HOMER
ARMSTRONG
THOMPSON
(1906-2000)
&
THE UNIVERSITY
OF
BRITISH COLUMBIA

A Memorial Tribute

Compiled
By
Robert B. Todd
Acknowledgments

Hope Kerr, Homer Thompson’s daughter, in addition to providing some of the photographs included here, kindly made available the memoirs by her sister and father cited in the opening section above, and also granted permission for the use of her father’s U.B.C. transcript. My History of Classics at U.B.C. 1915-1975, due to be published later this year, will include more information about the faculty members and students who were Homer Thompson’s contemporaries. An electronic version of this tribute is available on the web site of the Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies (http://www.arts.ubc.ca/cners/history.htm).

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Robert B. Todd
Vancouver
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Preface

The death of Homer Armstrong Thompson on May 7, 2000 produced an outpouring of tributes to a man widely regarded as one of the foremost classical archaeologists of the twentieth century, forever identified with the excavation of the ancient Athenian market place, the Agora. But his passing had special significance at the University of British Columbia, the institution where between 1921 and 1927 he earned his first two academic degrees. His alma mater had long since recognized his achievements with an honorary degree (1949) and with its Alumni Merit Award (1967). Also, at the time of his death its Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies was in the process of establishing the Homer Armstrong Thompson Travel Scholarship in Classical Studies following a generous donation by the heirs of his sister, Doris Baldwin. More importantly, Homer Thompson remained proud throughout his life of his heritage in Western Canada, and retained close links with his alma mater, as he watched its Classics Department expand between 1954 and 1975 under the leadership of Malcolm Francis McGregor (1910-1989), and saw the study and practice of classical archaeology established there. The present tribute is both a record and a celebration of Homer Thompson’s early years in British Columbia and of his enduring connections with its premier university.
Before U.B.C.

“My family, Scotch on my father’s side, Northern Irish on my mother’s, reached the Chilliwack area in 1908 via the Ottawa Valley, the Rainy River area of Western Ontario, and Vancouver.” So runs Homer Thompson’s own description of his origins.

His parents were William James Thompson (1875-1965) and Sarah Gertrude Armstrong (1880-1969), descendants of settlers in the Ottawa valley in the mid-nineteenth century. As one of his daughters (Pamela Sinder Tod) has noted, “throughout his life, Homer preserved the unique accent of his parents and this region of Canada.” She has also vividly portrayed his parents.

“William James (W.J.) Thompson was a bit of a renaissance pioneer, a good-looking Scot with black wavy hair and bright blue eyes, he was a neat dresser who always, always, wore a tie. He was a softer individual than Gertrude, but could be rock stubborn as well. A strict parent, he demanded 150% from everyone, but was fair. He had earned a teaching certificate after high school, but had also worked as a lumberjack in the wilds of Quebec and developed into an excellent carpenter. He had received a classical education, and in later life returned to Latin and Greek, and read in the literature.” As for Gertrude, “she was fairly tall for our family, about 5’7”, with Irish reddish curly hair, and a medium build. Although she was rather severe looking with a powerful presence, she had a hearty infectious laugh which we all enjoyed. As a young woman she had learned a diploma in music in Quebec and went door to door teaching piano. She tried to teach Homer music, but, in his own words, gave him up as hopeless.”

William James and Gertrude were married in 1903 in Shawville, Quebec, and moved to Devlin (once described as a “90 person backwater, west of Port Frances”) in western Ontario, where on September 7, 1906 Homer was born, the second of five children, and the eldest son. In 1907 the family, then consisting of Homer and his elder sister Jean, left Ontario, and, to quote from Homer’s own account, his parents “bought an 80 acre farm eight miles east of the town of Chilliwack on the edge of Rosedale, one of the tiny satellite villages served by the town. Ours was the second generation of white settlers in that part of the Fraser Valley. There were still a good many Indians there, living largely on reservations. They provided us with

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Appendix Two: Citation for the Degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa)
Conferred at Fall Congregation, October 26, 1949

Mr. Chancellor, I have the honour to present a graduate of this University, HOMER ARMSTRONG THOMPSON, archaeologist, classical scholar and humanist. There is not a university in the English-speaking world today, and surely few in any foreign country, which will not automatically associate his name with the Agora of Athens, for it is with the deliberate and laborious excavation of that site that he has now for twenty years been continuously associated. From Professor of Classical Archaeology in the University of Toronto, and Curator of Classical Antiquities in the Royal Ontario Museum, he has become Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow of the German Archaeological Institute of Berlin, President of the Archaeological Institute of America, and, finally, Fellow of Classical Archaeology in the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University. In further recognition of the brilliant work of a man who is one of the world’s greatest living archaeologists, the Senate of his own University now presents him for the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

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The Thompson family, Christmas 1920.

Back row: Hugh, Jean, Doris, Homer (in short pants).

Front row: W.J., Gordon, Gertrude

Credit: Hope Kerr

Homer Thompson in the Agora Museum at Athens in the 1930s.

Credit: Hope Kerr
Appendix One: The Young Homer As Seen By Contemporaries

The Twelfth U.B.C. Annual, the university’s student year book for 1924-25, has the following entry for Homer Armstrong Thompson.

Homer, the youngest member of our class, comes from Rosedale, where he spent his earlier childhood. He entered Varsity winning a scholarship, a habit which he finds hard to overcome. Although the best of good fellows, he felt the call of his early namesake, and so was lost to Classics. His is also a relay man, inter-class soccer and rugby player, President of the Classics Club and business manager of the ‘Ulysses.’ One and only failing – going to sleep in church.

excellent salmon and fine basketry, and were beginning to profit from the very practical education, especially in agriculture and domestic science, designed for them in a school in the village of Sardis.”

