Physicians of Myddfai

The physicians of Myddfai, named due to their home base in Myddfai on the Western edge of Brecon Beacons National Park were herbalists who were widely renowned for their successful use of folk medicine. The first of a long line of physicians was Rhiwallon who, along with his three sons, was employed by a thirteenth-century Welsh prince. The last of the line was John Jones, a surgeon, who died in 1739. The physicians of Myddfai produced a unique recipe book of their prescriptions, maxims and diagnostic techniques.

The book contained material on Welsh medical practice dating back to the tenth century and was gradually added to over time. The final manuscript covers the treatment of complaints from flatulence, toothache, hemorrhoids and bad breath to heart disease, pneumonia and even the prevention of plague. The recipe book is significant for what it tells us of Welsh medical practice in the medieval and early modern periods, and for its inclusion of passages relating to humeral medicine. The original manuscript is held in the British Museum, and a copy is held in Jesus College, Oxford. The only printed version, which includes an English translation, was produced in 1861.

While the Physicians of Myddfai and their work is historic fact, the history of the origins of the physicians' knowledge is attached to the legend of the lady of Llyn y Fan, said to be Rhiwallon, the first of the physicians' wife and mother to his sons (who were the founders of the line of physicians spanning some seven centuries). A magical lady of the lake, she is said to have appeared to her family and given them knowledge of the uses of the plants in and around the moors and mountains surrounding Llyn y Fan.