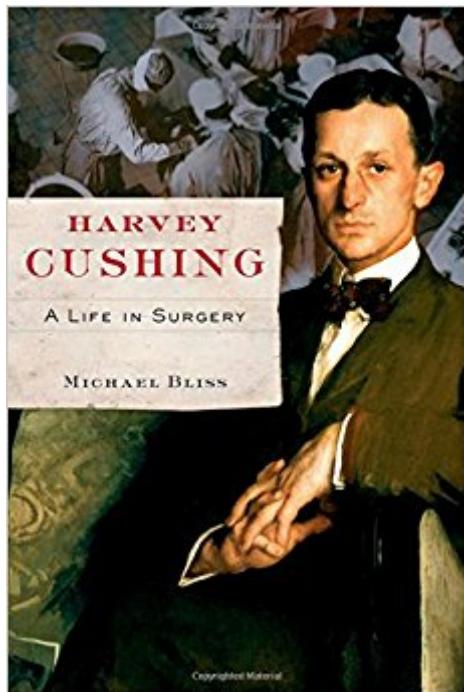


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# Harvey Cushing: A Life In Surgery



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"As cleanly efficient as a successful operation.... As this solid, accessible biography reveals, Cushing may have been the very devil to live with, but with a scalpel in his hand, he did God's work."--Julia Keller, Chicago Tribune"An absorbing chronicle of the career of one of the greatest medical innovators ever produced by the US--or any other country.... One of the most extraordinary

lives any biographer might wish to study.... It is Bliss's great accomplishment that he has made accessible not only the science, medicine, and professional atmosphere of Cushing's career, but also the character and personality of the man.... What Bliss has given to his subject is what Cushing himself, or any of us, would ask of a biographer: understanding."--Sherwin Nuland, New York Review of Books"Monumental. Bliss begins before the cradle and ends beyond the grave, touching both on the material facts of Cushing's remarkable successes and on his convoluted inner life.... It is difficult to imagine how any future writer might improve on this masterpiece of compassion and erudition." --Richard Barnett, *Lancet*"Brings back to life an amazingly accomplished man who was the father of American neurosurgery, a leading authority on the pituitary gland, a pioneer of endocrinology and a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer."--Denver Post"A fast paced, engaging portrait of one of America's great pioneers and heroes. Bliss gives important insight into Cushing's motivations, inspirations, demons, and flaws, thus revealing how he was motivated to change a field and bravely create a new outlook on the functioning of the brain as well as a fundamentally new approach to medicine and research." --Henry Brem, Harvey Cushing Professor and Chairman, Department of Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins"Bliss...had a voluminous treasure trove of primary documents with which to work. His readable and thoroughly documented book presents Cushing as both an icon and a human being whose family and colleagues suffered from his single-minded devotion to work and blunt perfectionism. Written almost 60 years after the last major Cushing biography, this illustrated work calls on new resources and provides a more contemporary perspective."--Library Journal"The essence of biography is the elucidation of personality, and this is accomplished in a superb fashion in Michael Bliss's splendid modern biography of Harvey Cushing, with each chapter providing a facet of insight into a complex and fascinating icon of 20th century medicine and surgery." --Edward R. Laws, MD, FACS, Professor of Neurosurgery and Medicine, University of Virginia"Bliss has provided us with a definitive biography of the founder of American neurosurgery. It is a book about glitter and intensity, about vision and persistence, and about the emergence of America as a world leader in medicine. Sophisticated, balanced, and thoughtful it is a story of interest to physicians, surgeons, and lovers of history." --Peter M. Black, MD, PhD, Franc D. Ingraham Professor of Neurosurgery, Harvard Medical School and Neurosurgeon-in-Chief, Brigham and Women's Hospital"Another tour-de-force by Michael Bliss. Like Bliss' *William Osler: A Life in Medicine*, it will be a classic of medical history." --Jock Murray, Medical Humanities Program, Dalhousie University"It is beautifully written and illustrated, a pleasure to read, and paints Cushing 'warts and all.' A must for anyone with an interest in the development of our profession and with the life of this extraordinary man."--British Journal of Hospital Medicine"Bliss does a superlative job in

conveying the strains that Cushing's surgical ambition and his celebrity status placed on his marriage."--Susan E. Lederer, *American Historical Review*

â ^Another tour-de-force by Michael Bliss. Here we have a great biography of the first American surgical superstar â " a rich, ripping story of a complex and brilliant man told by a masterful historian and writer and based on impeccable research and superior scholarship. Like Blissâ ™ William Osler: *A Life in Medicine*, it will be a classic of medical history.â ™ (Jock Murray, Professor, Medical Humanities Program, Dalhousie University)â ^A fast paced, engaging portrait of one of Americaâ ™s great pioneers and heroes. Michael Bliss gives important insight into Cushingâ ™s motivations, inspirations, demons, and flaws, thus revealing how he was motivated to change a field and bravely create a new outlook on the functioning of the brain as well as a fundamentally new approach to medicine and research.â ™ (Henry Brem, Harvey Cushing Professor and Chairman, Department of Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins Hospital and School of Medicine) --This text refers to the Digital edition.

