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Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

In the Middle Ages, in England, the Scropes family included an Archbishop of York, who was beheaded for treason, a Lord Chancellor, who spent five years of his life in court, arguing over whether he or another peer was entitled to bear a particular coat of arms (he won eventually) and, around the year 1500, a certain attractive young lady, Mistress Jane Scropes, amongst whose attributes, according to the poet John Skelton, were that she was 'The daisy delectable, the columbine commendable'.

We have a fairly commendable columbine of our own, here on the Islands, which flowers, mainly by the roadsides, in late May and early June. The Western Columbine, (*Aquilegia formosa*) grows to about two feet in height. The stems, which branch near the top, carry nodding coral-red and yellow flowers. The leaves, which are deeply divided around their margins, mainly grow at the base of the plant although smaller ones do appear further up the stems. The flower shape is almost impossible to describe. This really is a case where a picture is worth a thousand words, if not even more. In the distant past, someone with a far stronger imagination than most of us decided that the flower looked like five pigeons clustered together, from whence arose the name 'columbine', from the latin word *columba*, meaning a pigeon or dove. When it came to giving it a botanic name, however, the image of another bird came to someone's mind and, from a supposed resemblance to the talons of an eagle, *aquila* in latin, the name

aquilegia was assigned to it, or so some experts say. Others suggest that, because a watery



nectar often hangs in droplets from the tips of the petals, the name 'water carrier', derived in latin from aqua (water) and legere (to carry) was the source of the name. The second word, *formosa*, has nothing to do with the island, now known as Taiwan, which used to be called Formosa. The word actually means beautiful in a shapely sense, a description which could have been applied, one assumes, to Mistress Jane Scropes.

Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore. /

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