



Figure 1: Portrait of Peter Macnair © Glasgow Museum

PETER MACNAIR F.R.S.E., F.G.S.
(12TH SEPTEMBER 1868- 28TH MARCH 1929)

In his time, Peter Macnair was a well-known Scottish geologist who was regarded as a national expert within the field. Born in Glasgow, his family moved to Perth in 1873 where he attended first the Board School (now Kinnoull Primary School), then Perth Academy. On finishing school, Macnair was apprenticed to a firm of linen drapers. In his free time, studying at the museum and library of the Perthshire Society for Natural History, Macnair educated himself in the natural sciences, drawn particularly to the study of geology.

In 1886 Macnair took up a post in Killin, Perthshire. He worked there for three years continuing to study geology in his free time. In 1889, Macnair returned to Perth where he arranged and catalogued the museum's geological and mineralogical collection. During the period of 1887-1892, he presented several papers on the geology of Perthshire to the Perth Society of Natural History.

In 1890, Macnair moved to Glasgow to take up a post in business. The same year he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Glasgow Geological Society. He continued as Secretary sharing the role with James Barclay Murdoch, until Murdoch's retirement at which time Macnair was appointed as Honorary Secretary of the Society. Along with Fredrick Mort, he edited and contributed to the History of the Geological Society of Glasgow 1858-1908 (1908). Macnair ultimately went on to serve as the Society's President.

From 1889 Macnair's autodidactic studies in geology began to be professionally recognised. In the same year he was appointed curator of the People's Palace (Green Branch Museum), Glasgow Green. Alongside his other responsibilities for the natural history collection Macnair worked on the museum's geological collection. In 1901 he was employed as an Assistant in the Fine Art and Historical Section, at the Glasgow International Exhibition. In the following year Macnair was appointed Curator of the Natural History Collection, at Kelvingrove Museum and Professor of Zoology, at Anderson's Medical College, Glasgow.

He wrote extensively on the geology of Scotland and published a number of well-received books. His two volume *The Geology and Scenery of the Grampians* (1908) was considered an important work. Macnair was also the author of two volumes of the Cambridge County Geographies series, Perthshire (1912) and Argyll and Bute (1914). Throughout his career Macnair wrote and published close to 100 different papers on geology and palaeontology and other natural history subjects. In 1910 he published an Introduction to *the Study of Minerals and Guide to the Mineral Collections in Kelvingrove Museum*, which provided a general guide to the subject as well as a guide to the museum's mineralogical collection. Several of Macnair's later papers in palaeontology were on the subject of the Carboniferous Limestone Series in the Midland Valley of Scotland.

Alongside his career as curator, Macnair held an exhausting list of teaching posts and advisory posts. In 1902 he was appointed to the Chair of Zoology at the Andersonian Medical College, Glasgow. He lectured part time in Mineralogy and Geology at the Glasgow and West of Scotland Technical College during the period 1904-1912. He held an array of posts relating to his geological expertise including positions as Examiner in Geology at the University of Aberdeen from 1908-1910; Examiner in Biology to the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow, for the Triple Qualification of the Scottish Licensing Bodies, 1922; Tutor in Geology to the Worker's Educational Association, 1921; Consulting Geologist in questions of Mining and Civil Engineering. Macnair's expertise was held in high regard and he was called to give evidence as an expert witness on a number of important cases before both the Court of Sessions and Committees of the House of Commons. He became a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1907.

Both Perthshire Society for Natural History and the Glasgow Geological Society played an important role in providing Macnair with opportunities in field and private study, as well as providing loci where ideas could be exchanged and discussed with other scientists. As places of study and exchange, the Societies have been the institutions within which Macnair received and created an education in natural sciences that thereafter allowed him to educate and advise in geology at the highest levels. This situation obviously provides a challenge to any notions of such societies as genteel undemanding social clubs and rather suggests that they were able to function as institutions within which individuals could accumulate scientific knowledge to a grade sufficient to the requirements of professional career, and at least in the case of Macnair, recognition as a national expert.

Peter Macnair married Rebecca Mackenzie. Their three eldest sons Peter, Duncan and Ian served in the RAF and British Army during World War I. Ian Macnair died in action in 1918 while serving with the Flying Corp. After the war, their eldest son Peter became Professor of Metallurgy at Swansea. Macnair's daughter Helen studied geology and palaeontology at Glasgow University, graduating with a Master of Arts in 1920. Peter Macnair died aged 61 in Glasgow in 1929.

References:

<http://archiveshub.ac.uk/dat/gb248dc256>



This is part of a series of Tayside Geodiversity biographies. Who have we missed? Please contact us if you would like to see someone included in the future.

