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In Memoriam: Paul Roger Thomas (1940-2021)

The Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association announces with great sadness the passing of Paul Thomas, a long-time member of the RMMRA and president *ex officio* whose unflagging organizational support, irrepressible good humor, unqualified collegiality, and thoughtful scholarship provided an important part of the RMMRA meetings for over three decades.

As is the case with many, Paul's journey to academia was somewhat indirect. He worked for the Civil Service Commission for a brief time following his graduation from Brigham Young University, and then was offered a spot in the MA program at the University of Virginia. After taking a master's degree in English, he taught at Brigham Young University—Hawaii in Laie for six years. Finding one kind of island life to be more insular and expensive than he liked (he had side-jobs as an HVAC installer, a maintenance staff at a sewage plant, and a speed-reading coach for military personnel), he traded it for island life in York, where he finished a D. Phil in English and Medieval Literature—and at which time he met and studied with Derek Pearsall, who was a life-long friend and mentor.

After the D. Phil was complete, including a short stint at the Virginia Military Institute to help fund his last year, Paul joined the faculty at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT. Paul was unwavering in his devotion to the study of literature, and similarly unwavering in being a friend and ally of students from every background. His welcome laugh and good will were his hallmarks among students, many of whom knew him as a friend when their circumstances were such that they did not believe there were any friendly faces around them. His advocacy of student causes was evidence of his generous spirit, and a major part of his legacy is the many admiring students who remember him as one who accepted and appreciated every student without regard to common stereotypes or prejudices.

While at BYU, Paul started the Chaucer Studio that produces sound recordings of medieval English. RMMRA has welcomed Paul and Sandy as conference participants and vendors since the Chaucer Studio began. He was also instrumental in providing finances and personnel to the *Canterbury Tales* Project, making BYU a full partner

in this important digitization and collation of Chaucer manuscripts for a number of years.

Our conference has always been a gathering of affable friends who research literature and history from contiguous periods and movements that abut and overlap one another. Conference presentations that might exhibit gaps in research or which might reveal the inexperience of the presenter are met with patience, suggestions for improvement, and even diplomatic correction. This kind of restraint and caring governed Paul's interactions in general, and he helped to promote the productive, kind, and academically serious tenor of our meetings at every level, helping budding and experienced scholars alike to sharpen their ideas and increase their own knowledge while adding to the scholarly conversations of their various disciplines.

Paul was a fine scholar, an excellent teacher, a motivational and helpful mentor, a supportive colleague, and a dear friend to many graduate and undergraduate students over the course of his career. His legacy of service, benevolence, support, and commitment to his discipline live on in our shared memory of this friend, mentor, and colleague. We are grateful to have known him and for his contribution to the RMMRA, and we send our condolences to his wife, Sandy and their family.

Darin Merrill

Obituary Paul Roger Thomas
30 November 1940 – 24 July 2021

Paul Roger Thomas was born at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park, Maryland on Saturday, 30 November 1940, the youngest of three sons born to Dessie and Edwin Thomas. He died at Utah Valley Hospital on Saturday, 24 July 2021, of complications related to treatment for pancreatic cancer.

He enjoyed an active childhood and youth in Virginia and New Jersey, where he learned to work hard, live the gospel, develop his musical talents, and venture outdoors. He took up the cornet, sang, and handled a canoe with the skill of an Eagle Scout.

Life took a momentous turn when Paul moved with his parents to England in 1957. He attended London Central High School at Bushy Park, where he met another expatriate, Sandy Johnson. Cast together in a performance of *Blithe Spirit*, they began to fall in love. Along the way, Paul shared his faith with Sandy, and she was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after returning to the US.

Paul attended Brigham Young University before another two years in England as a full-time missionary for the Church. After he and Sandy completed their missions, they were married in the Salt Lake Temple on 21 June 1963. The following year he graduated from BYU and took a job with the Civil Service Commission in Washington, DC. The first of four sons (John) was born while they lived in Arlington and the second (Geoffrey) arrived while Paul pursued a Master's degree in English from the University of Virginia. The young family moved from Charlottesville to Laie, Hawaii, where Paul taught English at the Church College of Hawaii. Two more sons joined the family during six years in Hawaii (Jason and Justin). To support this growing family, the professor moonlighted in HVAC installation, sewage plant maintenance, and speed-reading classes for military personnel. Meanwhile he filled varied responsibilities at Church, ranging from temple worker to scoutmaster.

Once more England beckoned and the family moved to York, where Paul studied for a Doctoral degree in English, that focused on medieval literature. The family adapted well to Yorkshire ways, aided by a network of friends in the York ward and faithful devotions at home. Dwindling finances after four years necessitated a one-year return to the States, where Paul taught English and coached the debate team at Virginia Military Institute. The family then returned to York for two more years, before Paul was hired by the English Department at BYU.

Paul joined the faculty in Provo in 1980 and taught thousands of students over the next twenty-six years. He loved singing in the Ralph Woodward Chorale as well as ward and stake choirs. He founded the Chaucer Studio at BYU, which continues to uncover medieval literature and music for scholars and students around the world. Directing study abroad meant additional time overseas and summer

sojourns in England became so regular that eventually Paul and Sandy purchased a flat in Oxford. Both served faithfully in the Church, whether in the Pleasant View 3rd ward, where Paul was a bishop, or in the Oxford wards that they adopted for part of the year for more than two decades.

Paul was a diligent, gregarious, and sympathetic son, brother, husband, father, teacher, colleague, mentor, and minister of the gospel. Above all he was and is a faithful disciple of Christ, who departed this life firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection. He leaves behind his soul mate, four sons, their spouses, and eight grandchildren, as well as a brother Gordon, (his oldest brother, Grant, died in 2001), several brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews, and countless neighbors on both sides of the Atlantic whose lives he touched for good. Paul donated his body to the University of Utah Medical School for the furtherance of medical research.

