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# Alexander Thomas (Stephen) Prickett FAHA

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1939 – 2020

Alexander Thomas (Stephen) Prickett (1939–2020) was born in Sierra Leone on 4 June 1939, to Barbara (née Lyne) and William, a Methodist missionary. He was educated at Kent College, Canterbury, then went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he read English, graduating B.A. in 1961. C.S. Lewis was one of his tutors. His first book, a detective novel entitled *Do It Yourself Doom*, was published by Gollancz in 1962 and is still advertised on Amazon. His other non-academic work, published in 2015, was *Naming the Birds*, partly based on the life of William Blake.

Prickett taught at the Uzakuoli Methodist College in Nigeria for a year before returning to Cambridge to embark on a PhD, graduating in 1967. *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth* (Cambridge University Press, 1970) was the published version of this thesis, subsequently described as “one of that small number of enduringly valuable critical studies to be written in our time”. His newly minted doctorate (examined by Lewis and F. R. Leavis) gained him an appointment in 1967 as assistant lecturer at the University of Sussex, accorded university status in 1961 and then emerging as one of the most innovative of England’s “plate glass” universities. This position was the harbinger of precocious advancement: it was confirmed within the year, and by 1982 Prickett had advanced to the position of Reader, collecting a teaching qualification from Oxford along the way (University College Dip. Ed. 1962).

Other publications while at Sussex included *Romantics and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), described as “magisterial” and still suggested reading in some university courses. The book laid a foundation for many of Prickett’s subsequent publications, arguing that Wordsworth

and Coleridge initiated not just a poetic but a theological revolution, infusing Anglicanism with a new energy; and that the religious and spiritual dimension of the work of many nineteenth-century writers had been ignored or downplayed. In particular, Prickett argued, the English of the King James Bible inspired a number of Romantic writers and so influenced the development of the language.

Another earlier publication was *Victorian Fantasy* (Harvester Press and Indiana University Press, 1979, with an expanded edition in 2005), which arose out of a pioneering course on children's literature that Prickett first taught at Smith College in 1969–70, and then at Sussex. Roderick McGillis called the book "the most authoritative study of the literary counterculture of Victorian literature ... Prickett convincingly connects writers from Walpole to Kipling and Nesbit to a tradition that sees fantasy as a matter of utmost importance to the spirit and to reality." Six authors constituted the focus: Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, E. Nesbit, Rudyard Kipling and the Scottish writer George MacDonald. Prickett always maintained that MacDonald was the founder of religious fantasy literature, and his advocacy, including as longtime President of the George MacDonald Society, helped stimulate interest in the author.

In 1983 Prickett moved to the other side of the world, taking up a post in Canberra in 1983 as Professor of English and head of department at the Australian National University. In addition to his expertise in the Romantic period, he always carried a torch for Shakespeare with productions wherever he went, including in Cambridge, Oxford, Nigeria, Waco, Texas and Kent. At ANU, he directed productions of *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Winter's Tale*. An ambitious scheme of building a replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, in conjunction with ANU, for which he raised A\$2 million in funding from "two local entrepreneurs", ran aground when the project failed to gain support from the University Senate (the Bard was not Australian). Prickett, ever the enthusiastic academic entrepreneur, frequently expressed later in life his disappointment at what he saw as parochial small-mindedness on the part of the University. He became an Australian citizen and continued to visit after he left ANU in 1990 to take up the Regius Chair of English Language and Literature at Glasgow University. On one visit in 1999, he was part of a group that crossed the Great Victoria Desert; other exploits included white water rafting in Costa Rica and walking in the Amazon.

All the while, Prickett was publishing prolifically (and not only books: this obituary must pass over his hundred-plus academic articles). The borderlands of literature, art, history and theology, and especially the interface between theology and literature, emerged as his particular domains. There is a connecting thread running in his thinking through Romantic and Victorian literature, Victorian and Edwardian children's literature, and the theology-literature overlap: it is arguable that Prickett's scholarly and intellectual home was more in the Victorian period with its Romantic antecedents, theological overtones and

early twentieth-century successors than anywhere else. The titles of his books perhaps reveal some of the grand trajectory of his thinking: *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory* (Blackwell, as editor, 1991), *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition: Backing into the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). It seems invidious to single out just one of these, but *Words and the Word*, particularly, has had a major impact among scholars of literature and literary theory as well as among theologians and biblical critics. In this highly acclaimed book, Prickett pursued the question of the relationship between religion and poetics, and in particular, the nature of religious language, investigating the hermeneutic, epistemological and linguistic reverberations of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of biblical interpretation. The concept of theology as literature is now a widely accepted idea but was new to many when Prickett introduced it.

