

*Life-Lens: A Profile of George F. Thompson*

by Ross Ritchell

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Before authoring and editing eight books, publishing more than 500, and earning some 110 book prizes in academic and professional fields, George Thompson nearly lost sight in his right eye at the age of fifteen. It happened one cold day in January 1969, just before the New York Jets and Baltimore Colts clashed in Super Bowl III, in fact; George, not yet two weeks into his fifteenth year, studied for his midterms in his bedroom before the game. “Every minute counted,” he recalled, pulling for a Joe Namath victory—University of Alabama football fiefdom the Thompson abode was, both parents being university alums—so he figured on studying before, and after, the big game.

It would be a busy day, bookended by literal book-study and punctuated by pigskin relief (and a prophesized Namath-led Jets upset), and on the first “Super” contest to claim that superior distinction no less (though it was the third iteration between divisional professional American football league champions). But, first, for it was cold and a wintry mix had settled in sheets of ice around his Connecticut home, George’s father wanted firewood for a cozy fire during the game. So George, a football-eager, study-wearied, and winter-weather-begrudged boy—axe in hand—obliged.

It should be noted here that George Thompson, after successful stints acquiring, editing, and publishing at the Johns Hopkins University Press, founded and directed the Center for American Places (renamed the Center for the Study of Place) before founding his own namesake press, George F. Thompson Publishing, in 2011, his career specializing in place-based books and photography—an ironical twist of professional fate, if not a serendipitous inevitability, since, as he stepped outside to savage the ice-crusting wood pile for his father, he had mere moments of dual-eyed sight left.

But George had a dancer waiting for him in the years ahead—a future Professor of Dance at James Madison University—named Cynthia whose mother “liked his smile” in church in Signal Mountain, Tennessee, where George and Cynthia found each other. First meeting on December 22, 1977, Cynthia asked George for a New Year’s Eve date, and eight months later they were wed on the second of September. Madison, Wisconsin, was the first stop for the newly christened Team Thompson, incorrectly driving down State Street around one-thirty in the morning “with barely enough money to spend the night anywhere,” Cynthia pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Dance and George a Masters of Arts in Landscape Architecture/Landscape History.

From snow-choked Wisconsin it was on to the green hills of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, since Cynthia landed employment at James Madison University whilst George landed ninety-four job rejections of ninety-six inquiries before landing the dream job at Johns Hopkins in March 1984. They endured a seven-hour combined commute between Baltimore, Maryland, and Harrisonburg, Virginia, switching cars as needed and piling up 70,000 road miles annually—George netting all seven familial flat tires during five years of commuting while his radio laid down a smooth stream of bluegrass and blues, jazz and National Public Radio—and made their own way. “After getting tenure, we decided to base our life on Cynthia’s career, and I became independent,” George said.

So it is, in life, how little we know of what awaits us beyond the inch-thick woodpiles we must slay for our fathers; for George attacked the inch-thick ice covering the uncovered cords of wood with a malice well-known to disgruntled youth of all ages whose diligence and discipline in timekeeping and preparation for a much-sought moment of relief from laborious study and chores is usurped by the couch-bound demands of the patriarchy reclining in comfort. “I lost my temper,” George said, and, as his sharp axe chewed hard at chips of ice and wood, he hit a log that dislodged from the pile, hitting him in the right eye, knocking him out—and down—onto the icy ground.

After coming back to consciousness—concussed and unable to open his eyes—he stumbled by memory into the family room through the garage and lay on the couch, an ice pack over his right eye, for the rest of the day, the Super Bowl—which he couldn’t see after taking such studious steps to ensure he’d be able to watch it—playing in the background while he flitted in and out of the moment in significant pain. The next day his mother took him to the emergency room—weathering withering, harsh rebukes of neglect from the chief ophthalmologist—where

he would be diagnosed with a “detached and severely torn retina” in his right eye. Head stabilized for ten days with sandbags while in the hospital, George would later become one of the earliest recipients of clean-up Lasik eye surgery, following three major surgical procedures after the initial incident.

It seems outrageous that a man stricken with chronic iritis (inflammation of the iris, causing near constant light-sensitivity and pain and discomfort that require regular steroid management)—who would, upon damage to his left eye, be unable to read or drive—has made a life bringing words and pictures of different places to the masses, and yet George claims to have “always known the profound influence of place.” He was born with it, he said, as a man of sixty-six years still armed with memories “that have me at twenty-four-months-old trying to skate on frozen ponds in Connecticut. I've always been intensely influenced by surroundings around me.” In fact, to this day, upon hearing The Beatles’ *White Album*, George goes “back to my hospital bed on Thanksgiving, and I’m depressed . . . I’m back in Columbia Presbyterian [Hospital in Manhattan] recovering from another surgery.”

Next time George hears that famed, repetitive “Shoot Me” in the introduction of *Come Together*, uttered by John Lennon who was himself shot to death, I hope George can tell the transported, hospital-bed bound boy of his half-century self that he’s got miles of copy ahead of him, thousands of photographs of the beautiful places he’ll visit, and a young dancer named Cynthia who will ask him on a date and marry him, all waiting outside those cold hospital walls.

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