

THE LIFE OF JAMES THOMSON ("B.V.")

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The Life of James Thomson ("B.V.") by Henry S. Salt

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HENRY S. SALT

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THOMSON ("B.V.")**



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OF
JAMES THOMSON

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BY
HENRY S. SALT.

REVISED EDITION.

LONDON:
A. & H. B. BONNER, 1 & 2 TOOK'S COURT,
CHANCERY LANE, E.C.

1898.

941
1889
37

NOTE TO NEW EDITION.

T-19-41 A.E.

IN revising this book for a new and cheaper edition, I have omitted a great part of the detailed study of Thomson's writings, to which some chapters were devoted in the edition of 1889. At that date a number of the poems and prose essays were still unprinted or inaccessible; but as most of these have now been included in the collected works of their author, there is no longer need of analysis or quotation. A few unimportant passages have also been omitted from the Letters; but, on the other hand, some new biographical matter has been added, thanks to the aid kindly given me by Mr. Bertram Dobell, Mr. J. W. Barrs, Mr. H. E. Clarke, Mr. W. M. Rossetti, Mr. C. L. Brodie, and others.

The following letter from Mr. George Meredith, dated 2nd February, 1891, with reference to a proposed volume of selections from Thomson's poetry, to which it was hoped that Mr. Meredith might write an Introduction, will be of interest to all students of "B. V."

"I have gone through James Thomson's works, to spur myself. He was a man of big heart, of such entire sincerity, that he wrote directly from the impression carved in him by his desolate experience of life. Nothing is feigned, all is positive. No Inferno could be darker. But the practical effect of a greater part of the Poems is that of a litany of

the vaults below. The task of a preface would be to show him pursued and precipitated by his malady in the blood to do this poetical offence of dark monotonousness, which the clear soul of the man would have been far from committing had he not been so driven, as the beautiful 'Om-el-Bonain' may witness. Bright achievement was plucked out of the most tragic life in our literature. Still I find that to expound him rightly, doing justice to him, with satisfaction to his admirers—to show how the noble quality of the man, harried though never more than physically conquered at times by the Fury he inherited, affected his verse, making it record the gloomy images absolutely conceived by him—this is more than I can undertake. My health is of a pale sort at present. Now and then I have had in me a jet of an endeavour to hit the delicate balance which would give the just portrait of a brave good man and true poet, hapless in his birth, fighting his best, and, as the book would show, not failing, though baffled. I cannot. Hold me excused as well as you can."

The portrait of Thomson given as frontispiece to this edition is reproduced from a crayon by Mr. Rowland Holyoake, kindly lent for the purpose by Mr. Theodore R. Wright.

LONDON,
September, 1898.

PREFACE TO ORIGINAL EDITION.

I COULD wish that the duty of writing this biography had been entrusted to one who had enjoyed the advantage of personal acquaintance with James Thomson. As, however, no such biographer was forthcoming, I have done my best to put together the scattered records already published, and to collect such further information as could still be obtained. It has been my object to avoid all fancy portraiture, and to give a clear and reliable narrative of the main facts of Thomson's life, allowing his letters as much as possible to tell their own tale, and quoting in many cases the actual words of those who have recorded their personal reminiscences.

I gratefully acknowledge the cordial help I have received from a large number of Thomson's friends and correspondents. To Mr. Bertram Dobell, in particular, I owe my best thanks for his untiring kindness and goodwill, and for the loan of numerous letters and manuscript poems. Mr. Percy Holyoake generously placed at my service his interesting collection of Thomson's papers, including the diaries kept between 1874 and 1881, without which this biography could hardly have been written. I am indebted to Mrs. John Thomson, Mr. J. W. Barrs, Mrs. Pelluet, Mr. W. M.

Rossetti, Mrs. Greig, Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, and Mrs. James Potterton for the use of letters, notebooks, and other documents, and for information about certain points in Thomson's life and character. For further assistance of various kinds I have to thank Mr. John Grant, Mr. and Mrs. T. R. Wright, Mr. George Meredith, Mr. William Sharp, Mr. H. Hood-Barrs, Mrs. George Duncan, Mr. Charles Duncan, Mr. W. Weller, Mr. G. W. Foote, Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, Mr. W. E. Jaques, Mr. G. J. Harney, Mr. Byron Webber, Mr. A. A. Thomson, Mr. Thomas Carson, Mrs. Birkmyre, Mr. C. A. Watts, the Rev. C. M. Barnes, Dr. R. Garnett, Mr. F. Potterton.

H. S. S.

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