

**TALK ON THE LIFE OF SIR THOMAS ROBINSON GIVEN BY
DR EDWARD MCPARLAND IN ARMAGH PUBLIC LIBRARY ON
WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE 2016**

I'm going to talk this evening about Sir Thomas Robinson, baronet, the eldest brother of Archbishop Richard Robinson who built and endowed this library. My reason for talking about Sir Thomas is that many of his books are still on the shelves of this room.

If that's my reason for talking about Sir Thomas, my justification for doing so is more slender. It wouldn't be fair to describe the very speculative and incomplete nature of what I have to say as 'work in progress': all I have done is to synthesise what has already been written about him, to guess freely where I felt I might, and to identify some of the books in this room which were his. And it's not 'work in progress' since I don't intend to pursue 'Long Sir Thomas' (as he was called) any further. But the sources are there for someone else to study this scallywag, man of fashion, social climber, spendthrift, *arbiter elegantiarum*, and his wonderful books.

He was called 'Long Sir Thomas' because he was so tall. So I'll introduce my account of him with an 18th-century epigram which sets out my plan for my talk:

"Unlike my subject now shall be my song,
It shall be witty and it shan't be long".

As a start, let's get his c.v. out of the way.

He was born in 1702 or 3, and lived in Rookby, Yorkshire, which had been in his family since the early 17th century. (Rokeby was thought to be a more polite denomination of the ancestral place once Thomas became a man of fashion). Perhaps it's too early in my talk for a digression, but here goes anyway. Velazquez's famous painting, the *Rokeby Venus*, in the National Gallery in London, did indeed hang there but after Thomas had sold the house. And Walter Scott's Rokeby also dates from after Robinson occupancy. Rokeby Hall in Co. Louth was built by the archbishop after his spendthrift brother was forced to sell the Yorkshire house. And when the Archbishop got his peerage, he chose the title of Baron Rokeby. Thomas was, it seems, a great disappointment to his respectable brother.

Back to Thomas's c.v. being careful not to confuse him with his contemporary namesake, Thomas Robinson, 1st Lord Grantham.

After Oxford, our Thomas set about completely rebuilding Rookby, or Rokeby. Fellow of the Royal Society in 1726, M.P. in 1727, in 1728 he married a daughter of the 3rd Earl of Carlisle of Castle Howard, better known to us as Brideshead. Most of 1729 to 31 was spent abroad, and on his return to England he was created baronet. In 1742 he went as governor to Barbados where, as a widower, he married money. He brought the money back to England in 1747, but not the lady who chose, for unstated reasons, to remain in Barbados.

As Master of Ceremonies in Ranelagh Gardens he entertained so lavishly that he was forced to sell Rokeby in 1769. Six years later, in 1775, he made his will leaving to his brother the Archbishop whichever of his books on architecture and antiquities the Archbishop might choose 'in order to complete the Collection that he is now making'.

Of these books Thomas in his will says 'several ... are very valuable'. Two years later, in 1777, he died.

If that's the bones of the c.v., let's try now to put some flesh on them.

To the urbane Christopher Hussey of *Country Life* Sir Thomas was a 'scallywag', albeit an 'engaging' one. As he puts it, 'in 1739 his extravagance required a period of recuperation, and he was appointed Governor of Barbados'. Anthony Malcomson is, characteristically, more to the point: 'Having lost heavily in his Ranelagh speculation... [Thomas] was placed under trusteeship by his brothers ... and packed off to be governor of Barbados'. From here he had to be recalled five years later at the request of the local assembly for self-interested mismanagement of building projects.

The Archbishop was probably over-sensitive to scallywaggery, even of the engaging kind, and out of fear of embarrassment to the family effectively frustrated Thomas's request in his will that his correspondence be published.

