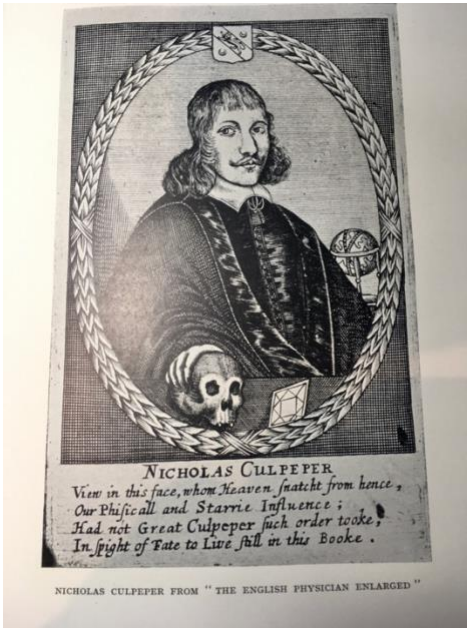


2 THE BAD LAD OF ENGLISH BOTANY?

Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654)



Altruistic hero or self-serving charlatan? Lives are complex and it's possible that Nicholas Culpeper was both of these. I've been reading my grandfather's edition of Culpeper's most famous work, 'The English Physician Enlarged' (1788) which came out originally in 1753 and has been in print ever since, particularly in the USA.

1753 was just a year before his untimely death, at the age of only thirty-seven from tuberculosis, exacerbated by an injury he received on the battlefield during the Civil War. Here is how he proudly announced his latest and his very last work:

Being an Astrologo-Physical Discourse of the Vulgar Herbs of this Nation: Containing a Compleat Method of Physick, whereby a man may preserve his Body in Health; or Cure himself, being Sick, for three pence Charge, with such things only as grow in *England*, they being most fit for English Bodies.

Herein is also shewed these Seven Things, viz. 1 The Way of making Plaisters, Oyntments, Oyls, Pultisses, Syrups, Decoctions, Julips, or Waters, of all sorts of Physical Herbs, That you may have them ready for your use at all times of the year. 2 What Planet Governeth every Herb or Tree (used in Physick) that groweth in *England*. 3 The Time of gathering all Herbs, both Vulgarly, and Astologically. 4 The Way of Drying and Keeping the Herbs all the year. 5 The Way of Keeping their Juyces ready for use at all times. 6 The Way of Making and Keeping all kind of useful Compounds made of Herbs. 7 The Way of mixing Medicines according to Cause and Mixture of the Disease, and Part of the Body Afflicted.

By NICH. CULPEPER, Gent. Student in *Physick* and *Astrologie*: Living in *Spittle Fields*.

His life was a strange mixture of tragedy *and* some good fortune. Born into a family with aristocratic connections (Thomas Culpeper, his ancestor, was the lover of young Catherine Howard, Henry VIII's fifth wife, having been aided and abetted by Lady Rochford, Jane Boleyn, the widow of George Boleyn, a distant relative¹), Nicholas was the only child of



Ockley Manor

the Reverend Nicholas Culpeper, Vicar of St Margaret's at Ockley near Dorking, and his wife Mary. His father died just a few days before his son's birth (which is why his mother named him after his father, who had become Lord of Ockley Manor but only for a few weeks). On his death, the title and property passed on to another person and Mary was forced to return to her father's home in Isfield in Sussex, where the Reverend William

Attersoll was the vicar of another St Margaret's Church at Isfield (St Margaret of Antioch).

The boy's grandfather did not warm to children, and he was a stern, forbidding man with Puritan leanings in his theology. He was dutiful, however, and had high hopes for his grandson, teaching him the classics, mathematics, Latin and Greek. The Reverend Attersoll also had a collection of clocks which intrigued his grandson. From the age of 10, Nicholas was fascinated by astrology and astronomy and read deeply in his grandfather's well-stocked library, becoming particularly interested in William Turner's 'Herbal'. The boy's mother encouraged his curiosity for plants and herbal remedies and apparently owned a copy of John Gerard's great 'Herbal' (1597), one of the key botanical books of the 17th century with its 1,484 pages and numerous illustrations.