The “farm” was initially virgin forest, and above the land towered 8,000 foot Mt. Cheam, overlooking the Fraser Valley. Pamela Sinkler Todd records that “with a pair of horses, Maude and Mary, two men and a cross-cut saw, William James Thompson cleared the land, built the family homestead, and started a dairy farm of fifty head of Holsteins, a dozen pigs, and fifty Rhode Island Reds.”

Both parents were also active in the local community. W.J. served on school boards, while Gertrude drew on her musical training to serve as an organist at the Presbyterian church. W.J. was also a leader in the organization of the Fraser Valley Milk Producers’ Association which, as Homer said, “brought order into the most important branch of industry in the valley at that time” and “became something of a role model across the country.” It was the ancestor of today’s conglomerate Dairyland.

Homer’s earliest education was at a school two and a half miles from the farm. The children would rise at 5 a.m., help in bringing in the herds from pasture and in milking them, and then walk to the school, a modest three-room structure “presided over by three excellent teachers, all women.” But education proper began with high school in Chilliwack, eight miles from the farm, in 1918.

Homer recalled that “since there was no daily bus service from Rosedale to Chilliwack, I spent five days each week in town, living with a widowed woman, Mrs. Bradwin, and her two grown children. The three-year course, largely prescribed and humanistic in content, with a little physics thrown in, was well taught. But what interested me especially were the courses in Ancient History and the Latin language, brilliantly taught by a retired clergyman, Rev. Fraser by name. It was this good teaching at an impressionable age that led to my majoring in Classics when I entered the University of British Columbia in 1921.”

But while the Chilliwack high school may have attracted Homer to Classics, his experience on the farm, as he saw it retrospect, helped in his future career as an archaeologist and historian: “Come summer, all we children joined in the farm work: the dairy, the poultry, the kitchen garden, the orchards. As I look back, I recall one way in which these farming activities were relevant to a future in field archaeology. In the course of digging drainage ditches we had become aware that the rich farmland of the valley had been built up through the ages by the repeated flooding of the Fraser River. Along with soil these floods had left behind many tree trunks, often complete large trees. To reduce their menace to ploughing many of these trees had to be removed by ‘primitive’ trenching, which revealed nicely how delta areas and valleys might be built up.”

His early life also, he claimed, gave him “a sure understanding of major aspects of early Greek history. First: how did the early Greek colonists in the western Mediterranean adjust to the ways of the aborigines, often of decidedly different cultural levels? Secondly, in an old settled part of Greece such as Attica, how did the central authority in Athens deal with the many small but proud local authorities, the Demes? In the Chilliwack Valley of my time we had plenty of first-hand experience of both such situations.”

But before Homer could become either an archaeologist or a historian he needed to complete his higher education, which, after winning a provincial medal for proficiency in what was then called the “Junior Matriculation Examination,” he began in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia (hereafter U.B.C.) in September 1921. He was just fifteen years old.
U.B.C.: The Fairview Years

The university that Homer Thompson entered in 1921 was new and small. It had opened in 1915 with 379 students, and by his first academic year there were 976 undergraduates (37% of them women), and 31 graduate students, numbers that during his six years at U.B.C. would increase to 1469 (43% women) and 46 respectively. His graduating class of 1925 had just 181 members, most of whom were in the single Faculty of Arts and Sciences that dominated the campus in those early years.

“Campus” is a misnomer. This little university was housed in temporary quarters on part of the land occupied by today’s Vancouver Hospital, in an area of the city known as Fairview. Many of its activities were concentrated in a stone building that still stands (the Willow Pavilion), but some were pursued in what were soon called the “Fairview Shacks,” temporary huts that served as classrooms and laboratories. The university was awaiting a move to improved quarters on its present campus at Point Grey, but financial difficulties were delaying this, and it would not occur until 1925, the year of Homer’s graduation.

When Homer arrived at U.B.C. he was the youngest member of his class, and was wearing short trousers, as a fifteen-year-old boy of modest height would have done in those days. Legend has it that some “bairy-legged engineers” fell on him, “deugged him and hoisted the offending shorts on an outside pulley beam in the gable of the physics building where they fluttered ominously to other callow freshmen.”

Such hazing must be seen in context. In U.B.C.’s early days freshmen (fresh-men, at least) invariably faced initiation rites. Thus the Elysian records that members of one incoming class of the early 1920s were “blindfolded and bandaged, with thumbs bound together” and “each Freshman was delivered up to torment,” the ceremony culminating with a large “23” being branded on their foreheads. Compared with this treatment, debagging may not seem so extreme.

The ethos of the institution that Homer entered is embodied in the University’s Calendar for 1921-22. Incoming students had to pass a physical examination, and also (at least until 1924) a moral one, in that they were requested “to report to the Registrar, in writing, the churches which they intend to make their places of worship.” Such information would be “used for the information of the various

Historiographical scholar Phillip Hacking, the current Head of the Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies (into which Classics was merged in 1995), has recently summed up this transformation: “In our early days we trained people such as Homer who went on to achieve great success elsewhere. Now U.B.C. conducts research at excavations which include the university’s own archaeological sites: Mytilene on Lesbos and Sibtiphilos in Arcadia under Hector Williams’ direction, and, under the direction of Tony Barrett, the Late Roman Fort in Britain. Also, Elizabeth Cooper is the Assistant Director of the Canadian Expedition from Université Laval to Tell Acharneh, Syria, where U.B.C. students will soon be able to receive training.”

