

*'A TURRA LOON: HARD
WROCHIT AND HAME-OWER,
HE KENT THE RICHT SIDE O' A
MEK'
BY JANICE ROBINSON*

Noo, fan James Thomson wis a bairnie in aichteen an' forty, his mither and faither wid niver hae thocht that he wid ging fae biding in a wee rented hoosie wi a boorach o' ither fowkies, tae ha'in his ain hoose bocht by his ain siller. Mair nor 'at, that he wid get siller for bidin at hame and nae wrochtin' aifter he maun be auld. They wid hae been dumfoonert tae ken 'at, fan he deid, he gar gied his wife a gweed closhach o' bawbees.

When John Thomson was born in 1840, his parents Alexander and Janet, could never have imagined that, as they welcomed him to his multi-family home in North street Turriff, that by the end of his life, he would sittin his own home, drawing a pension and that he would have enough in the bank to leave an inheritance to his wife.

Lang ago, Turra wis a grand fairmin' place. James's dyde hid bin a weaver an' his faither, a 'orra loon. Noo, an 'orra loon wis ablo' near abdie on i' ferm. James's faither, Alexander, likely ca'ad Sandy, wid ging twice a year ti' the Feein Fair- the Porters Fair - in Turra. He wid a' waited fir some fairmin' chiel tae say till him: 'Fit fee are you sikkin?' or 'Hiv ye gotten a fee?' Then he wid a' workit for 'at ferm for half a year. The jobbies he wid hae deen were the eens naebidy else wid dae. He micht hae been tellt 'we'll need ti be sneddin the thistles' or 'the burnies needin redd up'. FIn it wis the hairst he wid a workit nicht an day ti mak sure the stooks were richt. Mebbe, he widna hae workit if it wis snaa'in . Nae wirk, nae siller, nae maet, nae mowse.

In 1840, Turriff was a community with strong agricultural ties. His grandfather had been a woollen weaver and his father, an agricultural labourer. They would, like the rest of the North East, have spoken Doric and they would have found life difficult. Alexander, his father, was an agricultural labourer: an 'orra loon'. This was the bottom of the pile in the agricultural worker's world. A seasonal worker, he would have been 'fee'd' if he was lucky at the twice-yearly feeing market known locally as the Porter Fair. If they were chosen by the farmer or the grieve, they faced poorly paid, back breaking work with fourteen-hour days in the summer and little or no

work in the bad weather. Unskilled, 'orra loons' were usually unmarried and lived in a communal bothy. They often worked up to the status of having a modest cottage, a 'cottar hoose', on the farm before getting married. The fact that Alexander lived in a multifamily dwelling in the town suggests that he had not done that, and that he wasn't regularly fee'd to any farm, but worked at whatever he could get. If he didn't work, there was no money for food and his family went hungry.

Scottish fowk hiv aye thocht richt highly o' learnin', an' James wid hae gan ti' the local skweel. The dominie wid hae gar James dee his sums but he wid hae been learnin a' thing in the King's English. The bairnies were instructit in English and the dominie didne like it if they spoke in the Doric. It wis thocht, by the kirk and ither incommers, that the Doric tongue wis nay sic gweed as fit the toonsers spoke. Bit, the bairnies were fair able ti read and richt in English and then spik in the Doric aa' their days. Chiels in Turra in 2021 still spikk in the tongue o' their faithers. Bit if the Queen herself drappit in, they'd files be able tae hae a richt newsie wi' her. Fowkies in Turra an in ither places roon aboot still spik till een anither in the local tongue. Just like James, they wid say 'Aye aye fit like i day, and the unser nicht be 'aye tchavvin, knipin on like a coo on a bike.'

Rural Scottish communities have always valued education and it was not uncommon for the children of manual workers to be educated at least until the age of eleven. James was almost certainly educated at the local parochial school. There, he would have been taught in Standard English, his native Doric discouraged. He would have been taught to read and write by the teacher but his day-to-day conversation, in the playground, at home, and later elsewhere, would have continued to be conducted in Doric. This ability to register shift continues today in 21st century Aberdeenshire, where it is still common to hear the greetings James would have used: 'Aye aye, fit like i day?' and the reponses: 'Aye tchavvin' knipen on like a coo on a bike.' The instruction in schools today is still mostly done in English but the youngsters still speak to each other in Doric.

