

Reminiscences of Mary Thompson, daughter of the British Vice-Consul in Livorno

by Piero Posarelli, edited by Matteo Giunti (Feb. 2012)

<http://leghornmerchants.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/mary-thompson/>

On the Internet site www.bristowefamilies.com, we can read the passage *Reminiscences of my young days*, written by Mary Thompson, daughter of Frederick Thompson who was British Vice-Consul in Livorno from 1839 to 1852. The first part of the *Reminiscences* speaks about Mary's memories of that period, when Livorno was full of revolutionary ideas that brought to the battle of Porta San Marco in 1849. On the site we can also find information about her father and her family.



Malta in the 19th c. by the Schranz brothers

There is little known about the first years of Frederick Thompson's life. We know that he was born about 1805 in Maldon, Essex, England, and that for some unknown reasons he went to Malta where he opened a school. In Malta he met and married Mary Ann [*Mary Ann Bingham born 1810, NdR*], who was born there from English parents [*William Bingham and Eleanor Temple, NdR*], and had two children: Fred (born in 1833) and Mary (born in 1835). It is from the information that Mary left us in the

form of reminiscences written in her later life in Charlcombe, Somerset, England that it is possible to piece together some of the events surrounding the life of this family.

During the period from 1836 to 1839, the Thompson family were on the Greek island of Corfu in the Ionian Sea, where Helen (1837) and Emily (1838) were born.

In 1839 Frederick was appointed British Vice Consul in Livorno and there he remained, with his family, until 1852. During this time William was born on 24 November 1842, Alfred on 31 July 1844, and Henry on 3 April 1846. The Thompsons' youngest surviving child, Emily Rose, was



A view of Corfu by (after) Joseph Schranz

born outside of Livorno at a 'safe house' in the Baths of Lucca on 19 October 1848. Francis James was born on 15 November 1849 in Leghorn and died on 26 February 1850. He was interred in the same grave as his sister Emily [in the [New English Cemetery of Livorno](#), NdR].



The British and Foreign Bible Society Logo

During the 13 years spent in Livorno, Frederick was involved in important events, like the invasion of Livorno by the Austrian army and the distribution of Bibles for the British and Foreign Bible Society. By 1851 it had become too dangerous to continue this work for the Bible Society, and, with the British Foreign Office not offering Frederick further work in the consular service, he started to look around for somewhere he could make a new start for his family. Following the receipt of a letter from a civil engineer whom Frederick had met during the construction of the

Pisa railway [*the Leopolda, NdR*], a decision was made to emigrate to the new settlement of Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand. In 1852 the Thompsons left Livorno to go to England and then to New Zealand where Frederick and Mary Ann opened a school and where they remained until their death. Frederick died in 1881 and Mary Ann in 1885.

REMINISCENCES OF MY YOUNG DAYS

by Mary Thompson

"My father, Mr. Frederick Thompson, was at one time Head Master of the school called '*l padre di famiglia*' in Malta. It was afterwards the Malta College; now I believe done away with. My Mother was born and brought up in Malta, and there my Father married her in 1832. There my brother Fred and I were born. About the year 1836 we all went to Corfu where Helen and a little sister called Emily were born. Emily died before she was two years old. About 1839 we all went to Leghorn, where my Father soon became British Vice Consul, and we lived there about 13 years.

At that time Italy was in a troubled state. I remember hearing about the carbonari; I fancy they were a brigand group. Papa never went out at night without a very heavy stick, never walked round a corner, but in the middle of the road. He told us that men used to lie at the corners pretending to be unable to rise, and imploring for help, but if you went near them, they would treacherously assault, rob and often murder you.

I do not know when revolutionary ideas began to spread in Leghorn and other parts of Italy, but there were serious troubles there in 1847. In 1848 the Pope and Leopold Grand Duke of Tuscany ran away, the Pope I believe to Gaeta. The Austrians entered Italy in 1848 or 1849. In 1849 they entered Leghorn.



A Bible from the BFBS

Sometime in the '40's my Father had a room in our house was always kept locked up. It was full of Bibles in all the well-known languages of the time and many publications of the Religious Tract Society and my Father distributed Italian Bibles secretly through friends. Having so much to do with sailors of various nations he distributed Bibles and other literature among them. In what we called the Bible room, I was his chief help, though my mother came sometimes when we were extra busy. My Father always said that the Jews were great helpers in distributing Bibles among the Italians. Once 500 Bibles were sent to us secretly in a large wooden case, in sheets, just as they came from the printers in England. We in Leghorn, in that locked room, cut and folded them accordingly to their pages; sorted them and arranged all the different books of each Bible according to their proper order, and in chapters etc. Then, in some way, I cannot remember how, they were sent to be bound. An Italian lawyer Avvocato Chieso often came to help us over them; he was a secret Protestant. Mama sometimes helped us, and occasionally Helen did so, but at that time she was only 11 years old and very delicate, so she was seldom asked to come. I was, I suppose nearly 13. Some time after that Papa gave it all up. He must have had the Bible room two or three years then.

