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**ROBERT THOMAS**

**Memoirs, 1863-64**

**Reel M2090**

**National Library of Wales  
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## ROBERT THOMAS

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### MS 22103B

Manuscript autobiography of Robert Thomas of Llanfechain, Montgomeryshire, written in 1863-64. (151pp)

The manuscript covers Thomas's life from his birth in 1836 until 1854, when he was living in Australia. There is also a brief record of his return to Britain in 1862. The bulk of the manuscript deals with his first 18 months in Australia (1852-54) and his experiences on the Victorian goldfields.

The first part of the manuscript (pp 1-51) describes Thomas's early years in Wales and Shropshire and his voyage to Australia in 1852. He was born on a farm near Llanfechain, Montgomeryshire, and grew up near Westbury, Shropshire. He writes of his childhood, schooling, the death of his father, his return to Wales, work on a cattle farm, the sale of his brother's farm and its repercussions, and news of the Australian goldfields. The voyage from Liverpool to Melbourne on the *Sarah Sands* (20 September – 16 December 1852) is recorded in detail. Thomas describes the parting from his family, conditions in his cabin, fellow-passengers, his relations with his brother Thomas, impressions of Cork and the Cape Verde Islands, the crossing the Equator ceremonies, the death and funeral of a passenger, impressions of Cape Town, activities including a visit to a winery at Constantia and a mock duel, the voyage across the Indian Ocean, sightings of albatrosses and Cape pigeons, church services, the sighting of Cape Otway and the arrival at Port Phillip.

Inserted at pages 52-55 is a summary account of Thomas's voyage home from Melbourne to London on the *Lincolnshire* (28 May – 18 August 1862).

The rest of the manuscript (pp 57-151) gives an extremely detailed account of Thomas's early experiences and observations in Victoria. He records his first impressions of Melbourne, Port Phillip Bay and the canvas town of hopeful gold miners, the formation by his brother of a party to proceed to the goldfields, the serious illness (dysentery) which Thomas endured for several weeks, the journey to the Forest Creek diggings, impressions of the Australian bush and descriptions of various kinds of trees, Thomas's separation from the party and his brief employment by a Jewish storekeeper, his search for the party and his continued illness, his brother's meeting with acquaintances from Shropshire, and encounters with former convicts on the goldfields. He describes working with his brother at New Chum Gully, mining equipment, the techniques of discovering alluvial gold, their discovery of their first nugget, his slow recovery from illness, life on the goldfields,

meals, encounters with the police, an incident involving a bolting horse, work herding cattle and the loneliness of the life, and meetings with Australian Aborigines.

Thomas then moved to Castlemaine and worked as a storekeeper and cook. He gives details of his wages and refers to bushrangers, the widespread discontent over miner's licences, the development of Castlemaine and its hotels, stores and churches, employment as a waiter at a restaurant, and his employer's problems with his wife. Thomas re-joined his brother at the diggings and he describes Christmas (1853) on the goldfields, their journey to a new field between Creswick and Ballarat, the landscape, bushfires, the grand house built by Captain John Hepburn, kookaburras, mining at Creswick Creek and Sulky Gully, bushrangers disguised as diggers, Welsh acquaintances on the goldfields, a near-fatal accident in a shaft, his first encounter with emus, and his relations with the rest of the party. The memoir ends with Thomas's journey to Melbourne in May 1854, his visit to the Ballarat goldfields, Bacchus Marsh and the Pentland Hills, and his impressions of the changes in Melbourne since his arrival 18 months earlier.

There is no information about the later life of Robert Thomas. His brother, the Reverend David Thomas (1833-1916) was the Archdeacon of Montgomery (1886-1916) and a noted local historian.