highlife highland
na gàidhealtachd

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY
MARY BEITH

Mary Beith was born in London in May 1938. After leaving school, she taught English in Germany, before enrolling on a journalism course in Poole. Mary was named Campaigning Journailst of the Year in 1975 for her undercover work in an animal testing laboratory and she also spent time undercover in Northern Ireland. Mary moved to the Highlands in the late 1980's, eventually settling in Melness, Sutherland. We are lucky to have a collection deposited here, dedicated to Mary Beith, and containing some of her work and papers.

Deanamh a' Leighis
•
Making the Cure
22.11.02
MARY BEITH
on Gaelic medical tradition

Alas, there's nothing for it — the Butler will have to be dealt with. For thus have I now dubbed the invisible force in this house which has quite patently been filching all manner of papers, letters, books and records from their proper place and stashing them away in dark corners for future provision against his pension.

I know this force is of the buttling kind for he glides about silently as well as invisibly. I just wish he'd do be ironing once in a while.

When I came across a reference in fcNeill's "Colonsay" to the butter-ort or bog violet, I was sure the ant had been discussed at length in

this column some years ago. Two days of searching have revealed nothing in the files, so please forgive me if I repeat myself (though I dare-say it won't be for the first time). Otherwise, blame the Butler, who has also managed to mislay the Hoover attachments and the vegetable knife. He'll have to go.

Anyway, I have some more recent findings about the plant. In mention-ing the bog violet, McNeill gives a tale about a changeling which is rel-evant to Raghnall MacilleDuibh's recent interesting ideas on the sub-ject:

"This plant, together with the Whin and Juniper," writes McNeill, "was believed to act as a charm against witchcraft. Cows that ate it were safe from elfish arrows and supernatural ailments that were sup-posed to make much havoc in olden times. It was believed that a healthy, nice-looking baby was sometimes coveted and, when the opportunity occurred, even carried off by the fairies and a languishing, old-fash-ioned creature left in its place.

" Some women, as the story goes, who were watching a new-born infant in a house in Machrins to make sure that the child would not be changed, heard two fairies coming to the window, and the following conversation take place. 'We will take it,' said one. 'We will not, we cannot,' said the other; 'its mother partook of the butter of the cow that ate the Butterwort.'"

Father Allan Macdonald collect-ed a similar tale: "Where Aonghus Gobha's (Angus the Smith's) house now is in Benbecula there were two

women in a house, and they were going out to the hill pasture, and they left two children behind them in the house. They had not been long away when two women came into the house. One said 'We had better take them with us'. 'Oh no' said the other, 'they have drunk the milk of the cow that ate the Mòthan today.'"

And, yet again, we seem to have a name problem. Father Allan translates *mòthan* as pearlwort or sandwort (which is very like the former), yet in most place *mòthan* is the bog vio-let/butterwort. In McNeill's Colonsay the magical place it is referring to is, he notes, locally known as *modalan* or *bodan measgan*.

So far as I've ever been able to work out, the bog violet – a fetching insectivorous plant with a flower very similar to that of the true violet – fits best with all the stories. The pearlworts, and there are many kinds, are insignificant, almost mossy-looking, wee things which are, nev-ertheless quite pretty in close-up.

In most places *mòthan* seems to refer to bog violet and in their excel-lent work "Ainmean Gàidhlig Lusan" (Gaelic Names of Plants) Joan Clark and Ian MacDonald give *mòthan* for it and *mungan* for the pearlwort. Ellen Garvie's "Gaelic Names of Plants, Fungi & Animals" clearly states that *mòthan* is bog violet and a mistake when applied to pearlwort.

Alexander Carmichael has sever-al references, notes and verses about *mòthan* and admits he is uncertain as to which plant is meant: "... it appears to be either the thyme-leaved sandwort (Arenaria serpyllifolia) or the bog violet". John Gregorson Campbell, on the other hand, is con-vinced it is pearlwort. As I've said, sandwort and pearlwort are very sim-ilar.

Was mòthan perhaps the name given to pearlwort in Eriskay and South Uist (Father Allan Macdonald) and Tiree (J G Campbell)? I don't know but perhaps one of you out there does. The mat-ter is further confused by Dr S Rutherford Macphail writing knowl-edgeably about Highland charms and remedies in the Caledonian Medical Journal in 1896.

