

## Three Historical Accounts of Gilles de La Tourette Syndrome

Surely no neurologist today can be unaware of the diagnosis of Tourette's syndrome or disorder. However, this familiarity was not always so. Although the eponymous description was published in 1885, the first full description is accredited to Itard in 1825, and a possible case dating back to the fifteenth century has been found.<sup>1</sup> Herein, three accounts suggestive of individuals suffering from Tourette's syndrome are presented, dating from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, two predating Tourette's publication. The sources are a biography, a novel, and an autobiography.



### Case 1: Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

The great English writer, critic, lexicographer and moralist was noted by many of his contemporaries to have involuntary movements. For example, in his biography, *Life of Johnson*, published in 1791, James Boswell writes:

That the most minute singularities which belonged to him, and made very observable parts of his appearance and manner, may not be omitted, it is requisite to mention, that while talking or even musing as he sat in his chair, he commonly held his head to one side towards his right shoulder, and shook it in a tremulous manner, moving his body backwards and forwards, and rubbing his left knee in the same direction, with the palm of his hand. In the intervals of articulating he made various sounds with his mouth, sometimes as if ruminating, or what is called chewing the cud, sometimes giving a half whistle, sometimes making his tongue play backwards from the roof of his mouth, as if clucking like a hen, and sometimes protruding it against his upper gums in front, as if pronouncing quickly under his breath, *too, too, too* ... Generally when he had concluded a period, in the course of a dispute, by which time he was a good deal exhausted by violence and vociferation, he used to blow out his breath like a whale.

The illustrator William Hogarth also noted Johnson's movements:

Mr Hogarth came one day to see Richardson [the author of *Clarissa*] ... While he was talking he perceived a person standing at a window in the room, shaking his head, and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an idiot [*sic*], whom his relations had put under the care of Mr Richardson, as a very good man.

The diarist Fanny Burney (later Madame d'Arblay) describes Johnson thus:

I have so true a veneration for him, that the very sight of him inspires me with delight and reverence, notwithstanding the cruel infirmities to which he is subject; for he has almost perpetual convulsive movements, either of his hands, lips, feet or knees, and sometimes of all together.

All these excerpts suggest the presence of motor and vocal tics. Accounts suggestive of obsessive-compulsive behaviour are also to be found in the biography. For example, Boswell noted:

He had another particularity, of which none of his friends ever ventured to ask an explanation. It appeared to me some superstitious habit, which he had contracted early, and from which he had never called upon his reason to disentangle him. This was his anxious care to go out or in at a door or passage, by a certain number of steps from a certain point, or at least so as that either his right or his left foot, (I am not certain which,) should constantly make the first actual movement when he came close to the door or passage. Thus I conjecture, for I have, upon innumerable occasions, observed him suddenly stop, and then seem to count his steps with a deep earnestness; and when he had neglected or gone wrong in this sort of magical movement, I have seen him go back again, put himself in a proper posture to begin the ceremony, and, having gone through it, walk briskly on ...

Mr S Whyte used his opera glass to observe Johnson approaching along a London street:

I perceived him at a good distance walking along with a peculiar solemnity of deportment, and an awkward sort of measured step ... Upon every post as he passed along, I could observe he deliberately laid his hand; but missing one of them, when he had got at some distance, he seemed suddenly to recollect himself, and immediately returning back, carefully performed the accustomed ceremony, and resumed his former course, not omitting one until he gained the crossing. This ... was his constant practice.

What explanations for these features were contemplated by Johnson's contemporaries?

Boswell stated:

The infirmity ... appeared to me ... to be of the convulsive kind, and of the nature of that distemper called St Vitus's dance; and in this opinion I am confirmed by the description which Sydenham gives of that disease. "It manifests itself by halting or unsteadiness of one of the legs which the patient draws after him like an idiot [*sic*]. If the hand of the same side be applied to the breast, or any other part of the body, he cannot keep it a moment in the same posture, but it will be drawn into a different one by a convulsion, notwithstanding all his efforts to the contrary."

It is interesting that Boswell, no medical man, should have been familiar with the works of Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689). As we have seen, Fanny Burney was also of the opinion that the movements were convulsive, as was the writer Alexander Pope:

[Johnson] has an infirmity of the convulsive kind that attacks him sometimes, so as to make him a sad spectacle.

However, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds took a different view

Those motions or tricks of Dr Johnson are improperly called convulsions. He could sit



Andrew Larner is the editor of our Book Review Section. He is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries' Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

motionless, when he was told to do so, as well as any other man; my opinion is that it proceeded from a habit which he had indulged himself in, of accompanying his thoughts with certain untoward actions.

