

# Samuel Smith Thomson (1778–1849)

President of the Belfast Medical Society

1806–07 and 1807–08

MEMOIR OF THE LATE SAMUEL SMITH THOMSON,  
OF BELFAST<sup>1</sup>

By ROBERT STEWART, M.D.<sup>2</sup>

Samuel Smith Thomson, whose name is so interwoven with all that is “true and honest and just and lovely and of good report” that it will not easily be forgotten in the town and neighbourhood of his adoption, was born in Coleraine in May, 1778, and died on the 30th April, 1849. The immediate cause of his death was bronchitis, to attacks of which he had been subject for a number of years, but which were always easily removed, until the last, which, notwithstanding the most prompt and energetic treatment, could not be controlled, congestion of the lungs supervening, and a fatal issue being the result on the fifth day from the period of the attack, immediately before which the deceased had been in the full enjoyment of his usual excellent health and spirits.

Doctor Thomson was of the middle stature, and of a full habit of body, but remarkably active in all his movements. He had a more than ordinarily well-developed cerebral organisation, a quick, penetrating, intelligent eye, florid complexion, and a remarkably kind and benevolent expression of countenance; of great affability and suavity of manner; in truth, the finished and polished gentleman, incapable of giving offence, and if offended most readily and easily appeased.

His conversational powers were at once varied and of the highest and most agreeable order; his tastes pure and refined; a great, indeed it might be said an enthusiastic lover of music, vocal and instru-



mental. He was an excellent performer on the violin, having an admirable ear, and regularly enacted his part at the concerts of the Belfast Anacreontic Society, of which he was the founder and president. The Music Hall of Belfast, a very conspicuous and ornamental building in one of the leading private streets of the town, was erected chiefly through his great and influential exertions.

His father was James Thomson, a highly respectable surgeon and eminent practitioner in Coleraine, Co. Derry, a man who was naturally gifted with a mind of great power, which was both well cultivated and well balanced. He had ten children, two sons and eight daughters, Samuel Smith being the youngest of the whole family. The eldest child, an unmarried daughter, lived to the advanced age of 88 years, having died about six months since in Belfast, retaining all her faculties perfect to the last.

The early education of Doctor Thomson was conducted by his father, and finished under the roof of a Presbyterian minister with whom he resided as a member of the family. His medical studies

<sup>1</sup> *Ulster Medical Journal* 1963, v32, p3.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Robert Stewart was Resident Medical Superintendent of the Belfast District Hospital for the Insane from 1835 until 1875. He presumably wrote this memoir soon after the death of Dr. S. S. Thomson in 1849. Dr. Thomson was on the staff of the Belfast General Hospital (now The Royal Victoria Hospital), and was a visiting physician at the Hospital for the Insane (which occupied the site on which the Musgrave and Clark Clinic now stands). He was also in 1806 the first President of the Belfast Medical Society (now the Ulster Medical Society), for several years Chairman of the Belfast and County Antrim Branch of the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund Society of Ireland, and a founder and performing member of the Anacreontic Society (now the Belfast Philharmonic Society). (Professor R. A. McCance, F.R.S., is a great-great-nephew of Dr. Thomson.) The memoir was apparently designed not for publication but for private circulation, and recently the Professor's brother, Mr. Henry B. McCance, lent it to Dr. Robert Marshall, and gave permission for its publication in the Journal.

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commenced by his being bound apprentice to his father. In due course he went to Edinburgh, attending regularly at that celebrated university until he had completed his curriculum, when he immediately went in for his examination, obtaining his degree of M.D. in 1800. Shortly after this he came to Belfast to settle as a private practitioner, where, after remaining for a few years, he went to Magherafelt, in the County of Derry; but soon leaving it, he returned to Belfast in 1805, which he never afterwards left, thus being nearly half a century actively engaged as a practising physician amongst its inhabitants.

He was greatly interested in the establishment of the Belfast Fever Hospital, now entitled the General Hospital. In 1817, when typhus fever broke out so malignantly and spread so fearfully and fatally, he was night and day in attendance on the suffering poor, not thinking at all of self or personal risks, but heroically combating with the dire pestilence which was decimating the land; and this so successfully, with such unremitting, such superhuman efforts in fact, that when the epidemic had ceased, his fellow-citizens presented him with a most complimentary address, accompanied by a splendid service of plate.