In June 1973 he returned with his wife for the fiftieth anniversary of his graduation. The Vancouver Sun devoted a full page to his visit, labeling him “The 20th-century Homer who walks with Pericles.” He obliged his interviewer by expressing scepticism about the immediate return of the Elgin Marbles, and by revealing the recent discovery of the state prison in the Agora, and of the cups that were probably used for the hemlock that the likes of Socrates drank when condemned to death by the state.

In the 1980s when profiles of Homer’s teachers were published in the Classics Department’s Newsletter he responded warmly to these efforts to recapture a fading institutional past. In 1990, following the death of Malcolm McGregor, Homer himself had the task of memorialising for the Royal Society of Canada this master architect of the department’s more recent past. He depicted Malcolm in terms that could equally well have applied to any of the men by whom he had himself been trained at U.B.C. in the 1920s: “a compulsive teacher” with “a devotion to both his subject and his pupils.”

Homer Thompson is for U.B.C.’s classicists and archaeologists a vital part of our collective past, and with this pamphlet the story of his family roots in British Columbia and his academic roots at its premier university may become better known.
In the years that followed Homer observed with pleasure the development of classical archaeology at his undergraduate alma mater. The catalyst was the indefatigable Malcolm McGregor. He had returned to U.B.C. in 1954 after two decades at the University of Cincinnati, and in 1957 appointed to his department Charles William John Eliot. Eliot had pursued doctoral studies at Toronto under, among others, Homer Thompson’s successor at the Royal Ontario Museum, Walter Graham (1906-1991), and his dissertation on the coastal cities of Antica was published in 1962. In the 1960s and early 1970s there were two further appointments – James Russell and Russell’s former student at the University of Manitoba, E. Hector Williams – and the department became involved in an excavation of a Roman city at Assur in northern Syria. By the mid-1980s there was an M.A. Programme in Classical Archaeology, and faculty and students were participating in further excavations.

churches,” for it was “desirable that all students attend a church of the denomination to which they adhere.” Homer, we know, complied with this injunction, though, if his yearbook is to be believed (see Appendix One), he had trouble staying awake in church.

As for accommodation, which Homer would have required, the Calendar reports that there was board and lodging near the University “at a cost of $35 per month upwards” (the university’s fees were $62 for the academic year), but it was emphasised that “men and women students are not permitted to lodge in the same house, unless they are members of the same family, or receive special permission from the Senate.”

Attendance at class was also taken very seriously. Students were required to be present for at least seven-eighths of the total number of lectures in each course, while credit for attendance could be refused “on the grounds of lateness, inattention, neglect of study, or disorderly conduct.”

Academic dress was also an issue. The Calendar prescribed undergraduate gowns (black, made of “ordinary stuff material,” ankle length, long sleeves, the yoke edged with khaki cord), though by the fall of 1923 Homer’s class had baulked at this, and voted down such garb, “I wonder how much dignity we should assume in these shifts of ours,” wrote one defender of this move.

Through this intrusively prescriptive world, watched over by President Leonard Sylvan Klink (1877-1969), an austere Quaker agronomist, Homer Thompson, dubbed “the best of good fellows” by his graduating class, passed smoothly, picking up a scholarship worth $137.50 at the end of his second year, and graduating with a first-class Honours degree in Classics.

The Department of Classics in which he took the majority of his courses was a three-man operation: Samuel Robertson (Head) (1878-1956), Harry Tremaine Logan (1887-1971), and Otto Johnson Ford (1883-1957), assisted during Homer’s time
by an eccentric English clergyman, Aubrey Neville St. John Mildenor (1865-1955). Todd (a Harvard graduate from Pennsylvania) was the scholar of the three, soon to make his name with an index to Aristophanes. Robertson (from Prince Edward Island via McGill) had been in Vancouver since 1899, and had played a crucial role in building the forerunner to U.B.C., the McGill University College of British Columbia, which between 1906 and 1915 had offered the first two years of a McGill degree. Logan, born in Nova Scotia, had been a pupil of Robertson before going on to take degrees at McGill and, as British Columbia's Rhodes Scholar for 1908, at St. John's College, Oxford. He had briefly taught at the McGill College before heading off to war from which he returned with the rank of Major and a Military Cross. His forte would lie in teaching and administration.

Homer revered all three men. "I count it a great privilege to have shared life with these men at such an impressionable age," he wrote in the 1980s. He particularly admired Robertson for his capacity to bring Cicero to life. "He could understand Cicero's problems as a public orator and make him real," Todd would recall as "shy, but very kind and considerate."

The department's courses were mainly in the ancient languages, although even in the early 1920s there were offerings in Greek literature in translation, and a Roman History survey. Homer was well prepared in Latin, but had to take Beginner's Greek in his first year, as well as courses in Mathematics, Physics, English, History, Economics and Philosophy (91% in the latter) during both his first and second years. His grade average was 86% in his first year, and 89% in his second. He achieved 100% in Algebra, and had second-class standing only in English 2 and History 2.

The Honours Classics programme to which Homer committed himself after his second year, and of which he became the second graduate, is first defined in the Calendar for 1924-25. It consisted of six all-year (i.e. approx. 24 week) courses during the third and fourth years: "any three of Greek 3, 5, 6, 7, and any three of Latin 3, 4, 5, 6." (The omitted Greek 4 was the survey of literature in translation.) The Greek texts in these courses were: Greek 3: Thucydides: Book 7; Sophocles: Antigone; Euripides: Heracles; Greek 3: Demosthenes: Olynthiac 3 and Philippics 1 and 3; selections from Homer's Iliad; Greek 6: Herodotus and Lysias, Aristophanes: Birds; Greek 7: selections from the Republic, and apparently the whole of Aristotle's Poetics. The Latin texts were: Latin 3: Terence: Phormio; Vergil: Aeneid 7-12; Latin 4: Horace: Epistles, Cicero: Pro Sisito and selected letters; Latin 5: Juvenal: Satires and Seneca: selected letters; Latin 6: Tacitus: Histories 1 and 2 and selections from the Oxford Book of Latin Verse. (Ovid and Catullus, according to local folklore, were banned by the austere Maritimer Lemuel Robertson.)

