

Allan Thomson 1881–1928

New Zealand's first Rhodes scholar



Thomson and a fellow student taking tea at Oxford. Oxford, he wrote 'gives a man more polish in manners, and a greater amount of *savoir faire* than most men are likely to attain in the colonies'. (Mr AP Thomson collection)

New Zealand's first Rhodes scholar was James Allan Thomson, a young geologist from Dunedin. He was born on 27 July 1881 in Otago Boys' High School Rectory where his father George Malcolm (GM) was a science teacher. Allan shared his father's passion for science and went on to study geology at Otago University. He graduated in 1904, the same year as Sir Peter Buck. Encouraged by his father, Thomson applied for the newly established Rhodes scholarship. To the delight of Dunedin, he won.

It was Oxford's social life that particularly impressed Thomson. He wrote for the Otago Daily Times:

'It is in her social life that Oxford is unique, and all anticipations were exceeded. Comfortably settled in an airy and well-furnished room, the night was marked by a succession of visits from captains and secretaries of various clubs. Next morning the breakfast table was littered with invitations. "Will you come to breakfast with Smith and myself at 8.45 am? – Jones."

'I am very hopeful about Mr Rhodes' ideals. I do not believe the result will be seen quickly or at all in many individual cases, but in a century I am confident that Oxford will have inspired into colonial life through the Rhodes scholars some of the breadth of view and patriotism for the Empire that Mr Rhodes desired.' Allan Thomson, Otago Daily Times, 8 June 1905

Thomson was not as inspired, however, by the university's small geology department. Geology had been established as a subject at Oxford not much longer than at Otago.

In 1909 he returned to New Zealand. He was appointed as the geologist to Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the Antarctic, but developed tuberculosis and had to withdraw.

Although the disease blighted the remainder of his life and career, he was appointed director of the Dominion Museum in 1914, and was influential in reforming the institutions of science in New Zealand.

Thomson became a world authority on brachiopods, a marine organism commonly found as fossils. His treatise *Brachiopod morphology and genera: recent and tertiary* was published in 1927 the culmination of years of patient study punctuated by periods spent in the sanatorium.

In his short life Thomson made a remarkable contribution to science in New Zealand. His work, and that of his father, was recognised with the establishment in 1985 of the Royal Society of New Zealand's Thomson Medal.

FURTHER READING

Ross Galbreath, *Scholars & gentlemen both: GM & Allan Thomson in New Zealand science & education*, Wellington: Royal Society of New Zealand, 2002.



Allan Thomson as Director of the Dominion Museum, Wellington. Despite his illness he was an energetic and effective administrator. 'What a fight the poor chap has for his life', his father GM wrote in 1925, 'and how bravely he meets it'. (Photographer: James McDonald, Te Papa Tongarewa, B.000837)