Sent to Cambridge in 1632, aged 16 by his grandfather, who had studied there, Nicholas was soon bored with theology and far more interested in reading Galen and Hippocrates, the classic Roman and Greek writers on medical matters. During this time, he fell deeply in love with a childhood friend, Judith Rivers, an heiress, linked, I believe, to the

¹ On the 28th of June 1541, handsome Thomas Culpeper, a probable rapist and murderer as well as a favourite of the king (he was one of the Gentlemen of the King's Privy Chamber), began an affair with the 16-year old girl, who had already been seduced by Francis Dereham, a 'kinsman', when she was only 14. Although she left a damning love letter to Culpeper, it is clear that he was a ruthless libertine, and her letter may have been written to try to *divert* his advances. She had married the king, who was thirty years older than her, on the 28th July 1540, the same day that Thomas Cromwell was executed. The affair with Culpeper lasted most of the summer of 1541 until it was brought to the king's notice (via Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop), whereupon after investigation, torture and confessions, Culpeper, as a one-time favourite of the king was allowed to be beheaded, whilst Dereham was hanged, drawn and quartered that December. In February 1542, poor out-of-her-depth Catherine and Lady Rochford, who had allowed Culpeper access and had encouraged him, were both beheaded. Catherine bravely accepted her fate, but Jane was driven mad by the whole business (no torture was involved) and Henry had to introduce an act that allowed mad people to be put to death if treason was involved. It was a singularly sad and messy business, all told.

Shurley family in Isfield. Although she returned his love, their marriage could never possibly have been approved of by the wealthy, upper-class family. They planned to elope to the Netherlands but before they could meet for a hasty wedding in Lewes poor Judith's carriage was tragically struck by lightning and she died.

Nicholas was devastated and sank into depression, abandoning his university studies.



Harrison's Map of London 1777

His grandfather was not at all pleased and struck him from his will. He did, however, put up the money to allow him to be apprenticed to a Master Apothecary, Daniel White of Temple Bar. Unfortunately, White's business failed after a year or two and he fled to Ireland taking with him all of Culpeper's money for his indenture as an apprentice. The young man was broke!

Luckily, he soon found another apothecary, Francis Drake of Threadneedle Street, who took him on in return for Latin lessons. That only lasted two years, for Drake died (really, you would say, poor Nicholas did have a string of particularly bad luck!). During this time, too, his mother died from breast cancer, and Nicholas had to struggle on alone with his apothecary studies, until finally luck came his way.



In 1640, now aged 24, Nicholas Culpeper fell in love with another heiress, 15-year old Alice Field who had just come into her inheritance from her wealthy, grain merchant father. They married, happily, and Nicholas was at last able to set himself up as an apothecary in Spitalfields, just outside the walls of the City. This is significant because being outside the City of London, Culpeper was beyond the reach of the Royal College of Physicians, the august body founded in Henry VII's time, which authorised apothecaries and the practice of medicine.

He was not out of the woods. In 1642, he was tried, and eventually acquitted by the jury, for

witchcraft! This was not altogether unusual for the time. A patient of his, Sarah Lyne, brought the case, claiming his remedies had brought her no relief. Luckily for him the jury accepted Culpeper's defence. But there was more danger looming elsewhere. The Civil War was beginning. As a staunch republican and anti-Royalist (politics inherited partly from his Puritan-leaning grandfather), Culpeper joined the Parliamentary forces hoping to fight for the cause. Instead of being trained for combat, he was asked to become a field surgeon, just before the Battle of Newbury in 1643. There, working in the thick of the combat to save lives, he received a musket shot in the chest, from which he was extremely lucky to escape with his life though he never fully recovered from the wound.

