

# The Phenomenal Launch of Thomia

Posted on



Thomia Volume I and II represents a detailed history.



Richard Simon, Author of Thomia.

Thomia explores the island's modern history through the lens of a colonial-era private boys' school—St. Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia—offering a unique perspective on the nation's past. After a decade-long journey to bring his masterwork to life, its author, Richard Simon, finally unveiled Thomia in March, marking the culmination of years of dedication and research. The launch was met with overwhelming support from a large legion of proud Old Thomians, who shared in celebrating this monumental achievement.

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

**Photography** Sharni Jayawardena and Dominic Sansoni.

Thomia, penned by Richard Simon, is a two-volume work that delves into the profound influence of St. Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia, on the modern history of Sri Lanka. Through many stories, some from its distinguished Old Boys, the book traces the college's role in shaping the nation's social, cultural, and political landscape. It's a project of nearly thirteen years of meticulous research and preparation. Richard embarked on a global journey to uncover the stories, which took him from the British Library in London to the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford to the School of Pythagoras at Cambridge's Saint John's College and from the STC Library to the National Archives in Colombo. Along the way, he connected with a network of individuals—from descendants of former English wardens to Old Boys—each contributing pieces of the school's rich history. The result is *Thomia*, an unprecedented 'soliloquy' that intertwines the evolution of colonial Ceylon from 1801 to the founding of STC in 1851 and, from there, the next 150 years of the college and the country, offering a parallel account of the nation's social and political transformation during this period. The individuals and events

that shaped St. Thomas's College and influenced the nation's course are at the heart of Richard's narrative. *Thomia* is more than just the school's history; it is a story of the institution's resilience and continuity amidst the sweeping tide of local and global events. The book examines how these events impacted the college and how its Old Boys played a pivotal role in shaping the island's destiny, contributing to its social, political, and economic fortunes for the better and otherwise.



Former Warden Mark Billimoria receiving a copy of *Thomia* from Richard.



Jill MacDonald, Proofreader and Editorial Advisor.



Richard with designer Chanishka Colombage.



Richard in conversation with Suresh Navaratnam and Prof Priyan Dias while Dominic Sansoni is in action and Ruveka Attygalle Simon looks on.

The narrative of *Thomia* begins in 1801, a pivotal year in the island's history, marking the beginning of formal education under colonial rule. The first seven chapters of the book's first volume delve into this crucial development, offering a detailed exploration of how the infrastructure for education was established on the island. Volume one spans from 1801 to 1948, covering significant events culminating in Sri Lanka's independence from British rule. Volume two shifts focus to the post-independence era, charting the evolution of Ceylon into Sri Lanka. *Thomia*, therefore, weaves together three interconnected narratives: the history of the island – the colonial history of Ceylon, the history of education in the country and the rise of St. Thomas's College as a colonial institution, and the story of independent Ceylon and Sri Lanka, culminating in 2001, STC's sesquicentennial year.

*Thomia* began as a part-time project for Richard, but by 2019, it became his full-time focus. He claims to have reworked on the manuscript several dozen times, which allowed him to refine sections that needed rewriting, especially when tackling history and the complex issues surrounding St. Thomas's College and the country. Richard was mindful of how he addressed these topics, ensuring that his narrative would not come across as a deliberate attempt to offend. He stresses that *Thomia* is not a work of flattery or uncritical praise. Instead, it's a careful exploration, where he sought to use the most appropriate language to tell a story without alienating readers.

One particularly delicate subject was homosexuality. Richard had to navigate the college's historical reputation as a refuge for gay individuals—an aspect that, while undeniable, might upset some readers. Similarly, the book touches on sensitive topics like corporal punishment and bullying, which require cautious handling. This careful approach extended the project by another year, as Richard reworked these sensitive matters to ensure the tone was respectful yet honest.

To say that Richard's *Thomia* journey was fraught with challenges would be an understatement. The entire endeavor was nothing short of formidable, as he narrated nearly 200 years of history—spanning the country and the college. This required uncovering a wealth of information about individuals who had left the shores of Ceylon and passed away more than a century ago. Researching history is, by nature, a daunting task, Richard admits, but he spared no effort, pursuing every lead and meticulously piecing together events and eras.

A key resource in this quest was the college *Magazine*, which had been published since 1875. The college library housed many editions, though Richard encountered a significant gap—between 1916 and 1925, many issues were missing, along with several others scattered throughout. Undeterred, Richard reached out to Corinne King in Australia, the daughter of D. N. Pereira, a former schoolmaster who had taken his collection of the college *Magazine* when he migrated to Australia. After his passing, the collection was handed down to Corinne. Richard recounts how, without expecting any recompense beyond goodwill, Corinne photographed 500 pages of the magazines for him, an act for which he remains profoundly grateful.

Another challenge arose in reconciling the often contradictory memories of elderly Old Boys of STC, who recounted events from their time at school in vastly different ways. Richard found that the variations in their recollections required him to speak to more people to put things into perspective, sometimes unearthing newer

versions of events. To resolve these discrepancies, Richard would cross-check stories against old newspapers or browse through archived college magazines, piecing together the most accurate version he could find. As he put it, this was the best rendition he could offer.

