

Matthew Forster Heddle and The Mineralogy of Scotland



title

Matthew Forster Heddle and *The Mineralogy of Scotland*

by Peter Dryburgh

Introduction

In the nineteen-fifties, degree courses in geology at St. Andrews included some lectures by Harald Drever on the history of the subject. They provided an introduction to Neptunism, Plutonism and other early theories of the earth, as well as outlining the contributions made by such pioneers as Hutton, Werner, Hall, Playfair, Lamarck and Smith. Drever's lecturing style was rather measured and plodding so that when he treated a topic with explicit enthusiasm, it tended to catch the attention and stay in the memory. When he discussed Heddle's famous book, *The Mineralogy of Scotland*, his admiration obviously overcame his normal reticence and he described the work in glowing terms and referred to it as 'the most comprehensive mineralogy of a single country ever written'. While Drever's lecture was still fairly fresh in my mind, a quirk of serendipity gave me the opportunity of acquiring a copy of Heddle's book.

In those days, John Macgregor of St Andrews Ltd. held auctions on Wednesdays at their premises in Market Street, now used by the company as a shop and restaurant. There were no classes on Wednesday afternoons so, while most of my fellow students were out playing rugby or hockey and inflicting minor injuries on each other, I often attended the auctions. Large collections of books appeared in many of the sales and, at one of them, I got the chance to buy a copy of Heddle's *Mineralogy* in excellent condition. There was a [hand-written inscription on the title-page](#) but I paid no attention to it at the time. Many years later, however, having just returned from a long EGS excursion to Shetland, I was checking a reference in Heddle and, for the first time, read the inscription carefully and was astonished to realise that the book had been presented by Alexander Thoms, Heddle's son-in-law, to Cecilia Westgarth Thomson. The book was published after Heddle's death and Thoms was responsible for its production as well as assisting J.G. Goodchild with the editing.

I made no real attempt to find out anything about Cecilia Westgarth Thomson but obtained some information about the Heddle family from local records in Orkney and visited Melsetter on the island of Hoy, Heddle having been born in [Melsetter House](#).

Some further years elapsed until, in September 2001, Richard Batchelor led an interesting EGS excursion around St. Andrews and announced that one of Heddle's great-grandsons, Hamish Johnston, had corresponded with him. In answer to my enquiry, Richard quickly established from Mr. Johnston that Cecilia Westgarth Thomson was one of Heddle's daughters. By this time I was determined to discover as much as I could about Heddle, his work, his family and Goodchild, and this article summarises some of what I have learned up to now.

The Heddles, the Moodies and Melsetter

The family of Heddle, like many old Orkney families, is of Norse origin, although the name Heddill or Heddal was recorded by G.F. Black (1946) as being of local origin. The family is said to have held land in Harray and Stenness before 1303 and, according to David Balfour (1859), William in Heddal was one of the most prominent men in Orkney in 1424. Despite the existence of such an ancient pedigree, my brief account of the family of Matthew Forster Heddle starts with his grandparents, John Heddle and Elizabeth Flett, who were married in April 1772. John Heddle had the title 'Heddle of Cletts and Ronaldsay'. With an energy and dedication, notable even in the eighteenth century, John and Elizabeth produced 15 children, of whom Robert (born in 1781) became the father of Matthew Forster Heddle.

In 1769, some years before John Heddle's marriage, Major James Moodie became ninth Laird of Melsetter and inherited Breckness, Snelsetter Castle and Melsetter. He married Elizabeth Dunbar and had 6 children, the youngest of whom was Henrietta, later to become the wife of Robert Heddle. The Moodies, like the Heddles, were an ancient family and could claim to be able to trace their descent directly from Robert the Bruce as well as from the Kings of Norway. The first written record of the family seems to date from about 1470, when William Mudie appears in a list of Scottish bishops as Bishop of Caithness. The non-conjectural pedigree of the Moodies (or Mudies) starts with another William, the first Laird of Melsetter, who was a man of some importance, being, among other things, Chamberlain in Orkney to Mary Queen of Scots. His lands were listed and confirmed by King James VI in 1591. At that time he disposed of his properties on the mainland of Scotland to consolidate his position in Orkney.

