

## Waters Medicinal

### Contradiction and Complexity in Early Modern Maritime Remedies

LYN BENNETT

Dalhousie University

---

**F**rom at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, natural and distilled waters of varying kinds were specified in remedies prescribed to treat a range of diseases and disorders. The medicinal waters that appeared in early modern medical recipes encompassed the familiar kinds of rose, mint, and plantain as well the more strange. Among the strangest – at least to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibilities – is the “frog-spawn water” that was included in remedies well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps beyond. Most often distilled as a watery ingredient to be used in a variety of medicinal concoctions, frog spawn was also applied in its natural state. The 1687 edition of Amsterdam physician Paul Barbette’s translated *Thesaurus Chirurgiae*, for example, advocated frog spawn as useful in the treatment of cancer: “Suppuratives and strong Discutients are hurtful” against malignant tumors, Barbette maintained, and prefaced his list of the efficacious with the declaration that “the following [are] good” (123). In the book’s volume titled “A Body of Military Medicines Experimented,” distilled frog-spawn water served Barbette’s particularly surgical interests as a key ingredient in an astringent applied to various kinds of bleeding. Frog-spawn water was also specified by Genevan physician Théodore Mayerne in combination with plantain water, alum, and other ingredients in a recipe to treat the “paroxysme” (19) of “an Illustrious Nobleman” identified in his 17<sup>th</sup>-century *Medicinal Councils* as “inclin’d to a Consumption” (10).

---

Frog-spawn's usefulness was not, however, limited to treating cancer, staunching war wounds, or preventing paroxysms; nor was its application restricted to the purview of learned and best-selling physicians like Barbette, who treated the military, and Mayerne, who ministered to French and English kings. Educational and agricultural reformer Samuel Hartlib, for instance, drew on a more domestic understanding of frog spawn's healing efficacy in his earlier manuscript ephemerides. Like Barbette, Hartlib advocated frog spawn in the treatment of injuries, but not in the kind of concoction detailed in the *Thesaurus Chirurgiae*. Instead, as Jennifer Evans notes in her *Early Modern Medicine* blog, Hartlib recommended a simple "Cloth dipped in frogs sperma" as an efficacious treatment for sundry wounds ("255 Frogs"). Frog spawn was thus useful to domestic healers, military doctor-surgeons, and royal physicians alike, applied both on its own and in combination with other ingredients in remedies intended to treat a variety of medical ailments.

Frog-spawn water also found its way into remedies applied in the treatment of venereal disease. George Bate, court physician to both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, recommended in his *Pharmacopoeia Batenana* the inclusion of frog-spawn water in a remedy for the specifically male afflictions of "Gonorrhoea's" that brought about "Ulcers of the Yard" (918). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, French professor of medicine John Astruc's *A Treatise of Venereal Diseases* also included frog-spawn water in a recipe specifying the additional ingredients of milk, marshmallow root, and linseed to treat genital sores. Applied not only to male body parts, frog-spawn water was also specified in remedies treating afflictions particular to women. In his 1698 *The Compleat Midwife's Practice*, Royal College physician John Pechey described a troublesome case of "A Gentlewoman of a full body having been long diseased by

an immoderate flux of the Courses." Though the suffering gentlewoman "at length recovered her Health by the prescriptions of her Physician," she was within a year "seiz'd with a straitness and pain in her right Breast" that became increasingly inflamed (181). Her skin, Pechey explained, was hard and hot, and "several hard Tubercles . . . that gleeted much" quickly "spread up that side of the neck" to the "shoulder, and Sacapula," "arm-pit, and down the side." Despite the extent and severity of her illness, the patient was, Pechey confidently reported, relieved of her suffering by successful treatment with "Vigo's Oyntment of Tutty" and "this following Lotion" (182) made up of ingredients that include a distillation of frog-spawn water combined with seeds of quince and plantain.

Frog-spawn water continued to appear in a range of medical remedies well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when "Water of Frog-Spawn with a little Alum" was described by pharmacist John George Hansel in his 1730 *Compendium Medicinale* as "a volatile Alcaly" (110) astringently useful in numerous remedies. The household handbook titled *The Complete Family-Piece* published in 1741 included frog spawn in a remedy for Quincey, a severe form of tonsillitis and, from the earlier work of Royal Society fellow Robert Boyle, a treatment for "Redness of the Eyes." Another popular handbook, the 1733 childcare guide titled *The Art of Nursing*, used frog spawn and frog-spawn water in recipes for a liniment and for a concocted medicinal water. That frog-spawn water was widely perceived to have legitimate medical benefits throughout the early modern period the London Physicians' *British Dispensatory* – the official pharmacopeia of learned medicine – confirms with the inclusion of its own instructions for producing *aqua spermatic ranarum* from strained frog spawn mixed with alum.

