

## **Peter Macpherson, FRCP, FRCR, FLS, MBE** **(1925–2015)**

With the sudden death of Peter Macpherson (Colour Section Plate 2) on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2015, in his 90th year, the society lost one of its more distinguished members, who will be fondly remembered for his service to the Scottish membership and for his contribution to the botany of Glasgow and Lanarkshire.

Peter was born in Inveraray on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1925, the eldest of a family of brothers. They lived on the shores of Loch Fyne, where Peter developed the love of boats which he retained throughout his life. He also established his love of natural history and in 1936, at the age of 11, he began collecting plants and won school prizes in both 1937 and 1938. He used to take Sunday afternoon excursions to identify and log flowers into school record books, which he retained: early signs of the thorough and meticulous recording that would mark his later botanical work.

Peter's schooling began in Inveraray Grammar School, Argyll, continued at Keil Boarding School in Dumbarton and at 16 years of age he entered the Anderson College of Medicine in Glasgow. In 1947 he gained the triple licentiate qualifications LRCP (Edinburgh), LRCS (Edinburgh) and LRFP & S (Glasgow). One of his first jobs was at Robroyston Hospital in Glasgow where he met a fellow resident Agnes Cochrane Davidson (affectionately known as 'Nan') who was to become the love of his life, and to whom he was married for 56 years. After marrying they moved to Oban where he specialised in chest medicine, helping to fight TB in Argyll. It was here that his four daughters, Elspeth, Lorna, Barbara and Gillian were born. Early family home movies focused on boats and babies, with the emphasis often on the former! He was a keen sailor of dinghies and was the Commodore of Oban Sailing Club in the early 1960s.

The family moved to Glasgow in 1966 and his medical career finally led to a consultancy in neuroradiology at the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow, in 1970, where he was

one of the pioneers in the use of new scanning techniques. He was president of the British Society of Neuroradiology, and during his distinguished medical career he generated over 200 publications and presentations. He enjoyed his work and after retirement continued in locum posts until the age of 70. However, partial retirement also allowed him to devote more time for his other passion, botanical recording.

Peter's first involvement in more dedicated botanical recording arose in the 1950s with the Distribution Maps Scheme. A field meeting held in the Oban area, led by Ursula Duncan, first brought the BSBI to Peter's attention. He joined the society in 1957 and the Glasgow Natural History Society (GNHS) in 1967. However it was in 1978, following the death of the celebrated local botanist Robert Mackechnie, when Peter took over the BSBI's vice-county recordership for Lanarkshire (v.c.77), that his most significant botanical work began.

With the Flora of Glasgow project developing in the early 1980s, Peter's early recording was targeted at urban Glasgow, where he further honed his sharp-eyed skills. Perhaps Peter's greatest contribution to local botany has been his searches of urban waste places, notably pit bings, coups and former industrial complexes (e.g. Gartcosh Steel Works) and many other smaller waste ground sites. He recorded over 416 species from the Glasgow Garden Festival Site and made many interesting finds in the less manicured corners of the Glasgow Botanic Gardens. In the 1920s Robert Grierson was a well-known explorer of municipal tips who recorded many non-native 'Clyde Casuals' (some 430 species). At the time Grierson lamented "The City is burning most of its rubbish now; possibly this is good for public health but it is ruinous for my work"! With new developments and urban renewal along the Clyde over the last 30 years, modern day botanists can echo this sentiment. Professor Jim Dickson, in his book on local

plants (Dickson, 1991), described Peter as “The present day hunter par excellence on the coups”. Many of Peter’s stunning 565 new non-native vice-county records are from such explorations. In his Flora he lists a remarkable 33 taxa he found new to the British Isles and 66 taxa new to Scotland, mostly non-natives.

Even though I knew Peter for 30 years, and we were BSBI Recorders of adjoining vice-counties for 25 of these, we never spent much time together in the field; we were both very focused on our own patches. I did help out with Peter’s surveying in the more remote upland Lanarkshire (funded by the GNHS), which was supposedly not so easy for him in later years. However whenever I came back with reports of interesting new vice-county records (like *Saussurea alpina* (Alpine Sawwort) and *Thalictrum alpinum* (Alpine Meadow-rue) on Gana Hill), he quickly found the energy to go and visit the site – and, while there he also managed to add another new v.c. record (*Persicaria vivipara*, Alpine Bistort)!

