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Archival Sources for Sir Godfrey Hilton Thomson

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Abstract

Sir Godfrey Hilton Thomson was Bell Professor of Education at the University of Edinburgh from 1925 until 1951. He was a prominent theorist of intelligence, statistician and psychometrician, educational researcher, deviser and distributor of intelligence tests, and worked on the issue of intelligence and family size as it affected the population. Despite his previous eminence, he has become an obscure figure. Partly, that is because there are few remaining archive materials from which he can be studied, and these are scattered. Here, we describe sources that contain useful information on Thomson's life and work. These include specific sources in the University of Edinburgh, some archives beyond Edinburgh that include items related to Thomson, and new materials that we have gathered in a project to improve the availability of historical materials on Thomson's work and life. The latter are large in extent and have come to light only recently.

In 2006 we began a project—funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council—to ‘reconstruct a Scottish school of educational research’. This came about after meetings and discussions between two of this paper’s authors, Martin Lawn and Ian J. Deary (IJD). The latter had been following up people who took part in the Scottish Mental Surveys (Deary, Whalley, & Starr, 2009), while the former had been studying the work of the International Examinations Inquiry (Lawn, 2008), of which Sir Godfrey Thomson and other Scots were members, and under whose auspices and with whose funding the first Scottish Mental Survey was undertaken. Two broad questions were prominent in our project: why had Scotland punched so much above its weight in educational research between about 1925 and 1950?; and why had Thomson, once so famous, become so obscure? The two questions were connected. Thomson was a key factor in Scottish psychological and educational research prominence. But sources for him were few. Our project sought sources, and has had time to archive, examine, and publish on a few of these to date.

The rise and disappearance of Godfrey Thomson

Professor Sir Godfrey Thomson (1881-1955) was a prominent psychologist but has disappeared from view. From humble birth, he was originally a pupil-teacher in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in England. He had a bent for mathematics and statistics and took a PhD in physics from the University of Strasbourg, Germany. He rose to Professor of Education at Armstrong College, Newcastle, then part of the University of Durham, where he was on the staff from 1906 to 1925. Thomson turned down a job offer from the eminent statistician Karl Pearson. He spent an academic year, 1923-1924, at Columbia’s Teachers College, by invitation of Edward L. Thorndike. The invitation was based on the strength of Thomson’s publications (Thomson, 1969). From 1925 to 1951, he was the Bell Professor of Education at the University of Edinburgh. During this period he was also head of the Moray House [teacher] Training College in Edinburgh.

Thomson’s prominence arose from a number of contributions. He wrote substantially on the theory of intelligence differences, over a long period. His work on this was heavily statistical, and he debated with Charles Spearman concerning general intelligence (*g*) and its alternatives for over 30 years. He was a peer of well-known psychologists such as Spearman, Burt, Thorndike, and Thurstone, and statisticians such as M. S. Bartlett. He devised the Moray House Test series of intelligence and school achievement tests. There were dozens of these tests, and Thomson’s tests—produced in hundreds of thousands—were used, mostly by English education authorities, to assess children for school selection from primary to secondary education at about age 11 years (Sutherland, 1984). They were used in Scotland to investigate and improve education. The mental tests made a great deal of money, which Thomson used to build a team of staff comprising

psychometricians, test developers, and clerks, whose aim was to improve the tests and provide a service to the education authorities who used them. His tests were used in the Scottish Mental Surveys of 1932 and 1947 (see Deary, Whalley, & Starr, 2009), in which Scotland—via the Scottish Council for Research in Education—tested entire year-of-birth (1921 and 1936, respectively) cohorts on intelligence. Thomson chaired the statistical committee of the earlier survey and was chairman of the latter. He was prominent in studies, and debates, about the place of intelligence testing in the eugenics movement in the UK. He oversaw the prestigious, research-oriented BEd degree at the University of Edinburgh, many of whose graduates went on to be influential in education and psychology. Thomson was knighted for his services to education and served as President of the British Psychological Society, 1945-1946.

Thomson is comparatively unknown today, despite being a psychometrician-psychologist described by E. L. Thorndike as “tops” (Anonymous, 1937) and by H. J. Eysenck as being “the leading exponent of the application of statistics to psychology, an outstanding psychometrician who was widely regarded as the most rigorous and technically the most sophisticated of them all” (Eysenck, 1990, p. 106). Once ranked with the top names in intelligence, he alone goes almost unmentioned. In part this was because he was self-critical, and never stood four-square beside a theory—even his own ‘bonds’ theory of intelligence—unlike Spearman and Thurstone, for example. He certainly lacked the notoriety of Cyril Burt. Although he left behind an autobiography, which all but stops upon his arrival in Edinburgh in 1925 (Thomson, 1969), there appeared to be few archival sources from which he could be studied further.

