

James Thomson (1824 – 1887) and Agnes Carruthers (1827 – 1910)

1. The Earl's Coachman – Dalmeny House. July 1859

It was a fine day in late July when a boy brought a message to the Stables at Dalmeny. A carriage was to be brought round to the front of the house immediately. All of a sudden the careful routine was interrupted. Horses were led from stalls and harnesses removed from the tack room. Men and boys ran hither and thither. Within fifteen minutes, a smallish carriage was crunching its way across the gravel to the front door of Dalmeny House.

On the seat of the carriage sat James Thomson. He was dressed in a blue jacket with white breeches and black boots. A long whip hung over a matched pair of bay horses. The carriage itself was painted gold as far as the bottom of the windows and then black above. A small coat of arms was painted on the doors. At the rear of the carriage stood one of the footmen, also dressed in blue, on a small running board, and as the carriage came to rest he leapt off and hurried to open the door. Down from the door of the great house came Archibald Primrose, fourth Earl of Rosebery. He was seventy-five years old, but still active. His wife, Anne watched from the door as he addressed the coachman.

“Right Thomson. Kindly take me to Waverley Station. We need to meet the London train at half past three.”

“Yes m’lord. A brisk pace should see us there in good time.” If he spoke with a soft Dumfriesshire accent, it was confidently said. He was used to the old Earl by now, and knew that he would make the centre of Edinburgh in good time.

They set off at a reasonable pace for the Chapel Gate and then by the Queensferry Road for Edinburgh. There was a pleasant country drive for five miles or more, before they crossed the Water of Leith at the Dean Village. Then they made their way up the brae and into the New Town; that splendid Georgian city of stone terraces. The Earl’s coach weaved through the city traffic as it entered Princes Street, but was still making good progress.

The coachman leaned back and opened a small hatch in the roof of the carriage.

“Excuse me m’lord. You would be wanting the North British Station?”

“Exactly Thomson, we are collecting Lord Dalmeny and his tutor from the station.”

“Very good, m’lord.”

Expertly Thomson brought the carriage to a halt by the side entrance of the railway station in Market Street, and Lord Rosebery, followed by his footman, proceeded into the depths of the station with its sounds of engines and sulphurous smell. Twenty minutes later, the old Earl reappeared with a young boy and a diffident tutor by his side. At the rear, the footman assisted by two porters carried several trunks on their shoulders. These were carefully stored at the rear of the carriage, and the footman

joined Thomson on the driver's box at the front. Quickly the carriage re-joined the traffic of Princes Street.

The footman leant over to Thomson.

“Well, Jimmy, I thought we might have had all four of the bairns up this year. Seems the Duchess is keeping a close grip on her family.”

“Mebbe so, but who can blame her. Still the earl will be pleased to see the laddie. And we've been preparing some good horses for him to try out. The boy needs to get to know his folk, and I hear that he's a decent rider, which is a good start. Looks like he's not to run entirely wild though this summer. No doubt that long nebbed streak of misery will be setting regular lessons for the boy. I hope they give him some time to himself.”

“My Mary was saying that you're about to be a father again, Jimmy?”

“Aye, that'll be our sixth. Could do with another lassie to balance things up a bit.”

And with that, the carriage swung onto Queensferry Street, and the run for Dalmeny and home.

Notes.

