

# John Fergusson (1834–1907)

This is one in a series of articles by **Mark Lawley** about prominent British and Irish field bryologists of the past. Mark would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content. *A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* is also available online at [www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk)

## Bryological career

John Fergusson's obituary in the *Forfar Herald* (9 August 1907) relates that he first became interested in botany in 1863, when the Reverend Robert Whitaker McAll spent a holiday in Clova, and inspired Fergusson with his love of plants as they roamed the hills together. McAll (1821–1893) holidayed in the district again in 1864, and in 1872 founded and headed the Independent Protestant Mission in Paris. He was the son of the Congregationalist minister Robert Stephens McAll (1792–1838), who merits an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and also took interest in wild flowers.

By 1866 Fergusson had acquainted himself with most of Scotland's flowering plants, and took up bryology. After he had discovered a number of rarities, William Wilson (see *Field Bryology* 96, 39–43) visited him in the late 1860s and stayed for several weeks. A little later, Fergusson made the acquaintance of the Reverend Mark Lowden Anderson (born 1831), minister at Menmuir, Angus, in the 1860s and '70s, who had also taken up bryology, and the two men made frequent excursions together in search of mosses.

John Hutton Balfour (1808–1884), Professor of botany at Edinburgh from 1845 until 1879 encouraged Fergusson to publish his findings in the *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh* (Mosses indigenous to Forfarshire not included in the Flora of Forfarshire. *Transactions*

of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh, 1869/70, x, 245, in which he listed between a100 and 200 species new to the county). After moving to New Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire in 1869, he published his bryological records in *Science Gossip* and other periodicals, with other rarities noticed in *Hedwigia* and in Robert Braithwaite's *Recent Additions to the Moss-Flora of Great Britain*. Thereafter, Fergusson corresponded with most of Europe's prominent bryologists, including William Wilson (1799–1871) and George Edward Hunt (1840–1873), and at one time contemplated preparing a manual of British mosses. He also contributed to Husnot's *Musci Galliae (Herbier de Meusses de France et Diverses Contrées de l'Europe)*, and wrote *Mosses and Lichens of the County* (pages 190–193 in the second volume of A.J. Warden's *Angus or Forfarshire, the land and people, descriptive and historical*, 1881).

Fergusson possessed a remarkably keen visual acuity for detecting and intelligence for distinguishing species. Within 2 years of taking up bryology, he discovered *Anomodon attenuatus*, *Cynodontium fallax* and *Grimmia elatior* (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, *Mielichhoferia elongata* in the same county in about 1870, *Grimmia ungeri* and *G. montana* (as *G. alpestris*) near Ballater, South Aberdeenshire in 1870 and 1872 respectively, and *Grimmia cf. austrofunalis* in 1872. He may also have been the person who

found the exceedingly rare *Encalypta brevicollis* in Angus in 1871. Fergusson also found *Andreaea frigida* on Ben Macdhui in the Cairngorms in 1873, and apparently collected *A. crassinervia* in 1890 near Loch Dubh, Lochnagar, south Aberdeenshire. The voucher for *A. crassinervia* is at New York, but the provenance of Fergusson's specimen is doubted. Fergusson also found *Hygrohypnum molle* on Lochnagar, and *Eurhynchium pulchellum* at Vayne near Fern in Angus.

Fergusson collected large quantities of some of the rare species he found in order to distribute material to other bryologists, in order that they might familiarize themselves with their forms and structures, particularly for species not described and illustrated in Wilson's *Bryologia Britannica* (1855). This helped other bryologists to become familiar with these species before Dixon's *Student's Handbook of British Mosses* (1896) was published. His collecting of large quantities of rarities has attracted criticism in our own times, which is unfair, for he lived in an era when botanists were not nearly so sensitive about endangering rare species by over-collecting; nor could he or his contemporaries have known just how very rare these species were, for large tracts of the Highlands remained bryologically unknown. Indeed, were he alive today, one wonders what Fergusson would have to say about the condition of Angus's countryside now, with much of the county's lowland an unending prairie of corn, and nearly all the upland irreparably damaged by burning in order that people may shoot grouse for fun, and only a few cliffs and watercourses with botanical gems remaining.