Although dedicated to his Lanarkshire patch, Peter was a fervent ‘twitcher’ and was keen to see all the native plants recorded in Britain. I did have the pleasure of accompanying him on a visit to see some rare alpine plants that had thus far escaped his attention. He proved very sprightly at scaling Cul Mor to see *Artemisia norvegica* (Norwegian Mugwort) on the summit plateau, and in the early days of GPS we had to be very wary of being directed over the cliff edge! The next day he managed a very long trek and ascent to see *Poa flexuosa* (Wavy Meadow-grass) on the boulder scree at Ben Nevis.

Peter’s daughter Elspeth recounts how when growing up “our summer holiday destinations were determined by the location of target plants he was seeking” adding wryly that “many a ‘fun’ hour was spent trawling coups, bings and bogs!” Later in life he spent family holidays in southern Europe and his herbarium holds over a thousand specimens from Cyprus, Crete, Italy, the Iberian peninsula, Madeira and the Canaries. He also had a small collection from visits to Manitoba, Canada, (where his daughter Lorna worked for a short time) and

several alpinists from earlier visits to Sweden and Austria.

Peter regularly hosted local GNHS and BSBI botanical meetings. I remember attending one, at a time when such meetings were increasingly becoming like extra-mural training sessions; this was not Peter’s approach. He greeted the participants, handed out some blank record cards and sent us off in all directions! However, he gave significant support to the activities of both the GNHS and BSBI, sitting on many committees in various capacities. His botanical activity led not just to the presidency of the GNHS (1979–1982, and 1984–1987) but also to that of the BSBI (1991–1993), as well as to the national honour of Member of the British Empire for services to natural history (2002). He was very proud when, during his presidency, the Society was invited by the BSBI’s Patron, The Queen Mother, to visit her at the Castle of Mey, Caithness in 1992.

Peter served on the BSBI’s Records Committee from 1994 to 2003, and he was Secretary of the Scottish Committee from its inception in 1991 till 1995 when he became Chairman (1996–1999). He hosted meetings at his home on Sundays, where we were always assured a fine tea and cake spread, courtesy of Nan. He was very thorough with meeting notes and helped to make sure that such meetings were effective, thus raising the profile of the Scottish membership. His long standing support of the *BSBI Scottish Newsletter*, which he edited since its inception in 1979, initially with the help of his long-term local botanical colleague Allan Stirling, was a great achievement and helped to give the relatively small band of Scottish recorders, covering disproportionately large land masses, an identity and cohesion. The publication came to be envied by some colleagues further south, many of whom were keen to receive a copy.

Mirroring his professional medical career, as an amateur botanist Peter was proactive in communicating his botanical work, producing over 100 botanical publications, mostly articles and short notes on the local flora in the *Glasgow Naturalist*, *BSBI News* and *BSBI*

*Scottish Newsletter*. His first presidential address to the GNHS was *The Doctrine of Signatures* (1982) and later his presidential address to the BSBI was titled *Colonisation of the Glasgow Garden Festival Site three years on: implications for recording* (Macpherson, 1993), a site studied in detail and followed up with several more publications. He also published on several other waste ground sites such as the old Gartcosh steelworks (Macpherson, 2001) and refuse tips like Coatbridge coup (Macpherson, 2000). He researched ship movements and cargoes along the Clyde, covering historical times and his own recent explorations (e.g. Macpherson, 1997). His fascination with the non-native flora led to his appointment as the convenor of a Working Group established by BSBI Council to discuss the vexed business of the terms used to describe plant status. Their report (Macpherson *et al.*, 1996) was thought-provoking and influential.

Peter sought the help of many specialist botanical experts for plant identification. He noted that he had sent at least 562 packages over 30 years to over 100 expert botanists. This has resulted in a locally unparalleled, comprehensive and reliable dataset. His work is particularly important for its coverage of non-native taxa, but also the numerous native records for hybrid, infraspecific and critical groups.

