

JAMES :  
THOMSON

BY  
WILLIAM  
BAYNE :

FAMOUS  
•SCOTS•  
•SERIES•

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## P R E F A C E

ONE or two points of some fresh interest on the life and work of Thomson, directly due to the revived attention which at the present hour is bestowed upon this poet, have come under my notice since this volume was in type.

The first of these concerns the opinion of Mr Gosse on the eighteenth century renaissance. In Mr Gosse's recently published study on *Modern English Literature* he gives a much more important and, as I think, a juster value to the work of Thomson in relation to this movement than he does in his essay on Gray, to which I refer in my introductory chapter. "It was Thomson," he says in his last book, "who made the first resistance to the new classical formula, and it is, in fact, Thomson who is the real pioneer of the whole romantic movement, with its return to Nature and simplicity." Further on he adds:—"His extraordinary freshness, his new outlook into the whole world of imaginative life, deserve a very different recognition from what is commonly awarded to him." This verdict, coming from a critic of the high qualifications of Mr Gosse, is a remarkable bit of testimony in the wide approbation which has of late years been pronounced upon the poet of *The Seasons*.

Another matter of considerable moment just now with

respect to Thomson's work is the question as to whether Pope collaborated with him in the final revision of *The Seasons*. In *Notes and Queries* for November 13, 1897, Mr Tovey published a statement supplementary to his discussion of Pope's copartnership with Thomson in the recension of his chief poem; but I do not find that he has adduced any new evidence in favour of Pope's share in the task. The fact that Pope seems to have altered a few lines in the MS. of Aaron Hill's *Athelwold* lends no authority whatever to the credibility of his having revised Thomson's poem. In brief, this problem still remains exactly as it is left in the following pages.

Much obscurity surrounds Thomson's early career in London; and, although I have sought to make clearer this part of his life, there must always be a good deal of conjecture in the case. The Rev. Dr Mair, Southdean, a recognised authority on Thomson's biography, has very kindly communicated with me on the difficulty, and, while apparently inclining to the view that Thomson's "design" in going to London was to take orders in the Church of England, Dr Mair agrees with me that the poet's second intention was to return to his original studies in the Church of Scotland.

EDINBURGH, *January* 1898.

To

JAMES A. MANSON, Esq.

WITH MUCH ESTEEM, AND IN PLEASANT REMEMBRANCE OF  
SOME HOURS CONJOINTLY GIVEN TO THE POETS, THIS  
VOLUME IS DEDICATED BY HIS OBLIGED FRIEND  
THE AUTHOR

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# JAMES THOMSON

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY. EARLY SCOTTISH POETRY OF NATURE

'IF I were asked,' remarks Matthew Arnold in his *Study of Celtic Literature*, 'if I were asked where English poetry got these three things—its turn for style, its turn for melancholy, and its turn for natural magic, for catching and rendering the charm of Nature in a wonderfully new and vivid way, I should answer, with some doubt, that it got much of its turn for style from a Celtic source; with less doubt, that it got much of its melancholy from a Celtic source; with no doubt at all, that from a Celtic source it got nearly all its natural magic.' Arnold, with his altogether exceptional insight into any matter whatever connected with poetry, supports his contention with perfect convincingness. He would have encountered a task not less hard had he set himself to solve the problem why Scottish poetry supplies so much of what he includes in his third division of the special debt of English Literature to the Celtic genius. How does it happen that Scottish poetry possesses a very great deal that is first-rate on the theme of outward Nature, while English poetry, at least until the time of Wordsworth,

furnishes so slight, if precious, a collection of verse of this description? The predominant influence of the Celtic element in Scotland will not be found sufficient to account for it. Ossian, the bard of *Woody Morven* and *Echoing Sora*, had undoubtedly the delicate magic and ærial brightness in his treatment of Nature to which Arnold refers. But this fact does not go far to explain the prevalent and deep sympathy in the interpretation of the outward world which so characterises the whole of Scottish poetry, especially that of its early writers.

A certain paradoxical view of Leigh Hunt's might be vainly grasped at by the unhistorical reader as offering a clue to unravel the mystery. In inquiring for a reason to determine why the Caledonian showed a more widely-spread faculty of song than the Southron, Hunt came to the conclusion that the Northerner was driven by the utter antithesis of pleasure in his surroundings to the enticing cultivation of the muse. His love of outward Nature, therefore, if this view were to be adopted, would logically result from untoward climatic conditions. One link in the argument, however, would be wanting. The Scot, if he has not the best of climates, is, at all events, favoured with beautiful scenery, an inspiration that of itself might aptly rouse him to its praise in song. Any sort of serious acceptance of Hunt's theory thus avails nothing. The question derives further complication from the circumstance that most of the early Scottish writers who delighted in depicting landscape were not dwellers in the midst of the most picturesque districts of their native land. Not the Highlands, but the Lowlands, was the soil from which

they sprung. Ossian himself meets telling rivalry from several Lowland compatriots in point of natural description. Yet a solution of the difficulty, though not an absolutely definite one, is possible.

The intense perception of the beauty of Nature evinced by the early Scottish poets is admittedly Celtic in character. Especially does this manifest itself in the love of colour. The descriptions of Gawin Douglas, says Mr Stopford Brooke, blaze like an Oriental monarch. In what manner are we to trace the existence of this Celtic influence? It seems to be fairly well settled by the conjecture that this delight in the outward world was a legacy left by the Celtic blood among the English of the Lowlands. The old kingdom of Strathclyde held both Celt and Saxon within its borders, extending as it did from Wales to the Clyde, and taking in part of the Lowlands and the more western parts of Northern England. The peculiar power of observing Nature, and delight in describing her, probably crept in from Strathclyde, and there was thus retained, in the Lowland mind, after the Celtic inhabitants had lost their individuality or passed away, this passion of man for the world of phenomena beyond him.

English literature developed the like quality in Chaucer ; but this was not so direct nor so dominant. In English poetry, too, the characteristic was lost for many a day, until nobly revived by Spenser and Shakespeare, and a few of the Elizabethan dramatists. During the interval Scottish poetry was marked by a regular sequence of writers, whose work displayed unflinching enjoyment in the charm of Nature. In England, after

Milton, and, it may be added, the author of *Britannia's Pastorals*, no fine poetical fruit of this kind made its appearance. The field again became comparatively sterile and bleak. The Restoration ushered into literature in the main the fancy for keeping exclusively to the comedy of social affairs, and amusement enough and to spare was thereafter to be obtained from the witty and carefully-finished verse of Dryden, Congreve, and Pope.

A tendency to artificiality, and ultimately sheer pettiness of sentiment, became the almost direct consequence of such writing. Life itself suffered under this narrowing and particular view of looking at the world. A reaction was bound to come, and it very shortly did so. Men had to be taught to think somewhat more soberly, more broadly and freshly. Two schools of literary instructors undertook this revival, and reaped success. The one, that of satire, was most notably represented by Swift and Mandeville. The other, that of a deliberate and decided return to the consideration of Nature, both in life and art, had for its pioneer James Thomson. No explanation of the romantic renaissance of the eighteenth century bears adequate interpretation apart from him. Gray, in his cloistered seclusion, felt the stir of the movement inaugurated by Thomson, and was an almost unconscious exponent of the new creed. Burns, Cowper, Wordsworth, all doubtless would have had their say, quite independently of the fresh influence breathed into English literature by the author of *The Seasons*; but he assuredly was the protagonist in an achievement which would have been sadly incomplete without him.

With perfect admission of the excellence of Thomson's

contemporaries, who dealt with the poetry of external Nature, it may be urged with fairness that his supremacy in this respect has not always been recognised as it ought. Vague speculation on the romantic revival of the eighteenth century often contents itself with the opinion that Gray or Cowper in England, and Rousseau, were the responsible leaders in this direction. These names, it may be conceded, bulk more largely in a general estimate than does the reputation of Thomson. Yet it must be remembered that it was thirty years after Thomson's best work appeared that Rousseau published his *New Heloise*, probably induced thereto in some degree by the example of Montesquieu, who imported into France the prevailing English devotion to Nature. Nor does Gray or Cowper, praiseworthy as is the thought of each in this relation, command the first position in time as an expounder of the revival of Nature in literature. Mr Gosse curiously overlooks this in his monograph on Gray in *English Men of Letters*. More than once he refers to the author of the *Elegy*, as if he, and he only, were the discoverer of the modern world of delight in the picturesque. Gray, it will be generally granted, felt the fascination of Nature in a marked degree, and did much to forward the poetical interest which culminated in Wordsworth. Still, he was by no means the first of modern writers to do so.

When we consider that a work so important as *The Seasons*, embodying a poetical exposition of the facts of the external world at once various and comprehensive, had appeared nearly ten years before the date of an early letter of Gray's, which Mr Gosse believes to contain 'the first modern feeling of the picturesque,'

the verdict of that usually excellent critic seems to be open to the charge of prejudice or something equally reprehensible. Again, it is true that during Gray's Continental tour he gave undoubted evidence of his sincere appreciation of the scenery of his travels, in language both beautiful and eloquent, whereas Thomson, in the same circumstances, was silent, or nearly so, displaying, indeed, absence of a feeling of enthusiasm. But the author of *The Seasons* all the same forestalled the rapt admiration to which Gray gave utterance in his journey through the impressive surroundings of the Grande Chartreuse. The Alps certainly found a new interpreter, but the wildness and awe of Nature had already been fitly celebrated by Thomson. Here we get no novelty of observation on the part of Gray, though it is very finely expressed. 'I own,' Gray writes to West, 'I have not, as yet, anywhere met with those grand and simple works of art that are to amaze one, and whose sight one is to be the better for; but those of Nature have astonished me beyond expression. In one little journey up to the Grande Chartreuse I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation that there was no restraining; not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry.' Finally, the delight which Gray experienced in his visit to the Lake country was of the most genuine and exalted kind, and he narrated what he saw in a style that is classical in its keen and sterling power of presentation. One cannot, however, subscribe to Mr Gosse's dictum that he showed in his correspondence on the subject that he had 'an eye for Nature which was then

without a precedent in modern literature.' The defects of Thomson, whatever they be, lie not in his power of observation.

His most formidable competitor, in truth, in the claim to leadership in the Nature renaissance of his day is in downright justice none other than Allan Ramsay, who, when Thomson was yet a tacit (or an unheard) worshipper at the shrine of his life's adoration, published *The Gentle Shepherd*, the first far-sounding note of modern nature poetry. The tribute which Burns, a competent critic, pays to Ramsay on this head, argues with some power for the recognition of Ramsay as the first writer in modern English literature whose literary bias was at variance with that of the established order.

'Thou paints auld nature to the nines  
In thy sweet Caledonian lines ;  
Nae gowden stream thro' myrtle twines  
Where Philomel,  
While nightly breezes sweep the vines,  
Her griefs will tell !'

But Ramsay's view of Nature while true was also limited. It was but the 'scanty plot of ground' of the pastoral poet. The distinction belongs of right to Thomson of seeking to expound the phenomena of Nature with absolute earnestness and in variety. His versatility alone gives him the palm. He has no rival either in his outlook or attainment. Prior, Dyer, and Collins, all writers of more or less note belonging to the same period, were visibly in touch with the preceding literary age. Even from any one of them cannot be altogether dissociated the satirical allusion to the pastoral equipment of such versifiers as Ambrose Philips and Lady Winchelsea,

as consisting in 'the crook, the pipe, and the kid.' Collins, in his third eclogue, has the excruciating line—

'Each bore a crook all rural in her hand.'

Looked at in the light of similar work, both before and after, in comparison with that of Virgil or Wordsworth (if not of such rare quality as the work of these masters), the poetry of Thomson holds a place unique and transcendent in the verse of his epoch.

The scope of the present volume does not call for any special speculative consideration of the expression of man's sympathy with the outward world. Thomson's position as an interpreter is, at any rate, clear enough. Criticism has adequately settled the source and character of man's passion for the external world. This interest has been minutely analysed into various sections. The first is that which arises from the mere state of agreeable sensation. The second and third may be called utilitarian, being the expression of man's pleasure in the rich pasture or the fertile field. The fourth stage is that of pure love of Nature for itself, the satisfaction of the æsthetic faculty. This is the feeling in Homer and in all poetry where the writers are face to face with the fresh, unalloyed excitement of the natural world. The ballads reflect it perfectly. The fifth view reaches a higher stage than any of the former. This may be described as the Greek feeling. It represents a yearning for something beyond Nature, for a fusion of the visible with the Invisible. It includes also the symbolical manner of Wordsworth. Sensuous as any one of the conceptions of Nature, it goes further than any in endeavouring to give voice or character to Nature as being in some fashion of harmonious relation-

ship with man. The Greeks best typify this class of thinkers with their acute sensibility to the beauty and mystery of Nature, and their complete identification of her activities with human interest and emotion. Schiller understood this above most when he described

‘The fair humanities of old religion,  
The power, the beauty, and the majesty,  
That had their haunts in dale, or piny mountain,  
Or forest by slow stream, or pebbly spring.’

Wordsworth signalises a more advanced stage of this symbolical view. Natural description to Wordsworth amounted to little. *The Excursion*, nominally descriptive, is only diversified by ‘sunny spots of greenery,’ curiously few and far between; the poem takes its rank chiefly because of the searching natural metaphysic with which it is permeated and infused from the first line to the last. Nature to Wordsworth has its fascination as revealing an Invisible Power, in whose Presence abides the ultimate grandeur or beauty of man’s reverence. Thomson’s conception of Nature is much more objective. He combines the simplicity of observation seen in early poet and balladist with that of the philosophical and contemplative thinker. Believing Nature to be the expression, even the embodiment of a Power beyond her, he does not, at the same time, so to speak, energise his metaphysical idea as Wordsworth did. With Thomson there is Nature and there is God. He never becomes purely pantheistic. The work of the two poets, therefore, radically at one, proceeds under different conditions. Thomson approaches Nature from the æsthetic side, Wordsworth from that of philosophy. Both set forth in serious and impressive lan-

guage the fact of Nature as a grand revelation, as a vesture of the Divine. With both beauty is truth, truth beauty. Their accomplishment is alike noble, sincere, and gracious. Of their work, if of any, it may assuredly be expected, what was once declared regarding Nature poetry: 'It redeems from decay the visitations of the Divinity in man.'

It is impossible to discuss the work of Thomson without particular reference to the long list of Scottish writers who preceded him in his especial vein. The similitude, it is true, is one of hidden sympathy rather than of direct obligation. Thomson's reading does not appear to have been based in any degree upon previous writers of his own nationality. Spenser, Milton, and Shakespeare were favourite authors, and it is to these authorities that there may be traced much of his literary adherence. Even more than by these was he probably swayed by the splendid example of Virgil. The *Georgics* above all, formed, it would seem, a select part of his early studies. In the preface to the second edition of *Winter*, he fully acknowledges the inspiration gained from the 'rural Virgil,' who wrote 'so inimitably,' and he translates one passage from the *Georgics* in evidence of his keen appreciation of the work of the great Latin pastoral writer. Comment and aptness of rendering as well display unmistakable enthusiasm. 'Who can forbear,' he says, 'joining with him in this declaration of his, which has been the rapture of ages?—

' Me may the Muses, my supreme delight !  
Whose priest I am, smit with immense desire,  
Snatch to their care ; the starry tracts disclose,  
The sun's distress, the labours of the moon :

Whence the earth quakes : and by what force the deeps  
Heave at the rocks, then on themselves reflow :  
Why winter-suns to plunge in ocean speed :  
And what retards the lazy summer-night.  
But, least I should these mystic truths attain,  
If the cold current freezes round my heart,  
The country me, the brooky vales may please  
'Mid woods, and streams unknown.'

It is somewhat curious that the old ballad literature of the Borders, wherein there ever glows a love of Nature fresh and bright as the sunshine, seems to have had no prominent place in the esteem of Thomson. Possibly he read and enjoyed the native lore of his country-side, but no evidence can be adduced to show that he did. Perhaps temperament had something to do with it. A man's studies take their due course, just as the wind bloweth where it listeth. Hamilton of Bangour, a close contemporary of Thomson's, wrote in complete accord with the old ballad spirit, catching up skilfully its romance and its very tone. But Hamilton, we know, like his namesake of Gilbertfield, carried himself 'bauld and gay,' while Thomson was never in his life aught but the contemplative and observant student.

This will so far explain his apparent lack of familiarity with the traditional literature of the Borders. His obvious isolation from the rest of the great Scottish singers of the world of Nature bears plainer explanation. It was probably unavoidable. The revival of early Scottish literature dates from recent times. The old language was a species of dead letter to the eighteenth century reader. Besides, even were the volumes not literally sealed, they might not always be accessible. The broad and sometimes

Rabelaisian sentiments of Dunbar and Lyndesay, at all events, were likely to be outside the pale of the scantily furnished library shelves of the minister of Southdean.

The rich product prepared by the forerunners of Thomson, the greatest name of Scottish, perhaps of British, writers of descriptive poetry, may be briefly surveyed. The consideration takes us back to the earliest romances, to "Sir Tristrem" and the work of Thomas of Ercildoune, with their clear landscapes, haunted by elfin dwellers. Whether in fairyland or on the Eildon slopes, true Thomas never loses the sight or memory of the soft Border scenery. Vivid glimpses gleam out entrancingly in his story.

‘ And see not ye that bonnie road  
That winds about the fernie brae?  
That is the road to fair Elfland,  
Where thou and I this night maun gae.’

The martial ardour of Barbour cannot reasonably delay over anything of a subordinate character, and Henry the Minstrel and his coadjutors were in like case. But in the *King's Quair* we reach a true sense of the attractiveness of garden and field, as well as full capacity to describe them. Here was truly one

‘ Wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion,’

who gazed with such wistfulness through his prison window on May leaf and flower at Windsor. Sympathy of a perfectly Scottish strain his may not be; the influence of Chaucer, indeed, is to be noted without dubiety in the

work of James I.; but original insight does not fail. His poem, in fact, strikes the first throbbing chord of the music of Scottish poetry of Nature, which in the years to follow was to sound with such diverse and brilliant effects. Henryson's pastoral gift was of the truest. His outlook is wide and free, and the freshness of wood and hill breathes in his verse. *Robene and Makyne* comes into the midst of the reflective literature of his day, like a touch of Spring. Professor Veitch acutely points out that to Henryson is due the merit of having anticipated all others in introducing with felicity into his verse graphic traits from the scenery of his native land. His imagination dwelt within native limits, and rejoiced to glorify the beauty and the richness of Nature at his own doors. With Dunbar we reach the grand climacteric in the work of early Scottish poets of Nature. A man of masculine, as well as tender feeling, and a poet of great variety of power, Shakespearian in breadth except in the almost inevitable deficiency in expression of the passion of love, Dunbar now receives general acknowledgment as one of the foremost of Scottish poets. Potent imagination in his case lifts his descriptions beyond those of his forerunners or immediate followers. He draws a broad, comprehensive, and finished picture. His details are true, vivid, and exact. His colouring is bold, even splendid. He reflects the intense love of colour of the pre-Raphaelites in painting, with something of their idealism, but none of their rigidity of workmanship. Dunbar takes most concern, as was generally the case with the early Scottish poet, in the glories of Summer, and the luxuriance of his delineations is here specially noticeable. The following

description reveals an original and hitherto unapproached mastery :—

Doun throu the ryce<sup>1</sup> a ryvir ran with stremys,  
 So lustily agayn thai lykand<sup>2</sup> lemys<sup>3</sup>  
 That all the lake as lamp did leme<sup>4</sup> of licht,  
 Quhilk schadowit all about with twynkling glemis ;  
 That bewis<sup>5</sup> bathit war in fecund bemys  
 Throu the reflex of Phebus visage brycht ;  
 On every side the hegeis raise on hicht,  
 The bank was grene, the bruke was full of bremys,<sup>6</sup>  
 The stanneris<sup>7</sup> clere as stern in frosty nycht.

The cristall air, the sapher firmament,  
 The ruby skyes of the orient,  
 Kest beriall bemes on emerant bewis grene ;  
 The rosy garth depaynt and redolent,  
 With purpur, azure, gold, and goul<sup>8</sup> is gent<sup>9</sup>  
 Arayed was, by Dame Fflora the quene,  
 So nobily that joy was for to sene ;  
 The roch<sup>10</sup> agayn the ryvir resplendent  
 As low<sup>11</sup> enlumynit all the leves schene.'

Gawin Douglas, in the prologues to his translation of Virgil—transcripts which received the approbation of Scott in *Marmion* in the sincere flattery of imitation—well sustained the merit of the Scottish school of Nature poetry. Douglas has, not unjustly, been charged with indefiniteness and lack of selection in his materials. All is made too much of equal importance ; and the writer fails by indiscriminate prominence of details. A description of a natural scene by Douglas partakes in undue measure of the manner of a catalogue. But his observation is sure and acute, and he revels in the colours,

<sup>1</sup> brushwood.<sup>2</sup> grateful.<sup>3</sup> rays.<sup>4</sup> sparkle.<sup>5</sup> boughs.<sup>6</sup> rapids.<sup>7</sup> pebbles.<sup>8</sup> gules.<sup>9</sup> fair.<sup>10</sup> rock.<sup>11</sup> flame.

in the sounds and fragrances of Scottish landscape, with unabated zest. His work is deficient alone in the artist's susceptibility to form.

The work of one other Northern writer before the time of Ramsay and Thomson is memorable. The picturesqueness of the ballads reappears in the resonant and musical verse of Alexander Montgomery, author of *The Cherrie and the Slae* and *Hey now the Day Dawis*. Montgomery could transfer almost the very brightness and aroma of the world of Nature into his pages. The second of his poems just mentioned, the structure of which he borrowed from an old popular song, owes nothing to acquired art for its charm of fancy. The lyric is as fresh and sparkling as a dewdrop. In the presence of so much outshining and spirited poetical production as Scottish poetry has to offer from writers with whom Nature is so ardent a passion, it is easier to apprehend with some fitness the fervent, almost solemn, adjuration of Beattie :—

‘O how canst thou renounce the boundless store  
Of charms which Nature to her votary yields?  
The warbling woodland, the resounding shore,  
The pomp of groves and garniture of fields;  
All that the genial ray of morning yields,  
And all that echoes to the song of even;  
All that the mountain's sheltering bosom shields,  
And all the dread magnificence of heaven,  
O how canst thou renounce, and hope to be forgiven?’

The part which the author of *The Seasons* played in bringing home the influence of boon Nature in its æsthetic conception was a most signal one; one, indeed, the most eminent and suggestive in any litera-

ture. This is avouched not only by the growing attention to his work in our own country, but by the renewed interest which it has aroused of late years on the Continent. When studies of the poet so scholarly and luminous as those of Dr Schmeding, in Germany, and Dr Morel, in France, have been produced by way of elucidation of his art, we have strong corroboration of the gathering increase of his fame.

## CHAPTER II

### BOYHOOD AND EDUCATION. AT EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY

JAMES THOMSON was born on 7th September 1700. No record exists as to the exact date of the month, and it is sometimes given as the 11th. From the fact that he was baptised on the 15th, it is premised with some probability that the former date is the correct one. The poet was the son of the Rev. Thomas Thomson, minister of Ednam, in Roxburghshire. The name of his mother, who was related to the titled family of Home, was Beatrix Trotter. There were nine children, of whom James Thomson was the fourth. Four of the family, Andrew, Alexander, Isabel, and James were born at Ednam. The others, John, Jane, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Mary, had for their place of nativity the manse of Southdean, a parish lying to the south of Ednam, in the same county, whither the Rev. Mr Thomson went to minister on receipt of a call, the poet being then an infant of two months.

Evidently Mr Thomson was popular as a preacher and pastor, for other two charges, those of Castleton and Morebattle, also in the neighbourhood, were within his power to accept at this time. He could not well have been allured by wealth of emolument to Southdean, his stipend there being only a trifle better than

that of Goldsmith's village pastor, namely, £60 a year. In this parish he was to pass the next eighteen years of his life, and here the poet's imagination was to be nourished on village and rural scenes, with which he was afterwards in part to inform his verse. Authorities agree in ascribing the poet's best hereditary gifts to his mother, who is said to have been a person of uncommon natural endowment, 'possessed of rare social and domestic virtues, with an imagination for vivacity and warmth scarce inferior to that of her son, and which raised her devotional exercises to a pitch bordering on enthusiasm.' But his father, too, had very high qualities. An esteemed clergyman, the poet himself designates him 'a good and tender-hearted parent.'

