

JOHN & PHYLLIS THOMPSON - AMATEUR BOTANISTS

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Early Lives and Careers

Born in Halifax, England, on 23 December 1906 according to his birth certificate (but as John always said, according to his Mother, 28 December, and who would know better than a mother whether her child was born before or after Christmas?), John attended Leeds Central High School and in July 1923 gained a School Certificate of the Northern Universities Joint Matriculation Board, with credit in History, Mathematics and Geography.

In late 1923, however, his father, George Hartley Thompson brought his wife and three children to Christchurch, New Zealand. The father was unable to find a position, though he had some connection with the W.E.A., and returned home to Leeds, together with his wife and youngest daughter. John and his older sister remained in Christchurch.

John started work as an office junior in March 1924 and by 1928 was employed as a secretary-accountant. During this period he was exempted the matriculation and accountants' preliminary examinations, admitted *ad eundem statum* to the University of New Zealand, and attended Canterbury University College. By February 1932 he had gained a certificate of accountancy and in July that year became a member of the New Zealand Society of Accountants. He was classified as an Associate Registered Accountant.

About this time John took singing lessons from a Mr. Dixon, and he and a group of fellow pupils sang together both privately and publicly. John also found time to become a Mason and was initiated into the Southern Star Lodge, No. 256, Sydenham, January 1934. He was elected and installed as Worshipful Master of his Lodge in September 1943.

Now occurred a major change in his life. His older sister, who had been married for about a year, died suddenly and this, together with some unpleasantness at work, decided John to return home to visit and comfort his family. He sailed from Sydney, December 1934 on the Orient Line's RMS 'Orsova' via Suez. This was a momentous voyage for John as here he was to meet his wife to be, Phyllis Hopkins. Phyllis was born in Bombala, New South Wales. She obtained a B.A. with Honours in Modern Languages in May 1930. She had intended going on to Teachers Training College, but the college was closed down and she spent a year house-keeping for her mother, and helped to form the Toowoomba Repertory Society in her spare time. Her next three years were spent teaching at St Hilda's School, Southport, Queensland. She joined the 'Orsova' at Sydney on the same sailing as John and travelled to London, under the University free passage scheme, to study Dramatic Art for 18 months and spend one vacation in a language school in Paris. Eventually she held an A.C.T.L.

and Teachers' Diploma in Elocution and Theory and was a member of the New Zealand Association of Teachers of Speech and Drama.

Phyllis relates that she saw this young man standing and walking about the deck and told her friend she had never seen him smile for a whole week and it was to be her job to bring a smile to his face. That they had the opportunity to become better acquainted was borne out by entries in an 'Orsova' concert programme 'Recitation by Miss Hopkins' was bracketed by 'Songs (with violin obligato) Mr J. Thompson' and 'Songs by Mr J. Thompson'.

John applied for many positions in the accountancy world in England, once being turned down because the firm 'really wanted an Englishman', other times because they wanted chartered accountants. Little did he know that in 1962 he would become one without any further effort on his part when the New Zealand Society of Accountants changed the designation of its members from 'Registered' to 'Chartered'! Instead he obtained a temporary position as a teleprinter machine operator in the Post Office in Leeds, which he found a rather 'dead end' job, once the novelty of using such a 'high technology' machine wore off. He also sang, at least once, when at Lidgett Park Methodist Church, Roundhay. "The Lidgett Park Orchestra, consisting of 23 instrumentalists, was assisted by J. Thompson, Baritone at a grand musical evening." John sang two groups of songs, one including "Kamate, Kamate, Maori Haka"!

John also kept in touch with Phyllis, by letter and occasional visits between Leeds and London, and she joined two tramping trips, one in the Lake District where they climbed some quite high peaks in very wet and cold weather, even snow, which Phyllis had never encountered before. The other was in the Yorkshire Dales. Both these trips had been organised by Phyllis' brother, Lester, who was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, reading Mathematics.

John was glad to be finally returning to New Zealand and sailed on the P&O Line's SS 'Moldavia' early January 1936. From papers that he kept it was obvious that he entered into the spirit of the voyage, being shown as Treasurer of the Programme Committee, singing in each of three concerts, and being the witness 'Mr Ilkley Moor' in a mock trial.

On his return to Christchurch John obtained a position as assistant accountant in charge of the main office of Blackwell Motors, leaving there to work in the Christchurch City Council offices for a short period. He was appointed acting Town Clerk of Lyttelton in November 1940, and was Town Clerk from February 1945 until his retirement in 1971. In July 1946 he became a member of the New Zealand Institute of Local Body Administrative Officers, classified as a Fellow (FIAO).

