

## Quacks and their Cures: *A Curious Herbal*

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All the doctors in Bristol have heard of the pioneering woman doctor Elizabeth Blackwell but few indeed are those who remember another, earlier Elizabeth Blackwell (figure 1) and her husband Alexander.



Figure 1. The first Elizabeth Blackwell

Alexander Blackwell would not be remembered today if it were not for his extraordinarily devoted wife, the midwife Elizabeth, whom he married in about 1728. She was born in Aberdeen in the 1700s and was originally called Elizabeth Blachrie. She married her second cousin, Alexander Blackwell, when she was twenty-seven. Alexander practised medicine in Aberdeen in the early eighteenth century. Although he undoubtedly had some training and was well versed in the use of herbal medicine he did not have the necessary qualifications to act as a physician and was denounced as a charlatan. The couple fled to London where Alexander managed to get into trouble again by setting up a print shop without having undergone the necessary four years apprenticeship. This led to large fines he could not pay and he was thrown into a debtor's prison.

This is where Elizabeth Blackwell's pre-marriage training as a midwife and artist came to the rescue. Between the two of them they came up with a plan for Elizabeth to create a series of engravings of the plants growing in the Chelsea Physic Garden (figures 2-7). Alexander would then provide the scientific nomenclature and foreign names from his prison cell in the debtor's gaol and details of their use in medicine. Elizabeth had received tuition in illustration before her marriage and was a genuine expert in botanical art. She was indeed one of the first botanical artists to personally draw, etch and engrave and hand colour her own designs<sup>(1)</sup>.

