Whiteside, Derek Thomas [Tom] (1932–2008), historian of mathematics, was born on 23 July 1932 at the Corporation Maternity Home, Dennisville Road, Blackpool, the second son of Ernest Whiteside, photographer, and his wife, Edith, “née” Watts (1899/1900–1953). The family lived in Blacow Street, Blackpool, a short street that was later demolished. Whiteside’s mother died at the age of thirty-seven when he was five years old. His and her brother were brought up by their father, who had been gassed during World War I and suffered from the effects of poison gas injuries, especially his brain. A childhood accident left Whiteside himself prone to increasingly severe epilepsy in later life.

From 1943 to 1949 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, where he was 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 Portland collection of Newton’s manuscripts in Cambridge University library, and in 1959 he was brought into contact with Newton’s manuscripts. He was a research assistant (1961–3) and then director of research (1972–5) at the Whigfield 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.

For two years (1961–3) Whiteside was supported by a research fellowship from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. During this period, on 26 December 1962, he married Ruth Isobel Robinson (1940–97), from Blackpool, daughter of Howard Robinson, market gardener. Their children Timon and Philippa were born in 1967 and 1968 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 (1972–5) at the Whigfield 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 Hobbs, one of his PhD supervisors, and later from two great friends, Adolp Pog. 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 insights into Newton’s intellectual development. Before Whiteside began his work scholars understood very little of Newton’s prior 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 méaille Alexandre Koyré of the Académie Internationale d’Histoire des Sciences in 1968; the Euler medal of the Soviet Union’s Academy of Sciences in 1985; and the médaille Alexandre Koyré of the Académie Internationale d’Histoire des Sciences in 1968; fellows of the Royal Historical Society, the British Society for the History of Science, and 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 Dr l.h. from the University of Lyon 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. The portrait that emerged of Newton as a mathematician underpinned all subsequent research in the field.

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WW (2008)
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b. cert.
m. cert.
d. cert.

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priv. coll.

Likenesses

obituary photographs

Wealth at death

£143,825: probate, 7 Nov 2008, CUPA Exp. & Wales

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