L. G. THOMAS

Interviewed by Gerald Friesen
Edited by Gerald Friesen

L.G. Thomas is *the* Alberta historian to a generation of Albertans, particularly those who were students at the University of Alberta. He wrote one of the scholarly books in the ten-volume "Social Credit in Alberta" series, the foundation of academic research on that province. He edited and prepared footnotes for the second edition of A.S. Morton's landmark work, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*. He has written several dozen historical articles and introductions, and he continues to publish regularly on the history of the Canadian west.

Dr. Thomas has also been a teacher and administrator. At the University of Alberta he introduced a course on the history of western Canada, one of the first in this field, but he also lectured in British, Canadian, and International History during his thirty-four years on the staff. Among his administrative responsibilites, he served as the first Albertan head of the History Department. During his six years in that position, from 1958 to 1964, the department's faculty complement increased from five to thirteen and the lineaments of the modern organization were established. L.G. Thomas has influenced a generation of teachers and a group of university and government-employed scholars. He is

Lewis G. Thomas enjoying the spring thaw on the family ranch in Alberta, 1915.

representative, too, of those few western Canadian scholars--W.L. Morton, L.H. Thomas, V.C. Fowke, Margaret Ormsby, G.F.G. Stanley--who were the first children of the four western provinces to record the area's history in their scholarly work. Dr. Thomas's recollections and reflections are worthy of attention, then, because they offer insights into the formative intellectual currents in the Canadian prairies.

Lewis Gwynne Thomas was born into a ranching family near Millarville, southwest of Calgary, in 1914. His father, the son of a banker in North Wales, had left the security of middle-class Britain to seek adventure in the North American "West" and eventually became a rancher in Alberta. His mother, an English governess employed in 1904 by ranchers in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains near Calgary, married Mr. Thomas a year later. Their third child, L.G., was educated in local schools and spent two years in Mount Royal College, Calgary, before entering the University of Alberta at the age of sixteen in 1930. After an M.A. at Alberta and doctoral studies at Harvard, Thomas taught in the History Department in the University of Alberta from 1938 to 1942, when he entered the Royal Canadian Navy, and from 1945 to 1975, when he retired. He still lives in Edmonton with his wife, Muriel Eleanor Massie (who is known as Jonesy), and spends the summer months at his cottage--and in its carefully-tended garden--at nearby Lake Wabamun.

Lewis speaks with an English accent and, in his conversation, often raises images of a world dominated by an earlier, imperial Britain. His sense of style is, for lack of better phrases, western British or prairie English. During one of the interviews that became part of the following text, he was wearing a gray, rib-knit cardigan, a light blue shirt, and a dark blue ascot. His slacks were dark blue, his socks gray, and his shoes suede. His white hair was combed forward and his bushy eyebrows accentuated his blue eyes. L.G.'s rhythms of speech and expressive gestures suggested self-deprecation but also the confident expectation of an attentive audience. Tea was served during our conversation, scotch after.

The three interviews integrated into this text took place in June and November 1981. Our discussions ranged over Dr. Thomas's youth, his academic activity, and, to a lesser degree, his views on education and contemporary society. They have been transcribed and will be deposited, along with transcripts of my interviews with five other prairie scholars, in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.[1] These conversations were undertaken in the hope that they might help to place the writing and teaching about the West in context. Researchers will respond to them in many different ways, but I was struck by the exceptional influence of English politics and letters in these scholars' lives. In an age when American culture is the dominant external force in Canadian experience and expression, it is noteworthy that England played an important part in prairie academic life until the 1960s.

Readers who have entered university in the years since 1960 may also be struck by the broad, humane approach to education evident in L.G. Thomas's discussion of the University of Alberta. His own teaching ranged across the history of England and modern international relations as well as Canada. And *his* professors apparently accepted a like obligation to know their students well and to emphasize the international context of their Alberta experience. Dr. Thomas's recollections of the university

between 1930 and the 1960s are dominated by this liberal, humane and international perspective. He himself devoted many hours to consultation with his students. And the specialist courses of the post-1970 generation have no counterpart in his pre-expansion prairie university.

The house at Cottonwood Ranch, ca. 1917

One cannot talk to Lewis Thomas without being intrigued by his views on the working and structure of Canadian prairie society. He grew up and then became a professor in a plural community, of course, because Alberta is the home of immigrants from many lands and stations. As he comments, he belonged among the "privileged." He spoke English, was encouraged from an early age to read widely, enjoyed a comfortable though not an extravagant material environment, was bright and able to enjoy the benefits of a "good education," and, thus, he travelled through life accustomed to the mysterious rituals and ceremonies--the tea and the church and the legislature--that might perplex those who were less favourably situated. He sees Alberta as an open society. Though he acknowledges differences of language, gender, ethnicity, and class, he does not depict them as crucial variables in the lives of its citizens: one's *aspirations* would determine whether one achieved the full measure of one's powers. Similarly, communication within this society was a matter of following the natural flow of kin and occupational and geographic *networks*, not of surmounting--or failing to overcome--barriers and conflict. Dr. Thomas emphasized connections, not discontinuities, in his discussions of the community in which he lived. In this optimistic world, the prairie church played a crucial role, smoothing over division and offering a believable interpretation of the present and the future. This may not have been a universe of certainties, but it was a harmonious and plausible whole for Dr. Lewis Thomas.[2]

The Interview

F: You were raised on a ranch southwest of Calgary, near Okotoks. What was your childhood like?

T: Well, it was very odd. One of my colleagues once said it explained why I was so odd. When I was six--just ready to go to school--my parents decided that the local school, which was quite a long way off, was not really very desirable. And so my mother bought a house in Okotoks and my sisters and I . . . went there during the week and went back to the ranch for weekends. It was only eight miles but, of course, we didn't have a car. We used horses. We spent a sort of suspended childhood . . . and I think it affected me more. Then, of course, most of our friends . . . were much further west and they had quite a different kind of life than that of the town.

