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A Jewett Pharmacopoeia

by TED EDEN

If we were to collect all of the herbs and flowers Sarah Orne Jewett mentions in *The Country of The Pointed Firs* (1896) and her Dunnet Landing stories, we would have quite a beautiful and useful garden. Jewett paid very careful attention to the flora and fauna of her native state; all of her fiction constantly refers to flowers and herbs to substantiate the readers' impression of life in Maine. These references are particularly significant because of Jewett's interest in healing and in the women who used herbs as part of their traditional calling as healers. In *The Country of The Pointed Firs* Jewett uses her extensive knowledge of herbs, flowers, and herbal medicine to deepen her portrait of Dunnet Landing, and particularly of Almira Todd.¹

As a child, Jewett learned much about the flora and fauna of Maine while making house calls with her father, who was a country doctor. Although poor health prevented her from fulfilling her early ambition to become a doctor herself, Jewett used the theme of healing in much of her fiction. *A Country Doctor* (1884), for example, focuses not only on Nan Price's effort to overcome conventional resistance to women's professionalism, but also on the meaning of healing itself. In this early novel Jewett tries to balance her sense that true healing is based on wisdom, sympathy, and intuition with her belief in medicine as an intellectual science. While Mrs. Martin Dyer and Nan Price herself know the healing properties of the wild herbs of the countryside,² medicine is clearly a scientific enterprise in this novel. Dr. Leslie is in competition with "the young scholar who could write a puzzlingly technical paper" (140); Nan learns to become a doctor in a city hospital. Dr. Leslie's wisdom and intuition afford him the status of the greatest doctor in the book, respected by his male colleagues in Boston and New York, but his accomplishments are best understood in the male world of professional medicine.

Almira Todd is also a healer, but, in contrast to Dr. Leslie and Dr. Price, she belongs completely to the woman's world of herb-gardening and herb-doctoring. She is familiar with her village doctor: "The village doctor and this learned herbalist were upon the best of terms" (4). Yet Mrs. Todd's healing is directed not at the body only, as scientific medicine too often is: "It may not have been

1. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 2. Further references to Jewett's novel and stories refer to this edition.

2. Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor* (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 133-34. Further reference made parenthetically.

only the common ails of humanity with which she tried to cope; it seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd's garden" (4). While every critic must come to terms with the symbolism of Mrs. Todd's herb-gathering and her garden, few have explored the uses and resonances of the herbs and flowers Jewett mentions so often.³

A few examples will suffice to show how knowledge about herbs and flowers can deepen our understanding of the novel. In Chapter II the flowers and herbs which the narrator mentions—"not only sweet-brier and sweet-mary, but balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood and southernwood" (3)—describe not only the variety of the garden itself but also the variety of Mrs. Todd's personality. Mrs. Todd favors sweet-brier, a particularly prickly version of the rose which produces only one blossom. This flower matches her character and history. Throughout the European tradition, the rose symbolizes love; the tragedy of Mrs. Todd's life is that "she had loved one who was far above her" (7). She was capable of only one love, and was not able to love her husband. Jewett uses the sweet-brier thus very subtly to introduce Mrs. Todd's personality to her readers. Mrs. Todd is a woman who has produced a solitary beauty in conjunction with a prickly personality. Similarly, the other herbs Mrs. Todd keeps are an index of her varied activities—from the southernwood which she uses in making beer to the sage which symbolizes her wisdom and the wormwood which calls to mind the bitterness of her lonely life.

Jewett frequently uses this kind of association between people and flowers. Lucy Hooper's *Lady's Book of Flowers* (1868) tells us that mallows represent a "sweet disposition";⁴ thus Jewett introduces Mrs. Blackett through the mallows clustering just on her kitchen doorstep, "that crept as near as they dared, like poor relations" (39). William Blackett, on the other hand, is a shy, retiring sort of person, and so he is attracted to linnaea. William picks some linnaea for the narrator, but, as the narrator says, "he knew as well as I that one could not say half he wished about linnaea" (45). A description of linnaea by Herbert Durand, a contemporary of Sarah Orne Jewett, might be a description of William himself: "this delicate trailing vine does not take kindly to cultivation unless the conditions to which it is accustomed in its native haunts are closely approximated."⁵

