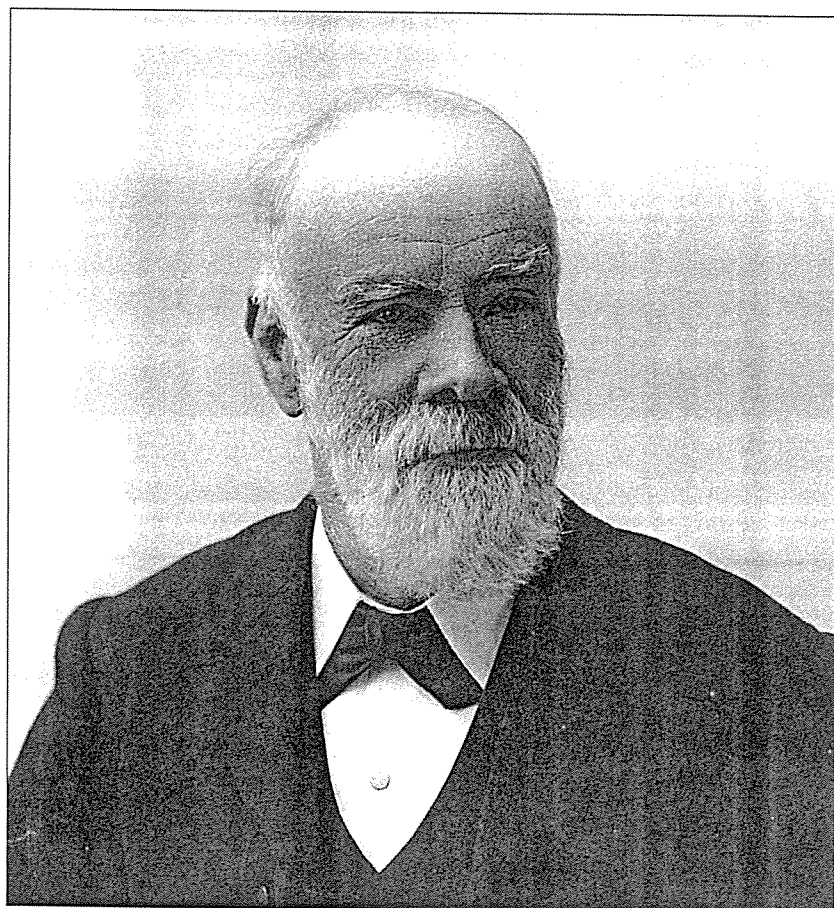


Rich Legacy to Nelson

William Hobbs



A rich Nelson businessman, Thomas Cawthron, used his wealth to confer benefits on his home city — from a notable research institute to a waterfront safety chain.

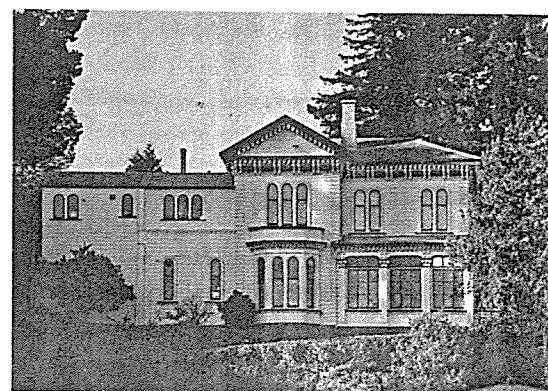
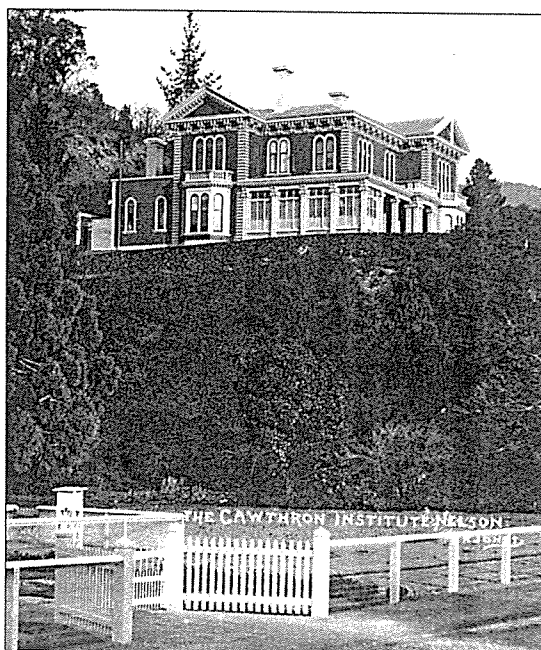
A touch of immortality is a just and proper reward for philanthropy; and the man who is probably entitled to be called Nelson's greatest philanthropist, Thomas Cawthron, has his share of recognition around the city. Arriving in Nelson as a fifteen-year-old in February 1849, he spent most of his eighty-two years as a resident of the city and provided or contributed significantly to some of the principal features of the townscape which give Nelson its character today.