At Southdean young Thomson found a congenial soil for his poetic upbringing. The parish lies on a pleasant slope some eight miles north of the Cheviots, at the Scottish extremity of Chevy Chase, retaining even to this day a considerable amount of its former simplicity of appearance and of its pastoral remoteness. It was the ancient region of the Douglasses, the Armstrongs, the Scotts, and other renowned Border clans. In the village of Southdean, on the spot, tradition says, which now forms the site of the parish churchyard, the army of the Scots met under Douglas, previous to the battle of Otterbourne. But all warlike relics and interests had long disappeared in Thomson's day. It is, indeed, solely from its natural characteristics that the district speaks of the poet.

In the case of a writer like Thomson a survey of his early environs is of decided value. Most eminent

writers about nature—Wordsworth, Tennyson, Richard Jefferies are striking instances—illustrate their work nearly as much from reminiscence as from actual observation in later life. This holds regarding Thomson. The student of his poetry is happily situated in an enquiry of the sort. The scenery of Southdean to-day differs in no material respect from its condition in the early part of last century. What Thomson saw and remarked may yet be noted from the very standpoint which the young poet occupied. The modern manse is built where stood the old one. A little to the left flows the ‘silver Jed’ on its way to join the Tweed, whose ‘pastoral banks,’ Thomson relates, first echoed to his Doric measures. Carter Fell and the Cheviot range tell of his conceptions of mountain scenery. Near to his home lies Swinnie Moor, a likely spot for the veritable enactment of his tragical episode of the perishing shepherd. Mr Logie Robertson, whose critical writings on Thomson have done much of late years to raise the poet to his just place as a British classic, points out in his *Furth in Field* the wonderfully accurate reproductions made in *The Seasons* from the surroundings at Southdean. He says: ‘The parish of Southdean either itself furnishes, or is the platform from which one may behold, the fugitive originals of scores of Thomson’s well-known scenes. Sometimes he elaborates, not seldom he idealises, but in numerous instances he has simply lifted the scene from Southdean and laid it in his *Seasons*, with as much apparent ease and completeness as one transfers a rare flower or fern-leaf to his portfolio.’

A circumstance of very curious interest also bearing

upon Thomson's early associations deserves to be added here. A careful observer has put it on record that the scenery round Mantua has in summer no inconsiderable resemblance to that of Southdean. The close sympathy which Thomson ever experienced with the 'Mantuan swain' takes a fresh suggestiveness from the existence of this agreeable particular, and it may well be, as has been thought, that 'the spirit which pervades the *Georgics* and the kindred spirit which animates *The Seasons* found their common bent, their inspiration and aspiration, from early and close acquaintance with scenery similar in beauty, variety, and the charm of pastoral repose.'

About the year 1712, young Thomson went to school at Jedburgh, the school being then held in the aisle of the Parish Church. We hear little or nothing of the poet's attainments or behaviour as a schoolboy. The general drift of opinion tends to the conclusion that he was not remarkably alert in his studies. One solitary and not especially noteworthy anecdote survives, which discloses, at least, an appreciation of humour in the young poet. His efforts to compass the intricacies of the classical grammarians drew from him the most unscriptural comment: 'Confound the Tower of Babel! If it had not been for the Tower of Babel, there would be no languages to learn.' Thomson's best education, no doubt, as it has been with others of intellectual note—with Scott, Macaulay, R. L. Stevenson—was got from his miscellaneous reading. He certainly was a great reader at some period of his youth, as may be inferred from the considerable body of learning in *The Seasons*. What

other mastery in scholarship he acquired was due to the Rev. Mr Riccaltoun, minister of Hobkirk, a parish adjacent to Southdean. Riccaltoun, who, with a bias to learning, had abandoned the profession of farming for that of the Church, was a man of unusual culture. Besides his short poem on *Winter*, regarding which Thomson himself declared that he owed to it a direct incitement to the composition of *The Seasons*, he published during his ministry at Hobkirk several works on theological subjects. For some reason they were issued anonymously during his lifetime; but a year or two after his death they were republished by his son, fully inscribed. They deal with exceedingly minute points of doctrine, the only deduction of material value that may be drawn from them being their obvious leaning to latitudinarian principle. An item of some little moment gleaned from the *Gentleman's Magazine* conveys the information that Riccaltoun's poem on *Winter* had its special origin in the writer's wish to commemorate an extraordinary fall of snow on the hill of Ruberslaw, which fronts the village of Hobkirk.

Riccaltoun helped Thomson in classics, and very likely induced him to try his hand at verse. His generous liking and support followed the poet to London. An extract from the session records of Hobkirk chronicles a gift of money to Thomson in January 1727, on the suggestion, it is stated, of Mr Riccaltoun, who was 'his patron and friend.'\* Gradually Thomson began to be famed for his precocity as a versifier. Sir William Bennet of

\* The sum paid was £1, 16s. Scots. These facts have been courteously stated to the writer by Mr Walter Deans, Hobkirk.

Chesters, distinguished in his day as a wit and poet, did much to stimulate his taste for verse. He was also at times a well-regarded guest of Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto, on whose estate two of Thomson's uncles were employed as gardeners. All such kindly encouragement could not fail to urge Thomson to the vigorous cultivation of his poetical taste. Evidently, too, the judgment of his generous advisers was not indiscriminating. Whatever he accomplished by way of poetical composition was evidently deemed a useful exercise and nothing more. Every year, at any rate, acting on a wise decision, native or otherwise, he consigned the effusions produced in the interval to the flames, the holocaust itself being celebrated in a seasonable rhyme.

Mr Goodhugh, of Portman Square, London, received from Lord George Graham a number of early poetical efforts of Thomson's, a survival of some less drastic era than that of which history informs us as above. Of most of them it has to be said that they might have followed their compeers without detriment to the repute of the author. Thomson, before he reached maturity, displayed no great promise as a poetical executant, the contrast in this respect between *Winter* and even the best of his previous productions being very marked. The collection of these juvenile pieces, which is stated to have been given by Thomson himself to Lord George Graham, numbers twenty-five in all. Included in it are the more ambitious pieces, *Upon Happiness*, and others composed during his stay at Edinburgh University. The best of the collection were afterwards printed by Sir Harris Nicolas in his Aldine edition of Thomson's works. Their re-

deeming feature is their genuine and elevated enthusiasm for Nature. *Lines on Marlefeld* and the rest reveal nothing beyond ordinary poetic skill; but Thomson was observing, if he was not yet attaining to any great accomplishment, and better results were to follow.

Thomson was intended by his parents for the office of a clergyman. With this profession in view he went in 1715 to study at Edinburgh University. According to tradition he was not at first enamoured of the prospects of study in the capital. He returned home very soon, before, it is said, his father's groom, who had accompanied him, both mounted on a single horse, to Edinburgh. He averred as his reason that he was convinced he could study with perfect satisfaction on the 'braes of Soudan' (the local term for Southdean). Other persuasion assured him to the contrary, and he went back to pursue his academic studies in due course.

Edinburgh, at the time when Thomson entered upon residence within its bounds as a student, was doubtless much stirred by civil and warlike matters. It was the year of the first Jacobite rebellion, and the town must have been perplexed in no slight measure over the military designs of Mar and his Highland host. The fight at Sheriffmuir was at hand, and speculation on the result would be rife at the very date of the young student's enrolment on the books of the University. On his interest in the matter, the whole history of his correspondence is silent. Nor even in the succeeding years of his student life does he refer at any time to events, fraught enough with excitement, which followed upon the war. The commission instituted by the Government

for the trial of 'certain traitors and of Popish recusants,' in the list of which were not a few of the nobility, comprising the Earls of Eglinton, Rosebery, Cassillis, Moray, Galloway, and others, held its sessions for some years continuously during the poet's University course. The last we hear of the Commission is in 1720. Moreover, one member of the Commission was no less a personage than Sir Richard Steele, who came crowned with literary fame to deal out justice against the enemies of his royal patron George I. The curiosity with which a literary aspirant like Thomson would remark so distinguished an ornament of letters as Steele would naturally be pronounced. That he had also much opportunity to do so during the first year's session of the Commission seems very possible. For Sir Richard Steele did not on this occasion, we are told, attend the business of the Commission, but gave his time to literary and other work, and a project for bringing fish 'alive and in good health to the metropolis.'

Another fact affords still better ground for the conjecture that Thomson may have seen Steele in Edinburgh. Steele, in the last of his visits to Edinburgh in 1720, was the guest of Mr Scott, the Professor of Greek in the University, and thus could hardly fail to be a figure familiar to the students. But no chronicle vouchsafes an authoritative opinion on the subject. And neither Commission nor its distinguished representative is noticed in any of the surviving correspondence of Thomson's University days. We may fancy that the world of action less attracted him than did that of learning and its kindred associations; here, in any case, we find that,

although not prominent in Edinburgh literary circles, he was not altogether uninterested or reserved.

The literary society of Edinburgh in the introductory quarter of last century was already assuming something of the Attic tone which it had wholly adopted in the time of Burns. Scholarship, poetry, and art were each being cultivated with assiduity and success. Learning, though not of the best or finest quality, was well represented by Dr Thomas Ruddiman; Hepburn of Keith and Dr Patrick Abercrombie were devotees of antiquarian research. Scottish poetry, little more than a 'wandering voice' since the death of Drummond of Hawthornden, now entered upon a fresh and prosperous career in the vivacious work of Allan Ramsay. The *Broadside*, which had been a fugitive publication of the preceding century, imprinted as the medium of famous poems like *Robene and Makyne*, and *The Thistle and the Rose*, had become modernised by the introduction of poems by Ramsay himself and others. Each new issue of this publication would be a literary attraction of itself in the limited round of reading available in Edinburgh at that date. Thomson, no doubt, shared in the general regard for Ramsay and his work, though there is no evidence that any sort of congenial affinity brought them together. Mallet, in part of his college correspondence, makes it plain that he had but a poor estimate of Ramsay, and this may have been the academic feeling which, at all times, tends to move but slowly in the wake of popular inclination. Yet Mallet was admitted as a contributor to the *Teatable Miscellany* of 1724, though no mention occurs of Thomson's name. The likelihood is that he was not

confident enough about his own powers, and as a consequence did not, in his University days, meet with the literary recognition that was his due ; while the less easily daunted and less scrupulous Mallet experienced no difficulty whatever on this score. As far as all evidence goes, Thomson carried his literary enthusiasm with him throughout his University life ; but either from sentiment or from compulsion (for his early poetical achievement is very slender) he confined its exercise to academic quarters. His correspondence of this date, to the extent in which it remains, offers sufficient warrant for the belief that he gave slight attention to the civic affairs, literary or otherwise, that were enacted round him ; what attention at least he did give to the literary and kindred affairs of the city was reflected from the peculiar and not unjoyous bounds of his own student circle which brought him most content.

A small group of students with literary ambitions, common enough in a Scottish University at any time, numbered Thomson as a representative member throughout his stay in Edinburgh. The most distinguished of the number, next to himself, was David Malloch (or Mallet, as he styled himself in England), with whom he was closely associated in poetical endeavour now and to the end of his life. The others with whom he was evidently most intimate were Patrick Murdoch, John Wilson, and John Cranston, all of whom became clergymen. Murdoch reached the greatest fame. He did valuable work in later life as biographer and editor of Thomson, and was one of the poet's intimate friends who were so happily drawn in his *Castle of Indolence*. Having

some prospect of advancement in the Church of England, he took holy orders, and settled near London about twelve years after the poet began his career in the Metropolis. He gained in the quiet of his country parsonage no little repute as a scholar. Of Wilson's later history nothing authentic is known. He was appointed to the charge of Maxton in Roxburghshire, and the chief reference made to him by Thomson in his London correspondence emphasises the good humour with which he dragged his way 'through the thorny paths of systems and school divinity.' Cranston, afterwards minister of Ancrum, is lost sight of afterwards in the greater intimacy between Thomson and his brother, Dr Cranston, who was the village doctor in Ancrum. The poet's friendly association with these fellow-students at Edinburgh University did not to all appearance lose in affectionate memory to the last. It was with Mallet, however, the ablest, if not the most estimable, of the four, that the poet was placed on terms of the nearest intellectual kinship. He joined with Mallet in literary contributions, produced under the direction of two clubs founded at the University, with a view to the promotion of intellectual accomplishments among the students, and in general regarded him with the greatest friendliness. Thomson's confidence in Mallet, whose business methods were not always of a commendable nature, can be understood only on the supposition that the untiring self-seeker had some redeeming points in his disposition after all. The son of poor parents, Mallet had for a time the inevitable hard fight during his University career. One legendary story, indeed, tells how his circumstances at one time were so mean, that he was com-

pelled to act as janitor at Edinburgh High School in order to eke out a living. This contingency seems most unlikely even for the traditionary impecunious Scottish student. A more plausible narrative states that he was present at the High School in the capacity of tutor or assistant-master. That Mallet was by no means ill-grounded in scholarship is readily inferred from his securing an appointment at the close of his University course as tutor to the sons of the Duke of Montrose. What we know of his ambitious characteristics in later years does not at all tend to confirm credence in the story of his janitorship.

The University literary clubs apparently found in Thomson a sympathetic, if not devoted, member. One of his poems, that *On the works and wonders of Almighty Power*, belonging to this period, inserted at a late date by Aaron Hill in the *Plain Dealer*, is there spoken of as the former production of a member of the 'Grotesque Club' at Edinburgh University. The editor adds the pleasing assurance that the aim of this society was 'a friendship that knows no strife, but that of a generous emulation to excel in virtue, learning, and politeness.' Hill quotes the words of a frequenter of the club. Unfortunately, there is good reason to believe that Thomson was not greatly appreciated in their exemplary body. According to Ramsay of Ochertyre he was voted 'a dull fellow.' But the rival society, the 'Athenian Club,' has handed down no such contemptuous estimate, and we can therefore fairly imagine that here the poet bore himself with more distinction. Under the auspices of the 'Athenian Club' appeared the *Edinburgh*

*Miscellany* to which Thomson contributed three poems. These were entitled *On a Country Life*, *Upon Happiness*, and *Verses on Receiving a Flower from his Mistress*. The only signature attached was 'T.,' but the pieces named formed part of the collection of his own juvenile poems, which the poet presented to Lord George Graham. The first edition of this publication is supposed by Mitford to have been issued in 1718. Mallet, who was also a contributor, did not, if we are to accept his own word for it, cherish very serious designs in verse. 'Poetry,' he declares about this time, 'gives me a sprightly turn of thinking and flocks the imagination into beautiful images that capacitate one for writing and talking agreeably.' This, in truth, crystallised an acute comment on his own powers, though he was not then, perhaps, fully conscious of his discernment.

An interesting and somewhat humorous letter to Dr Cranston, of 11th December 1720, bears testimony that with all his engrossing zeal as a literary aspirant, Thomson felt the isolation frequently peculiar to the denizen of a Scottish University; but he passes away from his complaint in a light-hearted and manly fashion. The letter concludes with some observations on a novelty in scientific experiment which had come under his notice, a species of interest maintained by him afterwards with more than a superficial sympathy.

In 1718, the fourth year of Thomson's attendance at the University, there occurred the sudden death of his father, attended, it was surmised at the time, by mysterious circumstances. The narrative of these circumstances as given by Mr Cranston, minister of Ancrum, partakes

largely of a legendary character, and carries the reader into the very midst of an atmosphere of old-world superstition. Thomson's father in the closing scene of his life acted a singular part in the movements of those superstitious beliefs which so widely affected Scotland even up to the beginning of the present century. He died suddenly during a solemn service which he had imposed upon himself, whereby he sought to exorcise a ghostly visitant supposed to haunt a mansion-house in his parish. The popular belief was that he was the victim of diabolical machination; and Cranston himself, though he only professes to interpret the popular idea, does not appear altogether convinced to the contrary. A wave of this superstitious folly, in fact, passed over the country during the year of Mr Thomson's tragical end. At Kinross, Calder, and Thurso there were exhaustive accounts of such startling manifestations. The dense mental obliquity that existed on the subject can now hardly be realised. We find, too, that in most of the instances just mentioned, ministers, who might, at least, have been supposed to have an intelligence superior to it, were actively concerned as in affairs of the most serious import. The Rev. Mr Wilkie of Calder, on a somewhat similar plan to that adopted by Thomson's father, held a religious service expressly to exorcise an evil spirit believed to infest his district. And all that then took place was rehearsed in sober faith by the minister of Inveresk to his friend Wodrow.\*

Cranston's narrative, of which the concluding sentences are here given, reads like a statistical report. He says:

\* See Chambers's 'Traditions of Edinburgh.'

'The sequel of the story I have heard, not at second-hand, out from the lips of a person, and that of rank and education above the vulgar. Mr Thomson, the father of the poet, in a fatal hour was prevailed upon to attempt laying the evil spirit. He appointed the diet of catechising at Woolie (Wolflee), the scene of the ghost's exploits, and beheld, when he had just begun to pray, a ball of fire strike him upon the head. Overwhelmed with consternation, he could not utter another word, or make a second attempt to pray. He was carried home to his house, where he languished under the oppression of diabolical malignity, and at length expired.'

This must be admitted to be a strange story. Had there been in those days a Society for Psychical Research the incident would undoubtedly have afforded a subject for clamant investigation. Whatever may have been the agency which proved fatal to the minister of Southdean, its effect was one of dramatic impressiveness. No stroke of apoplexy was ever involved in accompaniments so weird. Some attribute the poet's superstitious bias to this episode, but there is no proof of this. The awe of the supernatural in this connection, which is to be found in his poems, can be perfectly accepted as the outcome of artistic necessities.

On entering the Divinity Hall in 1719, Thomson did so under a new aspect of home life. By this time he had been joined in Edinburgh by his mother. Although left as a widow without any considerable means, she obtained the certainty of a regular income by the mortgage of a small estate, that of Widehope, near Southdean, belonging to her in her own right. On the

strength of this she forthwith went to reside in Edinburgh. Thomson's career at the Divinity Hall was apparently given up to the routine of study. He performed the necessary exercises up to May 1724. It was at the close of this year that the celebrated incident happened which affords some tangible reason for the abrupt change which he was about to make in his profession. Professor Hamilton, who occupied the Chair of Divinity, gave Thomson, as a subject either for a lecture or a sermon, a text from one of the Psalms. The result was a very poetical and ornate treatment of his theme. There have been ministers in the Church of Scotland both before and after Thomson who have not lacked poetical taste and have aptly utilised it in their prelections; others, too, it may be thought, both before and after him would have profited by a flavour of the same. But Mr Hamilton saw no merit in this line of exposition. According to Dr Johnson, he censured Thomson's dissertation as too 'flowery and redundant,' and went the length of stamping one expression as bordering on profanity. No doubt the criticism, well-meant as it was, caused a rankling dissatisfaction in Thomson, and, along with his irrepressible love for literature, had some cogent effect upon his almost immediate renunciation of the ministry in the Church of Scotland.

It is pretty certain that by this time Thomson, fairly cognisant of his own capacity, felt that the Church was not to be a congenial sphere. The chief motive for his abandonment of the Church as a profession is not dubious. He was not, it is true, despite the later

difficulties of Lyttelton on the subject of Thomson's faith, troubled by any sort of misgiving of a doctrinal kind; his religious faith was, upon the whole, perfectly orthodox. The lack of an elocutionary gift might have had something to do with it. Once during his reading of *Agamemnon* at a rehearsal he incurred the laughter of the actors by his faulty articulation; and on another occasion Dodington rebuked him for his maltreatment of one of his own poems that he was reading aloud. But the great influence in his choice of a literary career unmistakably arose from the feeling that there lay the work which he felt himself best fitted to undertake. He was doubtless buoyed up by a young man's hopefulness, the hopefulness which carried Johnson to fame and Chatterton to his death. We know that distrust of his literary ambition fell upon him not long after his settlement in London, and that he hesitated whether he should not after all depart from his original intention. Yet in Edinburgh his doubts were probably few. The chance of patronage in London, which he expected to have through Lady Grizel Baillie, a relative of his mother, may have given an impetus to his design. Furthermore, a copy of one of the best of his poetical pieces by-and-by fell into the hands of an eminent English lawyer—Mr Auditor Benson—whose encouraging verdict would be sure to go far to settle the young poet in his conviction. Mr Benson, after a perusal of Thomson's rendering of the 104th Psalm, a rendering characterised by dignity of treatment as well as by occasional real felicity of phrase, as of angels

‘Active and bright, piercing and quick as flame,’

or of the labourer who

‘ Home with content in the cool eve returns,’

uttered the pronouncement that if Thomson were in London ‘ his merits could not fail to be rewarded.’

Added to these hopes there was the stimulus from the prosperity of his friend Mallet, who had now passed a year or two in London with considerable success, carrying on the combined labours of tutor to the sons of the Duke of Montrose and that of an energetic man of letters. All these reasons fostered Thomson’s resolution to try his fortune as a writer. Accordingly he left Edinburgh for London in the Spring of 1725.

## CHAPTER III

### IN LONDON. PUBLICATION OF 'WINTER'

THERE is good reason to believe that Thomson reached London in February 1725. In a letter to Dr Cranston, dated 3rd April, he says that he was present at a performance of Southerne's play of *Oroonoko* at Drury Lane; and, as the only occasion on which that play was acted before Easter was 1st March, it amounts to something like a certainty that he arrived in London on or before 28th February. Thomson must then have left Edinburgh before the close of his last session at the Divinity Hall, setting aside any intention he may have had of going forward for license as a probationer of the Church. His true inclination lay, it may be fairly concluded, in quite another direction; and it doubtless cost him slight hesitation to enter upon the career which he preferred to follow.

One of the earliest of the accounts we get of his life in London is derived from his own letter to Dr Cranston mentioned above. This throws much interesting light on his first impressions of London, especially regarding the drama of the day. An occasional visit paid to Drury Lane brings out some careful and discerning criticism on the part of the poet. Crude as his notions of dramatic

representation must have been, entirely based as they were on tentative performances by amateurs or strolling English players in the Tennis Court at Holyrood, he speaks with much shrewd appreciation of the London actors of established repute. He was much struck with Booth as a tragedian. Among the comedians Norris pleased him most. Mrs Oldfield and Mrs Booth receive his cordial praise. He is, however, less flattering to Mrs Porter than her great reputation would seem to warrant, and varies from his maturer judgment as to her artistic capability. But the chief point of biographical note in this letter belongs to the introductory passages. Here we discover that Thomson has not felt that he has succeeded in his professional project just as rapidly as he could have wished. The remarks are these: 'I am almost out of humour at the letter I wrote for to Mr Elliott, since it so curtailed yours to me; I went and delivered it. He received me affably enough, and promised me his assistance, though at the same time he told me, which everyone tells me, that it will be prodigiously difficult to succeed in the business you know I design. However, come what will come, I shall make an effort, and leave the rest to Providence. There is, I am persuaded, a necessary fixed chain of things, and I hope my future, whatever it be, shall be linked to diligence and honesty.'

The robust ring of this declaration, with its interesting response to the faith in a directing 'divinity,' attests the intrinsic grit of Thomson's character. Beyond question he now experienced a position of much perplexity. To make his way to any purpose in literature,

he required an anchorage. What haven was he to seek? A good deal of speculation has been expended as to what Thomson actually means by the 'business you know I design.' There is in reality no enigma in the expression. He simply refers in the remark to his general purpose in coming to London in quest of a name in literature. What subordinate motive underlay this plan cannot be guessed so exactly. Perhaps he contemplated, through the help of his mother's relatives, the family of Home, a post in the service of the Government. It was the failure of some such prospect that now caused him concern. And he feels himself driven back, as we see in the same letter, upon his original profession as a clergyman.

