

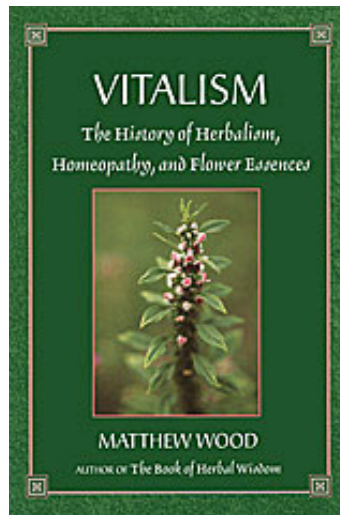
Matthew Wood

Vitalism The History of Herbalism, Homeopathy and Flower Essences

Reading excerpt

[Vitalism The History of Herbalism, Homeopathy and Flower Essences](#)
of [Matthew Wood](#)

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Samuel Thomson and the Demon Herb, Lobelia

Folk Medicine and the Philosophy of Herbalism

Lobelia inflata is a remedy whose excellency is equal to its nastiness.

—Dr. George M. Hite¹

If it is a good medicine, it is mine, and I am entitled to the credit of bringing it into use, and have paid dear for it.

—Samuel Thomson²

The early settlers of colonial America relied on a variety of medical traditions for their health care. Although there were no formal medical schools, a brief course in medicine was offered to divinity students at Harvard and Yale. Most formal doctors in colonial America were clergymen trained at these schools. Other students apprenticed under experienced practitioners, while some taught themselves from books. Such literate physicians constituted the organized medicine of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: they were called "book doctors."

A strong tradition of folk medicine also arrived with the early settlers. Galen's four "qualities" (hot, cold, damp and dry) were known to seventeenth century housewives, as well as to doctors. This system provided a basic logic for cooking and healing with

¹George M. Hite, M.D., *Abridgment of Symptoms*; Finley Ellingwood, M.D., ed., *Annual of Eclectic Medicine and Surgery* (Chicago: 1890), p. 46.

²Samuel Thomson, *The Thomsonian Materia Medica*, 12th ed. (Albany, N.Y.: J. Munsell, 1841), 2:588.

Folk Medicine and the Philosophy of Herbilsism

herbs. Spring greens such as dandelions were introduced by the pilgrims to enrich their diets. Early settlers brought herbal formulas with them, some of which are still in use among their descendants.³

The Indian people were another source of information about medicinal plants. The herbal wisdom of native Americans made a great impression upon the early settlers. They were doctored by Indian medicine people, and taught the use of hundreds of native plants. Some settlers studied directly under Indian mentors: they were called "Indian doctors."

Because of the difficulty obtaining supplies from abroad, frontier settlers increasingly came to rely upon indigenous plant medicines. The folk doctors among them were usually called "root doctors," as distinct from the "book doctors." Some of these people achieved modest fame and fortune, but they tended to be looked down upon by the "book doctors" and their clients.

All of these traditions had some following during the colonial period. *The Admirable Secrets of Physick & Chyrurgery* (1696), a manuscript by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Palmer of Massachusetts, shows that the author (a graduate of Harvard) was acquainted with the humoral theory, Paracelsian medicine, Gerard's *Herball* (1633), Culpeper's *London Dispensatory* (1649), and Christopher Wirtzung's *The General Practice of Physicke* (1605). Many of the medicines he mentions were the product of chemical manufacture. At the same time, a few items of native American origin had already crept into his practice, including the use of the "pizzle bone" of the raccoon as a charm against the cramp.⁴

Fever was the principal disease of the period. The basic approach to the treatment of this of scourge was to promote perspiration while clearing the stomach and intestines with emesis and purgation. This basic approach to treatment is alluded to by Dr. Palmer:

³William McGarm, *Amish Folk Remedies* (Battle Creek, Mi.: Whitmark Press, 1984), p. 7.

"Thomas Palmer, *The Admirable Secrets of Physick & Chyrurgery*, Thomas Rogers Forbes, ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 102. Palmer adds "probatum," i.e., proved, after this entry, so it was evidently a technique he used and approved of.

SAMUEL THOMSON AND THE DEMON HERB, LOBELIA

In the year 1676 many fell sick and died in several Towns in N[ew] England of a putrid Fever [typhus] that proved very mortal. Divers by taking Vomits at the beginning did not die by it; others by taking a gentle sweat were soon well, but such persons as had not the use of such means, lay a long time altho they escaped with their lives. Many that bled much at the nose of their own accord did escape with their lives.⁵

Anthropologists have determined that the same methods (clearing obstruction from the digestion and releasing perspiration) are basic concepts in Latin American folk medicine.⁶ This pan-American theory seems to have arisen out of basic concepts in Greek and American Indian medicine.

Galen (c. 200 AD) taught that the stomach separates the food into two segments, a refined, nutritive substance which adheres to the stomach wall, and a crude remnant which is evacuated into intestines for further digestion. The layer that remains on the wall of the stomach is absorbed into the body as nutriment (see *On the Natural Faculties*, book 3, chapter 7).

