In 1890, 14 years after Dr. John Kellogg converted a two-story home into a health institute, his Battle Creek Sanitarium had evolved into a massive medical center. The Michigan facility included a five-story hospital; 400 acres of land to grow the food seven to 10,000 patients consumed each year; canning and food manufacturing plants; 20 cottages for wealthy clients; and a charity hospital. With hundreds of publications bearing his name, Kellogg had an international reputation as a surgeon, an authority on nutrition, exercise and natural healing, and a patron saint of “wellness.”

In time, however, John’s younger brother Will would become the Kellogg. Founded in 1906, his Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company (based on the premise that there were many more healthy people eager to eat tasty, crunchy corn flakes for breakfast than sick people looking for health foods to aid their digestion) controlled more than 40 percent of the domestic ready-to-eat cereal market (and more than half of international sales) within three decades. And Will’s signature was on every box. After Will’s death, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation donated billions of
dollars to worthy causes.

In “The Kelloggs,” Howard Markel, a physician and professor of the history of medicine at the University of Michigan, tells the fascinating (and intertwined) stories of the brothers, who, it turns out, hated one another.

Markel struggles at times to balance the voluminous recorded material left by John Kellogg with far less ample sources related to Will (and the restrictions imposed on scholars by the Kellogg Foundation). His narrative, moreover, does not always proceed chronologically and is, at times, digressive.

That said, as Markel examines a rivalry that lasted for 70 years (and made its way into boardrooms and courtrooms), he illuminates medical, nutritional and business practices
in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, and the ways in which John and Will were — and were not — men of their times.

Breaking with conventional wisdom, Markel reveals, John Kellogg insisted that his patients move about as soon as possible after surgery, and remain hydrated. He warned that fashionable, tight-fitting corsets caused muscle injuries, poor posture, and damage to digestive and reproductive organs. Published in 1922, his book “Tobaccoism, or How Tobacco Kills,” maintained that cigarette smoking is addictive. Equally prescient were his advocacy of psyllium as a laxative, his studies of soy milk as a treatment for bowel problems in infants, and his role in developing bran cereals, fiber bars and nut foods.

Markel reads into the record as well the precepts that contributed to Dr. Kellogg’s reputation as a quack. He thought masturbation a “scourge,” for example, bandaging the hands of boys, and if that did not work, circumcising them in a procedure without an anesthetic because pain, “especially if connected with the idea of punishment would have a salutary effect on the mind.” And, Kellogg was a vigorous proponent, facilitator, and financial backer of the racist pseudo-scientific eugenics movement.

Unlike his brother, Markel points out, Will Kellogg was a brilliant businessman, who made superb use of the latest developments in advertising, marketing and mass production. His Battle Creek operation was highly mechanized, operating 24 hours a day. To stimulate demand, Will authorized the installation of thousands of giant electric billboards depicting a child whose tearful plea “I Want Kellogg’s Toasted Corn Flakes” turned to a smiling announcement, “I Got Kellogg’s Toasted Corn Flakes.” He put toys in every cereal box, taking special pleasure in the knowledge that the space they filled up would have cost more had it contained corn flakes. And Will approved the slogan “Snap, Crackle and Pop” for a new product called Rice Krispies.

“Biography lends to death a new terror,” Oscar Wilde once wrote. This is not the case with “The Kelloggs.” To be sure, Markel documents the substantial and destructive character flaws and errors of judgment of each of the two brothers. More importantly, he gives them their due.

John Kellogg, Markel maintains, “may not have always looked before he spent, spoke, or acted,” but in his philanthropic, missionary, and medical work, in his new food creations, mechanical inventions, publishing and public health ventures, he was
“generous to a fault.” And some of Dr. Kellogg’s ideas about wellness “remain sage prescriptions written out millions of times each day.”

Will Kellogg, who may or may not have invented corn “flakes,” Markel indicates, has in a sense achieved the immortality denied to his charismatic and once more famous older brother.

Although neither Will nor John ever admitted it, Markel also concludes, their success “was mutually dependent if not outright synergistic.” After all, their shared interests and collaboration in their early years enabled John to create “a university” of health and wellness and Will to identify “the possibilities of those toasted flakes of corn.”

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The Kelloggs

The Battling Brothers of Battling Creek

By Howard Markel

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