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 Cushingâ¢â ª™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 â¢â ª 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 â¢â ª the human brain â¢â ª 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, Cushingâ¢â ª™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 Cushingâ¢â ª™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. Chapters are

subdivided in ways that follow the content easily (and also help the reader decide where to temporarily stop). Third, it was a massive task, successfully done, to take all of Cushing's enormous output, including his detailed war-time diaries, and cull all of it down to one volume. The book is 522 pages of text in relatively small font but this is a drop in the bucket compared to what Bliss had to work with. In this sense the book is a masterful technical achievement. Finally, Bliss is able to show both the strengths and weaknesses of this brilliant, innovative, and often obsessive man and get the reader to identify with him. If one reads the Osler biography, feeling empathy for William Osler is easy. He was very likeable in so many ways. But not so with Harvey Cushing. It is no small achievement for Bliss to make Cushing a sympathetic figure. In certain areas it was not difficult. Cushing's work in Europe in World War I with wounded soldiers was extraordinary. His professional achievements were outstanding and his care for patients was genuine. In other ways it was very difficult. Cushing was a man of his time when it came to stereotypes and prejudices and Bliss gives many examples. Cushing never let ethnicity affect his care for a patient but otherwise he had plenty of opinions about certain groups of people. Likewise, as so many of his assistants and co-workers testified, he was very difficult to deal with and, while he could be charming socially, his family relations were often nonexistent. But the bottom line, which Bliss never forgets, is that Harvey Cushing saved thousands of men and women who would have died without his pioneering work on the brain. His techniques and innovations, his care in doing an operation correctly and safely, and his sheer brilliance in the field led the way to the point in brain surgery where we are today. I recommend this book very highly. It gives the reader a perspective on the history of surgery that most of us do not know about. Cushing opened the way into working safely inside the human brain – a feat that stands forever as one of the great advances in medicine.

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. Ambitious and single-minded with an insatiable appetite for knowledge, Cushing pioneered brain surgery, writing volumes of medical articles and essays, countless lectures, and even a Pulitzer Prize winning two-volume biography on his mentor and world renowned physician, William Osler. There are numerous anecdotes in this fine biography, but the one that really stands out is Cushing's first experience with a patient who dies in front of his eyes. A young student at Harvard, he managed to get invited to assist with 'etherizing' patients for surgery. Weeks pass and everything is moving along fine until one evening he administers the ether to a young woman under-going an operation for a strangulated hernia, whose chances for survival are next to nil. The patient dies before the operation commences minutes after Cushing etherizes her. This of course devastated the young medical student, who walked the streets of Boston deciding to quit the profession. When he returned and told his teacher of his intent, he berated the boy, calling him "a damned fool" and to buck-up, for they had work to do. He continued on, of course, but remembered this incident over thirty years later. As any good critical biography should be, it is written with erudition, (explaining medical terms and procedures for the laymen) as well as presenting as a riveting narrative- this is an entertaining and inspiring work of an astonishing individual in American medical history.

I think there are only a few books on the life of a surgeon that can keep a non-surgeon interested from the first to the very last page. Being a surgeon fascinated by history of surgery myself it is not surprising that I have found this wonderful book just fascinating. But the fact that my 18 years old cousin put down his laptop (playstation/pc/facebook or whatever those kids do these days) to read the book he found accidentally on my bookshelf speaks for itself. If you are a surgeon you'll love it. If not, you'll fall in love with surgery. And in any case you'll have quite an adventure going step by step through the life of a great surgeon and man of many faces. Highly recommended!

A great book, Mr. Bliss delivers once again. This book didn't deliver as much punch as the book on Osler, but I think that has to do with Cushing's life, versus Osler's own. Osler was a legend today, and when you read his biography, he is still a legend, a giant of towering heights. Cushing is a legend, but delving into life, he has flaws. In short, he is a man, complete with great qualities and deeds, but also character defects and short comings. He is a great man, of unquestionable achievement, and a pioneer, but a man none the less. If you haven't read either, I recommend Bliss's biography on Osler first, but if you have, this one is a good follow up. I hope that Mr. Bliss will continue to write these biographies on the giants of medicine!

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