Homer took all of these courses during his last two years, as well as the advanced composition in both languages (Latin 8 and Greek 8) in each of those years. His grade average was 86% (third year) and 89% (fourth year), with second-class standing only in the composition courses. During the fourth year he also faced examinations in sight translation, underwent a "course of private reading under the supervision of the department," and took a general paper on "Antiquities, Literature and History."

The mention of "Antiquities" points to Homer's first academic exposure to ancient art and archaeology, a subject in which there was considerable extra curricular interest. Vancouver, like numerous other Canadian cities, had once had a chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America. U.B.C.'s James Russell has described this situation, which ended during World War I,
After U.B.C.

The story of Homer Thompson’s career after leaving U.B.C. is part of the history of modern classical archaeology. After completing his dissertation, he was recommended by Benjamin Meritt for an Agora Fellowship, a component of the Rockefeller Foundation’s funding for the American School of Classical Studies at Athens’ excavations in the centre of the ancient city. His achievement was duly noted in the Odyssey, where Harry Logan hailed it as “one of the highest honours yet conferred on a U.B.C. graduate.”

In the 1930s Homer worked on the Agora excavation for part of the year, along with his wife Dorothy Burr, a native and graduate of Bryn Mawr, and a fellow archaeologist whom he had met in Athens and married in 1934. He held during these years a concurrent appointment at the University of Toronto, where he had been recruited by Charles Teck Curely (1876-1957), the dynamic founder of the Royal Ontario Museum, to be the Assistant Director and Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities, while also serving as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Archaeology.

During this period he maintained contact with the Department of Classics at U.B.C. In 1936 he sent along a paper on the excavations in Athens for delivery to the students and faculty to be delivered at professors’ houses. Homer is credited with reviving the club after a slow period, though unfortunately there is no record of what paper, or papers, he himself delivered.

The Odyssey’s notice for the final meeting of the 1924-23 session gives us the flavour of these occasions: On Monday March 23 at 8 p.m. the Classics Club will meet at the new home of Dr. O.J. Todd at 366 19th Avenue West. The paper for the evening will be read by Mr. J.L.C. Catheral, his subject being “The Etruscans.” It is requested that those who attend shall wear something indicative of any noted characters of antiquity. There will be special vocal and instrumental music.

Homer graduated in May 1925, aged 18. He was (along with a future U.B.C. President, the mathematician Walter Gage) a member of the last class to graduate from the Fairview Campus. He may not have won the highest honours — the Governor-General’s Gold Medal (captured by his Vice-President in the Classics Club, Edith Lucas of Victoria, who took an honours degree in French and Latin), or the Rhodes Scholarship (for which he was just eligible in age) — but he was well on the way to an academic career.

The university moved to Point Grey that fall. We do not know whether Homer joined the protests in the fall of 1922 that forced the provincial government’s hand into completing the new campus, but he would benefit from its improved facilities for two years as he earned the first M.A. in Classics, and so prepared himself to become the first U.B.C. student to earn a Ph.D. in this field.

The excavation staff at the Agora in 1933. Homer and Dorothy Thompson were married the next year.

Credit: Hope Kerr
The “campus” to which Homer Thompson and around two thousand others moved in September 1925 was vividly evoked in a valedictory memoir by Malcolm McGregor who at age sixteen began his undergraduate studies there a year later. Two permanent buildings graced the campus: the library (the centrepiece of the present structure [i.e., the “Main Library”] and Science (the basic section, of “college Gothic,” of our Chemistry Building). The others were semipermanent: Arts (which is now Mathematics), Applied Science (now Geology-Geography), Agriculture (still existing just south of Mathematics), the Auditorium (which also housed the single-roomed Bookstore, the Odyssey, and the “Caf”), and Administration (then giving shelter to the Registrar and the President). To the north of the Auditorium as far as Lower Marine Drive lay a vast expanse of undressed surface where the few plutocrats parked their lonely automobiles. Apart from an old barn and fields for the cattle on the south side, the rest was virgin forest, nice for walks with one’s companion in the spring – or summer or winter.

Here Homer Thompson spent two years. He had duties as a teaching assistant in first-year Latin and Greek, took two courses in German, did some additional reading courses in Latin and Greek, and wrote a thesis “Roads and Road Travel in Roman Dominions to 180 A.D.” His overall average for this biennium was exactly 90%. The thesis itself (for which he received 138/150 or 92%) is 95 pages long, nearly divided into the relevant topics: “The Chief Roads,” “The Construction of Roads and Bridges,” “Administration and Distribution of Cost,” “Means of Conveyance,” “The Post,” “Milestones and Travelling Guides,” and “Wayside Accommodations.” It was supervised by that seasoned administrator Lennuel Robertson, who would have found in Homer, the former Business Manager of the Odyssey, a kindred spirit when it came to organising and analysing data.

The year 1926-27 was decisive for Homer’s future. In addition to perhaps having to teach Malcolm McGregor (who would probably have been wearing a gown, as he did until he retired) in first-year Latin, he had to decide where to pursue doctoral studies. His choice of the University of Michigan may seem surprising, since Lennuel Robertson was a cousin of the leading ancient historian at Harvard University, William Scott Ferguson (1875-1954), and O.J. Todd had taken his doctorate there. But Lennuel may have chosen to point Homer towards Michigan because of a personal connection with one of its rising stars, Arthur Edward Romilly Boak (1888-1962), whose survey of Roman History had been prescribed at U.B.C. as soon as it appeared in 1921. Boak, a Nova Scotian who spent part of his youth in Vancouver, had taught at the McGill University College with Robertson between 1907 and 1910 after graduating from Queen’s University and before going on to Harvard to work under the aforementioned Ferguson.

