

Thompson, Holland McTyeire ^[1]

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by Clyde Wilson, 1996

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Holland McTyeire Thompson, historian of the New South, was born in [Randolph County](#) ^[2] to D. Matt and Mary Elizabeth Rice Thompson. Reared in [Denver](#) ^[3], [Lincolnton](#) ^[4], and [Statesville](#) ^[5], where his father was for many years principal and superintendent of public schools, he received the Ph.B. degree at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[6] in 1895 and for the next four years was a high school principal at Concord. There he was in a position to observe the rapid transfer of population from farms to the textile industry and the attendant social changes. On the basis of an essay on that subject Thompson was awarded a fellowship to [Columbia University](#) ^[7] and, like so many other young southern teachers of the time, went north for advanced studies, receiving his doctorate in 1906. He then was appointed assistant professor of history at the [College of the City of New York](#) ^[8], with which he had been associated since 1901 as tutor and instructor. Thompson later stated that he accepted the position in New York on the advice of [Charles D. McIver](#) ^[9], who suggested that he, like [Walter Hines Page](#) ^[10], could do the state of North Carolina more good out of it than in it.

Thompson remained at the College of the City of New York until his sudden death at his home nearly forty years later. He became a full professor in 1920 and was active in the administrative affairs of his department, the college, and a number of academic organizations including the [American Association of University Professors](#) ^[11], of which he was a charter member. Although his writings and interests were eclectic, Thompson made the New South the subject of many articles and reviews as well as of two of his best-known books. *From Cotton Field to Cotton Mill: A Study of the Industrial Transition in North Carolina* ^[12] (1906), his doctoral dissertation, based largely on firsthand investigation, achieved something of the status of a classic. *The New South: A Chronicle of Social and Industrial Revolution* (Yale Chronicles of America Series, 1919) was praised by [William K. Boyd](#) ^[13] at the time of its publication for its "catholicity of spirit" and "descriptive value." According to Boyd, "as a brief and suggestive survey of the rise of a civilization the book is unsurpassed."

Although not profound, Thompson's *The Age of Invention: A Chronicle of Mechanical Conquest* ^[14] (Yale Chronicles of America Series, 1921) was a popular work. Thompson also delivered numerous speeches and scholarly papers and contributed many articles and reviews on diverse subjects to journals, both popular and scholarly, and to encyclopedias and reference works. Simultaneously with his academic life, he enjoyed a productive and lucrative career as an editor. He served as editor-in-chief of *The Book of Knowledge*, a children's encyclopedia, published in twenty volumes in 1910–11 and several times revised. He worked in an editorial capacity with commercial publishers and popular magazines, most notably the *Review of Reviews*. In the course of such editorial work he collaborated on, contributed to, or edited a number of textbooks, pictorial histories, symposia on current subjects, and the like. In this category are works such as *History of Our Land* (1911), *Prisons of the Civil War* (1911), *The People and the Trusts* (1912), *The United States* (1915), *The World War* (3 vols., 1920), and *Lands and People* (1929–30).

One of the first historians to make the New South a field of study, Thompson maintained a lifelong interest in North Carolina and in the work of the social sciences pertinent to the social, industrial, and racial problems of the state. He visited regularly and was said to be contemplating retirement in Chapel Hill for the writing of a comprehensive history of the New South at the time of his death. He received a gold medal for distinguished service to education at the [Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition of 1926](#) ^[15] and an honorary doctorate from The University of North Carolina in 1935. Thompson married Isobel Graham Aitken of New York in 1905 and they had one son, Lawrence. Vigorous and square-built, he was described as a man of "genial spirit" with a "penchant for conversing upon the South and her problems." Named for the Methodist bishop Holland McTyeire, Thompson early in life dropped both the family faith and the middle name that it had inspired. At death, his remains were cremated and the ashes scattered at the base of the [Davie poplar](#) ^[16] in Chapel Hill.

Though his contributions to historical scholarship were by no means insignificant, Thompson is perhaps best characterized as a social commentator or higher type of journalist, skilled as a graceful essayist and interpreter of broad trends. Unlike the next generation of southern scholars, his dedication to progress did not override his genteel detachment or lead him to complete repudiation of inherited traditions. The civilization of the New South, which had clearly emerged by 1920, was, he believed, a natural evolution of the Old South and not a sharp new departure. A cautious optimist, his life was representative of the success wrung from the northern, urban, professional world by some southerners of his generation, and in temper his writings represent something of a link between the values of the Old South and the hustling progressive spirit of the early twentieth century.

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