New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12084

Comment: *Timothy McDermott in memoriam*

With the death on 13 February 2014 of Timothy Stephen McDermott the last of a generation of remarkable exponents of Thomas Aquinas has gone. Born on 26 November 1926 in St Helens, of a Lancashire Catholic mother Theresa Taylor (1896–1982) and an Irish-born father Stephen McDermott (1883–1929), both schoolteachers, Stephen (as he was christened) was not yet three when his father died. He was brought up 'under the shadow' (his phrase) of his uncle, the future Sir Hugh Stott Taylor (1890–1974), professor of physical chemistry at Princeton, member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, as well as of the Manhattan Project (that led to the first atomic bomb). Young McDermott graduated in physical chemistry at Liverpool University in 1945. He then went up to Cambridge (Fitzwilliam College) to undertake research in colloid science: 'Structure of Liquids'.

'Lured away' (his phrase) by lectures by three Dominicans at the Catholic Chaplaincy on 'The Ten Commandments' as norms of behaviour that are *rationally* demanded ('a new idea to me then') McDermott attended 'brilliant' weekly seminars at Buckingham Road directed by Richard Kehoe on Scripture and Thomas Gilby on Thomas Aquinas. In September 1948 he went to Woodchester as a novice, taking the religious name of Timothy, which he retained for the rest of his life

Ordained priest at Oxford in 1954 he was sent in 1957 to South Africa to teach at the Dominican study house then at Stellenbosch — the Provincial refused a request by the Leonine Commission that he should join them in Rome, to work on critical editions of Aquinas's works. Lecturing in philosophy to young Dominicans, in due course Timothy was put in charge of studies and then in charge of students as well, just as the unsettling effects of the Vatican Council were being felt. He contributed to this journal, notably a series of 're-viewings' of difficult doctrines: The Devil and his Angels (October 1966), Hell (January 1967), Original Sin (January and February 1968) and The Indefiniteness of Moral Issues (March 1969).

Disillusioned by policy decisions about the future of the Order in South Africa, Timothy was granted leave of absence, eventually going to stay in London with his sister Mary Tuck (1928–1996), already a well-known social scientist. Mary asked what he could do to earn money. 'I said crosswords [which he had indeed been paid

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for setting]. She said that must be much the same as computers. And took me along to LSE where I was taken into the computer laboratory'. In due course he qualified in computer science, a subject just beginning to take academic shape, in the era before personal computers. Having left the Dominicans and been laicized, Timothy was appointed in 1973 to a lectureship in computer science at the University of Cape Town, the year in which he and Jasmin married. In 1978 he transferred to the University of Tasmania. In 1981 he returned to Cape Town as professor, more and more interested in the philosophy of computers, artificial intelligence, the programming of computers to do apparently intelligent things — 'all the more interested in finding out how the metaphysics of the Middle Ages had spawned the mathematicisation of the Enlightenment'.

Thus began a slow move back from computer science to Thomas Aquinas. Resigning the professorship in Cape Town, Timothy became visiting scholar in theology in Cambridge at St Edmund's, then associate professor in computer science in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he conceived the *Concise Translation* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Back in Cambridge he produced the OUP World Classics volume *Selected Philosophical Writings*. From 1994–6 Timothy was a visiting fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, where his uncle had been dean of the graduate school all those years before. In 1996 (aged 70) Timothy and Jasmin settled in Cambridge, where he wrote his last book – 'my favourite, and an absolute flop' — *How to Read Aquinas* (Granta). In his last years Timothy was happy to discuss Thomas with the Dominican novices at Buckingham Road. With his three books Timothy McDermott has left a legacy that will enable readers new and old to join in the conversation about Saint Thomas Aquinas which so many of us enjoyed over the years with such an authentic exponent.

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