

## Ebenezer John Thomas (1839 – 1923)

From “*Things New and Old*”:

[September 1872] Vol.15 p.216. “E.J.T.”, Melbourne. *Will you kindly accept this mode of acknowledging your most welcome letter? We are unusually pressed just now; but we long to assure you of our deep and hearty interest in all you tell us, both as to yourself, beloved brother, and as to the Lord’s work around you. His holy Name be praised! Give our warmest love in Christ to all the beloved friends in Melbourne and Adelaide. May His richest blessings rest upon you all!*

E J Thomas laboured amongst the Lord’s people for over 45 years. He wrote several books, one of which in recent years was reprinted by Believers’ Bookshelf under the title “*Understanding and Experiencing Prayer*”. His last printed article appeared in the Bible Treasury in 1916. His service extended from before 1872 until his home-call in 1923. He lived in various locations within Melbourne’s inner suburbs, one home *Abercarn*, having been in Stanley Street, Elsternwick.

### **Family**

Of Samuel and Mary Thomas, EJT’s parents, neither the birth-place nor the date of arrival into Australia are known. They came to Australia with five children, born between 1838 and 1846 – Anna, Ebenezer, Mary, Howell and Margaret. Other than Margaret who died in St Arnaud in country Victoria, all lived and remained around Melbourne’s inner suburbs. EJT’s mother Mary died in 1869, and father Samuel in 1893.

In 1908, the author and magazine editor W J Hocking visited Melbourne – arriving on 5 August and departing on 22 September. Much of his time was spent with Mr and Mrs Thomas. Hocking’s diary records<sup>23</sup> that EJT had a son named Sam. WJH also visited EJT’s brother-in-law, Albert Malet Le Souëf who, as Chief Clerk of Melbourne Mint<sup>24</sup>, was in the same profession.

Personal hardship and tragedy marked EJT’s home life. His first wife died shortly before her 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, not long after the birth of their third child – who also later died aged only 9 months. Another son, born to his second wife, died at the age of 8. He endured these bereavements during the 15 year period from 1877 to 1892.

These years also encompassed the decade of division that tragically disrupted the fellowship to which EJT was committed. It was an added sorrow that in the division both families of “in-laws” chose a pathway diverse from his own.

Over this same period the stresses of his secular employment also took their toll. During 1886, then as Private Secretary to the Premier of Victoria, he wrote of the intensity of his work from 9:45am to 11pm<sup>25</sup>. Between April 1888 to April 1889 an uncharacteristic lapse

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<sup>23</sup> Courtesy of Edwin Cross.

<sup>24</sup> There is still a Le Souëf coin collection in the Melbourne Museum. One of the coins minted by A M Le S is now valued at around half a million dollars!

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Christopher Crisp, Editor of an influential Bacchus Marsh newspaper.

appears in his secretarial Letter Books held by the Victorian Archives. A letter written on 11 January 1890 explains the lapse:

*“...Since you were here I was laid aside with a nervous, or cerebral, disorder from overwork and had simply to part company with everything in the shape of pen or paper. On getting better and coming back to the office...”*

### His first wife – Minna (1854 – 1877)

Eveline Minna Le Souëf was born on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1854 in Surrey, England. EJT had visited England and in October 1871 had stayed at “The Parks” in Crediton with her parents, Dudley and Louisa Le Souëf. It was at that time they were engaged. At 17 she travelled to Melbourne, arriving on the ship *The Lord Warden*<sup>26</sup> in June 1872. (Her younger brother Albert at 18 sailed on the same ship<sup>27</sup> five years later, arriving in May 1877.) On 15 July 1872, then 18 and living at Royal Park, Hotham<sup>28</sup>, she was married to E J Thomas (32, of George Street, Fitzroy) at Lygon Street Carlton. Their marriage certificate was witnessed by Samuel Howell Thomas (EJT’s father) and her uncle, Albert Alexander Cochrane Le Souëf. A separate section is devoted to the Le Souëf family.

