

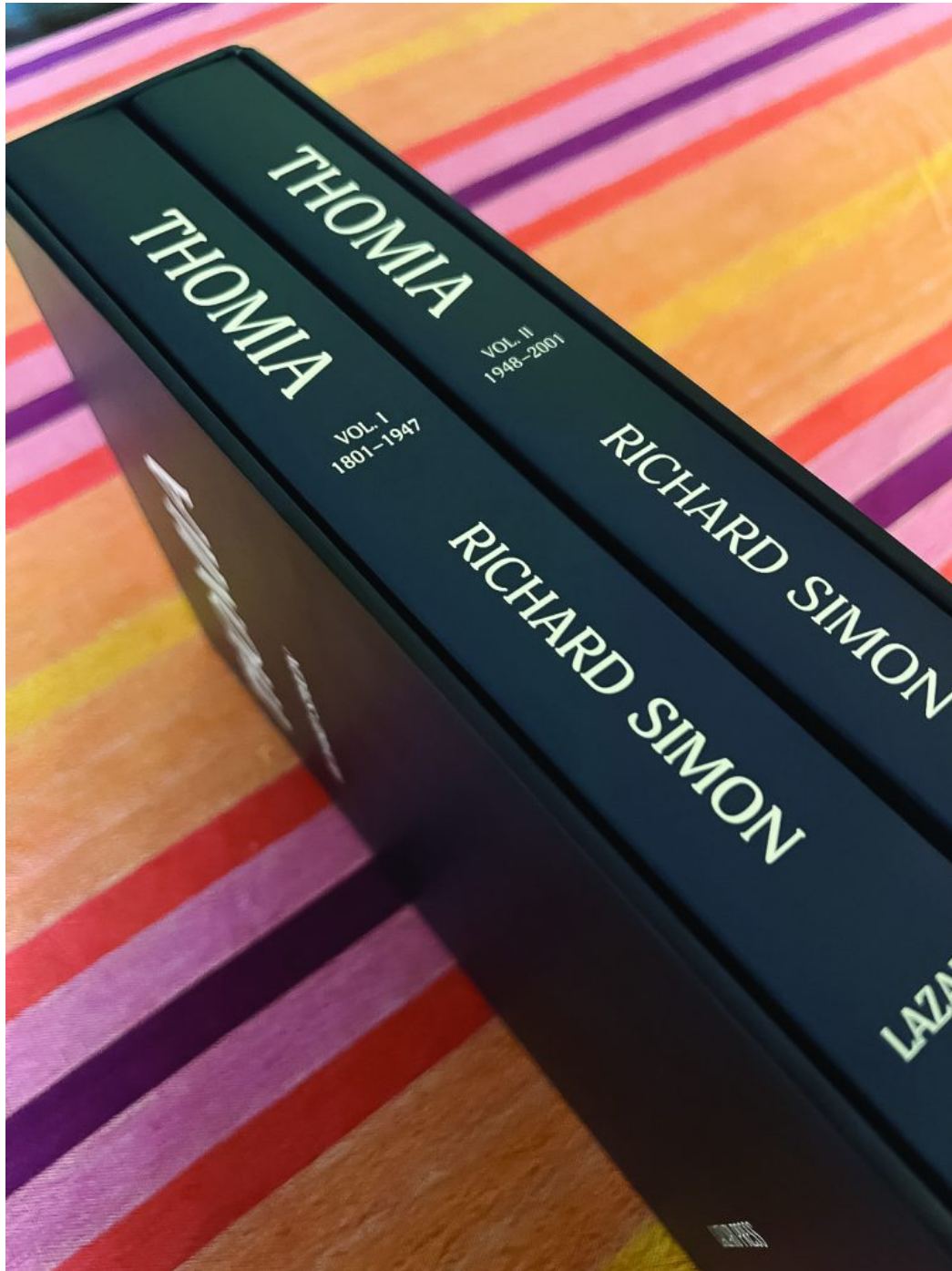
Thomia: A Celebration of History, Resilience, and Unflinching Truth

Posted on

Richard Simon's Thomia finally arrived in 2025, and it stands as a historic achievement. This two-volume, 935-page opus is the culmination of nearly a twelve-year journey— a labor of love and determination to recount the history of a prestigious Christian boys' school, St. Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia, exploring its legacy through the eyes of the innumerable men connected to it, both near and far.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography Sharni Jayawardena and Dominic Sansoni.



Thomia represents a detailed history of St Thomas's College.



Richard signing a copy.