F: A rancher's life?

T: Well, it was that very peculiar community which is still quite well known in the Calgary area–Millarville. It had been settled early and almost entirely by people from the U.K. or people who related easily to them. And as far as we were concerned, life centered around the church, the racetrack, and the polo grounds, with gymkhanas pulling the church and the racetrack together, you see. And very horsey. Well, I gave up horses--had too much horse really--the church had more permanence in my life than the horse.

Lewis G. Thomas with (left to right) aunt Ethel Gwynne Thomas, sisters Gwynydd and Dorothy, and mother Edith Agnew Louise Thomas

F: Were you an active horseman?

T: Oh, we rode a great deal, of course, because it was our means of transport and our pleasure.

F: It was a very British life?

T: I haven't quite made up my mind. It's a very closed kind of society. It's North American in that it pretends to a great degree of egalitarianism, but I have come to the conclusion that that is largely a pretence. It's North American never to think that anything is structured in terms of class and even if you do, never to mention it–never use the horrid word.

F: The society was cosmopolitan and yet it had class distinctions?

T: Well, horses I think are the secret, tempered only by the fact that the strongest cultural element was the church, I mean specifically, the Anglican Church, in my case. As I say, I rather gave up on the horses but the church certainly lingered on.

F: Were you told that you were part of a select few?

T: It was never as explicit as that, and any suggestion that that was the case would certainly have been clobbered by almost everybody in the group, because they subscribed on the surface to this egalitarian North American attitude but . . . one tended to make the friends of other people who shared the same aspirations. It is more a matter of aspirations than actual background, I should think.

F: Wealth was not necessarily the source of social distinction?

T: Well, no. We certainly were very poor, but nobody was rich. There were one or two families who were comparatively well-to-do, but most of the people were very poor. But of course in southern Alberta and again I suppose in British Columbia (Margaret Ormsby [the British Columbia historian] and I have often talked about this) before the war of 1914, you could do all these things, none of which involved horses, with a very low income. You didn't need to have very much money, but I think in most cases, there was a trickle of support coming in. . . . I am describing the privileged sector. That is the person who came with, say, a professional education of some kind which he could put to good use as a doctor, lawyer, architect, or clergyman.

They came with this little bit of extra privilege. The largest group probably are those who had a little money or access to it. They always knew that they could borrow or they knew that some day they'd inherit--something like that. This is what I mean by privileged sector: it isn't wholly a matter of money. It's an ability to link yourself to the society to which you want to belong and remain in it. Southern Alberta was a society which centered upon interest in horses--and dogs, too. Cattle were all right, but they weren't horses, after all. People were quite devoted to cattle, but you don't have quite the same sentimental attachment, though my sister refers to her Herefords as her "babies."

F: This definition of your childhood milieu is elusive: money, ethnicity, education, aspiration all seem to play a part.

T: I think aspiration is really the key. It's liking that sort of thing, wanting that kind of life and yet not being willing to sacrifice all the amenities to have it. People kept their manners, I think.

F: Were there servants in this society?

T: No, you had "lady helps" and "gentleman helps"--that is, floating bachelors who worked from place to place and who could, because they were in the genteel tradition, be part of the family.

F: More than a hired hand?

T: Very definitely! They fitted in comfortably and often married eventually and some of them even prospered. I can think of one quite well-known racehorse owner whom I would classify as gentleman help. His father was an army captain. He belonged to quite a genteel Cornish family and they had absolutely no money at all at that stage. He worked from place to place and finally homesteaded, was ultimately involved with racing, and made a very sensible and happy marriage. He got some racehorses. He had two passions--horseracing, which was his living--and the amateur theatre. Rather an odd combination but explicable in terms of this discussion.

F: Did you have to do much work as a child?

T: Not really, no. I think I was exceptional in this way. It was this business of skating back and forth between the two homes. I did chores. I did a lot of gardening because that was really about all there was to do, and as time went on I stooked and did that kind of thing. But I have to admit I never learned to milk a cow.

F: You were sent to Mount Royal College in Calgary for high school. Did you enjoy it?

T: Well, yes and no. The ethos of the college was not what I had been used to. The curious sort of mixture of fairly High Church Anglicanism and very left wing liberal Welsh nonconformity, which my background involved. . . . I was about thirteen, and I suppose by that time one is forming these judgments and of course it was apparent to me immediately that the level of teaching, though done entirely by university graduates, was low. They used to import these teachers from the Maritimes, pay them very badly and make them work very hard. I think for a little WASP brought up on lots of English children's literature, the school system in terms of curriculum and objectives and so on in the 1920s, when I was going through school, was really a lead-pipe cinch because it was geared to somebody who was literate, who had learned how to speak grammatically, more or less, and who had been fed precisely the diet that would make us all into little models of Ontario Tories.

F: Toryism would have had a religious base?

T: The churches were very much the cement that held the community together. My entry was into the little Anglican group which was held together by the church and certainly not by class, because it was a very diverse group--from the man who drove the honey-wagon to the nearest thing to a squire that the town had. . . I think we had a kind of inheritance . . . a kind of cultural inheritance effectively passed on to those of us who were receptive to it. It must have been incredibly meaningless to the people who didn't have the aspirations that my parents and their friends had for their children and themselves. I liked to read, that was certainly what I most liked to do, and I quite liked going to school.

F: Your parents would assume that you would go on to further education?

T: Well, they hoped very much and they certainly took steps. I can remember the controversy in the town over the teaching of French. It was not the question of people not wanting French and Latin to be taught; it was a question of luxury. Pressure was brought to bear by people like my parents who said, "After all, we're tax payers too, and we're going to have French and Latin for our children, so that they can matriculate. . . ." But there was a substantial division of opinion in the town as to whether this wasn't a frill and a little unnecessary, because a very much smaller proportion of people in my age group went to university immediately. A good many did eventually but, in Alberta, university education for large numbers was very much a post-World War II thing.