Godfrey Thomson’s work and life merits further study. From the limited sources we have had access to, it is clear that his work still has relevance and importance. His ‘bonds’ model of intelligence is as statistically and biologically acceptable as Spearman’s still-dominant theory (Bartholomew, Deary, & Lawn, 2009a). His statistical insights in the field of multivariate analysis are being re-assessed as innovative (Bartholomew, Deary, & Lawn, 2009b, 2009c). Re-discovered lectures of his—a printed one on intelligence and civilisation (Deary, Lawn, Brett & Bartholomew, 2009), and a recorded one on the techniques of lecturing (Lawn, Deary, Brett, & Bartholomew, 2009)—have been reprinted and studied, showing his breadth of vision in the broader relevance of intelligence and his insights into university teaching. His transcribed discussions with Spearman and Thorndike reveal him to be a master psychometrician (Deary, Lawn, & Bartholomew, 2008).

Sources on Godfrey Thomson

The purpose of this article is to describe some progress we have made towards finding out more about Thomson’s work and life. This is a work in progress. Some of the materials we have located and discovered are relatively new and many have still to be archived. We have chosen to

describe the sources by location, rather than by topic; thus, for example, it will become obvious that correspondence is located in diverse locations. In addition to materials already stored in archives, we have found some forgotten in cupboards, some with former workers or their relatives, and some in his family home.

Publicly-available sources

There are materials that are available outside traditional archives. Autobiographical (Thomson, 1952, 1969) and biographical (Sharp, 1997) accounts of Thomson are available. Online, he has an entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101049732>). There is a useful published account of his large-scale Moray House Test enterprise (Sutherland, 1984). His many journal articles and his books are available, via libraries or used book outlets. Sources such as JSTOR are useful for the many reviews of Thomson's books. The purpose of this article is, however, to describe less accessible sources.

Archive materials at the University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections department

Godfrey Thomson Unit

Godfrey Thomson's research unit within Moray House Training College in Edinburgh—known as 'Room 70'—was later relocated and named the Godfrey Thomson Unit. There are over 30 boxes of materials archived from this unit, some of which date from Thomson's time (Godfrey Thomson Unit, 1879-1979). These materials were conserved, processed, and archived with funds from our ESRC project, and the Moray House Test ledgers were re-bound. Key items among this collection are Thomson's own collection of journal offprints (Boxes 23-24), many samples of Moray House Tests, the Moray House Tests ledgers (much in Thomson's own hand), and a previously uncollected notebook in Thomson's hand (located by us in a cupboard in Moray House during the project). Some items require highlighting. Boxes 15-16, containing the ledgers that record use of the Moray House Tests, are compiled by Thomson and date from 1927 to 1948 (Thomson, 1927-1948). They relate to test administration in the United Kingdom. There are annotated copies of the tests, answer keys, directions for scoring, data from local education authorities, analyses of results (including diagrams), general statements about the tests, typed reports, correspondence with schools, and other notes by Thomson. The hardbound hand-written Thomson notebook contains notes, quotations and thoughts on articles, potential projects for BEd theses, and many mathematical notes (Thomson, ca. 1930). Added to this collection have been copies of books that Thomson owned and annotated that were found by us in cupboards in Moray House, and Thomson's own annotated copy of Thorndike's *Educational Psychology: A Briefer Course*. There is also information about the Thomson Trust funds and their expenditure.

Walter Ledermann correspondence

Ledermann was Thomson's mathematical assistant from 1937 to 1939. Thomson funded Ledermann from Carnegie funds, which also paid for Thomson's sabbatical in 1937-1938. During this time Thomson completed his book, *The Factorial Analysis of Human Ability* (Thomson, 1939). Thomson spent time away from Edinburgh, writing at his holiday cottage in Glenapp in Ayrshire. Therefore, much of their discussion took place by letter. Ledermann retained all of Thomson's letters, which run to several dozens, and donated them to the University of Edinburgh (Ledermann, 1937-1954). There is much mathematical material in them alongside occasional social matters. Although most date from the late 1930s, the letters continue to the 1950s.

Faculty papers

These have some matters relating to Thomson's appointment and replacement. There is correspondence relating to Thomson's pension (University of Edinburgh, 1925-1951).

