Identifying a Family Heirloom:  
The Indian Doctor’s Dispensatory

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For over a century and a half a small book of pharmacological interest has been passed down within my family. Leather-bound in what may be sextodecimo format, it contains nearly 200 prescriptions for botanical remedies and descriptions of curative roots, leaves, barks, and berries found in eastern North America. References in the text suggest it was published in the United States in the second or third decade of the nineteenth century. The title page is missing, however, as are the table of contents, the preface, most of the introduction, and a few pages of text. Consequently, the author’s name, title, place, and date of publication remained a mystery for more than 35 years after the book was given to me by an elderly aunt who had found it in a bookcase in her farmhouse in Ontario’s Ottawa Valley. Recent investigation has now established not only its identity, but its bibliographical significance as well. At first thought to be a copy of Peter Smith’s *The Indian Doctor’s Dispensatory*, our book now appears to be an even rarer work incorporating Smith’s under a slightly different title: *The Indian Doctor’s Dispensatory, or Every Man His Own Physician*, published in New York state in 1833.

That the book should have been owned and carefully passed on in this manner is not surprising, for my family had a long tradition of practical medicine. Franz Otto, my great-great-great-great-grandfather, who lived in prerevolutionary Schoharie, New York, was long remembered as a doctor, barber, and phlebotomist.¹ Today another branch of the family preserves a lancet that may have been his. After the Revolution Franz’s elder son Johan Gottlieb Otto (1758-1803), a Loyalist, claimed war losses that included, “Sundry medicines left to him by his father who died & was a Docr.”² Since Johan Gottlieb died before the date of our book’s publication, it is assumed that his son, Gottlieb (1787-1855), was its first owner.


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Coincidence played an essential part in the book’s eventual identification. In 1969 a sharp-eyed librarian at the Harvard Business School, where I was then a student, recognized in the text the same piece of chatty advice (“... an old man ought never to marry a young woman. A word to the wise is enough”) that had been cited shortly before by Marcus McCorison, Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, to illustrate one of the Society’s newly acquired treasures, *The Indian Doctor’s Dispensatory, being Father Smith’s Advice respecting Diseases and their Cure.* Printed for its author, Peter Smith, by Browne and Looker of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1813, *The Dispensatory* was the first medical book published west of the Alleghenies in the old American Northwest. In a reprint edition published in 1901, John Uri Lloyd tells us that Smith (1753-1816) was Welsh-born but raised in New Jersey. About 1780 he left with his family, spending 14 years in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Kentucky before settling finally near Cincinnati, where he farmed and practised medicine with remedies learned from the Indians and drawn from his own experience.

In 1969 only six copies of *The Dispensatory* were known to exist, all in public collections in the United States, although the 1901 reprint edition also was found in several libraries. A page-by-page comparison of the original with my copy showed them to be similar but not identical. More importantly, however, mine contained many more prescriptions and pages, which led Marcus McCorison and me to assume it was a later edition than anyone had been aware of before.

This explanation sufficed until a few months ago when I reread a learned bibliographical piece on *The Dispensatory* published in 1969 by Robert G. Hayman of Carey, Ohio. It set me to wondering what more Mr. Hayman might know today. In a telephone conversation in June 1995, he kindly directed my attention to a similarly titled work by A. F. Smith and J. Merwin printed in Hamilton, New York in 1833: *The Indian Doctor’s Dispensatory, or Every Man His Own Physician.* The standard reference work showed that only one copy of this work survived in the Grosvenor Rare Book Room of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library. Subsequent contact with the Curator of that collection, William H. Loos, confirmed that my book is indeed an imperfect copy of Smith and Merwin’s *Dispensatory,* and he indicated that a third copy exists in the library of the University of Indianapolis.

At present no more is known about the authors, A. F. Smith and J. Merwin, than is revealed in their preface. Both were doctors who had “an experience of more than forty years of constant practice in almost every State in the Union.” Testimonials to their remedies were offered by judges, clergymen, and others in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Since Smith and Merwin used a title similar to
Peter Smith's work and reprinted all his prescriptions—91 in total—besides publishing 119 of their own, it seems likely that A. F. Smith was Peter Smith's son, but this has not yet been confirmed.

NOTES
2 National Archives of Canada, War Loss Claims, Audit Office 13, v. 80, p. 360.