

What can the Sound Archive Recordings of the School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh) tell us about the Traditional Use of Medicinal Herbs in Scotland? An Exploration into the Scots/English Sound Archive Materials

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ABSTRACT

The Sound Archives (SA) of the School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh), established in 1951, contains Gaelic, English and Scots dialect audio recordings of the cultural traditions of Scotland. Included in interviews with informants throughout Scotland over the last half-century is information about traditional life, including use of herbal medicines. Utilizing information available in English, this project has explored the SA to determine what the material can tell us about the traditional use of medicinal herbs in Scotland.

153 cures were identified covering 45 different plants (a summary of these uses is included). The information period covers early 20th century. Most informants came from Argyll, Inverness-shire and Ross & Cromarty with the majority of these from Scotland's Isles.

The most commonly used plants were bogbean, plantain, nettle, docken, dandelion, seaweed, chamomile and oats. No specific dosages and only occasional harvesting instructions or specific results were provided. More than half (60%) of the cures provided preparation information, including external preparations (such as poultices, ointments and liniments), food, decoctions (including bottled) and tea. All cures were simples (one plant) except six which included two herbs. The ailments treated were generally common including skin, gastrointestinal and respiratory problems. Informants also confirmed that plant cure use had been influenced by the

unavailability (due to distance) and high cost of orthodox care.

Healers, when denoted, were often family with emphasis on mother and grandmother, with local or other gifted people also mentioned. Although many of these informants are from an oral tradition culture, only a few stories and legends were provided.

Overall, the project provides insight into Scottish use of plant cures in the early 20th century with an integrated and traceable summary of relevant SA materials thereby enhancing accessibility to others wishing to explore this heritage.

Following is a condensed version of this paper. An unabridged version is available through the web link.

'I verily believe that the divine Providence had a care in bestowing plants in each part of the earth, fitting and convenient to the fore-known necessities of the future inhabitants" (Thomas Johnson (1636) quoted in Allen & Hatfield, 2004), p19).

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

There is now, as there may always have been, interest in preserving past knowledge. This is especially appropriate for knowledge of traditional medicine which was prevalent in everyday Scottish rural life up until early last century (Beith, 1995). But with the introduction of social medicine programmes and increased accessibility from improved transportation, the need for people to depend on their own remedies is disappearing (Hamilton, 2004).

Projects such as Ethnomedica (Ethnomedica, 2004), Channel 4 Medicine Chest project (Barker, 2009), and Flora Celtica 2000 (Flora Celtica, 2000) aim to collect and preserve Britain's remaining memories of this plant tradition. But, there is also a wealth of information locked in the nation's libraries and archives. The Sound Archives (SA) of the School of Scottish Studies (SSS) of the University of Edinburgh is an example. Established in 1951 to collect, archive, research, and publish material about Scottish cultural traditions, fieldworkers from the School have collected, to date, over 9,000 audio recordings of songs, music, tales, verse, customs, beliefs and oral history from Scottish people through open-ended interviews (Sound Archives Website, 2008). While the SA primarily contains recordings of traditional songs, music and tales, it also holds accounts of traditional life including use of herbal cures (Macaulay, 2006).

About 40% of the collection is in Gaelic with the remainder in Scots dialect or English. Access is thus limited for non-Gaelic speaking persons. English summaries, however, are available for most of the collection (Macaulay, 2006). As the author is not Gaelic speaking, this research was limited to information available in English.

While a number of authors have explored its herbal cure information (Milliken & Bridgewater, 2004) (Beith, 1995) (Allen & Hatfield, 2004), their use of the material has been anecdotal. The goal of this study was to provide an integrated view of the SA plant cure material thereby enhancing its accessibility to Medical Herbalists.

METHODOLOGY

The research question posed specific characteristics and limitations given that the data's nature and depth was unknown, yet finite. After evaluating several possible approaches, qualitative Grounded Theory (GT) was selected as the project's method as it emphasises exploration of unknown data and seeks to identify theories about that data (Charmez, 2006). Following this approach, the SA data was sampled and evaluated for concepts and themes in an iterative process towards building theory about the data.

Refer to the unabridged paper for more details about the project's methodology.

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF DATA

In addition to the SA audio recordings (in Gaelic or English), written summaries, abbreviated database summaries, and in some cases transcriptions were also available in English.

Using the SSS coding convention for "cures", 234 possible recordings were selected. The supporting materials for these recordings were then reviewed for relevancy (e.g.:

plant related cures). The data identified as relevant included:

- 42 English/Scots audio recordings
- 40 English written summaries of Gaelic recordings
- 8 English transcriptions

These interviews yielded 181 plant cures covering 45 different plants.

