

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Flu: British Medical Science and the Viralisation of Influenza, 1890-1950 *by Michael Bresalier*

Hardback, 458 pages
Palgrave Macmillan September 2023

This long work is one of the Medicine and Biomedical Sciences in Modern History series. It is well written, readable, full of information and contains several figures. The book has many footnotes, a large bibliography and an index.

Central to the discussion in the book is the way in which viruses, in particular influenza, were recognised as causes of disease and how this evolved. This process of 'viralisation' of influenza was complex, multifactorial and started at the end of the 19th century when traditional concepts were replaced by more rigorous scientific approaches to the disease. Bacteriological methods and concepts provided some input but also the blind alley of the 'influenza bacillus' as a causative agent for many decades.

The development and recognition of the name of influenza and many synonyms is discussed as is the debate between miasmatisms and contagionists on the aetiology. Opium was widely used as a treatment because of the many symptoms of influenza. Several major influenza epidemics in the 19th century served to consolidate recognition as a clinical entity. Major epidemics of influenza with considerable mortality in the late 19th century spurred research and public health interest. The varied clinical picture posed diagnostic difficulties. A comprehensive chapter discusses the Spanish flu and military attitudes and responses. Further chapters, all detailed, cover the role of the National Institute for Medical Research, the Medical Research Council and the Ministry of Health.

Work on the final discovery of the influenza virus was hampered by a piecemeal organisational approach to research but helped by the development of the ferret model. There was vociferous criticism of the lack of treatment options for influenza. The embryonated chick egg became the main growth medium and facilitated standardised approaches to research and vaccine production. The development and politics of global monitoring systems is discussed.

The concluding chapters emphasise the immense clinical and economic consequences of influenza. The book describes the emergence of virology, specifically influenza from 1890 to 1945, covering the multifactorial roles of pandemics, war, politics and medical research organisations. How we might learn from influenza history and Covid-19 are also covered. The book will appeal to virologists who wish to know more about history, researchers within the field of infection history and to the medical historian with an interest in modern history. It is extraordinarily detailed and thorough and has a wealth of scientific as well as historical detail. It will be regarded as an important reference work.

William Dibb
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