Nichols, who supervised Murdoch's edition of the poet's works in 1849, discusses the matter at some length, and gives it as his opinion that Thomson now intended entering the Church of England.\* His argument is far from carrying conviction. It is founded chiefly on the consideration that Thomson's relatives on his father's side were great favourites with the Elliots of Minto, and that one of his cousins, having graduated at an English University, became, by means of the patronage of this family, rector of a parish in the North of England. This clergyman it was to whom Thomson alludes in his letter as having given him advice regarding his affairs. Mr Elliot was then on a visit to London. It is, of course, possible, though by no means certain, that the idea of Thomson's taking holy orders was considered at this inter-

\* The Poetical Works of James Thomson, with a Life of the Author by the Rev. Patrick Murdoch, D.D., F.R.S., and notes by Nichols. London: Tegg. 1849.

view; but an indefinite conversation of the kind is a frail buttress with which to prop so distinct a contention. The text of the letter, indeed, apart from the implied possibility of Thomson's return to the study of theology, in no degree supports the argument of Nichols. The writer says: 'Succeed or not, I firmly resolve to pursue divinity as the only thing now I am fit for. Now if I cannot accomplish the design in which I came up, I think I had best make interest and pass my trials here, so that if I be obliged soon to return to Scotland again, I may not return no better than I came away; and to be deeply serious with you, the more I see of the vanity and wickedness of the world I am more inclined to that sacred office.' The language sets forth with perfect lucidity that, in the event of his inability to attain to literary success, it is the writer's determination to resume his place in the ranks of the Scottish Church; to deduce any other meaning from it is to twist its natural construction. That Thomson may on some occasion have hazarded the expression of a desire to become a clergyman of the Church of England, is not, in the circumstances, outside of reasonable conjecture; but it was, in the light of all the proof, no deliberate resolution of his. His religious philosophy, indeed, can hardly be conceived as adapting itself freely to the strictly-defined theological system of the Church of England. His attitude with respect to the creeds was altogether, as with his friend Riccaltoun, in favour of a broad theology; and the toleration of this tendency of opinion he would naturally recognise as existing more strongly in Presbyterianism than in Episcopacy. The theory of Nichols, it is true, is not of recent origin. As

far back as the date of Johnson's life of the poet a report went abroad to the same effect ; and Boswell was commissioned to obtain information for Johnson on the point from one of the poet's sisters. Her answer carries with it much conclusiveness. She assured the inquirer that 'she never heard he had any intention of going into holy orders.' The balance of credibility decisively inclines to the absolute accuracy of this negative.

But Thomson secured a footing in London, and had not to return to Scotland. In July he was appointed tutor to Lord Binning's son, a child of five, and settled at East Barnet. This work he obtained on the recommendation of Lady Grizel Baillie, whose encouragement, extended to Thomson while at College, Murdoch ungraciously declares to have 'ended in nothing beneficial.' The engagement, although it was a 'low task,' as Thomson himself remarked, yet gained him a livelihood. It also brought him the attention and help of influential friends. The society in which the poet now mingled was adorned by not a few of the leaders in politics and letters, and a young, ambitious man, with ability on his side, was bound to have the best opportunities for wide recognition. In the drawing-room of Lady Grizel Baillie gathered such distinguished guests as her daughter, Lady Mary Murray, an accomplished friend of Pope, Lord President Forbes, the Duke of Argyle, the Earl of Burlington, and Sir Robert Walpole. Dr Arbuthnot, Pope, and Gay were also visitors. Most pleasant of all to Thomson, perhaps, was his introduction to the Scottish artist, William Aikman, whose friendship was most helpful and lasting. With such important backing, it is not to be

wondered at that Thomson ere long seriously set himself to the task of poetical composition with the aim of taking a place of mark on the roll of British poets.

In the meanwhile the home associations of the poet had suffered a grievous blow in the death of his mother. Her health, fragile since the terrible shock occasioned by the death of her husband, became wholly enfeebled simultaneously with her son's departure for London, and she died on 10th May. Thomson was deeply attached to her, and this affection declares itself very touchingly in the poetical tribute which was drawn from him by the event. In delicate pathos, as well as in beauty of expression, it holds unquestionable rank beside Cowper's tender elegy, *On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture*.

' Still, still is she my soul's divinest theme,  
The waking vision and the wailing dream !  
Amid the ruddy sun's enlivening blaze  
O'er my dark eyes her dewy image plays ;  
And in the dread dominion of the night  
Shines out again the sadly-pleasing sight.  
Triumphant virtue all around her darts,  
And more than volumes every look imparts ;  
Looks soft, yet awful, melting, yet serene,  
Where both the mother and the saint are seen.'

The whole poem is stamped with that elegiac quality by which he was yet to distinguish himself.

At East Barnet Thomson plainly was still in considerable doubt as to the actual means whereby he was to obtain a quite satisfactory competency. In the same letter in which he apprises Cranston of his appointment in Lord Binning's family, he utters another resolve to 'consummate my original study of divinity.' He goes on to say that 'the

business of a tutor is only precarious and for the present.' He speaks approvingly of the intention of Cranston's brother, John, who had abandoned medical study for that of divinity: 'If well pursued, it is as honourable, useful, and certain a method of living as one, in his or my circumstances, could readily fall into.' He somewhat deprecatingly alludes to his own ambitious departure from Scotland, upbraiding himself as having 'contemptible notions of things at home, and romantic ones of things abroad; perhaps I was too much affected that way, but I hope in the issue it shall not be worse for me.' Reference to Mr Riccaltoun, 'who deserves encouragement as much as any preacher in Scotland,' and to Sir William Bennet, and a desire for country news, abundantly testify that the poet's affection clung closely to the land of his nativity, and that he yet craved its reviving memories to cheer him in the turmoil of the struggle upon which he had so courageously, if not recklessly, entered in London.

The London literary world at the beginning of the reign of George II. was a brilliant one, and Burns hardly meditated so great a feat when he hoped to captivate Edinburgh with his rustic muse as did Thomson in his progress from the Divinity class-room to a sphere of work where Pope led the way. A glance at his contemporaries brings his position into relief. The great figures of the 'silver age' of Queen Anne had passed away; Dryden, Addison, and Prior died within the new century. But they left behind them a great tradition. Nor did some of their successors yield to them in greatness. Pope, Swift, and Gay flourished vigorously; and that wonderful

trilogy, the *Dunciad*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and the *Beggar's Opera*, was to be added to English literature at almost the same date as *The Seasons*. Thomson sought, therefore, to excel where excellence was of the most undeniable order, and the rapidity with which he won his way to a foremost place among so illustrious a band of writers in itself argues much for the inherent value of his work. Of the young generation which was to assert its worth with some considerable power beside the work of its distinguished forerunner, nothing is yet heard. Richardson quietly followed the industrious tenor of his business as a printer; Johnson was a lad at Lichfield; Fielding gladdened in boisterous youth; Gray was still at Eton. Yet the literary wealth of the period which Thomson desired to enhance with a fitting contribution was such as to thoroughly test a high capacity to respond to it.

At the close of 1725 Thomson left his irksome duty at East Barnet, and went to live in lodgings in Lancaster Court, Strand. Here he deliberately pursued the work of poetical composition. His love of rural subjects had been strong from the first, and it is not improbable that some passages of *Winter* were struck off before he crossed the Scottish Border. Various literary sources have been mentioned as contributing to guide the particular poetical bent of Thomson. Warton, on the authority of Collins, believed that Thomson 'took the first hint and idea' of writing his *Seasons* from the titles of Pope's four Pastorals—Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. It has also been thought that he consulted so recondite an ensample as the *Kalendarium Humanæ Vitæ* of William Hope, published in 1638. Mitford thought to trace certain passages of

*The Seasons* to the *Prædium Rusticum* of Vaniere, a poem written in Latin hexameters. But whatever indebtedness the poet owed to occasional suggestions from those writers, no original obligation was due to them. He states himself that the idea of *Winter* was suggested by a perusal of Riccaltoun's poem on the same subject. 'In it,' he says, 'are some masterly strokes that awakened me.' Riccaltoun's poem was entitled *A Winter's Day*. First published in Savage's *Miscellany* in 1726, it was reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1740. Mallet revised it for re-issue, and with the daring unscrupulousness which is not unreasonably associated with his character, included it in his own volume of poems as an original composition. Riccaltoun writes with a true feeling for Nature, though correctness of delineation rather outdoes more vital characteristics. He uses the heroic measure, which proves in his hands a fairly melodious instrument. The impressionism of the piece is not infelicitous. It opens thus :

'Now, gloomy soul, look out ! now comes thy turn !  
 With thee, behold all ravaged nature mourn ;  
 Hail the dim empire of thy darling night  
 That spreads slow-shadowing o'er the vanquished light.  
 Look out with joy ! the ruler of the day,  
 Faint as thy hopes, emits a glimmering ray ;  
 Already exiled to the utmost sky,  
 Hither oblique he turns his clouded eye.  
 Lo, from the limits of the wintry pole  
 Mountainous clouds in wide confusion roll ;  
 In dismal pomp now hovering in their way,  
 To a sick twilight they reduce the day.'

Scottish as he was to the core, and replete as his recollection was with the scenic pictures of his native place,

Thomson did not in *Winter* and the rest of *The Seasons* limit the scope of his imagination to Scottish scenery. English scenery, as well as that of his own country, stirs him. His work gains in effect from this. It has, of course, to be borne in mind that he produced all his mature work with his eye upon English landscape, and that this had its own attractiveness and claims. Along with the country round Barnet, the actual survey of his contemplation during the composition of *Winter* is supposed to have been a reach of the Thames below Hammersmith, where was situated the Dove Coffee House, a haunt of Thomson's. A local historian announces this statement as authoritative. But that the beauty of Northern scenes prevailed with him may be judged from his own words. He writes to Cranston from East Barnet, September 1725 :

‘When the heavens wear a more gloomy aspect, the winds whistle, and the waters spout, I see you in the well-known cleugh beneath the solemn arch of tall, thick, embowering trees, listening to the amusing lull of the many steep, moss-grown cascades, while deep, divine contemplation, the genius of the place, prompts each swelling awful thought. I am sure you would not resign your place in that scene at any easy rate. None ever enjoyed it to the height you do, and you are worthy of it. There I walk in spirit, and disport in its beloved gloom. This country I am in is not very entertaining; no variety but that of woods, and these we have in abundance; but where is the living stream? the airy mountain? or the hanging rock? with twenty other things that elegantly please the lover of Nature. Nature

delights me in every form. I am just now painting her in her most lugubrious dress for my own amusement, describing Winter as it presents itself.'

These sidelights on the poet's literary method are not unimportant as serving to illustrate precisely his imaginative nearness to what he portrayed.

*Winter* was published in March 1726. After considerable search for a publisher, it was bought by Millan for the sum of three guineas, a price which he is said for a time to have rather grudged. Its reception was not unfavourable, though the regular critics were reserved rather than cordial in their estimate. One of the number, Mitchell by name, the reviewer in the *British Journal*, incurred the vigorous wrath of Thomson by the carping nature of his criticism. Mitchell was blind in one eye, and is bitterly retorted on in a letter from the poet to Mallet as a 'planet-blasted fool.' The popularity of the poem was, however, much aided by the insight and generous appreciation of one or two outstanding men of culture. Mr Whately, afterwards Prebendary of York, is named as having lauded it freely to his friends, while Spence, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, passed a graceful and effective eulogium upon it in the course of an essay on Pope's translation of the *Odyssey*. Mallet, who was sincerely charmed with the poem, perhaps gave its fame the best impetus of all by bringing it under the notice of Aaron Hill, who at the outset of Thomson's career takes a rather important place in its events.

A considerable literary dictator in his day, the name of Aaron Hill is now one of the obscurest in the annals of eighteenth century authorship. From his social posi-

tion he was well qualified to act as an intermediary between the struggling *littérateur* and the powerful patron. Possessed of an income of £2000 a year, entailed upon him, it was said, illegally, he devoted himself to literary undertakings on his own account, and had in other ways acquired authority as an accomplished man about town. Besides efforts in historical and poetical authorship, he wrote several plays, one of his operas having the honour of a musical setting by Handel. Nor were his energies restricted to literature. He proposed a scheme for improving the wool-trade. He floated another, which was a scandalous failure, for extracting oil from beech-mast. He signally approved his literary bent by enthusiasm over the novels of Richardson and by crossing swords with Pope, in which encounter he fared not so ill. And though he has a place in the *Dunciad*, what is said regarding him is more complimentary than otherwise. He comports himself well among the divers:—

‘ He bears no token of the sable streams,  
And mounts far off amongst the swans of Thames.’

‘Although absurd and a bore of the first water,’ says Mr Leslie Stephen, ‘he was apparently a kindly and liberal man, and abandoned the profits of his plays, such as they were, to the actors.’ Hill was, at this period, at the height of his bustling activity, and Thomson was distinctly impressed by him. Hill praised *Winter*, and Thomson’s letters of thanks constitute adulation of an extreme character. In one instance he avows his conviction that he ‘ought with the utmost deference and veneration to approach so supreme a genius.’ Hill’s

applause, he says, he prefers to the 'acclamations of thousands.' The redoubtable Richard Savage, who was a common friend of Mallet and Hill, ludicrously figures in one letter as 'bleak and withered' under the overpowering eloquence of Hill's conversation. Yet much must not be made of Thomson's invertebrate action in this matter: he merely followed the fashion of the times. His gratitude to Hill, at any rate, was sincere, and as the sequel demonstrated, was not misplaced.

The fight for fame, however, was only begun. A fresh obstacle occurred in the coldness with which the patron to whom *Winter* was dedicated, treated his client. The patron selected, probably on the suggestion of Mallet, who composed the address, was Sir Spencer Compton, Speaker of the House of Commons. Compton, a man of small ability and weak character, had been pitchforked into the dignity of Speaker in spite of his own feeble protests. He pleaded, but without avail, that he was deficient in memory and power of judgment, and had no skill to guide debate; he satisfied the King and the Walpole party, and that was enough.

Compton's indifference to the dedication of *Winter* was not allowed to pass unchallenged. Energetic steps were taken by Hill and Mallet on behalf of their friend. If Compton did not care to exert himself regarding the new poet, amends must be made for his neglect. The means of recrimination adopted by Thomson's friends was skilfully devised. Each wrote a set of verses in which patronage was scathingly satirised, direct reference to the case of Thomson being introduced by the use of his name in the superscription. These verses

were published in the newspapers. Both strongly urged the poet to act independently. One passage of Mallet's poem runs :

'Cast each low thought of interest far behind ;  
Neglected into noble scorn, away  
From that low path, where vulgar poets stray.  
Inglorious herd ! profuse of venal lays,  
And by the pride despis'd, they stoop to praise !  
Then careless of the statesman's smile or frown,  
Tread that straight way that leads to fair renown.'

The hint was immediately taken by the Speaker. Mallet and Thomson were asked to call upon him, and though they were received coldly, he excused his discourtesy with respect to the dedication as a misunderstanding, and presented Thomson with twenty guineas. The money was accepted with the best possible grace, though the poet at heart could not justly have the most grateful emotion towards his lethargic admirer. But here the affair did not end.

The difficulty with Sir Spencer Compton was the source of a considerable dilemma to Thomson. He contemplated a new edition of *Winter*, and Mallet and Hill, notwithstanding the enforced friendliness of the Speaker, wished their verses to occupy a place in the volume, which, indeed, it was originally intended they should do. Thomson, although the verses were much to his own mind—'that best satire I ever read,' he calls them—requested that they should now be withheld. Hill was inclined to yield to the poet's entreaty, but Mallet stoutly refused to give way. The result was that the verses did appear in the book, although those of Hill, at least, were subjected to some alteration.

The new edition of *Winter* was published in the summer of 1726. It is remarkable as including a fairly elaborate preface by Thomson, on the study and pursuit of poetry. His prose style may be charged with not a few defects; but the preface exhibits vigorous thought, insight, and unfeigned appreciation of the line of poetical art in which he was so splendidly to assert his capacity. With excusable feeling he deplores the unfortunate condition of literature as suffering from the unconcern of dull and unaccomplished patrons. For once Johnson and he agree, and Thomson to some extent anticipates Johnson's letter to Chesterfield, which Carlyle calls 'that far-famed blast of doom, proclaiming that patronage should be no more.' Patronage, in effect, worked out its own hollowness, and the increase of public support to literature, seen in some measure in Thomson's life-time, rang the last knell of a pernicious system. Thomson hoped for 'some long-wished, illustrious man of equal power and beneficence' to 'rise in the wintry world of letters,' but the realisation of his ideal was far to seek. A striking passage further on in the preface appeals very pointedly for a higher conception of their art on the part of writers of verse, and forcibly strikes the keynote of his own position. He argues for the selection of 'great and serious subjects' in poetry. 'To be able,' he says, 'to write on a dry, barren theme is looked upon by some as the sign of a happy, fruitful genius—fruitful indeed!—like one of the pendent gardens of Cheapside, watered every morning by the hand of the Alderman himself. And what are we commonly entertained with on these occasions, save

forced, unassuming fancies, little glittering prettinesses, mixed terms of wit and expression, which are as widely different from poetry as buffoonery is from the perfection of human thinking? A genius fired with the charms of truth and nature is turned to a sublimer pitch, and scorns to associate with such subjects.'

The second edition of *Winter* met with a good reception, and the literary position of Thomson became fairly well assured. New and valuable introductions resulted, in the enlarged circle of friends there being now such distinguished personages as the Countess of Hertford, and Dr Rundle, afterwards Bishop of Derry. The Countess of Hertford, herself something of a poet, and with a genuine taste for literature, was yet to receive the dedication of *Spring*, while Rundle's acquaintance brought with it the friendship of a mind of rare culture. The hopefulness of his outlook encouraged Thomson to devote himself completely to literature. At the end of the year he resigned a tutorship which he had held with a Mr Watts, at an academy in Tower Street, where his pupil was, it has been supposed, Lord George Graham, and actively set about the preparation of *Summer*.

## CHAPTER IV

PUBLICATION OF 'SUMMER' AND 'SPRING.' FIRST  
EDITION OF 'THE SEASONS.' MINOR POEMS

THOMSON had begun work on *Summer* immediately on the promise of the success of *Winter*. To both Mallet and Hill he spoke of introductory passages of the new poem before the close of 1726, and that it was ready for the press in the following year shows that he had not worked slowly at perhaps one of the most exacting of his compositions. Full of literary designs, he also advertised an *Essay on descriptive Poetry*, which, however, never saw the light; and he sent out *Proposals for Printing by Subscription, The Four Seasons*, with a *Hymn on their Succession*. Patronage, notwithstanding the profound dislike with which he reasonably regarded it, he could not yet afford to ignore; and he now chose as sponsors of his new works Sir Robert Walpole and Mr Bubb Dodington, subsequently Lord Melcombe. To Walpole was inscribed the poem on Newton, while Dodington was honoured with the dedication of *Summer*. It does not appear that Walpole took any notice of Thomson's address: very likely he disregarded it, for this dedication was in all future editions withdrawn.

The suggestion of the dedication to Dodington came from Lord Binning, on whom it was the original wish of the poet to confer the compliment. But

Binning judiciously imagined that Dodington would prove a much more useful patron than himself, and promptly pointed out this fact to Thomson. Dodington, who descends to history as the 'last of the patrons,' approved himself altogether grateful for the distinction which was thus bestowed upon him. He treated the poet with frank consideration; he received him on terms of friendly intimacy at his house at Eastbury, and ever exerted himself generously on his behalf. Dodington at the date of the publication of *Summer* held the post of Lord of the Treasury. A noted place-hunter, he was not popular, and his ousting from Court favour some years later by Chesterfield and Lyttelton caused not a little public satisfaction. Thomson's ready acquiescence in Lord Binning's proposal was, no doubt, chiefly due to the fact that Dodington more than any other contemporary of political eminence was recognised as having a declared taste for literary pursuits. This taste, avowed rather than genuine, combined with a pompous demeanour, gave shape to Foote's caricature of him in Sir Thomas Lofty. Perhaps the resistless insincerity of the appeal made in the dedication had a corresponding effect upon the strain in which the address is conveyed; the language surpasses, at any rate, all Thomson's other efforts in the line of exaggerated encomium. In Dodington he declares 'the virtues, the graces, and the muses join their influence.' He alone is the 'British Macænas.' Thomson states that he considers himself privileged in being introduced to the regard of Dodington 'through the recommendation of an art in which you are a master.' This fulsomeness would be a painful matter

to contemplate were it not remembered that Thomson simply acted upon an accepted method of his day. Gorgeous mendacity of the kind passed as a matter of course.

The publication of *Britannia*, composed about this time, was, for a good reason, delayed. Inspired by the negotiations with Spain over British colonisation in the West Indies, it was reserved till an opportune moment for giving it to the public. This came with the final overthrow of the objections raised by the Spanish Government, and the work was issued in January 1729. The strong attack it embodied on the Walpole Ministry caused Thomson to hesitate over publicly stamping it with the authority of his authorship, and it was printed in a sort of clandestine fashion. It was published anonymously; the date of writing was misrepresented as 1719; and Thomson's usual publisher did not give the volume the imprint of his name, the publisher being T. Warner, of Paternoster Row.

The poem on Sir Isaac Newton places Thomson in a notable light. The piece is one of high merit, marked by passages of true poetical insight and metrical power, and quite maintains the level of excellence displayed in *Winter*. The work of the distinguished scientist found in Thomson an appreciative and not incompetent critic, devoted as he had been in no slight measure to the study of the pursuits in which Newton exercised his genius. Nor did he, in view of his memorial poem, content himself with the fairly intelligent knowledge he himself possessed of the subject; he collaborated on the accuracy of certain details with a friend, Mr John Gray, a man of

recognised scientific acquirements, then of the Royal Society, and afterwards Lord Rector of Marischal College, Aberdeen. The poem forms one of the best of Thomson's minor pieces, and, indeed, takes a place of distinction in poetical achievement.

For all Wordsworth's exultant prophecy on the harmony of Poetry and Science, it cannot be said that any very assuring illustration of the circumstance has happened before his date or since. The *Botanical Garden* of Erasmus Darwin looms almost tragically alone, like the forlorn desert image of Shelley's famous sonnet, as a warning, if not a menace, to all travellers in this demesne. Our own century, which might have been fairly expected to produce something of moment in this relation, is curiously unfruitful in result. Imagination is evidently slow to celebrate the glories of scientific attainment. Yet an exception in the matter must be made in favour of Thomson's brief poem to the memory of Newton. It contains a decidedly successful interpretation of the philosophy of the great scientist. The following passage, dealing with the Newtonian theory of colours, has all the art of apt poetical treatment:—

' Nor could the darting beam of speed immense  
 Escape his swift pursuit and meaning eye.  
 Even light itself, which everything displays,  
 Shone undiscovered, till his brighter mind  
 Untwisted all the shining robe of day ;  
 And from the whitening undistinguished blaze  
 Collecting every ray into his kind,  
 To the charmed eye educed the gorgeous train  
 Of parent colours. First the flaming red  
 Sprang vivid forth ; the tawny orange next,

And next delicious yellow ; by whose side  
Fell the kind beams of all-refreshing green.  
Then the pure blue, that swells autumnal skies,  
Ethereal played ; and then of sadder hue  
Emerged the deepened indigo, as when  
The heavy-skirted evening droops with frost,  
While the last gleamings of refracted light  
Died in the fainting violet away.  
These, when the clouds distil the rosy shower,  
Shine out distinct adown the watery bow ;  
While o'er our heads the dewy vision bends  
Delightful, melting in the fields beneath.  
Myriads of mingling dyes from these result,  
And myriads still remain ; infinite source  
Of beauty ever flushing, ever new.'

During the composition of *Summer* Thomson had the continued advice and critical encouragement of Mallet, who while residing at Twyford, the seat of the Duke of Montrose, was also engaged upon his own descriptive poem of *The Excursion*. The interchange of opinion between the two writers is interesting. The letters of Thomson are invariably kindly rather than critical. Mallet's *Excursion* is a thin and unimaginative performance, but is viewed by Thomson as remarkable alike for surpassing power of thought and of expression. One of these letters, written during the autumn of 1726, contains sentiments for which excessive admiration is hardly a term. 'Trust me, my friend,' he says, 'I could run with you the race of glory, if heaven would permit ; true, I am inferior, but through your assistance might hold out.' Again he jubilantly remarks : 'This is poetry, this is arousing fancy—enthusiasm—rapturous terror. Can't you get another epithet for Night? Evening in

her brown mantle wrapt. I am not afraid of your finding out as good a one

“Sung by the ascending demon of the hour.”

You leave me as Cervantes does his readers. . . . I can, mark me, bear it no longer, but must have next post the whole of your *Excursion* over this earth. I say it again, must have it—so fail not.’

The reception of *Summer* by the public, if not exceedingly cordial, was yet of such a kind as to confidently impel the poet to the production of the rest of his contemplated work on the *Seasons*. That not a few defects and omissions, the result often of the high rate of pressure at which it was produced, presented themselves to him is clear from the numerous alterations which the work was to undergo. The original edition consisted of only 1205 lines; the revised edition, that of 1744, was enlarged by 600 additional lines. The poem looked finally almost like a new production. Changes of every description were effected upon it. Many of these were verbal or bearing upon the artistic form of the verse. Various passages were expanded, while not a little old matter was cut out. The benefit that thus accrued was chiefly of a superficial kind, but it was needful enough. Greater clearness of expression was obtained; the tumidity and indefiniteness of style that was too promptly at the command of Thomson, even in the careful moments of his earlier poetical compositions, was so far intensified by the speed at which he wrote *Summer*. The objection of Johnson that the process of revision to which Thomson subjected

*The Seasons* robbed the poetry of something of its 'race' is inconsequent; Thomson's verse was of the kind to profit by such patient correction.

