

## SYMERS DOUGLAS MACDONALD MACVICAR (1857-1932)

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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*

S. M. MacVicar probably first became interested in natural history through the influence of his father, John Gibson MacVicar, who studied bryophytes to some extent. The herbarium at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh has some of J.G. MacVicar's mosses, for example, *Grimmia ovalis* from Dundee in 1824, and *Ulota drummondii* from Balnaboth, Glenprosen, Angus. Then, as a young man, Symers's medical studies at Edinburgh in the 1870s and early 1880s must have further stimulated his interest in field-botany, for in those days medical students had to know their plants in order to qualify as doctors.

MacVicar had the botanical bug seriously by the late 1880s, when he married and settled to live on the west coast of Scotland at Invermoidart, on the island of Shona Bheag, Kinlochmoidart, West Inverness-shire. The mild, humid climate of the Atlantic seaboard is a mecca for liverworts, and MacVicar arrived there at a time when bryologists remained uncertain about how to distinguish many of the species. In taking up the challenge, he became accomplished at identifying liverworts, and was soon acknowledged as the leading British expert in hepatics.

MacVicar discovered *Lejeunea mandonii* new to science at Kinlochmoidart in 1898, and many more species new to Scotland: *Acrobolbus wilsonii*, *Adelanthus decipiens*, *Barbilophozia quadriloba*, *Calypogeia suecica*, *Cephaloziella spinigera*, *C. stellulifera*, *Cololejeunea rossettiana*, *Drepanolejeunea hamatifolia*, *Geocalyx graveolens*, *Jungermannia subelliptica*, *Leiocolea heterocolpos*, *Leptoscyphus cuneifolius*, *Lophocolea fragrans*, *Lophozia obtusa*, *Marsupella condensata*, *M. sphacelata*, *M. sprucei*, *Nardia breidleri*, *Pedinophyllum interruptum*, *Radula carringtonii*, *Riccardia incurvata*, *Scapania calcicola*, *S. degenii* and *Tritomaria exsecta*.

MacVicar not only excelled at finding and identifying liverworts, he also took trouble to communicate the knowledge he had acquired in the form of a succession of publications, starting with 'Hepaticae of Moidart, West Inverness' in the *Journal of Botany* (1899). Then came 'A Key to British Hepaticae' in the 1901 issue of the same journal; this was revised and republished in 1906. In 1905 he prepared the first *Census Catalogue of*

*British Hepatics* for the Moss Exchange Club, and in 1910 'The Distribution of Hepaticae in Scotland' appeared in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh*.

His writing career culminated in the publication of *The Student's Handbook of British Hepatics* (1912), with a second edition appearing in 1926. This book is a model of organisation and clear presentation, with H.G. Jameson's drawings accompanying MacVicar's text describing how to recognise and where to look for each species.

MacVicar's herbarium is at the Natural History Museum in London, with other of his plants at Ulster Museum in Belfast, and the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

### *Family background*

Symers Macdonald MacVicar was born at Moffat, Dumfriess-shire on December 27<sup>th</sup> 1857, the youngest child of nine born to the Reverend John Gibson MacVicar (1800-1884, who was then minister for Moffat) and Janet (Jessie) (*née* Robertson-Macdonald, died 1900).

His father, John Gibson MacVicar, minister and author, was born at Dundee, the second son of the Reverend Patrick MacVicar (1763/4-1842, minister of St. Paul's, Dundee) and his first wife Agnes (*née* Gibson), daughter of the Reverend John Gibson, minister of Mains, Forfarshire (Angus). Patrick and Agnes's eldest son, Archibald, was born in 1797, followed by a daughter Euphemia in 1799, then Patrick, and another daughter Catherine Halliburton MacVicar (born 1804) who married James Beckwith at Dundee in 1843. The Haliburtons of Dirlleston had formerly enjoyed considerable influence as servants of the Scottish crown in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and James Halyburton (1518-1589) was a noted religious reformer and provost of Dundee.

One wonders whether the MacVicar family of Dundee at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century knew the Gardiners – William Gardiner (1808-1852) who wrote the *Flora of Forfarshire* (1848), and his father James and uncle Douglas, both of whom were keen botanists.

John Gibson MacVicar went to the university of St. Andrews in 1814, where he excelled in mathematics and natural philosophy, and thence to Edinburgh, where he studied chemistry, anatomy, and natural history under John Knox's tutelage, together with rhetoric, Hebrew and church history (see *Dictionary of National Biography*). At this time he also delivered his first papers, on the germination of ferns and on the air-pump.

He was licensed to preach, but in 1827 took up a newly established post as lecturer in natural history at St. Andrews, becoming professor in 1830. In 1828 he began editing and writing articles for the *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture*, assisted with the formation of a museum at St. Andrews and helped to promote the Watt Institution at Dundee. He lectured at both these places, and also wrote several books on natural philosophy in the early 1830s, in which he explained recent scientific advances and attempted to reconcile

these with religious orthodoxy. *Elements of the Economy of Nature, or, The Principles of Physics, Chemistry and Physiology* appeared in 1830 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1856), and *Inquiries Concerning the Medium of Light and the Form of its Molecules* in 1833.

The MacVicars of Dundee were connected with prominent MacVicars at Edinburgh, several of whom are commemorated on tablets in a mausoleum at St. Cuthbert's Church, Edinburgh. Alexander MacVicar, merchant of Edinburgh, was the eldest son of Neil MacVicar (c.1672-1747, minister of the Gospel) and Liliias (*née* Dunbar, 1686-1732). A later Neil MacVicar (1742-1813) was also a merchant of Edinburgh, as well as Lord Provost of that city in 1802/3. By his wife Ann Jean (*née* Johnstone, died 1836) he had a daughter Euphemia (1789-1818) who married John Young, junior, Esquire of Bellwood. Also commemorated at St. Cuthbert's is John MacVicar, Esquire (1791-1858), of Ardarroch, Dunbartonshire, son of David MacVicar. This John MacVicar died at Millbank House, Edinburgh.

