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

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 100 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 Meuisses 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 and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielichhoferia elongata and Grimmia elatior (all three mosses being very rare and new to Britain) in Angus (Forfarshire) in 1868, Mielic...
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 Hydrohypnum molle on Lochnagar, and Earzynchium 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 time, 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 botanically 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 clumps and watercourses for botanical gems remaining.

In addition to the species mentioned above, Fergusson also found numerous uncommon or rare mosses in his adopted home county of Fergusson also found numerous uncommon In addition to the species mentioned above, Fergusson was also interested in fungi, and Fossombronia wondraczekii near Montrose in 1879, Hypnum callichroum at Lethnot, Campylium gracilis in Clova, Pseudoleucobryum longifolium in Clova, Glenprosen and Glen Fee, Encalypta alpina in Glen Doll and Caenlochan, Tortula leucothamnoides in 1886, Stegania latifolia in Clova, Glen Fee and Glen Doll in the 1860s, Leptodontium gemmaceum in Denhead of Gray, Liff in 1880, Grimmia ovata in Clova in 1868 as well as in Glenprosen, G. lutea in Glenprosen in 1867, Clova in 1868, and in Glen Fee, Bryum calyptlium at Barry Links in the 1860s, Pseudobryum cinclidioides in Glenprosen and at Menmuir, Cinclidium stygion in Clova and near Fern, Uloa coarctata in Clova in the 1860s, Myurella julacea in Clova in the 1860s and in Glen Fee, Pseudoleksekiya rugostris in Clova in 1868, Pseudoleksekiya incurvata at Loch Brandy, Heterodontium dimorphum in Glen Doll in 1868 and in Glenprosen, Pseudoleksekiya decipiens in Glenprosen in the 1860s, Campyliadelphus elodes near Montrose in 1879, Amblystegium confervoides at Airlie in the 1860s, Sciurn-hypnum reflexum in Clova in 1868, and Hypnum callichroum in Glenprosen in the 1860s.

Of liverworts he added Cephalozia plenticeps, Fossombronia wondraczekii, Hatarnathus flavo-vanus, Pseudoleksekiya decipiens, J. polaris and Marrupella sprucei to Scotland's known bryoflora. In Angus, he found Moerchia hylity in Caenlochan in 1868, Marrupella sparsulae in Caenlochan in 1873, M. sprucei near Loch Brandy in 1876, Barbilophozia hypopodioides in Clova in 1876, Radula linderbergiana also in Clova, and Cladophodium francisci at Balquharn near Fern.

Fergusson was also interested in fungi, and by means of a letter in *Scottish Cryptogamic Society* in the following year, Fergusson's letters are at the Natural History Museum in London. His plants are at Oxford, 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 Shie, Angus (Forfarshire), a son of Donald Fergusson (1791/1–1871), 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 (1843/4–1777). 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 eldest brothers, John and Donald, were still living in Glensheie in 1871, and their sons continued to farm in the district after that.

John junior was educated at Glensheie 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 Fern 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**

I thank Reverend David Gray, minister at Fern for arranging to provide the likeness of Fergusson, and Moira Mackenzie (archivist at Angus Archives) for supplying information.