During a period of five-and-twenty years, Doctor Thomson continued one of the attending physicians of the above hospital, when, owing to his extensive private engagements arising from a rapidly increasing practice, he retired with honours not less numerous than deserved. He still, however, remained in official connexion with it as one of the consulting physicians, the duties of which he performed until his death, always taking a warm and lively interest in everything that concerned its welfare and good working, and of which the most ample proof was given by his leaving it a legacy of £100, and this too not more than a couple of hours preceding his dissolution, thus showing how vividly its prosperity was on his mind, and how clear, collected, and benevolent the intellect of this highly-gifted and distinguished man was to the very last moment of his honourable and exemplary existence.

At the first meeting of the Committee of the Hospital after his death the following resolution was passed: —

“That this Committee have heard with the deepest regret the melancholy intelligence of the death of Doctor S. S. Thomson, Consulting Physician to the Hospital, one of the earliest and most efficient

promoters of this charity, to whose interests he so long and so ably devoted the best years of his professional life.

As a slight but sincere tribute of respect for his memory, this Committee beg to express, in the most especial manner, their unfeigned sorrow at his sudden removal, and tender their cordial sympathy and condolence to his sorrowing relatives.

“(Signed) Andrew Mulholland,  
*Chairman*”

The only other public medical institution with which Doctor Thomson was professionally connected was the Belfast District Lunatic Asylum, to which he was appointed the visiting physician in 1837, in succession to the late Doctor James McDonnell, who retired from this office owing to the infirmities attendant upon his then very advanced age. This appointment he held until his death, and in what manner the annexed official document, as published in the local newspapers, will show sufficiently.

“At a meeting of the Governors of the Belfast District Lunatic Asylum, held on Monday, the 7th of May, 1849, the Right Reverend Bishop Denvir in the chair, it was unanimously resolved: “That this Board, deeply lamenting the sudden removal of their late visiting physician, Doctor Samuel Smith Thomson, deem it their duty to record their cordial esteem for his most estimable character as a man, their due appreciation of his distinguished attainments as a medical practitioner, and, above all, their grateful remembrance of his eminently judicious, humane, faithful, and efficient services during the last twelve years as the visiting medical officer of this asylum.’”

Before proceeding further with this brief memoir of Doctor Thomson, the relation in which he stood and the conduct he invariably pursued towards his professional brethren must be alluded to. And here it may be truly stated that we come to one of the brightest and purest gems in his character, for if ever there was an upright man, acting with the fullest integrity and singleness of heart and purpose, and uninfluenced by the mean and petty jealousies which unhappily are so rife amongst professional men, that man was Doctor Thomson. His family motto, significantly enough, was “Honesty is the best policy,” a motto which he handed down to his relations, not merely unsullied, but rendered all the purer, and made to shine forth in still more refulgent colours by

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his noble manner of life, which was pre-eminently that of the “noblest work of God”—an honest man.

From a very early period in his professional life he stood forth the resolute, vigorous, and uncompromising champion of the rights and privileges, the honour and station, of his brethren. He invariably espoused the cause of the juniors in particular, having never ceased to preach that the medical labourer was worthy of his hire; and he ultimately succeeded, after many years of local battling and no small animosity and facetious opposition, in having the principle carried that the medical attendants of the General Dispensary in Belfast should be paid regular and fixed salaries. This principle is now fully recognised in Belfast, thanks to Doctor Thomson’s exertions for its accomplishment. For his able and distinguished advocacy of his brethren at all times, and his exalted professional conduct generally towards them, he was presented in 1834 with a massive and splendid gold snuff-box,<sup>1</sup> on which were engraved the names of the donors, thirty-six in number, of all branches of the profession; a gift which the lamented deceased prized, as it may be supposed, in no small degree. Having lately been referring to Doctor Cheyne’s very interesting “Autobiographical Sketch,” we were forcibly struck with the following extract, as very applicable in many respects to Doctor Thomson: —

“I endeavoured to become acquainted with the characters of those who moved in the highest ranks in the profession, and to discover the causes of their success; and I ascertained that although a man might

acquire popularity by various means, he could not reckon upon preserving public favour unless he possessed the respect of his own profession: that if he would effectually guard his own interests, he must in the first place attend to the interests of others; hence I was led carefully to study and liberally to construe that part of medical ethics which regulates the conduct of physicians towards each other.”—Essays by John Cheyne, M.D., page 8.