He continued his practice of medicine in Spitalfields as a radical, particularly influenced by the teachings of John Goodwin, the Puritan preacher who advocated very egalitarian ideas. Culpeper loathed the College of Physicians, who charged a lot and with whose practices of bloodletting, examining the urines, plus using complicated and dangerous procedures in their remedies, he profoundly disagreed. He famously wrote that examining "as much piss as the Thames might hold" was no way to treat patients properly, rather than examining them *in person*. Culpeper set out to do just that. He would sometimes see up to 40 patients in a morning, mostly for free. This was 150 years before anyone was talking about General Practitioners; Culpeper was acting as one and *refusing to charge*.

Going further, in 1649, he translated the huge directory of plants, the 'Pharmacopeia Londoniensis' upon which the College of Physicians relied, turning it from Latin into English and publishing it as 'The Physical Directory or Translation of the London Dispensary'.



A relatively recent 'threepenny bit' and one dating from 1578

This aroused the fury of the College of Physicians and drew from them a stinging rebuke with their broadside of 1652 entitled "A Farm in Spittlefields where all the Knick-knacks of Astrology are exposed to open sale." In response, Culpeper then brought out a cheap book on childbirth, a 'Directory for Midwives', because he thought childbirth was being made too costly and complicated. He wanted to democratise medicine and take it out of the hands of the College of Physicians.

The culmination was Culpeper's 'Complete Herbal', brought out in 1653 and costing a mere Three Pennies ('thruppence' or 3d, as we oldies remember a 'three-penny bit'!). This was radical medicine - for the people, by the people (with, of course, Culpeper's generous help).

The book I'm holding is impressively... cheap! The paper is thin and the binding, though leather, is not expensive looking. It is also very simple to read, though wonderfully quirky and dogmatic. "Do this and you'll be fine. Try this cheap remedy and you'll get better..." (my words...)

My edition doesn't have the following introduction which he wrote for the 1653 publication, possibly realising that his time on earth was coming to an end. It needs quoting from in some depth as it is packed with such fiery self-belief and extraordinary chutzpah. This, after all, was his life's work, as he saw it, to benefit humanity and to fight against the closed shop of the London Apothecaries who were 'bloodletting' the nation!

All other Authors that have written of the Nature of Herbs, gave not a bit of a Reason why such an Herb was appropriated to such a part of the Body, nor why it cured such a Disease: Truly my own Body being sickly, brought me easily into a capacity, to know that Health was the greatest of all Earthly Blessings, and truly he was never sick that doth not beleeve it. Then I considered, that all Medicines were compounded of Herbs, Roots, Flowers, Seeds, &c. and this first set me awork in studying the Nature of Simples, most of which I knew by sight before; and indeed all the Authors I could reade gave me but little satisfaction in this particular, or none at al: I cannot build my faith upon Authors words, nor beleeve a thing because they say it, and could wish every Body were of my mind in this, To labor to be able to give a reason for every thing they say or do; they say Reason makes a Man differ from a Beast, if that be true, pray what are they that instead of Reason, for their Judgment, quote old Authors? perhaps their Authors knew a Reason for what they wrote, perhaps they did not, what is that to us, do we know it? Truly in writing this Work first, to satisfie my self, I drew out all, the Vertues of vulgar Herbs, Plants, and Trees &c. out of the best, or most approved Authors I had, or could get; and having done so, I set my self to study the Reason of them. I knew well enough, the whole world, and every thing in it, was formed of a Composition of contrary Elements, and in such a Harmony as must needs shew the Wisdom and Power of a great God: I knew as well, this Creation, though thus composed of contraries, was one united Body, and Man an Epitome of it; I knew those various affections in Man in respect of Sickness and Health were caused Naturally (though God may have other ends best known to himself) by the various operations of the Microcosm; and I could not be ignorant, That as the Cause is, so must the Cure be; and therefore he that would know the Reason of the operation of Herbs, must look up as high as the Stars: I alwaies found the Disease vary according to the various motion of the Stars; and this is enough one would think to teach a Man by the Effect where the Cause lay. Then to find out the Reason of the operation of Herbs, Plants, &c. by the Stars went I, and herein I could find but few Authors, but those as

