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HISTORICAL NOTE

Henry Head (1861–1940)

Henry Head was born of Quaker stock on 4 August 1861 at 6 Park Road, Stoke Newington, son of an insurance broker at Lloyds. Educated at Charterhouse and Trinity College, Cambridge (1st class in both parts of the Natural Science Tripos),¹ he chose to study Medicine, influenced by his mother's cousin, Marcus Beck, who had been Joseph Lister's assistant. For a period after Cambridge, he worked with Hering on respiratory physiology in Prague, acquiring fluency in both French and German. Head returned to University College Hospital, qualifying in 1890. He worked at Queen Square under Thomas Buzzard, and at Victoria Park Hospital for Chest Diseases, where he developed his interests in pain and in physiology. His Cambridge MD thesis, *On disturbances of sensation with especial reference to the pain of visceral disease*, was later published in *Brain* (1893). It was of outstanding merit.

He was registrar, then assistant physician at the London Hospital, where his gifts as a born teacher, impelled to impart information, brought crowds of admiring students from afar. "Henry Head doing gait was a perennial attraction." In 1903, with the assistance of Sherren and Rivers, he made many observations on himself after sectioning the superficial ramus of his own radial nerve. He undertook this experiment because of his annoyance with the unreliability of the average sensory witness.² The results were first published in *Brain* in 1908 and were widely acclaimed.

Patterns and the referral of pain led him to study herpes zoster with A W Campbell, pathologist to Rainhill County Asylum.³ From this his investigations of the dermatomes naturally evolved. To obtain first hand information on shingles, which was then common in his patients afflicted by general paralysis of the insane, his enthusiasm forced him to live in the hospital for 2 years recording 450 cases and 21 postmortem studies. Foerster noted the remarkable accuracy of Head's observations when compared with the method of section of nerve roots.

After his study on cutaneous sensation and dermatomes, Head's investigations were devoted mainly to the sensory system, where his original thought and skilled clinical techniques brought order out of chaos.⁴ His postulate of two separate sensory systems—protopathic and epicritic—to explain the different susceptibilities of sensation, was however, severely criticised. Recent recording from single sensory neurons has partly reaffirmed Head's separation of highly differentiated sensations from other types. He did indeed provide the first rational explanation of the nature of sensory dissociation. The clinical facts and techniques, which he and his collaborators established, remain the basis for many clinical investigations of sensation today.

His extensive study of spinal reflex functions also illuminated and provoked interest in this relatively neglected area. It arose in the first world war, when he worked with George Riddoch on war injuries. They studied spinal cord injury and paraplegia yielding important papers, and knowledge that would save many such future casualties.

Brain disorders were likewise the subject of his inquiring mind. He wrote an important paper with Gordon Holmes in 1911 on sensory disturbances from cerebral lesions. His last major work, *Aphasia and kindred disorders of speech*, appeared in two volumes in 1926, lauded by Critchley⁵ as "the finest monograph on the subject of aphasia in the neurological literature." Here, his originality brought critical definition to the then materialistic notions of what he scornfully described as the "diagram-makers." Describing "semantic aphasia", he provided a link between the linguistic and the intellectual aspects of speech. The full implications of this work have been credited and amplified by modern aphasiologists. His later works related to the concepts of attention and vigilance, and the idea of body image. These, and Head's notions of dynamic schemata in thought processes, which were manifest as symbolic formulation and expression, were well in advance of his time.

His writings⁶ include a volume of attractive verse, *The destroyers*. He was the author of *Allbutt's System of Medicine*, and he edited *Brain* from 1910 to 1925.

Head's singular merit⁷ was rewarded by the Marshall Hall medal of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society in 1903, the Royal

Medal of the Royal Society in 1908, and the Moxon Medal of the Royal College of Physicians in 1927. To the College, he delivered the Goulstonian Lectures in 1901 and the Croonian Lectures in 1911, and, to the Royal Society, the Croonian Lecture of 1921. He was knighted in 1927.

Undoubtedly Henry Head is to be rated as one of England's great neurologists: a diligent and inspiring teacher, bubbling over with new ideas, he combined a scientific and critical approach with a vivid, if at times overworked imagination. He was a generous man of rotund figure, with a Van Dyke beard and a high pitched voice.

He married Ruth Mayhew, headmistress and author, in 1904, and they worked together on her literary works and on his poetry, with mutual devotion. His interest in the arts, music and humanity were wide and deep; he could discourse on topics from Goethe to Guardi or Mozart without effort. Robert Nichols wrote about him in *The Times*:

"He had Leonardos' lofty human compassion, humility, patience, and profound serenity of spirit."

After the onset of Parkinsonism in 1919, he retired in 1925 to live in Dorset and then Reading. Even in this period, his lively mind and indomitable enthusiasm immensely stimulated the fortunate few who were privileged to enjoy his conversation. He eschewed all drug therapy, fearful that solanaceous drugs would impair his mind. He died on 9 October 1940, immobilised by illness, just able to talk, but mentally active. His fortune, he left to medical science, the Royal Society acting as legatee.

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