers of industry, high conscientiousness, keen sense of duty and unflagging loyalty, made him a perfect public servant. The description is that of a born and accomplished embodiment of bourgeois efficiency; and Thomas was precisely that. He was, too, self-contained and moved by simple convictions. He never doubted the supreme value to England of the class from which he sprang, or the unique industrial energy of the provincial city whence he came. Half a century of London never induced in him any craving for connexion with the cold shade of aristocracy. He remained faithful to the middle class and to the

midlands. For such a man translated to London, residence near Clapham Junction was appropriate. As he claimed it, 'Clap. Junc.' was within walking distance of the Museum: it was an efficient place to live at. And Thomas, who was hard-headed about money affairs, was not the man to waste anything on the metropolis. London S.W.11 suited him far better than S.W.1 or N.W.3. The social pretensions of 'Clap. Junc.' were not high—nor was the standard rent. Also its climate suited him. Unlike many provincials in London, Thomas hankered not after society either of the intellectuals of Hampstead or the aesthetes of Chelsea. London was Bloomsbury, and Bloomsbury was the Museum. For him Gordon Square did not exist. His week-ends were generally spent at home in Birmingham where he gave his spare time to something practical: work.

He equilibrated these middle-class virtues with an humanly-wide fund of humour, native freedom from pomp, and a complete absence of self-consciousness. His ambition was to do worthily what he was paid to do, and 'recognition', either given or received, needed to be unsought. He was accessible to the public and agreeable to all members of it with whom he came into contact provided they knew how to behave in the Museum. All were welcome to Bloomsbury who knew the rules of the place and obeyed them. Ignorant or lawless readers were quickly, crisply, and unambiguously instructed. There was, indeed, small difficulty in establishing contact with Dr. Thomas as he was in the mid 1920's, when he was in daily charge of the North Library—to attract his attention it was only necessary to commit some minor misdemeanour. At that time he occupied a high desk, from which he could, with a glance from an eye that a golden eagle might envy, observe any barbarian who should turn down the corner of a page, or lick his forefinger for the purpose of speeding through a book. Detection in an offence of this sort immediately brought Dr. Thomas down from his high desk to the side of the astonished delinquent. Such an incident provided my first opportunity for speech with him. Was the book I was spitting on, he asked, my own property or that of the Trustees?

The chiding was unforgettable, but my transgression in the North Library was a *felix culpa*. I now had the personal acquaintance of Dr. Thomas whom hitherto I had known by sight as five and a half feet of the finest Anglo-Spanish bibliographical learning, and by gossip as an official of the stricter sort. He was then forty-five and I thirty-five. From my answer and the books

I had in hand, he judged me to be what I was, a native Londoner, less efficient indeed than himself, and more philistine; with whom, however, something could be done. My word, on the honour of a Cockney, that the 'spitting' offence would not be repeated, was accepted. Thus began a friendship that endured for nearly thirty years. Our interests overlapped. Work on the *Short Title Catalogue of French Books of the XVI Century* fitted him to join in such an enterprise as a bibliography of the books printed by Denys Janot. This we began together. I was a rank outsider in Cervantes studies, but we came together over Spanish calligraphy, and other general subjects.

A year or two later we were meeting not only frequently, but weekly. Desiring to order his movements to suit colleagues with greater domestic responsibilities than his own, he put in more than his share of the attendances at week-ends and high festivals in the official 'Residence' in which routine by turn immures heads of departments. Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun regularly found us together in Bloomsbury. The 'Residence', while not exactly an elegant apartment in which to study, had slightly more amenity than the average hostel. There were two comfortable beds, one of which I occupied on many occasions—either because, before the war, our talk lasted overlong; or, during the war, the state of the skies and the streets discouraged the walk home. Bombs were of no personal concern to him, but he never ignored his duties to patrol the Museum. I vastly enjoyed these evenings. The 'Residence' in Thomas's days embodied a capable and competent cook. Thomas much loved a cut off the joint and two veg.—and still better to display his high craftsmanship as a carver on the round of beef or the shoulder of lamb which were procurable before the war. I generally contributed the Valdepeñas or the Rioja. Thomas was not remarkable as a bibber, but he could be tempted by wines from Spain. As the 'Residence' was a precinct of the Museum, books could be brought over from the Library for our purposes. Dinner over (there was no fingering of the Trustees' property until the table was cleared), he would describe a recent visit to Montserrat and his conversations with Dom Anselm Albareda, Librarian of the Abbey (and now Prefect of the Vatican Library), or make a running oral translation of Don Domingo Servidori's *Reflexiones*, or some other Spanish work. We collaborated on plans for numerous publications, some of which were actually achieved.

