

redactors of Caraka such as Valiathan would do well to avoid making such equations whenever possible (but this is admittedly hard to avoid). Valiathan's decision to provide digests for the lengthier chapters works especially well in his treatments of the *Kalpa* and *Siddhi-sthānas* (the sections on "pharmacology" and "cures" respectively), where literally hundreds of formulas for emetics and purgatives are listed.

The legacy of Caraka will prove useful as a reference book, and I can imagine assigning sections of it for use in general introductory courses on South Asian cultures and civilizations as well as in more specialized courses on medical anthropology and the history of medicine. Valiathan concludes his book with a list of botanical terms and an excellent glossary. Reading the entire book will help to attune the reader's own intuitions and expectations about how the systems of *āyurveda* work.

Martha Ann Selby,

Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study
Harvard University

David E Allen and Gabrielle Hatfield,
Medicinal plants in folk tradition: an ethnobotany of Britain and Ireland, Portland, OR, and Cambridge, Timber Press, 2004, pp. 431, illus., £22.50 (hardback 0-88192-638-8).

Anyone wanting to know the folkloric uses of a British plant would probably consult one of the standard herbals: John Gerard's *Herball or Generall historie of plantes* (1597), John Parkinson's *Theatrum botanicum* (1640), Nicholas Culpeper's *Complete herbal and English physician enlarged* (1681), William Salmon's *Botanologia: the English herbal* (1710), Elizabeth Blackwell's *Curious herbal* (1737), William Withering's *Botanical arrangement of British plants* (1787–92), or Mrs M Grieve's *Modern herbal* (1931), my favourite. But they might be misled, for those herbalists generally derived their information from Greek and Latin herbals, such as those of Dioscorides and Apuleius Platonius, ignoring information relevant to the British Isles; about a half of the plants included by

Gerard, for example, are not native to Britain.

For the last seventeen years David Allen has been following a different path altogether, seeking out information about the uses of herbs in Britain and Ireland from purely local sources. And at last, with the help of Gabrielle Hatfield, he has produced the work of scholarship that his many years of labour promised.

The results confirm two views that I have long held: that folkloric medicinal uses of herbs do not reflect their true pharmacological properties, except occasionally by chance, and that the more indications a plant is said to have the less likely it is that any of them is actually beneficial. This does not bode well for ethnopharmacologists interested in finding new therapeutic uses for plants. For example, we find here ten remedies for gout, including *Bryonia dioica* (white bryony), *Sambucus nigra* (elder), *Tanacetum vulgare* (tansy), and *Verbena officinalis* (vervain), none of which is efficacious, to my knowledge. But *Colchicum autumnale*, the source of colchicine, is listed for measles, jaundice, and the procurement of abortion, not gout. Herbs used to treat cancers include *Chelidonium majus* (greater celandine), *Conium maculatum* (hemlock), *Rumex acetosa* (sorrel), and *Taraxacum officinale* (dandelion), but not *Vinca major*, which contains powerful anti-cancer drugs. *Vinca* is listed, however, as being useful for cuts and bruises, nosebleeds and toothache, hysteria and nightmares, colic and cramp. Don't try it at home, is my advice.

Now a pharmacologist, disappointed with the effects of these remedies, might not be tempted to investigate the list of nearly thirty plants supposedly useful for asthma, including *Allium ursinum* (ramson), *Inula helenium* (elecampane), and *Verbascum thapsus* (great mullein). But if so he would miss a gem. For the list includes *Datura stramonium* (thorn apple), the source of an anticholinergic drug that is beneficial in asthma. The remedies with real effects often stand out in having only one major recognized use. Consider *Claviceps purpurea* (ergot), the rye-infecting fungus that causes smooth muscle contraction. It has only one credited action, a tonic effect on the uterus,

used, as its twentieth-century counterparts were, to procure abortions, to induce or speed the progress of labour, and to stop postpartum bleeding.

Occasionally, however, a real action is hidden among a gallimaufry of distracting indications. Dandelion, for example, or pissabed, is a diuretic, but its other uses, mostly in Ireland, are among the most diverse in the book, including coughs and colds, jaundice, stomach upsets, rheumatism, cuts and sprains, broken bones, thrush, headaches, diabetes, anaemia, and in Tipperary “every disease”.

The many alternative common names of these plants have been omitted, although to be fair this spares us some inordinately long lists. More important is the omission of maps showing how the uses of the plants vary from region to region, one of the major fascinations of this work. Perhaps there is another volume to come—an atlas of British and Irish herbs.

Jeff Aronson,
University of Oxford

James H Mills, *Cannabis Britannica: empire, trade, and prohibition 1800–1928*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. xii, 239, £25.00 (hardback 0-19-924938-5).

Myths and conspiracies have littered cannabis’s past and a good history of the plant has long been needed. Focusing on the British empire’s relationship with cannabis, this account stretches from 1800 to 1928, tantalizingly leaving us to await the second volume for the years up to the present.

Writings on the cannabis plant generally consider its medicinal and euphoriant properties, but Mills examines all aspects, including its use as a source of fibre for rope dating back to at least the sixteenth century. We learn that, unlike opium, cannabis was not widely consumed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britons. From the 1700s British medical publications showed an awareness of the plant’s properties as a medicine and intoxicant but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that William Brooke O’ Shaughnessy, a pioneer of

telegraph technology in India, wrote the definitive account of cannabis based in part on his human and animal experiments. Meanwhile in India cannabis preparations were popular as tonics, medicines and for recreation.

This book contains a great deal of interesting information, such as the description of how cannabis cultivation fitted into a nineteenth-century Indian village’s ecological, social and economic systems. A range of crops were grown but it was the hemp harvest that paid the land’s rent and even influenced the timing of weddings and festivals. Before the hemp was trampled to make hashish, an 1889 commentator recorded that “the persons to be so employed salute the ganja before placing their feet on it”. Much original material is quoted, which is entertaining to read, but at times the path of argument can be difficult to discern amid the dense forest of fact and anecdote.

Mills is rather dismissive of other works on cannabis and their authors, on the grounds that they have failed to consider the history of its regulation, whether or not that was part of their brief or might be of interest to their readership. This cannabis history is intended not only for its own value but because “It may be directly relevant to contemporary debates about laws and policies relating to cannabis in Britain today.” Today’s politicians, Mills contends, defend the UK cannabis laws on the assumption that the judgements of their predecessors “were based on solid ground” and have since been reinforced by reference back to an unknown past. If the reality of this past were known, he suggests, the case for the current laws would be weakened. While such research can be valuable in informing current debates, the claims that this book makes for its powers are exaggerated and some opportunities for comparisons with the present are missed.

The author seems to imply that had cannabis not been controlled in the 1920s, it could still be legal today, but the intervening years have seen many psychoactive substances, including some with therapeutic pedigrees, come under even stricter controls. Are today’s politicians defending cannabis prohibition because they think their predecessors knew best