Phyllis came to Christchurch and she and John were married in March 1938. She taught English, French, Drama and Speech in secondary schools in Blenheim and Amberley. She also taught speech, privately. In due course their family (Valerie, Hugh and Barbara) arrived.

Two happenings stand out in John's time as Town Clerk at Lyttelton: (1) the provision of a water supply for Diamond Harbour from a well and pumping station

in Horotane Valley with a pipeline which crossed the floor of the harbour. He always spoke as if he had had great difficulty in persuading a reluctant authority to agree to this; and (2) the provision of a Town Clock which was intended as a memorial to the 'little Doctor' Dr Charles Hazlitt Upham for his '52 years of selfless service' in the port. Money was available for the construction but there was difficulty in having plans and specifications drawn up. John made a scale model, drew plans, and obtained the services of two council employees, Dutch immigrants, accomplished in stone work, who supervised the building of the tower. It stands to this day in the Rose Garden at the north end of Oxford Street near the Lyttelton Main School and playground.

John's musical career was a very full one and this account is only an outline with a mention of a few highlights. On his return from England he found that his music teacher had left New Zealand. By May of that year John had reorganised a group of former pupils of Mr Dixon (and perhaps others). They called themselves the 'Dixonians' and often sang opera. John sang mainly as a soloist, but also as a chorus member. After John and Phyllis were married, Phyllis was often called upon to read some words, both as an introduction and between excerpts to keep the continuity of the opera being performed.

During the war years Muriel Oppenden organised a small group to read short plays in prisons where many Christian Pacifists had been incarcerated. Phyllis and John both took part. Phyllis also arranged a small group who read plays in their own houses. Though John enjoyed these activities, his real love was singing. In September, 1954 the W.E.A. established the William Morris Group, the idea being to promote the performing arts among working people. In September 1957 the group advertised for a voluntary conductor of the song group and John was appointed, from five applicants. He trained the group, which varied between 12 - 20 members, to a high standard. They put on varied programmes for anyone who asked: at school functions, trade unions etc; or where they offered: hospitals, old folks' homes, etc. In the words of Elsie Locke "It was all very enjoyable. We sang the kind of good English song in 2, 3 or 4 parts that most people would enjoy".

The William Morris Group dissolved in the early 1960's, but the song group continued on into the 80's using the same name. It became a family affair with John and Phyllis' eldest daughter acting as Secretary and also singing in the choir. To quote again from Elsie Locke, "John's 'stickability', his skill and dedication as a musician, a mixture of firmness and consideration for individuals were always the key".

John's love of music was such that he spent a lot of his time in attempting to teach fellow singers to learn to read music and especially, as in the case of Ernest Rogers who never conquered this skill, to teach them each new song.

A member of the Royal Christchurch Musical Society for many years, John resigned in 1988. Before his resignation he had been elected a vice president of the Society in recognition of "your many years of loyal membership of the choir". In a letter (May 1990) announcing that the above society was combining with the Christchurch Harmonic to form the Christchurch City Choir in the following year, John was informed that he had again been re-elected a vice president and was told that special

mention had been made of the wonderful service to the Society he had given in the past. Acknowledgement of this service was recognised by acclamation. The conductor of the Society, Robert Field-Dodgson, wrote to John on his retirement "I shall always feel grateful for having known you as a member of this Society, and for your loyal, hard-working, and always musically reliable service. You have been a real leader in the bass section and I shall miss you musically and socially."

The Thompsons and Canterbury Botany

The predecessor of the Canterbury Botanical Society, the Canterbury Native Flora Society, was started at a public meeting on 28 November 1952. The actual date of John becoming a member of this Society is shrouded in mystery, though it was probably in the first two or three years of its existence. Phyllis is of the opinion that Cecil Dunn was the member who introduced John to the Society. Another mystery is the date of his joining a W.E.A. class on Botany, the tutor being Dr Margaret Mayer, then a lecturer in Botany at Canterbury University College. He impressed Margaret with his eagerness to learn, and the thoroughness he showed in accomplishing this. Buying all the necessary books, and both a monocular and binocular microscope, he started a personal herbarium which is still being worked on. His moss specimens unfortunately were shifted out to the garage and some will need to be rejected because of moisture and insect damage, but it is hoped that many of the several hundred packets may still find their way to Landcare Research, where his specimens of ferns and flowering plants have already been sent. Bryony Macmillan reports that John's herbarium was particularly strong in ferns, monocots, and Port Hills flora; specimens are being added to the herbarium [CHR]. Bryony added that she appreciated the obvious loving care with which the specimens had been used and handled.

