

On *Winter* of James Thomson's *The Seasons*

by

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1. Introduction

The Seasons was published in 1730, and James Thomson published repeated revisions of the work in later years. James Sambrook edited, as one of the 'Oxford English Texts', *The Seasons* based on the 1746 publication. Sambrook's text was proofread by Thomson himself before his death in 1748. To begin with, Thomson wrote only *Winter*. This first edition, published at the beginning of April 1726, consisted of 405 lines in folio format.

Thomson was the first modern poet to make nature his subject. Earlier poets of course had not ignored nature. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton had observed and described its variety. "But earlier poets had made Nature subsidiary to humanity".¹⁾ Thomson observed landscapes closely and enthusiastically, and described nature objectively. "Thomson was describing the natural scene for its own sake".²⁾ The first readers of *Winter* knew clearly that *Winter* written in blank verse was a would-be Miltonic poem. Although at first *Winter* attracted the attention of a gentleman of taste,³⁾ it was very slow to be widely read. However, once *Winter* had come to public notice, it won great admiration and attained an unrivalled popularity in a short time. Every reader of *Winter* found the familiar paintings of nature in Thomson's descriptions deeply moving. Thomson's poem captured the imagination of those who knew the world of nature intimately. Dr. Johnson says that the reader "wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses".⁴⁾

After that, Thomson's acquaintance was in much demand among men of taste, and "several ladies of high rank and distinction became his declared patronesses".⁵⁾ But those who were satisfied with traditional styles of poetry as "satirical or epigrammatic wit, a smart antithesis richly trimmed with rhyme, or the softness of an elegiac complaint"⁶⁾ never applauded Thomson. These conservative men of taste were not among the admirers who wanted to make Thomson's acquaintance.

Why did Thomson make nature his subject, and why did he write *Winter* first among the seasons? The purpose of this paper is to consider these questions.

2. The Second Edition of *Winter*

As a result of the unexpected popularity of *Winter*, a pirated edition appeared soon in Dublin, and a second (London) edition was determined to be published only weeks after the first edition. John Millan, the publisher, wanted to publish the second edition in a hurry, but the publication was delayed for various reasons. It was on 16 July 1726 that the second edition was published in octavo, although the first edition had appeared in a fine folio.

One of the reasons for the delay in publication was that Thomson added 58 lines to the total of 463 lines and revised in several details. In his addition Thomson described an Alpine winter scene, and a robin — redbreast visiting a cottage, a Russian winter, and the cruel and hungry wolves of the Alps and the Apennines. The passage of the grave-digging wolves is widely known, making the reader shudder with terror.

Cruel as Death, and hungry as the Grave !
Burning for Blood ! Bony, and ghaunt, and grim !
Assembling Wolves in raging Troops descend;
And, pouring o'er the Country, bear along,
Keen as the North-Wind sweeps the glossy Snow. (ll. 393-397)

This passage is followed by the description of the wolves attacking cattle and human beings, and digging into a grave. In contrast with this description of horrific wolves, a warm and homely scene was added as well. It is about a robin entering a cottage. This well-known passage was probably a reminiscence from Thomson's boyhood.

... One alone,
The Red-Breast, sacred to the household Gods,
Wisely regardful of th' embroiling Sky,
In joyless Fields, and thorny Thickets, leaves
His shivering Mates, and pays to trusted Man
His annual Visit. Half-afraid, he first
Against the Window beats; then, brisk, alights
On the warm Hearth; then, hopping o'er the Floor,
Eyes all the smiling Family askance,
And pecks, and starts, and wonders where he is:
Till more familiar grown, the Table-Crums
Attract his slender Feet. . . . (ll. 245-256)

Timidly entering the cottage, the robin gradually becomes familiar with the family, and pecks at crumbs on the table. The behaviour of the lovely bird arouses a tender feeling, as it is the bleak and desolate season outdoors.

Besides the above-mentioned addition, there were two more reasons for the delay in publication of the second edition. One was for obtaining Spencer Compton's permission that *Winter* be dedicated to him, and the other was for Thomson's request that Aaron Hill's and David Mallet's satirical verses on Compton be softened.

