

Jacques Poirier

Edouard Brissaud, un neurologue d'exception dans une famille d'artistes

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Edouard Brissaud (1852–1909) is not the most well-known of J.M. Charcot's students. Nor is he associated with the description of a disease, as is G. Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904), nor with the description of a clinical sign, as is J. Babinski (1857–1932). Nonetheless, he was one of Charcot's favorite students, becoming interim director of his department following his sudden death.

After Jacques Poirier's fascinating biography of Babinski in 2009 (Oxford University Press), he warmly portrays Brissaud in his new book, highlighting the personality and exceptional intelligence of this physician born into a family of artists. As Marcel Proust noted, 'Today I went to see our dear physician in spite of himself'.

Brissaud served as *chef de clinique* under Ch. Lasègue (1816–1883). First and foremost a neurologist, he was also an internist ahead of his time, taking an interest in bradycardia, infantile myxedema and asthma. During his short career lasting barely 30 years, Brissaud, who died prematurely of brain cancer, published several hundred articles and books, with what Poirier describes 'as a limpid and appealing use of language'. He founded *La Revue Neurologique* along with Pierre Marie (1853–1940) and did most of the work on what is known as the *Traité de Médecine de Charcot, Boucharde et Brissaud*, the first volume of which was published in 1891. Poirier writes that his inventiveness and originality were remarkable, citing among the most striking examples Brissaud's

view of the substantia nigra in the etiology of Parkinson's disease. Brissaud was the first to suggest that Parkinson's was based on damage to this area, after P.O. Blocq (1860–1896) and G. Marinesco (1864–1938) published an observation in 1893 of parkinsonian hemiplegia contralateral to a tuberculous abscess that had destroyed this structure. Brissaud was also a brilliant professor, publishing in 1895 the first volume of his *Leçons sur les maladies nerveuses*. The classes described therein were given during his time as interim director after Charcot's death. His most remarkable work, still relevant today, is his *Anatomie des centres nerveux*. It includes an atlas that Brissaud prepared, in the words of A. Souques (1860–1944), 'with perfection and entirely by hand, devoting an incredible amount of energy and producing a monumental work'.

With his customary thoroughness, Poirier does not fail to note that Brissaud was a history of medicine professor and author of a *History of popular expressions related to anatomy, physiology and medicine*. In this small masterpiece, Brissaud demonstrates his vast cultural knowledge and erudition, accompanied by the humor and wit that characterized him.

Poirier was able to contact several members of Brissaud's family who provided him with a number of unpublished documents. Drawing on his broad expertise as a historian of 19th century neurology, he has put this precious information into perspective and painted a lively portrait of an important physician, who was a humanist and a progressive thinker, born into a family of writers, singers, ballet dancers, intellectuals and doctors. Anyone interested in this rich period of neurology's beginnings will be grateful to Poirier for having excavated so much new and captivating information.

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