

JOHN GOLDIE

Botanist and Traveler

By Alan R. Hickman©.

Previously published in 'Papus' Vol 19 No 2. Summer 2000 by Royal Botanical Gardens, Burlington, Ontario.

The story of John Goldie is illustrative of the legion of amateur and semi-professional European adventurers who traveled into newly accessible territories in search of knowledge and, possibly, financial gain. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were years of major discovery and an explosion of knowledge but it was still possible for a single individual to be competent in diverse disciplines.

John first saw light of day on 21st March 1793¹. His parents, William Goudie² and Janet McClure, lived in the parish of Kirkoswald, about fifteen miles south of Ayr, on the west coast of Scotland, and, when William died in 1813³, they had produced a family of four boys and two girls. As a teenager, John was apprenticed as a gardener and he showed enough ability to gain employment at the Glasgow Botanic Garden - 'The Physic Garden'. It is inferred that it was during his time at the garden that he accumulated much of his knowledge of botany. John also had a flair for languages. He was conversant with Greek, French and Hebrew and he had at least a working knowledge of Latin. He evidently took language courses at Glasgow University but, possibly from lack of funds, he never registered for a degree.⁴

While in Glasgow, John made the acquaintance of James Smith, a prominent local florist, nurseryman and botanist, and began spending time at his home, Monkwood Grove, near Minishant in Ayrshire. Whatever the original attraction was, it was James Smith's daughter who stole John's attention. In June of 1815, at the age of 22, John married Margaret Smith. Although the marriage was to last over sixty years⁵, John demonstrated his independence immediately. As soon as the wedding ceremony was over, he left, to go to Edinburgh, for an interview and an examination for a position as naturalist on an exploration of the Congo. As luck would have it, John did not accompany what turned out to be an ill starred expedition which lost most of its members to fever.⁶

From his work at the Glasgow gardens John would have been familiar with the botany of North America

¹ECB p.99

²ECB p.114. 'John was the first in his family to change his name to Goldie from Gaudie.'

³ECB p.101

⁴ECB p.101

⁵ECB p.110

⁶ECB p.102

and he determined to visit and collect for himself. In 1817, he raised sufficient money to pay his passage across the Atlantic and to leave a small surplus for expenses.⁷ In June, 1817, John left Leith bound for New York but, encountering bad weather, the ship diverted to Halifax where he debarked and began botanizing. From Halifax he journeyed to Quebec and collected for a further two weeks. All the material he had collected was packed up and stowed in a ship bound for Greenock and John traveled on to Montreal. Later he learned that the entire shipment had been lost.

In Montreal, John met and discussed his plans with the prominent botanist George Frederick Pursh, author of the first North American flora, *Flora Septentrionalis Americae*, who was at the time collecting in the region. Crossing the St Lawrence, John walked to Albany and there embarked, down the Hudson River, to his original destination, New York. It is possible that the pine barrens of eastern New Jersey were known to John as a rich source of plant life because he went directly to the area and began collecting. His notes record that he assembled a considerable amount of material “as large a load as my back would carry”. With this collection, he traveled to Philadelphia, staying but a few days before returning to New York. Once again he packed up his roots, seeds and specimens for shipment to Scotland and once again they were lost at sea.⁸

With finances extremely low, John took a job as a schoolmaster at the Mohawk River and stayed over winter and into April of 1818. He returned to Montreal, hoping to accompany traders on a journey to the north-west, but these plans fell through. Disappointed, he took another job, this time as a labourer. All through the summer, he spent the weekends plant hunting and on one occasion explored a short distance up the Ottawa River. In the fall, John packed up his latest collection and sent them to sea. One can only imagine his mortification when, two months later, he learned that the ship had foundered in the St. Lawrence. “Thus did I lose the fruit of two years labour.”

During the next winter John earned a few dollars making flower designs and early in the new year commenced labouring again. By June he had accumulated \$50.00 and, with that amount more, borrowed from a friend, John set out on one more expedition.⁹ This journey, on foot, from Montreal to Pittsburgh and back, is documented in his surviving daily journal which was reprinted by his grand daughter, Mrs Theresa Goldie Falkner, in 1967.

Goldie’s diary, starting in early June and ending late August, provides a rare glimpse of life in the sparsely settled land around the Great Lakes. A man of average height for the time, brown eyes¹⁰ shaded by a hat stuck with an assortment of insect specimens¹¹, with a back-pack bulging with plant material, and a book

⁷ECB p.102

⁸DOJ p.viii

⁹DOJ p.ix

¹⁰1830 passport description.

¹¹DOJ p.12

in each hand¹², John must himself have been something of a curiosity as he strode, pipe in mouth¹³, along the tracks that passed for roads. Some idea of his pace and stamina can be inferred. On 26th June he reached Toronto and immediately turned north along what is now Yonge Street. By evening he was eight miles out of the town. Starting at 6am next day, he walked the remaining distance to Holland Landing. “Having gone slowly”¹⁴ he arrived in the evening of the 27th!