After that in 1848, the revolutionary troubles began, as far as I know of them. I remember there was talk of the people demanding a 'constitution' which was granted. The mob passed in procession, my Father said it was very orderly, but as they passed each house they cried out that every window should be lighted up. We had to find lamps for all the front windows. Papa said they would have been smashed otherwise. There were many processions and every time we had to light up, and often when they went past our windows they used to sing a revolutionary hymn -

*Su fratelli concordi innalziamo
Questo grido di gioia di amore
Ed al grido rispondi ogni chore
Al affeto che par non avra .. etc.*

In 1849 the Austrians entered Tuscany, and were approaching Leghorn. All English gentlemen and ladies with their children were ordered on to the British Mercantile Navy vessels, and had to go out into the roadstead. It was while we were still in harbour that a steamer passed in front of our vessel on which a frati (friar) and another man stabbed each other; there was great outcry and they were both hustled on shore and taken to the fortress close by.



San Marco Gate in Livorno

The Austrians entered Leghorn by the Porta San Marco which was close to the house we lived in. The house was let in flats. We lived on the third floor or flat. Above and below us lived some Italians and some French people. Papa had fastened the Royal British Coat of Arms on what answered to our front door so that no one could enter to do us any harm and when we went onboard the vessel into the roadstead the neighbours who were friendly with us allowed my Papa to take refuge in our flat. The Austrians were very cruel, often shooting down any Italian men they saw in the street. Papa nearly lost his life in that way. Papa had heard that a Villa owned by a very wealthy English gentleman, ([Mr. Lloyd](#)) I think that was his name, and he may have been a Welshman for aught I know, was being looted. He went to the Austrian General and asked for an escort to this Villa, it was granted. As he, and the escort were going along an Austrian Patrol met them, and thought that Papa was a prisoner, and tried to shoot him, but the escort put their arms around him, and some crossed their swords over his head, crying out that he was not to be hurt, they were escorting him. It took some time to persuade the patrol, but at last Papa was allowed to go with the escort. Papa said it was a narrow escape for him.

In front of our house was the Fortezza Vecchia [*read Fortezza Nuova*], separated from us by a canal and a road. As the Austrians came up from Porta San Marco the Italian volunteers on the Fortezza Vecchia could fire straight at them from one corner. They collected all the guns



Livorno, 10-11 May 1849.
The defense of the city from Fort
St. Peter

and canons at that particular corner and fired, but they were comparatively few. The Austrians were far stronger and more numerous and killed most of them. At last there were only three left on the Fortress, they fired all the guns and two were killed or wounded. The one that was left fired as many guns as he could, and then fell down severely wounded. The Austrians soon got on the Fortress and found him. Before he fell he had shaken his fist at them and cursed them, but they were so struck by his bravery that they had him well cared for, and offered him money if he would enter their army, but he refused. I never heard what became of him. I remember the names of the Austrian Generals, Radetski, Windisgratz, also Metternick, also some noted Italians, Cardinal Antonelli, Mazzini and Governatore Recci.

While we were at Leghorn many British Man-o-War came there at different times and Papa being an Official, we were often asked to go on board for lunch or some entertainment. I remember going on board the old Bellerophon, the Tiger, the Dragon, the Bulldog and the Spitfire. One or two of these vessels afterwards took part in the Crimea War. Garibaldi was only beginning to be heard of during this time. It was during the '60's that he became so famous.

I must not forget to tell about the large Bible in my possession. We left Italy for New Zealand at the end of July 1852 and arrived in New Zealand February 1st 1853 or rather I believe we landed that day. Some time after, a large Bible, afterwards mine, was sent to my Father by the British and Foreign Bible Society, in token of their appreciation of services rendered by him to the Society in Leghorn.



Caricature of Mason Gerard Stratford and the Holloway's Pills (Punch 1846)

Now I must speak of Lord Aldborough and his family [[Mason Gerard Stratford](#) 1784-1849, buried in the New English Cemetery of Livorno, *NdR*]. He must have been, to say the least of it, a very peculiar man, who lived in a large house in Leghorn in the Via dei Condotti [*nowadays Via de' Larderel*], on the opposite side to where the Macbeans lived.

Mr [Alexander Macbean](#) was Papa's chief at the Consulate. He was the Consul, and Papa the Vice Consul. Well Lord Aldborough had a very large family, there were three grown-up sons and one quite a lad, and two grown-up daughters, and one about 13 or 14 I fancy and a little one. During their Father's lifetime there were some dreadful quarrels among the young men, and one of them shot at another.

