

Cunning-Folk in the Medical Market-Place during the Nineteenth Century

OWEN DAVIES*

Over the last twenty years a considerable amount of valuable research has uncovered the activities of a variety of unorthodox medical practitioners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Quack doctors, spiritual healers, medical botanists, and bone-setters have all been subjected to detailed analysis.¹ In contrast, the practitioners of folk-magical healing have been largely overlooked.² This neglect of a significant sector of the nineteenth-century medical market-place is probably due to the nature of the relevant source material. Most of the information we have about cunning-folk derives from ethnographic sources and newspaper reports. The considerable body of folkloric material on cunning-folk has been particularly overlooked because of historians' general disregard for the anecdotal, and unsystematic way in which much of this information was gathered. However, when folkloric sources are examined in conjunction with the concrete data supplied in newspaper reports of the prosecution of cunning-folk, new light is cast on the popular experience of healing during the nineteenth century.³ The aim of the following discussion, therefore, is to introduce cunning-folk to the debate over medical provision in nineteenth-century society, and to examine their relationship with other groups of medical providers in terms of practice and public perception.

* Dr Owen Davies, Lusty Hill Farm, Bruton, Somerset BA10 0BS.

¹ See, for example, W F Bynum and Roy Porter (eds), *Medical fringe & medical orthodoxy 1750–1850*, London, Croom Helm, 1987; Roy Porter, 'The language of quackery in England, 1660–1800', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *The social history of language*, Cambridge University Press, 1987; Roy Porter, *Health for sale: quackery in England 1650–1850*, Manchester University Press, 1989; Roger Cooter (ed.), *Studies in the history of alternative medicine*, Basingstoke, Macmillan in association with St Antony's College, Oxford, 1988; Logie Barrow, *Independent spirits*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

² For brief considerations of the continued role of magical healing see Roy Porter, 'Medicine and the decline of magic', *Strawberry Fayre*, Autumn, 1986: 88–94. A similar discussion can also be found in his 'The people's health in Georgian England', in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular culture in England, c. 1500–1850*, London, Macmillan, 1995, pp. 124–43;

F B Smith, *The people's health 1830–1910* (paperback edition with corrections), London, 1990, pp. 333–8; Neil C Hultin, 'Medicine and magic in the eighteenth century: the diaries of James Woodforde', *J. Hist. Med. Allied Sci.*, 1975, 30: 349–66; Glyn Penrhyn Jones, 'Folk medicine in eighteenth-century Wales', *Folk Life*, 1969, 7: 60–75. See also Matthew Ramsey, *Professional and popular medicine in France, 1770–1830*, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Willem de Blécourt, 'Four centuries of Friesan witch doctors', in Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff (eds), *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the fourteenth to the twentieth century*, Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1991, pp. 157–67; Hans de Waardt, 'From cunning man to natural healer', in Hans Binneveld and Rudolf Dekker (eds), *Curing and insuring*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1993, pp. 33–43.

³ For further discussion see Owen Davies, 'Newspapers and the popular belief in witchcraft and magic in the modern period', *J. Br. Stud.*, 1998, 37: 139–166.

Magical Healers and Witchcraft

After the *laissez-faire* commercialism of the eighteenth century, the next sixty years saw the increasing professionalization of medicine through the restrictive regulation of the medical market. First came the Apothecaries Act of 1815, followed by the Medical Act of 1858. With these pieces of legislation in place, the divide between orthodox and unorthodox medicine was clearly delineated: those officially trained and licensed practitioners on the medical register were the legitimate representatives of medicine, and all others were irregulars and open to prosecution if they misrepresented themselves. Despite such legal restrictions, however, a diverse and popular mix of unorthodox healers continued to flourish in what was now officially, if not popularly, perceived to be a medical “black market”. A significant section of that market was made up of magical healers amongst whom cunning-folk were, perhaps, the most important.

Cunning-folk by no means held a monopoly on magical healing. Another important group of magical healers were charmers who cured specific ailments and injuries such as toothache, bleeding, thorn pricks, ague, warts, and shingles. Unlike cunning-folk, though, charmers did not diagnose, did not deal with cases of witchcraft, and by tradition did not accept cash payments or even thanks.⁴ There were also other magical healers, such as toad doctors,⁵ who charged for their services, and who usually specialized in specific ailments. Cunning-folk were quite different from these other practitioners, however, in that healing was only one aspect of their magical activities. They offered a wide range of other services including fortune-telling, astrology, the detection of lost property, and the procuring of love. From a medical point of view, their most important activity was the prevention, identification, and curing of witchcraft.

The belief in witchcraft has often been seen as one of the victims of the so-called “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century. With the passing of the 1736 Witchcraft Act, for many contemporaries the subject of witchcraft was consigned to the annals of the past. It was strongly believed that advances in science and medicine, and the dissemination of “rational” knowledge through the medium of newspapers, were effectively dispelling such “ignorant” beliefs. However, amongst the populace at large, and also certain sections of the educated classes, particularly religious groups such as the Methodists, witchcraft remained a reality long after 1736.⁶ The ethnographic sources make it clear that a large proportion of the population continued to consider witches a danger to their health, and that of their livestock, right into the early twentieth century.⁷ W L L Davies, for example,

⁴ For a discussion on charmers and charming see Owen Davies, ‘Charmers and charming in England and Wales from the eighteenth to the twentieth century’, *Folklore*, 1998, **109**: 41–52; *idem*, ‘Healing charms in use in England and Wales 1700–1950’, *Folklore*, 1996, **107**: 19–33.

⁵ John Symonds Udal, *Dorsetshire folk-lore*, Hertford, Stephen Austin, 1922, pp. 215–16.

⁶ See Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its transformations 1650–1750*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997; James Sharpe, *Instruments of darkness: witchcraft in England 1550–1750*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1996; Owen Davies, ‘Methodism, the clergy, and the popular belief in witchcraft and

magic’, *History*, 1997, **82**: 252–65; Henry D Rack, ‘Doctors, demons and early Methodist healing’, in W J Sheils (ed.), *The church and healing*, Oxford, Blackwells, 1982, pp. 137–52; Michael Macdonald, ‘Religion, social change and psychological healing in England 1600–1800’, in *ibid.*, pp. 101–27.

⁷ See, for example, John Glyde, *The Norfolk garland*, London, Jarrold and Sons, 1872; Charlotte Burne, *Shropshire folk-lore*, London, Trübner, 1883; J C Atkinson, *Forty years in a moorland parish*, London, Macmillan, 1891; Jonathan Caredig Davies, *Folk-lore of west and mid-Wales*, Aberystwyth, Welsh Gazette, 1911; Udal, *op. cit.*, note 5 above.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

a general practitioner from the Welsh border, writing in the late 1930s, observed that “until very lately the belief in witches and witchcraft existed pretty generally”.⁸

During the nineteenth century, the problem facing all those who considered themselves ill through bewitchment was who to turn to for help. The orthodox medical profession had long ago rejected witchcraft etiologies, the Anglican Church no longer condoned praying for the bewitched, and since 1736 there was no longer any avenue of judicial succour. Private counter-measures could be employed, but the only real authoritative sources of advice were cunning-folk. So long as people continued to believe themselves bewitched, therefore, cunning-folk would continue to flourish.