Procrastination does not seem to have been a foible of Thomson in those days. He now set to work on *Spring*, and next year the third of his elaborate pictures of *The Seasons* came from the publisher. The volume was dedicated to the accomplished Countess of Hertford in an address of fairly judicious eulogy. The poet's reason for this step probably arose from the fact that in the summer of 1727 he had been the guest of Lord Hertford at Marlborough House, in Wiltshire. Here, according to Stephen Duck, the Wiltshire poet, there was carried out the composition of a considerable part of *Spring*. Johnson, who misses no opportunity of a savage growl at Thomson, whom he clearly disliked, relates an uncorroborated story about Thomson's failure in courtesy to the accomplished Countess on this visit. 'It was her practice,' he says, 'to invite every summer some poet into the country to hear her verses and assist her studies. This honour was one summer conferred on Thomson, who took more delight in carousing with Lord Hertford and his friends than assisting her ladyship's poetical operations, and therefore never received another summons.' This implies a virtual breach between the poet and the patron of *Spring*, a view which the existence of the dedication alone hardly supports. The supposition is further negatived by the Countess of Hertford's continued interest in Thomson's work. Twenty years after the publication of *Spring* she held out to one of her correspondents 'much entertainment in *The Castle of*

*Indolence,*' and expressed herself delighted with 'the many pretty paintings in it.'

For *Spring* Thomson chose a new publisher, Millan's financial position at the time being unsatisfactory. The publisher who undertook the publication of *Spring* was Andrew Millar, a Scotsman, who, in 1729, began business in the Strand, and, after a time, entered into occupation of an established bookselling business in the same street, at the sign of 'The Shakespeare's Head,' which he rechristened 'Buchanan's Head.' He very soon became prosperous as a publisher, mostly through his care in availing himself of capable advisers as to the purchase of copyright. He it was who brought out Johnson's dictionary, and, though lexicographer and publisher did not part quite amicably over the publication, Johnson highly esteemed his employer. Millar, he said, raised the price of literature. Millar also had the credit of markedly recognising the genius of Fielding, for whose *Tom Jones* he paid a handsome price. His regard for Thomson he gave practical effect to by generous treatment of his work throughout the whole extent of the poet's later authorship. He regretted his death with the deepest grief, and the monument erected to Thomson's memory in Westminster Abbey was defrayed by a sumptuous edition of the poet's works, with regard to which Millar abandoned his publishing rights for the purpose.

A longer lapse than occurred between the issue of the two previous *Seasons* took place in the case of the publication of *Autumn*. The poet worked hard at this poem during the year 1729, but it was not till June 1730

that it was produced. His wish was to include the poem in a complete edition of *The Seasons*, a design which he had contemplated as far back as 1727. Delay was principally caused by the different method on which he resolved to publish—that by subscription. This process of literary advancement, through the fault of some irresponsible authors, had now come under considerable suspicion. Thomson's plan in consequence did not fare happily. The subscriptions dropped in slowly and in no great abundance, even the reputation which he had won as a new and successful poet having insufficient weight against the prejudice which it was necessary to overcome.

The pause in the publication of *The Seasons* was however, broken by the appearance of *Britannia* at the beginning of 1729. The work soon achieved popularity, perhaps more on account of its sentiment than by its literary merits, though these are not trivial. The occasion of the poem, as before said, was a dispute between Great Britain and Spain with reference to British authority in the West Indies. Spanish troops, after some preliminary recrimination between the two governments, took possession of Gibraltar, and British ships were fired upon. Attempts at conciliation by Great Britain were made to little purpose. Spanish frigates plundered our merchantmen, and did everything possible to hamper our foreign commerce. When Parliament assembled in 1729, deliberations at once ensued as to the best course to be taken to check the active hostility of Spain. At this opportune time *Britannia* was published. Patriotic to a degree, it had a great vogue. Preceded by a

quotation from the *Æneid*, it consists of a warlike soliloquy uttered by the personified figure of Great Britain. Without rising at any moment to a lofty strain of poetical feeling, the poem is marked by undoubted vigour of sentiment; less ornate in expression than *The Seasons*, and less crude in this respect than *Liberty*, it moves with a certain ringing eloquence that not unsuccessfully does duty for poetry. The following passage, fairly typical of the bulk of the poem, deals with the overthrow of the Armada:—

‘ But soon regardless of the cumbrous pomp,  
 My dauntless Britons came, a gloomy few,  
 With tempests black, the goodly scene deformed,  
 And laid their glory waste. The bolts of fate  
 Resistless thundered through their yielding sides;  
 Fierce o’er their beauty blazed the lurid flame  
 And seized in horrid grasp, or shattered wide,  
 Amid the mighty waters, deep they sunk.  
 Then too from every promontory chill,  
 Rank fen, and cavern, where the wild wave works,  
 I swept confederate winds, and swelled a storm.  
 Round the glad isle, snatched by the vengeful blast,  
 The scattered remnants drove; on the blind shelve,  
 And pointed rock, that marks the indented shore,  
 Relentless dashed, where loud the northern main  
 Howls through the fractured Caledonian isles.’

To the year 1729 belongs another of Thomson’s shorter poems, that entitled *A Poem to the Memory of Mr Congreve*. Some uncertainty prevails regarding its authenticity, the belief that it is the work of Thomson having been expressed for the first time as late as 1843. The poem was brought to light afresh by the Rev. H. F. Cary, translator of Dante; and Mr Peter Cunningham,

a trustworthy student of poetry, edited it for the Percy Society. A note to the first edition of the poem mentions that the author, who was personally unacquainted with Congreve, was aware of the imperfect portrayal of the personal character of the great dramatist; but he justifies his effort from the absence of any similar tribute. Internal evidence pretty definitely points to the fact of Thomson's authorship. Not so redundant and rhetorical as was his wonted style, resembling in this particular his previous monody on Newton, the poem has much incisive thought and gracefulness of diction. Now and then we have tokens of the epigrammatic critical gift which distinguishes parts of both *The Seasons* and *The Castle of Indolence*, but which curiously fell so seldom from the writer's pen when he essayed prose. A few lines in proof may be cited:

‘ Lamented shade ! in him the comic muse,  
Parent of gay instruction, lost her loved,  
Her last remaining hope. . . . Nature was his,  
Bold, sprightly, various ; and superior art,  
Curious to choose each better grace, unseen  
Of vulgar eyes ; with delicacy free,  
Though laboured happy, and though strong refined.  
Judgment, severely cool, o'erlooked his toil,  
And patient finished all ; each fair design  
With freedom regular, correctly great,  
A master's skilful daring.’

One or two factors of the evidence would seem to be opposed to the probability of Thomson's authorship ; but the testimony as a whole is in his favour. Various persons mentioned, and the manner of their introduction, scarce appear as quite within the range of his intercourse.

Halifax, Godolphin, and the Duchess of Marlborough were all figures remote from his acquaintance. Then it were an utter impossibility that the 'Cenus' of the poem could have been Aaron Hill, as has been supposed by some writers. This difficulty, however, is readily removed by the admissible conjecture that by 'Cenus' may have been intended Colley Cibber. To him the reference is sufficiently applicable.

The autumn of this year saw a new and charming influence enter into the bookish routine of Thomson's existence. He declared himself to be in love. Scepticism on the genuineness of any sincere love passion on the part of Thomson, encouraged principally by an inept summary of his personal character by Savage, has long been exploded; but a certain obscurity involves the love story of the poet. It is not certain that the lady who now appears in his history was the Miss Young, belonging to a Dumfriesshire family, of the profound attachment of his later life. The first mention of the name of 'Amanda' is made in a poetical address of Thomson's which was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1736. The considerable interval of years between the present love affair and the date of this poetical tribute to Miss Young certainly leaves ample room for the possibility of a previous attachment; but we know, at all events, that Robertson, who married the sister of Miss Young, was on terms of friendly intimacy with Thomson as early as 1726. The present interest may therefore have sprung out of some friendship established at that time. Whoever the lady of this period may have been, it is clear that Thomson was much charmed by her. The allusion

regarding her occupies considerable space in a letter of date September 1729, addressed to Mallet, then at Twyford. Thomson writes: 'To turn my eyes a softer way, I am really touched with a fair neighbour of yours—you know who. Absence sighs it to me. What is my heart made of? A soft system of love-nerves, too sensible for my quiet; capable of being very happy, or very unhappy; I am afraid the last will prevail. Lay your hand upon a kindred heart, and despise me not. I know not what it is, but she dwells upon my thought, in a mingled sentiment which is the sweetest, the most intimately pleasing the soul can receive, and which I would wish never to want toward some dear object or other. To have always some secret, darling idea, to which one can still have recourse amidst the noise and nonsense of the world, and which never fails to touch us in the most exquisite manner, is an Art of Happiness that Fortune cannot deprive us of. This may be called romantic, but whatever the cause is, the effect is really felt. Pray, when you write, tell me when you saw her, and with the pure eye of a friend; and when you see her again, whisper that I am her most humble servant.'

There can be no mistake about the candid avowal and the requisite sentimentality of these remarks. It is true that after a good many years were past Thomson pointed out in a letter to Lyttelton that 'to say one cannot love twice is utterly unphilosophical, and, give me leave to say, contrary to my own experience.' On his own statement, therefore, the inference may be drawn that another than Miss Young had also effectually inspired his devotion. It seems unlikely. Thomson's nature did not enshrine the

restless, passionate heart of the quickly responsive emotion-  
alist, represented so prominently by Burns and Byron. His  
deeply-stirred affection was likely to be enduring as well  
as overmastering. Another of his remarks to Lyttelton to  
some extent indicates this: 'To strike one's fancy is the  
same in love that charity is in religion. Though a woman  
had the form, and spoke with the tongue of angels; though  
all divine gifts and graces were hers yet without striking the  
fancy she does nothing.' The sincerity of affection with  
which Thomson regarded Miss Young lends force to the  
view that he had no serious second affair of the heart.  
That he was finally debarred from marrying her, his friend  
Robertson states, greatly affected him, and made him,  
Robertson believed, indifferent to life. The snatches of  
verse which he addressed to Miss Young throughout a  
number of years reveal the rare strength and single-  
mindedness of his attachment. These find clear declara-  
tion in a letter which he wrote to her from Hagley. Here  
he remarks: 'The mind is its own place, the genuine  
source of its own happiness; and, amidst all my raptures  
with regard to the country, I would rather live in the  
most London corner of London with you than in the  
finest country retirement, and that, too, enlivened by the  
best society, without you.' More than mere formal grace  
also characterises the lines of which she is the subject in  
*Spring*:—

'And thou, Amanda, come, pride of my song!  
Friend of the graces, loveliness itself!  
Come with those downcast eyes, sedate and sweet,  
Those looks demure, that deeply pierce the soul—  
Where with the light of thoughtful reason mixed  
Shines lively fancy, and the feeling heart.'

Why at length Miss Young elected to marry Admiral Campbell is not at all apparent. She evidently had contemplated the prospect of a marriage with Thomson, but was dissuaded from the step by her mother, who is reported to have treated the proposed union in a very contemptuous manner. 'What! would you marry Thomson?' are the words ascribed to her. 'He will make ballads, and you will sing them.' But such an objection could not have been raised at the time of Thomson's later intimacy with the Youngs, when his income from Government offices and from the sale of his works must have been far from contemptible. No record to solve the question remains, save that which imprinted itself with some pathos on the poet's life.

## CHAPTER V

DRAMA OF 'SOPHONISBA.' CONTINENTAL TOUR.  
PUBLICATION OF 'LIBERTY.' OTHER DRAMAS

WITH much love for the stage, and rightly considering also that in the production of dramatic work there might be a remunerative scope for his powers, Thomson broke ground in 1730 with *Sophonisba*, a play produced at Drury Lane on 28th February of that year. The rehearsal drew a large and fashionable audience, including, among other notabilities, Queen Caroline. The reception of the play, if not of great warmth, was not discouraging; it ran for ten nights, then a fair series of representations. The poet, who was present on the first night, attracted attention by his unappeasable excitement, and by volubly repeating passages along with the players. The performance of the piece had the advantage of two actors of first-rate ability—Wilks and Mrs Oldfield. Wilks, though now past his best days as an actor, must have acquitted himself well upon this occasion, for Thomson added a sentence of thanks to him and to Mrs Oldfield in his preface to the printed copy of the play. Mrs Oldfield, who herself expressed liking for the part of *Sophonisba*, excelled in the representation. According to Chetwood, in fact, in his *History of the Stage*, she threw herself into the interpretation with a zeal that fatally taxed her

strength. His words are these: 'The part of *Sophonisba*, a tragedy (by Mr Thomson, famed for many excellent poems), was reputed the cause of her death, for in her execution she went beyond wonder to astonishment! From that time her decay came slowly on.' Thomson's expression of thanks enables a fair idea to be drawn as to the brilliancy of her representation of the heroine. 'Mrs Oldfield,' he said, 'in the character of *Sophonisba* has excelled what, even in the fondness of an author, I could either wish or imagine. The grace, dignity, and happy variety of her action have been universally applauded, and are truly admirable.'

Johnson, with his usual sneer at Thomson, declares *Sophonisba* to have been an utter failure, and attributes as one cause of this the occurrence of a very weak line, a parody of which (produced, it has also been presumed, upon the spot) 'for a while was echoed through the town.' The story has now become one of the mock pearls of history. The line in question:

'O Sophonisba, Sophonisba, O!'

is certainly bathetic enough, and was ultimately changed into

'O Sophonisba, I am wholly thine!'

a much happier verse; but the parody took some little time to mature. The burlesque verse:

'O Jemmy Thomson, Jemmy Thomson, O!'

was coined by an anonymous writer in a pamphlet entitled *A Criticism on the New Sophonisba*. This was the supposed work of Benjamin Martyr, or of a friend of

his. The critic's pique had the greater gall from the unfortunate reception which his own play of *Timoleon* had undergone. The pamphlet is of some serious value as containing a good deal of proof in favour of the stage success of the tragedy. The writer sarcastically observes: 'The tragedy has been recommended to the world by a crowded patronage. . . . 'Tis true the thing seemed to please some persons; there was a numerous party in the house. *Scotchmen*, with tuneful hands and merry feet, attested it to be the true *Barn* of wit.' The testimony of Dr Rundle also points to the success of the first representation of the play. In one of his letters he writes: 'I send you *Sophonisba*, which I think a reasonable entertainment, becoming virtue herself to behold with tears of approbation. . . . The story is a bad one, and its being true is the only justification of it. The writing is incomparable, though the pleasure it affords is not of that popular kind which can draw crowded audiences. . . . When it was acted, however, the sentiments of virtue and honour were universally felt with pleasure; and the audience was hurried, by the divine enthusiasm of nature, to honour by the praise of their hands those moral beauties which they cannot forbear loving.'

In the preface to the published edition of the play, Thomson briefly dwells upon the supposed faults of the piece, excusing these only, and in the slightest fashion, by reason that the work was a first attempt; he quotes Racine as his authority on the correctness of the unities; and speaks in detail of the care devoted to the elaboration of the character of *Sophonisba*. The printed play was inscribed to the Queen as one who 'commands the

hearts of a people more powerful at sea than Carthage, more flourishing in commerce than those first merchants, more secure against conquest, and under a monarchy more free than a commonwealth itself.'

It is in reference to the stage production of *Sophonisba* that we have any clear allusion to the collaboration of Pope with Thomson. Pope, it is supposed, wrote the first part of the prologue, Mallet completing the piece. The incident, if authentic, bespeaks a very cordial friendship between the two writers, for Pope had vented his great disinclination to any composition of the sort. In a letter addressed, in 1722, to Fenton, who had asked him to write a prologue, he sharply declined, adding: 'I have actually refused doing it for the Duke of Buckingham's play.' Again, in a letter to Hill, in 1731, when touching upon such requests, he says: 'Every poetical friend I have has my bond I never would, and my leave to take the same refusal ill if ever I wrote one for another; and this very winter Mr Thomson and Mr Mallet excuse me, whose tragedies are to appear this season or next.' Johnson, who speaks of the collaboration in question, quotes Savage as his authority; but Johnson had a strangely implicit confidence in that madly-shooting star of the Georgian literary firmament, and the statement may be accepted with reserve. The prologue, however, is an excellent one.

The enforced delay in the publication of *The Seasons* was brought to an end about midsummer 1730, when it appeared, *Autumn*, the new instalment, having its appropriate place. The *Hymn* was now also first printed. The volume was dedicated to the Right Hon. Arthur

Onslow, Speaker of the House of Commons. The address was inscribed in fourteen lines of verse beginning at line 9 of the poem, and all the previous prose dedications now also gave way to poetical substitutes. Onslow well merited the compliment. A man of fine personal dignity, of proverbial integrity, and with a real taste for literary pursuits, Onslow filled the Speaker's chair with extraordinary approval for thirty years, entering upon his appointment in 1727. The edition of 1730 differs so much from that of 1744 that much bibliographical interest attaches to the subject. How vast was the labour of the poet in the matter of revision is seen in the almost insurmountable difficulty that has attended all efforts at collation of the various readings. Dr Bell, nephew of the poet, made the attempt with sanguine expectations; but he never finished his task. Only an approach to a full statement of the variations was reached in an edition of *The Seasons*, published by Sibbald in 1789. Mr Peter Cunningham inserted a despairing footnote on the subject in his Aldine edition of Thomson's works. He called the proposed task 'an intention which no one can carry out. Wordsworth tried it—Mr Dyce tried it—I have tried it.' The feat, however, has not been found insuperable, the two latest editors of the poet, Mr Logie Robertson and Mr Tovey, having each carried out a full collation of Thomson's MS. corrections of his great poem.

The notices that have been preserved of the business transactions accompanying the publication of the first complete edition of *The Seasons* set forth not a little curious information. Three hundred and eighty-six sub-

scribers in all applied for copies, some, however, taking as many as ten copies; the whole number of volumes thus paid for being four hundred and fifty-four. Thomson himself received subscriptions at the Smyrna Coffee House; the publishers (Millar had by this time taken Strahan and Millan into partnership) accepted orders at the Golden Ball, Cornhill, at the Blue Anchor, Pall Mall, and at their own place of business at 'Buchanan's Head.' Edinburgh subscriptions were under the care of Allan Ramsay. Among the subscribers were nearly all Thomson's friends, titled and literary. Dodington headed the list with twenty copies; the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, John Conduitt, a nephew of Newton, took ten; Duncan Forbes of Cul-loden, five; Pope, three; while in the list of those who were subscribers for one copy each are the names of Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Horace Walpole, Young, Allan Ramsay, and Hamilton of Bangour.

In 1730 Thomson experienced a respite from literary employment. On the recommendation of Dr Rundle, he was appointed travelling tutor to the eldest son of Sir Charles Talbot, the Solicitor-General. Thomson accompanied his pupil through France and Italy, spending the customary two years in Continental travel. To judge from Thomson's correspondence, addressed to Dodington during the tour, he found, unlike Addison, some years before, and unlike Gray, about nine years later, no great entertainment in his travels. The criticism passed by Thomson on men and scenes is brief and rather morose; and he came back from the Continent apparently glad that the sojourn was ended. The travellers set out at the close of the year 1730. They stopped first at Paris, intending

there to spend the winter; they remained, however, till the following autumn. The fragmentary account of Thomson's tour is exceedingly disappointing. Most of his letters to Dodington are marked by petulant fault-finding with his surroundings, and by invidious contrasts made between Great Britain and France. This goes so far that it sometimes must be thought to overrule his better judgment. It is only on this understanding that there can be accepted the startling conclusions of certain of his statements, as that, for instance, on ancient statuary at Rome. 'How little of these,' he says, 'suffices! How unessential are they to life.' This, and kindred reflections during the journey, in a degree justify the severe censure of Mr Tovey, when he declares that if Thomson were judged solely by these letters, we should say that he gushed about Nature, as so many people do, 'rather like an epicure than a man of refined observation.' The explanation seems to be that the poet was beyond question insular—not in a derogatory sense—that his British prejudice, in short, prevented him from seeing any of the excellences of other countries; he travelled, observed, and wrote always with an eye upon the superiority of his own country. Young Talbot, we learn from a remark of Dr Rundle's, shared his prejudice.

One episode of Thomson's visit to Paris that may be fairly supposed to have been agreeable would be his visit to Voltaire, a meeting that, there is little doubt, really took place. M. Morel ingeniously supposes that the authors did meet at this time, inasmuch as Thomson refers to the hitherto unpublished preface of Voltaire's *Brutus*, and Voltaire subsequently made allusion to a proposed drama,

entitled *Socrates*, which Thomson had now some intention of writing. Both literary items argue the likelihood of this meeting. Voltaire had a sincere regard for Thomson's genius, his estimate on some points being exceptionally high, and an interview with the distinguished Frenchman, also renewing as it did a friendship begun in England, could not fail to afford much unmixed pleasure to Thomson.\* But of French society in general, that 'rose-coloured Parisian Arcadia' of Gray's amused observation, he has nothing to say, and very likely acted no part in it. We know at least that he was not favourably impressed by the French capital in other important respects. On the industrial and constitutional aspects of France under Louis XV. he passes a most adverse judgment, and here his opinion was based upon a capable discernment. He writes to Dodington, 'I have seen little of Paris yet—some streets and playhouses—though, had I seen all that is to be seen, you know it too well to need a much better account than I can give. You must, however, give me leave to observe that amidst all that external and showy magnificence which the French affect, one misses that solid magnificence of trade and sincere plenty which not only appears to be, but is, substantially, in a kingdom where industry and liberty mutually support each other. That kingdom I suppose I need not mention, as it is, and ever will be, sufficiently known from the character. I shall return no worse Englishman than I came away.' A premonition, however slight, may be read in these words of Thomson of the huge convulsion in social economy

\* Voltaire quoted Thomson to Boswell. See 'James Boswell,' by W. Keith Leask. 'Famous Scots Series.'

that, fifty years later, was to shake France to its political foundation.

A divergence from the route at Lyons to Avignon and Vaucluse constitutes a second apparent exception to the general dearth of pleasurable excitement which Thomson felt on his journey ; in the country of Petrarch he was much moved, and carried with him to England a lively recollection. But at Rome the spirit of *ennui* returned in force, assuming, in truth, a rude and nearly inexplicable cynicism. He discusses the art collections at Rome, with an astounding lack of approbation, and confesses that in his present circumstances he despairs of all attempt at poetical work. He says : ' Now I mention poetry, should you inquire after my muse, all that I can answer is, that I believe she did not cross the channel with me. I know not whether your gardener at Eastbury heard anything of her among the woods there ; she has not thought fit to visit me while I have been in this once poetic land, nor do I feel the least presage that she will.'

It can only be concluded that the amount of attention which the poet bestowed upon the people and institutions under his notice in these travels, while it did not draw fostering inspiration from their own charm or effectiveness, served to distract his observation into a not wholly congenial channel. The idea at the root of *Liberty* oppressed him from Paris to Rome, and from Rome back to London. And, after all, the sum and substance of his foreign experience produced no worthy result. The poem proved that constitutional freedom was a theme on which his imagination could not range freely, though it could do so intensely, as in *Rule Britannia*. A rationalised social

philosophy was not the kind of work for which he was fitted, though he himself did not yet, if he ever did, perceive this ; but it was decisively demonstrated by the common verdict pronounced upon his one deliberate philosophical poem.

Thomson and his pupil returned to England about Christmas, 1732. He at once entered energetically upon the preparation of *Liberty*. The surmise is that he did so at Ashdown Park, where he may have continued for a time in his post as tutor to young Talbot. His engagements at this time also included help in the organisation of a theatrical benefit for Dennis, the critic, who was in weak health. *Liberty* did not flow readily from the pen of Thomson, the composition extending over three years. Young Talbot died before Thomson had proceeded far with his poem, and in the first part of *Liberty* were comprised some memorial lines on the poet's former pupil. This inserted part, which was issued under the title *Ancient and Modern Italy Compared*, appeared in December 1734 ; the second and third parts, respectively devoted to *Greece* and *Rome*, were published in the following year. The announcement of the early stages of the publication was made to his friend Cranston in a strain of some confidence. The work was dedicated to Frederick, Prince of Wales. The public received it coldly from the beginning. Hill, with his indomitable gift of florid flattery, did his best, both in public and private, to arouse enthusiasm, but to no purpose. 'I look upon this work,' he wrote to Thomson, 'as the last stretched blaze of our expiring genius.' But the public sternly asserted that they would have none of it ; and the book,

of which an edition of three thousand copies had been struck off, was practically thrown upon the publisher's hands. Thomson, although greatly disappointed by the unpopularity of the poem, wished to requite the publishers for the loss. 'I think,' he remarks, in a letter to Hill, 'of annulling the bargain I made with my bookseller, who would be a considerable loser by the paper, printing, and publication of *Liberty*.' To the last, however, he believed in the merits of the poem.