1. Dalmeny House in 1859 was one of the most modern mansions in Scotland. It was completed in 1817, in the Tudor Gothic style by William Wilkins, a friend of the fourth Earl at Cambridge. It stands unaltered today in a pleasant setting looking eastwards down the Firth of Forth, to the west of Edinburgh.
2. The Rosebery family acquired the Dalmeny Estate in 1662 as a result of their steadfast support for the Stuarts in the Civil Wars. The estate had originally been centred on Barnbogle Castle by the Firth, and had been owned by the Mowbray family. The first Earl had fought for the Imperial Army in Hungary against the Turks, and later became a loyal fixture at the Court of Queen Anne. He was created Earl in the coronation honours list of the queen, in 1703.
3. The fourth Earl (1783-1868) divorced his first wife in 1815, after a scandal, which involved his brother in law. His second wife was Anne Anson and she died in 1882.
4. His heir was Archibald, Lord Dalmeny, but he died relatively young in 1851, leaving two sons and two daughters by his wife, Catherine Stanhope who later married the Duke of Cleveland.
5. The oldest boy was Archibald, who was born in 1847. He was Lord Dalmeny in 1859. He became the fifth Earl in 1868, and was prime minister in 1894-95. He was a brilliant scholar, historian and public speaker as well as being a very successful racehorse owner and sportsman. Archibald married a Rothschild heiress. He died in 1929, and was the last great Whig grandee to rule Britain.
6. James Thomson was born in 1824, and was the son of a shoemaker and grocer from Torthorwald in Dumfriesshire. He moved to Dalmeny from Dumfriesshire around 1854, and was the Earl's coachman until about 1865

when he moved to St Andrews to be an ostler and coachman. Around 1880, he returned to Edinburgh where he was a cab driver.

7. James married Agnes (Nancy) Carruthers in Dumfriesshire in 1849, and had Margaret in 1850. There then followed William, Adam, Robert and James. On March 5 1860, Agnes gave birth to David Thomson at Turnhouse on the Dalmeny Estate. Turnhouse is now Edinburgh airport.
8. In the 1840s, three railway stations were established in the same Waverley complex. They served the North British Railway (trains to England), the Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee Railway (trains to Granton Ferry, and the north), and the Edinburgh and Glasgow railway for trains to the west. The name Waverley, after Scott's novels, was applied to all three from 1854. The present station dates from 1868, after the North British Railway absorbed the other two. Today the site covers 25 acres with a 13-acre glass roof, and is the second largest station in Britain. The station lies just off Princes Street, in the bed of the old Nor' Loch which was drained in the late 18th century.

Fig 1 Dalmeny House.

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2. The Homecoming – St Andrews, Fife. August 1877.

The town was in festive mood. The ancient street fair of Lammas Market was in full swing. This was a mixture of agricultural market and fun fair for the jute workers of Dundee and the towns-people of St Andrews to enjoy. The sun had shone, and a sea of straw boaters and floral bonnets dominated the lanes and wynds and vennels of the old town. Down at the links, the new industry of golf was making its mark – still mourning the loss of its first hero, Tom Morris junior, at the age of twenty-four. However, there was one man who was not joining in this festive spirit, and if the sun was beginning to sink on a glorious day, then his face was set like granite, and there was no gaiety about him at all. He was dressed in a blue naval jacket with two gold rings round the sleeve, the upper of which shot up the sleeve into an elaborate Austrian knot. He wore white cotton trousers, black polished boots, a soft naval cap, and a collar and tie.

William Thomson was not yet twenty-five but he was a man in a hurry in all senses. Already he had made third engineering officer on a trading steamer. Now he was determinedly following the back of a blazer as it zigg-zagged through the crowds promenading on The Scores. He was following George Leslie, junior, from the Golf Tavern in Golf Place back to his cottage in North Castle Street. Having assured himself of the destination, he broke into an even faster walk, and cut down Murray Park into North Street, with barely a glance at the police station on the other side of the road. The light was now fading into a half-light, the gloaming. Just by St Salvators's Tower he broke into a run, and then turned left into North Castle Street and waited by the end of a wall at the top of the street.

Barely thirty seconds later George Leslie turned the corner from The Scores and out of the fast vanishing daylight and into half darkness. The crowds at this end of The Scores had gone too – all the boarding houses and inns and frivolity was at the west end. Here only the ancient shadow of the Castle glowered.

“Leslie, I've been looking for you. My brothers have told me what you've been up to with Jess. And now I've come back.”

The man in the striped blazer froze, and his face peered into the gloom. His thickly set frame clenched as he replied. “Well, well. I thought you'd be away for longer. America wasn't it. Jess is with me now, and you can have the ring back any.....”