The most important of Jewett's uses of herbs for symbolic significance is Mrs. Todd's preference for pennyroyal. In nineteenth-century America pennyroyal was used not only as a mosquito repellent (as Jewett notes in her story "A Dunnet

3. Critics who have written about the significance of Mrs. Todd's garden include Laurie Crumpacker, "The Art of the Healer: Women in the Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett," *CLQ* 19.3 (Sept. 1983): 155-66; Michael Holstein, "Writing as a Healing Art in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Studies in American Fiction* 16.1 (Spring 1988): 39-49; Sarah Way Sherman, *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone* (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1988), pp. 206-07; and Gwen Nagel, "'This prim corner of land where she was queen': Sarah Orne Jewett's New England Gardens," *CLQ* 22.1 (March 1986): 43-62.

4. Lucy Hooper, *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry: to which are added a Complete Floral Dictionary and a Chapter on Plants in Rooms* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1868), p. 245.

5. Herbert Durand, *Wild Flowers and Ferns: In Their Homes and in Our Gardens* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1923), p. 202.

Shepherdess”); its lesser known purpose was to promote expulsion of the placenta in childbirth.⁶ In cases of unwanted pregnancy pennyroyal was used to induce or increase menstrual flow. Pennyroyal, symbolizing the most intimate secrets of a woman’s world, thus adds an important dimension to Jewett’s characterization of Mrs. Todd. Elizabeth Ammons has pointed out that the place “Where Pennyroyal Grew” (Chapter X) is a womb-like space which represents the geographical and spiritual center of the women’s world of Dunnet Landing.⁷ Both the narrator and Almira Todd are single women who have no children; the fact that they meet in this womb-like space, carpeted with an herb inextricably linked to both the life and death of children, emphasizes both the lonely solitude of their “mateless and appealing” (131) lives and the comfort they find in the mother-daughter relationship they develop over the course of the summer.

There are many other subtle ways Jewett uses references to herbs and flowers (or the symbolic connotations of their names) to set a mood, to communicate an insight, or to help her reader understand one of her Maine characters. To help readers understand these moments, I have compiled a dictionary (or, technically speaking, a “pharmacopoeia”) of all the herbs and flowers Jewett mentions in *The Country of The Pointed Firs* and her four other Dunnet Landing stories: “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “The Foreigner,” “The Queen’s Twin,” and “William’s Wedding.” In the interest of helping readers unfamiliar with gardening, I have defined some herbs and flowers which many will already recognize.⁸

ash (tree)— represents “grandeur” in the 19th-c. language of flowers

balm— an herb used to soothe cuts and headaches

bay— a leaf used for flavoring soups and sauces; used medicinally for indigestion, headache, and rheumatism; used to crown famous poets in ancient Greece (see “laurel”)

bayberry— a short, thick wild bush which grows along the coast in New England; the wax from its berries is used to make scented candles; represents “instruction” in the 19th-c. language of flowers

bergamot— (also known as bee balm) used to soothe sore throats and as a mild sedative

bloodroot— a plant with red root and sap, bearing a single white flower in early spring; related to the poppy; used to induce vomiting

borage— used medicinally to reduce fevers, relieve liver and kidney troubles, as a laxative; also used in salads

camomile— an herb used to induce sweating (for treatment of fever), for upset stomachs and

6. See Elizabeth Ammons, “Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett’s *The Country of The Pointed Firs*,” in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16.2 (Fall 1983): 91, and Emrika Padus, *Woman’s Encyclopedia of Health and Natural Healing* (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1981), pp. 292-302. In the medical literature pennyroyal is known as “the abortifacient mint oil (pennyroyal oil).” See W.P. Gordon, A.C. Huitric, C.L. Seth, R.H. McClannahan, and S.D. Nelson, “The metabolism of the abortifacient terpene, (R)-(+)-pulegone, to a proximate toxin, menthofuran,” *Drug Metab Dispos* 15.5 (Sept.-Oct. 1987): 589-94. For a contrasting view see D.R. Black, “Pregnancy unaffected by pennyroyal usage” (letter), *J Am Osteopath Assoc* 85.5 (May 1985): 282. See also Barbara and Gideon Seaman, “Pennyroyal, tansy, and other home cures for ‘those days,’” *Ms Nov.* 1978, v. 7, p. 25.

