Thomson, Alexander [*called* Greek Thomson]

(1817–1875)

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Alexander Thomson [Greek Thomson] (1817-1875)

by unknown photographer, 1850s?

Thomson, Alexander [*called* Greek Thomson] (1817–1875), architect, was born on 9 April 1817 at Endrick Cottage, Balfron, Stirlingshire, the seventeenth of the twenty children of John Thomson (1757/8–1824), bookkeeper at Kirkman and Findlay's cotton spinning mill at Balfron, and the ninth of his second wife, Elizabeth Cooper (*d.* 1830), whose father, George Cooper, was a schoolmaster in Aberdeen and whose brother became the Burgher minister in Balfron. John Thomson's widow moved to Glasgow with her younger children in 1825 and Alexander eventually began work in a writer's office before his talent as a draughtsman was noticed by the Glasgow architect Robert Foote, who took him as an apprentice. Thomson then worked in the office of the architect John Baird I (1798–1859), with whom he stayed for about ten

years, becoming his chief draughtsman. In 1847, in a joint ceremony, Thomson and the unrelated John Baird II (1816–1893) married Jane Nicholson (1825–1899) and Jessie Nicholson (1827–1866), daughters of the London architect Michael Angelo Nicholson (1794–1841) [*see under* Nicholson, Peter (1765-1844)].

Thomson set up in independent practice in Glasgow in 1848, when he entered into partnership with his brother-in-law John Baird II. This partnership was amicably terminated in 1857, when Thomson was joined by his younger brother George (1819–1878), who was an architect who had also worked in the office of John Baird I. In 1871 George left Glasgow to work as a missionary in the Cameroons, and in 1873 Thomson took Robert Turnbull (1839–1905) as a partner; the firm became known as A. and G. Thomson and Turnbull.

Baird and Thomson began by building villas in the new suburbs of Glasgow and along the Clyde estuary; these were designed in a variety of styles, including the Gothic and Romanesque. However, by the mid-1850s Thomson had developed the refined and abstracted Grecian manner with which he would become associated. This was employed for his unique double villa in Langside, Glasgow (1856–7), in which two identical semi-detached houses faced in opposite directions, and in Holmwood House in Cathcart, near Glasgow (1857–8), his finest villa, built for the paper manufacturer James Couper. Thomson's first biographer, the Glasgow architect Thomas Gildard, wrote of Holmwood that, 'If architecture be poetry in stone-and-lime—a great temple an epic—this exquisite little gem, at once classic and picturesque, is as complete, self-contained, and polished as a sonnet', recognizing that he had done something unprecedented (Gildard). Although he was influenced by the neo-classical work of the Prussian state architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Thomson would seem to have been the first to apply picturesque principles of composition to the Greek style in his villas. Holmwood was also remarkable for its scheme of interior painted decoration, all designed by the architect along with furniture, carpets, and other furnishings.

Thomson came to reject the use of the arch, whether pointed or round, and held that the trabeated language of the Greeks could be the basis of a modern architecture which incorporated iron construction, arguing that 'Stonehenge is really more scientifically constructed than York Minster' (An inquiry as to the appropriateness of the Gothic style for the proposed buildings for the University of Glasgow, *Proceedings of the Glasgow Architectural Society*, 6–7, 1865–7, 47; repr. in Stamp, *Lectures*, 67). He was never, however, a conventional Greek revivalist, and his work was conspicuous for the originality with which he adapted and combined precedents from Greece, Egypt, and elsewhere. For all his admiration of such buildings as Thomas Hamilton's Royal High School in Edinburgh, he argued that the promoters of the Greek revival had failed, 'because they could not see through the material into the laws upon which that architecture rested. They failed to master their style, and so became its slaves' (*Art and Architecture*, 1874, 8; repr. in Stamp, *Lectures*, 147). He was insistent that

> architecture in its highest forms does not bear the least resemblance to anything in nature, that it is peculiarly and exclusively a human work; and yet, long before man came to need it, long before the foundation of the world, at the very beginning, in the councils of eternity, the laws which regulate this art were framed.Presidential address to the Glasgow Institute of Architects, *The Architect*, 15 April 1871, 198; repr. in Stamp, *Lectures*, 101

In this insistence upon eternal laws Thomson's approach to architecture verged on the mystical, and, as a devout Presbyterian, he was strongly influenced by the paintings and engravings of John Martin, which depicted the exotic architecture of the cities of the *Old Testament* with a remorseless horizontality receding towards infinity. Yet, from such images, he evolved a successful modern commercial architecture for Glasgow. More than any other architect, Thomson gave a distinct character to the second city of the British empire in his designs for warehouses and commercial buildings, and for terraces of houses and tenements. In all these he arrived at novel treatments for urban façades, in which depth and variety were achieved by the unusual arrangements of trabeated masonry combined with large windows of plate glass. The tragedy, however, is that for all his admiration of the 'imperishable thought' of the Egyptians, Thomson's achievement was constructed of weak and friable Giffnock sandstone.

