

Original articles

## Gilles de la Tourette: The man behind the syndrome

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### Abstract

French neuropsychiatrist Georges Gilles de la Tourette first described in 1885 the “Maladie des Tics” which earned him eponymous fame. Both his colleagues at La Salpêtrière hospital in Paris and medical historians report that he was a highly intelligent, if irascible, character. The Gilles de la Tourette syndrome was only a very minor contribution of its author, at the time. Gilles de la

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Tourette’s main and continued contributions were on hysteria and hypnotism. This article concentrates on his life and includes previously untranslated passages from authors of the time and, for the first time, a full English translation of his obituary written by Henry Meige.

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### The early days

Georges Albert Édouard Brutus Gilles de la Tourette (Fig. 1) was born on October 30, 1857, at Saint-Gervais-les-Trois-Clochers between Loudun and Châtellerauld. His father was a merchant, but there had been other doctors in the family, and George was the oldest of four children. Not much is known about his early life except that he was intelligent but irascible and restless. He completed his studies quickly and entered medical school at age 16 years in Poitiers. His mother considered that Paris would offer too many temptations to a young student. The story of Théophraste Renaudot was an early but lasting influence on Gilles de la Tourette. Dr. Renaudot lived between 1586 and 1653 in Loudun, a town near to Gilles de la Tourette’s birthplace and where he spent many of his holidays staying with relatives. Renaudot was a physician and journalist who established the first weekly newspaper in France, *La Gazette*. He also initiated a system of free medical

consultations for the poor and published the first “self-diagnosis” handbook in France in 1642. Gilles de la Tourette was fascinated by Renaudot’s story, particularly with the combination of medicine, journalism, and philanthropy and published the first complete biography of his life after spending much of his holidays searching out and reading old manuscripts. He used the money from this book to fund the erection of a statue in honor of Renaudot on the Île de la Cité (rue de Lutèce). A further statue was erected outside the Hôtel de Ville in Loudun by M. Gastin, another biographer. The New York Times in 1893 noted that after various speeches by municipal officers, the originator of the monument, Dr. Gilles de la Tourette, received the ribbon of the Legion of Honor [1].

### Charcot and the Salpêtrière

Gilles de la Tourette traveled to Paris to continue his studies in 1881. A friend, Paul Legendre, described him as follows: “So he was a jovial, exuberant chap with an arrogant, unsubtle way of speaking; the voice, unfortunately, was rough and a little hoarse. Very fervent, but with little patience, he was not the man to allow his opponents to let their arguments be taken up and refuted point by point; he

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Fig. 1. Georges Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904) and his autograph signature.

got worked up at the first contradiction; even the number of his adversaries did nothing to moderate his reactions and one could hear, in the middle of noisy discussions, the raucous explosions of his overworked larynx” [2].

At this time, he was already quite anti-clerical and, when carving a chicken in front of religious colleagues, he is said to have joked “I’m carving a *heavenly pigeon*.”

Prior to his internship with Charcot, Gilles de la Tourette studied with Damaschino at the Laennec Hospital and with Fournier. Charcot, however, was his hero and Gilles de la Tourette became rapidly attached to him following the start of his internship in 1884. At the time, Charcot’s Tuesday lessons were attracting much publicity from Parisian society and beyond, especially in relation to speculation about hysteria and hypnotism. Axel Munthe in his book “The Story of san Michele” [3] describes the sessions as follows:

“I seldom failed to attend Professor Charcot’s famous *leçons du mardi* in the Salpêtrière, just then chiefly devoted to his *grande hystérie* and to hypnotism. The huge amphitheatre was filled to the last place with a multicoloured audience drawn from tout Paris, authors, journalists, leading actors and actresses, fashionable *demi-mondaines*, all full of morbid curiosity to witness the startling phenomena of hypnotism almost forgotten since the days of Mesmer and Braid. It was during these lectures that I became acquainted with Guy de Maupassant... [who] even accompanied me once on a visit to Professor Bernheim’s clinic in Nancy which opened my eyes to the fallacies of the Salpêtrière school in regard to hypnotism... To me who for years had been devoting my spare time to study hypnotism these stage performances of the Salpêtrière before the public of Tout Paris were nothing but an absurd farce, a hopeless muddle of truth and cheating. [The subjects] were always ready to ‘*piquer une attaque*’ of Charcot’s *grande hystérie*, *arc-en-ciel* and all; or to exhibit his

famous three stages of hypnotism: lethargy, cataplexy, somnambulism, all invented by the Master and hardly ever observed outside the Salpêtrière.”

Charcot utterly dominated the scene at that time and, reportedly, rounded on critics:

“To speak of the Nancy school at the Salpêtrière was in those days considered almost an act of *lèse-majesté*. Charcot himself flew into a rage at the very mention of Bernheim’s name. An article of mine in the *Gazette des Hôpitaux* inspired by my last visit to Nancy was shown to the Master by one of his assistants who disliked me personally. For several days, Charcot seemed to ignore my presence altogether.”

Munthe was accused of passing misleading information to a Parisian gossip columnist and of offering help inappropriately to one of Charcot’s hysterical patients. Charcot ordered him to be removed from the clinic. Munthe’s book gives a firsthand account of Charcot’s authority within the Salpêtrière [3]. It was into this environment that the young Gilles de la Tourette entered.

### An odd character

Gilles de la Tourette worked at a superhuman pace, publishing, teaching and practicing clinical medicine. He founded *La Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* with his colleague, Paul Richer. At that time he also became attached to Désiré Bourneville, the director of the hospital, a Paris councillor and, later, an MP. Bourneville is credited for describing what is now known as tuberosc sclerosis. Gilles de la Tourette and Bourneville both had radical opinions for the time including the desire to secularize medicine and an interest in public health. They campaigned together to remove nursing nuns from the hospital. Opponents of theirs were said to sing:

*M’sieu Gilles de la Tourette*

*N’est pas de’humeur facile*

*Quand avec des pincettes*

*On touche a Bourneville*

(Mr. Gilles de la Tourette is not of good humor, when one touches Bourneville with pincers [4].)

Léon Daudet, a medical student with Charcot at the same time, wrote about his time at the Salpêtrière in his book *Devant la Douleur*. In their earlier meetings, Daudet described Tourette as follows [5]:

“Gilles de la Tourette was ugly with a face like a Papuan idol with bundles of hair stuck on it. He was neither good nor bad, neither studious nor lazy, neither intelligent nor foolish, and he vacillated with his confused and malicious mind between a multitude of qualities and faults without lingering on any. He had a husky and worn-out voice, abrupt gestures and a

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