

**THE SEASONS, AND
CASTLE OF INDOLENCE,
TO WHICH IS PREFIXED
THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649699865

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Cover @ 2017

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FRANCFORT O. M.
PRINTED BY AND FOR H. L. BRËNNER.
1826.

THE LIFE

OF

JAMES THOMSON.

JAMES THOMSON was born Septbr. the 7th, 1700, at Ednam, in the shire of Roxburgh, of which his father was pastor. His mother, whose name was Hume, was co-heiress of a small estate in that country. It was probably in commiseration of the difficulty with which Mr. Thomson's father supported his family, having nine children, that Mr. Riccarton, a neighbouring minister, discovering in James uncommon promises of future excellence, undertook to superintend his education, and provide him books.

He was taught the common rudiments of learning at the school of Jedburg, a place which he delights to recollect in his poem of "Autumn;" but was not considered by his master as superior to common boys; though in those early days he amused his patron and his friends with poetical compositions, with which, however, he was so little pleased himself, that on every new-year's day he threw into the fire all the productions of the foregoing year.

From the school he was removed to Edinburgh, where he had not resided two years when his father died, and left all his children to the care of their mother, who raised upon her little estate what money a mortgage could afford, and removing with her family to Edinburgh, lived to see her son rising into eminence.

The design of Thomson's friends was to breed him a minister. He lived at Edinburgh, as at school, without distinction or expectation, till, at the usual time, he performed a probationary exercise by explaining a psalm. His diction was so poetically splendid, that Mr. Hamilton, the professor of divinity, reproved him for speaking language unintelligible to a popular audience.

This rebuke is said to have repressed his thoughts of an ecclesiastical character, and he probably cultivated with new diligence his talent for poetry, which, however, was in some danger of a blast; for, submitting his productions to some who thought themselves qualified to criticise, he heard of nothing but faults: but finding other judges more favourable, he did not suffer himself to sink into absolute despondence.

He easily discovered that the only stage on which a poet could appear, with any hope of advantage, was London; a place too wide for the operation of petty competition and private malignity; where merit might soon become conspicuous, and would find friends as soon as it became

reputable to befriend it. A lady, who was acquainted with his mother, advised him to the journey, and promised some countenance and assistance, which, however, he never received.

At his arrival in town, he found his way to Mr. Mallet, then tutor to the sons of the duke of Montrose. He had recommendations to several persons of consequence, which he had tied up carefully in his handkerchief; but as he passed along the street, with the gaping curiosity of a new-comer, his attention was upon every thing rather than his pocket, and his magazine of credentials was stolen from him.

His first want was a pair of shoes. For the supply of all his necessities, his whole fund was his "Winter," which for a time could find no purchaser; till, at last, Mr. Millar, a bookseller in the Strand, was persuaded to buy it at a low price; and this low price he had for some time reason to regret: but, by accident, Mr. Whatley, a man not wholly unknown among authors, happening to turn his eye upon it, was so delighted, that he ran from place to place celebrating its excellence. Thomson obtained likewise the notice of Aaron Hill, whom (being friendless and indigent, and glad of kindness) he courted with every expression of servile adulation. We are not informed what estimate Thomson himself had formed of his production: whether with self-supported confidence he anticipated the reception it would eventually meet with from the public, or whether

he was satisfied to dispose of his unproductive treasure for a sum that provided for the wants of the moment—as he would have disposed of a precious stone of uncertain value to the first lapidary who would set a price upon it. In his most sanguine and ambitious moments he could not have ventured to hope, that the poem would ultimately not only amply reward its purchaser, but take its rank among productions which are considered as eras in English literature, and become identified with the language.

“Winter” was dedicated to Sir Spencer Compton, but attracted no regard from him to the author; till Aaron Hill awakened his attention by some verses addressed to Thomson, and published in one of the newspapers, which censured the great for their neglect of ingenious men. Thomson then received a present of twenty guineas, of which he gives this account to Mr. Hill:—

“I hinted to you in my last, that on Saturday morning I was with Sir Spencer Compton. A certain gentleman, without my desire, spoke to him concerning me: his answer was, that I had never come near him. Then the gentleman put the question, if he desired that I should wait on him? he returned, he did. On this the gentleman gave me an introductory letter to him. He received me in what they commonly call a civil manner; asked me some common-place questions; and made me a present of twenty guineas. I am very ready to own that the present was larger than my per-

formance deserved; and shall ascribe it to his generosity, or any other cause, rather than the merit of the address."

The poem, which, being of a new kind, few would venture at first to like, by degrees gained upon the public; and one edition was very speedily succeeded by another.

Thomson's credit was now high, and every day brought him new friends; among others, Dr. Rundle, a man afterwards unfortunately famous, sought his acquaintance, and found his qualities such that he recommended him to the Lord Chancellor Talbot.

"Winter" was accompanied, in many editions, not only with a preface and dedication, but with poetical praises by Mr. Hill, Mr. Mallet (then Malloch), and Mira, the fictitious name of a lady once too well known. Why the dedications to "Winter" and the other Seasons, are, contrarily to custom, left out in the collected works, is not known.

The next year (1721) he distinguished himself by three publications:—of "Summer," in pursuance of his plan; of "A Poem on the Death of Sir Isaac Newton," which he was enabled to perform as an exact philosopher by the instruction of Mr. Gray; and of "Britannia," a kind of poetical invective against the ministry, whom the nation then thought not forward enough in resenting the depredations of the Spaniards. By this piece he

declared himself an adherent to the opposition, and had therefore no favour to expect from the court.

Thomson, having been some time entertained in the family of Lord Binning, was desirous of testifying his gratitude by making him the patron of his "Summer;" but the same kindness which had first disposed Lord Binning to encourage him, determined him to refuse the dedication, which was, by his advice, addressed to Mr. Dodington, a man who had more power to advance the reputation and fortune of the poet.

"Spring" was published next year, with a dedication to the Countess of Hartford; whose practice it was to invite every summer some poet into the country, to hear her verses, and assist her studies. This honour was one summer conferred on Thomson, who took more delight in carousing with Lord Hartford, and his friends, than assisting her ladyship's poetical operations, and therefore never received another summons.

"Autumn," the season to which the "Spring" and "Summer" are preparatory, still remained unsung, and was delayed till he published (1730) his works collected. The autumn was his favourite season for poetical composition; and the deep silence of the night, the time he commonly chose for study; so that he was often heard walking in his library, repeating what he was to correct or write out the next day.