Germ Theory
Medical Pioneers in Infectious Diseases
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PREFACE

History is simply the biography of the mind of man; and our interest in history, and its educational value to us, is directly proportionate to the completeness of our study of the individuals through whom this mind has been manifested. To understand clearly our position in any science today, we must go back to its beginnings, and trace its gradual development.

Sir William Osler

In 2008, I gave a seminar to the Emory Division of Infectious Diseases on the history of our field using short biographies of the people who changed it. I began at the initial stages of Western medicine in ancient Greece and ended with the discovery of penicillin and the beginnings of modern antimicrobial therapy. The reaction that I received was the inspiration for this book. Faculty, fellows, postdoctoral students, residents, and medical students all appreciated the seminar and commented on their lack of acquaintance with the historical roots of their chosen discipline. A presentation at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) some months later yielded similar comments from those in public health. Designed to describe the genesis of the germ theory of disease by those whose discoveries shaped our understanding of it, this book is intended not just for physicians or students of medicine but to be accessible to anyone with an interest in microbiology, infectious diseases, medical history, and, to a degree, biography.

I have chosen to weave the narrative of the origins of the germ theory of disease through short biographies of the 11 men and 1 woman who changed the very fabric of our knowledge. Guided by
others who followed a similar path—notably Sherwin Nuland, author of *Doctors: The Biography of Medicine*—I selected the biographical approach to humanize further the persons who made the significant discoveries. Their stories demonstrate both the impact of their early life influences on their innovations and their frustrations with their societies’ inability to accept some of the greatest discoveries in the history of medicine. The biographical approach illustrates how change in medical thought has occurred. Since paradigm shifts in our scientific thinking will continue, the study of historical transformations functions to encourage a requisite open-mindedness to new shifts in medical thinking.

No book is the creation of just one person. I am indebted to those individuals whose comments helped to shape this text. Their constructive criticisms came with remarkable enthusiasm for the topic and the writing—an enthusiasm that encouraged me to persevere through my research and editing. I hope that the final product will impart to the reader the knowledge, understanding, and passion that I discovered in writing it.

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