

Thomas, David John (1813-1871)

David John **Thomas** (1813-1871), medical practitioner, was born on 13 September 1813 near Llangadock in Carmarthenshire, Wales, the eldest son of seven children of William and Ann Thomas. After an apprenticeship at Swansea Infirmary and further medical studies at University College Hospital, London, notably under Robert Liston, he became a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries and a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1838. After a short period as house surgeon to the Royal Lying-In Hospital, Golden Square, he signed on as ship's surgeon in the *Louisa Campbell*, commanded by an old school friend, Captain Buckley, for the round trip to Van Diemen's Land.

After leaving Launceston the ship called at Port Phillip in January 1839. Thomas's arrival was as unconventional as were many of his later escapades and numerous practical jokes in the colony; he swam ashore from a swamped boat, walked six miles through the bush in the dark to a hut, was attacked by a watchdog, and escaped in a boat down the river to arrive at 'Fawkner's Pub, where no doubt his troubles ended'. Thomas was prevailed upon to leave the ship and begin practice in Port Phillip, then a settlement of about 2000 people with four or five doctors already established. That year Dr Farquhar McCrae arrived at Port Phillip with members of his family, and in December 1840 his sister, Margaret Forbes, was married to Thomas, who also entered into partnership with McCrae.

Thomas was a member of the staff of the Melbourne Hospital, or its precursors, from its beginnings in 1841, and was the first surgeon in Victoria to perform a variety of operations, notably for arterial aneurysms, and including perhaps the first deliberate laparotomy for an intestinal tumour in Australia. His greatest achievement, requiring initiative and courage in so isolated a community, was to introduce ether anaesthesia to Victoria on 2 August 1847, less than a year after its discovery in America; he painlessly amputated the forearm of a shocked patient in forty seconds, two minutes after the ether inhalation had been commenced. The patient had travelled a hundred miles (161 km) in three days after a shooting accident, and four weeks later rode back unaided.

In reporting his experiences with ether in September 1847 to the Port Phillip Medical Association, of which he was a foundation member in 1846 and sometime committeeman and vice-president, he showed an awareness of its value which was not shared by many of his contemporaries both in Australia and abroad, referring to it 'as one of the greatest blessings bestowed on mankind', the use of which would in due course become general. The manuscript of this paper, the third presented to the association, was prepared for publication in the *Australian Medical Journal*, but as this journal became defunct it remained unpublished until 1934 when the manuscript was brought to light. The AMJ, itself, was revived in the 1850's by the MSV.

Thomas also claimed to have been the first to use chloroform in Melbourne. In 1850, after McCrae's departure for Sydney, Thomas entered into partnership with Edward Barker, who represented the firm on the goldfields.

In 1853 Thomas sold his home and furniture and went with his family to England, accompanied by a testimonial and public expression of goodwill and regret. He took his doctorate in medicine by examination at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, obtained the fellowship of the Royal College of

Surgeons, London, and studied surgery, anatomy and microscopy at the principal medical centres in Britain and on the Continent, where his work was highly commended. On his return in 1859 Thomas, always casual about income and expenditure, found himself in financial difficulties after the general fall in land values. These problems, accentuated by the need to re-establish his practice after a long absence in the face of increased and sometimes unethical competition, culminated in his bankruptcy in 1864.

None the less, he succeeded in once more becoming the leader of the profession, for in the same year he was elected president of the Medical Society of Victoria. Ultimately he was compelled by pressure of work to limit his practice to surgery, of which he was a deft and able exponent. In 1860 he had been re-elected to the staff of the Melbourne Hospital at the top of the poll, and in 1865 he was chairman of staff. He was appointed examiner in anatomy and physiology at the newly established medical school in the University of Melbourne in 1862, receiving its doctorate of medicine *ad eundem gradum*.

Among other appointments, he was an official visitor to the Kew Asylum, honorary physician to the Deaf and Dumb Institute, and member of the Medical Board of Victoria, as he had been before his departure overseas. An ardent Welshman, he was president of the annual Ballarat Eisteddfod in 1867. He contributed over forty papers, mostly case reports, to the *Australian Medical Journal*, of which the most important was his valedictory address in 1865 as president of the Medical Society of Victoria.

Thomas was a small man of boundless energy and good humour, partial to a good dinner and a convivial gathering, but no less afraid of controversy, 'a delightful combination of Puck, Peter Pan, Fluellen'. Never averse to a wager, he was a keen follower of horse-racing, and was himself noted for his horsemanship. Thomas's leadership of the medical profession in two different eras of the colony's history was recognized by his colleagues in 1869 when he was presented with a signed testimonial, illuminated on vellum, by the Medical Society of Victoria.

On 1 June 1871 he died of a 'stroke', after several premonitory episodes, at 58, and it is perhaps characteristic that he should die not only poor but intestate. He was survived by a wife and four daughters. Two sisters and his youngest brother Charles migrated to Port Phillip in 1840; Charles Thomas's recollections of his childhood and family and of his pastoral ventures include some references to his brother. D. J. Thomas is sometimes confused with J. Davies Thomas, who practised chiefly in Adelaide and who also wrote on anaesthesia.

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Main source: Bryan Gandeia, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.2, 1967.

Additional references: Haridas RP. David John Thomas and the first operation under etherisation in Melbourne. *Anaesthesia and Intensive Care*. 2020; 48(3S): 14–20. DOI: 10.1177/0310057X20969699

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