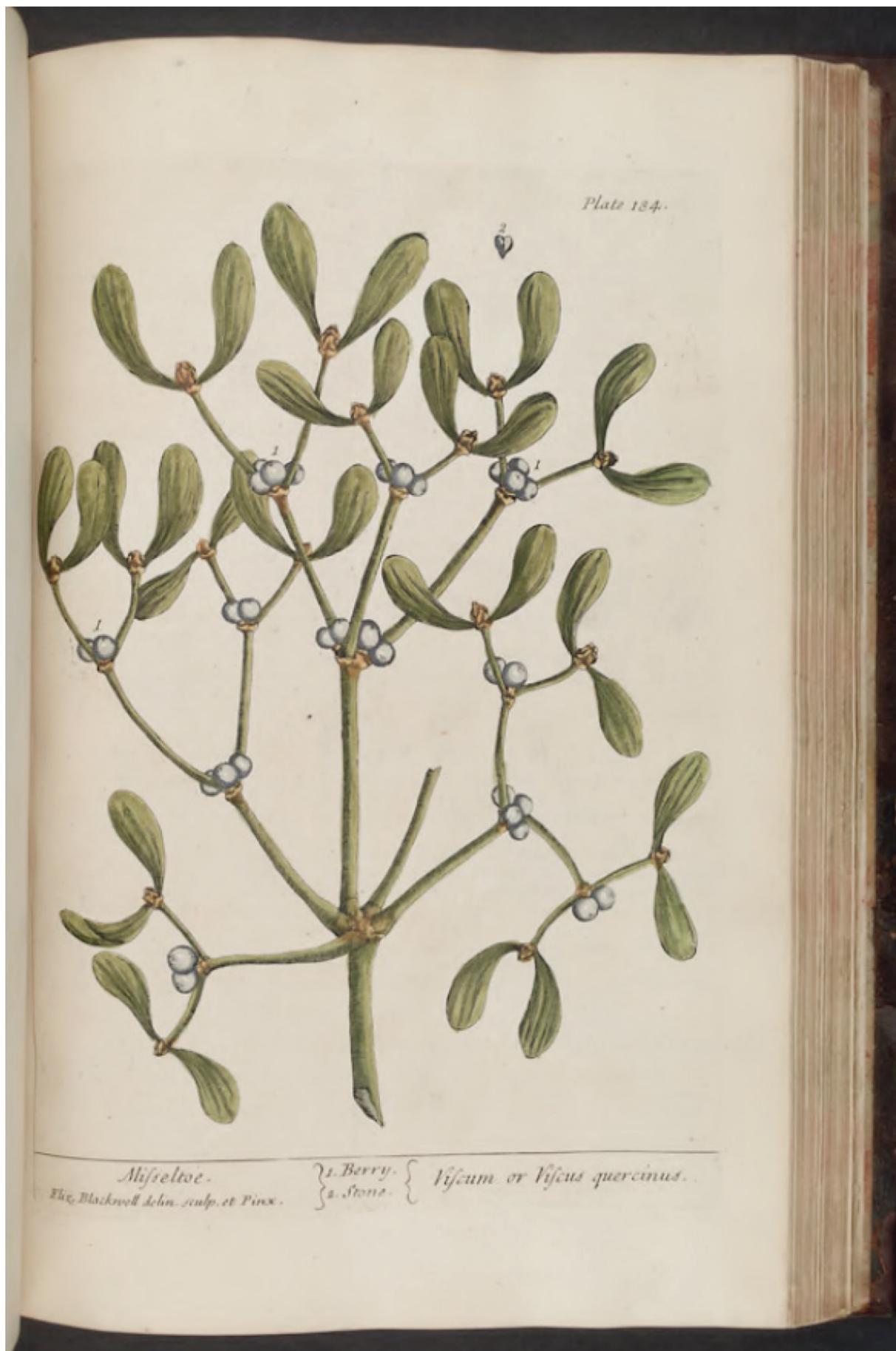


Figure 2

An illustration of Mistletoe from the *Curious Herbal* by Blackwell and Blackwell

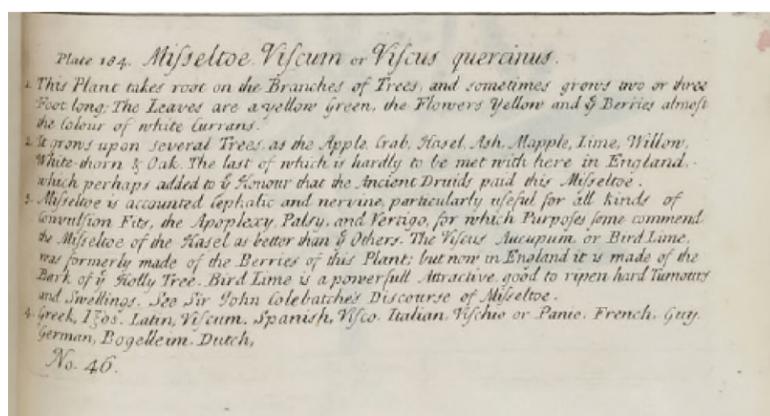


Figure 3. The text relating to Mistletoe: "Mistletoe is accounted cephalic and nervine, particularly useful for all kinds of convulsion fits, apoplexy palsy and vertigo."

This turned into an enormous task with Elizabeth doing all the drawings, engravings and hand colouring. A few plates were copied from H.A. van Rheedee tot Draakestein's Hortus indicus malabaricus but she acknowledged their origin.

The work was called 'A Curious Herbal, containing five hundred cuts of the most useful plants which are now used in the Practise of Physick, to which is added a short description of ye plants and their common uses in Physick'. So not exactly a short and pithy title but it does tell you what it is!

The work was published in two main parts, the first containing some 252 plates and a further 132 in the second. Eventually five hundred plates were published.

The book met a gap in the market, namely an up-to-date reference work for apothecaries including the many species recently discovered in North and South America (figures 6 and 7).

The profits were put towards paying Alexander's debts and eventually Elizabeth sold the copyright to finish paying the debts and get Alexander out of prison.

Meanwhile some printers had copied their work and started selling it without permission thus breaking their copyright. Alexander took great pleasure in suing the printers as they were the very same people who had made him bankrupt by prosecuting him for acting as a printer without having undergone the apprenticeship!

A Curious Herbal was a very timely publication as there were books about the medical use of herbs, such as Joseph Miller's or Culpeper's, but with no illustrations. Some prior rare publications showed pictures of plants but with no instructions about their use and there were many new plants that had not been illustrated previously.