Thomson's commercial designs included Grecian Buildings in Sauchiehall Street (1867–8), the Cairney Building in Bath Street (1860–61; dem.), the block in Gordon Street which he owned with his brother (1859; altered), and Egyptian Halls in Union Street (1870–72), which the London-based *Architect* noted was 'in Mr Thomson's well-known “Egyptian-Greek” style—a style which he has made his own, and in which he has no rival' (*The Architect*, 13 July 1872). Thomson's domestic work included Moray Place in Strathbungo (1859–61), where the architect himself lived from 1861 until his death, Eton Terrace in Oakfield Avenue (1862–4), and Great Western Terrace (1867–77), arguably the finest in the city in its grandeur and austerity. Gildard said of it that 'the windows have no dressings, but Greek goddesses could afford to appear undressed' (Gildard). Queen's Park Terrace in Eglinton Street (1856–60; dem.) was highly influential on the design of Glasgow's many tenements.

In addition, Thomson designed monumental urban churches for United Presbyterian congregations, which the American historian Henry Russell Hitchcock considered were 'three of the finest Romantic Classical churches in the world' (Hitchcock, 63). Of these, the only intact survivor is the St Vincent Street Church (1857–9), with its tall and exotic steeple. In this building, stone construction was combined with cast-iron columns and large sheets of glazing were applied directly to the masonry. Thomson's first church, the Caledonia Road Church (1855–7), was gutted by fire in 1965. His most extraordinary and innovative ecclesiastical building, the Queen's Park Church (1868–9), was Scotland's worst architectural loss of the Second World War; its richly decorated interior moved the painter Ford Madox Brown to exclaim 'Well done Glasgow!' and to put it 'above everything I have seen in modern Europe' (*Glasgow Evening Times*, 9 Oct 1893).

Owing to the loss of most of his drawings (a few remain in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow) and all of his professional papers, it is not possible to catalogue the whole range of Thomson's artistic activity. What is clear is that his career was to some extent paradoxical as, for all his intense idealism, Thomson was a successful commercial architect willing, on occasion, to employ the styles of which he theoretically disapproved. It also must be admitted that his insistence on such features as low-pitched roofs was not always wholly practical in the climate of the west of Scotland. It is clear, however, that contemporaries regretted that he was never awarded a commission for a public building commensurate with his talents. Thomson's designs for the Albert Memorial in London and for the South Kensington Museum must have seemed unfashionable in England to the point of perversity in the 1860s and only Glasgow, perhaps, could allow his idiosyncratic approach to flourish. Yet he was denied the opportunity of submitting a design for

the new buildings on Gilmorehill for the University of Glasgow when the commission was awarded, without competition, to the London architect George Gilbert Scott. Thomson ridiculed the universalist claims of the Gothic revival in general and Scott's design in particular in his published lecture of 1866.

Thomson was much involved in the affairs of the Glasgow Architectural Society and the Glasgow Institute of Architects, and served as president of both. In 1874 he delivered four lectures on art and architecture to the Glasgow School of Art and Haldane Academy; these covered the creations of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans and essentially constituted his architectural testament. Further lectures on medieval architecture were planned but never delivered owing to Thomson's death, from asthma and heart failure, at his home at 1 Moray Place, Strathbungo, on 22 March 1875. He had been ill for some years and increasingly delegated his professional practice to Turnbull. Had he survived the severe winter of 1874–5, Thomson planned to make his first ever trip abroad, to Italy, to recover his health.

Thomson's achievement was widely recognized at the time of his death and a memorial fund was established. This was used to present a marble bust of the architect, carved by his friend the sculptor John Mossman, to the Glasgow corporation galleries in 1877, and to endow a travelling studentship, awarded first in 1887, to the architect and historian William J. Anderson, and second, three years later, to Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

His pupil (William?) Clunas later recorded that

> Alexander Thomson was, in appearance, a distinguished-looking man, of a good average height, stout, well and proportionally made, a fine manly countenance with a profuse head of hair ... for the strictly professional side of his business he had but little capacity—punctual, he was not, neither was he persevering. You could not say he was indolent, but there was a dreamy unrest about him even when engaged on important work which caused matter-of-fact people who were waiting for further details some annoyance. But when he did plunge into a piece of work his attitude was that of a real devotee—patient, forceful, and painstaking.
>
> Clunas, My impressions

Despite this, his estate was valued for Scottish inventory duty at £15,395 5*s*. 3*d*. He was buried in the Southern Necropolis in Glasgow; the plot is now unmarked. Of the twelve children he had with Jane Nicholson, seven survived infancy.

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Likenesses

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£15,395 5*s*. 3*d*.: confirmation, 16 April 1877, *CCI*

See also

Nicholson, Michael Angelo (1794–1841), architectural draughtsman

Nicholson, Peter (1765–1844), architectural writer and mathematician

More on this topic

Thomson, Alexander <http://oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000084673> in Oxford Art Online <http://oxfordartonline.com>

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