Boris Semeonoff materials

Semeonoff took the BEd in the early 1930s. He continued in Edinburgh, and rose to Reader in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh. His materials in the archives include notes from his BEd courses, including Thomson's course on Advanced Experimental Education (Semeonoff, ca.1928-1933). These are the only lecture notes discovered from Thomson's teaching to date. Semeonoff's notes also contain a light-hearted poem describing Thomson and other teachers.

Other general materials in Edinburgh

The Edinburgh Provincial Training Centre minutes (Edinburgh Provincial Committee, ca. 1905-ca. 1975), University of Edinburgh Calendars (University of Edinburgh, 1917-1955) and Examination Papers (University of Edinburgh, 1917-1955) all may be found in the University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections. They are not personal to Thomson, but they give a rare insight into his work in administering the teaching side of Moray House and the content of the courses and examinations taken by the trainee teachers and BEd students.

Interviews with people providing information on Thomson

As a part of our research project, we interviewed several people who either knew Thomson or who could provide information about his work and life. These interviews have been transcribed but have not yet been archived.

Sheila Anderson (Anderson, 2007)

She is the daughter of Albert Pilliner, who was an employee in Room 70 and then Thomson's successor as the head of the Godfrey Thomson Research Unit. She donated a substantial amount of materials pertaining to her father. Among these are his hand-written notes from William Emmett

and Derrick Lawley, dating to when they worked in Thomson's Room 70 on the Moray House Test series, and a mechanical calculator that was used in Room 70.

Robert Bell (Bell, 2007)

A BEd graduate and researcher in the Godfrey Thomson Unit in the 1960s and 1970s, he wrote his PhD on the study of education in Scottish Universities (Bell, 1986), and knew a great deal about Thomson and other educational researchers during the same period (Bell, 1975).

Marian Cooke (Cooke, 2006)

She worked for Thomson for many years as his secretary. As well as a unique account of his working style, she relates many personal details that sketch his character, and some family details. She donated artefacts to the project, such as Thomson's stopwatch and personal photographs.

David Finney (Finney, 2006)

He visited Thomson in Edinburgh as a young statistician. He later rose to be Professor of Statistics at the University of Edinburgh. He discusses some of Thomson's statistical insights.

Cecily and Margaret Giles (Giles & Giles, 2008)

These sisters were daughters of a Reader in Ancient Greek and Roman History at the University of Edinburgh, who had been a friend of Thomson's. The families were close and, when the children were young, they spent Christmases together. Their account is a unique one of Thomson at home, with friends and family.

Catherine Hunter (Hunter, 2008)

She was a trainee teacher during the time that Thomson was head of Moray House. She recalls his lecturing and presence at Moray House.

Anne Lawley (Lawley, 2007)

She is the daughter of Derrick Lawley, the gifted mathematical statistician who worked with Thomson after Walter Ledermann, and who later became a Reader in the Department of Statistics at the University of Edinburgh. Derrick Lawley was contacted by telephone at the beginning of our project, but did not feel able to be interviewed.

Walter Ledermann (Ledermann, 2006)

Walter Ledermann was Thomson's mathematical assistant in the late 1930s. He provides an intimate account of their joint work together, especially on the mathematical aspects. Apart from the letters he had already donated, he additionally donated statistical books that had been bought for his work using Carnegie funds.

Ian Morris (Morris, 2006)

He took the BEd at Moray House while Thomson was director of studies, and wrote his PhD on the work of the Scottish Council for Research in Education between 1928 and 1993 (Morris, 1994), having been a member of the Council from the 1950s onwards. Dr Morris provides insights

into the workings of SCRE. He also helped locate many of the Thomson-related materials held within Moray House.

John Nisbet (Nisbet, 2006)

Another of Thomson's BEd students, he went on to be Professor of Education at the University of Aberdeen and gives a valuable account of both Thomson's teaching on the BEd course and educational research in Scotland during and after Thomson's time. He also donated photographs, including the BEd class from 1948 with the Moray House Staff.

Vida McFarland (McFarland, 2007, 2008)

She is the widow of Harry McFarland, who worked for Thomson relatively late in Thomson's career as a researcher. In addition to an account of her husband's work and some impressions of Thomson, she donated five recorded disks of a Thomson lecture given in 1950 (Lawn, Deary, Brett, & Bartholomew, 2009). The lecture, given to staff at the University of Edinburgh, was on the topic of effective lecturing.

