

# SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

## CHAPTER XI

### SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS IN ENGLAND

#### PART ONE: MALLET - THOMSON

THROUGHOUT the century there was a continual stream of Scotsmen passing to London in search of fortunes which they found it impossible to win in their own impecunious land. They were found everywhere, in every trade and profession - as merchants, as authors, as physicians, as booksellers, and as pedlars. Indeed, so ubiquitous were the last class that they were said to be even found in Poland; and in England they were so common that packmen were called "Scotchmen" by the people. Mrs. Thrale remembered how in her girlhood the children would jump for joy as a pedlar came to the door, and call to their mother, "There's a Scotchman coming! a Scotchman, indeed!" [Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*; Mrs. Piozzi's *Autobiography*, ii. 134.] It was not prudent, however, for a North Briton to flaunt his thistle too openly; it was found sometimes wiser to disguise a name which pronounced his nationality too clearly, which the English could not pronounce at all. As Malloch transformed his surname to Mallet, the translator of the *Lusiad* changed Meikle to Mickle, and the great printer softened Strachan to Strahan. John MacMurray, the half-pay naval lieutenant, when he set up his book-shop in Fleet Street, altered his cognomen to Murray, as John Macmillan, the publisher of Thomson's *Winter*, had curtailed his to Millan. Maccaul, the Duke of Hamilton's valet (who had married the waiting-maid, the famous Dr. Cullen's sister), would never have prospered with his club and fashionable assembly-room if he had not transposed his to Almack. [Kerr's *Life of Smellie*, i. 487. Smiles's *Life of John Murray*, i. p. 16.]

Distaste at the nation culminated when Lord Bute, the Court favourite, blossomed into Prime Minister of England, and, unpopular himself, made his country more unpopular than ever. Verses, pamphlets, lampoons made bitterly merry at the migratory race, who were vilified like Jews in Germany. Smollett, when travelling to Scotland, found "from Doncaster downwards all the windows of

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the inns scrawled with doggerel rhymes in abuse of the Scottish nation.” [Humphrey Clinker. John Wilkes told a friend at table, who was admiring his stewed pigeons, that he had tried to form a fine breed of them by getting them from France and other countries, but they always flew back; but at last he got them from Scotland, and they never returned to their country (Taylor’s *Records of my Life*, ii. 16).] It was considered fine humour for a nobleman to write: “I am certainly the most unfortunate man in the world. Two Scotsmen - the only two, I am persuaded, who are out of office and employment - have plundered the house in Hanover Square. I wish the Administration had provided for them before. If I had been pillaged with the rest of the nation I could have been content, but these private preferences are very unfair.” [Dartmouth Papers.] The well-known taunts of Dr. Johnson were mere commonplaces of humour. [Dr. Sam. Parr’s commination of the Scots is the most complete of all: “I hate Scots dogs; they prowl like lurchers, they fawn like spaniels, they thieve like greyhounds; they’re sad dogs, and they’re mangy into the bargain, and they stink like pugs” (*Autobiography of William Jerdan*, ii. 169).] No abuse, no rebuff, no contumely, however, could deter an enterprising people from going wherever a livelihood could be found. Least of all were lads, stirred by literary ambition, daunted from seeking a living by letters, which none could gain at home. With no capital but youth, courage, and a stimulating poverty, Mallet, Thomson, and Smollett found their way in London. Thither went a host of adventurers - all to woo fortune, too many to wed misfortune, and become needy hacks who starved slowly and wrote desperately.

The wonder is that so many succeeded, for the capital was swarming with men trying to live by their quills and their wits. These scribblers for the press, as Henry Fielding said, “needed no more stock-in-trade than a pen, a little ink, and a small quantity of paper.” They would write omnisciently on anything and impartially against anybody for a few shillings; they would compose travels in countries they never saw, and treatises on arts they never knew, and translate from languages they never learned. They were ready at a moment’s notice with reviews, pamphlets, and satires; no reputation was safe from their fulsome panegyrics or their venomous libels. It was sometimes well to appease them, as one would quiet a cur by flinging it a bone to gnaw. This was the bookseller Lintot’s plan. He would invite them to supper, and feed them on beef and pudding to keep them quiet, if not grateful, lest they should scarify his publications. That able *littérateur* and rascal Gilbert Stuart showed a brother Scot, whom he met at John Murray’s table, a panegyric and a lampoon on the popular idol, Alderman Beckford, both of which he intended to insert in antagonistic newspapers for a guinea a piece. [Dr. Somerville’s *Memoir*, p. 145.]

Men of genius felt the pangs of hunger as well as poor witlings. There were

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Richard Savage, prowling through St. James's Square at night, not able to pay for a lodging; Johnson, in garments which a beggar might wear, for forty-eight hours without bread, and glad to live on fourpence halfpenny a day; Samuel Boyse, remaining in bed in his garret while his only shirt was being washed; Goldsmith, who had paid his way through France by playing his flute, afterwards working in threadbare garments in the back shop of Ralph Griffiths, the bookseller, for board and lodging - the lynx-eyed Mrs. Griffiths watching lest he ate too much and stopped writing too soon. Yet greatly daring young Scotsmen went south to join the inglorious company of writers who had their hard struggles to live, with all the ills that attended their calling:

Debts, threats, and duns,  
Bills, bailiffs, writs, and jails,

The marvel was that so many Scotsmen succeeded so well and got on so quickly.

One of the earliest of Scotsmen to win literary success in England was Dr. John Arbuthnot, the son of an Episcopal minister in Kincardine. Having studied medicine in Aberdeen, he sought a livelihood in London in 1696 - teaching mathematics and administering medicine to earn his bread. His good-luck in being at Epsom, where Prince George of Denmark took ill, led to his becoming the favourite physician of Queen Anne and all the Court. His wit and his learning and his good-nature made him the friend of Swift, Pope, and Gay, and all men of letters, and his Court favour made him the friend of Whig statesmen. He was a scholar in his work on *Ancient Coins*; a humorist in his ridicule of pedants, in the *Memoirs of Martinus Scribilerus*; a satirist in his once famous political squib, *The History of John Bull*; and a scientific writer on diseases and medicine. That easy, sluggish, slouching man was as indifferent to his fame as to his practice; would let his children make kites of his papers; would let his cleverest pieces pass by unclaimed, and let his friends alter his writings as they pleased. "The doctor has more wit than any of us, and his humanity is equal to his wit," said Dean Swift of the man whose death in 1735 was felt as a personal calamity in a brilliant circle of poets and wits.