John was a Committee member of the Canterbury Botanical Society from 1960, and, at times, temporary Treasurer and Secretary. As President of the Society 1962-63, John did all those things that are expected of a President, including leading weekend trips, one to Arthurs Pass, one to Mitchells. The latter was one of the first outside Canterbury; it is written up in this number of the Journal.

John's biggest effort for the Society was probably the January, 1977 trip to Tasmania. Planning began in 1975. The itinerary started from Hobart, travelled across to the west coast, then north as far as Rocky Cape, back into the central area in Cradle Mountains, and finally east again to Launceston, the departure point for Melbourne. They stayed in hotels at Hobart and Launceston but otherwise it was tents in National Park camps.

On 31 December 1976 a party of 20 members and friends gathered at Christchurch airport for the flight to Melbourne. Australians who joined the trip for varying lengths of time included Jim and Mavis Willis. Jim was Assistant Victorian Government Botanist until he retired in 1972, and was a tremendous help in identifying plants. Winifred Curtis, the leading authority on the botany of Tasmania and authoress of a three volume *Student's Flora of Tasmania* went with the party on their first day, a trip to the top of Mt Wellington. As well there were several members of the Society for Growing Australian Plants. Later on, at Burney, two

members of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club also joined the party. John had made the fullest use of any contacts he was able to obtain, to help both in the planning and running of this trip.

Janet Moss was able to produce a tape-recording of a monthly meeting when John, Hugh Wilson, and Margaret Bulfin gave an account of the Tasmanian Trip. From it comes the following, transcribed from John's voice, which seems to express the views of all the 'trippers'.

"So ended a most fascinating, instructive, memorable, and friendly overseas trip, perhaps the forerunner of others. I am sure that it will afford my audience inexpressible comfort and happiness to learn that the conduct of our members was such that there were no occasions in which they suffered the attentions of the Tasmanian Constabulary."

There are three articles in CBSJ 10, 1977 relating to the Tasmanian Trip: 'Tasmanian Plants - the familiar and strange' (Hugh Wilson, p.21); 'Cushion Plants of Tasmania' (M.J.A. Simpson, p. 24); 'Alien Plants in Tasmania' (R. Mason, p. 26).

Another trip to study the orchids of Victoria was organised with help from Jim Willis, who wrote many letters giving suggestions as to time and places, and from Mary Doery, one of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club members who joined the Tasmanian trip. Mary was also particularly helpful in arranging places to stay and people to contact at the various places they visited. This trip, scheduled for October 1978, was not attractive to Society members, and finally became a private trip, by car, with John and Phyllis, Alice Dumbleton, Isobel Morice, a member of the Wellington Botanical Society, and Mary Doery. There is a good account of the orchids they saw in CBSJ 13, 1979 (J. Thompson, p. 38), and of a visit to the Grampians, Victoria (CBSJ 13 (Alice Dumbleton, p. 44).

Orchids were of a continuing interest to John; not only the native orchids of the Port Hills which he wrote about in CBSJ 14, 1980, but he also had one of his two glasshouses completely devoted to exotic orchids. When they came into bloom he had the main windows in a sitting room of their house and the main living room completely filled with pots, each containing up to eight stalks of flowers 60-80 cm in length and covered in blooms, much to the detriment of the natural lighting.

John joined the Canterbury Orchid, Begonia and Fern Society about 1972 and resigned in either 1983 or 1984. He was a committee member from the year he joined and was President from 1975 to 1978. An active member, he led many Society excursions to look for orchids (and ferns) in Canterbury. He also organised a shipment of *Cymbidium* spp. from Taiwan.

In the paper referred to above there is a statement "as the orchid flowering season is a comparatively short one, there were considerable areas we were unable to examine". However, that two people can produce in one season a list of ten different species from 28 different localities shows an intimate knowledge of the plants of the Port Hills. That was the outcome of many forays made regularly over the years to the areas concerned, sometimes with others, but more usually with only his wife, Phyllis. Phyllis was the 'hunter', the finder of orchids and the small crevice - loving

ferns and herbs. Accompanying them on such a foray was a delight. It seemed that one was led from plant and plant and introduced to each in turn. They certainly greeted each flower as though it were an old family friend.

According to Lawrie Metcalf (see CBSJ Commemorative Number (1978)), John was the prime mover in starting the Journal and was the Editor from its inception in 1968 to Number 14, 1980. It grew steadily during his editorship, attracting dozens of articles from both professional and amateur botanists. In 1982 it was known as far afield as Finland, where Dr Ikka Kukkonen of the Botanical Museum, University of Finland, Helsinki wrote to the Library at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for a photostat copy of an article. Unfortunately we never found out which article he wanted. In 1979 John was elected Honorary member of the Canterbury Botanical Society and in 1981 was awarded the Senior Bledisloe Trophy in recognition of his long service as Editor of the Society's Journal.

