

## Book review

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**Robert Bárány (1876–1936) *Leben und Werk (Life and Work of Robert Bárány)***, Marburger Schriften zur Medizingeschichte, Gunter Joas: Armin Geus and Irmgard Müller, eds., Volume 37, Peter Lang Publishing, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, 612 pp., \$95.95.

This is a most remarkable and perhaps the most comprehensive biography on one of the founders of otoneurology, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1914. It is based not only on already known and published documents, but also for the first time on Bárány's private archives, which were bequeathed to the University of Uppsala, as well as documents from the Nobel Prize committee. In addition, the book contains a very valuable appendix with an abundant listing of Bárány's scientific body of work as well as other documents (notes, University of Vienna and Uppsala), some of which have not been published to date.

The main sequence of events centers on the blooming Vienna University of the early 20th century. Adam Politzer, who presided as the chair of otorhinolaryngology, was surrounded by his most inventive and influential pupils Gustav Alexander, Robert Bárány and Heinrich Neumann. Their seminal ideas, moreover, made Vienna one of the most powerful centers of otorhinolaryngology at the time.

Bárány was a very hard working man, who was almost obsessed by his own ideas and who devoted his life exclusively to research, although not solely in the vestibular field. His completed bibliography contains 276 publications, of which he is either the sole or first author. Since he was very self-assured and self-centered and did not easily acknowledge findings by his colleagues, personal difficulties therefore accompanied Bárány's life during the whole Vienna period.

There were disputes with Gustav Alexander (Alexander's law), Heinrich Neumann, Erich Ruttin (the first to describe acute unilateral vestibular failure or neuritis), and with many more.

Nonetheless, the core of the story remains the dramatic controversy between Bárány and the medical faculty that covers more than a hundred pages of the book. It reads like a crime novel. The medical faculty declined Nobel laureate Bárány's nomination as Professor of the faculty for reasons that could not be thoroughly elucidated but seemed mainly to be of personal nature and due to Bárány's obstinate and unremitting character.

Bárány, however, was not as tenacious as he sometimes appeared. For instance, in his research on loss of bilateral vestibular function, he at first expressed his strong belief that the vestibular organ was an insignificant one and, anyway, was "an organ in regression" ("ein in Rückbildung begriffener Sinnes- und Reflexapparat", 1907). Later, he conceded that the vestibular organ was an important organ of reflex activity and also altered his view regarding the consequences of its bilateral destruction (1925).

This book is well written and worth being translated into English. It gives a thorough impression of this authoritative key figure in otoneurology. As an insert, the book contains a good review on the early history of investigation of vertigo and the discovery of the vestibular organ, with some of the most famous names linked to it. This book is not only a great pleasure to read, but is also of lasting scientific value.

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