As a girl and as a teenager, from the family home in England Minna (as she was known) wrote numerous letters<sup>29</sup> to her cousin Marion (May) in Australia. May was less than a year older, and it is evident that their parents encouraged a strong family relationship. As young men their fathers had been inseparable, and the great distance then between them – half the globe – was a real sorrow to both. Her letters display her earnest spiritual sentiments and commitment to the things of God as a young woman.

19 July 1865. Minna tells her cousin of Albert (her younger brother, then aged 5) working hard in the garden.

6 October 1870. Sixteen year old Minna tells of “*a very nice meeting while we were in London. Mr. Darby was there and he preached on the Sunday evenings, and lectured on the Wednesday evenings. The room was always very full and if you wanted to get a nice place you had to be there half an hour before... I wish I knew short-hand...*” She would have liked to have taken notes of the meetings had she been able.

26 October 1871. Minna, then 17, wanted to send a package of some kind to her cousin. Her letters are very hard to read — the horizontal hand-writing being over-written with vertical script, so that the paper is used in both directions. A means to save paper and postal charges! She says, “*...I expect Mr. Thomas will take it out with him ... he sails on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December...*” “*We have had Mr. Thomas staying here for more than a fortnight,*

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<sup>26</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> June 1882 List of Meetings in the Chapter Two Archive indicates that *The Lord Warden* was one of H.M. Ships with brother(s) in fellowship on board.

<sup>27</sup> On that voyage were a number of other passengers associated with the gatherings. William (52) and Martha (56) Powley, and their daughter Margaret Elizabeth (18); Harrison Ord (14) and his younger sisters Lily (10) and Anne (8); and the Raikes family – later of New Zealand.

<sup>28</sup> Now Parkville.

<sup>29</sup> Source: State Library of Victoria, Australian Manuscripts Collection. Backhouse Family Papers, Box 6 — Letters to Marion (May) Le Souëf (1862 to 1888)

*and now for a little news that will I expect astonish you, viz., that I am engaged to him, and am soon to become his wife."*

This is a beautiful letter<sup>30</sup> in which Minna appeals to her cousin, asking her to be sure that she knows the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. She presents a clear and direct gospel testimony to the cousin she had learned at a distance to love, and whom she hoped would be a close friend after she would take the long journey from home to a country, and to circumstances, yet unknown.

16 January 1872. "*I expect the Lord Warden to sail from London about the 5<sup>th</sup> April.*"

Records indicate that she travelled to Australia with her Aunt Caroline who was then 40. Looking forward to her marriage and a new adventure in a distant land, little was she to know that only five more years of life were left to her. At just 22 she was taken to be with the Lord — Whom she had trusted, known, and served faithfully in the few years given to her on this planet. She was survived by her husband and three small children. The youngest did only nine months afterwards.

#### His second wife – Mary (1846 – 1930)

Mary Ghinn married EJT in 1880. She was then 34; he 41. Besides the two surviving children from his first marriage, they had three sons, one of whom died at age 8. The youngest, Samuel Howell Thomas (named after his grandfather), was born in 1884. He is the young man who sailed to England in 1908, as mentioned by W J Hocking.

Little is known of the Ghinn family, except that it appears that they – like the Le Souëfs – threw in their lot with the Raven-Taylor fellowship. Writing to S J B Carter on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1929, James Taylor mentions that a brother Ghinn from Melbourne had sent him SJBC's pamphlet defending the eternal Sonship of Christ<sup>31</sup>.

#### His home

The house in Stanley Street, Elsternwick, his home for several years, bore the name *Abercarn*. This was a Welsh coal mining district and gives perhaps the only hint (other than their names) as to the birthplace of his parents, Samuel Howell Thomas and Mary Jones.