The story of the Moodies is an astonishing saga of feud, adventure and fighting, the decay of the family's fortunes having started at least two decades before the Rising of 1745, during which Melsetter House was sacked by Jacobites. The eighth Laird, Benjamin, was serving on the mainland as an officer in the Hanoverian Army at the time and, for years after his return to Orkney, he spent most of his energies in wreaking a terrible revenge on surviving Orkney Jacobites, although he did conserve enough to enable him to father 13 children in subsequent years. For the next 40 years, financial affairs deteriorated so rapidly that, in 1818, Major James Moodie was forced to sell the estate which had been in his family for more than 500 years, despite his strenuous efforts to save it. James Moodie died heartbroken and is buried in the Canongate Parish Churchyard in Edinburgh. The breaking up of the Melsetter estate gave rise to an acrimonious and extended legal battle involving, among others, Lord Dundas, and was never settled to the satisfaction of the Moodies.

As a young man, Robert Heddle was paymaster to the Royal African Regiment of Foot in Senegal while his eldest brother John held their father's title, Heddle of Cletts and Ronaldsay. After John's death, Robert returned to Orkney in 1817 and inherited the title. He brought with him the considerable fortune of £90,000, a circumstance which suggests that being a regimental paymaster in those days afforded ample opportunities for personal enrichment. He married Henrietta Moodie and, possibly having some sympathy with the financial plight of her family, purchased Melsetter for £26,000. He later extended his estate by buying the island of Papa Stronsay.

Although the connection between the Moodies and Melsetter in Orkney was irrevocably severed by the sale of the estate in 1818, another Melsetter connection was created years later in another continent. Just before the sale of the estate, the son Benjamin and others had emigrated to Africa and within a few years the Moodies had become one of the of those pioneering families whose story is interwoven with the history of Southern Africa in the nineteenth century. One of the family, Thomas, led a trek to Gazaland, in what was then Rhodesia, and founded the town of Melsetter at an altitude of 1586 m in the Chimianimani Mountains.

Meanwhile, Robert Heddle prospered, as the New Statistical Account of 1842 records:

The whole of the parish of Walls, with a small exception, belongs to the Crown and Mr. Heddle - the latter being the proprietor of two-thirds of the property.

Three generations of Heddles owned Melsetter House until it was eventually sold by Robert's grandson, John George Moodie Heddle in 1898 to Thomas Middlemore, who employed the architect W.R.Letherby to design a new mansion and garden. This is the house which stands now as an internationally famous example of the architect's work and a Grade A listed building. During the Second World War, Melsetter House was requisitioned by the government to accommodate the Admiralty Headquarters controlling the fleet in Scapa Flow but after the war it was returned to private ownership.

Matthew Forster Heddle was born in 1828 and his mother Henrietta died in 1833 at the age of 39. Henrietta is usually described as John Heddle's first wife but there are no obvious references to the identity of any other wife. Matthew had two brothers, John George and Robert, and three sisters, Emily, Elizabeth and Henrietta. His father died in 1842, leaving the fourteen-year old Matthew under the guardianship of William Henry Fotheringham, Sheriff Clerk of Orkney, and two other Curators. Fotheringham, who had practised law in Edinburgh between 1817 and 1830, was a man who seemed to collect appointments and titles. He was, amongst other things, Keeper of Register of Sasines, Clerk to the Justices of the Peace, Comptroller of Customs at Kirkwall, Admiral Clerk and Commissary Clerk.

Heddle in Edinburgh

Matthew had already been a pupil at Edinburgh Academy for five years when his father died, leaving him £2500. He had been nine when he entered the Academy and left it when he was

fifteen to attend Merchiston Castle School. Records of his schooldays are sparse but there is an account in the Chronicles of the Cumming Club (1887) about an encounter with one of the fearsome teachers at the Academy, James Gloag, 'Master of the Arithmetical and Geometrical School'. Matthew had become the possessor of a handsome pocket-knife which on one occasion he used to sharpen his slate pencil, unaware that Gloag detested any means of sharpening a pencil other than by rubbing it on a stone. The well-sharpened pencil emitted a loud squeak which incensed the irascible Gloag so much that he led the offending pupil to the side of the large fireplace and dropped his knife into the heart of the fire. The punishment was completed by a routine flogging with the tawse. Even at a time when corporal punishment was common, Gloag seems to have been noted for his enthusiasm for flogging and it was said that he had acquired a taste for it - 'taste with a distempered appetite.'

