

W. O. and P. K. Thompson: The Forgotten Couple from Canada

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Abstract

Willard Owen Thompson and his wife, Phebe Kirsten Thompson, both played important roles in the founding of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. They were born in the Maritimes and immigrated to the United States in the early 1920s. Willard Thompson was the founding editor of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, a position held until his death in 1954. Phebe Thompson had a nearly 30-year association with the *Journal*. She stepped down from her position of consulting editor in 1982 when she was 85 years of age. This article describes the careers of these forgotten Canadians.

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None

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By any definition, Phebe Kirsten Christianson lived a remarkable life. She was a medical pioneer, being only the thirty-fifth female to graduate with an MD from Dalhousie University.¹ Christianson was one of only two women graduates in 1923. Equally impressive was that she became the 1 in 10,000 of us who lives to be 100 years of age. Born September 5, 1897, in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, she died in Chicago during her one hundred and second year on January 9, 1999.²

While at Dalhousie she met Willard Owen Thompson. They married on June 21, 1923. Both she and her husband played important roles in the establishment of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. This article provides a brief review of their careers with particular emphasis on this aspect of their professional lives.

Willard Owen Thompson

Of the two, Willard Thompson was by far the best known at the time of his death.³ The son of a Presbyterian minister, he was born on February 17, 1899, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Thompson obtained a BA from

Dalhousie University in 1919 and an MD from Harvard in 1923. (He and his wife became naturalized American citizens in 1937.) After graduation he specialized in endocrinology. His research was focused initially on thyroid conditions, but he moved on to studying Addison's disease and the effects of both male and female sex hormones. In 1929 he joined the faculty of Rush Medical College in Chicago, which merged with the University of Illinois College of Medicine in the 1940s. When 55 years old, he died suddenly, on March 23, 1954, from a cerebellar hemorrhage secondary to hypertension. At the time of his death, he was the clinical professor of Medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine.

Thompson was a member of a large number of medical organizations in which he held a variety of offices, including the American Geriatrics Society (AGS). From 1950 on, he was a member of its executive committee.⁴ In 1949/50 he was the second vice-president of the society; he moved up to first vice-president in 1950/51, after which he served as president until his

death in 1954. The AGS honoured his memory by establishing the Willard O. Thompson Award,¹³ which was given to a member of the society who had made distinguished contributions to the field of geriatric medicine. It was awarded by the AGS from 1958 till 1996.

Willard Thompson also had an abiding interest in medical journalism. Both he and his wife were members of the American Medical Writers' Association. He was the editor of the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, the *Year Book of Endocrinology*, and *American Lectures in Endocrinology*, as well as serving on a number of editorial boards including those for the *Mississippi Valley Medical Journal*, *American Practitioner*, and the *Journal of the American Academy of General Practitioners*.

Thompson published extensively, particularly in the area of thyroid disease, and wrote a handful of publications touching on aging, principally the endocrine disorders encountered in older patients.¹²⁻¹⁴ He wrote the first editorial in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, which was optimistically titled "Aging Comes of Age."¹⁵ Thompson saw "two serious problems [that] must be faced—the care of the aging population and a concentrated attack on the causes of aging so that ways and means of increasing the life expectancy of people who have reached the age of 65 years may be discovered."¹⁶

Like many other geriatricians of that era, he defined the practice of geriatrics more widely than we do. In his editorial in the *Journal*, he set the threshold for "old age" at 50 years. His article read at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the AGS and subsequently published in *Geriatrics* on age-associated endocrine problems was titled "Endocrine Problems after the Age of Forty-Five."¹⁷

Geriatrics and the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society

Geriatrics was the first official journal of the AGS. It went into publication in 1946 under the direction of its founding editor, Dr. Axel E. Hedback. A native of



Willard O. Thompson.
(Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine)

Sweden, Hedback was "devoted in generous measure to medical journalism."¹⁸ W. O. Thompson joined the stable of 23 associate editors for the May-June 1946 issue. Dr. Hedback died at the age of 77 on December 31, 1951.¹⁹ Shortly afterward, the relationship between *Geriatrics* and the AGS came to an end. Whether the separation was amicable or bitter is unknown. In an interesting article, Hirshbein has explored the portrayal of old age found in *Geriatrics* during the years it was the official publication of the AGS.²⁰