A postcard from a member of the Le Souëf family in 1893 has his address at Regent Street, Elsternwick. It seems he moved in to Regent Street in 1891. In 1900 his address was Atkinson Street, Oakleigh. When he wrote to Alfred Deakin in 1916 he gave his address as, "Eglinton", Malvern Grove, Malvern. At the time of his first marriage he lived at George Street, Fitzroy. A nomadic life indeed!

#### **Career**

EJT received his first appointment with the Colonial Government on 17 May 1852. He was appointed as an accountant in the Department of the Treasurer on 23 September 1853, aged only 13 !

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<sup>30</sup> Note - **action:** Get a copy of this and reproduce it if possible.

<sup>31</sup> I have never seen a copy of this. It was written in relation to the 1908 troubles in Melbourne, when Charles Hayward Webb denied Christ's eternal Sonship.

The Department of the Treasurer had only been established in 1851 to administer the new Colony's finances, collect revenue and monitor expenditure. At the time of EJT's appointment it was known as the Colonial Treasurer's Office.

In the early colonial times, the Treasurer was frequently the head of government, or Premier. This was the case from 1883 to 1892, so during that period the Premier's Office functioned as a sub-department within the Department of the Treasurer. The Premiers in order were James Service, Duncan Gillies and James Munro.

The Government Gazette, in the State Library of Victoria, contains interesting records of EJT's employment history, showing his transition from the Department of the Treasurer to the Premier's Department.

Source	Title	First Appointed	Years Service	Age	Birthday	Salary
1861 p.371	Clerk, Dept. of the Treasurer	23/09/1853				£200
1866 p.315	xxx, Treasurer's Office					
Sept. 1884	Secretary, Premier's Dept. Private Secretary to Premier	17/05/1852	31			£516.13 + £100
Jan. 1887	Secretary, Premier's Dept. Private Secretary to Premier	17/05/1852		47		£700
1891 p.133	Secretary, Premier's Dept.	17/05/1852	38		29/11/1839	£900
1894	Secretary, Premier's Dept.	17/05/1852				

A series of documents, archived in the Public Records Office of Victoria, comprises letter books of the Premier's Secretary, containing copies of outward correspondence. It commences with a book of correspondence from 1876-1881 (predating the Premiers Office – which was not created until 1883). The book was created by EJT from within the Treasurer's Office while providing secretarial support to parliamentary Boards of Enquiry and Royal Commissions. On later becoming Secretary to the Premier, he continued this first book and filled another five. The books are large leather-bound volumes each comprising 500-800 pages of letters duplicated using carbon paper onto fine tissue.

Occasional personal glimpses can be found in all this. Here are two selections:

*17 May 1885*

*Dear Le Souëf,*

*I have mentioned that to Mr. Service – just call when you are ready –  
Let me know when you have made your appointment with Mr Berry in case  
Mr Service should have something special on that particular day to prevent him.*

*Yours Truly*

*E J Thomas*

*13 January 1891*

*Messrs Lillie and Davies, Elsternwick. Gentlemen,*

*I have no objection to the rent of the house which I have taken from you in  
Regent Street commencing from completion of repairs...*

On 9 May 1893, a personal letter appears in which he discontinued his two life policies with Clerical Medical and General Life Assurance Society, London.

Throughout volume 6 there is evidence of the stress EJT was under. The writing is more hurried, many of the carbon copies are uncharacteristically up-side down or on the back-sides of pages, there are increasing demands from other departments, references to late nights, a more officious tone in his letters, and acknowledgements that he has dealt with some matters on his own authority without troubling the Premier.

All this provides an interesting insight into the working life of a brother whose ministry has left a lasting effect upon the hearts of many of the Lord's people.

Due to the significance of Federation in the history of Australia, many important documents from the period have been preserved. Alfred Deakin, one of the champions of the Federation movement, became Australia's second Prime Minister. Like many public figures of the time, he dabbled in mystical religion and spiritism. As a friend and colleague, EJT had sent him various pamphlets addressing these issues<sup>32</sup>. It is possible that some of his publications, listed in the next section, were especially written with men such as Alfred Deakin in mind.

