

## Plain truths alone compose the substance

Thomson C. Twelve years in Canterbury, New Zealand. 1867

It's a change to have the husband present as only a ghost, even if not resident in New Zealand, giving his name and nothing else to an early account of life in New Zealand. So often it is the wives who are drifting somewhere in the background. Maria Thomson (1807-1875) was 43 when she emigrated to New Zealand, sailing on the *Hampshire*, one of the Canterbury Company's last ships. She boarded at Gravesend in December 1852 and arrived in Lyttleton in May the following year after a lengthy voyage. She was a widow and there is no mention anywhere of her husband Charles Thomson, whose name she used for the rest of her life: Mrs Charles Thomson.<sup>1</sup>

Maria was well-off, genteel and had experience teaching young girls, an ideal Canterbury immigrant. She was also, more unusually, a businesswoman, purchasing property in Christchurch and establishing the 'Christchurch Ladies School' on Oxford Terrace. Towards the end of the 1850s, she bought more property in Antigua and Salisbury streets, running the school there on a one acre site. In the early 1860s she was running a school at Avonside, more for working class children, partly funded by the provincial Government.<sup>1</sup> By the end of some 12 years in Christchurch, she decided to return to England, but first wished to see more of New Zealand and Australia, and then take the overland route home via Suez.

Back in England she wrote up her account, with its misleading title, since she describes nothing of her 12 years in Canterbury. It was published in 1867.

**Thomson C.** *Twelve years in Canterbury, New Zealand: With visits to the other provinces and reminiscences of the route home through Australia, etc. (From a lady's journal).* London: Sampson Low. [1867]. Bagnall 5539, Hocken 252.

*xiv, 262 pp. Frontispiece, verso on verso of short title page, original maroon decorated boards with gilt title and gilt title on spine, all edges gilt.*

The copy I have is the first edition, but neither Hocken nor Bagnall include the frontispiece. This might be a re-issue, perhaps a slightly more deluxe issue with the gilt edges, without the advertisements cited by Bagnall, though Bagnall does cite a re-issue of the same year that has green boards, but again no frontispiece engraving. This is a drawing by Henry Gastineau<sup>2</sup>, engraved by E Linden<sup>3</sup>. Oddly the landscape depicted is that of an



Maria Thomson. *Weekly press*, 15 December 1900, p. 98.  
<https://christchurchcitylibraries.com/heritage/publications/richmanpoorman/mariathomson/>

<sup>1</sup> <https://christchurchcitylibraries.com/heritage/publications/richmanpoorman/mariathomson/>

<sup>2</sup> Henry Gastineau (1791-1876) was a water-colourist, mainly of numerous romantic landscapes in England, Wales and Scotland.

<sup>3</sup> Probably Edward Linden (1791-1857), who while dead by the time of this publication may well have engraved the original. However, he was mainly known for his portrait, including that in Richard Cruise's 1823 NZ account.

English or Scottish lake scene with a ruin in the background, nothing to do with New Zealand. The verse printed on the preliminaries (*"Tis Greece where Greeks do dwell" so spake and thought the ancient race.....*) can be found in a book *'The Book of Canterbury Rhymes'*<sup>4</sup>, an anthology published later in 1896 in Christchurch in aid of a charity, comprising mainly humorous verse previously published in Canterbury. The poets are only identified by initials, and this one (in the 1896 book) has the letter 'J', dated November 1853. It turns out it was written by Henry Jacobs, (1824-1901), who emigrated to Canterbury on the *Sir George Seymour*, one of the first four ships arriving in 1850. He had been appointed Classics Professor of the proposed Christ's College and opened Christ's College Grammar School in 1852. He later became Archdeacon of Canterbury.<sup>5</sup> The poem is all about England, and helps shift the whole tone of the book away from New Zealand and the absence of any account of the 12 years Canterbury residence, to 'home'.

The publisher, in the Preface says that *'Having been in the habit of noting down in her journal all that struck her as interesting or peculiar in the course of her travels, and finding, on her return to England, how imperfect was the knowledge possessed by the public of the bright and sunny lands so far away, she has been induced to publish extracts from those notes, which, as a discerning eye may perceive, were originally intended only for the amusement of private friends.'* Thomson reiterates this in the opening pages where she goes to some length to exclaim how little people knew, and what naïve and uninformed questions they asked: *'Does not living with the Maoris make people become savage?', 'Did you come all the way by land?', 'I thought you all knew each other there. Is it not all one town'*. This despite the large number of books that repeatedly described life in New Zealand, available to the English public.

In her own Introduction, a little of the Maria comes through. Having boarded and cast off, *'We were six weeks wind-bound off the coast of England...'*. But she enjoyed it, and enjoyed the sea: *'In the placid beauty of the calm weather, and the awful grandeur of the storm.....I feel an intense worshipful admiration and a peaceful enjoyment far more perfect than usually falls to the lot of any on the busy land.'* ....*'It is refreshing and invigorating and you can leave your cares behind you...'* She doesn't say how carefree and invigorated the folk down below in steerage are during a 5 month voyage, but does say *'that there are two sides to the picture, and it cannot be denied that there are also temptations that beset the inmates of these little floating worlds, and that sin finds its way in there as readily as elsewhere.'*