In January of 1953, the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* was launched "almost entirely through his [Thompson's] energy and hard work"; he was its first editor. The previous year a notice for the new geriatrics journal, to be edited by Willard Thompson, then president of the AGS, was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.⁸ Because of the prior association with *Geriatrics*, there was some confusion as to which journal was affiliated with the AGS. In February 1953 an editorial written by Thompson emphasized that the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* was "the only

official journal of the American Geriatrics Society."²¹ Thompson's editorship came to an end with his sudden death. The contents of the first volume of the *Journal* have been usefully reviewed by Dr. Mark Clarfield.²²

Phebe Kirsten Thompson

After marrying Willard, Phebe Thompson worked at the Harvard School of Public Health as a biochemist in the Department of Applied Physiology. She and her husband then moved to the Metabolism Laboratory of the Thyroid Clinic at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Their professional and academic careers were entwined from then on. She wrote to Dr. Judith Fingard in 1986 that they "always worked together, as a 'team'" (J. Fingard, personal communication, November 2003).

After the move to Chicago, she was an assistant in the Metabolism Department of the Rush Medical College and the Central Free Dispensary before working with her husband in his private office.²³ She had a total of 66 publications, most ($n = 60$) co-authored with her husband (J. Fingard, personal communication,

November 2003). Only one of her articles was in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*; it was a short, unsigned (and undistinguished) editorial written in support of the National Library of Medicine.²²

At the time of Willard Thompson's death, two of their four children were just beginning high school (J. Fingard, personal communication, November 2003). Rather than entering clinical practice, she chose to work as editor for both the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* and the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* because this work could be done from her home (J. Fingard, personal communication, November 2003). She was the managing editor of the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* from 1954 to 1961 and then a consulting editor for it and *Endocrinology* until 1965.²³ Incidentally, in 1954 Phebe Thompson turned 57 years of age. If two of her children were starting high school at that time, she likely bore them after she was 35 if not 40. Bearing children naturally later in life has been found to be associated with a greater likelihood of women living to be 100 years.²⁴

Phebe Thompson had a nearly 30-year association with the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. She joined her husband as associate editor halfway through the first year of the *Journal*. After Willard Thompson's death, Edward Henderson took over as editor-in-chief, with Phebe Thompson assuming the position of editor. In 1973 Dr. Henderson died and Charles E. Lyght became editor-in-chief, with Phebe Thompson remaining as editor, a job she continued into the reign of Paul Beeson. In 1982 she stepped down to the position of consulting editor, finally retiring at the end of that year, when she was 85 years of age. In 1966 she received the Malford W. Thewlis Award from the AGS for her outstanding contributions to the welfare of the society.²⁵

Phebe Thompson outlived all of her contemporaries. Sadly, her death in 1999 failed to elicit comment from either her alma mater or the *Journal* she served for so long as editor.

Conclusion

A series of articles in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* dealt with the renaissance of American geriatrics, which started in the mid- to late 1970s.²⁶⁻²⁷ Gene H. Stollerman wrote that when Paul Beeson returned to the United States, he was "concerned about the retarded state of American geriatric medicine."²⁸ A key step in the revitalization of American geriatrics was inducing Paul Beeson to assume the editorship of the *Journal*. He was credited with "turning it from truly a backwater journal of anecdotes and case reports to the beginnings of a modern clinical science journal."²⁹ Up until then, "the *Journal* was a bit of a 'sleeper'...the *Journal* of that era focused on clinical articles and clinical investigation."³⁰

Although written to honour the more recent editors of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, these statements do represent unintended criticism of the prior custodians of the *Journal*. The key roles played by both Willard and Phebe Thompson appear to have become forgotten. The *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* was the child of Willard Thompson, whose editorship was tragically cut short. His contributions to the AGS were acknowledged at the time by the establishment of an award in his name. This is no longer given, and its place has been taken by the Nascher/Manning Award. For their married life, Phebe Thompson appeared to have been the "silent partner." Her contributions to the *Journal* do seem to have been underappreciated. For example, during the fiftieth anniversary of the *Journal*, her name was never mentioned. In comparison to the short tenure of her husband, for 28 years (1954 to 1981 inclusive) she held the position of editor of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, and even after retirement, she wrote when nearly 89 years old that she was still open to working "free lance" (J. Fingard, personal communication, November 2003). Her career would likely have evolved very differently in our era.

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