Amongst Deakin's papers exists a touching and instructive congratulatory note from E J Thomas. It exemplifies the scriptural attitude of Christian believers towards "the powers that be."

*Stanley Street Elsternwick  
25 Sep. 1903*

*Dear Mr Deakin,*

*I hope I may be allowed to add mine to the general voice of acclamation, on your attainment of the highest pinnacle of political life.*

*There has been, within my knowledge, no more consistent, zealous, devoted servant of his country than yourself; and well do you deserve the reward, which that country now, with such heartiness, accords you.*

*Best wishes for your health and long enjoyment of your high position. In Canada, I think, the first Federal Government held office for about 14 years!!*

*Yours very truly  
E J Thomas*

## **Publications**

His best known publications are *The Time of the End but the End Not Yet*, an exposition of Matthew 24-25, and *Practical Remarks on Prayer*.

Several other items he wrote dealt with controversial matters. He issued a number of small books refuting rationalistic and mystical religious teachings in a series entitled *Truth for the Time*, printed by W Ransom at 445 Sydney Road, Brunswick. One of these,

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<sup>32</sup> This was later in life, sent from *Eglinton*, Malvern Grove, Malvern, 23 April 1916.

published in 1902 under the pseudonym *Irenaeus*, refutes the theological views of a Supreme Court Judge which had been publicised in *The Argus* (now Melbourne's leading newspaper, *The Age*). It is likely that EJT considered a pseudonym necessary in order to avoid any accusation of political interference.

### **Books and Booklets:**

The Time of the End but the End not yet  
Practical Remarks on Prayer  
Truth for the Time (an exposé of Ravenism) – three editions  
Philadelphia and the Prospect Today  
The Necessity of the Atonement  
Letter to a Millennial Dawnist  
Letter to an Agnostic  
Letter to a Young Believer not Breaking Bread  
Truth for the Time – Death and Beyond  
Letter to an Evolutionist

### **Articles in the Bible Treasury:**

1910 – The Lord's Coming and the Lapse of Centuries  
1910 – The Actualities of the Rapture  
1910 – Probable Nearness of the Lord's Coming  
1910 – Two addresses on Revelation 2 and 3  
1910 – Notes of an Address on John 13  
1910 – Brotherly Love and Love  
1910 – What to Forget and What to Remember  
1912 – Thanksgiving at Meals  
1914 – Philadelphia and the Prospect Today  
1914 – A Letter on the Present War  
1916 – The Use of Wine  
1916 – Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum

### **Controversy and Later life**

His first use in a title of the phrase, “*Truth for the Time*” was subtitled, “*reasons for separation from the largest section of the christians commonly known as brethren*”. It appears that at the time of the Ramsgate division in England, EJT had aligned with William Kelly, and thus with a dwindling minority in Melbourne.<sup>33</sup> In increasing isolation, he and others had – not at the time convinced of the leavening effects of false doctrine – sought fellowship with the Raven brethren in Melbourne. Their wariness of his opposition to Raven's line of teaching kept him outside, and having considered the true

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<sup>33</sup> W J Ouweeneel describes the later 1890 division thus, “There had never yet been a separation, whose consequences were so deep and extensive among the ‘brethren’. In the British islands the overwhelming majority followed Greenwich and Raven, and the same point of view was taken by almost all meetings in Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies and South Africa.” (A free translation from his book on the history of the brethren, published in Dutch.)

nature and result of association with false doctrine, he wrote and issued this book. The following is an excerpt from the first chapter:

*Oakleigh, Melbourne, September, 1900.*

*I feel that it is due to the dear Brethren at Foresters' Hall, as well as to many others in the various meetings, who have shewn me much love and sympathy, to state that I am no longer an applicant for fellowship with them, and to give some explanation of the cause.*

