

## Dr Alexander Thomson<sup>1</sup> 1800-1866<sup>2</sup>

*Medical Practitioner, Catechist, Pastoralist*

*First Mayor of Geelong*

*Vice-President 1839 Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee*



Dr. Thomson in 1854

This article gives a résumé of Dr Alexander Thomson's life, and focuses on his role as Vice-President of the first Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee, and his relationship with other members of the Committee. Accounts of his time in Australia are dealt with in more detail elsewhere, including Croll, R.H. *Dr Alexander Thomson: a pioneer of Melbourne and founder of Geelong*<sup>3</sup>; Le Griffin, H. *Campfires at the Cross: an account of the Bunting Dale Aboriginal Mission at Birregurra, near Colac, Victoria 1839-1851*<sup>4</sup> (see Appendix 2); *Alexander Thomson Papers, 1830-1865*<sup>5</sup> (see Appendix 1 for Introductory note to the Thomson Papers); and Gardiner, L. *Thomson, Alexander (1800-1866.)*<sup>6</sup>

*Dr Alexander Thomson in 1854, aged 54. From Croll, R.H. Dr Alexander Thomson: a pioneer of Melbourne and founder of Geelong.*

Thomson was born in Aberdeen in 1800, the son of Alexander Thomson, shipowner, and received medical training in Scotland and London. "He was

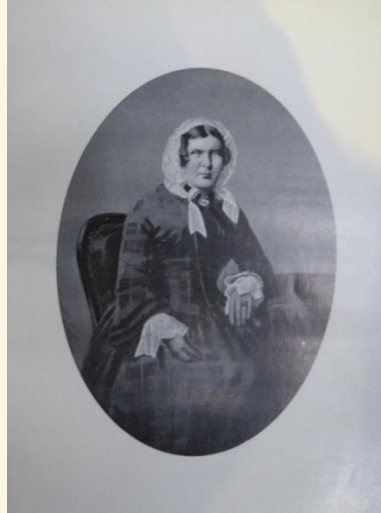
educated under Dr Todd of Tichfield, thence passed to the University of Aberdeen, and finished under Sir Everard Home."<sup>7</sup> Thomson's medical credentials therefore were impressive.<sup>8</sup>

### *Early days*

Thompson married Barbara Dalrymple on 24 March 1824 in Aberdeen. In 1825 he made the first of several voyages to Australia as surgeon on convict transports. He must have been impressed by what he saw as in 1831 he chartered the *Auriga*, arriving in Hobart in December 1831, with his wife and a three-year-old daughter Jane. By this time he had been left £9500 by his mother. They travelled on to Sydney but returned to Hobart in February 1832.

Half of Thomson's capital was in the form of two steamboats imported from Britain, and he opened a steam ferry service between Hobart and Kangaroo Point in October 1832. The

following year he received a land grant of 4000 acres in Van Diemen's Land from Governor Arthur, sold the service, and moved to Launceston.



*Mrs Barbara Thomson in 1854.  
From Croll, R.H. Dr Alexander Thomson:  
a pioneer of Melbourne and founder of Geelong.*

### ***Port Phillip District – 1835-1866***

It is thought that Thomson was the first of the 1839 Melbourne Mechanics' Institution committee members, and his wife and daughter the first white females, to set foot in Melbourne.

Finn reports that on 26 October 1835, the *Norval*, chartered by the Batman Association, with 500 sheep, arrived in Port Phillip Bay, and the stock was landed at Gellibrand's Point (Williamstown). In the same vessel arrived 50 pure Hereford cows, consigned to Dr Alexander Thomson.<sup>9</sup>



Thomson followed in 1836 and was one of a small group camped on the banks of the Yarra River. This ink drawing, by C.S. Bennett *Old Gum Tree Swanston & Flinders St. Dr Thompsons [sic] Camp in 1852* in the collection of the State Library of Victoria, depicts the gum tree on the site of the present St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, under which Thomson and his wife and small daughter camped on their arrival in 1836.

Appendix 2 relates how the newly-arrived Rev Orton, whom the Thomsons had met on the voyage to Australia, had come up the river with John Batman, and while the Batmans fed their children in a nearby tent, he strolled across to the Thomsons' camp and was invited to join their meal of freshly caught snapper and damper. Thomson was active as catechist at the first regular service in Melbourne performed by Rev Orton.

A work by artist R. Hofmann, on display in the Cowen Gallery at the State Library of Victoria, depicts Melbourne in 1836, probably reconstructed at a later date, looking north from the south bank of the Yarra River. The Library also holds a larger version of this painting, on display in the Manuscripts Room, which includes a legend identifying dwellings, including those of Batman and Thomson.

