Lus nan laogh, tribhileach - Bogbean or Bog Trefoil

This plant which has beautiful flowers is found growing in the water on the edges of lochs and lochans and nearby very wet areas of land. It has been used extensively in traditional Highland medicine for treating a variety of ailments and as a tonic. Some people still make a tonic from it which is very bitter to taste, but very beneficial to general health.

Fraoch - Heather

For promoting a refreshing sleep there are few things better than heather. A bed made from heather tops was once favoured by Highlanders for very good reasons: the plant absorbed moisture and it helped settle the nerves and restore fatigued bodies far more than the feather beds more popular in the south. As a poultice for insomnia, heather was sometimes applied to the head long after it was out of fashion as a bedding material. Some older people still put sprigs of it under their pillows. An occasional cup of heather tea is good for 'the nerves'. Patients with tuberculosis were once given a decoction made from flowering heather tops.

Lus nan leac - Eyebright

Eyewashes were made from the common eyebright and / or cold tea. One method was to infuse the plant in milk, strain very well, and then apply the liquid to the patient's eye with a feather. Eyebright grows profusely among the grass in Melness where medieval doctors were said to be specialists in eye problems. Eyebright infusions were also drunk. It was claimed the plant made you happy! Its botanical name Euphrasia is from a Greek word meaning ‘cheerfulness’.

Garbhag an t-slèibhe - 'little rough one of the high moorland' *(Fir club moss)*

An infusion of the moss was used as a skin tonic by women and girls. A woman who was born and brought up near Kinlochbervie in the early twentieth century has described how she and her brothers and sisters were regularly sent by their mother to collect large amounts of this moss. When the children returned with their haul, their mother would steep the moss in a big pot of boiling water which would be left to simmer for a while. The liquid was then strained off, left to cool, and used as a soothing and softening lotion for the women's and girls' faces, arms and hands.

Cneas Chù Chulainn - *Meadowsweet or Queen of the Meadow*

Traditionally used for treating fevers, headaches and fluxes, its Gaelic name, meaning Cu-Chulainn's belt, comes from a story about the legendary Celtic hero. Ill with a fierce fever, Cu-Chulainn was cured by being bathed in meadowsweet. Quite recently a woman in Lochinver said that her headaches were made better just by the scent of the flowers. Long ago it was sometimes used as a floor-covering along with bog-myrtle and fleabane - a more easily changed, hygienic, insect repellent and fragrant cover than our modern carpeting!

Nuallach - *Speedwell*

Used with St John's Wort and goldenrod in a wound ointment and once also said to have been popular in the North Highlands for making a refreshing tea. Some sources wrongly claim that wood betony was used for these purposes and the confusion may have arisen from an old Latin name for germander speedwell, Betonica Pauli. Mackay Country people may have adopted the tea from Sweden where it was very popular. Local men of the Mackay regiment, which was formed by the Mackay chief, Donald – later to be the first Lord Reay - for the service of Gustav Adolphus of Sweden in the Thirty Years War (1618-48), may well have introduced the custom back home. Or was it the other way around, perhaps?

Lus an rìgh - Thyme

As the Gaelic name suggests, thyme was a ‘king’ among healing herbs. It was considered one of the most potent of tonics, especially for the nerves and weak chests; and it was put under the pillow or drunk as a tea to prevent nightmares. Thyme tea was once popular throughout the Highlands as an everyday beverage. In areas where lime-loving lavender does not grow well, women used flowering sprigs of thyme to scent their clothes, handkerchiefs and household linen.

Lus nam ban-sìdh - Foxglove

Many different Gaelic names are given to the foxglove, the one here (it means the 'fairy woman's plant') is one of the most common. Other names, such as *meuran nan daoine marbha* ('dead men's fingers or thimbles') warn of the very poisonous nature of the plant. It is famous from the folk medicine of the English Midlands for having inspired the use of digitalis (the botanical name of the plant) as a valuable remedy in modern official medicine for heart problems. However, in the Highlands its main uses were for drawing matter from boils and abscesses and as a poultice to relieve swellings from internal growths and the fluid swellings of dropsy which can indeed be a symptom of some cardiac conditions.

