

BOOK REVIEW

Strangling Angel: Diphtheria and Childhood Immunization in Ireland *by Michael Dwyer*

Hardback, 224 pages
Liverpool University Press
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Diphtheria is a horrible disease of childhood, often resulting in a slow, suffocating death. Most of us – because of effective immunisation – have never seen a case, although it still occurs in the developing world, particularly Africa. This book provides historical descriptions of clinical diphtheria, the throat pseudo-membrane and the struggle for breath. Various contemporary theories of cause and transmission are described.

Predominantly, the book provides a history of immunisation, in particular for diphtheria, in Ireland. The situation moves in the first half of the 20th century from high epidemic prevalence and mortality in certain localities to zero cases nationwide. Ireland, as a small, evolving country, must be considered in the context of Britain, Europe and the U.S.A. The author manages this well, always reverting to the Irish situation. Some knowledge of recent Irish political history and geography would be useful to provide a full picture to the reader.

Chapters are dedicated to a discussion of diphtheria and why eradication was prioritised in Ireland. Different Irish cities and areas, Dublin and Cork for example, had varying success depending on the approach they took. The trial of Burroughs Wellcome's antigen preparations in institutions in Ireland is discussed. A chapter on the Ring College immunisation disaster, which involved this company and local medical doctors, makes interesting reading, providing all the intrigue of a detective story, and the author provides new evidence here. Later chapters highlight how progressive the Irish Free State was in its immunisation scheme. However, the Ring disaster and the resultant legal controversy had negative consequences for immunisation in Ireland. Anti-vaccination feelings, related to perceived "experimentation" on children, are discussed.

Strangling Angel is well written, interesting and thoroughly researched, drawing on a variety of new primary sources. It is not a history of immunisation in the British Isles, but differences in approach between progressive Ireland and Britain are highlighted. It will be useful to medical, political and social historians with an interest in infections and their prevention. Although the book is focused on Ireland, the public health issues of this small country, struggling for autonomy from a larger neighbour, will be of relevance to others around the world.

William Dobb
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