On 1 June 1836 Alexander Thomson was involved in the first meeting of the residents of Port Philip, which appointed James Simpson [who would become President of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution in 1840] as arbitrator of the District, and to petition Governor Bourke to appoint a resident magistrate at Port Philip.<sup>10</sup>

Captain William Lonsdale, the newly-arrived Administrator, reported to the Colonial Secretary on 30 September 1836 " ... I proceeded this morning to the settlement, and caused the Government Notice dated the ninth inst. to be posted and distributed about the place. The only persons of any respectability at present there are Mr Batman and Mr Thomson, who not only expressed themselves delighted with the protection it would be thus afforded them, but congratulated themselves on it, and appeared desirous to give me any information or assistance they can."<sup>11</sup> Lonsdale subsequently appointed Thomson, then the only settler with medical qualifications, temporarily as medical officer, at a salary of £200 p.a.

But, relations between Lonsdale and Thomson turned sour: on 8 December 1836 Lonsdale wrote to Governor Bourke concerning the surgeon's appointment: "Mr Thomson does not wish to retain it permanently, indeed his conduct is so extraordinary that it would be desirable if he were soon removed. He lately took it upon himself to detain a mail that arrived in Geelong harbour, and opened bags to distribute letters to persons there under pretence that it was done so before I arrived, though he was perfectly aware I had not sanctioned any such arrangement."<sup>12</sup> Lonsdale's sense of order, arising from his military training, would have been offended by such an initiative.

This was followed shortly afterwards on 1 January 1837 by Thomson's letter of resignation to Lonsdale: "I have the honour to tender you my resignation as colonial surgeon, urgent business requiring my removal to Geelong, and another medical man being on the settlement, I trust you can sustain no inconvenience from my absence."<sup>13</sup>

Thomson had chosen land in the Geelong district at Kardinia, near falls on the Barwon River. A return of dwellings, stock and cultivation at Port Phillip, 9 November 1836, lists: "Thomson, Alexander. Arrived February 1836. Location: Barwon. No of horses: 8. Residence: weatherboard and sod. Under cultivation: 4 acres barley, oats, potatoes. No. of sheep: 1750. Condition: generally clean but not free from scab. No. of cattle: 50. Remarks: 170 sheep belong to Mr Symes, King George Sound."<sup>14</sup>

But he retained interests in Melbourne. At the first land sale in Melbourne (following earlier Melbourne land sales in Sydney) on 1 June 1837, Thomson purchased land on the south west corner of Flinders Street and Elizabeth Street – a prime position – acquiring Lot 8, Block 4, for £46. *[Fellow-members of the 1839 Melbourne Mechanics' Institution also acquiring land at this sale included:*

*S.Craig, J.Gardiner, J.Sutherland, also J.Simpson, who would become President of the Institution for 10 years from 1840].* "Of the 100 Allotments Sold, upwards of 1/5<sup>th</sup> were purchased for Residents of Sydney." A copy of the Land Sale document is held at the Melbourne City Council Archives. The purchaser of each allotment was bound to erect, within a year, a house to the value of £50. The purchaser was not allowed to make any carriageways across the footways as access of that kind had been provided by backstreets (Flinders Lane, Little Collins Street) in which no foot ways were to be laid out. The first brick building was a general store which was built for William Rucker *[who would be a fellow-member of the 1839 committee]*, in the latter half of 1837, at the corner of Queen and Collins Streets.

Thomson became prominent in early Port Phillip history. "To trace Dr Thomson's life for the next decade [1840s] is to follow intimately the fortunes of Geelong."<sup>15</sup>

Thomson was active in exploration and survey in areas west of Geelong. Appendix 2 gives an account of a hazardous journey to the Cape Otway region which the party was fortunate to survive.

Thomson is also said to have driven the first bullock team from Geelong to Melbourne - single-handed after his support team left the journey - and in spite of the hostility of the aboriginal tribes around Werribee.

But although based in the Geelong district Thomson continued to be involved in Melbourne affairs.

The *Argus* newspaper of 3 January 1866, describing the life of Dr Thomson, commented "Before the time of steamboats and railways, the doctor frequently rode from Geelong to

Melbourne, on his celebrated pony *Creamy*, in four hours; and this was his only riding horse for over 20 years, and quite as much an institution as his master."