John Gibson MacVicar married Janet (Jessie) Robertson-Macdonald in Edinburgh on Christmas Day 1839, and eight days later was ordained to a newly established branch of the Scottish church in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The couple emigrated to Ceylon in 1840, where John became minister at St. Andrews, Colombo.

The first seven of their nine children were born in Ceylon, and then in 1852 the family returned to Scotland. In the following year John MacVicar was inducted to the living of Moffat, Dumfries-shire, where his two youngest children were born – Katharine in 1855 and Symers in 1857.

Of Symers's three brothers and five sisters, David Robertson MacVicar, sometime of Edinburgh, became a sub-manager for the River Plate Trust Loan and Agency Company Limited, and died at Mar del Plata, Argentina in 1900. Pauline Trevelyan MacVicar was born in 1844, Jessie Macdonald MacVicar (1848-1933) married the Reverend Robert Walter Weir of Greyfriars, Colinton, Edinburgh, and Katharine Beckwith MacVicar (1855-1939) died unmarried at Invermoidart, Kinlochmoidart.

While Symers's father's line was studded with well-to-do middle-class merchants and clergymen, his mother's family was landed. Jessie was a daughter of Margaret Macdonald (1773-1848), a sister to Colonel Donald Macdonald (governor of Tobago, died 1804), and heiress of the estate of Kinlochmoidart. Donald Macdonald (c.1705-1746), who died at Carlisle, descended from Angus Macdonald (died 1314-1318), King of the Hebrides (and whose sons became Lords of the Isles), and further back in time to Somerled (d. 1164), King of the Isles and Lord of Argyll.

On her father's side, Jessie was daughter to Lt. Col. David Macdonald (*né* Robertson, died 1845) of Kinlochmoidart, who served in India in the 1780s and raised the first Malay regiment in Ceylon. Of David's siblings, James Robertson (1762-1845) was a general in the army, William (1753-1835) became an advocate and later Lord Robertson, Mary (born 1752) married the traveller and author Patrick Brydone (1736-1818), and Eleanor married John Russell, writer and clerk to the Signet.

Jessie Macdonald's paternal grandparents were Mary (*née* Nisbet, 1723-1802), and the famous historian and church-leader in Edinburgh Dr. William Robertson (1721-1793, author of *The History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and James VI*, two volumes, 1758), *The History of the Reign of Charles V* (three volumes, 1769) and *History of America* (two volumes, 1777)).

The Robertsons of Kinlochmoidart derived from both Highland and Jacobite families: from James II on the female side, and on the male side from John Robertson of Muirton, Elginshire, second son of Alexander, fifth baron of Struan (Strowan) in Perthshire by his wife Lady Elizabeth, daughter of the Earl of Atholan.

### *Biography*

Symers MacVicar was educated at a private school at Moffat, and one wonders whether the MacVicars knew John Duncan (father of the bryologist John Bishop Duncan, 1869-1953), who was schoolmaster at Moffat from about 1871. Even if so, Symers must have left Moffat to attend school in Bedford while J.B. Duncan was still very young.

Afterwards MacVicar studied medicine at Edinburgh University, and qualified as a physician and surgeon in 1882. He practised as doctor on various ships, and travelled widely in course of his duties. His home address remained Moffat until 1886, according to the Medical Register.

In November 1887 he married his cousin's widow, Ada Julia Robertson-Macdonald (*née* Littledale, 1844-1920). Ada's first husband, William David Alexander Robertson-Macdonald (1833-1883), was a merchant of Liverpool, while Ada was the daughter of Thomas Littledale (1818-1861) and Julia (*née* Royds, 1820-1904) of Liverpool. The Littledales were [merchants and brokers] and descended from the Littledales of Whitehaven in Cumbria, of whom Mary Littledale married the ironmaster Isaac Wilkinson. The Royds of Rochdale were judges and Members of Parliament. Both the Littledales and Royds had also married into the Molyneux family of Liverpool, some of whom were merchants. Thomas Molyneux (1753-1835) was a mayor of Liverpool in 1806/7.

After their honeymoon, Symers and Ada settled to live on the family estate at Kinlochmoidart. After the uprising of 1745, the Macdonalds forfeited the estate of Kinlochmoidart, but it was restored to them in 1784, and it remained in the family until 1883, when William Frederick Robertson-Macdonald IX (Ada Julia's father-in-law) contracted to sell it shortly before his death on February 22<sup>nd</sup> of that year. His son (Ada's first husband) survived his father by only a few weeks, dying on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1883. The three islands of Shona Bheag, Deer Island and Green Island were not sold, and remained Macdonald property.

Ada had a house, Invermoidart, built on Shona Bheag, where she and Symers went to live after their marriage in 1887, a secluded seat which Symers, who had retired from his medical career, found ideal for his new career in hepaticology. Ada died in 1920, after which Symers's youngest sister Katharine moved from Edinburgh to live there. Symers died in 1932, and was buried in the Macdonald's family grave on Eilean Finnean, the beautiful Green Isle in Loch Shiel. Katharine lived on at Invermoidart for a further seven years, and the last of her generation of MacVicars passed from this life on the eve of the Second World War.

### *Acknowledgement*

I thank Estela Dukan of the Library of the Royal College of Physicians at Edinburgh, and Steven Kerr, Assistant Librarian at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh for information supplied.