THOMPSON, William Roland

Born 1823, ? CapeTown. Died 1875, Robben Island.

First surviving child of William Roland Thompson (1797, England – 25.01.1871, Grahamstown) and Margaret Murray, formerly Pakenham, maiden name not found (*c*.1794 – 21.08.1838, Grahamstown). Thompson Snr became a prominent merchant and public figure in Grahamstown. He was a landowner in Natal. (*DSAB* Vol.2, pp.746-7)(*AN&N* p.140)

1823.00.00 Probably b. in Cape Town. (*AN&N* p.140). William Rowland, known as the Younger, b. 1823. (*AN&N* p.141)

1839.00.00 He and his siblings taken to England by their father. According to Mrs Joyce Newton Thompson it was there he received his school and university (Oxford) education. He did the Grand Tour of Europe in the course of which he had made friends with a Russian nobleman, had spent some time on his estates, and had returned to South Africa with a great bearskin as a reminder of his travels (*AN&N* p.148 & p.151)

1843.00.00 Listed in the *Grahamstown Directory* for 1843 as a clerk living in Hill St, Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.151)

1843.07.17 Married Anne Back whose family seat was *Heigham Hall*, Norfolk. She and four siblings had been left orphans at an early age. They were all delicate and were sent to South Africa for their health, where friends looked after them. Their uncle, Sir George Back, was an Arctic explorer who was associated with Franklin in three polar expeditions. (*AN&N* p.151)

1849.07.20 Thompson Snr purchased *Umlaas Farm* (921 acres) in Natal. (*AN&N* p.152)

1850.07.00 Thompson Snr purchased an un-named farm (2644 acres) adjoining *Umlaas Farm* on the northern side and, adjoining it, portion of *Sea View* (1890 [should be1860] acres).These were in one block of 5425 acres. He did not consolidate the three properties but held them under separate title. They came to be known as *Clairmont*. (*AN&N* p.152) They were purchased from the estate of Mrs Robert Newton Dunn. The 2644 acre property was known as *Dunn’s Grant*. They were quitrent farms not freehold. (SO’BS)

1851.00.00 With his father and brother held shares in the Natal Fire Assurance & Trust Co. (*NW* 18.04.51)

1852.00.00 Stated to be a merchant at Fort England. Already had four children all of whom were born in Grahmstown, as was their sister, Chrissy Emma, who was b. in 1854. (*AN&N* p.156)

1854.12.09 With his wife sailed in barque *Lady of the Lake*, 329 tons, for Natal where they went to inspect the *Clairmont Estate*. (*AN&N* p.156). They are not shown on the passenger list. (S O’BS). They were to live there for the next four years. Before leaving for Natal he had a big sale of freehold farms situated in the district of Victoria, *Bivouac Vley*. (*AN&N* pp.156-7)

1855.07.10 Of Natal, coffee planter. As agent for father, he contracted with Robert Acutt as agent for W.H. Savory, for purchase of Lot 44, a sub-division of farm *Wentworth*, for £61.3s.8d. At time of purchase was not aware of any person claiming to hold a lease on the property. Only heard of this later. Shortly afterwards he returned to Grahamstown where he remained a considerable time, only returning to Natal a couple of months ago. This led to delays, also the tenant’s ill-health added to same. It was essential he possessed the land so that he could use it for the purpose it was bought. Asks for remission of fine. (CSO 2245 No. D557 dated 24.12.56)

1856.06.20 With wife, four children and two Hottentot servants arrived on *Eataw* from Cape Town and Algoa. (EI 73)(*NW* 27.06.56)

1856.10.00 Sent a consignment of coffee grown at *Clairmont* on the *Lady of the Lake* to London. (*NW* 24.10.56)

1857.02.00 Stood as a candidate for election to Durban seat in new Legislative Council. Not successful. (*ROD* p.303)

1857.05.11 Of *Clairmont*, given his father’s Power of Attorney. Signed at Dbn. (RSC 1V/12/13 No.121)

1857.08.29 With P/A from father, he and Edward Philipps of *Clairmont*, coffee planter, and George Walley of Dbn, Esq., made agreement to let to Philipps 72 acres now and for some time past in Philipps’ occupation, part of farm *Clairmont*, for 12 years from 24.06.57 for £18 p.a. for first two years and £36 p.a. for remaining years. Also agrees to let Philipps rent 28 acres adjoining the above 72 acres, which has also been in Philipps’ occupation for some time past, from 24.06.57 for two years at £7 p.a. If on 24.06.59 Philipps wishes to purchase latter, he may do so at £500. If on 24.06.59 he wants to purchase the 72 acres he may do so for £360. (RSC 1V/12/13 No.124)