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

Thomia is more than another St. Thomas's College (STC) history. While many have chronicled the school's story and its illustrious alums— four of whom became prime ministers of Ceylon, along with notable figures in civil service, law, the military, academia, and the arts—Richard approaches the narrative uniquely. He weaves a rich tapestry that interlaces the history of the college with the nation's evolution. Through a seamless blend of parallel narratives, Richard reveals the profound connections between individual lives and national events, all set against the backdrop of two centuries of history. The writer's quest for information took him to some of the world's most famous libraries, from the British Library in London to the Bodleian Library at Oxford and Cambridge's Saint John's College's School of Pythagoras.

In the Beginning: The Story of STC

The book intertwines the origins of STC with a fascinating story that sheds light on the social currents and sectarian tensions that even permeated the ranks of British clergy members. STC's genesis is witness to that. The college was founded by the first Bishop of Ceylon, Reverend James Chapman, in 1851. As a member of the Oxford or Tractarian

Movement in England, a crusade that called for a return to the Catholic heritage of the church, Chapman's vision was at odds with the dominant Anglican clergy in Ceylon. One of the most influential opponents was Reverend Barcroft Boake, the principal of the Colombo Academy (later Royal College). He was a staunch anti-Catholic and a fierce critic of the Oxford Movement, running his school with a distinctly Protestant ethos.

Chapman, eager to create an institution that could train men for the priesthood, quickly discovered that he would not realize his goals under Boake's leadership at the Colombo Academy or through the church schools operated by the Church Mission Society. Faced with this impasse, he founded a new school embodying his vision—thus, St. Thomas's College was born. That marked the beginning of a journey for an institution that would play a key role in the country's history.

Thomia: How it All Began

Initially, Richard envisioned *Thomia* as a coffee-table book in collaboration with the STC Old Boys' Union (OBU). However, as the project progressed, its purpose evolved with changes at the college. What began as a modest tribute grew into a more ambitious narrative, sometimes delayed but always revived, as Richard continued his pursuit of the story. Eventually, the college and the coffee-table concept parted ways, with Richard asserting full ownership of the project. What has emerged is a compelling historical narrative that interweaves the parallel histories of STC and the island of Ceylon over two centuries—one that culminates in the college's sesquicentennial in 2001.

Crafted with Care

As mentioned, *Thomia* is far from just another history of STC; it is a dual narrative that spans both the country and the college, exploring their intricate, interwoven stories. The book begins with Ceylon under British rule in 1801, when the British laid the foundation for formal education across the island. From this starting point, Richard delves into the colonial administration's efforts to establish an educational system leading up to the founding of STC in 1851. With the college's birth, the narrative shifts, masterfully weaving the histories of the college and the nation in parallel. Simon brings a unique flair to this task, seamlessly connecting political and social developments in Ceylon with events in England and their influence on the college.

What sets *Thomia* apart is Richard's ability to construct a layered, complex narrative that intertwines the evolution of the island under British rule with that of STC. He doesn't simply recount events but skillfully links societal incidents with the college's growth, showing how

the two profoundly shaped each other. The writer's brilliance lies in his deftness at weaving these seemingly disparate threads into a cohesive and compelling whole.

Thomia is a meticulously organized two-volume book. Volume one covers the period from 1801 to 1948, detailing colonial Ceylon and STC as a colonial institution. Volume two moves into the era of independent Ceylon and Sri Lanka. It's not just the sheer volume of information that is striking but Richard's remarkable ability to connect every key event and influential figure in England, colonial Ceylon, and post-independence Sri Lanka to STC. This approach offers a broader perspective on how local and external forces may have shaped historical events.

One striking example of Simon's skill is his exploration of William Arthur Stone, the early 20th-century Warden of STC (1901-1923). Richard's research took him to England, where he uncovered Stone's fascinating background—from a working-class family to an education at a public grammar school and an MA from Cambridge. Stone was a man of radical ideas for his time, espousing views that stood in stark contrast to the prevailing imperial mindset, and he instilled these ideas in the students he mentored. What makes Stone's story particularly intriguing is the lasting influence he had on a generation of young men, many of whom would go on to become the political heavyweights of pre and post-independence Ceylon. Stone's protégés, including figures like D. S. Senanayake and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, played pivotal roles in the island's struggle for independence and in shaping its future. The author paints a vivid portrait of Stone as a man ahead of his time, whose influence extended far beyond the college walls, leaving a profound mark on Ceylon's political and social landscape.

Much like the tale of Arthur Stone, *Thomia* reveals hitherto untold stories—narratives that had eluded other chroniclers. With relentless dedication, Richard pieced together the rich tapestry of history from various sources: newspapers, the STC Magazine, books, private letters, and intimate interviews with the Old Boys of STC. His pursuit of the truth was meticulous, leaving no stone unturned in his quest for the tiniest information. At one point, Richard even stumbled upon issues missing from the College Magazine. The issues from 1916 to 1925 had vanished. In addition, there were incomplete volumes in other years.



