

Growing Acadian Medicine: From the Acadian Homeland to Nova Scotia Gardens

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The Acadian people have left a significant mark on the history and culture of the Maritimes. Those who travelled to Acadia in the early 1600s were from different regions in France and adhered to a variety of cultural practices. Basques and Frenchmen, Catholics, and Huguenots travelled to the Americas in an attempt to make a new life (Griffiths 28-29). They settled in what is now called the Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and eventually Prince Edward Island. Port Royal along the Bay of Fundy was the first of these settlements that would later expand. Upon arriving, the settlers encountered the Mi'kmaq, Indigenous peoples in the region. Due to the diversity of inhabitants sharing this land, the Acadians became accustomed to cooperating despite cultural differences. Eventually, these cultural differences melded into a distinct Acadian culture. The Acadians lived peacefully in the Maritimes until 1755 when the British enacted what they called their “great and noble scheme” (Faragher, “A Great and Noble Scheme” 83). The forced deportations of the Acadians that took place between 1755 and 1762 have become known as the Grand Dérangement or the Great Upheaval. Roughly 10,000 Acadians were displaced from their homeland where they had built a culture for over 100 years (82). Despite many Acadians returning to Acadia, their homes were gone and their livelihood destroyed. The Grand Dérangement stands as an incredible shift in the culture and lives of Acadians living in Canada.

A unique, distinctly Acadian culture had emerged long before the upheaval of 1755. As mentioned, the diversity of cultures present in Acadian society allowed for a departure from European culture (Griffiths 75). The Acadians had

become an independent people, having more loyalty to their shared lands than to a seemingly foreign “Motherland” (Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme* 138). They were largely agricultural at this point, devoting much work to their dykelands that provided for all their needs. They also tended to vast personal gardens, with a variety of food and herbs of both medicinal and nutritional value (“Tour Traditional Acadian Garden”). This agricultural lifestyle necessitated large families and communal cooperation. Acadian families were generally quite large due in part to their Roman Catholic religion, but parents also had multiple children in order to provide farm hands. Communities were based around large family units and these communities aided in all manner of work (Griffiths 57). Good relationships were also held with the Indigenous peoples of the region. Early Acadians recognized the importance of local Indigenous knowledge in order to survive. The relationship flourished, with some European officials considering Acadians as “half-Indian” (Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme* 138). Inter marriages between the Indigenous peoples and Acadians expanded Acadian culture beyond its European roots (46). These influences on Acadian culture are exhibited in all aspects of their lives, including their medicinal practices.

Acadian medicine is influenced in equal parts by their French roots and their relations with the Indigenous peoples of the region. A large part of Acadian medicine was practiced by *les chirugiens* (or *chirugiennes*) (Cormier-Boudreau 13). These “popular caretakers” stem from a medieval French tradition, when many would “*soignant au moyen de ses mains*” or “take care by way of their hands” (13). This practice continued in Acadia and was greatly facilitated by both Acadian agricultural practices and Indigenous knowledge. Acadian folk medicine was largely based on natural medicine rather than religious or magical practices seen in some other folk cultures. However, it should be noted that natural medicine often worked alongside magical practices, though religious

medicine was significantly less popular (Dupont 104). The Acadians' large gardens provided the majority of the necessary ingredients for most traditional recipes. The local flora also provided new and alternative ingredients to cure ailments. With the help of their Indigenous neighbours, the Acadians had access to a wider variety of medicinal plants from around the Maritime region. Fortunately, the Early Modern Maritime Recipes project (EMMR) was able to find some documented Acadian recipes.

The short booklet found had only twelve remaining pages and measured about the size of a recipe card. Very little is known about this booklet as it is apparently missing pages, and there are no names attributed to the recipes. Only one date, the 3rd of July 1755, appears above a recipe that prevents "difficulty in urinating" (*Remede contre la difficulte d'uriner*). Strikingly, this is just a month before the horrific Grand Dérangement was to begin (Faragher, "A Great and Noble Scheme" 83). It is a mysterious inclusion in the Miller Family Fonds, an archival collection of documents from the Miller family. The earliest known member of the Miller family, Jacob Miller, was a German immigrant who arrived in Lunenburg County in the 1780s ("Miller family fonds"). The dates of the documents inside range from 1679 to 1944, containing information from Jacob and many of his descendants. However, this is the only document that is written in French, though there are some materials in German. Although little is known about the booklet, there are some interesting aspects about Acadian life and culture that can be discerned from its contents.