*Dr Alexander Thomson  
'on his well-known white pony'.  
From Croll, R.H. Dr Alexander Thomson:  
a pioneer of Melbourne and founder of Geelong*

Transport between Geelong and Melbourne was easier by sea than land. "The road between the two towns, via 'the Weiraby', was described as not much more than a rough track which travellers often 'got astray'. ... In mid-1841 there was a report of two instances of robberies being committed on the road ...".<sup>16</sup>

Dr Thomson was a staunch Presbyterian, being involved in early Melbourne services as official Catechist. Religion was a driving force in his life and he had close relationships with other religious leaders of all denominations, some of whom were involved in the early committees of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution. Although a Presbyterian he was closely involved with the Wesleyan aboriginal mission on the Barwon River, established by Francis Tuckfield of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. A committee appointed to a Port Phillip branch of the Methodist Missionary Society in Melbourne in 1839 were all Wesleyans, with the exception of the Presbyterian Treasurer Thomson. Dr and Mrs Thomson continued to support the Wesleyans throughout the 1840s, offering accommodation on many occasions, holding services in their parlour, and in many other ways. (See appendix 1)

Gardiner comments: "As a prominent member of the Geelong community Thomson was active in several fields. First, he was largely responsible for starting Presbyterian services in the district. These were held in his parlour and then in his woolshed; later he headed the subscribers to petition the Minister for a church at Geelong, the foundation stone of which



he laid in 1841. His enthusiastic Presbyterianism kept him in close touch with his friend [John Dunmore] Lang whose radical political views he shared in part."<sup>17</sup>

In 1843 Thomson was elected as one of the Port Phillip members to the New South Wales legislative Council, but resigned in 1844. "In March 1844 Thomson had found himself in financial difficulties through speculation, but he recovered and increased his holdings to 150,000 acres."<sup>18</sup>

He was elected for Geelong to the Victorian Legislative Council during 1852-54, following Separation from New South Wales, and to the Legislative Assembly in 1857-59, and in 1853 was on the select committee drafting the Constitution bill. "He followed it to Europe and won a promise from Lord John Russell that the bill would receive early attention by Parliament."<sup>19</sup>

He played an important part in the development of early Geelong, and in 1851 became Geelong's first mayor. He was mayor also from 1855-57.

Towards the end of his life he was appointed as medical officer at the Sunbury Boys Home. "This setback according to the *Australian medical Journal*, was due to his disregard of 'the prevailing rule of looking well to his own interests before endeavouring to promote those of his fellow creatures'."<sup>20</sup>

Thomson was buried in the old Geelong cemetery following his death on New Year's Day 1866.

### ***Dr Thomson as a member of the 1839 Committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution***

Thomson, elected a vice-president of the 1839 committee, was not able to attend committee meetings of the Melbourne Institution following his increasing involvement in the Geelong area. He rented his *Kardinia* property for a year to pastoralist Anne Drysdale, possibly on her arrival in Geelong in 1840 to take up a squatting run. She lived at *Kardinia* whilst she built her own cottage. The remarkable Miss Drysdale kept a diary of her 13 years in the area. She describes the local hospitality and the constant stream of visitors, including Dr Thomson. On one occasion when he was visiting Miss Drysdale had "7 strangers at once. We had to bring chairs from the kitchen, but we gave them the best we had and they all went away pleased."<sup>21</sup>

Thomson is believed to be a founding member of the Geelong Mechanics' Institute; he would probably have been present at a meeting held in 1842 to investigate the opening of an

## Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839

Dr Alexander Thomson

---

The Melbourne Athenaeum: <https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/>

---

Institute in Geelong. The first building was opened in 1846, with a new building opening on the current site on Ryrie Street on March 3 1856. At some point the building gained a second storey before it was destroyed by fire in 1926. The façade was retained by the Geelong Performing Arts Centre, and the upper story is now used as a ballet studio.<sup>22</sup>



*Geelong Mechanics' Institute, Ryrie Street.  
Wikipedia 2007 image.*

Thomson resigned from the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution 1839 committee, the Minutes of 8 December 1840 recording his resignation "on account of inability to attend the meetings of Committee." He was replaced by D.G. McArthur, who had also been a committee member in 1839.

"Thomson had urged on all occasions the advancement of Geelong, but that he had not neglected Melbourne is shown in many records ... A letter in the possession of the family reveals, too, that in September 1843, he appealed to the Government for a grant in aid of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, claiming that its diffusion of literature had a mild, benignant and civilising influence."<sup>23</sup>

### ***Relationships with fellow-members of the Mechanics' Institution Committee***

*[indicates members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution committee]*

From Melbourne's earliest days Thomson and other members of the 1839 committee would have crossed paths frequently as seen below.

