

Heather follies of 1861

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Nearly 140 years ago this summer a small kerfuffle erupted in the comfortable circles of American horticulture centered on Boston, Massachusetts. What rippled that placid pool was a pot of *Calluna vulgaris*, from which a grand theory briefly floated, an important man was embarrassed, and little chuckles of ridicule still echo through time. Here is the story of a young man who went courting a country girl, and of what happened at the Massachusetts Horticultural Society as a result.

"Mass Hort", as it is familiarly known, used to have weekly exhibitions at its Horticultural Hall, much like the Royal Horticultural Society of London, and its Flower Committee awarded handsome "premiums and gratuities" in various categories, including Ericas. These, as far as I can divine, were conservatory exotics of the tender South African species. Outdoor heather gardening was evidently not much done in Boston's harsh winter climate (USDA zone 6: -10° to 0° F; -23° to -17° C.)

All that changed on Saturday 13 July 1861 when a young professional gardener by the name of Jackson Dawson of Cambridge walked through the doors with a plant labeled "Native Heath, found growing within 20 miles of Boston". It created quite a stir, as recorded in the archives:

The plant was exhibited in a pot, and was apparently about six to ten years old, about half a foot in diameter, and the same in height; it was in full bloom, though the flowers were white rather than pink, caused by its having been kept from the light to prevent its drooping or dying from being transplanted at such an unfavorable season.

The chairman of the Flower Committee, Edward S. Rand, Jr., at once brought the plant to the attention of his colleagues, and called a special meeting to examine the matter. They correctly identified the specimen as *Calluna vulgaris*, known as "The Scotch Heather" in those days, but the assertion of its growing wild within 20 miles of Boston was naturally met with skepticism.

A scholarly squabble broke out. On the one side, botanists knew that although many members of the family Ericaceae are indigenous to North

America (notably *Andromeda*, *Cassandra*, *Epigaea*, *Cassiope* and *Arctostaphylos*) *Calluna* was definitely not among them. The conventional wisdom was that *Calluna vulgaris* belonged to Europe alone, and perhaps northern Asia, if you count Siberia. Young Jack Dawson and his so-called native Scotch Heather represented a shoddy attempt to deceive and mislead the Committee, they said. On the other side, those with inquiring minds – led by the chairman himself – wanted to find out more, and perhaps even imagined themselves on the edge of a major botanical discovery.

Of course the explorers won out, and the chase was on: bring in the wild heather! The Committee sent a note to Jack Dawson asking him to lead an expedition to the mysterious site itself. Here the plot thickens, as the Committee received no reply. More than a week passed, and the archives reflect that the gentlemen of the Mass Hort were mightily miffed. In fact they voted to drop the whole matter like a “hot potato”. Perhaps unfortunately, unfortunately, the chairman picked up the “potato” again



Fig. 1. Mr Jackson Dawson

when, after another day or two, Mr Dawson called on him and explained his predicament: his boss had told him to butt out. "It appeared the nurseryman in whose employ he (Dawson) chanced at the time to be, had forbidden his communicating with the Committee, or conducting them to the spot, at the same time endeavoring himself to find out the habitat, trusting thus, doubtless, by throwing every obstacle in the way of the Committee, to avail himself of the whole merit of the discovery, and doubtless reap pecuniary advantage by securing the whole stock of the plant. It was also attempted at the exhibition of the Society to suppress Mr. Dawson's name, his employer substituting his own," Rand wrote in his annual report. "The conduct of this person in thus attempting to control for private ends the scientific investigations of a Society of which he was himself a member, cannot be too strongly reprobated," he thundered. The greedy nurseryman's name is not recorded, but it surely must have fueled some gossip and earned the chairman an enemy.

Having cleared up the true reason for Mr Dawson's shyness, the Committee declared him "perfectly upright and straightforward", and promptly awarded the young gardener a silver medal and \$10, a generous sum that converts to \$200, or £125 by today's standards.

On the morning of Monday 5 August 1861 the seven-man Committee led by young Dawson "took the cars" for Tewksbury, a farming community northwest of Boston, near the old mill city of Lowell. I'll let Mr Rand tell you what they saw:

The locality of the Heather is about half a mile from the State Almshouse, on the farm of Mr. Charles H. Thwing. Leaving the Almshouse on our right, the Committee took a narrow sandy road, and in a short time came near the field; a short walk brought them to the spot, turning into a lane on the left hand side of the road. The plants occur sprinkled over a surface of perhaps half an acre; there may be in all about twenty or more old plants, some, allowing for the slow growth of the plant, from ten to twenty years old, others much younger.