The opinion of every succeeding age of readers has reversed the judgment of Thomson on what he considered to be his 'noblest work.' No other conclusion is possible. In *Liberty* he attempted a task that both in material and scope was not adapted to his powers. That imaginative strength which endows *The Seasons* throughout, in spite of whatever minor defects it may possess, with real poetic glamour, seems scarce to enter into this didactic effusion. Its cold reflections on civil and political conditions, ancient and modern, are stated eloquently enough; and the poem is aptly leavened with an immense deal of learning; but if the poet felt and thought keenly on the theme, he did not succeed in communicating the fervour within him to his verse. In point of form also, the poem falls much below the level of *The Seasons*. The recital of events is too little selected; incident after incident, repellent in utter flatness of presentation, is driven and hurried along with stilted and unattractive force. All too seldom does there come in a compensating passage of beauty. The blank verse does not lack a touch of the melodious movement which was ever at the command of Thomson; but this, too, sounds thin beside his accustomed utterance. The

failure of the poem is heightened by the arrangement which puts the whole narrative on the lips of an 'Awakened Muse.' The poem loses in distinctness by the pompous attitude thus assumed, and a strain is placed upon the reader in the endeavour to gauge the significance underlying the use of this artifice. Altogether, the poem is a work so unvitalised and jejune that the fame of Thomson owes hardly anything to its studied and magniloquent pages.

In the dedication to the Prince of Wales it is stated that 'the work is an attempt to trace *Liberty* from the first ages down to her excellent establishment in Great Britain.' It is with Great Britain as his subject that the writer attains to any degree of success in the course of his exposition. A few passages in the division of the poem dealing with 'Greece' also strike a fuller note than that of mere eloquence of enunciation; but the divisions devoted to Rome and Italy are simply a diligent and accurate chronicle. The description of the arrival in England of the first Saxon invaders may be particularised as one of the happiest delineations :—

'From the bleak coast that hears  
The German Ocean roar, deep-blooming, strong  
And yellow-haired, the blue-eyed Saxon came.  
He came implored, but came with other aim  
Than to protect. For conquest and defence  
Suffices the same arm. With the fierce race  
Poured in a fresh invigorating stream,  
Blood, where unquelled a mighty spirit glowed.  
Rash war, and perilous battle their delight;  
And immature, and red with glorious wounds,  
Unpeaceful death their choice; deriving thence  
A right to feast, and drain immortal bowls,  
In Odin's hall; whose blazing roof resounds

The genial uproar of those shades, who fall  
In desperate fight, or by some brave attempt ;  
And though more polished times the martial creed  
Disown, yet still the fearless habit lives.'

If not a literary success, *Liberty* was followed by an exceptional stroke of financial fortune to Thomson. In 1735, Talbot, now Lord Chancellor, appointed him Secretary of Briefs, a sinecure post from which he derived a fair income. Unhappily, the pleasure attendant upon this event was marred by the death of his brother. John Thomson had come to London to act as amanuensis to the poet, but was attacked by consumption, and went back to Scotland to die. The acquisition of the Secretaryship of Briefs led Thomson to consider the advisability of a settled residence; the locality he chose was Richmond, where he established himself in May, 1736. Preference was probably given to this suburb from the proximity of Pope's residence at Twickenham, and of Kew, where lived the Prince of Wales, then posing as a friend of men of letters, and Thomson's own patron in *Liberty*. Work very soon busily engaged Thomson at Richmond, for his drama of *Agamemnon*, of which he speaks as being occupied with during the early part of his stay, was ready for representation in January, 1737. An agreeable incident of the poet's life at this time is presented in his zealous energy on behalf of his two unmarried sisters, who were beginning business as milliners (at that date a somewhat fashionable profession) in Edinburgh. To his friends Ross and Gavin Hamilton he writes requesting their assistance in small advances of money to his sisters, promising repayment immediately on the production of his new drama. To Ross he

writes:—‘It was kind in you not to draw rashly upon me, which at present had put me into danger; but very soon, that is to say about two months hence, I shall have a golden buckler, and you may draw boldly.’

The death of Lord Chancellor Talbot in the spring of 1737 was a severe blow to Thomson, both from the personal and the worldly side. Talbot was sincerely lamented by the poet. The event drew from him another of his striking memorial poems. The personal character of the late statesman receives discriminating notice, and in the same effective manner is described his esteemed work as a public official. This poetical tribute fails in some degree by a tendency to over-elaboration; but it is none the less a noble poem, at once impressive in thought, conception, and finish. On the death of his patron Thomson perforce withdrew from his secretaryship, and made no request to have it renewed. Lord Hardwicke, successor to Talbot, with equal reticence offered no show of desire to continue him in office, and the appointment went to another claimant. A curious story of the poet’s financial embarrassment is supposed to belong to this date. It relates how, imprisoned for debt, he was visited by Quin, who frankly relieved him from his difficulties by a payment of £100, as a return for the pleasure he had derived from the perusal of the poet’s works.

The performance of *Agamemnon*, unduly delayed, took place in April, 1738. Its reception was not unfavourable; it ran for ten nights, Thomson receiving benefits on three occasions. According to an advertise-

ment in the London *Daily Post* it was performed 'with great applause.' Quin took the part of Agamemnon; the parts of Clytemnestra and Cassandra were deputed to Mrs Porter and Mrs Cibber respectively; Colley Cibber played Melisander. Pope favoured the first representation with his presence, and was cordially received. In book form, dedicated to the Princess of Wales, the popularity of the play was also considerable; Murdoch states that Thomson drew a large sum as the result of its publication. Nor did the financial benefits of the play end here. After the representation the Prince of Wales conferred a pension of £100 a year upon the poet; while his friends Mallet and Gilbert West received Government offices. *Agamemnon* had turned out a 'golden buckler' indeed.

A new drama followed close upon *Agamemnon*. This time Thomson chose his subject from English history; the drama was entitled *Edward and Eleonora*, and treated of the romantic incident in the crusade of Edward I. in the Holy Land. According to a statement in one of Pope's letters, this drama was ready in February 1739. Thomson's former experience of Drury Lane having been so unsatisfactory, he decided to offer his new play for production at Covent Garden. An unexpected and disappointing event, however, happened. The friction long existing between the King and the Prince of Wales was now at its height, and Thomson's friendship with the Prince was made the pretext of discovering censurable, if not treasonable, passages in the play. A 'Stage Act,' recently passed, directed that all plays reflecting in any degree upon the Government should be prohibited;

the public censor decided that *Edward and Eleonora* came under this ban. It was, therefore, never produced on the stage. What influenced the censor was the zeal shown throughout the work for the character of the earlier Prince of Wales as compared with that of his father. Passages to this effect, though far from obtrusive, were not uncommon in the play. The following is of average note :—

‘ To you my Prince this task of right belongs,  
Has not the royal heir a juster claim  
To share his father’s inmost heart and counsels  
Than aliens to his interest, those who make  
A property, a market of his honour ? ’

Dramatic censorship was rampant about this time. A playwright named Brooke had suffered the penalty of suppression of a play sometime before the prohibition of *Edward and Eleonora*; and there was speedily doomed another in the *Arminius* of Thomson’s friend Paterson. Ludicrously enough, Thomson was the unwitting cause of Paterson’s misadventure. Paterson acted as amanuensis in the preparation of *Edward and Eleonora*. When the official reader of plays espied the handwriting in which the treasonable sentiments of *Edward and Eleonora* had been penned, he desired no further proof of the unsuitability of this second drama for public representation. Its claims were disposed of at once. Unread, and almost unseen, the drama by Paterson was forthwith authoritatively condemned. Some amends for the rejection of *Edward and Eleonora* on the stage was hoped to be secured by the published edition; but such a sensation as might have been expected to be

aroused over the difficulties that had looked so menacing to the censor, was not excited. No greater attention than was common to the bulk of published plays was bestowed upon the supposed disloyal pages of *Edward and Eleonora*. A laboured witticism on the part of one of the ministerial writers is recorded in connection with the affair. The poet is herein stated to have 'taken a *Liberty* which was not agreeable to *Britannia* in any *Season*.'

These difficulties with the authorities experienced by the poet himself and other dramatic writers, obviously led him to very serious thought on the matter, and, finally, to direct recalcitrant action. This he exercised in a spirited preface to an edition of Milton's *Areopagitica*, published in 1738. The good seed of this reforming zeal fell on a fertile soil. For some time Thomson had held the business conditions of the theatre in no great estimation, and a year or two before his own luckless ventures he had diligently discussed with Hill the propriety of endeavouring to institute a Tragic Academy, apparently on the model of the French Academy of Science and Letters. 'Was there ever an equal absurdity heard of,' he writes on one occasion to Hill, 'among a civilised people, that such an important public diversion, the school which forms the manners of the age, should be made the property of private persons?' In another letter he reviews the subject, evidently under the stress of considerable feeling. Conjoined with his wish for an improved state of the business relationships of the theatre is a desire for amelioration on the question of book copyrights. The following passage represents the gist of his opinion on these points as to which his conviction was so firmly grounded.

‘In lieu of all patrons that have been, are, or will be, in England, I wish we had one good act of Parliament for securing to authors the property of their own works; and that the stage were put upon the footing of common sense and humanity. And can it be that those who impress paper with what constitutes the best and everlasting riches of all civilized nations, should have less property in the paper, so enriched, than those who deal in the rags which make that paper? Can it be that the great, the delightful school of manners should be abandoned to common sale, and become the property of any one who can purchase it, to be perhaps the school of folly and corruption? A simony this, in virtue; which, if not so wicked, yet is as pernicious as that in religion. What would Athenians have said to this? what laughter, what contempt, what indignation would it have raised among them!’

The idea of the Tragic Academy came to nothing; but Thomson was appointed, in 1736, one of the committee of managers of a Society for the Encouragement of Learning, composed of certain noblemen and men of letters. He was, therefore, both officially and by personal endowment well-qualified to defend the rights of the author.

It was on the suggestion of the Prince of Wales that Thomson, having the partnership of Mallet, composed the *Masque of Alfred*. Desirous of some work of the kind by which to celebrate the anniversary of the accession of George I. and also the birthday of the Prince's daughter, Augusta, the poet's royal patron naturally turned to him. The masque was duly performed on 1st August 1740, at Clieveden on the

Thames, before the Prince of Wales and a large assemblage of the aristocracy. So much discussion has been stirred over the most famous part of the play, the song of *Rule Britannia*, that extended treatment of both drama and song is deferred to another chapter. Quin again took a leading part in the performance. The popularity of the drama, which for some years was more than moderate, was much aided by its musical setting. This was the production of Dr Arne, who had, there is good reason to believe, some help from Handel.

## CHAPTER VI

REVISED EDITION OF 'THE SEASONS,' 'THE CASTLE OF  
INDOLENCE.' DEATH AND CHARACTER.

A VISIT to Lyttelton's country seat at Hagley, in Worcestershire, in the autumn of 1743, was the first of a series of such visits paid annually by Thomson. The poet seems to have held Lyttelton in much esteem, and the fact, that the earnest and doctrinally disposed man of affairs wrote his pamphlet on the *Conversion and Apostleship of St Paul* principally with the object of bringing Thomson to his own way of thinking, more than augurs that this regard was mutual. Their acquaintance had begun considerably before this date, though in what year is uncertain. The introduction came through Pope. Lyttelton had now won a foremost place as a politician, and continued to prove himself an intelligent and reliable member of his party, till his elevation to the House of Lords in 1756. He is described as a pleasant, absent-minded man of unimpeachable integrity and benevolent character, with strong religious persuasions and respectable talents. His interest in Thomson was of the truest, and these sojourns with his refined host amidst the beauti-

ful scenery of Worcestershire must have been delectable features in the poet's yearly round.

Lyttelton's invitation was given and acknowledged during the summer of the year 1743. How much the poet appreciated the prospect of this country holiday is thoroughly expressed in his letter of acceptance. 'I have the pleasure,' he writes, 'of yours some posts ago, and have delayed answering it hitherto that I might be able to determine when I could have the happiness of waiting upon you. Hagley is the place in England I most desire to see; I imagine it to be greatly delightful in itself, and I know it to be so to the highest degree by the company it is animated with. Some reasons prevent my waiting upon you immediately, but if you will be so good as let me know how long you design to stay in the country, nothing shall hinder me from passing three weeks or a month with you before you leave it. As this will fall in autumn, I shall like it the better, for I think that season of the year the most pleasing and the most poetical. The spirits are not then dissipated with the gaiety of Spring and the glaring light of Summer, but composed into a serious and tempered joy. The year is perfect. In the meantime I will go on with correcting *The Seasons* and hope to carry down more than one of them with me. The Muses whom you obligingly say I shall bring along with me I shall find with you—the Muses of the great simple country, not the little fine-lady Muses of Richmond Hill.'

The guess may be confidently ventured upon that *Spring* was one of *The Seasons* to which the poet makes reference in the foregoing letter. In *Spring*, at any

rate, his friend's charming surroundings were extolled in a passage of some length adhibited to that poem in the enlarged edition of 1744. The lovely valley is there named the 'British Tempe,' and in his title the poet hardly over-passed the truth. Hugh Miller in his *First Impressions of England* discloses an enthusiasm on the subject not inferior to that of Thomson. 'The entire prospect' he calls 'one of the finest in England, and eminently characteristic of English scenery.' Thomson's chief work as an interpreter of external Nature was now ended; but it may be fairly supposed that various suggestions upon his later poetical tasks were derived from these hours of quiescent retreat at Hagley.

This visit to Hagley has a heightened interest from the circumstance that now Thomson wrote to Miss Young a lengthened letter in terms of much endearment, and conveying an explicit proposal of marriage. This is the only occasion on which Thomson apparently gave serious consideration to such a step, but there can be no hesitation in regarding these words of his as presenting this meaning. 'Let me now,' so runs the concluding paragraph, 'my dearest Miss Young, bespeak your goodness. I shall soon, I am afraid, have occasion for all your friendship; and I would fain flatter myself that you will generously in my absence speak of me more than you ever owned to me. If I am so happy as to have your heart, I know you have spirit to maintain your choice; and it shall be the most earnest study and purpose of my life not only to justify but to do you credit by it. Believe me, though happy here as the most beautiful scenes of Nature, elegant society and friendship can make me, I

languish to see you, and to draw everything that is good and amiable from your lovely eyes.' Unfortunately for Thomson's peace of mind no progress whatever was made in the course he thus describes. The next we hear of Miss Young is upon the event of her marriage with Admiral Campbell. Lyttelton a year or two after this date tried to turn the poet's thoughts to the subject of a union with a lady who is not named; but he was put off with the excuse that his friendly counsel was then addressed to an unsympathetic ear. The poet was truly in the position of having loved and lost, and to the last it may be conceived his heart was in this, indeed, to him its own bitterness.

The stroke of good fortune which befell Thomson in 1744 was, however, to throw a fresh ray of cheerfulness across his life. On the recommendation of Lyttelton he was appointed to the sinecure office of Surveyor-in-General of the Leeward Islands. The duties incumbent upon him he could perform by deputy, and at the same time draw an income of £300 a year. The post of deputy he entrusted to his friend Paterson. With such a valuable resource to reckon upon, he could develop the capacities of his genius to the utmost; and this he prepared to do. In his quiet retreat at Richmond he struck off one drama after another; more than all, he worked out and perfected the most finished and beautiful of his compositions, *The Castle of Indolence*. Graced, too, by congenial spirits—Pope, Collins, Lyttelton, Hammond, Mallet, Quin, and Armstrong were all regular visitors—this period of Thomson's life must have been threaded with much brightness. Armstrong, a young

doctor from the Scottish Border, who had taken to literature, and produced one excellent poem in Thomson's manner, entitled the *Art of Health*, would be an irresistibly welcome associate. Lord Buchan gleaned some reminiscences of the poet's social surroundings at this date; and the narrative is of import. This information was obtained from Taylor, the barber at Richmond during Thomson's stay. Taylor informed the inquirer that Thomson wrote much in his garden, esconced in an arbour. One of his most frequent visitors was Pope. The 'little wasp of Twickenham' Taylor considered to be a marvellously fine talker. 'I have heard him and Quin and Paterson talk together so that I could have listened to them for ever.' No mention is made of the poet's indolence, of which the familiar anecdotes on the subject perhaps comprise considerable exaggeration. Placid and good-natured in disposition Thomson undoubtedly always was; sluggish and prone to unconventional habits in later years he must have been, or his friends would not have twitted him so excessively on the matter; but a writer who could put to his credit so much admirable and polished poetical work in a somewhat brief career, could not, on the face of it, have been a trifler once upon a day. The storied peach which he so leisurely plucked from his garden-tree at Richmond has enjoyed a celebrity much exceeding its due; in addition, a man who did his writing chiefly at midnight could not with any sort of fairness be expected to be astir at dawn. Thomson has surely borne undeserved reproach, if not libel, on the score of general inertia.

To add to the attractions of Richmond, Thomson

had here as neighbours the family of Youngs, including 'Amanda.' The sister of 'Amanda,' who was married to Mr Robertson, a friend of Thomson's, also resided in the district. Robertson, who says that the poet was desperately in love with Miss Young, describes her as not a striking beauty but of gentle manners and refined taste, such a woman, indeed, as was most likely to attract Thomson. It may have been at this time that not a few of those graceful little snatches of song which form not the least agreeable part of his poetic accomplishment, were composed. The following, though idealised, might well have been written during one of those later periods of occasional unrest, when the poet's fancy was charged with a weight of pensiveness regarding the tender, but ill-starred, relation with Miss Young :—

Tell me thou soul of her I love,  
 Ah ! tell me, whither art thou fled ;  
 To what delightful world above,  
 Appointed for the happy dead ?

Or dost thou, free, at pleasure roam,  
 And sometimes share thy lover's woe ;  
 Where void of thee, his cheerless home  
 Can now, alas ! no comfort know ?

O, if thou hoverest round my walk,  
 While under every well-known tree,  
 I to thy fancied shadow talk,  
 And every tear is full of thee :

Should then the weary eye of grief,  
 Beside some sympathetic stream,  
 In slumber find a short relief,  
 Oh, visit thou my soothing dream !

The preparation of a complete and much-amended edition of *The Seasons* resulted in its publication in 1744. In each of the books large additions were made and numerous corrections inserted. The most decided change was made upon *Summer*, which was enhanced by no less an amount than six hundred lines; eighty-seven lines were added to *Autumn*, one hundred and six to *Spring*, and two hundred and eighty-two to *Winter*. Mr Logie Robertson has gone carefully into these variations in his edition of *The Seasons* for the Clarendon Press, and brings out with practical exactitude the passages wherein the poet sought to make improvements. A disputed point of much bibliographical importance has arisen with reference to the preparation of this edition. The difficulty is, as to whether or not Thomson had a collaborator in this work, and if he had, whether that collaborator was Pope. The origin of this difficulty dates from a remark made by the Rev. John Mitford in his edition of Gray's works, published in 1814. Mitford, basing his assertion upon a volume of *The Seasons* which he had become possessed of, containing the MS. corrections of the edition of 1744 in two different hands, authoritatively declared that the second writer was Pope. Mr Churton Collins, in an able and convincing article on Mr Tovey's edition of Thomson's works (*Saturday Review*, 31st July, 1897), vigorously attacks this contention of Mitford's. The sole evidence of the slightest value that Mitford produced upon the theory which he advanced was derived from a letter of Pope's to Hill in which he says, 'I am just taken up [November 1732] by Mr Thomson in the perusal of a new poem he has brought me.' This reference is to

*Liberty.* That certainly supplies no positive proof whatever of the correctness of his view. To add to its very trifling cogency, there remains, however, the marked variation between the two instances of calligraphy in the MS. corrections. Mitford maintained that his two friends, Ellis and Combe of the British Museum, believed the hand of the second corrector to be that of Pope; but, on the other hand, the British Museum authorities of to-day are equally confident that the handwriting is not Pope's. Further, as Mr Churton Collins acutely points out, the external evidence to be deduced from contemporary opinion in Thomson's day, is quite opposed to the belief that Pope shared in the labour of Thomson's revision of his work. 'If Pope assisted Thomson to the extent indicated in these corrections, such an incident, considering the fame of *The Seasons*, must have been known to some at least of the innumerable editors, biographers, and anecdotists, between 1742 and 1814. It could hardly have escaped being recorded by Murdoch, Mallet, or Warburton, by Savage or Spence, by Theophilus Cibber or Johnson. It is incredible that such an interesting secret would have been kept either by Thomson himself or Pope.' An additional weighty factor of external evidence against this copartnership with Pope is to be found in the non-existence of any recognised work by Pope in blank verse. The internal evidence does not disagree with the probability of Thomson's own authorship of the second series of emendations. The line

'Through the black night that sits immense around,'

which Mr Churton Collins quotes as altered from—

'Through the black night that bids the waves arise,'

is altogether in the vein of Thomson's more precise manner. The ultimate item of proof on which reliance has to be placed in order to fix the actual authorship of Thomson's, is that of the handwriting. The issue does not here assume any magnitude of doubt. If the handwriting be neither that of Pope nor of Thomson, then it can only be reasonably explained as that of an amanuensis, the final credit of the emendations being thus left to the poet himself.

The revised edition of *The Seasons* was published by Millar in June 1744. Next month he followed it up by an edition of Thomson's complete works, while by-and-by separate issues of *Agamemnon* and *Edward and Eleonora* were published. Meanwhile, Thomson was far from slacking his energies. A new tragedy, *Tancred and Sigismunda*, was produced at Drury Lane in 1745. The published copy was again dedicated to the Prince of Wales. This drama attained the highest popularity among all Thomson's works of the kind. Garrick took the leading part in the representation. 'The town,' we are told, 'flocked to the performances.' Its esteem was such that it was translated into French and was brought out on the French stage some years after the death of the author.

Fortune had now bestowed, at least, its treasures of fame and sufficient wealth upon Thomson, and those years at Richmond were doubtless years of comparative happiness. Surrounded by the society of cultured and true-hearted friends, and devoting his leisured moments to the production of ripe verse, he approximated in no distant degree to the ideal he beheld in Virgil's *Corycius*

*senex*, or that of his own glowing picture of the truly happy mortal in *Autumn*. Pope was still a chief figure among his visitors. Robertson states that Pope frequently called upon Thomson, while Thomson was unfailingly admitted to Pope, whether he had company or not. Collins, whose beautiful ode alone sheds an immortal fragrance over the friendship, came often; Lyttelton brought his eager theological investigations and formal and amiable ways; Murdoch, Mallet, Armstrong and Quin, composed the fittest of company. Visits to Hagley fully diversified the routine of life at Richmond. Adjoining Hagley, moreover, was Leasowes, the home of Shenstone, who there directed the clever but superficial powers of his intellect to the composition of dainty verse and to the adornment of Nature. In the autumn of 1747 Thomson was the guest of Shenstone, who commemorated the occasion by a tablet placed in 'Virgil's Grove,' inscribed 'Celeberrimo Poetæ Jacobo Thomson.' Letters of this date to Lyttelton and to his sister, Mrs Thomson, betoken a steady burning of the flame of his characteristic optimism, although in the brief space of another year it was to be diminished not a little in its lustre.

The year 1748 saw the production of *The Castle of Indolence*. Upon this he had been engaged at irregular intervals during the long period of fifteen years. It was published in May 1748. In a letter to Paterson, dated April of that year, he announced the coming publication, reminding him of an original touch suggested by Paterson at a gathering at North Haw, and assuring him that he still held 'an apartment in it as a night pensioner.' This gathering at North Haw, it is supposed, produced

the badinage by his friends upon Thomson's indolence, to which he replied by throwing off some satirical pictures of themselves, delineating them as in no better case, the whole forming the nucleus of his exquisite poem.

But Thomson now met with a serious, though not disastrous reverse. As the result of a quarrel between the Prince of Wales and Lyttelton, the pension of £100 a year was withdrawn from Thomson as the nominee of Lyttelton. Mallet and West were simultaneously deprived of their appointments. Some hope was for a time held out that the interdict would in all the cases be removed; but no such event happened. Perhaps this stroke of ill-luck, combined with that vital calamity which his friend Robertson said Thomson certainly felt in the loss of Miss Young, explains better than a dispute with Garrick, the pathetic tenor of his remarks to Paterson: 'Let us have a little more patience, Paterson; nay, let us be cheerful; at last, all will be well, at least, all will be over—here I mean: God forbid it should be so hereafter! But as sure as there is a God, that will not be so.' A play on the subject of *Coriolanus* was now ready, and it was regarding a controversy between Garrick and Quin as to who should have the principal part, that the poet was, in the first instance, constrained to use these words. The author was not destined to see the production of his drama.

