

**A. Thomson and the History of Books in Albanian****Cultural Studies**

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**Abstract**

An important part in writing the history of a nation's culture is also played by the history of this nation's books. The 1860-1894 period, which corresponds to Alexander Thomson's years of service among Albanians, is an important period in the history of books in Albanian. This is the stage when this history entered its modern phase. The question arises: How is this historical period and its impact described and registered? This research draws an approach between the reality of books in Europe, not limited to this period, and the situation of publications in the Albanian language. Before Thomson began his work of publications in the Albanian language, the reality of books in Albanian was such that, according to us, they could not reach a sufficient mass of people to be considered an influential factor in the history of the formation of the national identity. When Thomson ended his service among Albanians in the Albanian language, the contribution of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the British Association for Religious Brochures had brought over 20 titles of publications to existence, and one of the greatest merits of this work was bringing books to a broad number of simple readers, books that were the same as ordinary European publications of the era.

This investigation is set in the 1860-1894 history, Alexander Thomson's years of service among Albanians, and includes first of all **an evaluative observation** that relates not only to the history of Bible translations, but also to the translation of books in the Albanian culture. This historiography branch of ever-increasing interest with scientific discipline is increasingly present in different programmes of graduate studies in human sciences, thus the history of books, cannot but minutely present the events that happened with books and the events that flowed in all Albanian culture of the period. But has this link in the chain of the history of books in Albanian been reflected in the content of this field? How are this historical period and its impact described and registered? Are the characteristics, merits and flaws of this contribution articulated? Is there sufficient registration of elements of this history, such as the books, circulation, distribution geography, publication quality, author, producer, publication type, etc.? These questions have been the focal point of our investigation.

An important part in writing the history of a nation's culture is the history of its books as an inherent part not only of the registration and preservation of cultural heritage, but of that same national cultural identity as well. The writing of the history of books in Albanian is a page still missing in Albanian historiography for different reasons. In regards to efforts to write and register this history, which is not only a call of time but also a scientific duty, the contribution of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) to books in Albanian is one of the most inherent parts of this history. Not documenting these contributions means creating a historiographic vacuum of almost a century of scientific events and facts. The period including Alexander Thomson's contribution is an especially important part of this history, when books and their history came out of the dark ages and were made visible for historiographic and scientific investigation.

Elements of the history of books must include data on the bibliography related to the book disciplines: religious book, textbook, literary book, etc.; data on its trade, the bibliographic description with data from different periods; the development of book writing and printing in esthetical and technical aspects, and further on the impact of the book from the cultural and, more broadly, human society point of view. By containing this data, the need for the registration of the history of books goes beyond this interest: The history of books is not only a history about books, but a history of the society, the culture, its language, its mental world in general, this society's economy in particular, etc. Thomson himself once called books published in Albanian "*historical gems*" (Xh.Lloshi, 2005) and "*a great gift to the nation*" (Xh.Lloshi, 2005). In 1994, professor Xhevat Lloshi, a scholar of the greatest contribution to this part of Albanian historiography, writes about the contribution of the British and Foreign Bible Society: "*By examining what nowadays we would call the book market, these representatives have documented for us the situation of education and culture in Albania, the fields of use of the*

written Albanian language, and the degree of its cultivation. They have even added the problems of Albanian writing and Albanian education” (Xh.Lloshi, 2005).

For Albanians and their history, as well as for many other European nations, these years of the XIX century are marked by a history of fast and furious events when, in just a few years, Albanians could delineate the first elements of national identity and were able to ensure themselves a spot on the pages of European history from the cultural and political point of view, and finally stood out as a separate community from the huge gulf of peoples of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of his book on the history of books, A.Stipcevic writes: *“The number of languages in which books, newspapers and magazines are printed increases with the number of peoples who, during the XX century, are freed from the political and cultural occupation of great colonial powers. With the creation of national states, many nations began printing books in their national languages. ... However, it is rightfully presumed that the same use of national languages in science and culture is part of the process of liberation from foreign oppression and part of the war for the affirmation of national identity.”* (A.Stipcevic, 2000). A.Thomson himself thought that writing in their mother tongue would make Albanians *“judge for themselves, ... (and) would undermine tyrannical power”* (Xh.Lloshi, 2005) (exercised at that time by religious structures in Albania). These XIX century years in particular marked a turning point in the world history of books.

