

THE FREETHINKER
LONDON, ENGLAND
18 NOVEMBER 1934
(pages 723-725)

James Thomson (B.V.)
(November 23, 1834—June 3, 1882)

I.

James Thomson, poet, essayist, satirist and critic, was born a century ago, on November 23, 1834, at Port Glasgow. His work, in all that he undertook, is personal; for "B.V.," as he later called himself (after Shelley and Novalis) was a genius; and genius is always unique, even in its affinities. No serious and informed critic has questioned the fact of Thomson's genius; it was admitted, during Thomson's lifetime, even by so rancorous a mental adversary as the Reverend Brewin Grant, Bradlaugh's now almost-forgotten, but once-famous, adversary; it is admitted, in our own time, by so whole-souled an opponent of Thomson's scheme-of-things as Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

B.V.'s contemporaries, William Sharp, Philip Bourke Marston, W.M. Rossetti, J.W. Barrs, William Maccall, Bertram Dobell, G.W. Foote, "Saladin," all of whom had the honour of knowing the great artist personally, are unanimous. "George Eliot," Swinburne, J.M. Robertson, H.S. Salt, agree. No sane critic will dispute so unvarying and Catholic a verdict; which unquestionably stances a century after the poet's birth, and which, I am convinced, will stand while we humans—or some of us—rejoice in poetry and satire. B.V. is securely and unalterably enthroned amongst the Immortals.

Thomson's life-history has been written in considerable detail by H.S. Salt. This Life, while a noble and balanced account, seems to me—and here I agree with the exceptionally sane and easy Walter Lewin—to err in being over-sombre. It paints B.V. as *essentially* gloomy and hypochondriacal. A corrective lies in the reminiscences of many who knew him well; notably Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, G. W. Foote, Bertram Dobell. Interesting too are the recollections of William Maccall, forgotten poet and individualist, the friend of Thomas Carlyle. To me the most poignant writing about B.V. is an account by "Saladin" (W. Stewart Ross) of a meeting with him a week or two before he died.

All those who knew the poet personally agree as to B.V.'s loveableness and humanism. In to-day's phrase he was "one of the best."

Life, or, as the purblind pious call it still, I suppose, "Divine Providence," was horribly scurvy to Thomson. From his father he inherited a tendency to dipsomania; he himself was haunted all his life by melancholia. It is no mere imagining that lies beneath that unforgettable key-phrase in the final section of *The City of Dreadful Night*; "the 'Melencolia' that transcends all wit." The girl whom "B.V." adored, to whom he had given his whole soul, died in her youth; again he seems never to have possessed enough money to make life seem a trifle easier.

Withal, he was a joyous pal to his friends, who all loved him for his shining gentleness; an unflinching loyalist to what he held to be true; an astounding conversationalist; an exquisite wit.

If accounts with "Divine Providence" could be squared, the balance would lie—a heavy balance, too—in "B.V.'s" favour. "Divine Providence" owes him reparation and many apologies. To the outer world, that picks-up its knowledge of men and things from shilling handbooks and derivative encyclopaedias, "B.V." is known merely as the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, the parrot-phrase concerning which is that it is "the finest pessimistic poem in the language," the parrot-phrases concerning its writer being that he was "a pessimist" and "a shy genius." These particular stale statements are true only "as far as they go"; and they do not go far.

B.V.'s poetry is only part of his literary work; some of his prose is so "shocking" to the unnumbered hosts of the Philistines that it is scarcely polite to mention the fact that he wrote prose at all. But the truth is that, from the view-point of craftsmanship, "B.V.'s" prose-writings are as good as his verse.

I do not pretend to agree with J.M. Robertson's view that Thomson was essentially a proseman rather than a poet. Excellent as Robertson is as an analytical critic, his occasional fault of priggishness shows heavily when he writes concerning "B.V."

But Robertson is right in his assertion that the poet's prose never fails in technical perfection. It never does; though B.V. has at least a dozen styles, he is master of them all. His prose is invariably as facile as Marlowe's blank verse. Even as a journalist he is a stylist. He was incapable of bad pen-work. Some of his writing in prose is hack-work, but even that is distinguished. All that I am saying here, be it noted, is merely an extension of the statement that "B.V." was a genius.