The high opinion held of the late Doctor Cheyne by every branch of the medical profession in Dublin is perfectly within our own recollection and observation; one and all of them, junior as well as senior, respected, nay, loved him, knowing that he was a man in whom the most implicit confidence could be placed at all times and under all circumstances. Such a man, also, was the late Doctor Thomson; the members of his profession, from the oldest to the youngest, almost venerating him for his exalted virtues and strict integrity, as shown in all his intercourse with them, to say nothing of the high estimation in which they held his professional talents and other varied and ennobling requirements. This confidence in and opinion of Doctor Thomson was never lost sight of by his brethren—sons, rather, we should say, for he had been for years past, with one consent, the father of the profession in Belfast, and as such his death was felt by the whole profession, who, without an exception, attended his unprecedentedly crowded funeral, walking in the procession as mourners. And in order further to prove their great love and esteem for him, and as only a fitting mark of respect for his memory and desire to perpetuate it, they, in their capacity as the Medical Society, have resolved that a marble bust of their “beloved and esteemed” chief shall be placed in their library, or in the hall of the General Hospital. And further, have placed on record their deep regret for his removal from amongst them by passing the following resolution at their meeting on the 7th May, 1849: —

“That this Society begs to record its deep sorrow in the lamented decease of Doctor Samuel Smith Thomson, one of its oldest members, a gentleman at the time of his death holding the distinguished position of head of the medical body here, a place to which he was most justly entitled, not only from his sincerity, but also from his skill, worth and integrity, and kindness and urbanity to his juniors; and especially from his untiring zeal for, and the

<sup>1</sup> The snuff-box was of 18 ct. gold, engraved with his crest and with the names of the donors:

William Aicken	Daniel Murray
Samuel Arrtot	James Murray
J. W. Bryson, M.D.	Robert McCluney
Samuel Bryson	James McCleery
William Burden, M.D.	Henry McCormac, M.D.
Robert Coffey, M.D.	Robert McGee, M.D.
James L. Drummond, M.D.	John E. Ridley, M.D.
William Duncan, M.D.	William McGee, M.D.
Henry Forcade, M.D.	Robert McKibben, M.D.
John Grattan	John McMechan, M.D.
William Johnston, M.D.	Henry Purdon, M.D.
Patrick Lynch	John Quin
Thomas MacLincoln	William Quin
Andrew Marshall, M.D.	Robert Stephenson, M.D.
J. D. Marshall, M.D.	Thomas Thompson, M.D.
Thomas Mawhinney	John Wales
James Montgomery	James Wallace
David Moore	Thomas Wilson

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unswerving firmness with which he ever upheld the honour and interests of the profession, and that a letter signed by the Chairman and Secretary be written to his relations, expressive of these sentiments, and respectfully offering the condolence and sympathy of this Society on their melancholy bereavement.”

The deceased was very liberal in his charities; his purse-strings were never closed against want or distress in any form, but freely opened to afford relief. The branch of the Medical Benevolent Fund Society established in Belfast in 1843 he supported from the first, and was unanimously elected its perpetual President.

The Belfast Branch of the Medical Benevolent Fund Society of Ireland, at a quarterly meeting held in the Library Room of the Medical Society, on Monday, 7th May, 1849—Robert Stephenson, Esq., M.D., in the chair—resolved unanimously that it is with feelings of the most unfeigned regret we have heard of the death of our late highly-esteemed and respected President, Dr. S. S. Thomson, whose unceasing and disinterested attention to the welfare of the Society since its foundation in 1843 added so justly to the lustre of his character for benevolence, and true sympathy for the wants of others, and now demands from us the expression of our greatest sorrow and concern for the heavy loss which we have sustained by his sudden removal.

