

# **John Thomson**

**14 June 1837 - 7 October 1921**

**By Samuel Stephenson**

**(Edited by Douglas Fix)**

John Thomson was born on 14 June 1837 in Edinburgh, Scotland to William Thomson, a successful tobacco spinner and retail trader, and Isabella Newlands.(1) He was the eighth of nine children, although only he and his two brothers, William (b. 1835) and Thomas (b. 1844), survived to adulthood.(2) John's early years were spent in the family home, first in Portland Place and by 1841 in a larger flat on Brighton Street in the Old Town of Edinburgh. After some degree of primary education in Edinburgh (most likely at the Bathgate academy),(3) Thomson was apprenticed to an optician and scientific instrument maker (probably James Mackay Bryson(4)) in 1851. Thomson finished his apprenticeship in 1857 or 1858 after having attended two years of evening classes at the Watt Institution and School of Arts (formerly the Edinburgh School of Arts) from 1856 to 1858. He attained the "Attestation of Proficiency" in Natural Philosophy in 1857 and in Junior Mathematics and Chemistry in 1858.(5)

On 29 April 1862, Thomson set out for Singapore where his older brother William was a watchmaker and photographer.(6) Arriving no later than 12 June, he and William began jointly operating a business making chronometers and optical and nautical instruments.(7) With his studio in Singapore as his base of operations (excluding a period when Penang, an island some 360 miles from Singapore, served as his base), Thomson embarked on extensive travels throughout the mainland territories of Malaya and Sumatra, as well as a brief visit to Malacca.(8) It was during this period that Thomson began to explore rural villages and city streets, taking a keen interest in recording people in their daily activities.(9) From October to November of 1864, he traveled to Ceylon and India, photographing the destruction wrought by a recent cyclone.(10)

In the following year, Thomson decided to sell his studio and move to Siam. Traveling aboard the steamer *Chow Phya*, he arrived in Bangkok on 28 September 1865, where he lived for six months, photographing the King of Siam and a ceremony with the King's eldest son. From Siam, Thomson departed on a dangerous trip overland on 27 January 1866 to Laos and Cambodia with student interpreter H. G. Kennedy of the British

Embassy at Bangkok, during which time Kennedy saved Thomson's life when the latter contracted jungle fever.(11) After photographing the King of Cambodia and visiting Saigon, Thomson returned to Siam; he left for England (with a brief visit to Singapore) in May or June.(12)

While in Edinburgh, Thomson joined the Royal Ethnological Society of London (1866), was elected to the Royal Geographical Society (1866), gave lectures before the British Association, published his first book, *The Antiquities of Cambodia*, in early 1867, and met his future wife, Isabel Petrie, a devout Methodist.

In July 1867, Thomson again returned to Singapore, then traveled to Saigon (where he stayed for three months), and finally settled in Hong Kong in 1868,(13); here he began his project of photographing the people of China. After a series of ventures with various magazines, Thomson set up his own makeshift studio in the Commercial Bank building in Hong Kong. Soon after, Isabel Petrie arrived, and on 19 November 1868, the two were married.(14) In the following year, Thomson made an important photography trip to Canton with his wife, had his first child (William Petrie),(15) published some of his photographs, and assumed responsibility for the debts of his brother William.

On 23 June 1870 Isabel Thomson, pregnant with her second son, left for England, picking up Thomson's brother William from Singapore *en route*.(16)

In the course of that same year, Thomson traveled up the North Pearl River, published an illustrated book, and put his studio up for sale in preparation for extended travel in China. He traveled extensively in the Foochow region from late-1870 to early 1871: up the River Min by boat with the American Protestant missionary Reverend Justus Doolittle and then to Amoy and Swatow. Thomson traveled to Formosa with Dr. James Laidlaw Maxwell.(17) They first landed in Takao in early April 1871 and then departed for Taiwanfu, the capital, aboard a steamer.(18) He and Dr. Maxwell then departed from Taiwanfu on 11 April to visit the plains aborigines villages on the west plain of Taiwan, where he shot a number of photographs.(19)

After leaving Taiwan, Thomson returned to Hong Kong; visited Shanghai in August and Peking in September; traveled up the Yangtze River for three months, reaching Hupeh and Szechuan;(20) revisited Ningpo and Snowy Valley in April; returned briefly to Hong Kong, and then left for England.