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Among the many Scotsmen who sought and found fame in London in the

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first half of the century, few were more successful than that little, eager, plump-bodied man, who went by the name of Mallet, but whom Scots friends had known under the less euphonious form of Malloch. He was a familiar figure in literary circles and clubs; in green-rooms, hobnobbing with Quin, deferential to Garrick, and gay with Mesdames Pritchard and Cibber. He was to be seen at Twickenham with Mr. Pope, who would lean his fragile, deformed figure on his arm, on his way to visit James Thomson at Richmond; or in my Lord Bolingbroke's library, obsequiously listening to his talk or assiduously arranging his papers. He had much changed his condition and his manners as well as his name in the course of his career.

David Malloch was born about 1700 at Crieff, where his father had kept an ale-house, [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 24. James Malloch and Beatrix Clark, his wife, were brought before the Crieff Session in 1704 "for profanation of the Lord's Day, by some strangers drinking and fighting in the house on the Sabbath immediately following Michaelmas." In November, they "being rebuked for giving entertainment to such folk on the Sabbath Day, and promising never to do the like, were dismissed."] said some, or been a gardener at Abercairney, say others - for the author was naturally reticent about the period of obscurity when he carried legs of mutton from the village to the mansion. Educated by the assistance of Mr. Ker, a schoolmaster who became master in the Edinburgh High School, and afterwards Professor of Latin in the University, he is found acting as janitor in the High School at a salary of £17 Scots. [Steven's *Hist. of High School of Edin.* p. 89.] Many men long and painfully remembered having been hoisted on little David's back at the teacher's emphatic order "tollatur," in order to be flogged. And years after, when the ex-janitor was pompous and arrogant in London clubs, it would happen that a former sufferer, with a whisper of the mystic word "tollatur," unkindly reminiscent of his days of poverty, would sink him into momentary silence. [Ramsay's *Scot. and Scots.* i. 24.] Worthy Ker looked after the education of this clever lad, who studied at college while he acted as tutor to a gentleman's sons, on the frugal terms of "having clothes and diet, but no fixed salary." He made some local fame by poems in the *Edinburgh Miscellany*, and by the thrilling ballad, on which his slender poetic reputation rests now, "William and Margaret," [With its first verse altered from Beaumont and Fletcher's "Knight of the Burning Pestle":

'Twas at the silent, solemn hour  
When night and morning meet  
In glided Margaret's grimly ghost  
And stood at William's feet.]

which appeared in a dusky broadside, and was sung in the streets before it found a resting-place in Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*.

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Edinburgh afforded no scope for a youth of literary ambition, and certainly no chance of a livelihood. One required to be a laird, a lawyer, or a minister, or, like Ramsay, a wigmaker, before he could write and live. So Malloch departed for London as tutor to the Duke of Montrose's sons, and soon he was rejoined in the metropolis by his friend and class-mate, James Thomson. Before he had been a year in England, he wrote to his old patron, Professor Ker, that "my cousin would have me write my name Mallet, for there is not one Englishman that can pronounce it" [Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (edit. by Cunningham), iii. 365.]; and from that time he was called by the new name, except when the surly critic, John Dennis, dubbed him "Moloch." While he was still a tutor, he wrote verses and reviews; he made high acquaintances; produced in Drury Lane the play *Eurydice* in 1730, which had the enormous run of thirteen nights. He was assiduous in his attentions to Mr. Pope. He won the distinguished friendship of Lord Bolingbroke, and through him was introduced to Frederick, Prince of Wales, to whom he forthwith pandered in his plays and sang melodious and mendacious laudations. We find the ubiquitous man at Oxford in 1736, [There he is entered, on Nov. 1733, as Son of James Mallet, gent., of Perth, aged 28 (Foster's *Alumni Oxon.* iii. 906) - almost as many lies as words. The father's name was not Mallet, his position was not that of a "gent.," and his son was not 28, but about 33. It was impossible for Mallet to be truthful.] where he had matriculated in St. Mary's Hall and taken the degree of M.A. two years before, and in the name of the University reciting with his best accents panegyric verses to His Highness the Prince of Orange, who had the form of a dwarf, the face of a baboon, and the will of a mule. [Hervey's *Memoirs of George II.* i. 239.] Proudly he sits beside Mr. Pope, when in 1739 his own play *Mustapha* is performed, while the Prince of Wales and the Court of Leicester House fill the boxes, and thunders of applause greet every political allusion meant to hit the King and his minister Walpole; and Quin is at his best and most stately as Solyman the Magnificent. Reputation grew year by year. With Thomson, he wrote the masque of *Alfred* in 1740, which with music and scenery was played in the gardens of Cliefden on the Princess Augusta's birthday. Never was he in higher favour than in 1742, when the Prince gave him the snug little berth of Under Secretary, from which he derived a salary of £200 a year for doing nothing. No one now could recognise in the pompous, vain, fat, well-dressed man-about-town, bouncing into the Smyrna Tavern, or at ease in lords' drawing-rooms, the former starving janitor. His manners were easy, his pronunciation was fine; for Johnson, who detested him, owned that he "never caught Mallet in a Scotch accent."