Thomas as man of fashion merges with Thomas as social climber. He was at least on the margins of the circle of Frederick Prince of Wales. His parties were famous, some so crowded that he had to remove his internal doors from their hinges. He was at pains in his will to stress his intimacy with Lord Chesterfield (though Horace Walpole said he thought that Chesterfield tolerated Thomas as the butt of his own sallies). In his will he is also at pains to point out that his monument in Westminster Abbey is to be close to that of the Duke of Argyle (a site which he says he paid £77-15-0 in 1753).

Perhaps Thomas tried too hard. There is a terrible story of him humiliating himself during a deluge on the hunting field in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the Duke of Grafton. And even his hero Lord Burlington found him trying. The poet Charles Churchill, describing Thomas as 'a specious empty man, and a great pest to persons of high rank ...' Adds that 'He was very troublesome to the *Earl of Burlington*, and when in his visits to him he was told that his lordship was gone out, would desire to be admitted to look at the clock, or to play with a monkey that was kept in the hall, in hopes of being sent for ... [by] the earl. This he has so frequently done that all in the house were tired of him. At length it was concerted among the servants that he should receive a summary answer to his usual questions; and accordingly at his next coming, the porter, as soon as he had opened the gate, and without waiting for what he had to say, dismissed him with these words: "Sir, his lordship is gone out, the clock ... [has stopped], and the monkey is dead" '.

There was unquestionably something of the interfering busybody about Thomas. He and Lord Burlington set about Palladianising (to its cost) Hawksmoor's sublime mausoleum at Castle Howard after Hawksmoor's death: Geoffrey Webb, describing Thomas's letters on the subject, deplores their tone of 'priestly infallibility'. And the *Dictionary of National Biography*, using a source I haven't identified, says that Thomas persuaded Sir William Stanhope to improve Pope's garden at Twickenham, and ended up spoiling it.

The late Giles Worsley has told us more than anyone else about the serious side of Thomas Robinson, the *arbiter elegantiarum* of the age. Robinson had a very good eye. His, for instance, is the standard characterisation of William Kent's innovations in landscape gardening. His description of Kent's work for the Prince of Wales at the

gardens of Carlton House is often quoted as the most perceptive analysis of the new style of landscaping. And it was Robinson who proposed the landscape architect Capability Brown for membership of the Society of Arts, as he also did, by the way, for Thomas Chippendale the furniture maker.

But Robinson's serious claim to recognition as a connoisseur lay in his interests in sculpture and architecture: as he says, 'When I enter upon the subject of sculpture and architecture my two favourite studies ... I quit the conversation with reluctance'. Arthur Young described Thomas's extensive collection of antique statuary in Rokeby, but while this may reflect little more than part of the routine kit of any gentleman's house, Robinson showed particular discernment in his patronage of contemporary sculptors such as Bouchardon.

Bouchardon's bust of Robinson's first wife, along with his own bust, by Francesco della Valle, is on the monument in Westminster Abbey which he himself designed. Bouchardon's and della Valle's credentials are suggested by the fact that both were connected with Alessandro Galilei's severely post-baroque Corsini Chapel in San Giovanni in Laterano. Bouchardon's busts are recognised as a very original group of classicizing portraits of patrons who shared a specific and informed interest in classical antiquity. Robinson proposed busts by Bouchardon to his father-in-law at Castle Howard.

The precocious neo-classicism of all this informed also his neo-Palladian taste in architecture. Don't worry about the tactless west wing he erected to complete Vanbrugh's Castle Howard (he had little sympathy with Vanbrugh's baroque approach, and Horace Walpole recalls hearing of how Robinson and Vanbrugh 'stood spitting and swearing at one another'. Don't worry about his structurally unsound work at Claydon which would have been more at home in St Petersburg than in Buckinghamshire. If he designed nothing other than his own house at Rokeby he would deserve his reputation as one of the most distinguished amateur architects of the 18th century. John Harris, who knows about these things, says that Robinson's Rokeby 'stands as an intellectual composition next to [Lord Burlington's villa at] Chiswick for both planning and composition'. To Giles Worsley, Rokeby was 'the paradigm of English neo-Palladianism'. Robinson's own copy of the first edition of Palladio's famous architectural treatise is on display this evening, but as Worsley points out there's as much of Pliny in Rokeby as of Palladio. And it's this archaeologizing instinct, noted earlier in his patronage of Bouchardon, which establishes the seriousness of our scallywag Sir Thomas.

