

Carlos J. Finlay, Cuban Physician

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AUGUST 20 OF THIS YEAR marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Carlos Juan Finlay, the Cuban physician whose pioneer work on yellow fever made possible the conquest of that disease. It is altogether fitting that Hispanic Americanists salute the memory of this man whose scientific studies so profoundly affected the history of the hemisphere and benefited the whole of humanity. It is to be regretted that the strained relations between this country and Finlay's homeland preclude joint programs of commemoration because of Dr. Finlay's contribution to both nations. Even so, in view of the unfortunate failure in this country to give Dr. Finlay due credit for his part in the conquest of yellow fever, a special effort to do so now is much needed.

Dr. Finlay took his medical degree from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia (1855) and returned to his homeland to follow in the footsteps of his father as a specialist in ophthalmology, but the prevalence of yellow fever in Cuba soon focused his attention on that disease. His inquiring mind sought the causes and their treatment, and by early 1881 his studies had led him to reject all of the known theories about the propagation of the disease, including some that he himself had formulated. In February of that year, however, he was in a position to make a preliminary announcement on its propagation at the International Sanitary Conference in Washington. He advanced the theory that yellow fever was transmitted from one person to another only through an intermediate agent.¹ He refrained from naming the exact agent pending the completion of some experiments he had under way, but in a paper read before the Academy of Sciences in Havana on August 14, 1881, he named the specific culprit (the female of the *culex* mosquito, later named the *aedes aegypti*) and explained in detail the steps that had led him to this conclusion.²

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¹ Report on the Transmission of Yellow Fever by an Intermediate Agent. *International Sanitary Conference. Protocol of Proceedings No. 7*, Washington, 1881.

² Carlos J. Finlay, "El mosquito hipotéticamente considerado como agente de

Unfortunately for humanity and for Dr. Finlay neither the Washington Conference nor the Academy in Cuba gave any serious thought to this epoch-making announcement; in fact, two decades were to pass before Dr. Finlay could get any scientific group to attempt to verify or disprove his theory. In the meantime, he himself continued to study, observe, experiment and collect data that would convince a doubting scientific world. From time to time he reported the results of his efforts to the Academy in Havana or to other scientific groups, including the Third International Congress on Hygiene and Demography in Budapest (1894), to which he outlined a program for eliminating yellow fever from an infested area—the program used later by Major William C. Gorgas in Cuba and Panama and by others elsewhere. About the only encouragement he received during those years came from Dr. Claudio Delgado (a Spanish physician who accepted his theory and became a close collaborator in the efforts to demonstrate it), and from Captain General Ramón Blanco and the Jesuit and Carmelite fathers who were laboring in Cuba. Through their cooperation Dr. Finlay inoculated freshly arrived soldiers and priests by means of a limited number of bites by infected mosquitos which conferred immunity sufficient to reduce noticeably the percentage of deaths among these new arrivals in Cuba where the disease was endemic and whose population was less susceptible to the disease than the newcomers.

Between 1879 and 1898 three medical groups from the United States were appointed to study the causes of yellow fever in Cuba, but these efforts were without success. A fourth was organized under Dr. Walter Reed because the epidemic of yellow fever among the occupation personnel continued to increase in intensity in spite of drastic sanitary measures. This American Army Board was under the direction of the surgeon general, Dr. Charles M. Sternberg, a yellow fever specialist and former member of the medical groups sent to Cuba in 1879 and 1888. Dr. Sternberg was a personal friend of Finlay³ but was convinced that the latter was in error concerning the propagation of yellow fever. Consequently, only after all other avenues of approach had been exhausted did Dr. Reed and his associates turn to Dr. Finlay for suggestions. He gave full cooperation, supplying mosquitos from his own laboratory and the data that he had accumulated.

transmisión de la fiebre amarilla," *Anales de la Academia de Ciencias*, tomo XVII, 147-149.

³ This was so close that Sternberg appointed Finlay a surgeon in the United States Army in 1898 although the latter was 65 years of age.

The dramatic experiments in 1900 that confirmed his theory are well known, but not so well known in this country is the failure of the American Army Board and publicists in the United States over the succeeding half-century to accord to Finlay the credit that was due him. Dr. Finlay himself never showed resentment over the affair, but his compatriots have never ceased to demand that justice be done to his memory. The error was launched when Dr. Reed made only casual reference to Finlay in a paper read before the annual convention of the American Public Health Association in Indianapolis in October of 1900.⁴

More serious was what happened in Havana at the Third Pan American Medical Congress (February 4-7, 1901), when the members of the American Army Board gave the delegates from the whole hemisphere the impression that they intended to reap all the honors from the discovery. Dr. Reed's report on the recent experiments,⁵ read while Dr. Finlay was presiding over the session, failed again to give proper credit, and the Cuban delegates were deeply offended by the omission. Unfortunately this has been continued practically unnoticed in this country for more than half a century; on the contrary, nearly all publications dealing with the subject (textbooks, works of science, newspaper, magazine and encyclopedia articles, etc.) tended to laud the work of the Reed board with only casual mention of Dr. Finlay's contribution, if mentioned at all. Efforts have been made in recent years to rectify the situation, but much remains to be done, especially in convincing the Cubans and others of this hemisphere that this effort is being made. An opportunity now presents itself on this fiftieth anniversary of Finlay's death. The Office of the Historiador de Salubridad in Havana is preparing a commemorative bibliography of writings about Dr. Finlay. Cooperation is requested in order to make this as nearly complete as possible. It is to be hoped that a concerted effort will be made by writers and publishers in the United States to help make this bibliography a success and to heal a rupture to which is due in part the unfriendly feelings of Latin America toward the United States.

⁴ The *Preliminary Notes* were read before the Indianapolis group on October 25, 1900.

⁵ Walter Reed, "The Etiology of Yellow Fever," Acts of the III Pan American Medical Congress, Havana, 1901.