

BOOK REVIEW

Denis Burkitt: a Cancer, the Virus and the Prevention of Man-made Disease *by John H. Cummings*

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Denis Burkitt made significant contributions to medicine in two seemingly unrelated fields. He had the distinction of having a medical condition named after him and his epidemiological evidence that Burkitt's lymphoma might have a viral aetiology led to the discovery of EBV, the first human tumour virus. His hypothesis was based on observations he made working as a doctor with the Colonial Medical Service in Uganda. A further observation, that lack of dietary fibre caused a variety of 'Western' diseases, stimulated an important field of medical research and increased the understanding of the role of fibre in disease. Both theories emerged from Burkitt's diligent study of the geography of disease.

In compiling this account of the man and his life's work, John Cumming had several advantages. As an academic in the field of dietary fibre he knew the key players involved in developing the hypothesis based on the function of fibre in disease prevention, including Burkitt himself. This has allowed him not only to give scientific context to Burkitt's role, but to provide personal insights into Burkitt's personality. These have been supplemented both by access to Burkitt's large personal archive (including his diaries from the age of twelve) and to extensive archives in Trinity College, Dublin and at the Wellcome in London.

From this emerges a picture of Burkitt's enthusiasm and energy, his deep Christian faith and his humility. The book is richly illustrated with diagrams and photographs, many of which were taken by Burkitt himself.

This is a comprehensive biography of over four hundred pages, packed with detail yet immensely readable. The appendices contain timelines and bibliographies which will be invaluable to researchers. It is difficult to find fault for what will surely be Burkitt's definitive biography. This book will appeal to those interested in the history of the fibre story, or in the history of cancer epidemiology but it will have a much wider appeal as a well researched and well written biography of one of the twentieth century's most fascinating doctors.

Iain MacIntyre
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