And the mention of Thomas's Palladio brings us to his books, with which we are surrounded this evening. As I said earlier, he left to the Archbishop any of his books of architecture and antiquities which Richard wanted for his collection. This was generous, as Thomas had described his book collecting saying 'I have bought most of the good books and plans of architecture of whatever was writ or built', testifying at the same time to his interest in the subject by writing 'I have now seen every seat in Italy and France which travellers think worthy of Notice'.

So which of the books in this room belonged once to Sir Thomas?

Well, it's not all that easy to say. Not, at any rate, if like me you have only spent a few hours going through the shelves.

For a start it is probable (but only probable) that many of the great plate books and collections of engravings – such as the Piranesis – were Thomas's not Richard's. My own view of Richard is that, busy builder though he was, his patronage was utilitarian rather than stylish. His churches, this library as Thomas Cooley left it, his Royal School, his Observatory, his infirmary, even his palace, represent what Anthony Malcomson agrees can be called fat commissions for dull buildings.

I have come across only one architectural book (and that a not very interesting one) in the library to which Richard was a subscriber. The earliest catalogue of the library, that by William Lodge, makes little or no reference to books we know belonged to Thomas, so regarding it as a catalogue of Richard's library it is very thin in grand architectural books.

So a case can be made that grand folios to which Thomas subscribed but Richard did not, such as Robert Adam's *Spalatro*, once belonged to Thomas. A similar case can be made for the Society of Dilettanti's *Ionian antiquities* of 1769: Thomas was a member of the society (Richard was not) and Thomas was on the committee overseeing the production of the book. But only the Archbishop's bookplate appears on the book. Again, only Richard's plate is on William Chambers's *Treatise* of 1759, though Richard did not subscribe, while Thomas is listed as subscribing to 12 copies!

And remembering Thomas's association with the furniture maker Thomas Chippendale whom he proposed for membership of the Society of Arts, surely the library's copy of Chippendale's *Gentleman and cabinet-maker's director*, to which he subscribed (and Richard didn't) was once his.

Thomas's bookplate is, of course, reliable evidence of ownership when it appears. But here there is something of a mystery. Giacomo Leoni's *Palladio* of 1721 is displayed this evening to illustrate the mystery. It contains, at first sight, only the Archbishop's book plate. But on the verso of the title page a plain sheet has been laid down over Sir Thomas's own bookplate, completely covering and obscuring it. Those of you, like me, who are more sympathetic to the scallywag than to the prelate may well speculate that this may have been a little too self-serving on the part of Richard.

And to add to the highly speculative nature of all these theories, some of Thomas's books have a characteristically beautiful green binding, which in the absence of other evidence may point to his ownership of other volumes such as the *Catalogue of Christopher Wren's churches* of 1718 also on display tonight.

So what? What, if anything, can we take away from what I have been saying?

First of all, it's worth getting to know Sir Thomas, as it is to get to know anyone who, like him, employed an organist to play for him while he fell asleep. And he was more than an eccentric, and 'toady' to whom some of the great closed their doors. Malcomson, whom I'll tease by recalling that he once called Thomas a 'mad Palladian', tells me that – after visiting Rokeby – he has revised his opinion. Very little work has been done on Thomas. The Historical Manuscripts Commission refers in a single sentence to the many letters on architecture and sculpture in Castle Howard (none of which I have seen) which they refrained from publishing. His library is here, waiting to be identified. Giles Worsley, who studied Thomas more than anyone else, died

before producing the big study which Robinson deserves. What scope for a PhD thesis, and what fun to be had in the doing of it!

