

Scottish Folk Medicine

First people

The first people thought to have inhabited Scotland were Paleolithic or Old Stone Age people who migrated across now swamped land bridges from the European mainland around 300,000 years ago. They were nomadic hunters that stayed while the weather was clement and moved south again when the ice sheets advanced. The last ice age left Britain about 10,000 years ago and analysis of sediment and peat bogs suggests that little vegetation existed at this time but within 500 years herbs, shrubs and some scrubby trees appeared. The oldest known settlement in Scotland is on the island of Rhum and has been dated to 8590 years, the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age. There was no animal husbandry or cultivation of land for many more generations. These people were hunters, gatherers, scavengers. They killed small game and the occasional larger animal and ate a wide variety of wild roots, leaves and fruits. Animal husbandry and cultivation of the land came around 4000 years ago and the diet then was unchanged until the last few hundred years.

Traditional diet

Oatmeal porridge (oats arrived with the Romans into Britain and spread north by about 2000 years ago; brose made from barley and peas; kale; seaweeds; milk; butter and clabber (soured buttermilk); fish and shellfish; eggs initially from wild birds and later from chickens and ducks; cultivated root vegetables including turnips and swedes (potatoes only arrived in Northern Scotland about 200 years ago); wild fruits; nuts especially hazelnuts, boiled acorns and beech nuts; wild mushrooms; wild greens such as Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), Orache (*Atriplex patula*), Fat Hen (*Chenopodium album*), Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) and Ramsons (*Allium ursinum*); wild roots such as Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*), Wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), Wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) and Sow thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*); little meat (animals were too valuable to kill) and blood drawn from cattle rather as the Masai of Africa are known to do today (Darwin 1996).

An ancient pagan festival, Christianized into the feast day of St. Michael, demonstrates the close relationship of magic to food. Wild carrots, a symbol of fertility were dug in late September to honor St. Michael, patron saint of the sea, a great celebration being held on September 29. The Sunday prior to St. Michael's day the carrots were harvested by women singing special songs, forked roots being especially prized. They were typically dug by removing soil in an equal-sided triangle, using a special three-pronged mattock. They were tied with a red thread in bundles of three and presented by the women to their menfolk. The significance of the number three is believed to have originated as symbolic of the three stages of a woman's life - girl, mother, crone - and later was Christianized to be symbolic of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. (Carmichael 1992)

Seaweeds

Seaweeds were an essential resource to the Scottish people, living as they all did, close to the

sea. They were used to provide dyes for wool as well as green manure for the land and as a nutritious food. In the Hebrides on Maundy Thursday a huge cauldron of porridge was poured into the sea from a cliff top, accompanied by prayers and chanting to encourage the sea gods to provide a rich seaweed harvest. (Campbell 1902). On the island of Lewis a seaweed ritual was conducted on All Hallows day (November 1 - the first day of the Celtic calendar year). A procession would leave the Church and make its way to the sea shore where a man would wade into the ocean, carrying a cup of ale to offer to the sea god Shoney. Back at the Church the altar candle was snuffed and the festivities continued with singing and dancing. (Bord and Bord 1982). In Aberdeenshire the first seaweed gathered on New Years morning would be placed in front of barn doors to indicate thanks for good harvests. (Walter 1884). Seaweed boiled in milk and sweetened with honey was considered just the thing for those who were rundown and listless - a use supported by modern research indicating the thyroid stimulating properties of most seaweeds. Dried seaweed was even smoked as a tobacco substitute. Ash from burned seaweed provided salts used for preserving foods.

Seaweeds known to have been eaten regularly include Bladderwrack / Kelp (*Fucus vesiculosus*), Tangle (*Laminaria digitata*), Irish Moss (*Chondrus crispus*), Sea Lace (*Chorda filum*), Linarich (*Cladophera spp.*), Bladderlocks (*Alaria esculenta*), Dulse (*Rhodymenia spp.*), Sea lettuce (*Ulva lactuca*), Laver (*Porphyria laciniata*) and Sea grapes (*Sargassum vulgare*).

Mosses and Club mosses

Sphagnum moss was widely used for dying as well for household purposes such as mopping up liquids, diapers, straining milk or murky water. Fir clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*) and Stag's Horn club moss (*Lycopodium clavatum*) were used as emetics, cathartics, abortifacients and the smoke was blown into the eyes to treat a variety of eye ailments. Club mosses were considered to confer protection and safety upon the person who carried them. The mosses were harvested without the use of iron, by the right hand passed through the left sleeve of a white tunic, the person being barefoot. A sacrifice of food was made to the plant prior to harvesting. (Campbell 1862)