As John had not stopped in Toronto but did take lodgings for a week on the outskirts of ‘the upper Landing Place’ he likely had prior knowledge of the interesting fen and prairie habitats south of Lake Simcoe. During his sojourn there he collected three of the fourteen plant species attributed to him as new to science.¹⁵ He noted that “If a person could spend a season here, they might expect to meet with many plants not yet described”¹⁶.

At 10 am., on the 5th July, John returned south, “I took it easy” he said and “stopped 12 miles from York.”¹⁷ John spent the next day in the town which he found to be quite underwhelming. “The harbour is not at all adapted to shipping. The bulrushes grow some feet above the water at near one hundred yards distance from the land.” “York is very inferior in extent to Kingston... It can only be said, strictly speaking, to possess one street for the cross ones scarcely yet deserve the name.”¹⁸ Such praise he had he reserved for the road out of town. The previous week, on his trip towards Lake Simcoe, he had written: “This is the best road that I have seen in Upper Canada and, since I left York, there have been more wagons traveling the road than all those that I have seen since I left Montreal.”¹⁹

By ship the trip to Niagara was just a few hours but John elected to continue on foot. He did however forward the contents of his pack on a schooner which left in the afternoon of the 7th. Taking time to collect plants on the way, he himself walked fifteen miles that day. The next day, after walking about twenty-eight miles he came to the western end of Lake Ontario and crossed the strand separating the lake from Burlington Bay. It was here that he first saw the great plume of spray rising from the falls at Niagara. “It appeared very distinctly and as at no great distance and in calm mornings & evenings the sound is distinctly heard at this place, which is thirty miles distant in a direct line.”²⁰ He slept that night in an ‘Hotel’ at Stoney

¹²DOJ p.50

¹³DOJ p.62.

¹⁴DOJ p.12

¹⁵ECB p.104

¹⁶DOJ p.14.

¹⁷DOJ p.15

¹⁸DOJ p.15

¹⁹DOJ p.12

²⁰DOJ p.18

Creek. After staying a few days (12th -18th July) at the Falls, John traveled to Fort Erie²¹. He crossed into the United States, and headed for Pittsburgh, arriving there on the 2nd August.²²

The summer of 1819 seems to have been particularly hot, for the daily highs were in the eighties and nineties Fahrenheit. Typically he walked twenty to thirty miles a day but he could go further. On 4th August he wrote: "I did not get away until after noon, and I traveled 42 miles."²³ Only once does he record that he rode in a wagon; for twenty miles along the shore of Lake Erie.²⁴ The mosquitos were a plague, black flies were worse, and, at night in lodgings, the predations of bed bugs and fleas deprived him of sleep. Often, the 'road' was nothing more than a strip with the trees cut down, alternately dusty and muddy. Being soaked by heavy summer thunder storms was a daily event and, though he never did see one, John was constantly anxious about being bitten by a rattle snake.

Pittsburgh, then a city of some ten thousand, was civilization and the first places John visited were the booksellers. He stayed but one night in the city then packed up for the return to Montreal. He needed to be back by mid September to leave for Scotland. Departing Pittsburgh, a little before noon, on the 3rd August, he arrived at Sackets Harbor²⁵, on Lake Ontario, on the 25th. He took a steamer across to Kingston where he retrieved the materials he had forwarded along the way.²⁶ He continued to Montreal, embarked on a ship for Greenock, and got safely home with all his specimens.

As something of a celebrity, John continued his association with the Glasgow Botanic Garden and there met the young David Douglas²⁷, some five years John's junior, who started at the garden in 1820. He developed a great liking and an admiration for this man who was to make such a name for himself in later years. John wrote an account of his travels and travails and arranged for the cultivation and scientific description of his surviving specimens. In 1822, through the agency of William Hooker, "*Description of some new and rare plants discovered in Canada in 1819.*" was published by the Edinburgh Philosophical Society.²⁸ One of the plants new to western botany was named, by Hooker, in Goldie's honour, *Aspidium goldianum* (Now *Dryopteris goldiana*) and roots of this fern, brought from Canada,

²¹DOJ p.32

²²DOJ p.46. p44 says 2 September, however, there is no August recorded. Had it been 2 September, there would have been no possibility of reaching Montreal by mid September as was the plan.

²³DOJ p.46

²⁴DOJ p.34

²⁵DOJ p.62.

²⁶DOJ p.ix

²⁷Born 1798, Scone, Perthshire. EB Vol III p.639

²⁸ECB p.115. *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* Vol. 6. pp.319-333.

were propagated in the botanic garden.²⁹

Although John sought sponsorship for a return trip to North America in 1823, his next trip was in 1824 to St Petersburg. He was appointed to assemble and transport a collection of plants, trees and shrubs to the newly organized botanical garden in that city.³⁰ Six years later, in 1830, John made a second trip to Russia. It is probable that on both of these trips John returned with plant material new to cultivation in Britain. During the 1820's, John established his own nursery business at his home, "Wrightfield", near Alloway, just south of Ayr,³¹ and this, possibly stocked with species discovered on his travels, supported his growing family.