Cunning-Folk and Quacks

To help explain why cunning-folk attracted so little debate amongst the nineteenth-century medical establishment—and consequently amongst medical historians—it is necessary to examine the reasons why other unorthodox practitioners generated so much attention. As Irvine Loudon has observed, vociferous attacks against “quackery” subsided during the period 1740–90, only to re-ignite during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹ The renewed attacks were primarily directed against dispensing druggists, but the whole question of irregular medical practice was brought out into the open. One of the reasons why the medical profession became so incensed about dispensing druggists was that although a large portion of the latter’s customers were from the poor, they also appealed to the “middling sorts”, such as tradesmen and professional people. It was from these social groups that general practitioners chiefly made their living, and so druggists and other dispensers presented unwelcome competition.¹⁰ Cunning-folk also attracted clients from these social groups, though not to the same extent, and not necessarily for medical treatment. However, cunning-folk were not so visible to the medical profession as chemists and druggists. Although some cunning-folk were high-street herbalists, many had secondary occupations—usually as artisans or tradesmen—unconnected with the medical professions. As a group, therefore, they were a far less conspicuous target. That is not to say they escaped authoritarian opprobrium altogether. The *Lancet*, for example, occasionally reprinted newspaper accounts of the prosecution of cunning-folk in order to highlight the problem of unqualified healers.¹¹ Furthermore, some legal and religious representatives identified them as a group, and condemned them for promoting “superstitious credulity”, but there was never any organized campaign of suppression.

When their medical activities were brought to the attention of the medical establishment or journalists, they were sometimes branded as “quacks”. This immediately confronts the medical historian with interpretational questions concerning the labelling of unorthodox medical practitioners. Whilst a journalist might consider a cunning-person a quack, the

⁸ W LL Davies, ‘The conjuror in Montgomeryshire’, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 1937–40, 45–46: 158–70, p. 168.

⁹ Irvine Loudon, “The vile race of quacks with which this country is infested”, in Bynum and Porter (eds), *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 108.

¹⁰ Hilary Marland, ‘The medical activities of mid-

nineteenth-century chemists and druggists, with special reference to Wakefield and Huddersfield’, *Med. Hist.*, 1987, 31: 415–39; *idem*, *Medicine and society in Wakefield and Huddersfield, 1780–1870*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

¹¹ See, for example, *Lancet*, 26 May 1849, i: 572; *ibid.*, 16 April 1864, i: 444.

cunning-person certainly would not, and I would suggest his or her clients would not either. Irvine Loudon has underlined the key problem of differentiating into neat historical categories all those practitioners who were not, at one end of the medical spectrum, qualified physicians, and at the other, patently quack-doctors.¹² The definition of “quack” and the validity of its application to irregular practitioners have generated some debate as to its utility. Jonathan Barry, for example, poses the question: “If we restrict the term ‘quacks’ to those who exploited without reservation the possibilities of press publicity, then we will still have to continue the elusive, if heuristically fruitful, hunt for a term to describe the majority of ‘irregular practitioners’”.¹³ Mary Fissell rejects the use of the term altogether in her discussion of eighteenth-century medical practice in Bristol.¹⁴ She is unhappy with the distinction made between “regular” doctors, and the “quacks” who had no formal training; the designation reiterating, as it does, early nineteenth-century attempts at denigrating mid-eighteenth-century medical practice. Instead, Fissell prefers to employ such terms as “full-time”, “occasional”, “apprentice-trained”. Her decision is understandable, the questions of imposture and impropriety which occur to us are not necessarily relevant in the context of patients’ perceptions in the past. However, such vague terms as “irregular” and “occasional” do not accurately reflect the diversity and distinctiveness of all those who provided some form of medical service. Cunning-folk were quite different from charmers, for example, and both groups operated within a different medical context to trained doctors and the vendors of patent medicines. These magical-healers provide a third dimension to what has previously been a rather two dimensional debate. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, “quack” will be used to designate those medical practitioners who exploited press publicity and vocal proclamation, and made bogus claims concerning their scientific credentials and patronage, to vaunt their curative methods.

Further confusion over labelling also surrounds the use of “doctor”. While “quack” was a derogatory term for medical practitioners, the title of “doctor” implied social respectability and popular esteem, which is why both quacks and cunning-folk sometimes adopted it. However, even a century ago, a “visit to the doctor” might not have had the same connotations as it does now. In the popular mind being a good doctor depended not only on the breadth of learning, but also on innate ability. Thus it was a prevalent belief that seventh sons were born doctors. Elworthy reported that in Somerset “The Doctor” was the recognized name for a seventh son, and that it was commonly held that he should be trained for one as a matter of course. In Craven, Yorkshire, it was thought that if a woman had seven sons in succession the last could not fail to be successful as a doctor. An old tailor at Almeley, Herefordshire, was heard to say of a seventh son: “What a pity his father couldn’t make him a doctor, when even now he can charm without any trouble!”¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, that some cunning-folk were anxious to advertise

¹² Irvine Loudon, ‘The nature of provincial medical practice in eighteenth-century England’, *Med. Hist.*, 1985, 29: 1–33.

¹³ Jonathan Barry, ‘Publicity and the public good: presenting medicine in eighteenth-century Bristol’, in Bynum and Porter (eds), *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 37.

¹⁴ Mary Fissell, *Patients, power, and the poor in*

eighteenth-century Bristol, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 63.

¹⁵ Frederick Elworthy, *The evil eye*, London, 1895, p. 407; W Harbutt Dawson, *History of Skipton*, London, Simpkin, Marshall, 1882, p. 390; E M Leather, *Folk-lore of Herefordshire*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1912, p. 70.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

their seventh son status. When, in June 1876, two representatives of the Plympton Board of Guardians visited a Mrs Cox, a herbalist and wise-woman of Plymouth, to question her concerning a charge of a sovereign she had made for curing a pauper woman, Cox readily stated her estimable credentials. She said she

was a very clever person, and knew more than most people; and in order to show conclusively that this was the case, and get rid of any scepticism there might have been on the part of Mr. Bewes and Mr. Pearse, she stated, as an explanatory fact, that she was the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter.¹⁶

What these problems of definition highlight is that historians must always be aware of who was labelling whom, and in what terms. Thus a person we identify as a cunning-man might call himself a doctor, a qualified doctor call him a quack, and his clients call him a cunning-man. Why, then, should a historian follow the labelling of his clients? It is a question of separating practice from pretence and bias. The cunning-man calls himself a doctor to appear respectable to the general populace—respectable in the sense of either being formally trained, or of possessing the innate healing qualities of a seventh son. He may in fact possess neither attribute. A qualified doctor condemns him as a quack because he represents unqualified competition. However, clients call him a cunning-man, or some such other title indicating the possession of supernatural powers, like wise-man, conjuror or wizard, for the range and form of what he actually practises, and it is on this basis that we can begin to delineate between the various categories of healer.

Bearing in mind the definition of “quack” given above, one obvious difference between quacks and cunning-folk was that the latter professed magical powers and the former did not. The distinction is obvious, but a closer analysis reveals that the boundaries of practice in this context were not always clear. As Roy Porter has observed, quacks “clearly thought the kudos of science invaluable”.¹⁷ For quacks to advertise that they practised magic would, therefore, contradict the public impression they wanted to make. However, there was a big difference between public and private practice. This point is best exemplified by examining the case of William David Harris, better known as “Dr. Harris, of Cwrtycadno”.

In 1867, Harris was arrested and charged with “obtaining money by false pretences, and with acting as a professional medical man without being duly qualified”.¹⁸ Harris was a very shrewd operator who appealed to every possible medical market by employing a variety of advertising techniques. To begin with, he latched onto the highly marketable Cwrt-y-cadno name. It was near this isolated settlement that three generations of the Harries’ family had plied their lucrative trade as wise-men, making their name famous throughout Wales and the neighbouring counties of England.¹⁹ With the death of the last practising Harries in March 1863, the way was open for the itinerant William Harris to exploit the similarity of his surname and adopt the Harries’ reputation. To those who knew and consulted the Harries, the name was imbued with magical associations, and so Harris would undoubtedly have been prepared for requests to cure witchcraft and remove curses.