Mallet unfortunately had a genius for doing shabby and shady acts. He was

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“ready for any dirty job,” said Johnson. He first toadied Pope, and then, after betraying him to Lord Bolingbroke, wrote him down a rascal. When his noble patron died and left his papers to his useful follower to edit, he published every wretched scrap to increase his fortune. The oracle of Bolt Court denounced Bolingbroke as a scoundrel for “charging a blunderbuss against religion and morality,” and as a coward “because he had not the resolution to fire it himself, but left half a crown to a beggarly Scotsman to draw the trigger after his death.” Yet it was more than “half a crown” Mallet could have made, for he was offered by Millar the bookseller £3000 - which he was fool enough to refuse. He wrote pamphlets against Admiral Byng which won him a pension of £400 a year; and for the death of that victim to ministerial cowardice Mallet may claim his share of glory or of shame. Nothing was too petty for him to do, to add to his means or widen his fame, down to puffing his own plays. In 1744 Sarah, the famous old Duchess of Marlborough, had left £1000 for the compilation from family papers of a history of the great Duke, whom she henpecked during life and adored after death. She assigned the task to Mallet and Glover, the author of *Leonidas* [Disraeli’s *Calamities and Quarrels of Authors*, 1858, p. 326.] - and as Glover declined the work, the other eagerly took the money, got the documents, and accepted a pension to stimulate his industry. But not one word did he write. For years he pretended to be laboriously engaged on it; each time as he drew his pension throughout twenty years, without a blush he protested he was progressing satisfactorily.

Being anxious to get his play *Elvira* performed, Mallet took a characteristic way to attain his purpose. [Davies’s *Life of Garrick*, ii. 38.] Calling one day on David Garrick, the vainest of mortals, he told him that he was occupied night and day with his great history of the Duke. “But look you, my friend, we have found a pretty snug place in it for you.” “Heh! how’s that? Well, faith, you have the art of surprising friends in the politest manner,” said the delighted manager, who thereupon observed with seeming irrelevance, “Have you left off writing for the stage?” “Well, to tell you the truth,” replied Mallet, in a careless tone; “I have, when I could rob the Duke of an hour, been preparing a play.” Garrick insisted on seeing it, and received *Elvira* with effusion. It was produced at Drury Lane, and he took the part of Don Pedro - the last new part in which he ever appeared. David the player was no match for David the playwright.

So swaggered through London this nefarious fellow, in his favourite suit of black velvet, “the prettiest dressed puppet about town,” - to quote Dr. Johnson again. He was to be found in all companies - literary, political, theatrical, social. His

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plays drew audiences, his poems gained readers, his pamphlets won money. But he was a knave and a liar - a man who wrote down reputations and traduced characters; who patronised small men and fawned on great men; too mighty to answer David Hume's request to correct his *Scotticisms* when he was obscure, but ready to flatter him when he was famous. An ostentatious freethinker, his voice was loud in the coffee-houses, lauding the deists and sneering at Christianity, strutting about town with his dumpy figure "round as a barrel," arrogant and self-important. At his villa at Putney was domesticated with him for a time a young man with a rotund person, an absurd little nose, puffy cheeks, and button-hole of a mouth - this was young Edward Gibbon, [Gibbon's *Autobiography*, Hill's edit. p. 160.] whom his father had considered could best be cured of his popery and believing too much by boarding him with his freethinking neighbours the Mallets, who believed too little. At an assembly one evening, David Hume had his usually serene temper ruffled by Mrs. Mallet addressing him: "Sir, we deists should know each other." "Madam," he answered hotly, "I am no deist. I do not style myself as, nor do I wish to be known by that appellation." [Hardy's *Life of Lord Charlemont*, i. 235.] Consternation, it is said, arose one day when the man-servant ran off with the silver-plate. When caught the fellow impudently told his master that he (Mr. Mallet) was alone to blame for the theft, because his infidel talk had taken away his belief in a future judgment - a disconcerting but not quite convincing explanation. [Davies's *Garrick*, ii. 47.]

The devoted Mrs. Mallet, "a clever talking woman," who set up for a wit, and by whom the little poet got a pretty fortune, believed profoundly in her husband, though not in Christianity. "Was he not the greatest poet of the age?" she protested. Was he not the finest wit about town? Was not everybody speaking of his *Elvira*, his lovely pieces "Amyntor," and "Edwin and Emma"? In rapture she would kiss his podgy hand, saying to the amused company, "I kiss the dear hand that confers immortality." [*Autobiography of Mrs. Piozzi*, ii. 160.] She adorned his circular and abbreviated person in the height of the fashion, choosing his hat, stockings, coat, and breeches. No clothing was richer, no lace finer, no bobwig neater, no cocked hat and "clouded cane" more dapper in the Mall than his. It was quite superfluous, however, of the good lady to inform her friends that all this was supplied by herself out of her own money. [Davies's *Life of Garrick*, ii. 38.] "Was it not annoying," she would complain, "that her Mallet should sometimes be confounded with that man Smollett?" "Ma'am," a friend suggested, "there is a short remedy for that; let your husband keep to his own name." The man lived well, and dressed fashionably, - a prosperous man with pensions and posts, with fame and fortune, - a pleasant man,

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too, with much ability and excellent talk, in spite of his insufferable conceit. When he died on 21st April 1765, literature lost a fourth-rate writer, the country was rid of a considerable knave, and Mrs. Mallet was deprived of a devoted spouse. According to George Steevens he was the only Scotsman of whom none of his countrymen spoke well. [*Lives of the Poets*, iii. 365.] Perhaps the best verdict on his literary character is Johnson's remark to Goldsmith: "Mallet had talents enough to keep his literary reputation alive so long as he lived." He must have had some good qualities, but if he had, they were the only gifts which he was modest enough to hide.

The fame of this "whiffler in poesy" as a contemporary styled him, is now small, though he was a considerable personage in his day. His plays are dead, his verses, which have some merit, are remembered no more, no one sings his once popular "Birks of Invermay," and as for his claims to the authorship of "Rule Britannia," we shall find those too are baseless. [See *post*, p. 291. Of his once famous ballad, "William and Margaret, enshrined in Percy's *Reliques*, a cruel fate tried to rob him. "Poor Mallet," writes his old boarder Gibbon in 1776, "I pity his misfortune and feel for him, probably more than he does for himself at present. His 'William and Margaret' is torn from him by the evidence of old MSS., and turns out to be the work of the celebrated Andrew Marvel, composed in the year 1680" (*Letters*, i. 284). This charge, however, is not true; he has enough to answer for without it.]

