



Clark, N.D.L. (2008) Working with fossils at the Hunterian Museum: a glimpse into the lives of John Young, John Young and Ethel Currie. In: 150th Anniversary of the Geological Society of Glasgow, 23rd Feb 2008, Glasgow, UK.

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Deposited on: 20 Jan 2014

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Working with Fossils at the Hunterian Museum

- a glimpse at the lives of John Young, John Young and Ethel Currie.

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The Hunterian Museum has been fortunate to have had some enlightened geological curators in its past history. Most notably from amongst these are the Carboniferous stratigrapher Ethel Currie of the twentieth century, and the illustrious, but perhaps confusing, John Youngs of the nineteenth century. All three of these geologists have made major contributions to our understanding of the geology of Glasgow as well as further afield.



John Young LLD

The two John Youngs are perhaps confusing because they were both employed by the Hunterian Museum at the same time; one as Assistant Keeper and the other as Keeper. Usually they are distinguished by their titles. John Young the Assistant Keeper was Mr Young and then Dr Young, whereas John Young, the Keeper, was Professor Young, although both were Fellows of the Geological Society. Luckily, one was an LLD and the other an MD FRSC.

John Young LLD was born in Lennoxton in July 1823 the son of Thomas Young (a carpenter from Glasgow) and Jean Roberston (daughter of a farming family in Campsie). From a young age he was interested in the fossils of his native Campsie Hills. As a blockcutter by trade, he started working as a message boy in 1833 at the Lennoxmill Printworks of Dalglish, Falconer & Co where

his father was foreman joiner. He would work for 16 hours a day for 6 pence even when the weather caused their clothes to ice-up. His fascination with fossils grew and by 1851 he was a recognised authority on the geology of the Campsie district often taking groups from the Natural History Society on excursions. He was chosen to exhibit a collection of local rocks and fossils during the 1855 meeting of the British Association held in Glasgow. At the inception of the Glasgow Geological Society in 1858, he was elected one of the first Honorary Associates. That same year, he conducted a number of field trips to the Campsies and presented his first paper on *The Geology of the Campsie District*. In 1859, the post of Assistant Keeper of the Hunterian Museum became vacant. John Young was awarded the position with support from Lord Kelvin and other members of the Glasgow Geological and Natural History Societies at a salary of £40 per year with accommodation (which was effectively a drop in salary). In 1847, he married Margaret Stirling daughter of Peter Stirling (a mason from Campsie) and Elizabeth Downie (daughter of a mill-wright). By 1861 he is recorded as living at the Hunterian Museum in the Old College with his

family, and in 1871, he was living in the university grounds at Partick. His wife died in 1874 at the age of 47 as a result of 'nervous shock'. That same year he was awarded a life membership to the London Geological Society. In 1883 he was awarded the proceeds of the Murchison Medal Fund by the Geological Society of London, this being the highest honours the society could bestow. Despite all his work and recognition from several prestigious organisations, he was only awarded a Doctor of Laws from the university in 1893. He died in Troon in 1900 aged 76, of a stroke after being weakened by illness suffered during the winter of 1899. Perhaps his contribution is best summed up by the obituary notice in the Glasgow Herald which stated: "The museum contains abundant evidence of the knowledge, zeal, and skill which have made its fossil and mineralogical departments objects of interest to men of science everywhere, while the reputation of the University was enhanced by having on its staff one whose work was valued as it was widely known." John Young LLD was also known as "the Good".



John Young MD

John Young MD was born in Edinburgh in 1835 the son of David Young (a successful accountant from Angus) and Ann Grant (of Invernesshire and daughter of a Captain of the 55th Regiment of Foot). John went to the Royal High School in Edinburgh where he was taught by the Rector, Leonhard Schmitz of Aix-la-Chapelle in France. Schmitz was a well known classical scholar and author and appears to have had a great influence on the young John. He first worked at the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, having qualified as M.D. in 1857. John joined the Scottish Geological Survey in 1861 where he worked with Archibald Geike who was also educated at the Royal High School at the same time as John. In 1864, John had an accident when he slipped and broke his kneecap on field work in Girvan. It did not heal properly and

