

The Pharmacopoeia of the Botanical Physician Eighty Years Ago*

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IN early times in Upper Canada there was a dearth of regularly educated physicians; it was not easy for a professional man to make a living by his practice—except in the towns, patients were few and generally poor. But there was no scarcity of those who undertook to cure the sick. The place of the regular physician was not infrequently filled by the herb doctor, the “yarb doctor,” as he generally called himself. Most of these came from the United States, few remained long in the same place, and they were generally ignorant quacks—although occasionally a man of real genius in the treatment of disease was to be found amongst them. Not a few were of the Thomsonian school, of which the founder was Samuel Thomson, born before the American Revolution in what is now New Hampshire (n. 1769, ob. 1843); he patented some of his medicines, which are not yet completely forgotten, and which seem to have met a ready sale.

In 1832 at Hamilton, in Upper Canada, was published a small volume of 120 small octavo pages, which purports to contain his practice of medicine except what he reserved to be taught orally to those who bought the right to use his system. His theory was that “medicines suited to every disease grow spontaneously on our native soil,” and that these “are better suited to our constitution.”

In this book he names the plants he employs and gives their qualities and the methods of applying them.

I propose in this paper to give an account of the pharmacopoeia. I italicize the names Thomson uses, and in giving the

* From a paper, contributed to the Botanical Society of Edinburgh by the Honourable Mr. Justice Riddell, of Toronto, Life Fellow and Local Secretary of the Society. Some portions of the paper which are purely botanical, are here omitted.

botanical equivalents I shall use the terminology of Gray in his "Field, Forest and Garden Botany".

1. Ranunculaceae. The only member of this family is the *Golden Seal* or *Ohio Kercuma*, *Hydrastis Canadensis*, recommended as a very pleasant bitter and an excellent corrector of the bile.

2. Nymphaeaceae. This is represented by the *White Pond Lily*, *Nymphaea odorata* or *N. tuberosa*; its roots are to be dug up in the fall, washed clean, cut into strips and dried. Being then powdered, it is used as a tea for bowel complaints.

3. Cruciferae. The Crucifers appear only in *Mustard*, *Brassica nigra*, "to create an appetite and assist the digestion and internally for rheumatism," and *Horseradish*, *Nasturtium Armoracia*, for the same purposes; but this is "apt to raise a blister."

5. Rutaceae. This Family includes *Prickly Ash*, *Zanthoxylum Americanum*, whose bark or berries in wine or spirit make a very good hot bitter, "good for fever and ague for sleepiness and lethargy, cold hands and feet and other complaints caused by cold."

6. Anacardiaceae. The *Sumach*, *Rhus typhina* or *R. aromatica*, claimed by Thomson to be a new article in medicine. A tea made of bark or leaves or berries will "scour the stomach and bowels and is good for strangury."

7. Leguminosae. *Red Clover*, *Trifolium pratense*; the heads are boiled for an hour, strained and pressed to get out all the juice; "then simmer over a slow fire till it is about the consistency of tar when it is fit to use. Be careful not to let it burn . . . spread on a piece of bladder split and made soft. It is good to cure cancers, sore lips and all old sores."

8. Rosaceae. This family has several representatives. In the Rose Family proper we find the *Evan Root* or *Chocolate Root*, *Geum rivale*, used to "scour out the stomach and bowels," but some use it as a drink instead of tea and coffee.

9. In the Rose Family proper is also found *Red Raspberry*, *Rubus triflorus* or *R. strigosus*. The leaves only are used; a tea made of them is good for children with the summer complaint and for women in labor, as well as for the new-born child.

10. The Pear Subdivision also supplies members; *Peach*,

Prunus (*Amygdalus*) *Persica*. Only the meat of the peach stones is used; made into a cordial, it will "recover the natural tone of the stomach after long sickness" and "restore the digestion," while, used as a tea, it is invaluable for "young children with the cholera."

11. *Wild Cherry Stones* (*Prunus Pennsylvanica* or *P. pumila* probably is meant) may be used in the same way as peach stones. The cherries themselves, steeped in hot water after being pounded up with the stones, make a good tea; sweetened with loaf sugar and with a little brandy added, they create an appetite and restore the digestive organs.

(*Bitter almonds* may be used when Peach or Cherry stones cannot be procured, but the tree which produces them is not native.)

12. *Hamamelaceae*. This family gives only *Witch Hazel*, *Hamamelis Virginica*. The leaves made into a tea is the best thing for bleeding at the stomach Thomson ever found, and he used it also for injections in "complaints of the bowels."

13. *Umbelliferae*. But one representative of the Parsley Family appears, *Archangel*, *Archangelica atropurpurea*, a good corrector of the bile.

14. *Araliaceae*. The celebrated ginseng, called by Thomson *Genseng*, belongs to this Family, *Aralia quinquefolia*, a nervine; the root should be dug up in the fall, dried and reduced to a fine powder; a dose, a half to a teaspoonful.

15. *Rubiaceae*. *Clivers*, better known as cleavers or goosegrass, *Galum Aparine*, a diuretic.

