**The story of Culpepper – the bad-boy of 17th Century Medicine**

Nicholas Culpeper was born and died in a century when it was dangerous for anyone but licensed physicians to possess and share medical knowledge. It is to him, however, that we owe much of our understanding of traditional herbal medicine. If it had not been for his systematic documentation and preservation of this knowledge, and his insistence that it be put into the people’s hands in a form that they could use, the information would almost certainly have been lost.

Culpeper was born in 1616 a.d. in Surrey, England. The Culpepers were an aristocratic, land-owning family whose history went back to the time of King John (who reigned from 1199 to 1216 a.d.). He was a brilliant student but also headstrong and wilful. By 18 he had spent all his father’s small fortune and fallen passionately in love with a rich young woman. The pair planned a clandestine marriage, but her coach was struck by lightning on the way to the wedding and the bride was killed.

At 19 he went to work for an apothecary and established in business in Bishopsgate under the license of an apothecary named Leadbetter and began a serious study of herbal medicines.

Many apothecaries preparedtheir own traditional plant medicines from herbs sold on the streets of London rather than using the expensive exotic herbs of the official London Pharmacopoeia. This angered the Royal College, of course, and the group began to crack down on the renegades. In 1642, they imprisoned Culpeper and had him tried for witchcraft, an offense that carried the death penalty. He was acquitted, however, and released.

By the time of his trial, Culpeper was a married man. His bride, whom he wed in 1640, was a fifteen-year-old girl named Alice Field. But the country was in the midst of a civil war, and Culpeper—who supported the radical views of those who wanted to increase the power of Parliament and give more power to the people—went off to fight against the King, where he received a chest wound.

After the war, Culpeper used his wife’s dowry to set up an apothecary shop on Red Lion Street, Spitalfields. There, he ministered to the poor, treating them with herbal medications, and continued to collect and record as much as he could about the uses of medicinal plants native to England. He developed a reputation for his compassionate treatment and his philanthropy, and continued his criticisms against the Royal College for their undemocratic control of medicine.

Culpeper always had difficulty in holding his tongue, and in 1649 his plain-speaking got him into even deeper trouble. Motivated by a desire to expose the secret practices of the exclusive guild of physicians and make their medicines available to people who were unable to pay their fees, he enraged the medical establishment by translating the Latin London Pharmacopoeia into English and publishing it as The London Dispensatory.

In 1652, he brought out his most famous work, The English Physitian: or *an astrologo-physical discourse of the vulgar herbs of this nation*, an easy-to-use handbook designed to teach ordinary people how to find and use herbal medicines. It was written in an easy-to-read, unembellished style, lightened by humour. And it sold for a mere three pence, so that even the poor could have a copy.

Thirty-eight-year-old Culpeper died (apparently of tuberculosis) in 1654. But his wife Alice (with whom he had shared his knowledge) edited and published his unfinished manuscripts and continued to publish all of his books. Now many of Culpeper’s treatments are common practice.