

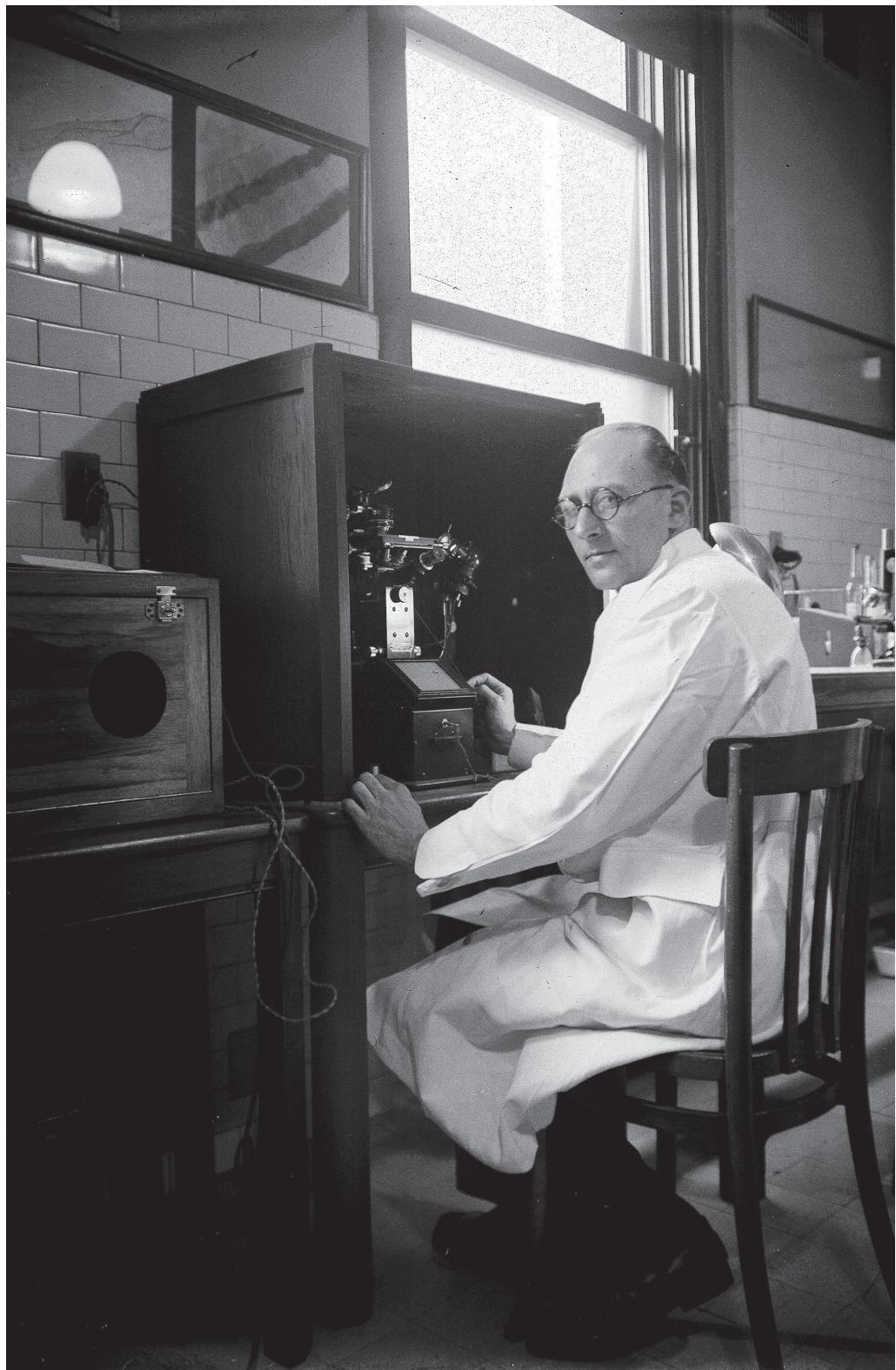
Ludwig Apers



*the* INSTITUTE  
*of* TROPICAL  
MEDICINE  
*in* ANTWERP

*from* SPECIALIST SCHOOL  
*to* WORLD-CLASS INSTITUTION

 MANTEAU



“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

L.P. Hartley, in *The Go-Between*

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# PREFACE

When I first stepped through the doors of the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp in 2002, I carried with me not just the hopes of my own scientific journey, but the aspirations of an entire generation of African researchers seeking to transform health research on our continent. That initial 45-day fellowship, generously extended to 90 days (by the ITM former director Bruno Gryseels), became the foundation upon which I built a research unit in Africa that today employs over 400 people in rural Burkina Faso.

This remarkable book traces the evolution of ITM from its colonial origins to its current position as a world-class institution committed to equitable global health partnerships. As I read through its pages, I am struck by how profoundly the story of ITM intersects with my own journey and reflects the broader transformation occurring in relationships between research institutions in the Global North and South.

The history documented here is both inspiring and sobering. The institute's founding was inextricably linked to Belgium's colonial project in Congo, established to train medical personnel for colonial service. The early chapters reveal an institution shaped by imperial ambitions, where knowledge flowed in one direction and African populations were subjects rather than partners. This past cannot be ignored, and I commend the authors and ITM leadership for confronting this legacy with honesty.

Yet what gives me hope is the evidence of profound institutional transformation. The ITM that supported my doctoral

research between 2002 and 2006 was already reimagining its role in global health. Rather than simply extracting knowledge from Africa, it was investing in African researchers through Master and PhD training, supporting our return home and helping us build infrastructure for locally led research.

My story illustrates this evolved approach. When I completed my PhD in medical sciences in 2006 at the University of Antwerp, I received an attractive postdoctoral offer from the University of Ohio in the United States. However, the Belgian cooperation offered something more valuable through ITM: a 're-entry grant' enabling me to return to Burkina Faso to set up the Clinical Research Unit of Nanoro (CRUN). This decision to invest in my return, rather than facilitating the brain drain, exemplifies partnership that builds sustainable research capacity in Africa.