At Michigan Boak supervised Homer’s dissertation, “The Transportation of Government Grain in Greco-Roman Egypt,” a study inspired by some publications of the great Russian economic historian Mikhail Rostovtzeff (1871-1932). It drew on Egyptian papyrological material, on which Boak had by then become an authority. Homer was also advised by some notable Greek scholars: Campbell Bonner (1876-1954) and Warren Blake (1900-1966), both Harvard trained, and the young Benjamin Meritt (1899-1989), a Princeton product. His research also led to what was apparently his first visit to Europe, to inspect papyri at the British Museum. In this way he initiated the academic career for which the University ninety miles away from his family farm had laid such solid foundations.
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During this period he maintained contact with the Department of Classics at U.B.C. In 1936 he sent along a paper on the excavations in Athens for delivery to the Classical Views 1936. In December 1937, for example, Francis Willey Kelsoy (1858-1937) (former President of the A.A.A. and founder of archaeological studies at the University of Michigan, where twelve years later Homer would earn his doctorate) lectured at U.B.C. on "St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome." Two years later the newly arrived O.J. Todd addressed the town-gown organization, the Vancouver Institute, on "The Architecture of the Athenian Acropolis." In 1938 Lemuel Robertson spoke on "Recent Excavations in Crete," and after a visit to Italy in the summer of 1925 he addressed both the Institute and the students' club on Roman monuments. The records of the Classics Club for the 1920s also frequently show talks on ancient art and archaeology, by both faculty and students, and suggest that this subject was an important informal element in students' education, and probably an ancillary part of the courses that seem otherwise so austere.

That Homer emerged from the demanding Honours Classics programme with high standing was no mean feat. It was certainly one beyond the powers of a future epigraphical giant from U.B.C., Malcolm McGregor, who a few years later could manage only a second-class pass degree. But, unlike McGregor, Homer did not dissipate his energies in extracurricular activities. He played soccer and rugby at the inter-class level, and was, as had been his teacher Harry Logan, a decent track athlete, notably in the sprint relay teams. In his final year he also became the Business Manager of the student newspaper, the Odyssey, after a year as business assistant. In this position he administered a budget of $7,000, and must have gained valuable administrative experience for his future career.

That final year also saw him assume the presidency of the Classics Club. This organization had been started in the 1920-21 session by Lemuel Robertson, and, following a format that would last until its demise ca. 1990, it arranged for papers by students and faculty to be delivered at professors' houses. Homer is credited with reviving the club after a slow period, though unfortunately there is no record of what paper, or papers, he himself delivered.

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Homer graduated in May 1925, aged 18. He was (along with a future U.B.C. President, the mathematician Walter Gage) a member of the last class to graduate from the Fairview Campus. He may not have won the highest honours — the Governor-General's Gold Medal (captured by his Vice-President in the Classics Club, Edith Lucas of Victoria, who took an honours degree in French and Latin), or the Rhodes Scholarship (for which he was just eligible in age) — but he was well on the way to an academic career.

The university moved to Point Grey that fall. We do not know whether Homer joined the protests in the fall of 1922 that forced the provincial government's hand into completing the new campus, but he would benefit from its improved facilities for two years as he earned the first M.A. in Classics, and so prepared himself to become the first U.B.C. student to earn a Ph.D. in this field.
by an eccentric English clergyman, Aubrey Neville St. John Mildmay (1865-1955). Todd (a Harvard graduate from Pennsylvania) was the scholar of the three, soon to make his name with an index to Aristophanes. Robertson (from Prince Edward Island via McGill) had been in Vancouver since 1899, and had played a crucial role in building the forerunner to U.B.C., the McGill University College of British Columbia, which between 1906 and 1915 had offered the first two years of a McGill degree. Logan, born in Nova Scotia, had been a pupil of Robertson before going on to take degrees at McGill and, as British Columbia’s Rhodes Scholar for 1908, at St. John’s College, Oxford. He had briefly taught at the McGill College before heading off to war from which he returned with the rank of Major and a Military Cross. His forte would be in teaching and administration.

Homer revered all three men. “I count it a great privilege to have shared life with these men at such an impressionable age,” he wrote in the 1980s. He particularly admired Robertson for his capacity to bring Cicero to life. “He could understand Cicero’s problems as a public orator and make him real.” Todd be recalled as “shy, but very kind and considerate.”

The department’s courses were mainly in the ancient languages, although even in the early 1920s there were offerings in Greek literature in translation, and a Roman History survey. Homer was well prepared in Latin, but had to take Beginner’s Greek in his first year, as well as courses in Mathematics, Physics, English, History, Economics and Philosophy (91% in the latter) during both his first and second years. His grade average was 86% in his first year, and 89% in his second. He achieved 100% in Algebra, and had second-class standing only in English 2 and History 2.

