The Importance of Being Wormwood

Gareth Evans makes a gentle plea for green thoughts in a green country as he muses on medicinal and herbal culture in Wales and the need for continuing research.

If one looks west from the low lands of Shropshire or Herefordshire the distant, dark wall of mountains appear to barricade Wales from outside influence. However recent findings suggest that the idea of an inward-looking cultural habit may not be what the Welsh should be known for. Archaeological and documentary evidence points to an obvious phenomenon; where in the past it would have taken weeks to travel to the centre of Europe cross-country, it took just days to sail from the many small ports on the Welsh coast to south-western France, northern Spain and Portugal.

It has been suggested that there was something of a common western coastal culture in the Celtic age and the linguistic legacy is the most obvious effect of this long established 'littoral superhighway'. We know that from early mediaeval times onwards trade was particularly strong to Wales's then largest harbour, Tenby, in Pembrokeshire, importing goods such as salt, oil, wine, sugar, dried fruit, oranges and spices. This varied and centuries-old Continental contact touched peoples' everyday lives in many ways, not least through the medicinal herbs they chose.

The general self-sufficiency of Wales's rural communities has been well-documented. However, despite a very full archive being painstakingly collected in the late 1970s, as yet there has been comparatively little published on the integrated and substantial herbal culture. There was clearly an informal structure of medicinal self-help within communities born of necessity, a lack of commercialism, a continuity of remedies passed down through families and persistence in time.

David Allen and Gabrielle Hatfield (2005) worked with the original collector of this Welsh archive and they suggest that Wales had a unique character within the folk medicine within the British Isles. The numerous occurrences of herbs from warmer European latitudes indicate an established tradition of herbal cultivation in Wales, in addition to the tradition of wild herb gathering. Feverfew, Tansy ('... give for a cold, but also good for small calves ...') or Southernwood ('make a plaster with spinach for quinsy') appeared to have travelled on the back of trade or, indeed, cultural or religious affiliations; there is no problem in mooting hypothetical possibilities in the long history of Wales.

In some cases the Continental cousins nudge their native sisters out of the medicinal cupboard. Closely related to each other, the introduced wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) was routinely substituted for conditions otherwise associated with the native wild-growing mugwort (*A. vulgaris*). 'Good for the stomach' and a 'blood purifier', wormwood was also used as a vermifuge and insecticide. Its great popularity in Wales led to it being routinely grown in gardens and dried for winter use. A pan could be kept boiling on the kitchen range all day and although most children needed persuasion some liked the taste, continuing the habit devotedly into old age. None of this is perhaps unique in the British Isles, but what was exceptional is its extent and persistence in Wales.

Some examples of the historic Continental trade at the Tudor Merchant's House, Tenby (National Trust).

Further back in documented history, we know of a tenth-century prince who deterred the theft of the medicinal plants grown for his physician with such crippling punishments that it leaves you wondering at the exact identity of the herbs. The famous fourteenth-century Myddfai manuscript lists many interesting medicinal plants, but the facsimile of the nineteenth-century translation that is circulated today has to be read with caution, not least regarding plant identification.

And this is the nub of my overview. As with the archive of Welsh traditional medicine described above, this historic manuscript is in need of friends. A product of its times, the text is made up of material from many sources and can be easily misunderstood although, tantalisingly, it apparently contains much more original material than its equivalent Irish and Scottish texts. A more scholarly early twentieth-century French translation shows the older translation's shortcomings. For instance, the Old Welsh name for mugwort refers to its many roots, a name that overlaps with other quite unrelated wildflowers; a simple example that demonstrates the acute need for modern scholarly translation of this interesting text. Only then can we begin to discern if exotic ingredients of some of the recipes are more aspirational than authentic.

Both this medieval manuscript and the archive of Welsh traditional medicine are sources that are relatively neglected but indicate the rich and informative nature of Welsh herbal culture. This neglect is not necessary just a Welsh issue. Repeatedly in both medicinal and social history herbal medicine is overlooked and, if referred to, the importance of accuracy is not always realised.

Meanwhile in Wales there are promising signs; a new project is proposed to combine the translation of mediaeval Welsh manuscripts with medicinal expertise, also *Ethnomedica* (the oral history archive project based at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, that researches the herbal traditions of Britain), has an energetic representative in Wales. To use the exclamation of a Welsh folk dance group after a particularly strenuous jig: Wermod Fawr! Great Wormwood!

References

Gabrielle Hatfield & David Allen, *Medicinal Plants in Folk Tradition: An Ethnobotany of Britain & Ireland*, Timber Press, 2005.

Pol Diverrès, *Le plus ançien texte des Meddygon Myddveu*. Paris, M. Le Dault, 1913.

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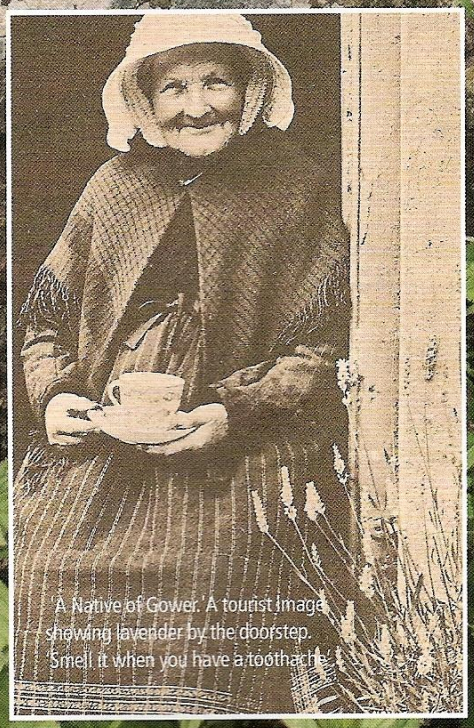
The interior of St. Beuno's Church on the Llyn Peninsula gets decorated with collected medicinal plants to mark the site's past use as a hospice for pilgrims to Bardsey.



A Native of Gower. 'A tourist image showing lavender by the doorstep. 'Smell it when you have a tooth ache'.

Photos: Gareth Evans