Because Compton was the Speaker of the House of Commons and exerted considerable influence then, it was undoubtedly wise for Thomson to win his favour. Thomson says in the dedication that the author of the poem is "Unknown Himself, and only

introduced by the Muse, He yet ventures to approach You, with a Cheerfulness: for, whoever attempts to excel in any Generous Art, tho' he comes alone, and unregarded by the World, may hope for your Notice, and Esteem."⁷⁾ It is not known who suggested to Thomson that he should dedicate *Winter* to Compton, who lived in a fine house at Chiswick and had so well laid-out gardens that he won the reputation of being "the best Gardener in England".⁸⁾ Compton might, therefore, "have been expected to take under his patronage a poet who could write so ably upon nature".⁹⁾

It seems that it was the first time that Compton had been asked permission for dedication. Moreover, he did not recognize the dedication "as quickly as Thomson and his friends had hoped,"¹⁰⁾ so they hastily determined to satirize Compton in poems to preface the revised second edition of *Winter*. An extravagantly enthusiastic review in *The London Journal* of 4 June in praise of *Winter* emphasized the question of patronage, referring to Compton's "Want of Encouragement" indirectly.¹¹⁾ On that very morning, however, Compton received Thomson "in what they call a civil Manner,"¹²⁾ and presented him with twenty guineas, which meant the patron's reception of dedication. Thomson wrote to Hill on 7 June asking him to tone down the satirical remarks on patrons in his verses,¹³⁾ although Thomson was not pleased with Compton's treatment either. But Thomson did want to include Hill's praise of himself. Thomson also wrote to Mallet suggesting that some alterations should be made in his satirical verses, but in spite of his promise to do so, Mallet did not revise his lines. Thomson had no choice but to print them as they were.

Although the second edition was ready to be printed by 13 June, the printer was compelled to wait because of the author's negotiations with Hill and Mallet. The publication was a matter of urgency, because it was advertised by Millan on 13 and 17 June. When the second edition of *Winter* was published in July, "Hill's revised poem proved no less severe than Mallet's in its satire upon ungrateful patrons in general, though neither is an attack upon Compton in person".¹⁴⁾

While the copy lay at the printers for a month or more, a press correction was made to remove "a compliment to Sir Spencer Compton from Thomson's new Preface to his poem, so that it harmonizes with Hill's and Mallet's poems, but correspondingly less with Mallet's adulatory prose."¹⁵⁾

3. Preface to the Second Edition

In the additions to the second edition, the preface is very important in terms of its quantity and content. Thomson expressed in this preface his wish and purpose to describe nature of the other seasons in succession. After Millan was aware of the poet's plan, he printed the title page in three ways: 'Second', 'Third' and 'Fourth'

editions so as to be able to supply the latest edition of *Winter* on publication of each of the succeeding seasons. The preface was included when *Winter* was printed as an independent piece, but at the time *The Seasons* was published in one volume in 1730, regrettably the preface was excluded.

Thomson declared his ideas about poetry in the preface, which can be said to be his support for poetry, and is interesting because his views on nature are expressed clearly. In this preface of 151 lines, Thomson's views on nature as well as his ideas about poetry are vividly revealed.

... let Poetry, once more, be restored to her antient Truth, and Purity; let Her be inspired from Heaven, and, in Return, her Incense ascend thither; let Her exchange Her low venal, trifling, Subjects for such as are fair, useful, and magnificent; and, let Her execute these so as, at once, to please, instruct, surprise, and astonish: and then, of Necessity, the most inveterate Ignorance, and Prejudice, shall be struck Dumb; and Poets, yet, become the Delight and Wonder, of Mankind. (ll. 34-41)

Thomson emphasizes that as the subjects of poetry are low, trifling, and venal, it is urgent to exchange those subjects for fair, useful, and magnificent ones, and to let poetry be restored to ancient Greek and Roman subjects of truth and purity. "Nothing can have a better Influence towards the Revival of Poetry than the chusing of great, and serious, Subjects",¹⁶⁾ for such subjects excite imagination, enlighten ideas, and warm emotion, giving "a Weight, and Dignity, to the Poem".¹⁷⁾ The "great, and serious, Subjects" are no other than the "Works of Nature". And Thomson praises Nature as a subject of poetry:

I know no Subject more elevating, more amusing; more ready to awake the poetical enthusiasm, the philosophical Reflection, and the moral Sentiment, than the *Works of Nature*. Where can we meet with such Variety, such Beauty, such Magnificence? All that enlarges, and transports, the Soul? What more inspiring than a calm, wide, Survey of Them? In every Dress *Nature* is greatly charming! whether she puts on the Crimson Robes of the *Morning!* the strong Effulgence of *Noon!* the sober Suit of the *Evening!* or the deep Sables of *Blackness*, and *Tempest!* How gay looks the *Spring!* how glorious the *Summer!* how pleasing the *Autumn!* and how venerable the *Winter!* (ll. 75-84)