On 2 May 1836 Thomson was involved as an arbitrator in the first legal decision in the district. "The arbitrators were Dr Thomson (the first medico), Messrs John Aitken (the first stock breeder), and James Simpson (the first magistrate)."<sup>24</sup> ) The latter would become an early and long-serving President of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution.

In June 1839 T.Wills, P.Welsh, and W.Yaldwyn would be appointed directors of the provisional Board of the Melbourne and Port Phillip Bank. They would be appointed

## Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839

Dr Alexander Thomson

---

The Melbourne Athenaeum: <https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/>

---

members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution committee later that year. "The colonists took it into their heads to set up a bank of their own; but the maiden essay at bank-making though not terminating in a smash, after a short life and a merry one, died a natural death. At a meeting in December the Board decided to increase the shares and capital and re-name the bank the Port Philip Bank." At this stage Thomson was appointed a Director. [*J.Gardiner, Managing Director, Dr.F.McCrae, S.Craig, P.Welsh and T.Wills; defeated candidates were H.Gisborne and G.B.Smythe*]. However, the bank ceased to carry on business – "the collapse might have been attributed to the free and easy manner in which some of the Directors accommodated themselves and their friends. They regarded the bank simply as a 'mutual accommodation' pie, and accordingly kept their own fingers in it."<sup>25</sup>

The following month Thomson was appointed a Director of the Fire and Marine Insurance Company. which started business offering 1,000 shares at £50 each. [*Squatters who were directors included J.Gardiner, J.Simpson, G.B.Smyth, W.Yaldwyn, W.Rucker, D.C.McArthur and Rev.J.Clw; S.Craig and W.Highett were auditors. Other 1839 committee members who were shareholders included P.Welsh and T.Wills*]. Shareholders were required at the time to pay only £2.10 per share.<sup>26</sup>

In September 1839 the Methodist Missionary Society was founded as auxiliary to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and established a mission to the aborigines on the Barwon River near Geelong. Although a staunch Presbyterian, Thomson was very supportive of the Wesleyan missionaries. (See Appendix 1). He was the Treasurer of the Society. [*J.Peers was a committee member*]<sup>27</sup>

Thomson was appointed director of the Pastoral and Agricultural Society of Australia Felix founded in January 1840. [*F.McCrae (Vice President), J.Clw, G.B.Smyth, W.Rucker, P.Welsh, also J.Simpson, who would become President of the Mechanics' Institution in June that year, and A.McCrae, who would become a Trustee of the Institution in June '40, who was appointed Secretary*]. "In those times it was a cardinal tenet of popular belief that no enterprise could prosper unless set going by a good dinner, a blended baptism of post-prandial grog and oratory, and so to work the 'undertakers' went to get up a convivial celebration accordingly. It was at first intended to hold it at the *Lamb Inn* – grandmother of the now *Scott's Hotel* – where there was a tolerably large room at the time, but on measurement this was pronounced to be not sufficiently commodious, and a recently-erected store of *Mr Rucker's*, in Market Street, between Collins and Little Flinders Streets was finally selected as the feeding ground. This was the first Public Dinner in the colony, and it came off on 15 January. The *Rev. James Clw*, one of the Directors, invoked a blessing. Amongst the best speakers of the jolly evening was another clergyman, the *Rev. James Forbes*, the first Presbyterian minister. ... The Association was born several years too soon, but it was not surprising that the premature bantling



should be an abortion. Annual exhibitions were promised at Melbourne and Geelong, but the materials did not exist in the Province to produce such unconsidered results. The first show took place on 3 March, 1842 and it was a failure. The exhibits were a vast disappointment. ... On the following evening the members consoled themselves over a dinner, much less enthusiastic, gushing and prayerful than the inauguration one."<sup>28</sup>

In April 1840 Thomson joined the directory of the newly-established Melbourne Auction Company [*Dr.F.McCrae, G.B.Smythe, W.Highett, T.Wills, J.Graham*]. This company " ... starting with a directory of ostentatious names, and less capital than expectations, very soon came to grief ..." <sup>29</sup> Its purpose was to afford security and facilities for the disposal of property.

