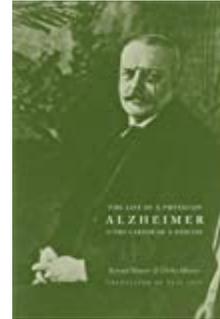




**Konrad Maurer, Ulrike Maurer.** *Alzheimer: The Life of a Physician and the Career of a Disease.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. x + 270 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11896-5.



**Reviewed by** Deborah Neill (Department of History, University of Toronto)

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This biography of Alois Alzheimer seeks to provide an account of the life of a famous scientist, and in doing so, to raise the profile of a disease afflicting millions of people throughout the world. In the United States alone, the authors note, Alzheimer's Disease is the fourth leading cause of death, with more than 100,000 people dying from it each year (p. 230).

Most of the book is dedicated to a straightforward discussion of Alzheimer's life, from his wild fraternity days to his years as a senior professor and clinician in Munich and Breslau. Alzheimer was born in Aschaffenburg, and his career reflects the circuitous routes that many aspiring young scientists took to complete their training in Germany: he studied in Berlin, Würzburg, and Tübingen, and then worked in Frankfurt, Heidelberg, and Munich, before ending his career as chair of the medical faculty at the University of Breslau. Along the way the authors exhaustively document Alzheimer's voluminous work, including his journal articles, presentations, conference papers and private research. They also provide details about his days as a clinician in local hospitals.

Alzheimer's family life is not as extensively discussed, although first-hand information taken from oral interviews with his son and grandchildren provide narrative color. Marrying late, and well, Alzheimer attained financial independence, enabling him to work for low pay,

or even for no wages, to further his career. After his wife died, his sister Elisabeth took over the running of his household. She is described as having a "severe manner." Though the authors tempt us with anecdotes about her strict Catholicism and her days as a Zeppelin pilot, we are, unfortunately, not given any further information about this extraordinary woman, except that she was a harsh disciplinarian, known to wash out the children's mouths with soap when they told lies (pp. 95-96).

Only the last chapter in the book is devoted exclusively to examining "the career of a disease." It effectively traces the pioneering research done by Alzheimer, as well as the excellent work completed by those who followed in his footsteps. The authors provide a summary of how our understanding of the science of Alzheimer's disease has developed, as well as describing how social and cultural perceptions of the illness have changed over time. This well-written chapter is concise and informative, and aims to educate people about not only the disease itself, but about how it has affected human relationships and society at large as an increasing number of people have been diagnosed with the disease.

Throughout the book, the authors present Alzheimer in a very positive way, and obviously have deep admiration for his kindness, intelligence and his dedication to his work. Alzheimer was indeed an admirable person,

and the authors successfully juxtapose his humanitarianism against the actions and attitudes of some of his colleagues, including Ernst R  din, who would later help to implement and promote Nazi scientific policies (p. 149). However, one cannot discount the likelihood that the almost completely positive view of Alzheimer is in part due to the authors' close collaboration with Alzheimer's descendants, to whom the book is in part dedicated. This may also reflect a still general trend in biography writing on scientists. The study of scientists' lives do not always effectively problematize their work or provide a larger analysis of their shared attitudes and beliefs.

Scientific biographies offer an excellent opportunity to the critical historian, as scientists are often engaged in pursuits that may be narrow in subject but are broad in import and meaning. There are several missed opportunities in this book for a more nuanced examination of Alzheimer's life and work, particularly within the context of imperial German and international science before World War I. Too often we are presented with material about his participation in conferences or his work at the hospital, without being given a larger picture of how conference life, scientific pursuits or the organization of medical and social services reflected a particular culture of belief and practice.

The most problematic aspect of this biography is in the authors' use of source material. While the book is well-researched and reflects the authors' extensive work in archives and libraries, the sources are presented as long quotations, in some cases covering two to three pages, where they could just as easily have been summarized to prevent the disruption of the narrative. Moreover, such evidence is seldom contextualized or analyzed. A curious interlude, for example, is the authors' long discussion concerning psychoanalysis that took place at a conference that Alzheimer attended in 1906. While pro-

viding evidence about the preoccupations governing the profession of psychiatry at the turn of the century, the discussion is presented in the form of excerpts of long quotations from the participants, and is not thoroughly analyzed or placed into a wider historical context. Such presentation fails to link this discussion effectively to the book's main theme (pp. 158-169).

An informative section analyzing Alzheimer's attitude to the First World War is a welcome exception to this criticism. Here the authors link Alzheimer's personal views to a larger context, presenting him as a typical example of a scientific establishment that threw its enthusiastic support behind the war effort. Alzheimer's writings reveal just how fully he accepted certain commonly held theories about degeneration and moral rejuvenation through war. It is fascinating to read that many progressive men like Alzheimer believed that "the war also trains a more determined, daring, enterprising race" (p. 207), or that the war would teach Germans to master "the many symptoms that a long period of peace allows to grow rampant and which some overly concerned people have regarded as proof of a psychological degeneration of our Volk" (p. 208). It is significant but not surprising; Alzheimer is representative of a much larger cultural milieu.

The lack of a larger context for Alzheimer's work will disappoint scholars seeking to understand his larger role in nineteenth and early twentieth century German science. However, the book's availability in English, as well as in the original German, make it accessible to many people, including those who have family members afflicted with the disease. This book will also appeal to people visiting the birthplace of Alzheimer, a house that co-author Ulrike Mauer has converted into a museum and conference center.

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