¹⁶ *Western Morning News*, 17 June 1876.

¹⁷ Porter, ‘The language of quackery’, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 87.

¹⁸ The following account is taken from the *Hereford Times*, 2 March 1867; *ibid.*, 30 March 1867.

¹⁹ See Owen Davies, ‘Cunning-folk in England and Wales during the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries’, *Rural Hist.*, 1997, 8: 93–109.

Harris was thus covertly advertising his magical powers, and in the same breath overtly attempting to establish his medical credentials. In his handbills and newspaper advertisements Harris claimed to be a “medical doctor” and “herbalist”. He professed to cure all manner of diseases, from sore eyes to lunacy, and pronounced that he was definitely “not a quack”.²⁰ However, the arresting officer, Sergeant Jones, deposed: “I asked him to produce his diploma; he said he had none, but he showed me a licence authorising him to sell patent medicine; I then took him to the station and locked him up; I produced the medical register for the year 1867, but the prisoner’s name does not appear therein.” Edwin Jones, who had recently returned from America, deposed in court that on reading Harris’s handbill he had assumed that he was a “regular qualified doctor”, and so submitted to his treatment. Harris even imitated the usual conventions of medical examination. When Jones visited him at Llanidloes on 9 November, he was told to lie down on a bed, and then, as Jones stated: “he took hold of my pulse; I opened my vest and he laid his ear on my chest in different places”. From this perfunctory examination, Harris diagnosed that Jones had a bad heart and lungs, a dislocated right elbow, and cancer in one of his legs. And the cause of Jones’s rather serious condition? According to Harris, it was the result of his having been “witched” by a woman in America. Having ascertained the cause of Jones’ condition, Harris “sat down at a table and wrote something on a piece of paper”. This was certainly no prescription, however, but a magical charm, which, as Jones recalled, “he afterwards sewed up in a piece of cloth and gave to me, and which I was to keep by me; I was to be very careful that it did not fall to the ground”.

Was Harris a quack or was he a cunning-man? For two main reasons, which become apparent when he is compared with the Harries, whose reputation he manipulated, the title “cunning-man” is inappropriate for the likes of Harris. Firstly, he was itinerant, moving around mid-Wales, staying in small towns such as Llanidloes and Rhayader, bases from which he could make advertising forays into the more remote, outlying areas. Wise-men and cunning-women, on the other hand, were usually firmly rooted to one spot, their abodes being known for many miles around, their permanence precluding the necessity of adopting the itinerant quack’s saturation advertising techniques. Thus, the village of Cwrt-y-cadno was almost synonymous with the Harries. Secondly, Harris does not seem to have pursued those other aspects of the cunning-person’s trade, such as astrology, fortune-telling, love magic, and thief-detection. This was a point made in 1849 by the Rev. Richard Phayre, vicar of Raynham St Mary, Norfolk, in a sermon occasioned by his parishioners “repairing to a man for health and cure, who, I cannot doubt, practises astrology.” Phayre thought it

possible that those of my parishioners who have consulted him may have supposed in the first instance that he was simply a quack doctor—that is, one who sells medicine without having been regularly educated; but he lays claim to the knowledge of facts concerning persons’ health, in a supernatural manner: therefore, he is not simply a quack doctor, but belongs to the herd of astrologers, soothsayers, and so forth, whether or not he expressly calls himself by one of these names.²¹

²⁰ A wag at Llanidloes, on hearing of Harris’s prison sentence, propounded the following riddle: “Why is Cwrt Cadno like a dead duck?—Because he’ll quack no more”; Edward Hamer, ‘Parochial account of Llanidloes’, *Montgomeryshire*

Collections, 1877, **10**: 231–55, p. 237.

²¹ Richard Phayre, *A sermon preached in the parish church of Raynham St. Mary on the sinfulness of astrology*, Norwich, Charles Muskett, 1849, p. 16.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

There were some similarities between the practices of quacks and cunning-folk. Both groups sometimes practised urine-scriving for example. This had once been a respectable diagnostic procedure, though it was increasingly condemned, and fell out of general use during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²² During the nineteenth century, Clayton Chaffer, a cunning-man of Dukinfield, described himself as a “Herb Doctor & Water Caster” in his handbill.²³ The famous Yorkshire wise-man, John Wrightson, advertised on his trade card that the afflicted “may be relieved by sending their water”.²⁴ Those consulting a Yorkshire wise-man near Halifax during the early nineteenth century, took their “water” to him, and he “skilled it”, deducing that his patients were bewitched.²⁵ As has already been mentioned, both groups also often adopted the professional title of “doctor” to boost their credentials.

To summarize, then, there are four main criteria which can be used to differentiate between cunning-folk and quacks. Firstly, quacks did not generally claim to cure the bewitched. Secondly, quacks did not practise fortune-telling, astrology, theft magic, or love magic. Thirdly, unlike quacks, cunning-folk were not itinerant, although some conducted periodic tours. Fourthly, cunning-folk did not generally “quack”, in other words, advertise by vocal proclamation at fairs, markets, or in the streets, or advertise in newspapers. Some, however, exploited the use of handbills, which could be used to target customers far more selectively. As has already been shown, such criteria are not hard-and-fast, but taken together they provide a good diagnostic tool.

Illness, Advice and Witchcraft

When we come to look at the types of complaint that cunning-folk and quacks were consulted for, we find a definite divergence of practice. While some quacks advertised that their medicines were cure-alls, many specialized in specific disorders, such as intestinal worms, corns, and venereal disease. Cunning-folk rarely seem to have dealt with such common-place disorders. People usually consulted them for *persistent* illnesses which orthodox doctors failed to diagnose convincingly, such as that suffered by a Norfolk farmer’s wife, as described by her husband: “she’s harassed about night and day—continual worrying—like wind teasing her stomach, and like a sow with all her young pigs a-pulling her to pieces”.²⁶ It was said of the clients of the wise-woman of Wing, Leicestershire, that many “who visit her have no positive disease, but are oppressed with that languid disenjoyment of existence consequent upon malaria and undrained dwellings.”²⁷ Those who suffered from strange fits, and symptoms of depression also fell into this category.²⁸ Writing in 1807, the Yorkshire clergyman, Thomas Hawkins, knew of

²² See Lucinda McCray Beier, *Sufferers and healers: the experience of illness in seventeenth-century England*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 22–3, 41–2; Roy Porter, “‘I think ye both quacks’”: the controversy between Dr Theodor Myersbach and Dr John Coakley Lettsom’, in Bynum and Porter (eds), *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 58.

²³ *Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter*, 17 January 1857; *Folk-Lore Society News*, 1992, 16: 12–13.

²⁴ Kathryn C Smith, ‘The wise man and his community’, *Folk Life*, 1977, 15: 24–35, p. 29.

²⁵ Thomas Hawkins, *The iniquity of witchcraft, censured and exposed: being the substance of two*

sermons delivered at Warley, near Halifax, Yorkshire, Halifax, Holden and Dowson, 1808, pp. viii–ix.

²⁶ *The Times*, 7 April 1857.

²⁷ Joseph Dare, *Annual reports of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1846–77*, cited in Barry Haynes, *Working-class life in Victorian Leicester*, University of Leicester Press, 1991, pp. 43–44. Thanks to John Walton for this reference.

