

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-06999-1 — Victor Horsley
Michael J. Aminoff
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Victor Horsley

Victor Horsley

The World’s First Neurosurgeon and His Conscience

Michael J. Aminoff
University of California, San Francisco





Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University’s mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009069991
DOI : 10.1017/9781009071734
© Michael J. Aminoff 2022

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2022
First paperback edition 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-316-51308-8 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-06999-1 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

.....

Every effort has been made in preparing this book to provide accurate and up-to-date
information which is in accord with accepted standards and practice at the time of
publication. Although case histories are drawn from actual cases, every effort has been
made to disguise the identities of the individuals involved. Nevertheless, the authors,
editors and publishers can make no warranties that the information contained herein
is totally free from error, not least because clinical standards are constantly changing
through research and regulation. The authors, editors and publishers therefore
disclaim all liability for direct or consequential damages resulting from the use of
material contained in this book. Readers are strongly advised to pay careful attention
to information provided by the manufacturer of any drugs or equipment that they plan
to use.

Neurosurgery saved the life but sadly
not the person of Monique Aminoff.
She therefore died not once but twice.
This book is dedicated to her memory.

It is also dedicated to my father,
Abraham S. Aminoff,
whose love and support of her never faltered.

Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xii

1. Early Days	1
2. The Other Side of Gower Street	10
3. At the Brown	22
4. Dividing the Indivisible: The Localization of Cortical Functions	38
5. The Making of a Specialty	52
6. The Grammar of Neurosurgery: Technical Underpinnings	61
7. The Neurosurgery of Specific Disorders	70
8. Measures of the Man	89
9. The Politics of Protection	105
10. Not So Trivial Pursuits: The Slide into Politics	117
11. Antivivisectionist Claims and Clamor	128

12. Bitter Tears: Horsley and the Suffragist Movement	137
13. Last Orders: The Temperance Movement	143
14. Syphilis and the Public Health	151
15. A Surgeon Goes to War	156
16. Aftermaths and Appraisals	170

<i>Appendix 1: Horsley’s Procedure for Cranial Surgery</i>	177
<i>Appendix 2: Appointments, Honors, and Awards</i>	179
<i>Appendix 3: Victor Horsley’s Professional Publications</i>	182
<i>Appendix 4: Sir Victor Horsley’s Correspondence with The Times of London</i>	198
<i>Index</i>	200

Preface

Historians encounter Horsley's name in many different contexts, but he is now largely forgotten by a public that owes him a great deal. His life was one of paradoxes, shaded by nuances and crises that varied with the circumstances. He was born in England in 1857 and, as a young surgeon-scientist, became the superintendent of the premier institution for advanced medical research in Britain. In this capacity, he helped to define the then-unknown function of the thyroid gland, examined the cause of rabies and the means to eliminate it from Britain, and studied the localization of function in the brain. The experience gained in the laboratory enabled him to construct a new clinical specialty, that of neurosurgery. He showed that operations on the brain could be accomplished safely and effectively, and was the first surgeon to devote most of his time to the nervous system, an area of the body then largely unexplored. He thus became a celebrity, a famous doctor with the only major established and successful neurosurgical practice in the world. It seemed he could do no wrong until he fell out of favor with his colleagues who felt threatened by his social activism and began a professional boycott that caused his clinical practice to wither. What manner of man, widely admired by so many, aroused such passion among his colleagues?

In his later years, he turned increasingly from clinical work, using his fame and influence to promote social causes and devoting more time to medical and national politics. A brilliant healer of physical illness, he felt the need to improve the circumstances and context in which people lived, and used all his energy to influence social policy. It was as if he needed something new with which to challenge himself, something for which to fight, something that complemented his medical work.