he was slightly lame for the rest of his life. In 1866 went to London with the Schmitz Family, after Leonhard Schmitz was appointed to Principal of the London International College at Isleworth, and married his daughter Eliza in Brentford. That same year he took the Chair of Natural History at Glasgow University, where he taught both geology and zoology, and was appointed Keeper of the Hunterian Museum. During his appointment, he attempted to sell the Hunter Coin Cabinet for the benefit of the museum twice and oversaw the transfer of collections from the Old College to Gilmorehill. He died at the age of 67 in 1902 as a result of a stroke. His wife lived on to the age of 87, dying in 1924 of old age. John Young MD has been described as 'unconventional, brilliant, and eccentric' as well as 'untidy, impetuous, scornful, flamboyant, brusque, outspoken, bearded and an exhibitionist in his dress

and enormous slouch hat'. He was not considered a great teacher in geology as he considered lectures a "waste of time", but he was an ardent supporter of women in education. He earned the nickname "the Bad". Why this is, is unclear as he certainly supported John Young the Good in attempting to get recognition for his contribution, "care and assiduous attention" to the collections of the Hunterian Museum. He considered that John Young (the Good)'s "salary is far too little for a man of his position in Science, and a very inadequate payment for the services he has rendered to the University in all these years" (Court Minutes 1895).



Ethel Currie

Ethel Dobbie Currie has been the only female curatorial member of the geological staff of the Hunterian Museum. She was born in December 1898 the daughter of James Currie (a quantity surveyor from Glasgow) and Elizabeth Allan (daughter of a brass finisher from Glasgow). Her parents were married in Philadelphia in 1896, but returned to Glasgow before she was born. She attended school at Bellahouston Academy and went on to the University of Glasgow to study geology.

Her whole professional career was spent in the University of Glasgow. She graduated BSc under Professor J.W.Gregory in 1920,

and after a short period as Demonstrator in his department was appointed Assistant Curator of the geological collections in the Hunterian Museum. The laborious administration of the collections she undertook was less well known to the public than it deserved to be. Visitors to the museum knew her better through the many geological exhibits she prepared. She researched fossils as opportunities arose when collections came to the museum. These included Mesozoic and Tertiary sea-urchins from Africa and southern Asia. She also described Mesozoic corals from Somaliland, and even collections of rock specimens from the Silurian. Some of this work appeared in the first volumes of Monographs of the Hunterian Museum, a series she helped Professor Gregory to establish. Although credited by T. N. George (1964) as having published on a xiphosure from Lesmahagow, the paper was actually written by her brother Leslie Douglas Currie.

Later she developed her technique of studying the morphology of ammonites to produce a comprehensive description of the Scottish Carboniferous goniatites. This work had its germs in an analysis of the fauna of Skipsey's Marine Band. It expanded into a detailed account of every known species and variety of Scottish goniatite and resulted in a volume that became of major importance to Carboniferous stratigraphy.

In 1952 she became the first woman President of the Geological Society of Glasgow in the hundred years of the Society's history. The Royal Society of Edinburgh

bestowed upon her a similar distinction when she became in 1949 one of the first three women ever to be admitted to the Fellowship and it also recognised her work when it awarded her the Neill Prize in 1945.

In her later years, she took a special interest in the morphology and relations of fossil vertebrates. Her long and devoted service was finally recognised by the university when she was promoted to the grade of Senior Lecturer in 1960. She retired through illness in 1962 and died six months later in March 1963 from a brain tumour.

John Young MD, John Young LL.D. and Ethel Currie D.Sc. have all contributed substantially in creating the foundation on which the science of palaeontology has grown in Glasgow. Their contribution is not only recognised in Scotland, but worldwide. They have increased the global awareness of the research value of the collections of the Hunterian Museum and the University of Glasgow as well as enhancing the reputations of the Geological Society of Glasgow and other societies by their enthusiastic involvement. Although there is still some confusion over which John Young is which, their contribution to palaeontology has resulted in several species being named after them such as the trilobite *Youngia*, the ostracod *Youngiella*, the reptile *Youngina* and one that was named after both of them the demosponge *Youngella*.

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