

Book Review

Jean-Martin Charcot. *Charcot in Morocco*. Introduction, notes and translation by Toby Gelfand. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2012. x + 133 pp. \$CAN/US29.95; 24.99€ (paper or pdf). ISBN 978-0-7766-0774-0 (paper); 978-0-7766-1987-3 (pdf).

Toby Gelfand (Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine, University of Ottawa) is an esteemed expert in the history of nineteenth-century neurology and in the work of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) in particular. In his most recent book, *Charcot in Morocco*, he offers the first English translation of Charcot's correspondence and notes written during a week's travels in Morocco in the summer of 1887. This slim volume provides English speakers access to little-known material from family archives, and Gelfand's 30-page introduction is equally valuable, linking the importance of Charcot's pioneering work in neurology, his family life, and his long-standing love of travel, commencing with his initiation to this important aspect of his life with his journey to Italy in 1853, immediately after he had defended his doctoral thesis. Throughout his life, Charcot undertook two or three journeys a year, often combining professional visits and private tourism. He frequently journeyed to England and Spain, but also to Italy, a country that fascinated him. In addition, he travelled to Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as undertaking two journeys to Russia.

With very rare exceptions, Madame Charcot never wished to take part in these travels. That is why Charcot regularly wrote to her, indeed at every stop along his route. Had she accompanied him, we probably would not have the precious testimonies of his journeys, of which his writings from Morocco are one example. In Morocco, Charcot was surrounded by writer friends, such as Philippe Burty and Paul Arène, and by physicians, such as Paul Legendre. Gelfand highlights how Charcot combined descriptions of the landscape with details of his daily experiences, including slow transport, unexpected occurrences, and the Mediterranean climate. "It is around 3 o'clock; we have let the hottest part of the day go by. However it remains so hot that I forgo the niceties. I leave aside cravat and collar; I wear an unstarched shirt, no jacket, and, for underclothes, my thin silk which I often use as a bathrobe. This abandon seems justified by the consideration that, excepting Jeanne, there are no women with us . . . But alas! There will be women . . . shortly" (p. 50). Charcot relates discussions with his companions, including his daughter Jeanne, of whom he said: "Has infirmities which are natural of her sex" (p. 54). As illustrated by his writings, his curiosity as a tourist provided him with some surprises but also with a window into the private sphere of those he encountered, which he observed with his renowned eye as a "visual" clinician: "A lady of mature years, who appeared beautiful to me, quickly fled, but not before showing us her face. That left 4 or 5 Negresses, who shamelessly stayed where they were. Moreover, they were very beautiful, their arms and legs nude, their bodies lightly clothed in a clear fabric. They certainly do not belong to the religion whose acolytes cover up" (p. 71). His little-known sense of humor shone through, revealing a secret personality that was quite different from his austere image as the "Napoleon of neurosis." For example,

Charcot wrote on his departure from Ceuta: “They hoist me up on a kind of chair (*cacolet*) where I arrange myself like someone disabled . . . which I am” (p. 51).

Henry Meige noted in his illustrated 1898 essay on “Charcot the artist” that “Charcot brought along a sketchbook and colored pencils on each of his journeys”; further, the “physician cannot be separated from the artist. One is guided by the other; they help each other mutually.” “Charcot attached the highest value to a gift he had received from his friend Burty, an album containing sketches and notes made on a voyage to Morocco by the painter [Eugène] Delacroix” (Meige, 1898, p. 503). Gelfand does indeed note that Charcot had studied the artist’s oriental works before travelling to Morocco and drew inspiration from these works for his own sketches (p. 61). The last stop on his journey was Tétouan



Figure 1. Passport used by Charcot in 1886.

— “a pearl, a jewel” (p. 12) — where Charcot glimpsed “a genuine Arab town [. . .]. It’s pristine, really pristine” (p. 13). There he met “Arabs of all sorts” (p. 13). Gelfand’s book contains several drawings by Charcot, notably a magnificent profile of Vidal Serfati, “prefect of the Judea” (the Jewish quarter). Charcot made the drawing in Tétouan and sent it to his wife: “I send you the sketch of a prefect of the ghetto who has just brought the patients to us” (Figure 14). Later, Charcot reworked many of his drawings, elaborating on their style and form. Some were preserved for posterity when they appeared in Meige’s 1898 tribute in the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, including the famous figure published with the caption: “Tétouan Jew suffering Parkinson’s disease; sketch by Charcot during a trip to Morocco in 1889” (Meige, 1898, p. 505).

Gelfand showcases Charcot’s considerable storytelling abilities, which the physician used to describe to his wife the exotic colors, odors, and tastes he discovered in the suffocating heat of August in Morocco. Gelfand also notes that Charcot expressed anti-Semitic stereotypes that were common at the time. For example, visiting the house of a Jewish merchant, Charcot characterized him as “an old rascal!” (p. 75). As Gelfand writes: “Charcot believed that his area of expertise, diseases of the nervous system and related chronic ailments, provided confirming evidence of Jewish distinctiveness” (p. 20).

Charcot frequently sent his patients for thermal treatments to ease their neurological disturbances, particularly the pain of tabes. In 1880, he said of his own travels: “It’s my rest cure” (cited by Goetz, Bonduelle, & Gelfand, 1995, p. 297). Concerning Morocco he commented: “This visit to Tétouan, with physical exercise outside in temperatures that average 35° in the shade, is decidedly advisable . . . Something to ponder” (p. 61).

Gelfand deserves our thanks for providing the opportunity to accompany Charcot during his “therapeutic travels.” We conclude as he does: “Charcot’s journal is a series of finely drawn word pictures, the verbal counterpart of sketches and the recreational analogue of the neurologist’s working method” (p. 26).

My enjoyment in reading this book gives me the opportunity to share with the readers of *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* an unpublished reproduction of the passport used by Charcot in 1886 to travel to Spain, accompanied by his son and daughter (Figure 1).

Olivier Walusinski
Family Physician, Private Practice
Brou, France

References

- Goetz CG, Bonduelle M, Gelfand T (1995): *Charcot: Constructing Neurology*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Meige H (1898): Charcot artiste. *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* 11: 489–516.