²⁸ In nineteenth-century Sussex, epileptics were thought to be bewitched; Charlotte Latham, ‘Some West Sussex superstitions lingering in 1865’, *Folk-Lore Record*, 1878, 1: 1–67, p. 25.

a child in his parish who was believed to be bewitched, or as it was expressed in the local speech, had “hurt done” her. She “was doubtless affected in a very singular way. In a way somewhat resembling fits, but to which no species of fits would exactly agree”. Hawkins also knew of two men in his parish who could not understand what was wrong with them, and eventually reached the conclusion that they were bewitched, and so consulted a local wise-man. One was an old man who “for some considerable time appeared very low, and now and then was melancholy in an extreme degree”. The other, “a man much esteemed for his piety and amiable temper . . . became strangely affected, (as he said). He was oft in violent pain—sometimes swelling in his body—sometimes becoming almost helpless—then suddenly becoming well”.²⁹ One Devonshire doctor who admitted his inability to diagnose accurately the illness of an old man, recalled that he “suffered from vague abdominal pain, and I must confess that my failure to give him relief led him to seek the ‘white witch’ for a further opinion”. Not surprisingly, the white witch declared it was a clear case of “over-looking”.³⁰

Ailments which were easy to diagnose but which appeared suddenly in an unorthodox manner, or which were unusually persistent, also generated suspicions of witchcraft. When, in March 1883, a prosperous retired farmer, Thomas Westren, of Barnstaple, developed eczema in one of his hands, he conceived the idea that its sudden appearance so late in life was caused by his having been “overlooked”. Instead of consulting his regular doctor, therefore, he consulted an Exeter cunning-man.³¹ The *ague* was not uncommonly interpreted as the symptoms of witchcraft. George Pycroft, a general practitioner of Kenton, near Exeter, remembered a rare case of *ague* in his district. The patient’s family “had never seen so strange a disease—a disease in which the man was perfectly well for two days and very bad on the third, and so on for several weeks—they concluded that he was bewitched. They felt so certain, that this peculiar people [*sic*] refused to take my quinine or other remedy”.³² Bad lice infestations were also attributable to witchcraft.³³ Writing in 1922, another Devonshire general practitioner recalled a labouring family plagued by lice: “In lack of any organized de-lousing system, I gave him the best at the time, namely, antiseptic lotions and ointment. We seemed to be making headway, when one night my patient came to tell me that I need not trouble further as he had consulted the ‘white witch,’ who considered that the family had been over-looked by the folk next door”.³⁴

It would seem that unless common-place ailments were thought to be attributable to witchcraft, people either resorted to folk remedies, patent medicines, or consulted general practitioners and quacks. As soon as witchcraft was suspected there were only two alternatives: private counter-magic, or a visit to a cunning-person. This meant that cunning-folk were not necessarily competing directly with other medical practitioners in the market-place. That is not to say that people exclusively consulted cunning-folk about magical problems, only that they held a near monopoly on curing bewitchment. Some

²⁹ Hawkins, *op. cit.*, note 25 above, pp. viii–ix.

³⁰ *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1922.

³¹ *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 1894, 26: 84–5; *Bideford Weekly Gazette*, 1 June 1886.

³² From a scrapbook of press-cuttings held in the Devon Local Studies Library.

³³ See, for example, Enid Porter, *Cambridgeshire customs and folklore*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 176, 178.

³⁴ *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1922.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

patients felt able to ask their general practitioner whether they were bewitched. In the 1860s, Dr Martin, of Pulborough, West Sussex, remarked that “within his experience it was a very common thing for people in cases of long illness to ask the doctor who attended them if he did not think that they were suffering from the effects of the evil eye, or that they were bewitched”.³⁵ Furthermore, chemists and druggists were also consulted concerning ingredients in magical rituals. In 1863 the *West Surrey Times* reported that a labouring man from Worplesdon, Surrey, told a Guildford chemist that his wife was bewitched, and that he needed some mercury to cure her. He said that he had been informed that if he got a quarter of a pound of mercury and mixed it up with the yolk of two eggs, and gave a dose to his wife night and morning, in water “over which the living and the dead had been carried”, she would soon recover. The chemist, not surprisingly, refused to sell him the mercury, and he left, avowing to get it elsewhere.³⁶ In 1888 a Devonshire chemist received a letter from a woman wanting to buy some “Oil of Man”. This substance was a distillation of the skulls of men who had recently been hanged, or who had otherwise died violently. The chemist replied that “the article was not made in these days”, and subsequently received the following letter:

Sir,—I return you many thanks for your kindness in informing me about the Oil of Man. I was told a few weeks ago by my Servant that Article could be had at the Chemist. I am a married lady, and my Husband was enduced to leave me a few months ago. My Servant says if I could get it to burn, he would return again to me. But as that Article cannot be had now, would you kindly inform me if there is any kind of drug can be had for that purpose, an answer will oblige. I remain, &c.

Another chemist received a similar letter: “Please, sir, I want some powder—I don’t know its name, but it is salmon-coloured—for a neighbour. She wants to burn it in the fire to fetch her husband back from America”.³⁷ Judging from its colour, the required powder was dragon’s blood (a gum produced from the tree *Dracaena draco*), which a retired Devonshire chemist remembered selling in quantities of three-pennyworths and six-pennyworths for the same purpose.³⁸ It would seem, then, that other medical practitioners were thought to have some occult knowledge, but not necessarily the power to counter witchcraft. A doctor might be asked to confirm suspicions of witchcraft, and chemists might be asked to supply the necessary ingredients to perform spells, but, when it came to advice on curing witchcraft, only cunning-folk were resorted to.

Herbalism and Cunning-Folk

Herbalism was a very important aspect of cunning-folk’s medical activities, though, once again, the boundaries of practice were more complex than they first appear, and concepts of overt and covert medical practice need to be considered. In the nineteenth century, those who called themselves herbalists encompassed a wide spectrum of unorthodox medical practitioners, from humble village simples-gatherers to Thomsonian medical botanists, from magic-wielding cunning-folk to respected high-street herbalists.³⁹

³⁵ Latham, *op. cit.*, note 28 above, p. 26.

³⁶ Cited in *The Times*, 17 August 1863.

³⁷ *Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, 1889, 21: 113–14.

³⁸ *Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, 1877, 9: 93.

³⁹ For a general survey of the history of herbalism see B Griggs, *Green pharmacy: a history of herbal medicine*, London, Jill Norman and Hobhouse, 1981.

It is not always easy to demarcate boundaries of practice between them. We know from court reports, for example, that many cunning-folk practised as self-styled herbalists. Conversely, we do not know how many of those seemingly respectable herbalists, whose names appear in the trade directories, dabbled in magical diagnoses and cures. The difficulties in uncovering the ubiquity of herbalism, and the exact nature of herbalists' business, have been well highlighted in P S Brown's study of herbalists in nineteenth-century Bristol. Brown found, for example, that while in 1871 there was only one herbalist mentioned in the Bristol trade directories, there were ten individuals calling themselves herbalists, herb doctors, or medical botanists in the census enumerators' books. Ten years later, there were only two in the directories but nine in the enumerators' books.⁴⁰ Most of the "herbalists" mentioned in this discussion cannot be found in the trade directories of the period either. Brown points out, furthermore, that there must have been an unknown number of part-time herbalists whose primary occupation only appears in official statistics. A couple of Bristol herbalists were willing to advertise publicly the more occult side of their practice, at least up until the middle of the century. In the late 1840s William Derrick was describing himself as a "medical botanist, student in physic and astrology" in local directories, and one Thomas Randall, recorded as a herbalist in the 1851 census, is also described as an astrologer in the directories and poll book.⁴¹ Brown's revealing study of the more respectable side of herbalism provides us, however, with little more than a glimpse at the illicit, occult aspects of the business.

