

The Enchantment of Western Herbal Medicine

Herbalists, Plants, and Nonhuman Agency

Guy Waddell



THE ENCHANTMENT OF WESTERN
HERBAL MEDICINE

THE ENCHANTMENT
OF WESTERN HERBAL
MEDICINE

Herbalists, Plants, and
Nonhuman Agency

Guy Waddell

AEON

Aeon Books Ltd
12 New College Parade
Finchley Road
London NW3 5EP

Copyright © 2019 by Guy Waddell

The right of Guy Waddell to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with §§ 77 and 78 of the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-91159-756-8

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India
Printed in Great Britain

www.aeonbooks.co.uk

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vii

PART I: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND,
AND LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction 3

CHAPTER TWO
A fragmented history of Western herbal medicine 9

CHAPTER THREE
A political history of the profession 17

CHAPTER FOUR
The profession and science 31

CHAPTER FIVE
Practice, concepts, and knowledge: views on Western herbal
medicine from the social sciences 45

PART II: METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL
UNDERPINNINGS

<i>CHAPTER SIX</i>	
Methods and methodology	59
<i>CHAPTER SEVEN</i>	
Entryways	73
<i>CHAPTER EIGHT</i>	
Conceptual orientations	81

PART III: CASES

<i>CHAPTER NINE</i>	
Visible entryway herbalists	103
<i>CHAPTER TEN</i>	
Hidden entryway herbalists	195

PART IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

<i>CHAPTER ELEVEN</i>	
Beyond cases	263
<i>CHAPTER TWELVE</i>	
How plants enchant	271
<i>CHAPTER THIRTEEN</i>	
Plants, nonhumans, agency, and Western herbal medicine	287
<i>REFERENCES</i>	303
<i>INDEX</i>	321

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Julie Whitehouse, Professor Volker Scheid, and Professor Tony Towell who supervised my PhD research at the University of Westminster, out of which this book grew. I could not have done it without them. Additionally, I would like to thank Nina Nissen, who has led the way in social science research into Western herbal medicine, and Luci Attala, who provided inspiration at just the right moment. I also offer thanks to my family. First, to Emma, whose narrative abilities are second to none and to whom I owe more than I can say. I thank our daughters, Minnie and Bea, who are finding their own strong voices and whose father spends too much time writing. I would also like to thank my parents, Peter and Yvonne, who have been extremely supportive throughout, and my brother, Mark, whose poems are already out there in the world. And thank you to Nick, whose wisdom is matched only by his kindness and his desire to get to the heart of the matter. While those thanked above have provided an environment for which I am grateful, I would now like to thank those who provided the primary material for the research, namely the herbalists involved in this research. Without their openness to having me spend time with them and their willingness to tell their stories the result would have been a thin soup indeed. I hope that some of the flavour of their narratives and lives is retained within these pages. I also offer my thanks to Oliver

Rathbone, Melinda McDougall, Cecily Blench, and James Darley at Aeon Books for their confidence in me and their guidance throughout.

This book is dedicated to Christopher Hedley, herbalist and teacher. I was lucky enough to know him for twenty-three years. I first met him when I went to an evening class in herbal medicine in the basement of Neal's Yard Remedies in Notting Hill, London. Each week, we did a tea tasting, then talked about the herb, its history, actions, phytochemistry, and different approaches to health care. He told wonderful stories and listened with his ears and heart wide open to all of ours. Christopher used to say, "Herbalism is about stories: people's stories they tell you and yours as you listen and think about how to treat them." Indeed, his stories were most likely responsible for many people deciding to study herbal medicine. Many of us owe our professions to Christopher. "How a plant is in the world is how it will be in you," Christopher would say. "Very generous things, plants. We don't deserve them, really." Along with his wife, Non, he developed a simple yet sophisticated tea-tasting methodology that he used with students and practitioners, arguing that differences of opinion about a herb could almost always be resolved by taking it as a tea.

On herb walks, he would point out a particular plant and say, "And here we have the most beautiful plant in the whole known universe," before moving on to the next plant, "And here we have the most beautiful plant in the whole known universe." He loved plants. His awe and love of green nature, combined with his willingness to truly listen and his knowledge about people and plants meant that his practice thrived. Despite never having a website or advertising, he developed a hugely successful practice. "When with patients, look closely and listen closely: they will tell you what's wrong with them; listen longer and they'll tell you what to do about it," he would say. "And then they pay you! It helps if you have white hair and look deeply into their eyes; they will think that you are wise!" While humour was a central part of his teaching, he was certainly wise, although he never claimed to have access to knowledge that anyone else couldn't cultivate. Christopher pointed out that the herbs we need are often under our noses, growing between the cracks in the pavement. He was an urban herbalist, and saw the city as offering up as many possibilities as meadows. He knew his patch like no one else.

People used to ask me how old Christopher was and I would reply that he was something between four and four hundred. He had the curiosity and twinkle of a four year old and the wisdom of the ancients. Non died in July 2017 and Christopher followed her on the autumn equinox. He always did have good timing.

