

Memoirs of a Migrant
© Margaret Thomas, 2013

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Memoirs of a Migrant Francis Thomas



Publisher's Note

ETHOS EVERGREENS

Great movies have remakes; great books – reprints.
The Ethos Evergreens series aims to
keep good Singaporean literature
in the public eye.

Francis Thomas, a man of uncommon accomplishments. Though a migrant to Singapore, he became a true son of this island-state which he came to love and in a colourful career spanning four decades, he served as teacher, principal, politician, and much more.

Memoirs of a Migrant was first published in 1972 by University Education Press. Ethos Books is proud to re-issue the title in this expanded form, with his personal photographs, letters and articles provided by his daughter, Margaret. His letters and articles are published in their original form, without editing, to give the full flavour of the man and his thoughts.

And following his death in 1977, several people penned tributes to this remarkable gentleman, whom one former student described as honest, kind, considerate and compassionate.

We do well to remember the significant contributions of “migrants” like Francis who epitomise the best of human values, and who humbly acknowledge their weaknesses and failings. They add to the meaning of what it is to be a member of the human race, doing what they can to improve their lives and that of their fellow sojourners on this earth.

Ethos Books has great pleasure in reprising the story of Francis Thomas. We hope you have as much pleasure in reading it.

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A Note of Intention

*infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem...
sed si tantus amor casus cognoscere nostros
et breviter Troiae supremum audire laborem,
quamquam animus meminisse horret luctuque refugit,
incipiam*

This book began as six articles written for the *New Nation* by my old friend Gerald de Cruz. We first met long ago, before World War Two. I was a young man and he was a little younger. He recited some lines of poetry, and I knelt to him in homage because at last I had met someone in Singapore who cared for poetry and the things of the spirit. We are older now.

Early in 1971 Gerald sat with me for several interviews making notes while I recalled memories and incidents. From his notes he wrote the articles which I revised before they were published as *Memoirs of a Minister*. He caught my outlook and tone very well, giving my words through his pen.

In this book I have included most of his articles but added other material, so that politics now take less than a quarter of the total. I have changed the title to *Memoirs of a Migrant*. I came to Singapore as an alien and stranger, an expatriate. I have found here a new identity as a citizen of our new nation. This is what the book is about.

We are all born into this world as strangers, carrying with us an inescapable inheritance from our family and race. Migration is a kind of second birth, in which we can to some extent choose what parts of our inheritance we will carry forward and use in our new

lives. I am proud of much of my inheritance as an Englishman. Especially, that it has been found acceptable and useful by my fellow citizens. But I am more glad to have been able to move on into the freedom of a new kind of life.

Since I have a full-time job as a school principal, this book has been written only in my spare time when it was available. Generally after dinner in the evening, sometimes on Sundays or public holidays. It is therefore on a very simple plan of selected incidents from childhood to the present time, with occasional comments on the way the world is changing.

I have avoided mentioning the names of friends in Singapore. We still live under great dangers. I have no doubts about the future, but it is common sense to remember that a favourable reference from me might hurt someone if things go badly. There are enough black lists in the world without my adding more names for them. But where names are already in the public record, it would be pointless to shut them out here.

There may be mistakes about dates or details in what I have written. I have made no attempt to be precise or accurate about them. Precision and accuracy are very important for some kinds of work, but not for a book like this. I shall be glad to be corrected where I have gone wrong, but I shall not feel guilty about it.

There is plenty I regret in my life. I have done things I ought not to have done; I have left undone things I ought to have done. But I do not regret coming here and being a citizen of Singapore. It is a piece of good fortune for which I owe gratitude to my fellow citizens.

Francis Thomas
Woodsville
June 1971

Home

I was born in a small English village, Westcote, on the edge of the Cotswolds, halfway between Oxford and Cheltenham. It is a beautiful bare countryside, very different from modern Singapore. From our hill-top we looked down into a wide valley, where we could see and hear occasional railway trains passing four miles away. Our nearest shop was four miles away on the other side of our hill. We could walk for miles, seeing no-one except a distant farm worker and hearing nothing but the song of birds. There was almost no traffic except farm carts or tradesmen like the butcher, who called once a week to deliver supplies and take the next week's order.

