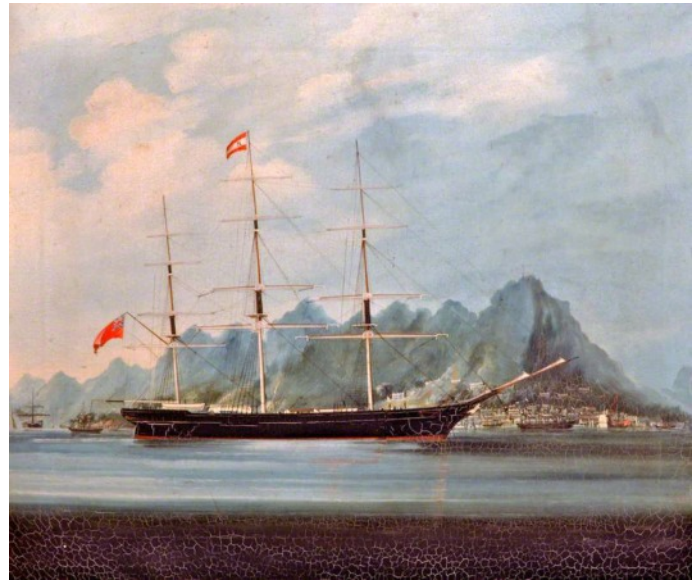


## Lost vessels and saved treasure

Old hands may remember a series of articles published here some 11 years ago, from *Cachalot* 23, March '07 to *Cachalot* 31, March 09, which covered the history of Past Captain Ian Thomson's seafaring forebears, namely Robert Thomson and his son George. Robert was master of the clipper *Skawfell* throughout her career with Rathbones from 1857 to 1871. The painting, right, by Lai Sung, was donated by the Thomson family to the Merseyside Maritime Museum, together with many of the more interesting letters (from a maritime point of view) that the father and son had written home during their careers. Ian had kept the 'domestic' letters and recently unearthed a couple more letters which also paint very interesting pictures themselves and may be of interest to us.



'Skawfell' off Hong Kong

Prior to the *Skawfell* Robert had been master of the *Cathaya*, from 1855 -1857. She is variously described as a barque and a full-rigger and, according to *The Ship's List* she was built in 1850 for Lamport & Holt at 407 tons and rebuilt in 1852 to 503 tons so perhaps that accounts for the change of rig. She was lost at sea in 1857 and the letter below sheds some light on her fate but raises an intriguing mystery.

*Hong Kong 1st November 1858*

*Capt. Thomson,  
Ship "Skawfell".  
Dear Sir,*

*Being desirous of expressing our appreciation of the service rendered by you to the Insurance Office of which we are the general Agents, in saving from the wreck of the "Cathaya" in October 1857 and bringing in to Hong Kong, under circumstances of considerable peril, a large portion of the treasure which had been shipped in that vessel, then under your command, we have now on behalf of the Shareholders in the said Office to request your acceptance of a gratuity of £100, and we beg at the same time to tender our warm acknowledgments of the conduct displayed by you on the occasion in question.*

*We enclose herein our draft on Messrs Matheson & Co. in your favour at sight for the above amount and remain, dear Sir,*

*Yours faithfully,  
Jardine Matheson & Co.  
General Agents "Canton Ins. Office"*

Hong Kong

1<sup>st</sup> November 1858

Capt Thomson  
Ship "Skawfell"

Dear Sir,

Being desirous of expressing our appreciation of the service rendered by you to the Insurance Office of which we are the general agents, in saving from the wreck of the "Cathaya" in October 1857 and bringing into Hong Kong, under circumstances of considerable peril, a large portion of the treasure which had been shipped in that vessel, then under your command, we have now on behalf of the shareholders in the said office to request your acceptance of a gratuity of £100, and we beg at the same time to tender our acknowledgements of the conduct displayed by you on the occasion in question.

We enclose herein our draft on Messrs Matheson & Co. in your favour at sight for the above amount and remain dear sir,

Yours faithfully,

Jardine Matheson & Co.

General Agents "Canton Insurance Office"

So, what befell the *Cathaya* and where? Were they rescued by another vessel or did they make their own way to Hong Kong? What were the 'circumstances of considerable peril' that Robert Thomson overcame to bring the treasure there? What was the treasure? One could hardly abandon a foundering vessel humping bars of gold bullion with one. If it was fine jewellery or precious stones that he held in his personal care would he not be expected, as master, to keep it close and deliver it anyway? "A large portion" would seem to indicate that the whole was more bulky than a packet of diamonds. From the tone of the letter and the size of the gratuity, around £12,000 in today's money, the insurers were mightily pleased to recover it. Perhaps the gratuity was a reward for his honesty.

