

**THOMAS CHALMERS:
PREACHER PHILOSOPHER
AND STATESMEN**

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Thomas Chalmers: Preacher Philosopher and Statesmen by Mrs. Margaret Oliphant

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MRS. MARGARET OLIPHANT

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From a Portrait by Thomas Duncan, R.S.A., A.R.A.

THOMAS CHALMERS

*PREACHER PHILOSOPHER
AND STATESMAN*

Margaret Oliphant^{or} Wilson
MRS. OLIPHANT[^]

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THOMAS CHALMERS.

CHAPTER I.

TOWARDS the end of last century, on the 17th March, 1780, Thomas Chalmers was born, the fourth son and sixth child of a well-to-do and comfortable family occupying a solid and substantial house at the west-end of the village of Easter Anstruther, popularly called Anster, in Fife. His father, John Chalmers, was a "dyer, ship-owner, and general merchant," a man of homely competency, a Scotch burgher, member of the Town Council, and elder in the Church, the most respectable and substantial of rural tradesmen, with links of alliance which attached him to the higher classes, territorial and clerical, in the district. The house still stands, and is more or less an object of curiosity and veneration as the birthplace of the great Dr. Chalmers, and I remember the half-contempt with which my questions about an old tenement once belonging to an ancestor of my own were received in the village. "Ye'll be wanting Dr. Chalmers' house?" the women at their doors said, eyeing with amazement the stranger who

sought another shrine. It stands within sight and sound of the sea, not far from the little harbour where the ships of which John Chalmers was part-owner, fishing-boats, or merchant smacks, or perhaps a whaler on its return from Greenland, lay. Anster was not the prosperous town it had been a hundred years before, in the days when Maister James Melville, who has left one of the most graphic of diaries behind him, chronicling many national events, was minister; nor was it an emporium of salted herrings, giving large, if not very lovely, occupation to husbands and wives alike, and filling the streets with busy industry and ancient and fish-like smells in the season, as it is now. But there was enough of leisurely traffic to keep life going in a way of homely comfort, nobody being very rich, nor any very poor. The old and feeble were supported by the little revenue supplied by the "Plate" at the church door, where every worshipper placed his offering as he entered, often no more than a penny, but not to be omitted save at peril of self-respect and good report—and by the neighbourly kindness of the well-to-do; while the old sailors had their little pensions from the Sea-Box, and the fisher-folk rejoiced in the summer harvest of the "drave" or shoal of herrings, which, I have heard an old Fife lady say, came by a special arrangement of Providence along with the new potatoes, and filled the cottages on the head of the cliffs with food and gladness. Now the drave furnishes herrings to be salted and packed in barrels, and the new potatoes are sent off by railway to Edinburgh and Dundee. For some things, certainly, the old times were better, more abundant and comfortable in their way, if money was scarcer and luxuries fewer.

Tom Chalmers went naturally with his big and little brothers—there were nine boys in all—to the parish school, which was not in very effective keeping at the time, and where he was remembered as “one of the idlest, strongest, merriest, and most generous-hearted boys in Anstruther school.” That he fought as well as played there can be no doubt in such a vigorous atmosphere, but there is a pretty anecdote of the sturdy independence and sense of the little lad, who is said to have taken refuge in a cottage when a “bicker” was going on, in which sharp and cutting mussel-shells were the missiles. “I’m no for powder and shot,” he said. A more remarkable, and indeed quite singular, little scene occurred, we are told, still earlier, at three years old, when he was found in his nursery, in the dark, pacing up and down and repeating to himself the cry of David, “Oh, my son Absalom: oh, Absalom, my son, my son!”—the wonderful story, and that wonderful outcry of passion and anguish, having somehow caught the child’s ear at an age almost too early to be conceivable as touched by such profound emotion at all.

That he should have declared his determination to become a minister at a very early age was not wonderful, for the minister was at once the most influential person in it, and the head of the village hierarchy, occupying a position which naturally attracted the first stirrings of childish ambition. But it cannot even be considered certain that it was from any special aptitude or progress in his work at school—where there was apparently more flogging than teaching—that young Tom Chalmers was sent with his elder brother, William, to the University of St. Andrews, when he was eleven