



Multiple Sclerosis: The History of a Disease

T. Jock Murray MD

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Multiple Sclerosis: The History of a Disease won a 2005 ForeWord Book of the Year Silver Medal!

The basic facts about multiple sclerosis are well known: it is the most common neurologic disease of young adults, usually beginning with episodic attacks of neurologic symptoms, then entering a progressive phase some years later. Its onset has an average age of 30, and occurs in about 1 in 500 individuals of European ancestry living primarily in temperate climates. There appears to be a complex interaction between a genetic predisposition and an environmental trigger that initiates the disease.

But these facts do not convey the impact of the disease on the people whose lives it affects. In this elegantly written and comprehensive history, we meet individuals who suffered with MS in the centuries before the disease had a name, including blessed Lidwina of Holland, who took joy from her misery, believing that she was sent to accept suffering for the sins of others; Augustus d'Est, grandson of George III and cousin of Queen Victoria, whose case shows how someone with access to the best of medical care of the age was understood and managed; and Heinrich Heine, the great German poet, who also had access to all medical services that were available, but who progressed into his mattress grave in two decades, aware of the loss of physical ability while still able to compose great poetry to the end.

From these early cases the author demonstrates how progress in diagnosing and managing multiple sclerosis has paralleled the development of medical science, from the early developments in modern studies of anatomy and pathology, to the framing of the disease in the nineteenth century, and eventually to modern diagnosis and treatment.

From beginning to end, Dr. Murray takes us on a fascinating journey of discovery, in the process showing how the evolution of our understanding of multiple sclerosis has been part of the greater history of medical knowledge.

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