Papa was sent for, to call them to order. It seemed strange at the time to me, why the parents could not manage to quiet their own sons without having a comparative stranger sent for. Anyway I believe Papa succeeded. Some time after Lord Aldborough died [*Oct. 15th, 1849, NdR*], and it was found out that the so-called Lady Aldborough [*Mary Arundell, NdR*] was not entitled to the name. There had been three wives, and the first one, the real Lady Aldborough was alive [*Teresa Davenport, NdR*], and all these young people were illegitimate. Lord Aldborough had had a great objection to having his children educated. One daughter Charlotte was for some time at the same school as Helen and myself, but sent by the mother without Lord Aldborough's consent or knowledge. After his death all the daughters and some of the sons used to join a Sunday class held by Mr. Sleeman, the Clergyman, in the Church. Then the three eldest sons got into great scraps by joining some Italian secret revolutionary society. They were seized and thrown into a fearful dungeon, in a fortress at the entrance to the Leghorn inner mole. Helen may remember that fortress, as she has been in Leghorn since my time, and I still remember it.

Then there was the great correspondence between the British and Italian Governments, the British trying to get these three young men out of Italy. Papa, of course, had a great deal to do with it, and at last he got them out, only to ship them off to Australia. I do not know if they ever saw their mother or their sisters. Evidently, they educated themselves, as, many years afterwards I met one of them as Warden or Chief Magistrate of some of the New Zealand Goldfields. Of course they were all badly off, for all that their Father left went to the first wife and family. The so-called Lady Aldborough came to live in the same house that we did for some time, then went to England. She gave us 6 beautiful French cups and saucers; my cup got broken, but I have kept the pieces. I afterwards had it mended and put together.



The Madias (Florin.ms website)

Now I must tell you about the Inquisition. I cannot quite remember whether it was in Florence or Rome, but I believe the former, and the Madias [*Francesco and Rosa Madias, whose case became internationally known, NdR*] were imprisoned and tortured there because they secret meetings in their house for reading the Bible. One died as a result of the tortures, and the other became a cripple. Bibles were found hidden in their rooms. I remember so well about them. Papa was instrumental in helping Dr. Archilles to escape from the Inquisition. His wife came to our house one day, and spent the whole day with us; in the evening Dr.

Archilles came, having escaped in his guard's clothing, and before morning Papa had got them both off on to an English vessel.

He also helped a Mr. Walker, who for some reason had got into the Inquisition. I never heard that he was tortured. I was 15 or 16 and was the only one of the young members of the family to really know these things. Fred was in England, and the others too young to know or understand. In 1852 we all left Italy for England on our way to New Zealand. There was no way in those days for going to those Islands direct. We were two months in England getting ready for the long voyage in a sailing ship, the 'Minerva'. We left Gravesend on the 30th September 1852 and reached New Zealand at Lyttelton, February 1st 1853 - just 4 months on our voyage. The first fortnight was the worst part of our voyage, as we were the whole fortnight off Dungeness, in a fearful gale. We lost our anchor - the boatswain through himself overboard in a fit of Delirium Tremens. I was so seasick, that they were afraid I should sink under it. We had to put into Portsmouth for a couple of days to get a few repairs done, and a new anchor besides a new boatswain and there was no going on deck for the ladies. When Helen and I were able to go on deck, we were, I suppose very foreign looking. We were called the "two foreign looking girls" Mamma must have looked foreign too, for she had never been in England but for those two months. On board the Minerva every fine evening, every lady and gentlemen, and young people belonging to them, used to congregate on the Poop deck and all who could sing had to do so. It was soon found that Mamma could. She used to sing "*Una Voce poco fa*" from "*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*" and "*Dipiacer mi blaza il cor*" from "*L'elisire di amore*". Everyone liked to hear her sing. Then Mamma, Helen and I every night had to sing together the Revolutionary hymn sung in Italy all through that dreadful time of 1848 and 1849, "*Su fratilli concordi innalziamo Questo grido do joia a di amore*". I wonder if Helen or Emily remember our singing it? Helen of course does - I quite forgot - that hymn was such a favourite on board, we had to sing it every single night, except on Sundays. Mrs. Helen (Henry) Torlesse, I dare say remembers it. She was quite a young girl on board.



Port Lyttelton. Immigrants' luggage disembarking by William Fox, 1851 (University of Otago Library)

In the "Minerva" we reached Lyttelton harbour or Port Cooper as it used to be called, at one time, on 1st February 1853 in the morning. As we went up the harbour, which was surrounded by the hills of Banks Peninsula on every side, but just at the entrance I noticed the hills were covered with a very different kind of grass, called tussocks or great bunches, close together the whole way up and around the hills. Afterwards we learnt would become finer by being burnt off the ground every year, and a beautiful sight it used to be, but very dangerous when it spread further than it had been intended. We learnt that; after being in New Zealand a year or two. In the early spring the grass was often set fire to on the hills after the sheep and cattle had been driven to other pastures. At that time the hills were quite bare of houses or even huts. As far as I can remember there were barracks in Lyttelton not far from the landing place for immigrants. A road led us towards what was a bridle path over the hills to the other side, and to a ferry over the river Heathcote. At the foot of the bridle path on the Lyttelton side of the hills, we saw a little cottage. A woman standing there perceived, I suppose, that we had just landed and asked if we should like a cup of tea. We were very thankful to accept. As far as I can remember she seemed a respectable working woman, but she made us very comfortable. My