16. *Valerianaceae*. *American Valerian*, *Valeriana sylvatica*, "the best nervine known . . . in all cases of nervous affection and in hysterical symptoms." The roots are to be dug up, washed clean, carefully dried and reduced to a fine powder, administered half a teaspoonful at a time, repeated if necessary.

Compositae. As was to be expected, the Composite Family is largely drawn upon.

17. *Squaw-weed*, *Senecio aureus*. The green roots and leaves are bruised and hot water poured on them; give this as a tea and it is effective for "canker rash," rheumatism and nervous afflictions. Thomson calls this plant also *Frost-weed*, but in Ontario the *Helianthemum Canadense* goes by that name.

18. *Elecampane*, Inula Helenium. The root made into a syrup is good for a cough. (In my youth this was thought to be a good "horse medicine.")

19. *Mayweed*, Maruta Cotula. "A tea made of this herb to be drank hot when going to bed is very good for a cold."

20. *Wormwood*, Artemisia absinthium, makes a very wholesome bitter; a tea or the green herb tinctured in spirit "is good to apply to a bruise or a sprain."

21. *Tanzy*, Tanacetum vulgare, made into a tea is good for hysterics and other female complaints, also for a "stranguary"; the green leaves powdered are good for "bruises and sprains." Apparently its alleged virtues as an abortifacient and eebolic had not then been discovered.

22. *Chamomile*, Anthemis nobilis (and perhaps *A. arvensis*), made into a tea is good for bowel complaints; used externally it will relieve "sprains, bruises and swellings and remove calouses, corns, etc., and restore shrunk sinews."

23. *Burdock*, Lappa officinalis; the leaves wilted by the fire will allay inflammation; they are good pounded and applied to a bruise or a sprain, and make excellent strengthening plasters.

24. *Thoroughwort*, Eupatorium perfoliatum, made into a tea is good for a cough and complaints of the lungs.

25. *Featherfew*, Chrysanthemum (*Leucanthemum*) Parthenium or *Pyrethrum Parthenium*, is "good for histeric complaints" and is diuretic.

26. *Golden Rod*, Solidago nemoralis and *S. rigida*. The oil made into an essence is good for pain in the head.

27. *Wild Lettuce*, Lactuca Canadensis; the roots powdered are good to restore weak nerves.

28. *Bitter Thistle*, Silybum Marianum, made into a tea is a good corrector of the bile, and so is

29. *Cardis benedictus* or *beloved thistle*. This is as near as the author could get to *Carduus benedictus*, the *Cnicus benedictus*, or blessed thistle.

30. *Lobeliaceae*. This Family supplies the crowning glory of Thomson's system, *Lobelia* or *emetic herb*, *Lobelia inflata*, whose virtues are claimed as his original discovery, and which was No. 1 in his system of medicine. All parts were used, powdered leaves and pods, the green herb in tincture and the seeds pow-

dered. It was employed in every disease, either as an emetic or in the form of a clyster.

31. Ericaceae. *Pipsisway* or *Rheumatic Weed*, *Chimaphila umbellata*; roots and tops made into a strong tea are "good for cancers and all serofulous humours by drinking the tea and bathing with it the parts affected."

32. Scrophulariaceae. *Bitter-herb* or *Balmomy*, *Chelone glabra*, used as a tea "this herb is very good to correct the bile and create an appetite."

33. Plumbaginaceae. *Marsh Rosemary*, *Statice Limonium*; the root is good for canker and sore mouth; and

34. *Mullen*, *Verbascum Thapsus*; the leaves pounded and applied warm are "very good to bring down swelling and to restore contracted sinews."

35. Verbenaceae. Both *Blue Vervine*, *Verbena hastata* and

36. *White Vervine*, *V. urticifolia*, are highly thought of, ranking next to lobelia itself "for a puke," and also being good to prevent a fever in its first stages. The herb has also cured several cases of Consumption "where the doctors had given them over."

37. Labiatae. *Spearmint*, *Mentha viridis*, given as a tea, stops vomiting.

38. *Peppermint*, *Mentha piperita*, promotes perspiration and relieves pain in the stomach and bowels.

39. *Pencroyal*, *Hedeoma pulegioides*, "may be freely used in all cases of sickness; it is good for the stomach . . . it will produce perspiration and remove obstructions."

40. *Summer Savory*, *Satureia hortensis*, is good for colds and the oil will cure toothache.

41. *Hoarhound*, *Marrubium vulgare*, is good for a cough, "An infusion made of the leaves, sweetened with honey, is good for the asthma and all complaints of the lungs," while "hoarhound candy is very useful . . . for old people and those that are short-winded."

42. Solanaceae. *Capsicum*, *Capsicum annuum*, ground to a powder, forms No. 2 of the system and is given to "strengthen the digesture," but externally it is "good to put on old sores."

43. *Bitter Sweet*, *Solanum Dulcamara*, Thomson uses only

externally, and finds it, made into an ointment, "an excellent thing for a bruise, sprain, callous, swelling, or for corns."