A few months after the publication of *The Castle of Indolence* Thomson was suddenly seized with his last illness. The cause was a chill, brought on during a journey on the Thames between Hammersmith and Kew. Having walked from London to Hammersmith, Thomson,

in an imprudently heated state, got on board the boat, with the result that next day he was seized with a fever. The crisis was passed, however, and he was again able to be out of doors. But he over-ried his strength; a relapse set in, and, despite the carefully directed skill of Armstrong, soon proved fatal. Thomson died 27th August 1748, within a few days of his forty-ninth year. His death excited the deepest sorrow in the circle of his friends. Armstrong, Murdoch, Lyttelton, Forbes of Culloden, and Millar, his publisher, have all left the strongest testimony of the ardour of their affection, and the profound sense of their loss. Shenstone was greatly touched, asserting that though slightly acquainted with Thomson, he felt as if he had 'known him and loved him a number of years.' When some months later, Quin, dressed in a suit of mourning, spoke the prologue to *Coriolanus*, the grief that choked his utterance was not feigned. The greatest pain Thomson ever gave to his fellow-creatures—so it was written on a votive tablet erected to his memory in his own garden—was that of his death.

Thomson was buried in Richmond Church, under a plain slab, but more than one monument has since been raised to his memory. The most notable is that in Westminster Abbey, which was unveiled on 10th May 1762. This is placed between the monuments of Shakespeare and Rowe. In 1792 Lord Buchan placed a small brass tablet in Richmond Church, with a quotation from *Winter*. A memorial was also erected on Ferney Hill, near Ednam, in 1820. Only a short notice on the tombstone of the poet's father for long traced his memory at Southdean, but within recent years a stained glass window

was dedicated to him in the parish church, built in succession to the pile in which he was wont to worship.\*

The best portrait of Thomson is the head by his friend William Aikman. This was possessed by Lyttelton, and is said to have been emphatically and favourably described by Pitt as 'beastly like.' This is now hung in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Another portrait, painted by Slaughter, is preserved at Dryburgh Abbey. A third, the work of Paton, representing Thomson at the age of forty-six, was presented by Miss Bell, the poet's grand-niece, to the National Portrait Gallery. Thomson was above the middle size, and stoutly built; in his last years, inclining to heaviness. As in the case of Burns and other contemplative men of note, his features were much less expressive in repose than when animated. In his youth he was considered handsome.

Lyttelton and Mr Mitchell (afterwards British Ambassador at the Court of Frederick the Great) administered Thomson's effects on behalf of his sister Mary, who married William Craig, a merchant of Edinburgh. Mr Beresford Chancellor, in his interesting and exhaustive *Life of James Thomson*, quotes an extract from the registry of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, bearing upon this administration. Mr Chancellor adds various details of note as to the transactions about the poet's

\* Regarding this window Dr Mair writes:—The subject designed on the window, suggested by an artist of eminence in Edinburgh, is appropriate for its memorial purpose. In the centre-piece is seated a youthful harper, with the rapt, ethereal expression of the poet in his countenance, and in the midst of woodland and river scene, which suggests the beautiful in rural life, while at the foot of the window is a portrait of Thomson taken from the portrait at Abbotsford.

affairs following upon his death. The sale of the cottage took place on 15th May 1749. The catalogue of this sale, which has been preserved, shows that the house was well furnished with engravings and designs, the result of Thomson's visit to Italy; among them were (singularly enough) works of Audran, Le Bas, Lépicié, and copies of some of the most famous sculptures attributed to Castelli. The library, consisting of about five hundred volumes, was made up, for the most part, of English and foreign classics. A copy of Shakespeare, Raleigh's *History of the World* and Harrington's *Oceana*, were bought by Forbes of Culloden. His friend Ross purchased the cottage, which, after some enlargement by Ross, has now been further added to, and is used as the Royal Richmond Hospital.

Thomson's personal character appears to have been such as attracted the liking of all who met him. He was agreeable, sympathetic, and generous alike in opinion and in act. Satisfactory proof is also produced that, apart from a certain *gaucherie* he was, in an age of excessive formality, in receipt of complete toleration in respect of good-breeding. Shenstone, it is true, did not greatly care for his manners, but Shenstone was a literary and probably social martinet. Yet such matters do not, when all is said, supremely concern a biographer of a man of genius like Thomson. A more serious affair is it that an attempt should be made to throw a blot on the poet's personal worth. His recent editor, Mr Tovey, discusses at some length an indictment of the sort by John Taylor, author of *Records of My Life*, who alleges that he had heard on some evident authority that Thomson was guilty of a 'calculating callousness' in a

secret love affair of his youth. Mr Tovey, who mingles praise and blame with unusual freedom in his estimate, accrediting Thomson with 'vulgarity,' 'effusiveness as a boon companion,' and one or two more undesirable errors, is not, however, prepared to accept this mysterious tribute to the poet's inherent baseness. True, he dismisses it with the fine recklessness which convicts by faint praise. 'Admirers of Thomson,' he says, 'will reject this tale as a mere lie, though it is a lie with many circumstances.' Impartial criticism will not endorse this grudging concession. Thomson's fame can never be blurred by such a wavering slander. A writer who could put so much bright, wholesome, and spiritual thinking into his poetry has inevitably drawn there for himself a character with dominant traits of the best and finest; and, upon the whole, there is no significant reason to conclude that he was materially untrue to the ideal which he thus upheld. Men like Lyttelton and Rundle, moral purists not only in sentiment but in practice, delighted in him. And if a man's letters to his friends are not cunningly devised pieces of deception, then Thomson must be deemed to have been possessed of uncommon goodness of heart. One of his first letters from London to Cranston, obviously composed at a white-heat of feeling, bears every sign of unaffected sweetness of disposition; while it may be said that the letters to his sisters, to Miss Young and to Paterson, all of which display unquestionable marks of sincerity, place him in an excellent light. Faults he certainly had; but to seriously pause, deliberate, and argue over these faults, as far as actual investigation brings them, is to

run the art of literary biography to a perilous brink ; the fame of Shelley, though his case cannot be admitted to be a parallel one, has not suffered so much by the fretful 'chatter about Harriet' as has the sense of historical perspective in his hostile critics.

But this matter simply revives an old story. Following some ten years after the publication of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and in the same year as Boswell published the 'Life' of the great literary dictator himself, there was set on foot by Lord Buchan a series of celebrations of the memory of Thomson, which did not a little to honour his name, and to bring home to the people of Scotland, at least, some living notion of the greatness of the poet of Nature who numbered himself one of them. Lord Buchan was doubtless directly moved to his design by the not too cordial criticism of the author of *The Seasons* which was offered by Johnson, and also by the covert slight on his character which was passed by Boswell in his famous biography. Boswell there said that it was Johnson's intention to introduce censure upon Thomson in the notice devoted to him, on the ground that his practice as a moralist did not correspond to the ideal which he commended in his published works. The inveterate cavilling jealousy which Johnson both in conversation and writing manifested towards his older literary contemporary cannot be said to be very intelligible. That the subject of his wrath was a Scotsman would be, as a matter of course, a primary cause of offence of a formidable kind ; that he was a successful Scotsman, it may be hazarded, produced the maximum of intolerable error. When the grievous struggle for reputation which

Johnson endured is contrasted with the comparatively smooth and easy access to fame which signalised the career of Thomson, a certain light is shed on the source of Johnson's animadversion.

Lord Buchan's answer to this criticism partook of the nature of a national vindication, and the incident of his inaugural celebration is one of much interest. Additional note is given to it by the hearty sanction it received from Burns. The cultured founder of these gatherings, which took place at Ednam, the poet's birthplace, made his attitude on the matter exceedingly plain by his judgment upon the author of the *Lives of the Poets*, whom he characterized as an 'overbearing pedant and bully, whose reputation was proof of the decline of British taste and learning.' Lord Buchan went on to say in his opening oration that in the very simplest view of Thomson's delineation of Nature, there was much to infer as to their sweetening effect upon human nature. 'In his poems, those who are able to taste and relish that divine art which raises the man of clay from the soil on which he vegetates to the heaven of sentiment . . . will delight in seeing the beautiful features of Nature presented to the eyes as spectators and not readers, and after these delightful impressions are over, they will find themselves happier and better than they were before.' Burns could not attend this meeting. But he sent a message of explanation, and along with it a memorial ode. The letter has a sentence or two which tell how deeply the great lyrical poet of the country felt the importance of the tribute that was being paid to its great descriptive poet. 'Language,' he says, 'sinks under the

ardour of my feelings when I would thank your Lordship for the honour you have done me in inviting me to make one at the coronation of the bust of Thomson. In my first enthusiasm, on reading the card you did me the honour to write me, I overlooked every obstacle, and determined to go ; but I fear it will not be in my power. A week or two's absence in the very middle of my harvest is what I much doubt I dare not venture on. Your Lordship hints at an ode for the occasion ; but who could write after Collins ? I read over his verses to the memory of Thomson, and despaired.' Burns, however, did write his verses in the mood of Collins ; they are here given as a graceful, and, so to speak, more than national eulogy of the poet of *The Seasons*.

' While virgin Spring, by Eden's flood,  
Unfolds her tender mantle green,  
Or pranks the sod in frolic mood,  
Or tunes Eolian strains between ;

While Summer with a matron grace  
Retreats to Dryburgh's cooling shade,  
Yet oft delighted, stops to trace  
The progress of the spiky blade ;

While Autumn, benefactor kind,  
By Tweed erects his aged head,  
And sees with self-approving mind,  
Each creature on his bounty fed ;

While maniac Winter rages o'er  
The hills whence classic Yarrow flows,  
Rousing the turbid torrent's roar,  
Or sweeping, wild, a waste of snows,

So long, sweet Poet of the year !  
Shall bloom that wreath thou well hast won ;  
While Scotia, with exulting tear,  
Proclaims that Thomson was her son.'

## CHAPTER VII

### 'THE SEASONS'

THOMSON, when he wrote *The Seasons*, was remarkable as the founder of a new literary era. This was less felt when he composed his great work than it is to-day, strongly supported as his deliberate study of Nature has been by such writers of our own century as Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley. Two reasons may be offered as suggesting a due explanation of this change in opinion. First, the habit of introspectiveness which does not find full satisfaction in a man's own mental attitude, was not so marked a characteristic of men of the eighteenth century as it is of those of to-day. Such gloomy subjective writers as Sénancour and Amiel would have been impossible participators in the virile speculation of last century. Again, it is now more vividly understood than in the century preceding, that man forms only an infinitesimal unit, if a potent one, in the vast universe in which he is placed. It is, therefore, more fully realised now than it ever was before, that he suffices not to himself, and that there exists in Nature a sphere alike congenial and beneficent, to which his haply jaded consciousness may turn for refreshing renewal. The modern love of Nature in its beauty and in its

invigorating purpose reaches much beyond any previous idea of its qualities alike in variety and range. This intensity of regard came notably into English literature, and it might be safely concluded, into all European literature through Thomson. It was no new thing to touch, it might be, with deft and subtle allusiveness on the charm and sweetness of Nature ; but he it was who first emphasized beyond all modern writers the 'living activities and operant magic of the earth.' After him philosophy and art alike found a new field in which to work. Nature in the poetry of Thomson was pointed to as a fresh and abiding source of wonder, of attractiveness, of solace. He was the veritable discoverer of a new world of æsthetic and spiritual perceptions.

Wordsworth, forgetful of the more mature growth of the feeling for Nature in his own day, and also of the different artistic conditions in which the poetry of Nature was written, passed an exaggerated condemnation on the state of thought as the subject in the eighteenth century, and on the character of the poetical work of the kind produced by the contemporaries of Thomson. This criticism was made in one of his prefaces to *The Excursion*. Professor Wilson in one of his *Blackwood* essays brought Wordsworth promptly to book for this mistaken idea. Wilson puts his case with the rare brilliance, wit, and critical faculty which he so truly possessed, the authority of his statement being further strengthened by the poetical affinity which he shared with both Wordsworth and Thomson. The 'blind wonderment' of the reading public of Thomson's day, Wilson affirms warmly to be beside the mark ; contemporary admiration for the

work of Thomson, if not so expansive as in Wordsworth's day (or, as Wordsworth hoped it was) was candidly and thoroughly appreciative. The critic of Wordsworth was in the right. Precisely the same criticism as Wordsworth here offered, would have applied in the case of Rousseau; the artificial society of his day, however, had nothing but cordial approval for the graphic and powerful delineations of Nature in the *New Heloise*. The delightful descriptions of rural life round Montmorency, caused singular and reciprocated pleasure to the readers of the French sentimentalist. The severity of Wordsworth's judgment distinctly called for such refutation. He reduced Thomson's popularity to a wholly specious one, ascribing much of it to his 'false ornaments' and 'sentimental commonplaces.' Professor Wilson proceeded in his review to give weight to the fact that the merit of Thomson lay not in the positive novelty of his work, but in its sincerity and variety. The author of *The Seasons*, he said, outdid his contemporaries in noting Nature more truly and on a wider scale; and this, no slight commendation, may be readily granted as the criterion of his rank as a poet.

The plan of *The Seasons* is exceedingly uniform. *Autumn*, the last to be composed, differs in no important point of form from *Winter*, the original of the series. The plan adopted was that of the natural development of each of the year's divisions. Considerable objection has sometimes been taken as to the introduction of the didactic passages which appear in all. These, it is true, embody the poet's philosophy of Nature, but are by no means of the best illustrations of his art. But apart

from their philosophical bearing they have in their place a distinct literary utility, creating as they do an appropriate sequence of pauses in the general narrative. The same may be said on behalf of his idyllic stories. None of them, with the exception of that on Lavinia, can count for more than a necessary variation in the treatment of the subject at large. Without these endeavours at diversity, the purely descriptive discourse would have incurred undoubted risk of monotony; and, howsoever serious their faults, the discretion that originated their introduction was a sound one. The usage, in short, is not more than an ordinary necessity of any continued literary composition. Any teller of a story who wishes his narrative to be engrossing must do the same. The most obvious instance occurs in that of the writer of tragic drama, wherein departure from a regular line of development is enforced by the clearest mandate. The true literary artist must accommodate himself to the needs of his reader or auditor.

Hazlitt called Thomson 'the best of our descriptive poets,' and the title, in its exact sense, will not with justice be denied him. His claim springs first from the completeness of his devotion to the treatment of external nature; no British poet rivals him in absolute absorption in this subject. No work in the range of British literature approaches *The Seasons* in dealing with Nature in a manner so apt and strenuous. Again, he excels in the expansiveness of his power in transcribing from Nature; his imagination ranges afar, while it depicts with precision; he can treat broad and striking areas with force as well as picturesqueness. A third eminent

characteristic is the freshness with which he invests his portrayal. In this he is second to none of the most original of his Scottish precursors.

In all essentials of his art he compares favourably with Wordsworth and Cowper, his greatest rivals in poetical description. Wordsworth, it is true, concerned himself with the imaginative statement of a natural theodicy rather than with the special interpretation of Nature; Cowper, also, was not an avowedly descriptive poet. But the works of both are shot through with passages of natural description of the finest texture. Alike in actual extent and consistency of his study of Nature, Thomson is superior to both. Moreover, in the inherent descriptive qualities that signalise the work of all, Thomson claims corresponding if not greater praise. His reach and vividness counterbalance Wordsworth's intensity, Cowper's pleasing and sedulous exactness of detail. No passage of *The Seasons* equals in dazzling grandeur the cloud scene and other too rare passages of *The Excursion*; but there are not a few as naturally clear and striking. Cowper's *Morning Walk*, it must be allowed, exhausts with wonderful nearness of review almost every object of note that enters into his landscape; yet Thomson succeeds with a few bold and vigorous strokes in setting forth a similar scene with an effect quite as just. As far as the 'unbought grace' of poetry is considered, Thomson brooks no assertion of surpassing quality on the side of either Wordsworth or Cowper. The stumbling-block to his equal authority of claim consists in his crudity of style. Bombastic, cumbrous, vapid, all these epithets forcibly apply to the language

of not a few passages, lines, and phrases of *The Seasons*; here Thomson, in all other respects to be praised, must be assigned an inferior position; in this artistic part of his work he greatly fails beside the studied, and yet satisfying ease of Wordsworth, and the polished grace of Cowper.

Most conspicuous of the gifts of the poet of *The Seasons* is his pictorial power. *The Seasons* has a wealth of clearly-limned and finished pictures. They stand out as truthfully and effectively as if drawn upon canvas. Concerned in the main with still life, there are included also figure pieces of the deftest workmanship. Thomson is not only the Claude of British poetry, he may also with fairness be called the Teniers or the Wilkie. Background, colour, and careful technique distinguish his transcripts derived from the world of external nature; spirit, verisimilitude, humour, his efforts in figure pieces. This class of picture scenes is met with least frequently in *Winter*, due perhaps to the less advanced power of the author's art. In *Winter* the poet is above all the *raconteur*. His effects there as elsewhere are skilfully managed; but the artistic result is less firm, less delicate. Only one or two of these delightful vignettes decorate the pages of *Winter*. We have the Snowstorm in the one class of pictorial representations; the Hall Sports in the other. They certainly challenge comparison with the best of the poet's similar achievements. But *Winter*, altogether, does not cohere so truly as do its companion studies. Description, episode, moralising, are intermixed in a way that disappears in the rest of the *Seasons*. When once, however, Thomson found the measure of his power, he carried out his design without hesita-

tion or flaw. To place beside the solitary *Winter* sketch from still life, there are in *Spring* the well-defined transcripts of Meadow and Forest, the Sunset, the Dawn, the Valley, and the Garden. Here, however, no figure pieces find a place. *Summer* has a large number of descriptive feats in both classes of work. Unsatisfactory to the author in its first draft, the scrupulous revision bestowed upon this book justifies itself fully in this particular line of description. A beautiful picture of Dawn holds the leading place; then in close array comes a varied series of well-felt landscapes and rustic scenes. First is that of Haymaking, followed closely by one of Sheep-shearing, and others—the Pasturing Horse, the Waterfall, the Hill, the Desert Storm, the Thunderstorm, and the Shepherd's Courtship. *Autumn*, too, contains not a few of these brightly defined drawings. Chief among them are the Fall of the Leaf, the Hunted Stag, the Revelling Fox-hunters, (one of the most successful of all, though Lyttelton in his edition excised it, from a fancied idea of its coarseness), the Orchard, Moonlight, and the Village Dance. Two examples of Thomson's rare power of presentation in this respect are subjoined; that of 'Moonlight' from *Autumn* being an outstanding example of his gift as a painter of still life.

‘ Meanwhile the moon,  
Full-orbed and breaking through the scattered clouds  
Shows her broad image in the crimsoned East.  
Turned to the sun direct her spotted disk,  
Where mountains rise, umbrageous vales descend  
And caverns deep, as optic tube describes,  
A smaller earth, gives all his blaze again,  
Void of its flame, and sheds a softer day.

Now through the passing cloud she seems to stoop,  
 Now up the pure cerulean rides sublime.  
 Wide the pale deluge floats, and streaming mild  
 O'er the skied mountain to the shadowy vale,  
 While rocks and floods reflect the quivering gleam,  
 The whole air whitens with a boundless tide  
 Of silver radiance, breaking round the world.'

'Haymaking' in *Summer* forms a rustic picture of the fullest exactness and verve. After introducing as leading figures

'The rustic youth, brown with meridian toil  
 Healthful and strong; full as the summer rose  
 Blown by prevailing suns, the ruddy maid,'

the picture is charmingly developed thus:—

'Even stooping age is here; and infant hands  
 Trail the long rake, or with the fragrant load  
 O'ercharged, amid the kind oppression roll.  
 Wide flies the tedded grain; all in a row  
 Advancing broad, or wheeling round the field,  
 They spread the breathing harvest to the sun  
 That throws refreshful round a rural smell:  
 Or, as they rake the green-appearing ground,  
 And drive the dusky wave along the mead,  
 The russet hay-cock rises thick behind  
 In order gay; while, heard from dale to dale,  
 Waking the breeze, resounds the blended voice  
 Of happy labour, love, and social glee.'

The style in *The Seasons* with the undeniable pomposity that grievously culminates at times in such phraseology as 'plummy people,' 'opponent bank,' and 'afflictive noon,' exhibits no inconsiderable number of felicitous lines. There is displayed none of the pre-eminence of expression shown by the great masters in poetical art, no line that impinges on the memory by the very mellifluous

beauty of its accent. Never does it reach the haunting resonance of

‘ Perilous seas in faery lands forlorn,’

or,

‘ Tall oaks branch-charmed by the earnest stars,’

or,

‘ With the moon’s beauty and the moon’s soft pace.’

Yet Thomson, as well as Keats and Wordsworth, owned the same gift of melody, not only in lines, but in passages. Had it not been that the verbose diction of his day held him so closely in its grasp, and irrevocably impelled him to the employment of its jarring chords, there might have been little to complain of in his work in this respect. Some of his verses sustain with unmistakable force the plea on behalf of his real power of expressiveness. Take, for instance,

‘ The thunder holds his black tremendous throne,’

or,

‘ And Mecca saddens at the long delay,’

or,

‘ Sighs the sad genius of the coming storm.’

These, and other lines, are touched with the finest illuminating art, and could have been written only by a poet whose judgment in regard to diction was, at its best, of unusual discernment.

The originality of Thomson’s genius declared itself as markedly in the literary method by which he chose to express himself as in the choice of material to which he dedicated his poetical insight. The heroic couplet, so overwhelmingly fashionable in his day, had no attraction

for him. In *Autumn* he speaks with undisguised admiration of John Philips as the second

‘Who nobly durst, in rhyme-unfettered verse  
With British freedom, sing the British song.’

He evidently felt that the somewhat metallic form in which Dryden and Pope enshrined their reflections, was equally open to criticism with their conception of the sphere of poetical thought. The success of his attempt at a new style of verse says much for his artistic penetration. For it was undoubtedly from his appreciation of Milton that he boldly essayed this revolution in the art of verse. The conviction dated from an early period. In more than one of his juvenile productions this idea of the superiority of blank verse influenced him. The pity is that his genius was not strong enough to go further, and to assert itself against the accepted rotund and unnatural diction with which he laboured, and which, indeed, was but a kind of meaningless echo of Miltonic language. Keats, with a finer intuition, but also, it must be remembered, with fuller literary advantages, faced the same problem, and solved it. In one of his letters, he speaks of the difficulties that beset him in seeking to conjure with the harmonies of the ‘organ-voice of England.’ Keats wrote:—

‘The *Paradise Lost*, though so fine in itself, is a corruption of our language. It should be left as it is—unique, a curiosity, a beautiful and grand curiosity—the most remarkable of the world; a Northern dialect accommodating itself to Greek and Latin inversions and intonations. The purest English, I think—or what ought to be purest

—is Chatterton's. The language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's Gallicisms, and still the old words are used. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet. I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written, but is the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another verse alone.'

Not only was Thomson unable to perceive that for him Miltonic verse was an impossible vehicle; he attempted to adapt it as far as in him lay. Alike in rhythm and in language he modelled his chief work upon it. Not a perfect success—this was in the nature of the case impossible—it was yet far removed from failure. The blank verse of Thomson moves with spirit and a fair amount of musicalness, and often with a certain graceful dignity. But the rich notes of Milton's verse were due both to the nobility of his theme and the unrivalled insight which he had into the rhythmical capability of the language used, and his extraordinary gift of melodious composition. Thomson fell altogether short in the two last qualities. Especially was his ear dull in the matter of verbal cadences. The general movement in the music of a passage he could perfectly understand and practise; but the subordinate touches proper to the elaboration of the whole escaped him. But success as well as defect must be acknowledged in the character of his verse. The merit of expansiveness that belongs to him in rendering landscape applies under different conditions to his rhythmical skill. He is deficient, in short, in the production of harmony. His blank verse is informed only with

melody ; but it is melody that, if sometimes overweighted, is, as a rule, clear, buoyant, and tuneful.

