

HISTORY

Curious Herbal; Curious Tale

Jareth Evans delves into the extraordinary life of Elizabeth Blackwell (1700-1758).



Elizabeth Blackwell

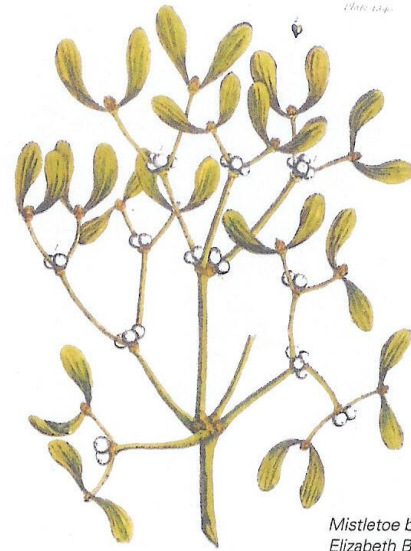
A Curious Herbal refers to a now arcane use of 'curious' meaning to take pains over something. This is certainly true of the book's production where, exceptionally, Elizabeth Blackwell not only drew the plants growing at Chelsea Physic Garden but engraved the copper plates and coloured the final prints. The whole enterprise was fuelled by Elizabeth's need to get her husband, Alexander, out of the debtor's prison. The story behind *A Curious Herbal* is as sensational as any associated with botanical literature.

Although Elizabeth Blackwell will always be remembered for her landmark publication, her life was shaped by her husband's restlessness and ambition. The son of an academic family, Alexander was deemed a perfect Latin and Greek scholar at fifteen. After first studying medicine on the Continent he continued his studies at Edinburgh. Then, before even his friends knew where he was, he had eloped with Elizabeth, a 19-year old Aberdeen merchant's daughter. To support their new life in London, the young scholar became a publisher's corrector then, without having undertaken the necessary apprenticeship, he set up his own printing business. It wasn't long before the printing guild took Alexander to court where he was declared bankrupt. The couple were respected enough to receive help from eminent physicians but it fell on Elizabeth to come up with a fundraising project.

A Curious Herbal is notable for being not only one of the earliest botanical publications by a woman, but also a remarkable feat of endurance. Not only did Elizabeth produce the book but she gained the support of Richard Mead, physician to King George II, who she credited with the initial idea for the work. Among the six 'gentleman' who thought the book performed 'service to the public' was Isaac Rand, Chelsea Physic Garden's first *Horti Perfectus* who gave Elizabeth access to its prized plant collections. Elizabeth skilfully marketed her remarkable illustrated part-work. The prison story was circulated in contemporary periodicals and it is referred to several times in the book itself.

Renting a house in Swan Walk, Elizabeth drew 'from the life', and then engraved and hand-coloured 500 illustrations that were published in 125 weekly instalments from 1736-39. With its English text and common names translated by Alexander from his prison cell *A Curious Herbal* became an instant success. It was also a bridge between the old 'disorganised' herbals and the new Linnaean systematics which were illustrated with minute dissections by such artists as Georg Dionysus Ehret.

The exact grounds for Alexander's release from prison, either



Mistletoe by Elizabeth Blackwell

through redemption by his wife or the completion of his sentence, is actually not clear. However, his re-launch as an agricultural expert was clearly successful in that the Duke of Chandos took him on to improve his estate at Cannons in Edgware. Alexander's subsequent move to Sweden, on the strength of his agricultural expertise, followed a strong tradition of Scottish enterprise in Sweden. In the more favourable accounts it is been suggested that it was the instability of contemporary Swedish politics that led to the decision that Elizabeth should remain behind in England. The dangers were to become obvious, and the suspicions and mistrust that must have been rife at the time are clear in Linnaeus's comments about Alexander in *Nemesis Divine*. Eventually reaching the position of a Royal Physician in Stockholm, Alexander entered dangerous political waters and almost inevitably was arrested. He confessed under torture to attempting to change the Swedish succession and was sentenced to death. After her husband's execution in Stockholm, Elizabeth went into obscurity until her death in 1758, by which time her work was known around Europe; and widely pirated. An official enlarged version, *Herbarium Blackwellianum*, with additional Latin text, was in the course of being published at Nuremberg. This would make her known to the European intellectual audience, including Linnaeus who, in investing her with the fine title '*Botanica Blackwellia*', set the seal on her botanical reputation.

Nemesis and the Systemist

Carl Linnaeus wrote a collection of salutary tales called *Nemesis Divine* to instruct his wayward son. His observations on Elizabeth Blackwell's husband may well have contributed to Alexander's downfall.

The two men met four years after Alexander arrived in Sweden and Linnaeus described him as 'a bold atheistic ignoramus'. The dye was cast when Alexander crossed the powerful Count Tessin who had helped Linnaeus when he was a struggling doctor. Linnaeus accuses Alexander of bribing the ineffectual King Frederick, with 'enormous sums of money' to appoint an English councillor. He also suggests that Alexander prescribed something 'remedial' to the husband of the woman he was consorting with and the man died. Linnaeus's notes have a tone of breathless gossip leading up to Alexander's eventual execution in Stockholm on 29th July 1747. Alexander always declared his innocence and documents found in 1845 show the execution was based on unsatisfactory evidence. When criticised for approaching the block with the wrong manner, he remarked 'as this was his first experiment, no wonder he required a little instruction'. Is this a glimpse of Alexander Blackwell, the poised, polished chameleon character or is it yet just another good Blackwell story?