Aifter his faither and his mither were deid, James foon ludgins wi' a dominie. Well aats fit she said she wis. A wida' an' a dominie. He movit intil her hoosie afore the 1861 census. Noo, hid she bin HIS dominie fan he wis at i sqweel? Weel we dinna ken, bit nae doot, bidin wi a dominie wid gar him hae a quiet douce upstanding life. The dominie, Mary Skene, wid hae been straicht and god fearing but they man be hertsome company each for the ither for he bade wi' her till 1881. Mebbe she took him unner her wing and winted him tae mak something o' himsel; mebbe she jist nocht i siller; mebbe he wis her bidie in - fa kens? Wis she really a dominie? Richt aneuch on the census she said she wis, bit she died a pauper and her deed man hid bin an orra loon. Mibbe she said she wis a teacher to look respectable bidin' as she wis wi' a single man

in a twa room hoose. Mibbe she hid a gweed conceit o' hersel. Mibbes aye mibbe no. We'll mibbe nivver ken.

After the death of his father in 1852, James would have had to leave school to help support his family. When his mother died in 1860, he was listed as lodging with a teacher and working as a saddler. His sister went into service. It is interesting that he didn't become an orra loon. Perhaps the uncertain lifestyle of the bothy billies was not one he wished to follow. Certainly, becoming a saddler had an element of respectability and would have required some training. There is some confusion over whether Mary, his landlady, was in fact a teacher. She was listed on the 1861 census as a widow and a teacher and on the 1881 census as a retired teacher. However, on her death certificate in 1889 she was described as a pauper and it was stated that her late husband had been an agricultural worker. So was she really a teacher? Or had she said she was to make the fact that a single man was living with her in her rented two room house look respectable?

In 1863 James startit ti wirk wi' the post office. Noo fin he wis born, an aul' wifie that wis his neibor, hid bin a letter carrier and she wis seventy. So mibbe James got the notion he wid dae a jobbie like at fae her. Fa kens? Nae doot Mary wid hae thought it wis a grand notion. A steady job wi' a good remittance. He wis tellt ti be the postie atween Turra and the fowkies at Fisherie. He wid a wakkit aboot acht mile gan uphill a' the wye oot ti fit is nooadays caad Crudie. Mind you it wid a bin doonhill fan he cam back. He wid a deen 'is in a' withers. In the summer it wid 'a been a rare walk bit in the winter, fan the sna' wis dingin' doon an the nor' wind wis fustlin', it wida bin starvation and James wid a bin jeelt tae the bane. He wid a' fair nocht a semmit anaeth his sark.

Perhaps as a result of the influence of Mary and his desire for a more reliably paid and less physically demanding job, James applied for a position with the Post Office in 1863. In the 1841 Census one of his many neighbours, a seventy-year-old woman, was listed as being a letter carrier so perhaps the idea was cemented into his mind early on. He was appointed to the post of Messenger between Turriff and the small settlement of Fisherie now known as Crudie. This route would have been about eight miles and would mostly have consisted of delivering to farms and isolated cottages. Walking at a moderate pace, it would take about three hours each way today, with no allowance for detours up farm roads. This is an uphill exposed route and whilst in the summer it would have been a pleasant daily stroll, in the winter when it was snowing heavily and the north wind was blowing, James would have been frozen to the core by the end of it and would have benefitted from wearing a vest under his shirt.

Bit he must hae made a guid impression on the fowkies that he delivered tae. In 1876 he wis presentit wi a golt watch and chine boucht bi' the fowkies on his route. They said he wis

trustworthy and reliable and they thought he wis the verra dunt. Mair nor 'at, in 1883, he got a peyrise by three shillings ivry wik an' he maun weer a strippet airm badge- een strip for ivvry five year he'd bin wrochtin'.

But he was a diligent and reliable employee. In 1876, he was presented with a gold watch and chain bought with donations from grateful customers on his route. They noted his carefulness and trustworthiness. In 1883, he was awarded a pay rise of three shillings a week and an arm badge with three stripes: one for every five years of service.

In September of 1881, James maerit Isabella Milne. She wis forty-five and he wis forty-one. Baith o' them hid a' their back teeth up. Isabella at i time wis bidin in a hoose wi a ludger- a young wifie teacher- an' James wis still ludgin wi' Mary. Fin they got maerit, James flitted oot a Mary's hoosie an' he bocht a hoose at six Manse Terrace in Turra. It wis a great muckle jam o' a hoose wi sax rooms fir bidin in. It hid a floor gairden in i' front an a richt sized bittie for tatties an i like awa at i' back. Mair nor aat, there were oot biggins en twa glais hoosies. En it wis aa just for theme twa.

In September of 1881 James married Isabella Milne. He was forty-one and she was forty-five. She was a keeper of lodgers and in the census had a young teacher living with her. When they married James moved out of Mary's house into six Manse Terrace, a house she had bought. They were living there in 1891: James was listed as a post runner and Isabella, a wife. Their house was a substantial home with six rooms, a bathroom, a large garden, a stable, outhouses and two greenhouses. All of this was just for the two of them.