The causes that he embraced to right injustices or social inequities kept him in the public eye. His combative manner sometimes offended those who opposed him, however, and the non-smoking

teetotaler must have seemed insufferably righteous to those who did not share his views. No cause was too small for him if he judged it worthwhile. In addition to reforming the autocratic institutions of the medical profession to make them more responsive to their members, he advocated in support of the temperance movement and for equal opportunities for women, for the education and welfare of children, and for health insurance and paid sick leave for wage-earners (through Lloyd George's national insurance bill). He fought to protect the public from unqualified doctors or nurses, and doctors from frivolous or malicious lawsuits. At the same time, he battled the antivivisectionists, opposed the use of alcohol and tobacco, and led the medical opposition to the forcible feeding of the suffragists. He called for the government to establish a ministry of health and for an independent office of national statistics, for improved certification of disease, and for the provision of sex education for children and the improved treatment of sexually transmitted disease. Almost all of his suggestions were adopted eventually, although he did not live to see them all come to fruition. At the outbreak of World War I, while in his fifties, he volunteered for military service and died on active duty in Mesopotamia in 1916, fighting the establishment to improve the medical care of the troops. His death, tragic as it was, had an air of inevitability about it, for it would be difficult to imagine an elderly Victor Horsley, increasingly infirm, dependent on others, dying in his own bed.

Horsley was a man full of contradictions. He resented both opposing views and those who held them but was an academic, a famous professor at a university where discourse and disagreement were encouraged and not to be taken personally. He was clear-headed and thoughtful but capable of the most injudicious acts to further his own sense of social justice. He could, it seems, behave

Preface

badly without any hesitation if the cause was good.

How was it that he was able to operate on the brain successfully when others failed? What led to his increasing involvement in medical and then national politics? What caused this man of position and substance to advocate so ardently for the poor, the sick, and the needy, and to attempt to right injustice and inequity wherever he encountered it. Why did this brilliant surgeon-scientist resign before the age of fifty from a leading teaching hospital in the capital of the British Empire, then at its grandest? What made him, in his sixth decade, volunteer for active military service during World War I in one of the most inhospitable regions of the world, where he died from heat-stroke? Questions of this sort attracted me to study his life.

I was a student and then a junior doctor at the very hospital in London where Victor Horsley trained and subsequently was on staff, and although he had died fifty years earlier, his spirit was still very much alive at University College Hospital during the 1960s, as well as at the National Hospital. Fascinated by his achievements and reversals of fortune, I resolved to write a biography of the man who was a neurosurgical pioneer and the public conscience. Alas, within a year of my commencing the necessary research, a monograph by another was published on the same topic, and so I laid aside my own project, feeling its redundancy.

More than half a century has passed since that time. I became a neurologist and clinical neurophysiologist, and – despite moving from London to San Francisco – developed an increasing interest in the history of the neurosciences. It was thus that I came back to the life and achievements of Victor Horsley, which had so fascinated me as a young man, particularly because I believe that no published biography has yet done him justice. It remains difficult to grasp the reach of Horsley’s career and interests. Stephen Paget’s biography of him was a labor of love that came out in 1919, shortly after Horsley’s death, and is more than one hundred years old; that by J. B. Lyons was published in 1966, fifty years after Horsley’s death. Both books provide only a limited analysis of Horsley’s laboratory and clinical studies and his social activism, and do not place them in the context of more recent work, leaving many questions unasked or unanswered. Moreover, they provide scholars with little in the way of

systematic documentation of source material or of Horsley’s writings, despite their importance. Nevertheless, both biographies were valuable in helping me to find my way when sometimes I got lost as I delved into Horsley’s life, with its twists and turns, and I remain indebted to their authors.

It is time for a reappraisal of the life of a pioneer who helped to shape not only the development of neurosurgery as a specialty but also the context and circumstances surrounding the very practice of clinical medicine, and who worked to promote legislation advancing the welfare of society. Many of the issues with which he struggled still resonate today. His achievements have not received the wide appreciation that they deserve, and he is unknown by many people. Others simply associate his name variously with a hemostatic bone wax, with a complicated apparatus for locating targets within the brain, and with outbursts of righteous indignation. One of my goals in writing this book was to set the record straight, to make the man and his achievements known to a new generation and to bring them back to the collective consciousness. There are many underlying themes to the book, however, including the interplay of science and politics, medicine and human rights, and the responsibility of physicians to themselves and for the welfare of society. The book includes discussions of social policy and their evolution, and Horsley’s influence on them.

