

JAMES DICKSON (1738-1822)

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This is one in a series of articles 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 Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Bryological career

Dickson began to study mosses in 1781, and collected material during several visits to Scotland between 1785 and 1791. For example, in 1789 he botanised with his 18-year-old brother-in-law Mungo Park on Ben Lawers and in the Hebrides.

In 1785 he published the first of four parts of *Fascicularis plantarum cryptogamicarum Britanniae* (1785-1801), with 400 species described in Latin, and with illustrations in water-colour by James Sowerby. Many of the bryophytes were described as new to Britain. Dickson did not have the benefit of a Latin education, and John Ziers, a Polish apothecary in London, wrote the descriptions for the first three fascicles. Ziers died in 1793, leaving his collection of cryptogams to the prominent London physician John Sims, after which Robert Brown (1773-1858) assisted Dickson with the descriptions for the fourth fascicle.

Uncertainty exists about the extents to which Ziers and Brown knew their British bryophytes at first hand in the field as opposed to second hand in herbaria. Perhaps Latin was not Dickson's strong suit if he missed a formal education at school, causing him to rely on Ziers and Brown for writing up his discoveries. Whatever Dickson's failings as a scribe may have been, he was evidently an astute business-man, who left £3,500 to his wife, £2,000 to each of two daughters, and his half of the business in Covent Garden to his son (also James).

Dickson published before Hedwig in 1801, so was unable to use his bryological binomials, whereas subsequent British bryofloras were able to draw on Hedwig's nomenclature (Smith, 1804; Smith and J. Sowerby's 36 volumes, the last of which was published in 1814; Sir William Jackson Hooker's and Thomas Taylor's *Muscologia Britannica*, 2nd edition, 1827).

Family background and biography

James Dickson was born at Kirke House, Traquair (Traquhair), Peeblesshire, apparently a son of John Dickson, who was probably a gardener. James's first job was as an apprentice in the Earl's gardens at Traquair.

James apparently did not work at a nursery at Kinnoull near Perth, for those grounds were originally laid out by another, apparently unrelated but contemporary James Dickson (1746-1820) who came from Hassendeanburn, Roxburghshire. This second James Dickson had a brother Walter Dickson (1759-1836) who moved to Edinburgh where he formed a joint business with a third (and also unrelated) James Dickson (c.1744-1795) who already had a nursery at Leith Walk. Their business became Dickson & Co. After this James Dickson died in 1795 his son James (1777-1834) sold his interest in Dickson & Co. and with his half-brother George (1783-1825) formed a new firm, James and George Dickson, which became Dickson Brothers, and after George's death James Dickson and Sons. James Dickson (1738-1822) of Traquair and later London was not related to either of the two Dickson families whose members ran these two separate Dickson businesses, and which dominated their trade in Edinburgh and beyond for many decades.

After arriving in London, James Dickson found employment at nurseries to the west of the city, such as that of Jeffrey & Co. in Kensington, and also worked for a time at a nursery in Hammersmith. This was probably the famous Vineyard nursery, owned by fellow-Scots James Lee and Lewis Kennedy. He may also have worked as a gardener at one or more of the large estates on the outskirts of London.

In 1772 he set up in business as nurseryman and seedsman on his own account, and started his own shop in Covent Garden. He lived in Bedford Street, Covent Garden between 1795 and 1799. He got to know the King's gardener, William Forsyth, and also Joseph (later Sir Joseph) Banks, who allowed him free access to his extensive library, introduced him to other botanists, and through whose recommendation he came to manage the garden at the British Museum.

In 1788 Dickson became a founding member of the Linnaean Society, and in 1804 attended the foundation of what became the Royal Horticultural Society. He became a vice-president of the RHS.

From the 1790s, Dickson established a nursery at Croydon, and lived at Broad Green (now 289, London Road), Croydon from 1799, but retained premises in Covent Garden to the end of his life.

Dickson married twice. His first wife may have been Janet Boyle (born at Rescobie in 1740), whom he married in 1770. Janet had seven children: James (born 1771), Janet (1772), Agnes (1775-1855), John (1777), Mary (1777), Katherine (1779) and David (1782-1868). However, none of these offspring are named in James's will, so perhaps it was another James Dickson who married Janet Boyle.

In 1786, aged about 48, after his first wife had died, James married Margaret Park (1762-1837), who was half his age, and daughter of Mungo Park (1714-1793), a prosperous tenant farmer at Foulshiels, near Selkirk, and Elizabeth (*née* Hislop, 1742-1817). Margaret's brother was the explorer Mungo Park (1771-1806), who made his reputation by exploring Africa. James and Margaret had a son, James (1800-1830/1), and daughters Isabella (born 1796) and Jane (or Jean, born 1805). Isabella married Frederick John Bassett (died 1852), surgeon of Fenchurch Street, London, at Croydon in 1824. James junior married Mary Ann Gaines in 1823.

Dickson died, aged 84, at Broad Green, Croydon on August 14th, 1822, and was buried in the churchyard of All Saints, Sanderstead (about two miles south of Croydon), Surrey. He willed £3,500, his premises in Croydon, together with his household goods and collection of dried plants to his wife Margaret, £2,000 to each of his daughters, the remainder of his estate and effects, including his share of the business in Covent Garden Market to his nephew and business associate James Anderson, and "the same and every part thereof" to his son James.

The Royal Horticultural Society has a portrait in oils of Dickson at the age of 82, and the Linnaean Society has a water-colour of him.

Acknowledgment

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