Father settled with her then we started walking up the bridle path. Emily was about 4 years old and Henry I suppose nearly 6, but we got over the hill and down the other side very comfortably. At the ferry we were to meet Mr. Bray's man with a horse and dray. I ought to have said before this that my Father had known Mr. Bray [*William Bayley Bray, NdR*] in Italy where he had been the Engineer of the [first Railway in Tuscany that went between Leghorn and Pisa](#). I remember seeing the opening of that railway and very curious and anxious I was to see it, and I believe Helen saw it too. It may have gone as far as Florence, but I have forgotten about that. I think we crossed the Ferry over the river Heathcote on the dray. My Father and eldest brother some distance behind on foot. Christchurch was about three miles or more from the Ferry, and [Mr. Bray's house and farm](#) 7 miles further. It seemed to us a very strange drive and the road was bordered on each side by flat ground, in some places very marshy but mostly covered with long tussock grass. We occasionally passed near the river and on the banks we saw tall flags growing in great bunches. We afterwards learnt that they were New Zealand flax bushes or Phorium Tenax. There was also a kind of rush, very like Pampas grass, but called in New Zealand 'Toitoi'. It was quite late in the evening when we got to Mr. Bray's place. It was called Avonhead as the Avon rose in his ground and later on ran its course through Christchurch. I expect we were all tired, especially Mamma and the little ones.



Photograph of the Reverend Henry Jacobs, ca1880s (National Library of New Zealand)

I think that we had met no one on the road but a clergyman and his wife, whom we found out afterwards to be the [Rev. Henry Jacobs](#) (he afterwards became the first Dean of Christchurch) and Mrs. Jacobs. We little thought then what the Rev. Henry Jacobs would be to all of us. I do not remember much about the first evening except that we were all glad to get to bed. They were mostly beds made up on the floor all in one room. My Father and eldest brother were somewhere else. Alfred was the eldest of the boys with us, he was about 7 years old and had a small bed in a corner. It must have been very enjoyable to sleep in a bed on shore instead of a narrow ship's bunk. Then it was delightful next day to be able to walk about on terra firma. It was such a funny house, I thought when I first saw it, a long narrow house. Three rooms on the ground floor all opening into a long narrow passage which had no windows and was not boarded but had a clay floor.

The rooms were good sized with nice large windows, but everything so primitive. The walls were quite guiltless of paper or paint. They looked like rough mud walls, but were quite thick. After a few days Mamma, Papa and all except me, went to live in a hut called a "V" hut, no walls, only a roof down to the ground. At one end was an open fireplace, a door in the middle and a window on the other side. Beds were made up on the floor next to the walls or the sides of the roof. There was a small loft at one end of the hut formed of boards, I think my Father and two of the boys slept there curtained off from the rest of the hut. There was no coal to be had at that time, so nothing was there in the way of fuel but wood which Papa and the boys had split up. They had to fetch water from the river. It was hard for Papa who had never done anything in that way before, but he seemed to enjoy it and so did my brothers. I think the hardest work was for Mamma to learn to cook in a large open fireplace - to make bread and bake it in a "Camp Oven" which was like a large round iron pot standing on three legs. A lid fitted on to it which had a rim a couple of inches deep to support the hot embers which were piled on to it. Fire was also put under the pot or oven. The whole stood on one side of the fireplace. Mamma learnt to make very good bread and so did I, but I was very much out of health at that time and Mrs. Bray asked Mamma to let me stay with her and help in the house in just a small way only I think out of kindness because I was out of health, and of course the "V" hut would not have been very comfortable for an invalid. As it was I had an illness

there. Papa and my eldest brother used to milk cows after the first week or two. Of course they had to learn to do that and drive them to and from the pasture.



William Bray's "Avonhead" mud wall house

Avonhead was a dreary place at that time. It was situated on almost flat ground. There were very few trees, mostly very young English forest trees. Within a few yards of the house there was a little stream from the source of the Avon. Mr. Bray had a small mill there worked by a water wheel. There were some small farmers in the neighbourhood who used

to bring their wheat to be ground. That was the only water worked mill except for Woods for years I suppose, at least anywhere within miles of Christchurch. The river Avon ran on through Christchurch, through the plains towards New Brighton (opposite Sumner) but before it got to New Brighton it joined the river Heathcote and both together reached the sea at Sumner. I was at Avonhead for a few months then went to stay with the Rev. J. Wilson and family on a farm two miles out of Christchurch a little way back from the road up from the Ferry. There was a large family all girls at the time I remember we all used to help, that is Mrs. Wilson the elder girls and myself when there was any special work going on on the farm. Once we had to prepare potatoes for planting then the farming man made and marked out the ground for us to plant or drop the potatoes. You must remember that every one, no matter what their social condition, had to do all sorts of work in the early days of the Colony. Later on when the potatoes were ripe we had to pick up potatoes for storing in a heap, covered and heaped over with soil. All this work in the early days was so new to us that had always lived in flats, and we never even had a garden.