This shows that Thomson had a physico-theological attitude. He believes that each season has its own appearance, and that Nature looks different in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. He says that it is the Works of Nature that are "ready to awake the poetical enthusiasm, the philosophical Reflection, and the moral Sentiment"; the Works of Nature are various, beautiful, and magnificent. Of the seasons, winter is

venerable as well as charming to the poet. That is because all living things, not to mention human beings, have no choice but to prostrate themselves before its forces when winter rages in the form of strong wind, snow, and blizzard. It is winter's forces and the living things that must endure this harsh season that Thomson clearly intended to describe. He concludes his preface as follows:

I only wish my Description of the various Appearance of Nature in *Winter*, and, as I purpose, in the other Seasons, may have the good Fortune, to give the Reader some of that true Pleasure, which They, in their agreeable Succession, are, always, sure to inspire into my Heart. (ll. 148-156)

Thus Thomson announced that the other seasons would be described in succession, wishing his description of nature in those seasons to give the reader some of the true pleasure which they would surely inspire in his heart.

4. Description of *Winter*

It is closely related to Thomson's having been brought up in the Scottish Border Country, where winter is severe, that he even thought of winter's venerability when he described winter as harsher than any other season. *Winter* begins as follows:

SEE, WINTER comes, to rule the vary'd Year,
Sullen, and sad, with all his rising Train;
Vapours, and Clouds, and Storms. Be these my Theme,
These, that exalt the Soul to solemn Thought,
And heavenly Musing. Welcome, kindred Glooms !
Congenial Horrors, hail ! . . . (ll. 1-6)

Thomson grew up in solitude free from all care in early childhood, and sang of "Nature with unceasing Joy". He was pleased that he "wandered thro' your rough Domain". He trod "the pure Virgin-Snows",

Heard the Winds roar, and the big Torrent burst;
Or seen the deep fermenting Tempest brew'd,
In the grim Evening-Sky. Thus pass'd the Time,
Till thro' the lucid Chambers of the South
Look'd out the joyous SPRING, look'd out and smil'd. (ll. 12-16)

Thomson begins 'Winter' describing its coming "with all his rising Train" of

vapours, clouds, and storms. Winter arrives lacking in colour. "The colourless or subdued-colour imagery of 'Winter' . . . contrasts with the strong colour imagery of 'Spring' and 'Summer' and is consistent with the dull hues of the landscape in certain bleak Scottish Border areas".¹⁸⁾ Thomson sings of his memories of winter in his childhood. "Thus pass'd the Time,/ Till thro' the lucid Chambers of the South / Look'd out the joyous SPRING, look'd out and smil'd." (ll. 14-16)

The following passage is Thomson's praise of nature. Exclamation marks are frequently used for hail and admiration.

NATURE! great Parent! whose unceasing Hand
Rolls round the Seasons of the changeful Year,
How mighty, how majestic, are thy Works!
With what a pleasing Dread they swell the Soul! (ll. 106-109)

Winter dominates over the world, and dwells alone in the middle of darkness caused by a violent storm. Thomson describes the scene of a tempest.

HUGE Uproar lords it wide. The Clouds commix'd
With Stars swift-gliding sweep along the Sky.
All Nature reels. Till Nature's KING, who oft
Amid tempestuous Darkness dwells alone,
And on the Wings of the careering Wind
Walks dreadfully serene, commands a Calm;
Then straight Air Sea and Earth are hush'd at once. (ll.195-201)

The passage about a shepherd added to the second edition is well known. The shepherd loses his way in a snowstorm, and dies, seized with fear, in anguish and despair. The reader is deeply moved by Thomson's description of man's helplessness and weakness against mighty Winter, Nature's King. The shepherd finds neither river nor forest, which are hidden underneath the formless wild tract.

. . . but wanders on
From hill to Dale, still more and more astray;
Impatient flouncing thro' the drifted Heaps,
Stung with the Thoughts of Home; the Thoughts of Home
Rush on his Nerves, and call their Vigour forth
In many a vain Attempt. How sinks his Soul!
What black Despair, what Horror fills his Heart! (ll. 283-289)

Round the shepherd who imagines his tufted cottage rising through the snow,

night irresistibly closes fast. "And every Tempest, howling o'er his Head", renders the fierce and violent wilderness wilder.