The timeframe for these interviews is 1953-1992, the informants' ages, when reported, vary from roughly 60-90 years, and they are generally speak of life when they were children suggesting that the timeframe for the data is roughly early 20th century.

The informants were predominantly from northern and western Scotland with the majority from the Western Isles..

Note that more details of data selection and, demographics, data referencing convention, and consideration of design reliability and reflexivity are addressed in the unabridged

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Bogbean (24) | Vetch (2) |
| Nettle (19) | Watercress (2) |
| Plantain (13) | Algae (1) |
| Docken (9) | Ash tree bark (1) |
| Dandelion (8) | Birch (1) |
| Cow droppings (7) | Butterbur (1) |
| Seaweed (7) | Buttercup (1) |
| Chamomile (5) | Chickweed (1) |
| Oat (5) | Daisy (1) |
| Black currants (3) | Heath (1) |
| Bog myrtle (3) | Horehound (1) |
| Garlic (3) | Peat (1) |
| Linseed (3) | Potato (1) |
| Clover (2) | Ragwort (1) |
| Ivy (2) | Rock fern (1) |
| Mint (2) | Royal fern (1) |
| Mould (2) | Saxifrage, golden (1) |
| Onion (2) | Senna pods (1) |
| Rhubarb (2) | Spagnum moss (1) |
| Rosin (2) | Small tangle (1) |
| St John's wort (2) | Whins (1) |
| Tormentil (2) | Yarrow (1) |
| Turnip (2) | |

paper.

PLANTS AS CURES

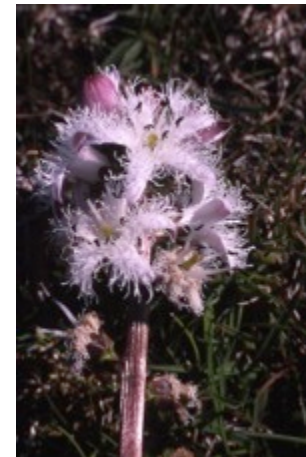
Table 1 lists the 45 plants, or plant products, identified by the informants. This list is ordered by popularity with the number of references in parenthesis. Herbs have been addressed by common names, as they were addressed in the original interviews.

Following is a summary of the cures of the most popular plants including bogbean, nettles, plantain, docken and dandelion. The Gaelic name, in *italics*, is identified when provided.

The complete list of findings for all 45 herbs is available in the unabridged paper.

BOGBEAN

Bogbean was referred to by many names, including: trefoil, marsh trefoil, *tri-bhileach*, *luibh na tribheann*, *luidh nan tri beann*, *lus nan tri bean*, and *lus na tri bean*.



Seven informants recalled bogbean for stomach complains (SA1955.158, Inverness-shire), upsets (SA1960.87, Inverness-shire, Gaelic) (SA1963.36, Argyll/Mull, Gaelic) (SA1988.35, Argyll/Mull) (SA1977.131, Inverness-shire, Gaelic) (SA1972.53, Jura, Gaelic) or as tonic (SA1974.113, Inverness-shire, Gaelic). Similarly it was also taken for internal troubles (SA1972.58, Argyll/Jura, Gaelic), intestinal complaints (SA1968.88, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic), constipation (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51) and as a general purgative medicine (SA1977.131, Inverness-shire, Gaelic).

Bogbean was also identified for respiratory complaints by six informants including

cough (SA1963.36, Argyll/Mull, Gaelic), bad/severe colds (SA1988.35, Argyll/Mull), chest complaints (SA1971.280, Jura, Gaelic), asthma (SA1972.002, Argyll/Mull) and a lingering cold (SA1987.29, Argyll/Mull).

It was also used as a cure for alcoholics to reduce craving (SA1974.113, Inverness-shire, Gaelic), kidney problems (SA1955.120, Sutherland) headaches (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51) and as a tonic (SA1969.146, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic).

Most informants spoke of teas or brews, and four bottled it for future use (SA1977.131, Inverness-shire, Gaelic) (SA1963.52, Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51) (SA1972.002, Argyll/Mull) (SA1987.29, Argyll/Mull). One told of a local man who made pills (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51). Another specified the plant parts as 'whole plant, roots and all' (SA1963.52, Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51) and a further used the dried roots boiled and strained (SA1968.88, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic). Many referred to the taste, 'worse than casara' (SA1987.29, Argyll/Mull) and the practice to add flavourings such as sugar, whisky (SA1963.36, Argyll/Mull, Gaelic) (SA1971.21, Argyll/Jura) and even Lucozade (SA1987.29, Argyll/Mull)!

