

Sir Frederick Banting: The Anti-Semite and Bigot?

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The discovery of insulin in 1921-22 has been documented in detail in four books: Seale Harris' *Banting's Miracle*, Louis Stevenson's *Sir Frederick Banting*, and Michael Bliss' two volumes, *The Discovery of Insulin* and his most recent, *Banting: A Biography*.

It is in Bliss' latest volume that light is shed on the darker side of Sir Frederick Banting. In a review of this book for *The Globe and Mail*, William French makes the startling conclusion that:

Frederick Banting was not a great scientist or even a very good one...wife beater, compulsive drinker, a prickly driven man whose emotional life was a mess...At times Banting's capacity for being a horse's ass seemed almost unlimited.

Bliss, a Professor of History at the University of Toronto, provides considerable evidence for the argument that Banting was an anti-Semite and was bigoted in his attitude toward the French. How accurate is this portrait? Was Sir Frederick Banting, the discoverer of insulin, the Nobel Laureate of 1923, a Canadian national hero, truly anti-Semitic and bigoted or does Bliss' second volume, "...tend to highlight the 'warts' [of Banting] rather than the whole portrait..."? An editorial in the April 1, 1986 issue of the *Medical Post* implores, "...who will save poor Banting from biographers like Bliss?" To discover whether or not Bliss' portrait is accurate, I have conducted interviews with both Michael Bliss and a former colleague of Banting, Dr. Chester B. Stewart.

A former Dean of Medicine at Dalhousie University, Stewart worked with Banting between 1938 and 1941 as Assistant Secretary of the Associate Committee on the Medical Research of the National Research Council. His duties with the Committee required that Stewart, then a young medical graduate, "...travel by train with Sir

Frederick, from Ottawa to Halifax to Vancouver and back...[providing] a unique opportunity...to get to know Dr. Banting." Stewart contends that, "...one does not travel across Canada by train without getting some clear and lasting impressions of the character, habits, and philosophy of one's traveling companion".⁶ Stewart disagrees with Bliss' portrayal of Banting. In evaluating the work of Bliss, given the evidence provided by several interviews, it is worth noting that Stewart, "...did know Banting personally and Bliss did not."⁶

Bliss describes Banting as a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) country boy raised in a community whose educated elite set the tone of prejudice. Banting was a man who had a disarming air of honesty in relating his prejudices. In refusing desperate, importuning, wealthy Americans, he said to his secretary, "You know if I'd known so many Jews had diabetes, I don't think I'd ever have gone into [insulin research]."⁴ On another occasion, Banting told his secretary, "...how hard it is to keep fending off people who want insulin. And besides, they're mostly Jewish..."⁴

However, the discovery of insulin in the 1920s sparked massive publicity, particularly in the United States, and precipitated a flood of people to Toronto who brought with them an insatiable demand for insulin. This put, "...a lot of pressure on [Banting] to deliver the scanty stock of insulin, to save a few diabetics." Stewart contends that the, "...pressures and annoyances of those days may have caused [Banting] to blow up or make a comment that was probably...exaggerated by Bliss."⁸

The pressures on Banting did not begin with the discovery of insulin. Before starting the insulin experiments, Banting had been rejected in his application for funding and resources not once but twice by J.J.R. MacLeod, the Head of the Department of Physiology at the University of Toronto. Once his application was finally accepted, "Banting got no money while he was doing the work. He had to sell his car to keep going. He cooked his meals over a Bunsen burner." Such sacrifices and frustrations may have added to an already prickly demeanour and precipitated

some negative comments and actions by the researcher.

It is worth noting that during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, there was a "...less sympathetic view towards Jewish people, and a great many other new Canadians..."⁷⁸ Anti-Semitism existed in the very structure of educational institutions. Bliss reports that J.J.R. MacLeod was able to attract excellent students to the University of Toronto, "...unfortunately those of them who were Jewish soon realized they could not hope for a career in an institution permeated with genteel anti-Semitism..."⁷⁴ As well, Bliss adds that, "...some schools had quotas on Jewish students."⁷⁴

Dalhousie University in Halifax, however, accepted a great number of American students in the 1930's, most of whom were Jewish. This action was taken as a measure to counter the current financial difficulties of the Medical School: increased enrollment as well as double tuition for those new Jewish-American students, were the chosen solutions. Stewart recalls that, "There was discrimination that was hidden and Dalhousie broke it as far as medical students were concerned partly because of their own financial difficulties...not because they felt generous towards Jewish people."⁷⁸

With regard to the prevailing attitude towards minorities at that time, Stewart suggests that one should, "...not try to apply present day standards to the actions that took place or the attitudes [held in the past]."⁷⁸ Banting was a "man of his day": if his anti-Semitic comments are unacceptable by today's standards, perhaps they should be conceptualized in light of societal attitudes of Banting's era. Anti-Semitic comments have, indeed, have been attributed to Banting, but Stewart contends, "...these were unimportant and overemphasized by Bliss."⁷⁸