Stephen Sharp (Sharp, 2007)

He worked at Moray House School of Education until recently, and had been an employee with the Godfrey Thomson Unit after Thomson's time. He is informative on the later work of the unit and familiar with Thomson's work and output (Sharp, 1997).

Elizabeth Sommerville (Sommerville, 2009)

She was a trainee teacher during Thomson's headship of Moray House College. She recalls Thomson as a presence at Moray House, and taking part in scoring tests from the Scottish Mental Survey 1947.

Elsie Taylor (Taylor, 2007)

She was employed by Thomson as a statistical clerk, and worked in the Room 70 research unit on the Moray House Test series. In addition to a rare account of work and life in Room 70, she donated her BEd graduation hood and certificate, and made a sketch of the set-up in room 70.

All materials donated by interviewees have been carefully stored within the study's own collection at the Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, and will be deposited and archived with the University of Edinburgh Library's Special Collections department on completion of the study.

The Hector Thomson Collection

The above sections broadly describe the materials that had been collected on Thomson prior to 2008. There were, in addition, some other sources: we had attempted a complete Thomson bibliography, obtained articles by those who worked with Thomson—such as Emmett, Ledermann

and Lawley—collected obituaries, sought relevant PhDs, collected occasional papers relevant to Thomson, sought articles on Thomson from The Scotsman newspaper, and so forth.

In spring 2008 we discovered that Thomson's son Hector had recently died. We had been informed, incorrectly, that he had died many years before. Not only that: Hector Thomson had been living in the same house—5 Ravelston Dykes, Edinburgh—that Godfrey Thomson had personally designed and inhabited since the 1920s. We sought to contact Hector's widow Andromache but got no answer, but did make contact with a neighbour. IJD wrote a letter explaining the project's interest in Godfrey Thomson. We discovered that Andromache had gone to Cyprus (her original home) to grieve with her family, and she died while there. Her niece—Annabella Senior—telephoned IJD months later. She was in Scotland—from her home in Wales—to clear the house in 5 Ravelston Dykes for sale. She was the closest remaining family to Godfrey and Hector Thomson. She found IJD's letter among the papers in the house. She stated that she had found a few effects of Godfrey Thomson's that might be of interest. IJD cycled to the house, which was 15 minutes from his office.

The house had altered little in its principal fittings since the 1920s. There were four house clearers already present in the house. Annabella Senior had identified and laid aside a number of items relevant to Godfrey Thomson, and kindly allowed IJD to scour the house for more, while the clearers were temporarily slowed. What then accumulated was the largest and most comprehensive collection of Thomson materials to date, offering a rich source of information on both his academic work—both published and unpublished—and fascinating new insights into his private life and interests. Thomson's house was soon sold, and then demolished in the following months; a new house is being built on the site.

The materials in this new source fall into six main categories (see Figure 1 to gain an indication of the bulk of some of the materials): substantial unknown works, correspondence, books, academic work, personal papers, and artefacts. This short account describes some of the highlights.

Previously unknown works by Thomson

Perhaps the most valuable are the major previously unknown and unpublished academic works within the collection. We give some examples to illustrate. There is the typescript of an unpublished 'book' on education written in around 1930. There is the typescript of an unpublished 'book' of lectures on music education. There is a large (30+) collection of lectures—in Thomson's handwriting and in typescript—given by Thomson to various public bodies over a period of many years (Figure 2). There is an incomplete chapter, in Thomson's handwriting, dealing with his time in Edinburgh. It was intended for his autobiography but never used.

Correspondence

There is a body of correspondence—from and to Thomson—relating to Thomson's work. For example, there are letters from the eminent statistician Karl Pearson (Figure 3). There is a collection of papers and correspondence concerning his involvement with the work of the Eugenics Society and its members, including the debate on the relationship between intelligence and fertility and the work of the Royal Commission on Population, the circumstances of which led up to the Scottish Mental Survey of 1947.

Books

There is a collection of Thomson's own copies of the different editions of his published books. The complete collection of five editions of *The Factorial Analysis of Human Ability* are heavily annotated in Thomson's own hand, amounting to a large amount of new material concerning the development of Thomson's thinking about multivariate statistical analysis and intelligence differences. Similarly, the editions of *Essentials of Mental Measurement*, and *Instinct, Intelligence and Character* are very heavily annotated in Thomson's hand. In addition there are many of Thomson's personal copies of other books, reflecting his varied interests within and outside of academia, including music, culture, classics, geography, and Germany.

