



## George Thom (1789-1842): Scottish pioneer in South Africa

George Thom was born in the Church of Scotland parish of Old Machar, Aberdeen on the 18th June 1789.<sup>1</sup> A short reference to his conversion is found in one of his letters, dated 28th of March 1809: *'Towards the end of the year 1803 it pleased the Lord to open my eyes to my original depraved state by nature and to lead me by his Holy Spirit to accept salvation through Jesus Christ.'*<sup>2</sup> When he was fifteen years old, he joined the Belmont Congregational Church in Aberdeen. This congregation stood under the care of the Rev. John Philip who later became a quite controversial figure in the South African church and political arena.<sup>3</sup> In 1807 Thom moved to London where he was involved in a business enterprise. Here he regularly attended the services of the Rev. Alexander Waugh, minister of the Secession congregation at Wells Street.<sup>4</sup>

Since his conversion Thom always had a burning desire to serve God through missionary work. The urge became so strong in London that he commented: *'My heart is not engaged in business and how can it be when the poor heathen are sitting in darkness and perishing for a lack of saving knowledge.'*<sup>5</sup> Initially he intended to go to America to be a teacher amongst the Indians. However, he decided against it and was accepted in 1809 as a theological student at the Gosport Academy of Dr David Bogue.<sup>6</sup> Bogue and the Rev. Waugh played an enormous role in the establishment of the London Missionary Society.

In a letter to the directors of this Society, dated 28th of March 1809, Thom clearly spelt out his reasons for wanting to be a missionary:

*'My motives for desiring to be employed as a missionary among the Heathen are these: Love to Christ and the extension of his Kingdom: out of love to the Souls of the poor perishing Heathen that they may hear and believe the great Salvation which is come by Jesus Christ to redeem them from the slavery of Sin and Satan: From a consideration of the **Promises and Prophecies** of the **glory, extent** and durability of the redeemer's Kingdom which is yet to be fulfilled and that by means of faithful, wise and prudent missionaries and the general dispersion of God's sacred Word.'*<sup>7</sup>

Although George Thom had an intense passion for missionary work, he approached the challenge very realistically: *'I would wish to keep **always** in view that the work of a faithful missionary of Christ is a work of danger, sacrifices and trials — that much living upon the promises and fullness that is treasured up in Christ can only enable him to endure unto the end.'*<sup>8</sup> George Thom was a product of the Evangelical Revival in Great Britain.

At Gosport Academy prospective missionaries of the L.M.S. were prepared for their arduous task. The L.M.S. expected this academy to equip its students for missionary work:

*'Our students are to learn how they may be patient and submissive under disappointments, persevering under long discouragements, ready to meet sufferings or even death, if such should be the divine appointment. The education of a missionary is to prepare him for a work in which he must calculate on labour and danger, opposition and reproach.'*<sup>9</sup>

Dr David Bogue, missionary spirit *par excellence* and regarded by some as the father of the L.M.S.,<sup>10</sup> served as the only tutor of this missionary seminary.

Bogue (1750-1825), the son of a Berwickshire laird, was a licentiate of the Church of Scotland. The abuses of lay patronage and the ascendancy of the so-called Moderates in the Church of Scotland

induced him to go to England and throw in his lot with the Independents as minister of a congregation in Gosport.<sup>11</sup> Here in 1789 he began a seminary for training theological students intended for the Independent ministry.<sup>12</sup> It was this institution which eventually became the seminary of the L. M. S.

The curriculum offered by Bogue to future missionaries, including George Thom, comprised a wide range of subjects — Systematic Theology, Old and New Testament, Rhetoric, Pastoral Office and Missionary Work.<sup>13</sup> His doctrinal premises can be characterised as Calvinistic. Bogue had a firm belief in predestination:

*'Election is known by calling. The book of life is not always legible to all believers. The book of death cannot be read by any unbelievers.'*<sup>14</sup>

*'Absolute Election is no way contrary to the wisdom of God, but most consistent thereto — for how can it stand without his wisdom, to determine the death of his sons, and the salvation of man.'*<sup>15</sup>

On atonement Bogue said the following: *'Justice in the purchase of Redemption ... In demanding satisfaction, He could not gratify mercy without honouring Justice ... Justice has been as much satisfied and honoured as if all the transgressors had been miserable for ever.'*<sup>16</sup>

On man's sinful state he commented: *'Original sin consists of two parts. The depravity of nature and the imputation of Adam's first sin.'*<sup>17</sup>

Dr Bogue gave extensive lectures on missionary work and touched numerous practical issues: *'When a Missionary finds it necessary to use the words and phrases of the Heathen, they should be well explained for fear of mistake.'*<sup>18</sup> He emphasised that education and civilisation are key factors in the Christianising of the heathen. Bogue also prepared his students thoroughly for the difficulties awaiting them: foreign languages, prejudice of the heathen, strange customs and traditions, material hardship and many more. He in addition gave invaluable advice on a missionary's attitude towards his colleagues and colonial governments.<sup>19</sup>

*'No one could leave Gosport without a deep impression of the grandeur and responsibility of the ministry, and an awful anticipation of the day when each shepherd of souls must render up his account to the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.'*<sup>20</sup>

That George Thom enjoyed a thorough preparation for his task as a missionary is beyond question.