The surface of the ground is varied by little hummocks, and is covered with a short close grass, interspersed with numerous plants of *Kalmia angustifolia*, *Spiraea tomentosa*, *Andromeda calyculata*, *Azalea viscosa*, *Myrica gale*, &c. A rapid brook bounds one side of this field, its banks densely fringed with the common Alder (*Alnus incana*), of which plants are sparingly scattered over the whole field; in several cases the Heather was found overgrown and shaded by these shrubs. The common Cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) occurs somewhat abundantly in the immediate vicinity of the Heather, usually most so in the depressions, while the Heather occurs on the hummocks. From

appearances, overflows of the brook are not of unfrequent occurrence, when the greater part of the field would be submerged, and as the field is surrounded by low ground and ditches, a moderate freshet would convert it into an island. At the time of the visit of the Committee, owing to the continued drought of the past summer, the whole field was parched, and the brook very low.

The soil is sandy peat, just that in which one would expect to find such a plant, and admirably adapted for the growth of *Ericas*. The Committee explored the stream on both sides for some distance, but a heavy rain coming on prevented a more satisfactory examination. They also searched for young plants, and found a multitude of seedlings from one to two years old, and a few somewhat larger. The plants were in full bloom, and presented a most pleasing sight.

Still, seeing was not believing, and the Committee remained unconvinced that the heather was indigenous. The question was, Whence did it come? Digging deeper, they dispatched a sub-committee and collected interviews with the neighbors. Suspiciously nearby lay the farm of a Scotsman, a Mr Strachan, who may have planted it in a fit of nostalgia for his native hills. But no, Mr Strachan denied having brought or sowed the seed, nor had he received any parcels from Scotland or done anything in any way by which he could have introduced the plant. Pressed further, he grew indignant and protested, "Wuld'na I hae been a fool, man, to sow it on another man's land, when my own, as good, would hae' grown it as well?"

The committee went back to the landowner, Mr Thwing, but it turned out that he had farmed the land only about three years. He had bought it from Caleb Livingston, who had retired to Lowell, and in whose family the land had been for as long as anybody could remember. Mr Livingston had a hard time figuring out what the Committee was talking about, but when he was handed a sprig of heather his memory came flooding back. He remembered some 50 years ago when he was a boy, helping his father plow up the field in question. They had great trouble plowing, he said, owing to large patches, "as big as a bushel basket" or larger of a strange, spreading plant which ran on the ground and had long, tough roots that caught the plow. After a great deal of trouble, they got a heavy, strong harrow and tore up the plants – which were very old, strong and tough – piled them in the hollows and covered them with deep soil. They then leveled and sowed the field with grass seed, and used the field for mowing ever since. Old Mr Livingston showed the heather sprig to his mother, and the ancient lady recognized the plant, told where it grew, said it had grown there for many

years and remembered the trouble it was to plow the field. He traveled to Tewksbury and, undirected, went to the spot where the heather grew.

The mystery of how the heather got there remained unsolved, but now Mr Rand stepped off the rock of empirical evidence into the thin air of speculation, plus a little math. If the plants he saw were, say, ten years old, and if the original plants were plowed up by the Livingstons 50 years before, in 1810, then how does one account for their survival during the intervening 40 years? The seeds could have remained viable, or a few low branches "escaped the scythe," he suggested. "The probability is, the plants have kept growing, more or less, ever since. ... Indeed it would have been strange if a farmer had noticed such a plant, unless its encroachment on his mowing, pasture or arable land, called his attention to it," he wrote.

As to the age of the Livingston era plants, Rand guessed they were more than a century old, which brings us back to 1700. The town of Tewksbury was incorporated in 1734, European settlers having arrived a few years before, and prior to that the land was a Native American Indian village called Wamesitt. (At this point I'm glad nobody whispered the word "Norseman" in Mr Rand's ear.) Now came the great leap of faith:

"We can only assert the probability that the plant existing at so early a date in such an unlikely, out-of-the-way place, was indigenous to the locality. From all the evidence adduced it seems more probable that this is an original locality of the heather, and that the plant is indigenous to the United States," he concluded.

"May not the Heather have once existed in profusion on this continent," he speculated, "and have gradually died out owing to some inexplicable, perhaps only slight, climatic changes? May not this be the last vestige of one of the last of what was once an American heath? And if the Heather exists in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, may we not expect further discoveries of localities intermediate between those countries and the Heather-field in Tewksbury?"

"Every few years botanists are startled by the discovery, in what were considered well-gleaned localities, of new or very rare plants; and we are forced to the conclusion that the botany even of New England and the Canadas is not yet wholly known. The importance of this discovery we cannot well estimate. It is, as it were, a landmark in botany, and connects us by another floral link with the mother country," he wrote.