... and down he sinks
Beneath the Shelter of the shapeless Drift,
Thinking o'er all the Bitterness of Death,
Mix'd with the tender Anguish Nature shoots
Thro' the wrung Bosom of the dying Man,
His Wife, his Children, and his Friends unseen.
In vain for him th' officious Wife prepares
The Fire fair-blazing, and the Vestment warm;
In vain his little Children, peeping out
Into the mingling Storm, demand their Sire,
With Tears of artless Innocence. Alas !
Nor Wife, nor Children, more shall he behold,
Nor Friends, nor sacred Home. . . . (ll. 305-317)

Underneath the shelter of the large pile of snow, the dying shepherd sees visions of his loving wife, his little children, and his friends. No other passage describes more clearly the harshness of winter than this. In winter there is ever-present danger that may well cost a man his life. That is precisely why Lafcadio Hearn says "I cannot help thinking that 'Winter' is rather a dreary book,—somewhat painful to read; it makes us shiver too much".¹⁹⁾

Winter, which has conquered the year, ruled as a tyrant, and caused pains and terror over the black world, is replaced by gentle spring before long. Thomson concludes *Winter* as follows:

... yet bear up a While,
And what your bounded View, which only saw
A little Part, deem'd *Evil* is no more:
The Storms of WINTERY TIME will quickly pass,
And one unbounded SPRING encircle All. (ll. 1065-1069)

The reader who has read, so far, the description of a raging winter storm and of the desolate landscape, must cherish a glimmer of hope relieved by the last line telling of the arrival of spring.

5. The Study and the Model of *Winter*

Why did Thomson stick to the season of winter and publish *Winter* first of all? It is because, as mentioned in part 3, Thomson thinks of winter as a great and sublime subject, and that winter is the most venerable of all seasons, revealing the

works of Nature so strongly. This view of Thomson's was not created in a short period of time, but probably formed during his younger years in Scotland. It was soon after his arrival in London that his view of nature came to be expressed in the form of poetry, that is to say, the study, in a sense, of *Winter* was composed.

In February 1725 Thomson arrived in London, and lived in lodgings "probably above a Tradesman's shop"²⁰⁾ near Trafalgar Square. In those days, there was Forest's Coffee-House on the southwest side of Charing Cross. Thomson became a regular customer at this coffee house much frequented by Scotsmen. In mid 1725 Thomson got employment as a tutor to Lord Binning's eldest son, Thomas. David Mallet, a friend of Thomson's, is said to have influenced indirectly Lord Binning to secure Thomson's post. However, Thomson did not get pleasure out of teaching the child to read. He wrote to William Cranstoun on 20 July, "Now I'm pretty much at ease, in the country, ten miles from London, teaching Lord Binning's son to read, a low task you know not so suitable to my temper, but I must learn that necessary Lesson of suiting my mind and temper to my state . . . the business of a Tutor is only precarious, and for the present".²¹⁾

Although teaching a child was not so suitable to his temper, he could afford to write poems without being worried about his living. On 10 July 1725 Thomson sent 'Hymn on Solitude' to Mallet. Thomson had sent a descriptive poem to the friend before, which was left in his hands. This poem led to writing Thomson's first great poem of *Winter*.

In the letter²²⁾ dated c.1 October 1725 to his friend William Cranstoun, Thomson says "Nature delights me in every form, I am just now painting her in her most lugubrious dress; for my own amusement, describing winter as it represents it self. [*sic*] after my first proposal of the subject,

I sing of winter and his gelid reign;
Nor let a riming insect of spring
Deem it a barren theme. [*sic*] to me tis full
Of manly charms; to me, who court the shade
Whom the gay seasons suit not, and who shun
The glare of summer. Welcom [*sic*]! kindred Glooms
Dear awfull [*sic*] wintry horrors, welcome all, &c."

After this introduction, Thomson proceeds with his lines.

Nor can I, o departing Summer! choose
But consecrate one pitying line to you;
Sing your last temper'd days, and sunny calms,

That cheer the spirits, and serene the soul.

The introductory part of seven lines quoted above is not the same as the first passage of *Winter*, but it gives a similar impression because Thomson intends to sing of gloomy winter.

The part of “Welcom! kindred Glooms” is not different from that of *Winter* in the respect of diction, but they are slightly different from each other in punctuation. James Sambrook says “the longer verse passage in the letter anticipates the opening of *Winter* . . . in the confident tone of a poet stepping to take possession of new literary territory”.²³⁾

In the same letter Thomson says “Mr. Rickleton’s poem on winter, which I still have, first put the design into my head. in[sic] it are some masterly strokes that awaken’d me”.²⁴⁾

Robert Riccaltoun (or Riccartoun, Rickleton) was Thomson’s Border friend. Thomson’s father chose Riccaltoun to be his son’s tutor and companion. Thomson was strongly influenced by Riccaltoun, who was himself a poet. The poem mentioned by Thomson is probably ‘A Winter’s Day’, which is a poem of 58 lines written in heroic couplets. This poem “was reprinted in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, X(1740), 256, as “A Winter’s Day. Written by a Scotch Clergyman. Corrected by an eminent Hand.”²⁵⁾ This was identified later as Riccaltoun’s poem. ‘A Winter’s Day’, reprinted in *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot*²⁶⁾ by Mary Jane W. Scott, begins as follows:

Now, gloomy soul! Look out—now comes thy turn;
With thee, behold all ravag’d nature mourn.
Hail the dim empire of thy darling night,
That spreads, slow-shadowing, o’er the vanquish’d light.