Bogbean - mini-monograph

Keith - would you like to add your thoughts here

Real mix of constituents: glycosides, coumarins, saponins,

alkaloids, sterols, bitters, tannins

Your personal experience meetin it in a bog in Islay

Personal reporting from Irish relatives

Menyanthes is flower month in Greek

NETTLE

Nine informants remember nettle soup (or broth) made each spring to purify the blood (SA1964.18, Perthshire) (SA1970.164, Inverness-shire/Barra, Gaelic) (SA1971.21,



Argyll/Jura) (SA1958.22, Ross & Cromarty, Gaelic) (SA1964.28, Perthshire) (SA1976.74, Argyll/Islay) (SA1972.2, Argyll/Mull). Several recall whelks in the soup (SA1969.146, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic) and another described women curing children's eczema with soup made from nettles and whelks because it cleansed the blood (SA1973.12, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic). A charming story about John Beaton, his daughter and a toad recommends nettle soup for children three times each March claiming "there is nothing [harmful] of any kind in their insides what nettle soup cannot kill" (SA1953.49, Argyll/Mull, Tocher4 pp51-52).

Nettles were also used for rheumatism as a tea (SA1977.149, Argyll) (SA1988.71, Ross & Cromarty/Lewis) or externally thrashing the rheumatic joint (SA1969.28, Argyll/Islay).

A tumbler full of bottled nettle each morning and night (made by boiling nettle 3 hours to a solid pulp, sieving and bottling) was a cure for serious bleeding and chronic bloody noses (SA1955.108, Shetland).

Nettle was also taken for constipation (SA1955.165, Plockton, Gaelic) as well as to cure nerves and varicose veins. Nettle-carrageen combination called "Hebridean lotion" was used externally for softening muscles, skin disorders (eg psoriasis),

stings, burns, mouth ulcers, as well as stomach ulcers and nerve disorders (SA1974.113, Inverness-shire, Gaelic).

PLANTAIN

Gaelic names included *cuach phàdruig*, *goc-phadruig*, and *copag-phadruig*. It was used for bad (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 PP41-51) or festering sores (SA1960.87, Inverness-shire, Gaelic). Several informants also identified it for drawing poisons and boils (SA1960.118, Inverness-shire, Gaelic) (SA1963.36, Argyll/Mull, Gaelic) (SA1964.94, S Uist, Gaelic). It can be prepared by scraping the surface of the leaf and covering the cut with the scrapings (SA1964.28, Perthshire). Also see docken.



Ribwort was differentiated by several informants. Gaelic names for ribwort included *slàn-lus*, and *slàn-lusg*. It was used for cuts (SA1960.87, Inverness-shire, Gaelic) and to stop bleeding,

sometimes with cobwebs (SA1977.131, Inverness-shire, Gaelic). The juice from crushed leaves healed the skin (SA1988, Ross & Cromarty/Lewis) and it can be chewed and applied to wounds to stop bleeding (SA1960.118, Inverness-shire, Gaelic). An ointment made with beeswax was used to dress wounds (SA1977.135, Berneray, Gaelic) and a salve made from crushed leaf, sugar and fresh butter was used for cuts, especially drawing septic ones (SA1970.349, Barra, Gaelic).

DOCKEN

Docken was used as cure for nettle stings by six informants (SA1964.28, Perthshire)

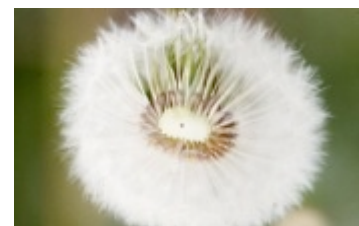
SA1974.171, East Lothian) (SA1988.24, Angus) (SA1988.71, Ross & Cromarty/Lewis) (SA1988.72, Glasgow). It was also used to draw boils, combined with soap and sugar (SA1955.162, Achilitibuie, Gaelic).

Docken was used to heal and dress cuts, on its own (SA1968.88, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic) and with plantain (*cuach phadruig*) (SA1970.35, S Uist, Gaelic). Similarly, it (*bun na copag*) was boiled (leaf and roots) with unsalted butter and smeared on the skin to heal scalding and bad burns, leaving no scar (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51).



DANDELION

Dandelion was made into a soup for bladder troubles (SA1971.21, Argyll/Jura), the root was used for stomach ailments



(SA1988.24, Angus) and the whole plant made into a poultice for bad cuts (SA1984.95, Argyll). An informant remembers a local man boiling it with horehound into a strong tea for coughs and colds (SA1955.120, Sutherland) and another remembers using the dandelion milk as quinine, because it tasted the same (SA1988.24, Angus).