We lived largely from the food of our own gardens; our own potatoes, vegetables, fruit, eggs and chickens; milk and butter from the farm next door; bread made by my mother in our kitchen. We had no public utility services. The house was lit by oil lamps, and water was pumped by hand from our well. We used coal in the kitchen, but other fires – when we had them – were mostly wood, either collected by ourselves or bought locally.

This was our family home for nearly fifty years. My father was the Rector, the Rev J A Thomas. After taking his degree at Oxford, he worked for some time as a missionary in Africa and then had to come back with heart trouble. He spent the rest of his working life at Westcote. The benefice was worth only £150 a year, so we were always poor, though much better off than the farm workers of the village, who might earn only £50 a year.



Toddler: Francis, at the entrance to the family home in the village of Westcote

I was born in April 1912, so the background to my childhood was the first World War – the Great War, as it was called – which started in August 1914. For a hundred years England had had no major war, and the extraordinary waste and cruelty of these war years formed a gloomy background to childhood experience.

One of my earliest and most painful memories comes from about this time. My mother had two brothers, who both volunteered for the army when war was declared. Both were killed in the early battles. One night, for no reason I remember, I crept out of bed and down the dark staircase to where I could hear my mother sobbing in the dining room and from time to time my father speaking above her sobs. A terrible feeling of helpless loneliness over-whelmed me

as I went back to bed. The same feeling from time to time catches me even today when I am tired and let my defences drop for a moment.

At the time, it seemed to me that my father was making my mother cry. I did not try to understand why. As a teenager, I thought he was making her cry over the household accounts; this was a reasonable guess, since the burden of an inadequate income always falls most heavily on the mother who has to reconcile the different needs of her family with an inflexible budget. Today, I believe that news of the death of one of her brothers may have been received that day. A dim understanding of this might have drawn me out of bed, at risk of punishment. If so, what I heard was my father trying to comfort her.

Whatever the truth may be, part of my childhood experience was of a cruel and threatening background to human life. Peace and happiness were things seldom achieved and easily lost.

My parents were deeply united in their marriage, and especially shared a profound and unflinching devotion to Christianity. This formed the whole framework of their lives, and of their children's lives. The last one or two centuries have been the worst and weakest in the history of European Christianity, and their views and decisions were probably confused and misled by the numerous false prophets of their time. But behind all that was a strong and true light of faith in their lives, for which I love and honour them in memory.

They had six children. I am not bringing my sister and brothers into these memoirs, except in passing here and there. The following brief facts summarise all that is necessary in my account of our family: Mary was the eldest child and only girl in the family. She took a degree at Oxford, and trained as a secretary, and held a number of jobs in the inter-war years, including travelling a good deal. After the war, she worked as a teacher in England, and is now retired in a quiet and beautiful place on the border of South Wales.

David was the eldest son. After school, where he finished up as Head Boy, he had the opportunity of going to Oxford, but chose



Infant: Francis in the arms of his nanny, his parents (seated), and his three elder siblings and household staff

to take a job planting tea in Ceylon. He retired after the war, and lives not far from Mary.

Michael was the second son. His education was confused owing to his having a strong bent for Science, whilst my father insisted on the primary importance of Latin and Greek. He went to Oxford and after a heartbreaking struggle got free of the Classics and into Science. But it was too late and he suffered a breakdown. He now works as a professional gardener.

Francis – myself – was the third son and fourth child. Anthony was the fifth child. He suffered brain damage by falling from a table when a baby, and was crippled. He died in early adolescence.

Christopher was the youngest. He was born six years after myself, and with Anthony away, was always rather isolated in the family. He was perhaps the ablest of us academically, with great personal charm. He was finishing at Oxford when World War Two started and did not get his degree. He was already an officer in a Territorial regiment, and was called up for service. He was killed by the Japanese in Burma in January 1944.