Ferns

Ferns were considered to have magic properties and to keep witches at bay. Black Spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*) was made into a cough syrup with honey and as a hair wash. Wall Rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*) was used to cleanse the lungs and to treat coughs and shortness of breath. Additionally this tiny fern was considered beneficial in purifying the blood, reducing swellings, treating kidney stones and jaundice. It was applied topically to ulcers, dandruff and falling hair. Adder's Tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) was used for internal bleeding and bruising. (Grieve 1931). Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) was used to treat jaundice, intestinal blockages, bruises, and lumbago. Poultices of the boiled root were applied to arthritic joints and the stalks were used in love philters. (Beith 1995, Carmichael 1900). The leaves of Hart's Tongue Fern (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*) were made into an ointment for hemorrhoids and burns, and a decoction of the leaves was used to treat coughs and consumption (TB) (Martin 1703, Sowerby and Johnson). Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) which grows prolifically all over Scotland and is the clan emblem of the Robertsons, was used for many household and agricultural purposes as well as for medicine. Its value was so great that landlords would even accept it as rent. The fronds were used as bedding for animals and people and for thatching - in both cases the pest-repellant properties of the plant making it an ideal material for these

purposes. Green fronds were especially favored as a bedding material for children with rickets. Ash of Bracken is rich in potash and was used as a soil ammender, especially for potatoes. Bracken ash made into balls with a little water and sun dried was used as a crude soap. The ash was also used extensively in the glass making industry. The roots yielded a yellow dye and the fronds a bright green. Decoctions of the root were used to treat visceral obstructions and disorders of the spleen, manifesting as a splenic temperament, and also to treat worms. (Grant 1961, Lightfoot 1777, Page 1974).

Trees

Although today many native trees have disappeared, displaced by serried rows of plantation pines that flourish on the thin acid soil of the Highlands, trees have been central to the Scottish materia medica and culture for many centuries. The Gaelic alphabet consists of tree names, each letter being the name of a tree. Trees are also found as clan emblems, embroidered onto caps worn for ceremonial events and appearing on crests and shields.

Scot's Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) is the clan badge of the MacGregors, the MacQuarries, the MacCauleys, the MacAlpines and the Grants. It was traditionally considered symbolic of longevity and was often planted in graveyards. The twigs and roots are so full of resin that they were often burned like a candle and planks from the heartwood were used for boat building because they didn't rot in the water. The tree was only cut in the waxing moon to ensure maximum resin. An ointment from the harvested resin was used to treat boils and sores and a decoction of the buds was used to treat scurvy. (Darwin 1996).

The Yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) while not traditionally used for medicine was never the less one of the most revered plants in ancient Scotland. Considered a symbol of immortality because of the enormous age the tree can attain, it was frequently planted in grave yards where it was thought to reach down into the dead bodies and provide a route of release for the soul. Yew wood was preferred for making bows and a yew rod was a symbol of office in the ancient clan system.

Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), clan emblem of the Calquhouns, was widely used for food and magic. The nuts were considered an ideal and complete food and babies were frequently weaned on hazelnut milk and it was also used as a nutritious gruel for invalids. Eating the nuts was said to confer magical power and second sight and they were traditionally eaten by the druids and bards before embarking on story telling and prophecy. On Samhain (Halloween) questions about ones lover feelings and intentions were asked of the nuts which were then thrown into a fire. The jumping and burning of the nut could be interpreted to reveal the answer. Witches were said to make their brooms from Hazel and if two nuts joined together were found they could be used as an amulet to protect against witchcraft and spells. (Darwin 1996).

Probably the most revered tree in Scotland through the ages has been the Rowan (*Sorbus acuparia*), clan badge of the MacLauglins. It was planted in graveyards and farmyards to keep evil spirits away and branches were placed over doors and lintels for the same purpose. Protective amulets made from threaded berries were worn by women and children and making love under a Rowan tree was considered a certain cure for infertility. a sharp, tangy berry and a fermented alcoholic drink were made from the berries, and the bark was used as a poultice for snakebite.

Herbs and other plants

Of course an enormous number of medicinal herbs were employed in Scotland through the ages, many of which have survived even into modern herbal materia medica. Some were indigenous and some introduced and naturalized or specially cultivated, and others still were imported in dried form to be turned into medicines. The following is a small selection of some lesser known indigenous plant medicines, and a few better known medicinal herbs with unusual Scottish applications.

Stems and leaves of Scots Lovage (*Ligusticum scoticum*) were eaten raw in salads and boiled as a green vegetable. It was also recommended for gas and indigestion, as a stimulant tonic and aphrodisiac, a soothing nervine and for consumption (TB). Additionally it was used to treat worms in cattle. (Beith 1995, Lightfoot 1777, Martin 1703, Sowerby and Johnson).

Ivy (*Hedera helix*) was another plant thought to protect from witches and evil spirits. It was widely used as a diuretic, astringent and stimulant. It was used internally for indigestion, coughs, nervous headaches, bruising, jaundice, sciatica, gout, sore throats and gangrene. Applied topically in the form of an ointment it was used for burns and it was made into a tea for bathing irritated or infected eyes. a cap sewn from ivy leaves was used to treat cradle cap in infants. (Grieve 1931, Beith 1995, Rorie 1994).