Academic work

There are large notebooks with lists—in Thomson's hand—of his reprint collection, and of his own published works. There are reprints of Thomson's published papers. Together with the books, these represent the most complete collection of Thomson's publications in existence. There are also carefully compiled—and sometimes annotated in Thomson's hand—collections of reprints by Thomson of other peoples' work including his colleagues in Moray House (Ledermann, Emmett, Lawley, Maxwell, to name only a few), and figures such as L. L. Thurstone and Cyril Burt. Additional material—related to Thomson's honorary membership of various academic bodies, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the British Psychological Society and the Educational Institute of Scotland—is present in the form of correspondence, certificates, proceedings of meetings or conferences, certificates, press cuttings, and photographs.

Personal papers

The collection contains a meticulously-gathered and -maintained collection of letters relating to Thomson's knighthood, retirement and death, mostly compiled by his son, Hector. There is a summary diary for the years 1941-1954. There are some hand-written pages on spiritual matters when he was close to death. There is an extensive memoir on Thomson in his wife's hand. There are also various official documents, including the Thomsons' wills and estate, birth certificates, and Thomson's driving licence. There is family correspondence. There is a large diary—over a hundred pages in Thomson's hand—full of extremely detailed handwritten notes and images charting his son Hector's development from birth to age 10 years. There are copies of completed intelligence tests which Thomson administered to his son at

various stages of his development. There are many family photographs of both the Thomson and Hutchinson (his wife's) families as well as several pages of handwritten family trees and notes on family history. Thomson's interest in music, hitherto unexamined, is revealed—in addition to the lectures to music teachers—with a large collection of music books.

Artefacts

There are many important personal artefacts in the collection. For example: Thomson's Masonic aprons; a major oil portrait painted by R. H. Westwater; Thomson's own slide rule (dated 1909); many dozens of family and professional photographs, framed, loose, or in albums; many certificates; and the retirement book signed by many co-workers and friends.

Conclusion

Godfrey Thomson has been lost from the history of psychology and of educational research. As far as we are aware, our project—and this article in particular—is the first attempt to describe some of the principal remaining materials that record his life and work. A Godfrey Thomson archive now looks possible. It is still unsatisfactory. Our modestly-funded project found us working on a combination of four Thomson-related activities: finding already-known archive materials; discovering lost materials; creating new materials (such as the interviews); and writing academic papers on aspects of Thomson's work. We remind the reader that the project itself was more broadly on a theme in which Thomson was just one (the major) player. The materials we have identified are doubtless incomplete: our own recent discoveries of new materials suggest there might be more to come; for example, about Thomson's close relations with colleagues at Teachers College Columbia. The materials are as-yet incompletely studied and integrated. Especially, the Hector Thomson materials remain safely (under archivists' advice) stored in an interim fashion, awaiting support to study them in detail.

The ambition is for a full archival collection of Thomson materials in Edinburgh, and a clear record of what lies elsewhere as an adjunct to that collection: see the Appendix and the relevant references. The aim is to restore Thomson to his position as a major figure in the history of psychological and educational research and its applications. This, fully realised, should involve many journal articles examining his archive from a number of disciplinary viewpoints, a full biography, an exhibition (there are many attractive artefacts), and a full beyond-the-academy appraisal of his works' impacts on society.

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Figure 1

From the Hector Thomson collection: some of the newly-discovered Godfrey Thomson materials



Figure 2

From the Hector Thomson Collection: close-up of some of the collection of Thomson's public lectures

