

Physicians, Plants & Poisons Library Event and Exhibition August 2015

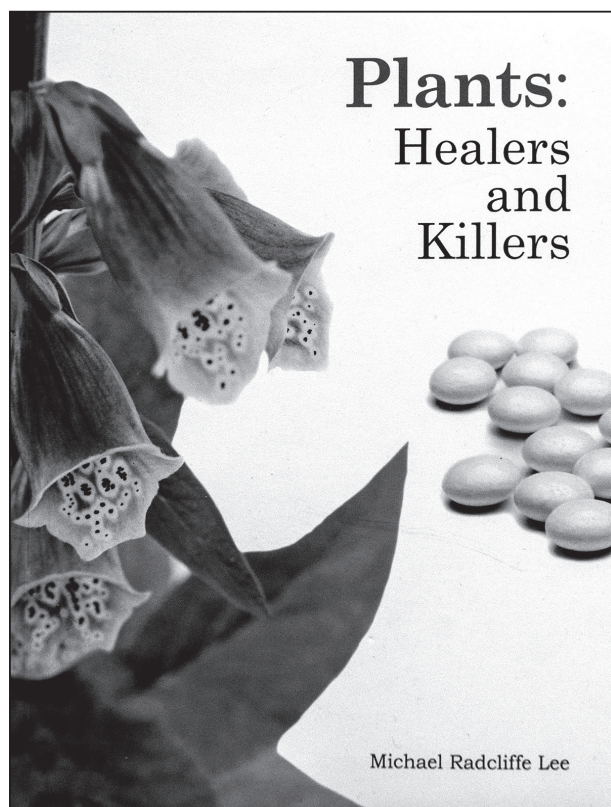


FIGURE 1 Michael Radcliffe Lee. *Plants: healers and killers*. Edinburgh: Royal Botanic Garden: 2015.

For our sixth Edinburgh International Festival event we delved into the College's fantastic collection to produce an event entitled Physicians, Plants & Poisons.

The event was devised to celebrate the publication of Professor Michael Lee's new book based on papers which were originally published in *The Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* and the updated planting of the Sibbald Physic Garden.

To accompany the Great Hall talk an exhibition was curated in the New Library.

Elizabeth and Alexander Blackwell moved to London from Aberdeen some time before 1728, where Alexander started a printing business. By 1734 he was declared bankrupt and condemned to a debtor's prison.

Elizabeth took up lodgings near Chelsea Physic Garden where she began work on a herbal. The final work consisted of 500 copper plate illustrations, drawn, engraved, and coloured by Elizabeth herself, of medicinal plants from the Chelsea garden. Nomenclature was

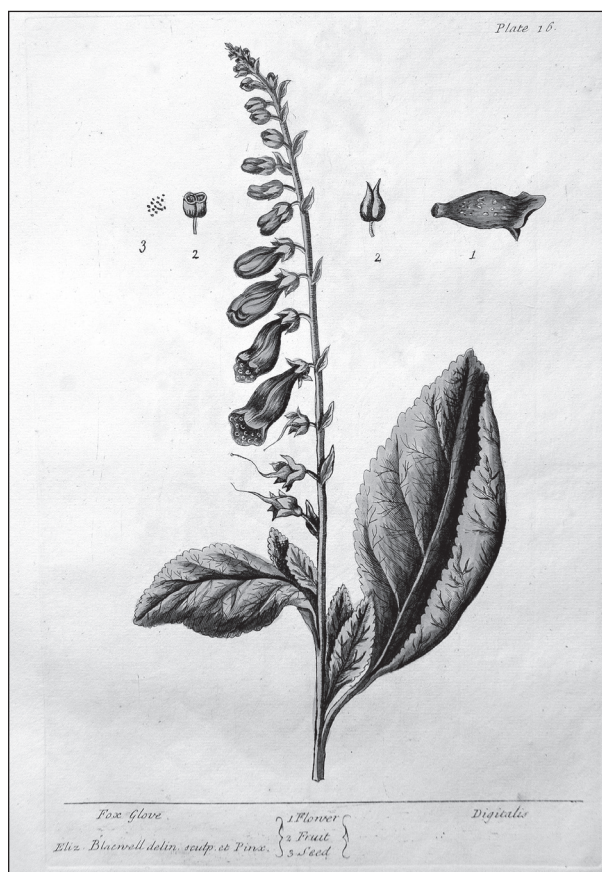


FIGURE 2 *Digitalis Purpurea* Common Foxglove; Blackwell, Elizabeth & Blackwell, Alexander