In the most extensive obituary of Heddle that I have found, Goodchild (1897) describes how Heddle helped to found a Natural History Society at Merchiston and began to develop his propensity for collecting, 'which became his most dominant characteristic in after-life'. As part of his natural history collection, Matthew had created a herbarium which had involved some years of effort. He lent this herbarium to a friend who accidentally dropped it into a stream and ruined it. Heddle decided that he would collect no more things that could so easily be destroyed and began to collect minerals instead, a decision which marked the beginning of his lifetime's work.

While he was attending Merchiston School, he lived at 51 Albany Street, the house of Dr. John Brown. Heddle attributed much of his own love of natural history to the genial influence of Dr. Brown, who provided him with some of the paternal affection and guidance which he had been denied by the early death of his father.

Heddle commenced his medical studies at Edinburgh University in 1845 and, at the end of his course, went to Germany to study chemistry and mineralogy at Clausthal and Freiburg. He returned to Edinburgh and graduated M.D. in 1851. His graduation thesis was entitled The Ores of the Metals. In that same year, he became President of the Edinburgh Geological Society, which must then have been a more influential position than it is now because, according to Goodchild, writing Heddle's obituary in 1897,

He was also at one time President of the Geological Society of Edinburgh and, while holding this office, was instrumental in urging upon the Government of the day the importance of instituting a Geological Survey of Scotland.

(The official Geological Survey of Scotland was started in 1855 under A.C. Ramsay as a result of the petition in which Heddle had played an important part.)

For the next five years he practised medicine in the vicinity of the Grassmarket but found the life increasingly uncongenial so, in 1856, he chartered a boat and went to the Faroes, where he amassed a huge collection of zeolites with multiple specimens of each mineral. He exchanged his duplicate specimens with other collectors and so laid the foundations for his renowned collection of minerals.

Heddle at St. Andrews

In 1856 he was appointed Assistant to Arthur Connell, Professor of Chemistry at St. Andrews but for several years Connell was so ill that the burden of teaching was carried by Heddle and, when the Chair became vacant in 1862, he was appointed to the post which he then occupied for over twenty years.

Heddle had married Mary Jane Sinclair MacKechnie in 1858 and between then and 1874 they continued the family tradition of fecundity by having 10 children ([see picture of family group](#)). The eldest surviving daughter, Clementine, was the one to whom The Mineralogy of Scotland was later dedicated by her husband Alexander Thoms, while Cecilia married and became the Cecilia Westgarth Thomson to whom my copy of the book was presented by Thoms in 1908. The 1871 census records Heddle living at 172 South Street with his wife, 6 children, 2 nieces and 3 servants.

At some time in the eighteen-eighties Heddle temporarily vacated his chair at St. Andrews to act as a consultant to a financier who had an interest in South African gold mines. When he reached South Africa he quickly realised that the claims being made were totally unjustified or, as Goodchild politely phrased it:

after making a full and proper inspection of evidence on the ground, he felt himself unable to endorse some of the statements that had been made regarding the enterprise referred to.

He returned to Britain and immediately engaged in a successful legal action in connection with the gold mining enterprise. The result was an award which significantly enhanced his income for the rest of his life. (There is some uncertainty about the year in which the South African events occurred: in 3 different obituaries Goodchild quotes 1880, 1883 and 1890.)

Despite his interests and reputation as a mineralogist, he was still a professor of chemistry ([see picture](#)) and some of his students, like Purdie, became distinguished chemists in fields unconnected with mineralogy. He was reputed to be an excellent teacher, good at practical work and popular with students. Nevertheless, as Drever (1955) pointed out, mineralogy was sadly neglected at this time in Great Britain and:

it must be admitted without disparagement that his chemistry was in effect a camouflage.

