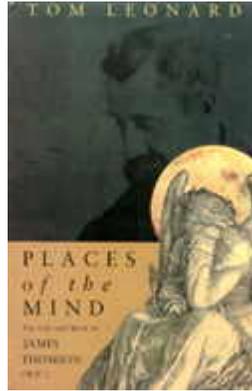


## **James Thomson at the opening of the New Secular Society Hall in Leicester 1881**

(An extract from Tom Leonard: *Places of the Mind: The Life and Work of James Thomson (B.V.)* Jonathan Cape 1993 pp 246-247)



Then came a request from his secularist friends in Leicester. They were due to open a new hall in March, and Michael Wright wrote asking him if he would compose a poem for the occasion. Thomson set to work, and in 2 weeks the poem he sent was "joyfully accepted".<sup>52</sup> It was printed as a leaflet to be sold at the opening of the hall, and on March 5th Thomson travelled by train to Leicester with Theodore and Jane Alice Wright.<sup>53</sup>

We gaze into the living world and mark  
Infinite mysteries for ever dark:  
And if there is a god beyond our thought  
(How could he be within its compass brought?);  
He will not blame the eyes he made so dim  
That they cannot discern a trace of him;  
He must approve the pure sincerity  
Which, seeing not, declares it cannot see;  
He cannot love the blasphemous pretence  
Of puny mannikins with purblind sense  
To see him thoroughly, to know him well,  
His secret purposes, His Heaven and hell,  
His inmost nature, formulating this  
With calmest chemical analysis,  
Or vivisecting it, as if it were  
Some compound gas, or dog with brain laid bare.  
And if we have a life beyond our death,

A life of nobler aims and ampler breath,  
What better preparation for such bliss  
Than honest work to make the best of this?  
Our creed is simple, All men are one man! -  
Our sole commandment, Do what good you can.

They stayed at Michael Wright's home in Regent Street Leicester for 4 nights. On the Sunday the hall was opened with 4 "services" morning afternoon and evening, including an overflow in the society clubrooms because of the crush. Thomson's "Address on the Opening of Leicester Secular Society Hall" was read each time by Jane Alice, with "endless speeches" and a dinner that Thomson described as "Three courses & enough dishes to last me for many years to come."<sup>54</sup> On the Monday they were taken round the Wrights' family factories, with dancing in the evening, toasts in champagne, bed not reached until after midnight. On Tuesday morning they were shown round Josiah Gimson's engineering factory, then Jack Barrs, a 29-year-old tea merchant - he described himself on the census form that year as "Tea dealer and local atheistic lecturer (occasionally)" - took them out to his villa "Forest Edge", set in grounds in the village of Kirby Muxloe, 4 miles away. Jack introduced his 20-year-old sister Harriet, known as "Dick". After tea the whole party returned to Leicester where they went to see the Carl Rosa company in Benedict's opera *The Lily of Killarney*. Next day Thomson returned to London. "Very pleasant visit. All of us plus Adeline & Percy must go in summer," he wrote.<sup>55</sup>