



Journal of the History of the Neurosciences

Basic and Clinical Perspectives

ISSN: 0964-704X (Print) 1744-5213 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/njhn20>

Olivier Walusinski. Georges Gilles de la Tourette, Beyond the Eponym. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. 490 pp., b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-19-063603-6

Jean-Gaël Barbara

To cite this article: Jean-Gaël Barbara (2019): Olivier Walusinski. Georges Gilles de la Tourette, Beyond the Eponym. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. 490 pp., b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-19-063603-6, Journal of the History of the Neurosciences, DOI: [10.1080/0964704X.2019.1690344](https://doi.org/10.1080/0964704X.2019.1690344)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964704X.2019.1690344>



Published online: 20 Dec 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Olivier Walusinski. *Georges Gilles de la Tourette, Beyond the Eponym*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. 490 pp., b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-19-063603-6

The vast historiography of the French Salpêtrière neurological school of Paris includes complete biographical works of its main principal representatives. Missing, however, has been substantial work on Georges Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904), who has received some attention principally due to his eponymous syndrome. The interest of neurologists in his life and work faded after Grégory Duncan published a thesis devoted to him in 1955. Olivier Walusinski, one of the best specialists in the history of French neurology, collaborated with Duncan in 2010 on Gilles de la Tourette, and this collaboration, along with help from Jean-Philippe Neau, led him to the discovery of new personal archival material in Loudun, the city of origin of Gilles de la Tourette's family. Relying on these documents, Walusinski has written an extensive, original, and well-informed biography on the life and the works of Gilles de la Tourette.

In his preface, Christopher Goetz, a world-famous specialist on Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), considers Gilles de La Tourette a rather obscure neurological figure brought to light thanks to Charcot's special deference for his beloved and loyal pupil. One may then ask what good would be a 500-page book on the subject? Beyond the erudition and the recounting of stories found in archival material at risk of disappearing, there is a great historiographical interest in studying minor figures of Charcot's inner circle, especially those who were close to the master, who lived with him at home or accompanied him to the *Folies Bergères*. There is, indeed, much to learn and unravel in the relations between Gilles de la Tourette, Charcot and his family, and other students.

One question is why Charcot supported Gilles de La Tourette, before the completion of his doctoral thesis, when Charcot used his student's name for the eponymous syndrome. Walusinski rightly stresses that this is a matter of understanding the fiction of the social construct of eponymous syndromes, which has fascinated neurologists and historians of science. What is at stake is the strategy Charcot built to strengthen his school and shore up his authority, not only by promoting himself directly but also by reassuring posterity through the support of his closest students.

This biography of Gilles de la Tourette deals with a social historiography of French neurology that may appear a bit anecdotal at first glance but that raises epistemological and social issues. Walusinski's book is divided into four main independent parts. The first is devoted to the origins of the family; to Gilles de la Tourette's education, personality, and career in broad terms; to his assassination attempt, his disease, and his death. This is a descriptive and informative section, contributing many new biographical elements, painting a background scene to the work as well as providing a wealth of details for further interpretations.

The second part, and the most important, is an analysis of Gilles de la Tourette's medical writings, in the broad context of nineteenth-century neurology both in France and worldwide. The written papers of Gilles de La Tourette do not seem sufficiently numerous or remarkable enough to justify a complete analysis centered only on their constitution and scope, but once placed in a proper context, it becomes evident how the *internes* of Charcot could compete for positions and competitive examinations and choosing subjects according to publication strategies.

Along all these dimensions, Walusinki tells the stories of French neurology with vivid and relevant details. The various chapters of this section of the book give a wider perspective of the medical issues presented, illuminating Gilles de La Tourette's work and emphasizing the social factors at stake. This section also includes discussions of the eponymous syndrome, vibration therapies, suspension therapies, hypnotism, and hysteria. One understands more clearly how Gilles de la Tourette represents a worthy representative of the school of Charcot, having served Charcot as his personal secretary for one year, and having proved himself to be a meticulous student, transcribing lectures and explaining words that Charcot himself left unexplained.

In that respect, Walusinki demonstrates that Gilles de la Tourette was a central and integral element of the school of Salpêtrière, and it is important not to ignore his work on the grounds that it does not share the autonomy, the depth, or the scope of the work of other more famous of his fellows.

The third part of the book, less essential at first sight, deals with Gilles de la Tourette's literary work and further demonstrates his personality and political commitments. This is an occasion to place the history of French neurology in a global human science perspective, building on relationships between neurology, literature, arts, and politics.

The book ends with a fourth part listing all the works of Gilles de la Tourette. This section brings an impressive mass of valuable information that will not be easily surpassed and offers a social analysis of the history of French neurology as seen from an *interne's* perspective. This social vision requires further analyses, but Walusinki shows how Gilles de la Tourette's complete biography is particularly favorable to present a vivid testimony of important facets of Charcot's school, deserving great attention and honor.

Jean-Gaël Barbara
Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Sorbonne Universités, UPMC Univ. Paris 06
Paris, France
✉ jean-gael.barbara@upmc.fr

© 2019 Taylor & Francis
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0964704X.2019.1690344>

