



John Arthur Thompson

24 October 1913 – 23 November 2002

The Reverend Dr John Arthur Thompson died peacefully in Melbourne in November 2002. His friends gathered with Marion, his wife of 62 years, to remember him at a memorial service on 28 November and a number of tributes have been published covering his long and distinguished life. This tribute focuses on John's contribution to the Australian Institute of Archaeology. John was the Institute's first Director, its first President after the death of its founder and its first Fellow.

The minutes of the first Council meeting of the Institute held in the Institute rooms at 174 Collins Street Melbourne on Friday 27 September 1946 at 6:15 pm record that "Mr John A. Thompson, from Brisbane, was present by invitation". Subsequent negotiations led to John's appointment as the first Director of the Institute on 1 January 1947, a post he held for the following ten years.

After completing a Masters degree in Science from the University of Queensland, John had taught science at the Anglican Church Grammar School in Brisbane for eleven years. The reason for appointing a secondary school science

teacher as Director is not clear from Institute records, but it turned out to be an inspired choice, even though the Council balked at holding a public welcoming function for Mr & Mrs Thompson "until the Director is more fully conversant with Archaeology".

At 35 years of age, John was by today's standards a late starter in archaeology. There were no archaeological schools in Australia so on 22 August 1950 John boarded the Strathaird bound for the Middle East. He spent a fortnight in Egypt visiting museums and archaeological sites in and around Cairo and Luxor, before flying to Amman en route to Jerusalem where on 2 October he commenced a year as an Honorary Fellow at the American Schools of Oriental Research. He worked and studied in Jerusalem until the end of May 1951 and then travelled on to Iraq before visiting classical sites in Europe.

While at ASOR John dug with Professor F.V. Winnett, Dr James Pritchard and Dimitri Baramki at Dhiban and Jericho. He worked as a site supervisor and undertook a survey of cisterns in the Dhiban region. He travelled with



Figure 1: *The Dhiban team at Thanksgiving dinner, November 1950. The photo was taken by Dr James Pritchard and includes from the left, John, Father Murphy, Bennie (servant) Ken Ogden, Amil (driver), Omar (cook) and Bill Morton.*

Gerald Lancaster Harding and a team to Jawa and other desert locations in Jordan to record Safaitic inscriptions.

The archaeological experience gained would have been the best available at the time. Kathleen Kenyon was Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and Père R. de Vaux was at the École Biblique. The Dead Sea Scrolls had only just been discovered. He spent much time at the Palestine Museum in Jerusalem and travelled widely through Palestine and Jordan. This activity meant that John spent up to a year away from his wife demonstrating his commitment to this new discipline. John knew the clear bright mornings of Jordan, the dust and heat of the day in the trench, the battles with personal health and stomach problems, and the struggles communicating with workmen in Arabic. As Director of the Institute he was first of all a “dirt archaeologist”.

On his return on 22 August 1951, John was equipped to set up the Australian Institute of Archaeology in a professional manner. He systematically catalogued and conserved much of the material acquired by the Institute. His registers are still relied upon today. He organised a library with the most comprehensive range of Near Eastern Archaeological journals in Australia.



Figure 2: *John in front of Cave 1 Qumran, 1951.*

The extent to which John understood Biblical Archaeology may be seen in his book *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1962). Most of this book was written during his time at the Institute and had been previously published in three parts from 1957 to 1960. This work was a scholarly exegesis of the field of archaeology in relation to the Bible, as it was understood at that time. John’s book



Figure 3: *John setting out on a survey of the Wadi Qelt. He is with Dr Dimitri Baramki.*

is easier to read than its contemporary, Keller’s *The Bible as History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1956) and it does not make the extravagant claims common in Keller’s book. There were many smaller publications prepared by John for the Institute and lectures he gave that culminated in *The Bible and Archaeology*.

A reading of the Council Minutes and Annual Reports of the period give a feeling of frenetic activity. The Institute began to employ people to assist with the lecturing in churches, colleges and schools and the mounting of exhibitions throughout Australia. Some of the exhibitions drew significant crowds and numerous people today still remember these events as their introduction to archaeology.

John was a consummate scholar who was committed to careful analysis and the accurate reporting of results. However there were others associated with the Institute who were enthusiasts with less commitment to scholarly care and who were driven to use archaeology to prove the historical accuracy of the Bible. John was later to write that his time as Director was traumatic and it was no doubt partly the challenge to his academic integrity that caused much of the tension. The long periods of separation from Marion would also have contributed to the trauma. In spite of this he laid the groundwork for the Institute's future operation and his own distinguished academic career in archaeology and Old Testament studies.

The following minute was recorded on 15 February 1957 testifying to the Council's respect for Dr Thompson:-

In Mr Thompson the Institute received a man with a vital Christian experience, which revealed itself in devotion to Jesus Christ and consecration to His service. His qualities of leadership and exact scholarship combined with his Christian character to make him well fitted for his task.

