

The Poet and the Prince

Kew Foot Road is today a quiet backwater, but it was once part of a busy thoroughfare – known for most of its length as Love Lane – running from Richmond Green to the Brentford Ferry and passing, on the way, between two royal estates. On the front of the original Royal Hospital block, there is a blue plaque that reads: “Thomson, James (1700-1748): Poet, Author of *Rule Britannia*, lived and died here.”¹ This is a rather poor epitaph for a man who had once been internationally famous: indeed he was one of the most influential poets of the 18th century. Also, he had interesting associations with what was destined to become the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. However, it is not on *Rule Britannia* that his reputation rests, but on his fantastically successful extended poem *The Seasons*.

Thomson, the son of a Presbyterian minister and the grandson of a gardener, left his home in the Scottish borders in 1725 and took, to use the words of Samuel Johnson, the high road that leads to England. Other eminent Scots who took the same road in the first few decades following the Union of 1707 included Tobias Smollett the novelist, James Gibbs the architect, and Alan Ramsay the painter. Thomson contributed to the vibrant artistic scene in London, where his social circle included Alexander Pope, Samuel Richardson, Richard Savage and many of the other London literati of the day. His masterpiece *The Seasons* was published in four instalments between 1726 and 1730, and despite the occasional obscurity and awkwardness in the language (perhaps because Thomson was writing in what was for him a foreign dialect, rather than his native broad Scots), it created a sensation. It ran to a remarkable 400 editions, including French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Latin translations, in the following one hundred years. The 19th century poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, once came across a tattered copy of the poem in a remote country ale-house and exclaimed “That is true fame!”² Thomson’s fame and influence were not confined to Britain. His poem was the basis for the libretto of Haydn’s oratorio *The Seasons* (1801), and “as for Rousseau”, according to a French biographer, “it would be impossible to exaggerate the part Thomson’s work played in the development of his genius, or at least in the inspiration of his literary work”.³

To modern eyes, rural landscapes and wildernesses are self-evidently beautiful, but this was a revelation to many in the 18th century. Samuel Johnson wrote: “[Thomson] looks round on nature and on life with the eye that nature bestows only on a poet ... and with a mind that at once comprehends the vast and attends to the minute. The reader of *The Seasons* wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses.”⁴ Johnson may have been thinking of Thomson when he had his fictional poet, Imlac, say: “Nature was to be my subject, and men to be my auditors ... I ranged mountains and deserts for images and resemblances, and pictured upon my mind every tree of the forest and flower of the valley. I observed with equal care the crags of the rock and the pinnacles of the palace. Sometimes I wandered along the mazes of the rivulet, and sometimes watched the changes of the summer clouds ... [A poet] must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety.”⁵ The poet and critic, Joseph Warton (1722-1800), said that Thomson had “enriched poetry with a variety of new and original images, which he painted from nature itself”,⁶ including such previously unconsidered details as the murmuring of insects on a summer’s day:-

Nor undelightful is the ceaseless hum
To him who muses thro' the woods at noon;
Or drowsy shepherd, as he lies reclin'd
With half-shut eyes.⁷

Thomson's poem was a major influence on a number of painters, notably John Constable, who attached quotes from *The Seasons* to his paintings.⁸ When the latter's famous work *The cornfield* was exhibited in 1826, the catalogue contained the following lines:-

... A fresher gale
Begins to wave the woods and stir the stream,
Sweeping with shadowy gusts the fields of corn.⁹

One of the landscapes that Thomson eulogised in his poem was the view from Richmond Hill, and in so doing he helped make it world famous:-

Enchanting vale! beyond whate'er the Muse
Has of Achaia or Hesperia sung!
O vale of bliss! O softly-swellling hills!
On which the power of cultivation lies,
And joys to see the wonders of his toil.
Heavens! what a goodly prospect spreads around,
Of hills, and dales, and woods, and lawns, and spires,
And glittering towns, and gilded streams, till all
The stretching landskip into smoke decays!¹⁰

Another of the artists influenced by Thomson was JMW Turner, who said of the poet that "he looked and nature sparkled in his eyes".¹¹ Turner produced two noted paintings of the view from Richmond Hill, one of which is titled *Thomson's Aeolian Harp* (1809, Manchester Art Gallery). This painting features figures representing the four Seasons and the three Graces¹² around the wind harp that Thomson first made famous and which was subsequently adopted as a theme by other poets, including Coleridge. Another poet indebted to Thomson, William Wordsworth, acknowledged the Scot in a sonnet of 1820 on birdsong, set on the slopes of Richmond Hill, which ends:-