His literary loves were many, and—once again—they were all distinguished; Dante, Rabelais, Balzac, Goethe, Heine, Meredith—a gallery of greatness that reveals part of the poet's mind-range. Other of Thomson's literary loves I shall mention presently. His especial love, a love where from loyally he never dreams of wavering, is Percy Bysshe Shelley, whom he understood as few men are capable of understanding him.

The man who loves with equal devotion and sympathy—which together spell understanding—both Dante and Rabelais has a great and noble mind; whatsoever may chance to be the external events of his life. That profound and exquisite saying, "To know all is to pardon all," applies in a unique and absolute way to "B.V."

Noble, loyal, generous, uncompromising, a fatal flaw in the artist's make-up, the man's equipment, a flaw due mainly—almost, entirely, indeed, so far as one can judge—to mental inheritance, caused "B.V." break after break with his intimates. At times he became "impossible"; even so, his friends always longed for his "return"; so tragic and so loveable was he. It was neither his fault, this fatal waywardness, nor theirs. It was his personal, and almost permanent, misfortune. This is clear from his record. He understood—the real soul in him—and honoured accordingly the dark Fates.

Externally B.V.'s life was uneventful. It is all in Salt's very-easily-accessible life of him. His father was originally a jolly, roystering sea-captain, who caught a fatal chill in a terrible storm, during which he could not change into dry clothes for days; became permanently rheumatic; took to alcoholic solace; had a paralytic stroke; and ended as a peevish, useless, dependent invalid.

The poet's mother was a kindly, gentle, religious woman of the forgotten Irvingite sect; Irvingism being one of the innumerable semi-mystic, wholly-irrational, inspirational minor cults that are especially dear to impressionable women.

Thomson drew his mysticism and romanticism from his mother; his geniality and good-fellowship from his father. Genius—to me, anyway—is a mystery; for its source remains unknown, and its effects are incalculable; so it were idle here to speculate about the origin of "B.V.'s" share in that priceless heritage.

The poet began his education at the Caledonian Orphan Asylum; then he was transferred to the Chelsea Military Asylum, whence he "graduated"—if the word be here permissible—as an army school master, being stationed first in Ireland, at

the Curragli Camp, where, by the way, he first met Bradlaugh, and later at Aldershot. For a minor breach of discipline he was discharged from the Army, when Bradlaugh found him a job as a lawyer's clerk, and took him to live in his own household, then at Tottenham. Later, Thomson was on both the clerical and literary staffs of *The National Reformer*. He quarrelled with Bradlaugh—it is now no secret; for the history has been printed and unchallenged—over Annie Besant, whom he resented when she, a newcomer to Freethought, supplanted himself, an old and tried friend, as Bradlaugh's right-hand lieutenant. Thereafter "B.V." shifted from one set of cheap "digs." to another, unmotliered, untended, forlorn, solitary; a free-lance journalist, too honest to be prosperous, and too unorthodox to be popular. The high lights in this depressing tale of loneliness and neglect are represented by the poet's frequent visits to his staunch and abiding friends, the Barrs of Leicester, who loved the man and appreciated the genius that always flowered within him. Eventually, through no fault of theirs, B.V. broke even with them, and returned to London to die his tragic death.

My dear old friend and editor, "Saladin," maintains that "B.V." committed suicide—or what amounts to suicide—by an act of will. Upon Saladin's staff in the 'eighties was G. Gordon Flaws—Gegeëf—whom he describes as "B.V.'s" alter ego; Flaws spent his time, when his last fatal days began finally to enmesh their poet-victim, in tracking "B.V." from haunt to haunt; that is to say, he sought his lost friend in the Westminster and Pimlico pubs., wherein, thanks to a mysterious Nemesis, Genius sought oblivion. But this time Gegeëf sought in vain.

Later I shall have occasion to return to this final tragedy; almost all B.V.'s biographers, I think, tend to lessen a picture of irrevocable doom. The really telling account has been written by "Saladin," whom I shall quote. "Saladin," a fellow-poet and fellow-Scot, was of all men the one capable of a full understanding of Thomson's life; and of a complete sympathy with the dying poet enmeshed in an invisible and unbreakable web woven by the incomprehensibly-occupied hands of Fate. "I find alone Necessity Supreme" is Thomson's statement of faith, in *The City of Dreadful Night*. So, perforce, he accepted his doom as necessary. We are all children of our own philosophy.

Victor B. Neuburg.

(*To be continued.*)

[In the 25 November 1934 issue of *The Freethinker*.]