Our education began at home, under a lady who came to live with us and who became a lifetime friend of the family. She taught us to read and write; Arithmetic, History and Geography; a little French; Science – they called it Nature Study; and the Bible. She is still alive as I write this, very old and quite blind, but never losing her hopeful happiness of character.

I remember only one thing she taught me, and that was a punishment. I had been lazy about my lessons and she made me learn by heart a hymn which included the words: “Give us grace to persevere”. This stays in my mind because I took it as a definition of my character; I was someone who did not persevere, who gave up in face of difficulties. It has been a basic reference point for me throughout my life.

The first book I remember reading was a fat blue volume about the development of the British Empire. One story in it was about the capture of Quebec from the French in the 18th Century. A picture given with this showed soldiers climbing a cliff, with the caption “Slipping and stumbling the men held on”. Like “Give me grace to persevere”, this stayed with me for life, a permanent point of reference. In these memories the emphasis is on the difficulty, not on the achievement.

Another personality in our childhood was a young lady who stayed with us regularly, and who tried to start a Scout Troop for the sons of the farm workers. She was the first person I clearly recognised as a woman, someone sexually different from myself as a boy. I suppose I was about six or seven years old. I was not in love with her; I just knew she was different and feminine.

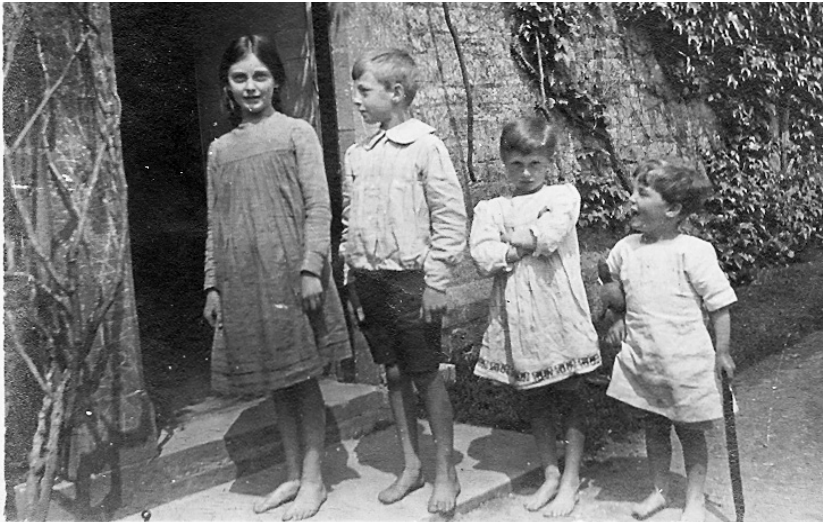
She was very fond of painting, mostly copies of pictures in the art galleries. This led to her death when she was very old, not long ago. She had gone to an art gallery and set up her easel. A powerful English schoolgirl, on a visit to the gallery, ran round the corner roaring with laughter, crashed into her and broke her thigh. She died of shock soon afterwards.

Another memory of my childhood must come from about 1919. The war was over, and the peace was far from what had been hoped. The farm workers of our village resented the leadership which had led them into war and involved – if I recall rightly – 8,000,000 combatant deaths and war expenditure of £40,000,000,000. I was with my father in the yard behind our house, and some naughty boys sang, to the tune of “God save the Queen”, a rude hymn:

“God save our old Tomcat
Feed him on bacon fat
God save our Cat”

This combined disrespect for God with scorn for King and Country, and resentment that our family was better housed and fed than theirs. It was my first recognition of the deep class divisions of England, and especially of the practical inability of the rulers – in this case my father – to win the respect and give the leadership their situation demanded. I felt that these bad boys should be struck by lightning from heaven, or at least arrested by a policeman; but nothing happened. We went in and they went away.