44. Asclepiadaceae. *Bitter-root* or *Wandering Milkweed* of two kinds, *Asclepias phytolacoides* on moist ground, and *A. verticillata* on dry. The roots only are used, dried and pounded in a mortar; while they are very bitter, they are an excellent medicine to remove costiveness and correct the bile.

45. Aristolochiaceae. *Snakeroot*, *Asarum Canadense*, to be made use of "in tea for measles and other eruptions to keep the disorder out," also "for all nervous complaints." That *Asarum* is the "snakeroot" meant, and not *Eupatorium ageratoides*, which is also popularly called snakeroot, is clear from Thomson's description of it as of a hot nature, thus identifying it with Canada Wild Ginger or *Asarum*.

46. Polygonaceae. *Yellow Dock*, *Rumex crispus*; the root made into an ointment with cream, rubbed in at bedtime, will cure the itch.

47. Urticaceae. *Slippery Elm*, *Ulmus fulva*; the inner bark is dried and ground, a teaspoonful of the powder is put into a teacup, a little cold water added, stirred until perfectly mixed, then hot water added and stirred till a jelly is formed. The jelly is an excellent medicine for sore throat, the bark also is used for poultices, for burns, scalds, old sores, etc. (Half a century ago I have seen the inner bark fresh from the tree boiled into a jelly and the jelly given for colds and sore throat.)

48. Juglandaceae. *Butternut*, *Juglans cinerea*; the bark boiled down thick makes good pills for emetic and cathartic purposes; or a syrup made by boiling the bark with molasses and a little spirit may be given to children for worm complaints. "The bark of the butternut is the principal ingredient in Dr. Hawke's rheumatic and cancer pills, and also of Chamberlain's bilious cordial, which have been so celebrated for many complaints."

49. Myricaceae. *Bayberry* or *Candleberry*, *Myrica cerifera*; the bark of the root dried and powdered is "highly stimulating and very pungent, pricking the glands and causing the saliva and other juices to flow." It is the chief source of Thomson's No. 3.

50. *Meadow Fern*, *Comptonia asplenifolia*: the "burr pounded fine and simmered in cream, hog's lard or fresh but-

ter, is almost a sovereign remedy for the itch or external poison and all bad humour sores," also "for salt rheum or canker sores."

51. Betulaceae. *Black Birch*, *Betula lenta*; the bark used as a tea is given for dysentery and all complaints of the bowels.

52. Salicaceae. *The White Poplar*, *Populus alba*, and the

53. *Stinking Poplar*, *P. balsamifera*, belong to this family. The inner bark is taken off trunk, limbs or root, dried and used as a tea for "headache, faintness at the stomach . . . and those of a consumptive habit will find great relief in using this tea freely." It is also a valuable diuretic.

54. *Balm of Gilead*, *P. balsamifera* (var. *Canadensis*) may be used in the same way, but "it is more harsh than the other kinds of poplar." It is good taken inwardly, as a restorative, is a good collector of the bile, and will operate both as an emetic and cathartic, while externally it is used for bathing sores.

55. Coniferae. *Balsam Fir*, *Abies balsamea*, produces the Canada balsam from small blisters in the bark. This is good to remove internal soreness and forms an important article in Thomson's healing salve.

56. *Hemlock*, *Abies Canadensis*; the inner bark is dried and powdered, made into a tea, and administered for "canker and other complaints of the bowels and stomach." The boughs made into a tea are very good for gravel and for rheumatism.

57. Araceae. *Skunk Cabbage*, *Symplocarpus foetidus*; the root dried and powdered, made into a tea, is good "for asthma, cough, difficulty of breathing and all disorders of the lungs."

58. Liliaceae. *Wake Robin*, *Trillium erythrocarpum*; the root dried and reduced to powder is given with honey or in a syrup; it "is extremely pungent and stimulating, and is given for choleric and pain in the bowels and to expel wind . . . and for coughs and disorders of the lungs."

The empiric is not quite true to his principles, for he uses a few exotic plants; bitter almonds, ginger, black pepper, cloves and myrrh. Myrrh, indeed, is the main ingredient in his celebrated medicine which he calls No. 6.

He is not wholly averse from chemical preparations; sal ammoniac, lime, spirits of turpentine all appear as remedies.

Products of the animal kingdom he does not discard: butter, honey, beeswax, milk, etc.

Vegetable products are frequently met with: turpentine, rosin, pearlash, etc.; but these may fairly be included in his theoretical category.

The school founded by Thomson* afterwards merged in the Eclectic School, and at length it practically disappeared. Many of the Thomsonian remedies are, however, in common use in the farming community to this day.

* I have before me a duodecimo volume printed in New York in 1829, "The Improved System of Botanic Medical Practice . . . by William Barber." Barber practised in Vermont and other New England States, then came to Auburn, New York, and finally to New York City. He wholly repudiated Thomson's system. He says: "My preparations are of my own discovery." He pestered the New York Legislature year after year for a license to practise. He was a quack and pretender of the rankest kind. It must not be thought that all botanical physicians were followers of Thomson; quite the reverse is the fact. Many practised by the light of nature, some relied upon their own experience, while some few had a real medical education.