

George Don's Herbarium Britannicum

BY

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During his short stay in Edinburgh (1802-1806) as Principal Gardener of the Royal Botanic Garden, then situated on the north side of Leith Walk, George Don began the issue of his exsiccata under the title "Herbarium Britannicum."

At that time he had close association with Dr. Patrick Neill, whom he had first met at Forfar about the year 1797,* and who continued to befriend the family for many years. In his company Don made botanical excursions in the vicinity of Edinburgh, collecting such interesting species as *Vicia lutea* at North Queensferry in June 1804, and *Valeriana pyrenaica* at Abercorn in September 1805, the specimens of the former, gathered on the occasion just mentioned, forming No. 40 in his second fasciculus of plants. That Don held this distinguished botanist in high esteem may be gathered from the fact that his third surviving son, born at Leith Walk not long after his arrival, was named Patrick Neill Don.† It is therefore a matter for no surprise that such printing as was required for the "Herbarium Britannicum" was done at that time by Messrs. Neill & Co., Dr. Neill's firm,‡ and to learn from the Doctor himself that he edited many of the tickets which accompany the specimens. "Tho' Mr. D. is a most acute botanist," he wrote to Sir J. E. Smith,§ "I need not tell you how confused and inaccurate a writer he is, nor how much labour it has given me to extract the habitats and observations which appear in his 5 published fasciculi. They are not yet correct; but they would certainly have been infinitely worse had I not transcribed the greater part."

The "Herbarium Britannicum" comprises nine fasciculi, issued at irregular intervals, six during Don's residence in Edinburgh and three after his return to Forfar. Each fasciculus contained 25 mounted

* For an account of this first meeting cf. Trans. Bot. Soc. Edin. iv (1850-53), p. 117.

† Three other sons were named with the same motive: James Brodie Don in honour of the Brodie of Brodie, who assisted Don in obtaining the Edinburgh post; Jas. Edward Smith Don in honour of Sir J. E. Smith; and Chas. Lyell Linnaeus Don in honour of Carl Linné and Charles Lyell of Kinnordy, Forfarshire.

‡ The title-pages of the first six fasciculi (1804-1806) are inscribed: "Edinburgh: Printed by Neill and Company."

§ From Edinburgh, dated 9th May 1806. Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii, No. XII (1904), pp. 95 and 96, footnote.

[Notes, R.B.G., Edin., No. LXXXIX, April 1934.]

plants, loosely bound up in book form, but so arranged that each sheet could be easily separated for inclusion in its proper place in a larger collection, a procedure adopted by many of the subscribers. Few sets, it would seem, were called for,* and it is now the case that hardly any exist in their original form. It is possible, indeed, that the only quite complete and well-preserved example still extant in that condition is one obtained in 1929 by the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, from Mr. Charles Grierson of Bemersyde, Tarbet. The observations which follow are largely the outcome of a study of this unique set, and are intended to supplement the late Dr. Claridge Druce's account, given in these Notes† some thirty years ago, of a somewhat less complete set, then in the possession of Mr. John Knox of Forfar.

Besides the 25 specimens with their printed tickets, each fasciculus contained a dated title-page and a numbered list of contents; while, in addition, the first fasciculus had an author's "Advertisement" and a Dedication to Sir Joseph Banks. The dates of issue of the several fasciculi are not in every case correctly indicated on the title-pages, and the facts, so far as they can now be ascertained, may well be given here. The first fasciculus bears the date 1804, and undoubtedly appeared about July of that year.‡ The second, in the Edinburgh copy, is dated 1805; but Dr. Druce makes 1804 the year of its publication,§ without however stating upon what authority he does so. Such small internal evidence as the fasciculus itself supplies seems to support the later date, which the present writer believes to be the correct one. For instance, the ticket accompanying the specimen of *Vicia lutea* (No. 40) reads as though referring to a previous summer. "This rare vicia I observed," Don records, "on banks close by the sea shore, a little way east from the village of North Queensferry, in June 1804, in company with Messrs. P. Neill and G. White of Edinburgh." Two more fasciculi were completed in the course of the same year, and are correctly dated 1805; while a fifth and sixth made their appearance, as their title-pages show, in 1806.

On 31st December 1806 Don resigned his position in Edinburgh, returning thereafter to Forfar. The call of those mountains where grew his cherished botanical treasures no doubt largely influenced him in this action; but there is also no doubt that an independent spirit such as his was galled by those restrictions, not all physical, which were entailed by his connection with the Royal Botanic Garden.|| His removal put a stop to the publication of further instalments of the

* In a letter to N. J. Winch, dated 18th February 1810, Don writes: "... but although my subscribers are not numerous yet I flatter myself they are respectable and likely to continue. . . ." Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii, No. XII (1904), p. 65, footnote.

