

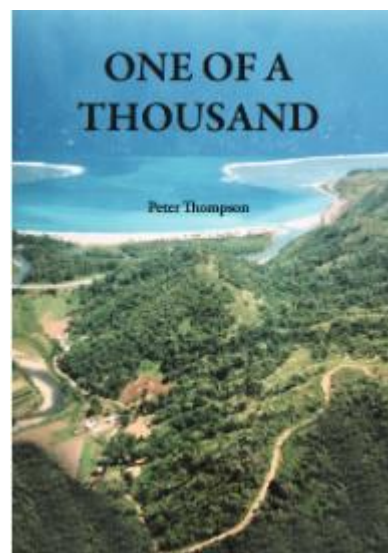
One of a thousand

Peter Thompson, 2019

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Soft cover, 343 pages

Available to download from TAA



website:

https://taa.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/Peter_Thompson_One_of_a_thousand_text.pdf,
or email the author if you wish to buy a hard copy (pgvmthompson@gmail.com)

In this autobiography, Peter Thompson (born in 1934 and a TAA member) traces his life and career as an agriculturalist, initially in the British Colonial Service, which was reputed to have recruited a total of 1,000 graduate agricultural scientists to the service (hence the title), then as an employee of Hunting Technical Services (HTS), and following that as a freelance consultant and finally involvement in a Yorkshire charity. The career involved him working across the Pacific, South Asia, Middle East, Caribbean, Eastern Europe and Africa (between 1959 and 2017).

The book is structured in an innovative way divided into the following parts: I. Starting out, II. Colonial service, III. Extra- curricula activities, IV. International consultant (HTS), V. Freelance consultant, and VI. Last lap. Within these parts, he presents bite-sized sections dealing with different aspects of life: projects, family, family pets, UK leave, etc. Consequently, the chronology is a bit confusing at times.

Peter was born and raised in south India before independence, where his father was employed in a manufacturing enterprise in Madras, after which the family moved to Yorkshire. After school and a BSc in agriculture at Leeds, he followed the Diploma in Tropical Agriculture (DTA) course through Cambridge and the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) in Trinidad.

For pragmatic reasons, Peter had selected Fiji as his favoured posting, mainly because there was little risk of independence for a few years. Part II begins with him sailing to Fiji via the Panama Canal and New Zealand in 1959. He actually served 16 years in Fiji, at a permanent Colonial Agriculture Office post within the Agriculture Department. Initially, he was assigned to

the Sigatoka Agricultural Station, then to the Karonivia Research Station and later he moved into rice projects and irrigation/drainage responsibilities, on projects supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), marked by an influx of 'experts'. (In fact, I first met Peter in Suva in 1972, while I was returning to the UK from an HTS project in Thailand!).

Fiji evidently became his second home: it was where he married Valerie (whom he had met in Trinidad); their two children were born in Fiji; and their son married a Fijian and still lives in Nadi. Under his service contract, he was allowed a four-month home leave every three years (but the standard allowance of 6 weeks for sea travel each way had been replaced by 4 days air travel, just after he arrived). I liked his note on making mahogany packing cases for the return to the UK, which were then converted into furniture (I did the same with map cases from Côte d'Ivoire!). They have returned to Fiji regularly.

Part III describes the enterprises and farmers' cooperatives that Peter and Valerie set up with Fijian contacts, including handicrafts, brooms and fishing lures, and a home at the 38-acre Sovi farm.

In 1975 (Part IV), Peter joined HTS as Chief Agriculturalist, posted to the Lower Khalis Project in Iraq. HTS arranged to pay for the costs of driving from Borehamwood to Baghdad in his Volvo, which is not something to contemplate today. On his return in 1977, he was appointed Area Manager for Middle East and South Asia. These were hectic days, at the height of UK overseas development consultancy. Much of his time was spent on planes to negotiate and monitor projects in Saudi Arabia (Umm er Radhuma), Nepal, Burma, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan. In Kuwait, Peter met colleagues of Ian Baillie (TAA member), who had been the HTS Team Leader of a huge soil survey project that was abandoned due to the Iraqi invasion: Ian avoided internment by showing the Iraqis his Swaziland driving licence – they thought he was from 'Switzerland' and he was allowed to go!

I joined Peter on an assignment to China as a member of the 'Gang of Eight' consultants. In the book he recounts our singing of 'Auld Lang Syne' on our departure from Yingchuan, but failed to mention that it was a week into the mission before we discovered that our Chinese hosts did not want an irrigation scheme but a mink project. As an ever-resourceful consultant, Peter said we could do this (he explained to us that he had prepared a rabbit project in Fiji: "mink and rabbits have much in common!").

Peter was later promoted to Managing Director of HTS, but in the late 1980s the business prospects were deteriorating. Hunting went through rationalisation and a move to Hemel Hempstead. Ultimately he decided on early retirement.

He made the ambitious decision to study for an MBA and get into institutional development consultancy. As he describes in Part V, he took a post at the Natural Resources Institute Greenwich during its privatisation, and assignments in the Pacific (multi-island development), Pakistan (water supply), Bangladesh (rural development review), St Lucia (watershed management), Guyana (Lands & Surveys Commission). He also made inputs in Moldova, Romania, Swaziland and Ethiopia, but some of the projects and clients were of rather uncertain quality.

In Part VI, Peter and Valerie became involved in a charity (PhysioNet) to provide physiotherapy equipment around the world, starting in Bosnia and culminating in winning the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2017. He decided to retire from the charity that year and took this as the natural end of the book.

The book is a good read, especially for those of us who have a similar globe-trotting life. Personally, I found the insights into working with the colonial administration in Fiji enlightening, especially in the light of the current fashion of denigrating anything related to Empire. The Fiji service was a dedicated, professional body of officers who spent long periods in the field (16 years in Peter's case) and promoted new ideas from other parts of the world.

The text is well edited with very few typos. One I did like was a reference to an Eritrean who had a masters degree in 'afro-forestry' from S California! I would have appreciated a few maps in the text to guide me around the places mentioned. The photos at the end of each part add a personal touch. I was left bemused by how we ever managed to communicate in the early days, with no computers, mobiles, etc. Peter did mention the value of 'Tippex' (a white solution for painting on text errors, which could then be typed over and would appear unblemished when photocopied) to amend a typed contract that he was negotiating in Aden, but little of the advance in communication and travel over his 60 year career.

Keith Virgo

(TAA Member)