His gweed wife hid been a servint deem tae the meenister fae The Free Kirk o' Scotland. She wid hae bin innnot a god fearin hoose an' she wid hae bin affa affectit by it -Free Kirkers maun be ge y straicht fowkies. In 'i 1901 censis James wis still describit as a post runner an' fan he retired in the same 'eer, it wis said that he hid walkit i same roadie for thirty-five and a half year. If he trumpit 'at route sax days a wik, 'at wid hae bin 166,424 mile walkit in his wrochtin life. He could hae traivilled frae Turra till London 287 times. 'Aats a lot o' shoe leather. Fan he retired, he maun bin contintit tae puddle aboot in 'is gairdin. He wis mair nor likely hain' hairt problems and at wid hae mint he hid ti' live a qwait life. He micht hae hid a mustard poultice syne he wis sair made ti' dra' breath.

Isabelle had been in service from a young age to a Free Church of Scotland minister. The family with whom she lived would have been clean living, Bible believing and evangelical in their approach to spreading their word in the community. Isabella could not fail to have been influenced by the beliefs of the family. She would have undoubtedly lived a quiet life and

encouraged James to do the same. They lived at six Manse Terrace in 1901 while he was still working as a post runner. When he retired in the same year, there were notices in the local newspapers to the effect that he had walked the same route for thirty-five and a half years. If he walked sixteen miles a day, six days a week for 35 and a half years, he would have walked 166,424 miles over his working life- enough to walk from Turriff to London 287 times. Little information is available as to how he spent his retirement but no doubt he relished the rest. He may have been showing signs of the vascular disease of the heart which eventually killed him; the treatment of the day for which was a quiet life, no marriage to young women (considered too exciting) and rest. He and Isabella seemed to live quietly, perhaps enjoying their garden and home until his death.

On the sivrnteech o' Februar nineteen and twinty three, James drappit doon deed. He wis said ti hae hid somethin arang wi his hairt. Nae seener than he hid bin kisted bit his wida pit his hoosie till a roup. He didna hae only bairns ti leav it ti and Isabella must hae hid her een on another hoosie for she moved inta a posh soondin placie caad Devronvale afore he wis caul. There she bade till 1927 fan she slippit awa'. James must ha' kent the richt side o' a shillin for he left her £263.10s. 9d as weel as th' hoose. Fan she died there wis £690 8s 11d in her will bit they'd nae faimly tae pass it on till. Sum chiel caad Adam Cruickshank Smith made oot like a bandit. A hoose quine an' the son o' an orra loon- in thi hinnerend, James an' Isabella did richt weel fthemselves.

On 17 Feb 1923 James died. The cause of death was vascular disease of the heart. His widow was left £263 10s 9d in his will along with the house, which she promptly put up for auction. She moved to Deveronvale, another house in Turriff. There she died in 1927 leaving in total £690.8s.11d although she had no children to whom they could bequeath this hard-earned fortune. A house servant and agricultural worker's son, in the end, they certainly did well for themselves.

Fact Sheet: James Thomson

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> James Thomson
<i>Person ID:</i> SC1039
<i>Your name:</i> Janice Robinson
<i>U3A group:</i> Forfar
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
Born 1st April 1840, baptised 12th April 1840 ⁱ
2: Who were your pensioners' parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)
Father: Alexander Thomson , Agricultural Labourer Mother: Janet McKenzie ⁱⁱ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1841 Census: Alexander age 40, agricultural labourer. Janet Thomson 30, wife. Children Alexander 7, James 1. Also living with them George Andrew 20 (agricultural labourer) and Barbara Andrew 30.ⁱⁱⁱ • 1851 Census: Alexander age 50, agricultural labourer. Janet Thomson 40, wife. Children James 11 (scholar), Ann 9 (scholar), and mother-in-law Isabella Reid 80.^{iv}
3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)
There are references to 4 siblings who died in infancy- no names or dates given- in addition to Ann, listed on parents' gravestone in Turriff. ^v <p>Brother Alexander Thomson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born 1834^{vi} • 1841 Census: Age 7, Turiff^{vii} • 1851 Census: Age 16, Aberdeen (Draper Apprentice)^{viii} • 1917: Death, age 81, Aberdeen^{ix} <p>Sister Ann Thomson</p>

- Born 1842^x
- 1851 Census: Age 9, Turriff^{xi}
- 1861 Census: Age 19, Turriff (domestic servant in furnishing tailor's home)^{xii}
- Died 13th May 1865^{xiii}

Part Two: Marriage and children

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)

Married **Isabella Milne** on 2nd September 1881. Isabella was a housekeeper when they married. They married in the Free Church of Scotland in Turriff.^{xiv}