Three months later, in July 1840, Thomson was elected to the committee of management of the Auxilary Bible Society of Australia Felix. [*C.J. La Trobe, Patron; W.Lonsdale, President; J.Clow and E.J.Brewster, Vice-Presidents; committee members J. Gardiner, R. Reeves, D Wilkie, J Peers; J.Forbes, Secretary*]. Thomson acted as a Geelong committee member.<sup>30</sup>

1840 was a busy year for Thomson: in December, he was elected to the Committee of the Immigration Association established to introduce immigration to the Port Phillip District, independently of that to New South Wales in general. [*C.J.La Trobe, W.Lonsdale, J.Simpson, P.Welsh, W.Yaldwyn, F.McCrae, J.Graham*]<sup>31</sup>

At the close of 1840, Thomson, a prominent Presbyterian was made a Trustee of Scot's Church, Geelong, which had close links with the church in Melbourne. [*at Melbourne: J.Forbes, Minister; S.Craig, Trustee. Also supportive, raising funds for the Geelong church: J.Clow; D.Wilkie, W.Yaldwyn*] The church in Geelong was opened in April 1841.<sup>32</sup>

The following year, 1841, saw the establishment of the Port Phillip Theological Education Society, and Thomson was elected to the committee of management. [*J.Forbes, President; S.Craig, J.Graham*]<sup>33</sup>

In 1846 Thomson began publication of a bi-weekly religious journal in Geelong, the *Victoria Colonist*. Other religious journals started in the mid-1840s included the *Port Phillip Christian Herald*. [*Rev. J. Forbes*]<sup>34</sup>

In 1848 a public meeting on 3 July led to an anti-La Trobe movement. Alleged public transgressions by La Trobe were aired with a view to petitioning the Queen on the matter. It was alleged that La Trobe had been against the interests of the Port Phillip District and had told Governor Sir Charles Fitzroy that the District was not capable of managing its own

revenues – that it was not fit for separation from New South Wales; that the community had lost confidence in the administration of Mr La Trobe; that he had misused public funding. A lengthy petition to the Queen was adopted on a motion. Dr Thomson was appointed to a committee to procure signatures and for the submission. [*J.Rankin*]<sup>35</sup> Charges against one of the main speakers, John Fawner, was one of the ensuing results of the public meeting.<sup>36</sup>

In August 1849 a public meeting was called to protest against the possibility of the re-introduction of transportation. Dr Thomson delivered a speech. [*T.Wills*] It was decided to transmit petitions to the Queen and to both Houses of Parliament.<sup>37</sup>

Thomson arranged for ten German families to arrive as part of a contingent to establish industrial activities in Port Phillip. On 4 December 1849, shortly before their arrival, a public meeting was held and a committee set up to help with the arrivals. [*W.Rucker*]<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the 1840s therefore Thomson, although heavily engaged in the Geelong area with religious, commercial and pastoral interests, remained closely in touch with other members of the Melbourne 1839 committee. He worked with them, supporting them in a wide range of activities, but especially with those in the religious sphere, including Forbes, Clow, and Craig. For instance, in 1843, Craig seconded a motion nominating Thomson as a representative to sit in the Legislative Council in Sydney.<sup>39</sup>

### *Summary*

In July 1865, at a dinner given to Dr Thomson in Geelong, he gave a detailed account of his life. "The part I have played in the history of the colony is not an inconsiderable one. I have seen the colony pass from its childhood to youth ...".<sup>40</sup> An interview with Dr Thomson's daughter, Mrs Creswick, in 1908, also provides a first-hand account of Thomson's life. Aged 75 at the time of the interview she was "... the only survivor of that little company of white folk in 'The Settlement'", including John Batman, who camped on the banks of the River Yarra in 1836.<sup>41</sup>

"A man of wide sympathies and broad views, he entered every field for the advancement of the general good, and his character, as well as his professional attainments and university training, gave him high standing in the community. So we find him a member of many committees ...".<sup>42</sup>

Thomson was "a useful, good natured, though near-sighted gentleman, and rendered many kind offices to the very limited community in which fate had cast him. He did not remain long in Melbourne for he conceived an affection for Geelong which never left him until his dying hour ... The question was never raised as to the sincerity and disinterestedness of his

motives,"<sup>43</sup> and "he was one of Victoria's most prominent and versatile early settlers." (see Appendix 1)

But not all reports were positive: as we have seen, Lonsdale crossed swords with Thomson very early in the piece and was glad to see him resign from his medical appointment in 1836 and depart for Geelong. This was possibly due to very different temperaments: Lonsdale's sense of order, inherited from his military background, was possibly affronted by initiatives taken by the energetic Dr Thomson.