While I was staying with the Wilsons I learned to milk cows, that is I tried it and did it several times, but was so nervous I had to give up. But I could manage the milk after the cows were milked, set it in pans, skim the cream off and make butter and take it to the shop and sell it, as the other ladies had to do.

My Father built a sod house, near the Wilsons on a farm he rented, but it was a miserable place, very cold and damp. At that time the Rev. H. Jacobs had a Grammar School. My Father was asked to assist him in it. My Mother was also asked by the clergy to open a school for tradespeople's girls, as they wanted a lady to do that, so my Father bought a house in Cashel Street, where Mamma opened a school, and Papa joined Mr. Jacobs in his school. That school years afterwards developed into [Christ's College](#). My Father taught in the school for several years as Mathematical Master. After some time the Rev. J. Cotterill joined it as Classical master. My Mother was very successful with her school, and only gave it up when her health failed.

I must describe the house we lived in at that time. It was in the shape of a "T" the top having once been a stable, then a Carpenter's shop. The other part of the house had been the first building used as a Church until the original St. Michael's Church was built. Part of this was boarded off for a kitchen. It had a fireplace, and I think there must have been some sort of range there, but I've forgotten that. Then the rest of this part of the building was divided into Mamma's Bedroom and Schoolroom, by the two large wardrobes we had brought out from Italy. They were unusually large, so made a good dividing wall. The sitting room was what had been the stable, and it had nice windows - one a french window opening into the garden, which was reckoned one of the best fruit gardens in Christchurch at the time. We had apple trees, peaches, and every kind of small fruit, such as Gooseberries, red and black currants, and Raspberries. We often made more than a hundred pounds weight of jam in a year. Papa took to managing the fruit and vegetable part of the

garden, and he and Mamma between them managed the flower bed. At first we had very few flowers, redribes, escoldcias, marigolds and daisies - by degrees we got some bulbs and other things.

Above the sitting room was a bedroom (a very primitive one which was given to us girls, Helen myself and Emily), it had a nice little window, but the roof was so close to us as we lay in bed, that in the winter time we were very cold, especially as the boards forming the roof had warped and we could see the stars and sky. Outside, the roof was covered with what they called in New Zealand "shingles" that is small slabs (laths) of wood, but they also warped. The house was a mere shell, quite guiltless of paper and paint until we gradually got our sitting room done.



The Malta Protestant College,
c.1849

Willy had been sent to Malta College before we left Italy, so we only had Alfred and Henry to arrange beds for. Fred had gone away somewhere, I forget where, I fancy to learn shepherding or farming. Alfred had a bed in the kitchen and Henry in the loft over the schoolroom, a small ladder led up to our bedroom, as well as to his. Our room was very cold so Papa and I papered strips of paper all over the cracks, but they did not do much good, as the wind and rain cracked them or tore them. Well, at the time we were thankful to have the house such as it was, many had nothing better than huts.

When we went to live in that house, Mamma had her school, where she had to be by 9 o'clock in the morning. Papa went to Mr. Jacob's school, which was called the Grammar School. I was away for the first month or two that they were there. Very soon after I came home Mrs. Charles (Maria) Thomson, who had the only young ladies school at that time, came to see us, and asked if I would go and be her Assistant. I did accept that offer, and was with her for ten years. Helen was married soon after I went to help Mrs. Thomson. Then Mamma and I had to do all the work of the house before school hours. It was dreadful work in the winter time, to get it done and breakfast over in time for school. I often had to run all the way.

Now I must tell you something about the plan on which Christchurch was built. It was one mile square, but all round the town there was land reserved so that it might form part of the town or city when ever required. The streets all ran at right angles to each other, but the Ferry Road ran through the town in an oblique direction to what is now the Victoria Bridge where the Papanui Road begins. None of the streets were formed, only planned. The Ferry Road was formed after a fashion, and crossing the river joined the Papanui Road, the latter was only formed for a short distance.



Plan of the city of Christchurch,
New Zealand, 1875

The river Avon through the town was crossed in those days, as far as I can remember, by a wooden bridge on the site of what is now the Victoria Bridge. About opposite to the beginning of Hereford Street from the river, there was an Island on which stood what was known as Inwood's Mill. I am not sure if that was there when we first went to Christchurch. There was a bridge connecting the mill with the bank of the river nearest the town. A foot bridge was built sometime after what is now, I think, Gloucester Street. That was replaced by a traffic bridge many years afterwards. When first we went to live in Christchurch the river was often flooded by heavy rains and the banks used constantly to break away. Then weeping willow cuttings were planted on the banks, and in a few years grew into lovely trees, dipping their branches into the river. The willows made the river one of the beautiful sights of Christchurch.

