



THE LAST MAN WHO KNEW EVERYTHING:
THOMAS YOUNG

ANDREW ROBINSON

REVISED EDITION

WITH A FOREWORD BY MARTIN REES



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The first edition of *The Last Man Who Knew Everything* was published in 2006 by Pi Press in the United States and Oneworld Publications in the United Kingdom.

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Preface

Versatile people have always fascinated me as a biographer. Most recently, there was Albert Einstein, who, as everyone knows, fathered diverse new fields of science, but who also influenced some crucial areas of international politics. Before Einstein, Michael Ventris, a professional architect who in his spare time deciphered Linear B, the earliest readable European writing system, and became revered by archaeologists. And before Ventris, two prodigious Indians, the Nobel-prize-winning writer Rabindranath Tagore and the Oscar-winning film-maker Satyajit Ray, both of whom were intensely creative in areas outside literature and cinema.

But I must admit that Thomas Young (1773–1829), for sheer range of expertise, beats them all. Not only did he make pioneering contributions to physics (the wave theory of light) and engineering (the modulus of elasticity), to physiology (the mechanism of vision) and to Egyptology (the decipherment of the hieroglyphs), but he was also a distinguished physician, a major scholar of ancient Greek, a phenomenal linguist, and an authoritative writer on all manner of other subjects, from carpentry and music to life insurance and ocean tides. In an exhibition on Young arranged by London's Science Museum for his bicentenary in 1973, the organisers went so far as to state: 'Young probably had a wider range of creative learning than any other Englishman in history. He made discoveries in nearly every field he studied'.^[1]

This makes Young a tough subject for a biographer, and perhaps that is why there appeared no new biography of him for half a century. I contemplated writing one for over a decade, after first encountering Young while researching a book, *The Story of Writing*, and I became further committed to the idea while writing another book, *Lost Languages*, on archaeological decipherment, a few years later. But having thought about the challenge, I decided it would be better to write an

introduction to Young for a new audience, rather than attempting a full biography. To cover his work and life in detail and with authority is probably impossible for a single writer. This book therefore dwells only on the highlights of his polymathic career, though it aims to touch on every interesting and enduring aspect of Young.

I should like to thank the following for their help. Nicholas Wade, emeritus professor of visual psychology at Dundee, procured for me a four-volume set of the recent facsimile edition of Young's most famous work, *A Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts*, for which he wrote an introduction. Christina Riggs, former curator of Egyptology at the Manchester Museum, advised me on Horapollo's hieroglyphs. David Springings, former consultant cardiologist at Northampton General Hospital, encouraged me to trace the post-mortem examination of Young to the library of St George's Hospital, London (where Young was a physician), and provided an expert opinion on the cause of his early death. Simon Young, son of the physiologist J. Z. Young, and great-great-great-grandnephew of Thomas Young, kindly gave me permission to reproduce his copy of the portrait of his ancestor painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence. Finally, I am grateful to my original publisher, Stephen Morrow at Pi Press, for getting excited by Young's versatility, too; and to Rupert Gatti and Alessandra Tosi at Open Book Publishers.

The book was first published in 2006. This revised edition contains a foreword by Sir Martin Rees, a generous spirit, plus a postscript, in which I consider at some length the phenomenon of polymathy in the two-and-a-half centuries since the birth of Young.

London, March 2023

[1] Unsigned note for a Science Museum loan circulation exhibition, 1973 (copy in the J. Z. Young papers at University College London).