The Story of the Curious Herbalist

The strange life and times of Elizabeth Blackwell

1707? - 1758
Background

- Born in Aberdeen in 1707? as Elizabeth Blachrie
- Eloped?? (after 1726) to London with her cousin Alexander Blackwell
- Trained as a midwife?
- Alexander trained as a doctor?
- Alexander set up as a printer in 1730
The birth of the Herbal

• 173? Alexander imprisoned for debt
• Elizabeth and the Royal College of Physicians
• The role of Chelsea Physic Garden
  – 4 Swan Walk
Chelsea Physic Garden

A view of the Physic Garden from the river, 1795.
The Herbal

- Joseph Miller
- The role of Alexander
- 500 plates over 2 years
- Publication
  - Samuel Harding & John Nourse
  - Reprinted by Trew in Nuremberg
The further adventures of Alexander Blackwell

- Released from prison
- Sells copyright to John Nourse
- In charge of the gardens at Little Canons
- Moves to Sweden to run a “model farm” at Allestad
- Becomes physician to the King
- Letters from Elizabeth (1745 & 46)
- Treason and execution (1747)
Elizabeth after 1739

Practiced as a midwife?

• Died 1758
• Elizabeth’s children
• Buried at Chelsea Old Church (as is Sir Hans Sloane)
The British Library project

- In 2000 NLM funded 2 “Turning the Pages” projects
  - Blackwell herbal
  - Vesalius “De Corporis Fabrica Humana”
- 3 copies in the Library (including Joseph Banks personal copy)
- Used Kings Library copy
- c40 images – text written and recorded in the US
- Book?
- St John’s Wort
- Joseph Miller and Blackwell - melancholy
- First mention? of depression
- Today used as an antidepressant
- The Foxglove
- Miller and Blackwell – Purgative
- Withering – 1775 - Dropsy
- Digitalis
Thank you for listening

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