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



Richard with Astrid Sansoni.



Jill MacDonald, Proofreader and Editorial Advisor.



Richard with designer Chanishka Colombage.



Nazreen Sansoni, Richard and Ashley de Vos.

Stories Shared, Histories Preserved

Richard built an intricate network to piece together the fragmented narrative, reaching out to sources. One pivotal connection was Corinne King, the daughter of former STC master D.N. Pereira, who had inherited her father's collection of the college Magazine after his passing in Australia. Generously, Corinne sent Richard 500 photographs of the magazines in her possession, allowing him access to invaluable material. All of this, done in the spirit of *Thomia*, fueled Richard's passion and provided crucial pieces to the puzzle he so carefully assembled. Thus, *Thomia* emerges as a comprehensive retrospective of the men who shaped, led, taught, mentored, and studied at STC—exploring their families and backgrounds and the far-reaching influence they held within and beyond the college. The narrative delves into the complex web of disagreements, rivalries, and unique quirks that define them.

Against the backdrop of a flourishing Ceylon and the turbulent shifts of a society abounding with conflicting voices—movements demanding self-governance, rising communal violence, the growth of ethnocentric nationalism, the ravages of world wars, and the crushing weight of the Great Depression—the story of STC unfolds.

The narrative does not shy away from the darker side of college life—chronicling the abuses and excesses, from the bullying and ragging to the extremes of corporal punishments. It also

reflects on the tolerance of homosexuality within the institution's walls. Through this intricate story-telling, *Thomia* provides an honest look at a school that was both a microcosm and a catalyst for the forces that shaped modern Ceylon.

Born of Devotion

In 2019, *Thomia* became Richard's full-time pursuit, and he devoted himself tirelessly to bringing the project to life. Along the way, he found invaluable collaborators: Jill Macdonald, whose careful attention to detail was instrumental in refining the manuscript of *Thomia*, and Chanishka Colombage, a patient designer who worked through over fifty iterations of the book's layout. Architectural photographer Sebastian Posingis contributed his expert insights into the book's design and overall presentation, enhancing its visual appeal. Richard is deeply grateful to each of them for their support and dedication, guiding him through the final stages of production. The culmination of hard work saw the book self-published and, upon its launch in March, met with an overwhelming and enthusiastic response.

Richard also received tremendous support from his alma mater throughout the journey. He credits former Warden Mark Billimoria, a historian in his own right, for offering invaluable insights and access to the college library. Meanwhile, a legion of Old Boys enthusiastically embraced *Thomia*, praising its distinctive narrative approach of telling its stories in their most authentic form.

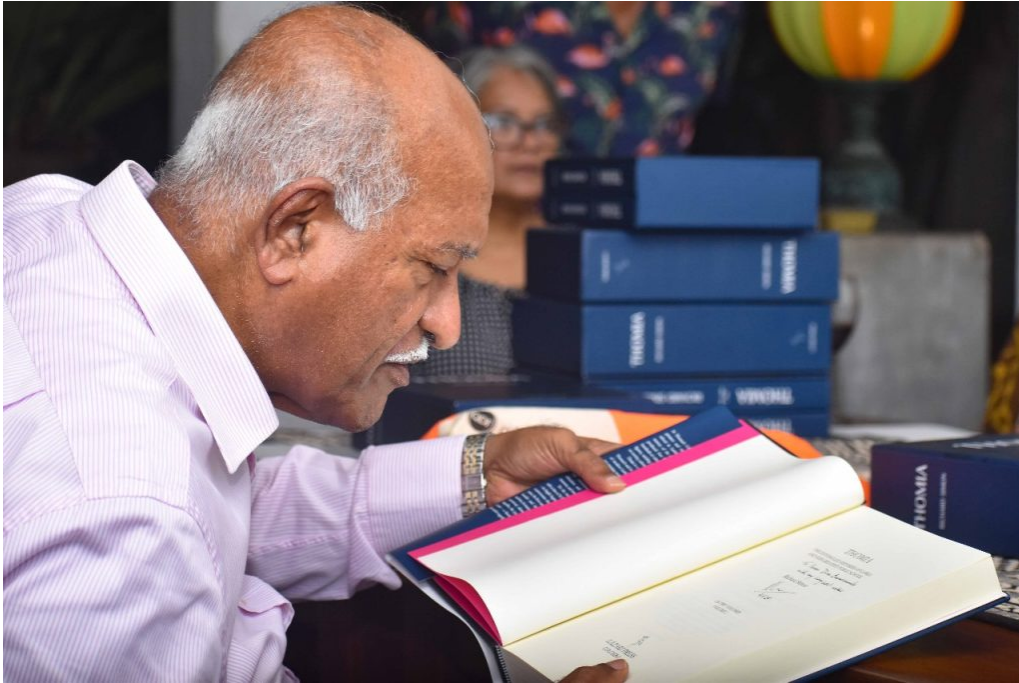
The book encapsulates everything Richard believes STC and the Thomian spirit stand for—liberalism, tolerance of the unconventional, and a willingness to accept people as they are, regardless of their inclinations. It echoes the adage that while Royalists walk as though they own the road, Thomians walk as though they couldn't care less who owns it. This quiet confidence is what many Old Boys of the prestigious school demonstrate. It harkens back to the Anglican tradition of embracing diverse views, drawing from the British political tradition of liberalism that spread worldwide—an ethos that permeated STC, making it an institution both liberal and tolerant, ever willing to examine itself and address its flaws.