And scarcely conscious of the dashing oars
Plied steadily between those willowly shores,
The sweet-souled Poet of the Seasons stood –
Listening and listening long in rapturous mood.¹³

Thomson's influence was felt in another important sphere. His friend, the artist William Kent, illustrated the 1730 edition of *The Seasons* and went on to become the landscape gardener who, in the words of Horace Walpole, "leapt the fence and saw that all Nature was a garden".¹⁴ Joseph Warton was probably the first (in 1782) to cite Thomson, as well as Pope, as an important influence on Kent and the English Landscape School of gardening: "May I be suffered to add [regarding the origins of modern English gardening] that *The Seasons* of Thomson have been very instrumental in diffusing a general taste for the beauties of nature and landscape ... It is only within a few years that the picturesque scenes of our own country, our lakes, mountains, cascades, caverns and castles, have been visited and described."¹⁵ (Pre-Thomson, Daniel Defoe had dismissed Westmoreland as "the most barren and frightful"

county in England!¹⁶). A modern biographer has suggested bluntly: “Neither Hagley, nor the many other parks which were being laid out at this time all over the country, would perhaps have been so easily conceived had it not been for his [Thomson’s] genius ... Kent simply carried into practice the implicit rules for landscape gardening which he found in that poem [*The Seasons*].”¹⁷ Lord Lyttelton at Hagley Hall had a garden seat dedicated to his friend Thomson, as did the poet William Shenstone at The Leasowes and Lord Edgcumbe at Mount-Edgcumbe Park. As well as being an inspiration for these new naturalistic gardens, Thomson became a propagandist for them. The revised edition of *The Seasons* of 1744 contained descriptions of some of them, including these lines later inscribed on an extant c.1800 fountain in the grounds of Stowe House in Buckinghamshire¹⁸:-

... There along the dale,
With woods o'erhung, and shagged with mossy rocks
Whence on each hand the gushing waters play,
And down the rough cascade white-dashing fall
Or gleam in lengthened vista through the trees,
You silent steal; or sit beneath the shade
Of solemn oaks, that tuft the swelling mounts
Thrown graceful round by Nature's careless hand,
And pensive listen to the various voice
Of ruling peace.¹⁹

However, there is another strand to Thomson’s poetry – its forays into science in general and Newtonian science in particular – a subject that had fascinated Thomson since his time at Edinburgh University. In this his poetry reflected a growing scientific interest in the natural world at that time:-

... And thou, O Sun!
Soul of surrounding worlds! in whom best seen
Shines out thy Maker! may I sing of thee?
'Tis by thy secret, strong, attractive force,
As with a chain indissoluble bound,
Thy system rolls entire – from the far bourne
Of utmost Saturn, wheeling wide his round
Of thirty years, to Mercury, whose disk
Can scarce be caught by philosophic eye,
Lost in the near effulgence of thy blaze.²⁰

Inspired by the first scientific account of sap flow in plants – by Stephen Hales in 1727 – Thomson addresses the Source of Being:

By Thee disposed into congenial soils
Stands each attractive plant, and sucks, and swells
The juicy tide, a twining mass of tubes.
At Thy command the vernal sun awakes
The torpid sap, detrued to the root
By wintry winds, that now in fluent dance
And lively fermentation mounting spreads
All this innumerable-colour'd scene of things.²¹

Other scientific topics in the poem include the hydrologic cycle and newly discovered micro-organisms. “Nor is the naturalist without his part in the entertainment” observed Samuel Johnson “for he is assisted to recollect [i.e. collect] and to combine, to arrange his discoveries and to amplify the sphere of his contemplation”.²² Thomson had a liking for reciting lists of things, reflecting the contemporary interest in collecting and cataloguing flora and fauna [italics mine]:-

Then seek the bank where flowering *elders* crowd,
Where scattered wild the *lily of the vale*
Its balmy essence breathes, where *cowslips* hang
The dewy head, where purple *violets* lurk
With all the lowly children of the shade;
Or lie reclin'd beneath yon spreading *ash*.²³

And again, with exotic species:

Bear me, Pomona! to thy *citron* groves.
To where the *lemon* and the piercing *lime*,
With the deep *orange* glowing through green,
Their lighter glories blend. Lay me reclined
Beneath the spreading *tamarind*, that shakes,
Fanned by the breeze, its fever-cooling fruit.
Deep in the night the massy *locust* sheds,
Quench my hot limbs; or lead me through the maze,
Embowering endless, of the *Indian fig* ... etc.²⁴

