

EDWARD DEAS THOMSON

AND

NEW SOUTH WALES

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EDT	Edward Deas Thomson
JDT	John Deas Thomson, Edward's father
ADB	<i>Australian Dictionary of Biography</i>
BM	British Museum (British Library)
BP	Bourke Papers in the Mitchell Library
CO	Colonial Office <i>or</i> Colonial Office Papers in the Public Record Office (followed by series number and volume number)
Col.Sec.	Colonial Secretary of New South Wales
CSIL	Colonial Secretary's In-Letters, Main Series, in the New South Wales Archives
CSIL MM	Colonial Secretary's In-Letters, Minutes and Memoranda, in the New South Wales Archives
CSIL SB	Colonial Secretary's In-Letters, Special Bundles, in the New South Wales Archives
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
DTP	Deas-Thomson Papers in the Mitchell Library
DTP:SCP	Deas-Thomson Papers, South Carolina Papers, in the Mitchell Library
DTP London	Deas Thomson papers in the possession of Mr John Grigg, London
HRA	<i>Historical Records of Australia</i> (followed by series number and volume number)
HS	<i>Historical Studies</i>
JRAHS	<i>Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society</i>
LC	Legislative Council of New South Wales
ML	Mitchell Library
NSWA	New South Wales Archives

PP	Parliamentary Papers, Great Britain
PRO	Public Record Office
SH	<i>Sydney Herald</i> (to July 1842)
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> (from August 1842)
VPLA	<i>Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly,</i> New South Wales
VPLC	<i>Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council,</i> New South Wales (to 1831 known as <i>Minutes of</i> <i>Proceedings</i>)

INTRODUCTION

Between the 1820s and the 1850s New South Wales experienced a remarkable social and economic transformation. When the first census was taken in 1828 convicts comprised some forty-three per cent of the population. The colony still served the needs of the British government as a dumping ground for criminals and its economy was geared, to a large extent, to the needs of the convicts and their masters. By 1851, native-born persons and free immigrants were the largest sections of the population. Transportation had ceased and convict numbers had fallen to less than two per cent. The ships which landed the immigrants at Sydney Cove reloaded with wool, which would shortly be rivalled by gold as the colony's leading source of wealth.

These changes were accompanied by a gradual evolution of the colony's mode of government. In 1824 a nominated legislative council met for the first time, ending the almost completely autocratic powers which governors had enjoyed since the foundations of settlement. A representative element was added to this council in 1843 and in 1856 the executive branch of government became responsible to the lower house of a bicameral legislature. In a little over thirty years New South Wales had been transformed from a penal autocracy to a free colony with the same measure of self-government as that enjoyed by British North American colonies.

One man who experienced and contributed to these changes was Edward Deas Thomson. Born in Edinburgh in 1800, he came to Sydney in 1828 as Clerk of the Executive and Legislative Councils. In 1837 he was appointed Colonial Secretary, an office second in importance only to that of governor in the administration of the colony. He retained this position for almost twenty years, until in 1856 he was released from office on the introduction of responsible government. Following his retirement he continued to play an active role in the political and social life of the colony. Except for a visit to Europe between 1854 and 1856 he remained in Australia from his first arrival until his death in 1879.

While he was Colonial Secretary Thomson was as well known and as widely respected in the community as any governor under whom he served or any politician who achieved more lasting fame. Few of his contemporaries doubted that he would be remembered and lauded by posterity. On the eve of his departure for England in 1854 one of his admirers wrote:

When in the zenith of thy power,
Forget not THOMSON'S name.

Yet Thomson's name has been forgotten, while the careers and achievements of such men as W. C. Wentworth, Robert Lowe and John Dunmore Lang are known to every student of Australian history. Save only for a valuable entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, and occasional references to his influence in specific areas historians have glossed over or entirely ignored his

contribution.

One of the objects of this study is therefore to evaluate Thomson's role in the development of New South Wales as a free colony. Did he exert influence in his own right, or was he merely the agent of successive governors and the Colonial Office? How did he contribute to the day to day administration of the colony? What part did he play in, for example, the operation of the legislative council, the evolution of responsible government, the land disputes of the 1840s and the gold rushes of the early 1850s? Was he 'a man of progress' or rather what Lang called 'a patron of obstruction'? Finally we may ask if the history of New South Wales would have been significantly different if other men had occupied his place in the colonial secretary's office.

A second object, closely related to the first, is to investigate his attitudes and motives. How did his upbringing, his early aspirations and the difficulties he encountered in improving his situation influence his later outlook? What hopes and assumptions did he bring with him from Britain to Australia? How did he adapt to life in the colony? Did his views of politics and society change markedly throughout his lifetime?

Thomson's outlook and career provide a useful means of investigating various nineteenth century values and attitudes, trends in imperial administration and developments in New South Wales politics and society. His dedication to the concept of 'improvement' is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. His efforts to advance

his own situation throw light on contemporary attitudes to patronage. Many aspects of his career illustrate the working of colonial government, both in Downing Street and New South Wales. As he enjoyed a close and sometimes unique association with five governors of the colony, his relationship with them reveals much about their personalities and furnishes an opportunity for assessing their vice-regal performances. He was in frequent contact with many other colonial politicians, who make numerous appearances in the following pages.

As Colonial Secretary Thomson was involved at one time or another in almost every aspect of colonial life. It would therefore be impossible to write a comprehensive account of his career. In this study the selection of areas for examination is influenced by my wish to illustrate the variety of his activities, by the primary sources available and by what has already been written about him. For example, as his role in the early federation movement has attracted close attention, I do not dwell upon this subject at any length. Nor do I emphasise the period after his release from office in 1856, when his influence was greatly diminished. For these years I rely heavily on recent research by C. N. Connolly, who investigated the politics and ideology of colonial conservatives from 1856 to 1872.

The arrangement of this thesis is largely chronological, though in certain chapters I pause to discuss specific themes. It is as much a chronology of colonial developments as it is of Thomson's career, for few of his contemporaries in New South Wales could boast an influence more wide-ranging or interests more diverse.