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It was in 1725 that a college friend of Mallet's arrived in London, and sought out his countryman. He had travelled by sea in a smack from Leith - his luggage consisting, according to tradition, of a few letters of introduction, a scanty supply of raiment, and some manuscript verses. Arriving at Wapping amid strange scenes and confusing crowds, he found that his letters had been stolen - there was little else to steal. James Thomson had come, one more impecunious Scotsman, seeking a livelihood and fame in the great world of London.

Amid the uplands of Roxburghshire lies the parish of Southdean. In front of the old manse was seen the Cheviots, with the Carter Fell rising in verdant massiveness above them all. By the foot of the garden the Jed murmured in summer and rushed in winter in noisy tumult over the red sandstone rocks. It was a quiet, remote district; bleak in the winter-time when snow covered the hills and moorlands, solitary in warm summertime when the stillness was only broken by the whirr of lapwings and the shriek of curlews in the marshes, and the bleating of



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From the Painting by Aikman in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

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sheep upon the hillsides.

These were the scenes amidst which Thomson's boyhood was spent. To the manse of Southdean Mr. Thomas Thomson had removed in 1706, with his wife and nine children, from the manse of Ednam, where the poet had been born in 1700. Down to Jedburgh the boy would trudge to the Grammar School, which was held in the parish kirk - part of the abbey, dirty, mutilated, disfigured, to make it fit for a place of presbyterian worship. Tradition tells how the reluctant lad was taken to Edinburgh to attend College, riding on the family steed behind the minister's serving-man, and obstinately returned on foot, some fifty miles, before the servant had made his way back.

At the manse there would be few books except on theology, for Mr. Thomson belonged to the revered "Antedeluvians" - those who had lived before the flood of prelacy - and had been bred in the strictest school of dogged Calvinism, saturated besides with the superstitions of the day, credulous of ghosts and witches, "providences" and evil spirits. In the parish, however, there was worthy Mr. Robert Riccaltoun, a preacher of the Gospel, who, while waiting for a kirk, lived on a little, unfertile farm, in a poor thatched house - a man of learning, of keen thinking, of culture, and fine poetic tastes, who had on his scanty shelves some classics and English literature. It was there the boy delighted to go, when college classes were over, for congenial companionship. Already Riccaltoun had written some verses on Winter, which, as Thomson said, contained "some masterly strokes which awakened me," and by the reading of Virgil's *Georgics* his appreciation and observation of nature were fostered. At his leisure he was wont to scribble verses incessantly, but at the end of each year there would be a fire in the manse garden, to which with fine discriminating severity he consigned his immature poetry.

When he was eighteen his father died. The worthy man had been engaged in prayer, exorcising demons from a ghost-haunted mansion in the parish; while in the midst of his fervid exercises he was struck by illness, and died with a mysterious suddenness, for which Satan was very severely blamed. The widow and family now removed to Edinburgh, where two daughters set up the highly "genteel" business of mantua-making, at a time when there were only two of that profession in the city.

When a student at the College, Thomson, like many others, saw with glowing bosom his verses in the glory of print in the *Edinburgh Miscellany*, a humble receptacle for trifles "unconsidered" by the public, though much considered by their authors - one of these productions signed "T," "On a Country Life," containing the germs of his "Winter." [Dr. Somerville's *Memoirs*, p. 130.] In his college days

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he met the young men of letters, who were chiefly nimble versifiers, and saw good company at Newhall, where Forbes, the laird, gathered round him Allan Ramsay, Aikman the artist, and other friends who were lively and literary. [*Gentle Shepherd, with Illustrations of the Scenery*, 1808, i. 88.]

Thomson was studying for the Church - then the goal aimed at by most of the clever lads of Scotland - and his studies were nearly completed, when a slight discouragement in 1724 is said to have changed his whole career. He had to deliver a discourse or exegesis on part of the 119th psalm, and this he did in so rhetorical and florid a manner that Professor Hamilton pronounced it far too poetical to be intelligible for any audience. Was such a rebuff, which every student must expect, not once but a dozen times, from a critical professor, the real reason of his renouncing his intended profession at the beginning of a session? This is doubtful, for after he had been in London some time, he thought of returning to enter the ministry. Whatever the reason was, he did depart, landing at Wapping in 1725, with the usual poor prospects and daring hopes of Scots. David Mallet, then comfortably settled as tutor to the Duke of Montrose's boys near London, and already familiar with the town, would receive him kindly; the recommendation of Lady Grisell Baillie, a remote connection of his mother's, could help him; the Elliot family, who knew his parents well at Southdean, and to whom his cousin was gardener at Minto, could befriend him; and an introduction to the Lord Advocate, Duncan Forbes of Culloden, brought him in contact with the kindest of men. Thomson afterwards found in "Jock" the lord President's son one of his dearest friends. [Carruthers, *Highland Note-book*, p. 67.] It is true he was sadly in need of money, but not so hard pressed as to lack a pair of shoes, according to Dr. Johnson's story. An occupation as tutor to the son of Lord Binning, Lady Grisell's grandson, only five years old, provided him with food and lodging, but no salary.

It was in the summer of 1726 that there issued from the obscure shop of John Millan a poem in pamphlet form, "price one shilling," entitled "Winter." Millan, whose real name was Macmillan, was a young Scotsman, only twenty-two years old, who had just begun business as a bookseller, and in order to please the English taste, or to disguise his nationality, had dropped the betraying prefix of "Mac." A copy of the poem so quietly born was sent by its author to Mr. Riccaltoun, who was now minister of Hobkirk, - sorely burdened by debts he could not pay, with a big family he found it hard to rear, and with many manuscripts he found it impossible to publish. When the good man opened the little parcel from the cadger's creel, and saw the name of his boy friend on the title-page, tradition tells that he was surprised,

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and when he read it he dropped it in amazement. His own poem, entitled a "Winter's Day," had appeared in *Savage's Miscellany* the same year as the "Winter," of which Thomson owns his friend's verses "had put the design in his head." [It had previously appeared in an Edinburgh periodical; Dr. Somerville's *Memoirs*, p. 129.]