Cawthron's greatest benefaction in financial terms, and the one for which he is most widely known, is the Cawthron Institute, the country's principal scientific institution outside government and university circles. Apart from a few small family bequests, all of his estate of close to a quarter of a million pounds, a very large sum in those days, was bequeathed on his death in 1915 for "the purchase of land and erection and maintenance of an industrial and technical school, institute and museum to be called the Cawthron Institute".

But so far as the enduring character of Nelson is concerned, Cawthron's greatest contribution

Above: Thomas Cawthron. (Photo: Nelson Provincial Museum)

Right: In its early years, the Cawthron Institute occupied Fellworth House. (Photo: Alexander Turnbull Library)
Far right: Though no longer owned by the Cawthron Institute, Fellworth House survives as one of Nelson's fine old buildings. (Photo: Ross Wearing)



is one which does not carry his name. He totally funded and personally supervised the construction of the granite steps from Trafalgar Square up to the Cathedral above. Church Steps, as they are popularly known, are the social centre of Nelson. For years they have been used for outdoor civic receptions. A succession of royal visitors have stood on them to wave to the crowds below. They are the traditional end point of processions and protest rallies in Nelson.

There was a flight of wooden steps up to the Cathedral long before Cawthron took an interest in them. They were made of wood and by early this century there was much complaint about their state of disrepair. A Church Hill Beautifying Society was formed to do something about the steps, but after several years it was still having funding difficulties and, rather than see an inadequate structure, Cawthron offered to defray the whole expense of building a flight of stone steps.

The original plans prepared by the city engineer called for asphalt landings between the flights of granite steps, but Cawthron, who was clearly no cheapskate in these matters, intervened to ensure that the landings were granite paved as well. This added an extra £350 to the cost of the project, taking the total to £1887. The steps were designed by an architect, A.R. Griffin. They were formally opened by the Governor of New Zealand, Lord Liverpool, in September 1913. In 1942 a podium was built level with the top of the first flight as a centennial memorial to the early settlers of Nelson.

Nelson is also indebted to Cawthron for another of its landmarks, or at least for part of it — the safety chain along the sea wall between the port and Tahunanui. A Rocks Road chain in the style of those on the seaside promenades of Victorian England was first proposed in 1897 by John Tinline, who provided £400 for its erection from “the beacon to Magazine Point”. This still left an unprotected drop from the road at both ends of Mr Tinline’s stretch of chain and following an accident in 1912, when a Nile Street man fell over the edge and was seriously injured, Cawthron contributed £668 to extend the chain both east and west, providing a continuous line of protection from the port to Tahuna Beach.

The chain, with its cast iron stanchions, remains an effective barrier to prevent pedestrians from falling accidentally, but it has been breached on numerous occasions by out-of-control cars and trucks. Such depredations, along with the effect of salt water on cast iron, have had their impact on the Rocks Road chain,



Two of Cawthron’s gifts to Nelson. Left: The Cathedral Steps. (Photo: Ross Wearing) Below: The Rocks Road chain fence. (Photo: Gary Holz)



but a recent restoration project through the Nelson Civic Trust has seen it made good again. These contributions to Nelson’s appearance, the Church Steps and the Rocks Road chain, came towards the end of Cawthron’s life. His many gifts to the city had begun some time earlier.

Cawthron was born in Camberwell, South London, in 1833 and was brought to Nelson with other members of his family by his father in 1849. Young Thomas was initially put to farming work near Richmond but found it too hard for his physique and switched to clerical work, moving to Wellington and a job with the trader William Barnard Rhodes, with whom there was a family connection. He subsequently got a touch of gold fever and spent some years on the Australian goldfields, returning to Nelson in 1854 or 1855 following the death of his brother and serious illness of his father. He had intended it to be a short visit but decided to stay on and became involved in contracting, taking up jobs in connection with the Enner Glynn coal mine and the Dun Mountain Copper Mining Company. These contracts formed the foundation for his later fortune.

