

Introduction to APS Session in Celebration of Keith Stewart Thomson¹

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I was asked to introduce a session in celebration of Keith Stewart Thomson as he finished his term as Executive Officer.² In 2012 I participated in a search for Pat McPherson's successor as Executive Officer of the APS. Because Keith Thomson was a new Member and thus possibly unfamiliar with important aspects of APS activities, he might have been viewed as an unlikely candidate. In addition, he was unknown to some members of the search committee. However, as the committee reviewed his background it became obvious that he was the perfect choice for Executive Officer. He didn't just epitomize APS leadership qualifications, he almost defined them.

After graduating from the University of Birmingham (UK) Keith earned his Ph.D. in biology from Harvard. He was an anthropologist, a paleontologist, a historian of science, and an evolutionary biologist. Doesn't this sound like an APS leader? Keith was either director or CEO of several important museums, including the Peabody Museum at Yale, the Museum of Natural History at Oxford, and Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences. At Yale, Keith had been a professor of biology and also dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. At Oxford, Keith had been a professor of natural history and also director of the university's Museum of Natural History.

Keith is a recognized authority on two of the figures with whom the APS is obsessed, namely Charles Darwin and Thomas Jefferson. Among the 10 books Keith has authored are ones on Darwin, Jefferson, loons, coelacanth fish, mastodons, and dinosaurs. In addition to the other qualifications, Keith had been a senior research fellow in the APS Library and was quite familiar with the Society. During our search

1 Read 11 November 2017 as part of the Session in Celebration of Keith Stewart Thomson.

2 The session included a talk by Robert M. Peck (published in this issue), as well as talks by Ted Daeschler, Richard O. Prum, and Steven B. Hutton.

there was really no need to say more. Keith was a unanimous choice of the committee to succeed Pat McPherson as Executive Officer.

As I got to know Keith better I discovered that reviewing his CV only scratched the surface of his versatility. His extensive knowledge of plants and flowers was enough for us to recommend that he be appointed APS Curator of the Jefferson Garden. Another unexpected area of his encyclopedic knowledge and passion is mystery novels and stories.

And of course Keith is widely versed in other aspects of literature. Thus it is not surprising that one of his favorite epigrams comes from an Italian novel, which if not entirely obscure was known to me only because Burt Lancaster starred in the movie version of the story. This epigram comes from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*. And it goes something like this: If you want things to stay the same, things must change. Keith's credo for the last five years as Executive Officer may have been based on this epigram—for the APS to stay the same, we needed to make some changes.

At the APS, we're not against progress but there are some things we definitely want to keep the same. These are our mission, the pursuit of useful knowledge, our culture and character, and the casual ambiance of our friendships and meetings. Keith has accomplished all this by making some changes, some by necessity and some by choice. In fact, he addressed all the major programs of the APS and made appropriate changes in a seamless manner.

In the Library, change was necessitated by Marty Levitt's retirement. Keith recruited Patrick Spero whose enthusiasm and energy promise to carry the Library to new heights. At the Museum, he elevated Merrill Mason to Director. The last four exhibitions have focused on the mission and work of the Society and have utilized the APS's own collections. These have been focused on Jefferson in Philadelphia, Jefferson and science, Jefferson's interest in Native American languages, and finally the Peale family. The result has been record-breaking attendance at the Museum. In Development, Keith recruited two very accomplished directors. Molly Roth, the first of these, unfortunately had only brief tenure because of her fatal illness. Her successor Linda Jacobs is doing a wonderful job generating many successful grant applications. In addition, the Annual Fund has exceeded goals and increased every year. Paul Miller and John Reed have masterfully handled our endowment investments and have not only completed the recovery from the crash of 2007 but have generated record highs for the endowment. The Grants program remains robust and now awards \$1 million annually. Membership, Meetings, Publications, and Finances

seemed to need little change and were left in the capable hands of Nora Monroe, Annie Westcott, Mary McDonald, and John Wolfe.

At least as important as these accomplishments, Keith correctly indicated that his relationship with the staff was the key to the APS's success. Keith's affinity with the staff has been exceptional. In his regular staff meetings his relaxed collegial style belied his energetic and comprehensive attention to the details of his job. Despite the evidence of an outstanding performance, after three years Keith asked that his performance be reviewed. This was something new for an Executive Officer. After the review Keith was voted the unanimous approval of Council. No doubt a poll of the entire membership would have been the same.

We have every reason to give Keith highest praise and thanks for his performance as Executive Officer. We are fortunate that he is not going away and we will look forward to his continuing success as he assumes the role of APS Curator.