It is clear from John's writings (at intervals in many CBS Journals) that he was also a specialist on ferns. Lawrie Metcalf remembers that he knew the sedges and rushes very well. He was recognised as an expert field botanist well beyond New Zealand's shores. When Peter Raven returned to the USA after studying *Epilobium* here he offered to buy herbarium specimens of New Zealand plants for the Missouri Botanic Gardens Herbarium. John sent 686 specimens in the period October 1972 to April 1973, well annotated with the relevant data, a mammoth effort.

A fitting memorial to John and Phyllis (and which the Society once attempted to have named for them) is what is known as Lyttelton Reserve No 101. Unfortunately the then Lands and Survey Department, though happy with the suggestion that it should be named Thompson Reserve, pointed out there was a Thompson Park nearby on the Port Hills, which could have led to confusion. There is an account of Lyttelton Reserve No 101 in CBSJ 16, 1982, under the heading 'Fencing of Reserves'.

John and Phyllis started surveying the plants in the reserve in 1962 and continued on till 1965, some 30 visits in all, two with members of the Native Flora Society. They listed 171 species and two additional varieties. They found several species previously recorded by J.F. and J.S. Armstrong and Potts, but not by Laing or Wall. *Carex vacillans* found at two locations, had not been recorded from the South Island before.

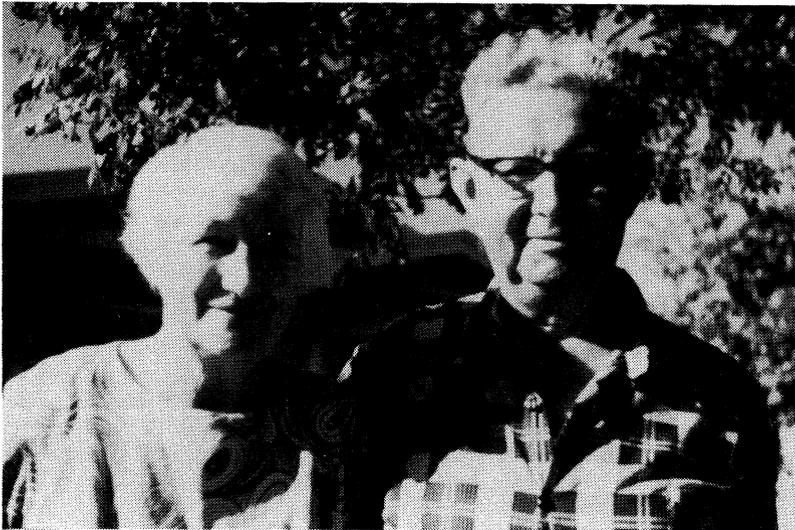
At 18 Therese Street, Spreydon, where John and Phyllis lived all their married life, they had a good garden. There was a year-round supply of vegetables, many of which John grew from seed in the second glasshouse. He also grew his own annual bedding plants and these were mainly planted along his front border, together with a row of very fine tulips every year. There were also some interesting trees and shrubs with numerous ferns underneath and the odd clematis climbing through them.

We remember John and Phyllis entertaining the children on outings and camps, with stories and songs, as well as all the other activities related to the plants that they both also loved. Perhaps these were the memories in the minds of Lawrie and Lena Metcalf when they penned the following: "John was a very modest person who never thrust himself forward, but was always ready to help others and pass on his

knowledge when asked. He had a kindly, gentle nature and always made sure that new members were made welcome. On field trips he was hard-working and was also good at organising mid-week excursions for any members who were able to accompany him and Phyllis. On those excursions he did a great deal to extend our knowledge of plant distribution in Canterbury, especially in commonplace areas which are often overlooked. In later years John and Phyllis were not able to participate in the more vigorous parts of field trips, but those who stayed with them, in the easier areas, always found they were well rewarded."

John died on 3 January 1994 in the Christchurch Public Hospital after a lengthy illness. He had attended and enjoyed the 1993 CBS Annual General Meeting and contributed an article to the Journal of that year. Phyllis now resides at Beckenham Court Retirement Village, 269 Colombo Street, Sydenham.

[This account by Ross and Yvonne Elder, good friends of John and Phyllis Thompson, for many years, is a celebration of their lives, and an appreciation of the wonderful contribution which these two made to our Society for more than 30 years. Thanks are due to the many people who provided information for this article. Next year we will print a full list of John's botanical publications in the CBS Journal, Ed.]



John and Phyllis Thompson, photographed in July 1975