Some men of taste soon detected the merit of this obscure piece. Dr. Rundle, afterwards Bishop of Derry - being promoted to an Irish bishopric, because he was not orthodox enough for an English one - happened to be in the shop, picked up the poem, saw its worth, and soon sounded abroad its praises. The versatile Mr. Aaron Hill, playwright and poet, earned the poet's gratitude and adulation as "supreme in genius," by speaking well of it. That was an age of grovelling dedications, in which a great man was poetically beslavered with praise to win his favour and a present. A patron was as necessary for a book as a sponsor at a christening, and Thomson had fixed on dull-witted Compton, Speaker of the House of Commons, as a suitable protector, and he lauded his virtues and his genius mendaciously in dedicatory lines in the poem. The great man took no notice, till he was satirised by Hill and Mallet for his neglect, and then from very shame he gave the author £20 as a present. This could serve little to relieve the necessities of the poet, who was trying to raise money by selling his share of the property his mother at her death had left, who needed to borrow money from his friends in Scotland, and to get an advance of £2 from his bookseller. Dr. Cheyne, the corpulent, prosperous, wealthy physician, blandly told him that poets should be kept poor, the more to animate their genius. "That," however, the poet remarked, "is like the cruel custom of putting out birds' eyes to make them sing the sweeter. But surely they sing the sweetest amidst the luxuriant woods, with the full spring blooms around them." [Seward's *Anecdotes*, v. 174.]

The merits of the new strain in Thomson's poetry could not be felt all at once. It was so new, so fresh, so natural, while the age was artificial in manners, in life, and in literature. It had sentiment, but no passion; admired prettiness, but not beauty, still less grandeur. If it read of rural life it was in a pastoral, shepherds and shepherdesses dressed as never seen save in a masquerade, who piped on "lyric reeds," to which "swains" danced gracefully on the "sward." Here, however, was a man who brought people face to face with nature. Rugged nature, too, such as the poet remembered it when "red from the hills innumerable streams tumultuous roar" down the glen at Southdean from red sandstone crags, when in winter "o'er rocks and woods in broad brown cataracts, a thousand snow-fed torrents shoot at once," as he had seen when wandering in Cheviot dale. How could English poets describe nature in its wild rough moods and aspects as did this Scotsman? Not Pope, whose

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scenery was that of Twickenham, and whose ideal of beauty was a fantastic grotto; not Shenstone in the pleasant woods and lawns at Leasowes; not Englishmen who mistook hills for mountains, and like White of Selborne could speak of “gazing with fresh admiration on the magnificent mountain range of the Sussex Downs.” As for town poets, most of them poor as church mice, they saw no trees save in the Green Park, or water except in the Thames or Marylebone Pond, and heard no birds except sparrows twittering on the house-tops, to which their garrets were so near. When Thomson heard of an epic written by a poet who lived all his life in London, he pronounced it impossible. “Why, the man never saw a mountain!” [Moore’s *Life of Smollett*, p. 104.]

A poet could not live by his pen, save in Grub Street, and though he saw his poem pass into a second edition, Thomson was glad to become tutor at an Academy to a son of the Duke of Montrose, probably through the good offices of his friend Mallet, whose great genius he was ever praising in fine simplicity. In 1727 “Summer” came, and won popularity as genial as its subject; “Spring” came the next year, and then in 1730 “Autumn,” his fame increasing with every fresh “Season.” Each poem had a magnificent dedicatory introduction, lauding great men whom he did not know for genius and virtue they never had. All this to gain favour and money. Now the poor poet was rich in friends, if not in funds, admitted into high circles, staying with Lord and Lady Hertford at their seat; for her literary ladyship wished him to listen to her verses, and assist at what she whimsically called her “studies,” though the tactless bard paid far more attention to his lordship’s wine. The great Mr. Bubb Dodington, splendidly invoked as patron to a “Season,” and praised for graces and talents with which providence had never favoured him, was pleased to have him at his sumptuous house at Hammersmith.

The author had changed his publisher. Young Millan was poor, and could not give terms to suit the now popular poet; but another Scotsman, Andrew Millar, became his bookseller and his friend. Millar in 1729, when only a lad of twenty-two, had established himself in the shop in which Jacob Tonson had been prosperous, known as the “Shakespeare’s Head,” which his successor patriotically styled the “Buchanan’s Head.” A kindly man, and an honest, who saw his friends in his little back shop, he modestly would go for a mug of porter to the tavern opposite. For years were to pass before he became what Johnson called him, the “Mæcenas of literature,” and a man of wealth. It was from his shop, the year he set up business, that his friend Thomson sent forth his “Spring” and the “Britannia,” with the magniloquent patriotic strains which made it popular when the country was

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excited at the prospect of war with Spain.

In those days if a poet was famous, he was almost certain to become a playwright; not that the plays were poetic, but they were heroic tragedies in blank verse. They must have rolling passages, with grandiose sentiments, fit for sonorous declamation. The stage about the middle of this century was filled with "Mustaphas," "Boadiceas," "Mahomets," "Alfreds," and "Cleones," in which each character spoke as no mortal ever spoke in flesh. Actors to suit their parts enunciated with solemn roll of voice; declaimed slowly the words of bombast, and, as Churchill said of Tom Davies, "mouthed a sentence as curs mouth a bone." As they pronounced so they dressed. There was Quin, so fine in comedy, so portentous in tragedy, acting "Coriolanus" with his fat figure stiffened out with buckram, in tunic and trunk-hose, a periwig with curls flowing in cascades over his ample shoulders; and Garrick in a Grecian part, attired in robes which blended the dress of a Venetian nobleman with the garb of a gondolier. One sees in Bell's *Theatre* of 1779 those wonderful engravings of ladies representing a Sigismunda, a Boadicea, or a Clytemnestra, with pyramidal framed hair and huge bell hoops posing in agonised attitudes before kings and tyrants, with daggers uplifted to strike the foe, or voices uplifted to pierce the ears of the dullest gods. There were dresses of heroes - Heavens! what dresses they were! - which inhabitants of no age or race ever wore; for it was assumed that anything was ancient which was not modern, and anything Oriental which never was European.