full of nonsense and contradictions as an Egg is full of meat; this being little pleasing, and less profitable to me, I consulted with my two Brothers, Dr. Reason, and Dr. Experience, and took a Voyage to visit my Mother Nature, by whose advice together with the help of Dr. Diligence, I at last obtained my desires, and being warned by Mr. Honesty, a stranger in our daies, to publish it to the World, I have done it.

..... If you please to make use of these Rules, and them at Carduus (thistles ?), in the Book, you shal find them true throughout the Book, and by heeding them, you may be able to give a Reason of your Judgment to him that asketh you: I assure you it gave much content to me, and for your goods did I pen it; but I must conclude, my Epistle having exceeded its Bounds already: Hereby you see what Reason may be given for Medicines, and what necessity there is for every Physitian to be an Astrologer, you have heard it before I suppose, but now you know it; what remains, but that you labor to glorifie God in your several places, and do good to your selves first by encreasing your knowledge, and to your Neighbours afterwards by helping their infirmities; some such I hope this Nation is worthy of, and to such shall I remain a Friend: and when the Purchaser may without fear of Theeving Knaves enjoy their just Proprieties in their Copies, I shall not fail to bring forth many more Books for a Common good in the English Tongue for the benefit of all my Countrymen, poor or rich.

Nich. Culpeper.

Spittle Fields next door to the Red Lyon. September, 5. 1653.

These are the touching, heartfelt (and very last) words of someone embattled against the forces of ‘convention’. He is almost desperate to plead his case and refer us to ‘Reason’ in everything.

Everything, that is, except all of this astrology nonsense. Here is where we have to part company, I’m afraid, but we *should* nevertheless recognise that astrology, which is not mentioned in either Gerard or Parkinson, was still seen by many clever, well-read people at that time as vitally linked, within the ‘Great Chain of Being’ (the microcosm and macrocosm he refers to here). Culpeper actually met and talked with William Lilly, a fascinating character and supposedly the greatest astrologer of the day, another populariser in the same vein as Culpeper, this time of classical ideas on astrology more likely to be found in Latin or Greek than in English.

So, how is Culpeper rated in more modern times?

Eleanour Sinclair Rohde, the American researcher whose classic account of the history of botanical literature is to be found in her beautiful and well written book, ‘The Early English Herbals’ (1922), writes scathingly about Nicholas Culpeper. This is after she has taken us through Turner, Gerard, Parkinson and the other great botanists, who down the ages had been gradually shifting the study of plants, from the ancient ‘simples’ and mystic medicinal lore, towards a better identification and classification of the various families and genera that make up what we currently know to be the *science* of botany.

Of his astrology she writes:

“The most notable exponent of this debased lore was the infamous Nicholas Culpeper, in whom, nevertheless, the poor people of the East End seem to have had a boundless faith. It is impossible to look at the portrait of that light-hearted rogue without realising that there must have been something extraordinarily attractive about the man who was the last to set up publicly as an astrologer and herb doctor.”

She criticises the “nonsense” he writes about what happens to sap in autumn and winter as affected by the planets. Of which she comments wryly:

“One cannot help suspecting that Culpeper knew perfectly well what nonsense he was talking, but that he also realised how remunerative such nonsense was and how much his customers were impressed by it.”

