

JOHN DUNCAN

BOTANIST AKA JOHNNY MEEN

Johnny Meen (Johnny Moon), the man who thought Burns 'a filthy loon' was himself of humble origins. His real name was John Duncan, born in Stonehaven in 1794, illegitimate son of weaver John Duncan, and Ann Caird, both of Drumlithie, Kincardineshire. John's education in both weaving and nature began at his mother's knee. Ann wove stockings to support them, being a single mother, so could ill-afford to send John to school. He wandered the fields looking at plants and puzzling over their origins. At the age of ten, John collected rushes to make candle wicks which he sold to help his mother.

His whole life would be punctuated by unfortunate choices; the first, that of master when he wished to learn his father's trade. Charles Pirie was a bully and a crook, but Mrs Pirie took pity on the boy and taught him to read from her hidden library. After her early death, the villagers of Drumlithie continued to aid his education.

By age 20, John returned to his mother's house and earned his keep by weaving. The frugality which would shape his character allowed him to save the princely sum of one pound, which he used to buy a copy of Culpeper's Herbal, the 18th-century study in the medicinal properties of plants. This served to expand John's growing interest in botany, herbalism and astronomy.

He made a disastrous marriage to Margaret Wise, already the mother of an illegitimate child. She could not remain faithful to John, despite their having two daughters together. John fled her clutches, living his life in a sort of penance thereafter, working around the Vale of Alford as a weaver and farmhand, spending a period of each year serving in the Aberdeen Militia force until Margaret finally died and left him alone.



John Duncan's Gravestone, Alford Cemetery

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During this sojourn, John made the acquaintance of Charles Black, a gardener. Black taught him the basics of plant classification as laid down by Swede, Carl Linnaeus. Using the work of Kings College botany professor, George Dickie, the pair roamed the county, identifying plants.

John settled at Droughsburn, Alford. He was widely respected, but kept himself very private, living in a hayloft, his books and botany papers his only possessions, apart from two suits and two tall hats "of quality". Local children liked to tease him at his botanical labours, which often involved him crawling along the ground to peer through his short-sighted eyes for samples. The name "Johnny Meen" came from being seen in the evening, staring up at the moon. John continued to educate himself, being an active member of the Auchleven Mutual Improvement Class, 1850–52, giving talks on botany, astronomy, weaving, and gardening.

Sadly, by his retirement he was practically destitute, his daughters long having lost touch with their father. John's only indulgence had been his purchase of books. His supporters encouraged him to apply for parish aid, which he did, ever so reluctantly.

Suffering from heart disease, John knew he was not long for the world, so helped by his botanical friends, he labelled all his samples and catalogued his notes and books. He presented them to Marischal College in 1880 and used the rest of the kind donations from his supporters to fund prizes for nature studies by local children.

He died the following year, requesting a 'decent funeral' and his grave to be marked with a volcanic boulder. A polished black granite obelisk was also erected in his memory by public subscription, which stands today in Alford Cemetery. The Strathspey King, James Scott Skinner would later memorialise him in a fiddle tune, The Alford Weaver.