Charcot, Jean-Martin (1825-1893)

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Place: France

Subject: biography, biology

French neurologist whose studies of hysteria still excite controversy.

Born on 29 November 1825 in Paris, the son of a wheelwright, Charcot studied at the Paris Faculty of Medicine, graduating MD in 1853 with a doctoral thesis on chronic rheumatism and gout. In 1862 he became resident doctor at the Salpêtrière, where he built up a leading neurological department. In 1872 he was appointed professor of anatomical pathology at the Faculty of Medicine, ten years later moving to the chair for the study of nervous disorders at the Salpêtrière, where the distinguished Joseph Babinski served as his director. Charcot died on 16 August 1893 in Niève, France.

Charcot was an ardent champion of the clinical anatomical method that systematically correlated the symptoms presented by the patient with the lesions discovered at autopsy. He was also committed to the view that all diseases (even apparently strange psychiatric conditions) were regular natural phenomena, whose laws could be discovered by medical science. Widespread observation of multiple cases (simple at a huge institution like the Salpêtrière), would thus crack the secrets of diseases. Over the course of a generation, Charcot published a series of memoirs that turned him into one of the world's pre-eminent neurologists. As well as portraying the neuropathy that became known as Charcot's disease, he produced classic descriptions of multiple or disseminated sclerosis; of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis; of cerebral haemorrhage; and of tabes dorsalis, a form of neurosyphilis. He studied Parkinson's disease and contributed to the investigation of poliomyelitis. His *Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux faits à la Salpétrière* (1872-73) laid his teachings on such subjects before a larger audience.

In his approach to brain function, Charcot vigorously supported the theory of cerebral localization, as developed by English neurologist Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911). He applied this theory to cases of Jacksonian epilepsy, aphasia, and Beard's neurasthenia. During the 1870s, he developed highly publicized work on hysteria. Far from being a psychogenic disorder or just a disease of women, Charcot regarded it as a general malady of neurological origin. Such views proved influential upon his pupil, Sigmund Freud, not least because Charcot was also fascinated by the relations between hysteria and hypnotic phenomena. Critics widely accused Charcot of inadvertently ‘training’ the young women who were his main hysterical subjects. One of the founders of modern neurology, Charcot thus left the relations between neurology and psychiatry extremely obscure.