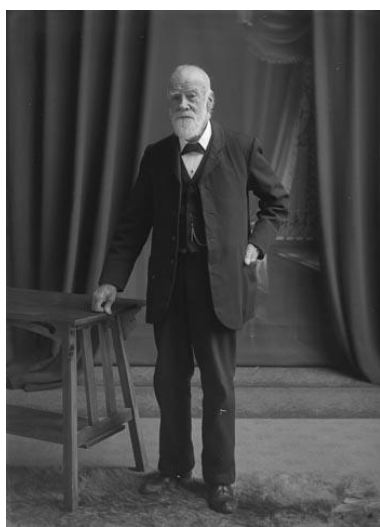


Thomas Cawthron

In his death he was named “the Grand Old Man”¹, in life “the personification of compound interest”². No matter the label he was given, when Thomas Cawthron passed away, the entire city of Nelson mourned for him.

The Man behind the Money

When Thomas Cawthron was born in Newington, Surrey on May 25th 1833, Britain was in the midst of an economic slump. This would have been the determining factor as to why, fifteen years later in 1849 and after the death of his first wife Sarah, Thomas’ father James Cawthron decided to move his six children and new bride to Nelson, New Zealand.



Portrait of Thomas Cawthron, The Nelson Provincial Museum, FN Jones collection, 6x8-8

Although his father worked hard to send him and his siblings to a good school in England, because of his age (15) when he arrived in New Zealand, he was required to start work immediately. Thomas began his life in Nelson as a farm worker, but soon found out that he was not cut out for the physical labour required in this job. However, Thomas was not one to give up easily because of the strong work ethic that had been embedded in him from a young age.

In July 1849, Thomas Cawthron journeyed to Wellington to work in the office of a distant relative, Mr William Barnard Rhodes who was involved in the merchant and trading industry. After the 1851 discovery of gold in Ballarat and Bendigo in Victoria, Australia, Thomas Cawthron left his job in Wellington in 1852 to seek his fortune in the gold fields. Although he did not ‘strike it rich’, he learned a lot about prospecting and became a successful contractor supplying necessities to the miners. Cawthron returned to Nelson between 1854 and 1855 due to the declining health of his father and the death of his brother, James Daniel. He had planned to go back to Australia to work but, to Nelson’s benefit, he never did.

After the copper mines on Dun Mountain and the coal mine in Enner Glynn opened in 1856, Thomas Cawthron began contracting work with the miners. He was a clever economist and soon began building his fortune by loaning “sums of money (at appropriate rates of interest) to his less thrifty workmates”³.

By 1859, Cawthron began a new, long-standing career in shipping in Port Nelson. He was in charge of a number of shipping companies for the next 25 years and in 1876, when the Union Steam Ship Company bought out the company he was working for, he “acquired a monopoly of shipping

¹ Reporter name not available, ‘Obituary: Mr Cawthron-“Grand Old Man”’, *the Nelson Evening Mail*, page number not available, date published: 9/10/1915

² Gee, M., ‘Thomas Cawthron 1833-1915: Businessman, philanthropist’, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, <http://www.dnz.govt.nz/>, date accessed: 29/06/2010

³ Miller, D., (1991) *Thomas Cawthron and the Cawthron Institute*, The Cawthron Institute Trust Board: Nelson

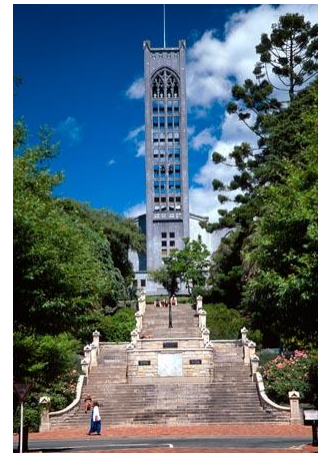
agencies in Nelson”⁴. He also controlled overseas interests, most prominently the shipping of coal between the West Coast of New Zealand and Australia. These business successes were not, however, the root of his substantial fortune, rather this came through well-placed investments in property, shares, mortgages and other institutions, from 1860 onwards.

A Lasting Legacy: His Gifts to Nelson

It was not until his retirement in 1884 that Cawthron began thinking seriously about the ways in which he could use his money to benefit his community. Although Cawthron had a great deal of money, he relied upon his close friends, F. G. Gibbs and J. H. Cock, to suggest various ways of spending his money to aid the whole of Nelson. Thomas Cawthron was known around Nelson as being a recluse, but because Gibbs and Cock were so prominent in the community, they were able to encourage him to invest his money in projects for the benefit of many future generations of Nelsonians. These projects included the financing of the Church Steps in 1912-1913, costing £1800; the gift of an £1800 organ to the Nelson School of Music in 1913 and the 1913 purchase of over 2000 acres near Dun Mountain for a nature park, to be named Cawthron Park. He was also very willing to help people in need, but he did not appreciate begging letters and often put conditions on his gifts. For example, in his will Cawthron provided a monthly sum for a young woman for life, provided that she did not marry, at which time the “last payment shall cease forever”⁵.

Thomas Cawthron died in his home at the age of 83 on October 8th, 1915. In his will, he left the city of Nelson over £200,000 for the “purchase of land and the construction and maintenance of an industrial and technical school, institute and museum, to be called the Cawthron Institute”⁶. Since opening in 1921, the Cawthron Institute has gained an international reputation for the work they do to benefit not only our local community, but also the rest of the world.

It will never truly be known exactly how much Thomas Cawthron contributed to Nelson’s economy, community and lifestyle. There are many people of Nelson who appreciate his various contributions every day, but do know that Cawthron was responsible for them. He was a driven, but responsible and caring individual whose philanthropic nature created a legacy that will last a long time into the future.



The Church Steps in Nelson City, a lasting reminder of what Thomas Cawthron gave to us, David Wall Photo, www.davidwallphoto.com

Karamea Fossett, Nelson College for Girls, 2010

⁴ Ibid

⁵ The last Will and Testament of Mr Thomas Cawthron, the Cawthron Institute, via Lincoln Mackenzie

⁶ Ibid

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