Thomson settled into Brixton, a suburb of London, living with his family, publishing the results of his travels and giving papers. While in London, he continued to photograph, collaborating from 1876 to 1877 with Adolphe Smith in producing the monthly *Street Life in London* (February 1877 - January 1878).(21) Thomson and Isabel's last child was born in 1878. They had a total of three daughters and three sons.(22)

Beyond an excursion to the new British colony of Cyprus in 1878 and occasional trips to France (in at least 1875 and 1889), Thomson remained in England for the rest of his days. He set up a portrait studio at 78 Buckingham Palace Road (in 1881, but later moved to 70A Grosvenor Street), and was appointed a photographer to the British Royal Family by Queen Victoria on 11 May 1881.(23) Thomson initially worked alone at the portrait studio but was later joined in the enterprise by two sons and a daughter.(24) In January 1886, Thomson began instructing explorers at the Royal Geographical Society after convincing the Society that the camera was a critical tool in documenting their journeys "in a trustworthy manner."(25) After retiring from his commercial studio in 1910, John and Isabel spent most of their time in Edinburgh until he died of a heart attack on 7 October 1921 at the age of 84.(26)

### **Selected Publications:(27)**

*The antiquities of Cambodia.* Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867.

Contributed photographs to: Beach, William R. *The visit of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh to Hongkong in 1869.* London: Smith, Elder, 1869.

*Views on the North River.* 1870.

*Foochow and the River Min.* 1873.

"Notes of a journey in southern Formosa." *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 43 (1873): 97-107.

*Illustrations of China and its people: A series of two hundred photographs, with letterpress descriptive of the places and people represented.* London: S. Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1873-1874. Reprinted in 1900.

"Voyage en Chine. Formose." Notes by A. Talandier. *Le Tour du Monde* (1875): 209-224, 225-240.

*The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China or Ten years' travels, adventures and residence abroad.* London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle. 1875.

"Thomson's Reise auf Formosa" [Thomson's voyage on Formosa]. *Globus* 29, No. 20 (1876): 305-310; No. 21: 321-325; No. 22: 337-340..

*The land and people of China: A short account of geography, history, religion, social life, arts, industries, and government of China and its people.* London, New York: Society for promoting Christian knowledge; Pott, Young, and Co., 1876.

D'Avillier, Jean Charles. *Spain.* John Thomson, trans. New York: Scribner, Welford and Armstrong; London: S. Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1876.

Tissandier, Gaston. *A history and handbook of photography*. John Thomson, trans. London: S. Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1876.

Grandville. *Public and private life of animals*. John Thomson, trans. London: Paddington Press, 1877.

*Dix ans de voyages la Chine et l'Indo-Chine ouvrage*. Ouvrage traduit de l'Anglais avec l'autorisation de l'auteur par A. Talandier et H. Vattemare. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1877.

With Adolphe Smith. *Street life in London: With photos from life*. London, 1878.

*Through Cyprus with a camera in the autumn of 1878*. London: Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1879.

Photographed illustrations for: *A description of the works of art forming the collection of Alfred de Rothchild*. 1884.

"On the effects of rainfall in the island of Formosa." *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* [Also referred to as: *Proceedings of the Geographical Section of the British Association*] n.s. 18 (1892): 712-713.

*Through China with a camera*. Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1898.