Engraved on folio copper plates, after drawings, taken from life. London: John Nourse 1737–39

provided by Alexander. It was highly recommended by many physicians, apothecaries and botanists and met with such success that Alexander Blackwell was able to clear his debts. Alexander later turned up in Sweden as an agricultural expert but was accused of becoming involved in a plot to alter the Swedish succession. He was arrested, condemned for high treason, and executed on 29th July 1747.

William Woodville was born in Cumberland, graduated MD from Edinburgh University, and settled in London where he became Physician to the Smallpox Hospital at St Pancras.

Woodville bought the ground surrounding the hospital and made it into a botanical garden. The work below was originally published in serial parts between 1790 and 1795, and completed in three volumes with an additional 'Supplement'. It contains illustrations,

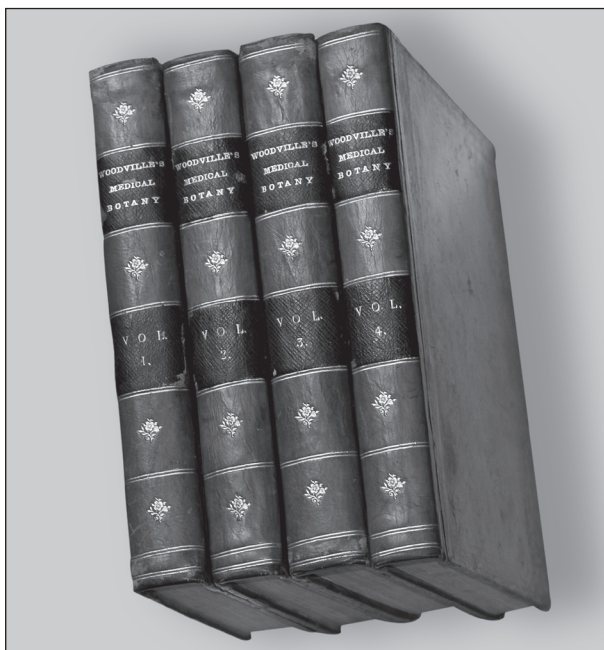


FIGURE 3 William Woodville. *Medical Botany*. London: printed and sold for the author by James Phillips; 1790-94

descriptions, and medicinal properties of all the plants featured in the pharmacopoeias published by the Royal College of Physicians of London and Edinburgh.

In 1762, Dr. James Mounsey returned from Russia to his native Scotland. He had spent 25 years working as a doctor for several Russian empresses and he brought with him a rare prize – seeds that were promptly proclaimed to be the True Rhubarb.

Sir Alexander Dick, then President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, remembered a few years later that:

upon his arrival at Edinburgh, Mounsey presented me with a good parcel of the seeds: which I immediately sowed in my garden at Prestonfield. Mounsey was soon received in the College with the greatest respect, and gratitude. He brought a parcel of the true rhubarb seeds to the meeting: which were consigned to Dr Hope; professor of botany in our university: who was then laying out the royal physic-garden

By the later 1770s, a trove of an estimated 3,000 rhubarb plants dating from the early to mid-70s was



FIGURE 4 Medicinal Rhubarb from Woodville

observed in an enclosed area behind the botanical garden. Dick speaks of Hope's intent 'to serve the public, after the proper number of years were elapsed, and the roots fully matured', and acclaims the goals of promoting the 'public good' and the 'health of the people', and of reducing 'the spending out of the kingdom, to foreign parts of great sums of money for this article of commerce'.

Another physician was growing rhubarb in Edinburgh. In the garden of Canaan Lodge in Morningside, James Gregory grew the Turkestan rhubarb whose roots provided one of the main constituents of his famous powder, Gregory's powder or Gregory's mixture. Composed of powdered rhubarb, ginger and magnesium oxide, descendants of these plants were still growing in the garden in fairly recent times.

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