Richard's research also took him to England, where he spent three weeks in libraries seeking sources unavailable in Sri Lanka, dedicating more time to the British Library than to the National Archives in Colombo. During his search in Sri Lanka, he could not locate a book by Reverend Barcroft Boake, a polemic against the British colonial government's engagement with local religious systems, at the Colombo Museum Library—though Richard suspects the book's controversial content may have led to its absence. However, at the British Library, he found the book *A Brief Account of the Origin and Nature of the Connection between the British Government and the Idolatrous Systems of Religion Prevalent in the Island of Ceylon*. While the book's subject did not directly align with his research, Richard was drawn to the quarrels between the bishop and his colonial chaplains, which were exposed in Boake's letters.

Thus, *Thomia* uncovers a wealth of original research, shedding light on previously undiscovered aspects of the college's history. Richard has brought lesser-known individuals to the fore, delving into their lives and their lasting influence on generations of STC students.



Nazreen Sansoni, Richard and Ashley de Vos.



Richard with Astrid Sansoni.



Richard signing a copy.

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Richard signing a copy for Radhika Hettiarachchi with Henry and Digby Hill in the background.



Richard signing a copy while Suresh Navaratnam looks on.



Arun Dias Bandaranaike, radio and television presenter and writer going through his copy of Thomia.



Richard with Anil Cooke, MD/CEO, Asia Siyaka.



Eranga Tennekoon, Steve de la Zilwa, Digby Hill and Shehan Karunatilaka at Thomia launch.

One such figure is Warden William Arthur Stone, whom Richard describes as poorly understood (Stone served as STC's warden for an impressive 23 years from 1901 to 1924).

Richard was particularly intrigued by Stone's obscure origins. Born into a Methodist family, Stone's early life was marked by hardship after the death of his father, which forced his brother into shop work and his sister into service as a maid. Yet, despite these challenges, Stone managed to earn an MA from Cambridge. This curious trajectory led Richard to search through libraries in England, where he discovered that, despite his family's poverty, Stone had attended grammar school and later Cambridge—a remarkable achievement considering the circumstances. Wondering how Stone could afford such an education, Richard found the answer when he uncovered records in his tutor's account books, revealing that Stone had a benefactor who must have funded his education. This long-hidden part of Stone's story had never been told—until Richard scooped it for *Thomia*.

Interestingly, Stone's influence extended far beyond the walls of STC. He helped shape a new class of Ceylonese men who would play pivotal roles in the country's independence movement, governance, and multiple professions. His strong views on self-governance and freedom profoundly influenced many of these future leaders. Richard considers Warden William Stone one of the most influential figures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Lanka, a man whose legacy shaped the college and the nation's course.

Suppose one were to ask why it was crucial to draw parallels between historical events and their impact on education. In that case, the answer is that education, as a powerful communication tool, became how those in positions of power could advance their agendas. In doing so, they could shape the course of history and even influence the trajectory of progress.

Richard takes the reader through the evolving education landscape, examining its development parallel with key events in England, Ceylon, and, later, Sri Lanka. He explores how religious controversies in England influenced educational policies in Ceylon, shaping the course of schools on the island. As the narrative progresses, Richard delves into the role of Sri Lankan leaders who used education to embed communal ideologies into national consciousness. This shift, he argues, ultimately contributed to the decline of English-language education in Sri Lanka.

As Richard embarked on bringing *Thomia* to life in print, he received invaluable support through advice and encouragement from many. Despite multiple rounds of proofreading, typographical errors still crept through, leading Richard to enlist the help of a trusted proofreader, Jill MacDonald, whose meticulous work helped perfect the manuscript. The book's design process was no less demanding. Richard found a

patient and talented designer in Chanishka Colombage, who worked through more than fifty layout versions. Chanishka's professionalism shone through, and together, they found the perfect fit for *Thomia*'s final look. Renowned architectural photographer Sebastian Posingis helped guide him through the intricate process of ensuring that *Thomia* would be more than just another weighty tome. Together, they worked to create a visually stunning book that reflects the high quality and thoughtful craftsmanship embedded in its contents.

Publishing, however, proved challenging. After struggling to find a suitable publisher in Sri Lanka and overseas, Richard decided to self-publish, determined to maintain complete control over the project. He partnered with Softwave Printing and Packaging, a Sri Lankan printing company. Richard takes immense pride in the fact that *Thomia* was produced by Sri Lankan hands in Sri Lanka, ensuring both quality and local craftsmanship.

Richard's tribute to his alma mater finally comes to fruition, reflecting his deep connection to the college and his journey as a STC student. Actively involved in clubs, debates, and drama during his secondary school years, Richard's most significant takeaway from his time at the college was how it instilled a sense of liberalism and a profound tolerance for the unconventional. It taught him the value of embracing diversity of thought and accepting that one need not conform to societal or cultural expectations. *Thomia* will give a complete picture of what STC has been for over a century and validate Richard's claim.



Giving their best smile – the author's friends Steve de la Zilwa, Ranmali Mirchandani, Kumar Mirchandani and Jagdesh Mirchandani.



Attendees at the launch – Radhika Hettiarachchi, Tanya Hettiarachchi, and Mihiri Devendra.



Steve de la Zilwa, Richard Simon, Shehan Karunatilaka and Digby Hill.



Richard began his Thomia quest when he was more than ten years younger.



Richard Simon was fully committed to making his ambitious literary goals a reality.