There is little to be found on the 'net and I expect the answer may lie in letters that Robert may have written home at that time and would now be in the Merseyside Maritime Museum. Unless there is somebody out there who can investigate further we may have to approach the museum for more information.

The previous articles on Ian Thomson's forebears can be found on our website under Club Journal / "The Cachalot", or those reading online can click [here](#) All previous editions of *The Cachalot* can be found in the members only section.

The other letter was written by George Thomson in 1883 when he was on the *Sierra Estrella*. He had been at sea just seven years so was probably mate or second mate then.

*Ship 'Sierra Estrella'*  
*Is. of St Vincent*  
*Cape de Verdes*  
*Feb 28th 1883*

*My dear Mamma,*

*You will be surprised to hear from me so soon. We are now about thirty miles from the Island & shall be there by morning, when we shall anchor. When I last wrote by the pilot we were off .????? & ever since then we have had one ceaseless gale of wind until the 21st of Feb. On the 14th we picked up with a distressed Norwegian barque at daylight & ran down to her. We found she was leaking badly & also lost her rudder & the crew wanted to leave her. The weather was moderate with a heavy sea but no break from it, so we got them all on board in about three hours, eleven hands all told. That same night she went down. We were hove to all night for it blew something frightful. That was in Lat 47deg N Long 11 deg W. the only thing that was lost was a large Newfoundland dog & the old skipper of the barque would not let him come in the boat in case the barque lasted out till fine weather & was picked up but there was no fear of that for she sank like a stone in less than 24 hours after.*

*We were going to land the crew at Madeira but we ran past there in a heavy gale under lower topsails so we are now going to land them on St. Vincent.*

*We have now 32 men living in the forecastle, our own men, barques' crew & five stowaways so we are pretty well manned.*

*Captain Murdoch told me the other day that he read in the paper the day we left of a barques' crew being picked up in exactly the same position as the one we picked up. Her name was the "Scawfell" formerly belonging to Rathbone Bros & Co. and the smart passage from China was in the paper too. He says he remembers reading about the passage in the paper when he was a boy, so now you will know where the old "Scawfell" has gone.*

*8a.m. Mar 1st.*

*We are now in sight of St Vincent. It has been calm all night. This morning we signalled a barque bound for Sydney. She is also going to call at St Vincent to land her English Channel pilot as she could not land him before through the weather, so we are not the only unfortunate ones.*

*2p.m. we are now entering the harbour. I don't know whether we shall anchor.*

*With dearest love to all & wishing you all many happy returns of your birthdays.*

*I remain your affectionate son*

*Geo B Thomson*

Notes by IBT;

The 'smart' passage from China was Whampoa to Liverpool (Capt R.Thomson, 88 days, arr. Liverpool 11th April 1861)  
The *Scawfell* was first owned by Rathbone Bros. of Liverpool, and then was sold to Wilson & Blain of South Shields in 1872, then W.Hutchinson of Newcastle in 1880. She was abandoned at sea in a force 12 storm on the 9th January 1883, at 47.30N 11.10W, her pumps having become blocked by the coal cargo.

From the Times newspaper, Weds. 31st January, 1883, page 6:

Captain Kane of the barque *Rosedale*, of Belfast, reports that on the 9th inst. he rescued the master and crew of the barque *Scawfell*, which was then in a sinking condition. Subsequently the rescued crew were transferred to a German vessel, and thence to the ship *Norwhal*, which has landed them at ..?????

George does not mention the name of the Norwegian barque but it was a common thing and the lucky ones were those that were sighted by other vessels. And how coincidental that she foundered in just about the same spot that his father's old vessel had done just one month previously.

We don't know where the *Sierra Estrella* was bound but I assume she was outward bound from Europe and I wonder where the five stowaways thought they were going.

As a retired pilot I am familiar with over-carrying although it never happened to me. It is reputed that the choice pilots for the liners outward bound from Southampton to the States would sometimes get over-carried but they always seemed to have their dinner jackets with them when they did! But to end up off the west coast of Africa is a bit much - he must have been worrying that he might fetch up in South Africa or even Sydney itself!



**Sierra Estrella**

Picture.: State Library of South Australia PRG 1373/8/96