The Honours Classics programme to which Homer committed himself after his second year, and of which he became the second graduate, is first defined in the Calendar for 1924-25. It consisted of six all-year (i.e. approx. 24 week) courses during the third and fourth years: “any three of Greek 3, 5, 6, 7, and any three of Latin 3, 4, 5, 6.” (The omitted Greek 4 was the survey of literature in translation.) The Greek texts in these courses were: Greek 3: Thucydides: Book 7; Sophocles: Antigone, Euripides: Heracles; Greek 3: Demosthenes: Olynthiac 3 and Philippics 1 and 3; selections from Homer’s Iliad; Greek 6: Herodotus and Lycurgas; Aristophanes: Birds; Greek 7: selections from the Republic, and apparently the whole of Aristotle’s Poetics. The Latin texts were: Latin 3: Terence: Phormio; Vergil: Aeneid 7-12; Latin 4: Horace: Epistles, Cicero: Pro Sestio and selected letters; Latin 5: Juvenal; Satires and Seneca: selected letters; Latin 6: Tacitus: Histories 1 and 2 and selections from the Oxford Book of Latin Verse. [Ovid and Catullus, according to local folklore, were banned by the austere Maritimer Lemuel Robertson.]

Homer took all of these courses during his last two years, as well as major advanced composition in both languages (Latin 8 and Greek 8) in each of those years. His grade average was 86% (third year) and 86% (fourth year), with second-class standing only in the composition courses. During the fourth year he also faced examinations in sight translation, underwent a “course of private reading under the supervision of the department,” and took a general paper on “Antiquities, Literature and History.”

The mention of “Antiquities” points to Homer’s first academic exposure to ancient art and archaeology, a subject in which there was considerable extra curricular interest. Vancouver, like numerous other Canadian cities, had once had a chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America. (U.B.C.’s James Russell has described this situation, which ended during World War I,

Homer Thompson (second from left) with the recipients of honorary degrees at U.B.C. Fall graduation, 26 October 1949
Credit: UBC Archives (3.1/582)

he moved to his final home, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Here he joined Benjamin andor who had been a founding member of the Institute in 1935, and who was at the time an associate of another U.B.C. graduate, Malcolm McGregor, on the production of the major epigraphical work, The Athenian Tribute Lists. When McGregor spent time at the Institute in 1948 all three men were united at that prestigious academic centre.

At the fall graduation of 1949 U.B.C. awarded Homer Thompson, by then Director of the Agora Excavations, an honorary doctorate, lauding him (see Appendix Two) as “one of the world’s greatest living archaeologists” for his “deliberate and laborious excavation” of the Agora. (He was also identified as a former President of the Archaeological Institute of America, when he served only as Vice-President.) The day following the ceremony Homer addressed the Classics Club on Agrippa’s Concert Hall in the Agora, and two days later gave a lecture to the Vancouver Institute, “Hercules among the Herœides: A Study of Athenian Art of the Fifth Century B.C.”
In the years that followed Homer observed with pleasure the development of classical archaeology at his undergraduate alma mater. The catalyst was the indefatigable Malcolm McGregor. He had returned to U.B.C. in 1934 after two decades at the University of Cincinnati, and in 1937 appointed to his department CHARLES WILLIAM JOHN ELIOT. Eliot had pursued doctoral studies at Toronto under, among others, Homer Thompson’s successor at the Royal Ontario Museum, J. Walter Graham (1906-1991), and his dissertation on the coastal dunes of Antica was published in 1962. In the 1960s and early 1970s there were two further appointments – James Russell and Russell’s former student at the University of Manitoba, E. HECTOR WILLIAMS – and the department became involved in an excavation of a Roman city at Anemurium in southern Turkey. By the mid-1980s there was an M.A. Programme in Classical Archaeology, and faculty and students were participating in further excavations.

churches,” for it was “desirable that all students attend a church of the denomination to which they adhere.” Homer, we know, complied with this injunction, though, if his yearbook is to be believed (see Appendix One), he had trouble staying awake in church.

As for accommodation, which Homer would have required, the Calendar reports that there was board and lodging near the University “at a cost of $33 per month upwards” (the university’s fees were $62 for the academic year), but it was emphasised that “men and women students are not permitted to lodge in the same house, unless they are members of the same family, or receive special permission from the Senate.”

Attendance at class was also taken very seriously. Students were required to be present for at least seven-eighths of the total number of lectures in each course, while credit for attendance could be refused “on the grounds of lateness, inattention, neglect of study, or disorderly conduct.”

Academic dress was also an issue. The Calendar prescribed undergraduate gowns (black, made of “ordinary stuff material,” ankle length, long sleeves, the yoke edged with khaki cord), though by the fall of 1923 Homer’s class had baulked at this, and voted down such garb, “I wonder how much dignity we should assume in these sacks of ours,” wrote one defender of this move.

Through this intrusive prescriptive world, watched over by President LEONARD SYLVANUS KLINCK (1877-1969), an austere Quaker agriculturist, Homer Thompson, dubbed “the best of good fellows” by his graduating class, passed smoothly, picking up a scholarship worth $137.50 at the end of his second year, and graduating with a first-class Honours degree in Classics.

The Department of Classics in which he took the majority of his courses was a three-man operation: SAMUEL ROBERTSON (Head) (1878-1956), HARRY TEMMAINE LOGAN (1887-1971), and OTIS JODONSON TIDIO (1883-1957), assisted during Homer’s time...
U.B.C.: The Fairview Years

The university that Homer Thompson entered in 1921 was new and small. It had opened in 1915 with 379 students, and by his first academic year there were 976 undergraduates (37% of them women), and 31 graduate students, numbers that during his six years at U.B.C. would increase to 1469 (43% women) and 46 respectively. His graduating class of 1925 had just 181 members, most of whom were in the single Faculty of Arts and Sciences that dominated the campus in those early years.

“Campus” is a misnomer. This little university was housed in temporary quarters on part of the land occupied by today’s Vancouver Hospital, in an area of the city known as Fairview. Many of its activities were concentrated in a stone building that still stands (the Willow Pavilion), but some were pursued in what were soon called the “Fairview Shacks,” temporary huts that served as classrooms and laboratories. The university was awaiting a move to improved quarters on its present campus at Point Grey, but financial difficulties were delaying this, and it would not occur until 1925, the year of Homer’s graduation.