At the time when A.Thomson began his activity for the publication and distribution of the Bible among Albanians, Europe was at the height of the development of typographic technique: a new period had started not long ago in the history of typography (with the new typographic machine built by Friedrich Koenig in 1812, around 1,000 copies could be printed in an hour) (A.Stipcevic, 2000) and, as a result, books were being printed faster, they cost less, and they were found in the hands of practically all interested people. Alexander Thomson gives this data on this period in the history of books: *“Before the XIX century, books were seldom printed in a circulation higher than 2,000 or 3,000 copies. In the XIX century, the situation changes drastically. On the one hand, the number of readers and, consequently, the number of buyers, is vehemently increased, whereas, on the other hand, the use of typographic machines and cheaper paper enabled the printing of books at much higher circulations. Thus, it is not unusual that some books are printed in a circulation of 50 to 100 thousand, and others in an even higher number of copies.”* (A.Stipcevic, 2000). It was the time of “cheap uniform publications” by Universal Bibliothek, publications that would conquer the civilised world of the time, with *“all titles printed in an average of more than 34,000 copies”*, (A.Stipcevic, 2000). It was the time when newspapers, and no longer books, *“become the most read literature, because it is only through newspapers that the written word will reach every household.”* (A.Stipcevic, 2000)

What was the situation of books at that time? We may here quote N.Veqilharxhi’s efforts to bring impact with his *Evëtar* (Primer- the first one in 1825 and then in 1844, and again with the new *Evëtar* of 1845), Dr. Meksi’s text which circulated a little restrictively since the first publication of The Gospel according to Matthew in 1824 and the publication of the complete New Testament in 1827, efforts of romantics on the other side of the Adriatic (see above) from De Rada’s generation, and De Rada himself with “Milosao” (1836), books which, in our opinion, could not reach a sufficient mass of readers to be considered an influential factor in the history of books and culture. Moreover, we must quote that a certain literary tradition, created a century ago, of oriental and Islamic influence and inspiration, created by the Bejtexhinj, which Kadare in his essay on *“The European Identity of Albanians”* calls *“a certain Albanian-Turkish mixed dough, [which] was ultimately broken, as a clay concoction from the stately and monumental wall, cold as it may be, of the tradition of the bilingual Albanian-Latin literature... when scholars took it in their hands, they saw that besides its level being ridiculous, it was profoundly immoral as well.”* Books of Christian writers from the North were remote in time and inaccessible to readers, though Kristoforidhi had had the opportunity to examine two of them when he learnt Hahn. (Xh.Lloshi, 2005) In Document 10, I.Lowndes for S.S.Bergne, Malta 13 April 1857, among other things,

writes: “*He [the Austrian consul, note from T.T.] had two books in this language, printed in Roman letters, books whose existence I was not aware of*”, part of A.Thomson’s reportage on his travel through Albania in 1867.

Kristoforidhi himself makes such a presentation of the reality of books in Albanian at the time in “*Notes on Albania: Language and translation of the Holy Scriptures*”, writing that: “*Albanian is a spoken but not written language. The people do not have books and they do not even think their language can be written like the languages of other countries, or that it can be used among them and in their schools*”, (Xh.Lloshi, 2005); somewhere else he says that: “*our translation... will be the first book to use this special study of many thousands of young geg Albanians*” (Xh. Lloshi, 2005). On this reality, A.Thomson also states that: “*We turned south and went through Ragusa... and then reached Albania, a country whose nation up to this day is famous for being second to none in not having any literature in their own mother tongue. Apparently, this comes as a result of their ancient language having no importance beyond their nationality...*” (Doc.61, 1869, as well as Doc.35, 1866); “*..., considering also the particular character of the language and how obscure it is, ...*” (Doc.68, 1870) or “*... being the only responsible for the publication of the Holy Scriptures in Albanian, a language without any literature whatsoever...*” (Doc.70, 1870); “*... to give the Holy Scriptures and other books to the people, whom the government and all others had left without any kind of literature for centuries...*” (Doc.84, 1872); “*The greatest difficulty is that the Albanian language can hardly be called a written language and, at the very first step, we are confronted with different alphabetical plans*” (Doc.104, 1877).