In an undated fragment of a letter from England, late 1854, to D.C. McArthur [auditor in 1839 of the Melbourne Mechanics Institution committee], La Trobe said "I believe he [Mitchell] told them at the Colonial Office when he learned that Dr Thomson wanted an interview with the Secretary of State and was asked who the Dr was – that he was an old scamp and most improper character. This is only to the initiated. When asked my opinion, I could only laugh most heartily and say that Mitchell certainly knew him better than I did."<sup>44</sup> La Trobe must have known Thomson well and was not forthcoming in his defence on this occasion.

They were indeed well known to each other: Thomson, speaking about his life at a public dinner in his honour in 1865, a year before he died, said that in the mid-40s he had shown to Superintendent La Trobe, "the adaptability of the colony for the construction of railways, which I submitted could be constructed without expense to the State – not private, the State Railways – and I recommended that lines of country should be reserved ... and the adjacent land sold after the railways were constructed. I failed in my representations to Mr La Trobe. Times changed, and goldfields were discovered and I joined ... with others to start the Mt Alexander line, and instituted a scheme for a Geelong railway to the westward ... " but this scheme did not meet with public approval.<sup>45</sup>

The significant role of Thomsons wife, Barbara, should not be overlooked: it was courageous to leave with her husband and small daughter for Australia, leaving her family and home territory behind for an unknown future. It must have been a daunting start to their new life, camped in a tent community, with a few other early settlers, on the banks of the River Yarra. Mrs Thompson and little Jane were reportedly the first white female residents of Melbourne. It is evident that she was very supportive of Thomson throughout in his many interests, especially offering hospitality in her Geelong home, and a venue for religious services in her parlour, not only to Presbyterians, but to Wesleyans and others alike. She would have endured many privations, and long absences by Thomson, both within Victoria and in Europe, requiring a degree of stoicism.

In a brief surviving copy of a letter Barbara Thompson wrote to a Mrs Clarke, we feel closer to her as we read her gentle words of friendship, following a disagreement between their husbands.<sup>46</sup>

Settlers such as the Thomsons provided strong direction and guidance in the early settlements of Melbourne and Geelong, showing energetic leadership, great courage, and a willingness to take on new challenges.

## Appendix 1

*Alexander Thomson Papers, 1830-1865*

*Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 9345,*

### *Introductory Note*

This collection of papers is only a small proportion of those which must have been acquired by Dr Alexander Thomson during his varied career. However, a considerable number of his many interests are represented.

Thomson's interest in Port Phillip politics is reflected in notes for speeches, resolutions of meetings and other papers dealing with political issues, notably those of separation, anti-transportation and immigration including copies of correspondence with John Dunmore Lang on these and other topics.

Thomson was also active in local Geelong politics and civic affairs and the collection includes copies of petitions from Geelong residents and other papers concerning local issues.

In the field of religion there are papers concerned with the Presbyterian Church, the Wesleyan Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Dr Thomson was especially interested in the work of the Wesleyan Missionary Society among the aborigines in the Geelong area.

Papers reflecting Thomson's business interests include documents concerning the Geelong Steam Navigation Company, and the Geelong and Melbourne Railway Company.

Thomson's profession of medical practitioner is not well represented here apart from a small collection of papers relating to the Sunbury Boys' Home at which Thomson was a medical officer towards the end of his life.

Altogether the collection presents an interesting and varied view of the life of one of Victoria's most prominent and versatile early settlers.



## Appendix 2

### *1839–1851 Thomson's involvement with the Aboriginal settlement at Bunting Dale, near Colac, Victoria.*

**Source:** Le Griffin, H. *Campfires at the Cross: an account of the Bunting Dale Aboriginal Mission at Birregurra, near Colac, Victoria 1839-1851*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2006.

Although he was a Presbyterian Thomson became closely involved with the establishment of a Wesleyan aboriginal settlement in Victoria. The Rev. Joseph Orton, who had arrived in Sydney in 1831, had brought with him from London a directive from the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society to gather information relevant to the establishment of a mission for the aborigines in New South Wales. He was later transferred to Hobart. During the voyage from England he had befriended Dr and Mrs Alexander Thomson and their daughter, Jane. In April 1836, Orton landed, in company with John Batman, who was returning with his wife and seven daughters, to settle permanently in Port Phillip, where Thomson had arrived a week or so earlier from Van Diemens Land to act as medical officer and religious instructor, or catechist, for the settlement. "While the Batmans settled in and fed their hungry children, Orton strolled across to visit the Thomsons who were overjoyed to see an old friend. They invited him to share their evening meal of freshly caught snapper and damper."

