

IRELANDS HIDDEN MEDICINE

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An exploration of Irish
indigenous medicine from
legend and myth to the
present day

Rosari Kingston

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For Julia

CONTENTS

<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i>	xi
<i>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</i>	xiii
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	xv
<i>CHAPTER 1</i>	1
What is medicine?	1
The biomedical model	5
The indigenous model	11
Plant medicine	17
Physical manipulation	18
Charms, prayers, and rituals	19
<i>CHAPTER 2</i>	25
History of irish indigenous medicine	25
Legend and myth	25
Hospitals and physicians	26
Medicinal baths	26
Humour and expertise	27

Déin Chécht's jealousy	28
Music and chanting for healing	29
The earliest Irish physicians	32
The coming of christianity	33
More factual accounts	36
Legal tracts	37
Hindu-celtic connection	39
Diet and nursing care.	40
Medical manuscripts	41
Medical families.	45
Herbals through the centuries.	47
18th—20th centuries	58
National Folklore collection	59
<i>CHAPTER 3</i>	73
Change and decline	73
A changing worldview.	73
Famine: the great hunger	78
A national system of primary education	78
The Roman Catholic Church	80
Economic progress	81
Social hegemony	83
<i>CHAPTER 4</i>	87
Utilising Irish indigenous medicine today	87
Spring	89
Imbolc/St. Brigid	89
St Brigid's flower.	94
St Patrick's day.	95
Easter	96
Valuable food and plants in spring	99
Summer	102
Bealtaine/May 1st.	102
St John's eve, June 23rd	104
Valuable food and plants in summer	104
Autumn	107
Lughnasa	107
Reek Sunday	108
Puck fair	109
Valuable food and plants in autumn.	110

Harvesting marshmallow117
Winter117
Halloween117
Valuable food and plants in winter120
Christmas.125
January126
 <i>CHAPTER 5</i>	 129
Conclusion	129
 <i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>	 133
 <i>INDEX</i>	 147

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosarie Kingston practises as a medical herbalist in an integrative medical practice in West Cork, Ireland and lectures on the topic “Herbs and Healing in Irish Folklore” in the Department of Folklore and Ethnology, at University College, Cork.

Like other medical herbalists, her training involved the study of the biological sciences, biomedical diagnostic techniques, and the tradition and science of plants that may be used therapeutically. These seemingly opposite subjects were reconciled in an MSc thesis discussing the scientific foundation for the therapeutic use of *Crataegus monogyna* and a PhD dissertation exploring the rich vein of Irish vernacular medicine in the twenty-first century.

She considers this blending of science and tradition, and the integration of both where possible, to be the best way forward for modern healthcare as it will benefit both the health-care professional and the patient. Her work and involvement with the Irish College of Traditional and Integrative Medicine (ICTIM) in training healthcare professionals to achieve this integration in their practice is, therefore, of paramount importance to her, as it draws together the wisdom and knowledge of different medical traditions with biomedicine.

INTRODUCTION

Ireland's indigenous medicine is a diamond hidden in plain sight. Its beauty is present in our landscape, our festivals, our language, and yet we ignore it to the detriment of our health and wellbeing. The many thousands who climb Croagh Patrick on the last Sunday in July, or the many pilgrims who travel to any one of Ireland's numerous holy wells are aware that such excursions are part of their heritage, but very few see these activities as an integral part of a healing tradition. These journeys are not considered part of medicine, because biomedicine* is the dominant medical system of healthcare in the country and every other means of healing is deemed immaterial, even inconsequential.

The position of biomedicine is not questioned, even though it is a medical system born of a particular time, place, and culture, just as Irish indigenous medicine is. There are other renowned medical systems in the world, such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Chinese medicine, and these too are products of their culture and worldview. In chapter one therefore, I seek to tease out the theories and philosophy that underpin biomedicine to show how they differ, at their very core, to the belief system underlying Irish indigenous medicine. All aspects of

*Called biomedicine because it is based on the biological systems of the body.

biomedicine, be it pathology, diagnosis, or therapeutics, are based on the biological systems of a person, resulting in specialists of the cardiovascular system, respiratory system, and endocrine system, among others. The problem affecting a patient's health has to be clearly defined and described, with the subjective symptoms of the patient only relevant in so far as they allow the physician to correlate them to signs that may be seen and measured.

The philosophy of Descartes and Bacon, with their stress on the importance of mathematical certainty, is the foundation on which biomedicine is built and is the opposite to indigenous medicine, where the subjective experience and personal narrative of the patient is deemed all important. Indigenous medicine, no matter where it exists in the world, is characterised by the oral transmission of knowledge and the necessity for each person to be in harmony with himself, his society and environment, as well as the spirit world. An individual is seen as inseparable from their milieu and the therapeutic approach is designed to address the body, mind, spirit, and emotions within the social and environmental context.

