

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Continual Raving: A History of Meningitis and the People Who Conquered It by Janet R Gilsdorf**

Hardcover, 272 pages  
Oxford University Press  
December 2019

The “continual raving” of this book’s title refers to the description by 17<sup>th</sup>-century physician Thomas Willis of a malady known as the “phrensy”, characterised by headache, fever and delirium, symptoms similar to those caused by swelling of the brain secondary to the meningeal inflammation that can result from bacterial infection.

Janet Gilsdorf, a practising paediatrician and researcher, sets out to tell the stories of the many scientists and doctors whose work from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards helped medicine to comprehend and fight the deadly form of meningitis in young children caused by *Haemophilus influenzae*. These stories are set within the context of contemporary scientific and medical developments.

A short opening chapter sets the scene. The following chapters cover Richard Pfeiffer’s discovery of a bacillus thought to cause epidemic influenza, Martha Wollstein’s serological studies of meningitic forms of the microbe, Margaret Pittman’s identification of immunologically distinct strains, and Joyce Wright’s demonstration that young children lack natural immunity to infection by the bacterium.

Moving to treatment, there is an excellent account of Simon Flexner’s development of a serum therapy against the meningococcal form of meningitis that succeeded in doubling the survival rate of patients with this disease. Unfortunately, the same approach failed in the case of influenzal meningitis, which exemplifies the author’s sense that *H. influenzae* had an “infuriating refusal to follow the rules”.

The book then moves on to the use of antibiotics to treat meningitis, genetic research, and the creation of the Hib vaccine to *H. influenzae* type b, based on prior work with pneumococcus and meningococcus. An epilogue relates the author’s attempt to locate Pfeiffer’s final resting place in modern-day Poland, a coda that underlines her deep investment in the topic of the book.

An attractive feature of the book is the many illustrations from textbooks, research papers and other varied sources, along with original drawings by the author and relevant photographs. Another strength is that each chapter has a comprehensive bibliography listing many references to the key scientific and medical literature as it relates to *H. influenzae*. Less attention is paid, however, to secondary sources that cover the history of meningitis and bacterial diseases more generally.

*Continual Raving* is very readable, explains the science with commendable clarity and gives useful vignettes of the main protagonists. Gilsdorf has done her subject justice in a book composed and edited with obvious care. In my opinion, it deserves a place on the bookshelf of every medical historian interested in infectious disease and medical research.

**Edward Wawrzynczak**  
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