Duileasg - *Dulse - Seaweeds*

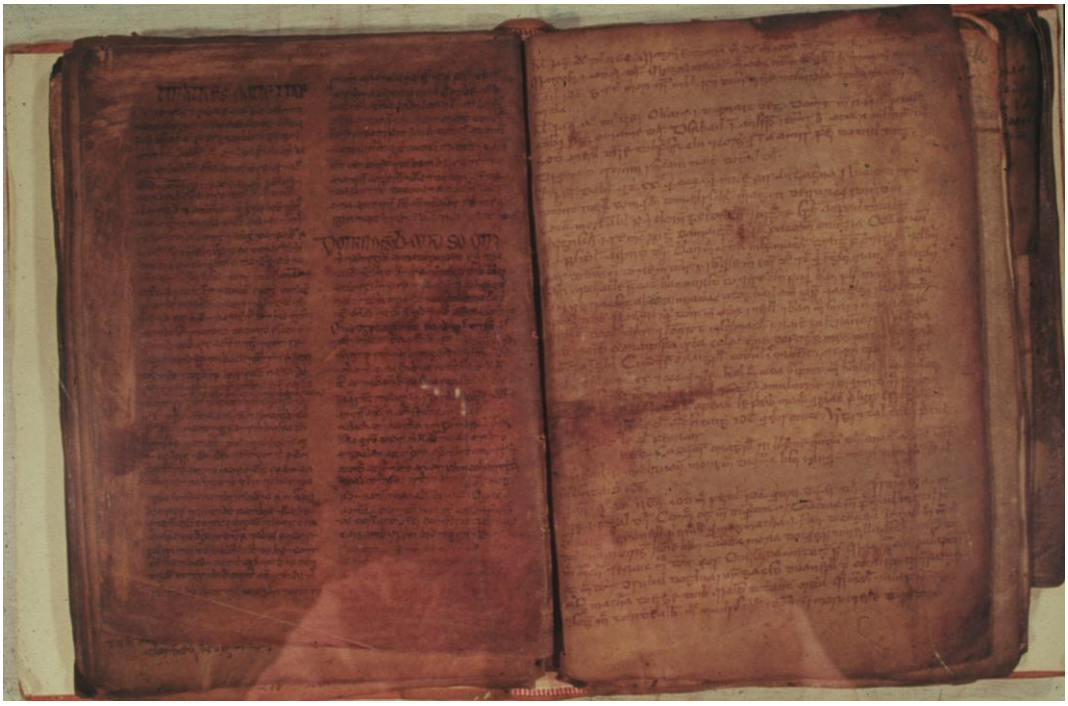
Seaweeds were extensively used in the old days, as fertiliser, foodstuff and medicine. Dulse soup made a nourishing dish and sometimes dulse was simply boiled and eaten with butter. The soup, *càl duilisg*, was believed to be one of the best remedies for indigestion and stomach ulcers. It was sometimes eaten raw to improve eyesight and relieve constipation - though it was said to be more effective for the latter if taken boiled and the juice drunk with it. Dulse was applied in a plaster to the temples to relieve migraine; for colic and bladder or kidney stones it was boiled and eaten in its own juice; and for worming it was dried without washing (not such a good idea in these more polluted times), powdered and taken after fasting.

Uaimh ‘s mo ***- Smoo Cave, Durness***

Literally the ‘bigger cave’ – strictly speaking the name given to the outer, larger cavern of the complex. The discovery of a Middle Stone Age (Mesolithic) shell midden at Smoo shows that it has been used from very early times. The sides and roof of the inner passages – reached by crossing the underground pool – are covered with masses of fungi which have, in common with ‘cave soils’ the world over, antibiotic properties. It was customary in olden times for people with injured limbs to apply cave soil to the wounds.

Medieval Gaelic Medical Manuscript

The bulk of the early Gaelic manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland consist of medical works dating from before 1700 when clan chiefs extended a valuable patronage to their doctors and other learned orders. While in number these make up only twenty-nine of the library's eighty-three early Gaelic manuscripts, many are lengthy, some running to several hundred pages. Most were translated into Gaelic from Latin, Greek and Arabic (often well before such works were available in English), but some contain original Gaelic material. One of the pages shown here (the well-used one!) contains a wondrously lengthy praise of the values of whisky as a medicine.



Medieval Physician's Garden - Pennyghael, Mull and Melness

This now overgrown garden in Mull was well tended in the Middle Ages when it provided a variety of herbs for use by the physicians to the Macleans of Duart. These doctors in common with other clan physicians, including those employed by the Mackays, combined their knowledge of traditional local cures with their official university training in medicine. There would have been similar herb gardens in other parts of the Highlands and Islands. In the north a medical school was endowed in Melness in 1379 by King Robert II. More exotic plants mentioned in the medieval Gaelic manuscripts would have been imported, an easy matter for sea-trading people on the coastlines.