The Rev. Orton is said to have performed the first regular religious services on Batman's Hill.<sup>47</sup> Finn records that "the hymn tunes were pitched by Dr Thomson, the Surgeon Catechist." Thomson remained in touch with Rev. Orton and was strongly supportive of plans to establish an aboriginal mission in Port Phillip. Rev. Francis Tuckfield, another Wesleyan missionary arrived in Port Phillip in July 1838. Shortly afterwards he visited Geelong and became the first ordained minister of religion to conduct a service. "It was held in the parlour of the house of Dr Alexander Thomson who had settled in Geelong after resigning his post as the first government medical officer at Port Phillip. Until their own accommodation was completed, the Tuckfields stayed at the home of Dr and Mrs Thompson, who became firm friends and loyal supporters during the difficult years ahead.

In March 1839 Tuckfield, and another missionary, Benjamin Hurst, planned an expedition to locate surrounding aboriginal tribes. Thomson, who had been planning a trip to Portland Bay to find an outlet for his cattle, suggested that the missionaries accompany him. "Consequently, a party of five riders ... set off on 21 March 1839. None were experienced bushmen or familiar with the skills of orienteering. Their search for Cape Otway led them into the Otway forest. This diversion almost led to loss of life." They encountered rugged terrain and wet weather as they struggled to navigate their way through the forest. Two of

the horses died of exhaustion, and the others had to be left behind. "The five men were fatigued beyond measure. Their clothes were almost torn away, the footwear wrecked and their food supplies were almost gone. ... Finally, the party reached the beach and toiled back around the coast to Geelong. The journey had lasted sixteen days. The explorers were lucky to be alive. Their reward was the discovery of an aboriginal clan, possibly the Katubanut, of which little is known. ... Tuckfield finally favoured a site about 40 miles to the west of the little settlement at Geelong on the south side of the Barwon River."

"Hurst organised a Port Phillip Branch of the Methodist Missionary Society in Melbourne, at a two-day function in September 1839, clergy and distinguished laypersons from several different denominations took leading parts in the proceedings. The Committee that was appointed were all Wesleyans, with the exception of the Presbyterian treasurer Dr Alexander Thomson, who lived in Geelong and had been a good friend of missionaries from the very beginning."

Soon, "inter-racial unrest had become such a problem in the districts of Colac and Geelong that a meeting was held under the Chairmanship of Dr Alexander Thompson, and a Memorial seeking protection, signed by thirty-nine settlers, dated 8 July 1840, was forwarded to Governor Sir George Gipps in Sydney." ... At other meetings held in Geelong and chaired by Dr Thomson, collections were taken for the benefit of the work on the Bunting Dale Mission."

Dr and Mrs Thomson continued to support the Wesleyans through the 1840s, offering accommodation on many occasions, holding services in their parlour, at times caring for wives of the missionaries prior to their confinements, and looking after mission finances. He provided medical help, and even on one occasion lent a horse to a missionary who had to return to the mission. When the mission finally closed in the late 1840s, Thomson assisted Tuckfield to wind up the sale of the stock and to seek compensation for the improvements made upon the station.

### Appendix 3

*Thomson, Dr Alexander – letter to Robert Russell requesting work to be done at his property Kardinia.*

Source: Royal Historical Society Victoria

Item	Box 29/2MS 000068			
	<p>Russell Collection Letters to Robert Russell 1808 – 1900 Preserved by R.R.</p>	<p>Letter from Alexander Thomson Kardinia February 20, 1848 Request for (undecipherable) work on his run, (when can it be done? Cost?)</p> <p>R.R. note appended to the letter:</p> <p>Alexander Thomson Known as Dr Thomson He came from Van Diemens Land and knew something of medicine. He had a house close to where the Cathedral now stands in Swanston Street and the tree grown over with ivy still stands on which the meat was hung up to keep it clear of native dogs. He took part in all the political movements of the day, taking special interest in Geelong where he had eventually settled down at Cardinia (? nr) Buckley's Falls</p>		