---

Though certified by the Royal College and prescribed in treatments for numerous maladies, frog-spawn was not always thought helpful to human health. Jennifer Evans notes that Barbette – the Amsterdam physician who recommended frog-spawn as an astringent in the treatment of wounds and as a medicine for cancer – also warned sternly against the drinking of “Pit or Ditch-water.” Motivated not by the recent discovery of bacteria, Barbette was instead concerned that one might thereby “swallow Frog or Snake-spawn,” materials he believed dangerous to ingest on their own. Indeed, “a Countryman” under Barbette’s care, Evans explains, evidently “voided” no fewer than “two hundred fifty and five Frogs” as a result of consuming untreated frog spawn. It’s unclear why voiding a large numbers of frogs was thought harmful, but the episode Barbette described nevertheless cautions against the ingestion of frog spawn in circumstances that, his anecdote implies, do not include its distillation into a proper medicinal simple for concocting with other ingredients. Though Barbette and his fellow physicians elsewhere recommended the use of frog spawn even on its own, it is evidently dangerous when ingested unmediated by a qualified professional.

Even when distilled or concocted, however, the medicinal value of frog-spawn water was likewise subject to question. In his 1760 *A Treasure of Useful Discoveries*, medical doctor Godfrey Boyle wrote of his experiment to test whether *aqua spermatis ranarum* did in fact contain “a volatile, animal Salt” (36). Having tested both old and “new Frogs Spawn Water” in his findings “of universal benefit to the publick,” Boyle “found it a Mistake, it being only a phlegmatic, simple Water” that, like “a Distillation in the same Manner from *Snails* and *Worms* would be of no great Use in Medicine,” though “Decoctions of them prudently managed might” (36). Concluding that frog-

spawn water, whether distilled or decocted (and therefore sterilized), would be medicinally useless at worst and only tentatively useful at best, Boyle's findings challenged the many medical uses to which frog spawn had long been applied in both domestic and learned medicine.

The recommendation of frog-spawn water as a medicinal ingredient nevertheless made its way across the Atlantic, where our research has also uncovered evidence of what might prove to be equally conflicted views of its usefulness. That a recipe to treat a sore throat published in the *Nova Scotia Almanac* of 1791 included frog-spawn water suggests its likely use as a medicinal ingredient in the early modern Maritimes. Specifying "frog's spawn water" as a gargle ingredient, the almanac recipe also calls for syrup of mulberries and "sugar of lead" along with the equally popular plantain water found also in concoctions recommended by Barbette, Mayerne, and Pechey. Nearly a century later, an article titled "Toads and Frogs as Curatives" that appeared in the *The New York Times* on the 26th of June and in *The Globe* on the 2nd of July 1887 indicates sustained North American interest in the medical application of frog-spawn water, and even frogs themselves, in treating various afflictions. Focusing specifically on Ireland and Scotland, the article proposes that

... frog's spawn placed in a stone jar and buried for three months till it turns to water has been found wonderfully efficacious in Donegal when well rubbed into a rheumatic limb. How much of the credit was due to the rubbing is not recorded. In Aberdeenshire a cure recommended for sore eyes is to lick the eyes of a live frog. The man who has thus been healed has henceforth the power of curing all sore eyes by merely licking them! (13; 10)

---

Frog-spawn water may here be lauded as “wonderfully efficacious,” yet the metadiscursive “How much of the credit was due to the rubbing is not recorded” and the exclamation point at the passage’s end may point to a growing – and perhaps uniquely North American – skepticism about the curative benefits of frogs and the products they produce.