One man's landmark is another man's laughing-stock, and nowadays as well as 140 years ago, Mr Rand was pretty much "out there", alone in his

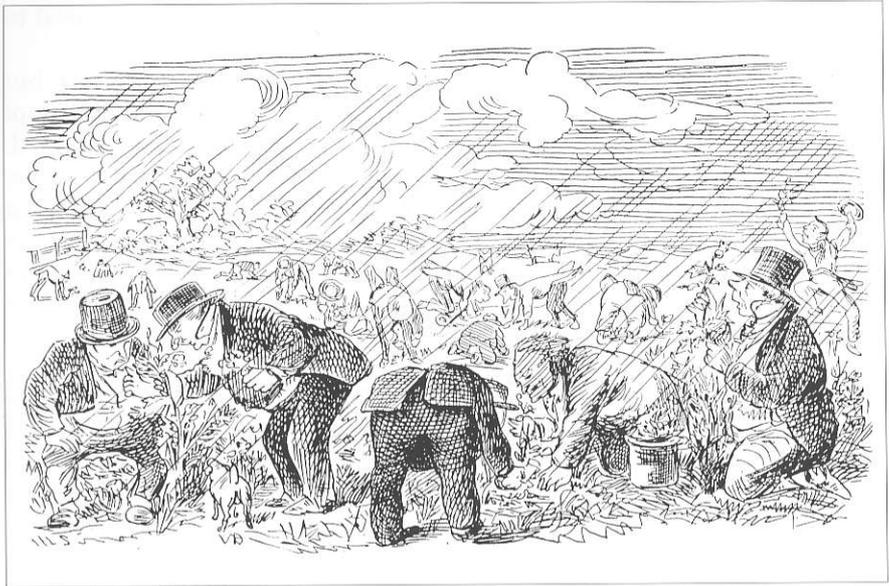


Fig. 2. *Vanity Fair*'s cartoon of the Flower Committee of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society searching for heather at Tewksbury, Mass.

contention that heather is indigenous to North America. The affair created a stir, though, and it even inspired a send-up in that New York avatar of good taste, *Vanity Fair* magazine, in whose 22 February 1862 issue a caricature appeared under the title "Heather and Weather."

A few days ago, as the sun was busily employed in gilding a very pretty landscape, the passers along a quiet lane at Tewksbury, near Boston, were arrested by a novel and curious sight. Several elderly men, some of them stoutish, others scraggyish, but all of solid and respectable appearance, were seen scattered over an area of an acre or so in extent, apparently occupied in the process of grazing, or pasturing themselves upon the scanty herbage, their postures being of the fashion known as 'all-fours,' and their heads close to the ground. It was some time before any person had sufficient presence of mind to address himself to any of the strangers, as, if not grazing, they might have been praying, and it is not Boston manners to disturb decent-looking citizens either from their prayers or their provender.

At last, however, a smart shower of rain came down, upon which the mysterious grubbers arose precipitately to their feet and toddled off to a neighboring farmhouse for shelter. Here it transpired, upon inquiry, that the strangers were certain Wise Men of Boston, forming in the aggregate what is

called the 'Flower Committee' of that city, and that they had been occupied in investigating the subject of a 'native heather,' said to have been discovered in the field just deserted by them.

They had several fine specimens of the plant, and might have been now in fine spirits about it had not the farmer, a Scotchman, informed them that it was not Heather, but good, old-fashioned, rough-and-ragged Scotch thistle, upon which they feed donkeys in his country.

This, combined with the shower, was rather a damper, and the sages made their way back to Boston with all speed, wetter if not wiser men.

Alas, the records of Massachusetts Horticultural Society do not tell us whether poor Mr Rand was laughed out of office, or whether his term at the helm expired, but he was no longer the chairman of the Flower Committee in 1863.



Fig. 3. Mr John Strachan and Wife



Fig. 4. Mrs Margaret Strachan Murray

And what of young Jack Dawson? The story of his later years is lost in the mists of time, too, but if the Flower Committee had dug just a bit deeper they might have found out what he was doing in the heather field in the first place. It was the farmer's daughter, Mrs Margaret Murray, née Strachan, (or "Stratton, as we girls changed it," to quote the old lady's quaint remark) who told a writer at the turn of the present century what really happened.

Margaret saw the heather and was attracted by its pretty little purple bells. She brought a sprig to her father, a native of Auchinblae, Kincardshire, who said, "Why, that looks like Scotch Heather!" He verified the find with another Scotsman, gardener Alexander Skene of Andover, and everybody went down to the field for a good look and a few bouquets.

"I gave a few sprigs to a girl friend of mine," recalled old Mrs Murray, "who Jack Dawson, then a young fellow, was comin' round to see; and when he noticed the sprigs of Heather on her table he wanted to know where she got them. She told him, and the first thing we knew the public was makin' a big time over it, and the committee came down to see it.

"After that the man who owned the land, who told Father that for twenty years he had been plowing the Heather up to keep it from spreading over the cow pasture, thinking he could make something out of it, forbade us girls to go near the spot. That's how many years since I've seen the Heather. I wonder if it's as pretty as it was then!"

The town of Tewksbury has joined the sprawling suburban tide of Boston now, and the old Livingston farm has grown its final crop – the houses of a modern bedroom town. Chairman Rand's grand theory, published under the title *Calluna vulgaris, A Native of the United States* lies quietly forgotten in the handsome leather-bound volumes of Mass Hort's library on Massachusetts Avenue. And the heather follies of 1861 have faded like a mere blip on the radar screen of American horticulture.

References

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