7. Elizabeth Ammons, “Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett’s *The Country of The Pointed Firs*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16.2 (Fall 1983): 91.

8. Information about herbs and flowers used in this dictionary comes from Arabella Boxer and Philippa Black, *The Herb Book* (London: Octopus, 1980); *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1961); Jane Courtier, *Herbs* (Topsfield, Mass.: Salem House, 1987); and the sources noted above. It is interesting to note that Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The American Woman’s Home; or, Domestic Science* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1869) do not mention any herbal cures. In their effort to justify the “scientific” nature of housekeeping, Beecher and Stowe were anxious to avoid techniques which had not been sanctioned by male scientists.

- indigestion, as an eye bath to refresh eyes, for cramps, and as a tonic (a kind of general pick-me-up)
- cardinal flowers— represent “distinction” in the 19th-c. language of flowers
- catnip— used (paradoxically enough) to soothe people who have fits
- clustering mallows— (also know as marshmallows) to relieve coughs and bronchitis, to soothe skin inflammations, to relieve sore throat; represent “sweet disposition” in 19th-c. language of flowers
- electampane— coarse herb; used to make sweetmeats (which are something like nuts) and for sore muscles
- hyssop— an herb used to make holy water (in the Catholic Church) and as a charm; used medicinally for colds, coughs, catarrh; as an expectorant (to clear out lungs and mucous membranes); for bruises and sprains
- laurel— (also know as bay laurel) a slow-growing tree whose leaves were used in ancient Greece to crown victors in athletic contests and as a sign of honorary office; used in sauces and soups
- lemon balm— used as a tonic and to relieve headaches
- lilac— a common garden bush with heart-shaped leaves and strong-smelling purple blossoms; blooms early in the spring; signifies a first expression of love or “forsakenness” in 19th-c. language of flowers; used by Walt Whitman as a symbol of the renewal of life through death in his elegy for President Lincoln
- linnaea— also know as “twin-flower”; a delicate wild plant difficult to grow outside of its native habitat
- lobelia— represents “arrogance” in the 19th-c. language of flowers
- marigold— represents “jealousy” or “uneasiness” or “despair” in the 19th-c. language of flowers
- marsh rosemary— a wild herb used to improve circulation and to relieve nervous headaches; also applied to insect stings and bites
- mayflower— any of several spring-blooming plants, such as the trailing arbutus, the hepatica, or various species of anemone
- mint— for flavor; mint tea relieves morning sickness during pregnancy
- mullein— an herb used for colds and coughs
- pennyroyal— an herb used for mosquito repellent, to improve digestion and relieve flatulence, for bronchial ailments, to purify water, and to promote expulsion of the placenta in childbirth
- portulaca— (also known as purslane) a brightly-colored, five-petal flower used in salads and as a tonic
- sage— an herb used to flavor meats; as a hot drink for coughs, colds, and constipation, as a tonic tea; symbolic connotation: wisdom
- simple— an old word for an herb
- snowberry— related to honeysuckle; with white berries
- southernwood— used to make beer; also used as an antiseptic and stimulant; said to cure baldness
- sweet-brier— a European rose with big, strong thorns and a single pink blossom; rose hips (the fruit) are a source of vitamin C and are used for jellies and sauces; stands for “poetry” in the 19th-c. language of flowers
- sweet-mary— sweet marjoram, an herb used for cooking; as a mouthwash and gargle for sore throat; for rheumatism; used as snuff to relieve headaches
- tansy— an herb with an aromatic odor and very bitter taste; used as a tonic; name comes from the Greek word for immortality; stands for “resistance” in the language of flowers
- thoroughwort— an herb used to induce sweating (for treatment of fever)
- thyme— an herb used for cooking; as an antiseptic rinse for cuts; to treat asthma; for clearing up skin spots and pimples; symbolic connotations include strength, happiness, remembrance, time, and virginity
- windflower— an anemone, a flower with no petals but brightly-colored sepals; in the 19th-c. language of flowers anemones represented sickness
- wormwood— an herb used medicinally and to make absinthe (an alcoholic liqueur); symbolizes gall and bitterness; stands for “absence” in the language of flowers
- yarrow— used as a diuretic and to treat fever, rheumatism, and flatulence; used to stimulate hair growth; made into a lotion to cleanse skin and to heal cuts and burns; chewed to relieve toothache