

THOMAS EDMONDSTON

A Neglected Shetland Genius

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There is a metaphysical cord connecting the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Strathclyde with the Shetland island of Unst and the shores of Ecuador. The insubstantial yet brilliant connection is provided by the short life and considerable achievements of Thomas Edmondston.

On 24th January 1846, a party from the 500 ton, 26 gun frigate H.M.S. Herald was embarking after an expedition ashore at Sua Bay near Esmeraldas, in what is now Ecuador. As one of the party leapt into the whale boat his trouser leg became entangled in the uncocked hammer of a loaded buffalo rifle. The hammer was pulled back and then fell forward. The rifle went off and a 1½ oz. (42 gram) lead ball hit the expedition's naturalist, Thomas Edmondston, on the right temple. He fell with a groan and died instantly. He was just 20 years and 4 months old.

At that precise moment and half a world away, in the dark night of a Shetland winter, his mother, Eliza Macbriar, wife of Laurence Edmondston, the respected general practitioner of Unst, woke from a nightmare and said, "My boy is dead." She fell back into a troubled sleep, but long before dawn broke she went downstairs and tearfully prayed for her son. She confided her forebodings to her diary and for almost six months she waited in fear and hope until she received the fateful letter from Captain Kellet which confirmed that her first born would never return home.

Thomas Edmondston was born on 20th September 1825 at Bunes, Baltasound, Unst, the most northerly inhabited island in the Shetland group. The Edmondstons came from Fife to Shetland in the latter years of the 16th century and intermarried with the Hendriksons, an old Shetland family of Scandinavian origin. Eliza Macbriar was the daughter of a Glasgow merchant and married Laurence Edmondston on 8th October 1824.

Both sides of Thomas' family were talented. His mother was the author of "Sketches and Tales of the Shetland Islands" while his father was an ornithologist of distinction, and fluent in French, German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Norse, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic and Faeroese. While still a student, Laurence wrote "Remarks on some Proposed Alterations in the course of Medical Education of the University of Edinburgh."

Laurence Edmondston graduated M.D. at Edinburgh in 1830 and during his student days, his wife Eliza was left to bring up Thomas. She may well have spoiled Thomas but she certainly encouraged him in his scientific studies. When he was but 16 months old he could recognise the letters of the alphabet and, by the age of four, he had taught himself to read by studying the Bible. At the age of 11 he had compiled a list of the plants of Unst and this list appears in Dr. W.D. Hooker's book "Notes on Norway." A year later Thomas had prepared a "Collectanea of the Flora of Shetland" and in his early teens he travelled all over Shetland adding to his collection

In 1840 his mother took Thomas to Edinburgh and introduced him to many of the leading scientists of the day. Thomas was fascinated and a year later he matriculated at Edinburgh University and was elected a Fellow of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh. His sponsors were William Brand from Peterhead and Joseph Dickson from Berwick-on-Tweed. By November 1841, when he was just turned 16, Thomas was assistant secretary of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh although he was not formally admitted until the 9th December.

While in Edinburgh, Thomas lodged at 39 Albany Street, and it is a matter of small but pleasing import that a hundred years later, 39 Albany Street was still housing students, and indeed may still be doing so to this day.

Early in 1841, Thomas Edmondston's paper "On the native dyes of Shetland" was read to the Botanical Society. In it Thomas laments "Many beautiful dyes were said to have been known to our ancestors, but which are now lost to us." The paper is a remarkable work for a 15 year old as he is careful to qualify any statement which he is not absolutely certain is factual.

In February 1842 Thomas was writing to his uncle:— “It has been proposed to me that I should attend Graham (botany) in summer, so as to make out the year, to count in the medical curriculum. I think there is little doubt he will give me a ticket, — indeed, he as good as offered me one, at all events, strongly recommended my staying and competing for his gold medal, which, he says, ‘I should be sure to take.’ It is offered as a prize for the best herbarium composed of the plants within a ten miles circuit of Edinburgh.”

Robert Graham was Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University and Vice-President of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh. What happened during the spring and summer of 1842 we do not know but Thomas did not get the prize. Graham accused him of cheating and the prize went to a student who had not collected half the number of plants. The injustice preyed on Thomas — he was not yet 17 — and in a distraught condition he rushed off to London. When news of this reached Unst his father made a midnight voyage to Lerwick where he caught the steam packet to Aberdeen. From Aberdeen he took ship to Leith and then caught the train to London. Arriving in London early in the morning he found his son reading in bed prior to getting up. Father and son took the train north to Edinburgh but it was two months before the weather moderated sufficiently to allow the packet to sail from Leith to Lerwick. As Mrs. Edmondston wrote: “The isolated solitary circle in Unst suffered dreadful anxiety when no mail, no intelligence reached them. Days drearily grew into weeks of tempest and rain.”