The general embodiment of opinion throughout *The Seasons* comprehends subjects of a varied character. Though it was not the primary object of the poet to set forth opinion in the work, he had well-marked views on social and political matters, and on religion, which he was able to introduce with perfect aptness into his pages. So clearly-defined, indeed, is his religious philosophy of Nature that consideration of this is of distinctive moment. But, apart from the religious attitude of Thomson, other topics of importance, seriously handled, arrest attention. Following closely upon his frank and ardent love of the external world comes his insistence on a tender regard for the lower creation, in which he was so worthily succeeded by Cowper, Burns, and Blake, and which in the nineteenth century has assumed the terms of a pretty definite creed. He misses no opportunity of dwelling upon this subject to a practical purpose, and his picture for instance, of the hunted stag in *Autumn* might be found to profoundly appeal to one with a sense of feeling unusually blunted. It has been pertinently said that Burns's 'Wounded Hare' will live in men's memories when hares are no longer shot for sport. Thomson's feeling with respect to the humane treatment of the lower animals was evidently as deep as that of Burns ; and, although he gave no expression to his conclusions in lines so memorable, his whole-hearted humanity appears to have had in this respect, as in others, a strong community with his great Scottish successor.

The patriotism of Thomson shines with no fickle light

throughout *The Seasons*. As he showed, not only in *Liberty* and *Rule Britannia*, but in his general attitude in practical affairs, his convictions upon political matters were settled and pronounced. The conjecture that he went originally to London under the hope of obtaining some part in the service of the Government has much to assist it from the actual drift of Thomson's political ideas. He associated himself in London with the literary party of the day opposed to Walpole; and his independent bearing in relation to the unfortunate position in which he was placed at Lord Chancellor Talbot's death is a plain declaration to his reliance upon his convictions. He was, it is also clear, a Scot first, and then a loyal adherent of the British constitution. On more than one occasion he recalls the perfervid spirit and robust strain of his fellow-countrymen. One of the most compact and effective passages in *The Seasons* conveys an enthusiastic account of Scotland. He was fully cognisant, at the same time, of the many sterling qualities of the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt in other quarters of the kingdom. In a few lines of *The Prospect* he characterises each of the nations with much keenness of appreciation.

- ‘ She rears to freedom an undaunted race  
Compatriot zealous, hospitable kind.  
Hers the warm Cambrian : hers the lofty Scot,  
To hardship tamed, active in arts and arms,  
Fired with a restless, an impatient flame,  
That leads him raptured where ambition calls ;  
And English merit hers, where meet combined,  
Whate'er high fancy, sound judicious thought,  
An ample, generous heart, undrooping soul,  
And firm tenacious valour can bestow.’

This enlightened feeling of patriotism prevails throughout *The Seasons*. A united and prosperous Britain forms ever the poet's warmest political aspiration. In one phase of his constitutional opinions he maintained a certain individuality of outlook; like Burns, who, however, did not approve himself the unswerving constitutionalist we know Thomson to have been, he was at heart something of a democrat. As truly as did Burns, he realised the mighty safeguard of the 'wall of fire' that was set round a country by a hardy and contented peasantry. A man of the people, Burns's earnest advocacy of popular right admits of no manner of difficulty; the position of Thomson was somewhat different. True, he was born in a sufficiently humble rank of life; but during most of his career he mingled only in a society of culture, refinement, and, it might be, exclusiveness. Notwithstanding the circumstances in which he thus was placed, he preserved from first to last a true and deeply rooted esteem for the 'rustic' and other sons of toil. The sheep-shearing scene in *Summer* is followed by a number of reflective lines in which the poet urges the vital dependence of British greatness upon the industrial activities of the common people:—

' Hence Britannia sees

Her solid grandeur rise ; hence she commands  
 The exalted stores of every brighter clime ;  
 The treasures of the sun without his rage ;  
 Hence, fervent all, with culture, toil, and arts,  
 Wide glows her land ; her dreadful thunder hence  
 Rides o'er the waves sublime, and now, even now,  
 Impending hangs o'er Gallia's humbled coast,  
 Hence rules the circling deep and awes the world.'

He returns to the subject in the same poem, comparing favourably the condition of the British people with that of foreign nations. The contemplation leads him to dwell upon the general happiness of the peasant and the mechanic; the heroic capability of the soldier and the sailor; and the characteristic generosity of the British nobility. This is succeeded by a long and eloquent passage on past leaders in British greatness, celebrating the deeds of the Edwards and the Henries, of Drake, Raleigh, Hampden, Algernon Sidney, and Lord William Russell. Then comes a final stirring piece of writing, in which the poet recites the glories of British literature.

‘Is not wild Shakespear thine and Nature’s boast?  
Is not each great, each amiable Muse  
Of classic ages in thy Milton met?  
A genius universal as his theme,  
Astonishing as chaos, as the bloom  
Of blowing Eden fair, as heaven sublime.  
Nor shall my verse that elder bard forget  
The gentle Spenser, fancy’s pleasing son  
Who, like a copious river, poured his song  
O’er all the mazes of enchanted ground;  
Or thee, his ancient master, laughing sage;  
Chaucer, whose native manners-painting verse  
Well-moralised, shines through the gothic cloud  
Of time and language o’er thy genius thrown.’

It has been discriminatingly pointed out by Mr Logie Robertson that Thomson’s patriotism was inspired from a peculiar external source; that he primarily loved his country, and Scotland, principally, as viewed ‘rather in its geographical than its historical aspects.’ As far as Scotland was concerned, this national pride had much

to nourish it. 'The associations of his own early life doubtless made it clear to him; doubtless, too, the heroism exemplified by Wallace in ancient times, and by the "good Argyle" in his own, was viewed with true Scottish reverence and admiration; but more than the history of its "battle mounds and Border towers," his recollection of its scenes of rural life and rustic sociality, viewed idyllically through his own poetical imagination, was the main and overmastering element of his patriotism.' *Britannia*, too, he wrote upon one occasion, in language that bespeaks a note of this affectionate memory, 'includes our native kingdom of Scotland.' But, withal, his affection for England also was at length firmly planted; the scenes at Richmond and at Hagley drew out his friendly zeal as well. The much-expanded Great Britain of to-day would have found in Thomson an eager and loyal admirer.

The religious philosophy of Nature presented in *The Seasons* does not, as a rule, attract the closest regard. This absence of concern as to the speculative character of the poem has some defence in the positive character of the work itself; for it was not the chief aim of the poet to expound a philosophy. But, along with the graphic and subtle interpretation of Nature in *The Seasons*, there exists a carefully-balanced and systematic religious philosophy, with a meaning and a force of its own. The choric passages of reflection that are introduced in each division of *The Seasons* exhibit it with distinctness, while it burns with a steady and effulgent light in the ideas of the culminating *Hymn*. Criticism has been wont to content itself with the assurance that Thomson in these

philosophical passages did no more than give ready and unconsidered utterance to the ordinary, and often superficial, philosophical beliefs of his day. There is some truth in this. Both philosophical thought and language in the eighteenth century were of a stereotyped order, and only a writer of the greatest originality could have been expected to throw aside their encompassing bonds. Further vindication of the concessions paid to received intellectual fashions in *The Seasons* proceeds from the fact that the writer was an artist first and then a philosopher. But there is sufficient reason to suppose that Thomson also thought and wrote with an independent outlook; the passage on *Creative Wisdom* in *Summer*, the concluding passage of the same poem, and the *Hymn* fully warrant such a decision.

Thomson's creed regarding Nature was an impersonal one, and here, perhaps, he comes nearer to man's attitude to Nature to-day than do the highly-wrought philosophies of nature intervening between his date and the present. Modern science, which has dispelled to some extent the enchantment of the splendid pantheistic systems of Wordsworth and Shelley, has not been able to pierce beyond the inscrutable veil in the presence of which the poet of *The Seasons* reverently worked. Nor has it, with its relentless connotation of the evil as well as of the brightness that exists in Nature, succeeded in sapping the foundation of that earnest optimism on which his spirit was stayed against all reck of shock. The cardinal terms of his creed of Nature—its sanity, its calm, its self-centred strength—remain a powerful faith to-day. One great voice of our century proclaims this:—

'From the intense, clear, star-sown vault of heaven,  
Over the lit sea's unquiet way,  
In the rustling night-air came the answer,  
Wouldst thou *be* as these are? *live* as they.

Unaffrighted by the silence round them,  
Undistracted by the sights they see,  
These demand not that the things without them  
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

And with joy the stars perform their shining,  
And the sea its long moon-silver'd roll ;  
For alone they live, nor pine with noting  
All the fever of some differing soul.

Bounded by themselves, and unobservant  
In what state God's other works may be,  
In their own tasks all their powers pouring,  
These attain the mighty life you see.'

The joy of the earlier poet in the glory of Nature sounded a more jubilant and more thrilling note than this. And yet by implication both might, with perfect sincerity, have been attuned to the more inspiring strain. The radiant hopefulness of the *Hymn* has not been silenced :—

' I cannot go  
Where Universal Love not smiles around,  
Sustaining all yon orbs, and all their sons ;  
From seeming evil still educing good,  
And better thence again, and better still,  
In infinite progression.'

## CHAPTER VIII

### 'THE CASTLE OF INDOLENCE'

SPENSER was a long-established favourite of Thomson's, and he therefore took up a very congenial piece of work when he began his *Castle of Indolence*, avowedly based upon the great epic narrative of the 'poet's poet.' The poem was begun, according to his own words, as early as 1733, and engaged his attention at intervals of more or less duration till its publication in 1748. It formed another 'departure' in his poetry. The intention of the writer obviously was that the work should be a reflection of his ideas and capabilities as an artist—as an artist especially of the effects of poetical cadence, and of the literary grace of language. The result fully justified his aim. No imitation of a similar kind ever made has attained so near a rank of excellence to the original as do certain passages of *The Castle of Indolence* to *The Faery Queen*. Although Thomson's poem was the principal achievement of the sort in his day, Spenser awakened an active spirit of enthusiasm among English writers in the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1736 Gilbert West published his *Education*, written 'in imitation of the style and manners of Spenser's *Faery Queen*,' which was rewarded with considerable popular favour. This

was followed by Akenside's *Virtuoso* in 1737, and by Shenstone's *Schoolmistress* in 1742. But none of these productions takes any serious place as a faithful replica of Spenser's style. The stanza is correctly and fluently written; but so bereft is it in every case of its engaging beauty that the manner of its use approaches perilously near to travesty. These imitations in general fully merit the criticism passed in the *Lives of the Poets* upon those of West. 'Works of this kind may deserve praise as proofs of great industry, and great nicety of observation; but the highest praise, the praise of genius, they do not claim. The noblest beauties of art are those of which the effect is co-extended with rational nature, or at least with the whole circle of polished life; what is less than this can be only pretty, the plaything of a fashion, and the amusement of a day.' But *The Castle of Indolence* baffles the dire condemnation of this category. A professed and successful imitation of Spenser, it is also much more: a quite spontaneous and living poem.

The comparison in method between *The Seasons* and *The Castle of Indolence* is fraught with suggestive interest. In *The Seasons* we have the poet, in his most representative character, dealing with the intrinsic imaginative elements of his art, with the conception, vividness, and lively comprehension of his ideas; in *The Castle of Indolence* he seeks to emphasise the power of expression of his thought, the aptness and felicity of his language, the beauty and tunefulness of phrase and rhythm. In *The Seasons* we recognise chiefly the hand of the poet; in *The Castle of Indolence* the hand of the artist. In the one he achieves distinction beside those whose special

office it has been to grasp and vivify some poetic truth; in the other he enters the select ranks of the formal stylists of our literature. Here he belongs of right to the school of Coleridge and Keats. In deft and curious arrangement of topic, and in the exercise of subtle peculiarities of form and diction, *The Castle of Indolence* bears adequate consideration beside the masterpieces of the great romanticists of our own century. Nor does this excellence in point of outward form remain its simple recommendation. The poet's imagination asserts its capacity to answer to the particular demands made upon it by the conditions of the form upon which he works; and the result is something of that ethereal temper which characterises alone the best products in rare and delicate romance. Realistic, in a sense, in *The Seasons*, Thomson now becomes the exponent of an idealism in poetry. The region of *The Castle of Indolence* has no locality or name. It is a region of dream, of entrancing vision and enticing sound, of sun-flushed skies and radiant air, of bright sward and purple hill, of murmurous forest and melodious river, but where there lurks, moreover, depth of horror, and where landscape not far removed shines fair beneath a temperate day. It is a region consecrated indeed by the 'light that never was on sea or land.'

No work of poetry between the time of Spenser and Thomson is so marked by this absolutely delicate idealising tendency; nothing like it appears again till the time of Keats. We do not hear much about the significance of Thomson's part in setting forth anew the 'sweet-slipping movement' and charm of the Spenserian manner as a model for the poets of the nineteenth century literary renaissance;

but there can be no doubt about the validity of his right in this matter. In the romantic method, so excellently represented by Thomson, Keats may be taken as the most direct successor who understood the extraordinary richness of the note that was struck in *The Castle of Indolence*; for though there is its mystic glamour in the poetry of Coleridge, Keats, in his work, combines in a more general way, the main aims in the literary design of Thomson. The supreme greatness of Coleridge and of Keats has tended to dim the less splendid glory of their distinguished predecessor; but the claim of his accomplishment in this direction demands acknowledgment. The matter is valuable if only as an item in the historical development of our literature. Mr Theodore Watts-Dunton, in an admirable essay on *Chatterton*, contributed to Ward's *English Poets*, points out with conclusive force that the gracefully light and flexible octosyllabic rhythms, which became so great a power in the hands of Coleridge and Scott, had already received efficient illustration from the bright genius of Chatterton. The brilliancy of conception, the wealth of imagery, the ample command of the musical resources of language displayed in *The Castle of Indolence*, certainly seem to constrain the like recognition of a strong claim on the part of its author as a master of style in which worked some of the greatest who came after him.

*The Faery Queen* was not only the model upon which Thomson based his *Castle of Indolence*, but it supplied him with a definite hint as to the very scene in which he should set his narrative. This was the House of

Sleep, whence the wizard Archimago sent for a dream by which to cast a spell over the Red Cross Knight :

‘ And more to tell him in his slumber soft,  
A trickling stream from high rock tumbling down,  
And ever-drizzling rain upon the loft,  
Mix’d with a murmuring wind, much like the sound  
Of swarming bees, did cast him in a swoond.  
No other noise, no people’s troublous cries,  
That still are wont t’annoy the walled town,  
Might there be heard ; but careless Quiet lies  
Wrapt in eternal silence, far from enemies.’

But this hint given him, Thomson owed nothing more with respect to the actual evolution of his story. With the playful picture of the little society at North Haw as a nucleus, he wove his own fascinating romance, original, picturesque, and stored with new and strange allusions. The figures who act in the drama, if not altogether novel, are freshly and decisively drawn ; while the circumstances by which they are surrounded, and the light in which their activity is made clear and captivating, take their origin from no source but that of the moulding imagination of the poet himself. The difference in the matter of allusiveness between Spenser and Thomson is emphatic enough. The bounteous fields from which Spenser chiefly garnered his imposing array of literary allusions were medieval legend and classical mythology. In *The Faery Queen* no surprise attends the reader should he now and again even meet the co-existence of persons and events from these sources so widely separated by time and space ; when perhaps Venus and the Graces are introduced side by side with historic personages of a new era,

‘Knights of Logres and of Lyonesse,  
Tristrem, and Pelleas, and Pellenore.’

In *The Castle of Indolence*, a totally different fund of illustration is utilised. Now it is Oriental story that lends its personages and its incidents as enriching factors; the literary treasures of Chaldea and Arabia and their neighbouring kingdoms, and these almost solely, afford the material wherewith the poet of *The Castle of Indolence* adorns his story.

Although the art, rather than the subject-matter, of the allegory may be fairly premised—indubitably so from the superiority of the art to the story with which it deals—to have given the poet most concern, the theme which he strove to elaborate is important enough. This designates the old and perennial story of the conflict between Pleasure and Duty. The poetical literature of the eighteenth century evinced a special leaning to this subject. This bias, ultimately borrowed from the supremely ethical tone which pervaded the religious discussion of the day, affected alike all and sundry in the busy class of poetical writers. No doubt Thomson’s choice was also considerably guided by the precise nature associated with allegory in the pages of Spenser. But the didactic spirit was abroad in the eighteenth century with a power of exceeding energy. It did not, however, enter into poetical art with very satisfactory result. The doctrine that poetry is a criticism of life has much to commend it; but, as far as it is pertinent, there must be the admission that the poetical outcome should be conditioned by laws of beauty as well as of truth. The heroic measure of the eighteenth century

writers with its inflexible and unvaried rhythmical arrangement, approximating in a hazardous degree to the bald usage of prose, did not offer a medium at all attractive for the unreserved enunciation of moral and philosophical truth. Not that it is utterly inimical to the statement of such solid truth. Wordsworth's *Happy Warrior*, though not so successful a poem as his *Ode to Duty*, is, nevertheless, far from an unsuccessful poem. Yet the professedly didactic poets of the early part of the eighteenth century, with their love of paradox, of hazy abstraction, and the mere gratification, as it sometimes seems, of a forcible iteration of words, produced no great didactic poem. It has been said with a good deal of justice even of Pope's *Essay on Man* that he 'spins the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument.' Young, in the main merely a follower of Pope, succeeded in placing the didactic poem in a still less agreeable light. With an occasional evanescent gleam of poetry in his *Night Thoughts*, Young, as a rule, simply forges his way through the extensive and unrelieved course of his ascetic message with a solemnity at once depressing and amusing. With Young, morality is not only a serious but a sombre affair. Little wonder is it that Madam de Staël ingenuously associated him with Ossian and the Northern Scalds as the prime cause of our national melancholy. The poetical transition made in passing from the perusal of a writer like Young, to the allegorical method of Thomson, is of the most significant character. Both works alike inculcate momentous truth; both works are alike sound and decisive in what they aim to enforce. But in the entire legitimate appeal of the

argument of each, how far does the one outvie the other! Inasmuch as both are to be judged as poetry, the predominant merit of the one stands out with singular clearness. The morality of the one cannot be dissevered from that of the formal tractate; that of the other partakes in a very great degree of the transforming and heightening power of imagination.

The two parts of *The Castle of Indolence* have a kind of antithetical relation. The first canto, describing the abode and circumstances of the wizard Indolence, teems with rich and resplendent imagery; the vein in which the narrative is conveyed is of the most delicately-wrought sweetness. The more restrained gift of the poet is revealed in the second canto. Now, the pictures are less finely-drawn and less gorgeous; the music of the verse is touched with less aerial tone; the diction has not so much subtlety and skilful refinement of workmanship. The allegory, in short, assumes conditions that do not so readily kindle in the glow of the poet's imagination. The story of the triumph of Industry brings him back to the concrete affairs of the everyday world, and to the necessity of emphasising the value and character of its normal activities. The didactic element more decidedly prevails, and though to Thomson as well as to Spenser it was vouchsafed to inspire brightness into the didactic note of poetry, it was scarcely given to either to form it, 'musical as is Apollo's lute.'

Interesting alike from their biographical interest and their nice elaboration is the group of portraits that are introduced in the first canto, and that formed the first suggestive draft of the whole poem. The least distinct

is the first, which may be a composite presentment. Were it not that the author speaks of Paterson, to whose personality it answers with considerable faithfulness, the resemblance might be as aptly referred to Collins. Perhaps the original idea was taken from the character of Paterson, to be afterwards developed and coloured with various hints from that of Collins, who was no infrequent dweller in the society of Thomson in his last years. The second portrait also bears some slight divergence from the original of Armstrong, to whom tradition has generally applied it. Thomson, indeed, averred that Armstrong was the victim of a 'certain kind of spleen that is both humane and agreeable, like Jacques in the play;' but another report speaks of Armstrong's ready share in London social affairs, and makes it plain that 'pensiveness' was certainly not a prominent feature of his character. Welby, who is said to have been the third of the group, did not belong to the choice literary coterie at Richmond. He must have gained admittance to this poetical distinction from sheer merit of his personal characteristics, which receive such pointed and humorous setting in the poem. The fourth portrait was in all likelihood that of young Forbes of Culloden, but this, like the first two, is a somewhat generalised drawing. Any young man of sprightly and masculine character would answer equally well. The friendship of Thomson with Forbes, however, gives much reliableness to the conjecture that the description is one from life. Lyttelton's portrait is faithfully and gracefully done. The poet does not err, as he was so prone to do, on the side of exaggeration; but presents a clear and natural picture of the estimable

friend of his later life. The last three portraits—those of Quin, the poet himself, and Murdoch—have the most piquant character, and are perhaps most felicitous of all. Quin is drawn with sympathetic firmness. Lyttelton has generally received the credit of writing the inimitable account of Thomson himself. If so, he accomplished a portraiture of rare spirit and exactness. Familiar enough in some of its particulars, the whole stanza may be cited as reflecting with quaintly humorous precision and effect the character of the poet.

‘ A bard here dwelt, more fat than bard beseems ;  
 Who void of envy, guile, and lust of gain,  
 On virtue still, and Nature’s pleasing themes,  
 Poured forth his unpremeditated strain :  
 The world forsaking with a calm disdain,  
 Here laughed he careless in his easy seat ;  
 Here quaffed, encircled with his joyous train ;  
 Oft-moralizing sage ! his ditty sweet  
 He loathed much to write, ne cared to repeat.’

The contrast between the artistic method of *The Seasons* and that of *The Castle of Indolence* is most definitely brought out in the first canto of the second poem. No approach is made in *The Seasons*, vivid and striking as are so many of its descriptive passages, to the superb imagery of the introductory part of *The Castle of Indolence* ; and of the marvellously fine rhythmical cadences of the Spenserian imitation there may, indeed, be said to be no trace at all in the earlier poem. No better summary of this salient factor of *The Castle of Indolence* could be desired than that expressed in these words of Mr Logie Robertson :—  
 “ Now the style is serious, grave, and solemn ; now

it is cheerful, lively, and gay. It sometimes borders on burlesque, mostly of a brisk and airy character. There are, however, numerous descriptive passages of clear-ringing and exalted melody, sufficient in themselves to rank Thomson as a genuine singer of commanding rank." As a typical instance of these passages, where it may be added, the poet proves that he possessed the gift of harmonious movement, which is so lacking in the blank verse of *The Seasons*, there is here given the stanza which describes the music of the harp of Æolus. *Christabel* contains nothing better.

‘ Ah me ! what hand can touch the string so fine ?  
 ^ Who up the lofty diapason roll  
 Such sweet, such sad, such solemn airs divine,  
 Then let them down again into the soul :  
 Now rising love they fanned ; now pleasing dole  
 They breathed, in tender musings, thro’ the heart ;  
 And now a graver sacred strain they stole,  
 As when seraphic hands a hymn impart :  
 Wild warbling nature all ; above the reach of art.’

Nothing of this bewitching music is to be heard in the second canto, where the Knight of Industry and his energetic train are depicted. The solemnity of his position lends to the poet's verse something of its soberness. The epithets lack the brightness and lucidity of the first canto ; the rhythm is more moderated and exact. But one or two passages, especially that in which appears the hortatory song of the bard, are written in well-compounded verse of great excellence—nervous, fluent, and graceful. This is, perhaps, best noticeable in the comparison made between the vigour belonging to Nature and its reflection in man.

'Is not the field, with living culture green,  
 A sight more joyous than the dead morass?  
 Do not the skies, with active ether clean,  
 And fanned by sprightly zephyrs, far surpass  
 The foul November fogs, and slumbrous mass  
 With which sad Nature veils her drooping face?  
 Does not the mountain stream, as clear as glass,  
 Gay-dancing on, the putrid pool disgrace?  
 The same in all holds true, but chief in human race.

It was not by vile loitering in ease  
 That Greece obtained the brighter palm of art;  
 That soft yet ardent Athens learned to please,  
 To keen the wit, and to sublime the heart:  
 In all supreme! complete in every part!  
 It was not thence majestic Rome arose,  
 And o'er the nations shook her conquering dart:  
 For sluggard's brow the laurel never grows;  
 Renown is not the child of indolent repose.

Had unambitious mortals minded nought,  
 But in loose joy their time to wear away;  
 Had they alone the lap of dalliance sought,  
 Pleased on her pillow their dull heads to lay,  
 Rude Nature's state had been our state to-day;  
 No cities e'er their towery fronts had raised,  
 No arts had made us opulent and gay;  
 With brother brutes the human race had grazed;  
 None e'er had soared to fame, none honoured been, none praised.

Great Homer's song had never fired the breast  
 To thirst of glory and heroic deeds;  
 Sweet Maro's muse, sunk in inglorious rest,  
 Had silent slept amid the Mincian reeds:  
 The wits of modern time had told their beads,  
 The monkish legends been their only strains;  
 Our Milton's Eden had lain wrapt in weeds,  
 Our Shakespeare strolled and laughed with Warwick swains,  
 Nor had my master Spenser charmed his Mulla's plains.'

The realistic scene of horror with which the poem concludes, though terminating somewhat abruptly, is drawn with intense and masterly force. Slight as it is, and thrown into denser obscurity by the magnificence and extent of the scenes in which it is enclosed, it takes a noteworthy place in its own line of poetical art. It may not have suggested, but certainly deserves a place beside, the description of the final terrors that beset the path of Browning's 'Childe Roland.'

