

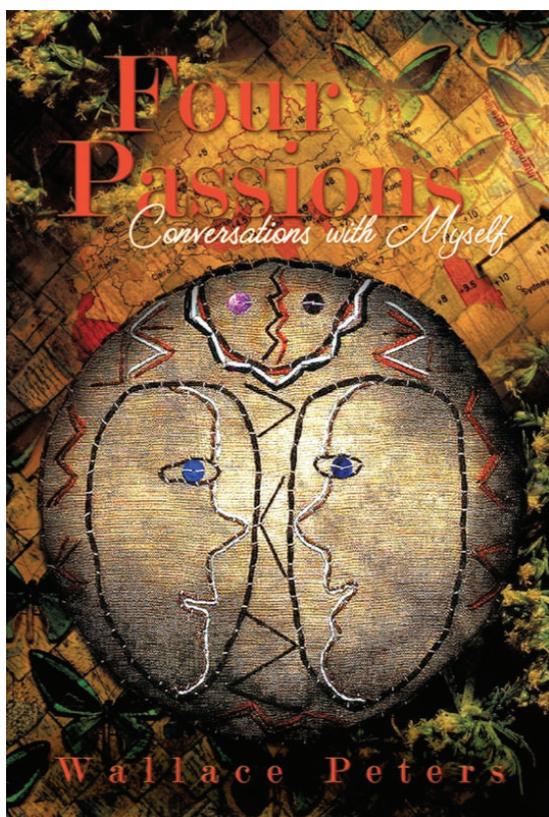
## Book review: 'Four passions: Conversations with myself'

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### Review

Sometimes you come across a book that grabs you and stays with you long after you finish reading it. Wallace Peters' book does just that. It is not a scientific book, nor is it some sort of textbook on tropical diseases. It is an autobiography with a lot of interesting information about a researcher whose life was devoted to the study and control of malaria and other vector-borne diseases such as leishmaniasis.

It is also unusual. Never before have I read a book in which the author includes his own obituary at the end of it (whilst still alive!). Read that before you start reading the

book and you'll know that Peters was not just any malariologist. In fact, he still remains active today, even when well beyond eighty years of age.

Wallace, as a child, developed a keen interest in nature, notably insects, but chose to be trained as a doctor, after conducting successful surgery as a young boy on a frog that swallowed a fish hook! He writes of his youth in terms of being lonely, with few friends, and parents who were too preoccupied living their own lives to recognise his needs. He once ran away from home, which perhaps was the first signal that he would become a globetrotter one day. After seeing malaria parasites in the blood of a soldier whilst a student at Hill End hospital in St. Albans, Wallace was 'hooked for life'. His career in the field of malaria was further stimulated when seeing syphilis patients being 'treated with malaria' to let the fevers kill off the spirochaetes.

The book encompasses Wallace's sixty odd years of working on malaria and he concludes early on in the book that 'much has been done but relatively little has been achieved today'. Nevertheless, here's a story of a malaria researcher that many of us contemporary scientists can and should be jealous of. As a young bachelor he travelled across Europe shortly after WWII, and by sheer luck was sent to Ghana in 1948 to serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps, where he was introduced to the world of tropical medicine. Next, Peters served the Colonial Development Corporation in Njombe, Tanzania, where his medical career progressed and his hobby to collect local butterflies flourished. But Wallace's days as a bachelor were soon to end.

In 1953, whilst on his way from London to Geneva where his sister worked for WHO, he is introduced to Ruth, the lady that changed every day of his life thereafter. In those days, giants like Bruce-Chwatt and Pampana were preparing the world for the Global Malaria Eradication era that would be launched two years later. Without any formal entomology training, Peters was offered a job as a medical entomologist to work in Liberia. Compare that with getting a job at WHO today!

