

*The Scottish Society of the History of Medicine*

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Mrs. Monica Clough, also a Lecturer in the Department of History at Stirling University followed Dr. Chitnis, contributing:

A RESEARCH NOTE—MATERIAL OF MEDICAL  
INTEREST IN THE CROMARTIE PAPERS

The following note contains some lay reflections on the mass of medical material which may be found in collections of old family papers in Scotland. The Cromartie family papers, to which I have recently been given access, contain quite a lot of this sort of material. These papers were sorted into categories by William Fraser when he was working on the two-volume *History of the Earls of Cromartie*, published in 1876. He only published a fraction of the correspondence but left it all in remarkably good order. Only one category concerns us today, the rather random bundle bound together as *Poetry, Medical Prescriptions and Cookery Recipes*. The poetry I can judge—it is at best 'minor' and 'occasional' verse; the cookery section has not yet been looked at.

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The medical material presents me with many difficulties. Clearly it falls into two sections, first, the general family remedies, preserved for occasional use; and a second, more interesting section where prescriptions can be correlated with other correspondence to build up some sort of case history. This requires tracing relevant letters through other piles of correspondence and takes considerable time.

Of the first, general category, there is plenty that is of interest, though it is misleading—manuscript copies in a late seventeenth-century hand often appear to date from much earlier and must have been handed down, or copied from another family: headings such as *Several of my lord Ennerdaleis receipts* or *The Countess of Middleton's Plague Water* are of this order. Hardly any of them mention the ailments for which they were used. For what, for example, was Snail Water a specific? One is more exact in that it is endorsed on the back in a later hand *Dyot Drink pro Hymorrhoids* [sic]. Undated, it begins mildly and accurately enough with 'Sasaparoll four ounces; red, whit and yallow sanders [cinders] of each one ounce, carander, swet fennoll and Anna seeds of each one ounce . . .' and various other simples, ending alarmingly with 'Crom of Tartar one ounce and antomondy the quantity forgot. . .'. There is direction for *Aurum potable* in French, and an odd document in Scots and Latin, endorsed 'Alexane Murdisone Edinburh August 1 1612'—for *Aurum ex plumbo*. I fear it did not work! One *For poysons by fumes of mercury for the Palsye* possibly throws a light on recognition of the dangers of over-dosage with mercury; it is a herbal recipe and undated. There is a long letter shrouded in decent Latin obscurity, and a particularly difficult script, of *Advyses for my Lord Tarbett's son* which I have not yet tackled; and a good deal else besides, on which I hope to work with the present Countess of Cromartie, who is medically qualified herself. Some of the most interesting are also the earliest, including some with overtones of sympathetic or imitative medicine, even of alchemy. There is a beautifully written document listing a *Remedy for the bite of a mad Dogge*, together with one for *Staunching of Blood*, and this one for Toothache:

Write vpon a trencoir of wood  
H A Ab Hur Hurst Gebal then the parteis name  
Efter Sraipa away wt. a knyff all the voyells then all the rest.

A number of others I simply cannot read, either because of physicians' agelessly notorious handwriting, or because of the use of dog-Latin or Greek, and of pharmacological symbols. There are other, more legible, from *Gaskin's Powder*—whose chief ingredients are powdered pearls, coral, ambergris and French brandy-wine—said to be good for every complaint, and well it might be, to *Syrup of Steel*—two ounces of steel filings to a quart of good white wine. This brings me to the second section, prescriptions for known patients.

So far, time has only permitted a very cursory study of one particular patient. She was Ann Sinclair, Lady Tarbat, who died in 1699, apparently at Castle Leod. Some of the prescriptions in the bundle can be related to her terminal illness, and of even greater interest are the letters from several medical practitioners who were consulted during it. These letters are in quite another bundle of general correspondence, preserved in chronological order but not by subject.

Ann, Lady Tarbat, was married in 1654. She reared eight children and managed the

Cromartie estates with a degree of practical competence which comes out clearly in a few surviving letters written to her husband, a statesman often in Edinburgh or London. She fell ill in her late sixties, in the summer of 1699, and many letters survive. Fraser in his *History* prints a few of them, from what was clearly the fashionable Edinburgh partnership of Drs. Archibald Pitcairne and Archibald Stevenson. Dr. Stevenson, on 6 July 1699, excuses the delay in replying to one letter because he 'had been kept at Dunebrisse many days attending My Lord Drumcairn's daughter who died of a fever the 26th day after she was brought to bed of a verie lively sonne.' He however takes a sanguine view of Lady Tarbat: 'If there be nothing else in her present colicks than was before, I am verie hopeful will do well', and he prescribes the 'same pills'. A fortnight later Dr. Stevenson wrote from Edinburgh that he and Dr. Pitcairne had been called 'Be your sonne Mr. James to consult anent my lady's present state of health in the light of your lordship's letter and the information of some physicians with yow . . . Wee did conclude that her ladyship's trouble is plainlie hysteric' and adds—only partly comfortingly—that 'I have seen my lady in many colicks and hysteric passions worse, according to information.' Evidently the trouble is long-standing. He then prescribes no strong purging, and some of 'King Charles his famous Drops which are of the volatile salt and spirit of raw silk', and pills against vapours, and instructions to drink 'a posset made of sack and double-sweet milk of a cow.' Then the partner, Dr. Pitcairne takes a hand, writing a month later: 'Since Dr. Stevenson is out of town (with my lord Hume, and merry too I hope for no body is very sick there . . .)'; he takes a stronger line, prescribing Peruvian Bark to help her stomach and prevent useless sweatings, and a poultice for 'the sore pairts'—'a pledget of flax prettie thick', covered with white of egg, 'soaked in Aqua vite or brandie', with 2 drams camphire and 1 dram spirits of hartshorn, applied cold 4 or 5 times in twenty-four hours. Then he falls back on a homelier prescription. 'My Lord, if the pain continue in one place make a pulstess of cow's dung, milk and camomil flowers and apply, or cause bake a bannock . . . let it be pease or bean meal, and Thiss apply warm to the places.' He does not advise bleeding, and in a postscript, as if he thought the poultices were too homely, he sends two 'rols of old Lady Colston's plaister . . . the *Emplasdrum de minio cum sapone*.'