Figure 4. Foxglove

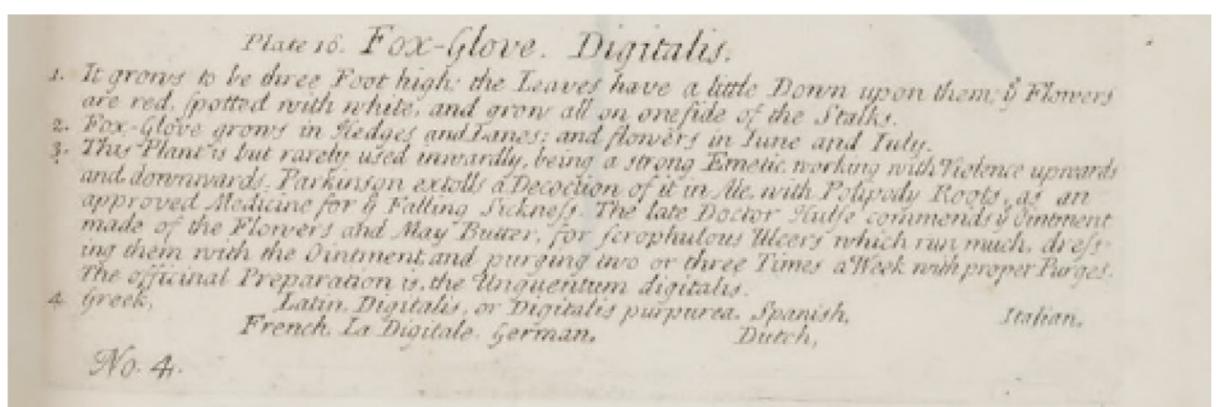


Figure 5. Text for Foxglove, Digitalis: ... "but rarely used transorally being a strong emetic...An approved medicine for the falling sickness" (epilepsy, PRG). No mention of cardiac problems!

Figure 6  
Love Apple (Tomato)



Figure 7  
Text for the love apple  
“Love Apple outwardly applied is esteemed cooling and moistening, good for Inflammations & Erysipelas; the Juice is commended in hot Defluations of Rheum upon the Eyes. In Italy they eat them with Oil and Vinegar as we do Cucumbers.”

Plate 133. Love Apple. Amoris Pomum.

1. The Stalks grow to be two Foot high, the Leaves are a light yellowish green, and the Flowers yellow.

2. It is sown in gardens, and flowers in July, the Fruit being ripe in September.

3. Love Apple outwardly applied is esteemed cooling and moistning, good for Inflammations, Erysipelas; the Juice is commended in hot Defluations of Rheum upon the Eyes. In Italy they eat them with Oil and Vinegar as we do Cucumbers.

4. Greek. Στρουγγιον ενπαρον. Latin. Pomum Amoris. Solanum pomiferum. Spanish Italian, Pomo d'Oro. French Pommes d'Amour. German. Gold apffel. Dutch.



# West of England Medical Journal

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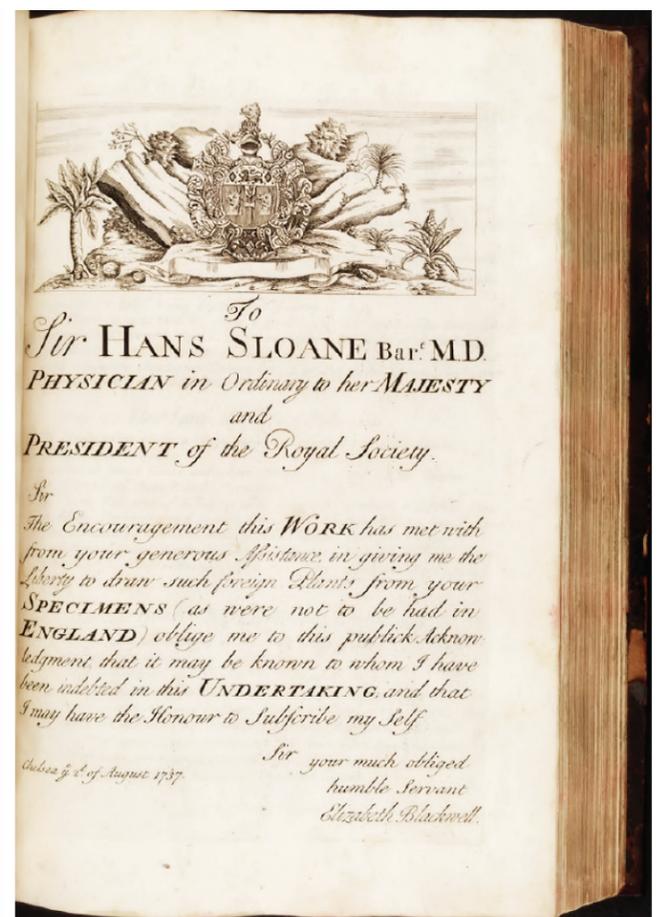
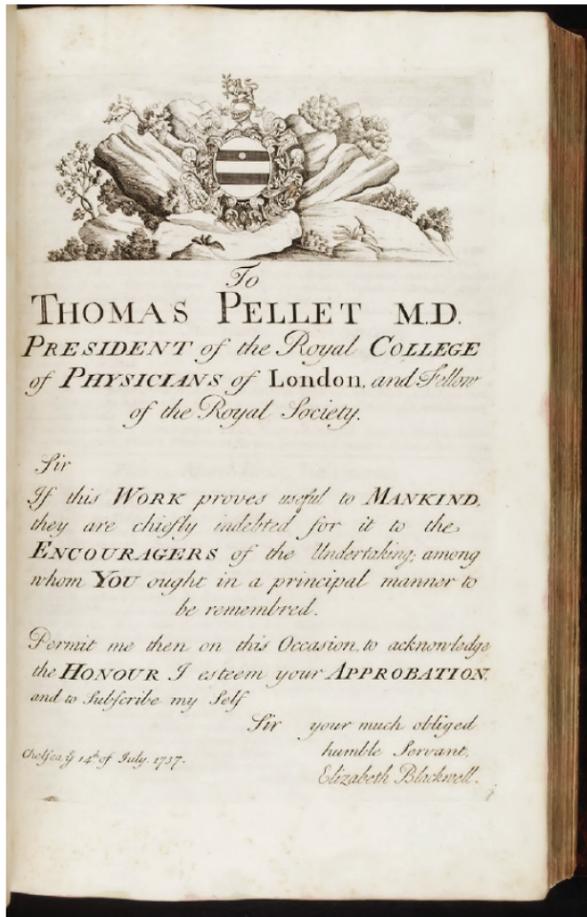
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Many dedications were included in the various volumes and editions including dedications to famous physicians and apothecaries and to the Royal College of Physicians (Figures 8a and 8b).

