

REMEMBERING
GEORGE H. THOMSON
1924-2016

Scott McCracken

George Thomson was indefatigable in his commitment to Richardson scholarship. Without his extraordinary contribution, Richardson studies would be years behind its present position. George was educated at the University of Western Ontario and the University of Toronto. He taught at Mount Allison and Wayne State before joining the University of Ottawa in 1969, where he would spend the rest of his career. His early research was on Forster. He published *The Fiction of E. M. Forster* with Wayne State University Press in 1967. Although he continued to publish on Forster, he spent much of the rest of his career, including his retirement working on Richardson. He made himself an expert on her life, gradually gathering copies of all the available materials as evidence, the originals of which are scattered across over more than thirty different libraries and archives in Britain and North America. In this he was aided by his wife and co-worker, Dorothy Thomson. The couple had met when they were both teaching at Mount Allison, but when they moved to Ottawa, Dorothy changed direction to become a librarian. Her skills as an archivist were evident in the vast, carefully organised collection of Richardson materials they kept in the basement of their Ottawa home. They were both collectors, of books, documents, and art. If the basement was an archive, visitors found the airy upstairs rooms were more like a gallery, filled with well-chosen paintings by contemporary Canadian artists.

In the 1990s, George began a fruitful collaboration with ELT Press, which publishes the journal *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*. *Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage: A Reader's Guide* appeared with ELT in 1996. For those new to Richardson's work it offered an invaluable introduction to her fiction, but it was so comprehensive that it quickly became indispensable to Richardson

scholars, who, if they are wise, always keep a copy within reach. The *Guide* was followed three years later by *Dorothy Richardson Annotated: Notes on Pilgrimage*, the first set of detailed annotations on *Pilgrimage* informed by George's meticulous scholarship. One of the three appendices listed misprints and errors, the first step in a long process that George hoped would result in a new critical edition of Richardson's work. Both books were dedicated to 'Dorothy', an in-joke between husband and wife, that would not have been picked up by most readers. In 2001 an *The Editions of Pilgrimage: A Comparison of Texts* was published under both their names as an e-book, the second step towards a new edition.

Gloria Fromm, Richardson's biographer, had prepared a selected letters for University of Georgia Press, but sadly died before it could be published. In the mid-1990s, George and Dorothy stepped into the breach, helping with the final corrections and identifying references as well as sorting through Gloria's own collection of Richardson materials. The volume was published in 1995. *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* was a major achievement, but shorter than Fromm originally intended. George decided to continue the work on the letters, working with Fromm's transcripts and producing his own, while adding new annotations. In 2007, he published a Calendar of all the known letters as an e-book with ELT Press. This was the third step towards a new Richardson edition, which he hoped would include all her surviving letters.

The Dorothy Richardson Society was founded in London in 2007. George and Dorothy attended its first conference in Bloomsbury, meeting for the first time Richardson scholars with whom they had been in communication for many years. Over dinner in an Italian restaurant, chosen to recall 'Donizetti's' in *Pilgrimage*, we quickly discovered that George's exactitude as a scholar was matched by a mischievous sense of humour and a passion for ice-skating. When not engaged with Richardson, he and Dorothy had spent their retirement travelling round the world to the major competitions.

They were keen to contribute their expertise and pool their resources with the Society, but tragically Dorothy fell ill and died in

2009. George carried on bravely, continuing the life they had led, frequenting the same neighbourhood restaurants, where he was a well-known figure, and despite everything pursuing his work. When I visited him in Ottawa in 2010, a few months after his bereavement, he was as mischievous as ever. ‘Dorothy is downstairs’ he said, visibly enjoying my look of alarm while I worked out that he was referring to his archive of Richardsonia. He had decided to hand on both the material he had collected and the material he had inherited from Gloria Fromm to the Society. That archive became the basis for a proposal to Oxford University Press, accepted a couple of years later, for new editions of Richardson’s letters and fiction.

George continued to participate in the preparation of the editions, advising from afar and even publishing a couple of items in the Richardson journal – short articles that filled gaps in Richardson’s biography. However, his capacity for work gradually diminished. He stayed in his own home for as long as he could, but a stroke meant he had to move to the residential building where Dorothy had spent her last days. He was tough, but he hated his situation. No longer able to work or enjoy life, he was ready to go when his time came; but his loss leaves a big hole for those of us for whom his work has been so important. His legacy will be his published scholarship and the archive he helped to create. That legacy will be realised in the forthcoming editions, which will bear his name alongside those of the other editors. He and Dorothy helped to build the foundations for all future work on Richardson. They will not be forgotten.