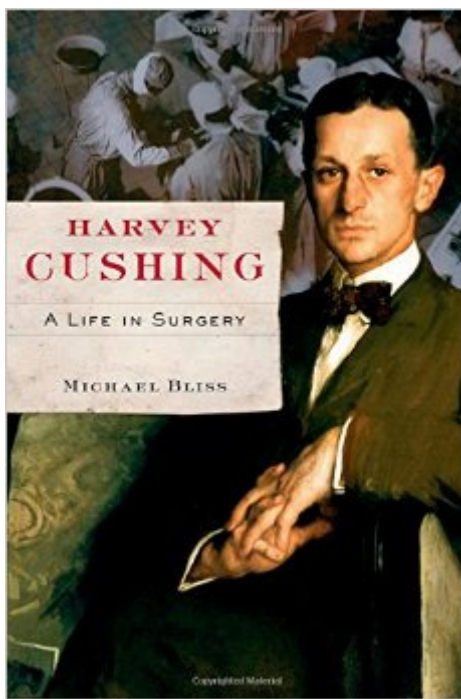


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Harvey Cushing: A Life In Surgery



Synopsis

Here is the first biography to appear in fifty years of Harvey Cushing, a giant of American medicine and without doubt the greatest figure in the history of brain surgery. Drawing on new collections of intimate personal and family papers, diaries and patient records, Michael Bliss captures Cushing's professional and his personal life in remarkable detail. Bliss paints an engaging portrait of a man of ambition, boundless, driving energy, a fanatical work ethic, a penchant for self-promotion and ruthlessness, more than a touch of egotism and meanness, and an enormous appetite for life. Equally important, Bliss traces the rise of American surgery as seen through the eyes of one of its pioneers. The book describes how Cushing, working in the early years of the 20th century, developed remarkable new techniques that let surgeons open the skull, expose the brain, and attack tumors--all with a much higher rate of success than previously known. Indeed, Cushing made the miraculous in surgery an everyday event, as he and his team compiled an astonishing record of treating more than two thousand tumors. This is the definite Cushing biography, an epic narrative of high surgical adventure, capturing the highs and lows of an extraordinary life.

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Customer Reviews

It is a strange mystery why a man of such accomplishments and medical innovation in the history of neurosurgery, the American pioneer in fact, is not more well known in popular culture. Dr. Harvey Cushing has to be one of the most fascinating, complex and astounding medical personalities in the last century. He became the first of American medical men to be an international leader in this

special field. Harvey was part of a long line of medical men, his great grandfather, grandfather and father were all competent physicians. A Yale graduate, later attending Harvard Medical and working at John Hopkins, he paved the way, as he called "The Northwest Passage", in the area of brain tumour surgery, his OR innovations, insistence on sterile working conditions, the use of clips to prevent excessive bleeding and the diagnosis of brain tumours, were all devised and applied by him, having operated on over 2000 patients with brain tumour related illnesses during his long career. This man takes the term "workaholic" and takes it to an entirely new level. A tireless researcher, recorder, bibliophile, surgeon and prolific writer, his drive and obsession for work and life, set the precedent for future surgeons. A truly remarkable individual. Michael Bliss, however, is a competent biographer, revealing Cushing's genius as well as his many faults. Cushing was an irascible perfectionist with zero tolerance for any incompetence in the OR. His arrogance and caustic tongue became the stuff of legend; interestingly, as Bliss implies, his personality has become almost a stereotype for the brilliant surgeon, egotistic, sarcastic with no patience for mistakes while in surgery. He was a difficult man to work with and for, however, his care for his patients took priority over all other actions.

Another excellent book from the Canadian historian Michael Bliss. This biography is a companion volume to Bliss's outstanding biography of the great William Osler. Together, these biographies tell the story not only of their subjects but also of the rise of North American medicine from provincial status to equality, and in some respects superiority, with the great clinical centers of Europe. Harvey Cushing was the first great pioneering surgeon produced by the USA or Canada. As much as a single person can be said to generate a field, Cushing was the progenitor of neurosurgery. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Cushing was the product of a line of respected physicians of New England extraction. From his parents, he inherited a Puritan sense of mission, rectitude, and a remarkable dedication to work. Educated at Harvard Medical School, he sought post-graduate training at the epicenter of the revolution in American medical education that was Johns Hopkins University Hospital. At Hopkins he became a protege of Osler and started his surgical career under the direction of the outstanding and rather erratic William Halstead. Ambitious and remarkably diligent, Cushing set out to make his mark by pioneering an area of surgery avoided by other pioneering surgeons - brain surgery. A remarkably facile technical surgeon, Cushing was obsessed with improving all aspects of surgical care, including use of careful clinical diagnostic methods, improvement of anesthetic management, and post-operative care. Despite formidable obstacles, Cushing succeeded in creating a new discipline. His methods were adopted widely and his trainees

became the founding neurosurgeons in many regions. Bliss gives a vivid impression of surgical practice in this period and of Cushing's innovations.

This biography is long and detailed and exceptionally well-written. Bliss had no shortage of material with which to work. Harvey Cushing left a wealth of papers, diaries and letters. As others have noted, Bliss also did an excellent biography of William Osler. Though Osler was Cushing's mentor and medical hero, the two could not have been more different. Osler had genuine empathy to go along with a prodigious medical memory, superb organizational skills and an uncanny ability to get along with people. Cushing was a driven man – a medical genius who was often imperious with others and rarely if ever let his emotions other than anger or frustration show. Osler's relationship with his wife and family were intensely close and his wife Grace was a major part of his ongoing life. Cushing was a distant father whose relationship with his wife Kate was often cold. But while Osler is often called the physician who opened the Americas to modern medicine, he never advanced the boundaries of medicine itself. It was Cushing who made significant advances in his field – the human brain – a part of the human body that doctors before him preferred avoiding. Cushing made brain surgery an option for suffering patients. This is an outstanding book in several ways. First, Bliss is able to take a highly technical area, Cushing's work with the brain, and make it readable and easy to follow for the general reader. The author never talks down to the reader and can make the various tumors, the operational procedures, and Cushing's work with the pituitary gland interesting reading. Second, Bliss is completely in charge of his prose. The writing is lucid and smooth. Transitions and paragraph breaks are excellent.

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