

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

More on Literature and the History of Neuroscience: Using the Writings of Silas Weir Mitchell (1829–1914) in Teaching the History of Neuroscience

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Mary Harrington's recent editorial on "Literature and the History of Neuroscience" (Harrington, 2006) indicated how Charlotte Gillman's novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Gillman, 1892) is instructive to students of neuroscience by illustrating the changing concepts in mental illness and doctor-patient relationships, especially with regards to the historical contexts of cultural and gender issues. In our neurology and neuroscience programs I can attest to the value in directing our students to the historical sources for these concepts, as well as the fictional accounts which arose from them. As noted in Harrington's editorial, Gillman's literary account of the "rest cure," a treatment attributed to Silas Weir Mitchell (1824-1914) in the late 19th century, portrays past scientific beliefs which might not be evident in other ways. As Harrington has suggested, an examination of Mitchell's life and literary works can provide many insights into past practices and the development of scientific ideas for our students. Mitchell is regarded as the father of American Neurology and was also a prolific author of fiction, whose body of work (19 novels, seven books of poetry, short stories and a biography of George Washington) offers one of the best examples of learning the history of neuroscience through literature (De Jong, 1982). Samples of his major writings can provide students with an interesting and insightful background of how treatments for certain neurological disorders were developed over time.

Mitchell began his medical writing for the lay public with *Wear and Tear*, which addressed the theme of urban pressures on American life resulting in an increase in "nervous diseases." The success of this popular book led to others, including *Nurse and Patient and Camp Cure* and later by *Fat and Blood – and how to make them*, highlighting his views on neurasthenia and hysteria and emphasizing his concept of "rest-cure" (Mitchell, 1884). This program of prolonged bed rest, high caloric nutrition, and massage was popularized in *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892 and gained widespread acceptance for many decades, not only in America but also in Europe, including favorable attention from Freud and Charcot. His fictional short story, *The Care of George Dedlow*, which combined psychological and physiological crises in its main character, was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1866. The historical novels, *Hugh Wynne* in 1897 and *The Adventures of Francois* in 1898, achieved great popular success. The novel, *Westaways*, was written by Mitchell in his 80's and graphically describes the horrors of Gettysburg and its consequences. His fictional works display detailed characterization which reflects his

experience of clinical observation of patients. His most popular poem, *Ode on a Lycian Tomb*, written about his daughter who died in 1898 from diphtheria is the most poignant and has been described as the finest elegiac poem written in America (Wood and Garrison, 1920).

In an age where advances in neuroscience are heavily dependent on technology, it is important for us to encourage our students to read and appreciate the historical foundations of our discipline. The life and work of Silas Weir Mitchell is the starting point that I recommend in teaching programs. With Mary Harrington, I warmly endorse the incorporation of his fictional works to provide a cultural understanding of scientific ideas. As our students consider their future career in science, the history of neuroscience provides a rich background and foundational knowledge for vocational choices.

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