We get no record of her time in Christchurch, The first Chapter is a history and description of Canterbury and Christchurch, and then in Chapter 2 *'Having at length made up my mind to leave Canterbury, my adopted home, which had been endeared to me by a twelve years residence, and yield to the solicitations of my friends in England to return to my native land I resolved before my final departure from the Antipodes, to visit the other settlements of New Zealand...'*. She sets off in a Cobb's coach to Lyttleton, then takes a return ticket to Dunedin on a screw steamer. These may have been the latest thing, but: *'You lean backward in your seat on deck, and thump, thump, thump, continually goes on at your back until you can bear it no longer; you lie down exhausted in your berth, and find it even worse – thump, rattle, crank at your brain, and the screw itself seems working into your side to your very heart.'* She spent a few days in Dunedin, pavements were bad with asphalt scarcely having made its way south from Christchurch, local unchaperoned girls disapproved of, liked St Pauls, and visited the exhibition, then took the same steamer back to Christchurch. The boat, the *'Airdale'*, she points out used to be

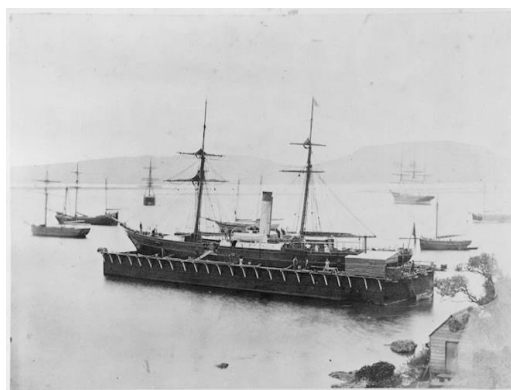
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<sup>4</sup> The Book of Canterbury Rhymes, Ward and Reeves, Christchurch, New Zealand, MDCCCLXVI. The book is in neither Hocken nor Bagnall.

<sup>5</sup> McQueen, H., (ed), The New Place. The Poetry of Settlement in New Zealand, 1852-1914. Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1993. P. 21.

Lord Cardigan's yacht that he slept in at the Crimea, presumably not with the screw in action. It was then sent out to provide a coastal service for New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

After a month in Christchurch, she finally leaves, on the same steamer, heading north. She walks over the hill to Lyttleton, passing on her way Bishop Selwyn and assorted clergymen 'wending their way wearily over the hill' to attend the General Synod, and embarks for the Manukau, sharing a cabin of 6 berths, one with a squalling baby, and the stewardess on a mattress on the floor between. They call in at Wellington, '...nothing remarkable as a town', visits the Hutt, and then they sail for Picton, picking up '...a very fat old Scotch widow and her great, strapping grand-daughter' who, to her horror, were to sleep in the cabin as well. They



*The Airedale, Port Chalmers, Dunedin, c. 1870 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22706681*

occupied the floor and the stewardess sat up all night. They then sailed for Nelson, Taranaki, and then crossing the bar, where the Captain helpfully pointed out where the *Orpheus*<sup>7</sup> had been wrecked not long ago, they landed at Onehunga. There she finds a bus leaving for Auckland every hour (not much different from today). And eventually, in the rain, gets put down in the middle of Auckland, and has to walk to a boarding house, where she finds 'Worse accommodation, worse attendance, and less civil servants could scarcely be found.' The food is bad and has to be shared at table with horrid other people, and the bed worse. It continues to rain for some days, there are mosquitos, and 'There is something indescribably oppressive in the climate of this place, producing a sensation of languor...and damp, clammy heat'. Nothing like the buoyancy produced by the Canterbury climate.

Mrs Thomson is forced to stay a month before she can get a passage to Australia 'Here is am, doomed to stay a month in the dullest place on earth.' But she manages, and the rest of the book is a mix of diary, direct speech, and usually entertaining observations. It covers her travels on from Australia to Ceylon, Suez and Alexandria, Malta and then to Marseillaise where to her frustration the ship is held in quarantine for some days, because it came from Egypt. She makes the most of it with a lively account. And then lands at last with a view towards Paris and home.

At the end of the book Thomson inserts a 'The Stewardess's Story', a dramatic and tragic story told to her by a stewardess on the ship at Sydney. The woman and her husband and their two small children sailed and traded in the Pacific, quite happily, until one day at an unnamed island, there were attacked by the local people. She and her husband fought them off, but the attacking men leapt into the sea with the two children. The daughter was retrieved but her 6 year-old son was never seen again, though reportedly was alive. They settled in Sydney and her husband sailed later to New Zealand to try gold digging, but was

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<sup>6</sup> The *Airedale* was built in South Stockton in 1857, to be used for a coastal mail service between Nelson, Picton, Wellington, Lyttleton and Port Chalmers. She arrived in Nelson in August 1859. The story is that this ship was first used by Lord Cardigan in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and then used to cruise in the Mediterranean until 1859. She was wrecked off Taranaki in 1871. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22371034>; <https://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/features/9725891/Airedale-exposed-by-low-tides> ; <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18710306.2.59>

<sup>7</sup> The Royal Navy steamer the HMS *Orpheus* ran aground on the bar on 7 February, 1863, losing 189 men of a complement of 259, still New Zealand's worst maritime disaster.

drowned crossing a river. She was left with her girl and a job as a stewardess on the Sydney passage. To lighten the mood there then follows some humorous and religious (separately) verse that had appeared variously in the Lyttleton Times during her Canterbury stay. So she never gives any details of her *Twelve years in Canterbury*.

Maria Thomson stayed in England to publish her book, and then a year later was back in Christchurch, starting up a school again, and over the next few years, until her death in 1875, she was, unusually, an active business woman in Christchurch, forming business partnerships with prominent families, and active in the church, bequeathing it a considerable sum, and finally being buried in the Barbadoes Street Cemetery. Even there, she carries her identity with her rather mysterious husband to her grave, with the epitaph saying '*Here lieth all that was mortal of Maria, relict of Charles Thomson...*'<sup>1</sup>.