*I will say at once, without qualification or compromise, that the Lord has opened my eyes to see that that Association of Christians is not really a Gathering with the authority of the Lord's name; though claiming to be so. I believe it to have lost its status as such: and this, notwithstanding the large number of adherents that it counts, both in this city and in the world; notwithstanding the precious earnestness and piety of many within it, its abundance of gift, and its undeniable influence as a powerful Association: there may be all these things, and yet not the divine sanction upon the fellowship, nor the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its proceedings.*

*The present is a day of individual responsibility. We must each walk before the Lord. It will be no answer for disobeying His word, to say that ten thousand are in fellowship with us: though certainly it requires faith to rise above the ensnaring influence of numbers: but the Scripture says: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil."*

As would have been expected, his book drew many criticisms and responses. These were answered in another booklet, "*Truth for the Time, No.2*". Then in December 1901, on account of unexpected interest in the publication, he combined the first two editions into a third, deleting any personal and local matters, with the subtitle, "*A Refutation of False Doctrines amongst a section of the Christians commonly known as Brethren.*"

The gatherings with which EJT was identified remained small. Those from which he was separate were influential and there were numerous gifted brothers amongst them. Evangelical work was prominent and effective. Fellowship meetings were frequent, and teaching was solid. Yet they remained linked with gatherings overseas where questionable doctrines were tolerated. The majority evidently – as with EJT himself until 1900 – did not give consideration to the leavening influence of association with false doctrine.

Excessive occupation with what is negative can colour a personality. An attempt at doctrinal purity alone is not sufficient to attract souls and produce commitment to Christ. An expressed aversion to what is false can enhance an unhealthy degree of suspicion and scepticism. EJT was very conscious of the need to be occupied with that which edifies, but there is evidence that his strong focus on warning and contending led to a display of some of these unhelpful characteristics.

Letters from Alick and Alice Hepworth. (Punctuation added.)

February 1913. We arrived at Melbourne which is five miles from port – fine town. Met Mr Thomas and he took us over it. There is a station like Liverpool St

*and a 12 story building in granite just like a large town in England. He took us in some of the big hotels – rather out of our line; took us over the house of parliament. Railway fares are cheap; trams are dear. He kindly paid for everything. He wants us to go on to Sydney; thinks we are much needed there, but we think we shall go up country.*

June 1913. Now a few lines about the meeting. We are going happily on. We had some strong letters from a brother at Brisbane and also Mr Thomas, warning us to keep clear of Mr Train, and threatening to cut us off. But we wanted to know on what grounds they would act. Mr Train repudiates Raven teaching. Those who charged him have linked themselves with the brethren holding such teaching, and one said he did not know what made him make such charges against Mr Train. So there was none to prove what they have said. Mr Thomas was to have come this week but has postponed his visit till the end of the month. I am afraid he has put his foot into trouble — as he has never seen Mr Train, has never wrote to him, only once thanking God for sending him to Sydney when everything was upside down. But since then has altered his tone and has made things hum. I am inclined to think he is ashamed to come down because he has not a single person to rely on for evidence against Mr Train — which is very serious, and a cause of much trouble to the saints here. But we trust things will be cleared up and all will go on with the Lord, and doing that which is right in his sight, and walking in His fear.

May 19??. We heard from Mr Thomas that Mr and Mrs Priestly have left our meetings and are I believe with open brethren. Mr Thomas had a slight stroke a short time ago, but is much better again now. He was here for 3 or 4 weeks in November but did not think he would get this way again.<sup>34</sup>

#### Books given to friends

“*The Time of the End but the End not Yet.*” 1910 edition. Inscribed, “E J Mauger, from the author, 28 May 1919.”

“*Truth for the Time: A Christian’s Answer to Rationalistic Teachings*” by E J Thomas (Irenaeus). August 1917 edition<sup>35</sup>. Inscribed, “Mr H S Dale, from the author, 4-8-19”.