† Loc. cit., p. 144.

‡ The "Advertisement" is dated 1st May; the Dedication 2nd July.

§ Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii, No. XII (1904), pp. 65 and 148.

|| Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii, No. XII (1904), p. 65.

"Herbarium Britannicum" until 1810. Writing to Nathaniel J. Winch on 18th February of that year Don says :* "I am much obliged to you for your kindness in saving specimens for my herbarium as I am now employed in finishing my 7 and 8 numbers after a stand of nearly 4 years. . . ." The title-page, in both these fasciculi, bears the legend "Edinburgh: Printed by John Johnstone. 1806."† A probable explanation would seem to be that the printing was done before Don's return to Forfar, and that, not appreciating the need for detailed accuracy, he allowed the date to go unaltered. As regards the ninth and last fasciculus there is even greater conflict of evidence. The title-page in the Edinburgh copy is one printed by Neill & Co. for the third fasciculus, dated 1805, with the number III altered to IX; while, according to Dr. Druce‡ that in Mr. Knox's set bore the date 1806. Don would therefore seem to have used spare title-pages of various dates in the preparation of this fasciculus, again without altering them. That publication cannot have taken place earlier than the autumn of 1812, quite possibly not till the spring of 1813, is certain from the inclusion of *Oxytropis campestris* (No. 213), the label of which begins as follows: "I discovered this truly beautiful species, new to Britain, on a rock on the Clova Mountains, in July 1812."

It may also be of interest to record here something of the history of this complete set now at Edinburgh. Upon the front cover of each fasciculus, written in ink vertically at the left upper corner, apparently by Don himself, is the inscription "3. G. A." This appears to show that Don numbered each set according to a list of subscribers, and that the original owner of the present one was the third of these. A note in the first fasciculus indicates that this person was the Rev. John Barclay, M.D. (1758-1826), in his day a well-known teacher of anatomy in Edinburgh.§ Dr. Barclay's wife, whom he married in 1811, was Eleanora Campbell, daughter of Sir James Campbell of Aberuchill, his friend and patron. This lady was one of Don's botanical correspondents, supplying him with specimens of *Paris quadrifolia* (No. 163) and *Vaccinium Oxycoccus* (No. 209) for his "Herbarium Britannicum";|| and it was doubtless through her that Dr. Barclay became one of his

* Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin., loc. cit., p. 65, footnote.

† Why Don at that time severed his connection with Messrs. Neill & Co. is quite unknown.

‡ Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii, No. XII (1904), pp. 65, 178.

§ For a short biography of this brilliant teacher cf. "Introductory Lectures to a Course of Anatomy Delivered by the Late John Barclay, M.D., F.R.S.E., &c," by George Ballingall, M.D., Edinburgh; 1827. Barclay was latterly assisted by Dr. Knox, who, a few years later, was involved in the Burke and Hare case.

|| "I have been honoured by Miss Eleonora Campbell with excellent specimens of this plant [*Paris*] collected by her in the glen of Kilbryde near Dunblane"; and "I have again to acknowledge my obligations to Miss Eleonora Campbell for excellent specimens of this plant [*Vaccinium Oxycoccus*], collected by her near Kilbryde, within three miles of Dunblane, in Perthshire." Cf. Don's labels in his "Herbarium Britannicum."

earliest subscribers. She survived her husband and no doubt retained the collection after his death.

Aberuchill Castle, the seat of Sir James Campbell, is situated about a mile and a half from Comrie in Perthshire. Near the same place there resided at that time a family named Macrosty, one of whom, Margaret, married Alexander Hector, Writer, of Edinburgh. To them was born, on the 16th of March 1834, James—afterwards Sir James—Hector, who graduated M.D. at Edinburgh in 1856 and later distinguished himself by his work as naturalist to the expedition to British North America and as government geologist in New Zealand and director of the Botanic Garden at Wellington. His name appears immediately below that of Dr. Barclay, on the cover of the Edinburgh set of the "Herbarium Britannicum," suggesting the likelihood that he obtained it as the result of friendship between his mother and Dr. Barclay's widow; a likelihood which becomes almost certainty when their connection with the Comrie area is taken into account. From Sir James, Don's plants passed to his brother-in-law, the Rev. James Farquharson, D.D., minister of Selkirk, and a prominent member of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, who, on his retiral about the year 1900, gave them to Mr. Charles Grierson, in whose custody they remained till offered by him to the Edinburgh Herbarium.

