

# The knowing of herbs in the work of poet and scholar George Herbert

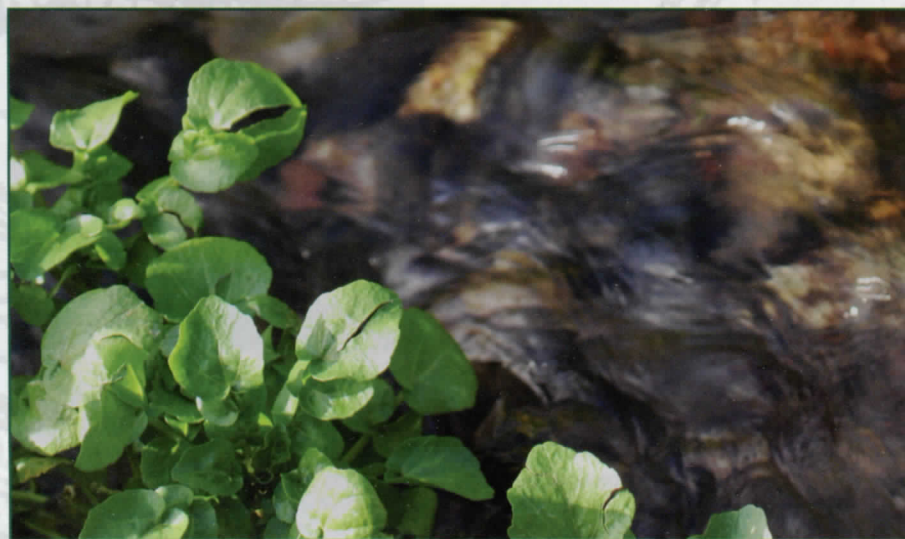
Gareth Evans examines the work of poet and scholar George Herbert (1633-1633) and finds that literary and botanical allusions are closely entwined.

"I know the ways of learning", George Herbert could confidently state; "Both th'old discoveries and the new-found seas". Probably one of the best minds of his time, Herbert was born and brought up as one of seven siblings at Montgomery in what is now Powys, Wales. He benefitted from an extensive education that was carefully supervised by his mother, Magdalen Herbert, a woman of "outstanding intelligence and courage" who was a confidante and a patron of the poet John Donne.

He followed the path she had devised for him that led into an academic career at Cambridge. His own ambition led him on to parliament and the court of James I. As he wrote, "I know the ways of honour; what maintains/The quick returns of courtesy and wit". After the King's death in 1625 Herbert's court life came to a close and in due course he took on a new and contrasting role of a rural parson. He promptly prepared the spiritual and practical guide *The Country Parson*, in part to be able to remind himself of his own high standards of behaviour. The devotional verses that he now began to compose in what is now Bemerton parish, near Salisbury, are now most widely known as the source of such well-known hymns as King of Glory, King of Peace, Let All the World in Every Corner Sing and Teach me, my God and King.

Herbert's metaphysical poetry, like Donne's, is known for its closely argued style. In what was an age of discovery and progress the metaphysical poets drew on striking images from such diverse fields as navigation and chemistry. In his poetry Herbert partly displays his learning by allusions to botany, from both the Old and the New World. We do not know definitively his personal source for these, but to find a very good candidate we need go no further than the text of John Gerard's *The Herball, or, Generall historie of plantes* (1597) or its immediate Continental precursors, which Herbert would have known.

The well-read Herbert was immersed in the long-revered physiological theories that still held sway. Here the venerable humoral system is combined with the belief that cause and antidote were in intimate relation to each other due to the action of divine providence:



Gerard's *Herball*: "Watercress do growe in running brookes of the most cleer fountains and grauelie springs, where the best for phisic use do grow."

*Most herbs that grow in brookes are hot and dry,  
Cold fruits warm kernells help against the winde;  
The lemmon's juice and rinde cure mutually;  
The whey of milk doth loose, the milk doth binde.*

## Providence

The first line brings watercress naturally to mind for, as Gerard states, it "is evidently hot and drie".

In his poem *The Holy Scriptures* he imagines scattered Biblical verses are like individual herbs that "do watch" a curative potion ('watch' here having the now obsolete meaning 'wait', as in 'vigilantly attend'):

*This verse marks that, and both do make a motion  
Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:  
Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,  
These three make up some Christian's destinie.*

Related to providence was the concept of the essential unity of God's creation; hence the human body reflects the complete 'sphere' of the natural world that it is an integral part of: "(Man) is in little all the sphere". In *Man (The Temple)* he simply states a consequence of these beliefs:

*Herbs gladly cure our flesh, because that they  
Finde their acquaintance there.*