The “*Truth for the Time*” series of booklets addressed controversial subjects that were topics of public interest or high profile debate. Although addressing completely different themes, they were issued in the same format (and by the same printer in Brunswick) as his “*Truth for the Time*” polemic against Ravenism.

\*\*\* insert photograph of 445 Sydney Road \*\*\*

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<sup>34</sup> Copies courtesy of W G Hepworth.

<sup>35</sup> John Collier’s library

## **Extracts from Writings**

### Long Prayers

The prayer meeting needs to be elevated to its true level: it has been rather belittled. It is not a private meeting; nor a meeting for select ones more especially charged with church-responsibility. The prayer meeting is for all: it is, or should be, THE ASSEMBLY'S EXPRESSION OF ITS DEPENDENCE UPON GOD, and its need for His help. And if the great underlying principle of the presence in the midst of the Lord Himself received due weight, many trying matters of practice and detail would fall into their due place.

For instance, there is not a greater cause of ‘deadness’ in the meeting than long prayers. Of course no rule can be made; and some may say: Do we not profess to be guided by the Holy Spirit? Most truly we do: but God has given us a, spirit of sound judgment. (2 Tim.1:7.) And in the Epistle, which pre-eminently gives the Spirit's operation in the assembled saints, we find a practical rule that the prophets were to ‘speak two or three’. (1 Cor.14:29.) A man might say that the Spirit led him; but the Spirit in the Assembly is not a blind uncontrollable power, but coincides with moral order; and however much a man may think he is led by the Spirit, he must, if three have spoken, bow to the practical rule which the Spirit has given by Paul – ‘two or three’. Judging by analogy then, if the saints have met for an hour or so of prayer, it would not be according to moral propriety, for one person to monopolize a large part of the time, selfishly ignoring that there may be others present whose exercises may be just as important as his own, but who by the egotism of one may be shut out from a part in the meeting. Some persons possess by nature a fluent verbosity which seems delightful to themselves, but is nauseous to their neighbours: once well started, their ready phrases range from Genesis to Revelation, commenting garrulously on the entire scheme of redemption and providence, but in these utterances, the element of prayer is only a negligible quantity. Such performances are a weariness to the meeting, and may unconsciously influence saints, say, at the end of a tiring day-towards remaining at home (however wrongly) when otherwise they might go with cheerful hearts to the place where prayer – simple and genuine – is wont to be made.

This matter of LONG PRAYERS is of more importance than might be supposed. The practice of having short prayers lately led, in Foreign parts, to quite an awakening in connection with the Lord's work. One writes:

I let you know how the Lord has visited His people lately. A month ago, I was in — and saw how the Lord rejoiced His people through many short prayers and praises, and through this came new joy and strength in the meeting.

Another with reference to a different place, bears similar testimony, viz.:

I visited — where the Lord greatly comforted me in the midst of the dear brethren, through their short prayers and praises with spiritual joy –

and this I found in nearly all the meetings which I visited: it has caused a general awakening.

Short prayers and praises beget a happy liberty. They increase interest all around, and the prayer meeting becomes a profitable occasion, in which saints feel that they have really enjoyed drawing near to God. As a wet blanket to a commencing fire, so are long dismal droning prayers to the rising fervour of a prayer meeting.

This it may be said is detail. Such detail however may be wholesome and necessary, in order that conscience may be reached: for, do we not know, how readily abstract principle may be assented to, while in practice it is ignored? True, it is, that if the magnitude is at all apprehended of the principle of the Lord's presence in the midst, all detail would sink into its proper place. If a sense of this rested upon our spirits, with what reverence should we move and act. The flesh, with its verbosity and all else, would be withered up, while the most timid would feel sure of acceptance and encouragement for the faintest genuine utterance in prayer.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Practical Remarks on Prayer.* 1910. Chapter 9 – The Prayer Meeting. p.68-70