In addition to the species mentioned above, Fergusson also found numerous uncommon or rare mosses in his adopted home county of Angus, including *Buxbaumia aphylla* in three places, *Dicranella crispa* at Fern, *Oncophorus virens* in Glenprosen, *Dicranum spurium*

at Lethnot, *Campylopus gracilis* in Clova, *Paraleucobryum longifolium* in Clova, Glenprosen and Glen Fee, *Encalypta alpina* in Glen Doll and Caenlochan, *Tortula leucostoma* in 1886, *Stegonia latifolia* in Clova, Glen Fee and Glen Doll in the 1860s, *Leptodontium gemmascens* in Denhead of Gray, Liff in 1880, *Grimmia ovalis* in Clova in 1868 as well as in Glenprosen, *G. lisae* in Glenprosen in 1867, Clova in 1868, and in Glen Fee, *Bryum calophyllum* at Barry Links in the 1860s, *Pseudobryum cinclidioides* in Glenprosen and at Menmuir, *Cinclidium stygium* in Clova and near Fern, *Uloa coarctata* in Clova in the 1860s, *Myurella julacea* in Clova in the 1860s and in Glen Fee, *Pseudoleskeella rupestris* in Clova in 1868, *Pseudoleskea incurvata* at Loch Brandy, *Heterocladium dimorphum* in Glen Doll in 1868 and in Glenprosen, *Palustriella decipiens* in Glenprosen in the 1860s, *Campyliadelphus elodes* near Montrose in 1879, *Amblystegium confervoides* at Airlie in the 1860s, *Sciurohypnum reflexum* in Clova in 1868, and *Hypnum callichroum* in Glenprosen in the 1860s.

Of liverworts he added *Cephalozia pleniceps*, *Fossombronina wondraczekii*, *Harpanthus flotovianus*, *Jamesoniella autumnalis*, *Jungermannia atrovirens*, *J. polaris* and *Marsupella sprucei* to Scotland's known bryoflora. In Angus, he found *Moerckia blyttii* in Caenlochan in 1868, *Marsupella sphaelata* in Caenlochan in 1873, *M. sprucei* near Loch Brandy in 1876, *Barbilophozia lycopodioides* in Clova in 1876, *Radula lindenbergiana* also in Clova, and *Cladopodiella francisci* at Balquharn near Fern.

Fergusson was also interested in fungi, and by means of a letter in *Scottish Naturalist* he organized a show of fungi at Aberdeen in 1874, which helped to stimulate founding of the Scottish Cryptogamic Society in the following year.

Fergusson's letters are at the Natural History Museum in London. His plants are at Oxford,



△ Reverend John Fergusson. Courtesy Reverend David Gray.

and some of his bryophytes are at Cardiff. 250 of his bryophytes are at Dundee City Museum and Art Gallery. He exchanged material with E.M. Holmes, J.A. Wheldon, John Sim (whose herbarium contained numerous gatherings sent to him by Fergusson), and the American botanist Isaac Comly Martindale (1842–1893). However, many of his plants were lost in a fire that destroyed most of his ‘*unique collection of the plants of the north-east of Scotland*’ (see Brebner, J., 1912, *The Flora of Forfarshire*, in *British Association Handbook*, pp. 597–610. Dundee).

### Family background and biography

John Fergusson was born on 29 July 1834 at Kerrow, Glen Shee, Angus (Forfarshire), a son of Donald Fergusson (1791/3–>1871), a farmer, and Mary (*née* MacGregor), who married at Kirkmichael, Perthshire in 1826. John had an elder sister, Margaret (1830–1892) and a younger brother, Fergus (1843/4–?1877).

In 1841 and 1851, the family was farming near Kirkmichael with Donald’s elder brother John Fergusson (1786/8–>1871), his wife Jane (or Janet or Jean, *née* Lamb, c.1807–>1861) and their two sons Donald (born 1827) and Robert (born 1829). In 1851, Donald senior held 40

acres, and John senior was described in the Census Return as a grazier and shepherd. The two elderly brothers, John and Donald, were still living in Glenshee in 1871, and their sons continued to farm in the district after that.

John junior was educated at Glenshee School and Dundee High School. After 6 months’ training there, he became a student at the University of St Andrews in 1850/1 and completed the last two sessions of his theological training at Aberdeen University.

He was licensed by Meigle presbytery in 1858, and assisted at St John’s parish, Dundee. In 1860, he was ordained to become minister at Glenprosen, Angus. In 1861, he was living at Inchmill, and minister of Glenprosen Chapel near Kirriemuir. In 1869, he became minister of New Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire. In 1875, he moved to Fern, Angus (not Fearn in East Ross-shire), and was still in post there at the time of his death. Fergusson loved to show to visitors the rare plants in his garden at the manse that he had collected from far and wide.

John did not marry, and his unmarried sister Margaret was living with him in 1871, 1881 and 1891. In 1896, the University of St Andrews conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws, and his parishioners presented him with a coffee tray and solid silver tea and coffee service. He died in Edinburgh on 6 August 1907 in consequence of an illness that first manifested itself in 1902.

### Acknowledgements

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