He jointly produced three books on the Bible: with Robert Barnes, *The Bible*, for Cambridge University Press's Landmarks of World Literature series in 1991; with Robert Carroll, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, for Oxford World's Classics in 1997 (Frank Kermode called this "a quite extraordinary success" and "a magnificent achievement", and Gabriel Josipovici commented that "the editors seem to have read everything ... and their commentary consistently illuminates everything it touches upon, from the meaning of single words to the largest issues"); and with David Jasper, *The Bible and Literature: A Reader* (Wiley, 1999), a volume "amply demonstrating the vital and continuing relationship between the Bible and the arts", and a "treasure house of illuminating scholarship", according to one reviewer at the time. He was also editorial consultant to the Oxford Bible Commentary series and to Blackwell's Bible Commentaries.

Substantial books, frequently designed as teaching texts, and drawing on the wide learning of this scholarly dynamo, were a feature of his publications from the late 1980s: for example, *England and the French Revolution (Context and Community)* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1988), and *European Romanticism: A Reader* (Stephen Prickett, General Editor, Simon Haines, Editor; Bloomsbury, 2010), a multilingual project involving 18 universities in 15 countries which was awarded the Jean-Pierre Barricelli Prize 2010 sponsored by the International Conference on Romanticism for the year's best book in Romanticism Studies. Yet another tangent is represented by *The Edinburgh Companion to the Bible and the Arts* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

Prickett held the Glasgow chair until 2001. Major appointments followed, as Director of the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, 2001-08, where he was also Margaret Root Brown Professor of English; Visiting Professor at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2001-03; and Honorary Professor of English at the University of Kent at Canterbury from 2008 to his death. Moreover, in the course of his career, he

lectured in 23 countries, among them the United States, Singapore, Denmark, Italy, France, Romania and Denmark, as well as the countries where he held substantive appointments.

His last book, *Secret Selves: A History of Our Inner Space*, an examination of the human search for identity (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), deals with our secret inner sense of self—what we feel makes us distinctively us, arguing that “in the last few centuries our inner space has expanded far beyond any possible personal experience”, but also can be “a source of terror, fear and delight”. Dante, Newman, Augustine, Hopkins, Etty Hillesum, Humphry Ward, Velasquez and artificial intelligence are just some of the references in the Introduction alone. Prickett’s last book was almost a retrospective of a polymathic lifetime’s concerns and interests.

Prickett took his share of positions in professional organisations. He served as trustee of the Higher Education Foundation and as president of the European Society for the Study of Literature and Theology. He was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and of the Royal Society of Arts. In 2015 he was honoured with the Conference on Christianity and Literature Lifetime Achievement Award.

Stephen Prickett was a man of enormous energy, a brilliant lecturer and conversationalist. He would arrive at his lectures with no notes and simply expound for 50 minutes, his narrative punctuated with anecdotes and extemporised footnotes on the figure and era he was discussing. Students were mesmerised. His zest for physical adventure has been mentioned. He swam and walked daily. Facial recognition was not his forte, however, causing him to cut people dead at times, much to his mortification when he realised what he had done.

He married first, in 1967, Miranda Mabbutt, a primary school teacher, with whom he had two children, Ruth, a publisher, and Mark, a businessman. Second, in 1983, he married Maria Alvarez Visconti, an Argentinian journalist; and third, in 2001, Patricia Erskine-Hill, a history lecturer, who survives him with his children.

Students, colleagues and friends around the world testify to his influence. Wherever he lived, Prickett created conversations and communities centred on literature, including reading groups at Baylor and, in his retirement, in Charing in Kent. The tribute from his Cambridge college, Trinity Hall, concluded that “When asked how he wanted to be remembered, he said ‘as a teacher’.”

**Simon Haines**

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**5 October 2021**

**Margaret Harris**

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