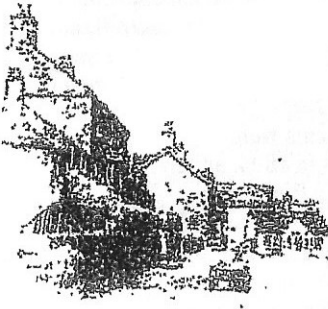


# Currie & District Local History Society

## *CURRIE CHRONICLE*

(The Journal of the Society)

September 2015 .. No.84



Currie Toll 1897

*Hello, everybody,*

It seems, nowadays, that the Autumn comes round quicker than usual - maybe it is because of the poor summer we have had this year.

For Chronicle No. 84, Douglas Lowe, our present Secretary, has written a most interesting article from the notes he uses when presenting his illustrated talk on '**James Thomson**', Currie's own weaver poet.

He has agreed that his well-researched notes be put into print and be included in this issue of the 'Chronicle' and I trust you will find his article interesting reading.

The 2015/16 Syllabus is enclosed with the Chronicle which lists a variety of speakers including a professor, a high-ranking Army officer, an archivist, a few Society members' and others.

Looking forward to seeing everyone again at our first meeting on **5<sup>th</sup> October, 2015.**

**Ronnie Dickson, Editor.**

## JAMES THOMSON – THE KENLEITH POET

Much of the information we knew about James Thomson came from the prefaces of his published poetic works. Three editions of his poems were published, two during his lifetime in 1801 and 1819, and a third in 1894, edited with notes by Robert B Langwill, son of the Currie Kirk Minister Rev James Langwill. The preface entitled "An Account of the Author", which appeared in all three volumes, was not written by Thomson but by George MacLaurin, who was a lawyer and poet. In the second edition of his poems Thomson pays tribute to the late George MacLaurin (1771-1802) with a poem, mourning the loss of his friend and patron. George MacLaurin was the second son of the late Lord Dreghorn.

The "Account of the Author" tells us that James Thomson was born in Edinburgh on 10 September 1763. It goes on to say "over the parentage of Thomson delicacy must draw her veil".

We have not been able to find a record of Thomson's birth in the various Edinburgh parishes, or those round about, but more on this later.

When he was a few months old he was sent to be brought up by his maternal grandparents in Currie. His grandfather was a weaver in the hamlet of Kinleith, above Currie. Thomson was nursed and raised by his grandparents and an aunt who lived with the family. At the age of seven he was sent to the village school. This was the first village school, the foundations of which were laid in 1699 and which still exists as the white cottage directly opposite the library, on Lanark Road West. Thomson's formal schooling was short-lived however, he caught a severe bout of smallpox and his recovery was slow. His grandmother and the aunt took on his education and taught him to read.

When his health improved he took to looking after his grandfather's cow, herding it daily to the hill pastures. Thomson on these trips took with him books of ballads or songs with which to both practice his reading and to occupy and amuse himself during his idle moments in the fields. Allan Ramsay was a particular favourite and he managed to commit most of "The Gentle Shepherd" to memory. This was a great feat when we consider that Ramsay's pastoral poem/play runs to five acts - and fifty seven pages in my edition. His fellow herds looked on Thomson as a "prodigy of learning" and often gathered to listen to him, leaving their own charges to stray.

At the age of thirteen he started work as a weaver with his grandfather and also augmented his income by taking on other work; blood letting, barber, butcher and forester. He saved enough to buy a fiddle and, having learned that skill was soon much in demand as a musician. He also returned to formal schooling and learned to write but spent much of his time making rhymes on his fellow pupils. It was during this period that some of the pieces which appeared in the first edition of his poems were composed, including **Willie Weir's Legacy** – the first of any length that he had attempted. This poem of 26 verses is a rollicking list "**O' the utensils, gudes, an' gear, That did belong to Willie Weir**".