In 1888 the Devonshire folklorist, Robert Dymond, bemoaned that "drunken tailors, idle shoemakers, and other worthless fellows, spring up into herbal doctors and white witches, and, by pretending to find out lost property, dispel charms, and lay ghosts, pick the pockets of their victims".⁴² Twenty years later, the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould opined: "the professed herbalist in our country towns is very often not a herbalist at all, but a mere impostor. He puts up 'herbalist' on a brass plate at his door, but his procedure is mere quackery."⁴³ Baring-Gould was not unsympathetic to the use of herbal remedies, and believed that "the simples employed by the wise old women in our villages were admirable in most cases, but they were slow, if sure of action". However, he condemned the magical activities of the cunning-folk who carried on their lucrative trade behind doors marked "herbalist". William Henry Thomas who lived at 10 Bartholomew Street, Exeter, was one such contemporary herbalist whom both writers, perhaps, had in mind. In May 1903, he found himself before the magistrates charged with using "subtle means to deceive and impose with intent to defraud". Thomas had inherited his herbal business and was presumably well educated in his trade, for, when the police searched his premises, "a lot" of literature relating to the herbal business was seized. Herbalism was only one facet of Thomas's work, as he also traded on his reputation as an unbewitcher. In one instance, a farmer who had been losing his horses, sheep, and cattle, consulted Thomas concerning his bad luck, and on payment of two guineas was given a powder by the defendant, who told him to throw it around the homestead between nine o'clock and midnight, repeating

⁴⁰ P S Brown, 'The vicissitudes of herbalism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain', *Med. Hist.*, 1985, 29: 71-93.

⁴¹ *Idem*, 'Herbalists and medical botanists in mid-nineteenth-century Britain with special reference to Bristol', *Med. Hist.*, 1982, 26: 405-21; 407.

⁴² Robert Dymond (ed.), *Nathan Hogg's letters and poems to es brither Jan, in the Devonshire Dialect* (1st ser., 7th ed.), Exeter, Drayton & Sons, 1902, p. 74

⁴³ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Devonshire characters and strange events*, London, John Lane, 1908, p. 71.

the Lord's prayer whilst doing so. Despite the suggestion of Thomas's defence lawyer that, having grown with the business, Thomas probably never recognized the "heinousness of the offence he was committing", he was fined £100 and costs or five months' imprisonment.⁴⁴

The case of another Exeter herbalist, who practised sixty years earlier, highlights even better the difference between overt and covert herbal practice. James Tuckett was one of the most successful cunning-men in nineteenth-century Devon, though from his mention in orthodox sources one would never have suspected that he was anything but a prosperous provincial herbalist. In a releasing document dated 27 November 1841, for example, he was described as a "herbal doctor", and in a Devonshire directory published in 1850 he was entered as "Tuckett Jas. and Son, herbal doctors, Botanic Hall, 44 Bartholomew st."⁴⁵ In August 1846, he appeared before the Devon Lammass Assizes, and was again described as a "Herbal Doctor". However, he was not appearing as a defendant like many cunning-persons, but was suing a customer. Tuckett had "professionally attended" the mother of William Day, "a gentleman connected with the turf", of Kennford, in consideration of which, Tuckett claimed, Day had made him a present of a horse. However, Day had subsequently come and taken the horse back from Tuckett's servant, and not returned it. The case broke down for want of proof that the horse had actually been given to Tuckett in the first place.⁴⁶ Here, then, is a picture of a prosperous and respectable herbalist, wealthy enough to afford a servant, and who was not at all afraid to present himself before the courts as a thoroughly respectable citizen. An examination of the ethnographic sources, however, reveals another side to Tuckett's career. He was undoubtedly the "whit-witch" "maister Tuckitt" who was the subject of a humorous poem by the Exeter bookseller and dialect poet Henry Baird, who wrote under the *nom de plume* of "Nathan Hogg". First published in 1847, the poem, entitled 'Tha old humman way tha urd cloke; un tha evil eye', tells the story of a farmer, Jan Plant, who goes to consult Tuckett about the "ill-wishing" of himself by an old witch named "Nan Tap". Baird described "Tuckitt's" appearance as follows:

Es hair wis zich a cruel vright-
Twis zom aw't yeller, zom aw't white,-
An then tha cloke ha wared aroun
Wis black, an drappin ta tha groun,
In vack tha zight aun, et wis zich
Ta shaw et wance he was a witch.⁴⁷

Several contributors to the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* also recalled the magical activities of Tuckett. In 1879, E Parfitt recounted how Tuckett kept a servant in livery who always answered the door and, after showing any visitor into a waiting-room, gently questioned the client as to the purpose of his or her visit, and secretly relayed the information to Tuckett. In Nathan Hogg's poem, Tuckett's servant pretends to be another client who draws out of Jan Plant his problems, all of which could be heard by Tuckett

⁴⁴ *Western Morning News*, 11 May 1903.

⁴⁵ Devon Record Office D7/1311/4; William White, *History, gazetteer and directory of Devonshire*, Sheffield, 1850, p. 137 (facsimile

reprint, Newton Abbott, David & Charles, 1968).

⁴⁶ *Somerset County Herald*, 8 August 1846.

⁴⁷ *Nathan Hogg's letters*, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 65.

through a papered-over hole in the wall. Another contributor remembered that Farmer Bale, of Littleham, near Bideford, applied to Tuckett for a charm to prevent his ewes from slipping their lambs.⁴⁸

Those cunning-folk who publicly practised as herbalists had to maintain a balance between preserving their image as respectable tradesfolk, and exploiting their magical reputations amongst the magic-believing sections of society. Their unbewitching skills could not, therefore, be formally advertised. They relied on word-of-mouth to spread their reputations, and hoped that the discreet popular discourse on witchcraft and magic would be self-contained. In this context, the prosecuting lawyer in the trial of William Henry Thomas, made the patronizing admission that Thomas did not advertise himself “as possessing these supposed powers”, but that “it could be imagined that such a person soon got a reputation, his name being handed on from one poor-witted, soft-headed country person to another.” Performing this balancing act was not always an easy task, and when the boundary between the two fields of practice began to crumble, such “herbalists” could find themselves in serious trouble. In 1863, John Collander, well known to some as the “White Witch”, of Newton Abbot, Devon, found the boundary between his two spheres of practice breaking-down publicly, and the desperate measures he took to repair the damage only made his situation worse. Collander, a professed “herbal doctor”, had obviously managed to cultivate an aura of respectability in the town. He drew a pension for military services, and was a member of the Odd Fellows. In June, however, he became incensed with one of his neighbours, Mrs Mead, whom he accused, “in common with other women, with saying that he and his wife were fortune-tellers”. She denied saying such things, upon which Collander “clasped his hands, and with uplifted eyes said, ‘I will make your labour depart from you so that you shall not have any bread to eat,’ and he further explained, ‘I will do for you and your family as well’”. He left Mead’s house, but once outside, threatened to return and “murder the lot of them”. Collander was bound over to keep the peace, and was then prosecuted for telling fortunes under the Vagrancy Act. Because of his prosecution, Collander lost his pension and his membership of the Odd Fellows, and on being conveyed to Exeter prison he told his custodian that on his release he would take up residence in Cornwall. With his reputation in Newton Abbott in tatters, it was probably a wise decision.⁴⁹

Although Baring-Gould and others complained about the fraudulent nature of the herbalism practised by cunning-folk, it is obvious from the sources that many were actually competent herbalists. It is likely that they gathered their knowledge from both oral and written sources. Herbal medicines were often prescribed to cure the bewitched, though they were usually sold in conjunction with charms and talismans. Unfortunately, details of the ingredients and doses of these herbal medicines are scarce. The Exeter cunning-woman, Mother Arthurs, provided the following remedies, at a cost of £2, to a client, Mrs Heacock, whose son was thought to be bewitched. The first medicine was sweetened with liquorice, and a tea-cup full was to be taken three times a day and had to be drunk warm. A second bottle was provided, which was to be taken in quantities of two spoonfuls. The medicine made him feel worse, and Arthurs subsequently told Heacock

⁴⁸ *Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, 1879, 11: 105, 115; *ibid.*, 1925, 57: 115.

