

## William Thain 1797-1841

Canon Hall wrote that in the Losh burial plot, 'surrounded by a dwarf curb, there is a pine tree. On the wall at one side of it stands a giant cone carved in stone, with this inscription below: "This Khelat Pine is planted in memory of Wm. Thain, Major of the 33rd, and was raised from seed transmitted by him to England. He perished in the fatal Pass of Coord Cabul, esteemed and lamented by all who knew him."'

William Thain was born in 1797, the son of James Thain. His father, a friend of James Losh, was the superintendent of the Losh alkali works at Walker on the Tyne. William went to school in Wreay. Canon Hall mentioned an old Latin grammar with the inscription, 'Wreay School. William Thain's Book, 1802'. William stayed with the Bewley family at Townhead Farm and probably received instruction in the classics from William Gaskin. He came to know the villagers well and, as a young soldier, corresponded with Joseph Bewley. On 16th June, 1814, after William, then in the 33rd Regiment of Foot, had survived the humiliating defeat of Bergen-op-Zoom, Bewley wrote: 'Your much respected friend Mr John Losh died in the month of March 1814. His loss will be much felt in this neighbourhood. The two Miss Loshes continue at Woodside with little alteration in the family, except that Joseph is come to Mr Gaskin's with a person appointed to take care of him. Mrs Gaskin has brought her husband a son, whose name is John.' Bewley was happy to give Thain permission to write personal letters to his daughter Margaret: 'I see no harm in addressing your last to my daughter.'

William Thain saw much action in the latter years of the wars against Napoleon. At Waterloo (on 18 June, 1815), still only 18, and serving with the 33rd led by Wellington, he was 'shot through the left arm'.

Promotion followed. In 1822 he was in Jamaica; in 1836 in Gibraltar.

In 1839 he left the 33rd to become aide de camp to Major General Elphinstone in Bengal. Two years later, during the First Anglo-Afghan War, Elphinstone was commanding the British garrison in Kabul. William Thain sent the cone of the Khelat pine to Wreay at this time. In the bitterly cold winter of 1841, the Afghans rose up against the British. The British Army was humiliated.

The *Carlisle Journal* reported: 'Nearly thirteen thousand troops (including camp followers) have been totally destroyed! - a disaster such as never before befell a British army. . . . The terms of the capitulation were of a degrading character. In compliance with the treaty the troops marched from Cabul for Jellalabad; but no sooner had they quitted Cabul than they were set upon by the natives in the passes, and great numbers destroyed. The road lies through mountain passes of the most frightful character - the mountains rising up almost perpendicularly on each side, - and was covered with snow to the depth of several feet. The sufferings of our troops in these passes were of the most frightful description - without food for the commissariat was soon separated from the main body, almost without clothing, a ferocious enemy hovering on the heights above hurling fragments of rock amongst them, and using their firearms with destructive effect. The soldiers became disorganized, and in many instances refused to obey the commands of their officers . . . only one individual, Dr Brydon, out of 13,000, escaped alive. Dr Brydon reached Jellalabad, wounded in three places, almost naked, and in a state of the greatest exhaustion.'

Canon Hall commented that: 'I have been told that another form which she introduces to the church building - an arrow - is due to the fact that Major Thain was killed by an Afghan arrow.'

That dramatic arrow and the pinecones have caused some, including the poet Norman Nicholson, without any justification whatsoever, to elaborate the bare strands of Thain's story into a most improbable romance: 'For Sarah Losh had been in love with a young man of the district, Major William Thain, who went with his regiment to India and was killed by a poison arrow, and the church is as much a memorial to him as to Katherine Losh.'

From the evidence we have, William Thain was a younger childhood acquaintance, whom Sarah may have met a few times in later life through her uncle James. He sent her a pinecone when he was serving in Afghanistan. She had already adopted the symbol of the pinecone when she had David Dunbar carve the statue of Katharine gazing thoughtfully at the pinecone in her lap.