

Weeds and Wild Flowers - a

Weeds and Wild Flowers is the 1858 book of Swansea-born Caroline Lucas (later Lady Wilkinson). It sounds as if it is yet another Victorian 'flora for ladies' but Gareth Evans has drawn out much of its interesting herbal content.

Not far from the desk where I am writing the subject of this article, Caroline Lucas (1822-1881), spent her childhood. At that time Uplands referred to a house set in the fields and parklands to the west of 'the no longer unsophisticated town' of Swansea, rather than the suburb that was later to take on its name. Upwind of the blighting smoke of the copper works, the owners established their genteel bay-side estates, along with other families of substance.

Caroline Lucas was the issue of local gentry, however her father in the course of his life worked gradually through his fortune breeding and racing horses. What must have been her clear abilities were partially fulfilled with what was counted as a good education for a girl at the time. By the end of her teens she particularly excelled in languages and in her knowledge of the classics, and was counted as being 'immensely well-read'.

She had a particular interest in natural history, and already had articles published in a popular national journal. What was an uncongenial home-life, especially after the death of her mother and her father's subsequent re-marriage, was left behind when she became a companion to the indefatigable Lady Llanover (Octavia Hall) the so-called 'Bee of Gwent'. In 1856 Caroline Lucas published a book that, like other volumes of Victorian 'Ladies' botany', is nowadays easily passed over on the shelves of many second-hand bookshops.



In print

At first sight *Weeds and Wild Flowers* appears to be a literary version of Victorian *découpage*. For each subject, there are poetic quotes from many cultures, and botanical and utilitarian facts, as the subtitle states: *Uses, Legends and Literature*. A style largely shunned by 19th-century professional botanists, it was left as a genre that the so-called 'angel of home' could author while keeping within the conventions of the time. Although the book was deemed 'particular suitable for ladies' the reader is conventionally addressed as 'he'.

An early exponent of the genre was Elizabeth Kent who was part of the circle of early Romantic poets including Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and naturally included much poetry among her facts and observations about each plant. The subjects of Kent's volumes were first, houseplants and, secondly, trees, a third volume on wildflowers never materialised.

Lucas, among others, took up the challenge, giving an emphatically down-to-earth tone to her book by adding the unpretentious 'weeds' to the title. The first chapter, on the nettle, proved surprisingly popular, one reader requesting 120 reprints (it is not recorded for what reason). Clearly the compilation of an erudite and well-informed person who was not without character and humour, it appears to be the only book not written by a scientific authority produced by the leading natural history publisher of the time.

Rustic uses

The Spectator review was favourable but took the author to task for denying what the reviewer saw as inevitable progress. This was particularly applied to her interest in the 'rustic' use of plant remedies: "Many of the old herbalist remedies are dropped, or abandoned to the rustics who cannot pay for

anything better." In modern terms the Victorian rural poor were here seen in the same light as the Third World today; in the narrow view, condemned by their poverty to 'subsistence' medicine, alternatively, to a broader mindset, as practitioners of genuine utility and subjects of legitimate study.

Although not a focused researcher Lucas has a clear interest in the ingenuity of rural people around her; in contrast to most contemporary writers who bundled plant remedies together with folk charms and superstitions in a rather romantic way. What does jar to the present-day reader is the author's use of the term 'peasant'. At worst this can possibly be seen as a practical categorisation within the hierarchical and segregated society of the times – as demonstrated by the reviewer's comment - at best it could be seen as almost complimentary.

Lucas' interest in the everyday society around her was possibly justified by the conscious revival in the 1840s of Welsh culture, and the attempt to place it in a wider European context. Her mistress and friend, Lady Llanover, was a major patron of this movement, herself devising what we now know as the Welsh national costume from peasant originals.



Above: The Large Flowered Mullein by Charlotte Berrington, a member of the Llanover Circle, a group of intellectual women related to or friends of Lady Llanover.

Left: Lady Wilkinson circa 1862.

Opposite top: Burnet Rose by Charlotte Berrington of Woodlands Castle (now Clyne Castle). Her brother, Lady Llanover's husband, was Benjamin Hall after whom the bell, Big Ben, in the tower at the Palace of Westminster, was named.

Opposite bottom: Sea and Small Bind-weed by Charlotte Berrington.