1857.11.00 With brother signed a petition of Umvoti County residents about the road from there to Pmb. (CSO 2247 No. D815)

1858.01.16 Coffee planter of *Clairmont*, with P/A from father, leased to R.G. Mack, sugar planter, *Clairmont*, 100 acres, part of the farm called *Clairmont* and part of the farm called *Sea View* which belong to his father and are together known by name *Clairmont*, plus 8 acres for 20 years. Mack can buy same at £1000 and £80 respectively. (RSC 1V/19/32 No.98) Thompson allowed to make a drain through the property for the drainage of the swamp leading from the Amanzimyana River into the Bay of Natal. Mack to have grazing rights on the adjoining 500 acres. (RSC 1V/19/36 No.65)

1858.08.03 Writing to Lt Gov. as agent for his father, states father owns the farm *Clairmont* between the Bay and the Umlaas River. Which, from its soil and its proximity to the Port, is admirably adapted for the cultivation of tropical produce. Many parts of it have already been let and sold for sugar and coffee land by him as his father’s agent. Because of its suitability it has realized such high rents and prices that it has been divided into holdings from 30 to 100 acres. Very few holdings, already disposed of, exceed the latter extent. Complains about the way the road which is being made follows a line irrespective of the interest of the various landowners. (CSO 2248 No. E76 dated 03.08.58)

1858.08.09 Wrote again on same subject enclosing a map showing parts of the road about which he was questioning. Answer: Lt Gov. cannot comply with his request. (CSO 2248 No. E84)

1858.08.13 *Clairmont* did not suit the Thompson family and by 13 August 1858 they were living at 114 Loop [*sic*] St, Pmb. (*AN&N* p.160) Property numbering in Pmb. only introduced after 1900. (SO’BS)

1858.09.02 One of the committee for the importation of sheep from the Cape. (*NM* 02.09.58)

1858.12.09 Of Smith St, Dbn. (*NM* 09.12.58)

1859.01.00 Described as the Squire of C*lairmont* by the Rev. Rivett who, on the first Sunday of the New Year, took the English service at St Stephen’s, *Clairmont*. (Rivett p.96)

1859.01.24 Made agreement with M.B. Smart of Isipingo, sugar grower, to lease him 50 acres, now and for some time in occupation of Smart, on the farm *Clairmont*, *viz*. Sub 1. (RSC 1V/16/4 No.12)

1859.01.26 Leased to James Price North of *Clairmont*, sugar grower, 50 acres of *Clairmont*, now and for some time in occupation of North, marked **l,** for 10 years from 25.03.58. (RSC 1V/16/4 No.14)

1859.01.26 Agreed to lease 25 acres of *Clairmont*, marked A on diagram, now and for some time in occupation of J. Dove, to Dove for 8 years from 01.08.58. (RSC 1V/16/4 No.13)

1860.07.13 Made agreement whereby M.B. Smart would lease 217 acres now in his occupation, part of *Clairmont* (S on diagram), for 3 years from 14 Dec 1858. (RSC 1V/19/36 No.53)

1861.01.27 With wife and two servants arrived on *Waldensian* from Algoa. (EI 74)

1861.10.03 With family left on *Waldensian* for Cape Town, cabin. (EI 74)

1871.01.25 By the time of his father’s death William Roland Jnr had suffered a complete mental collapse. (Canon F.Fuggle) His education had not fitted him in any way to face life on the frontier, and he never appears to have achieved much. (*AN&N* p.151) William Rowland, the Younger, never made good in business and was more of an anxiety than a support to his father. (*AN&N* p.163)

1875.00.00 Died in an asylum on Robben Island. (Peter Wood from Thompson papers in KCAL 15.03.1999) He was the father of ten children. (*AN&N* p.151)

SOME DETAILS ABOUT *CLAIRMONT*

Before and after purchasing *Clairmont* Thompson Snr made frequent trips to Natal. In 1852 he instructed

G.C. Cato to lay out the site of a village on his estate *Clairmont*, bounded by the Bay of Natal, the

Umhlatuzaan and the Umlaas Rivers (*NW* 27.08.52). A sugar mill to be erected as soon as a sufficient

number of canes had been planted to authorize the expense. A bridge had been erected over the

Umhlatuzaan by which the whole property might easily be approached (*NT* 27.08.52)(*NI* 03.09.52). In

May 1853 R.G.[*sic*] Thompson (brother) arrived at Port Natal on *Sir Robert Peel* from all ports, cabin.