F: You then went to the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

T: Yes. I was quite young when I went to University, I was a freshman in what was actually second year Arts at the ripe age of 16, which does mean that you are young to the group, but it was an incredibly close, tight little society which was very much what I had expected it to be. And I knew what to expect from people who talked about it. I'd met one or two of the very small number of professors; some of them were known to my parents and we had--not a wide acquaintance in Edmonton, but--in Canada, and perhaps the West particularly--Canadians tend to know each other and so you were very comfortable in the University. The University was dominated by the academic side--History was dominated by Rhodes scholars.

F: Were you interested in history as a subject of study?

T: Yes. I'd liked it as a kid. I was fed a lot of it, especially British and ancient history, by my aunts in the United Kingdom who saw to it that no stone went unturned--although the odd thing was that they were extremely left wing ladies--all suffragettes--but the books they sent out were British Imperial adventures. The work of Patrick Dunae does so much to describe the literary and cultural experience of somebody like myself who is the child of British immigrants.[3]

F: Why did you enter the Honours History programme?

T: Well, I was sixteen and the only place I could find employment at the age of sixteen would have been in a bank--that is, suitable employment. I couldn't have been accepted as a student in Normal School for teacher education because I was too young, so the only thing to do was to go to university. I received a letter from the President that it was a bit exceptional to enter second year Arts at my age, so he recommended that I enroll in an Honours programme.

Another advantage of the Honours programme was that you didn't have to

take Science. It wasn't that I dislike Science. It was that it was appallingly dull, and actually grade 12 Physics was not only dull but almost totally erroneous. What a waste of time! I've never been a great sympathizer of Lord Snow's on this point. I've got on quite nicely without the Third Law of Thermodynamics. So I took Honours History. A.L. Burt had been head of the Department and he had given it, I think, real distinction. He had produced a number of Honours students whose academic careers--Eileen Dunham for example, and of course George Stanley (who was very close to me in time)--were very distinguished.

I still remember my teachers as excellent people. I think the level of lecturing was probably not as high as it is now. And I don't think that all academics were as dedicated to their better honours and graduate students as my colleagues are now. But my teachers took a tremendous interest. Of course there was very close contact because there was so few of them--and so few of us. I'd like to write a memoir on [one of those teachers] George Smith.

F: What was he like?

T: Well, he wrote his lectures. He used to tear them up every year and write new ones, and in those days, of course, even the head of the department, and, as he became, Dean of Arts, taught at least three courses and lectured three hours a week in each-- nine hours. Now to produce what was in effect a text, which he then read with such elegance and such distinction and such diction . . lectured sitting, but of course you could because classes were relatively small. His were very popular. He really introduced the study of international relations in Alberta. I suppose it was one of the first courses that was given to Canada.

F: What was it like to grow up in Alberta in these years?

T: What I can say about Alberta in the '20s and '30s is that it didn't seem nearly as detached from the real world as it seems today--when I say the real world, of course you know I mean London. I suppose it is still true to some extent; my kids probably feel much more at home in the U.K. than do the kids from further east . . . but even the ones who haven't spent time there seem to adjust to it, they don't have any of that sense of being colonial.

F: Your choice of Harvard for graduate studies must have seemed a milestone.

T: Well, that was George Smith. I graduated into the depths of the depression and I'd never had any summer employment because there were really no summer jobs going. . . . If you could live at home and perhaps deliver papers or something, you could survive . . . so I spent my summers quite pleasantly doing whatever my mother thought needed doing in the garden and having a nice time--and reading . . . . Well, it seemed reasonable to do my M.A., and the Department found me a little money, and I had a research job for George Smith, who helped Angus in that volume in the Canadian-American Relations Series.[4] Then I think they found me some more money. It never crossed my mind--George was rather cross with me about it--He said, "Why didn't you ever apply for a Rhodes scholarship?" I said, "I didn't think I would conceivably get one. I'm no good at athletics." Well, I tried the IODE but I didn't quite make it. I wasn't really that distinguished a student. I squeaked through first class. [Then] . . . I did the M.A.[5]

F: You must have been satisfied with that thesis.

T: Well, it's pure literature of course. It hasn't a footnote in the significant

part of it--about as unscholarly as anything could be. I think I wrote better in those days than I do now.

F: You wished you had carried on the study of ranching?

T: I don't anymore, but at the time I wished that I had done that rather than politics. I really think that my interest was in the nature of society rather than the nature of politics--political history now seems to me to be so much a product of social history. But one had to get the politics off one's mind. It was a nice, neat, tidy thing that you could do and it only took me 18 years. (Laughs)

F: Why Harvard?

T: Well, George Smith was the worldly one, he gave you the advice. . . . George said there were four possibilities: you could go to Toronto (I wanted to do Canadian history by this time), you could go to Berkeley, you could go to the U.K., or you could go to Harvard. Now he said, "Toronto really isn't very good but they do have a lot of Canadian history. You have a point of view completely warped by your United Kingdom background so there is no point really in your going to the United Kingdom as a student. If you are going to be spending your own money, it's wisest to spend it going to an American university." And he said, "There are two choices for someone interested in Canada and the West: one is the University of California where Bolton is. The other is Harvard with Merk." . . . So he said, "Take your choice." I said New England sounded more exciting than California. . . . I had read absolutely no United States history, so that summer I started out having read Morison's *History of the United States*.[6]

F: Did you like it at Harvard?

