

History of herbs in medicine: john gerard



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John Gerard - 1545-1612

John Gerard was born in Nantwich in Cheshire. He went to school nearby in Willaston. According to Jackson (1876), 'at an early age he was drawn to the study of medicine and travelled, possibly as a ship's surgeon, on board some merchant vessel trading northwards, since he speaks of having been [to]... "Denmarke, Swenia, Poland, Liuonia, or Russia or in any of those colde countries where I have travelled"'.

According to Annals of the Barber-Surgeons, 'in 1562 he was apprenticed to Alexander Mason, a Surgeon in extensive practice, who was Warden in 1556 and 1561 and Master in 1567 and 1573. Gerard was admitted to the freedom of the Barber-Surgeons 9th December, 1569.' Pavord (2008) states that he was a self confessed 'Master of Chirurgerie'; and became Warden of Company of Barber-Surgeons (1597) and became Master in 1608.

He had a garden in Holborn, London, 'the little plot of myne own especiall care and husbandry'; and supervised Lord Burghleigh's gardens in the Strand and was curator of the College of Physicians' garden (Pavord). It is known that he held the appointment of 'Herbarist' to King James I.

He died in February 1612 and is buried in St. Andrew's, Holborn but the grave is unmarked.

Influence on the practice of herbal medicine:

In 1596 he published a list of plants he had cultivated in his garden for some years. Jackson (1896) claims that this is the first ever published complete catalogue of any one garden either public or private. One year later, he

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published his most famous work, 'A Histoire of Plants'. There is some debate as to how much was actually his own work and how much in the original edition is actually accurate. Walters (1981) mentions how, in the first edition, although charming, there are many serious errors with wrong placement of illustrations and multiplication of species to name just a few.

Thomas Johnson, one of the most successful apothecaries of London (and a proud owner of an exotic bunch of bananas presented to him by Dr. John Argent, President of the College of Physicians) edited Gerard's herbal and an amended edition was published 1633 (Wooley). This and the following one printed 3 years later is the one that has allowed Gerard to stay strong in the history books.

Influence on other historical figures:

Barbara Griggs emphasises throughout Green Pharmacy that Gerard's herbal, among others, was a household necessity and was held with great pride by many housewives, gardeners and cooks alike.

According to Bartram (1998), Gerard's herbal revealed considerable scientific insight into the medicinal character of plants and he was one of the first to discover the 'companionship of plants', referring to the affinities and antipathies in the plant kingdom. Gerard clearly influenced Bartram considerably in that he named his practice Gerard House 'in the belief that the science of the herbalist makes an important contribution towards national health'.

Although Chevallier may question the medicinal reliability of Gerard's text, he does not deny that it does contain a large amount of information and uses an apt quote from Gerard in these times, ' goldenrod has in times past been had in greater estimation and regard than in these days: for within my remembrance, I have known the dry herb which came from beyond the seas sold...for half a crown an ounce. But since it was found in Hampstead wood... no man will give half a crown for an hundredweight of it: which plainly setteth forth our inconstancy and sudden mutability, esteeming no longer of anything (how precious soever it may be) than whilst it is strange and rare'

Outside of the herbal medicine world, to this current day the Barbers Company in London now has a physic garden which is open to the public and is largely influenced by Gerard as one of their esteemed past Masters. On their website it states that the design of the garden aims to present a broad view of the way in which plants have been used, from the earliest times to the present day, in relation to both the practice of medicine and surgery and to the use of plants in domestic and civic environments and also to show the relationship of plant use to the Company. They chose to do this by selecting plants which were especially mentioned by their former Master, the celebrated surgeon and gardener, John Gerard. There is even a dedicated section to " Gerard" plants which are related to surgery, dentistry, wounds and burns. These include Parsley, Spurge, Daisy, Lady's Mantle, Comfrey, Self Heal and Henbane.

Reference list:

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