Today, CRUN stands as one of Africa's premier clinical research centres. We have conducted groundbreaking research on malaria, including studies on parasite resistance and vaccine development including the two malaria vaccines (RTS,S and R21) that are now being deployed to protect children across Africa. This achievement was possible because partnerships like those with ITM recognised a fundamental truth: the most important questions about African health must be answered by African researchers, working with African communities.

The transformation documented in this book – from colonial medical school to an

institution actively engaged in decolonisation – mirrors the transformation that must occur throughout global health research. The principles now guiding ITM's partnerships – shared agenda-setting, equitable resource distribution, capacity strengthening and respect for local leadership – are the operational framework that enabled a young pharmacist from Burkina Faso to become a medical scientist leading internationally recognised research.

I have trained dozens of Master's and doctoral students through partnerships with ITM and Belgian academic programmes. These researchers have returned to contribute to Burkina Faso's development, creating a multiplier effect extending far beyond any individual project. This is genuine capacity-building: sustained investment in people and institutions that generates lasting change.

The impact extends beyond academia. CRUN's presence has brought electricity to Nanoro, improved healthcare access and created economic opportunities in a rural community. These 400 jobs would not exist if I had accepted that American position, reminding us that research partnerships carry profound social and economic consequences.

To young African researchers reading this history: your generation has unprecedented opportunities to lead research addressing our continent's pressing health challenges. Nevertheless, these opportunities come with responsibilities. We must insist on partnerships that respect our expertise and invest in our institutions, recognising that sustainable solutions

to African problems must be African-led. We must be patient – I spent many years in higher education after secondary school – and master global science tools while remaining rooted in our communities' needs.

To Northern institutions: ITM's journey demonstrates that genuine partnership requires institutional transformation, honest reckoning with colonial legacies, and sustained commitment to shifting power and resources to Southern partners. The return on this investment is measured not merely in publications in high-impact journals, but in research ecosystems that will drive innovation long after individual projects end.