The sentence was never finished. Out of the dark, a fist crashed onto his nose and there was an odd clicking sound. Another fist hit him on the side of the face, and then a third blow found the point of his chin. Leslie's head cracked against the unyielding stone, and down he went. The polished boots went to work on his ribs and then his lower body. Twenty seconds later, Bill Thomson's rage had stilled and he looked at the silent, crumpled body. He bent over the man, who smelled heavily of drink, and

who was not moving. He was unconscious. From the nose, a steady stream of blood flowed, and spattered the fancy blazer. It was time to get away.

Ten minutes later he was back in Guthrie Place, at his parent's home, and his mother was speaking.

"So is he dead. Are you sure? Oh William what's to be done. If only your father was here."

"Better that he's not. It is bad enough that you and David and Janet are here. I'm going back to sea. I'll write when I get somewhere safe. It will have to be a long way though. Somewhere where cables don't go yet. Maybe Australia or New Zealand."

"William, here is all the money in the house. Get away quickly before some one finds him. But the last train will have gone. Take David's bicycle. If you get a move on, you'll make the London train at Leuchars junction."

Then with a few more hurried words, the party headed for the door and the bottom of the close, where David's far from modern bicycle stood.

It was about 10 o'clock the next morning when Constable Pirie of St Andrew's Burgh Police knocked at the Guthrie Place door.

"Is your Bill back from the sea, Agnes?"

"If it's about last night, then he's gone again. There was some trouble with Geordie Leslie over Bill's fiancée. He's broken the engagement."

"Aye, he's broken more than that. Young Leslie is nursing a smashed nose and probably half a dozen broken ribs too. He's getting strapped up at the doctor's surgery just now, and he's saying that it was Bill who did it. Where is he?"

"All I know is that he's gone back to sea, and won't be coming back for a long time. He left in a hurry. What are you going to do?"

"No doubt he is in Glasgow or Liverpool or London, and will be signing on under a false name. Not sure what the Procurator Fiscal will make of this, but it will have to be reported to him. Luckily Leslie seems to be recovering. No doubt I'll be back for a statement."

And with that the constable departed.

Six months later an unsigned note came to the house in Guthrie Place, St Andrews. It was posted from New Zealand.

Notes.

1. St Andrews had a number of taverns, but among the more respectable was the Golf Tavern at 1 Golf Place. In 1861, the inn-keeper was George Leslie.
2. There were also at least three inns in the 1870's which were termed "post-houses" – in other words they kept stables and horses could be hired from them, as well as other horses and carriages being stabled there during a visit to the town. These were the Star Hotel and Cross Keys Hotel, both in Market Street, and the Victoria Hotel in Abbey Street. It is likely that James Thomson was the ostler at one of these hotels. He lived with his family in Guthrie Place.
3. Agnes and James had five sons and three daughters. My great grandfather, David Thomson, was the youngest boy, and he was born in 1860. His four older brothers were born between 1852 and 1858, with William being the oldest.
4. This story is as told to me by my great aunt, Laura Walker nee Thomson, one of David's daughters. This would have been in the 1970's when she was already in her eighties but still very sharp. It could have referred to any of the four older brothers, and I have simply used William as the oldest. We are not sure at this point what happened to any of these sons, but it seems likely that some or all of them emigrated from Scotland. Certainly it was David and his sister Jane, later Jane Robertson, who looked after Agnes in her old age in Leith.
5. The choice of New Zealand was made because they believed that a cable could have been sent to America – the trans-Atlantic cable service began in 1866. It had not however reached Australia or New Zealand at this time. The Americans Cyrus Field and Samuel Morse developed cable messages, and by this time there were a number of cables across the Atlantic, and they were beginning to reach out around the world, but the network was far from complete, especially outside Europe.
6. It is believed that because no address was sent back to Scotland, that Agnes was unable to tell her son that he had not in fact killed the victim of his attack.

Fig 1: Map of St Andrews showing the part of the town encompassing Golf Place, North Street, The Scores and Castle Street.

were “colony” houses, an Edinburgh speciality when it came to good standard artisan dwelling houses and he could be seen standing on the external stairs to an upper flat. It was more Fife fishing village than Georgian New Town in its ambience. People sat outside or stood at the narrow street corners and gossiped in the spring sunshine.

