

The Beautiful Mrs Rousby and her Uncles, John Evan and William Meredyth Thomas

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As some of you will know I have been researching for some years the life and work of the Brecon born sculptors John Evan Thomas (1810-1873) and his brother, William Meredyth (1819-1877), sons of John Thomas, a memorial mason, and his wife. Another son, James Lewis Thomas became an architect and achieved the position of chief surveyor to the War Office.

Every now and then new nuggets of information emerge and my most recent discovery is the remarkable fact that a daughter of the Thomas family, Sarah, sister to John Evan, William Meredyth and James Lewis, was the mother of a celebrated actress, Clara, known as "the beautiful Mrs Rousby".



Mrs Rousby as Joan of Arc



(To the Editor of the ILLUSTRATED SPORTING AND DRAMATIC NEWS.)
SIR,—In your issue of the 9th ultimo, I find an article, entitled "Mrs. Rousby as the Missing Gainsborough." I thought I knew something of Mrs. Rousby and her relations, therefore I have to respectfully ask you, who is Mr. Meredith Thomas, the sculptor?
I know two of her uncles, John Evan Thomas, a sculptor, and his brother, William Meredith Thomas, sculptor also, and likewise, indeed, rather more so.
Pray enlighten me, for I'm in a dense fog at present.
Yours truly,
Swansea, Aug. 12th, 1876. J. D. FRANCIS.

Letter in *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* 1876

This is how it happened. I started a new search using the technique of varying the words and the spelling. This time I chose to enter "William Meredith Sculptor", spelling Meredith with an "i" and not a "y", chose the MORE button and then clicked on BOOKS. This took me to references in a variety of texts. Among the search results was one for *The Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic news - Volume 5 - Page 622* and clicking on this led to the intriguing but hard to read facsimile of two letters. One described the performances of the popular actress Mrs Rousby and in the other J D Francis of Swansea expostulates: "I

thought I knew something of Mrs Rousby and her relations, therefore I have to respectfully ask you who is Mr Meredith Thomson, the sculptor? I know two of her uncles John Evan Thomas, a sculptor, and his brother William Meredith Thomas...."

Fascinated by this hint of a new relation and hoping for a clearer version of the text, I entered the title of the magazine into the search bar and found that there was a complete digital record of this publication which deals almost entirely with sporting and theatrical news in Britain. Surprisingly the material has been put on line by the Bavarian State Library.

The letter mentioned above had been stimulated by a double-page portrait of Mrs Rousby in an earlier edition of the Illustrated Sporting News. It had been



The Missing Gainsborough by Henry Furniss, 1876 Illustrated Sporting News

entitled "*The Missing Gainsborough*", a reference to the wonderful painting of Mrs Siddons that hangs in the National Gallery and suggesting that if the great artist had still been alive he would surely have asked Mrs Rousby to sit for him. So who was this Mrs Rousby? Searching for other images of her led me to the very informative *Library of Nineteenth-Century Photography* which holds not only a whole array of pictures of Mrs Rousby in different roles but also detailed biographical notes. Mrs Rousby's first great success on the London stage came in *The Fool's Revenge* and she soon became known as '*the beautiful Mrs Rousby*.' During the 1870's she had a string of successes, including Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Cordelia in *King Lear*. One of her most famous roles was as Joan of Arc.

"The Beautiful Mrs Rousby" was born Clara Dowse in 1848 at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight. Her father was a Dr Richard Dowse, inspector-general of hospitals and former surgeon in 14th Regiment of Foot. Her mother, Sarah, was the eldest daughter of John Thomas, the Brecon mason. It is possible that Sarah Thomas and the widowed Richard Dowse had been introduced by her other brother James Lewis who was responsible for the design of military hospitals and is likely to have known Dowse professionally.



The Two Rousbys, NPG

The article in *The Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News* also provides some details about Clara's father and her early life. It reports that Richard Dowse had been in his "young days a great theatre goer ; he remembered Siddons and Kemble and had seen Kean and Macready in their prime and he was constantly at the Plymouth theatre – always accompanied by his youngest and favourite daughter...and they witnessed the many performances of a rising young actor of great provincial reputation named Wybert Rousby". An actor and theatre manager from Jersey , Rousby who had started his life on the stage as a teenager is reported to have seen a portrait locket of Clara and declared "I'll win that girl" and bet a dozen gloves that "I marry her within the year". He won his bet.

The account continues "after persistent entreaties on (Clara's) part she won his reluctant consent to adopt the profession . That is to say to go on the stage. Her husband was we read, her sole "tutor" preparing her debut as Cordelia. Further light is shed on her career in a report which accompanies the double-page portrait and includes this : "Her uncle Mr Meredith Thompson (sic) the sculptor also did much to foster her love of the drama , reading to her from Shakespeare and encouraging her to read the great works to him. (It is this substitution of Thompson for Thomas that prompted the letter which started my quest).

This description of William Meredyth bears out what we know of him from another source. His obituary in the Aberystwyth Chronicle describes how "He was an ardent and appreciative student of history, poetry, and elegant literature, and his retentive memory enabled him to delight his associates for hours with the beauties of Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Byron, Macaulay and the other giants of our classical English literature".



Mrs Rousby as Rosalind in "As you Like It"

On the 20th December ,1869, Clara made her debut in London at the Queen's Theatre as Fiordelisa in Tom Taylor's adaptation of *The Fool's Revenge*. Her two uncles, John Evan and William Meredith Thomas were both living in Buckingham Palace Road in London and I like to think that they were able to attend the opening night and share in her success.

After a career in which she toured many provincial theatres in Edinburgh, Exeter, Leamington Spa (where her costumes were impounded by a bailiff) and Bristol (where she had a riding accident), Clara travelled to America and was reported to have been paid \$1000 dollars for a single performance - echoes here of Adelina Patti. But a final and sad twist to her life is contained in a later report in a Dublin journal at the time of her death in 1879 at the age of just 31; *"She last appeared on the stage as the heroine of D.E. Bandmann's Madelaine Morel at the Queen's Theatre on 20 April 1878. The following month she appeared in court, having brought a charge of assault against the play's author, who had 'struck and wrenched' her arm during rehearsals.*

Flatterers and excitement turned her head. One evening she was missing alike from the stage and from her home. Repeated absences and repeated forgivenesses told, and at last there came a life-long separation from her husband and her one surviving child.

Her malady was strong, and its progress steady. When her husband and herself met a year ago in a judge's chambers to discuss the custody of their child, she had changed almost beyond recognition. Her pitiful fracas with Herr Bandmann, and her repeated accidents while recklessly horse-riding, brought her name again and again before the public; but she was never more to return to the pinnacle of popularity from which she had so fallen, and which her strong nerve, intellectual capacity, and fatal beauty qualified her to fill' (Freeman's Journal, Dublin, 23 April 1879).



Clara Rousby by Jose Maria Mora.

By the time of her death her parents and her two uncles, John Evan and William Meredyth Thomas had died so none of them lived to see the sad decline of Clara's career.

Two final thoughts. Is it possible that Clara, like Sarah Siddons, performed in Brecon? From the Welsh newspapers of the period we learn that the Rousbys toured in Newport and Cardiff and the local papers covered their successes and their failures. Maybe further research will reveal that Clara visited her relatives in Brecon and perhaps performed here.

And secondly it is salutary to realise that the connection between "*the beautiful Mrs Rousby*" and Brecon might never have come to light if the alert J D Francis of Swansea hadn't spotted the mistake in the newspaper report and taken the trouble to reprimand the editor for his carelessness!