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The Gram stain is a fundamental test used by microbiologists and physicians. It is an integral component in the management of patients, pursuit of research and education of students. So commonplace is it that few people give the Gram stain a second thought. Still fewer are aware of that the Gram stain was born out of controversy and need. What are the origins of this bedrock technique, and how has the stain survived more than 130 years when its inventor referred to it as a “defective and imperfect” method?

Hans Christian Gram was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1853, the oldest of seven brothers. His father—a professor of law at the University of Copenhagen—tried and failed to steer his bright son toward a law career and away from the natural sciences (Slottved E. University of Copenhagen, e-mail communication, October 15, 2013). Gram earned his bachelor’s degree in botany from Copenhagen’s University of Copenhagen, e-mail communication, October 15, 2013). Gram never returned to bench microbiology, nor did he publish any project. They would also like to thank John D. Nelson, MD, and George H. McCracken, MD, for their personal and editorial support of the History of Medicine.

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