For there is no doubt of Thomas's passionate interest in architecture. This comes through his detailed accounts of buildings visited. It is a cliché to say that he was interested in classical antiquity: what gentleman wasn't? But his interest had a precocious archaeological bent, precocious because it anticipates the neo-classicism of the later 18th century. His Rokeby was anything but a routine neo-Palladian villa. With its *bagnio*, its hippodrome, its twin towers, its baseless Doric columns, its *fastigium*, its pediments from the Roman *terme*, it might have ended up as little more than a classical lexicon. Instead it is an original and integrated exercise of which Lord Burlington himself could have been proud. And since Burlington offered to Robinson a design for an Egyptian hall in Rokeby (not executed), maybe there's more to Rokeby than plain Sir Thomas. And if this 'more' wasn't lord Burlington himself, perhaps it was Isaac Ware to whose edition of Palladio's *Quattro libri* Thomas subscribed, and which is in the gallery upstairs. Remember, it is said that Ware may have been in Rome at just the same time as Thomas; remember that Ware designed the magnificent London town house for Thomas's intimate friend Lord Chesterfield; and remember that Ware engraved a suite of prints of Rokeby.

Robinson? Burlington? Ware? At the end of the day the presiding genius of the place was the 'Petronius of the age', the amateur architect Long Sir Thomas.

But a picture of Sir Thomas is only one of the impressions which I want to convey tonight. The other concerns the Robinson Library itself. This is one of the treasure houses of Ireland, and while many have recognized this before me, the opportunity which I have had recently of spending a day or two going through the shelves has given an immediacy to my description of it as a treasure house which I want to communicate.

I mean treasure in all its associations, from the financial to the scholarly. To illustrate the financial, let me say that there is a book on these shelves and for its title page alone, as a single sheet, I was happy recently to pay 2,000 euro - for the dismembered, single, title page alone! It's important to treat a library such as this with reverence. And as for the scholarly treasures, it's not every day that you come across a 1570 first edition of Palladio's *Quattro libri*, annotated in Italian and English: even Inigo Jones and Edward Lovett Pearce made do with an edition of forty years later!

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Consider now some of the responsibilities that come with being a national treasure such as the Armagh Public Library. I'm talking about more than keeping the roof on, more than paying the staff, more than welcoming tourists and visitors and scholars to one of the principal attractions of this ancient city. There is the equally heavy responsibility to investigate continuously the importance of what is on the shelves.

Consider that first edition of Palladio I mentioned earlier. Whose are the annotations in Italian? Whose those in English? Is its 16th-century Venetian style binding really 16th -century Venetian, or an 18th-century imitation?

Consider the spectacular collection of prints by Piranesi: whose were they and are they early or late states?

Consider which of these books is unique in the sense that it is the only copy in Ireland: as a start I could rattle off a list of books on these shelves which are in neither the library of Trinity College Dublin nor in the National Library of Ireland. Your copy of Dal Re Bolognese's *Maisons de plaisance* of 1726 is only one of a number of your books which is not in the British Library. And these exceptional volumes were spotted in the quickest of scans, of only the architectural holdings.

And who put together, under what circumstances, the breath-taking collection of French and Italian prints catalogued by Thirza Mulder – the untravelled Richard, or Thomas? My hunch is that they came from Thomas. Remember that the earliest surviving print room in England is in Thomas's Rokeby, dating from the 1750's.

But that's only a hunch. And I'll excuse myself for presenting you with more questions than answers by referring back to my phrase 'work in progress'. The progress mightn't be mine; it will be that of those students in the future who will develop the great potential of the treasures of this library.

When you have a treasure, it is provident to know how treasurable it is: and that requires a great deal of long drawn out arduous work.

That arduous work is being done brilliantly by the Dean and by Carol Conlin and by their staff who maintain the library impeccably. As long as these treasures are in their hands, our support for the Robinson library, and for its incalculable potential for research, is very well directed, and deserved.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that, unlike Sir Thomas, I haven't been too long.