At the time of writing it is twenty years, almost to the day, since David Winton Thomas died on 18 June 1970, and it seems an appropriate time to review his contribution to Hebrew studies. Thomas was a modest man and, if I have understood him correctly, he would not have regarded himself as standing in the front rank of innovative Hebrew scholars like his teacher G. R. Driver, but as one of the conscientious followers who travel circumspectly along the paths pioneered by others, seeking to extend their work by applying their methods to further problems. Precisely the work of such a Hebraist can serve as an example of a particular kind of scholarship in a particular period of the twentieth century, a period that is already part of the history of scholarship, a period that is the background to our work to-day.

The present article is not intended as a biography or an obituary, and yet a brief biographical sketch is appropriate for a study of Thomas's work. He was born on 26 January 1901, the son of a Welsh Anglican clergyman who was the Principal of a teachers' training college in North London. Although Thomas's upbringing and education were entirely in England, he was conscious of his Welsh ancestry, and he acquired at least a reading knowledge of the Welsh language. Many years later, it gave him great pleasure when the University of Wales conferred on him an honorary doctorate, and in his will he left his books to the University College of North Wales in Bangor.

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1 This article is based on a lecture given in Jerusalem at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities on 12 June 1990 under the chairmanship of Professor Joshua Blau.

Thomas was fortunate to go to Merchant Taylors’ School in London at a time when it still had a Hebrew class. As well as teaching many pupils to read and appreciate the Hebrew Bible, the class trained a number of people who were later to become professional scholars. It was there that Thomas acquired his first knowledge of the Hebrew language, and a love for it that was to determine his whole career.

From Merchant Taylors’ School Thomas went up to Oxford University as a member of St John’s College. He read for the Final Honour School of Literare Humaniores, and was placed in the fourth class as a result of the examination. Although the old fourth class at Oxford did not necessarily imply that a candidate was intellectually weak—indeed, it was compatible with some kinds of brilliance—it was scarcely a promising result, and it gave no hint of future academic distinction. It may be suspected that Thomas was not particularly interested in the subjects that he was reading, and perhaps that much of his time and energy were devoted to what was to be a lifelong enthusiasm, namely, rugby football—not an unusual interest for a Welshman, and certainly a sport for which he was well suited by his burly frame. Be that as it may, he decided to read for a second Final Honour school, that of Oriental Languages. The foundation in the study of Hebrew that had been laid at school, and with it his evident love for the language, served him well, and he was fortunate to have as a teacher G. R. Driver, later to become Sir Godfrey Driver. Thomas was one of Driver’s first pupils in Hebrew, and Driver’s influence was to remain dominant over him for the rest of his life. This time his true ability showed itself, and his performance in the examination led to his being placed in the first class.

Thomas deepened and extended his knowledge of Semitic languages during the next few years, working at first in the Oriental Department of the Bodleian Library, then lecturing for a time in Arabic at the Gordon College in Khartoum, and studying at Marburg University. It was shortly after he had gone to the University of Chicago that he received a summons from Driver to return to England, for the Chair of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at Durham University was vacant. Thomas was appointed, and so his first permanent post at a university was a professorship. He later remarked that he thought he had missed something by starting in a senior position rather than in the usual manner of working one’s