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PIERRE POMET, A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WORKER FOR PURE DRUGS, SPICES AND FOODS.*

BY L. F. KEBLER.¹

In order to understand existing conditions, it is necessary to know something of the efforts of the past. I shall therefore briefly note a few historical features, undoubtedly well known to Monsieur Pomet, a man of the highest ideals.

The striving for pure foods and drugs antedates the memory of man. Pliny's Natural History, written about 77 A.D., is one of the oldest source of information available to us. Much of what he says was common knowledge in his time. He simply recorded current information, including the wheat and some chaff, in his

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¹ Bureau of Chemistry, Washington, D. C.

voluminous granary. About a third of his 37 books is devoted to thousands of "remedies" and their natural sources, including many diversions into the art of medicine. Sophistication of drugs and other commodities of life was common in the early days of the Roman Empire. Pliny repeatedly calls attention to these practices and says: "It is the natural propensity of man to falsify and corrupt everything. At the present. . . they (physicians) trust entirely to the druggists who spoil everything by their fraudulent adulteration. For this long time past, they have even purchased their plasters and eye salves ready made, and the consequence is, that the spoiled and adulterated wares in the druggists' shops are thus got rid of."

Pliny gives tests for the genuineness of a few drugs, among which may be mentioned elaterium, opium, white lead and hematite.

Dioscorides, a renowned Greek physician, about 100 A.D., wrote a classic of five volumes entitled "De Materia Medica," considered by many as the chief ancient work on pharmacology. He drew much of his information from previous sources and is credited as being the first to indicate means for detecting the adulteration of drugs. He refers to debased opium, styrax, resin, etc.

The adulteration of wine in Greece was so notorious that special inspectors were appointed to detect and stop these practices.

Claudius Galen, 129 to 210 A.D., was among the first to prove that cinnamon lost its potency by exposure and referred to the necessity of physicians knowing drugs and their properties in order to detect impositions. He gives much information concerning the drug trade in Rome and throughout the Empire. In order to assure himself of the quality of his drugs, he gathered many of them himself. Galen refused to reveal the methods employed for certain adulterations which he had investigated personally, lest the evil practices spread further.

For about a thousand years there is a practical barrenness of literature dealing with drugs. Either nothing of importance was done and recorded or the records are lost to civilization.

A Norman-French ordinance issued 1316 A.D., intended especially for "spicers," reads in part:

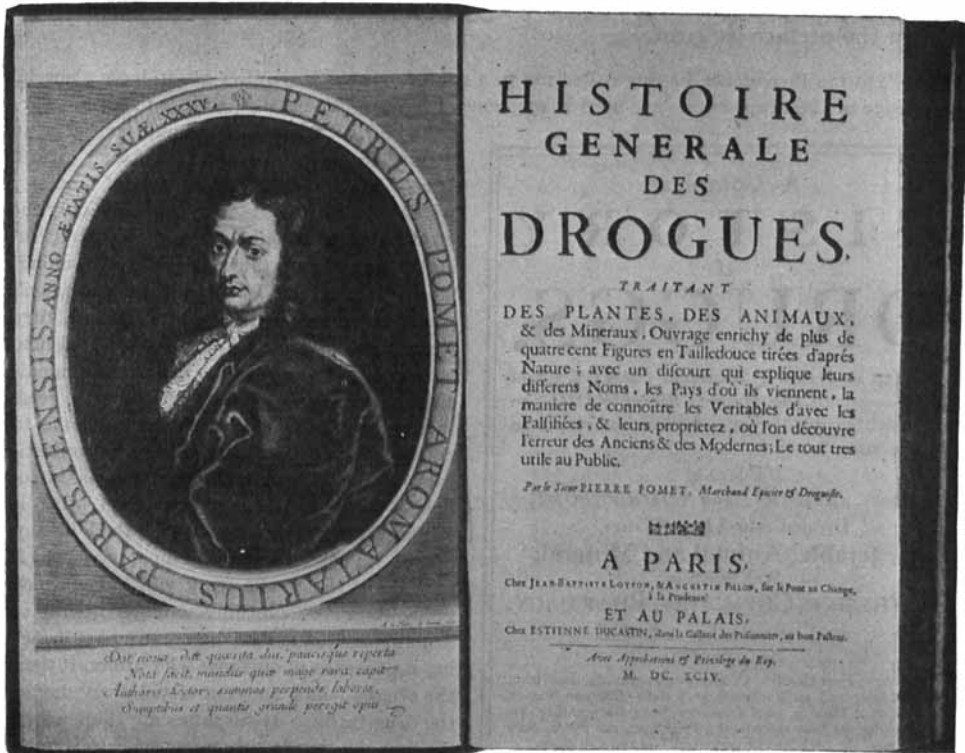
"No man shall dub any manner of wares, that is to say, by putting in a thing that was in another bale, and then dressing the bale up again in another manner than the former in which it was first bought, so as to make the ends of the bale contain better things than the remainder within the bale, by reason whereof the buyer may be deceived, and so lose his goods. Also that no man shall moisten any manner of merchandise, such as saffron, alum, ginger, cloves, and such manner of things as may admit of being moistened; that is to say, by steeping the ginger, or turning the saffron out of the sack and then anointing it, or bathing it in water; by reason whereof any manner of weight may, or any deterioration, arise to the merchandise."