All the original streets in Christchurch were named after some Bishoprics of the Church of England - Armagh Street, Tuam Street, Lichfield Street, Gloucester Street, Worcester Street, Colombo Street, and ever so many others, but in time many other streets were formed and received other names, and by degrees better houses were built.



Armagh Street, May 1860 By: Seager, Edward, fl 1924; Barker, Alfred Charles (Dr), 1819-1873

We had a good many fires, and generally after that a good many houses were built of stone or brick. There were gullies or small valleys through the town in those days, forming dreadful bogs in winter. One year Cashel Street, where we lived, had such dreadful bogs in it that the residents in view of the conditions agreed to meet every afternoon if possible and give a couple of hours to levelling it and making it decently level for traffic. My Father worked hard at it.

The houses, such as they were, were all built of timber, except one or two and they were built of sod, but when we first lived in Christchurch there were very few houses. They soon increased. The houses being so often built of timber, made us subject to destruction by fires. We often used to get great storms of wind from the North West and from the South West, the first were generally very hot and parching, and the latter bitterly cold with great storms of rain. Woe betide a house on fire in either of these winds. Sparks used to fly great distances and often set fire to other houses. Water was brought to the scene of the fire by men and boys from the river in all sorts of conditions, with rows of men passing up buckets of water and passing them down again to be refilled.

I must tell you of my great adventure. For two or three years rather late in the 1870's I fancy, I had a school in Greymouth and when going home for the Christmas holidays this happened. I left Greymouth on a Wednesday, a lovely day going by bush tram, such a rough tramway over wooden rails and often laid with rough logs. We had to cross the river Teramakau. We left the tram on the banks of the river. This bank, if I remember right, was 90 feet above the river and we crossed in a kind of box they called a 'cage' slung on wire.



Barker's Panorama of Christchurch 1860, detail

It was rather like a railway with the lines above instead of below. The other bank was quite low, almost level with the river. There we met another tram, which took us to Kumara late in the evening. Next morning we were called a 6 o'clock to have breakfast and then resume our journey, but unfortunately it was pouring. There was nothing for it, we must go on as the coach only travelled that way twice a week. It poured all day long, making part of our journey very dangerous. We had dinner or lunch at Otira. Then we had to go over Arthur's Pass, that is over 5,000 feet high. The mountain is all covered with loose 'shale', I think they called it, so that no road can last long on it, as it would be washed away every time it rained heavily.

Navvies are, or rather were, employed to mark out this road afresh after every heavy rain and the coach driver had to be on the lookout not to take a broken track. The road down from Arthur's Pass is just a zig-zag and we went down at a tremendous pace with five or six horses on the coach. We got to the Bealey River between 6 and 7pm. It was high in flood. Two navvies stood there and said we could not possibly cross. They told us their hut was close by and the only thing we could do, as the coach was not weatherproof, was to go there and wait until the flood went down.

There were five men in the coach including the driver, a married woman and myself. They were all respectable working people. One man was a 'swagman' whom we picked up on the road, but he

seemed quiet and respectable. Well, we all got into the hut and found a splendid fire ready for us. The swagman took refuge in a small open shed on the outside of the hut. I was so thankful there was another woman besides myself, and that a married one. The navvies gave us a good substantial tea - only half of us could share a meal at the same time, as there were not enough cups and saucers, plates etc.. When the first half had finished, the things were washed up, and the others had their meal. By the time their meal was finished and the things washed up and put away, we were quite ready for bed.

There were three bunks in the hut - two by the fireplace and one in the far corner of the hut. We two women took that and when we were in it, there was no room for us to move hand or foot. We only had sacking to lie on and a blanket to cover us. Of course everyone lay down in their clothes. Counting the navvies, there were eight men in the hut. Two were in bunks and the others all lay on the floor besides the bunks so that no-one could move out of the bunks if they had so wished to do so. The navvies did their very best for us in doing what they could for our comfort, and providing good food for us. It was coarse food but wholesome. The big kettle hung on a hook all day over the fire. In the morning a handful of tea was put in there and it stewed all day long, tannin or no tannin. We were there parts of three days.

We had good wood fires, but not being able to undress (there was no privacy whatever) it was very trying. The only relief we had was that we could wash our faces and hands as often as we wished. There was one little tin basin for us all, and one towel, but I unfortunately was wearing a rather large white silk square round my neck. I used that as my towel, dried it at the fire and put it on again, so that no-one had a chance of touching it.