Even as the article’s publication in two prominent North American newspapers implied the ongoing use of frog-spawn water as a medicinal ingredient, the manuscript notebook of Dr. William James Almon of Halifax recorded concerns akin to Barbette’s. A near-contemporary of the English physician Godfrey Boyle, whose experiments questioned the value even of decocted frog-spawn water, Almon was Halifax’s most popular and successful 18<sup>th</sup>-century physician and the owner of a substantial medical library. Like most physicians of his day, Almon complemented his medical texts with a handwritten collection of remedies and receipts in the form of a notebook that also included several clippings from other sources. Among those that Almon preserved is the epistolary advice of one Samuel Brown, whose published letter, “*Prophylaxis*,” advocated the careful shunning of “pools and puddles of stagnant water” and countered popular belief also in recommending “frequent bathing in warm water of a middle temperature” (ca. 1797-98). What Almon thought of frog-spawn water specifically can only remain, for the moment at least, the subject of conjecture. Yet, given his apparent interest in avoiding “pools and puddles of stagnant water” as a means of preventing illness, it seems likely that the Halifax physician wasn’t entirely confident about the medicinal value of ingredients produced in a muddy habitat or, at the very least, was as unconvinced as Barbette about the

usefulness of frog-spawn water when not ministered or mediated by a qualified physician.

The medicinal use of frog-spawn water on both sides of the early modern Atlantic thus implies both continuity and change in a long 18<sup>th</sup> century that saw the publication of the *Nova Scotia Almanac* and the medical practice of Dr. Almon. That century, Jerry Bannister notes, has been the subject of historical approaches that tend to characterize “the Atlantic Ocean as a type of highway that linked peoples together rather than a barrier that kept them apart” (6). Viewing the Atlantic as a barrier as well as a link, the *Early Modern Maritime Recipes* (EMMR) project considers similarities and differences among recipe uses and ingredients, including water, in a trans-Atlantic and settler context. Though I here focus specifically on one kind of medicinal water, among the medical remedies and receipts we have so far uncovered, water is specified also by temperature, cold, warm, “blood,” “pretty hot,” hot, and boiling, as well as by kinds pure, clear, soft, spring, and distilled. Beyond the locally available kinds of frog-spawn and spring, waters used in a variety of Maritime remedies also encompassed the rather exotic tamarind water, cream of tartar dissolved in water, and the water in which red oak is boiled that is recommended as a cure for cancer. Water also appears in the mixture of milk and water thought to ward off infection, the remedy of sack and warm water recommended for vaginal injection, and the distilled varieties of lime, soda, barley, juniper, and rose. Further revealing water’s many forms and uses in medicine, food, drink, agriculture, veterinary medicine, and household application, EMMR offers a means of exploring the links of continuity and barriers of change that shaped water usage in the early modern Maritimes.

---

### Works Cited

Anon. *The art of nursing: or, the method of bringing up young children according to the rules of physick, for the preservation of health, and prolonging life.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London, 1733.

Anon. *The complete family-piece: and, country gentleman, and farmer's best guide. In three parts. ... With a complete alphabetical index to each part.* London, 1741.

Anon. "Toads and Frogs as Curatives." *New York Times*, 26 June 1887, p. 13 / *The Globe*, 2 July 1887, p. 10.

Astruc, John. *A Treatise of Venereal Diseases.* Vol. 2. London, 1754.

Bannister, Jerry. "Atlantic Canada in an Atlantic World? Northeastern North America in the Long 18<sup>th</sup> Century." *Acadiensis*, Vol. 43, No.2, 2014, pp. 3-30.

Barbette, Paul. *Thesaurus Chirurgiae.* 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. London, 1687.

Bate, George. *Pharmacopoeia Batenana, or Bate's Dispensatory.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Trans. William Salmon. London, 1694.

Boyle, Godfrey. *A Treasure of Useful Discoveries.* Dublin: James Hunter, 1760.

Boyle, Robert. *Medicinal experiments: or, a collection of choice and safe remedies for the most part simple, and easily prepar'd: very useful in families, and fitted for the service of country-people.* London, 1712.

Brown, Samuel. "Prophylaxis, or Method of Preventing Infection." Letter from Boston, 2 August. Newspaper clipping published in New York, ca. 1797-1800.

Evans, Jennifer. "255 Frogs." [www.earlymodernmedicine.com](http://www.earlymodernmedicine.com), 3 May 2014.



Hansel, John George. *Compendium medicinale: or, a brief summary of the Original causes of most Diseases in Human Bodies, with their Symptoms and Method of Cure.* London, 1730.

Mayerne, Théodore. *Medicinal Councils.* Trans. Tho. Sherly. London, 1677.

*Nova Scotia Calendar or Almanac by Metonicus.* Halifax, 1791. (NSA AK.AY.N85M)

Pechey, John. *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged.* London, 1698.

Royal College of Physicians of London. *The British Dispensatory.* London: Edward Cave, 1747.