Isabella was born 22 March 1835 and baptised 11 April 1835 at Forgue Aberdeenshire. Her parents were James Milne and Margaret Chapman.^{xv}

- 1851 Census: Age 16, living as a Domestic servant to her brother in law at Yonderton.^{xvi}
- 1861 Census: Age 26, living as a servant at the Free Church Manse in Forgue^{xvii}
- 1871 Census: Missing
- 1881 Census: Age 45, head of household and keeping lodgers, Wynd Turriff^{xviii}
- 1891 Census: Age 55, wife 6 Manse Terrace, Turriff^{xix}
- 1901 Census: Age 65, wife 6 Manse Terrace, Turriff^{xx}
- 1927: Death on 29th April 1927. Cause of death: senility.^{xxi}

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

No children

Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

- 1861 Census: Occupation saddler, living at 13 Market Street Turriff as lodger with Mary Skein (sic) a teacher.^{xxii}

- 1871 Census: Occupation postman, living at 5 Church Street Turriff as lodger with Mary Skene 64 Teacher.^{xxiii}
- 1881 Census: Occupation rural letter carrier, living at 1 Maurice Lane as lodger with M Skene.^{xxiv}
- 1891 Census: Occupation Post Runner, living at 6 Manse Terrace.^{xxv}
- 1901 Census: Occupation Retired Postman (Annuitant), living at 6 Manse Terrace.^{xxvi}

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

See Part 1 Q1-Q2, Part 2 Q1 and Part 3 Q1

Part Four: Anything Else

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

- Retirement notice in *Aberdeen Press and Journal* 11 April 1900. Mentions James post runner for nearly 40 years between Turriff and Crudie 7.6 miles each way
<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000032%2f19000411%2f195&stringtohighlight=james%20thomson%20turriff>
- Probate: left £263.10s 9p to wife
https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/60558/images/40884_b206820-00280?pld=466738
- Sale of 6 Manse Terrace house, notice in *Aberdeen Press and Journal* dated 2 March 1923. 2 public rooms, 3 bedrooms:
<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000577%2f19230302%2f129&stringtohighlight=james%20thomson%20turriff>
- Notice of house sale 26 Feb 1923 in *Aberdeen Press and Journal*
<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000577%2f19230226%2f183&stringtohighlight=james%20thomson%20turriff>
- Turriff Post Office building 1899
<http://britishpostofficearchitects.weebly.com/turriff.html>
- Ordnance survey maps 19th C Turriff
<https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=16&lat=57.53839&lon=-2.46099&layers=5&b=1>

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

See endnotes

ⁱ Scotlands People- OPR 247/30/130 Turriff FHL 993304

ⁱⁱ See death certificate for James Thomson 1923 (Scotlands People Statutory registers: Deaths 247/ 8) and 1881 marriage transcript: https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=R_69631

ⁱⁱⁱ Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 14; Line: 1160; Year: 1841

^{iv} Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 16; Line: 20; Roll: CSSCT1851_52; Year: 1851

^v <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/215960057/ann-thomson>

^{vi} https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=R_691680690 and

^{vii} Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 14; Line: 1110; Year: 1841

^{viii} Parish: Aberdeen South; ED: 1; Page: 37; Line: 1; Roll: CSSCT1851_39; Year: 1851

^{ix} https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=R_104260348725

^x <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/215960057/ann-thomson>

^{xi} Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 17; Line: 1; Roll: CSSCT1851_52; Year: 1851

^{xii} Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 7; Line: 18; Roll: CSSCT1861_33

^{xiii} <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/215960057/ann-thomson>

^{xiv} Scotlands People Statutory registers Marriages 1881 247/ 18

^{xv} <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=SCOT%2FOPR%2FBAP%2F1276751>

^{xvi} Parish: Fergie; ED: 2; Page: 12; Line: 4; Roll: CSSCT1851_44; Year: 1851

^{xvii} Parish: Fergie; ED: 4; Page: 9; Line: 18; Roll: CSSCT1861_28

^{xviii} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 22; Line: 14; Roll: cssct1881_70

^{xix} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 16; Line: 3; Roll: CSSCT1891_74

^{xx} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 20; Line: 6; Roll: CSSCT1901_80

^{xxi} https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/view-image/nrs_stat_deaths/8108472?return_row=14#

^{xxii} Parish: Turriff; ED: 2; Page: 26; Line: 14; Roll: CSSCT1861_33

^{xxiii} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 14; Line: 20; Roll: CSSCT1871_44

^{xxiv} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 3; Line: 6; Roll: cssct1881_70

^{xxv} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 16; Line: 3; Roll: CSSCT1891_74

^{xxvi} Parish: Turriff; ED: 3; Page: 16; Line: 3; Roll: CSSCT1891_74