Whiteside, Derek Thomas [Tom]

(1932–2008)

- Jacqueline Stedall

Whiteside, Derek Thomas [Tom] (1932–2008), historian of mathematics, was born on 23 July 1932 at the Corporation Maternity Home, Devonshire Road, Blackpool, the second son of Ernest Whiteside, photographer, and his wife, Edith, *née* Watts (1899/1900–1937). The family lived in Blacow Street, Blackpool, a slum street that was later demolished. Whiteside's mother died at the age of thirty-seven when he was five years old. He and his brother were brought up by their father, who had been disabled by poison gas injuries suffered during the First World War. A childhood accident with a bus left Whiteside himself prone to increasingly severe epilepsy in later life.

From 1943 to 1950 Whiteside was educated at Blackpool grammar school. In the sixth form he studied languages but also displayed a precocious interest in mathematics. He went on to read French and Latin at Bristol University, and graduated with first-class honours in 1954. After two years of national service with the 5th Royal Tank Regiment in Libya he entered Cambridge University in 1956 as a graduate student. His PhD thesis, 'Patterns of mathematical thought in the later seventeenth century', was published in 1961 as the first issue of the newly established *Archive for History of the Exact Sciences*.

In the course of his research Whiteside worked his way through practically the entire corpus of seventeenth-century mathematical literature. In 1958 he began to examine the Portsmouth collection of Newton's manuscripts in Cambridge University Library; from 1959 to 1961 a Leverhulme fellowship enabled him to continue working on them. The story he himself liked to tell was that in 1960 he dropped in to Cambridge University Press to offer them an edition of Newton's mathematical papers. The offer was verbally accepted and thus began the many years of intensive work that eventually resulted in the eight volumes of *The Mathematical Papers of Isaac Newton* (1967–81).

For two years (1961–3) Whiteside was supported by a research fellowship from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. During this period, on 28 December 1962, he married Ruth Isabel Robinson (1940–1997), from Blackpool, daughter of Harold Robinson, market gardener. Their children Simon and Philippa were born in 1967 and 1970 respectively. From 1963 until his retirement in 1999 Whiteside was employed by the University of Cambridge. He was a research assistant (1963–72) and then director of research (1972–6) at the Whipple Science Museum. He was made a university reader in the history of mathematics in 1976, and university professor of the history of mathematics and the exact sciences in 1987.

In the early years of editing Newton's papers Whiteside (who published as D. T. Whiteside, but was known as Tom) had some assistance from Michael Hoskin, one of his PhD supervisors, and later from his great friend Adolf Prag, but otherwise he accomplished the prodigious task singlehanded. He was proud that the completed volumes were so often referred to as 'Whiteside's papers'. Besides transcripts and translations of Newton's mathematical manuscripts the volumes contained lengthy introductory essays offering detailed insight into Newton's intellectual development. Before Whiteside began his work scholars understood very little of Newton's private mathematical world. Whiteside's extensive knowledge of seventeenth-century mathematical literature enabled him to set Newton's work into historical context, while his profound understanding of Newton's approach enabled him to interpret many difficult and often obscure calculations. The portrait that emerged of Newton as a mathematician underpinned all subsequent research in the field.

Various honours came in the wake of the Newton volumes: the médaille Alexandre Koyré of the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences in 1968; fellowship of the British Academy in 1975; the Sarton medal of the American History of Science Society in 1977; the Euler medal of the Soviet Union's Academy of Sciences in 1985; and an honorary degree of DLitt from the University of Lancaster in 1987.

For much of his career Whiteside was a solitary scholar. He never held a teaching position and had no research student. Nevertheless, he was enormously generous to those he regarded as serious researchers. To his friends he sent long handwritten letters, full of invaluable information and Whitesidean idiosyncrasies, greatly treasured by many of the recipients.

Whiteside completed his work on Newton while he was still in his intellectual prime. He afterwards turned his attention to the papers of Kepler and of the English mathematician Thomas Harriot, but failed to find in them the inspiration he had found in Newton and published very little on these or other historical topics. For the last few years of his life he was housebound by ill health and lived alone, his wife Ruth having died in 1997. He occupied himself for some of this time with a history of Blackpool grammar school, to which he felt himself so greatly indebted. He died at West Oak care home, Murray Road, Wokingham, near his daughter's home, on 22 April 2008, from complications of epilepsy. Proud of his humble beginnings he asked for his ashes to be scattered in Blackpool. He was survived by his two children.

Sources

- *Blackpool Gazette* (1 May 2008)
- *The Independent* (3 May 2008)
- *The Guardian* (5 May 2008)
- *The Times* (7 May 2008)
- *Regeneration and Renewal* (16 May 2008)
- *BSHM Bulletin*, 23 (2008), 189–92
- *Historia Mathematica*, 36 (2009), 4–9
- *WW* (2008)
- personal knowledge (2012)
- private information (2012) [Philippa Whiteside Tomkins, daughter; N. Guicciardini]
- b. cert.
- m. cert.
- d. cert.

Archives

- priv. coll.

Likenesses

- obituary photographs

Wealth at Death

£143,825: probate, 7 Nov 2008, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*