He worked under his grandfather for a few years but his grandfather's sight began to fail and after a lingering illness the old man died. It fell to Thomson to support his grandmother. Soon after his grandfather's death he moved to "a village in the parish of Colington" to continue his work as a weaver. This is where we start to find evidence in parish records for Thomson. We find in Colinton Parish records that James Thomson married Elisabeth Burns on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1787 and paid 2/6d to the poor. Most of us previously had interpreted the phrase "had married a young woman, of decent parents, who lived in the same village" as meaning that Elisabeth was from Currie. I think that we, and I include me in this, were incorrect in this interpretation as we have evidence in Langwill's notes from interviews that he had with Thomson's granddaughter Mrs Hislop (1/10/1892) in that her grandmother Elisabeth "belonged to about Hailes". So having moved to Colinton, James married a local Colinton/Hailes girl. Thomson and his wife went on to have eight children – seven girls and one son, James. We can find records for the children in the parish records as follows;

Janet 14<sup>th</sup> October 1788 (Colinton Parish)

Jean 7<sup>th</sup> October 1790 (Currie Parish)

James 7<sup>th</sup> August 1792 (Currie Parish)

Elen 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1794 (Currie Parish)

Betty 1<sup>st</sup> August 1796 (Currie Parish)

Catharine 8<sup>th</sup> July 1799 (Currie Parish)

Mary 13<sup>th</sup> December 1801 (Currie Parish)

Ferguson 24<sup>th</sup> December 1803 (Currie Parish)

Ferguson, baptised on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1804 was called after the poet Robert Fergusson (1750 – 1774), who was a particular favourite of Thomson.

What of his grandparents? We know that Thomson started working as apprentice to his grandfather at thirteen (1776/77). Going by "The Account" he "served under his grandfather a few years when the old man fell into a decay, and, after a lingering illness, died. Leaving his grandson the heir of his loom

and burdened with the charge of his grandmother, who survived her husband ten years. Prior to this event, (presumably the grandmother's death) Thomson had married Elisabeth. Well we know that the marriage was in 1787. Armed with what we knew; the fixed date of marriage, the grandmother dying a few years after 1787 and the 10 year gap between the grandfather and grandmother's deaths I contacted Val Wilson our librarian who searched the Currie Parish records and came up with possible entries relating for Thomson's grandparents. Val found entries for a John Thomson who entered into an irregular marriage with Margaret Toward, which was later confirmed (14/12/1740) and who had a daughter Margaret. So did daughter Margaret give birth to James in Edinburgh in 1763 and brought him out to Kinleith to be raised by her parents. "Over the parentage of Thomson delicacy must draw her veil" says "The Account" it continues "To the authors of his birth he owes nothing but his existence; the caresses of a father he never shared, and the fondness of a mother he never experienced". There is no mention of his mother in his poems but the last few lines of his poem written in 1787, *To Young Women* gives an insight;

"But till the priest has joined your hands,  
Keep something to yourself.  
For once your virtue get a crack,  
In vain ye may deplore  
In vain in tears you may look back  
To what you were before."

Thomson, sometime between October 1788 and October 1790, returned to Kenleith to continue his business as a country weaver in the cottage at the head of the small wooded glen we now know as "the Poet's Glen". The cottage he lived in still stands, it was thatched until 1906. The three cottages have been greatly altered, modernised and made into one dwelling in recent years. It still has the original tablet "Mount Parnassus" on the lintel above the door. Mount Parnassus was the name Thomson gave to the area rather than just the cottage and the tablet was originally fixed to the north gable of the row of three cottages. Part of one of his poems reflects the situation of his cottage;

In my bed I can view thirty miles to the north,  
The ships as they pass an' repass in the Forth;  
In my green I can stand and nine counties survey;  
Then where is the view that can match mine I pray?

Historical accounts tell us that by 1814 weaving was the most important industry in Scotland. The weavers were well remunerated – in 1791 the wages trebled and by 1800 wages of 30/- to 40/- per week were not uncommon. However competition from power looms and an increase of handloom weavers

coming from Ireland and the Highlands led to a decline after 1815 and wages dropped to around 6/- per week. The New Statistical Account 1834-45 for Currie Parish mentions that there are now no handloom weavers in the parish.