The next few lines mention cedar, coconut, pomegranate and ananas (pineapple). The two mentioned strands in Thomson's poetry – landscape and natural science – happen to be the twin foundations of the Royal Botanic Gardens that emerged out of the Kew estate of Frederick and Augusta, Prince and Princess of Wales. Is there any link? The poet and the Prince were certainly well acquainted. Frederick acquired his Kew estate between 1731 and 1750, and Thomson moved into the neighbouring Kew Foot Lane (as it then was) in 1736, the year of the royal couple's marriage. In the following year Frederick and Thomson both became members of the Richmond Masonic Lodge. Frederick, the first of the royal freemasons, was initiated in a special ceremony at Kew House two months after Thomson's initiation.²⁵ Thomson dedicated most of his publications to Frederick and/or Augusta, including the 1744 edition of *The Seasons*. The first edition of the latter was translated into the royal couple's native German in the following year. Also, most of Thomson's dramatic works were given performances by command of the royal couple, including a masque at which *Rule Britannia* was performed. Thomson became a member of Frederick's circle and Frederick became Thomson's patron: with the help of Lord Lyttelton, who was Thomson's good friend and the Prince's private secretary, the poet was granted a pension of £100 per annum out of Frederick's coffers. Thomson was one of a group of intellectuals who, though Whigs, were dedicated to the downfall of George II's Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, and who gravitated towards Prince Frederick. These “nobles” of Frederick's alternative court were to be seen strolling and conversing with the Prince beside the Thames at Kew.²⁶ Garden design at that time was replete with political symbolism, so this would undoubtedly have been a topic of conversation.

Were the Prince and Princess inspired and influenced by the poet as so many others were? While there were other likely sources of influence, such as Alexander Pope at Twickenham in landscaping matters and Stephen Hales (of sap flow fame) at Teddington in botanical matters, there is good reason to suppose also a Thomsonian influence – both directly through his poetry and conversations, and indirectly through William Kent and other landscape gardeners inspired by the poet. Much of Frederick's correspondence was destroyed by Augusta after his death in 1751, so important information about his horticultural activities may have been lost.²⁷ His first major project was in 1733 at Carlton House (Pall Mall) where he employed William Kent on what was one of the latter's earliest landscaping (as opposed to architectural) commissions. Sir Thomas Robinson remarked (1734): "There is a new taste in gardening just arisen ... viz., to lay them out, and work without either level or line ... It has the appearance of beautiful nature." At Kew, Frederick had inherited a formal garden from the previous owner, but it was not until the late 1740's that he started major re-landscaping work there. After his death, Augusta continued the work.

Under Augusta, two Scots, 3rd Earl of Bute and William Chambers, continued the landscaping of the pleasure grounds in an informal style, including an irregular-shaped lake, cow and sheep pastures, man-made mounds and a sprinkling of exotic and classical garden buildings – what Chambers called "nature improved by art". Charles Bridgeman, William Kent and "Capability" Brown – leading exponents of the English Landscape style – took turns in landscaping the neighbouring Richmond estate of George II and George III, part of which would later be merged with Kew Gardens. Brown's style was closest to nature or, rather, an idealised form of it. Therefore, until some formal features, including parterres and, avenues of trees, were re-introduced in the mid-19th century, the royal gardens at Kew were what one might call "Thomsonian" – informal and bucolic, totally devoid of the straight lines and geometric shapes found at Ham House and Hampton Court. Meanwhile, starting in 1759, William Aiton with the help of Bute and perhaps Hales (who had become Augusta's chaplain!) created a nine acre physic, or botanic, garden at the north end of the Kew estate in accordance with the new Linnaean system that was putting botany on a sound scientific footing. Adjacent to this was an aviary and a menagerie, displaying native and exotic birds. After 1840, the botanic function would gradually spread over and absorb most of the surrounding pleasure grounds, changing their character somewhat in the process.

The origins of Kew Gardens are manifold and it is difficult to assess the significance of an individual whose influence was mainly of an inspirational sort. However, there can be no doubt that Thomson helped shape the spirit of the age in which Kew originated and developed. At the very least, Thomson deserves to be remembered in the annals of Kew Gardens as an internationally famed local poet, whose patron was Prince Frederick and who celebrated in verse the beauties of landscape and the wonders of nature and science. As a matter of fact, there is intriguing evidence that he may actually have been at one time memorialised in the Gardens.

