



David Ezekiel Benjamin, later known as David Edward Theomin, was born in Bristol, Gloucestershire, England, on 25 April 1852. His father, Joseph Benjamin, a Jewish minister, had emigrated from Prussia earlier in the nineteenth century and discontinued the name of Theomin. His mother, Esther Braham, was Joseph's second wife, and he had two half-brothers, one half-sister, and one sister.

David was educated at Wharton's School in Queen's Square and then, from January 1862 to December 1864, at Bristol Grammar School. After serving an apprenticeship in the hardware trade, he worked for three years for Platnauer Brothers, merchants. In 1874 he sailed for Melbourne, Australia, where his half-brother, Abraham Benjamin, lived. There he worked for P. Falkand Company, wholesale jewellers.

David Benjamin first visited New Zealand in 1878. On 29 November he was shipwrecked near Tauranga on the steamer *Taranaki*, but no lives were lost. By 1879 he was back in Melbourne, and on 21 January he married Mary Ann (known as Marie) Michaelis, eldest daughter of the successful businessman Moritz Michaelis. The couple were to have two children, Edward and Dorothy.

On his return to Dunedin David Benjamin helped his father-in-law to develop a tannery business in Sawyers Bay. The firm Michaelis, Hallenstein and Farquhar (later incorporated as Glendermid Limited) was established in Dunedin in 1879. By 1880 the firm of D. Benjamin and Company had opened for business in Princes Street as wholesalers and general importers, and by 1881 David Benjamin owned a house in Royal Terrace. In 1885 David Ezekiel Benjamin resumed the surname his father had used in Prussia and by deed poll became known as David Edward Theomin.

Through the 1880s David Theomin worked hard to build his business interests. In 1883 or 1884 the

Dresden Pianoforte Manufacturing Agency and Company (renamed the Bristol Piano Company during the First World War) was formed to meet a rising public demand for musical instruments. Branches were soon opened in all New Zealand's main centres and the business flourished.

In the early twentieth century Theomin engaged Ernest George, a fashionable London architect, to design a fine house of 35 rooms. Between 1904 and 1906 this was erected on the site in Royal Terrace where the family had been living. Their home, Olveston, named after a village near Bristol where Theomin had enjoyed childhood holidays, was demolished to make way for the new Olveston. In the ensuing years, the mansion was filled with a sizeable collection of European and oriental treasures.

Throughout his life in Dunedin, David Theomin was a leader within the Jewish congregation and a generous supporter of civic enterprise. He was a financial supporter of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and an office-bearer in its society. Apart from contributing to the advance of Dunedin's art collections, he gave quiet support to promising young artists, among them Frances Hodgkins. His long and active association with the Royal Dunedin Male Choir (he was president for many years) was acknowledged in 1932 by their presentation to him of a gold lyre and clasp.

Theomin was energetic in the affairs of the Shipwreck Relief Society of New Zealand and the Patients' and Prisoners' Aid Society. Between 1905 and 1932 he was one of the commissioners of the Dunedin City Sinking Fund set up to free the municipality from debt. After long association with the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce he became its representative at the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 and at the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902.

David Theomin died at Olveston on 15 July 1933 at the age of 81, and is buried in the Jewish Section of Dunedin's Southern Cemetery. His wife and son were already dead. In 1966, when Dorothy Theomin died, her will revealed that Olveston and its contents had been left to the citizens of Dunedin. An astute businessman, a natural philanthropist and a connoisseur of the arts, David Theomin was proud to be a self-made man. Small of stature, he dressed immaculately and combined a commanding presence with unfaltering kindness. Austerity and hardship were an accepted part of his boyhood life. Travelling across the world to put down roots in a better place, he sought to improve the state of his fellow New Zealanders of all creeds. His legacy to his adopted country demonstrates that he achieved his goals with distinction.

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