As Thomson wrote in his letter, his *Winter* was clearly inspired by Riccaltoun’s ‘A Winter’s Day’, whose “images of dull, fading colour and disorder closely resemble Thomson’s imagery in *Winter* as he describes the first and second storms and flood.”²⁷⁾ Riccaltoun describes a Scottish winter scene in his poem. Thomson gained a clear image of winter from ‘A Winter’s Day’. Riccaltoun’s poem was the direct model of Thomson’s *Winter* describing the desolate and harsh winter of Scotland.

6. Conclusion

The reason why Thomson wrote *Winter* before he wrote about three other seasons, and the question of how he came to write *Winter* have been examined in the

historic perspective of his life and times. Those are summed up as follows:

First, Thomson's childhood experiences in the Scottish Border Country forms the basis of his description of *Winter*. Thomson as a boy was deeply impressed by the greatness of Nature. Second, winter, Thomson thought, is harsh but full of manly charms, and is venerable; the brightly coloured and glorious seasons do not suit him as well.

Thomson's opinion on the subject of poetry is that there is no subject "more elevating, more amusing" than the works of Nature. He asserts that "let Poetry, once more, be restored to her antient Truth, and Purity, let Her be inspired from Heaven". Thomson expressed his severe criticism of contemporary poetry whose subjects were "low, venal" and "trifling".

With such assertion and criticism, Thomson wrote detached descriptive pieces, one of which was an experiment for *Winter*, so to speak, modelled on Riccaltoun's 'A Winter's Day'. Those detached descriptive pieces "were shown to Mallet and eventually combined to make *Winter*".²⁸⁾

Not all the natural descriptions of *Winter* are based on Thomson's own experience or observation. He owes some passages to Scottish folklore, older Scottish poetry, or other sources. For example, the lines of hungry wolves "in raging Troops" descending the mountains are written by blending foreign information with Scottish information and impression.²⁹⁾ And the passage of "thaw" is based on accounts by such explorers as Martin Frobisher and William Barents, although Sambrook says that "the overall tone and intention of the Arctic thaw passage itself owe more to" the Book of "Job (41:1) than to Frobisher".³⁰⁾ Thomson devoted himself to detailed and exact descriptions of Nature's works after the model of Virgil's *Georgics* as well. The publication of *Winter* caused a sensation in a short time, and later *The Seasons* resulted in influencing Romantic poets.

Notes.

All references to *Winter* and its Preface are to James Thomson, *The Seasons*, edited by James Sambrook (Oxford, 1991); abbreviated as *OET*.

- 1) Grant, Douglas, *James Thomson: Poet of 'The Seasons'* (The Cresset Press, 1951), p. 100.
- 2) Unwin, Rayner, *The Rural Muse* (George Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 42.
- 3) Sambrook, James, *James Thomson 1700-1748: A Life* (Oxford, 1991), p. 40.
- 4) Johnson, Samuel, *Lives of the English Poets* (The World's Classics, 1952), vol. II, p. 358.
- 5) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 41.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) *OET*, p. 302.
- 8) Grant, op. cit., p. 49.
- 9) Ibid.

- 10) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 41.
- 11) Ibid., p. 42.
- 12) *James Thomson (1700-1748): Letters and Documents*, edited by Alan Dugald McKillop (University of Kansas Press, 1958), p. 32. Abbreviated as *Letters* hereafter.
- 13) Ibid., p. 33.
- 14) Sambrook, op. cit., pp. 42-43.
- 15) Ibid., p. 43.
- 16) *OET*, p.304.
- 17) Ibid.
- 18) Scott, Mary Jane W., *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot* (University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 116.
- 19) Hearn, Lafcadio, *On Poets* (The Hokuseido Press, 1941), p. 443.
- 20) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 25.
- 21) *Letters*, p. 12.
- 22) Ibid, pp. 16-18.
- 23) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 33.
- 24) *Letters*, p. 17.
- 25) Ibid., p. 18.
- 26) Scott, op. cit., pp. 297-299.
- 27) Ibid., p. 105.
- 28) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 32.
- 29) Scott, op. cit., p. 120.
- 30) Sambrook, op. cit., p. 35.