PART I

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND,
AND LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On the entrance door to a long-established complementary and alternative medicine clinic in the UK there is a sign that gives a menu of the therapies available. Amongst acupuncture, homeopathy, healing, and many others is “Herbal Medicine (Western)”. This sign was put up in the late 1990s, with “(Western)” necessary to differentiate herbal medicine from Chinese herbal medicine that was making its presence felt on the high street in the UK. Eventually it became known as Western herbal medicine.

As a healing art that has persisted yet is barely acknowledged in the West, Western herbal medicine appears to be a mass of tensions. Being “Western” is partly a claim to modernity, yet it uses many plant species that would have been used hundreds of years ago. Stewart¹ suggests that while herbal medicine can be understood as a traditional medicine, putting “Western” before “herbal medicine” aligns it with a European philosophical basis. Most of its practitioners are not medical doctors, but their training includes much orthodox medicine. As a medical approach it transfuses much black-boxed knowledge from orthodox medical curricula, yet it prescribes “dirty pharmaceuticals” made from once living organisms, often including unknown and unquantified constituents.

Nissen and Evans² point out that there is no generally agreed-upon definition of Western herbal medicine. They argue that it is sometimes aligned with a scientific or “phytotherapeutic” approach to prescribing herbal medicines for patients, while others look to its American roots in the physiomedical and eclectic traditions which were taken up in the UK, or to the concepts of holism or vitalism, or to a practice that uses plants that are mostly native to Europe and North America.

Some of these plants can be found growing in the UK between cracks in the pavement as well as in parks and gardens and in the countryside, yet they may also be borrowed from other traditions such as Ayurveda and Chinese medicine. Jackson-Main³ points out that Western herbal medicine can be a misleading term in that it breaches cultural and national borders and uses herbs and approaches from other traditions outside the West. He argues that it “almost defies definition”.

As a Western healing art it is practised in the UK, America, and Canada, but also in the southern hemisphere countries of Australia and New Zealand. Western herbal medicine refers to a large geography yet practitioners often prefer to use medicines that they know as local plants. Its dominant language is English but some herbalists seek to understand what plants are telling them. Contradictions and tensions, of course, are not specific to Western herbal medicine. Referring to Chinese medicine and other medical traditions undergoing modernisation as well as to biomedicine, Scheid⁴ states that “Wherever we look, syncretism and ambiguity abound.” Despite the presence of plurality in diverse healthcare practices, Western herbal medicine has its herbal medicines—living plants that have somehow become medicinal. But what more can we say? This book seeks to unravel aspects of Western herbal medicine in the UK, arguing that a particular element of Western herbal medicine inherently produces differences within and between practices. However, a caveat is necessary here: despite Western herbal medicine being the subject matter, the reader is reminded that Western herbal medicine is a concept and does not exist as a bounded object. Rather, it is something to work with.

While much of the landscape and profession of Western herbal medicine is influenced by science, an intention of the current work is to investigate whether this involvement with science captures the experience of herbalists or whether something else is also going on. This necessitates bringing the herbalists themselves vocally into the presented material,

something that has been largely missing from previous work. And if their voices are to be heard then their beginnings must be attended to. One aim is to identify why and how people come to be herbalists, to join a profession that is marginalised within healthcare practices, at the centre of modernity yet using age-old tools. Another aim is to consider what impact the once living-ness of herbal medicines has on herbalists, their practices and Western herbal medicine. A final aim is to contextualise this within wider conceptual and theoretical frameworks and to look for resonances in other knowledge practices.

From these aims the research question was eventually arrived at. How do people become drawn to learning and practising Western herbal medicine and what is the relationship between these entryways, the rest of their narratives, Western herbal medicine, and developments beyond Western herbal medicine? The objectives of the research thus became: to research the history of the development of the profession in the UK; to identify and critically evaluate the social science literature on Western herbal medicine; to identify herbalists with a wide variety of approaches to practice; to collect their biographic narratives using an interview methodology that seeks to cede control to the interviewee; to collect ethnographic data from the observation of consultations; to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for the research that arises out of the primary data; to develop an approach to the analysis of the data collected that keeps the cases and voices intact but allows theoretical exploration; to compare the social science and historical data with the collected cases; and to identify spheres beyond Western herbal medicine that offer fruitful associations with the findings of the primary research.

Book outline

To state the obvious, Western herbal medicine is important to itself. In the UK, it is important to the 800 or so practitioners that make up its numbers as well as to their patients and the training institutions and professional associations. Beyond itself, Western herbal medicine is of interest to a powerful sceptic lobby in the UK that sees it lacking a solid evidence base and is opposed to its political recognition as a healthcare practice. However, looking beyond itself and its local politics, Western herbal medicine, in its engagement with living plants and with herbal

medicines, will be shown to have relevance to those that seek to move the human from the epicentre of everything and look to new ways of working with the nonhuman.