To return to Thomson. He was a successful poet. He must now become a successful dramatist. One night in February 1729 Drury Lane was full to overflowing. Her Majesty Queen Caroline was present, all London society therefore was there; gentlemen of fashion were glad to get room in the footmen's gallery, for Mr. Thomson's *Sophonisba* was to be performed by the favourites of the stage. No wonder the author was in a state of wild excitement in the orchestra. Ten nights the play was performed - an excellent run in those days. The playwright had reason to be pleased, though it was vexatious to find his drama made fun of, and his tragic line "O Sophonisba, Sophonisba O!" parodied into "O Jemmy Thomson, Jemmy Thomson O!" He changed the words afterwards to "O Sophonisba, I am wholly thine!" but what would have been his chagrin had he foreseen that posterity would remember not one scrap of all his tragedies except that unlucky line. [The line came from Nat. Lee's "O Sophonisba O," and was parodied by Fielding in Tom Thumb, "O Huncamunca, Huncamunca O!"]

During a tour abroad for two years as tutor to the son of Solicitor-General

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(afterwards Lord Chancellor) Talbot, he owns “his muse did not travel with him,” he found little pleasure in nature or art, “for ruins, statues, paintings were surely not of such importance as to set the world gadding about,” and he confessed “he had no taste for smelling nasty stones.” [Letters to Bubb Dodington in Seward’s *Anecdotes*, v. 173.] Nor does the poet of nature seem to have been more moved by the glories of the Alps he passed through than any of his prosaic fellow-travellers. He returned wearied of it all, with a few engravings to decorate his walls. He came back to compose his laboriously eloquent poem on “Liberty,” which the author considered his best, though the world thought otherwise. “Liberty,” says Dr. Johnson, with ponderous humour, “called upon her votaries to read her praises and reward her encomiasts. Her praises were condemned to harbour spiders and gather dust.” [Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 231.]

In 1736 he quitted his lodging in London to settle in a small house at Richmond, for he was fairly well off, and even spoke of “hanging up his harp on the willows.” He had a pension of £100 from the Prince of Wales, to whom, when questioned as to the state of his finances, he replied that “they were in a more poetical posture than formerly” - for a pleasant sinecure he had lately lost by Lord Chancellor Talbot’s death, which left him hampered with debt. Some years later he got the satisfactory post of Surveyor of the Leeward Islands, with £300 a year, the minute duties of which he paid a poor friend to execute. He showed his gratitude to his patron in his plays, whose hits at Walpole and the King called forth rounds of applause from the audience who favoured the opposition.

In his country retreat he was at his ease. Though getting fat and indolent, he would walk to see Mallet in the Mall, at the Smyrna Coffee-house; at which place he announced to the public he would take subscriptions for his poems; or call on Mr. Pope at Twickenham. He was ready to meet friends at dinner once a week at the “Bohemia Head” in London, or at the “Three Pigeons” at Richmond. His days of poverty were over, when in a sponging-house Quin came to rescue him, gave the money and regaled the distressed poet with a welcome dinner. We can see Thomson as he sat to his friend William Aikman’s portrait - a night-cap on his polled head, with a face, open and frank, wide, clear eyes and full red lips, as of a man who took life with lazy enjoyment, Yet he was still obliged to work, and as plays paid better than poems, one after another came from his pen. True, his soul was too heavy to soar to tragic heights, his lazy bosom could not throb with passion, and a fat poet in heroics is never impressive.

In 1738, the year that young Smollett arrived in town, the theatre again was

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crowded, when *Agamemnon*, was acted, with Quin and Mrs. Porter and Colley Cibber and his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Cibber, in their parts. [Davies's *Life of Garrick*.] He had tried to read his piece beforehand to the actors, but as they heard him speak the heroic verse in broad Scots accents, the green-room resounded with laughter. Pope, who had revised it, was in the boxes, the Prince of Wales and his court were present; while the author in the upper gallery kept up in feverish anxiety an audible recitation of the passages as the actors played them, till the angry audience hushed him to silence. When he joined very late the friends whom he had invited to sup after the performance, he explained that his wig had been so spoiled by his perspiration in his agony of anxiety, that he had to get it retrimmed by a barber.

In 1740 the groves of Cliefden were filled with the fashion of the town, for it was the Princess Augusta's birthday, and the Masque of *Alfred* by himself and Mallet was to be acted. Quin took the principal part; the music was by Dr. Arne, who conducted the orchestra, with his ugly face, purple complexion, and goggling eyes. Whatever interest this piece possesses is due to its containing the famous ode, "Rule Britannia." As a spectacle it was good enough, as a play it was bad enough. Here starts up the vexed literary problem: who wrote that song with its stirring refrain, "Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves"? which has expressed vocal ardour of many generations of "bumper patriots," who in moods of martial conviviality, and regardless of the original and of syntax, persist in vociferating, "Rule Britannia, Britannia *rules* the waves." Was it by Thomaon, or by Mallet? After Thomson's death, a revised version of the play was performed and published by Mallet in 1751, who in his preface says: "I am obliged to reject a great part of what I had written in the other [version]; neither could I retain of my friend's part more than three or four speeches and a part of a song." Does he refer to "Rule Britannia"? He obviously does, for out of that ode he had cut some stanzas to substitute others by his noble patron, Lord Bolingbroke, and he honestly, though with cunning vagueness, allows it to his friend. Even if he did not, and meant to give the impression that he wrote the ode himself, his word would have been worth nothing. He had the predatory instincts of his native Highlands; he was a literary Rob Roy, only he "lifted" impartially the goods of friends as well as of foes. Even in this preface he cannot help lying, for he speaks of having "been obliged to discontinue the Duke of Marlborough's history for a few months past, till I receive from a foreign country some letters of importance." Why, the rascal had not written one word of it. A man who lies in one paragraph, need not be believed in the next. Even if he had wished to claim it he dared not, so long as Dr. Arne, the composer

