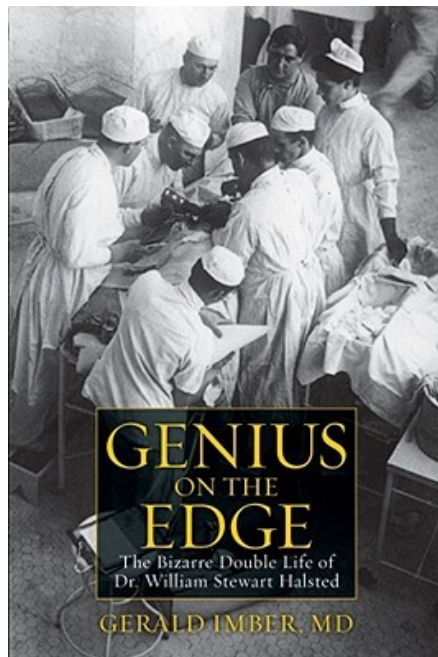




Genius on the Edge: The Bizarre Double Life of Dr. William Stewart Halsted

Gerald Imber

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A major new biography of the doctor who invented modern surgery. Brilliant, driven, but haunted by demons, William Stewart Halsted took surgery from a horrific, dangerous practice to what we now know as a lifesaving art. Halsted was born to wealth and privilege in New York City in the mid-1800s. He attended the finest schools, but he was a mediocre student. His academic interests blossomed at medical school and he quickly became a celebrated surgeon. Experimenting with cocaine as a local anesthetic, he became addicted. He was hospitalized and treated with morphine to control his craving for cocaine. For the remaining 40 years of his life he was addicted to both drugs.

Halsted resurrected his career at Johns Hopkins, where he became the first chief of surgery. Among his accomplishments, he introduced the residency training system, the use of sterile gloves, the first successful hernia repair, radical mastectomy, fine silk sutures, and anatomically correct surgical technique. Halsted is without doubt the father of modern surgery, and his eccentric behavior, unusual lifestyle, and counterintuitive productivity in the face of lifelong addiction make his story unusually compelling.

Gerald Imber, a renowned surgeon himself, evokes Halsted's extraordinary life and achievements and places them squarely in the historical and social context of the late 19th century. The result is an illuminating biography of a complex and troubled man, whose genius we continue to benefit from today.

Genius on the Edge: The Bizarre Double Life of Dr. William Stewart Halsted Details

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From Reader Review *Genius on the Edge: The Bizarre Double Life of Dr. William Stewart Halsted* for online ebook

Tony61 says

I reserve 5-star ratings for books that have profoundly added to my understanding of the world and have a lasting effect on how I live my life. Gerald Imber, MD, presents William Stewart Halsted as a dedicated innovator who, along with several physicians of the age, changed the practice of medicine with his insight and hard work. As a practicing surgeon himself, Imber is able to give invaluable accuracy to the various advancements to medicine and surgery by Halsted and his colleagues.

Medicine in the United States at the turn of the 20th century was too reminiscent of the dark ages, with little empiric evidence guiding patient care, which carried poor outcomes and too much suffering. William Halsted devoted his life to improving, among other things, how doctors are trained, how studies are designed, and how surgery is performed. As the progeny of a wealthy family of investment bankers and real estate developers (Halsted Avenue in Chicago is named for his grandfather), Halsted dismayed his parents by pursuing a medical career.

Born in 1872, Halsted went to Ivy League schools, trained in surgery at his own expense with some of the great physicians in Germany (Europe was ahead of the US in training), and brought the science of medical training to the USA. Imber's book is largely the story of the making of Johns Hopkins Hospital and medical school in Baltimore, with the surgeon Halsted joined by other key players: William Osler (medicine), Howard Kelly (gynecology) and William Welch (pathology). This emphasizes the necessity of collaboration and a robust system to care for sick patients.

Early in his career, cocaine was discovered as the prototypical local anesthetic which, along with sodium pentothal and ether, allowed the birth of the entire field of surgery. Halsted performed the first successful cholecystectomy (removal of the gallbladder) in his kitchen on his septic mother using drip ether. He also developed the techniques for inguinal hernia repair, radical mastectomy for breast cancer, and various vascular procedures. His attention to detail, careful hemostasis to prevent blood loss, and adherence to strict antisepsis (well known in Europe but ignored in the US) were the keys to his success.

Unfortunately, Halsted experimented with cocaine on himself and quickly became addicted. This led to morphine substitution as the only treatment at the time and severely limited Halsted's ability to contribute over the years. Despite his addiction, Halsted slogged on, humanely studying techniques on dogs before operating on his patients. Halsted set the standards for formal residency training that persist today, replacing the archaic system of apprenticeship and journeyman extant at that time.

