

BOOK REVIEW

Georges Gilles de la Tourette: the definitive biography

Georges Gilles de la Tourette: beyond the eponym, by Walusinski, O., New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, £ 25.99 (hardcover), 512 pp., ISBN 978-0190636036

It is tempting to speculate that the history of medicine is populated by heroes, unsung heroes, and half-sung heroes. Georges Albert Édouard Brutus Gilles de la Tourette arguably deserves to be remembered for more than the tic disorder that bears his name (Lees, 1986; Rickards & Cavanna, 2009). The French physician with the musical name played a significant role in the birth of modern neuropsychiatry. To start with, he was one of Jean-Martin Charcot's favourite pupils, his house physician and his self-appointed amanuensis: in turn, Charcot helped his admiring pupil progressing steadily up the academic ladder. Gilles de la Tourette's most substantial achievements were in the study of hysteria and the medico-legal ramifications of hypnotism, but he was also a competent neuropsychiatrist with a special interest in therapeutics. It is not widely known that Sigmund Freud attended Gilles de la Tourette's lectures and was possibly influenced by his work on hypnosis.

Olivier Walusinski is one of the world's foremost authorities on Charcot's school of neurology and a fine connoisseur of the life and work of Gilles de la Tourette. His biography of Gilles de la Tourette is the first comprehensive volume to delve into the life, scholarship, writing, and hobbies of the famed doctor. Walusinski did an outstanding job in pulling together unpublished family archives, Gilles de la Tourette's correspondence with the Parisian journalist Georges Montorgueil, journal articles, and police archives to shed an original light on Gilles de la Tourette's life and lasting legacy. Notably, these archives have never before been studied or made available to the public, making Walusinski's work a must-have for any medical library.

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I, Walusinski introduces Gilles de la Tourette's family history before his birth in 1857, details his schooling and mentorship under Charcot, and examines his work with the Paris World's Fair of 1900. One of the highlights of Part I is Gilles de la Tourette's narrow escape from an attempted assassination. In 1893, shortly after the tragic death of his young son and of his mentor Charcot, Gilles de la Tourette was shot in the head in his consulting rooms by a paranoid young woman called Rose Kamper, who had been a patient at the Salpêtrière hospital (Draaisma, 2009). Interestingly, she claimed that she had been hypnotised by Gilles de la Tourette against her will causing her to lose her sanity. On the 9th of December 1893, "Le Pays Illustré", a renown French journal *hebdomadaire*, dedicated its front cover to the attempted assassination of Gilles de la Tourette, referring to it as *un drame de l'hypnotisme*. The bizarre episode became a *procès célèbre*, apparently supporting the theory of the Nancy School that criminal suggestion was possible under hypnotism, a view Gilles de la Tourette and Charcot's Parisian school had vehemently rejected (Bogousslavsky, Walusinski, & Veyrunes, 2009; Bogousslavsky & Walusinski, 2010). Part I of Walusinski's book closes with Gilles de la Tourette's death by syphilis in a mental hospital in Lausanne in 1904.

In Part II, the author provides an in-depth analysis of Gilles de la Tourette's neurological and psychiatric works, notably the eponymous neurological disorder that is currently referred to as "Gilles de la Tourette syndrome" or, more briefly but inaccurately, "Tourette syndrome" (or its acronym "TS"!). In 1884, Gilles de la Tourette, prompted by Charcot, described nine

patients who presented with motor and vocal tics (Gilles de la Tourette, 1885). One of these was the Marquise de Dampierre, a French noblewoman who had previously been reported in 1825 by Jean Marc Gaspard Itard. This aristocratic lady lived as a recluse and was nicknamed “the cursing marquise” because her vocal tics included coprolalia: the obituaries in the French newspapers quoted some of the more colourful details of her condition. It is important to highlight that the patients described in Gilles de la Tourette’s initial case series shared the clinical triad of tics, echolalia, and coprolalia. Of these, only the presence of both motor and vocal tics is currently included in the diagnostic criteria of Gilles de la Tourette syndrome (Cavanna & Seri, 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was Charcot who decided that the *maladie des tics* should be named after Gilles de la Tourette. Apparently, Charcot favoured the euphonic eponym of “Gilles de la Tourette” (a fragment of poetry with a dactyl followed by a iambus) and this name ended up being inextricably attached to the tic disorder (Cavanna & Seri, 2019). In his biography, Walusinski himself cannot help but asking “Had Gilles de la Tourette been named Martin, or Leblanc or Guinon, would the eponym have been created?” (p. 202).


In Part III, the author exposes Gilles de la Tourette’s lighter side, inspecting his favourite pastimes as poet, historian, and art critic. A talented teacher and a prolific writer, Gilles de la Tourette wrote and spoke publicly on a wide variety of topics, including literature, art, and controversial issues such as mesmerism. Gilles de la Tourette’s own poetry is a touching gem that Walusinski has generously shared with both historians and more casual readers. As in a *trompe l’œil*, an interesting and eye-catching picture emerges. Throughout his life, Gilles de la Tourette showed little respect for authorities or conventions. He had boundless energy and threw himself avidly into new therapeutic techniques, including suspension, vibration, and hypnotherapy. The condition that gave him eponymous fame is but a piece of a considerably larger jigsaw that portrays a rich and complex personality. Gilles de la Tourette had peculiar hypomanic and histrionic traits: a decade ago, Walusinski had already presented some ignored aspects of his life and personality based on the discovery of personal letters which had shed some initial light on his hidden side (Walusinski & Duncan, 2010).

Finally, Part IV consists of an extensive bibliography of Gilles de la Tourette’s complete body of work. Through his extensive research, Walusinski has succeeded in compiling what is arguably the most comprehensive bibliography ever published. Each chapter of Walusinski’s book stands on its feet as an exhaustive monograph illuminating the heterogeneity (if not the quality) of Gilles de la Tourette’s personality and work.

It takes a writer who is out of the ordinary to compile a fascinating biography of a man who is far from ordinary. This concept is exemplified by James Boswell’s biography of the famous British lexicographer Samuel Johnson (who—incidentally—is also thought to have suffered from a tic disorder) (Monaco, Servo, & Cavanna, 2009). Doubtlessly, Walusinski’s *tour de force* is destined to become the definitive text on the life and work of Georges Gilles de la Tourette. The author’s unparalleled erudition and passion have resulted in a remarkable piece of work, which combines the rigour of a learned scholar with the *finesse* of a skilful novelist. In the present, this book joins Philippon and Poirier’s biography of Joseph Babinski (Philippon & Poirier, 2009) and Marshall’s account of Jean-Martin Charcot’s dramaturgy (Marshall, 2016) as the *nouvelle vague* of medical historiography on *fin de siècle* Parisian neurology. In the future, this book will deservedly stand the test of time and join Gilles de la Tourette himself in the gallery of enduring fame.

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