BOOKS RECEIVED

Howard Florey: the making of a great scientist

The author of this first full-length biography of Howard Florey possesses the unique credentials of having worked not only with Florey himself but with his first wife and his sister, and of having "known almost everyone who had played a significant part in his professional life". The claim that Florey was "the most effective medical scientist since Lister" is convincingly argued and supported by fascinating accounts of his scientific versatility and personal qualities. At the same time a full explanation is given for the paradox that he remained virtually unknown to the general public—even after his supreme triumph of rescuing penicillin from oblivion and introducing it into clinical medicine. Florey’s aversion to journalists and other representatives of the news media, his often exaggeratedly Australian brusqueness and, in a complex manner, his adherence to the mores of the Royal Society and his university, together with other influences, all ensured that public attention turned in 1942 from Oxford to Paddington. So began what Alexander Fleming himself called the “Fleming Myth”. But much else is to be found in this splendid book apart from the best account yet of the birth of the “antibiotic era.”

The opening chapter describes the origins of modern medical science in Britain, with particular emphasis on pathology. This general story is taken up again in later chapters and provides new insight into the evolution—and rivalry—of the twin disciplines of academic and clinical pathology. Florey’s formative years in Adelaide, the long-distance and stormy courtship he conducted from England and America, and his researches in Oxford, London, Cambridge, Sheffield and, again, Oxford are all vividly described.

The medical microbiologist will find Florey’s lifelong enthusiasm for the body’s natural defences of special interest, in addition to his later work on penicillin, the cephalosporins and the less successful micrococcin project. He usually built on foundations laid by others for, as Sir Alan Drury observed, Florey “was always a great finisher”. Sometimes he would mercilessly reveal the inadequacies and fallacies of other investigators but, as most notably with Fleming’s lysozyme and penicillin, Florey had the supreme ability to unearth abandoned ideas and bring them to glorious fruition. He also attracted to his department disciples of the calibre of Ernst Chain and Edward Abraham.

The book is enlivened with such unexpected delights as the story of the Irish mason who in the 1850s decorated Oxford University’s new Science Museum with owls and parrots bearing the faces of University dignitaries in revenge for their disapproval of his other zoological embellishments, or of the Australian anatomy professor who arranged that a group of distinguished visitors should be greeted by six motor-cyclists (including Florey) who rode deafeningly between his dissecting-room tables!

Occasional lapses are readily excused. For example, Joseph Lister did not coin the word “antiseptic”; an Edinburgh predecessor, Sir John Pringle, first used the term 120 years earlier in its modern context. By chance, Pringle in the 18th century, Lister in the 19th century, and Florey in our own century had curiously parallel careers. The pioneer work of each in pathology arose partly from an interest in inflammation; each made major contributions in the battle against infection; and each attained, among many honours, the Presidency of the Royal Society. The special achievement of Florey, however, was that in an age of increasingly narrow specialisation he was able to encompass all the major medical sciences—in particular, anatomy, physiology, pathology, bacteriology and experimental surgery. But beyond his technical brilliance, his teaching and his writing were his contributions as administrator and statesman of science. Florey’s life is a source of inspiration that has at last become accessible through Professor Macfarlane’s book.

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