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



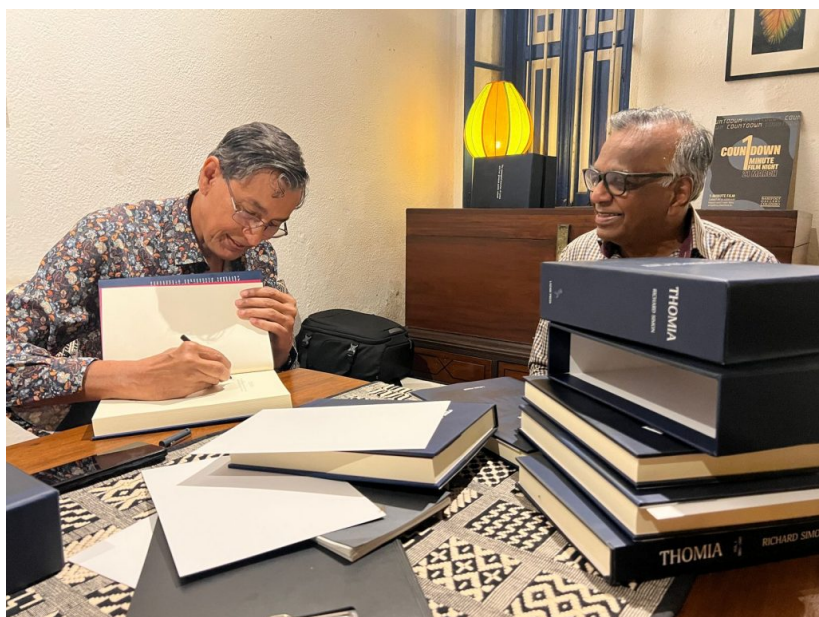
Eranga Tennekoon, Steve de la Zilwa, Digby Hill and Shehan Karunatilaka at Thomia launch.



Arun Dias Bandaranaike, radio and television presenter, and writer.



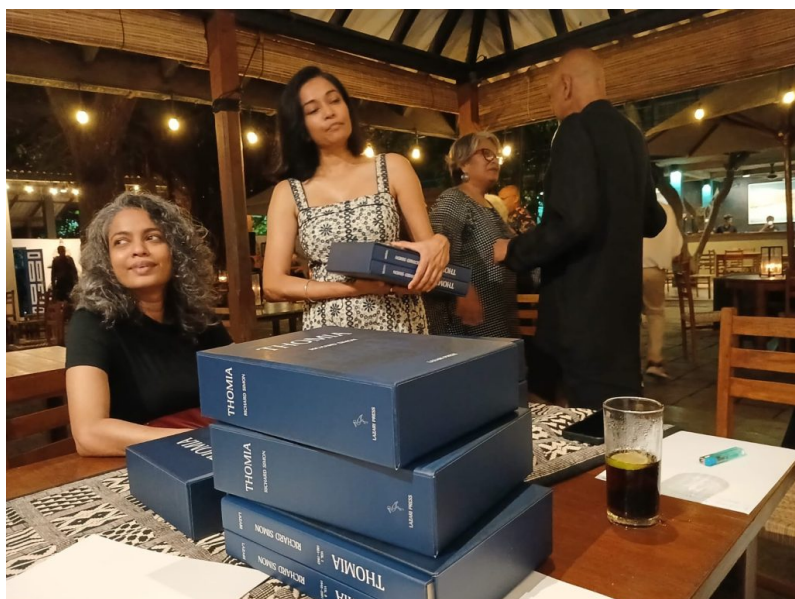
Richard with Anil Cooke, MD/CEO, Asia Siyaka.



Richard signing a copy while Suresh Navaratnam looks on.



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.