

THOMAS TAYLOR (1786-1848)

Mark Lawley
email: mrbyology@gmail.com

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/>

Botanical career

Taylor was particularly interested in bryophytes and lichens, and with William Jackson Hooker he prepared *Muscologia Britannica* (1818). Taylor also wrote 'Lichenes' for James Townsend Mackay's *Flora Hibernica* (1836).

Taylor's bryophytes are in the Farlow herbarium of Cryptogamic Botany at Harvard, and at the Natural History Museum in London. His lichens and drawings are with the Boston Society of Natural History, and his letters are at Kew.

Family background and biography

Thomas Taylor was a son of Joseph Taylor, whose paternal grandfather (also Joseph) of Dunkerron Castle married Mary Palmer, daughter of the Reverend Thomas Palmer. Mary's sister Margaret married Beversham Harman of Laharen, and their daughter Katharine (1709-1804) married Thomas Hutchins (died 1754) of Ballylickey, who was paternal grandfather of the botanist Ellen Hutchins (1785-1815). Thomas Taylor and Ellen Hutchins were thus distant cousins.

Thomas was born on May 10th 1786 in a boat on the River Ganges, East Indies, one of eight children born to Joseph Irwin Taylor (1765/6-1811) and his wife, an Indian lady of rank known as Poor Begum. Joseph was a captain in the Bengal Artillery, and subsequently major of the British East India Company. He also had scholarly accomplishments, and compiled a Hindustani-English dictionary that ran to two editions in 1808 and 1820. His son, Thomas, was sent back to Ireland in about 1793 for his education, where he attended the French School in Cork, but eighteen more years were to elapse before Joseph resigned from the army in 1811 and returned from India with his other children. This may have been because Joseph was ill, for he died that year.

The Irish Taylors were free-thinking Unitarians, who settled near Kenmare in 1650. Thomas's career was influenced by his religion. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin (B.A. in 1807 and M.D. in 1814), and practised as a physician in Dublin from

1814 until 1820, when he took up an appointment as professor of botany and natural history at the Royal Cork Scientific Institute.

In 1809 Thomas married his first cousin, Emma or Harriet Taylor (1790-1875), daughter of Captain Thomas Taylor. Emma was also born in India of part-Oriental extraction, and had been educated in Ireland. Emma and Thomas had three children: Joseph, another son and a daughter.

In 1830 the government withdrew its grant to the Institute at Cork, and Taylor retired to the family estate of Dunkerron, near Kenmare and Killarney in Co. Kerry. There he had a new house built, and established the woods and garden. While farming his estate, he also acted as physician to his workmen, and was J.P. and magistrate. During his time at Dunkerron he concentrated on botany, and particularly liked to climb Mangerton mountain and McGillicuddy's Reeks in search of plants.

Like so many others in Ireland, economic circumstances of the 1840s and the potato-blight and famine affected his final years. In 1843 he was appointed medical officer of the Kenmare Poor Law Union, for which he was paid £40 a year, and in 1847 he was appointed consultant to the new fever hospital at Kenmare, where unassisted he attended 200 patients every day at the height of the epidemic. He wrote to Hooker in May 1847 that "more than 40 medical officers of Union Work Houses have already perished of Fever caught in the discharge of their duties." His work did indeed prove his undoing, and he died of fever on February 4th or 6th 1848. Dunkerron passed to Thomas's son, Joseph, who was in turn succeeded by his son, Thomas, who sold off the woods and allowed the house and grounds to fall into decay before selling them. Most of the remaining descendants subsequently emigrated to Canada.

Thomas's grand-nephew, Henry Taylor, described him as being "of stout build and medium height with handsome features, dark brown eyes and coal-black hair..." Doubtless some of these features came from his Indian mother. He always wore "a blue coat, large gilt buttons, thick woollen stockings and knee breeches.... [and was a man of] great activity and muscular strength".

Acknowledgement

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