John's brother, David, had immigrated to Montreal and, in 1833, John decided on a family visit. He landed in New York and, on 29th June, in the company of Neil MacKinnon and David Newbiggin, traveled up the Hudson River to Troy and thence, by way of the newly opened Erie Canal, duly arrived at Buffalo.³² In Niagara, they boarded the daily steam boat to Toronto from whence John went on alone to Montreal. Three weeks later, he returned to Toronto and, on the 25th July, Goldie and Newbiggin set out to examine the land to the west of the city. Evidently John was looking to settle and set up business somewhere in the districts of London or Gore. It was then that word came that one of his brothers had died. Immediately John abandoned his search for land and returned home.³³

Whatever his plans were, they were put on hold for a decade. John's family was growing up and prospects were not good in Scotland. In search of a better life, his eldest sons, James and William, emigrated to the United States in 1842,³⁴ and John had to think of the future for his other six children.

One of his friends had emigrated to a farm close the village of Ayr, on the Nith River, just a few miles north of the growing mill town³⁵ of Paris, Ontario. His friend, Thomas Fulton, had written of good land to be procured in the area. In 1844, at the age of 51, John sold up and the whole family set off across the Atlantic bound for Montreal. They went on, by water, to Hamilton, by wagon to Galt and finally by cart to arrive late at night in the tiny settlement of Ayr. John immediately rented land nearby on which stood a log house. In 1847, when the landlord, William Dixon, died, the Goldies purchased the property and named the farm 'Greenfield' in memory of a place near the old home in Scotland.³⁶

²⁹DOJ p.65

³⁰DOJ p.x

³¹ECB p.106. GS p.4.

³²GS p.3

³³GS p.4. ECB p.107.

³⁴GS p.4

³⁵AFG v1 p.20

³⁶ECB p.108

Although John's traveling days were over, he still had more than forty years, almost another lifetime, to live. Success in the new land was far from assured. The family had exchanged the oppressive social inequalities of Scotland for the physical hardships of pioneers. Just to survive the resources of the entire family had to be brought to bear. Money was very short and it fell to son, James, who was working in New York as a gardener³⁷, to provide much of the cash needed for bridging loans and for keeping creditors at bay.

As well as clearing land for farming and constructing mills, much of which was done by his sons, John built up a nursery. In letters to James, John was often asking for plant material to be shipped up. There was also material being exchanged with Britain. John sent rare and unusual Canadian plants and received choice new European cultivars in return.³⁸ He even managed to maintain a communication with William Hooker, by then Sir William, and, since 1841, the first director of the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew³⁹. Despite his enthusiasm and knowledge, the nursery was never a major business success. Ayr was a long way from customers who had the wealth or the sophistication to want to grow anything other than a few fruit trees and vegetables.⁴⁰ It was the milling business which was to provide the foundation of the family's success.

In January, 1854, the chimney of the log house caught fire and quickly reduced the Goldie home to ashes. Although most of the contents were saved, John's botanical notes, made on his journeys to North America and Russia, were all consumed. There seems to have been little sense of loss and soon a new and much larger, brick, house was constructed. The new place came to be known as Greenfield House or Greenfield Manor.⁴¹ The Crimea War of 1854-6, sent grain prices spiraling and the family's milling efforts began to pay off. The American Civil War, a few years later, also contributed to the family fortunes.⁴² By 1859, son David, had accumulated enough money to buy a partnership in a foundry in Galt and this investment was to be the basis of his subsequent personal wealth.

With John approaching his seventies, David began gradually to take over management of the family businesses. By 1861, David held title to most of the land with John and his wife retaining the part containing 'Greenfield'. The family was prospering and John lived an active 'retirement'. John was still gardening when his wife, Margaret, died in her 87th year, in 1876. When David built a grand house, overlooking the Nith River in the village of Ayr, John, left 'Greenfield' and moved in. Aged 91, he was still able to plan the landscaping for the 'Gore' and to supervise its installation. As his last horticultural efforts took root, John lived out his remaining time, in comfortable surroundings, cared for by children, grand children and great grand children. He finally died in his sleep in July, 1886, in his 93rd year.⁴³

³⁷ECB p.108

³⁸ECB p.109

³⁹DSB vol6. p.492.

⁴⁰ECB p.109

⁴¹ECB p.110

⁴²ECB p.109

⁴³ECB p.112

Sources

RBGB = Royal Botanic Gardens, Burlington;

4CPL = Four Corners Public Library, Brampton;

(AFG) *At the Forks of the Grand*. two volumes Donald A. Smith. Walker Press, Paris, Ontario.

(DOJ) John Goldie, *Diary of a Journey Through Upper Canada and some of the New England States, 1819*. Privately published by Theresa Goldie Falkner, 1967. (RGBG)

(DSB) *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (4CPL)

(ECB) *John Goldie, Early Canadian Botanist 1793 - 1886*. Roger Suffling *Waterloo Historical Society*, Vol ? (19??) pp.98-116 (RBGB)

(GS) *The Goldie Saga*. Theresa Goldie Falkner. 1968. Unpublished manuscript.

(EB) *Encyclopaedia Britannica*