Heddle had a powerful physique, had probably climbed more Scottish mountains than anyone before him and was a Member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. His physical toughness and stamina were necessary attributes for his tremendous exertions in collecting minerals and other work in the field. He explored every corner of Scotland in the company of a few friends who shared his enthusiasm. In his Memoir of Dr. Heddle, Thoms (1902) records that he spent the vacations on mountain-tops, on remote islands and in mines and railway cuttings:

with hammers up to 28lbs weight, blasting powder, or dynamite, and wedges, he made the rocks give up their hidden treasures

The large size of his hammers was well known to his friends and was the subject of student jokes. It was said that even his alpenstock was bigger than anyone else's. He was a gifted and dramatic raconteur and delighted in telling elaborate stories. He had high principles accompanied by a quick temper and formed strong likes and dislikes with the consequence that he occasionally made enemies; any dislike he had of certain people was founded upon their having violated some principle rather than on any trivial personal matter.

Heddle's Contribution to Mineralogy

Heddle's many publications range from short notes to extensive papers; 60 of his contributions have been recorded by Richard Gillanders (2001) in the BGS Library.

The foundations of his posthumous Mineralogy of Scotland are to be found in 8 extensive papers in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh but he published many items in the Transactions of the Geological Society of Glasgow, the Philosophical Magazine and the Mineralogical Magazine. His sequence of papers in the Mineralogical Magazine is entitled The Geognosy and Mineralogy of Scotland and emphasises the fact that his geological work in the field was not confined to mineralogy.

In writing the history of the Geological Society of London, Woodward (1907) mentioned the meeting held in February 1876 which established the Mineralogical Society. The chairman was H.C. Sorby, while among those present was Heddle, James Nicol and Archibald Geikie. The creation of the Mineralogical Society marked the beginning of a new phase in the growth of mineralogy and Heddle was the Society's Vice-President in 1876 and President in 1879. In his Presidential Address to the Geological Society in 1887, Judd referred to the neglect of mineralogy in the past by the Society and Geikie, in his massive anniversary address of 1908, described the decline and rebirth of mineralogy from its ancient beginnings:

For many centuries before the Geological Society was founded the science of Mineralogy had flourished as an important and popular branch of natural knowledge.

Geikie quite properly attributed most of the renaissance of the subject to the application of thin-section microscopy in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Shortly after his St. Andrews appointment, Heddle undertook the revision and editing of Greg and Letson's Manual of Mineralogy of Great Britain and Ireland. The preface of the new edition (1858) states:

Dr. Heddle has kindly undertaken the general and especially the chemical revision of this work, preparatory to its going to press; and the Authors take this opportunity of acknowledging the great obligation they are under to that gentleman.

One of Heddle's many notes to the Royal Physical Society (1856) concerns the occurrence of oxalates as minerals. The two minerals described, conistonite and heddleite, do not appear in any modern list of Scottish minerals, the only oxalate recorded being glushinskite, which occurs as a result of lichen attacking serpentinite. However, a sentence in his paper summarises very well his painstaking approach to mineralogical research:

It is always desirable that a mineralogist should be able to account for the occurrence of every substance which comes under his notice.

The section on mineralogy which Heddle wrote for the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1883) extended over 85 pages and covered classical crystallography, aggregation, pseudomorphs, physical

properties and a table of 1150 minerals from abriachite to zwieselite. The article is beautifully illustrated with his line drawings.

He took a particular interest in the structure and origin of agates and his collection of Scottish agates in the National Museum is unsurpassed in quality and variety. It is noteworthy that the origin of agates is still a subject of active research (see, for example T.J. Moxon, 1991 and M. Landmesser, 1998).

Heddle expended much labour on the preparation of his comprehensive work *The Mineralogy of Scotland* and before his death in 1897 had completed the greater part of the manuscript and about 600 beautifully drawn figures but it was left to his friend and son-in-law Alexander Thoms to supervise the completion of the work in conjunction with its dedicated editor, J.G. Goodchild.

I have not found any annotated bibliography of Heddle's publications but am convinced that a detailed review would reveal an enormous and largely unrecognised contribution to mineralogy, despite his already established reputation.