The milieu of a person includes the legends and myths of their culture.^[1] These are significant because they tell of events that have become central to their sense of self and identity. It is while listening to such stories that a person can internalise and process the many messages they impart. The legends tell us of The Tuatha de Danann and their mythical god of healing called Déin Chécht, who had a son, Miach, and a daughter, Airmed, who were also healers. The legends tell us of the significance of psycho-somatic illness and the means used to address and cure it. Medicinal baths, cupping, surgery, as well as the use of sound give a glimpse of a therapeutic repertoire that was comprehensive and wide-ranging.

In Ireland, the coming of Christianity led to the indigenous belief system being syncretised with the new faith as well as a blossoming of literacy. The old gods dimmed and were replaced by Patrick and Colmcille, but the goddess Brigid remained and obtained her own feast day on February 1st. She was, and is, the guardian of the hearth of the home, whereas Mary, the mother of God, is relegated to the gables. The gables are external, but the hearth is where the fire of love, sustenance, and renewal resides. Brigid's association with fertility, as well as her role as the triune goddess of healing, poetry, and smithcraft, ensured her continued central presence in the daily lives of the people.

The healing modalities during these centuries centre on the miracles of the saints, the importance of relics and, as always in Ireland, pilgrim journeys to sacred spaces. The law tracts, *Bretha Crólige* and *Bretha Déin Chécht** dating from the eighth century, tell us about the compensation due in the event of injury and the laws relating to the maintenance of a sick person, whereas *The Annals*† record the various plagues and pestilences that ravaged the country at various times. There is not much detail about therapeutics from this period, but the detail of terms given regarding a health issue, such as piles for example, is impressive and suggests careful observation of change and pattern in an illness.

Ireland has a treasure trove of medical manuscripts and the compilation and translation of these was undertaken in the medical schools, which were organised and regulated by the hereditary medical families. These manuscripts are, mainly, adaptations or translations into Irish, of European Latin treatises. One of these translations and compilations, *An Irish Materia Medica*, was completed by Tadhg Ó Cuinn in 1415 and serves as a useful base point to discuss the origin of herb use today. It is all too easy to forget that knowledge has no borders and the Irish hereditary medical families were part of a broader intellectual network of professionals^[3] and students who travelled to Europe to keep up to date with contemporary medical knowledge.

Immigrants to Ireland from the 17th century had herbals in the English language available to them. Some of these were Culpeper's written in London in 1653, Threkeld's written in Dublin in 1725, and that of K'Eogh in Cork in 1736. By comparing herbals written in the 20th century with these older books it is possible to establish, to some extent, where the information regarding the current use of a herb originates. Instances of such provenance are illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Authors such as Lady Gregory and Wilde at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century give us an insight into the vernacular understanding of illness. We see, through their eyes, that illness could be caused by the "Sí," with the evil eye, the fairy dart and the changeling falling under this designation. The National Folklore Collections (NFC and NFCS) serve as a portal to the practice and opinion of Irish indigenous medicine in the 1930s. Again, the attributes of indigenous

* Also spelt as *Dianchecht*.

† The Annals of Ireland by the Four Masters, usually shortened to "The Annals."

medicine as it is understood in the global context are clearly evident in this magnificent collection.

Chapter 3 explores the possible causes of decline in the acceptance and practice of vernacular medicine. There were several factors in the 19th century that helped to erode a traditional way of life in many areas. One of these was the establishment of a national primary educational system where the medium of teaching was English. Further research will unravel the importance of “the grandmother factor” in this loss, and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh has already highlighted this potential research area in relation to the loss of the Irish language and the inter-generational discord this must have engendered.^[4] The potato famine of the 1840s, and the resulting increase in emigration, did nothing to lessen the destruction of the traditional way of life. Larkin^[5] has also stressed the significance of the rising power of the Roman Catholic church for the widespread adoption of Victorian mores, as this suited the ambitions of the rising middle class in the country. More significantly is a point, the historian, Kwasi Konadu^[6] makes about a colonised people, namely, that even on winning their independence they will only value what the coloniser valued, and associate anything demeaned or ignored by the coloniser as not worthy of development or preservation. Irish literature and music were valued, vernacular medicine was not.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I try to show how aspects of Irish indigenous medicine may be incorporated into a person’s life today. By following the seasons of the year, we are able to connect with the Irish medical tradition and include it in daily life. This can be achieved through rituals, pilgrimage, and visits to sacred spaces, all of which helps us to realise that we are immersed in a sacred and therapeutic landscape, if we take the time to integrate it into our lives.