The Old (1791-99) and New (1834-45) Statistical Accounts give great insight into this period of great change. The OSA talks of 2 stagecoaches twice a week, of depopulation from farms owing to enclosures and improvements to land and roads. By the NSA there is now a stagecoach every day, there is still depopulation from farms, some have disappeared, but the population is now increasing because of the mills (paper) - and there is post twice a day! When reading the poem "The Discourse of Mary Shanks, a Supposed Witch, to her Daughter" the disappearance of farms is apparent. Mary travels from farm to farm collecting "gifts". Among the farms visited are Ramslack, Cowslap and the Loan all now just names on old maps.

Thomson's poetry had become very much part of his life. He composed poems and rhymes for his own relaxation and amusement at the end of the days toil, and also repeated these for the entertainment of his fellows. Some poems he set down on paper and these were passed around the area but the catalyst which led to his fame as a poet came from another of his skills.

By reason of the variety of his other skills; musician, physician, butcher, forester and barber, ("on a Saturday night, all the beards of the village came under his hand") he was described as "the most useful man in the Parish". The minister, the Reverend James Dick, had sent his razors to Thomson for sharpening. He received his razors back accompanied by a short humorous poem;

Your razors, Man, were baugh indeed,  
An' they o' sharpin' had great need;  
But now, I think, they will come speed,  
An' glegly rin?  
Sae, redd ye, billie, tak gude heed,  
They slipna in.

The Reverend Dick was so impressed he encouraged Thomson to set more of the poems down in writing. These he passed on to various influential friends and Thomson's fame spread. The Historical Magazine of 1799 referred to the discovery of a second Burns "possessed of no small measure of poetic fire, who though constantly engaged from morning to night in the laborious employment as a country weaver, still finds time to cultivate the Muse, even though borne down by the iron hand of poverty". There was indeed what would be described today as a press campaign with similar articles appearing in newspapers and

journals the length and breadth of Britain. The Scots Magazine, Caledonian Mercury, Chester Chronicle, Hereford Journal and Aberdeen Journal all carried similar articles which included the poem The Ghaist, ( although the English papers titled this poem The Grey Mare). I feel that George Maclaurin must have had some influence in this.

Largely due to the influence of the Reverend Dick, and possibly also George Maclaurin, the 1801 edition of his poems was published and listed six hundred subscribers, The Duke of Buccleugh, General Scott of Malleny, Lord Cullén and Principal Baird of Edinburgh University being some of the more prominent but the list of subscribers showed a good representation of the law, landowners, businessmen and the clergy. Thomson's poems convey simple descriptions of nature, humour, rustic satire and some carry simple moral messages. The money from this volume enabled Thomson to carry out improvements to his cottage.

The September 1813 edition of The Scots Magazine contains an article on Thomson. A Biographical Sketch of Thomson, the Poet of Kenleith, with a description of his celebrated Parnassus. It describes Thomson ; "simple and unaffected in his manner, yet fraught with all that is respectable in the composition of a worthy, honest and industrious mind. Born to no inheritance but poverty, even in that state he has found the means of making himself respected and esteemed."

What did Thomson look like? There is a pictorial representation in the front of the first edition of his poems but Thomson gives us a poetical description in the year 1796, part of which is.

"My claise are a' to tatters worn,  
An' soles frae upper-leathers torn;  
Ilk day I think that I' the morn  
I'll better fare;  
Yet still the skaith comes wi' the scorn,  
An' O 'tis sair"

In 1881 Robert Langwill interviewed a contemporary of Thomson, Old Sandy Ritchie from Newmills he described Thomson as follows:

"He had lang hair hinging doon ower his shouthers. He used tae gang about wi' a lang stick wi a man on the heid o't and a pair of hawks on his right arm. He was a weaver sin'a kent him. He just daundered about his boo'r playing on the fiddle tae the gentry that cam about him."

Thomson had, following the publication of his poems, become a bit of a celebrity and there is a report in the Caledonian Mercury of 14 September 1815 of a great gathering of friends visiting him to celebrate his birthday. Indeed the next year we find an advert being placed in the same paper by Thomson, with accompanying poem, inviting friends to join him to celebrate his birthday on the 10<sup>th</sup> September.

General Thomas Scott of Malleny visited Thomson one day and noticed the verse he had inscribed on the wooden beam of his loom.