On the third morning we were called at 5am and told to get up at once. Snow had fallen and the flood was going down; we must take our chance of getting on with our journey before another storm came. Remember we were high up in the mountains where snow often falls in heavy storms even in the middle of summer. When we were dressed, which only meant washing our faces and hands and tidying our hair and putting on our outdoor things, there was an hours delay before the horses could be found: they had been turned out loose to find what little food was to be had - there was not much grass there for the poor things as the land was nearly all covered with bush (or forest, as English people would say).

Unfortunately no-one thought of having anything to eat. The other woman and I had had very little sleep, being so crowded in our little bunk, so that by the time we got to the Bealey Hotel between eight and nine o'clock, I was sick and faint with exhaustion. However, a good breakfast set me up.

To my astonishment I found a very old friend at the breakfast table, a youth, Arthur Dobson, whom I had known since he was quite a little boy, and his family were all friends of mine. I forgot to say that each of our party had given the navvies 10 shillings and they seemed pleased with that. There had not been a grumble, nor an unseemly word or action all the time. Everyone made the best of everything. After that we had a very rough journey. We had not gone very far when a dreadful storm of wind came on. The driver had put (Mrs X) and myself on the coach box, saying that would be the safest for us. Arthur Dobson had given me a woollen comforter to tie my hat down with. I do not know what I should have done without it, but I felt very ill before I got to the hotel at Springfield, where we stopped for dinner at three o'clock.

After dinner we had to drive a couple of miles to the railway station (probably Sheffield) to Christchurch. I felt so poorly I did not know how I should get through the railway journey. However,

an old friend turned up who was travelling the same way and he got some brandy for me. I telegraphed from the station to my father to meet me at the Christchurch station. Directly I saw him I asked him to have a cab, and when in it I surprised him by bursting into tears. He could hardly stop me, but by degrees I told him of my adventure. For days I could not bear to talk about it without tears. I seemed to have no strength to visit (Mrs X). She told me a year or two afterwards when I met her, I forgot when, that she had a terrible illness after we parted. She told the doctor how I had cried. He said those tears had saved me from illness, and how better it would have been for her if she had had that relief.

It was Christmas Eve when I reached home. When Papa had heard my account of how well those men behaved, he was so pleased with them, he went out, bought the nicest Christmas cards he could find and illustrated papers and sent them to the navvies in the hut. Then he put a paragraph in the daily papers thanking those men publicly for their kindness and sent them a copy. Those men never forgot to ask after me whenever they saw the coach pass to and from Greymouth.

I used to get messages very often while I remained on the West Coast. They thought that I, being the only lady (though 'Mrs X' was a lady in her conduct, if she were not by education and other ways) and the men all working men, though respectable, that I should have been hard to please, but I, like the rest of them, made the best of everything and that pleased them. I used to think that one of the navvies, whom we all called Jack, was a gentleman in disguise. I believe it was his management that kept everything right those three days. All the same, it was a fearful experience. I shall never forget it. Now a railway has been almost carried through to the West Coast - it may be quite through by this time.

Another time instead of going overland Amy Goulay and I went by sea, via Wellington and Nelson, at both of which places we stopped for a few hours. Then after we left Nelson for Greymouth we came into a terrible storm. To make matters worse, Amy had whooping cough and coughed incessantly. We had to stay in our berths. We were three days knocking about. Something happened to the shaft of our screw. (I do not know if I express that rightly, anyway it made the vessel almost unmanageable). Our skylight was smashed, the water was covering the floor of our cabins and saloons and how we got back to Nelson I do not know. We had been close to three harbours, Westport, Greymouth and Hokitika, but could not get in. Well, we got back to Nelson early one morning and stayed there all day while things were being put right in our steamer - it was the *Maori* - and then started back to Greymouth in lovely weather. There I had an Association school for three years and only left when my father died and I had to go and take care of my mother in Christchurch. I forgot to say that for two days during the trip no meal could be cooked, as the waves constantly put out our galley fire. They managed to boil some water to make tea now and then.

The Revells, who had had the next cabin to ours in the *Minerva* went to settle in Kaiapoi about 12 or 14 miles from Christchurch. They bought a farm which their sons managed. They had cows. Mrs. Revell attended to the dairy work and made beautiful butter. It was most difficult in those days to get anyone to work for you, and if you did succeed in getting anyone, you had to pay very large wages. Servants of all kinds were most independent, so most people tried to manage without and wonderful it was to see ladies and gentlemen who had never done anything to soil their hands, do whatever work came to them to be done. I knew of a baronet who arrived in New Zealand in the next ship to ours. He had heard in England that boots and shoes were scarce in New Zealand, so he had bought a quantity and used to go about with a wheelbarrow full of them trying to sell them.

I often used to go to the Revells and spend my holidays. They were lifelong friends to me indeed to my Father and Mother. Mrs. Revell wrote to me within two or three months of her death at a very advanced age I fancy she must have been not far from 90.

One of Archdeacon Wilson's daughters married a Mr. F. De Cartfret Halet and they were very kind friends to me. For some years I taught two of their children. Young men when they first came out to New Zealand gentlemen with good education and of a good family but small if any means always got on if only they made up their minds to take any employment that came their way. I knew two who did hard work bullock driving, carting bales of wool or timber either for building or for firewood.