T: Oh very much, yes--I was always about to leave--I had two years and I liked it. Merk was my supervisor, a saintly man and a superb presenter of material. His lecture style was very low key. Lecturing wasn't as good at Harvard. Nobody touched George Smith. Morison was quite showy but you didn't feel he had the careful preparation that George Smith had--which would shock Morison. . . . As is turned out it was the Tercentenary of Harvard--and so Morison's seminar was overcrowded and I had a man called Fulmer Mood--a nice man but perhaps of less distinction. I got to know Morison fairly well. You couldn't fault them on that. They knew the graduate group. Of course, Morison took a great deal of interest in graduate students. . . . Canadians always had it made.

F: Were there other Canadian specialists in your time there?

T: No. Nobody. Gerald Graham had just left and they didn't fill his appointment ever again until after the war when Conway was appointed.

F: And there were no students pursuing Canadian topics?

T: Yes, there were. Maurice Careless was there just after, and we have often compared notes. There really wasn't much Canadian history. There was Merriman in English history--I did know more English history, it's true, than the other graduate students, who knew basically North American history. This so impressed Merriman that he insisted that I be passed, Merk told me later. The Americans thought I should go back and do it again, not the thesis but the candidacy exams, for there was much stress placed on them in those days. Cambridge was lovely, and I made a great many new friends in New England and had a nice time. It was a very interesting society and it was on its last legs, I suppose. But I felt right at home . . . . It was fading away just the

way pre-war southern Alberta was fading away when I was an undergraduate. The New England society, the old Brahmin structure had indeed faded.

F: Why did you choose to come back to Alberta?

T: I was the only person in my group at Harvard who was offered a job. And I had completed my candidacy exams. I'm sure it was one of the reasons why I was passed. It was only in Canada, it's true, but it was a job. There weren't very many going.

F: Had you written back to Alberta?

T: Oh, I kept in very close touch. George Smith, I suppose, wrote and said, "Would you like to come and be a teaching fellow at $800.00 a year next year and teach Morden Long's British history while he is on leave?" And I said I should think very much so. Then I was allowed to teach summer session and do Canadian history. That paid the princely sum of $300.00 which was really quite a lot of money. Then I short of hung about. Then, of course, the war came and nobody had the heart not to continue to employ you until you could get in one of the services.

F: You spent three years away from Alberta, while in the Navy, didn't you, during the war?

T: Yes, in Ottawa and in Newfoundland. Purely sedentary but interesting--a change.

F: When you came back to Alberta in 1945, were you a full-time appointee in the History department?

T: Yes, I had been appointed in the interval. The university did that for people who were on overseas service--they held the post open. I didn't have a full time appointment when I joined the Navy, but I was given one while I was in the Navy and it was sort of advance along. I came back actually as a lecturer--I always remember that I made a mild complaint about the size of the salary to Dr. Robert Newton, who was then the President, whom I liked very much, and he said, "Well, Mr. Thomas, you must remember that this is a university; we can't possibly pay as much as you were paid as an officer in the services." But I really wanted to go back to the University and to Alberta.

F: Did you have a sense of service to your province? Was there a kind of provincial patriotism involved in this?

T: No, I don't think so. I think the war made me much more Canadian and I became much more aware of Central Canada.

F: What was your relationship to the rest of Canada?

T: Well, I knew about it, obviously, and I think what first interested me in history and in Canada was an interesting old lady who came to live in Okotoks with some cousins--the squire's family--the Wyndhams. Miss Seymour was a cousin who had to make her own way; she was born in St. Kitts, and . . . was part of the West Indian planter society. She led most of her life in straitened circumstances in Ottawa but, thanks to the patronage machine of John A. MacDonald [Prime Minister 1867-73, 1878-91] was able to keep body and soul together. She retired about 1910 from the Canadian Civil Service and came to live in Okotoks. . . . She was full of tales about life in Ottawa and about her family background. Mrs. Wyndham's mother had watched the Americans burn York [Toronto] from the veranda of "Rosedale" [the house that gave its name to the neighbourhood just at the end of the then village] (they were related to the Jarvises [a leading family]). Miss Seymour was full of tales. . . . She'd known everybody, especially John A.,--she dated him. Of course he had been extremely good to her. So you

got a very different picture of John A., in the eyes of a devoted Tory; their dog was even ealled Tory.

F: And you weren't therefore estranged from Central Canada?

T: No. It didn't strike me as a place of great interest, at least not Ontario, nor indeed, to be perfectly honest, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The real centres seemed to be in the northeastern United States and particularly, London and Britain.

F: And yet, you did teach the Canadian history survey course and presumably followed the classic staples and constitutional approach?

T: Yes. I think it was just at this point that Creighton's *Empire of the St. Lawrence* was published.[7] I remember it struck me as being exceedingly interesting and fresh and vivid--much more interesting than my lectures--which I think were considerably enriched by it.

F: You launched in 1949 the first "History of the West" course in Canada. Why did you do this?

T: So I'm told--at least the first undergraduate course. Well, the department thought it was high time that I taught some Canadian History at some time other than evenings and in summer school. I think it really was intended to give me some opportunity to teach Canadian history in regular session without impinging on vested interests. I think it was premature, in many ways--this has been the experience of other people who have taught Western History.

F: Was it hard to teach?

T: Not especially, except for the unevenness of the literature. When you think back, there really wasn't much that you could put in the hands of an innocent and trusting undergraduate. There was some good primary-secondary material, the travel books and so on. There was very little in the later period--there really wasn't much except the Canadian Frontiers of Settlement series, and one did use that a lot.[8] And then you'd try to somehow make it hang together.

F: Over this whole period, from '36 or '38, to the early 50s, from time to time, you must have been occupied with your doctoral dissertation.

