

Klein J. *Biology of the mouse histocompatibility-2 complex: principles of immunogenetics applied to a single system*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1975. 620 p. [Department of Microbiology, University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, Dallas, TX]

True to its name, the major histocompatibility complex (Mhc) is one of the most intricate genetic systems known. When it became known in 1974 that Mhc codes for one of three principal immunological molecules, many immunologists began using this book as a guide through the maze of esoteric symbols and knowledge scattered in a large variety of journals. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the book reared a generation of immunologists. [The *SCI*® indicates that this book has been cited in over 1,375 publications.]

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We scientists differ in the scope of knowledge that satisfies our curiosity. Some of us prefer to limit our exploration to a small area in which no stone is left unturned, while others are inclined to encompass as broad a field as is humanly possible. I belong to the latter category. If I could choose the time and place of my birth, I would opt for eighteenth-century France. I would not particularly care about making the acquaintance of Marat or Robespierre, but I would be thrilled to work with d'Alembert and Diderot on the *Encyclopédie*. However, I was born in the twentieth century, so I satisfy my urge for encyclopedic knowledge in undertakings that others might consider insane—in writing books about the major histocompatibility complex (Mhc), for example.

Following the 1969 discovery that Mhc has a major influence on the immune response of an organism to foreign antigens,¹ there began an influx of scientific nomads to this area of study. The number of papers dealing with Mhc began to grow exponentially, and the scope of Mhc studies widened so much that it began to touch not only on immunology and genetics, but also on virology, tumor biology, biochemistry, developmental biology, anthropology, cell biology, and other fields. A sporadic reading of the literature was no longer enough to keep up with the new developments. I there-

fore decided to review the literature systematically, to organize it, and to try to make some sense out of it.

At first I thought a paper of some 70 pages or so would suffice, and I made arrangements with the editors of *Series Haematologica* to publish the overview as one of their issues. I soon realized, however, that the work would be much longer. I then started to look for a publisher willing to bring the manuscript out in the form of a book. At a conference at the Asilomar Conference Center, Monterey, California, I met Dietrich Götze, who was then a postdoctoral fellow at the Scripps Clinic working on the H-2 complex, which is the mouse version of Mhc and the epitome of all such complexes. When he heard that I was writing a book on the H-2 complex, he immediately offered to arrange its publication. The arrangement presented no problem for him since his father was the executive director of Springer-Verlag. In the end, the book turned out to have over 600 pages!

After the book was published, its success was almost instantaneous. Regardless of the laboratory I visited, I found it on a desk in a state indicating that it was used extensively. I attribute this success to the comprehensive scope of the book and the intelligible way in which it was written. The many newcomers to the field found the H-2 complex as incomprehensible as the hieroglyphs on the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde. In the book I took great pains to explain, to synthesize, and to put things into perspective. Apparently, that was just what was needed at that time. For many, the book became a gate through which they could walk comfortably into the H-2 citadel instead of having to laboriously climb its walls.

The book is still used, more than 12 years after its publication, and now that I have written a new book on an even broader subject,² it is sometimes referred to, somewhat sacrilegiously, as the "Old Testament," the recent book being the "New Testament." This gives me great satisfaction and is a small compensation for the effort that went into writing both books.

I thank all those who have written letters of appreciation to me or who have sent me postcards with a picture of a bridge. I had no particular bridge in mind when I wrote the preface, and I am surprised that the metaphor I used seems to apply to so many bridges all over the world.

1. McDevitt H O & Chinitz A. Genetic control of the antibody response: relationship between immune response and histocompatibility (H-2) type. *Science* 163:1207-8, 1969. (Cited 310 times.)

2. Klein J. *Natural history of the major histocompatibility complex*. New York: Wiley, 1986. 775 p.