

The Book of mushrooms



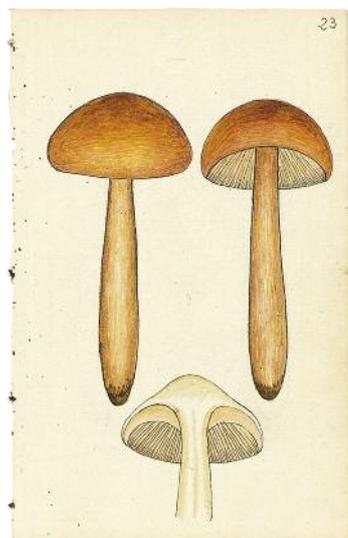
Its author, Robert Wilson (Banff 1787-Glenairnie 1871), practised as a doctor in Aberdeen, which did not prevent him from travelling to the east and in Asia before settling down in Glenairnie.

He probably carried out this work in 1805, while still a medical student at Aberdeen and an assistant at Guy's Hospital, as the medical syllabus included a substantial part of botany and the drawing of plants from living samples.

Robert Wilson left many journals which were also bequeathed to the University of Aberdeen, but no other botanical work by him is known.

The importance of this work is reinforced by the growing interest in mycology, for although the consumption of mushrooms by man dates back to the collecting and hunting societies of Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras, **ancient treatises on this subject are, however, practically non-existent.**

Another fact supports the interest and timeliness of this manuscript: **mycology as a science is relatively recent**, as it is only from the 18th century onwards that the scientific study of mushrooms began in earnest.



This is therefore **a curious manuscript**, rare in the best sense of the word and **of considerable interest for enthusiasts.**

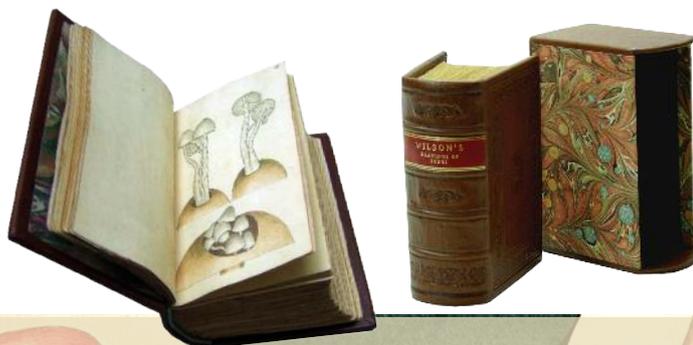
The absence of text seems to indicate that this manuscript was not intended for printing. As the great expert María Rosa Tellería argues, with this book *we recover a small but exciting territory for the history of mycology.*

This **curious book on mushrooms**, the fruit of many years of patient fieldwork, is a precious manuscript of the kind that does not abound very often and which could very well be described as "rare" in the most positive and suggestive sense of the term. This is why the *Librería Rara* collection of which it forms part fits it like a glove, while at the same time, due to its singularity, it enriches the collection by providing it with a note of captivating variety.

Its simple external appearance makes it particularly pleasing and striking. It is one of those manuscripts which in themselves, regardless of their subject matter and content, already make up a library all on their own.

There is something warm and seductive about it that makes you fall in love with the manuscript.

Those who approach this charming treatise, in its volume of complementary studies, will be delighted with the brief outline of the life and work of its enigmatic author, conveniently sketched by María Teresa Tellería –who has had the honour of having been the first woman to direct the important Botanical Garden of Madrid– in its over 250 years of history. And, of course, the reader will also be delighted by the extensive and detailed analysis of each and every one of the plates offered by the great mycological expert Francisco de Diego Calonge –a key figure in the study of mycology in Spain over the last half century– who, among many other positions and functions, also directed the aforementioned noble institution of the Botanical Garden of Madrid for several years.



In the pages of the aforementioned complementary volume of the facsimile we will find, therefore, a **detailed formal description of each of the species included in the work**, and we will also enjoy **discovering their curative or gastronomic properties or their possible toxicity**, as well as a whole range of anecdotal and curious information for the enjoyment of our imagination and the pleasure of our minds.

On the other hand, we cannot but invite everyone to carefully read the brief but substantial work by María Teresa Tellería, mentioned above, in which –as she herself confesses– she has had to face the very interesting and difficult challenge of discovering for us the hidden personality behind the enigmatic and generic name of R. Wilson, the author of the manuscript, as well as the motive that prompted him to write it. The total absence of available data and clues to elucidate these mysteries has demanded a really arduous and detective-like research that traps the reader, who follows this entertaining plot in which, for the intrigue to be complete, there are also false clues with their corresponding complications.

Because of its lively interest, we would like to give you four glimpses of the finally unveiled personality of Robert Wilson, from Medomsley, County Durham (UK), about whom, however, the information we have is still somewhat scanty. We do not even know the exact dates and places of his birth and death. We do know that he worked as an engraver in a sword factory in Shotley Bridge, near Medomsley. He was also a watchmaker. Because of his many skills and a special innate talent, he was known as “Witch Wilson”. **His medical knowledge was truly vast and considerable**, and he was admired by his countrymen as an **accomplished botanist**, both theoretically and practically, which even led him

to cultivate in his own garden a valuable collection of a great variety of plants. It was his first and foremost vocation as a naturalist that led him to the indefatigable study of the flora around Medomsley, Weardale and Teesdale in County Durham. Add to **this his undeniable and well-known skill as a draughtsman** and it is hardly surprising that he seems to have possessed his own cabinet of curiosities full of **life drawings of the mushrooms** in the vicinity, **executed with exquisite precision and beauty**, and painstakingly and patiently coloured in pencil.

Wilson had a real passion for mushrooms, and as soon as he discovered a new one he would run like mad to his cabinet to immortalise it live, before its evanescent or brilliant colours began to fade or mutate. In the manuscript, we can see the clear scientific bias of his concerns, which led him to the patient task of offering us the representation of the same specimen in changing and diverse perspectives, in order to better highlight its most ostensible formal characteristics.

A final note. This treatise may be somewhat incomplete for some, as **it must surely have been completed** –as is suggested below– **by a notebook or notes that have now disappeared**, in which the habitat of each specimen drawn would have been identified, described and presented, and commented on. It is a pity that, as on so many occasions, the history of these works plays a dirty but inevitable trick on us.

Nevertheless, with the present facsimile edition we have sought to rescue this unknown, unpublished and charming work from oblivion. And although ours is only a modest contribution, we could not agree more with María Teresa Tellería when she states that **we are recovering here a small but exciting territory for the history of mycology**.

This was our main intention, as it was also, of course, to offer the general public and mycologists in particular, a nice, attractive and curious collectors’ piece of natural history for their enjoyment and delight.