When Homer arrived at U.B.C. he was the youngest member of his class, and was wearing short trousers, as a fifteen year old boy of modest height would have done in those days. Legend has it that some “hair-covered hunters” fell on him, “debarked him and hoisted the offending shoots on an outside pulley beam in the gable of the physics building where they fluttered ominously to other callow freshmen.”

Such hauntings must be seen in context. In U.B.C.’s early days freshmen (freshmen, at least) invariably faced initiation rites. Thus the Elyssary records that members of one incoming class of the early 1920s were “blindfolded and bandaged, with thumbs bound together” and “each Freshman was delivered up to torment,” the ceremony culminating with a large “23” being branded on their foreheads. Compared with this treatment, debarking may not seem so extreme.

The ethos of the institution that Homer entered is embodied in the University’s Calendar for 1921-22. Incoming students had to pass a physical examination, and also (at least until 1924) a moral one, in that they were requested “to report to the Registrar, in writing, the churches which they intend to make their places of worship.” Such information would be “used for the information of the various historiographical scholar PHELIP HARRING, the current Head of the Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies (into which Classics was merged in 1995), has recently summed up this transformation: “In our early days we trained people such as Homer who went on to achieve great success elsewhere. Now U.B.C. conducts research at excavations which include the university’s own archaeological sites: Mytrine on Lesbos and Sphalamos in Arcadia under Hector Williams’ direction, and, under the direction of TONY BARRETT, the Late Roman Fort in Britain. Also, ELIZABETH COOPER is the Assistant Director of the Canadian Expedition from Université Laval to Tell Acharneh, Syria, where U.B.C. students will soon be able to receive training.”

In 1971 when Harry Logan died, Homer honoured the memory of his former teacher by presenting the U.B.C. Library with a copy of the standard modern edition of Plato by Henri Ennien (Stephans), published at Geneva in 1578. Logan had been a Platonic amateur since his days studying “Greens” at Oxford before the First World War, and Homer had chosen a fitting tribute.

In June 1973 he returned with his wife for the fiftieth anniversary of his graduation. The Vancouver Sun devoted a full page to his visit, labeling him “The 20th-century Homer who walks with Pericles.” He obliged his interviewer by expressing scepticism about the immediate return of the Elgin Marbles, and by revealing the recent discovery of the state prison in the Agora, and of the cups that were probably used for the hemlock that the likes of Socrates drank when condemned to death by the state.

In the 1980s when profiles of Homer’s teachers were published in the Classics Department’s Newsletter he responded warmly to these efforts to recapture a fading institutional past. In 1990, following the death of Malcolm McGregor, Homer himself had the task of memorialising for the Royal Society of Canada this master architect of the department’s more recent past. He depicted Malcolm in terms that could equally well have applied to any of the men by whom he had himself been trained at U.B.C. in the 1920s: “a compulsive teacher with a devotion to both his subject and his pupils.”

Homer Thompson is for U.B.C.’s classicists and archaeologists a vital part of our collective past, and with this pamphlet the story of his family roots in British Columbia and his academic roots at its premier university may become better known.
Appendix One: The Young Homer As Seen By Contemporaries

The Youth U.B.C. Annual, the university’s student year book for 1924-25, has the following entry for Homer Armstrong Thompson.

Homer, the youngest member of our class, comes from Rosedale, where he spent his earlier childhood. He entered Varsity winning a scholarship, a habit which he finds hard to overcome. Although the best of good fellows, he felt the call of his early namesake, and so was lost to Classics. His is also a relay man, inter-class soccer and rugby player, President of the Classics Club and business manager of the ‘Ulysses.’ One and only failing — going to sleep in church.

excellent salmon and fine basketry, and were beginning to profit from the very practical education, especially in agriculture and domestic science, designed for them in a school in the village of Sardis.”

The “farm” was initially virgin forest, and above the land towered 8,000 foot Mt. Cheam, overlooking the Fraser Valley. Pamela Sinkler Todd records that “with a pair of horses, Maude and Mary, two men and a cross-cut saw, William James Thompson cleared the land, built the family homestead, and started a dairy farm of fifty head of Holsteins, a dozen pigs, and fifty Rhode Island Reds.”

Both parents were also active in the local community. W.J. served on school boards, while Gertrude drew on her musical training to serve as an organist at the Presbyterian church. W.J. was also a leader in the organization of the Fraser Valley Milk Producers’ Association which, as Homer said, “brought order into the most important branch of industry in the valley at that time” and “became something of a role model across the country.” It was the ancestor of today’s conglomerate Dairyland.

Homer’s earliest education was at a school two and a half miles from the farm. The children would rise at 5 a.m., help in bringing the herd in from pasture and in milking them, and then walk to the school, a modest three-room structure “presided over by three excellent teachers, all women.” But education proper began with high school in Chilliwack, eight miles from the farm, in 1918.

Homer recalled that “since there was no daily bus service from Rosedale to Chilliwack, I spent five days each week in town, living with a widowed woman, Mrs. Bradwin, and her two grown children. The three-year course, largely prescribed and humanistic in content, with a little physics thrown in, was well taught. But what interested me especially were the courses in Ancient History and the Latin language, brilliantly taught by a retired clergyman, Rev. Fraser by name. It was this good teaching at an impressionable age that led to my majoring in Classics when I entered the University of British Columbia in 1921.”