### **Honors and Memberships:(28)**

Watt Club Prize (1857); "Life Diploma," the Watt Institution and School of Arts (1858); Royal Scottish Society of Arts (1861); Bengal Photographic Society (1864); Royal Ethnological Society of London (1866); Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (1866); *Medaille de 2<sup>e</sup> classe*, the Congress International des Sciences Geographiques, Paris (1875); member of the Royal Photographic Society (1879, resigned in 1891); Royal Warrant (1881); gold medal from Queen Victoria for travels in China (1886); highest awards at the Paris Exhibition (1889); French award for his exploration of Cambodia (1908); honorary life fellow of Royal Geographical Society (1917); and in honor of his life's work, one of the peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro was named "Point Thomson" posthumously (1921).

### **Notes:**

1. White, Stephen, *John Thomson: A window to the Orient* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 195; Thomson, John, *Thomson's China: Travels and adventures of a nineteenth-century photographer*, with an introduction and new illustration selection by Judith Balmer (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. ix-x; Ovendon, Richard, *John Thomson (1837-1921) photographer* (Edinburgh: The Stationary Office Limited, 1997), p. 1.

2. Thomson 1993, p. x.
3. Ibid., p. x; Ovendon 1997, p. 2.
4. Ovendon 1997, pp. 2-4, puts forth an extended and convincing, albeit not conclusive, argument to this effect.
5. Ovendon 1997, p. 3; <http://www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/thomson/sixthpage.htm>.
6. Thomson 1993, p. x.
7. Ovendon 1997, p. 6.
8. Ibid., pp. 7-8. This period of Thomson's life is the subject of some debate. Judith Balmer (Thomson 1993, p. x), for example, maintains that Thomson never set up a base in Penang and Province Wellesley, while White 1986, pp. 9-10, argues that Thomson visited his brother in Singapore briefly in 1861, worked in Penang and Province Wellesley for 10 months, and then finally moved to Singapore in 1863. I believe Ovendon to be the most reliable of these sources; Balmer seems to overstate her case, while White was apparently unaware of the published records of Thomson's attempts to establish a studio in Singapore in early 1862.
9. White 1986, p. 9.
10. Ovendon 1997, p. 8 argues (to my mind unconvincingly) that since Thomson was proposed for membership to the Bengal Photographic Society on 25 October 1864 and then elected on 22 November 1864, he could not have taken the photograph of the destructive Indian cyclone (which touched ground on 4 October 1864). White 1986, p. 11, attributed that photograph to Thomson.
11. White 1986, pp. 12, 195; Thomson 1993, p. xi; <http://www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/thomson/sixthpage.htm>.
12. White 1986, p. 195; Ovendon 1997, p. 11.
13. Thomson 1993, pp. x-xi; Ovendon 1997, p. 9.
14. White 1986, p. 195; Ovendon 1997, pp. 2, 16. Although Balmer (Thomson 1993, p. xi) claims that they were married on November 21, November 19 seems the more plausible date; see the correspondence between White and Ovendon.
15. Thomson 1993, p. xi.
16. White 1986, p. 195; Thomson 1993, pp. xi-xii.
17. Thomson 1993, p. xii.

18. Carrington, George Williams, *Foreigners in Formosa 1841-1874* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1978), pp. 125-26.
19. Ibid., pp. 127-28; Otness, Harold M., *One thousand westerners in Taiwan, to 1945: A biographical and bibliographical dictionary* ([Taipei]: Institute of Taiwan History, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica, 1999), p. 157.
20. Thomson 1993, p. xii.
21. White 1986, p. 195.
22. Thomson 1993, p. xiii.
23. White 1986, p. 195; Thomson 1993, p. xiii.
24. Thomson 1993, p. xiii.
25. Thomson, John, "Photography and Exploration," *The Geographical Journal* 13 (1891): 670; quoted in Thomson 1993, p. xiii.
26. White 1986, p. 195; Thomson 1993, pp. xiii-xiv.
27. Ibid., p. 195; Thomson 1993, pp. ix, xii; Kirk, John Foster, *A supplement to Allibones critical dictionary of English Literature and British and American authors* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1900), Vol 2, p. 1434.
28. White 1986, pp. 11, 195; Ovendon 1997, pp. 1-11;  
<http://www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/thomson/sixthpage.htm>.