Two weeks later he again writes rather tersely, evidently in reply to another anxious letter from Lord Tarbat: 'There needs no more be said in answer to it than that it is fit to give Steel (It did well in the Lord President's case)', and he says he sends the prescription. Back to the *Collection of Poetry and Prescriptions*, and there it is, Syrup of Steel, to which reference has already been made. So far most of the letters quoted are printed, but further research amongst the unprinted ones reveals several more letters in this case, far too detailed to give here. One contained what might be expected. On 8 August, another Doctor Pattison writes, possibly from Inverness, 'I have sent for my lady a great many of the anti-hysteric pills (within which is a verie small quantitie of opium well prepared). The Kings Drops may be left off seeing they nauseate. The mixture ordered by your physicians there is proper enough against Vapours and may be taken by spoonfuls at any tyme her Ladyship is infected with a fit.' Now, who were these local physicians? Were they all rivals? A further search reveals a Dr. Forbes writing on 10 August from somewhere illegible in the north, possibly Portmahomack, on the Cromartie Estates, where he had been called because of a serious outbreak of

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'Feavers'. He writes a long and sensible letter, from which we gather that he was actually familiar with the patient's present situation, and that she had persistent abdominal pains, violent sweatings, and great weakness. Dr. Forbes goes on to speak slightly about yet another doctor, Dr. Simpson, who, it seems, was also treating her, for he writes, 'Try first his pills conforming to his own directions. The pain in stomach would appear to be the effects of the Lemon Juice, for acids doe not agree with my Lady and seldom misse to create some pain.' When she is less weak, Dr. Forbes hopes to attempt some prophylaxis with Peruvian Bark, and adds the very modern advice: 'Let my lady dayly try to gett up altho not for a long tyme. . . see that they that look to her be gentle and easy.' Some undated prescriptions of Dr. Forbes, made out to Pattersone, Chirurgen Apothecary of Inverness, exist, but these, it seems, refer to his attendance on the second countess, fifteen years later, and require further elucidation. At any rate, by September 1699, Lord Tarbat was taking the varied advice of at least five medical men, and word had got around the neighbours. Col. Menzies wrote from Inverness on 8 August inquiring for news by express 'how my lady is, which I long exceedingly for, not only upon her but your own account. I am confident (if my friendship douth not blindfold my regard) this visitation will contribute verie much not only to her temporal but lykewise to her eternal happiness.' A minister with an unreadable signature was writing with even greater piety that he blessed the Lord for the test he had put her Ladyship to, adding how beloved she was by 'the poore'. Piety and prescriptions were unavailing. The next letter in chronological sequence is from the factor, John MacLeod, written on 9 October to Provost Duff of Inverness, and it is a thought unfeeling, even in a letter between men of affairs: 'I knowed yesternight from Lord Tarbet shewing yt. my lady's dead, wha departed yesterday about twa o'clock in the morning and withall I am about to send to you for eight bolls of malt.' Another business letter four days later concerns the expenditure of twenty pounds Scots for some of 'the necessities for my Lady Tarbet's burriall'.

This is all that has been extracted about this case, but it is interesting to learn that the distraught husband, five months later and in his seventy-first year, was signing a letter to a beautiful widow: 'Yours or else little better than nothing—T.'. He remarried shortly afterwards.

The final contribution to this meeting was a paper by Dr. K. John McCracken, another member of the Department of History at Stirling University, who spoke on:

SCOTTISH MEDICAL MISSIONARIES IN  
CENTRAL AFRICA

It is one of the oddities of historical scholarship that perhaps the most important expatriate group in tropical Africa in the late nineteenth century has been largely ignored by modern historians. Apart from David Livingstone, the centenary of whose death we commemorate next year, Scottish medical missionaries are obscure and anonymous figures to students of Scottish, as well as of African, history. Yet whereas Livingstone's importance relates essentially to the impact of his personality in Britain, his successors were directly responsible for far-reaching changes in Africa itself.

Livingstone, in fact, was by no means a typical medical missionary. His training. in