

## The Streets of York

Do you live in Thomson Street?



DR. J. R. M. THOMSON D.I.

Dr John Rae Menzies Thomson (1856-1934) was born in Richmond, Melbourne in 1856, attended Melbourne Grammar and went on to study medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating with surgical qualifications in 1879.

At the time only about 10% of doctors in Australia were locally trained. Although the Melbourne medical course was longer than British or European training it offered primarily *book learning* and insufficient clinical work and it was common for young doctors to study overseas, particularly in Scotland. The recently married Dr. Thomson, however, travelled to Western Australia where he replaced Dr Hope as Resident Medical Officer in York in 1881.

He immediately threw himself into social and public life. He became a Justice of the Peace and Resident Magistrate of York in 1886, Chairman of the Mechanics Institute, Churchwarden, Master Freemason, a militia officer in the York Volunteer Rifles, secretary of various societies and promoter of good causes. He sang at concerts and amateur theatricals, instructed local school children in elementary anatomy, physiology and first aid, sat on the committee of the York Board of Education and attended to public and personal health problems.

In 1888 family concerns forced the couple to return to Melbourne and in 1889 the entire contents of the house in York was publicly auctioned. The auction listing took up two full columns of the local York paper.

A public farewell was held at the Mechanics Hall where champagne was served, paid for by Dr. Thomson. He was presented with a purse of 21 sovereigns, the equivalent of approximately \$13,000 today. He was assured of "*the high esteem in which he was held by all, and the deep regret felt at his departure from the colony*". It was noted that "*Dr. Thomson was identified with everything which could possibly tend to the social and moral welfare of the people, a man in whom people could rely with the greatest confidence; a skillful professional man in the pursuit of*

*the many and arduous undertakings peculiar to his profession; affable, free, and noble in all his dealings."*

The doctor was triumphantly carried on several gentlemen's shoulders, the crowd *vociferously* cheering. One of his last acts was to visit the local Hospital where he invited all the inmates to "*partake of a little wine*". The patients were tearful and grateful. The following month in Melbourne he was presented with a gold watch and pencil case, subscribed for by the ladies of York.

Dr. John Rae Menzies Thomson went on to have a distinguished career in medicine.

He became Doctor of Medicine in 1900 becoming best known for his advocacy of temperance, anti-smoking and food reform. He regularly lectured on *The Deadly Cigarette, Food Reform, Scientific Temperance and Baths and Bathing*. Several of his lectures were published by the Total Abstinence Society and he was an office bearer in the Total Abstinence branch of the British Medical Association. He was also supportive of the Vegetarian Society of Australia and attended their yearly vegetarian banquets. In 1908 he became the inaugural President of the Food Reform League (patron Mrs. Alfred Deakin)

In 1908 he stood for election as a member of the Essendon Board of Advice, responsible for the upkeep and good running of all local Essendon schools. He became the Secretary of the Board and participated in a day long inspectorial visit to all Essendon schools, attended the Victorian Conference of the BOA and waited on the Minister as part of a delegation which amongst other things desired regular medical inspection of all schoolchildren.

He recommenced formal study and in 1909 was awarded the Diploma of Public Health, in 1913 moving to Canberra as Government medical officer. In 1919 he was temporarily posted to Broken Hill hospital during the influenza epidemic dealing with all the involved issues of isolation and infection after which he returned to Melbourne, continuing to practice in Geelong until 1930.



*Melbourne Medical School University of Melbourne. Archives Accession no: MHM00460*

*Taken in the courtyard of the Old Medical Building, c1880 with the students wearing academic robes and mortar boards, and some are supporting human skeletons and skulls;*

*J R M Thompson is identified as seated in the middle of the front row*