

# Bygone bryologists: Ursula Katharine Duncan (1910-1985)

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## Preamble

This is the fifth article in a series about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

A more general but at present unfinished *Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* is available on-line at: <http://ralph.cs.cf.ac.uk/HOB/HOBB.pdf> with an introductory file at <http://ralph.cs.cf.ac.uk/HOB/HOBBintro.htm> (from where the main file can be downloaded).

## Family background

Ursula Duncan was born in Kensington, London on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1910, the elder daughter of John Alexander Duncan (c.1878-1943, CB, RN) and Beatrice Dorothy Percy (*née* Weston, born 1881).

John Duncan's father was Alexander Robert Duncan (1844-1927) who at the time of the 1881 Census was a non-practising advocate, and a Justice of the Peace. In 1881, the family was living at 43 Melville Street, Edinburgh, where nine servants (a housekeeper, general domestic servant, two lady's maids, a lady's nurse, another nurse, an under-nurse, a table-maid and a kitchen-maid) attended to their domestic requirements.

Ursula's mother, Dorothy, was the youngest of six children of Percy Weston (1852-1905), a stockbroker, and Blanche Katherine (*née* Williams,

born c.1850). The Westons lived at East Sheen, Mortlake, Surrey while Dorothy grew up. Dorothy's mother, Blanche, was a daughter of Frederick Sims Williams, a barrister, while her father, Percy, was the son of a merchant and financial agent, John Weston (1816/7-1893), and Augusta Ellen (*née* Wood, 1815/6).

Perhaps Dorothy Weston's future husband was an acquaintance of her eldest brother, Digby St. Aubyn Percy Weston, for both men served in the Royal



**Figure 1.** Ursula Duncan. Courtesy of Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

Navy. John Duncan became a naval commander, and retired from service after the First World War, taking his family to live near Arbroath in Angus, where several generations of Duncans had owned an estate at Parkhill. Ursula's great-great grandfather, Alexander Robert's grandfather (Alexander, 1758-1832) and his son (John, born *c.* 1803) were both born at Parkhill. This John Duncan married Catherine Gourlay, a daughter of Robert Fleming Gourlay (1778-1863), the prominent author, agriculturalist, agitator and reformer who emigrated to Canada in 1817.

However, Ursula's most illustrious ancestors were forebears of her paternal grandmother, Frances Euphemia (*née* Edmonstone, 1850-1921), who must have met Alexander Robert Duncan (1844-1927) when he was factor of the Edmonstone estate at Duntreath in Stirlingshire. Frances was a daughter of Admiral Sir William Edmonstone (1810-1888, Bart, CB, MP). One of her sisters married Lord Dunedin, and another sister, Alice Frederica (1868-1947) married George Keppel, third son of the seventh Earl of Albemarle. Alice Keppel became mistress to King Edward VII, a great-grandmother of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, and was also mother of the illegitimate Violet Keppel (1894-1972) who had a lesbian affair with the poet Victoria (Vita) Sackville-West.

Nor was close liaison between royalty and the Edmonstone lineage confined to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tracing back through generations and centuries, the Edmonstones descended from the Elphinstones, who in turn derived from the Stuarts, Kings of Scotland: James I (1394-1437), James II (1430-1460), James III (1452-1488) and James IV (1472/3-1513). James II's mother was born Joan Beaufort (d.1445), granddaughter of John of Gaunt (1340-1399) who was the fourth son of Edward III of England (1312-1377). James I, King of Scotland, was descended from the Bruces, who had been Norman knights in earlier times.

Even this does not complete the roll-call of royalty in Ursula Duncan's genealogical provenance. Returning to the Edmonstones of a later age, Sir William Edmonstone's (1810-1888) mother was born Louisa Hotham (1778-1840), daughter of Beaumont Hotham (1737-1814, judge and Second Baron Hotham), who married Susannah Hankey (1737-1799), granddaughter of the politician Sir John Barnard (*c.* 1685-1764). Several generations of Hothams had owned land at South Dalton, near Beverley, Yorkshire, and like the Edmonstones, descended from royalty of the distant past: John Balliol (*c.* 1248/50-1314, King of Scotland), powerful Norman knights, and before that kings of France, Sweden, Denmark and Russia in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the bryologist Paul Richards married a Hotham, whose father came from the Hothams of Yorkshire.

Of course, ancestors who lived in the far distant past can have influenced Ursula Duncan's character but little. Nevertheless, the continuous grip on land, wealth and power from before the time of the Norman conquest down the centuries by the Hothams, Edmonstones, and their antecedents must have influenced these families' attitudes to their natural and cultural environments. Like John Duncan's extraordinary facility with languages, might his interest in natural history - which kindled so rich a botanical career in his daughter - have derived from his mother's social background?

### **Biography and botanical career**

Ursula's father retired from the Royal Navy after the First World War, and took his family to live on their estate at Parkhill, where John Duncan reared stock that often won prizes at agricultural shows.

Ursula was privately educated by a governess, Isobel Leslie, and much later took an external de-

gree at London University, where she graduated in classics (B.A. in 1952 and M.A. in 1956). She also became a Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music in 1948.

Ursula Duncan's botanical interests began at the age of ten, when her father (who had recently retired) encouraged her. As a teenager she wanted to identify the mosses around her home, and in 1929 her father gave her a copy of Dixon's *Handbook* and a dissecting microscope for her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The Second World War disrupted the BBS's activities, and Ursula served in the Censorship Department at Inverness for a time, dealing with forces' mail. Her younger sister, Frances Louise, married in 1943, a few days before their father died, but Ursula remained single, and administered the 600-acre farm at Parkhill after her father's death.

She had joined the BBS in 1938, and after the war Ursula's contact with other accomplished field-bryologists such as John Bishop Duncan (1869-1953) accelerated development of her own expertise. John Duncan, who was not related to Ursula, had retired to live in Berwick-on-Tweed. Ursula became referee for the Orthotrichaceae,

Ptychomitricaceae and *Sphagnum*, and she produced an illustrated key to *Sphagnum* in 1961. She also wrote bryofloras for Wigtownshire in 1956, a more comprehensive bryoflora for Angus in 1966, and for vascular plants *A Flora of East Ross-shire* (1980).

Duncan was accomplished in identifying vascular plants and bryophytes, but her greatest botanical influence was in lichenology, a subject to which Walter Watson (1872-1960) of Taunton helped introduce her. She was one of very few Britons who were interested in and studied lichens during the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and she wrote the highly respected *A Guide to the study of Lichens* (1959), supplemented by illustrations published in 1963, and *Introduction to British Lichens* (1970).

Duncan donated her herbarium of vascular plants to Dundee University, and her bryophytes and lichens to the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh.

Ursula Duncan died at Arbroath on January 27<sup>th</sup> 1985.