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Pringle, Thomas

(1789–1834)

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Pringle, Thomas (1789–1834), poet, journalist, and philanthropist, was born on Blaiklaw Farm near Kelso, Roxburghshire, on 5 January 1789, the third son of Robert Pringle, farmer, and Catherine Haitlie, daughter of a Berwickshire farmer. Thomas seemed destined for a farming life until an accident at the age of three months, which left him permanently disabled and unable to walk without the aid of crutches. Barred from outdoor activities, he was encouraged to develop an interest in learning and literature, which he retained even after his mother's death in 1795. After attending a local parish school he was enrolled in Kelso grammar school in 1802, the former school of Walter Scott. In November 1805 he matriculated at the University of Edinburgh, where he studied classics. His early academic promise was not realized during his three years at university. By all accounts his was an undistinguished scholarly record, due in part to his outside literary interests, which included a weekly literary club he started to discuss poetry and read original work and compositions by club members.

In February 1808 Pringle left university to take up a post as clerk in Edinburgh's General Register House. When not copying old records he spent time writing poetry and engaging in fledgeling literary work. His first major publication, in 1811, was 'The Institute', a satirical poem lampooning the Edinburgh Philomatic Society, and co-written with his schoolboy friend Robert Story. It was not until 1816, however, with publications in *Albyn's Anthology* and the featuring of the lyrical verses 'The Autumnal Excursion' in the *Poetic Mirror*, edited by James Hogg, that Pringle began making a literary mark for himself. 'The Autumnal Excursion', set in Kelso and a clear imitation of Walter Scott, was read and admired by Scott, who knew the area described and remarked upon receiving it from Pringle that he wished his own notes on the subject 'had always been as fine as their echo' (Doyle, 184). It led to a close friendship between the two authors, and Scott was to prove significant in advancing Pringle's career in future years.

Pringle quit his clerical post to concentrate on literary activity. In 1817 he was invited to co-edit with James Cleghorn the newly established *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*. Envisaged by its publisher, William Blackwood, as a tory alternative to the whig-influenced *Edinburgh Review*, as well as a riposte to his rival Constable's *Scots Magazine*, the magazine was launched in April 1817 to lacklustre reception. Pringle's energies were not in the enterprise, as he was simultaneously occupied with editing the *Edinburgh Star*, described by Pringle's first biographer, Josiah Conder, as 'almost the only Liberal paper in Scotland' (Doyle, 23). Disappointed with his editors' lack of inspiration and commissioning zeal, Blackwood dismissed them and set about recruiting a more dynamic team to run the journal. Calling on James Hogg, John Wilson, and John Gibson Lockhart, he relaunched *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in October 1817 to great success. In the same month Pringle took on the editorship of Constable's rival publication, the *Edinburgh Magazine*. By now he was also married, having wed Margaret Brown (1780–1854) on 18 July 1817 in St Cuthbert's Church in Edinburgh.

By 1819, however, Pringle's editorial activities were at an end. Despite publication that year of his first volume of poetry, *'The Autumnal Excursion' and Other Poems*, the dissolution of the *Star* and the *Edinburgh Magazine* saw him return to clerical duties at the register house. Soon after, with his extended family in similar reduced circumstances, Pringle decided to emigrate to southern Africa. With the help of Sir Walter Scott he secured free passage to and a grant of land in southern Africa for the Pringles. On 15 February 1820, with Pringle as their leader, what became known as the 'Scottish party' of twenty-four Scots emigrants set sail from Gravesend for the Cape on the brig *Brilliant*. The group arrived at their new southern African landholding in late June 1820. Over the next two years, Pringle worked hard to secure the future of the new settlement of Glen-Lynden. He was also to undertake several journeys round southern Africa, which were to form the basis for his ground breaking *Narrative of a Residency in South Africa* (1834), one of the first published travel accounts of pioneering life in the Cape.

In September 1822 Pringle took up a post in Cape Town as librarian of the South African Public Library, a position secured through the influence of Sir Walter Scott and Sir John MacPherson. Sixteen months later, in December 1823, joined by his long-time friend John Fairbairn, he founded the Classical and Commercial Academy, which enrolled fifty pupils within a month of its launch. Not content with this, Pringle also launched a newspaper in January 1824, the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, and in March of the same year started South Africa's first literary journal, the bilingual Dutch-English monthly *South African Journal*.

During this period Pringle also assisted in raising funds for the relief of settlers in Albany, who as a result of crop failures and floods between 1820 and 1823, had been left destitute. Through determined letter writing, journal publications, and his account of

their plight, *Some Account of the Present State of the English Settlers in Albany, South Africa*, published in London in 1824, he helped raise more than £10,000 by the end of 1825.

Pringle's activities were not always welcomed, though. His uncompromising championing of freedom of the press brought him into conflict with the autocratic Cape governor Lord Charles Somerset, who in May 1824 suppressed both Pringle's periodical publications and launched a campaign against him. By October, with his school struggling for support and no further outlets for income, Pringle and his wife returned to the Pringle homestead at Glen-Lynden to prepare for the long voyage back to Britain. In July 1826, 'Ruined in circumstances and in prospects but sound in conscience and character', Pringle arrived in London with his wife and sister-in-law, and resumed his journalistic career (Meiring, 109). An article in the *New Monthly Magazine* in November 1826 on the horrors of slavery led to his appointment in 1827 as secretary of the powerful Anti-Slavery Society. Working with the abolitionists William Wilberforce and Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, he was reputedly responsible for producing more than half the organization's multi-varied publications. Pringle's energetic political activism bore fruit. On 23 August 1833 parliament passed the bill which abolished slavery. On 27 June 1834 the document proclaiming the Act of Abolition was published, with Pringle its signatory.

In addition to political work Pringle found time to publish several collections of prose and poetry, including *Ephemerides, or, Occasional Poems Written in Scotland and South Africa* (1828), *Glen-Lynden: a Tale of Teviotdale* (1828), and *African Sketches* (1834). His best known poem, 'Afar in the Desert' (1832), a romantic description of the southern African bush, was admired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who declared it 'among the three most perfect lyric poems in our language' (Meiring, 163). Pringle's poems were the first to represent southern African life and incorporate local dialect and phraseology, leading him to be dubbed the father of south African poetry, a view still held at the end of the nineteenth century by Rudyard Kipling who, when asked what southern African poetry there was, replied: 'As to South African verse, it is a case of there's Pringle and there's Pringle' (Meiring, 163). According to a South African critic, A. M. Lewin Robinson, Pringle was 'the first poet of any acknowledged ability to attempt to describe the South African scene in English' (Meiring, 163).

Pringle's political and literary successes came too late in his life for him to enjoy the benefits. The day following publication of the Act of Abolition, Pringle was taken seriously ill with tuberculosis, eventually dying at his home in London on 5 December 1834. Buried at Bunhill Fields, London, he was reinterred on 5 December 1970 at Eildon church, on the grounds of the Pringle family estate in South Africa's Baviaans river valley.

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Likenesses

W. Findler, stipple and line engraving, pubd 1837 (after unknown artist), NPG

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Anti-Slavery Society (act. 1823–1833)

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