A simple weaver at his loom,  
Wi' duddt coat and pooches toom,  
May hae as guid and honest heart  
As ony laird in a' the pert.

The General was so amused he had that that section of the beam removed to be hung in his hall. General Scott then offered Thomson the post of supervisor on Malleny Estate and was given the tenancy of his cottage, at a nominal rent, together with a few acres of ground for so long as he, or any of his family, resided there. General Scott by this simple act rescued Thomson from the precarious existence of a country weaver and gave him a steady position. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Thomson dedicated the second Edition of his poems (1819) to his benefactor Lieut. General Scott in recognition of "kindness which he can never forget or repay". Indeed one of the poems in the second edition was;

"Rules to be observed by those who hunt or course on the property of General Thomas Scott of Malleny. ( 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1818).

(1) That nane presume, except your tikes,  
To loup the hedges or the dykes;  
When mounted on a yead or aiver,  
To champ the wheat or fields of claver.

There are seven verses of "rules" to be observed.

There was, however, a dark side to life which Thomson refers to in a note to the readers of this second edition – "my family consisted of eight children – seven daughters, and a son named James, who I had fondly hoped, would not only be the support of his parents in the decline of life, but also prove the guardian of to his sisters when my head should be under the clod," "for he reached his fifteenth year when I had to record his death". James had been thrown from a horse at Bavelaw and fatally injured. He died on 4<sup>th</sup> October

1806. But fate was not finished with Thomson, shortly after James' death one of his daughters, aged 14, took ill and was confined to bed for three years. This presumably was Elen. On her recovery Thomson's wife Elisabeth "was deprived of the power of her right side, by a stroke of the palsy, which would have left her debilitated for a number of years. Elisabeth died on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1829.

Thomson's fame was such that a visitors book covering the period 1817 – 1926 records some 1500 people visiting him at his cottage. They came to pay homage, to listen to his recitations and music and to enjoy his hospitality of oatcakes and whisky. He was a man of sober habits himself but free with his hospitality to guests. The Kent Club (a kent is a shepherd's crook) "a select company of ladies and gentlemen from Currie and Colinton" visited him every year on his birthday. They marched from Currie up the Poet's Glen headed by a piper. In the glen behind his cottage was Jamie Thomson's Helicon, a spring of crystal clear water which was also known as Jamie's Well. It was marked by Thomson by a stone carved with a few lines of verse. Visitors thronged to visit this and also the bower, which was a short way up the glen. The bower was a rustic construction containing a long stone bench and also a stone embedded in the base of an overhanging tree, on which the poet had carved a verse. Thomson referred to the bower as his "shed" and it was to this that he escaped after the toils of the day to sit, to wander the glen, to drink from the spring, consort with the muse and construct his poems. There is a report in the Caledonian Mercury of 22 May 1815 of a party of Freemasons visiting Thomson and presenting him with an elegant stone table on which was carved a some verses of his poetry.

James Thomson died at home at Kenleith Cottage, Mount Parnassus, on 7 July 1832 aged 68. "During a protracted illness of several years, he endured his suffering with Christian resignation". In his final years he was looked after by his daughter Ferguson. She had married Archibald Finnie on 27 Nov 1830, at Midcalder. In Thomson's declining years when he was no longer able to leave his cottage General Scott allowed Archie Finnie, Thomson's son-in-law to carry out his gamekeeping duties on his behalf thus affording Thomson comfort in his final years. General Scott had also allowed Thomson to have the lease of the cottage at a nominal rent, together with an annual salary as gamekeeper, and the lease of the cottage continued so long as any relatives of Thomson resided therein. Indeed the 1841 and 1851 census' show Archibald and Ferguson Finnie, and their growing family still residing at Kenleith Cottage. According to Mrs Hislop, Thomson's granddaughter, Finnie served for 25 years as gamekeeper on Malleny Estate.