A crowd of two women and five children stood at the door of No1 Elm Place, knocked and entered. They were carrying various food items including a pot of newly made broth. Inside, the elderly women rose from the leather chair by the fireside to greet them.

“It’s awfully good of you Sarah to be making all this broth for us. I could have got out to “the Store” today. I’m sure that I’m well enough to get my own messages.”

Sarah turned to her sister, Martha, and said something in Welsh. They both laughed, and then turning back to the older women she said. “I’m sorry Agnes, it’s just that I’ll never get used to the word messages meaning shopping. Martha thinks that you’re sending her to the post office each time!”

Marta placed the broth on top of a black cooking range and stove, whilst Sarah ushered the children to place various food parcels from the grocers on the table. Only little Douglas carried nothing other than a tennis racket, which he swung dangerously at a fly.

“Right boys; take your younger brother out please.” He looked far from angelic in a sailor suit, and Sarah sensed that he needed the wide spaces of Leith Links to avoid trouble. Edward, in particular, looked less than pleased that at fourteen years he was being put in charge of a boy of three. James looked a little more amenable to a game with a ball and racket.

“Oh and boys, anymore April fools jokes on Douglas, and it won’t just be him that is hitting you. I promise you that.” Sarah was small and slim with dark auburn hair and brown eyes. However, there was no doubting the long look she gave Edward. This was a woman not to be trifled with.

Helen and Laura took this moment to exit their grand mother’s house and return the couple of doors to their own home at No 3 Elm Place. If Helen was the sensible one, then Laura had her mother’s colouring and temper to match. It was a volatile combination.

Sarah turned to Agnes. “Did you fill in the census forms for the man? He was in an awful hurry.”

“Aye, I had them all filled out last night, and checked them with Bill before he went to work.”

“I don’t suppose you gave them your right name?”

“Well, I’ve been Agnes for fifty years, so I’m not changing now. It would just have confused the poor man.” Her rural Dumfriesshire accent was quite different from her daughter in law’s Welsh tones.

“He was in such a hurry, that we hadn’t even time to help in pronouncing Llanidloes. And then he had to spell it twice!” Sarah’s older spinster sister, Martha, was staying with her and her family at No 3.

At No 1, Agnes Thomson was living with two boarders who helped to augment her meagre annuity. These were the widowed Bill Harkness, and his teenage son. The food was being prepared for their tea by this clutch of women, as old Agnes had been rather poorly this past week.

Just then the door opened again and Agnes’s youngest daughter, Jane Robertson, nee Thomson, popped into the room.

“Just picked up the Dr Collis Brown mixture for you at the chemist. This should do the trick. Apparently they use it for horse colic. Father would have been pleased!”

“For goodness sake, horse medicine. There should be laws.....”

Notes

1. The date of the 1901 census was 31 March 1901. Census enumerators were assigned specific areas and delivered schedules, which were to be completed by the Head of each house on that day. The enumerators then called the following day (1 April) and checked the schedules before copying them into their census books. It was then the job of the local Registrar to check both schedules and book, before forwarding on to the Census Office. The books have been retained until this day, but the schedules were then destroyed. It is certain that this enumerator was in a hurry. He failed to record several people as “workers” on this page and incorrectly spelt both Applegarth in Dumfriesshire and Llanidloes in Wales.
2. In 1901, the government was keen to learn who spoke just Gaelic and who spoke both Gaelic and English in Scotland. This would have been a rare entry in Edinburgh, but in the very next street, at 14 Fingzie Place, Police Constable Strath from Old Deer in Aberdeenshire lived with his wife Amelia. She was from Blair Atholl and spoke both Gaelic and English. As it happened both Sarah Thomson and her sister, Martha Jerman, from Mid-Wales, spoke both Welsh and English, but there was no place to record this on a Scottish form (unlike the Welsh variant).
3. Sarah’s sea-going husband David Thomson was shown as at home on that Census return, but in addition her older sister Martha had come to live with her and her five children (Helen, Edward, James, Laura and Douglas), probably to help her whilst her husband was away on lengthy sea voyages. It seems to have been a happy arrangement because Marta never returned to Wales and died in Scotland in 1920 – still living with her sister and family.
4. Agnes Thomson was born Nancy Carruthers in 1827. She appears to have changed her first name to Agnes around 1850, just after her marriage. She lived until 1910 at 1 Elm Place, where she died of old age. She was then eighty-three years old. Her younger daughter, Jane Robertson, who lived at 19 Restalrig Road, which is a matter of a few yards away, recorded her death.

