

Reverend James Bruce Duncan (1848-1917) minister and collector of North-east Scotland folk-lore



James Bruce Duncan was born in 1848 at New Deer, Aberdeenshire. Educated locally at Whitehill School, New Deer, and subsequently Aberdeen Grammar School, he entered Aberdeen University in 1865, and graduated with M.A. with honours in Philosophy. Thereafter he studied theology at United Presbyterian Hall, Edinburgh, and Leipzig University, Germany.

In 1876 Rev. Duncan was ordained minister of the United Presbyterian Church at Lynturk, near Muggarthaugh Hotel. Described as preaching with ability and force, he was greatly respected for his adept ministry. On his semi-jubilee in 1901, Mr Duncan was presented by his congregation with a purse and sovereigns as a token of their thanks.

Of quiet humour and most estimable personal qualities, Mr Duncan was a man who made close and warm friendships. As well as being a man of the cloth, Rev. Duncan also had a life-long interest in local folk-lore. Aberdeenshire and its neighbouring counties afforded a rich field for such a study, and he came to possess a valuable knowledge and amount of old-time local verse and music. His literary hobby took him into all parts of the county, and brought him into contact with all social classes. His lectures on the subject were extremely popular, the quaint and interesting matter from his resources being presented in a happy and entertaining fashion.

The New Spalding Club of Aberdeen, founded in 1886, published scholarly editions of texts and archaeological studies relevant to the history of Aberdeenshire and its region. Rev. Duncan was a close friend of Gavin Greig (1856-1914), schoolmaster and author, and in 1907 the New Spalding Club chose the pair to prepare for publication a collection of the Older Popular Minstrelsy of the North-East. On Greig's untimely death, age 58, in 1914, over 100,000 lines of folk-song, 3,500 complete songs and 3,000 records of tunes had been collected. The works had been planned for two volumes, the first dealing with ballads and their airs, the second with the songs and their music.

When Rev. Duncan was stricken in early spring 1917 by what proved to be his fatal illness, he had the first volume well on the way towards completion. The several volumes of folk-songs are still available from Aberdeenshire Council Libraries.

By the time he died in September 1917, at his home, he had been minister of Lynturk United Free Church for over 40 years. He is interred, with other members of his family in the old Kirkyard of Alford, two miles west of village.