"In Uist a plant called 'mothan' or 'moan' (Pinguicula vulgaris [i.e. bog violet]) was believed to be a sure pro-tection against the power of witch-es. The correct way to collect this herb was to gather it on a Sunday, pulling each tuft with frequent invo-cations of the Trinity." But he adds: "Other herbs are also used to place in milk receptacles to prevent witch-es turning the milk sour." And that seems to contradict the coagulating action of bog violet and pearlwort. Maybe this milk was specifically set aside for making cheese and butter?

Bog violets, as their name implies, grow in wet places, the pearl and sandworts in dry ones. The first two plants affect milk in varying degrees by acting like rennet and creating curds, but the English butterwort name for *mothan* gives the game away as to which is the most effec-tive. I'm not sure whether the sand-worts work in the same way but will give them the benefit of the doubt.

More *mòthan, modalan, mungan* business next time — if the Butler doesn't make off with the notes.

WHFP 22.6.90
Deanamh a' Leighis
•
Making the Cure
MARY BEITH
on Gaelic Medical Tradition

As one of those who is inclined to agree with the late great Hugh MacDiarmid that Robert Burns is exploited by far too many as a "laxative for loquacity" on and around 25th January, I should also like to risk life and limb by point-ing out that over-indulging in too much haggis and whisky is, regar-ding a certain irritating fact of Highland life, totally unseasonal.

There is one very good reason for making not January but high summer the haggis-and-whisky ritual season: the midge. Let me explain.

Some years ago a scientific experi-ment in a steamy, equatorial jungle proved that the mosquito — a creature of remarkable similarity to the midge, and professing the same dietary habits — does not like vitamin B. Half the volunteers in the experiment were dos-ed with the vitamin, the other half were given placebos, and the former were barely troubled by bites, if at all.

Now oatmeal is bursting with vitamin B1, malted barley with B2 and liver with B6. What's more, a sheep's stomach contains an awful lot of B12. With porridge for breakfast and hagg-is for tea your bloodstream should be hoaching with enough of the B-complex to deter the most undiscern-ing midge. However you take your malted barley is up to you, bearing in mind that too much alcohol in the system detracts from rather than adds to the body's vitamin B content.

The traditional diet may be one reason — the other being misplaced pride — why the macho Gael has ever claimed, especially in front of tourists, that the wee beasties never worried him. But diets change and the malt barley won't do the trick on its own, lads. It's the vitamin B *complex* that counts.

Good basic native diets the world over may well be a strong factor in why locals are less plagued by certain pests than incomers who stick to their home-based eating habits. I spent several of my childhood years in the West Indies and was amazed to find other incoming whites had their beds draped with mosquito nets. Our fami-ly, like the native Jamaicans, had never felt the need of them, but then we ate the same local foods.

It's an idea worth pursuing, but we mustn't forget the midge is an in-genious and probably all-too-adaptable creature. The defences need to be broad-based. The vitamin B answer is not 100 per cent foolproof, and over-doing any one thing — including cer-tain vitamins — is not a good idea either.

reckoned he had the ultimate midge repellant was a man in his nineties who claimed, many years ago now, that the secret of his immunity to midges — and much else — lay in the fact that he hadn't had a bath in 40 years. As may be imagined, the side-effects of this preventative can be socially awkward.

Those who swear by tobacco may have similar problems, though it may not just be the smoke that helps to deter the midges. The toxin nicotine, oddly enough, provides the pharma-ceutical industry with a rich source of vitamin B, though it (nicotinamide) is obtained from a variety of origins other than tobacco.

And then there are those who put their faith in garlic. This, as is well known, will repel just about every-thing and everyone, so perhaps we ought to pursue the trail of the socially desirable, humanly safe anti-midge lotion.

I once persuaded my younger daughter to try out one of the old Highland devices — rubbing the skin hard with bog-myrtle leaves. Up the hill she went and back she came — cross and scratching like mad. The bog myrtle had kept the midges at bay but strongly attracted the clegs . . .

Feverfew had the best reputation in the old days, and it's a fairly common plant in our gardens. Boil a couple of handfuls of it up in a pint of water, strain, and put the cooled liquid on the exposed areas of your skin. Its bitter taste will be repugnant to insects and even prevent them from hovering too close.

An introduced plant into early physic gardens, it was valued for treat-ing the condition its English name sug-gests — fevers. A popular herb, it was also renowned for treating migraine-

modern medicine. Feverfew has many other uses too, especially in treating problems particular to women. How-ever, we shall stick to the midge angle.