This book will show that hidden experiences of meetings with plants, where the boundaries between herbalists and plants meet and are blurred, are important in some herbalists' routes to studying and practising and are also to be found in the later parts of these and other herbalists' narratives. This constitutes the "push" and "pull" of "enchantment", which will be seen to be a sensual affective energy that spreads throughout many, but not all, of the narratives and which embraces both more scientific and more traditional ways of doing herbal medicine. This enchantment sometimes starts before formal study begins, including at very young ages. It will be argued that herbalists' meetings with plants and herbal medicines allow herbalists to draw easily from a diverse range of influences that others may see as incommensurable, and challenges the view that Western herbal medicine is being "mainstreamed", "taken over" or "co-opted" by science. Despite the profession's engagement with science and politics, with modernity necessarily separating herbs from herbalists, it will be shown that herbalists meet with plants and herbal medicines in ways which challenge the assumption of human exceptionalism. Other traditions that use herbal medicines, such as Chinese medicine, Kampo, Ayurveda, and Unani Tibb, arguably have practices that have more solid and direct connections to, and articulations with, their histories, origins, and foundational philosophies. This book suggests that at least a part of Western herbal medicine is formed gravitationally by the herbs themselves as living plants in relationship with the herbalists who prescribe them. Meadowsweet, horsetail, yarrow, lady's mantle, hawthorn, betony, black cohosh, sage as well as species not indigenous to the West such as the various ginsengs, as living plants and as medicines made from them, are in relationships with their herbalists. And this has arguably been the case for a long while, meaning that the tradition of Western herbal medicine is made up of, at least partly, herbalists' relationships with plants.

The centrality of herbs and their sensual ability to enchant herbalists raises questions about the agency of living plants and of herbal medicines. It also raises questions about how the relationship between herbalists and plants may be reconceived. There are developments in plant sciences as well as in the social sciences and humanities that

resonate with the cases and with the current exploration of Western herbal medicine, and these will be considered in the later sections of this book. Recent work in the plant sciences relates plant physiology to spheres of interest that had previously been restricted to the animal and human sciences, including the study of behaviour and communication, raising questions as to how plant intelligence and agency should be considered. There are also signs of change in the social sciences and humanities, where the journey to nonhumanism, aspects of posthumanism and various ontological turns have permitted the decentring of the human to include plant-specific concepts such as “plant thinking” and “plants as persons”. These new ways of looking at the world resonate, to varying degrees, with the cases of individual herbalists discussed, and with Western herbal medicine.

In order to explore Western herbal medicine a route has been chosen that starts with what has been largely absent from the limited research that has been carried out to date: the voices of herbalists themselves, presented as words in “thick” cases. The backbone of the research is a narrative approach to gathering interview data, namely that found in the biographic narrative interpretative method that allows the subjects to tell their stories without interruption. This minimalist-passive approach to interviewing reduces the likelihood of the researcher missing elements and themes that are important to the subjects. Without this method, it is unlikely that the research question would have been arrived at. Ethnographic methods were also used to provide both background information and substantive descriptions, particularly of consultations. The research is then presented as selected cases of individual herbalists.

Part I of the book starts with a look at the fragmented history of Western herbal medicine in the UK. It is fragmented because it has not had a clarified position within the academic field of the history of medicine, rather than because it has not been persistent, if marginal, as a medical practice. The book will then address the political history of herbal practice in the UK, which looks at the profession’s fight for survival and recognition, before exploring the profession’s engagement with science. The social science research on Western herbal medicine is then reviewed, where Nina Nissen’s work resonates with directions that will become important for the development of arguments in this book. Part II begins with an account of the methodology used. The reasons for herbalists being drawn towards studying and practising

herbal medicine are then described, with some herbalists having “visible entryways” that are arguably unsurprising. This is contrasted with the “hidden entryway” herbalists, who had various “meetings” with plants, often at a young age, including being “called” by plants. These accounts are presented here because they form the foundation for this book and for the selection of its conceptual orientations, which are then described. The starting point for this is Max Weber and his arguments about the disenchantment of the modern world. David Abram, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Jane Bennett are then drawn on to suggest that enchantment is alive and well in the modern world, including in Western herbal medicine. Josephson-Storm is turned to, in order to suggest that, just as the social sciences have historically promoted both humanism and looked beyond it, so Western herbal medicine is a patient-centred practice that radically embraces nonhumans.

The cases are then presented in part III, first the visible entryway herbalists and then the hidden entryway herbalists. Each case is first made up predominantly of the herbalist’s own words, followed by a reflective section that looks at how the entryways relate to the rest of the narrative. The book then looks beyond the cases, arguing that it is the enchanted meetings with plants, that is, with creatures from another kingdom, and with medicines made from them, that allows difference to be easily brought into practices and into Western herbal medicine. The argument is also made that enchantment is a sensual affective energy and is found in both scientific and traditional approaches to practice, with both often easily existing within the same practitioner. The cases are also compared to social science research as well as the history of Western herbal medicine and the profession’s engagement with science.

In part IV the enchantment of plants is explored through recent developments in plant science and in vegetal philosophy which point, respectively, to the enchanting power of similarities and of differences between humans and plants. This turn to plants is then situated within the growing field of critical plant studies and established academic disciplines before locating this, more broadly, within growing attention to the nonhuman in academia. Finally, the implications of increased plant agency are considered for understanding Western herbal medicine, resulting in the proposal, following Michael Marder, that the concept of “grafting” can help us understand something about the agency of herb-plant-herbal medicine assemblages in Western herbal medicine.