

**THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT
AND OTHER POEMS: BEING A
SELECTION FROM THE POETICAL
WORKS OF JAMES THOMSON**

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The city of dreadful night and other poems: being a selection from the poetical works of James Thomson by James Thomson

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BEING A SELECTION
FROM THE POETICAL WORKS OF
JAMES THOMSON
(“B.V.”)

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JAMES THOMSON*

ALTHOUGH the fame of the second James Thomson is at last securely established, and he cannot now be confounded, save by the very ignorant, either with the author of "The Seasons," or with his almost equally unfortunate contemporary, Francis Thompson, the story of his career is not yet so well or so generally known as to make it unnecessary to tell it here. Therefore, since that knowledge is the key to any proper appreciation of Thomson's writings, I will once more briefly relate the tragic story of a life which was, to use his own words, 'a long defeat.' Yet was it really that? As regards himself and his personal misfortunes it certainly was. Yet in this respect it was hardly more so than was that of Robert Burns, who at the close of his brief career might almost have used the same words. Yet what seemed to themselves defeat and

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failure we can now see was but the necessary discipline which was to fit them for their allotted tasks. They were each of them tried 'so as by fire,' but both accomplished the work for which they were born.

James Thomson was born at Port-Glasgow on the 23rd November, 1834. He was the first child of his parents who were both Scotch; and certainly he himself was by nature as well as by parentage no less a true son of the 'land of the mountain and the flood' than Robert Burns or Sir Walter Scott. A stranger or more unaccountable report never got about than that which gave him for a father that compound of false sentiment and tinsel rhetoric, the author of 'Paul Clifford' and 'Ernest Maltravers.'

The poet's father was a sailor in the merchant service, in which he attained a good position and continued to prosper until, in 1840, when acting as chief officer of the ship *Eliza Stewart* of Greenock, he was disabled by a paralytic stroke, the effect, it is said, of a week of terrible storm, during which he was unable to change his drenched clothing. Up to this time he had been of a cheerful disposition, fond of society, and a delightful companion: but now a change greatly for the worse took place, and his temper became strange, moody, and uncertain. He lived on till 1853, but in a state of melancholy and weakness of mind which prevented him from providing for his sons, or from acting as a guardian towards them. The poet's mother, *née* Sarah Kennedy, was a deeply religious woman, and a devoted follower of Edward Irving. It was from her, no doubt, that her son inherited the deep vein of melancholy in his disposition; for it appears that she was of a highly emotional and imaginative temperament. One of the best of wives and mothers, it was a

great misfortune for the poet that she died when he was little more than eight years old.

In December 1842, through the kind exertions of some friends of his parents, James Thomson was admitted to the Royal Caledonian Asylum. There he remained for the next eight years, and there is no reason to suppose that that period of his existence was anything but a happy one, or that he was less full of the buoyant spirit of youth than is commonly the case. Pessimism indeed rarely afflicts the young: it allows its victims to enjoy at least a spring-time of hope and illusion before revealing to them 'the bitter, old, and wrinkled truth' of the hollowness and hopelessness of human life. Thomson took his part in all the sports and recreations of his fellow-pupils, who saw nothing uncommon in him, except that he mastered his lessons with unusual ease and quickness, and was much above the average in general capacity.

In 1850 Thomson quitted the Asylum and became a monitor in the "Model School" at the Royal Military College, Chelsea. He entered that institution because it had been decided that his future profession should be that of an army-schoolmaster; and in order to obtain this post it was necessary first to qualify for it at the above-named College. This was hardly Thomson's own choice of a career, but was adopted on the advice of his teachers at the Asylum. Their advice, I think, was the best that could have been given, for Thomson, so far as he was qualified for any employment which requires its professors to go through an unvaried round of daily duties, was better qualified for the post of a schoolmaster than for any other.

At the Royal Military College Thomson made some very good friends among his fellow-students, with some of whom he kept up friendly relations during a