

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BOTANY SEMINAR

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The seventeenth century was characterized by an interest in science that led to the founding of the Royal Society of London and the *Academie des Sciences* in France. Although only these two bodies had official status, they were however by no means the only organizations of their kind. Particularly in France, private assemblies of natural science were popular, frequented by persons with much more catholic interests than the members of our present-day specialized scientific societies.

One of the most popular of the French academies was the one organized by the Abbe Bourdelot for the Prince de Conde, the great military leader, who also delighted in gatherings of scholars and scientists. The meetings of this body were also frequently attended by visitors from other countries, like Christopher Wren. The Academy's first interests appear to have been medical, if we are to judge from its typical activities which included the dissection of animals and the discussion of controversial subjects like blood transfusion. The latter had become a lively subject following the death of a poor Paris madman given a transfusion of blood from a calf in an attempt to cure his insanity. Later, however, Bourdelot encouraged a more general audience by inviting other scientists and offering to publish their lectures.

Paolo Boccone, herbalist to the Duke of Florence, was one of these invited lecturers. Boccone had come to Paris ostensibly to study the plants of France. He brought with him a collection of mounted plants from Italy, many of which he claimed were rare and undescribed by authors . . . a collection he hoped eventually to offer to the Royal Society of London. In Paris, he organized a series of discussions or seminars which he



Caltha palustris major (The great Marsh Marigolde). "Marsh Marigold hath great broad leaves somewhat round, smooth, of a gallant greene colour, slightly indented or purple about the edges, among which rise up thicke fat stalkes, likewise greene wherupon do growe goodly yellow flowers, glittering like gold, and like to those of Crowfoote, but greater: the root is small, composed of verie many strings. . .". From GERARD'S Herball, p.67 (1597).

described in detail in a promotional handbill which can still be seen in the collection of the British Museum.¹

Medical doctors and the general public were invited to attend these "conferences" at Boccone's home free of charge. Each person was allowed to bring half a dozen plants — fresh or dried, of rare or interesting

species. It was proposed to draw by lot those to be examined first. Only eight people could actually participate in keying out the plants, since it was necessary to keep such a circle small. The rest simply listened or occupied themselves looking up references in the botany manuals provided. Two pads of white paper were also provided, the one for writing down all the proposed identifications and the other for displaying the corresponding plant specimens. Each participant had to write down his opinion, but to save embarrassing anyone all but the identification generally agreed to would later be erased! Each person was asked to differentiate between a tentative identification that he felt needed to be verified, and one of which he was fully convinced after examination of the plant and comparison with the author's description. Boccone cautioned, however, that one plant can often be mistaken for another, and be practically unrecognizable under different conditions of growth and climate. When a new or exotic plant was brought for identification, only a tentative identification was made, pending consultation of other

manuals. Each person left the conference with a list of plants identified, and the right to challenge any identification at the next meeting. The practical "laboratory" approach that we associate with modern science already characterized this seventeenth-century botany seminar!

Boccone claimed it possible to obtain a modest knowledge of plants in two months by following a definite programme of travelling, collecting and studying botany manuals. Furthermore, he particularly invited women to become botanists. He noted that Englishwomen were said to be very fond of botany, and that in his own experience at Lyon he had instructed two gentlewomen who were able in three months by assiduous application to learn almost all their local plants. All of which gives a pleasantly modern ring to this seventeenth-century series of botany seminars.

¹BROWN, HARCOURT. *Scientific organizations in seventeenth century France (1620-1680)*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1967 (1934).



Low Lady's Slipper

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