She claims he was writing “with his tongue in his cheek”, in his conclusion with his thoughts on Wormwood. Wormwood is (alphabetically) his very last entry on plants and it is an extraordinarily flippant account. Eg:

***Roman Wormwood:** and why Roman, seeing it grows familiarly in England? It may be so called, because it is good for a stinking breath which the Romans cannot be very free from, maintaining so many bawdy-houses by authority of his holiness.” ie the Pope and Roman Catholics, presumably!*

Here is his weird conclusion and you can almost sense Eleanour Rhode’s profound, scholarly distaste as she quotes him:

“He that reads this and understands what he reads hath a jewel of more worth than a diamond. He that understands it not, is as little fit to give physick. There lies a key in these words, which will unlock (if it be turned by a wise hand) the cabinet of physic. I have delivered it as plain as I durst... thus shall I live when I am dead. And thus I leave it to the world, not caring a farthing whether they like it or dislike it. The grave equals all men and therefore shall equal me with all princes... The ill tongue of a prating fellow or one that hath more tongue than wit or more proud than honest shall never trouble me. Wisdom is justified of her children. And so much for Wormwood.”

And so much for Culpeper! Was he really the generous-hearted populariser of medicinal practices that were for the most part perfectly in line with current thinking. Indeed, his insistence that blood-letting and other ‘hard’ remedies, or studying urine samples, were unnecessary tricks played by unscrupulous apothecaries and licensed physicians, makes him seem to be on the side of Good Sense. Or else, was he perhaps just a ranting, flippant, self-serving rogue - out for fame and publicity (his cheap books did end up selling by the thousands)? He apparently plundered most of his herbal lore from John Parkinson².

You can tell from his style that he had *plenty* to say for himself - he shouts from the rooftops, on behalf of the poor commoners who flocked to his door. But he was prepared to die for the cause of removing the monarchy and establishing greater parliamentary rule and accountability. He battled against the College of Physicians who were unwilling to see their secrets and their wealthy monopolies on medical practices threatened. I like it that Rohde quotes a “vivid description” of Culpeper from the Gentleman’s Magazine of May 1797:

*“Though of an excellent wit, sharp fancy, admirable conception and of an active understanding, yet occasionally inclined to melancholy, which was such an extraordinary enemy to him that sometimes wanting company he would seem like a dead man...
...he had a spirit so far above the vulgar, that he condemned and scorned riches any other way than to make them serviceable to him. He was as free of his purse as of his pen.... He acknowledged he had many pretended friends,*

² Cf Julie Bruton and Matthew Seal <https://www.herbalhistory.org/home/sources-for-a-study-of-the-herbalist-and-gardener-john-parkinson-1567-1650/>

but he was rather prejudiced than bettered by them, for when he most stood in need of their friendship and assistance they most of all deceived him.”

I can see why Rohde’s nose is curled with distaste and why she moves briskly on to Coles and his ‘The Art of Simpling’, a more attractive herbalist who also takes Culpeper to task:

“Many Books indeed he hath tumbled over, and transcribed as much out of them as he thought would serve his turne (though many times he were therein mistaken) but added very little of his own.” (and “sure he or the Printer had not learned to spell.”)

His writing may be archaic, but it’s also weird! Let’s not forget, however, that Culpeper *has* had a lasting effect, particularly in the USA, which has always warmed to his entrepreneurial style of self-help over several centuries. And we should remember that he was only 37 when he died of tuberculosis, aggravated by his war wound. His style is more that of a rebellious teenager who never learned how to write properly.

Nonsensical quack, or selfless moderniser? I beg leave to declare that the jury may be out on this one!

Useful further reading

For a useful discussion on Culpeper’s use of astrology:

<https://clok.uclan.ac.uk/50358/1/Graeme%20Tobyn%20The%20English%20Physitian%20v5.pdf>

For ‘The Old English Herbals’ 1922 Eleanour Sinclair Rohde (which I have in the beautiful original)

https://books.google.es/books/about/The_Old_English_Herbals.html?id=dNE-AAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y

For ‘The English Physician Enlarged 1753’ by Nicholas Culpeper:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A81133.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

PS His widow, Alice, went on to marry an astrologer John Heydon in 1656 (it must have been in the stars!).