In addition to his recording efforts he amassed a large collection (well over 6000 specimens) of dried plant specimens. These specimens provide a permanent and verifiable record of locally found plants, which can be studied by botanists in the future. His reference collection of local *Cotoneasters* is of particular value. Eric Clement is quoted by Peter as stating that the “33 Lanarkshire taxa of *Cotoneaster* must be a world leader for one vice-county” – to which Peter then added that the total was “Now 38”! His collection is now held by Glasgow Museums (GLAM) and is in the process of being catalogued thanks to a generous legacy from Peter’s family to the GNHS.

Peter’s *magnum opus* is the recently published *Flora of Lanarkshire* (2016). In a funeral eulogy his daughter Elspeth stated “Every summer he travelled to all corners of Lanarkshire as he strove to record every plant in every square km of the county, letting no obstruction defeat him. As well as his vasculum and camera, the botanising kit in the boot of the car included bolt cutters, a grappling hook, high visibility vest and on occasion a small ladder”. It is a very handsome volume of 392 pages with 24 colour plates, each with four or five splendid, apposite photographs, mostly of plants but also of a few landscapes. It is very sad that Peter did not live to see the volume in print, but we can all take some comfort in the knowledge that he had completed the draft text and had seen some early proofs. Had he lived just a little longer then he would have had great satisfaction in the quality of the final publication. Now *The Flora of Lanarkshire* has joined *The Changing Flora of Glasgow* (Dickson, Macpherson and Watson, 2000) and *The Flora of Renfrewshire* (Watson, 2013). The flora of west-central Scotland has never been better known.

Jim Dickson wrote that “throughout its long history [the GNHS] can have had very few more devoted members than Peter”, a sentiment that can also be applied for his service to the BSBI. He was rewarded with an Honorary Membership in 2000. On first impressions Peter could present a rather dry and formal manner but underneath was a warm, friendly, caring and helpful man, with a great deal of energy and passion. Anyone attending a BSBI (or GNHS) meeting will have experienced one of his polite, but firm, “point of order” interventions from the floor, invariably helping representatives to ensure that correct procedural processes were always followed! He had a dry sense of humour and loved to include puns and quips in his writing and presentations, demonstrated by the title to the report of his visit to ‘Mey’ – in August (Macpherson & Macpherson, 1993). Peter was a dedicated family man, held in great esteem and love by his late wife Nan and daughters, their partners

and grandchildren. He will be remembered in a similar high regard by those who knew him well throughout the botanical community.

I am grateful to Professor Jim Dickson for granting permission to adapt the obituary he has recently submitted to the GNHS and also to Peter's family for some detailed personal notes, many of which are quoted verbatim.

#### References:

- DICKSON, J.H. (1991). *Wild plants of Glasgow. Conservation in the City and Countryside*. Aberdeen University Press.
- DICKSON, J.H., MACPHERSON, P. & WATSON, K.J. (2000). *The Changing Flora of Glasgow*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- MACPHERSON, A.C. & MACPHERSON, P.. (1993). 'At Mey in August'. *BSBI Scottish Newsletter*, **15**: 8–11
- MACPHERSON, P. (1982). 'The Doctrine of Signatures'. *Glasgow Naturalist*, **20**(3): 191–210.
- MACPHERSON, P. (1993). 'Colonisation of the Glasgow Garden Festival Site three years on: implications for recording'. *Watsonia*, **19**: 169–179.
- MACPHERSON, P. (1997). 'Plants from ships' ballast'. *BSBI News*, **74**: 51.
- MACPHERSON, P. (2000). 'The flora of the Coatbridge Coup'. *Glasgow Naturalist*, **23**(5): 7–8.
- MACPHERSON, P. (2001). 'An unusual assemblage of plants at Gartcosh, Lanarkshire (VC77)'. *Glasgow Naturalist*, **23**(6): 22–23.
- MACPHERSON, P. (2016). *The Flora of Lanarkshire*. Pisces Publications.
- MACPHERSON, P., DICKSON, J.H., ELLIS, R.G., KENT, D.H. & STACE, C.A. (1996). 'Plant status and nomenclature'. *BSBI News*, **72**: 13–16.
- WATSON, K. (2013). *The Flora of Renfrewshire*. Glasgow Museums & Pisces Publications.

KEITH WATSON



Peter Macpherson inspecting *Vicia orobus* in 2009 at a site he had discovered in 1997 above the River Clyde east of Robertson, Lanarkshire