Gerald Imber presents a compelling narrative of a devoted surgeon who struggled through personal hardship and failings to revolutionize the practice of surgery. Many of the benefits we enjoy today began with the insight and innovation of men like Halsted. This book is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in medical care: students, doctors, nurses, ancillary technicians. Imber provides expert insight in the importance of hard work and imagination, and the value of empiric observations, in caring for patients. Halsted joins the pantheon of secular saints who have made our lives better.

Patricia says

My purpose for reading this book was two-fold. I'm reading as much as I can about about medicine and doctors to inform the current non-fiction book project that I'm working on. And since my project is essentially a biography, I'm reading biographies to see how other writers approach and manage the material. From *Genius on the Edge* I learned a great deal about the contemporary history of medicine, especially in the United States in addition to learning about William Stewart Halsted in particular. The book is in part a history Johns Hopkins and the men who were at the forefront of creating that institution.

The history was fascinating and I feel like I learned a lot. As a biographer, however, Gerald Imber is not the greatest. He certainly dug deeply into the biographically material, especially to elucidate Halsted's drug usage, but his manner of presentation left something to be desired. The writing was not fluid, and it was often redundant and repetitive. Since Imber is a doctor first and a writer second, I should probably place this fault on his editor.

The book served one of my purposes well by adding to my understanding of American medical practice, and it offered a good example of what I hope NOT to do with the story I'm preparing to tell.

Debbie says

"Genius on the Edge" is an interesting book describing the medical developments (especially in surgery) during the period of about 1846 to 1922. The first third of the book mainly focused on what surgery was like before this period, on the developments that occurred from 1846 to 1889, and how they affected Halsted's medical training and prompted his surgical innovations. The rest of the book was more a series of short biographies of men who worked with Halsted and the developments they (and he) brought to the practice of surgery from 1889-1922. It also covered Halsted's marriage and how he lived.

The author didn't assume that the reader was familiar with medical terms and so concisely worked that information in as was needed to understand the innovations. He did an excellent job of making the topic fascinating and easy to understand. I found the book a quick read despite the amount of information packed into it. I also liked how the author wove the general technological changes and social setting into the story so we could see how society effected the advances and how Halsted and the others influenced society in turn. While the book mostly focused on American surgery (especially that done at Johns Hopkins Hospital and Johns Hopkins School of Medicine), the author also brought up related advances over in Europe.

There were only a couple of brief descriptions of actual surgery, so most of the book probably wouldn't bother those who get queasy by descriptions of operations.

Some of the topics covered were: the introduction of general anesthetics, heat sterilization, and antiseptics to make surgery safer. How medical training had been done and how it changed (both in medical school and post-graduate) under the influence of Halsted and his friends at Johns Hopkins. The creation of out-patient clinics, the beginnings of bacteriology and the germ theory, the change from quick and brutal surgery to gentle, careful handling during surgery, the introduction of surgical gloves, of using cocaine as a local anesthetic, emergency blood transfusion, surgery of the brain, and much more.

Overall, I'd highly recommend this well-written and interesting book to those interested in how medicine (especially surgery) has developed into what we take for granted today.

I received this book as a review copy from the publisher.

Jan Stone says

If anyone is interested in the history of modern surgery, this is a good place to start. Even though Halsted was flawed and addicted to cocaine and morphine, he was still able to develop the basis for aseptic technique and surgical procedures. Worth the time to read

Jcorbman says

Detailed and informative, but also somewhat repetitive. The end gets very technical. Diagrams and a timeline would help.

Neal Jones says

I must admit that I felt somewhat misled by this book's description on its back cover. While the primary subject of this biography is Doctor William Halstead, the bulk of this book is actually about the formation of one of America's premier teaching hospitals: Johns Hopkins. William Stewart Halstead was one of a dozen influential doctors who were instrumental in revolutionizing the techniques of modern surgery. The founding of Johns Hopkins Hospital is part of Halstead's story, so I wasn't too disappointed by the misleading summary on the back cover. In fact, I found the stories of Halstead, Welch, Mall, Cushing, and the other doctors quite fascinating, as well as the amazing discoveries they made in the process of creating and/or improving the antiseptic process of modern surgery.