This perspective gave rise to the pathological concept of a viscid, incompletely digested material adhering to the stomach wall, which would interfere with the warmth of digestion, resulting in indigestion, incomplete nutrition, cooling off of the digestive and vital warmth, etc. This concept passed into Anglo-American folk-medicine, where the coating on the stomach was called "canker." An analogous idea survives in Latin American folk-practice, where it is called *empacho*.

The use of perspiration to remove fever is a world-wide folk practice, since a good sweat often heralds the end of a fever. However, the strong emphasis on sweating which appears in early American medicine may reflect American Indian ideas. Throughout the Western hemisphere, the sweat lodge was the basic institution of healing for native people. So we can see that the Indians not only contributed herb lore, but also medical concepts.

Folk Medicine and the Philosophy of Herbalism

These concepts are illustrated in Beal P. Downing's Reformed Practice and Family Physician (1851). Dr. Downing graduated from Dartmouth medical school in 1805. He learned of these methods both from his old mentor at Dartmouth and from the Indian people:

I received a part of my knowledge of cure and disease of the great Dr. Smith, who lectured and dissected at Dartmouth College, in New Hampshire, forty years ago. He told me that a sweat at the commencement of a fever was better for a patient than all the medicine in the shops; for, says he, sweat opens the pores. Then give physic [purgatives] and strengthening bitters. It is all that is wanted in the early stages of a fever.

I was among the Indians in the West [i.e., Midwest] four years, and did not find but one down with a fever; but saw many sweating themselves over a hot stone, by turning water on it, and covered with a blanket. Fever is the same in all countries, and with all classes of the human species, at the commencement; and the same thing will cure all, if taken in season. Some are attacked more violently than others, and then they are alarmed and send for the doctor, but he cannot cure it unless he can open the pores of the skin, and warm the stomach. Bleeding and giving cold minerals runs the patient down.⁷

The Indians gave sycamore chips or mountain mint tea to increase the diaphoresis and, as Downing reports, to "warm the stomach." (Mountain mint is an analog of peppermint which acts on both the skin and the stomach). Thus, he attributes the ability to perspire freely to both the open pores of the skin *and* the warmth of the stomach. Dr. Smith's recommendation is slightly different: purge to cleanse, then give bitters to strengthen the digestive tract.

About 1800, formalized education began to make its influence felt in this fledgling Republic. Doctors were expected to have more training, rudimentary licensing appeared, and folk medicine became increasingly associated with uncouth country people. However, folk medicine was not about to be eclipsed by a self-proclaimed "science" of medicine. The entrenched beliefs of the common people, invigorated by democratic sentiments, created an environment in which medical authority was impossible to enforce. The excesses

P. Downing, *Reformed Practice and Family Physician* (Utica, N.Y.: Published by the Author, 1851), p. 161.

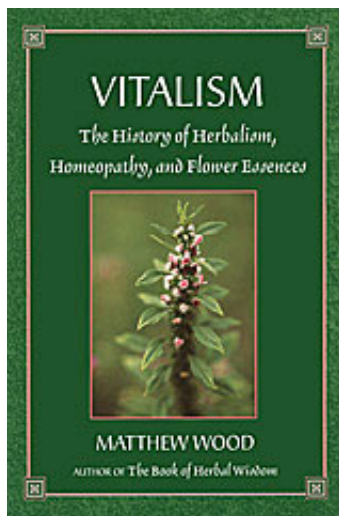
of the European system were also becoming so pronounced that a rebellion was fomenting in the villages and cities of America. Nineteenth century America was home to many attempts at the reform of medicine. Some of these innovations were tied up with the use of botanical remedies and folk medicine, while others were associated with new scientific and pseudo-scientific ideas. Two important systems, physio-medicalism and eclecticism, arose from this North American ferment.

Samuel Thomson

Several individuals from the ranks of the folk doctors were elevated to prominence, but one name stands above them all in fame and infamy. Samuel Thomson (1769-1843) was a self-educated "root doctor" from New Hampshire. He introduced a simple system of medicine that relied upon native plants and steaming. With these he set out to replace bloodletting, purgation, salivation, and the use of poisonous drugs. These botanical medicines were utilized according to simple theories and formulas that could be mastered by uneducated frontiersmen like himself. They were designed to combat the common epidemic and acute diseases that were the scourge of the era. There's no doubt that, compared to bloodletting and salivation with mercury, they were more effective some of the time, and less harmful all the time.

Thomson's system was well-suited to pioneer existence and became immensely popular. It is estimated that Thomsonian practitioners treated over a million patients in a population of five million. Such popularity emanating from an unorthodox quarter was not well received by the medical establishment. Thomson soon became the focus for an exceptionally vicious campaign of hatred and libel. His name and discoveries were maligned in conventional medical textbooks throughout the nineteenth century. Falsehoods were spread about him which still appear in the literature today.

The "hellish animosity"⁸ directed towards Thomson cannot be explained entirely by reference to his person or writings. His ideas



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