The apparent value of *The Castle of Indolence* as an example of the application of careful æsthetic conditions in poetry makes it less needful to dwell upon the character of the work as an allegory. Thomson himself, although he published the poem as an avowed effort in allegorical reflection, probably did not feel that this feature of the story was of paramount note. His preface, in truth, declares as much. It runs as follows:—'This poem being writ in the manner of Spenser, the obsolete words, and a simplicity of diction in some of the lines which borders on the ludicrous, were necessary to make the imitation more perfect. And the style of that admirable poet, as well as the measure in which he wrote, are, as it were, appropriated by custom to all allegorical poems writ in our language; just as in French the style of Marot, who lived under Francis the First, has been used in tales and familiar epistles of the age of Louis the Fourteenth.' Clearly, the material and strain of the allegory do not bulk very largely in the consideration of the author. But in the matter of just evolution of the allegorical materials of the story, Thomson reached a requisite amount of success. The scene is perfectly realised; the

characters are drawn with distinctiveness and breadth ; the moral to be derived from the story does not thrust itself unpleasantly upon the attention. In respect of structural arrangement, indeed, the allegory of *The Castle of Indolence* is sufficiently praiseworthy. Especially has this to be said of the balance preserved throughout the development of the allegorical narrative. Though it were scarcely justifiable to bring an allegorical effort so much less ambitious into any sort of comparison with the great allegories of Spenser and Bunyan, yet the merit of adequate discrimination as to the respective places of allegory and romance in a narrative of the kind seems, at least, to be carried out with signal faithfulness by the author of *The Castle of Indolence*. The clear outlines of Bunyan's landscapes and the actuality of his personages save his work from the overpowering depression incidental to the general arrangement of his didactic narrative ; while Spenser's gorgeous scenes and moving episodes fulfil a like virtue for his great epic. Both of these allegories are weighed down by unvitalised material, by ethical or theological doctrine, and other matters, that hardly come with perfect right into the natural progress of the story. There is good reason to think even from the slighter performance which Thomson achieved, that had he extended the plan of his work, built turret and pinnacle on the pleasing edifice which he raised, the result would have been a great and very convincing testimony to the genius of the designer and builder.

Tennyson, in the recent biography of the late laureate by his son, is reported to have declared that Thomson was his earliest model. The appreciation thus begun

was not abandoned, we may infer, in the critical conclusions of his later years. He has, at any rate, signified his sincere approval of *The Castle of Indolence* in the imaginative beauty, rich colouring, and finished literary form of *The Lotos Eaters*. The imitation, though individual enough, plainly intimates the closeness and fulness with which the earlier artistic masterpiece had enlisted his regard. The sun-tinted sky, the soothing streams, the sombre pine, the 'joy of calm,' all point to one undoubted source. Tennyson's power of limpid and magical expression was all his own; and so too was his gift of intricate and delicious harmony; but it may be said with every truth that in this poem, at least, he was not forgetful of the unique picturesqueness and winning music of the art of *The Castle of Indolence*.

## CHAPTER IX

### THOMSON'S DRAMAS. 'RULE BRITANNIA.'

THE literary fame of Thomson depends little upon his work as a dramatist. His plays held their place on the stage of his own day; but succeeding fashion quickly displaced them from esteem, and slight trace of their character survived from their obscurity with the exception that the Masque of *Alfred* included the renowned lyric of *Rule Britannia*. Sir Walter Scott in his essay on the Drama, thought that Thomson and others 'who followed the same wordy and declamatory system of composition, contributed rather to sink than to exalt the character of the stage.' Admitting that Young and Thomson were 'both men of excellent genius as their other writings have sufficiently testified,' he concluded that as dramatists 'they wrought upon a false model, and their productions are of little value.' The dramas of Thomson are certainly the fruit of his genius least to be admired; but they reach, upon the whole, a fair standard of merit, and, at least in one case, that of *Tancred and Sigismunda*, a real measure of dramatic consequence. Apart from their intrinsic value, moreover, they are noticeable and serious attempts at a literary exposition of the drama, and on this account alone

would fitly call for some critical attention in any survey of his work aiming to consider it to some representative extent.

The French school of dramatic composition so dominated the English stage at the time when Thomson made his first effort as a playwright, that he would have found it in the nature of an impossibility to shun the literary fashion. That here, he was fain, however, boldly to try his hand at further literary innovation is plain enough by various references as well as in some points of practice. In the prologue to *Tancred and Sigismunda*, he reverts with regret to the halcyon days of the British drama, when false, if classical, restrictions were unknown to the poet, and when criticism of the dramatic art did not fetter its spontaneity and force.

‘ Thrice happy could we catch great Shakespeare’s art,  
To trace the deep recesses of the heart ;  
His simple, plain sublime, to which is given  
To strike the soul with darted flame from heaven.’

But in those days criticism of dramatic form had usurped such strong and mastering power that a dramatist was bound to concede to it. The much-vexed question of the unities, which stirred so great dispute in the circle of literary authorities of the eighteenth century, has now dwindled out of all proportion to the significance which it possessed at that time. Then a drama was thought to be made or marred, not so much by the skill with which character was portrayed, or by which a story was movingly told and developed, as from the consideration whether the action was carried out in due time, or took place in one invariable spot, or was itself merely an

episode and not a series of actions. Dennis wrote one of his most caustic criticisms to maintain the egregious failure of Addison's *Cato*, because of the dramatist's lack of success in these external matters. His remarks on the scenery of the closing act, where Cato is represented in his soliloquy on the immortality of the soul, contain admirable ridicule of the straits in which a dramatist was occasionally placed by the rigorous necessity imposed upon his art. 'Consider the place,' says Dennis, 'in which this sight is presented to us. The place, forsooth, is a large hall. Let us suppose that anyone should place himself in this posture, in the midst of one of our halls in London; that he should appear *solus*, in a sullen posture, a drawn sword on the table by him; in his hand, Plato's treatise on the *Immortality of the Soul*, translated lately by Bernard Lintot; I desire the reader to consider, whether such a person as this would pass with them who beheld him, for a great patriot, a great philosopher, or a general, or for some whimsical person who fancied himself all these.' But while the critic saw perfectly the inevitable failure attending such efforts, he did not perceive that the radical error lay in the literary method from which they sprang. Both Dennis and Rymer, two leading post-Restoration critics, persistently enforced the stringent laws of the French dramatic system, which had the earnest and militant advocacy of Voltaire himself.

Lessing, in his *Dramaturgie*, with a much juster insight into the nature of Greek dramatic art than was possessed by any of his predecessors in criticism, completely disproved the efficacy of their view, and the romantic

drama, with Shakespeare as its illustrious leader, was restored to its former potency in the eyes of poet and observer alike. The German critic pointed out with the greatest thoroughness and lucidity, that both the French idea of dramatic construction and that typified in the work of Shakespeare were correct, and that the French critics were in the wrong in assailing the art of the romantic dramatists. He demonstrated that the French dramatists were quite justified in their close imitation of the Greek dramatic method, but also that Shakespeare was equally right in wishing to surmount its limitations. A short story, so ran his argument, may be represented with perfect success in the confined area prescribed by the Greek unities; and so may a story of some considerable duration, independently of the laws as supposed to be laid down by Aristotle. Lessing, in short, enunciated the reasonable deduction that, so long as one species of dramatic construction or the other was faithfully followed out, was artistically handled, a dramatic unity would assuredly be attained. All opinion to the contrary, thanks in the main to the analytic genius exercised in the *Dramaturgie*, has long since been confuted.

It was a purely artificial resemblance which the French dramatists established between the classical drama and their own. Apart from the fact that the Greek genius delighted in what was spectacularly simple in dramatic representation, in this relation manifesting the whole natural tendency of its idea of art, the flower of which was sculpture; and that the whole genius of the romantic spirit found its satisfaction in variety of beauty, exemplified in its most characteristic

exercise in painting, there was a practical difficulty in the way of greater complication of incident on the part of the Greek dramatist. He was hampered by the continual presence of the chorus, who, stationed in some appropriate place, acted throughout the part of interested spectators of all the events that passed. To have withdrawn any one of the scenes of the drama from the observation of the chorus would have been an impossible aim for the Greek writer; equally incompetent would it have been for him to alter the situation of a large and obviously stationary body of spectators with a changing order of events. Thus it came about that the simplicity of structure in a Greek play was partly idealistic and innate to the genius of the nation, and was also partly practical. Imitation outright on the part of modern dramatic writers was, therefore, a hollow necessity; and though the French drama reckons some brilliant instances of the success with which this illusive adaptation was carried out, in England, although it was welcomed, it never prospered. The movement initiated by Lessing on the Continent, like all other enlightened intellectual movements, was not inspired by one man only; on the English stage, Garrick, grasping the conviction that the interest in dramas upon a classical model was effete, returned to the production of Shakespeare's works, and the days of the so-called classical drama in Britain were numbered. No guiding light of the real truth in the matter beamed in the second scholastic darkness in which Thomson produced his dramas; and it is to his credit that he so fully understood the true drift in the case; nay, that he endeavoured

with all the knowledge, skill, and opportunity granted to him, to withdraw English writers from their unvarying devotion to the literary method of the artificial classical school.

Although it is principally in *Tancred and Sigismunda* that we observe the signs of Thomson's sympathy with the romantic drama, this leaning is also perceptible in his previous play *Edward and Eleonora*. In both dramas we have a greater variety and plasticity in the story than he had shown before; a closer interpretation of the character as influenced by passion rather than events; and a much more graceful and natural diction. He congratulates the hearers of the first-mentioned play on their quick approbation of what he thinks an improved condition of dramatic art.

'Your taste rejects the glittering, false sublime,  
To sigh in metaphor, and die in rhyme.  
High rant is tumbled from her gallery throne:  
Description, dreams, nay, similes are gone.'

But in his first dramatic performances he was perfectly in touch with the orthodox school, and it is by the association of his dramatic genius with these that he has come to be virtually judged. Unfairly so; for, although the coldness and artificiality of design and the love of mere declamation which are serious blots on his early dramas, do not wholly disappear in his maturer productions, there is very much greater vitality and charm in his more thoughtfully elaborated dramas. Compared with a play on such strictly classical lines as *Cato*, Thomson's early plays and others of their class, take, of course, no great rank in the history of the literary drama.

The more accurate feeling for style exhibited in the blank verse of Addison gives his drama an immense advantage in this respect over the *Sophonisba* or the *Agamemnon* of Thomson, who here accentuates the bombastic and stilted manner which was ever a threatening evil in the blank verse of *The Seasons*. No passage in either of those dramas of Thomson could be selected to place satisfactorily beside many a one in the stately, yet never pompous or frigid, verse of *Cato*. A sign of literary inferiority, this defect of style did not, however, disastrously affect the popularity of Thomson's plays when they were performed. Actors and audience homologated the taste of the dramatic author. Fashion for a time, indeed, favoured it. Tragedians like Booth and Wilks delighted in declamation preferably to the finer art of expressing emotion by fitness of tone, of look, and gesture; and their hearers of the hour agreed that it was right and proper that that should be.

Voltaire pronounced a flattering estimate of Thomson's dramas, and as M. Morel points out, shared with him, despite their great diversity about Shakespeare, the wish for some concession to the romantic method. He wrote to Lyttelton after the death of Thomson: 'Mr Thomson's tragedies seem to me wisely intricated and elegantly writ: they want perhaps some fire, and it may be that his heroes are neither moving nor busy enough, but taking him all in all, methinks he has the highest claim to the greatest esteem.' Voltaire's ripest idea regarding the drama was that the most perfect form a play could take would be effected by an expert blending of what was best in the classical and romantic methods. He proposed,

therefore, to graft the style of development in a story, and the manner of interpretation of character, both as seen in the romantic drama, on the ever-honoured irrefragable unities of the classical drama. This is exactly what Thomson accomplished in *Tancred and Sigismunda*, though it is doubtful whether, with his excellent insight into the best literary forms, and his inbred partiality for the romantic in art, he would have stopped there. It is not hard to conceive that the dramatist who could so graphically depict the natural, impassioned conflict in the heart of Sigismunda, and who could use language so terse and expressive as characterises his greatest drama, preserved only a superficial adherence to the enforced limitations of his craft. No doubt he accomplished as much as the circumstances in which he worked permitted him to do. That he accomplished much may be easily discerned by reference to only one element, that of language, between the date when he wrote *Sophonisba* and the production of his chief dramatic work. The following passage might have been written with entire appropriateness by one of the minor Elizabethan playwrights:—

‘Methinks I see again,  
Those gentle days renew’d that bless’d our isle,  
Ere by this wasteful fury of division,  
Worse than our Ætna’s most destructive fires,  
It desolated sunk. I see our plains  
Unbounded waving with the gifts of harvest ;  
Our seas with commerce throng’d, our busy ports  
With cheerful toil. Our Enna blooms afresh ;  
Afresh the sweets of thymy Hybla flow.  
Our nymphs and shepherds, sporting in each vale,  
Inspire new song, and wake the pastoral reed.’

If he cannot be deemed a noteworthy English dramatist, Thomson at least deserves recognition as a singularly dexterous and estimable exponent in English stagecraft. Perhaps the dramatic faculty was less developed in his genius than those of description and reflection; yet, under other literary conditions than those in which, with the distracting elements belonging to a transition period, he wrote, the issue might have been different. As it is, his achievement holds a position of no inconsiderable note in the history of the English drama. It embodies, moreover, literary work possessed of qualities of commendable mark and value.

In *Sophonisba*, as in most of his other dramas, Thomson adopts a political subject as the motive agency in his story. In *Sophonisba*, as well as in *Tancred and Sigismunda* and *Coriolanus*, the interest turns upon the sacrifice made by one or other of the personages in the cause of the State. A like interest, to some extent, colours *Agamemnon*. But it was, we can only suppose, the treatment of political motive in its broadest and most dramatic sense that influenced Thomson to the composition of such plays. Mr Tovey adopts the astonishing theory that, at least in one instance, Thomson wrote with a wholly mercenary object. Mr Tovey, who utters sweeping condemnation on Thomson's dramatic work, gravely propounds the theory that the 'real interest of *Agamemnon* is its political purpose,' that is, to exhort King George and to damage Walpole. The active research into symbolical history which such a style of play-writing would involve would have been a very serious consideration for a man of Thomson's alleged temperament! A

certain amount of innuendo may be with some show inferred in the character of Ægisthus as reflecting Walpole ; but in other respects the parallel is nought. The choice of subjects so ambitious as those formerly treated by Shakespeare, Æschylus, and Corneille would, at the first blush, tend to the supposition of a very alert confidence in his own dramatic capacity and experience on the part of Thomson. Probably, however, the varied selection made here, as throughout his dramatic experiments, was designed to test the dramatic terms under which writers so different worked. We have the authority of Voltaire's example in concluding that Thomson too strove after adequacy of structural treatment. Beginning with Corneille, therefore, he was at last drawn to Shakespeare, with what may be reasonably believed to have been his consummate preference. But both the conception of this dramatist's art, and the material which he sought to mould, conspicuously fail in his two classical tragedies, and are strangely disappointing in *Coriolanus*. The characters lack firmness and faithfulness of drawing ; the episodes move with a certain rigidity, though accurately, into their places ; the language is generally magniloquent, sometimes fatuous. These defects stamp especially the two early dramas, the sufficient mobility of the action alone saving them from the charge of somewhat ineffective presentation.

In *Edward and Eleonora*, and *Tancred and Sigismunda*, Thomson produced the best of his dramatic experiments. Although both of these dramas again are indebted to the political world for their groundwork, their human interest is much more fully grasped, and

much more distinctly limned, than in the rest of his works. A lightness of structure, an agreeable variation and intricacy of episode; a clearer, quicker, as well as more searching play of passion; and an altogether new and graceful diction, quite separate these apparent studies in romantic art from the dramatic attainment of his early career. In both, too, is introduced, as a new element of attraction, a considerable amount of local colour. Not that the former deficiencies are obliterated. In *Edward and Eleonora*, in particular, the obdurate fault of declamation tends to assert itself, and to convert a scene, otherwise of some passionate earnestness, into one spiritless and flat. *Tancred and Sigismunda* has most excellences and least blemishes of all Thomson's plays. Based upon an episode in *Gil Blas*, whose source in turn was Boccaccio, the story affords good scope for dramatic treatment. Thomson's especial liking for it is supposed to be established by this probable authorship of a prose rendering of the tale, published in 1745, under the initials 'J. T.' In the drama the materials are managed with skill. The action is vivid and stirring; the characters stand out finished and life-like; the portrayal of passion is direct and natural. The essential merits of the play, added to the crisp and telling style in which it is written, make it the most readable, as it seems to have been on its representation the most admired, of all Thomson's plays.

The masque of *Alfred* does not take a high rank on its general literary merits. With Alfred the Great as its principal figure, the drama draws its other sources of attraction from the introduction of scenes from English

history, in which the most notable of the sovereigns play a part. In this way, a considerable portion of the dialogue recounts the deeds of Edward III., The Black Prince, Elizabeth, and William III. Mainly spectacular, much subsidiary display was obtained from the narrative of the romantic wanderings and exploits of the hero. Altogether, while exhibiting facility and deftness of construction, the play is without great literary distinction. The sprightly lyrics scattered throughout the piece redeem its literary repute. The song, 'If those who live in shepherd's bower,' is worthy of the best examples of Thomson's skill as a lyrical writer; while the immortality of *Rule Britannia* arises not only from the inspiring and noble music to which it has been wedded, but from its indisputable literary value.

The much-argued question as to whether Thomson or Mallet wrote *Rule Britannia* has long been and is still debated. By most who discuss the subject, the possibility as to its being a joint production is not contemplated; and, in truth, the cohesion and compactness of the lyric discountenance the likelihood of such a plan. The song, it is pretty evident, was the work of one or other of the two authors of *Alfred*; the point at issue then comes to be as to which of them should have the honour of the claim. The whole body of evidence strongly postulates Thomson's authorship. Whatever evidence inclines to the case of Mallet is to be traced simply to his own seeming assertion of his right on the matter, though, in this instance, unlike that of the plundering of Riccaltoun's poem, he adopted a more evasive attitude in attempting to make good his claim. Mallet was endowed with not

a little ability, and that he was capable of unselfish effort, may be fairly judged from various acts in his career, to name only his zeal on behalf of Thomson at the date of the publication of *Winter*; but his treatment of Riccaltoun, his base attack upon Pope's memory at the instigation of Bolingbroke, and his petty hostility to Admiral Byng, all heavily becloud his personal repute. The very foundation of the argument, therefore, that pleads for his authorship of *Rule Britannia* is of the weakest character, and any trivial support it has can count but poorly beside the vast array of testimony on the side of Thomson.

No definite claim as to the authorship was evidently made by either of the presumed writers during the lifetime of Thomson. The difficulty began with a second and revised version of *Alfred*, which Mallet put on the stage in 1751. He then announced that he had subjected the play to a number of alterations, referring as follows to the changes which he had thought necessary to carry out: 'According to the present arrangement of the fable,' so he declared in a preface to the published version of the revised play, 'I was obliged to reject a great deal of what I had written in the other; neither could I retain of my friend's part more than three or four speeches and a part of one song.' Dr Dinsdale, who in an edition of Mallet's *Ballads and Songs*\* advocates Mallet's authorship in a very prejudiced and confident manner, rests completely satisfied with the conclusion which he draws from Mallet's words that only a part of the song, 'From those eternal

\* *Ballads and Songs of David Mallet*. Edited by F. Dinsdale. 1857.

regions bright,' obtains a place in the version of 1751, and that this and nothing else can be the meaning of Mallet's words. To assist the force of the friendly biographer's conviction, *Rule Britannia* is inscribed as an 'ode' in the printed copy of the play. And so with Dr Dinsdale the matter simply and summarily ends. But this is to take the astute and unscrupulous Mallet very generously. It seems very likely that in the case of such a popular item as *Rule Britannia* his literary vanity seized at an opportunity that would associate its authorship with himself. But his assertiveness on the subject, perhaps from policy, was of but a half-hearted character, and his friends have claimed more for him than he did himself. He assuredly wished the public to infer that the 'song' by Thomson to which he refers in the advertisement was 'From those eternal regions bright'; but he had not the daring to affirm his own authorship of *Rule Britannia*. With the help of Bolingbroke therefore he put together a garbled copy of the original lyric. He cut out three of the original stanzas—the three final and best—and, after inverting the natural sequence of a fourth, substituted three tawdry stanzas from the pen of Bolingbroke. By this scheme, however, Mallet saved himself from the perpetration of an entire falsehood, and still left room for the inference of the actual authorship of the original version to go to his credit. The dubiety that he probably wished to throw over the authorship in this manner has been so thoroughly sifted that no jot or tittle in favour of the genuineness of his claim is left.

Outside of Mallet's suspicious action in the matter, the advantage both in external and internal evidence lies

wholly with Thomson. The poem was published in Mallet's lifetime in an Edinburgh song-book called *The Charmer*, the signature attached being Thomson's initials. In various editions of Mallet's poems, issued before his death, he does not include *Rule Britannia*. It was never assigned to him by any of his contemporaries, and reference made to him at the time of his death spoke of him as the writer of *William and Margaret*, but did not credit him with the authorship of *Rule Britannia*. Mr Churton Collins (*Saturday Review*, 20th February 1897) is of opinion that the knowledge which Dr Arne, the composer, possessed of the authorship of the libretto deterred Mallet from openly putting himself forward as the author. 'A vainer and more unscrupulous man than Mallet,' says Mr Churton Collins, 'never existed, and it is simply incredible that he should not have claimed what would have constituted his chief title to popularity as a poet had he been able to do so.'

Internal evidence corroborates the verdict of historical opinion on behalf of Thomson. The ode in its language and movement indubitably bespeaks his workmanship; it is marked by the imaginative sweep and thrill of Thomson's poetry at its best. The form of the lyric, too, suggests that of Thomson's lyrics, the majority of which are written on the stanzaic model used in *Rule Britannia*. Moreover, the sentiment pervading the ode is a most familiar constituent of Thomson's poetical work in general. In *Britannia*, *Liberty*, and elsewhere, the idea and the very words are easily recognisable. The third stanza has distinct parallels in more than one

passage of other poems by Thomson. It is here given with its original variants :

‘ Still more majestic shalt thou rise,  
 More dreadful from each foreign stroke ;  
 As the loud blast that tears the skies  
 Serves but to root thy native oak.’

In *Liberty* the simile runs :

‘ Like an oak,  
 Nurs’d on feracious Algidum, whose boughs  
 Still stronger shoot beneath the rigid axe,  
 By loss, by slaughter, from the steel itself  
 E’en force and spirit drew.’

The same poem repeats this idea :

‘ Every tempest sung  
 Innoxious by, or bade it firmer stand.’

It occurs also in *Sophonisba* :

‘ Thy rooted worth  
 Has stood these wintry blasts, grown stronger by them.’

A passage in *Britannia*, ll. 106-142, obviously supplies the net material for one stanza which it is difficult to suppose for a moment that anybody except Thomson could have written :

‘ To thee belongs the rural reign ;  
 Thy cities shall with commerce shine ;  
 All thine shall be the subject main ;  
 And every shore it circles thine.’

Many of the single terms and epithets, in addition, are in frequent and specific use by Thomson. ‘ Azure ’ and ‘ generous ’ are of common note ; while another set of favourite allusions are ‘ native oaks,’ ‘ the fair,’ and ‘ flame,’ in its secondary sense. Not the slightest trace of such supplementary internal evidence is to be discovered in

the poetry of Mallet. As has been pointed out by the distinguished critic, to whose concise and trenchant discussion of the subject we have already referred, 'neatness and tenderness bordering on effeminacy mark his characteristic lyrics.' And equally certain is it that neither in the smaller matter of phraseology, nor in the important factors of sentiment and of insight, does the ode witness to the handiwork of Mallet. No analogue or parallel to expressions in *Rule Britannia* presents itself in his poetry; he betrays no sign of Thomson's patriotism and love of liberty; while unstinted approval may be given to the critical finding which declares that 'a man who was capable of the jingling rubbish of such a masque as *Britannia*, and who had the execrable taste to substitute Bolingbroke's stanzas for the stanzas which they supersede, could hardly have been equal to the production of this lyric.' The utmost appropriateness accompanies this assignment of the authorship of *Rule Britannia*. No more fitting lyricist than he who sang so admirably and so unremittingly of Nature and of man, and the social and industrial glory of his country, could have composed the unchallenged pæan of the nation's greatness.