AILMENTS

As illustrated in Table 2 below, gastrointestinal (GI), skin and respiratory cures were most prevalent. GI cures predominantly referred to diarrhoea,

constipation, 'bad stomach' and 'purifying the blood'. The skin cures were generally vulnerary for cuts, burns and 'festering', provided 'drawing' ability (especially for boils) and cured 'stings' (e.g.: docken for nettle stings). Respiratory cures addressed coughs, colds, 'chest complaints' and asthma.

| Table 2: Ailments |
|------------------------------|
| Skin (49) |
| Gastrointestinal system (38) |
| Miscellaneous (23) |
| Respiratory system (20) |
| Musculoskeletal system (8) |
| Nervous system (5) |
| Cardiovascular system (4) |
| Eyes, ears & throat (4) |
| Urinary system (3) |

Most other ailments tended to be common conditions such as headache, sore eyes and rheumatism, though two jaundice cures (SA1960.195, Ross & Cromarty, Gaelic) (SA1968.88, Argyll/Islay, Gaelic) and a poultice for thrombosis (SA1976.74, Argyll/Islay) were mentioned. Interestingly, an Inverness informant recalled that while they could do anything with their cures, they left measles to the doctors, they were afraid to treat measles (SA1955, 158, Inverness-shire).

PREPARATION

METHOD

The majority of the cures used external preparations (poultice (19), ointment (4), salve (4), lotion (2) and liniment, roasted, ash and dried/cooked (1 each). There were also 15 direct applications to skin and 4 externally applied decoctions representing almost half the preparations.

Only six of these preparations used more than one herb and these cases were limited

| Table 3: Preparations |
|---|
| External preparations, such as poultice, ointments (33) |
| Directly applied to skin (15) |
| Food (14) |
| Tea (13) |
| Decoction: internal (13) |
| Bottled drink (8) |
| Decoction: external (4) |
| Drink (4) |
| Infusion: cold (3) |
| Inhalation (2) |
| Pills (1) |

to two herbs. The remaining cures are presented as simples.

SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

ORAL TRADITION

While all the SA recordings refer to oral tradition, there was little indication that plant cures were passed as stories. Only two stories were told, these appearing in the SA journal, and both referred to the *accidental* discovery of cures: one for nettles (SA1953.49 Argyll/Mull, Tocher4 pp51-52) and the other seaweed (SA1975.174, na, Tocher3,p90).

Additionally, two Shetland legends were described, by the same informant, involving graveyard mould (SA1954.115, Shetland) and barefoot walking among the sphagnum moss (SA1955.108, Shetland).

THE HEALERS

Five informants spoke of the healing powers of a 7th son (one informant being a 7th son) (SA1984.95, Argyll). Two of these spoke of the 7th son able to heal Scrofula (King's Evil) (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51) (SA1973.164, Lewis), one with forecasting ability (SA1971.21, Argyll/Jura) and another who could cure boils and sores that wouldn't heal (SA1988.71, Ross & Cromarty/ Lewis).

Two specified that the healing powers were strongest if the healer were a 7th son of a 7th son

(SA1973.1



Figure 1: Jeannie Gibson in her home in Knockan Ross of Mull, Tocher 7 p194, by Ian MacKenzie

4, Lewis) though one of these suggested greater powers if the 7th son had a girl sibling born first and last (SA1971.21, Argyll/Jura). Another specified that there could be no girls between the sons (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51).

Nine interviews elaborated about people gifted as healers. In some cases this might be a person gifted to cure a particular disease such as jaundice (SA1969.158, Argyll/Tiree) or warts (SA1964.59, Fortingall).

Three spoke of local people who worked with herbs. One man was said to make 'healing cubes' from flowers and herbs (SA1955.107, Shetland), another boiled herbs with sugar (SA1955.120, Sutherland), and a woman, now dead, worked with marsh-trefoil (SA1988.35, Argyll/Mull). Several referred to cures 'women' made (SA1973.12, Islay, Gaelic) (SA1972.53, Argyll/Jura, Gaelic) (SA1964.94, Inverness-shire/S Uist, Gaelic) explaining that 'some old women were very good at herbal remedies' (SA1958.86, Argyll/Oban, Gaelic). Others referred to an abstract 'they' (SA1964.69, Fortingall) (SA1988.35, Argyll/Mull), 'the old folks' (SA1988.34, Argyll/Mull) and 'old ones' (SA1977.207, Argyll/Mull).