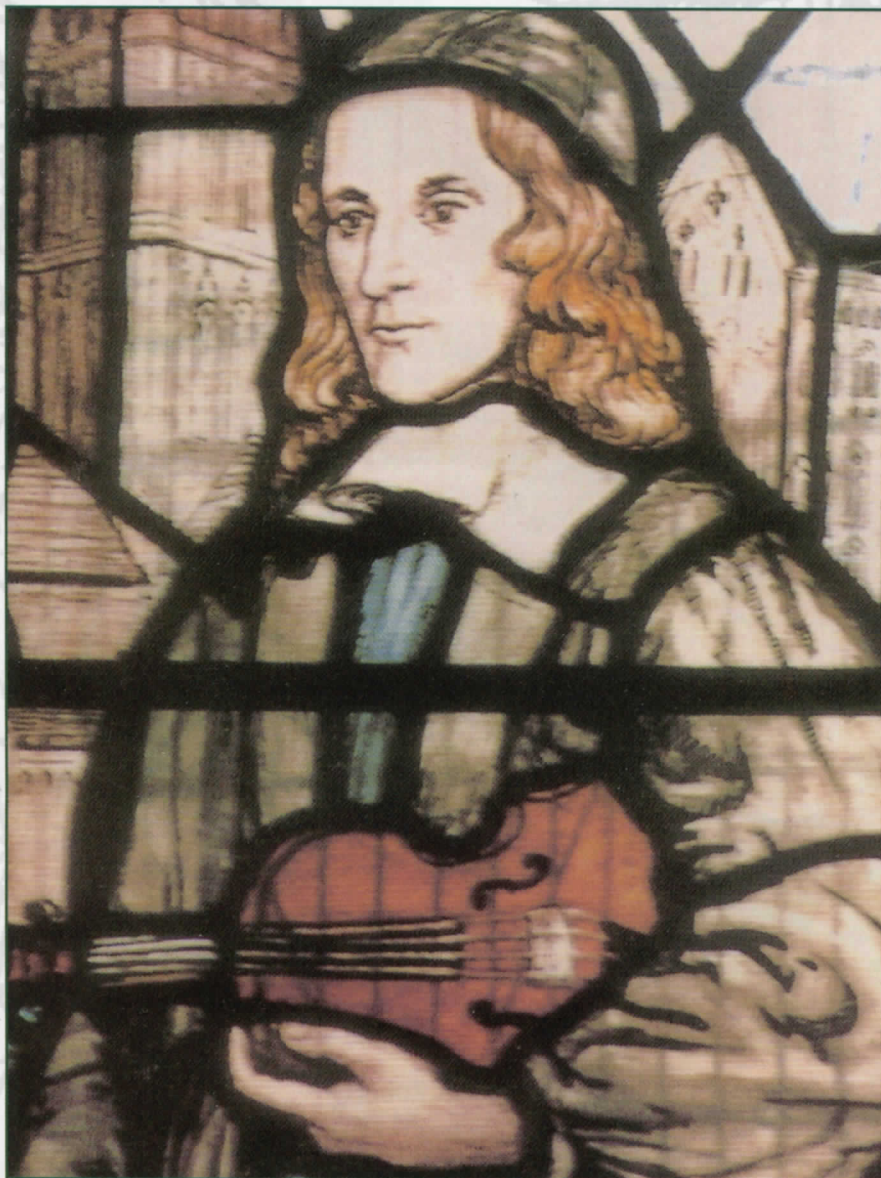
These theological ideas could be put down to Herbert's accumulated study. However, perhaps surprisingly, there is evidence of Herbert's practical knowledge too. An early 20th century biographer (A G Hyde, 1906) claimed that "all the Herberts seem to have been accomplished herbalists". His father (who died when Herbert was three) counted being "a good botanic" as part of the desirable education for a gentleman "so that he may know the nature of all herbs and plants", something that at least two of George's accomplished brothers approved of in their own way.

When he took the Bemerton living he and his wife, Jane (née Danvers), followed the spirit of his own stated principles by willingly helping the needy of his flock in a variety of practical ways including "healing a wound and helping the sick". His belief in divine providence, in addition to a realistic attitude, meant his stated preference was not for the costly imported drugs supplied by the apothecary's shop. Instead he recommended an interesting list of wild and garden herbs (see box). The Chelsea garden of his step-father, Sir John Danvers, was one of the most celebrated in the country, being the first designed completely in the formal Italianate style in Britain. In contrast, we are told that "Mr Herbert made a good garden and walks" at Bemerton no doubt containing some of the "home-bred things" the Herberts made use of.



of poet and

Photos: Gareth Evans



George Herbert with his viol, St Andrew's Church, Bemerton, near Salisbury.

Remembered for being blessed with intelligence, wit, good looks and charm, Herbert lacked only good health. Plagued by recurring 'agues' and fevers throughout his life, he said of his own slight frame: "He had wit like a Pen-knife in a narrow sheath, too Sharp for his body". Throughout his life he struggled with the tension between his worldly ambition and his religious piety. The imagery of his

questing devotional poetry drew on the common experience of healing plants, of which he appears to have had a detailed understanding. He was not quite 40 when he eventually succumbed to what is thought was consumption; a short, but full life, guided by a precept he recommended to others "Do well and right, and let the world sink".

### ***From The Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson.***

"Yet it is easy for any scholar to attain to such a measure of physic, as may be of much use to him, both for himself and others. This is done by seeing one anatomy, reading one book of physic, having one [unnamed] herbal by him. ... the knowing of herbs may be done at such times as they may be a help and a recreation to more divine studies. If there be any of his flock sick he is their physician or at least his wife ... one thing would be carefully observed; which is, to know what herbs may be used instead of drugs of the same nature, and to make the garden the [apothecary's] shop. For home-bred medicines are both more easy for the parson's purse, and more familiar for all men's bodies. So, where the apothecary useth, either for loosening, rhubarb [Chinese rhubarb]; or for binding, bolearmena [bole Armenia]; the parson useth damask or white roses for the one, and plantain, shepherd's purse, knot grass, for the other; and that with better success. As for spices, he doth not only prefer home-bred things before them, but condemns them for vanities, and so shuts them out of his family; esteeming that there is no spice comparable, for herbs, to rosemary, thyme, savory, mints; and for seeds, to fennel, and caraway seeds. Accordingly for salves, his wife seeks not the city, but prefers her garden and fields before all outlandish gums [such as frankincense etc.]. And surely hyssop, valerian, mercury, adder's tongue, yarrow, melilot, and St. John's-wort made into a salve; and elder, camomile, mallows, comphrey, and smallage made into a poultice, have done great and rare cures."

Izaak Walton, *Life of George Herbert*, first published 1670.

Adam G. Hyde, *George Herbert and his times*, London 1906.

George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple Or The Country Parson...* (editions accessible on Google Books).