There were many books in our lives. We met them first when my mother read aloud to us by the fireside before we were put to bed. Some of these were excellent, like Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* and *Jungle Books*. Others were meant to give Christian teaching, such as stories of saints and martyrs who after self-denial and self-sacrifice suffered cruel deaths. One of these was *The Young Pilgrim’s Progress*, a kind of long parable about a boy who was tempted onto a cart filled with delicious looking food and kidnapped by a devil who drove very fast down into a dark valley. There the boy escaped somehow and had to try to climb back to the hilltop over very high, hard steps of stone with vultures flying round him. This terrified me and I protested so strongly that the readings stopped and we got some of Andrew Lang’s fairy stories instead.



Siblings: (from left) Mary, David, Michael and Francis, circa 1915, at the entrance to their family home

We attended church twice every Sunday, at 11am and 6pm. These services were quite meaningless to me. In the Communion service – we called it mass – there were the words: “It is meet and right so to do”. I found in this the only tolerable moment, because I heard them as: “It is meat and rice so to do”. This brief mention of food comforted me in my eternity of boredom. As far as I understood what was happening, my father, in especially beautiful clothes at the altar, was God and we were worshipping him.

The last time I visited our church, in 1956, I found on our seat the marks of the nails in my boots trodden into the soft wood as I stood on the seat by my mother week after week. My lifelong habit of inattention on public occasions, especially in church, may have begun during these childhood sessions. My father’s sermons in particular were tedious to me beyond words. I have some of them in manuscript on my shelves now, but I have never been able to read them.

My feelings about our religious life were almost certainly a kind of defence against the pressure of the intense faith of our

parents. It seemed clear that if we shared their faith, we must live it as fully as they did; and since our experience was so narrow in childhood, that this would mean modelling my life on my father’s, or on one of the martyr saints we learned about. There was no other Christian way of life we knew about and could aim at.

So we all, in our different ways, went through a process of rejection of the Christian standards of our parents. The first clear occasion in my memory was when I was about three years old, perhaps four. My father used to come to my bed at night, and I had to kneel beside him and whisper my prayers into his ear. Instead of my prayers, I whispered:

Diddly diddly dumpty
The cat ran up the plum tree;
Give her a plum
And down she’ll come;
Diddly diddly dumpty.

My father listened with surprise to this version and told me to say my prayers properly or he would spank me three times. I gave him the cat and plum tree rhyme again, he spanked my backside three times with his hand, not painfully, and the matter dropped.

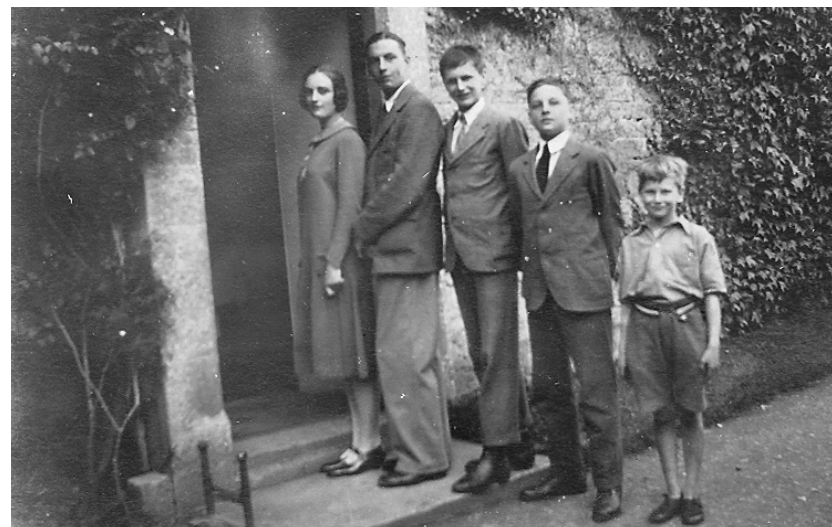
I recall Michael making a rather similar rejection when we were a little older. By this time my father no longer heard our prayers, but would come to our bedroom to give us his blessing before we slept. We would be lying in bed when he came into the dark room, with a faint light from an oil lamp in the passage. Each boy in turn knelt on his bed and my father put his hands on his head and murmured a few words of love and prayer. One evening Michael presented his feet for blessing instead of his head, and my father did not notice it until the blessing was nearly completed. I don’t remember any punishment, although, my father was obviously shocked and hurt.