One became one of our chief lawyers, the other took a very prominent position in the government of what was then the Canterbury Province. Another one of our best lawyers I met first when he was for some years shepherding on a sheep station for a friend of mine Mr. Higgins who married one of the Miss Revells. All these and many others were men who made their mark in New Zealand. I heard of some who came thinking they could only take work that just suited their ideas and nothing else. They lost many opportunities through waiting for just what they wanted with the result that all their money was spent. Some took to bad ways and some went back to England having done nothing."

+++

→ After this article was written I found a letter from Frederick Thompson at Leghorn to the Secretary of the British and Foreign Sailors Society [[The Sailors' Magazine, 1847](#), p.187-188]:

It is with much gratification that the following letters have been received by the secretary in acknowledgment of grants of books and Bethel flags made by the Directors of this Society during the past year and which have been before referred to in the pages of this Magazine. Many similar and interesting applications are being frequently made to us for assistance but for want of funds the Society is not in a condition to afford that help which otherwise it would most gladly render. The first letter is from her Britannic Majesty's Vice Consul at Leghorn who is evidently a devoted servant of the King of kings and one who is especially anxious to promote His glory amongst seamen The Bethel flag mentioned as being left at Leghorn by an English captain was replaced to him by the Directors granting him a new one on his return home. (...)

Leghorn, May 5 1847

Dear Sir, - Most sincerely do I tender to you and to the Committee of the British and Foreign Sailors Society, my thanks for the very handsome donation of books accompanying your note of the 27th of November last. These it shall be my endeavour, in an humble dependence on the Divine blessing, so to lend or give as that the good seed may be widely scattered - the Lord of the harvest can alone give the increase. Amongst the numbers of the Sailors Magazine sent were complete sets of the years 1844-5; these I have had bound, and they are found to be particularly acceptable to seamen detained in our hospital (at present there are five) by sickness or accident. Should it be convenient to you to send me sets or subsequent years, it will greatly oblige.

I esteem it a privilege to be permitted to labour in any way in the vineyard of the Lord, but particularly so in conjunction with your Society. Captain John Bufham of the brig Wisbech, of Wisbech, lately left with me, at my particular request, a Bethel flag; but I regret to say that other not less urgent duties prevent me from attending to the vessels in the Mole as I would wish. During last summer, the clergymen, both of the Established and of the Free Church, had Sabbath services on

board of different vessels; but these were discontinued for the winter season and, I grieve to say that I see no present prospect of a recommencement.

During several years I have distributed Bibles, tracts, and other religious publications among soldiers, sailors, and others, foreigners as well as British, and did I but know that I had been instrumental in the saving of one soul, how exceedingly great would be my reward! I have, however, much reason to bless the Lord for giving me the hope that my unworthy labours have not been entirely without fruits, and also for making them acceptable to my suffering brethren; these are mercies infinitely greater than I deserve. In no port is the poor seaman more exposed to the soul-and-body-destroying influences, or rather contaminations, of the bumboat, the grog shop, and the brothel, than in Leghorn; therefore so much the greater is the call on all who love the Lord, and especially on the British and Foreign Sailors Society, to exert themselves in His service.

A worthy friend, Captain Thomas Hunkin, of the schooner Grasshopper of Truro, in a most pleasing letter, acknowledging the receipt of some tracts I had sent to him when he was on the eve of sailing, enclosed to me ten Tuscan hire, equal to 6s. 8d. sterling, which, together with the first annual subscription of 10s. 'for the Bethel Cause,' and this letter, will be delivered to you by Captain Thomas Lindsay, of the barque Maxim of Leith. Captain Lindsay is very desirous of obtaining a loan library for the use of the crew of the Maxim, and I have ventured to promise him your kind influence in the furtherance of so laudable an object. Believe me to remain,

*Reverend and dear Sir,
Your very faithful Servant in Christ,
Frederick Thompson.*

References:

- Bristowe Families website, [Thompson family of Malta, Corfu and Tuscany](#), by G. B. Carlson, November 2004.
- Christchurch City Libraries, [Frederick Thompson](#).
- New Zealand National Register of Archives and Manuscripts, [Transcript of "Reminiscences of my Young Days"](#).
- British Foreign Bible Society Archives (Cambridge University Library): [Thompson, F.: 20 letters from Leghorn \(Livorno, Italy\) 1847-1851](#).
- G. Spini, *Il contrabbando britannico delle Bibbie a Livorno nel Risorgimento* in *Atti del Convegno "Gli Inglesi a Livorno e all'Isola d'Elba"*, U. Bastogi Editore, Livorno 1980.

This PDF has been created from the original article posted on the blog Leghorn Merchant Networks at the following address: <http://leghornmerchants.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/mary-thompson/>