

**A Review of
Gilles de la Tourette, beyond the Eponym
by Docteur Olivier Walusinski**

By A.J. Lees
The National Hospital, Queen Square London

While still a medical student, Georges Gilles de la Tourette translated an article entitled *Experiments with the 'Jumpers' of Maine* by a New York neuropsychiatrist George Beard in *The Popular Science Monthly*. What drew him to this endeavour is unclear but it may have been that he identified in some way with these individuals. Little knowing that it would be a labour that long after his death would be seen as the catalyst for the resurrection of his name as an unforgettable if often mutilated eponym.

Léon Daudet, the author of *Devant la Douleur*, a book rich in anecdotes and memories of his medical studies during La Belle Époque described Gilles de la Tourette as follows:

Gilles de la Tourette was ugly like a Papuan doll 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 faults without lingering. He had a husky and worn out voice, abrupt gestures, a strange gait. He passed for an eccentric starting an interesting subject but leaving it for another, disconcerting his masters by his queer ways, which got worse and worse and became less and less amusing.

In 1884 Gilles de la Tourette entered Charcot's service and was given the difficult task by his hero and master of sorting out 'the chaos of the choreas'. At that time chorea had a much less precise definition than today and was used as a nosological repository for a hotch potch of miscellaneous jerks and twitches. Beard had suggested that the jumpers may have a form of hysteria but Gilles de la Tourette wanted to find out if it might be an obscure form of chorea. Arguing that if the 'Jumping Frenchmen of Maine' really existed then cases should be identifiable in Paris, he scoured the wards and clinics of La Salpêtrière for similar cases. He failed to find a single case but identified 9 individuals with a related behavioural disturbance characterised by multiple tics, abnormal vocalisations, copromimia and echophenomena that he published in *Les Archives de Neurologie* in 1885.

Charcot later bestowed his devoted assistant's surname onto a malady which at the time received minimal attention. A paper that Gilles de la Tourette considered of little importance and was regarded by Charcot as insubstantial and incomplete would eventually put his poetic chivalrous name in lights.

Gilles de la Tourette syndrome received negligible interest from neurologists and psychiatrists in the first half of the twentieth century. I first encountered it as a medical student in Enoch and Trethowan's little book *Uncommon Psychiatric Syndromes* together with Cotard's, Capgras and De Clérembault's syndromes but it was not until 1981 at the commencement of

my 'disreputable' neurological research into tics that I first learned about the strange world of Georges Gilles de la Tourette. In common with most of Charcot's disciples he drew inspiration for his work from newspaper reports, works of art in the Louvre, history books and Paris's literary cafes. His thesis related to the recording of footprints of neurological gaits which appealed to my Sherlockian sleuthing methods. His colourful personality more than made up for his less than brilliant academic achievement.

After I had written an article about him with the help of the archivist Gérard Jubert, I often used a picture of his regal and ornately decorated consulting room in 39 Rue de l'Université in my lectures as an example of how the social standing of neurology had dropped steadily over the ensuing hundred years. It was here where Gilles de la Tourette saw his patients and where he was shot in the neck by Rose Kamper LeCoq, a schizophrenic who claimed he had hypnotised her against her will, a claim that would become a cause célèbre in the French courts and a battle between the Nancy and Parisian schools of medicolegal jurisprudence.

One of Gilles de la Tourette's many obscure and long forgotten papers that has always fascinated me was a report of a young man who had a pathological compulsion to dance. In his 1893 presentation to the Faculty of Legal Medicine and in his two articles published in the same year in *Le Progrès Médical* and in the *Annales d'Hygiène Publique et de Médecine Légale*, Gilles de la Tourette described a character known as 'Le Danseur' or 'Le Fou' who frequented *Le Moulin Rouge* and the *Casino de Paris*. Habitues of these establishments reported that Monsieur X was always correctly attired with a flower in his buttonhole and was considered harmless if deranged. When on the floor he would sometimes use a dance move to attract attention in which he kicked one of his legs high in the air and then juggle his hat on the end of his cane. Spurred on by the applause of the demimondaines he would then run ecstatically from one end of the dance floor to the other before jumping onto the stage. Immediately the music stopped he would melt into the crowd until the next dance when the whole ritual would be repeated.

Gilles de la Tourette had interviewed the man and learned he was aged 26 and one of nine children born in Paris of German Jewish parents. His father was a businessman who had died in his fifties of brain congestion. In his early twenties Monsieur X had spent 2 years in Costa Rica working in an import business but he had not worked for the last year. He explained that since early childhood he had been intoxicated by loud infernal pieces of music like Orpheus in the Underworld that triggered an irresistible compulsion to dance.

Gilles de la Tourette's interest in this man may have first been aroused by his interest in the cause of the epidemics of choreomania in mediaeval Europe. He considered the man to have a monosymptomatic compulsion and raised concerns that there could be medico-legal complications if his impulsive behaviour led to him entering private establishments where music was playing.

I pictured Monsieur X like the top hatted, gloved dancer with the pointed chin and trimmed beard in John Huston's 1952 film *Moulin Rouge* and drew parallels with some of the Northern Soul enthusiasts at Wigan Casino. This paper led me on to read articles on choreophilia, a rare disorder where individuals achieve orgasm by dancing with or without frottage and to contemplate the notion of loneliness on the dance floor. The fact that Gilles

de la Tourette had been almost murdered by Rose Kamper LeCoq in the same year the paper had appeared gave it an inviolable poignancy.

Olivier Walusinski, *médecin en ville*, is the leading world authority on the history of fin de siècle Parisian neurology. One of the many fascinating insights in his book *Georges Gilles de la Tourette, Beyond the eponym* is the genuine affection Charcot had for his young disciple. He particularly admired his industry, passion and journalistic skills but must also have been delighted with his undying loyalty. Gilles de la Tourette served as his amanuensis recording his *Leçons du Mardi* and was a frequent visitor to Charcot's home for dinner parties. Charcot also took him to *La Folies Bergère*. where it has been claimed *Le Patron* would leave before the arrival of the dancing girls. As he entered the twilight of his career Charcot came to depend more and more on Gilles de la Tourette to protect and promote his ideas on hysteria and hypnotism.

This book will become the definitive text on the life and achievements of Georges Gilles de la Tourette and will join Dr Walusinski's earlier book *The Mystery of Yawning in Physiology and Disease* as a tour de force. If publishers come to me in future with fresh proposals for a biography on Georges Gilles de la Tourette, I will refer them to this scholarly but soulful book.