

# Ex Libris: Early Herbals

By John R. Kenyon

**I**N THE RECENTLY published catalogue of the pre-1701 books in the Museum's Library (see p.00), a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century herbals are listed. Among them there are examples of the works of three men who have been described as the 'German fathers of botany', namely Hieronymous Bock (1498-1554), Otto Brunfels (1489-1534) and Leonhard Fuchs (1501-66).

Although the printed herbals were similar to their earlier, medieval counterparts in that they listed plants, providing details of what illness each one could cure, what made the work of these three men stand out in particular is that many of the descriptions and illustrations of the flowers in their books were, on the whole, based on first-hand evidence in the field, and not copied from other writers. In fact Bock was forced to provide detailed and accurate descriptions in the original German edition of his herbal (1539) as it was unillustrated, but in 1546 an illustrated edition appeared, and this was followed in 1552 by a translation in Latin (*De Stirpium*) of the third German edition of 1551.

It is the 1552 volume that is in the Library. Although the opening pages are missing, the main body of the text is complete, with its hand-coloured illustrations. At some date, but in an early hand, a previous owner has added the English names against each plant illustrated. Most of the woodcuts simply show the plants themselves, but occasionally birds and man are depicted, such as the rather crude depiction of the effects on some unfortunate of eating a fig!

The example of the work of Otto Brunfels in the Library is the second volume of *Herbarum Vivae Eicones* (1531). The title was an apt choice for it translates as 'living picture of plants'; the author was one of the first to turn to nature itself as the source of his illustrations for a book which was as much a flora as a herbal, and one that was based on plants to be found in the Strasbourg area. In the introduction to the work the author wrote that his desire had been to produce 'new and lifelike illustrations'. However, unlike those that followed him, Brunfels did not describe the plants from his own observations, but rather repeated what had been written in other herbals.

The Library possesses two of the books compiled by Fuchs, namely *De Historia Stirpium* (1542) and *Plantarum*



● Part of an early German herbal annotated in Welsh and English, once in the possession of Morris Owen

*Effigies* (1549). The author had a distinguished career as the professor of medicine at the University of Tübingen, but he is best remembered for the 1542 herbal. Although only some of the descriptions of the plants are actually Fuchs's own, the majority being taken from other books, it is the quality of the illustrations that makes this herbal one of the great books of the sixteenth century. The reason that the woodcuts are so accurate is that Fuchs took it upon himself to supervise the preparation of the illustrations, and the portraits of the three men who prepared the figures were included in the herbal, although, unfortunately, the Museum's copy lacks these pages. The *Plantarum Effigies* is a pocket-sized version of the 1542 volume, no doubt designed to be used in the field; it has very little text, apart from an index to the plants depicted, and with each woodcut the name of the plant is given in three or more languages, usually five (Greek, Latin, French, Italian and German).

The above books are all in the Willoughby Gardner Collection, which also includes other great herbals of the

same period, notably the works of Rembert Dodoens (1516-85) and John Gerard (1545-1612). Dodoens' herbal was published in Flemish in 1554, and it was not long before a French version appeared. It was the latter that Henry Lyte translated into English, the first edition of 1578 being in the Library, and it included new material which Dodoens himself had sent to Lyte for incorporation in the new edition.

One of the most famous herbals written in English is Gerard's *The Herbal* (1597). Head gardener to many properties in and around the London area, Gerard was also responsible for the gardens of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Elizabeth I's Secretary of State and Lord Treasurer, and it was to Cecil that Gerard dedicated his great work. The Gardner Library has a copy of the 1633 edition, and there is also a second copy of this in the Library collections, along with the original work itself. Much of the text was based on the writings of such men as Dodoens, and many of the illustrations were taken from existing woodcuts obtained from the Continent. Nevertheless, Gerard's *Herbal* is a delight to peruse, and he did include over 180 plants which had not been listed in earlier English herbals such as William Turner's *A New Herbal* (1551-68).

Other herbals in the Library collections include an incomplete German example dating to the first half of the sixteenth century. It was once in the possession of a Morris Owen of Caernarfonshire who added in ink, around 1767, the names of the various plants in Welsh; the English equivalents are also given in most cases. In some instances the Welsh locations are given for some of these plants, for example Chirk Castle and Machynlleth. This book, and the other herbals, remain of great interest to this day, and are examined in particular by those who study the history of botany and pharmacy, as well as by students of the history of the printed book.



● The cowslip as depicted in Fuchs's *De Historia Stirpium*