

BOOK REVIEW

Pharmacopoeia Londinensis 1618 and its descendants *by Clare J Fowler*

Paperback, 140 pages
Royal College of Physicians
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This book forms part of a series of attractively produced publications celebrating the quincentenary of the founding of the Royal College of Physicians of London. It is written by a retired neurologist and horticulturist who has taken much trouble to place her research within the social and professional context of the time.

In the first chapter, the author describes the circumstances that led to the establishment of physic in England before 1600. She provides short biographies of the small group of elite physicians who were instrumental in compiling the original *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*.

Fundamental to the story is the history of the English apothecaries and how their role related to that of the physicians. The apothecaries were a large and powerful group in the early Jacobian period; they had public and royal support and in 1617 broke away from the Grocers to form their own City livery company. The Royal College of Physicians saw the rising status of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries as a threat to their monopoly and the publication of the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* was one of a series of measures to counter this threat.

The first edition, hastily produced in 1618, contained errors and omissions that at the time were blamed on the printer. However, Clare Fowler provides compelling evidence that the deficiencies of this preliminary offering are likely to be down to Théodore de Mayerne, physician to King James I, who was responsible for the first draft. The revised edition, published just a few months later, contained a more comprehensive list of medicines, suggesting a wider authorship.

Unlike some of the earlier European pharmacopoeias, which formed its template, the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* was not intended to provide information useful to the layman. It was printed in Latin and contained only the ingredients of medicines not their indications. This presented an opportunity for the iconoclast Nicholas Culpeper to serve the wider public when he translated the *Pharmacopoeia* into English and produced his vade mecum *A Physicall Directory* in 1649 and later the more famous *The English Physitian* in 1652.

Pharmacopoeia Londinensis 1618 and its descendants is an unashamed celebration of Culpeper's influence and its author completes the book by including an illustrated appendix on the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* beds in the gardens around the Royal College of Physicians' headquarters in Regents Park. This is an affectionately written and readable book that will appeal to a wide audience.

Christopher Derrett
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