This suggests that the movements were suppressible (perhaps a portrait painter was particularly adept at getting people to sit still). However, Boswell counters by stating:

I still however think that these gestures were involuntary; for surely had that not been the case, he would have restrained them in the publick [*sic*] streets.

The neurologist Lord Brain was a devoted Johnsonian and wrote about his movements,<sup>2</sup> but ascribed them a psychological origin. His failure to mention Tourette's syndrome may perhaps reflect general neurological unawareness of the condition at the time of writing. It was left to later authors to suggest that Johnson in fact had this disorder.<sup>3,4</sup>



#### Case 2: "Mr Pancks"

The novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was an author of fecund imagination but also with an acute eye for human oddity or idiosyncrasy. Many subsequent readers have thought they could detect particular neurological conditions in his characters.<sup>5</sup> One such is Mr Pancks, from the 1857 novel *Little Dorrit*:

he ... snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little labouring steam-engine.

Mr Pancks here made a singular and startling noise, produced by a strong blowing effort in the region of the nose, unattended by any result but that acoustic one.

... Mr Pancks, snorting and blowing in a more and more portentous manner as he became more interested, listened with great attention ...

Clear as these descriptions of vocal tics are, there are fewer suggestions of motor tics, although Pancks is described as "darting about in eccentric directions" and of stirring up his hair. Obsessive-compulsive behaviour is suggested by his keeping a notebook in "dictionary order" and by descriptions of his tendency to nail-biting:

... snorted Pancks, taking one of his dirty hands ... to bite his nails, if he could find any ...

...with the fingers of his right hand in his mouth that he might bite the nails ...

Furthermore, another behavioural feature may fall within the spectrum of obsessive-compulsive behaviour: trichotillomania:

Mr Pancks took hold of himself by the hair of his head, and tore it in desperation ... All the time, [he] was tearing at his tough hair in a most pitiless and cruel manner. [He] took hold of his hair again, and gave it such a wrench that he pulled out several pangs of it.

The suggestion that this all reflected a diagnosis of Tourette's syndrome was first made by Cosnett.<sup>6</sup>



#### Case 3: "Captain Hardcastle"

The popular children's author Roald Dahl (1916-1990) recalled a schoolmaster, a veteran of the first World War, encountered when he was 9 years old (1925-6), as recounted in his autobiographical work *Boy: Tales of childhood* (1984):

We called them masters in those days, not teachers, and ... the one I feared most of all ... was Captain Hardcastle.

Captain Hardcastle was never still. His orange head twitched and jerked perpetually from side to side in the most alarming fashion, and each twitch was accompanied by a little grunt that came out of the nostrils.

Prep was in progress. Captain Hardcastle was ... twitching his head and grunting through his nose. ... The only noises to be heard were Captain Hardcastle's little snorting grunts ...

What explanation did the boys have for this?

Rumour had it that the constant twitching and jerking and snorting was caused by something called shell-shock, but we were not quite sure what that was. We took it to mean that an explosive object had gone off very close to him with such an enormous bang that it had made him jump high in the air and he hadn't stopped jumping since.

#### Conclusion

Considering the striking clinical features of Tourette's syndrome, it is perhaps not surprising that the condition should have attracted the attention of creative writers, as well as neurologists. Acute observers of nature, including writers and painters may, without the benefit of specific medical training, record medical conditions, sometimes prior to their description by members of the medical professions.

#### References

1. Goetz CG, Chmura TA, Lanska DJ. *History of tic disorders and Gilles de la Tourette syndrome: Part 5 of the MDS-sponsored history of movement disorders exhibit, Barcelona, June 2000*. *Mov Disord* 2001;16:346-349.
2. Brain R. The great convulsionary. In: *Some reflections on genius and other essays*. London: Pitman Medical, 1960: 69-91.
3. McHenry LC. *Samuel Johnson's tics and gesticulations*. *J Hist Med Allied Sci* 1967;22:152-168.
4. Murray TJ. *Dr Samuel Johnson's movement disorder*. *BMJ* 1979;1:1610-1614.
5. Larner AJ. *Charles Dickens, qua neurologist*. *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience & Rehabilitation* 2002;2(1):22.
6. Cosnett JE. *Dickens, dystonia and dyskinesia*. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1991;54:184.

#### Correspondence address:

AJ Larner  
Walton Centre for Neurology  
and Neurosurgery  
Lower Lane, Fazakerley  
LIVERPOOL L9 7LJ  
U.K.  
E-Mail:  
a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk