

## Reseñas

Susan Francia, Anne Stobart, eds. **Critical approaches to the history of Western herbal medicine: from Classical Antiquity to the Early Modern Period.** London: Bloomsbury; 2014, 349 p. ISBN: 9781441184184. £ 65.

For most of its history, all over the world, medicine has been almost entirely «herbal», that is, its *materia medica* has been based on plants. Yet herbal medicine is now a «complementary therapy» in Europe and North America, viewed as «untested» by governments and by a mainstream profession that claims the heritage of Hippocrates, Galen *et al.*, for itself. It would be perfectly understandable, under these circumstances, if medical herbalists decided to leave such historical claims for historians to deal with and saved their energies for treating patients, challenging enough in itself with no official support. But, happily, not all of them have.

The editors of this volume, both medical herbalists themselves, are to be congratulated, not only on producing the book itself, but also for a substantial amount of valuable work lying behind it, in particular for organising a series of workshops, as well as an electronic mailing list, bringing together historians, practitioners, and many others interested in the history of herbal medicine. The papers in this volume represent the proceedings of some of those meetings, together with some others specially commissioned, and will be valuable in bringing to the attention of a wider reading public some of the important work being done on the history of herbal medicine at the present time.

To put the word «critical» in the title of a collection such as this could be regarded as a hostage to fortune, almost an invitation to hyper-critical readers to look out for instances where authors or editors might seem to have been less than critical. But this is certainly an area where critical approaches are called for. There is always a danger, where historical work is carried out by those without historical training, of flattening the chronological perspective, of assuming that things (people, practices, ideas) in the past were the same as their modern counterparts, or indeed that they were necessarily different, less sophisticated, and of looking for «progress», or for «lessons» for the present day. Conversely, professional historians may be unaware of light that modern herbal practice

and knowledge can throw upon what was thought and done in the past, and may make serious *faux pas* about, for example, the likely effect of plant-based prescriptions, as a result.

One of the things the editors draw attention to in their introduction is the «fragmentation» of work on the history of herbal medicine. Bringing together historians and practitioners (and other interested parties), and their differing approaches, is therefore well worthwhile, and bound to lead to new knowledge that neither discipline on its own could have produced. This volume does not attempt to provide a synthesis, an overview of what such collaboration can achieve, but brings together authors taking different approaches, and allows them to show for themselves what their different viewpoints can offer to others interested in the history of herbal medicine. In doing so, it does a good deal to overcome the fragmentation which has hitherto hindered the progress of understanding.

Some of the most illuminating papers in the collection are those which do not merely take, but analyse, the approaches of different disciplines, such as those by Anna Waldstein on ethnobotany and, to some extent, Brian Moffat on archaeology. Sometimes the interdisciplinary approach can be liberating: for example, no department of history or classics would consider someone qualified to analyse the works of the Hippocratic corpus or Dioscorides who could not read them in the original Greek. But this does not mean that such a person has nothing interesting or useful to say about these texts, as is demonstrated by Vicki Pitman's article, drawing on her expertise as a practitioner. Others take a more conventional historical approach, but nevertheless reveal the potential of sources that have not been widely used, as for example Susan Francia's contribution based on late medieval trading records.

Under the surface of much of the discussion here is the knowledge that different disciplines take different approaches to the history of herbal medicine because they pursue it for different ends. For herbal practitioners, the interest of the history of herbal medicine is indivisible from its importance at the present day, and much increased by the light it can shed on present-day ideas and practice, but historians, as well as archaeologists, ethnographers *et al.*, can easily be fascinated by the history of herbal medicine without being at all interested in its present-day manifestation. For these scholars, understanding the past is an end in itself, independent of any effect on the present. They naturally want to know «what the evidence really means», and indeed put a lot of effort into finding out, but in the end, if that is not possible, *tant pis*, there are plenty of other things that need investigating. But for herbal practitioners, whether the

plant described is henbane or a teasel, and whether it is prescribed for backache or indigestion, is clearly of much more than academic interest. «We don't know—and we can't find out'» is not a satisfactory answer, from their point of view.

This of course means that practitioners interested in the history of their discipline are dependent on historians, and especially the editors and translators of texts, for their knowledge of past ideas and practice. Discussing the vital question of the translation of plant names, John Wilkinson writes: «A reader needs to know where the identification of a plant or drug is possible, and where not—and where it is uncertain». This point has a much wider application: all readers depend on editors and translators to be honest with them, simply because what they want to know, fundamentally, is what the text «really says», and if it is not possible to know that for sure, the reader needs to know that, too. Otherwise, judgements based on the edited or translated text lose their validity. This makes collaboration between the various disciplines absolutely vital. We cannot all be experts in all relevant fields, but we can work with those who are, and this volume provides hope that in future such collaboration will increase, and be increasingly fruitful, as researchers from different backgrounds benefit from each other's knowledge and ideas.

For many historians of medicine, the word «herbal» in the title of this volume will be redundant; the light it sheds on medicine in (mostly) Europe from antiquity to the eighteenth century will be of interest far beyond the restricted field of *materia medica*. «Herbal medicine» is of course a category that has only recently come into existence, as mainstream medicine has become less herbal and more chemical. For the majority of the period explored in this volume, «herbal medicine» was simply medicine. Nonetheless, the insights of those whose interest is in specific herbal aspects of medicine can add a great deal to historians' understanding of past practice and thinking. Let us all join the editors in hoping that this volume is only the beginning, and there will be plenty more such insights to come. ■

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