

A FURTHER NOTE ON JOHN JONES THOMAS, *BRITANNIA ANTIQUISSIMA*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO a short article in the first number of the Society's *Bulletin* demonstrated that the 'second edition' of John Jones Thomas's *Britannia Antiquissima; or, a key to the philology of history (sacred and profane)* (Melbourne, H.T. Dwight, 1866) was effectively a re-issue of the sheets of the first edition of 1860 (not recorded by Ferguson, who lists the 'second' under no. 17023), although the differences between the two extend beyond a cancelled title-page to resetting of the two plates and of gatherings A and B of the text.¹ The former school inspector's justification (verso of cancellans title) that the first edition had been 'exhausted' and that he had been 'unable to satisfy the various demands' for his book made 'by numerous friends' was therefore seen to be lacking in candour, to say the least.

Even in its renewed form *Britannia Antiquissima* was not an obvious success with the Australian public. Evidence collected incidentally in the course of other research points to some of the difficulties faced by Thomas and by his publisher, Henry Tolman Dwight, although no document indicating the size of the print run of this excursion into Celtic philological speculation seems to have been preserved.

When Dwight died on 13 June 1871 after a short but brilliant career as a bookseller and publisher in the Melbourne of the period after the Gold Rush,² his business was wound up and the stock sold by auction. The main sale, conducted by Cohen & Co., began on 28 August 1872 and lasted fourteen days, disposing of some 35,000 volumes arranged as 4555 lots. Despite the printing of 2000 copies of the auction catalogue only three of these are known to have survived into the twentieth century.³ A supplementary sale by the same auctioneers on 4 November 1872 cleared a further 2000 volumes.⁴

Dwight's stock included some lines in stationery but essentially new and secondhand books, some of them of a distinctly antiquarian character. The titles present in substantial numbers were either the bookseller's own publications or school textbooks from other houses in the Australian colonies or in Britain. Although Thomas's work was less of an embarrassment to the estate than some other items held in scores if not hundreds of copies, for example Menasseh Ben Israel's address to Oliver Cromwell of 1655 (reprinted by Dwight in 1868, Ferguson 10834), *The Cordial and Liqueur Maker's Guide and Publican's Instructor* (2nd edition, 1869, Ferguson 8691), Aristide Deltas's *A Key to the Pronunciation of French as spoken in Paris* (1868, Ferguson 9083) and M.K. Beveridge's *Gatherings among the Gum-Trees* (Melbourne, James Reid, 1863, Morris Miller I, 240), a total of fifty-eight remnants of the 'second edition' scattered over the two catalogues⁵ suggests durable buyer resistance.

Two years afterwards Thomas himself still had a copy of his book to give to a foreign visitor. Achille Ballière (1840–1905), architect, *communard* and later Paris municipal councillor,⁶ was deported to New Caledonia, but escaped with Henri de Rochefort to Australia, whence they returned to Europe. In 1875 Ballière published an account of his adventures under the title *Un Voyage de circumnavigation. Histoire de la déportation par un des évadés de Nouméa*,⁷ which has remained one of the least well known of temporary residents' accounts of the Australian colonies.⁸ In April 1874 the escapee was cordially received in Melbourne, whose liberal climate and institutions he praised with some enthusiasm:

Je reçois des livres, des volumes qui me sont adressés par les auteurs.

Le plus intéressant est certainement celui qui m'est remis par M.J.J. Thomas, ancien inspecteur des écoles de Victoria. Cet ouvrage a pour titre: *Britannia antiquissima; or, a key to the philology of history (sacred and profane)*. Cet ouvrage a été publié par Henri Tolman Dwight et imprimé par Clarson, Shallard et Cie, imprimeurs à Melbourne. M. Thomas est assez aimable pour bien vouloir joindre à ce premier cadeau la loi votée par le Parlement sur l'instruction, qui est dans cet heureux pays tout à fait gratuite, absolument laïque et obligatoire.⁹

Later Thomas saw Ballière off on the *Norfolk*,¹⁰ where the latter examined at leisure his little travelling library:

j'y trouve un livre très-intéressant qui m'a été offert par l'auteur, M.J. Thomas; mais c'est de l'anglais, et de l'anglais bondé de science et de mots scientifiques, ce qui le rend bien difficile pour un étranger.¹¹

The rest is silence, and there is no way of knowing whether Ballière ever struggled through the 'scientific' language of *Britannia Antiquissima* to absorb its message. At all events, the precision of his bibliographical citation allows one to suppose that the volume was in front of him when he was writing the first version of his reminiscences.

The second, revised edition of Ballière's story, published as *La déportation de 1871. Souvenirs d'un évadé de Nouméa* in 1889,¹² notes that the author was presented with various volumes in Melbourne, records Thomas's name in the group of his acquaintances, but omits any reference to *Britannia Antiquissima*.¹³ That ill-fated work thus relapsed into the obscurity from which few but bibliographers and historians of the book trade would now wish to rescue it.

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¹ Wallace Kirsop, 'John Jones Thomas, *Britannia Antiquissima* — Addenda to Ferguson 17023', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand. Bulletin*, no. 1 (March 1970), 7–10.

² See Ian F. McLaren's entry on Dwight in *ADB*, 4, 121–2. The research I reported provisionally in a lecture to the Society on 23 August 1975 under the title 'H.T. Dwight and Secondhand Book-selling in Melbourne in the 1860's' is still not finished.

³ The Mitchell Library copy lacks the title leaf and is not annotated with prices. The Baillieu Library copy (apparently annotated) is missing. An annotated copy formerly in the possession of Robert Castles Miller, an employee of Dwight and subsequently author of *Books: their History and Influence* (Melbourne, M.L. Hutchinson, 1883 — see the reprint with an introduction by Annette Potts published by Gaston Renard in 1977), is still in private hands. The last-mentioned collates: 160 leaves, pp. [3] 6–321 [1].

⁴ R.C. Miller's former copy is the only one known to me. It collates: 14 leaves, pp. [3] 2–25 [1]. According to a note in Miller's hand lots 230 to 284 came from a different source.

⁵ Main sale, lots 233, 919, 1338, 2671, 2964, 3004, 3246, 3289, 3392, 3558, 3591, 3689, 3890, 4020, 4195, 4226, 4231, 4245 and 4293. Supplementary sale, lots 10, 63 and 233. The list price of the 'second edition' was 7/6, but some copies went at auction for as little as 3d each.

⁶ See *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, IV, col. 1487.

⁷ London, Henry S. King and Co. (Ferguson 6595).

⁸ It is not included in L.L. Politzer's admittedly quite unsatisfactory *Bibliography of French Literature on Australia 1595–1946* (Melbourne, 1952). At the time of the publication of the relevant volume of the *Catalogue général des livres imprimés* no copy was held in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. I have to thank M. Jean Viardot for drawing my attention to it.

⁹ *Un Voyage de circumnavigation*, pp. 295–6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹² Paris, G. Charpentier et Cie (Ferguson 6596).

¹³ *La déportation de 1871*, pp. 400, 402, 404.

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