In a jury list for 1859, Cawthron’s occupation is given as “miner”, but that year he also became involved in shipping, taking the agency for the Panama Royal Mail Steamship Company. He also acted as agent for the Union Steam Ship Company and eventually handled most of the shipping agency work in Nelson — this at a time when virtually all of the region’s passenger and cargo traffic with the outside world was seaborne. Road links with Blenheim and the West Coast were not completed until the mid 1880s.

Cawthron was involved with shipping for thirty years, but he engaged in other business enterprises as well. Shrewd investments helped to make him very wealthy. One acquaintance called him “the personification of compound interest”. From around the turn of the century,



For a time, the museum of the Cawthron Institute was housed in the Harley House. The house is still owned by the Institute. (Photo: Gary Holz)

the headmaster of Central School, F.G. Gibbs, acted as Cawthron's part-time secretary and adviser on schemes for the betterment of Nelson. They would meet once or twice a week after school hours to discuss these things. In his diary entry for 28 May 1899, Gibbs noted: "Had a chat of about one and a half hours with Cawthron on his experiences in the early days. He says he cannot regard his life with much satisfaction as he has done nothing but accumulate a lot of money."

But Cawthron was now disbursing a lot of money as well. He provided £15,000 (a sum which attracted a further government subsidy) to build a new hospital for Nelson and later provided another £1000 for a nurses' home. He gave the School of Music £2500 to clear its debts and then provided another £1800 to buy the organ for the auditorium. He bought 2500 acres of land along the line of the Dun Mountain railway and presented it to the city as Cawthron Park. He provided the site for an Anglican Sunday School in Toi Toi Valley and money for the Nelson Institute to buy a valuable collection of Maori curios and shells.

At the time of his death, Cawthron was still working on schemes for the improvement of Nelson. The main one of these was a solar observatory, which was to have been built on the Port Hills. Cawthron had acquired the land there, but was still negotiating access when his death halted the process. The trustees of his estate would not allow the observatory to go ahead, but did allow Gibbs to move the Atkinson observatory onto part of the land Cawthron had bought.

Although Gibbs advised Cawthron on many of his projects, he did not claim credit for the

Cawthron Institute, which he said had been a suggestion of a friend of Cawthron, J.H. Cock, in 1902. Cock had been asked by his friend how he could spend a large sum of money for the betterment of Nelson. He made three suggestions: a greatly enlarged art gallery and art school; a commercial college; and a research institution — this latter suggestion being particularly recommended and, as was subsequently revealed by the will, accepted by Cawthron.

Indirectly, this last and greatest of Cawthron's benefactions has also helped to preserve two of the city's finest early homes. They are Fellworth in Milton Street, which became the first home of the Cawthron Institute in 1921, and the Harley House, also in Milton Street, which was purchased in 1960 to house the Institute's museum. The museum collection has since been transferred to the Nelson Provincial Museum, but the Harley House remains the property of the Institute. Fellworth was sold to a catering company in 1969. Fellworth was designed by J. Scotland and is similar in style to Melrose, also designed by Scotland. Harley House, built in 1868, was the work of architect John Scott.

Cawthron's own houses do not seem to have survived. On arriving in Nelson, the family moved into a house in Selwyn Place and Thomas may still have been living with the family when it later moved to upper Collingwood Street. He was recorded as living in Toi Toi Valley in 1868 and later lived for many years in Hampden Street west. He moved to Examiner Street in 1895, to a property which is now part of the bowling club.

One can hardly do better to close this brief look at Cawthron and his contribution to the character of Nelson than by quoting from his obituary, published on 8 October 1915:

Thus passed away Nelson's greatest benefactor — the man who, having the means and the desire, helped the city of which he had so long been a resident to a greater extent than any other person has ever done. All that Mr Cawthron has done for the city may never be known. He had a horror of publicity. What he intended to do he liked to accomplish in his own quiet way without any flourish of trumpets. Honoured by his fellow citizens for what they know he has done, Mr Cawthron would have been still more honoured had there been general knowledge of his direct and indirect benefactions to Nelson. □

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