Burdock (*Arctium lappa / minus*) was used in Scotland, as elsewhere, as a depurative for skin eruptions and arthritic problems. One special ritual with Burdock was traditionally held in the county south of Edinburgh. On the second Friday in August the *Burry Man* paraded around the town of Queensferry and circumnavigated the town boundary dressed in a costume comprising several thousand burrs from Burdock and with flowers at shoulder, hips and knees. He was completely encased in the costume, no provision being made for calls of nature, and was expected to drink plenty of whiskey but to eat nothing while he perambulated from dawn till dusk! It is thought that the intent of the custom was to catch evil spirits in the burrs, the entire costume being burned ceremonially at the end of the day. (Edinburgh Museums pamphlet #8).

Field Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) leaves and flowers were made into an ointment for skin disorders including sores, ulcers, dandruff and gangrene. Taken internally it was considered excellent for fever, coughs, pleurisy, shortness of breath and other lung problems. The roots and tops of its close cousin, Devil's Bit Scabious (*Succissa pratensis*), were taken as a blood purifier and to reduce inflammations. (Grieve 1931).

Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia* and *spp.*) Was first mentioned in Scottish materia medica in the 1400's where it was suggested to boil it in asses milk to make a remedy for whooping cough. (Gillies 1911). The liquids which exudes from the fleshy insectivorous apparatus was said to remove warts and corns (Lightfoot 1777) and the caustic fresh plant juice diluted in milk was used to remove freckles and sun marks on the skin. (MacNeill 1910).

Heather (*Erica cinera*, *Erica tetralix*, [collectively known as the Heaths] and *Calluna vulgaris*) are the quintessential Scottish plant. Thousands of acres of the Highlands turn purple when the heather blooms and the plant has traditionally served a host of domestic and even industrial

functions. Heather was used to make animal bedding and to stuff mattresses for humans, branches stripped of leaves and flowers were used as a rough strainer in cooking, nails were made from the roots hardened in a fire, the flowers were distilled into beer when hops were unavailable, stems were used for thatching and to make rope, to make crude brushes and brooms, to stuff into the walls of houses as insulation, to weave into baskets and mats, and even compressed into roadbeds. Heather honey is still considered a delicacy. As a medicine, heather tops were recognized as a lung tonic consumption and coughs, as well as a tonic nervine for depression, a diuretic for dropsy (heart failure) and an anti-arthritis agent. (Darwin, 1996).

Scotch Broom (*Cytisus / Sarothamnus scoparius*) was, of course, widely used to make brooms, and a beautifully grained veneer was made from the wood. It was also associated with magic and ritual. February 1 (traditionally the pagan *Imbolc* and later claimed as Candlemas day by the Church) in the Hebrides is called St. Bride's day and was celebrated by fashioning a woman's image from a corn sheaf decorated with Broom flowers, primroses and other seasonal flowers. This was carried in procession by maidens dressed in white, the girls later feasting and making merry while displaying the effigy in a window where young men would come to pay homage. (Carmichael 1990). The tops are well known as a stimulating cardiac tonic and diuretic, useful for treating heart failure and cardiac edema, but with the potential of causing hypertension. Broom tied around the neck was believed to prevent nosebleeds. (Beith 1995).

Centaury (*Erythraea centaurea*) was considered a blood cleanser and kidney tonic, useful for jaundice, wounds, sores, rheumatism, indigestion and wind. (Darwin 1996). In modern usage it is considered an excellent upper digestive tonic for gastric insufficiency, chronic indigestion, gastric ulcers, belching, acid reflux and hiatal hernia.

Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) is very common in Scotland. It was traditionally used as an infusion to treat cancer, wounds and skin diseases. (Cameron 1883, MacNeill 1910, Thompson 1984). The whole plant, roots and aerial parts, is mildly astringent and can be used for bleeding conditions of the digestive tract or female organs and for prolapse of the abdominal contents.

Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) grows prolifically in damp, shady, sheltered areas, forming thick mats of creeping stems with bright blue flowers. It was traditionally used as a general tonic and to treat kidney disorders, consumption, coughs, indigestion snake bites and bruises. A snuff from the dried leaves was used to relieve asthma and headaches. (Beith 1995, Grigson 1958, Paterson 1980). In modern materia medica it is considered a connective tissue regenerator much like Plantain with a tissue specificity for the kidney and lung tissues.

Bog myrtle *Myrica gale*) is a strongly aromatic plant that was traditionally used to repel insects and pests. It was used in bedding and spread on the floor to repel fleas, as a skin wash to repel mosquitos and other biting insects and around foods to repel flies. Taken internally it is a vermifuge. The astringent action makes it useful for toning mucous membranes and reducing bleeding.

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