Alexander, freed from prison, initially worked for the Duke of Chandos as director of improvements, even writing about *A new method of improving Cold, Wet and Clayey Grounds*. Once again he managed to upset his employer and left under a cloud. The Swedish ambassador persuaded him to go to Stockholm where he acted as a doctor, even treating the king. He was again accused of quackery and rapidly switched back to agriculture. Whilst running a “model farm” for the king he ran into problems and was charged with a plot to put the Duke of Cumberland on the Swedish throne. This may have been a trumped up charge by another court adviser, Count Tessin, but it led to his arrest and torture.

In 1747 Elizabeth and child were on their way to join him in Sweden but arrived too late. Alexander had been executed for treason. It is said that he kept up his good humour to the last, apologising for putting his head on the wrong side of the block as “*It is the first time that I have been beheaded.*”

*A Curious Herbal* continued to sell well. The Bristol Library Society had a copy and this was noted in its catalogue of 1814. This, presumably, moved with the library in 1894 to the Old Library, King Street, Bristol. This building now houses a very good Chinese restaurant called Cathay Rendezvous (figure 9). In 1906 the library moved to the present central library.



Figures 8a and 8b.  
Dedications to Thomas Pellet, President of the Royal College of Physicians  
and to Sir Hans Sloane, President of the Royal Society

I have a copy of *A Curious Herbal* in PDF form and the illustrations (figures 2-8) are from the PDF. Reproductions of the book are available on the internet. I have even been able to purchase a miniature version of the book: dolls house scale (figures 10 a, b and c).

Not many of us could nowadays afford to own an original copy of the Blackwells’ book. There is, however, a recent publication from the Royal College of Physicians<sup>(2)</sup>, based on their own herb garden and remarkably similar to *A Curious Herbal*. In fact the Blackwell’s book is the very first one mentioned in their bibliography.

The full title of the RCP’s book is “*The illustrated College herbal: plants from the Pharmacopoea Londinensis of 1618*” and it is a very beautiful book indeed!

## REFERENCES

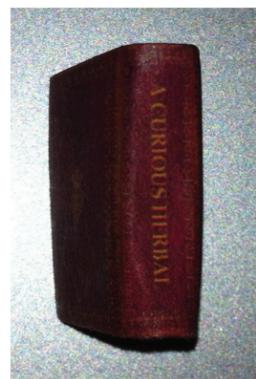
1. <https://www.botanicalartandartists.com/about-elizabeth-blackwell.html>
2. The illustrated College herbal: plants from the Pharmacopoea Londinensis of 1618 [www.oakleybooks.com](http://www.oakleybooks.com)

## WARNING

The use of the plants as mentioned in this article is to be understood in historical terms only and should not be copied in treating patients



Figure 9. The Old Library



Figures 10 a,b & c. Dollshouse-scale miniature copy of *A Curious herbal*