T: Yes. When I left Harvard I hadn't selected a topic, and it took me a little while before Merk, who liked the idea of a history of Alberta conceived very broadly, had managed to sell it to my committee. They took those things seriously in those days. . . . It was accepted as a topic and I started to research soon after I got back in '38, or maybe '39. I think I was too busy making lectures, trying to teach my two courses. Then of course, the war came and that was a little unsettling. You really didn't know what was going to happen. Well, finally it became evident that we weren't all going off to be infantrymen right away, and I did a fair amount of research to about 1942. And then I just dropped it during the war, I did almost nothing--although it was silly, I was in Ottawa and had free time. I think about others who always seemed to have free time and beetled off to the archives. I seemed to never get past the Chateau pub or the Wardroom, or some other place. I had a desk job, but it rather preoccupied one and I didn't do anything on the thesis. . . . Then of course we came back after the war to be confronted by these enormous classes of veterans--very exciting teaching but the work load was incredible. I think I had something like 700 students in about five different versions of the introductory eourse, which was then in British History, in the calendar year after I returned in 1945, and I marked all their papers.

F: But it would take a couple of years

before you could even think of working on your thesis?

T: Yes. It was about four years. . . . But, then I managed to write a little book called *The University War Effort*.[9] By that time, it was apparent that it was high time I finished my thesis.

F: You did narrow your sights, of course, to that first twenty years of Alberta politics.[10]

T: Yes. The thesis was meant to stay within that time. The thesis was much broader than the book, and not nearly as political. I still think it was a pity that I accepted the advice of the Editorial Committee (of the Social Credit in Alberta series). If I'd been older, tougher, and more knowledgeable about academic life, I would have fought back. One of the editors, my friend, Bill Morton, I think it was, thought that the book should be more like the thesis, and I've come to the conclusion that Bill was dead right. S.D. Clark took a neutral position, but I think Brough MacPherson wanted it to be a political science work. . . . I think it would have been a more useful book if it had had more of the social and economic history in it.

F: Were you a Canadian nationalist in your outlook upon teaching questions?

T: That is a very difficult question, I find now, because I grew up in the '30s [when] we were very worried about the war. After all, George Smith, who perhaps had more influence than anyone else on me and on my fellow students at Alberta in the early '30s, was one of the first Canadian academics to be serious about the threat of world war. . . . He knew the people . . . people like Lothian, Lionel Curtis, Halifax--I don't think Halifax was an intimate friend but he knew him well--Lothian was a very close friend, Curtis was of course the father of them all. And he [Smith] spent every summer abroad, maintaining his contact with the outside world. But to be in his classes was an experience . . . and the groups were relatively so small then-- you saw your professors quite a lot outside the classroom. You were still able to gather groups together and have them to dinner or lunch or tea or whatever and to spend a great deal of time talking to them. And in that atmosphere, George was regarded by many of his academic friends, and certainly by his quite extensive acquaintance among Edmonton's leaders--the equivalent of Winnipeg's Sanhedrin,[11] which existed in Edmonton (a group called The Little Club)--George was regarded as eccentric but he was also, of course, respected as an authority. Well, he was trying to warn Canadians that they had to think internationally. So my view of the world was formed, I think, in the '30s. It was a view that Canada was part of the world and that it behooved Canadians to understand what was happening to the world. We read international affairs and, certainly, when I began to teach, it seeped into my teaching and into my whole approach to the process of education.

F: Did you have fears about American influence in Canada?

T: Not so much fear of American influence, as a fear of American failure to appreciate the realities of the world as we saw them. Our point of view, I think--the point of view that we learnt from George Smith--was very much influenced by his own relationships with the United Kingdom. . . . Now it's very hard to recapture, because the world was shaken. It was really still the world before 1914 that people thought about. After the war, my own thinking was so completely dominated by the bomb . . . this imminent, total destruction that man seemed to be able to inflict upon himself. I think I was at first concerned

that Europe wouldn't be able to pull itself together.

F: What strikes me is that you were still thinking in the 1950s and early '60s about international power relationships and that your teaching was placed in an international perspective.

T: Yes, I think that we felt a responsibility to teach Canadians about their place in the world, even if we were teaching Canadian history; I think we were still internationalist.

Of course, this is just in the beginning of the television period. Immediately after the war the veteran students had a visual image of Canada because [they] had moved about a great deal in the country. They also had some overseas experience. They knew something of the shape of the world. And of course, they'd been involved in a cataclysmic world experience. But this fell away as time went on and, more and more, the Alberta student was dependent for his vision of the rest of Canada upon what he saw on television. . . . The difficulty, I think, of this post-war period was that the old images of my youth were created by books, by reading. And the old curricula were based on the assumption that there was a lot of reading going on and it was reading at an appropriate level and that people passed very rapidly to reading seriously. Then of course, the film, I don't think anyone has ever really explored the influence that the film must have created. . . . One was struggling to communicate some sense of the world outside the experience of these youngsters which seemed to us to be narrow. I think it really was a narrow experience. Now my own sons were growing up in this period [the 1950s] and we were, I think, trying consciously to transmit this sense of the richness of the outside world. And to transmit, as far as we could, the culture. All of this, of course, against this background of the extreme delicacy of the international position. One knew in the 1930s that very unpleasant things were happening in Europe and could happen to you individually and could happen to your country, no matter how remote you were. And you wondered how Americans could be so blind to this. But we really then didn't visualize the total destructiveness . . . the total oblivion. I mean, one was rather inclined to laugh at the idea of Armageddon, of the end of the world, before 1945, but it was certainly an idea that one couldn't reject after 1945. And this goes on haunting us.

F: What approach did you take to Canadian history and to French Canada?