After two years Thom completed his studies at Gosport and was appointed by the London Missionary Society as missionary to India. Ordained at the Scots Kirk, London Wall, in April 1812, he reached Cape Town on the 24th October the same year.<sup>21</sup> Here he was instructed to stay as acting agent of the L.M.S. in the Cape Colony.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile he obtained permission to attend to the spiritual needs of the 93rd Highland Regiment or Sutherland Fencibles who had been stationed at the Cape. Very soon he became actively involved in a Calvinistic Society which had been existing among these soldiers since 1808.

Thom enthusiastically rendered his assistance in the total reorganisation of the society and it eventually started functioning as a church. Soldiers from the 83rd Regiment, the 21st Dragoons and the Royal Artillery soon joined this movement. At that stage no Presbyterian Church existed at the Cape and this society, with Thom as their chaplain, served in particular the spiritual needs of the soldiers of the Presbyterian conviction. The popular Thom enjoyed the respect of the soldiers and the society flourished. Unfortunately, the transfer of the 93rd Regiment to England in 1814 considerably reduced membership numbers.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless Thom's role in the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa cannot be ignored.

In 1814 George Thom married Christiana Louisa Meyer, a very pious and devoted lady.<sup>24</sup> She dedicated herself to the spreading of the gospel amongst the children of the local slaves. In the process she mastered the Malay language.<sup>25</sup> Her total commitment is evident from her diary:

*'I went this morning to the slave school; the sight of so many children filled me with inexpressible joy. I thought — O, God! what a privilege do these not enjoy above many*

*other children in Africa, and yet most of them remain without feeling during divine service. Adorable Lord Jesus! O mayest thou, by thy Spirit enlighten their darkened understandings, and qualify them for another world. On coming out, after having taught my class, I thus thanked the Lord: Most blessed God! my heart is filled with joy, by reason of having again had an opportunity of doing something for the preservation of these immortal souls.*<sup>26</sup>

The entry on the 7th of December 1814 reads: *'Went to the slave school this morning, and experienced great joy. My heart thanked God for his great goodness displayed toward me: God blesses me daily with more knowledge, and with precious grace. My soul is transported with joy in the Lord, when I meditate on my blessed Saviour — He will prepare a place in heaven for all his children. I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that mine eyes shall behold him. Never will he leave those who trust in him. Shall I not love him who shed his blood for me? Holy and adorable Jehovah, to thee belong glory, honour, and praise for ever.*<sup>27</sup>

On another visit to the school of the slaves she commented: *'When I was conversing with the children this morning about their souls, many of them said they had no souls; I looked on them with pity and love, and told them that they all had souls, and that Jesus died to save them.*<sup>28</sup>

Tragedy struck when she died in 1816 while giving birth to their first-born.<sup>29</sup> She was only 27 years old.<sup>30</sup> The distressed George Thom exclaimed at her funeral, *'There she sat — I shall see her face no more on earth — the wife of my youth — the joy of my heart — the delight of my eyes is gone for ever ... Some may think it strange that I should deliver this funeral discourse. It was her wish — she loved your souls.*<sup>31</sup>

As the local representative of the L.M.S. Thom very soon observed that the local situation with respect to the missionary work had left much to be desired. In a frank and honest way he constantly reported to the directors of the L.M.S. that conditions were unsatisfactory — the immoral behaviour of some missionaries, instability caused by the preaching of conflicting doctrines, the unwise utilisation of funds, the incompetent local organisation of the society, rivalry and jealousy which existed among certain missionaries, inadequate salaries and the lack of provision for the education of the missionaries' children and the care of their widows.<sup>32</sup>

Initially the L.M.S., not realising that the situation was so serious, was rather reluctant to act promptly. That Thom became desperately concerned about the deteriorating situation is clear from his correspondence with the directors in London:

*'Gentleman Directors. I blame you for not settling the affairs of Africa before they have come to this length ... Have you not seen for the last three years that matters were not correct in Africa? Did you not suspect a wrong direction even before I left England? ... Believe me that dreadful will be the consequences if the chaos continues. The Christian public may be deceived by fine letters in the Magazine and the sinful practice of praising Missionaries in sermons and reports may continue but the truth will really come out and generations unborn will consider us hypocrites.*<sup>33</sup>