Daniel says

So, the subject of this book was really cool. I loved learning about Halsted and how strange he was, and what things he did that changed surgery. Especially as someone who loves the history of medicine, that was the good part of this book. However, it was written pretty terribly. The style was bad, and, more importantly for a biography, the timeline wasn't consistent. Imber jumps back and forth, mentioning characters as if we know them, 20 pages before they're introduced. We go to 1922, then back to 1906, then to 1917 without a clear demarcation of time, or really a clear reason to do so. In addition, the book often gets a little tedious and repetitive (Halsted STILL was using morphine, Halsted STILL was kind of annoying to a lot of people...) and I often found the supporting characters' lives that he goes into more interesting than the main story. It was a good overview of medicine at that time, and a great way to learn about the early history of Johns Hopkins, but, in the end, I wish there was just another way I could have learned about it. The writing was too bad for me to really recommend it, except for diehard fans of the period, or the people involved. It took me many years to get through this, and while I'm glad I finally finished it, I'm not sure if that's satisfaction at learning and reading, or satisfaction that I surmounted an obstacle and will never have to deal with it again.

Florence says

Dr. Halstead was the father of modern surgery. In the mid nineteenth century a compound fracture or appendicitis was essentially a death sentence. Anesthesia didn't exist. Even if a patient could be operated on, surgeons weren't aware of the need to keep the surroundings sterile. If the patient contracted an infection there were no antibiotics to arrest it. So much for the good old days. Dr. Halstead introduced aseptic methods of surgery. He pioneered hernia surgery, mastectomy to excise breast cancer and thyroid surgery. He was the first Professor of Surgery at the new Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Descriptions of illness and surgical technique were interesting. University politics were less interesting. Amazing that Dr. Halstead accomplished all this while his addiction to cocaine and morphine raged on uncured.

notRahimeanymore says

This is a fascinating view of early modern medicine and the establishment of Johns Hopkins (and how it shaped modern medical practice). I'd say it's about 60% a biography of William Halstead and 40% about my first sentence. I didn't know any of the history and really enjoyed it; my sister read it at the same time and said she had read a biography of Dr. Welch that she enjoyed more. I could see how the diversions into other people's stories/lives could be distracting or annoying (sometimes they seemed to be not in chronological order/placed oddly), but for someone who wasn't familiar with any of it, it was all interesting.

(I was especially interested by the history of gallbladder removal and the significant 'bumps on the road' since I had mine out 2 years ago and it was a cinch. Lucky for me I didn't live 100 years ago or it probably would have killed me.)

Mary says

Not particularly well-written, but an extremely interesting account of early modern medicine in general, and Johns Hopkins Hospital in particular. I will be seeking out more information on the people, places, and events that were written about; what better review could there be?

Patricia says

I would never have chosen to read this book; it is a book club selection, not my selection. The book, about the foundation of Johns Hopkins university and hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, drew me in.

The drawback is all the technical medical terminology, but the men and the lives this book describes are fascinating. The difference these founders made in the practice of medicine are relevant to us, today. Halstead developed a sterile operating room, and found successful ways to operate on conditions that were normally fatal. His contributions prolonged lives, and increased quality of life. It was a valuable book to understand just how differently medicine is practiced today because these doctors-with-a-scientific-bent spent their lives figuring out how to practice medicine better.

Jenna says

A fascinating topic, a strangely written book.

For one, there strangely doesn't seem to be enough information about Halsted to really warrant the title "a bizarre double life." Since his drug habit was in secret, there's seemingly barely any record of it other than "then he would disappear for six months every year and who knows, we can assume drugs." Imber also repeats himself often, sometimes from chapter to chapter, making it seem like either his editor only worked chapter by chapter or there was actually not enough information to warrant 350~ pages. He does mention a good chunk of Halsted's correspondence was burned by his wife's sister after her death, but he'll allude to letters and correspondence that he doesn't bother to quote or reproduce. Like, I'm here for Halsted, dude. Let's get some words from the man's mouth himself. I'm a big girl, I can handle it.

Perhaps it's just that Imber was simply more interested in the medical information than the man. There is a lot of that, and it's written pretty clearly in laymen's terms for the most part. And it is totally fascinating. There is a lot of information about Johns Hopkins – which is super interesting and obviously relevant – but it makes you wonder if perhaps it would have been easier to just write the book about the founding members instead, with initial chapters devoted to each man's life – sort of the way a lot of rock and roll anthologies are written nowadays.

ANYHOW, overall, an interesting read either way if you're into the man, the medicine or medical history in general.

Leslie Nienaber says

We have a LOT to thank William Stewart Halsted for, and modern medicine wouldn't be what it is today if it wasn't for him. Breast cancer surgery, hernia repair, even what medical residencies are today all started with this brilliant man. If you enjoy The Knick (which is what initially brought me to this book) or are interested in the history of modern medicine, or even slightly curious about medicine, I can't recommend this book enough. Also... we can thank him for painless dental procedures as well. Seriously, his achievements are endless!

Deborah says

Very dense. Fascinating. It became more dry for me when they branched out to talk about Dr. Halsted's friends/coworkers...which is what took me so long. But a great book overall.

Petr Augustin says

Really interesting book on early medicine of United States before the WW2.