T: Now that is a change of focus, I think. It comes back to the question of people with a limited experience and people with, as we hoped, a less limited experience, trying to transmit to them some sense of the outside world. . . . I suppose I still talked quite a lot about the Commonwealth relationships of Canada and I would emphasize the difficulties of these in my lectures, and be increasingly frustrated by the difficulty of engendering any kind of response in the students because they had no idea really what these countries were like and how they had gotten to be there. . . . I would think that it was again a sense of frustration on the part of the educated person with a sympathetic view of cultural difference and someone who found cultural difference exciting rather than disturbing—the incredible frustration of watching the climate of public opinion becoming more and more provincial, more and more eager to wipe it out and make everything into a nice homogeneous and, in the case of Alberta, English-speaking world. I think

that was one's real sense of mission, doing what one could to counter that. But then of course, the emergence of the post-Duplessis Quebec obviously was very exciting and very satisfactory, and very acceptable. And of course Trudeau somehow managed to communicate a sense that this was acceptable. . . .[12]

F: What was your impression of Canadian nationalism and of regionalism in Alberta. . .?

T: All this is based on a response to an interesting difference. This is the key to the kind of excitement that I suppose one could call patriotism. It's based on an ability to feel that there is a tremendous human and physical variety in the country that is very loveable. Let's put it that way. I suppose, all my life, I've resisted the tendeney to wipe out difference and replace it by some kind of homogenized pattern. And this, I think, is why I find nationalism as it's usually understood and practiced, distasteful. No matter what region or country or province or whoever, is practicing homogenization, [it is] going in a direction which I find personally extremely distasteful and depriving. And it's spoiling my world. It's reducing my capacity to love, in effect--of course, that's a theological way of looking at it.

F: Another interest of yours that was developing at this time, the 1950s and 1960s, was Church history.

T: When I went baek after the war, my wife and I started to go to a church near us. The Rector was the present Dean of Rupertsland, Bill Harrison, and we got to be great friends. It was a very active, lively, growing, thriving parish. I got involved in that and then got involved in the affairs of the diocese because of Walter Barfoot, Bishop of Edmonton. He was one of this country's great saints and I admired him very much and enjoyed him very much. His idea of a perfect way to spend an evening was to gather together a group of young academics, a bottle of scotch and just chat. Then I found the church archives. This was in the early days--even the Saskatchewan archives were barely established. The ones in Manitoba were pretty moribund. B.C.'s were mueh better than the others but again a bit scatty. Alberta--there was damn all. It crossed my mind that if I wanted to go out and study Western history, the largest body of witnesses, literate witnesses, with a relatively objective and definable position, were the missionaries, and the Anglican ones came to hand. Now I found them very sympathetic. By this time I was embroiled in all sorts of Anglican in-fighting in the days when you cared whether the Bishop wore a biretta every second Thursday or not. So I formulated a proposal. It was fairly honest as academic proposals go--simply to examine the missionary records available in the United Kingdom. They weren't at that point available on microfilm and there was very little even in the Public Archives of Canada--and nothing in the West. In England you could go around the corner and find whatever else you needed. So off I went with a plan of seeing what they had to say about the West and with a view to writing more about the West and about Canada. . . . It was really just to familiarize myself with the material. Church history was continuous as an interest, but to me it's social history. It's still one of the best bodies of material for western social history--especially the early period when there were very few others. And the Anglican archives of course are rich because it's the kind of church whieh generates, by its structure, a lot of records. . . .

F: During your teaching career, the University of Alberta became a centre for graduate studies in Western

Canadian history. Was that a conscious decision?

T: Oh yes, very much so, but not just for Western history. We were lucky at Alberta in the early years of expansion, which happened to coincide with the period in which I was chairman, roughly from '58 to '64. We did get really superlative people. Bill Eccles perhaps was the best known among them because he was the one who remained in Canadian history, but it was an extremely exciting group. It seemed to us that, because there was pressure from the university, which wanted to see graduate studies developed in the Arts disciplines, we should go ahead. The University gave us a certain amount of support. I always thought the real core of the department's work was the honours programme, and if that's healthy everything else will look after itself.

F: But the program did achieve recognition as a centre for Western Canadian specialists?

T: Yes, the supply was there, the opportunities were there, and nobody else was doing it of course. I yield to no one in my admiration for Hilda Neatby, but I think she rather held it back in Saskatoon. She was very cautious about graduate studies. I could never understand why there weren't more in Manitoba, which in my view had more eminent and distinguished Canadianists than we had. And the other place was B.C. It would have been the obvious place but it didn't flourish there either. One of the great disappointments to me, and I don't feel it's any fault of hers, was that Margaret Ormsby didn't have more graduate students of high calibre and didn't have the opportunity to develop British Columbia history as it should have been developed. I think we were lucky. There was a little core of people who cared--who felt that it was important to have a high level of scholarship in whatever graduate work you did. It had to be just as high in Western Canadian history as anywhere else. . . .

F: Why did you decide to do the re-editing of A.S. Morton's *History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*?[13]

T: Because Hilda Neatby asked me and I didn't dare say no! [Laughs] No, I was terribly flattered by the suggestion and I really looked forward to the opportunity of getting into the Hudson's Bay Company material without having any particular plan. I think all the time I was feeling my way towards more emphasis on social history. I didn't quite know how to go . . . after all, it was some years ago and there wasn't much. Arthur Lower had written that really remarkable book, but everybody had been a little unfair, unkind, quite unwise about it, and so social history didn't have a good image.[14] I think that is perhaps why: I really did want to look at the Hudson's Bay Company stuff.[15] And then you do get hooked on fur traders, especially when you discover that the interesting thing is the social history of the fur trade, which isn't in the forefront of Morton but is certainly lively. . . . I was interested in the blending of race and class, especially of race, in the early west. This is to me a terribly interesting thing and hasn't been seen very accurately. I haven't myself done much on it but . . . [graduate students did].

F: Did you have an initiating role in pushing graduate students . . . in that direction?[16]

T: I would say yes. I did feel that there was a tremendous need for an on-going study of the mixed-blood and particularly of the neglected--in my view--mixed-blood whose speech was English. This is really how, to return to my childhood--how one's early years can

affect one's whole life.