In these evenings he made himself my preceptor in bibliographical method, and raised me above the raw autodidact level

at which I must otherwise have rested. His taut, precise, and unpedantic mind, however swift in all its movements, abhorred any quickness of output that carried with it a risk of inaccuracy. He made me use my eyes to see and note down what might matter in the volume as a whole. Accuracy was to be achieved in re-reading and verifying my notes before incorporating them.

Bibliographical enterprise and energy were abundant before the war. Although Thomas never had what is called good health, and had numerous troublesome (and not altogether minor) disabilities to bear, he stood upright, retained all his life his own teeth, and possessed a good head of hair. He also had enviably good legs. I walked with him several times from Richmond to 'Clap. Junc.'—a considerable distance, traversed, for my sake, at no great speed, though I had the longer leg and stride. It was otherwise when every week during the summer months we customarily caught at London Bridge the cheap mid-day excursion to Brighton, where we took in at five miles an hour the whole of the sea front from Hove to the Brighton end. This feat entitled us to an *hors-d'oeuvre* of whelks and cockles (floating in vinegar) from a stall on the beach level, and a good dinner at the Ship or the Albion. A swift walk up the hill to the station took us to the train home. We shared an interest in railways and collected railway pictures, while not making a cult of ferroviarianism. Inevitably Thomas was all for the L.N.W.R. and the Webb compounds, with a respect, of course, for the great junction at Clapham through which more trains pass day by day than through any other station in Europe.

Thomas was no snob. When he was created a Knight, and promoted to the dignity of Principal Keeper of Printed Books, it made no difference to his relations with me or anybody else. He was a man of modesty to a degree that was, as the booksellers' jargon has it, 'excessively rare'. A beautiful and exact linguist, he exhibited nothing, and threw no scraps of his tongues about drawing rooms or elsewhere. During the Spanish Civil War, when strangers of all sorts from the Peninsula gathered in London, I invited him to one of the many new Spanish restaurants ('English Spoken') that were then being started up by and for these refugees. The house had been open only a week and we were given marvellously ample refreshments, the whole having been ordered by me in English. We were both fully satisfied and while waiting for the bill, I reposed with a lofty conceit of myself for discovering the place. The bill,

when it came, was modesty itself. But I couldn't meet it—I had come without cash. Worse still, Thomas had enough for himself only. The black-jowled proprietor who looked like an anarchist (and probably was) expressed in the best English he could (for his purpose it was more than sufficiently clear) that he was not impressed by promises to pay, I must fetch the money now. Only then did Thomas prove that he had something worth more than money. He looked discriminatingly at the proprietor and spoke to him in Catalan. We were saved. Our new-made friend showed us photographs of his children in first communion dress and a villainously coloured picture of the Pope.

Thomas's modesty is not to be mistaken for nervousness. While he was not bothered with any sense of 'mission' or feeling that he had a 'message' to deliver, he liked being in demand for lectures and broadcasts on Spanish subjects. Like many other great talkers, Thomas was a reserved man, knowing that confidence comes from reticence and that friendship reposes on both. We exchanged no tokens of affection. It was sufficient to be of service one to the other. Thus he brought me from Spain, after much searching, a choice copy of Iciar's *Arte Subtilisima*. From politics he was singularly detached, though during the Spanish Civil War he knew where his sympathies lay. We talked more ecclesiology than religion. If he came gladly with me to St. Patrick's in Soho it was probably because he liked to hear sung in London the Latin and virtually the same basic chant with which Montserrat had familiarized him.

In 1950 his university, Birmingham, of which he had early become a doctor, conferred an honorary D.Litt. upon the present writer, in company with Professor Wallace Notestein, of Yale, and Dr. James Mountford, of Liverpool. The occasion was the pleasantest. Thomas, of course, was present and took the keenest pleasure, with Professor Thomas Bodkin, in charting my course and piloting me through the intricate business of vesting and all the ceremonies proper to admission to the degree. That was the last time I saw him at his best.

When separated by circumstances he was always a splendid correspondent. Even during the visit he made to America with the then Director and Principal Librarian of the Museum, Sir John Forsdyke, in 1946, he found it possible to write long and amusing accounts of adventures in New York, Washington, and Chicago. We continued to correspond when, in 1951, his health began to break. It became first difficult and then impossible for him to travel from Birmingham to London. But to the end his

correspondence remained lively. He never lost his trick of dropping into verse, or ending with some jesting question.

When I last saw him he was obviously not well, and talked with effort. But the talk was good. I was in the presence of the man I had first encountered in the North Library. The essential Thomas was in the armchair before me. He was as attractive as ever, if less piercing in his exchanges; as gay in spirit, though noticeably distracted. He was still exact, though conscious of shortcomings, at last, in his formerly exceptional memory. He was still enthusiastic to complete the slips on Denys Janot, though aware that time was passing. He was no less keen to have news of Bloomsbury. I observed the same old desire to know what extension of sound learning I had lately perceived. And it was thus that I left the friend whom I had revered and esteemed for over thirty years.