When no real positive reaction from London was forthcoming, Thom became impatient and organised a 'missionary synod' on the 12th of August 1817 in Cape Town. It took place without the sanction of the authorities in London. At the meeting, which continued till the 22nd, a large number of resolutions were accepted for submission to the directors. The motive behind these resolutions was a genuine desire to improve the organisation of the L.M.S. at the Cape. Six missionaries, including Thom and the later well-known Robert Moffat, further declared that unless certain demands were met, they intended to cut their ties with the L.M.S.<sup>34</sup> The estrangement between Thom and the L.M.S. reached a climax in September 1818 when he resigned as missionary. Shortly after him, two more missionaries severed their links with the L.M.S.

The directors of the L.M.S. realised that action had to be taken to improve the situation. Some missionaries were suspended<sup>35</sup> and in 1819 the Rev. John Campbell and Dr John Philip were sent as a commission of enquiry to the Cape to investigate all relevant grievances.<sup>36</sup> Although not all Thom's actions with regard to his missionary synod can be justified, one still appreciates his genuine pastoral concern and tireless pursuit of the truth. To state that this so-called synod posed

a real threat to the continuation of the labours of the L.M.S. in South Africa<sup>37</sup> is an oversimplification and it places the well-meant motives of Thom in a questionable light.

In 1818 Thom was appointed minister of the Dutch Reformed Church at Caledon. His two colleagues, who had resigned with him, also became pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church. Part of Thom's assignment was the ministry to lepers and the indigenous Khoisan. Thom adapted very quickly in the new environment, learned to speak Dutch well and maintained healthy relations with the local colonists.

At that stage the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape Colony experienced a shortage of ministers. Through the efforts of Thom, who visited Scotland in 1820, a number of Scottish clergymen were recruited. They were Andrew Murray, Alexander Smith, William Ritchie Thomson, Henry Sutherland, Cohn Fraser and George Morgan. Thom also recruited the services of six Scottish schoolmasters. Among them were James Rose Innes and William Robertson. Most of these ministers and teachers influenced the church and education in South Africa quite considerably.

In 1825 Thom became minister of the Tulbagh congregation which was to be his last parish. He served the Dutch Reformed Church in various leadership positions, such as chairman of the Presbytery and assistant *scriba synodi*.<sup>38</sup> He made a most valuable contribution by drafting rules which dealt with certain aspects of the church discipline and administration of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. At its first Synod, held in 1824, he submitted 'Fundamental Regulations' and 'Temporary Propositions and Regulations'. Some of Thom's proposals were that no minister should have a pre-eminence above his colleagues, the Cape Colony be divided into different presbyteries, no minister be allowed to preach in the district of another without his permission, no minister should leave his charge beyond a limited time without providing for the supply of his charge to the satisfaction of his presbytery, the Heidelberg Catechism be preached and expounded at least once every month, a committee of synod be appointed to draw up a general plan for religious education of the heathen population within the bounds of the Dutch Reformed Church and that a memorial be presented to the Church of Scotland to seek formal recognition and close communion.<sup>39</sup> Thom was the only minister at this monumental first Synod who made proposals of such a nature and the Synod eventually accepted most of them in a more elaborate form.<sup>40</sup>

In 1821 the University of Glasgow conferred on him the D.D. degree (*honoris causa*).<sup>41</sup> He proved himself a very able administrator and his extensive correspondence with ecclesiastical, missionary and political authorities witnesses that Thom was a very zealous correspondent. He took a keen interest in education affairs and at Caledon he initiated a school for slaves.<sup>42</sup>

Theologically one could describe Dr Thom's theology as Calvinistic. He stated his creed in a letter to the directors of the L.M.S.:

*'I believe ... that man is depraved originally by sin; that God sent his Son into the world, who died and by his death made full satisfaction to divine justice and thus made a way whereby the guilty may be saved; that sinners of themselves cannot come unto Christ for salvation unless the Spirit draw them; that good works are the evidences of saving faith in the heart; that those who reject the Saviour, and the impenitent will be lost; that believers will be upheld by divine grace.'*<sup>43</sup>

Without God's grace man is doomed. Sin corrupted him in such a manner that he is destitute of every holy principle. His depravity is evident from the general state of this world. Only the Spirit of God can dispel man's moral blindness and spiritual ignorance. Salvation is entirely of God.<sup>44</sup> George Thom stressed the absolute necessity of Christ's incarnation — *'because man had committed an infinite evil. He was unable to renew himself. Indeed he had no desires of returning to God ... it required the atonement to be made in the nature in which sin was committed. And also the atonement was required to be perfect, therefore none but God could have saved man in his own nature.'*<sup>45</sup> Thom also stressed in his sermons the importance of self-examination. This should lead to a sincere mourning over one's sins.<sup>46</sup>