David’s demonstration of rejection was made more publicly, yet with such skill that no-one except us three boys knew of it. As

an Anglo-Catholic, my father liked to celebrate the Mass supported by his sons dressed in white and performing minor functions to assist him. On one occasion, Michael and I, robed in white, were kneeling each side of the altar as servers, whilst David was the thurifer, carrying a pot of smoking incense on a chain. His place was in the middle, with Michael on his right and myself on his left. He swung his incense pot so that it swept from the tip of Michael's nose to the tip of mine, and he kept on doing this in spite of our paralysed protests by frowns and suppressed whispers. My father at the altar had his back to us and knew nothing of what was going on. The people in the nave could see only three little boys apparently rapt in adoration. But we all knew the incense smoke was going up to heaven as a signal of protest.

One other rejection memory comes a little later in my life, when I was ten or eleven years old. I had been confirmed and admitted to take the consecrated bread and wine at Communion. Part of my confirmation teaching was that after taking Communion I should feel God's power and grace, lifting up my heart and filling me with peace and joy. One summer morning I came out of church after Communion and felt a powerful feeling of joy. For a moment my heart said: "This is it. This is what they told me. They spoke the truth". Then my mind noted the beauty of the sky and trees, the sweet scent of summer flowers, and the cool clean breeze. And I said: "No. This happiness is not because I have been in church, but because I have got out of church into the free air of the world".

When I was young, I thought this was a rejection of Christianity, and blamed myself for going through the forms of religious life whilst my mind and feelings were elsewhere. I called myself a hypocrite. But this was too simple an analysis. I never rejected the Gospels and the inspiration of the life and teaching of Jesus. What I could not accept was the institutional church and the failing structure of English society of that time which had been so largely shaped by the church.



Teenagers: The siblings (Mary, David, Michael, Francis, Christopher) pose for their annual picture at the doorstep, circa 1925

During this century the winds of change have been blowing, and they touched my life fifty years ago. We do not understand how social changes are generated and take effect until there is a qualitative jump into what seems a new way of life. We can see the material mechanism, changes in the productive forces and institutional functions. But behind that lie the movements of the human heart, so that a little boy in a remote English village is touched by the same wind that swept the Communists into power in Russia and more recently has carried away the colonialism of the West, creating new and troubled nations where new forces shape and shatter human lives.

Today I do not reject the church or the other institutions or bourgeois society. They are necessary evils, like Communism. I only wish those who run them could attain Communist standards of energy and purposefulness.

Staff Dinner at Goodwood Hotel

14th March 1974

When I was a boy, my school had an exceptional teacher who was able to teach me something I have never forgotten. It was this. Someone asked him: "Have you finished?" He replied: "No, I've stopped". A teacher's work is never finished, but sometimes he has to stop.

Our School is a living community that has been growing since 1862. It's a work that has never been finished. I hope it will never be stopped.

But its work changes. In 1936, we asked: "Do we dare introduce Prefects?" After World War II, we asked: "Do we dare allow girls into the Sixth Form?" More recently: "Do we dare have Student Councils?"

We have to fight for useful changes and against stupid changes. 130 years ago Karl Marx warned of revolution and social collapse that might follow the social stupidity of the Western bourgeoisie. Mr Lee Kuan Yew repeated that warning in his own words in 1966, and the danger is still around us.

We can preserve the life of our School community best by refusing to become impersonal, out of touch, indifferent to individual feelings and needs; by being open, warm, friendly and helpful.

And especially, open to the world around us. Our school will wither if it turns its back on the world. Do not concentrate everything you have in your schoolwork. Make the school the centre of your life, but surround it with the widest, richest range of interests and activities you can. Then you enrich the school community and it enriches you.

Working with you all in the School has enriched my life, given it purpose and meaning and value. Thank you for all our years together.

St. Andrew's Old Boys Dinner Speech

1st September 1974

Many of you may have heard of Alvin Toffler and his Future Shock. Francis Thomas may seem a voice from the past, now completing forty years work in the school.