As already mentioned, the only set of Don's "Herbarium Britannicum" available to Dr. Druce, when preparing his account of it, was a somewhat incomplete one. It therefore appears fitting to give the text of those tickets not seen by him, along with comments on a few other numbers where necessary. In extracting the information which follows, the writer was interested to observe the number of plants represented by specimens actually gathered in habitats near Edinburgh, where the species may yet be found. Arthur's Seat provided *Arenaria verna* and *Poa rigida*; from Duddingston Loch came *Ranunculus Lingua* and *Stellaria palustris*. Further afield, *Pulmonaria officinalis* was from Arniston woods; while Gullane links and marsh supplied *Apium nodiflorum* var. *repens*, *Artemisia maritima*, *Samolus Valerandi*, *Scirpus maritimus*, and *Lepturus filiformis*. On the other hand, many localities close to town must be greatly changed since Don's day, for he obtained his material of *Trifolium arvense* and *Hieracium umbellatum* from the Figget Whins, west of Portobello; and his *Brassica campestris* "in cornfields near Edinburgh, by the side of the road leading from Queen Street to St. Bernard's Well," now almost in the heart of the city.

Text of Labels additional to those given by Dr. Druce ; with comments on a few others.

The mark ! indicates that the identification is correct.

FASCICULUS II.

26. *Eriophorum alpinum*. *Fl. Dan.* t. 620 ; *E.B.* t. 311 !

In the plate in English Botany, the shoot represented with radical leaves does not belong to the *Eriophorum alpinum*; but must be the *Carex dioica*, the roots of which are often found entangled with it, and when cultivated frequently destroy it entirely.

I discovered this plant in July 1791, in the moss of Restennet, near Forfar; but it is now [1804] totally extirpated from thence by the digging of marl and peats; and at present we know of no British habitat for this plant.

[The single small specimen consists of less than an inch of rhizome with six fruiting stems.]

32. *Spiraea salicifolia*. Pall. Ross. t. 21!

I observed this plant in hedges in several places in the district of Stormont, Perthshire; and by the side of a rivulet, near Balnamoon in Angusshire, growing among betula alnus, and undoubtedly indigenous there.

[Now known not to be native.]

35. *Leonurus cardiaca*. E.B. t. 286; Fl. Dan. t. 727!

At Collington, near Edinburgh, from whence my specimens were taken.

39. *Vicia lathyroides*. E.B. t. 30.

On Salisbury Craigs, and on the south side of Arthur's seat, near the basaltic rocks; and Blackford Hill, all near Edinburgh: near Forfar and Kirriemuir, Angusshire; and near Forteviot in Perthshire.

[The specimens in the Edinburgh set are *Vicia angustifolia* (L.) Reichard var. *Bobartii* (Forst.), which occurs on Arthur's Seat and Blackford Hill along with *V. lathyroides*. Don no doubt gathered both, some of his specimens being correct, which would account for Dr. Druce's acceptance of those seen by him.* The two plants are very similar and easily confused.]

FASCICULUS III.

62. *Cerastium latifolium*.

[The specimens bear out Dr. Druce's opinion that this is *C. alpinum* var. *lanatum* (Lam.) rather than *C. arcticum*.†]

FASCICULUS VI.

126. *Scripus palustris*. Eng. Bot. t. 131; Fl. Dan. t. 273; Leers, t. 1. fig. 3.

In marshes, and by the sides of rivulets; frequent.

[This is *Eleocharis palustris* (L.) Br.]

* Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii. No. XII (1904), p. 150.

† Cf. Notes, Roy. Bot. Gard. Edin. iii. No. XII (1904), p. 154.

133. *Symphytum tuberosum*. Eng. Bot. t. 1502!

By the side of the water of Leith, between Collington and Currie; at Bell's Mills, near Edinburgh; and also at Bilston-burn, near the village of Loanhead, Mid-Lothian, whence my specimens were taken. In all these places it is undoubtedly native.

[This ticket is reproduced here in view of the recent suggestion* that *S. tuberosum* is not native in Scotland. The species is abundant in many places in the Lothians, and the writer believes Don to be correct as regards its status.]

* Cf. Pugsley in Journ. of Bot., lxi, No. 820 (Apl. 1931), pp. 93, 94.