

Francis Thomas, *Memoirs of a Migrant*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 209 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-5679-6.

Memoirs of a Migrant, by former educator and politician Francis Thomas, is a reprint of his 1972 autobiography, which was first published by University Education Press. It has been reprinted, with some additions in the form of photographs, letters and articles, under the Ethos Evergreens imprint, which “aims to keep good Singaporean literature in the public eye.” This particular volume seems an odd inclusion, given that Ethos tends to publish rather “literary” works, with a strong list of titles in poetry, prose, drama and criticism. Thomas’ straightforward, simple prose doesn’t quite seem to fit stylistically. But it is, I think an interesting and significant choice, and one which well deserves to be kept “in the public eye” as it makes some rather penetrating observations on the nexus between education and the moral character of the nation.

First, a little background for those of us who are unfamiliar with Thomas and his contributions to the development of Singapore as a nation: he was born in 1912 in an English village near the Cotswolds, the son of a Rector, and the fourth of six siblings. He moved to Singapore in the mid-1930s to take up a teaching post at St Andrew’s School, and more or less remained there for the rest of his life. He was a POW during World War II. After the war he returned to Singapore to once again take up teaching, married a Singaporean woman, and joined the Labour Party of Singapore. His membership in the Party led to his involvement in the politics of Singapore in its early days as a nation. He eventually withdrew from political life, and devoted his energies to education (always with St Andrew’s). He passed away in 1977.

Thomas’ writing style is bare and unadorned, befitting the very straightforward and somewhat uncompromising tone he takes in these memoirs. There is not a shred of self-pity here; rather, what comes across is a strong-minded, fair and deeply moral personality, who tried to bring those same qualities into all his dealings whether as a teacher, a principal, or a public figure.

It might seem odd for someone who devoted himself so wholeheartedly to education, that he was singularly unimpressed by the education he himself received. He seems always to have been highly conscious of the difference between what he wanted in life, and what his schools wanted to impose on him. Interestingly, he does not blame the schools, saying instead that the “trouble was that I had to find what nowadays they call a lifestyle” (25). He was clearly in some way troubled, and further alienated by the education system; this led to odd, subversive but solitary acts of rebellion – cheating in his Matriculation exams, for example, and stealing five shillings from a collection meant for soldiers “crippled in the war” (28). Yet his recounting of these incidents is utterly matter-of-fact; he offers no excuses for his actions, merely states what he

did, and records the emotional effect on him of these actions. He says, for example, that he felt an uplifting of morale after passing his exams; he never got rid of his feelings of guilt for stealing the money, however.

Thomas does not cast judgment on himself; but neither did he judge the others with whom he came into contact. For example, he describes encounters with two homosexual teachers who surreptitiously fondled him (and several other students); these teachers were eventually found out and dismissed. Thomas's response was guilt that he might have contributed to their dismissal, but he also felt sympathy for them.

This kind of fair-mindedness seems also to have guided his public life in Singapore, where he was appointed Minister for Communications and Works (a post he held from 1955 to 1959) because of his honesty and integrity. David Marshall, writing a short tribute to Thomas after his death, said "I immediately appointed him Minister for Communications and Works, as that was the Ministry which handled the largest amount of public money and I wanted a man on whose integrity I could rely without any qualms" (198). Perhaps unsurprisingly it is his integrity which eventually led him to distance himself from politics.

The political tales here interested me less than Thomas's experiences as a schoolmaster and principal. He writes about the difficulties of setting up new systems and trying to make them relevant to a new nation. He recounts, for example, the sad story of a boy who did reasonably well in school despite discipline problems, got a job, but was unable to break free of old gang connections, and ended up being killed in a gang confrontation. Thomas writes of this "wasted life, where talents and opportunities existed above the average, but which was destroyed by circumstances beyond what a school can hope to deal with. Beyond what any formal structure or institution in Singapore can deal with. His death was part of a new social situation" (129). It is clear from this book that Thomas was deeply concerned about helping the new nation to navigate these new social situations in a compassionate and moral way. He describes the efforts he made as an educationist, and these efforts can be seen as mirroring the needs of the nation at a broader level. He sees the danger of a new upper class emerging, "with a different morality from the masses" (147), and sense some danger in this. Instead, he advocates a "common morality serving all classes.... It will also mean giving up the old, simple, morality of commercial success, with its corollary of an education system designed to train students for simple success in economic careers. Schools will have to be communities where children learn to be members of one another and not rivals in a rat race" (147-48). His words here are prescient – unfortunately, it does not appear that they have been heeded. Reading this book, one is left with the impression of abundant good sense and practicality mixed with real concern for

the individual. But one also feels a certain bleakness at what has *not* been accomplished.

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