I told you we had a house in Okotoks, in town. Now friends of ours were the grandchildren of quite a celebrated Hudson's Bay trader, Richard Cornwallis King; his grandchildren (there were four of them) lived further west than we did--so far west that once they exhausted the resources of the local school at grade 8, they had to go away . . . so the two youngest came to board with us in town. This went very well for a year and then their mother died and my mother became a kind of surrogate mother. We were all very close--these two kids and my sisters and I. And, of course, they were actually I suppose by blood, one-quarter Indian. Now, I was interested in the Kings. They really were very snobbish, in a nice way, but they were very old Calgary, very old southern Alberta--old, meaning that Hudson's Bay Company chief traders don't have grandchildren everywhere. He was terribly well connected--their English connections were very grand indeed--Admiral Duckworth King and the Cornwallises--and they had exactly the same sort of attitudes as we had. We were, I think, sometimes the subject of a certain amount of criticism, "Who the hell do those hayseeds think they are"--that sort of thing, and that interested me. Why would they adhere so closely to these loyalties? They took great pride in their Indian ancestors; their grandmother was a very remarkable woman.

And I was curious. All the time I'd been working on Western history, I had been wondering why some people--especially of course Trader King--why did his children turn out so well, in terms of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos, and why did those of his colleague, Trader Moberly, who was recruited from the same background (Moberly, son of a post captain, Cornwallis King, son of a general in the Indian Army), turn out relatively poorly? Well, of course, there was only one King and there were a lot of Moberlys. Mr. King, the father of my friends, went to school in England for eight years, where he was moulded by his English relations. He came back, went to work for the HBC himself, married a lady of genteel background. The key was his mother, Charlotte Flett, almost a full-blooded Indian, but culturally a product of the Red River educational system, a very devout Churchwoman. . . .

F: What are you working on now?

T: There are so many unfinished projects which keep catching up with me. I have started another line of inquiry because, of course, the really exciting things for me have been, first my involvement in local history and, then, the way in which it has led me into social history. And, perhaps . . . intellectual history. But, I must say, I am very interested in the way in which the privileged sector has affected the West. It has not been fully recognized by most of us; we see the West as a product of the frontier. And even people who don't think this way, still have a vision of the West which is very different from my vision.

F: One of the questions I asked Professor Morton and would like to ask each of the historians: do you see a kind of architectural design in the way your work has gone or your interests have developed?

T: I'd be very interested in what Bill said to that, I must say. . . . I find it a very difficult question to answer. As you know, both Bill and I have given a certain amount of thought to Anglicanism. It's not a thing we ever discussed very much, except in jest, which is usually, I think, the way Anglicans converse about their faith. I

think you do see some kind of structure in my work. I've always been interested in relationships and the way in which, in Canada particularly, these things are very important. I think they're enhanced by the isolation in which the immigrant finds himself. I don't think perhaps we've realized how isolated the British immigrant was--that is, what I've called the privileged sector, the individual settler who comes out more or less on his or her own, and who is accustomed to a very supportive and elaborate network which includes the family, and is obliged to find a group to replace the family. The privileged British newcomer has a freedom of movement; he has no language handicap, isn't broke--at least not desperately broke . . . he finds, of course, that there's a society just made to order for him, and he reinforces that tremendously. I wonder sometimes if it hasn't caused a great deal of anguish for other people who have found this kind of genteel society difficult. Not only is it difficult to enter, but it's difficult to relate to because it doesn't correspond to anything in their tradition. I've always been struck by the intensity of friendships between families that are not related to each other. . . . In the case of settlers of my parents' generation, it was your friends you depended on, not your family, because your family was thousands of miles away. And this is peculiar to this group. . . .

F: What are the things of which you are most proud in your career?

T: I think we've finally managed to produce the hideously-entitled volume, *Our Foothills*, without actually breaking the community and breaking my heart.[17] That was a very interesting exercise and consumed a great deal of time--not only mine but that of dozens of other people. It brought me back, of course, into relationship with my childhood and my early associations. It's really at the root of all the things I've been doing since. I think that's one of the reasons why I find it so hard to settle to writing a rather conventional book about the prairie provinces because there are all these other fascinating things . . .

F: Do you still enjoy living in Alberta?

T: Yes I do. A great many aspects of it are nasty, but then you find those everywhere and you're bound to find them in a society that suddenly is thriving at a time when others are not. I confess I'm a little . . . I would have hoped that Albertans would have been less quick to turn in on themselves as they appear to have done in a great many cases. It's very hard, of course, to form an opinion; but my Alberta childhood and my life in Alberta has always been a very open life. I felt that Alberta opened all sorts of doors to me, all kinds of opportunities, and I somehow find it disturbing to feel that people don't realize that Alberta isn't the centre of the world--it never crossed our minds--I mean, we knew we were provincial, and I always felt that was our great advantage over those unfortunate people from Ontario who thought Toronto was the centre. We knew it was London of course. (London wasn't the only centre . . . . I think that's very peculiar to me--to the Anglo--[though] it was adopted by a great many Albertans. It was a transplanted Canadian version of the British myth that we all flourished in during the 1920s, or were comparatively comfortable in.)

F: Was there a sense among the many Western historians we've talked about of protest . . . a feeling of being outside the mainstream?