Heddle's Contribution to Geology

Heddle is widely thought of as a collector and mineralogist but his contributions to geology were considerable and so, for example, in 1853 he supervised the excavation of fossil fish from Dura Den, one of which, *Gyroptychius heddlei*, is named after him (see Batchelor, 1995). We should recall that when he started work, not only were there no geological maps but even OS maps were unavailable. These deficiencies and the virtual absence of public transport did not deter him from producing a geological map of Sutherland which was for a long time the only one available. He produced also maps of Orkney and Shetland and worked for years on a geological map of Aberdeenshire, Elgin, Nairn, Banff and some adjoining areas of Inverness-shire. Although this map was never completed, the scale of these enterprises is almost superhuman considering the nature of the ground and the absence of reliable maps and transport.

He made important observations on the composition of Scottish granites and on the nature of pegmatites and showed that the change in volume during the conversion of limestone to dolomite led to a commonly observed form of dolomite. His observations on the development of structure during dynamic metamorphism can easily be extended to describe granulite. Goodchild records that Heddle provided him with the laws governing the rounding of sand grains in desert conditions and finishes his obituary with the comment:

enough has been presented here to justify the statement made at the head of this section, and to which the present writer is disposed firmly to hold, that Dr. Heddle's geological work is nearly equal in importance to his contributions to mineralogy.

Discussion and Conclusion

What started as a simple quest for information about Heddle, his sisters and his editors led me down more byways than I expected but has been an educational experience. J.G. Goodchild, for instance, was known to me only as the editor of Heddle's book but emerged as an important early member of the Geological Survey. He joined the Survey in 1867 and was mapping in the Lake District until 1883 when ill-health forced him to abandon fieldwork and return to London, where he worked in the Survey's Headquarters in Jermyn Street. In 1887 The Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art - which later became the Royal Scottish Museum - assigned the upper gallery of the west wing to the Geological Survey of Scotland for the purpose of exhibiting specimens and maps illustrating the geology of Scotland and Goodchild was appointed to be curator of the collection. It was during his work in Edinburgh that he became acquainted with Heddle and his collection of minerals.

Goodchild was an imaginative and enthusiastic worker who published over 200 papers on a variety of subjects including glacial geology, dyke formation, sandstones, mineralogy and stratigraphy. Outside geology his interests ranged from ornithology to Japanese clocks. He seems to have been an affectionate and generous man who was widely admired for his scrupulous honesty and his unstinting support for people whom he considered had received insufficient credit for their work. (For a detailed obituary see J.W. Gregory 1905-10.)

Cecilia Heddle married William Westgarth Thomson ([see pictures of both](#)) who had been born in Lanarkshire but traded in sugar as a commission merchant in the Philippines. Heddle's other sister, Clementina, married Alexander Thoms whose family wealth came from the tea trade ([see dedication](#)). He was a close friend of Heddle and had a great interest in geology. The 1901 Census describes him as a retired Bengal zemindaar and indigo planter, a zemindaar being a feudatory in British India who held rights to a large amount of land by paying the government a substantial revenue.

As for Matthew Forster Heddle, I have read nothing to detract from his status as a major figure in the fields of mineralogy and geology but it is fairly clear that his robust character must have alienated some of his contemporaries. His death was announced at a meeting of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and reported in five lines of the Transactions. The Geological Society published no obituary and in the President's Anniversary Address, Henry Hicks listed obituaries but Heddle was not included. The Royal Physical Society, the Mineralogical Society and the Geological Society of Edinburgh all published extensive obituaries and a memorial address was delivered to the Glasgow Geological Society. All these obituaries were written by Goodchild and, with minor variations, are from the same text. I was surprised to discover that even the 1897 edition of *Who's Who* has no entry for Heddle.

Goodchild, with his characteristic decency, was generous and perceptive when he wrote:

For myself, who had much to do with him, I may say that, taking him all in all, I looked up to Dr. Heddle much as Boswell looked up to Johnson. Like his prototype, Dr. Heddle did a vast amount of work of good quality, and in the face of many difficulties; like Dr. Johnson he was modest and never sought honours (so none were conferred on him); like Dr. Johnson he never appropriated other men's ideas; and like Dr. Johnson he was much given to kindly acts, in a quiet way, towards his fellow-men and looking for no reward.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Richard Batchelor for putting me in touch with Hamish Johnston, to Mr. Johnston for providing information and the photographs and to Freddy Theys of Antwerp for permission to reproduce his etching of Melsetter House. Thanks are due also to Mr. Ronnie Smith of the Edinburgh Academy for his help.