In Liberia, Peters becomes familiar with the wonders

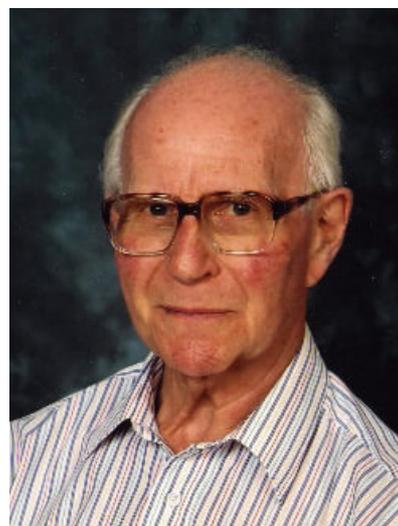
of DDT and the new rules of the malaria game based on George Macdonald's formulae we still teach today. Of that period Wallace states: "I set off for Africa like a knight in shining armor, to eradicate malaria with a bucket of DDT in one hand and a bottle of chloroquine in the other. About fifteen years later I returned and found that nothing had changed." Immediately upon returning from Liberia, Wallace proposed to Ruth and they married soon after before taking on his next assignment for WHO, this time in Nepal. With a young wife who had never ventured beyond Europe and a project leader who made life miserable, working in a rural remote setting deprived of any form of luxury wasn't easy. Frustration over this led Peters to resign from WHO.

Shortly afterwards two opportunities emerged: Canada or Papua New Guinea. Without reading on I guessed his choice, to work on malaria in PNG. It signalled the start of working on anti-malarial drug treatment that would become his passion for life. Life out in the PNG jungle was hard, not without dangers (Ruth once slept with a cocked pistol under her pillow...), but at the same time these were the days in which confidence that malaria could be conquered still reigned. The classical story of DDT's impact on lizards and the resulting outbreak of thatch-eating caterpillars that destroyed the roofs of yam stores was witnessed by Peters. Worse was to come, when Peters visited West Africa in the early 1960s and saw resistance to pyrimethamine and failed programmes that relied on DDT. Peters started drawing conclusions that WHO didn't want to hear. "Eradication was the objective so eradication had to succeed" he writes. His outspokenness did not go unnoticed and shortly afterwards he became a persona non grata in Geneva for a number of years. Admittedly, nothing much has changed between 1960 and today, when becoming too vocal still means that invitations to meetings in Geneva stop coming in... Nevertheless, the malaria situation in PNG is pretty much today what it was in 1960.

Peters writes in detail about his work in Brasil, Sabah and Saudi Arabia, to which he devotes entire chapters in the book. He writes about numerous meetings he attended, the lectures he presented around the world, and the sometimes comical events that extensive travel brought with it.

But the tide slowly turned after Peters' retirement from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1989. Although he continued to pursue scientific research and still was professionally involved in tropical disease research, slowly but surely life became less intense and this reflected on Peters' personal situation and relationship with his wife, about which he writes in a very open manner. Coming to grips with this situation took years and is well reflected in the numerous diary entries that are copied into the book.

But then disaster strikes, when his wife Ruth passes away at the age of seventy-eight after a long and painful illness;



in December of 2007. Wallace adds his own poem titled 'The Departure' to the more than hundred pages that follow and describe his intense pain, loneliness and solitary existence in the succeeding months. David and Joyce, two occupants of the residential village in which Wallace now lives who befriended him are massively important in pulling him through this difficult time. Former colleagues, notably David Warhurst, pass by from time to time. Apart from that Wallace's computer remains the only link to his once such huge network around the globe.

'Four passions' gives a wonderful impression of the life of a well-respected and indeed famous malariologist. But Peters' writing goes beyond a detailed and interesting account of the life of a tropical diseases expert. He is frank, open, and transparent about his personal life, ambitions, and relationships as well - making much of what he writes about highly recognisable for anyone working in academia with lots of international travel and collaboration.

A must-read for anyone interested in malaria and leishmaniasis and developments in the field of tropical medicine over the last fifty years. With lots of wisdom, reflections on life and insights of a great scientist, but above all also a normal human being, in the autumn of his life.

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