(EI 73). In Sep. 1853 R.J. Thompson and E Philipps of *Clairmont* advertised coffee plants for sale (*DA*

08.09.53). In 1854 Thompson Snr, indicated as owner of *Clairmont* (*NGG* 08.08.54), with R.J. Thompson

as farmer, occupier(*NGG* 15.08.54). In 1856 Mr R. Thompson again favoured the public with an excellent

sample of coffee grown at *Clairmont* (*NSEAT* 17.09.56). 1859-60 Robert Johnstone Thompson of

*Clairmont*, farmer, renter, and William Rowland Thompson of Grahamstown, merchant, owner, on Dbn

Jury list (*NM* 11.08.59). On 12 Jan. 1861 George Wood wrote – “My old neighbour, Thompson, appears

to be breaking. I fancy that he must have had a good deal of trouble lately and, perhaps, losses too…A

few days ago I purchased the Natal property, some 5000 acres in extent for £10,000 – some say not half

the amount it really cost him…” (Bell, May. *They came from a far land*. Quoted in *AN&N* p.162) On 14

June 1861 Robert Johnstone Thompson m. the only d. and heiress of the late Robert Newbiggin of

Locherbie, Dumfriesshire, and was to live there for the rest of his life. They had no children. (*AN&N*

p.162)

CHILDREN

**William Rowland** (24.10.1846-10.06.1896)

1846.10.24 Born in Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.156)

1860-1862 Attended St Andrew’s, Grahamstown, before moving on to Bishop’s, Cape Town. (*AN&N* p.163)

1890 Sold the portion of *Sea View* (1890 [*sic*] acres) which he had inherited. (*AN&N* p.163)

1896.06.10 Died at Tsomo. Had never married. Death notice signed by his youngest brother N.O. Thompson. (*AN&N* p.163)

**Livingstone Pakenham** (08.04.1849-?)

1849.04.08 Born in Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.156)

Educated at Bishop’s. (*AN&N* p.163)

Last heard of on the diamond fields. (*AN&N* p.163)

**Emily Jessie** (01.11.1851-?)

1851.11.01 Born in Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.156)

**Charles Somerset**(20.06.1852-?)

1852.06.20 Born in Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.156)

**Chrissy Emma** (13.07.1854-?)

1854.07.13 Born in Grahamstown. (*AN&N* p.156)

**Alice Clairmont** (01.09.1856-?)

1856.09.01 Born at *Clairmont*. (*AN&N* pp.156-7)

**Frederick Barnes** (05.12.1857-?)

1857.12.00 A son born. Father of *Clairmont*. (*NS* 19.12.57)

1857.12.05 Born at *Clairmont*. (*AN&N* pp.156-7)

**Ruth Kate** (13.08.1858-?)

1858.08.13 Born at 114 [*sic*] Loop St, Pmb. (*AN&N* p.160)

**Newton Ogilvie** (10.08.1863-?)

1863.08.10 Born in Grahamstown. Educated Fort Beaufort. (*SAWW* 1915)

1888.07.25 Married Jessie Blanche Lawton of Cape Town. (*SAWW* 1915)

1915 A Resident Magistrate. Has a medal for “Kafir” War 1880-81. Address: Kentanie, Transkei. (*SAWW* 1915)

1971 Chief Justice of the Republic of S.A. (*DSAB* Vol.2 p.747)

SOURCES

**Articles**

Thompson. Joyce Newton. *William Rowland Thompson*: *frontier merchant* in *Africana Notes & News*.

Vol.17, No.4, Dec.1966. (*AN&N*)

**Books**

*Dictionary of S.A. biography*. Vol. 2. Ed. Kruger, D.W. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1972. (*DSAB*)

*South African who’s who*. 1915. (*SAWW*)

Rivett, A.W.L. *Ten years’ church work in Natal*. London: Jarrold, 1890.

Russell, George. *History of old Durban*. Durban: P. Davis & Sons, 1899. (*ROD*)

**Manuscripts**

*Thompson papers* in Killie Campbell Africana Library, now Campbell Collections, Director, Ms Y. Winters [wintersy@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:wintersy@ukzn.ac.za) (KCAL)

**Newspapers**

DA – *Durban Advocate*

NA – *Natal Advertiser*

NI – *Natal Independent*

NM – *Natal Mercury*

NSEAT – *Natal & South East Africa Times*

NS – *Natal Star*

NT – *Natal Times & Durban Mercantile & Agricultural Gazette*

NW – *Natal Witness*

**Official Documents** (Available Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository: Contact Pieter Nel [nelp@kzndac.gov.za](mailto:nelp@kzndac.gov.za)

CSO – Colonial Secretary’s Office

EI – European Immigration

NGG – Natal Government Gazette

RSC – Registrar Supreme Court

**Personal Communications**

Canon F. Fuggle. Deceased

Peter Wood

Shelagh Spencer (SO’BS)

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**As W.R. Thompson Snr only visited Natal and did not settle here he has not been researched. The details that follow are merely those noted while gathering information on W.R. Thompson Jnr.**

THOMPSON, William Roland Snr

Born 1797 Nottingham, England. Died Grahamstown 25.01.1871.