I have never been a voice from the past, and I am not going to accept that role this evening. We learn from the past, we plan for the future.

Leave the dead past to bury itself; our revolutionary job in school is to create the conditions of a new future. It is a never-ending job, with new needs rising out of old achievements.

St. Andrews pioneered things like bilingualism long before they became state policy. Our first workshop was built and equipped in 1941, when we foresaw the needs that are being met today by technological education. That is all past now.

My only complaint about the modern technological education is that it is much too narrow, shutting out so many who want to get in. But that is a matter of costs and manpower.

The revolutionary job St Andrews can do today has no cash costs. We are moving into a depersonalised society, where the individual loses value and is treated as a unit of cost.

Our revolution must be to recognise the personal value of each individual, his right to be different and to follow his own way of life. That will not be easy in the new Singapore, but it is vital for the future. We face great dangers but we can stand against them if we keep the St. Andrews spirit:

Never cow down; Never accept defeat. Always Up and On.

Interviews

The following are records of interviews conducted by students and others, giving an unadulterated picture of Francis Thomas, the man.

For St. Andrew's Student Magazine

Interviewer: Long Foo Jin

1974

Q. What do you feel can be done to improve the percentage of the GCE examination passes in our school, especially among the Arts?

A. The most useful thing is not to achieve more Passes in GCE, but to widen and set free our education so that it comes closer to meeting real human needs. Subject to that, I think the problem is motivation, not intelligence. Students could easily pass all GCE subjects if they wanted to; but too many are unable to adjust to our narrow, limited courses and so end in rebellion and failure. Perhaps better standards of language skill will be the most hopeful area of work on the Arts side. Thought clothes itself in the language in order to be shared.

Q. St. Andrew's is reputed to have one of the best Arts stream in Singapore. Do you feel that we have lived up to this reputation?

A. I dislike the "Who is the best?" approach. I do not want St. Andrew's to be the best; I want it to meet real human needs and to develop real human beings, not machines and morons. If we have a good Arts side, it will be because we meet real needs in a human way.

Q. What are your impressions on the computerisation of Pre-University applications?

A. We must learn to use machines like computers, which can set mankind free from a great deal of uncreative work. But we have not yet learned the social skills to use all machines well. The danger with the computer is that no one can effectively be called to account for what it does. It offers a perfect cover and camouflage for the bureaucratic idler to hide behind. It remains to be seen how computerisation of PU applications will operate.

Q. The other day during assembly, you quoted Mr Lee Kuan Yew as saying that the classroom teacher plays the most important role in modeling the lives of the students. Could this be one of the reasons for your returning to the classroom?

A. The teacher in the classroom is in some ways more able to work freely according to his own judgment than a Principal in the Office, reading and acting on instructions conveyed by circulars. That is one reason I want to get back to the classroom. It offers direct interplay and interaction with my fellow human beings. I feel I need that after years spent in my office. Mr Lee Kuan Yew spoke of the teacher who "commands the respect and the affection" of his class. Respect and affection mean happy relationships, which are suitable for an aging man. As I approach my old age, I want to de-escalate my way of life, and make room for happy relationships.

Q. What can be done to improve the level of the arts, as a whole in our school, with respect to plays, poetry reading sessions, etc.

A. Things like plays and poetry-readings operate in a space-time continuum. At present our space is pre-empted by floating classes and by activities for an excessive number of students; and time is a negative concept, something which is lacking. But when I have settled down as a classroom teacher, a new look at space and time may suggest things we can do.

Q. In conclusion do you feel that the performance of controversial plays like Godspell will have any effects beneficial or otherwise on the general school populace?

A. Controversial plays can mean a great many different things. Plays like Godspell seem to mean nothing more than an attempt to make money out of the newly affluent younger generation who have little education or judgment. Making money is quite a sensible thing to do, but performances of Godspell in the school will not make money for us, only for overseas property owners. I doubt if Godspell type plays have such creative quality, or such interest apart from money making.