Dr Thom had a wide range of interests. He spent many hours studying geology and botany. The fossilised shells of the Cold Bokkeveld and Cedarberg mountains fascinated him so much that he

undertook various expeditions to verify certain theories in this respect. In addition he collected plant material and sent it to Kew.<sup>47</sup> He even asked permission from the colonial authorities to have a number of species of game shot with the intention of sending them to the museum in Glasgow.<sup>48</sup> Today George Thom is generally heralded as one of the pioneers in the study of the geology of South Africa. His article 'Remarks on the Geology of South Africa' which was published in 1830 is regarded as the first article on this topic ever to appear in South Africa.<sup>49</sup>

Since the last part of 1830 Dr Thom had suffered from a serious mental disorder which had a detrimental effect on his pastoral duties in Tulbagh. This unfortunate state of affairs soon led to his retirement from the ministry.<sup>50</sup> He was a truly remarkable man whose distinguished career ended tragically and, humanly speaking, prematurely. George Thom died in hospital on the 11th of May 1842 at the age of 52 and was buried in Cape Town.<sup>51</sup> One can only agree with the observation of F.W. Sass: '*In any history of the D.R.C. (Dutch Reformed Church) in South Africa, the Rev. George Thom must be accorded a special place.*'

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. Sass: *The Influence of the Church of Scotland on the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1956), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> L.M.S. Candidate Papers 1796-1899, Box 16, No. 20 (S.O.A.S. London).

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Sass: *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> L.M.S. Candidate Papers 1796-1899, Box 16 No. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Vol. II (Cape Town, 1972), p. 742; L.M.S. Candidate Papers 1796-1899, Box 16 No. 20.

<sup>7</sup> L.M.S. Candidate Papers 1796-1899, Box 16 No. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> R. Lovett: *The History of the London Missionary Society*, Vol. I (London, 1899), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bennett: *Memoirs of the Life of Rev. David Bogue*, D.D. (London, 1827), p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> A. L. Drummond: *The Kirk and the Continent* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lovett: *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>13</sup> Bogue's Lectures L14/1-9 (Dr William's Library, London)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/2, p. 451.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/4, p. 419.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/2, p. 247.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/3, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/9, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, L14/9, pp. 79-88, 103-112, 126, 139-159, 161-171, 193-201, 213-223.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bennett: *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>21</sup> F. W. Sass: *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 742.

<sup>23</sup> J. P. Claasen: *Die Kaapse Kerk in Dorgangstyd 1780-1824* (unpublished D.Th. thesis, University of South Africa, 1986), pp. 196-202.

<sup>24</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 742.

<sup>25</sup> J. Werninck: *Onderzoekingen naar den toestand des Christendoms in Zuid-Afrika* (Groningen, 1817), p. 297.

<sup>26</sup> *The Cape Cyclopedia*, Vol. I, pp. 177-178.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 742. Mrs Thom's mother also died shortly after Mrs Thom's birth. Cf. *The Cape Cyclopedia*, Vol. I, 1835, p. 173.

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- <sup>30</sup> *The Cape Cyclopedia*, Vol. I, 1835, p. 196.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.
- <sup>32</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 742.
- <sup>33</sup> L.M.S. Africa Odds: Thom — Burder, 29 April 1817
- <sup>34</sup> P. H. Kapp: Dr John Philip se koms na Suid-Afrika en sy werksaamhede tot 1828 (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1966), pp. 71-73; A. Ross: *John Philip (1775-1851), Missions, Race and Politics in South Africa* (Aberdeen, 1986), pp. 49-51.
- <sup>35</sup> P. H. Kapp: *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.
- <sup>36</sup> D. W. Kruger (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 742.
- <sup>37</sup> A. Ross: *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.
- <sup>38</sup> A. Dreyer: *Boustowwe vir die Geskiedenis van die Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerke in SuidAfrika*, Vol. III (Kaapstad, 1936), pp. 188-192.
- <sup>39</sup> D. C. Botha: Die Kerke op Tulbagh 1743-1835 (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1982), p. 148.
- <sup>40</sup> F. W. Sass: *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- <sup>41</sup> D. C. Botha: *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- <sup>42</sup> L.M.S. Candidate Papers 1796-1899, Box 16 No. 20.
- <sup>43</sup> H. B. Thom — Collection (J. S. Gericke Library, Stellenbosch), G. Thom Sermon Plans, s.p.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> D. W. Kruger: *op. cit.*, p. 743.
- <sup>47</sup> D. C. Botha: *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- <sup>50</sup> D. W. Kruger: *op. cit.*, p. 743.
- <sup>51</sup> F. W. Sass: *op. cit.*, p. 17.