This book is more than ITM's institutional history; it is a roadmap for how global health research can evolve from extraction to

partnership, from charity to solidarity. ITM's transformation from colonial school to collaborative partner offers hope that change is possible and demonstrates what that change must look like.

As I write this preface from Nanoro, surrounded by the vibrant research community that Belgian-Burkinabè cooperation contributed to create, I am grateful for the journey documented in these pages and optimistic about the future it helps us envision.

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November 2025









# INTRODUCTION

How do you start writing a history of an institution such as the *Instituut voor Tropische Geneeskunde*, the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium? Should you even want to? Might it not be better for us to concentrate on the here and now, on the everyday reality of contemporary concerns and complexities, and on the future – that unexplored land of promises and opportunities?

No, we decided against that. Who are ‘we’? In this case, a group of people who for various reasons are intrigued about the background to the institute.<sup>1</sup> There is a gigantic archive of images that is kept up to date meticulously by the staff of the Graphic Design Unit, often above and beyond their normal duties. There is also the equally gigantic archive of documents that have been handed down from generation to generation and from cupboard to cupboard ever since the very first reports and missives of more than a century ago. Handwritten letters in elegant or tiny script, on tissue-thin postal paper or beneath grandiose letterheads – documents that were arranged, numbered, classified and stored away by secretaries and librarians for...

Well, for whom, actually? For the librarians and archivist and graphic designer

mentioned above, who derive satisfaction from the ordering and classification in its own right? For the historians who turn up every few years looking for the detailed snippets of information that they<sup>2</sup> need for an academic article or thesis or dissertation? Or for the multitude of ITM staff and former employees who created the history of ITM (and are still doing so and will continue to do so), but who know little or nothing about all that material left by their predecessors?

For us, it was exactly those people who were the prime reason for making that history more accessible. So that’s a couple of thousand people for starters. Then there are also the partners that ITM works with – the scientific institutions, the NGOs, universities, students, funding bodies, governmental authorities and so forth. And who knows? There may be some people who are interested among the many who have ever come along for a vaccine at some point, or have heard an ITM staff member giving an expert explanation in the media. There are the passers-by too, passengers on the number 4 tram who are simply wondering what goes on behind the stately facades on Nationalestraat and Kronenburgstraat in Antwerp.

So it's a book for a broad readership, with wide-ranging content too. 1906 is generally considered as the year in which ITM was founded, so we're talking about a timespan of around a hundred and twenty years. A great deal has happened over those twelve decades, so how do you make a selection that tells the full story in a mere three hundred pages? Let's suppose first of all that there's no such thing as a definitive history of ITM. Just as there's no such thing as *the* history of Antwerp's Bourla Theatre or of the Merovingian dynasty or the Middle Ages. "Historians are products of their time, and the *Zeitgeist* of the time they live in determines what questions they ask of the past."<sup>3</sup>

We are not historians, but we *are* products of our time. Which is why you will find that quote by Hartley early on in the book: we want to describe events that figuratively – and indeed often literally – happened in a 'foreign country' – in the past, where people often thought and acted very differently than we would nowadays. We have attempted to understand the perspective of those times, with their different ways of thinking and acting, insofar as that is possible. We have asked ourselves numerous questions, which we have not always found answers for. We would also like to encourage the reader to try to do the same: put contemporary clichés and even our modern 'truths' to one side and – driven purely by curiosity – wander through more than a century of history.

That last aspect is something we *have* attempted to do literally: the book can be seen as a comprehensive walking tour of ITM's buildings. Every room, every corridor and every laboratory has a story to tell and is redolent of history. That immediately gave us a structure, but also created a limitation. There would be less opportunity to discuss events that are not linked to some part of the building. But the

basic outline has indeed been determined by the splendid Art Deco building and the renovated Kapucinessenklooster, the Capuchin Sisters' convent. Although the history of ITM actually starts in Brussels. So we'll also be taking you along on a walk there, in the districts of Watermael and Forest, for example.