The booklet itself contains remedies for such ailments as rheumatism, toothaches, gout, frostbite, and urinary tract stones. Many of these illnesses appear with multiple potential remedies. This shows that there was a degree of flexibility when using home remedies. Although not necessarily common, these illnesses were seemingly

important enough to have been recorded for future reference. The types of illnesses that were included also highlight interesting aspects of Acadian life. The remedies that are left in the booklet consist mostly of illnesses that cause general pain or discomfort, but are not necessarily life threatening. Home remedies of this sort, then, were reserved for minor afflictions and not significant illnesses. In fact, some of the recipes even indicate that one can continue with one's routine or commitments while taking the medicine ("*Contre toutes fortes de maux veneriens*"). These home remedies also include a variety of interesting ingredients whose names are reminiscent of *l'ancien français*. These ingredients call into question the availability of such variety in the Acadian garden.

There only a few ingredients that appear in multiple recipes and the vast majority are surprising additions. *Eau de vie*, a French term for an alcoholic beverage, and wine are the most common ingredients. They typically act as a base of a medicinal drink, or they are used to wash down a remedy. In two recipes, both concerning difficulty with urinating, "plantain juice" is a major ingredient. This is not the banana relative, but a common wild plant found the world over (Cormier-Boudreau 232). These three major ingredients were easily accessible for Acadians, either in their own forests, by import, or making them on their own. Other ingredients that did not appear often, but were commonly found in Acadia included ginger, honey, white onions, lemon juice, tea, milk, egg whites, and flour. Some of these ingredients, like onions, milk, and eggs, were commonly found on Acadian farms and were staples in their diet ("Tour Traditional Acadian Garden"). Others, like tea, flour, and ginger, would have been easily imported from France or America.

The majority of the ingredients were local to the region of Acadia, though there were a few of dubious origin. The local ingredients included easily found herbs and plants like betony, sarsaparilla, senna, anise, nettles, purslane and juniper trees (Cormier-Boudreau 201-44; Nova Scotia Government). Many of these did not need any particular care

and some would even be found in the wild. Others required more upkeep or a longer process to obtain, like turpentine and camphor. These two ingredients can be found in Canada in balsam fir trees; however, there is a significant process to extract turpentine from trees and then to extract camphor from turpentine (Saunders).

Three ingredients from these recipes may have existed in Nova Scotia at this time, or they may be similar to plants that Acadians owned. For example, cissus is well suited to this climate. However, there is little evidence to show that the Acadians had access to it, as it does not appear in any pieces about Acadian medicine or agriculture. Lastly, two ingredients have similar names to plants that existed in Acadian gardens (“Tour Traditional Acadian Garden”). One recipe calls for the *semence d’aurone*, or the seed of an aurone plant. One such plant is the Southernwood, also known as Southern wormwood. Wormwood was commonly found in Acadian gardens, so it is possible this variant existed in Acadia as well. Lastly, there is the *iris de Florence*, or the Iris Florentina, a white lily-of-the-valley. Although the Yellow Iris apparently existed in Acadian gardens, there is no evidence of the Iris Florentina in Acadia (“Tour Traditional Acadian Garden”). Perhaps both had similar medicinal properties and the Yellow Iris was able to replace the harder to obtain Iris Florentina.

There were few ingredients that were especially questionable as they were not from the region, but they were also not imports from France. Tropical plants such as Guaiac wood and bark, found in the Caribbean, are listed in the recipes. Almond oil needs a tremendous amount of work to grow, maintain and process which was beyond the means of Acadian farmers in the seventeenth century. Lastly, Salammonia, while it can be synthetically created, did not occur naturally in Nova Scotia and, once again, the Acadians were unable to provide the processing needed. While the majority of the ingredients found in this booklet coincide with what could be found in Acadian gardens,

one still wonders why they would record recipes that cannot be completed with the ingredients at hand.

Unfortunately, this booklet was the only piece of Acadian evidence that was found over the course of the EMMR project to date. Somehow, these recipes made their way from somewhere in the Acadian homeland to Lunenburg County where the Miller Family fonds were created ("Miller family fonds"). The lack of information calls many questions to mind concerning the origins of the booklet, the fate of the author, and how it ended up with the Miller family. Since these questions cannot be answered at this time, focus should shift to a question that can be answered. Considering the displacement of the Acadians and the cultural changes that resulted, one may ask what happened to Acadian folk medicine? Marielle Cormier-Boudreau's book *Médecine traditionnelle en Acadie* answers this question expertly. She notes that *les chirurgiens* lived on after the Grand Dérangement, specifically in her *chirurgienne* grandmother (13). Despite the lack of written recipes, as evidenced by our small booklet, the lively oral history tradition among Acadians has preserved folk medicine. Not only did this rich tradition spur the famous poem *Evangeline*, but it has also maintained the fascinating history of Acadian medicine better than documentary evidence has (Fragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme* 454-55).

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