Jane was married to a shipping clerk Tom Robertson. At the present, we do not know what happened to Agnes' four older sons and older daughter Margaret. It appears likely that some or all emigrated. This remains to be researched.

5. In the mid-19th century, Scottish housing reformers sought an alternative to the traditional tenement for the urban working class. They wanted every family to have their own front door on a street, and their own garden. There are seven Edinburgh "Colony" housing communities and they remain popular today. The Leith Links colonies consist of nine short streets built in two story blocks with doors either at ground level or at first floor level, reached via an exterior stair. The houses are just behind East Hermitage Place and are adjacent to Leith Links. They were model houses of the time, being built in 1880, with two, three or four main rooms, and a water closet. The occupants were of the respectable working class, and the Elm Place residents include clerks, Customs officials and a Collector for the gas company. A number of houses had boarders resident, and these were often houses belonging to elderly widows like Agnes Thomson. This was in the period before an old age pension.
6. Collis Brown was a vet. Boots sold the patent medicine for stomach cramps and colic until the 1980's. It contained a goodly shot of morphine. I recall being dosed with it by my grand parents as a boy. It remained my grandfather's medicine of choice until his death in 1983! He was the young Douglas mentioned above, and a Leith photograph of 1901 shows him in a sailor suit with tennis racket.

Fig 1: The census return for Elm Place 1901, showing the households of both Agnes Thomson and her son David Thomson.

The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the [Page 7]

Civil Parish of <i>Leith</i>		Parish Ward of <i>Leith</i>		Ecclesiastical Parish of <i>South Leith</i>		Queen's Ward of <i>Leith</i>		School Board District of <i>Leith</i>		Parliamentary Borough of <i>Leith</i>		Parliamentary Division of <i>Leith</i>		
Road, Street, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE		NAME and Surname of each Person		RELATION to Head of Family	SEX	AGE (last birthday)	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION	Married, Widowed, or on Sick Account	If Working at Home	WHERE BORN	Qualif. as to Education	Number of Windows in House	Number of Rooms in House	
28	14 <i>Truggie Place</i>	1	<i>James Meath</i>	Head	Mar	40	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>			2	
			<i>Angela Meath</i>	Wife	Mar	38				<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>Charles McThom</i>	Boys	S	12	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
39	1 <i>Blair Place</i>	1	<i>James Thomson</i>	Head	Mar	40	<i>Accountant</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>			2	
			<i>William Thomson</i>	Boys	S	12	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>William Thomson</i>	Boys	S	10	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
40		1	<i>George James</i>	Head	Mar	40	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>			4	
			<i>Joseph</i>	Boys	S	12	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>Marion</i>	Boys	S	10	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
41	2 <i>Blair</i>	1	<i>William Thomson</i>	Head	Mar	40	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>			3	
			<i>James</i>	Boys	S	12	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>John</i>	Boys	S	10	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>Edward</i>	Boys	S	8	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>James</i>	Boys	S	6	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>John</i>	Boys	S	4	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>Edward</i>	Boys	S	2	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>William</i>	Boys	S	1	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
42	3 <i>Blair</i>	1	<i>James Thomson</i>	Head	Mar	40	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>			3	
			<i>John</i>	Boys	S	12	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>George</i>	Boys	S	10	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>James</i>	Boys	S	8	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>John</i>	Boys	S	6	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>Edward</i>	Boys	S	4	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
			<i>William</i>	Boys	S	2	<i>Police Constable</i>			<i>Highland, Perthshire</i>				
5	Total of Houses..	5											11	
												Total of Males and Females..	11	11

Note.—Draw the pen through each of the words of the headings as are inappropriate.

Fig 2: The family of James Thomson.

Descendants of James Thomson