The first garden building designed by Chambers for Augusta (in 1757) was an unroofed Gallery of Antiques, situated on a wooded mound adjacent to Love Lane – not far from the current site of the Temperate House. Chambers gave no explanation for this splendid classical building, and only half of the statues and bas reliefs that adorned it are shown on his original drawings. In addition to Minerva, patron of the arts and sciences (a reference, perhaps, to Frederick and Augusta²⁸), the known sculptures are of Ceres, Proserpine and four dancing Horae – *all deities particularly associated with the seasons of the year* – and two muses, one with a lyre and the other holding an orb – symbolising lyric poetry and science respectively.²⁹

Also, all around the building are keystone heads which apparently depict nature gods with four different expressions. Harris in his monograph on Chambers states that this statuary represents both the seasons and the arts, but he does not draw the most compelling conclusion.³⁰ The Gallery may have been primarily a memorial to Augusta's husband who had died six years previously. The central feature between the two muses appears to be masonic symbolism, and there is similar iconography (a pair of sphinxes, urns with trailing festoons, statues in niches) in one of Chambers' unused plans for a mausoleum for Frederick.³¹ However, it is possible that the Gallery was also a tribute to Thomson who had died nine years previously. Artistic references to the Seasons (or Horae) had a long history, but Thomson's poem gave new impetus to the theme. The biographer of Joseph Wilton, the presumed sculptor of the Gallery of Antiques' statuary, wrote: "The names of Kent and Gibbs and Chambers appear upon our public monuments as inventors of the designs ... In truth the architects of those days were mighty men ... They laid out the gardens in which [the nobles] walked [and] hung gods and *seasons* upon the ceilings of their galleries".³²

It is odd that Chambers should have drawn up several plans for a mausoleum for Prince Frederick but nothing, apparently, came of them. And it is odd that Hagley Hall, The Leasowes, Mount-Edgcumbe Park and Stowe House should have tributes to Thomson but his friend and neighbour's Kew estate, apparently, did not. The Gallery of Antiques may be the answer to both of these puzzles. The Gallery was gone by the 19th century, but perhaps Decimus Burton was thinking of Chambers' lost gallery when he placed statues of Flora and Silvanus above the entrance to his Temperate House (1863).³³ If so, these statues would be the nearest thing to a memorial to Thomson at Kew Gardens today.

Thomson died of a fever in 1748 and was buried in Richmond Parish Church (near the font).³⁴ Such was his renown that a monument, designed by his compatriot Robert Adam, was erected in his honour in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey – right next to Shakespeare!³⁵ The house in Kew Foot Lane, where Thomson "would sometimes listen a full hour at his window to the nightingales in Richmond Gardens",³⁶ was acquired after his death by his friend, George Ross. From 1786 it was occupied by the literary hostess Frances Boscawen (d. 1805) who decorated Thomson's summerhouse "with votive offerings, creating a shrine to her favourite poet of nature"³⁷ and with an inscription reading "Here Thomson sang the seasons and their change."³⁸ As late as 1825, John Evans in his publication, *Richmond and its vicinity*, devoted a remarkable 17 pages of this 200 page book to Thomson, stating that "the abode of Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon, of Pope at Twickenham, and of Thomson at Kew [Foot] Lane, Richmond, must be pronounced hallowed ground in the eye of distant generations". William Howitt in 1847 acknowledges Thomson's failings but concludes: "Among those who have used the voice of poetry given them of God to rouse their fellow-men to a life of beneficence, none have done it more zealously or more eloquently than Thomson."³⁹ The 1868 Ordnance Survey map has a remarkable reference to Thomson. The poet's garden, re-designed by "Capability" Brown after his death, is shown in some detail. Where Thomson's alcove stood there is the above-mentioned inscription: "Here Thomson sang the seasons and their change". No "James", no "poet", no dates of birth and death, just "Thomson". A hundred and twenty years after his death, that is, truly, fame!⁴⁰

The poet's beloved garden, with its shady bower, is long gone: today the only link with the past is a blue plaque.⁴¹ It is unfortunate that he should now be remembered mainly for a jingoistic anthem. However, on a board in Pembroke Lodge Gardens on Richmond Hill there is a poetic tribute to Thomson, by John Heneage Jesse (1851), that serves his memory better:-

Ye who from London's smoke and turmoil fly,
 To seek a purer air and brighter sky,
 Think of the Bard who dwelt in yonder dell
 Who sang so sweetly what he loved so well,
 Think, as ye gaze on these luxuriant bowers
 Here Thomson loved the sunshine and the flowers.
 He who could paint in all their varied forms,
 April's young blooms, December's dreary storms,
 By yon fair stream, which calmly glides along
 Pure as his life, and lovely as his song,
 There oft he roved. In yonder churchyard lies
 All of the deathless Bard that ever dies,
 For here his gentle spirit lingers still
 In yon sweet vale – on this enchanted hill;
 Flinging a holier int'rest o'er the grove,
 Stirring the heart to poetry and love,
 Bidding us prize the favourite scenes he trod,
 And view in Nature's beauties, Nature's God.⁴²

¹ James Thomson, "Rule Britannia", 1740

² James Sambrook, ODNB article on Thomson.

