

BOOK REVIEW

The Illustrated College Herbal: Plants from the *Pharmacopoea Londinensis* of 1618 by Jane Knowles, Henry Oakeley and Gillian Barlow

Hardback, 224 pages
Oakeley Books
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This beautiful book marks the 500th anniversary of the Royal College of Physicians and the 400th anniversary of the *Pharmacopoea* [sic] *Londinensis* in elegant style.

The book's main feature is, of course, its botanical illustrations: 118 paintings and drawings commissioned from 80 artists by Gillian Barlow who was artist in residence at the College in 2012-13. A range of artists obviously brings a range of styles to the images, and this is to the book's advantage. Each illustration is stunning in its own right, and the book design shows them off well on plain white backgrounds. The volume's large format (32.5 cm x 23cm) allows the detailed portrayal of each plant to be examined and enjoyed. These commissioned images are complemented by 77 woodcuts from historical herbals, notably from 1568 folios of Matthioli's *Discorsi*. An artists' directory towards the end of the book provides details and contacts for all the illustrators.

But the book is much more than beautiful pictures. As Henry Oakeley notes in his useful preface and history of the *Pharmacopoea Londinensis*, it did not include descriptions and uses of the medicinal plants it contained. Now as then, Nicholas Culpeper's English translation, published in 1649, provides evocative descriptions for each plant, bringing the 17th century medical context into sharp focus: "yea the very smell" of pennyroyal, or the fact that nettles are "an herb so well known, that you may find them by feeling in the darkest night". A short glossary helps the modern reader to follow the 17th century medical terms and historical medical figures referred to.

The illustrations and captions rest on an enormous amount of historical botanical expertise, particularly Jane Knowles' vast experience as Head Gardener at St Andrews Place, the College's current home. Her research for the *Pharmacopoea Londinensis* gardens has been revisited with Henry Oakeley and published for the first time. The resulting *Catalogus Simplicium* section is an extremely useful reference for anyone researching the history of medicinal plants. It provides the original plant name given in the *Pharmacopoea* with a translation to its modern botanical name. The preface to this section notes that there remains some confusion over the exact plants referred to by the Physicians in this pre-Linnaean era and is a reminder that interpreting historical botanical texts still presents challenges.

Medical historians, botanical historians, and readers who appreciate skilful and beautiful artworks, will all thoroughly enjoy this fitting celebration of the College and its first *Pharmacopoea*.

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