

SIR ROBERT SIBBALD PHYSIC GARDEN

Joan P. S. Ferguson,* 21 Howard Place, Edinburgh EH3 5JY

On the bitterly cold afternoon of Friday, 22 March 1996, amidst falling flakes of snow, the Rt Hon Norman Irons, Lord Provost of Edinburgh accompanied by the Lady Provost, unveiled a plaque in the Sir Robert Sibbald Physic Garden of the College to commemorate its opening. Distinguished guests gathered—the President, Dr J. D. Cash, past Presidents Dr C. C. Clayson, Sir John Crofton, Dr John Strong, Dr R. H. Girdwood, Trustees of the College and members of Council, Lord James Douglas Hamilton (Minister for Home Affairs & Health), Professor D. S. Ingram Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Mr John Main the Curator, Mr David R. Mitchell the designer of the College Garden and his team. They were entertained by the bagpipes of a former Honorary Pipe-Major of the Royal Scottish Piper's Society, also former Vice-President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and an Honorary Fellow of the College, Mr I. F. McLaren. The unveiling was preceded by a fanfare by four Herald Trumpeters of the Band of Her Majesty's Royal Marines, Scotland. Because of the inclement weather, most of the accompanying ladies viewed the proceedings from the windows of the Duncan Room.

The Garden is situated in the enclosed courtyard, open to the sky, between the back of No 8 Queen Street and the New Library. In former years the schoolboys of the Edinburgh Institution (then tenants in No 8 now part of Daniel Stewart's and Melville College) used this area as their playground. The Garden is in the form of four raised beds and was designed by Mr David R. Mitchell of the Royal Botanic Garden, whose staff have been responsible for the construction and planting up of the beds and who will maintain it. Three garden seats have been donated by Drs A. D. Toft, A. T. Proudfoot and M. A. Eastwood.

The plants in the four beds represent the materia medica of the *Early Herbalists, the 16th and 17th Century, the 18th and 19th Century and the 20th and 21st Century* respectively. Thus, in Bed One, the *Early Herbalists*, there are, amongst other plants, *Erica arborea* or Tree Heath which, in the interesting pamphlet, *Materia Medica*, which has been compiled by Ursula Gregory and Judith Moore of the Royal Botanic Garden, was used according to Dioscorides, to 'heale the bitings of serpents' and *Lilium Candidum*, the Madonna Lily 'cleareth ye faces & makes them without wrinkles'. In Bed Two, the *16th and 17th Century*, there are more familiar names represented, the English herbalists William Turner, John Parkinson, John Gerard and Nicholas Culpeper. Gerard recommended Scottish heather as being 'good to be laid upon the bitings and stingings of any venomous beasts' (the Scottish midge?).

Bed Three is devoted to plants associated with British and American herbalists of the *18th and 19th century*. Dogwood is included, *Cornus florida* 'Cherokee Princess' as 'the American Indians used the bark for fever and colic'. The Ostrich fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris* was 'used by the Menominee as a poultice'. Bed Four, the *20th Century*, contains plants which figure in Mrs Grieve's 'A Modern Herbal'. It contains *Hedera helix*, the common ivy which is a remedy for sunburn

*Formerly the College Librarian.

if the 'tender ivy twigs' are 'boiled in butter' and applied to the face; and Feverfew or *Chrysanthemum parthenium Aureum* 'employed in hysterical complaints, nervousness, and lowness of spirits'.

Refreshments were served to the guests in the New Library where the Librarian, Mr I. A. Milne and Mr John Dallas had prepared an exhibition 'Plants and Personalities' from the Library's collections. This contained a representative selection of the botanical treasures in the Library from the *Herbarum, arborum, fruticum, frumentorum ac leguminum* Christian Egenolff (1502-1555), published in Frankfurt in 1546; Fabio Colonna's *Phytobasanos sive plantarum aliquot historia* published in Naples in 1592 and containing the first copperplate engravings in any botanical book; James Sutherland, the first 'Intendant' of Sibbald and Balfour's physic garden, his *Hortus medicus Edinburgensis* published in Edinburgh in 1683; Peter Simon Pallas, *Flora Rossica* published in St Petersburg in 1790-91 and describing Asian and Siberian plants; Augustin P. de Candolle's *Plantarum succulentarum historia* with the illustrations drawn by Redoute, to James Bateman's *A second century of orchidaceous plants* published in London in 1867 with lithographs by Walter Hood Fitch, the most outstanding botanical artist of his day. In addition, Mr George Tait of the Library, had prepared a continuous slide show there. 'The Garden in Bloom' was based on the plates from William Woodville's *Medical Botany*, 1790-95 which described all the plants in the materia medica catalogues of the Edinburgh and London Colleges. The illustrations chosen related to the plants featured outside in the new Garden with captions based on the 'Materia Medica' notes. Also included were slides of title pages from some of the botanical books in the collections which illustrated actual gardens of the 16th and 17th centuries. This presentation was the Library's first venture in this field, produced by computer with the aid of the 'scanner' in the Education Department and was very successful. Mr Tait was also responsible for the production of the Menu/Programme for the Dinner & Entertainment held in the evening for the guests.

It was the immediate past President of the College, Dr A. D. Toft, who inspired the idea of the Garden and that it be called after Sir Robert Sibbald, the principal founder of the College. It was he, with his friend Sir Andrew Balfour, who founded a physic garden beside Holyrood Palace in 1670 so that apothecary apprentices and later medical students could be taught botany. This garden was the forerunner of the present Royal Botanic Garden. *Sibbaldiana procumbens*, a Scottish alpine plant was called after him and he is commemorated today as this plant forms the motif of the gates to the Royal Botanic Garden laboratories. Also a keen naturalist, Sibbald gave his name to a whale, (the blue whale *Balaenoptera Sibbaldi*). He also became the first professor of medicine at the University of Edinburgh which eventually led to the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine there. As a footnote, it may be remembered that the College, at its first Hall in Fountain Close in the Old Town of Edinburgh had a 'pleasure garden' in which they permitted their aristocratic neighbours to walk. Later, they had trouble with unauthorised persons gaining access and using the garden for washing and drying clothes. At the George Street Hall a garden was impractical but bulbs, such as daffodils were purchased, presumably for tubs. In Queen Street, it was even less practical though for a short time, after the College took over No 11 and the warehouse behind was demolished, this area supported a rose garden which disappeared when the Conference Centre was built on the site. The authorization of the Treasurer by the Council in 1911 that he should 'arrange for the permanent maintenance of window-boxes with flowers' was apparently never acted upon.