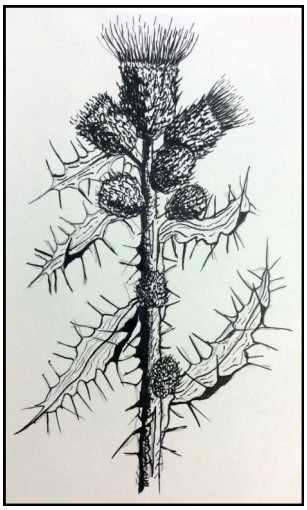
Once widely used as an insect deter-rent in the north and west mainland and the islands, its properties seem t have been largely forgotten. As it's a great deal more economic than th proprietary repellants on sale at th chemists, it's yet another old tip wel worth resurrecting. Feverfew lotion o tincture can also be used to relieve th swelling and irritation caused by in-sect bites.

But remember, insect repellant don't necessarily work equally effi-ciently for everybody. (pace my daughter and the clegs), rather in th way that scents may react, varyingly on different skins. A perfume ma smell delicately charming on one woman but powerfully over-the-top on another; one suits spicey scents, another floral ones. It can be a matter of personal chemistry and hormone levels. There may be a case for going out fully-armed, legged, faced and necked with a bellyful of haggis and porridge, a pipeful of foul tobacco, an unwashed body, a medicinal dram, *and* a protective layer of bog myrtle and feverfew.

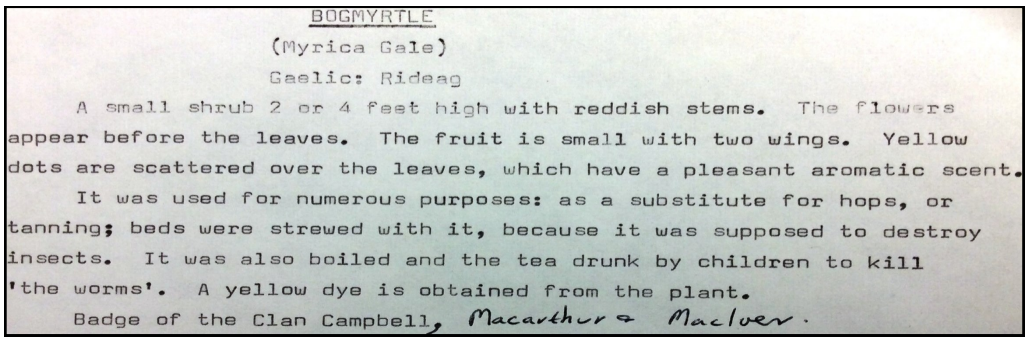
Light clothing is less attractive to midges than dark clothing. This was fiercely brought home to me one sum-mer evening when to my horror I found that a black jersey I was wearing had virtually turned grey, so thickly were the midges clustered on it.

Tell me, though, why is it that these self-vaunted macho types who claim not to be pestered by midges inevitably prefix any reference to them by that expressive little word "damn" — and others too socially unacceptable for my

It was in Melness that she started writing a fortnightly column for the West Highland Free Press. Mary had previously researched the history of herbal healing, and the use of it in Highland, especially Gaelic, history and culture, so her column was based around this subject. You can see two examples of her column here.



She went on to become an expert in the field of herbal medicine, and was often called upon to give advice, or lectures, at various events. She was interviewed many times on radio about the subject, and we have recordings of some of these interviews here.

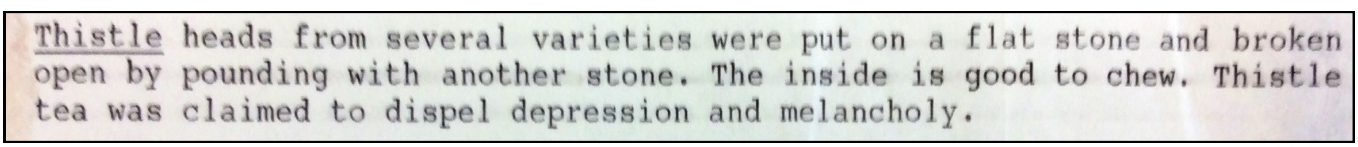


BOGMYRTLE
(Myrica Gale)
Gaelic: Rideag

A small shrub 2 or 4 feet high with reddish stems. The flowers appear before the leaves. The fruit is small with two wings. Yellow dots are scattered over the leaves, which have a pleasant aromatic scent.

It was used for numerous purposes: as a substitute for hops, or tanning; beds were strewed with it, because it was supposed to destroy insects. It was also boiled and the tea drunk by children to kill 'the worms'. A yellow dye is obtained from the plant.