³ Morel, 1895 [my translation].

⁴ Johnson, 1781.

⁵ Johnson, *Rasselas*, 1759.

⁶ Warton, 1782.

⁷ Thomson, "Summer", lines 282-285, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

⁸ Grant, 1951.

⁹ Thomson, "Summer", lines 1654-1656, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

¹⁰ Thomson, "Summer", lines 1433-1441, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

¹¹ Quoted in Mavis Batey et al., *Arcadian Thames*, 1994.

¹² <https://manchesterartgallery.org/explore/title/?mag-object-8367>

¹³ William Wordsworth, "June 1820".

¹⁴ Walpole, 1780.

¹⁵ Warton, 1782.

¹⁶ Defoe, 1724-27.

¹⁷ Grant, 1951. See also Alicia Amherst, *History of gardening in England*, 1895: "Thomson, in his *Seasons*, called up pictures which gardeners and architects of the day strove to imitate"; and Henry A. Bears, *A history of English romanticism in the 18th century*, 1968: "It is not perhaps giving undue credit to Thomson to acknowledge him as, in great measure, the father of the national school of landscape gardening".

¹⁸ <http://faculty.bsc.edu/jtatter/seasons.html> (has an illustration). This passage actually refers to Hagley Park.

¹⁹ Thomson, "Spring", lines 909-918, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

²⁰ Thomson, "Summer", lines 94-103, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747. N.B. "philosophic" here means scientific.

²¹ Thomson, "Spring", lines 564-571, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

²² Johnson, 1781.

²³ Thomson, "Spring", lines 446-451, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747.

²⁴ Thomson, "Summer", lines 663-671, *The Seasons*, revised ed. 1747. N.B. Pomona is the Roman goddess of fruit trees. "The night the massy locust sheds" refers to the shade shed by a massive locust tree, either the West Indian locust (*Hymenaea courbaril*) or the Mediterranean carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*). The "Indian fig" is the tropical banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) that can spread to cover an acre of ground.

²⁵ *Record of Richmond Lodge no. 2032*, 1934 (Richmond Local Studies collection). Thomson was initiated (by Richard Savage) on 9th September (Sambrook, 1991) and Frederick on 5th November (Library & Museum of Freemasonry).

²⁶ Gerrard, 1994.

²⁷ Desmond, 2007.

- ²⁸ There is a sketch by Francis Hayman (c.1750-51, i.e. just before Frederick's death) depicting "the Muses paying homage to Frederick Prince of Wales and Princess Augusta" with putti playing music, singing and dancing, and artists presenting the enthroned royal couple with a plan for a new academy of arts (sketch held at Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter).
- ²⁹ Joan Coutu in Harris & Snodin, 1996.
- ³⁰ Harris, 1970.
- ³¹ Harris, 1970.
- ³² Cunningham, 1830.
- ³³ These statues appear on Burton's original drawings (RBG Kew Archives).
- ³⁴ A brass plaque in memory of Thomson was donated in 1792 by David Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan, and can still be seen on the north side of the west wall.
- ³⁵ Illustration at <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/feist/21.html>
- ³⁶ Murdoch, 1799.
- ³⁷ Elizabeth Eger, ODNB article on Boscawen. This summerhouse has similarities to one designed by Thomson's friend, William Kent, for the Kew estate (William Chambers, *Plans, elevations, sections and perspective views of the gardens and buildings at Kew*, 1763). Perhaps one of them was inspired by the other.
- ³⁸ Garnet, 1896.
- ³⁹ http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41164/41164-h/41164-h.htm#Page_237.
- ⁴⁰ Thomson's former garden is at the time of writing a car park for Richmond Royal Hospital. However, the site is to be developed for housing and that area is due to become a garden again.
- ⁴¹ The surviving building is Grade II listed: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1193875>. See planning application heritage statement: <https://images.richmond.gov.uk/iam/IAMCache/2768667/2768667.pdf>.
- ⁴² LBRUT: <https://www.richmond.gov.uk/services/libraries/branch-libraries/local-studies-collection/local-history-notes/james-thomson>. Robert Burns in 1791 wrote an *Address To The Shade Of Thomson* that ends:- "So long, sweet Poet of the Year,/ Shall bloom that wreath thou well hast won,/While Scotia with exulting tear,/Proclaim that Thomson was her son!"

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