1797.00.00 Born Nottingham. A pioneer of commerce. (*DSAB* Vol.2, p.746)

1816.12.30 Arrived in Cape Town on the *Cape Packet*. Permit to stay dated 08.05.1817. (*DSAB* Vol.2, p.746)

1818.10.11 Arrived at Table bay on the *Ann* from Bombay and Mauritius. (*Philip* p.421)

1821.00.00 Married Margaret Murray, a widow. (*Philip* p.421)

1838.08.21 Margaret died aged 44. (*AN&N* p.147)

1845.12.00 Probably the W. Thompson who arrived at Port Natal on the *William Henry Shailer* from Cape Town and left on the *G.H.Harrison* for Algoa in the same month. (EI 73). It is also probable that this is when he travelled extensively in Natal, accompanied by Benjamin Blaine, to investigate the possibility of cotton cultivation here. He was much impressed by Natal but returned to the Cape before he decided to buy. (*AN&N* p.151)

1846.01.00 Early in January W.R. Thompson, first Chairman of the Municipal Commissioners of Graham’s Town, reported that the number of Trekker families in Natal was not more than 400. (*AN&N* p.151)

1847.09.00 Benjamin Blaine and family sailed for England only to return in December 1851. (*Brit*. *Sett*. Vol.2, p.101)

1848.06.16 A letter written by Blaine states he had delivered a paper to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and had shown them samples of Natal grown cotton. (*NW* 16.06.1848)

1848.10.00 Probably the W.R.Thompson who arrived at Port Natal on the *Jessie Smith* from Algoa. (EI 73)

1849.07.20 For purchase of land see entry for W.R.T. Jnr.

1850.07.00 For purchase of land see entry for W.R.T. Jnr.

1852.03.00 Sailed on *Sir Robert Peel* for Natal from Table Bay and brought back a specimen of sugar cane which was exhibited at the office of the *Grhamstown Journal*. (*AN&N* p.156)

1852.08.00 Thompson and son arrived on *Sir Robert Peel* from Algoa. (EI 73)

1852.08.00 For instructions to lay out a village on *Clairmont Estate* see entry for W.R.T. Jnr.

1852.09.00 Thompson and son left for Algoa on *Sir Robert Peel*. (EI 73)

1852.10.22 The *Natal Witness* commented, “We regret Mr Thompson’s short stay among us, and that no combined effort was elicited to second his proposal to introduce machinery.” [For sugar-making.]. (*NW* 22.10.52)

1853.05.15 J.F. Churchill [Durban merchant] dined at W.R.T’s and recorded that he, “…has a good deal of land in Natal and is going over there to see about sugar growing.” (Churchill diary, Grahamstown, 15.05.1853)

1862.02.04 In his history of the Victoria Club, Pietermaritzburg, Prof. Hattersley states that it was reported in the *Natal Mercury* on 4 February 1862 that Grahamstown, “…is to have a club, founded on the same basis as the Victoria Club, Pietermaritzburg.” He also says, “The foundation of the Victoria Club undoubtedly stimulated men in other centres to follow its example. The chief promoter of a club for Grahamstown was W.R. Thompson. Possessing land in, and often visiting, Natal, Thompson had been a foundation member of the Victoria Club. (Hatt. *VCP* p.12)

1871.01.25 Died in Grahamstown. (*DSAB* V.2, p.746)

**Verbal communication from Canon Frank Fuggle, deceased.**

W.R.T gave land at *Clairmont* as site for an Anglican church. The first building had previously been a

house in Durban and before that the site office for the clerk of works, or architect, for the building of the

Houses of Parliament, London. It was made of corrugated iron and called St Stephen’s.

W.R.T. was a great friend of George Cato.

Dick King said to have called at Thompson’s store in Grahamstown when he first arrived after his ride

[May 1842] and after resting, one of Thompson’s employees took him to the military, to present his

despatches.

**CHILDREN**

Henry. Born 1828. Died 1829. (*AN&N* p.140)

Willaim Roland.

Robert Johnstone. Born *c*. 1826. (*AN&N* p.148)

Christine Emma. Born *c*. 1827. (*AN&N* p.141)

Jessie Mary Scott. Born 1830. (*AN&N* p.141)

1848.01.18 Christine Emma m. Charles H. Somerset, CMG, eldest son of Col. Somerset, he was 28. (*AN&N* p.153)

1852.12.01 Jessie Mary Scott M. Fred Holland. (AN&N p.156)

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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**MANUSCRIPTS**

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