⁴⁹ *Somerset County Herald*, 27 June 1863.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

that “she could give her some more medicine, but that it would be very expensive, made of rum, &c., and that alder must be used. The first medicine the defendant said was composed of a foreign herb, and there were eighteen different ingredients in the first bottle.”⁵⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, analytical chemists were sometimes called in by the courts to identify the content of herbal medicines when a cunning-person’s patient died. At an inquest held in 1892 on the body of Mary Jane Saunders, of Lufton, Somerset, the coroner was told how her parents, unsatisfied with the doctor’s diagnosis of “softening of the brain”, believing their daughter bewitched, called in a cunning-man. He brought with him some herbs, described as being “brown and dried”, which he boiled up and administered to the patient. Dr Walters, of Stoke, after analysing the liquid, reported that it was “nothing deleterious”, however; just a slight tonic.⁵¹

Although many cunning-folk undoubtedly did provide herbal remedies such as simple tonics which may have been beneficial to their clients, in a few cases one seriously has to question their competence and motives concerning the remedies they prescribed. In 1858, for example, Esther Peadon, a professed herbalist from Dowlish, Somerset, was indicted for manslaughter after administering medicine to Sarah Palmer, a farmer’s wife.⁵² Palmer had consulted Peadon for “lowness of spirits” after having given birth six months previously—perhaps a case of what is now known as post-natal depression. Peadon was no orthodox herbalist though. As part of her cure, she told Palmer “to cut her toe and finger nails, and a portion of her hair, and tie it round the medicine bottle, there letting it remain until it perished”. This is a ritual of sympathetic magic, which has nothing to do with herbalism. She also practised urine-scriving. When, on one occasion, Palmer brought her urine in a bottle, Peadon looked at it, and told her she was definitely unwell. The alarming aspect of Peadon’s practice concerned the medicine she gave to Palmer for raising her spirits. After taking it, Palmer became delirious, and later suffered from a deranged stomach and constipation. A surgeon was called in who prescribed some calomel (a mild chloride of mercury), but she died a day or two later. After the post mortem, Palmer’s stomach and two bottles of the herbal medicine supplied by Peadon were sent to be analysed by the respected Bristol chemist, William Herepath. He reported the presence of belladonna, stramonium (thorn apple), bryony, tobacco, hemlock, hemlock dropwort, and several others. This was an extraordinary cocktail of plants with poisonous, narcotic and hallucinogenic properties. In fact, it was remarkably similar to the supposed contents of witches’ flying unguents. If Herepath’s analysis was correct, and the agonies suffered by Palmer would suggest so, the only explanation for this mixture is that Peadon had actually made it according to some such occult recipe. Some of these plants were individually thought to have beneficial properties. Culpeper’s *Herbal*, which was a popular text in nineteenth-century England, stated that bryony, if administered very carefully, was recommended for strengthening the womb, and for diseases of the mind. Hemlock could be applied externally to inflammations and tumours, but it warned that if taken inwardly would cause “frenzy or perturbation of the senses”.⁵³ Anyone with basic

⁵⁰ *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 January 1875; Paul Q Karkeek, ‘Recent cases of supposed witchcraft in Devonshire’, *Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, 1875, 7: 261–8.

⁵¹ *Pulman’s Weekly News*, 14 June 1892.

⁵² *Somerset County Herald*, 27 March 1858.

⁵³ Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, Ware, Omega Books, 1985. It was originally published as *The English Physician, or Herbal*, London, 1653.

herbal knowledge, though, would have known that such a concoction was potentially lethal. There is evidence to suggest that some cunning-folk may have used their herbal knowledge to induce or protract illnesses, either to produce unusual side effects which would substantiate their diagnosis of witchcraft, or to prolong the period of consultation, thereby enabling them to charge for further advice and medicine. Peadon may or may not have been guilty of this unpleasant practice, but in the case of James Tunncliff there would seem to be little doubt.

At the Stafford spring assizes, 1857, James Tunncliff, the keeper of a beer shop, called the Royal Oak, at Thorney-Lane, near Newborough, was charged with fraudulently obtaining around £30 from a farmer named Thomas Charlesworth. Tunncliff received the money for attempting to banish witchcraft from Charlesworth, his family, goods, and chattels. Soon after having first consulted Tunncliff about the bewitchment of his household, Charlesworth visited him at his ale-house and drank two cups of beer. On his way home Charlesworth was suddenly taken very ill:

I had shooting pains in my chest, and my head was very bad. When I got home I was taken with shaking and shivering. The prisoner came the next day, and saw me in bed, between 8 and 12. He said I must get up and have a little brandy . . . He did not say why I had been so bad. He said the reason was because he had had a contest with old Bull of Yeaverley, and he had beat him.

Shortly after this, Tunncliff persuaded Charlesworth to take him on as a servant. Since that time the latter had five more similar attacks:

on the third attack I conversed with the prisoner about it, and he said my mother had done it, and she had been to a man at Badley Hedge, and there were two working against me and my wife and baby, that they were putting witchcraft upon me.

On two subsequent days Charlesworth's attacks occurred shortly after Tunncliff had brought him his breakfast. When police inspector Ellis Crisp apprehended the prisoner on 25 February, he found in his house a briony root and "some leaves". Dr Monkton, of Rugely, identified the root as being the white briony (*Brionia dioica*), which has irritating properties. Mr Scotland, for the prosecution, hinted at the possibility of poisoning, and said he would prove that the prisoner had in his house certain roots and herbs, usual with persons who pretend to witchcraft, though he did not suggest that the prisoner had made use of them. Needless to say, on dismissing Tunncliff, Charlesworth recovered quickly. Tunncliff was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour.⁵⁴ In rural areas of England the root of white briony was known and used as mandrake.⁵⁵ It had several positive herbal uses. As Culpeper explained, when "corrected" it was "profitable for diseases of the head", it cleansed the kidneys, and was good for sores and skin diseases. It was also used for conditioning horses. However, it was also a dangerous, violent purgative, and Culpeper warned that it needed "an abler hand to correct it than most country people have". It may be that Tunncliff did not have an "able hand", but his behaviour strongly indicates that he was using briony deliberately to cause inexplicable torment for his own considerable financial gain.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 24 March 1857.