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of the music lived to confute him. The patriotic strain, the words, the similes, find close parallels in Thomson's "liberty" and "Britannia"; but none in Mallet's own work. Certain it is that, during the poet's life, it was ascribed to Thomson, and appeared in 1756 in the *Charmer*, a favourite song-book, with Thomson's initials. [Genest's *Acct. of English Stage*, iv. 324; Aldine Poets, Tovey's *Memoir*. On the intrinsic proof of his authorship the best and conclusive statement is in Morel's *James Thomson, sa Vie et ses Œuvres*, p. 584. See also Churton Collins's *Ephemera Critica*.] There surely has been needless controversy over the matter.

Thomson never re-visited Scotland, though he kept up kindly and constant correspondence with his sisters; while his brother, John, for some time lived with him as amanuensis. Unlike Mallet, he never rid himself of his Scots speech. His hair-dresser was always addressed as "Wull." When the son of his old minister in Edinburgh, Gusthart called on him: "Troth, sir, I canna say I ken your countenance weel," he said.

While the poet was writing plays, he could rest on his pension and his profits at Richmond, where friends came and went, and enjoyed his cellar of wine and good Scotch ale. David Mallet, whom the simple-hearted man trusted, loved, and humbly thought a better writer than himself, was a welcome guest, with his clever talk, his self-confident manner, and his self-important, podgy figure. Quin the actor, fat, jovial, and witty, would set the table in a roar. Patrick Murdoch, his old college chum, now an English parson, portly, plump, and small, celebrated in the *Castle of Indolence* as the "round-faced, oily man of God," would come full of stories and laughter. Mr. Bubb Dodington, not yet Lord Melcombe, the corpulent, pompous, over-dressed parasite of the Prince's court, would turn up from his mansion at Hammersmith in a profusion of brocade and embroidery with deep-laced ruffles and, enormous periwig, and would sleep profoundly while the others talked. [Richard Cumberland's *Memoirs*, p. 124.] This was the patron of Thomson's "Summer," "the youthful poet's friend," "in whom the human graces all unite." What a collection of fat friends assembled round the table of the fat poet! But there too came Mr. Pope, leaning on his cane as he walked round the garden, and he would have his mis-shapen, waspish little body, carefully laced in stays, placed at the table and discuss poets and dunces in his peevish voice. Dr. Armstrong, who made devoted friends by his warm heart and innumerable enemies by his hot temper, was ever welcome, both as doctor and friend; and Collins, too, the poet of the "Passions." Occasionally, the long, lank skeleton form of Lord Lyttelton - patron-in-general to poets and playwrights - came to visit, mingling gravely in the light-hearted company, saddened at signs of scepticism in his friend for whose behoof he wrote his treatise on the *Conversion of St. Paul*, to convert him to a

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clearer faith.

In this home, and with such friends, the poet grew happier and fatter and lazier. With the good nature and placidity which are the constitutional attributes of the obese, he lived a pleasant life of perfunctory virtues. He was to be seen in his garden walking in his slovenly dressing-gown and slippers, chatting with his cousin, Alexander, the gardener; according to legend, biting off the sunny sides of peaches, as they hung on the wall, with his hands in his pockets; and often found in bed at two o'clock in the day, with curtains closed, sleepily pleading to Dr. Charles Burney, in Scots accents, that he "had no mot-tive to get up," [Prior's *Life of Malone*, p. 415.] and tearing open the pages of new books with the snuffers. So egregiously sluggish was he that Quin told him he believed he would even let him chew his food for him. [Seward's *Anecdotes of Distinguished Men*, v. 137. Thomson's *Poems: Life* by Murdoch (1802), p. 24.

Yet this was the poet who had written: -  
Falsely luxurious ! Will not man awake,  
And springing from the bed of sloth enjoy  
The cool, the fragrant, and the silent hour  
To meditation due and sacred song?  
For is there ought in sleep can charm the wise?  
To lie in dark oblivion, losing half  
The fleeting moments of too short a life,

Total extinction of the unlighted soul ! - *Summer*.] In his later portraits he appears wearing his cumbrous night-cap, with a sleepy, torpid, double-chinned face, and a corpulent body, for he describes himself "more fat than bard beseems." At table he was dull in talk till the bottle went round, and then his big ungainly form and heavy countenance would waken up to life. [As to his style of conversation, there were those who spoke of it as coarse. Boswell's *Johnson*, ii. 63, iii. 117; Taylor's *Records*, i. 188. George Chalmers was told by an old woman, formerly Thomson's housekeeper, that he had married an obscure woman, who lived with him as a domestic and died in London, where she was buried in old Marylebone Church. Chalmers said he found the entry in the registry: "Mary Thomson, a stranger." Later researches have, however, discovered no such entry (*Notes and Queries*, 1881, i. 46). The story seems a myth, especially in view of the poet's wooing of Amanda, and the keeping the wife as a domestic in the house - known to a garrulous housekeeper and unknown to every one else - is clearly apocryphal.] When engaged in composition, he could be heard walking in his library at night humming over the lines he would write out next day. But to hear him read aloud his own verses was a painful ordeal. Actors laughed as in the green-room he read to them the plays in Caledonian tones, without expression or decent articulation. "I can write a tragedy, but I fear I can't read one," he said good-naturedly as he handed back his *Agamemnon*, to the manager. Friends winced as they listened as he spoke his poems with wretched mumbling. "You booby! you don't understand your own verses," exclaimed Bubb Dodington as he snatched the manuscript from his hand [Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 238.] and read it himself, with admirable effect, as he also

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did the edifying pages of *Jonathan Wild* to a company of ladies.