But while the Chilliwack high school may have attracted Homer to Classics, his experience on the farm, as he saw in retrospect, helped in his future career as an archaeologist and historian: “Come summer, all we children joined in the farm work: the dairy, the poultry, the kitchen garden, the orchard. As I look back, I recall one way in which these farming activities were relevant to a future in field archaeology. In the course of digging drainage ditches we had become aware that the rich farmland of the valley had been built up through the ages by the repeated flooding of the Fraser River. Along with soil these floods had left behind many tree trunks, often complete large trees. To reduce their menace to ploughing many of these trees had to be removed by ‘primitive’ trenching, which revealed nicely how delta areas and valleys might be built up.”

His early life also, he claimed, gave him “a sureer understanding of major aspects of early Greek history. First: how did the early Greek colonists in the western Mediterranean adjust to the ways of the aborigines, often of decidedly different cultural levels? Secondly, in an old settled part of Greece such as Attica, how did the central authority in Athens deal with the many small but proud local authorities, the Demes? In the Chilliwack Valley of my time we had plenty of first-hand experience of both such situations.”

But before Homer could become either an archaeologist or a historian he needed to complete his higher education, which, after winning a provincial medal for proficiency in what was then called the "Junior Matriculation Examination," he began in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia (hereafter U.B.C.) in September 1921. He was just fifteen years old.
"My family, Scotch on my father's side, Northern Irish on my mother's, reached the Chilliwack area in 1908 via the Ottawa Valley, the Rainy River area of Western Ontario, and Vancouver." So runs Homer Thompson’s own description of his origins.

His parents were William James Thompson (1875-1965) and Sarah Gertrude Armstrong (1880-1969), descendants of settlers in the Ottawa valley in the mid-nineteenth century. As one of his daughters (Pamela Sinkler Todd) has noted, "throughout his life, Homer preserved the unique accent of his parents and this region of Canada." She also vividly portrayed his parents.

"William James (W.J.) Thompson was a bit of a renaissance pioneer, a good-looking Scot with black wavy hair and bright blue eyes, he was a neat dresser who always wore a tie. He was a softer individual than Gertrude, but could be rock stubborn as well. A strict parent, he demanded 150% from everyone, but was fair. He had earned a teaching certificate after high school, but had also worked as a lumberjack in the wilds of Quebec and developed into an excellent carpenter. He had received a classical education, and in later life returned to Latin and Greek, and read in the literature." As for Gertrude, "she was fairly tall for our family, about 5’7”, with Irish red hair and a medium build. Although she was rather severe looking with a powerful presence, she had a very infectious laugh which we all enjoyed. As a young woman she had earned a diploma in music in Quebec and went door to door teaching piano. She tried to teach Homer music, but, in his own words, gave him up as hopeless."

William James and Gertrude were married in 1903 in Shawville, Quebec, and moved to Derlin (once described as a “90 person backwater, west of Port Frances”) in western Ontario, where on September 5, 1906 Homer was born, the second of five children, and the eldest son. In 1907 the family, then consisting of Homer and his elder sister Jean, left Ontario and, to quote from Homer’s own account, his parents “bought an 80 acre farm eight miles east of the town of Chilliwack on the edge of Rosedale, one of the tiny satellite villages served by the town. Ours was the second generation of white settlers in that part of the Fraser Valley. There were still a good many Indians there, living largely on reservations. They provided us with..."

Appendix Two: Citation for the Degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) Conferred at Fall Congregation, October 26, 1949

Mr. Chancellor, I have the honour to present a graduate of this University, HOMER ARMSTRONG THOMPSON, archaeologist, classical scholar and humanist. There is not a university in the English-speaking world today, and surely few in any foreign country, which will not automatically associate his name with the Agora of Athens, for it is with the deliberate and laborious excavation of that site that he has now for twenty years been continuously associated. From Professor of Classical Archaeology in the University of Toronto, and Curator of Classical Antiquities in the Royal Ontario Museum, he has become Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow of the German Archaeological Institute of Berlin, President of the Archaeological Institute of America, and, finally, Fellow of Classical Archaeology in the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University. In further recognition of the brilliant work of a man who is one of the world’s greatest living archaeologists, the Senate of his own University now presents him for the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.
Acknowledgments

Hope Kerr, Homer Thompson's daughter, in addition to providing some of the photographs included here, kindly made available the memoirs by her sister and father cited in the opening section above, and also granted permission for the use of her father's U.B.C. transcript. My History of Classics at U.B.C. 1915-1975, due to be published later this year, will include more information about the faculty members and students who were Homer Thompson's contemporaries.

An electronic version of this tribute is available on the web site of the Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies (http://www.arts.ubc.ca/cners/history.htm).

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Robert B. Todd
Vancouver
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Preface

The death of Homer Armstrong Thompson on May 7, 2000 produced an outpouring of tributes to a man widely regarded as one of the foremost classical archaeologists of the twentieth century, forever identified with the excavation of the ancient Athenian market place, the Agora. But his passing had special significance at the University of British Columbia, the institution where between 1921 and 1927 he earned his first two academic degrees. His alma mater had long since recognized his achievements with an honorary degree (1949) and with its Alumni Merit Award (1967). Also, at the time of his death its Department of Classical Near Eastern and Religious Studies was in the process of establishing the Homer Armstrong Thompson Travel Scholarship in Classical Studies following a generous donation by the heirs of his sister, Doris Baldwin. More importantly, Homer Thompson remained proud throughout his life of his heritage in Western Canada, and retained close links with his alma mater, as he watched its Classics Department expand between 1954 and 1975 under the leadership of Malcolm Francis McGregor (1910-1989), and saw the study and practice of classical archaeology established there. The present tribute is both a record and a celebration of Homer Thompson's early years in British Columbia and of his enduring connections with its premier university.