⁵⁵ See Roy Vickery, *A dictionary of plant lore*,

Oxford University Press, 1995.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

Another shady aspect of herbalism which some cunning-folk performed was the procuring of abortions. Plants such as feverfew, commonly known as “kill-bastard”, and tansy, were known abortifacients, supplied by herbalists, chemists and druggists.⁵⁶ In 1846, for instance, Sarah Whisker, a “cunning woman” of Norwich, aged between thirty and forty, was transported for life for attempting to procure an abortion for Frances Bailey, a servant. Bailey had gone to Whisker to have her fortune told, and during the course of the interview confessed that she was pregnant. Whisker told her to come again in a few days time and she would give her something that would “do her good and not interfere with her work”. When Bailey returned, she was given a powder and a liquid. After taking the abortifacients she fell sick and subsequently resorted to “medical aid”. The active ingredient in Whisker’s abortifacient was white hellebore. A local chemist testified in court that he had frequently supplied Whisker with small quantities of the plant, presumably for the same purpose.⁵⁷

Isaac Rushworth of Dewsbury Road, Leeds, was prosecuted at the York Assizes, in July 1857, for procuring the abortion of his own illegitimate child. The victim, Kitty Littlewood, aged twenty-six, from Sheffield, had been unwell for a considerable period, during which time several doctors had been unable to do her any good. Acting on the advice of a neighbour, she and her father decided to consult Rushworth, who “ruled her planet and gave her some pills”, which had little effect. On Rushworth’s advice the Littlewoods moved to West Ardsley—a place much nearer to Leeds, and here he visited them frequently. He gave her some more medicine, which he said was for palpitations of the heart. He then told her that she would never be well unless she had sexual intercourse with him. After resisting his advances for some time she finally agreed, after Rushworth had apparently given her “something which stupefied her”. This continued for some months until Littlewood became pregnant. Rushworth subsequently brought her a quantity of “seeds of paradise” and told her to make tea of it, and drink it: on 26 March she had a miscarriage. On one occasion, Rushworth brought her a bullock’s heart and some shoemaker’s awls; he burnt the heart and said the awls “were to keep her enemies off”. He also sent her two pieces of parchment as charms, at a cost of £5, saying that one “would get her a young man and the other was to prevent her being bewitched”. Rushworth was sentenced to eighteen months’ imprisonment with hard labour. Kitty Littlewood was taken to Wakefield Asylum “in a state of insanity”.⁵⁸

Herbalism was just one area of cunning-folk’s practice, but, as is obvious from the above examples, it was inextricably tied up with their other magical activities. Medical examinations were often conducted using methods of divination such as cartomancy, and astrology, and witchcraft was usually diagnosed. Herbal medicines, pills and potions and charms were then prescribed, often at considerable cost. The police seem to have been well acquainted with the magical activities of many such “herbalists”, but evidence upon which to prosecute was not often forthcoming, and people were sometimes loath to implicate them, often through fear of magical reprisals. Thus, after his committal to trial, Isaac Rushworth had contrived to convey to Kitty Littlewood that she would suffer if any

⁵⁶ Smith, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, pp. 73–8; Angus McLaren, *Reproductive rituals: the perception of fertility in England from the 16th century to the 19th century*, London, Methuen, 1984; P S Brown,

‘Female pills and the reputation of iron as an abortifacient’, *Med. Hist.*, 1977, 21: 291–304.

⁵⁷ *Somerset County Herald*, 4 April 1846.

⁵⁸ *The Times*, 16 July 1857.

harm came to him: “that he would cause her to be haunted by devils; and that if he should die in prison his ghost should never leave her by day or night.” Littlewood was further driven to distraction on subsequently seeing one of the jurymen faint twice in the box during Rushworth’s investigation. She became extremely violent, and had to be forcibly restrained: “she presented a sad spectacle, large pieces of flesh having been dug out of her face and neck with her finger nails.”⁵⁹

Veterinary Practice

As well as treating humans, cunning-folk also extended their curative activities to livestock. This was another medical field where orthodox medical practitioners rarely operated, and this gave an edge to cunning-folk’s longevity and popularity in the medical market-place. In 1865, H Strickland Constable attacked the abysmal state of veterinary practice, which had been highlighted by the cattle plague which swept through herds during the mid-nineteenth century, and which Constable believed was caused, “in a very great measure, by man’s ignorance, stupidity, and cruelty”. He condemned the hoards of irregular practitioners whose “superstitious” cures did more harm than good:

I suspect that animal doctoring is now about as advanced as man doctoring was a hundred years ago, when physicians prescribed “boiled snails,” “powdered earth-worms,” or “extract of toads’ brains,” . . . Cattle doctors now may not employ exactly these remedies; but I have often known them employ very much worse, because very much less innocent ones.⁶⁰

Although the subject is still largely unresearched, Constable’s portrait of veterinary practice would seem to be realistic. By the end of the eighteenth century, animal doctoring, to quote Iain Pattison, was best described as a mixture of “Folk-lore and empiricism, especially in rural areas, with a whiff of rational husbandry”.⁶¹ Even by the mid-nineteenth century the situation was not much better, despite the setting up of veterinary colleges. Veterinary surgeons were largely urban based, and most students’ knowledge was restricted to equine treatment. As J R Fisher has observed; “it was possible to graduate from the school—and acquire the diploma of the R.C.V.S. [Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons]—ignorant for all practical purposes of the major livestock diseases.”⁶² Some country surgeons were willing to treat livestock, although this probably went no further than prescribing simple drenches, and some druggists also sold animal remedies and dabbled in veterinary practices.⁶³ On the whole, though, livestock-doctoring was the province of a host of “untrained” cow doctors, herbalists, charmers, and cunning-folk. Since cunning-folk possessed both herbal knowledge and powers of unbewitching, they were frequently consulted about horses and livestock. The previously mentioned Mrs

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 22 July 1857.

⁶⁰ H Strickland Constable, *The cattle plague*, York, 1865, p. 9.

⁶¹ Iain Pattison, *The British veterinary profession 1791–1948*, London, J A Allen, 1984, p. 1. See also, L P Pugh, *From farriery to veterinary medicine: 1785–1795*, Cambridge, Published for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons by W Heffer, 1962; Frederick Smith, *The early history of veterinary literature*, London, J A Allen, 1976.

⁶² J R Fisher, ‘Not quite a profession: the aspirations of veterinary surgeons in England in the mid-nineteenth century’, *Hist. Res.*, 1993, **66**: 284–302, p. 287.

⁶³ Irvine Loudon, *Medical care and the general practitioner, 1750–1850*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 80; Marland, ‘The medical activities of mid-nineteenth-century chemists and druggists’, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 424.

Cunning-Folk in the Nineteenth Century

Cox claimed that “people from all parts of the county came to her to have their cows cured”, and Ellen Hayward, a cunning-woman of Cinderford, also stated that she gave “people advice for treatment of pigs, cows, and horses”.⁶⁴ John Wrightson, the famed “wise-man of Stokesley”, had a trade card printed in which he advertised his veterinary services. Thus the curing of livestock seems to have made up a hefty proportion of cunning-folk’s business, and, in comparison with the medical market for human-doctoring, in the veterinary market-place of rural England and Wales unqualified healers faced little competition from the qualified.

Income and Payment

The incomes of some cunning-folk during the period must have equalled and even exceeded that of neighbouring general practitioners, many of whom earned under £100, and some as little as £40 a year.⁶⁵ John Collander, for example, was apparently earning between £5 and £6 a week. Furthermore, he flaunted his prosperity: “he made himself very conspicuous when walking through the streets by the gold chains and the medals he wore, and by his luxuriant feminine ringlets”. When visiting neighbouring towns and villages he would hire a fly, “and was profuse in his expenditure”.⁶⁶ The excessive nature of fees in relation to clients’ earnings is evident from the prosecution, in 1867, of Mary Catherine Murray, a cunning-woman who lived at 18 William Street, Plymouth. The wife of Thomas Rendle, a labourer from Modbury, was thought to be “ill-wished” and so he consulted Murray. She informed Rendle that “his wife would have to go and see the planets, and gather certain herbs in the churchyard for 21 nights”. For this advice she charged him one guinea, and a further £3 9s. for some powders (which he was instructed to burn morning and evening), a written charm, and some bottles of medicine. Rendle was earning only 10s. a week, and had managed to scrape together a few pounds savings, much of which was given to Murray.⁶⁷ At the trial of William Henry Thomas it was revealed that he had charged Ben Crook, of Stockleigh Pomeroy, £2 2s; George Rundall, of Drewsteignton, £2; Edward Gloin, £3 3s; and Jane Stone, of Brixham, £5. His account books, which were seized by the police, showed that between 1 January and 17 April 1903, he had earned some £100 from his various dealings, and that he had been clearing around £300 per annum. The prosecution conceded, however, that it was impossible to say how much of that sum was gained from his witch-doctoring and how much from his legitimate herbal business. It has to be taken into account, of course, that cunning-folk practised a much wider range of activities than general practitioners. Cunning-folk did not always charge such large sums, and just as some general practitioners had a sliding scale of fees, so some cunning-folk charged according to the status of their clients. When, for example, a Dorset woman asked about the charge for her consultation with a Weymouth cunning-woman, the latter told the former, “I was a poor woman and if I would give her sixpence she would be

⁶⁴ *Dean Forest Mercury*, 18 May 1906.

