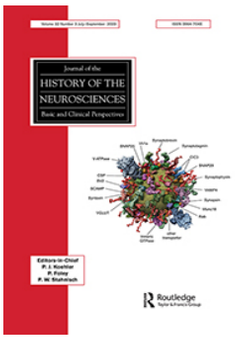

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The Idea of Epilepsy: A Medical and Social History of Epilepsy in the Modern Era (1860–2020)

Simon Shorvon. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 750 pp., £64.99/$84.99 (online or hardcover). ISBN: 9781108903684 (online); ISBN: 9781108842617 (hardcover)

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BOOK REVIEW

Simon Shorvon. *The Idea of Epilepsy: A Medical and Social History of Epilepsy in the Modern Era (1860–2020)*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 750 pp., £64.99/ $84.99 (online or hardcover). ISBN: 9781108903684 (online); ISBN: 9781108842617 (hardcover)

How does an idea come about and how does it develop over time? This is always a difficult question, especially when the idea in question is a disease as multifaceted as epilepsy. The concept of epilepsy, the very idea of it, has changed dramatically throughout history. Even if we focus on the time span from the 1860s onward, it is surprising to consider the extent of these changes. The reasons behind the evolution of the idea of epilepsy are thoroughly analyzed and discussed in this new book by Professor Simon Shorvon, a leading figure in the field, a consultant neurologist at the UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology for more than four decades, a world expert on epilepsy, and the author of numerous books on clinical neurology and the history of neuroscience (Shorvon 2023). Some of them served in part as the basis for this new book, which evidently summarizes a lifetime spent working and thinking around the very idea of epilepsy (Hodgson and Shorvon 2019; Schmidt and Shorvon 2016; Shorvon and Compston 2019; Shorvon and Weiss 2009).

As effectively illustrated in the painting by the artist David Cobley shown on the cover, in this book, Shorvon tracks the course of the ship *Epilepsy* on her journey from 1860 to 2020, rocked by the currents of science and medicine, society, and people afflicted with epilepsy. The symbolic representation of epilepsy as a ship has reminded me of the famous simile used by John Hughlings Jackson (1835–1911) to explain how an epileptic seizure arises:

But the case analogous to the epileptic fit, is when one of the twentyfour highest navy officials becomes occasionally insane. Then by issuing foolish orders to lower officials, "discharging downwards," he produces widespread and yet slight disturbance in the navy. But, by wrongly advising his colleagues, "discharging collaterally," he leads them to issue foolish orders to lower officials; leads them to "discharge downwards." Thus, by a multiplication of foolish orders, the whole navy is severely and universally "convulsed." (Jackson 1884)

The impaired and deeply disrupted neuronal order that occurs in the pathophysiology of an epileptic seizure, as expressed by Jackson, has its counterpart in the evolution of the idea of epilepsy throughout history.

In the book, the three-faceted and almost elusive nature of epilepsy as a disease, sickness, and illness is approached from different perspectives: science and medicine, society, and the person with epilepsy. After briefly outlining the aims and structure of his work ("The Voyage of the Good Ship *Epilepsy*"), Shorvon addresses the changing concepts of epilepsy in the second section of the book, which provides a fascinating and detailed chronological narrative ("A Plague upon Your Epileptic Visage"). The chosen starting point is the year 1860, when the clinical observations by Jackson—together with the seminal neurophysiological contributions of Gustav Fritsch (1838–1927), Eduard Hitzig (1838–1907), and David Ferrier (1843–1924)—shaped the modern idea of epilepsy and provided the basis for its diagnosis and treatment, beginning with the first surgical procedure by Victor Horsley (1857–1916) in 1886 to the increasingly targeted development of antiseizure medications, particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward. Hence, it complements and updates the scholarly account of the history of epilepsy given by Oswei Temkin (1902–2002) in his book, *The Falling Sickness. A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to*

the Beginnings of Modern Neurology (Temkin 1945/1971), continuing the story to the present day.

This chronological history is well documented and balanced, pleasant to read, and accessible to experts and nonspecialists alike (to broaden its accessibility, it includes a glossary of technical terms). The book is full of fascinating information, sometimes mixed with curious anecdotes. As the author explicitly acknowledges in the introduction, the story adopts the somewhat biased perspective of "a Cambridge-educated, Caucasian, male, British, clinical neurologist, of the baby-boomer generation, and a university academic, with all the cultural baggage that this entails." *Caveat lector*? Well, reader be reassured: This book is worth reading by anyone with a specific interest in epilepsy. Trivial inaccuracies and oversights do not detract from its overall value: For example, Broca localized motor aphasia to the frontal gyrus in 1861, not 1871, as wrongly reported on page 74; and there is no mention of the unethical experiment performed by Roberts Bartholow (1831–1904) on Mary Rafferty in 1874, which demonstrated the motor excitability of the cerebral cortex in humans (Bartholow 1874).

Shorvon carefully explores the deep intertwining and mutual influence between medical and social perspectives, showing how the idea of epilepsy has not evolved linearly; instead, although seemingly circular or unpredictable, its course has always been the direct consequence of broader political, economic, and historical trends. Shorvon successfully documents this intricate and sometimes bleak history, pointing out how the changing idea of epilepsy has profoundly affected the lives of those affected, from theories of degeneration and "neurological trait" to eugenics, from Cesare Lombroso's (1835–1909) pseudoscientific theories of epileptic personality to the founding of the first asylums and colonies, from the birth of the International League Against Epilepsy (in Budapest, 1909) to current systems of treatment.

Whereas Jackson conceived of epilepsy within the general framework of "evolution and dissolution," in the third section of Shorvon's book ("Epilepsy: The Paradigm of the Suffering of Both Body and Soul in Disease"), after discussing the evolution of the idea of epilepsy, Shorvon provides a series of thoughtful arguments to emphasize the "ambiguities of the concept of disease and question[s] the very existence of epilepsy—suggesting that it is an idea and a term which now holds up progress and has had its day." Just as Jackson lamented the lack of a botanical or scientific taxonomy of epilepsy for "the better organization of existing knowledge, and for discovering the relations of new facts" (Jackson 1931), Shorvon suggests that the very idea of epilepsy as a disease might represent a kind of mental shortcut, an oversimplification of reality, an idea that is based on an indistinct hyperuranion (Platonic realm) but without a real equivalent in phenomenal reality. Consequently, "Given that it does not exist as a disease, that it carries with it dark and deeply engrained archetypal memories of heredity, mental disease and impairment, and that if confers prejudice and social exclusion," Shorvon suggests that, "the removal of the term 'epilepsy' from public discourse is at least worthy of debate."

Shorvon's is undoubtedly a provocative and controversial vision (and, incidentally, a "non-idea" that takes the form of another idea!) that will stimulate debate in the medical community and among affected patients, perhaps taking "the epilepsy ship" to new and unpredictable horizons.

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