

Culpeper's Herbal

by Miriam Miller

The seventeenth century struggle to bring medicine to the people.

*First published in 1652 with the title **The English Physician**, the book is still in print and over 100 separate editions have been produced during the past 350 years.*

*The title **Culpeper's Herbal** was wished upon the book by later editors and is the one by which it is now generally known. The Herbal, therefore, bids fair to be the longest-surviving secular text printed in English, its nearest rival being Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* which was first published in the following year, 1653.*



Nicholas Culpeper

Line engraving, 1652. Wellcome Library

In spite of his book's popularity, the author Nicholas Culpeper is both a shadowy and controversial figure. Biographical information on him is meagre and subsequent comments on him and his published works by what might be described as orthodox medical opinion have been critical in the extreme. He has been described as a quack and 'that incorrigible charlatan'. This is hardly fair, Culpeper, after four years at Cambridge, had spent six years as an apprentice apothecary between 1634 and 1640 and for the last 14 years of his life, he conducted what must have been a

successful practice next to the Red Lion in Spitalfields, just outside the City of London. He never claimed, however, to be a physician, describing himself on the title-pages of his books as 'Nich Culpeper, Gent. Student in Physick and Astrologie'.

By 1652, he was already an established author and, in the prefatory matter to this, the first edition, he lists over 40 authorities whose works he has studied before publishing his book. These include classical authors such as Galen and Dioscorides as well as near-contemporaries, Gerrard and Parkinson. The list is no mere window-dressing exercise, because he continually refers to these authors throughout the volume, comparing and contrasting their opinions and recommendations.

Culpeper, himself, however, possessed a fine gift for invective, which he used to effect when criticising a group he regarded as his arch-enemy, namely the Fellows of the College of Physicians. Culpeper's antagonism was rooted in his disgust at the high fees the Fellows demanded of patients for consultation.

He had published his own translation into English of the College's Latin *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, in 1649 with the express intention of making the text available to the laity.

However, whilst the knowledge of what in the 17th century was called 'physick' may thus have been made available in print, the bulk of the ingredients needed to make up the medicines listed in the *Pharmacopoeia* could be obtained only from an apothecary and were, therefore, expensive. Herbs, on the other hand, were grown in gardens for culinary purposes, could be purchased at street markets or gathered wild.

The idea, therefore, of publishing a small, portable book, cheap in itself and offering information about cheap and readily available ingredients must have occurred to Culpeper and his printer, Peter Cole, hence the appearance of *The English physician* in 1652.

As with most herbals, *The English physician* offers an alphabetical list of herbs together with recommendations for their use.

As well as the more conventional information one might expect to find in a herbal, Culpeper offers many a fascinating side-light into the society of his time.

Describing the uses of 'the common alder tree', he remarks:

The leaves, put under the bare feet galled with travelling, are a great refreshing to them.

[In other words, in 17th-century England, those who could not afford to travel on horseback were obliged to walk, however long the journey.]

Further, concerning the same tree, he declares:

The said leaves, gathered while the morning dew is on them, and brought into a chamber troubled with fleas, will gather them thereunto, which being suddenly cast out, will rid the chamber of those troublesome bedfellows'.

It is one thing, however, to gather herbs but quite another to turn them into efficacious remedies. After offering his list of plants, Culpeper then describes how they may be made into syrups, ointments, poultices etc, how applied and how stored. Many of these techniques are culinary which is not to be wondered at. The method of manufacturing an ointment is very little different from that of making a savoury butter.

The book would appear to have been an instant success because it was, almost as instantly, pirated, two editions appearing, also dated 1652, the one bearing the imprint 'printed for William Bentley' and the other (rather piously) 'Printed for the Good of the Commonwealth'. Culpeper's and Cole's response was swift. In the following year, 1653, they produced *The English physitian* enlarged, which included over 30 additional herbs not included in the 1652 edition, together with a slightly altered format and layout. It is on this edition that all subsequent versions have been based.

The development of book illustration in the late 18th Century and into the 19th brought about a radical change in the appearance of what had come to be called *Culpeper's Herbal*. Although Culpeper's own descriptions of each herb are painstakingly detailed and accurate, the possibility of including illustrations, sometimes coloured, to such a volume was an enormous advantage when it came to recognition.

The 19th Century also saw considerable alterations to the text, some editors adding herbs discovered since Culpeper's lifetime, importing text from other publications and revising some of Culpeper's recommendations. In particular, his commitment to astrological medicine came into question at this time, a commitment which is undoubtedly one of the reasons he has been regarded as a charlatan. The whole practice of herbal or 'botanic' medicine, with or without astrological considerations, seems to have fallen from grace and was widely criticised.



The recent rise of interest in 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine has included medical herbalism and there is now available a plethora of herbals, some authoritative, others more frivolous. Culpeper's book holds its own in this market and one of the most interesting editions to appear during the last years of the 20th Century examines Culpeper's colour herbal in the light of modern herbal medicine.

It is a fitting valediction, but whether he realised that his book would live over 350 years after his death we shall never know.

Editor's Note:

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