Thomas spent the winter of 1842/3 resting at Unst. He resolved not to return to the scene of his public humiliation at Edinburgh. He continued with scientific work and correspondence and in the summer of 1843 he was giving lectures in botany at Lerwick. His lectures were very popular and in his letters home it is obvious that he was enjoying himself, attending balls and taking an interest in politics.

In the autumn of 1843 Thomas matriculated in the Arts Faculty of Aberdeen University for the second year of study. He was happier at Aberdeen than he had been at Edinburgh. Professor Macgillivray recognised the genius of Edmondston and in a letter to his father

wrote:— “His conduct has all along been most exemplary, and he has gone fairly to work as a student, regularly keeping up with the business of the class, and although infinitely superior to the rest, submitting like them to examination. I often walk with him on the shore, and fishing station, for mollusca, zoophytes, and the like.”

Thomas did not return home during the summer of 1844. Instead he spent the season in Moray, getting his “Flora of Shetland” ready for the press, giving lectures and botanising. He made a great impression on Dr. G. Gordon of Birnie and became a good friend of Dr. Innes of Forres. Twenty years later Dr. Gordon was to write:— “I know not an instance in which the early death of an individual so much blighted the well founded hopes of his advancing the interests of Natural Science generally, for he was well prepared in almost all its departments.”

Before Christmas of 1844 Thomas had applied for the professorship of Natural History at the Andersonian University of Glasgow. The Andersonian was founded by Mr. John Anderson, professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. On his death in 1796 he left all his property to endow a college which would be for the people and not for the financial elite. By the middle of the 19th century there were faculties of medicine, literature, science and philosophy. The medical section was eventually absorbed by Glasgow University while the rest incorporated with other institutions to form the West of Scotland Technical College. In 1912 it was renamed the Royal Technical College and in 1964 it was chartered as Strathclyde University.

Thomas was elected to the chair of Natural History on 15th January 1845 but he never gave any lectures. On the 30th April he received a letter from Professor Edward Forbes of King’s College, London, offering him the position as naturalist on a government expedition to California at a salary of £300 per annum. He accepted with alacrity and early in May left Glasgow. In London he received a silver mounted rifle from Prince Albert while scientists like Forbes, Hooker and Darwin deluged him with advice and requests for specimens. Darwin advised him to take plenty of steel rat traps in order to collect rodents and also requested that a note be taken of places where erratics had been transported by ice.

On Thursday 26th June 1845 on a fine clear brisk day, H.M.S. Herald under the command of Captain Henry Kellett, C.B., accompanied by her tender the sloop Pandora, Lieutenant Commander James Wood, sailed from Plymouth Sound. On board, in addition to 350 men there were 12 midshipmen, marines and scientists. Thomas Edmondston had his own tiny cabin which he had furnished with a chest of drawers, wash-stand, sheets, towels, plate etc. In addition he had a table in the chart room under the poop with shelves for his books and specimens.

Before sailing he sent a daguerrotype to his mother. This still survives in Unst and from it Thomas looks out with his wide brow, straight nose, somewhat hooded eyes and a suspicion of a smile. He looks older than his years.

By January 1846 the Herald was off Lima. Thomas, no Catholic, went to hear Mass at the cathedral of San Carlos. He wrote that it was the finest spectacle that he ever saw. He could speak, read and write Spanish and in a letter to Unst wrote:— “Of all the things in the earth to raise one to the seventh heaven of romance, Spanish poetry is the best.”

Like Darwin before him, Edmondston was fascinated by the Gallapagos. In four days he made what he called “a noble collection, well nigh every thing being new here.” A few days later he was dead.

A shipmate wrote:— “His loss was felt by all, he being universally beloved for his kind disposition and agreeable manners, while his talents rendered him a most useful and important acquisition to the duty the ship was employed upon. The shock that the sad news produced was awful; every one seemed to feel it as a personally afflicting calamity.”

“If his friends and relations weep for one of whom they might be justly proud, science has no less reason to regret the loss of so enthusiastic a student. Had his life been spared he would no doubt have become one of the first botanists of the day. He had already, young as he was, published a Flora of the extreme north of the British Isles, and contributed many able articles to Newman’s ‘Phytologist’ and other scientific periodicals.”

We can only guess what Thomas Edmondston would have produced if he had been allowed time to consider his numerous collections and minute observations. The indications from his published works are that his powerful intellect would have produced a unique synthesis. His *Shetland Flora* of 68 pages is a fine work which has stood the test of time, while his articles in the "Phytologist" are of high scientific standard. At a very early age he discovered *Arenaria norvegica*. His plants from Shetland, Falkland Islands and the Galapagos are at Kew. Some of his letters are also at Kew while others are at Bunness in the care of Lt. Col. L.D. Edmondston. The Dept. of Botany at the University of Aberdeen holds some of the collection made when he was a student there.

"The piece of oak which was placed at the head of his grave will in future be searched for in vain; but his brother naturalists will meet on the shores of the ocean on which their talented colleague died, an evergreen shrub with red panicles. It is the *Edmonstonia pacifica*, a monument erected to his memory by an ardent admirer of his talents."

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