

# The forgotten herbal

Belittled at the time of its publication, Salmon's *Botanologia* nevertheless has many merits. Brent Elliott reassesses this richly illustrated and informative tome after almost 300 years of neglect

ONE OF THE LARGEST of English herbals, published at the beginning of the 18th century, was William Salmon's *Botanologia, The English Herbal: or, History of Plants*. Largely ignored in its own time, it is, to a great degree, forgotten today, but it contains much fascinating information for those interested in the history of gardens and gardening.

A controversial figure, William Salmon (1644–1712) practised as a physician, though it is doubtful whether he ever received any proper training. The author of several pamphlets and works of a medical nature, he had an office near St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, where he treated those who could not be admitted there. His *Botanologia* was published in 1710, printed by Ichabod Dawks, a London newspaper editor as well as a printer.

## Costly volume

A prospectus in the Ashmolean Museum (described by Blanche Henrey, in 1975, in her *British Botanical and Horticultural Literature before 1800*) stated that the work had been 12 years in preparation, and that to offset costs it was to be

published at 37 shillings to subscribers and at 45 shillings or more to non-subscribing purchasers. This was for a work intended to be made up from 300 printed sheets, but it was never completed. The Lindley Library's copy, Book I of the intended publication, deals only with English plants. Created from 177 sheets, it runs to 1,296 pages (excluding introduction and other prelims). Book II was probably intended to cover foreign plants, but the second issue (1710–11), in two volumes, added nothing new and was probably made up from unused sheets from the original printing.

The work is arranged alphabetically, by English plant-name, and illustrated with woodcuts by at least three separate artists, to judge by the differences in the orthography and spelling of the captions. The spellings are generally phonetic: Gromel, Gromwel and Gromwell all appear (on the same double-page spread); Fumitory, Fumitery and Fumetory; and Artichoke is also spelled Hartichoke – and appears under H in the alphabetical sequence.

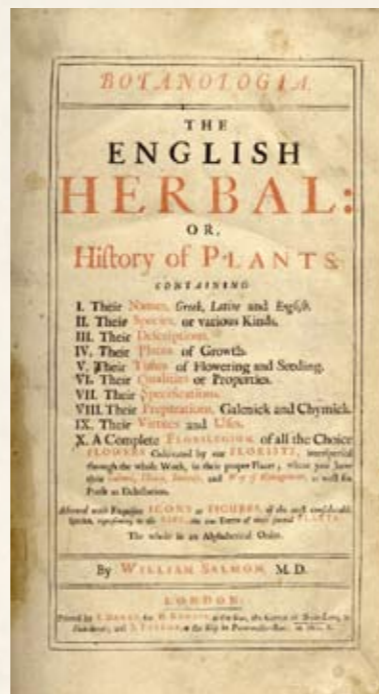
Henrey says that the illustrations are 'apparently original', but although cut specially for the book, they were largely

copied from previous herbals, primarily from Lobel's *Plantarum seu Stirpium Icones* (1581). Sometimes, hedging his bets, Salmon provides more than one illustration for the same plant, based on Lobel and Mattioli's *Commentarii in sex libros Pedacii Discoridis* respectively.

Salmon's copy of Mattioli – the 1565 Valgrisi edition, the first to contain large woodcut illustrations – is now in the Lindley Library; it was bought by an unidentified purchaser at the auction of Salmon's library in 1714, for the sum of ten shillings and sixpence.

## Harsh criticism

On its publication, the general attitude to Salmon's *Botanologia* was that it was retrograde, out of date, and out of step with the state of medical science at the time. Richard Pulteney, in his *Sketches of the Progress of Botany in England* (1790), summed up: 'As a botanical work it is beneath all criticism; the errors in this way being enormous, both in multitude and degree... [Salmon] distributes, with a lavish hand, extraordinary and numerous powers to almost every herb he describes.'



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Apart from his exaggeration of the curative powers of the plants, the main cause for complaint was his adherence to Galenic medicine. The principles established by Galen (about AD 129–216), a Greek physician working in Rome, had been the basis of medical practice for centuries, but came progressively under attack from the mid-17th century.

In Galenic medicine, the properties of individual herbs were less important than their use in combination with others (hence the term 'simples' for herbs – they were used as ingredients in complex mixtures). Just as the use of eggs in a recipe tells you little about the

resulting food, not even whether it is sweet or savoury, so the individual herb was not curative in its own right, but it contributed some quality to the medical recipe. This approach readily furnished excuses if a given medicine did not work well. Nevertheless, the course of 18th-century medicine saw the status of herbs alter from simples to specifics.

The dismissal of Salmon's work for its medical obsolescence has, unfortunately, obscured its significant merit. Like John Gerard before him, Salmon's interest in plants extended beyond the medicinal properties to include their uses as ornamentals. And just as Gerard



## HERBAL LEAVES

The plain title page (far left), and elaborately engraved frontispiece (centre) from Salmon's *Botanologia*, and a page (left) featuring some intricate woodcuts of wild and garden snapdragons

(in his *Herbal*, 1597) provided lists and descriptions of a wide range of garden plants, so did Salmon.

Thus *Botanologia* includes five pages each on violets, cyclamen, and crocuses (40 different crocus are distinguished). There are, disappointingly, only three pages on carnations, but eight on lilies, 10 each on ranunculus and poppies, 12 pages on anemones, and 14 on irises. There are also 14 pages on roses, with 32 categories distinguished. 'Jacinths' (hyacinths, muscari, and related plants) get 18 pages. The greatest amount of space is lavished on tulips: 23 pages, with 248 cultivars listed.

So, if you want to find what flowers were being grown in English gardens in the years around 1700, the long-despised *Botanologia* proves, surprisingly, one of the best places to look. ■

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**i** Copies of *Botanologia, The English Herbal* are held at the Lindley Library in London and Wisley, and can be seen by appointment. For contact details, see p1. ● To browse an online version, visit <http://digital.library.villanova.edu>