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Figures

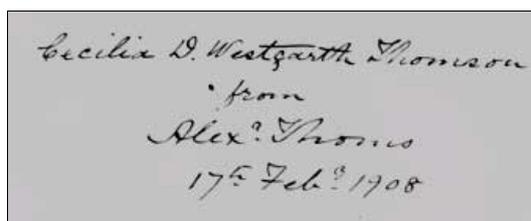


Figure 1: Inscription in the author's copy of Heddle's Mineralogy of Scotland

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Figure 2: Melsetter House Etching by F. Theys

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Figure 3: Heddle family group in about 1883

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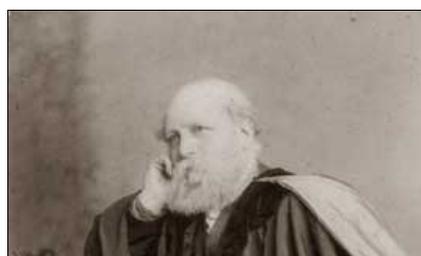




Figure 4: Professor M. Forster Heddle about 1880

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Figure 5: William Westgarth Thomson and Cecilia Heddle

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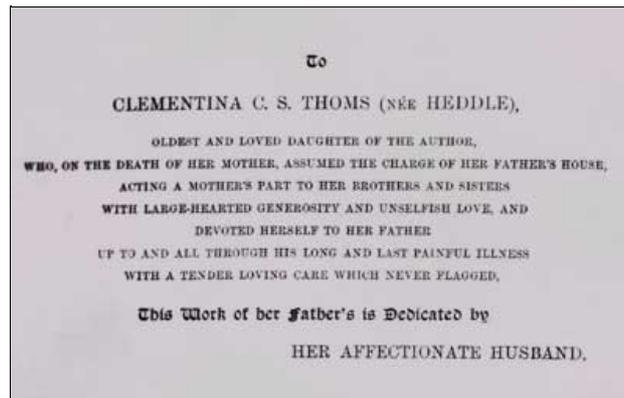


Figure 6: Dedication of The Mineralogy of Scotland by Alexander Thoms to his wife Clementina

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Peter Dryburgh is a retired physical chemist whose main research was in the field of crystal growth of optical and electronic materials. He worked in industrial research laboratories and as a lecturer in the Electrical Engineering Department of Edinburgh University. He has a long-standing interest in geology, has been a Fellow of the Edinburgh Geological Society since 1985 and is currently its President.

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Matthew Forster Heddle was Scottish physician and amateur mineralogist active through the 19th century. This he did not live to complete, but the manuscripts fell into able hands, and The Mineralogy of Scotland, in 2 vols, edited by JG Goodchild, was issued in 1901. Heddle was one of the founders of the Mineralogical Society, and he contributed many articles on Scottish minerals, and on the geology of the northern parts of Scotland, to the Mineralogical Magazine, as well as to the Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was a keen amateur mountaineer and one of the first honorary members of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. He is known to have climbed with his friend, the artist Colin

Matthew Forster Heddle is arguably Scotland's most famous mineralogist. His mineralogical adventures and researches are legendary amongst students of Scottish mineralogy. His "The Mineralogy of Scotland", published posthumously by J.G.Goodchild remains one of the most sought after antiquarian mineralogy texts. Although he trained originally as a medical practitioner, Heddle changed direction and followed a career in academia at St Andrews University, teaching chemistry and mineralogy. He undertook enormous numbers of chemical analyses (when a single analysis could take days), collected and polished thousands of agates, and presented his extraordinarily fine and comprehensive mineral collection to the National Museum of Scotland. Matthew Forster Heddle. 88 likes. IT'S HERE !! The new biography of Matthew Forster Heddle (1828-1897), Scotland's greatest mineralogist, has now been... Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created 22 March 2015. People.