Victor Horsley

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The World's First Neurosurgeon and His Conscience

Michael J. Aminoff
University of California, San Francisco

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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.

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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

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 heatstroke? 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.

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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.

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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 Schupbach 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.

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Michael J. Aminoff,
San Francisco, California