Figure 2: Betsey Whyte, Tocher 7 p130, by Barbara NcDermitt

Several referred to beliefs, as in 'the old ones believed' in these cures (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbe

cula, Tocher57 PP41-51) (SA1972.234, Blairgowrie) (SA1988.24, Montrose).



Figure 3: Miss Elizabeth Sandford in her home, Tocher 7 p257, by Cecilia Newton

Many informants spoke of their mother (14), grandmother (3) or father (1) preparing and/or administering cures. Various recipes and preparations were made by mother or granny, with one informant recalling that 'mother had all the cures' (SA1987.65, Galloway). Another recalled 'you wouldn't spend your money at the chemist; your granny said what you should take' (SA1985.133, Inverness-shire). This implies family tradition using herbs though a 3rd generation Glasgow informant was adamant that cures were not passed through families but were simply 'widely known' (SA1988.72, Glasgow).

LOST REMEDIES

Sadly, a few informants spoke how these past remedies were disappearing. One recalled a cure for jaundice which she wrote down, but now cannot find (SA1955.158, Inverness-shire/Laggan). Another explained that she and her Mother had learned about herbs from her Aunt, but it is now forgotten (SA1964.69, Fortingall). An Arran informant recalled a local woman who made a special healing ointment, which died with her (SA1965.130 Arran).

ORTHODOX HEALTHCARE

Fourteen interviews provided information about their views and experiences with local doctors. Consensus was that the

doctor was called only in exceptional circumstances. In some cases, however, there were no doctors. Uist, Benbecula, and Eriskay, for example, were under the care of one doctor (sometimes not even that) and a midwife. Because of long distances, one informant recalls that two ponies always went with the midwife (SA1963.52, Inverness-shire/Benbecula, Tocher57 pp41-51). A Mull informant remembers a fire being lit to signal the doctor (SA1988.34, Argyll/Mull).

The other reason doctors were seldom used was the cost. One informant remembers the doctor sent for 'only if it was serious because money was scarce and the doctor fee was steep' (SA1964.18, Perthshire). Another remembers the doctor as not expensive, would come anytime, very attentive, and had the Gaelic (SA1969.157, Argyll/Tiree). Though another recalls being sent, as a boy, for the doctor for his ailing grandmother and the doctor would not agree to come until told his remuneration (SA1965.130, Arran). This was not always the practice, though, as another informant found it was not necessary to pay the doctor at the time, 'though one always tried'. But she also provided a harrowing story of her mother lying by a stream with her hand in the water for three days to successfully heal a festering sore, all to avoid the doctors whom she feared (SA1972.234, Blairgowrie).

USING LOCAL CURES

A Lewis informant explained that the cures were called 'instant remedies' because they were easily available and they knew from experience that they worked. She added that 'they must work because they were not pleasant to drink and so were not taken from choice!' But as they lived remotely, they relied on what was available locally (SA1988.71, Ross & Cromarty/Lewis).

There were differing opinions as to the effectiveness of the local cures. For example, a Galloway informant felt one might as well do without the 'coupons' (prescriptions) because they were so ineffective (SA1987.65, Galloway), whereas one from Shetland preferred modern medicine though still used 'old methods' occasionally (SA1958.286, Shetland). A Mull informant described modern cures as working quicker, but the old ones did the trick when there was nothing else (SA1988.35, Argyll/Mull).

FINAL THEMES & THEORIES

Several final themes and thoughts, in the authors' opinion, are suggested:

- Most plant cures described used simples (single herbs).
- For the most part the plants identified are commonly known plants and the ailments treated were also common ailments.
- The cures information was primarily practical with little in the way of tales or legends, despite the fact that many of the informants lived among an oral tradition culture.
- For most of the informants, memories of plant cures were distant and often abstract.

Further discussion of the themes, supporting literature, evaluation of the methodology, strengths and weakness of this study and future work are discussed in the unabridged paper. Lit review also...

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an integrated view of the SA plant cure materials, albeit limited to the material available in English. Nonetheless, it has improved the

accessibility of the SA plant cure material to others by summarising its contents, providing a demographic overview of the content and providing traceability for future studies. While additional nuances may be gleaned from listening to the Gaelic recordings, their English summaries have likely provided most of the relevant information.

It must be kept in mind, however, that the SA materials are original oral stories and the transcription, summary and analysis will necessarily have introduced bias and potentially lost some of its nuances. That appreciated, it is hoped that these findings are useful to others wishing to explore Scotland's heritage of the local use of plant cures.