A French ordinance (1330) forbade the mixing of wines or falsely naming them. Similar edicts were in vogue during the life of Pomet. In the same country in 1336 a law was in force prohibiting apothecaries using exhausted, sophisticated or corrupted drugs in the preparation of medicines.

In England drugs and groceries were sold for many years in the same shops. In 1617 the apothecaries separated themselves from the grocers and soon thereafter they complained of the frauds and artifices of the grocers from whom they continued to be supplied with many drugs.

The College of Physicians compiled the first English Pharmacopœia and published it in 1613. During the seventeenth century there were committees of doctors in Europe whose duty it was to inspect the druggists and from these committees originated various Pharmacopœias, *viz.*: Pharmacopœia Antwerpiensis, 1661; P. Utrajectina, 1663; P. Amstelodamensis, 1668; Antidotarium Bononiense, 1674; Regia Chemica et Galencia, Geneva, 1684.

Pierre Pomet, chief druggist to the King of France, was born in Paris, 1658. He began to devote himself to his chosen profession early in life. After finishing his apprenticeship he traveled extensively in England, Italy, Germany and Holland. On the different voyages he acquired an intimate knowledge of medicinal



substances and in due time opened a drug store in Paris, which proved to be very successful. His talents and honesty won him the esteem of the most skillful physicians and it was at their invitation that he undertook at the "Jardin des Plantes" a demonstration of the drugs that he had collected at great expense from all countries with which France had relations at that time. Pomet was a teacher of rare ability and assisted in every way those who followed his course of lessons.

He was occupied with a description of the rare things in his cabinet at the time of his death in 1699, only 41 years old. On the same day he was sent a pension which Louis XIV, surnamed The Great, had granted as a reward for his services.

Pomet is the author of a book of two volumes. The title page of the first volume is shown above.

The objects and purposes of this 231-year old publication are shown in the Dedication and Preface. In the dedication of the Chief Physician of his Majesty, Pomet says:¹

"It is impossible to understand how much the public suffers from the traffic in the world of, I do not know how many, sophisticated drugs which can by no means produce the effect which is expected of them, either for the reestablishment or preservation of health. It may be still more surprising to learn that this terrible evil is the most ordinary thing in the world and that nothing is more common in the drug shops and apothecary shops than these falsified drugs. It is my purpose, sir, to expose in this work the bad faith which causes so much harm to the health of human beings. As these dark mysteries cannot be revealed without incurring the hatred of those who so unworthily profit from the credulity of human beings, I have need of a protector of sagacity and authority, and I cannot find a better one, sir, than in your person. . . ."

In the preface we read:

"Divine Providence having called me to a profession which requires me to have a special knowledge of the drugs which are used in medicine, I have applied myself to it with all the care

and good faith which one should expect of an honorable man. I must confess that at first I was impressed with the lack of sincerity which prevails in a trade which is not only the greatest in the kingdom but the most useful and the most important in the life of mankind. The abuses which I first noticed and which were the more horrible to me because they were designed to deprive men of the real help which they had a right to expect from medicine, either for the preservation or the reestablishment of their health, induced me to employ all my time in exposing the sophistications which criminal cupidity has introduced in a profession where good faith is without doubt more valuable than in any other. These are the circumstances which have given rise to the work which I am now publishing. . . . Nothing is more capable of bringing medicine into disrepute and of bringing reproaches upon those who profess it than the abuses which are committed every day in the drug trade. It surpasses anything which the imagination is able to conceive. It may be said at the conclusion of this work that this would have been a good place to declaim against such bad usage which is capable of doing so much harm to the health of individuals and of causing so much ravage to human society, but having more in mind the idea of correcting abuses than of decrying the professions