Even this lethargic man of letters had had an episode of romance when his dormant soul was moved to emotion. This was his love for Miss Young, a country-woman, whom he celebrates as “Amanda” in his *Seasons* and elsewhere - who was residing with her mother at Richmond, where her brother was a surgeon. The mother, a coarse, vulgar woman, did not favour an alliance with a poet still impecunious. “What!” she said, “would you marry Thomson? He will make ballads and you will sing them!” [Ramsay’s *Scot. and Scots*. i. 28.] The attachment was keen, and it seemed mutual, but romance ended by Amanda marrying another man, and the poet satisfied himself with good wine and good company. A torpid and corpulent poet in love is not a romantic object. Truly an ideal place was the Richmond home wherein a man should write the *Castle of Indolence*, over which he loitered for sixteen years. In 1748 that poem appeared, and his greatest work was done. Nearly done, too, was his life, for coming one summer day from Hammersmith overheated he went into a boat, a fever ensued, and on 27th August 1748 the poet was dead - his old friend, Dr. Armstrong, having tended him in his last hours. [Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*; Thomson’s *Works*, with Life by Murdoch; Thomson’s *Works*, with Memoir by Tovey (Aldine Poets).]

All loved “tried, amiable, open, honest-hearted Thomson,” as his old friend Patrick Murdoch wrote of his old companion [Carruthers, *Highland Note-book*, p. 68. Lord Balcarres was surprised find his *Seasons* so good; for, as he wrote: “I lived a whole winter with him in Bath; he had nothing amiable in his conversation, and I expected little from his writings” (*Lives of Lindsays*, ii, 275).] - and he passed away with hosts of friends, without an enemy. The tablet set up to his memory in his garden gives a charming estimate of the man; “The greatest pain he ever gave his fellow-creatures was that of his death.” A few months later his *Coriolanus* - a horrid amalgam of Thomson and Shakespeare - was performed at Drury Lane; and Quin, who acted Coriolanus, dressed in black, spoke the prologue written by Lord Lyttelton in a voice choking with emotion, as he uttered praise of a man who had penned

Not one immoral or corrupted thought,  
One line which dying he would wish to blot.

The poet’s plays are dead, and slumber their last sleep in forgotten volumes - even *Tancred and Sigismunda*, in which Garrick was great. Robert Burns was the last to admire and to quote *Alfred* and *Edward and Eleanora*. [Chambers’s *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 1851, iii. 273.] Few works, however, marked a literary era more distinctly

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than the *Seasons*. They were the first to awaken interest in nature - the first to describe its landscape in all its varied moods and aspects. In "Winter" and "Autumn" are pictures of its wilder phases, such as the poet had witnessed amongst the rugged mountains and barren wastes and torrents of the north; while in "Summer" and "Spring" he pictures the pleasant woodland meadows and rural life of the south. Yet there was no enthusiasm for nature: he did not feel it responding to any moods or passions of his breast - indeed, he was too sluggish to have any; he had none of the "pathetic fallacy." The very plainness of the *Seasons* made their popularity. They formed the poetry of the unpoetic; for the vivid descriptions left nothing to the imagination: the incidents interwoven with them were pleasantly vivid, and involved no mental fatigue. As Coleridge picked up a copy of the *Seasons* in a country inn, all thumbed and dog-eared, "This is fame," he remarked. Indeed, as Charles Lamb avowed, "Thomson's *Seasons* look best a little torn and dog-eared." What their influence has been is well known in literary history, over small poets as well as greater ones, like Cowper, who invested with charm the common incidents of rural life and the familiar aspects of nature. [Wordsworth said that between *Paradise Lost* and Thomson there was not a single new image drawn from external nature.] In France his works proved a very revelation to people who had never seen beauty beyond Versailles, any interest beyond trees all trimmed and shaped to forms fantastic, and nature laid out in parterres. It is something to a man's glory to have written words which stirred Rousseau to enthusiasm and Voltaire to admiration; verses which came from poor Madame Roland's lips in prison, as she awaited the tumbril to bear her to the scaffold.

"A born poet," is the verdict of Hazlitt, who however, asserts "he seldom writes a good line, but he makes up for it by a bad one." [Hazlitt's *English Poets*, p. 168.] Yes, there are many lines which living he "might wish to blot" - turgid lines and pompous phrases. In Thomson's day there was a reaction against the formal, artificial style of gardening. William Kent was laying out gentlemen's grounds with woods in careless clumps, and the better to imitate nature to perfection planted dead trees among them. In Thomson's *Seasons* there is an uncomfortable number of dry phrases and dead lines amongst the living verses, not from laziness but deliberation, for the *Seasons* were altered and enlarged in every edition. We have "gelid fount" and "gelid reign" and "gelid fleece"; we have "vegetable tubes" and "vegetable race." Poultry are the "household feathery people," and birds the "plummy races." The bee becomes a suction engine in his "Summer"

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The busy nations fly,  
Cling to the bud, and with inserted tube  
Suck its pure essence, its ethereal soul.

The pebbly gravel is -

strewn bibulous above the sands.

The poet informs the Deity in his "Spring":

By Thee the various vegetable tubes,  
Wrapped in a filmy net and clad with leaves,  
Draw in the live ether and imbibe the dew.  
By Thee, disposed into congenial soil,  
Stands each attractive plant, and sucks and swells  
The juicy tide, a twining mass of tubes.

And so on in a strain enough to condemn a poet to a penitentiary.

There are plenty others to quote. It would almost seem that, having come from Scotland with a limited supply of English, he had worked up his epithets with a vocabulary in his earlier days. What a change in the command and use of the language from his bombastic plays, and even from his *Seasons* and his odes, is found in the *Castle of Indolence* - began as a few verses of jesting on his own indolence, in Spenserian measure! It strikes by its originality, it attracts by its exquisite art, and charms by its rare felicity of phrase. We find its slumbrous lines carrying us away as in a pleasant dream to the "land of Drowsyhead." The measure fits the sleepy mood, like the hum of bees on a sultry summer day murmurous among the limes. When he wrote this the 'prentice hand at English had become a passed master in his noble craft.