This book is not the first attempt to portray the history of ITM. The reference work we have used as the basis is *Een brug tussen twee werelden* ('A bridge between two worlds'), which was never published in book form but compiled in A4 format into a heavyweight tome of nearly four hundred pages. This saw the light of day in 2006, the year in which the institution's centenary was celebrated. It had been edited by Roland Baetens, emeritus professor at UFSIA, the Saint Ignatius University Centre in Antwerp, where he had taught history until 2000.

Baetens had surrounded himself with a circle of eminent fellow professors emeritus who, as retired people so often do, enjoyed getting involved in things that they had not had the time for during their professional careers. In this case, it meant working on the history of ITM from the perspectives of their specialist fields. These learned gentlemen were Paul Gigase, Stanny Geerts, Dominique Le Ray, Harry Van Balen and Guido van der Groen. Gilbert Roelants, Dirk Schoonbaert and Veerle Demedts were the indispensable librarians who ploughed their way through the extensive archives and neatly selected the requisite items for the professors. They were only able to do that after the historian Eefje Anthoni (under Baetens' guidance) had sorted and collated the documents, which were kept at a variety of locations in the various buildings and departments.

The result of all that searching, selecting and writing was a highly detailed report on the history of ITM, grouped thematically and in

chronological order for the various directors. Each chapter closes with a detailed list of references, albeit one that is only comprehensible for insiders: they refer to the archive codes assigned by Anthoni. In short, it is a detailed and extensively documented opus... that is all but unreadable. The academic mindset is precise and accurate, but not necessarily captivating or compelling. The work was also purely textual, with no images. There was not so much as a single photograph, not even on the cover.

So it was time to combine the two sources: Baetens' text as the basis, plus a selection from the wealth of archived images, because a picture paints a thousand words. In addition, we have made use of other sources (see the Acknowledgements at the back), interviews with current and former employees, and books that have been written by other ITM staff members themselves – Peter Piot and Guido van der Groen, for example, have produced their own ‘histories’ in book form.

Let us return to that image of the past as a ‘foreign country’. We can even put a name to that distant land: Congo.<sup>4</sup> A one-time colony of Belgium, playing a major role in the circumstances of ITM’s birth and its existence for around three quarters of a century, the first and indeed only partner country until deep into the twentieth century. Anyone who dares drop the term ‘colony’ into conversation should immediately know that they need to tread carefully by observing the correct usage. We have attempted to do so, above all in terms of the words we use. We drew on a glossary of terms about decolonisation that was published in 2020, drawn up on instructions from a think-tank and platform known as the *Gemeenschappelijk Strategisch Denkkader – IT.II.II.*

Nomenclature is a relatively easy pitfall to avoid; the problem of colonial thinking,

however, cannot be resolved by avoiding specific words or replacing them with others. If only it were so straightforward. Colonial thinking goes a great deal deeper, and is intertwined with Eurocentrism, prejudices and a feeling of superiority. Those are all aspects that are much more awkward to tackle than mere terminology, as well as often being harder to identify or even only present in the subconscious. We would like to emphasise here from the outset that we have attempted to eliminate these ugly characteristics from our writing and thinking, or at any rate from what we do consciously. ITM is and will remain – for now at any rate – a Belgian institution, with largely Belgian staff. It is therefore not illogical that this attempt to write a history was tackled by individuals with roots in this culture, with all the obstacles and shortcomings this implies.

We may hope that the day will come when the history of ITM can be written by people with roots in a different culture, yet who also have sufficient affinity with the institute to tackle such a work. That is not as improbable as it may seem at first sight: innumerable authors and historians – mostly white – have written the histories of peoples, countries and cultures that they were not part of and did not belong to.

The sources are available and the archives are waiting to be consulted by other curious souls, wherever they may come from and whatever their backgrounds or motivations. Every new perspective adds yet another view of the history of this unique institution. We will be intrigued to see this, but until then we are coming up with our own effort.

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