No practitioner could have been more liberal in giving the benefit of his professional services gratuitously to those whose circumstances were limited; perhaps, indeed, he went to the extreme of liberality in this respect, his benevolence thus being unbounded, and meted out, too, in such a manner as to do away with all embarrassment on the part of the recipients thereof. All praise was due for this, and he received his reward by enjoying a highly lucrative practice for a number of years; in fact, latterly he was compelled to limit considerably his professional engagements, so extensive had they become, and only to attend in consultation, except in the case of patients with whom he had been since the days of their youth connected, not merely as medical adviser, but as a counsellor and friend.

Dr. Thomson never published any contributions to medical literature that we are aware of; not but that he had both material and ability to do so in the best and most attractive garb if he had pleased, for

not only professionally was Dr. Thomson thoroughly educated and experienced, but he was also an accomplished scholar, with a mind well stored with classical and general knowledge; he, however, had not the inclination, or rather his modesty prevented him, having not alone an utter aversion to appear in print, but to write anything more in ordinary than he could well avoid.

In politics Dr. Thomson was a Whig, but never appeared in public as a politician, thus evidencing that plain common-sense wisdom with which he was so largely gifted.

Having now touched, however imperfectly, on some of the chief phases in the remarkably even tenor of a lengthened existence such as Dr. Thomson's, it only remains to observe that it was in the family circle, amongst his own immediate relations and intimate friends, that he especially appeared in his true character of kindness and beneficence.

Though Dr. Thomson never married, yet from a very early period he took upon himself all the responsibilities and engagements of a parent by adopting two nephews, the sons of a deceased sister, both of whom (one being married and having a large family) continued to reside with him till death separated a tie which was made all the more precious and dear from its long and unbroken continuance of unmixed happiness.

The deceased was a truly religious man, a diligent and earnest student of his Bible, and most exemplary as a regular attendant on all the ordinances of public worship. He ever abhorred whatever tended in the most remote degree to put a slight on things sacred, and not less so did he detest hypocrisy in any shape. Living the life he did, he met death with the utmost resignation and composure. Its certain approach he plainly foresaw, having it fully impressed on his mind that he could not recover, owing to the severity of the attack which, in the Providence of God, he had been so suddenly and fatally seized. Speaking on the subject to a dear friend two days before he died, he observed, “I have been long prepared for this, and my trust is entirely on the merits of my Redeemer.”

To the last moment he continued perfectly conscious and collected, and within a few hours of his dissolution he, whilst his medical friends were visiting him, recounted over the whole treatment which had been pursued, observing at the same time that but for

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the distress which he suffered in speaking, he felt as fully competent as at any period of his life to discuss any professional question.

But we must draw this memoir to a close, and in doing so we cannot conclude it better than by quoting the following extract from the feeling letter of the Chairman (S. Brown, Esq., R.N.) and the Secretary (A. E. Lamont, Esq., F.R.C.S.I.) of the Belfast Medical Society in officially communicating with the family of the deceased the resolution of that body on the occasion of the death of their honoured and much deplored relative:—

“In conveying to you the resolution, we feel that we but feebly express the united sentiments of the medical body here, when we say that in the demise of Dr. Thomson not only has the profession sustained an irreparable loss, but the entire community have reason to deplore the removal of one who was an ornament to society, kind, gentle, and unassuming, charitable from innate feelings of benevolence, and generous without ostentation. Long shall the many families of which he was the respected friend and trusted counsellor—long shall the various public bodies with which he was connected, and in which he was so highly esteemed, remember Dr. Thomson.”

We may here mention that this Society has received a valuable addition to their library through the liberality of Dr. Thomson’s executors, as the following letter will show: —

Belfast,  
15th September, 1849.

Dear Sir,

At the late monthly meeting of the Belfast Medical Society I was directed to acknowledge the receipt of your most liberal and valuable present of books (above 800 volumes), being the medical portion of the late Dr. Thomson’s library, and to thank you most sincerely for the kind consideration and generous feeling which prompted you to put in possession of the Society so valuable and appropriate a memorial of one whom every member of it revered as a parent and valued as a friend.

Accept, therefore, dear Sir, the thanks of the Society cordially and gratefully tendered, and believe me,

Yours most faithfully,  
A. E. Lamont, F.R.C.S.I.,  
Secretary.

To James Bristow, Esq., Belfast.