



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.05 – John Muir's schooldays



The Dawell Brae, near Mungo's school © ELMS

John Muir received the best schooling that Dunbar could provide. In fact, he was so well drilled that the captain of their emigrant ship was astonished that *Scotch boys could read and pronounce English with a perfect accent and knew so much Latin and French*. John's accomplishments were hard won.

John's first school was Mungo Suddon's, at the Common Close near Dawell Brae and only 200 yards from home. There he made lifelong friends. Suddon was a private schoolteacher who prepared his infant charges with letters and writing, spelling books and grammar, counting and sums.

The pupils ranged from age three upwards and all were taught in a single room. Lessons were by rote and strict discipline was the only way to avoid chaos in the classroom but Muir remembered his teacher as *the good dominie*.

School was not all work. Dominie Suddon shared seasonal fruit and berries with his pupils and closed classes with a favourite hymn or song. Afterwards, the children played running games in the street outside. John remembered the time that a girl beat him in a race up the Dawell Brae (now Victoria Street). Fist fights were also popular – a boy's status depended on being a *gude fechter*.



A Selection of tawses © ELMS

When he was around seven or eight years old John went to the

Grammar School on the East Links. He was terribly busy in his first months there. He had to find his place by fighting everyone who challenged him and he was faced with a new curriculum. Dominie Lyon allowed new pupils a few lessons to find their feet but soon every mistake was punished by application of the tawse (or strap). A teacher of the old school, Dominie Lyon seems to have had little use for the progressive ideas and methods used by Mungo Suddon. John said *old-fashioned Scotch teachers spent no time in seeking short roads to knowledge ... it was all done by whipping – thrashing in general.*

John describes a school day divided into many periods – three each of Latin, French and English with regular spelling, history, arithmetic, and geography lessons. The class used set textbooks, tales from which John still remembered many years later.

The boys' playground games were more vigorous – *shin-battering shinny, prisoners' base, and dogs and hares* – and their fights were harder and included Saturday engagements against the pupils at another school – likely those of the next-door Mathematical School.

More information

Dominie Suddon used published works to help instruct his pupils. John mentions the Story of Llewellyn's Dog and Southy's epic poem 'The Inchcape Bell' as well as natural history works and books illustrated with sailing craft of all kinds. Mungo followed the then new 'Infant School system' and in 1839 was spontaneously given a public testimonial by delighted parents: the award consisted of 2 globes and a purse of six sovereigns. At that time he had 150 scholars!

The tawse was a thick, leather strap divided into two (or even three) tails at one end. It was used for corporal punishment in Scottish schools until the 1970s; it is clear from John's writing that the cane was also applied in his time.

Further Reading

- Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913)
- Miller, James, *History of Dunbar*, Downie, Dunbar, 1859
- Pugh, RJM, *Swords, Loaves & Fishes: A History of Dunbar*, Harlaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, Dunbar, 1998
- Glass, L (editor), *From Slate to Disk*, Dunbar Grammar School, Dunbar, 1997
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, 1998

Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- Friend's of John Muir's Birthplace www.djma.org.uk
- Dunbar Grammar School www.dunbargrammar.org.uk