He continually added to his wide knowledge of Biblical history and also engaged in diligent research on Archaeology. For a year he was associated with the American Schools of Oriental Research and assisted in excavations at Roman Jericho and Diban. In recent years he has attained a recognised position of authority as one of Australia's leading Old Testament scholars.

This knowledge has been made available to many through the Institute's program of lectures. Mr Thompson's undoubted ability as a teacher has resulted in opportunities in regular lecturing at the University of Melbourne and Theological Colleges in Victoria and New South Wales. Many other groups such as Bible colleges, church societies and schools have welcomed his ministry in presenting the witness of the Institute.

Mr Thompson has at the same time performed a task of real importance in the direction of the program



Figure 4: Excavation at Dhiban in John's Trench.

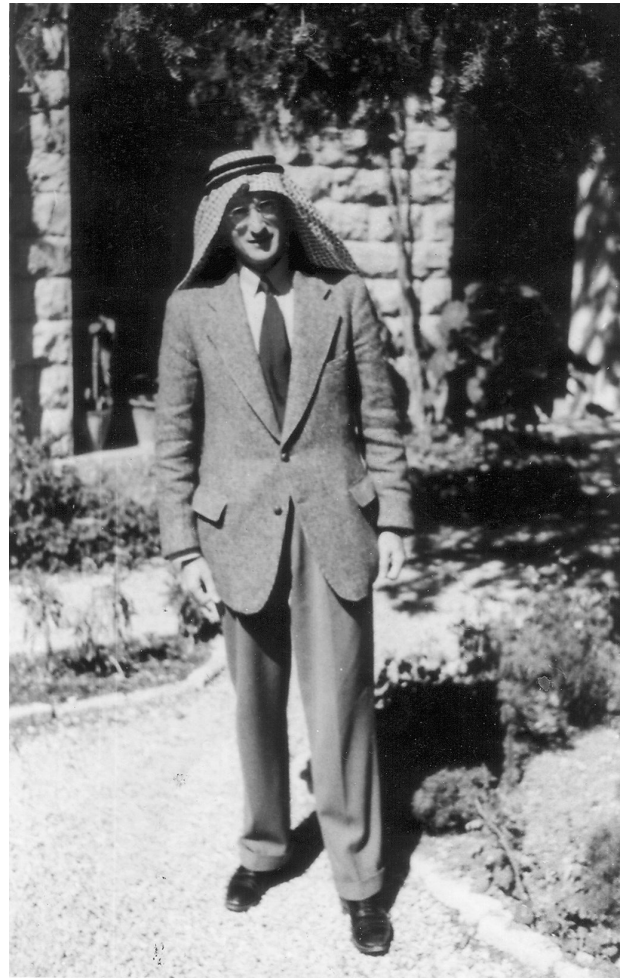


Figure 5: John in front of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem where he was an Honorary Fellow in 1951.

and staff of the Institute, and in this capacity has earned the unqualified approval of the members of the Institute Council. He has given without reserve in every avenue of service open to him. It would be difficult of overestimate Mr Thompson's contribution to the development of the Institute.

John's academic career continued with his enrolment in Hebrew I and Geology I at the University of Melbourne in 1947. The following year he did Hebrew II, Arabic I and Syriac. His capacity as a scholar is illustrated by the fact that by 1954 he was lecturing Hebrew at the University. It was the Old Testament that was to capture John's research interest and after he left the Institute he completed a doctorate at Cambridge University entitled *The Vocabulary of Covenant in the Old Testament*. He also wrote commentaries on Deuteronomy (1974), Jeremiah (1980) and 1 & 2 Chronicles (1994).

John returned to Melbourne in 1966 as a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne and in 1976 he became President of the Institute's Council, a position he held

until 1989. John continued to write prolifically for *Buried History* on matters archaeological. This was not an easy time for the Institute, finances were always limited and there was not the freedom and opportunity of the first decade. He had a clear idea about the direction that the Institute should take, but did not have people of like mind on the Council or on staff. In recognition of his service to the Institute and his standing as a scholar, John was made the Institute's first Honorary Fellow in 1992.

Dr Thompson's influence in the Institute lives on. It was he who inspired the current Director to put aside a career in Mining Engineering and to study Hebrew, Greek and Archaeology at the University of Cambridge and assisted by being one of his referees. The library and collection that

John arranged remain the Institute's most valued assets in the Australian context.

The television series, *It ain't necessarily so*, recently screened in Australia revealing that sometimes bitter conflict continues in Archaeology and Old Testament research. In the face of similar conflicts in his day, Dr Thompson demonstrated that careful and honest scholarship endures well after spectacular claims and prejudicial assessments pass. He remains an inspiration that may wisely be followed by all students of archaeology.

Christopher J Davey
Director

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Figure 6: John mending pots at the Institute in Melbourne.