Television Interview for *THIS & THAT*

Interviewer: Sandra Krempf

2nd April 1976

Q. Mr Thomas, you have been a teacher for forty years?

A. 1934 to 1975, 41 years.

Q. With all that experience, you should be able to tell us something about our education system?

A. I don't know much about the system, I have never wanted to get involved in any system. I have done all my teaching in one single school.

Q. Do I detect a little, can I say, irritation in your voice?

A. Well, any system cuts back freedom; it standardises in order to simplify things for the HQ. You lose flexibility and initiative.

Q. But there must be a system.

A. Of course, but it must be appropriate, it must suit social needs.

Q. So what is inappropriate in what Singapore has today?

A. Let me take you back before the war. The English schools took about 10% of the school-age population, and got about 70% of the Education budget. That meant we were training a small middle-class elite – not middle class in their backgrounds, but in their adult lives. In the circumstance of that time, training that kind of elite was the right thing to do. Our present government shows it.

Q. Then what has gone wrong?

A. We have had an enormous expansion. We have moved over from elite education to mass education. But the system is still essentially geared to middle class elitism; it does not cater for the variants, those who cannot or will not fit middle class patterns.

Q. But the Education Ministry is trying to recover some flexibility, and to give schools more scope for initiative. Isn't that correct?

A. Trying is not succeeding. I am sure they are right to try. But the system may be too strong. There is a huge inertia in educational situations.

Q. You are ready to criticise; I hope you will not mind my saying, you have not offered any concrete suggestions.

A. Ah no; no. Not in a 5-minute interview. But I'll give you a much harsher criticism than anything I have said about our system. It comes from Dr Goh Keng Swee, and I have quoted it again and again. He was speaking about the University six years ago:

“Neither the student body nor some of the staff have the slightest inkling of the problems we face, much less of their probable solutions... The idea of education as a search for truth, the excitement of intellectual enquiry and speculation – those are given lip service and little else... We have in Singapore intellectual conformity... a depressing climate of intellectual sterility... Because a student's future is so heavily dependent on his examination results in schools and university, his striving for good grades has resulted in a stultification of intellectual development...”

Q. That was six years ago. Surely things have gotten better?

A. I hope so, I have been fortunate in doing a little tutorial teaching at the University recently, and there surely is a minority who do not deserve Dr Goh's criticism. Of course, what I quoted is a broad general statement, which cannot do justice to a small minority. If I may recall the days when you were briefly my student, Sandra, you were far from being a sterile conformist.

Q. And I never got to the University. Can't you give us some comment on Dr Goh's criticism?

A. I'll give you a quotation from Kipling's verse:

There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays.
And every single one of them is right.

Q. That means, you would like more variety in the system?

A. Not planned variety put in by central office decision. I'd like to be thrown more open to the market forces. Let each school work out its own way within the broad national objectives.

Q. Do you blame the system for the drop-out/delinquent/drug abuse that we hear so much about?

A. No, that would be unfair. These problems start in the house, not in the school. But of course, the system fails insofar as it offers no alternatives to sterile conformists; that may make a child feel there is nowhere else to go except into rebellion.

Q. Would you like to give us a last comment on the education system and what people say about it?

A. People have absurdly exaggerated ideas about what can be expected from our schools. To use Dr Goh's words from a different context, you can get results only by investment, by effort and by know-how. Singapore simply has not got the resources yet to give the investment needed for a mass education system; not just resources of money, but much more, of manpower. Teachers who can make the effort and make it the right way. A mass system reflects the mass society that creates it. It cannot do anything else. But in another ten years, we may see things really starting to move. I have no doubt of it. The creative drive is there, and it will be set free.

Appendix

In September 1978, the late CV Devan Nair who was then secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress wrote to a group of friends, requesting their appreciations of Francis Thomas through a written article. These were intended for a book which he hoped to publish in memory of Francis Thomas. While the book did not materialise in the end, some of the memories and tributes which resulted from that letter are reproduced here, including an Eulogy delivered by Yahya Cohen at the Memorial Service for Francis Thomas.