The broad range of Horsley’s activities has made it difficult to capture the essence of the man. His frequent letters to the editors of *The Times* and other newspapers, however, provide some insight to his views, as does the enormous amount of non-digitized archival material that exists at University College London and in the National Archives at Kew. I was fortunate to be able to examine these archives on visits to England. Happily, I also kept the notes I had made when, in 1966, I interviewed the eighty-year-old Sir Francis Walshe, a formidable neurologist who had acted as Horsley’s house surgeon in London and later spent time with him while on military service in Egypt during World War I. Today, no-one who worked with Horsley is alive to share their personal recollections of him.

It has been difficult to follow a strictly chronological course in this account without confusing the reader, because it would have meant breaking off one narrative to catch up with others.

Accordingly, I have taken the main events chronologically, but have then followed them through to the end so that each topic is discussed coherently and comprehensively in one place. I hope this will make it easier for readers to follow the twists and turns in a remarkable life.

I like to think that if Victor Horsley were alive today, he would be delighted at the

manner in which scientific advances are underwriting new developments in neurosurgery and clinical medicine. He would certainly smile also at the general acceptance of the numerous causes and beliefs for which he once advocated so tirelessly, even as he would direct his efforts at righting other inequities.

Acknowledgments

Many people in the United States and Britain generously assisted me while I was preparing this book. At the University of California in San Francisco, Aaron Daley helped by tracking down reference material for me, often from obscure sources, with tremendous energy and initiative and assisted me in compiling the bibliography of Horsley's published writings. In the process he has become quite a Horsley fan himself. Theresa Devine helped by preparing some of the illustrative material. The library staff at the university – especially Andres Panado, Evans Whitaker, Bazil Menezes, and Ryan White – went to a great deal of trouble in obtaining reference material for me from many other institutions. I thank them all.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge also the assistance I received also from Jane Kirby, librarian and archivist at Bedales School; Peter Allen, archivist at Cranbrook School; Dawn Boyall, media relations manager of the Medical Defence Union; Lori Podolsky, archivist at McGill University; Richard Temple, archivist at the Senate House Library of the University of London; and Sarah Lawson, librarian at the Queen Square Library of the UCL Institute of Neurology. I am especially grateful to Steven Wright of the UCL Library Services for his help in accessing the Horsley Papers held at University College London and in the National Archives at Kew. In 1966 the late Sir Francis Walshe graciously shared with me his personal recollections of Horsley, whose house surgeon he had been and with whom he later served in the Middle East during World War I, and I greatly appreciated his insights.

The source of the various illustrations in the book is indicated in the figure legends. Many illustrations came from the Wellcome Collection in London, where William Schubach helped me to find my way and Holly Peel provided me with

certain improved high-resolution images. Other figures were from the Queen Square Archives in London, and I thank Sarah Lawson for her help in providing these. Mrs. Corinna Rock, the last surviving grandchild of Victor Horsley, graciously allowed me to include certain family photographs, for which I am grateful.

Professor emeritus Robert B. Layzer of the University of California in San Francisco read a penultimate version of the entire manuscript and Anne M. Sydor, PhD, read three of the chapters. I thank them both for their comments and suggestions. Various chapters were read by my wife, Jan, who has been a wonderful support and companion for more than forty-five years, and my gratitude to her is boundless. Our three children also looked over parts of the book. Alexandra is a pediatric rheumatologist working with the Kaiser Permanente Medical Group in Oakland, California; Jonathan is a federal defence attorney in Los Angeles; and Anthony is a federal prosecutor in Alexandria, Virginia. Their advice and comments were helpful as the book developed and I am grateful for their insights. Penny, Doushie, and Mollie provided loyal companionship and unconditional trust – as only a cat and dogs can do – while I worked on numerous drafts of this book and are remembered with great affection.

Anna Whiting at Cambridge University Press was always helpful and I am grateful for her support and encouragement. I am grateful also to Katy Nardoni for seeing the book through the production process and to Bethan Lee for her careful copyediting of the manuscript.

I am sure that there are many others who deserve my thanks, and I hope they will forgive me if I have not mentioned them by name.

*Michael J. Aminoff,
 San Francisco, California*