*Copied by Anne Marsden at RHSV, Melbourne Athenaeum Archives, January 2012*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Confusion exists between Dr Alexander Thomson and his contemporary Alexander Thomson who was a servant of John Batman and was a signatory to Batman's Title Deeds with the aboriginal chiefs in June 1835. Both were closely involved with John Batman.
- <sup>2</sup> *Aust. Dictionary of Biography* cites '1866'; *Wikipedia*: '1.1.1866'.
- <sup>3</sup> Croll, R.H. *Dr Alexander Thomson: a pioneer of Melbourne and founder of Geelong*, Robertson & Mullens, Melbourne, 1937
- <sup>4</sup> Le Griffin, H. *Campfires at the Cross: an account of the Bunting Dale Aboriginal Mission at Birregurra, near Colac, Victoria 1839-1851*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> *Alexander Thomson Papers, 1830-1865 Introductory Note*. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 9345.
- <sup>6</sup> Gardiner, L. *Thomson, Alexander (1800-1866)*, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 1967.
- <sup>7</sup> Finn, E., *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne 1835 -1852*, Fergusson & Mitchell, Melbourne 1888, p. 861-62.
- <sup>8</sup> Sir Everard Home was assistant surgeon to his brother-in-law, John Hunter, who was a collaborator with Edward Jenner, inventor of the smallpox vaccine. Home was the first to describe the fossil creature (later 'Ichthyosaur') discovered near Lyme Regis by Mary Anning, and initially suggested it had affinities with fish. Home also did some of the earlier studies on the anatomy of the platypus and noted that it was not viviparous, theorising that it was instead ovoviviparous.
- <sup>9</sup> Finn, E., p. 566.
- <sup>10</sup> *Minutes and correspondence of the first meeting of the residents of Port Phillip 1836* State Library of Victoria, Manuscript collection.
- <sup>11</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria, Foundation Series, Vol. 3, The Early Development of Melbourne*, Vic. Govt. Printing Office, Melbourne, 1984, p. 82.
- <sup>12</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria, Foundation Series, Vol. 1, Beginnings of Permanent Government*, p. 86.
- <sup>13</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria, Foundation Series, Vol. 3*, p.454.
- <sup>14</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria, Vol. 3*, p. 426.
- <sup>15</sup> Croll, R.H. p. 39.
- <sup>16</sup> Ancestor, Genealogical Society of Victoria, Vol. 30 issue 2, 2010, Roberts, B. *Geelong – The Gateway* p. 11.
- <sup>17</sup> Gardiner, L., p.1.
- <sup>18</sup> Gardiner, L., p.2.
- <sup>19</sup> Gardiner, L., p.2.
- <sup>20</sup> Gardiner, L., p.2.
- <sup>21</sup> Ancestor, Vol. 30. Issue 2, p.13.
- <sup>22</sup> Wikipedia entries: *Geelong Mechanics' Institute* and *Geelong Performing Arts Centre*.
- <sup>23</sup> Croll, R.H. p. 40.
- <sup>24</sup> Finn, E., p.12.
- <sup>25</sup> Finn, E., *The 'Garryowen' Chronicles of Early Melbourne 1835 – 1852* Ferguson & Mitchell, Melbourne 1888, p. 323-324.
- <sup>26</sup> Sullivan, M. *Men and Women of Port Phillip* Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1985 p. 63.
- <sup>27</sup> Finn, E., p.158.
- <sup>28</sup> Finn, E., p.427.
- <sup>29</sup> Finn, E., p. 596.
- <sup>30</sup> Finn, E., p. 177.
- <sup>31</sup> Finn, E., pp. 491-93.
- <sup>32</sup> Finn, E., pp. 159-60.
- <sup>33</sup> Finn, E., p. 178.
- <sup>34</sup> Finn, E., p. 831.
- <sup>35</sup> Finn, E., p. 345.
- <sup>36</sup> Finn, E., pp. 345, and 522.
- <sup>37</sup> Finn, E., p. 524.
- <sup>38</sup> Finn, E., p. 495.
- <sup>39</sup> Croll, R.H., p. 34.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Argus*, Melbourne, Wednesday 3 January 1866. (Trove newspapers)
- <sup>41</sup> *The Sydney morning Herald*, Wednesday, 1 January, 1908.(Trove newspapers)
- <sup>42</sup> Croll, R.H., p. 34.
- <sup>43</sup> Finn, E., pp. 861-62.
- <sup>44</sup> *Letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe*, Victoriana Series No 1. Victorian Government. 1975 p. 47.
- <sup>45</sup> *Argus* Melbourne, 3 January 1866.
- <sup>46</sup> *Alexander Thomson Papers, 1830-1865* Letter from Mrs Thomson to Mrs Clarke (undated).

**Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839**

**Dr Alexander Thomson**

---

The Melbourne Athenaeum: <https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/>

---

---

<sup>47</sup> The first service “appeared to have been conducted in spring 1835 by Henry Reed, a Wesleyan local preacher and wealthy business man from Van Diemen’s Land.” Breward, I., *The Victorian Churches before Separation.*” Seminar Paper, Genealogical Society of Victoria, Melbourne 2 April, 2011.

*Anne Marsden, Melbourne Athenaeum Archives, April, 2012*