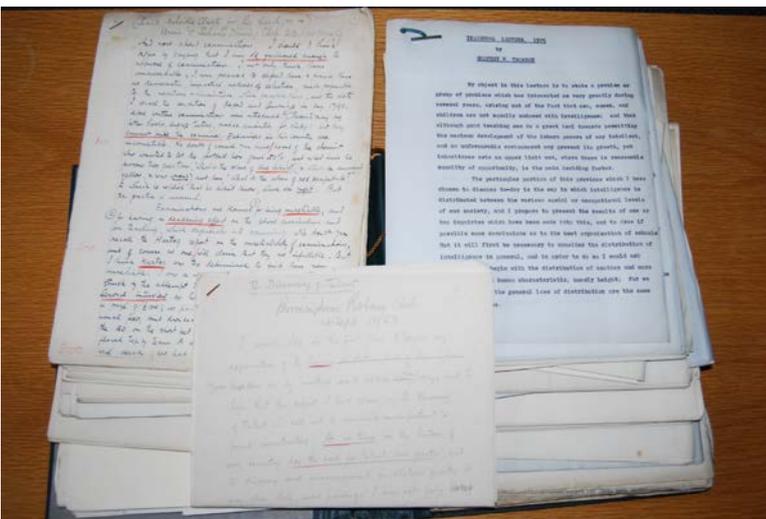
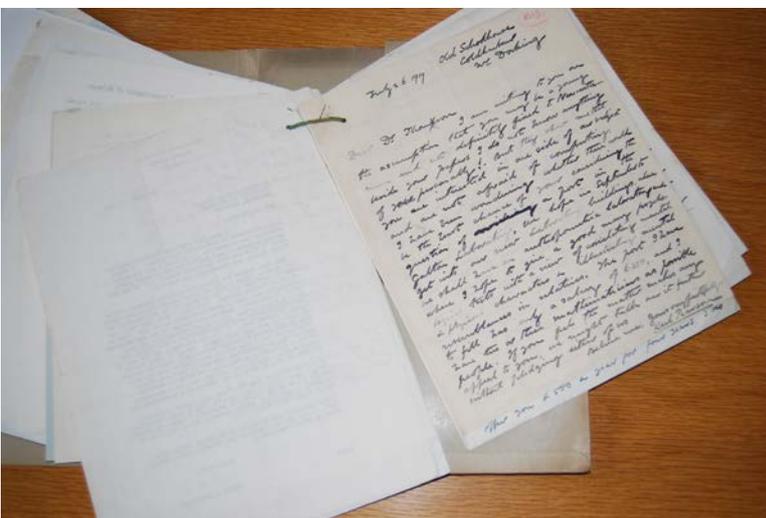


Figure 3

From the Hector Thomson Collection: a letter from Karl Pearson to Godfrey Thomson



Appendix

Archive materials in locations other than the University of Edinburgh

Scottish Council for Research in Education materials at the Glasgow University Archives, UK

This contains a very large amount of materials on the Scottish Mental Surveys of 1932 and 1947 (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1947-1974, 1955-1966). This includes: correspondence concerning the organisation of the surveys and the follow ups of some participants, and all of the original data from the surveys. There are some materials from Thomson, including some statistical tabulations in Thomson's handwriting. There are also minutes from the Mental Survey Committee from 1932 to 1967 (Mental Survey Committee, 1932-1967).

Sir James F. Duff papers at the University of Durham Library Special Collections, UK

There is correspondence between Thomson and Duff on their research on intelligence in Northumberland (Duff, 1922-1923, Duff & Thomson, 1923/24), correspondence relating to Thomson's posthumously-published autobiography (Duff, 1969, Thomson, 1969), and extracts from Duff's personal diary, which mention Thomson (Duff, ca. 1916-1967).

Papers of Sir Cyril Burt at the University of Liverpool Special Collections and Archives, UK

There is correspondence between Burt and Thomson, and between Spearman and Burt concerning Thomson's theory of intelligence (Burt, 1886-1948).

Ronald Aylmer Fisher papers at the University of Adelaide R. A. Fisher Digital Archive, Australia

There are several items of correspondence with Thomson (Fisher, 1930-1947).

Population Investigation Committee (PIC), London School of Economics, London, UK

There is correspondence regarding the Scottish Mental Survey 1947 (Population Investigation Committee, 1958-1975), including a memo from Thomson on his ideas for following up the Scottish Mental Survey of 1932 (PIC, 1943-1950, 1945-1947, 1947).

Royal Commission on Population, London, UK

There is a memorandum from Thomson and discussion on intelligence and family size involving Sir R. A. Fisher and Sir Cyril Burt, among others (Royal Commission on Population, 1950).

Eugenics Society (London) archive, Wellcome Library, London, UK

There is correspondence between Karl Blacker, Alexander Carr-Saunders and Thomson on intelligence, family size, population issues, and eugenics (Carr-Saunders, 1938-1953, Eugenics Society, 1941-1952, 1943-1958).

British Psychological Society History of Psychology Centre archive, Wellcome Library, London, UK

Amongst their collection of working papers of individual psychologists there is correspondence between John Raven and Thomson (Raven, 1949-1951), and materials in the Charles Spearman collection which discusses Thomson's theories (Spearman, 1935, ca.1940, n.d.).
The Carnegie Corporation of New York, Columbia University Library, New York, USA

There is material regarding the International Examinations Inquiry, which Thomson attended, and the Scottish Council for Research in Education (Carnegie Corporation, 1930-1968, 1937-1939, 1937-1945).