When Thomson closed his service among Albanians in the Albanian language, the contribution of the BFBS and the British Society for Religious Brochures had brought the publication of more than 20 titles. In Doc.155, Kristoforidhi writes to Nikolla Naço: “*... and I have been writing the Albanian language for twenty years and publishing more than twenty Bible copies in Albanian, geg and tosk dialects...*” (Xh.Lloshi, 2005). We see these books are published in a number of copies which is very common for the quantity of these books in other European countries, in proportion to the quantity of the reading group reached by the books. In Doc.66, page 291, A. Thomson writes to the Publication Committee in London, from Istanbul, 24 August 1870: “*I have no further doubts when sending you the rough estimation of new publications of the Testament and Psalms. I still believe it is best to limit publication to 3,000 for each, until we are in the conditions to say that our orthographical system is well-planted; however, with less than 3,000, there cannot be any good trial among a nation of 3 and a half million people.*”

A.Stipcevic writes: “*The consequences brought by the very big quantities of books printed [referring to the world history of books for the XV and XVI centuries, note from T.T.] in the realms of science and culture were manifold and long-lasting, and they can hardly be identified and analysed in all their details. Suffice is to say that printed books essentially affected the distribution of writing, especially in the population of cities, the affirmation of popular language as the language of literature and science.*” (A.Stipcevic, 2000)

When Thomson began his service among Albanians, he understood that his work was mainly related to bringing the Bible in the Albanian language. He had understood the great impact this endeavour would bring and all its consequences to the nation’s conscience and life further on; “*From this point of view, the Society’s activity in Bosnia, Albania, ... and other parts of this country where there are no missionaries has the highest spiritual and educational value, and there is no doubt the foundations of a praiseworthy development in the days to come are being laid, though, like all other foundations, they cannot be seen by a careless observer*” (Doc.61, 1869).

Thomson’s next ambition and goal was not only the spiritual awakening of Albanians, but also their education through books in their mother tongue: “*I have two booksellers in Shkodra and Ioannina, and they work well. Since the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 36 books in the Albanian language have been sold. I would want more for*

*Albanian schools, but I can only help you as a private person*” (Doc.31, 1865). However, the most encouraging part of his letter is the notification on *“the enthusiastic manner people from Central Albania, especially from the cities of Elbasan, Durrës, Tirana, Kavaja, Peqin and Dibra, have received our books and with what diligence they have introduced them to public schools”* (Doc.72, 1871).

The changes that happened in these years due to the BFBS and especially A.Thomson’s contribution to Albanian culture in general and Albanian books in particular regard: bringing books to the simple reader and in a broad number, national awareness-raising on the need for the unification of the alphabet and the preparation of the terrain for the necessity of a common alphabet, the delineation of written Albanian, the delineation of functional registers of the written Albanian language, the distinction of an objective norm for the Albanian language (the consolidation of the inventory of linguistic units common to one and then both dialects), as well as enabling mother-tongue education in schools, the preparation and broad distribution of textbooks in the mother tongue and the textbook on the mother tongue (primers, history of the Old Testament, Catechisms, etc.). For the first time, the readers’ demands were one of the factors in the preparation of new publications and, for the first time, readers understood the importance of and the need for education and reading in their mother tongue. Written Albanian would become an accessible scientific fact to researchers and linguists of the XIX century (Xh.Lloshi, 2005)

Thomson’s concrete contribution to Albanian publications and the history of books in Albanian regards:

- The beginning of efforts for the publication of the New Testament in the geg dialect, parts of which were published in **1866**, the Four Gospels and Acts of the Apostles;
- The help in the publication of the Primer in the geg dialect in **1866** (in 1,000 copies)
- The help in the publication of the Primer (in 2,000 copies) and the Catechisms in the geg dialect (in 2,000 copies) by the Society for Pamphlets in **1867**
- The Psalms in the tosk dialect in **1868** and the geg dialect (**1869**)
- The help in the publication of the Primer in the tosk dialect in **1868**
- The complete New Testament in the geg dialect in **1869**
- “History of the Sacred Scripture for boys”, a simplified summary of parts from the Old Testament in **1870**, and then in the tosk dialect in **1872**.
- The republication of the 4 Gospels and Acts of the Apostles in **1872**. The work takes great momentum and the circulation of books goes to 2,000-3,000 copies.
- The republication of the New Testament in the geg dialect in **1872**.
- The republication of the Psalms in the geg dialect in **1872**.
- The help in the publication of the Albanian-Greek primer in **1872** and the publication of “History of the Sacred Scripture for boys” in the tosk dialect at the same year and “Four prayers for little boys”
- The publication of the Gospel according to Matthew in **1878**
- The publication of the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John, and Acts of the Apostles in **1879**, as well as a summary of them
- The publication of “Genesis” and “Exodus” in the tosk dialect in **1880**
- The beginning of work on the publication of “Deuteronomy”, published in **1882** (with a circulation of 1,500 copies)
- A. Thomson enabled the publication of Grammar of the Albanian Language According to the Tosk Dialect, drafted by Kristoforidhi and published in **1882**
- The publication of the Proverbs of Solomon (in 1,500 copies) and Isaiah (in 1,000 copies) in **1884**.
- The republication of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Proverbs and Isaiah in **1884**.
- The republication of the Four Catechisms in the geg dialect in **1884** by the British Society for Religious Brochures.

- The republication of the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Luke in the tosk dialect in **1886**
- The publication of the Gospel according to Matthew and Genesis, transcribed in Istanbul Society alphabet, in **1889**, with Gjerasim Qiriazhi's proofreading (editing).
- In **1893**, efforts are made to publish the Psalms edited by Gjerasim Qiriazhi
- In **1895**, the Psalter is published in Greek letters, while the version transcribed in the Istanbul Society alphabet, proofread by Gjerasim Qiriazhi and written by Thanasi Sina, remains unpublished.

With Thomson, the history of books in Albanian entered its new, modern phase (defined by bibliographic standards, such as the type of book, the number of copies, distribution geography, kinds of readers) when books were offered to all interested people. Furthermore, it was everybody's language, the language of the greatest part of Albanians that had shaped the language of the biblical text (*"He is a Muslim, but wishes success for our Protestant work in Albania. He likes our translations and thinks the dialect used is understandable to gegs and tosk alike"*, Doc.150, 1883). Thus, books were reaching everyone, because it was everybody's language that had reached the books. For the same nature of expectation of the communication of the biblical text and the Bible Society's ambition to reach the greatest number of readers, the linguistic and semantic intelligibility of the text was proven and testified by positive or negative reception, in terms of copies sold and their impact in the country's culture, the separate books of the Bible (as for the issue of the publication of separate Gospels before complete publication). Having this expectation, Thomson's endeavoured not only to bring as many books of the Bible in the Albanian language as possible, and even the complete Bible, but also to bring a text in an updated language and system of writing exactly at the time when creating a new alphabet was understood as a national obligation.

Thomson was not only a witness, but also an actor in this history of when the Albanian language was not only a spoken language anymore, but also a written one, as all languages of nearby and distant neighbours in the continent. The merit is first and foremost Thomson's and his demands of high-level work regarding the selection of the translator, the distinction of the group of readers, the selection of editors and evaluators, always being informed on political, cultural and linguistic developments among Albanians, the contribution he gave to the translation through his knowledge as a professor of Hebrew, etc.

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