T: No, I don't think so. I think really rather less than there is today. . . . As generations proceed, they tend to grow further and further apart. Relationships

become more distant, cousins become second cousins. . . . This is central to any view I have of this country, of Canada. That is, for my generation, if you were relatively comfortable economically (you could be very poor but as long as you had some degree of security) and an Anglo background and bourgeois aspirations, then it was easy to plug into the Canadian structure. This was facilitated by the fact that people were related to each other. So you could come, as my parents did, from Britain, and my sisters and I could grow up in a community where almost everybody had come from Britain, and you inevitably developed connections with people spread across Canada because, you did have friends who had come from Ontario, the Maritimes. And this is why people like myself, Margaret Ormsby, Lewis H. [Thomas], Roger Graham (who was a bit younger), Bill Morton, Hilda Neatby, it was really very easy for us to feel comfortable in the Canadian structure. We might not approve of the strueture, we might be quite radical in our political attitudes, but, socially, we were quite at home. We were brought up to know how to eope with it. We might be a bit gauche at first but we learned quickly. A teacup was handled in much the same way from Victoria to Newfoundland. George Stanley was another. We were all without exception from relatively comfortable, educated, middle elass families and, all but Lewis H. and Roger Graham, from Anglican baekgrounds. It was easy for us. Our parents were well-educated, though not well-off.

F: What's the difference now?

T: I think what has happened is that these networks that existed then have been attenuated, and there have been two generations of change, maybe three, and the personal links are no longer strong. And of course, the whole thing is much larger and much more complicated so it's difficult, I think. . . . I see communities as interlocking; and if the communication networks between them have broken down, people find themselves uncomfortable. Today, it's harder to lock in to a community than it was in my generation. Especially in Alberta, society is placed in a position of strain by the dominance of particular groups, and the special privilege of particular groups, and the assumption that those are the values which should be preserved--and if you want to join us, we may let you marry our daughters. At the same time, of course, we pretend to be egalitarian and we also live in an atmosphere which is (in terms of much of what provides people's basic education) dominated by promotion of material standards whieh represent a different kind of aspiration, I think.

F: You flirted, I think, with the radical left in the '30s. Do I hear strains of that?

Lewis G. Thomas, at a gathering with friends, 1988

T: Oh well, yes, but I am enough of a realist not to think that the real radical left will ever go anywhere in this

country, and I am not sure that I would want it to. Because really, I am extremely conservative.

F: How is it that the Canadian "left" can find so many conservatives in its fold, so comfortably in its fold?

T: Well, I think that essentially the Canadian "left" *is* "small c" conservative. A violent revolution wouldn't, I think, appeal to too many people in the Canadian left. We may be post-Christian but we're still living in a Christian age. When I observe the young people--all the things they appear to *live* by--they are still using the standards of judgment that are essentially very close to what I would like to think were Christian standards, though I am afraid that more formally-attached Christians don't value the values that they are supposed to value very much.

F: I am going to ask you just one last question. Is history as a discipline important in a liberal arts education?

T: I think it is vital really. In fact, I think liberal arts education should really be "in history"; you may pursue other disciplines, but rooted in history. The liberal education, I think, was an entrance into the whole past experience of man. [History] gives you a vertical as well as a horizontal view of the world around you, and without that I don't think you have a liberal education. I would say that a liberal education is "history."

Endnotes

1. Edited version of two others have been published: "An Interview with Manitoba Historian, William Lewis Morton" *Manitoba History* 1 (1981): 17-20; and "Irene M. Spry: A Biographical Note," in Duncan Cameron, ed., *Explorations in Canadian Economic History: Essays in Honour of Irene M. Spry* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985), pp. 319- 26.

2. A collection of his papers has been edited by Patriek A. Dunae as *Rancher's Legacy: Alberta Essays* by Lewis G. Thomas (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986). In addition to Dunae's "Introduction" on Dr. Thomas, the interested reader might wish to look up Lewis H. Thomas's biographical essay, "Lewis Gwynne Thomas," in Lewis H. Thomas, ed., *Essays on Western History in Honour of Lewis Gwynne Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976), pp. 1-12.

3. Patrick Dunae, "'Making Good': The Canadian West in British Boys' Literature, 1890-1914," *Prairie Forum* 4 (Fall 1979): 165-81.

4. H.F. Angus, ed., *Canada and Her Great Neighbor: Sociological Surveys of Opinions and Attitudes in Canada Concerning the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1938). This volume was part of a project entitled "The Relations of Canada and the United States," a 25 volume series edited under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace by J.T. Shotwell between 1936 and 1945.

5. L.G. Thomas, "The Ranching Period in Southern Alberta," M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1935.

6. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930, 1937, etc.)

7. Donald G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence 1760-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1937).

8. The Canadian Pioneer Problems Committee, the offspring of a project on the world's "pioneer fringe" directed by Isaiah Bowman of the American Geographical Society, published eight volumes in the Canadian Frontiers of Settlement series between 1934 and 1940.

9. Lewis G. Thomas, *The University of Alberta in the War of 1939-45* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1948).

10. L.G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta: A History of Politics in the Province of Alberta, 1905-1921* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), vol. 8 in the Social Credit in Alberta series.

11. The Sanhendrin (or Sanhendrim), a small group of influential Winnipeg citizens under the informal leadership of newspaper editor J.W. Dafoe, was named after the highest court of justice in ancient Jerusalem--Murray Donnelly, *Dafoe of the Free Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968) pp. 78-9.

12. Maurice Duplessis was the Premier of Quebec from 1936 to 1939 and 1944 to 1959. The province changed significantly during the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s. Pierre Elliott Trudeau was Prime Minister of Canada 1968-79 and 1980-84.

13. Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (1939; 2nd edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), edited by Lewis G. Thomas.

14. Arthur R.M. Lower, *Canadians in the Making: A Social History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958).

15. The Hudson's Bay Company archives were then at the company's headquarters in London, England. The HBC has since moved to Canada, and the archives are now housed in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

16. Our conversation here touched on the work of Sylvia Van Kirk, Frits Pannekoek, John E. Foster, and several other scholars of the pre-1870 West.

17. Millarville, Kew, Priddis, and Bragg Creek Historical Society, *Our Foothills* (Calgary, 1975).