BSHM
British Society for the History of Medicine

BOOK REVIEW

Gilles de la Tourette. His life, work and world.
Wallace B Mendelson

paperback, 105 pages
Pythagoras Press
September 2026

Dr Mendelson's latest book is a short factual history of George Gilles de la Tourette, his life and work, describing his family, education and professional work, especially with Charcot, and his rapid decline and death in a Swiss lunatic asylum. It concludes with a short description of later views of Gille de la Tourette Syndrome followed by a short description of neurosyphilis through the ages and its famous probable victims.

It feels a frank assessment of the man – his difficult social style, his nine years of work under Charcot, the events of 1893 when Charcot died, Gilles de la Tourette qualified as a full-fledged physician and was shot in the neck by a patient. In 1895 he became a professor, and in 1896 the chief medical officer for the Paris World Fair of 1900, placing him firmly in the public eye. After the Fair he was unable to reap the professional benefits as his mental decline became apparent and he was confined in the Bois-de-Cery asylum in 1901 where he died from neurosyphilis in 1904.

Gille de la Tourette syndrome was named by Charcot in 1885 soon after Tourette wrote a paper on the *maladie des tics* as part of his interest in motor disorders, describing people with motor incoordination, echolalia and coprolalia. Tourette soon moved on from this interest and appears to have considered his work on hysteria his most important opus.

This is a well set out, relatively short and easily read text written by a neurologist, giving a good resume of a life from a clinician's viewpoint. It appears to be aimed at people who want to know enough about George Gilles de la Tourette to know his biographical details, and to place him in context with other doctors, including Charcot and Freud, but do not want to read the much longer biography of Walusinski or the multitude of shorter articles published about him.

Peter Carpenter
October 2016

Published online at www.bshm.org.uk.