Bliss denounces, as sub-standard, Banting's efforts to assist those wishing to escape Nazi tyranny in Europe: "It cannot be said that Banting, willing as he was to take in Bruno Mendel and other qualified Jewish scientists, went very far out of his way to help open the doors to Jewish refugees."⁷⁴ Furthermore, Bliss reports that Banting, "...went along with the prevailing attitude of admitting only those refugees whose skills could be of use in Canada."⁷⁴ In one instance, Banting was approached by Canadian immigration to comment, "...on an application to come to Canada by a former associate of Sigmund Freud...Banting replied that 'there are very few doctors in Canada who subscribe to Freud's theories,' that there was already a surplus of doctors in Canada, and a man in his sixties was not likely to be useful."⁷⁴

Per contra, Stewart insists that Banting, "...went very far out of his way to open doors to the Jews."⁷⁸ Indeed, "Banting was responsible for getting internationally famous cancer scientists, Dr. Bruno Mendel and Dr. Emil Fischer, out of Nazi Germany. These men...not only brought...front-line knowledge of cancer but also one of the finest private medical libraries in the world."⁷⁴ Of course, this raises the question of whether their rescue was performed on purely humanitarian grounds or with the eye to their potential contribution to medical science. It may be true that Banting did not, "...beard the Mackenzie King government to do more to open the doors for [Jewish] immigration."⁷⁸ If Bliss is accurate in his strong criticism of Banting's efforts to assist Jewish refugees then

one must also recognize that, "...99% of the...rest of Canada did the same."⁸

According to Bliss, Banting's prejudice was not exclusively against the Jews. In a 1933 trip, Banting spent only a few days passing through France but reportedly, "...loathed every minute of his time there and every contact with the French."⁸ Bliss attributes to Banting the following words: "The Jews are gentlemen in comparison to this scheming, begging, snivelling [French] race who beg one minute and parade in silks the next...Even Pasteur is going down in my estimation."⁴

Banting's purported dislike for the French may be traced back to his military days in the First World War. Stewart reminds us that relations between, "...the British and Canadians on one hand and French troops [on the other] was far from pleasant...[and] it was quite possible that Banting grew to dislike some Frenchmen."⁸

With the occupation of Paris in 1941, French-Canadian interest in English Canada's medical schools rose. Banting saw an opportunity to unite "...the medical profession of Canada by making special efforts to provide...French Canadian medical men facilities for their post-graduate training."⁴ Bliss questions Banting's intentions in the matter. "This quest for national medical unity balanced extremely unflattering comments about French Canadians in some of Banting's more violent tirades..."⁷⁸

According to Stewart, "[Banting] leaned over backwards to do everything he could to encourage research in French Canadian medical schools."⁸ In addition, Stewart recounts that in the early days of the Associate Committee on Medical Research, Banting made the utmost effort to ensure that, "...every committee, sub-committee or group that was to work in any field of research...[included] a French Canadian, even though it often took some 'hunting' to find anyone who would qualify."⁷⁸

Another example of his efforts to include French Canadians followed a meeting to establish a committee regarding early work on the storage of blood for transfusion. Banting, according to Stewart, stated "You know, we made a mistake. We do not have a French Canadian on the committee."⁸ Banting immediately asked Dr. Collip, a member of the committee at the time, for suggestions to ensure, "...that French Canadians were represented."⁸ Shortly thereafter, a hematologist and faculty member of the Université de Montréal was appointed.⁸

The impact of Bliss' assertions of Banting's anti-Semitism and bigotry is considerable; that a Canadian national hero and Nobel Laureate could hold such views is disturbing. Bliss asserts that his analysis was complete and his, "...research was...thorough and [he] used all of it." However, Bliss did not have recourse to personal knowledge of Banting. Dr. Bernard Liebel, Associate Professor at the Banting and Best Institute and a man who worked directly with Banting, remarked that, "There was never a more generous or honest man than Fred Banting...a man of principle...[who] followed his principles fanatically..."⁷⁹ Furthermore, Liebel contends that, "...compared with Michael Bliss, who never met either Banting or Best, my impressions are quite reliable."

Whether Banting voiced anti-Semitic or discriminatory words is debatable. Evidence, however, seems to support the fact that individuals and institutions of that era voiced and demonstrated similar viewpoints. A true evaluation of Banting's behavior must address the question of whether Banting ought to be judged by the moral standards of today or by those of his own era. As civilization grows and develops, one can only hope that an educated society becomes more enlightened and tolerant and that discrimination of any kind would cease. Indeed, the words and actions of today may well be judged offensive and unacceptable tomorrow.

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