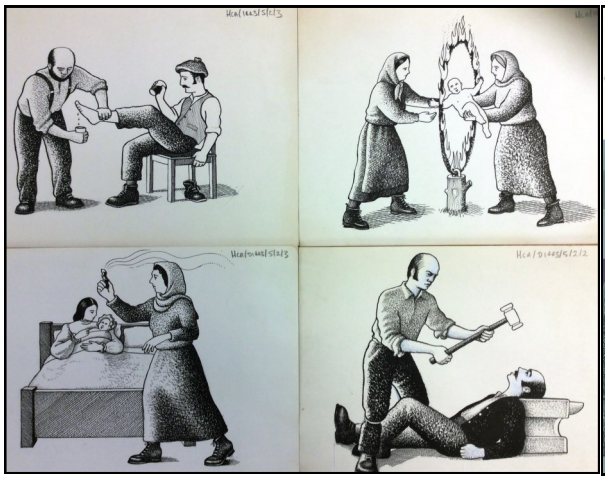
Badge of the Clan Campbell, Macarthur & Maclver.

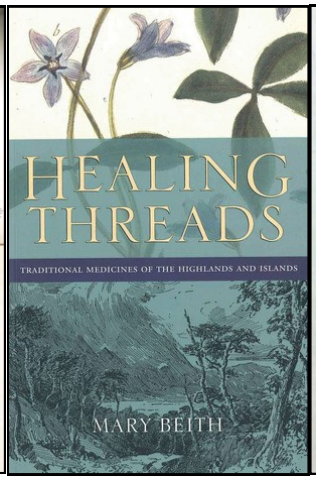


Thistle heads from several varieties were put on a flat stone and broken open by pounding with another stone. The inside is good to chew. Thistle tea was claimed to dispel depression and melancholy.

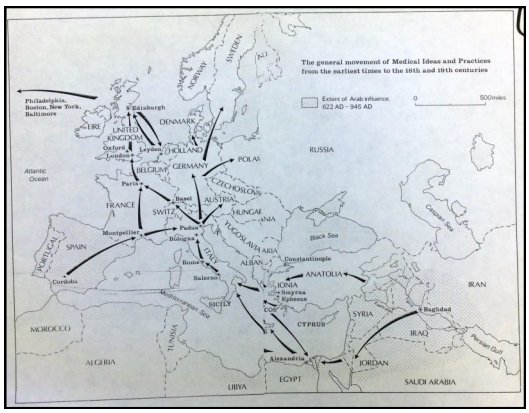
highlife highland
na gàidhealtachd

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY
MARY BEITH

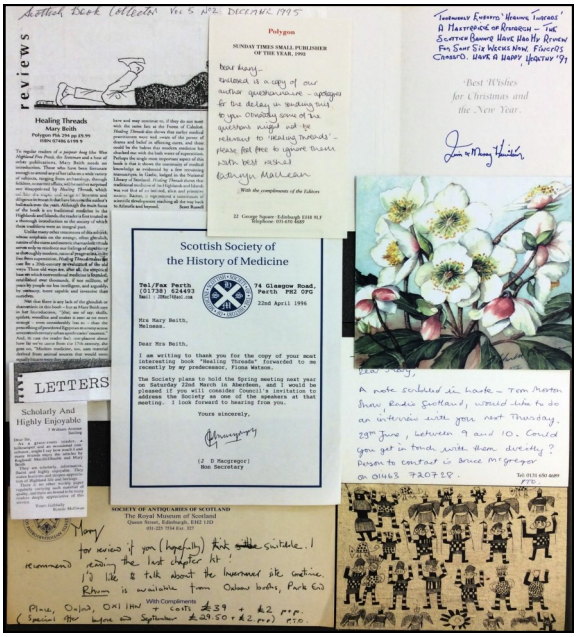




Mary went on to write a book called "Healing Threads, Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands", originally published in 1995. Again, we have notes and illustrations from the book here, amongst her papers. Some of the diagrams depict the methods that conditions such as epilepsy may have been dealt with, or "cured", in times gone by. Other illustrations show various plants, along with a caption as to how they would have been used, either as a dressing, or a tea drink, for example, and also for what ailments they could have helped with. Some are still used today, like the use of a docken leaf on a nettle sting.



One of the other areas that Mary explored was the influence that medicine and remedies used in the Far and Middle East had on the ones used here in the Highlands and Islands. As people began to travel more widely, ideas for methods and ingredients used would change, with some ingredients being transported from country to country.



It is obvious when looking through Mary's collection, that she was very highly thought of, in academic and alternative medicine circles. She was widely published in various media, and people from all walks of life to the time to write to her, send her notes, and even Christmas cards. She died in 2012, leaving three adult children, and a wealth of information for future generations.