⁶⁵ Ivan Waddington, *The medical profession in the industrial revolution*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1984, pp. 34–7; Loudon, *op. cit.*, note 63 above, pp. 256–66.

⁶⁶ *Somerset County Herald*, 27 June 1863.

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 13 December 1867; 17 December, 1867. Rendle’s wife remained unwell, and consequently believed Murray had “ill-wished” her. Murray was sentenced to three months’ hard labour.

quite satisfied, but it must be a silver sixpence.”⁶⁸ But the fees that many cunning-folk charged belies the notion that people consulted them only because they were a cheaper alternative to orthodox medical practitioners.

The Last Resort

Many of those who were willing to pay such expensive charges had already paid several costly visits to general practitioners. Over and over again we hear how the sufferer of some protracted illness has spent considerable sums of money in doctors' fees, and all to no avail. As a last resort, he or she consults a cunning-person, who confirms what the patient has usually already suspected, that witchcraft is the cause. When in 1856, for example, a Norfolk magistrate suggested to a local farmer that his bewitched wife ought to see a doctor, the farmer replied: “Doctor, Sir? We've been to all the doctors about. We've spent every shilling to get remedy. All my family know it, poor dears. We're wholly done up.” The farmer had finally consulted a wise-woman, whom he said was “wonderful clever in these things”, who confirmed their suspicions that witchcraft was responsible.⁶⁹ The three bewitched people mentioned by the Rev. Thomas Hawkins had all initially consulted orthodox medical men. In the case of the young girl, “several of the faculty were applied to, who endeavoured to remove her complaint, but with little or no effect”. The melancholy old man had “applied to medicine but in vain”, and the other man had “applied first to the faculty, but obtained little or no relief”.⁷⁰ In the early stages of their illnesses, then, these people had not suspected any supernatural causation. They had repeatedly relied on orthodox medicine to cure them. It was the inability of orthodox medicine to cure or even successfully diagnose some protracted illnesses which led to suspicions of supernatural causation, and, ultimately, a visit to a cunning-person. That cunning-folk were often consulted only after self-cure and orthodox medicine had failed, is also evident from the statements that cunning-folk made when attempting to justify their business. Mrs Cox, a Plymouth cunning-woman, observed, for example, that “she was in the habit of curing scores of people that medical men had given up, and many that Dr. Square and Dr. Hingston had declared incurable”. Mother Arthurs' defence lawyer, Mr Friend, maintained at length that there had been no false pretence. He said that the defendant was a herbalist, and “they knew it was true that herbalists often performed cures where surgical arts failed”.

That patients consulted cunning-folk as a last resort after orthodox medicine had proven ineffective, might suggest that many people who still believed in witchcraft and magic were initially more confident in the efficacy of orthodox medicine. This could be interpreted as evidence of declining belief in the efficacy of folk medicine and its practitioners. Thus F B Smith believes that “throughout the century orthodox medicine gradually overran and vanquished folk medicine”.⁷¹ However, it could instead indicate that people were increasingly exercising their freedom of choice in a crowded and multifarious medical market. Anthropological studies of the medical market in African countries where orthodox western medicine, faith healing, and magical medicine flourish, would support such a view. M F C Bourdillon observed from his research in Nigeria, for

⁶⁸ H Colley March, ‘Dorset folklore’, *Folklore*, 1900, 11: 107–12, p. 109.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 7 April 1857.

⁷⁰ Hawkins, op. cit., note 25 above, pp. viii–ix.

⁷¹ Smith, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 418.

example, that “people choose from a number of ways of understanding illness and healing. The choices any one person makes in different situations are often not consistent with each other; but each choice is consistent with the total situation in which a person finds himself”.⁷² The anthropologist Ursula Sharma has noted that research on medical pluralism in “third world” countries has shown that patients “commonly make their independent judgements about choice of therapy, usually based on practical considerations”.⁷³ Both the historical and anthropological evidence suggests that the popular “last resort” to folk diagnosis and magical medicine during the nineteenth century was not the result of a growing popular perception of the superior efficacy of orthodox medicine, or confidence in the medical profession. Instead, it reflected the growing maturity of a popular consumer market where choice was still dictated to a considerable extent by factors of accessibility and applicability. Unlike the widespread—but by no means complete—educated rejection of magic during the eighteenth century, the decline of folk magical medicine did not result from a conscious rejection of one cognitive medical framework and the deliberate subscription to a new one. The decline of cunning-folk during the early twentieth century can partly be explained in terms of the commercialization of medicines, and the growing ubiquity and popularization of orthodox medical practice, as outlined by Roy Porter. However, in seeking explanations for their decline we also need to recognize the cultural changes in society, unconnected with the medical profession, which led to the declining belief in witchcraft.

Conclusion

Cunning-folk remained popular throughout much of the nineteenth century for three main reasons. Firstly, orthodox medicine continued to be ineffective until the twentieth century. Secondly, cunning-folk’s curative powers extended to the treatment of animals as well as humans. Thirdly, and most importantly, people continued to believe in witchcraft as a source of illness. Willem de Blécourt has commented that, “the term ‘cunning-folk’ can be considered as an overall concept”.⁷⁴ That “concept” certainly embodied more than the sum of the various roles and activities cunning-folk practised, and the cement which held it together was the belief in witchcraft. Cunning-folk were the nexus of a complex set of beliefs which sought to explain, prevent and reverse misfortune. In terms of health, the belief in witchcraft provided an avenue of alternative diagnosis and cure which gave people hope when other curative paths proved unsatisfactory. As the belief in witchcraft declined, however, so the concept of cunning-folk fragmented into its constituent parts. Stripped of their unbewitching activities, cunning-folk were no more or less than herbalists, astrologers, and fortune-tellers.

⁷² M C F Bourdillon, ‘Pluralism and problems of belief’, *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, 1982, 54: 21–42, p. 26.

⁷³ Ursula Sharma, ‘Contextualizing alternative medicine: the exotic, the marginal and the perfectly mundane’, *Anthropology Today*, 1993, 9: 15–18, p. 17. For further discussion on this point see, for example, Arthur Kleinman, *Patients and healers in the context of culture: an exploration of the borderland between anthropology, medicine and*

psychiatry, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980; Ursula Sharma, *Complementary medicine today: practitioners and patients*, London, Tavistock/Routledge, 1992; Stein R Mathisen, ‘Continuity and change in the tradition of folk medicine’, *ARV*, 1988, 44: 169–98.

⁷⁴ Willem de Blécourt, ‘Witch doctors, soothsayers and priests: on cunning folk in European historiography and tradition’, *Soc. Hist.*, 1994, 19: 285–303, p. 299.