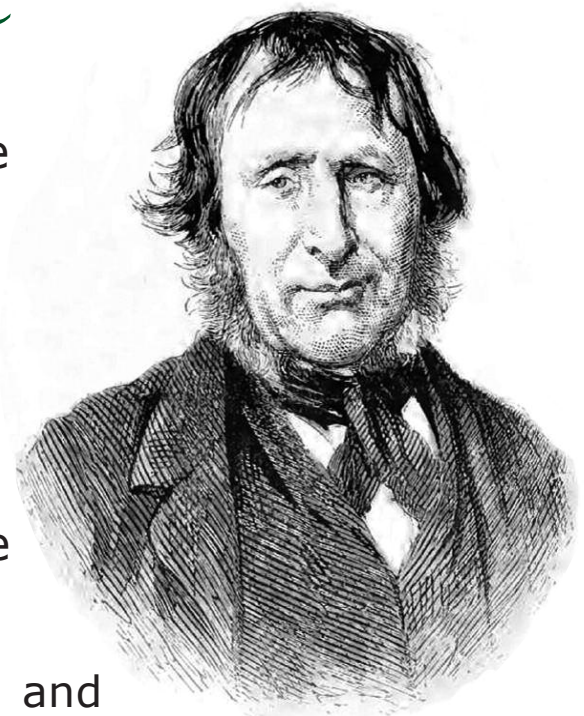


John Duncan (1794-1881)

weaver and botanist

John Duncan was a country weaver. An essential trade, the weaver often worked within a farm where the sheep wool was spun by the women of the house and then woven on the premises into lengths of cloth. Local tailors would then make this into clothes.

John received no formal education but, with help, learned to read aged 16. He did not learn to write until much later in life. He was largely a self-taught scholar acquiring knowledge purely for the love of the subject and not expecting any recognition or financial gain.



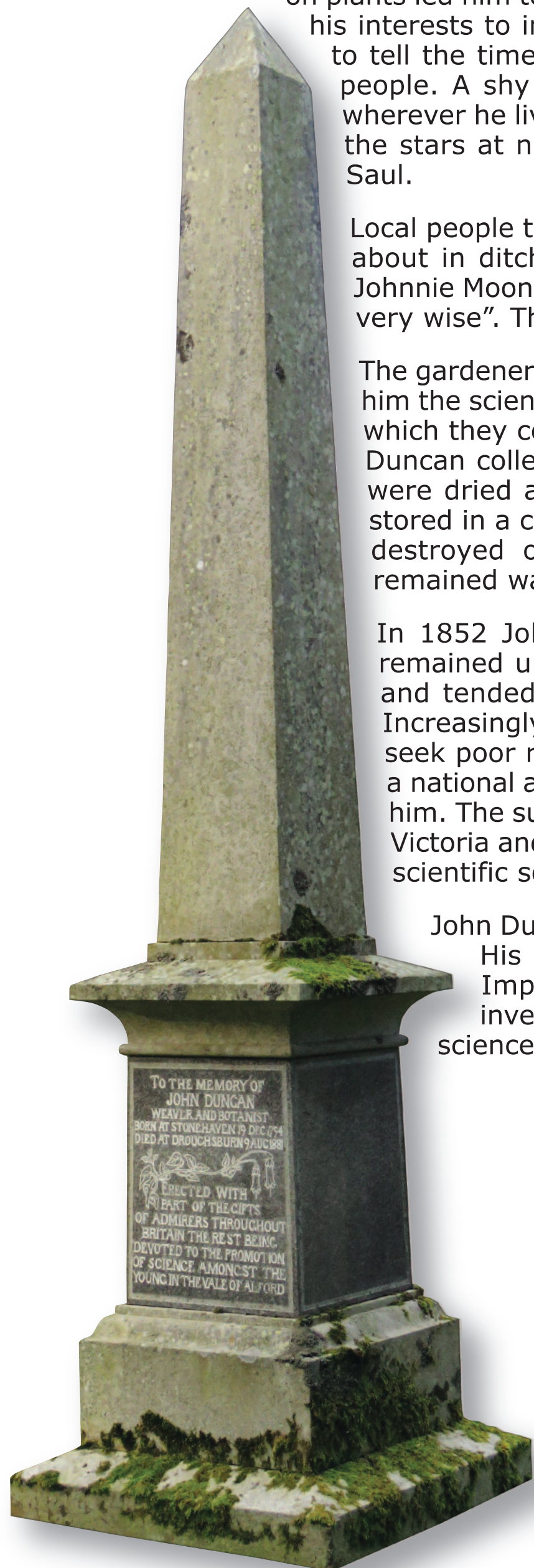
His work took him to live in villages such as Monymusk, Auchleven and Whitehouse. When not weaving, he walked in the countryside developing an interest in plants, especially their medicinal properties. He saved up to buy books. His reading on plants led him to study the influence of the stars upon nature and widened his interests to include astronomy and astrology. He made dials by which to tell the time as watches and clocks were not usually owned by poor people. A shy and solitary man, he wandered the fields and hillsides wherever he lived, looking at plants and grasses in daylight and studying the stars at night from local hilltops such as Cairn William and Knock Saul.

Local people thought him odd, both in habits and appearance, pottering about in ditches and verges. In the villages he was given the name Johnnie Moon, Star Mannie or the Nogman. He was considered to be "no very wise". This was very far from the truth.

The gardener at Whitehouse, Charles Black, became a friend and taught him the science of botany – how to identify and name in Latin the plants which they collected together in Donside and Deeside. In his life, John Duncan collected 1131 of the 1428 known British wild flowers. These were dried and preserved in large home-made books which he kept stored in a chest in his weaver's workshop. Sadly, many of these were destroyed over the years by moths and other insects but what remained was presented to Aberdeen University.

In 1852 John moved to Drougshburn, Leochel Cushnie, where he remained until his death in 1881. He lived in his weaver's workshop and tended a small garden in which he grew his medicinal plants. Increasingly poor as he aged, he was still weaving aged 80 but had to seek poor relief from the parish. His fame had spread, however, and a national appeal was publicised in the scientific journal *Nature* to help him. The sum of £320 was raised, including contributions from Queen Victoria and Charles Darwin. His work was recognised by several local scientific societies.

John Duncan is buried in the churchyard of the West Kirk in Alford. His library of books was bequeathed to the Alford Mutual Improvement Association, and the residue of his fund was invested to fund scholarships and prizes for the promotion of science, especially botany, in schools in the Vale of Alford.



John Duncan's Cottage.