

Victor E. Thoren (1935–91)

The death of Victor E. Thoren on 9 March 1991 in Los Angeles, California, was as unexpected as it was shocking. It terminated a career that had just reached its pinnacle with the publication of a biography of Tycho Brahe.

Vic (as he was known to all) was born on 13 May 1935 in Minneapolis, the son of Victor E. and Helen (Ling) Thoren. After serving in the US Army between 1945 and 1956, Thoren earned an AA degree from Los Angeles City College in 1958, a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1960, and the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Indiana University in 1965, whereupon he joined the faculty of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (he had begun to teach for the department in 1964) remaining in that post for the rest of his distinguished career. Thoren was first attracted to the history of science at UCLA, where he studied with A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall whom he followed to Indiana University in 1961. All told, he spent some thirty years associated with Indiana's Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

During that period, Vic gave generously of his time to departmental activities which ranged from his annual organization of the departmental picnic to his six-year term as Chairman of the department. Vic often read sections of articles or books by colleagues and repeatedly volunteered for difficult departmental tasks, especially those that involved complex logistics. His greatest logistics triumph was the 1985 annual meeting of the History of Science Society held in Bloomington. In a *tour de force*, Vic arranged for housing and transportation for the 400 participants who descended on Bloomington in what was to that point the largest meeting in the 61-year history of the Society.

If Thoren's record of service was outstanding, his achievements in scholarship were on the same high plane. With the completion of his Ph.D. dissertation on Tycho Brahe, Vic became the acknowledged authority on the Great Dane and an immediately respected figure in the history of astronomy. While he published numerous articles on Tycho over some twenty-five years, Vic decided at some point early on that he would do a detailed biography of Tycho to fill a great void, since no adequate biography existed of this extraordinary astronomer, who may have been the first scientist in history to organize and operate a scientific laboratory worthy of the name.

After many years of effort, the book – *The Lord of Uraniborg: A Biography of Tycho Brahe* (Cambridge, 1990) – appeared shortly before Vic's death. The book is a splendid piece of scholarship. Vic not only mastered Tycho Brahe's technical astronomy, the nature of his famous instruments, and his often incomprehensible Latin, but he also mastered the intricacies of Tycho's genealogy, which enabled him to place Tycho in a broader context. Indeed in devising a strategy for his book, Vic chose the more difficult but more rewarding approach. Instead of a narrow, intellectual study focused solely on Tycho's scientific achievements, Vic chose to do a full biography and to describe not only Tycho's scientific

achievements but his entire life and thus to place Tycho in a context that was broader than science. It was a choice that not only forced him to learn a great deal about life in sixteenth-century Scandinavia, but also lengthened the time required to bring this complex undertaking to completion.

Out of respect for his Tycho biography, Vic's departmental colleagues planned to honour him in a special ceremony following the Spring recess. As a vital ingredient of the ceremony, I had requested a copy of the book from John Kim, editor for the History of Science at Cambridge University Press. Fortunately the first copy of the book reached Mr Kim near the end of February and he immediately sent it on. It arrived on 27 or 28 February. On Monday 4 March, after informing Vic of the department's intention to honour him, I showed him the book, whereupon he asked to borrow it for a day. On that evening, I assume that Vic perused the volume at his leisure and perhaps showed it to his daughter, Paula. He returned it the next day, two days before he departed for Los Angeles on 7 March and four days before his death on 9 March. Although Vic Thoren did not live to enjoy the fruits of his labours, we may take some comfort, small though it is, in the knowledge that he at least saw and handled the book, and perhaps even savoured it by reading a few sections here and there.

At the request of Professor Frank Edmondson of the Department of Astronomy of Indiana University, Commission 41 of the International Astronomical Union has named asteroid 3717 in honour of Victor E. Thoren. As it whirls through space, *Asteroid Thoren* will be a fitting reminder of his numerous contributions to the history of astronomy.

EDWARD GRANT

*Department of History and Philosophy of Science
Indiana University*

A. Rupert Hall adds some personal recollections

Vic Thoren's home state was Minnesota – and he was so evidently from a Swedish family. He was rightly proud of his origins, and his book on Tycho Brahe reveals his keeping touch with Swedish cousins. Vic brought his family to the University of Indiana with us in 1961. At Los Angeles Vic and I had fallen into the habit of weekly chess evenings which we continued in Bloomington, where Zandra (his first wife) made a home in a University graduate-student apartment for Vic and an increasing number of daughters. I think she undertook part financial support of the family according to a familiar American pattern, Vic inevitably becoming housekeeper and nurse at times, a role not much worrying him since he was a natural night-owl: his working 'day' was from 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening to 3 or 4 a.m. He was a solid, if eccentric worker who mastered Latin rapidly, and a sturdy figure in the new (and also eccentric!) Department of History and Philosophy of Science headed by Russ Hanson. Vic was always a sensible and mature man, gentle and slow of speech but quick and certain in his intellect and it is not surprising that he was invited to join the Faculty of Indiana soon after taking his Ph.D.

Following us again, Vic had brought his family to England for the year 1963–64, which he spent in the British Museum and University College libraries and the family a little drearily in Kilburn. He acquired a firm grounding in the early printed literature of

astronomy, especially the writings of Tycho Brahe. The Thorens found England tolerable enough to spend another year here in the mid-1970s.

During over a quarter of a century of academic life in Bloomington Vic got on with life (I imagine) in his quiet, untalkative businesslike way. His daughters grew to adulthood. Zandra's early death a few years ago was a great blow. Articles appeared steadily but not in great profusion, nearly all preparatory studies for his great work which has at last appeared. No one is likely to write another book about Tycho for a long time! Though Vic had a collaborator, John Christianson, in the early chapters, the book is very much the man: dry rather than sweet, precise rather than florid, painstaking rather than colourful. So much of his life was in that book; I am happy that, like *De Revolutionibus*, a copy came to him in time. It is a fitting memorial to a learned man and a good companion.