Victorian cultural collage

Llanover Connections

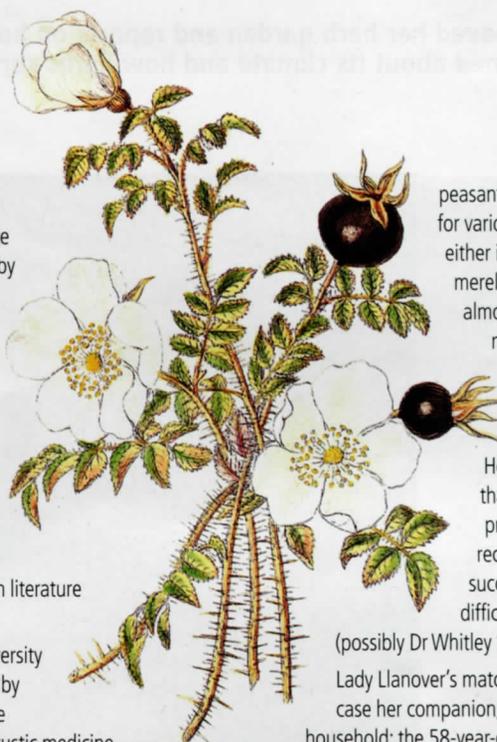
Interestingly, others in the Llanover circle make an appearance here. The poem with which the book closes is most probably by (Maria) Jane Williams who had published an influential collection of folksongs of the local 'peasantry'. The best 'manners and customs' of the Welsh country peasantry were seen as a model of behaviour and self-reliance. This was against the unsaid background of the more recent urban industrial worker; rootless and beset with 'low tastes and pursuits'. The book's fine botanical illustrations were a gift of the sister-in-law of Lady Llanover, and fellow Swansea resident, Mrs Charlotte Berrington. She was also a translator from German of a rather imaginative – but then highly regarded – text on the historical influence of the Welsh literature on Germany, France and Scandinavia.

Lucas' own linguistic interest leads her to sift through the diversity of Welsh plant names. But, true to her time, she is fascinated by what she sees as the continuity of Welsh herbal culture. "(The mountain flax) possesses qualities which make it a valuable rustic medicine and place it high in the estimation of the Welsh peasants who have not yet forgotten nor learned to despise the simple remedies growing untended on their own mountains and moors."

She upbraids the long-dead 17th-century herbalist, William Coles, for bemoaning the falling-off of the cleansing use of horsetail: "But we could tell him of farmers wives, in Wales, at least, and very probably elsewhere, who still retain both the knowledge and the practice; we could shew him, were he still alive, wooden pails, snowy as the milk they are to contain, ranged in certain sunny court yards, and daily scoured with the *Rhawn y march* (horsetail), just as were their ancestors – if pails can be supposed to have a genealogy – in the days of old Gerarde, and long before."

She is struck by the fact that the herbal practice around her is unchanged from the times of John Gerard's *Herball* published in 1597 although, obviously, there is no reason why it did not stretch further back. While much of the material of the book was drawn from long study in a well-stocked library, her notes on rural herbs seem to be drawn from first-hand experience: "The Welsh peasantry, so far as my own observation extends, still 'attribute greate virtues to the same,' just as Gerarde describes them to have done in his time and the employment of the germander and common speedwells as a substitute for tea is by no means confined to them, extending to Sweden, Germany and other countries."

She has observed figwort being utilised: "The name of *Scrophularia* has been derived from the employment of the plant in the cure of scrofulous complaints; it is now however rarely used for this purpose, except in the rustic practice of the



peasants of Wales, who hold it in the highest estimation for various swellings, boils, and even burns; applying it either in the form of an ointment, or, in simpler cases, merely tying a leaf on the part affected. From their almost unlimited faith in its virtues, it has received the name of *Deilen dda*, good leaf; or *Deilen ddu dda*, good black leaf – the latter title alluding to the colour, and corresponding with the English Brown-wort, and the German Braunwurtz."

Her experience of figwort makes her go further than pure observation, to regret its loss to professional medicine. She goes on to highlight a recent revival in its use following the publicised success that 'an eminent Dublin physician' had in a difficult skin condition, seeing 'extraordinary relief' (possibly Dr Whitley Stokes, *Dublin Medical Essays*, 1807).

Lady Llanover's match-making did not always work out, but in this case her companion, at 34, married a friend of the Llanover household; the 58-year-old, retired Egyptologist, Sir Gardiner Wilkinson in whom she found fun, tenderness and affection. On her husband's death, less than 20 years later, Queen Victoria granted a pension to the then-impecunious widow, in recognition of her husband's work.

There are calls for books of this genre to be seen as part of the history of science – in this case particularly ethnobotany – as they represent a thread of endeavour that was to lead eventually to the first women professional scientists. Richly of its times and culture, the book's scattered but clear-sighted notes on 'rustic' medicine had for the times a practical view of what was good and useful.

Bibliography

Lady Wilkinson, *Weeds and Wild Flowers*, Van Voorst, London 1858.

R L T Lucas, *Great Aunt Caroline*, Gower, Vol. 24, 1973.

Ann B Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science*, John Hopkins University Press, 1996.



Gareth Evans, a freelance writer and researcher specialising in the history of botany and medicine and is a regular contributor to Herbs magazine. He has worked in and with botanic gardens for 16 years, and was a co-ordinator for the Welsh programme 'Plants & Medicine' of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2009, Washington DC.