There was a fear of body snatching and Robert Langwill wrote of an interview he had with Mrs Hislop, in 1892 where she spoke of an attempt to snatch Thomson's body from Mount Parnassus whilst it was lying prior to burial and how the grave was watched for a number of nights after burial to thwart any attempts at removal of the corpse. One of Thomson's well known poems "On raising and selling the dead", sold as a pamphlet for 6d, relates the real life tale of how two grave robbers were halted and arrested by Currie folk and their cargo, corpses stolen from Lanark graveyard, returned to their home turf. Thomson was witness to this event and penned "On Raising and Selling the Dead" in 1821.

James Thomson was buried in Currie graveyard. Old Sandy Ritchie, in 1881 pointed out to Robert Langwill "the grave whaur Thomson's buried". On the north side of the ruined church, a small corner stone marked "T" showing the approximate spot.

Thomson received occasional gifts during his lifetime which he responded to in verse. A silver-mounted staff from a friend, a vest from the daughter of a lord, and from the "Gentlemen of the Fagakinyrigh Club a Boll of Oatmeal". On his death some relics of his life remained; a portrait by Archibald Clelland of the Dean presented to Thomson by the artist in 1816, a snuff box, a punch bowl, and the visitors book (1816-1827). These were in the possession of the Poet's great-grandson Mr James Thomson Finnie. Unfortunately over the passage of time the Society have lost contact with the remaining relatives of Thomson, and whether these items are still together, or still exist we know not.

As I mention earlier the three cottages at Mount Parnassus were purchased in 2003 and over the next few years were renovated and brought back to life as a family home, with the Mount Parnassus lintel still above the door. Some of the old photos of the Poet's Glen held in the Society archives show a much cleaner Glen with late Victorian/Early Edwardian visitors sitting on stone benches or partaking of the waters. The moss grown Poet's Stone marking Jamie Tamsen's Helicon is still in the Poet's Glen but if the stone benches and other "furniture" is still there then they is well hidden in the undergrowth. If visiting the inner Glen these days I suggest wellies or stout boots. "The Poet's Glen" path from Blinkbonny road up to East Kinleith Farm is a well-used walking route.

#### Inscription by Thomson on Poet's Stone

My water's refreshing and perhaps may inspire  
The enraptured mind with poetical fire.  
I'm as wholesome and free to all who here passes  
As the Fount from the side of the Grecian Parnassus  
Jamie Tamsen's Helicon.

James Thomson, The Kenleith Poet was buried in Currie Kirkyard. Acknowledging how popular he had been only five years previously when, from the visitors book, we know that he had been visited and feted. When we consider that he was a published poet, a local celebrity, "the most useful man in the Parish", why was there no memorial or gravestone. He made a little money from his poetry, but as we have heard the little money from the first volume went towards "doing up" his cottage. Whatever extra money that came his way would have gone towards raising his large family. What saved Thomson from the "hand-to-mouth" existence of a country weaver was the benevolence and generosity of General Scott of Malleny. Thomson appears to have gone to his rest, like many of his contemporaries of similar station, in an unmarked grave. He was saved from a life of relative poverty by General Scott, to whom he remained grateful, and in his final years was looked after by a caring daughter under the kindness and patronage of his Laird.

The popularity of the Glen continued for a century or more after James Thomson's death helped, no doubt, by the appearance of a third edition of his poems in 1894 (edited by Robert B Langwill) although the review in The Scots Magazine questioned why these poems had been reprinted, "why drag his verses from obscurity 60 years after his death", although they felt that some poems and Langwill's notes "gave curious glimpses into the past". And here we are today, 183 years after the death of James Thomson, the Kenleith Poet still talking about him. Thomson's Poems in the Scottish Dialect has recently been republished by the British Library, a copy of which is now held in the Society library, as is an original (1801) first edition so we can all read Thomson's words. Revel in the Discourse of Mary Shanks a supposed witch to her daughter; on Willie Weir's Legacy; local places are mentioned, Ravelrig, Malleny; and people, great and small; Mary Shanks was also a real person – but was she a witch? He laments the death of Marion Cunningham, landlady of the ale house at Currie-Brig End, but then follows it up with a Postscript announcing a new landlady, also called Marion; "She is a widow young and fair, Four barnies sma' employ her care" – so all is right with the world.

Douglas N Lowe



JAMES THOMSON.

# **CURRIE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**

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