I have usually confined myself to giving the methods of discerning the good drugs from those which are falsified. If it may sometimes have happened that in my zeal I may have used some expression which was perhaps too hard (if such a thing is possible in a subject where it is a question of nothing less than the life of human beings), I may be pardoned perhaps for these slight impulses which after all are only intended to give a better understanding of the evils which the whole world is interested in eradicating.

A Compleat
HISTORY
OF
DRUGGS,

Written in *French* by Monsieur *POMET*, Chief-
DRUGGIST to the present *French KING*; to
which is added what is further observable on
the same SUBJECT,

FROM
Messrs. *LEMERT*, and *TOURNEFORT*,
Divided into Three Classes,
Vegetable, Animal and Mineral;
With their Use
In PHYSICK, CHYMISTRY, PHARMACY,
And several other ARTS:
ILLUSTRATED

With above Four Hundred Copper Cutts curiously done from
the Life; and an Explanation of their different Names,
Places of Growth, and Countries from whence they are
brought; the Way to know the True from the False, their
Virtues, etc. A WORK of very great Use and Curiosity.

Done into *English* from the ORIGINALS.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
Printed for *R. Bonwick, William Freeman, Timothy Goodwin,*
Matthew Wotton, John Wallboe, S. Manship, John Nicholson,
Benjamin Tooke, Rich, Parker and Ralph Smith. 1712.

¹ Translated by A. W. Warthen.

"My work is, therefore, not only useful to those who practice medicine and who have as much right as any one to know whether only pure drugs are used in the composition of the remedies which they prescribe, but also to pharmacy students, to druggists and to apothecaries who will be able henceforth, through the information which they receive in this work, to discern the genuine from the false in usage or in the drug trade.

"I hope that those who read this work will concede that they have never seen such a complete treatise on drugs and that I have collected here not only material which is distributed among a great number of authors, and which could not be found without difficulty, but also a quantity of material of which nothing is known or at least very little by the authors who have preceded us."

There were scores of books on drugs printed or available in the 16th and 17th centuries, but Pomet's abundantly illustrated work, in spite of some inaccuracies, was considered the most complete and one of the best treatises that had yet appeared covering medicinal substances, spices and many food products. The publication was very well received. It was translated into German in 1717, and into English, with material additions, in 1712, 1725 and 1737. A revised edition of two volumes, prepared by Pomet's son Joseph, was printed in 1735.

The authors of the 1712 English revision made many useful additions, as is indicated by the title page herewith.

This English revision also contains an excellent bibliography of the many ancient works consulted. This is the oldest bibliography that I have ever seen. It is exceedingly interesting and of inestimable value to those having occasion to inform themselves in ancient drug lore; the wording of the title page is reproduced in the accompanying cut.

THE LITERATURE OF PHARMACY.*

BY FRED B. KILMER.

Heaped high on the top of Hargraves' desk, and overflowing to the floor, were rolls and bundles of drug magazines and journals, mostly enclosed in their wrappers, unopened and unread. When some one alluded to this mass of literature, Hargraves remarked:

"I never read them. I have no time. There's nothing in them anyway. Once in a while we have a clean-up, and out they go to the waste heap.

"Some of them are sent to me without my asking; some I pay for, to satisfy a glib canvasser or to stop a stream of letters from the publisher. Next year I will stop all of them. It's too much bother even to take them in and throw them away."

There are thousands of Hargraves in the land. Their names are counted on the magazine subscription lists and help the "circulation liar" to raise the advertising rate, but the pages are not read.

Noting the meagerness of the library in the store of a prominent pharmacist, he was questioned as to whether his home library contained works pertaining to pharmacy.

He replied emphatically, "No! when I go home I want to forget about pharmacy."

The pharmaceutical literature that is not read bulks large; it constitutes a great waste of energy, ink and especially of good paper, which the world just now needs to conserve.

It has been claimed that pharmacy ranks with the professions because it has a

* Section on Historical Pharmacy, A. Ph. A., Des Moines meeting, 1925.