

## INTRODUCTION

This is the first book-length biography of the neurologist Henry Head. A number of biographical sketches of Head do exist;<sup>1</sup> these tend to have been written by fellow medical men as acts of homage and in an attempt to place their subject within the genealogy of their discipline. Studies of this kind can yield much valuable information as well as providing insights into how Head has been viewed by other neurologists over time. Given their orientation and priorities, such biographies cannot, however, do full justice to a life as rich and multifaceted as Head's. Clinical medicine and medical science were indeed central aspects of his identity. But his life merits the attention of those to whom neurology and the physiology of the nervous system may seem extremely abstruse topics.

Because of his association with such poets as Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Nichols, Head has also been mentioned in passing in a number of literary biographies.<sup>2</sup> But the full extent of his literary and artistic interests has not been described. Thanks to his collaboration and friendship with W. H. R. Rivers, Head and his wife Ruth have figured as minor characters in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy of novels.<sup>3</sup> Sadly the Heads were not depicted in the motion picture adaptation of these books.

I first developed an interest in Head while researching a monograph on the history of aphasia studies.<sup>4</sup> 'Aphasia' is the name given to a complex of language disorders arising from injury to the brain. I chose to conclude the study at 1926 because this was the year in which Head's massive work on *Aphasia and Kindred Disorders* was published. Two aspects of Head's writing on aphasia were in particular striking. The first was his account of the history of aphasia studies and of his own place within that narrative. Head maintained that the value of the great majority of the studies of the phenomena of aphasia undertaken in the previous fifty years had been vitiated by both basic conceptual errors and technical shortcomings. He excluded only a handful of his predecessors from these strictures: in particular, the English neurologist, John Hughlings Jackson was, in Head's view, a lonely genius who had sketched an alternative, more fruitful, approach to the subject.

Head's was clearly a highly polemical use of history; his account can be faulted on that as well as on other grounds. What was most arresting, however, was the view of historical discontinuity that it implied. In a period where a positivist account of the history of science as a gradual, progressive, accumulation of knowledge was prevalent, Head insisted that a radical departure from the most cherished assumptions and practices of the past was necessary.

Reading the case histories upon which Head based his understanding of aphasia one is indeed struck by how different they appear to those found in the monographs and research papers of his predecessors. The patients embodied in these narratives seem very distinct from those found in the aphasiology of the nineteenth century. They tend to be rounded characters that play an active part in the unveiling of the truth of their condition. The doctor, for his part, is in this company much more an involved *primus inter pares* rather than the detached representative of a disinterested medical gaze. The understanding of the disorder appears to occur through as a process of mutual negotiation and cognition. There is also in these case histories a novel interest in technique. Head held that the errors of the earlier generation of aphasiologists had to a large extent been the result of the inadequacy of the methods of examination and assessment that they had employed. To remedy these deficiencies, he elaborated an extensive series of tests and protocols designed to illuminate the true nature of the linguistic and other deficits from which his patients suffered.

Head's case histories thus seemed to confirm his assertion of the dawn of a new era in the understanding of the language disorders classed under the term 'aphasia'. Examination of Head's researches on the physiology of sensation and of his programmatic statements on the future of medicine revealed a similar insistence that his work was the harbinger of a new medical modernity. The present volume is an attempt to explore those themes more thoroughly.

My initial interest in Head as aphasiologist led me to examine the extensive archive of Head papers held at the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre at the Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine in London. There are disappointing lacunae in this archive. In particular, it contains little material relating to Head's clinical or scientific activities. With the exception of some records of his early research on herpes zoster kept at the Royal College of Physicians of London, most of Head's professional papers have vanished. What has survived, however, are documents that provide an often-startling insight into Head's personal life, his views of the world he inhabited, and of his own place within that cosmos.

The most important of these sources are the letters and other manuscripts charting the course of Head's relationship with Ruth Mayhew whom he was, after a lengthy courtship, eventually to marry. Their relationship was based in the first instance upon a shared interest in the arts and especially in literature. The

correspondence thus provides insights into their tastes in books, music and the plastic arts. It is apparent, moreover, that this correspondence was also itself conceived as a work of art. Head and Mayhew also jointly composed a series of 'Rag Books' – collections of anecdotes, extracts from literary works, together with commentary – through which they further refined a shared sense of identity.

As a prominent member of his profession, Head left a mark on the records of such institutions as the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal Society, and the Royal Society of Medicine. The papers of acquaintances from the world of letters, such as Siegfried Sassoon, help to document his literary activities. The uncatalogued letters of the poet and playwright Robert Nichols have proven to be a particularly valuable resource. As well as sharing many of his literary interests, Nichols was for a time a patient; their correspondence provides an exceptional insight into the complexities of Head's clinical persona.

Taken together, these sources reveal Head as an aspirant poet and man of letters as well as a rising figure in the world of medicine. They show him to be interested in exploring artistic forms that challenged existing convention. But they also expose a sometimes-startling disparity between public and private personality.

Outwardly Head was a respectable member of middle-class society, advancing steadily through the ranks of his profession. Colleagues described him as a jovial, if sometimes bumptious, individual. Privately, however, he often expressed a deep sense of alienation from the society he inhabited. He found the values and mores of much of the medical profession repugnant; in particular, his commitment to the ideal of scientific medicine often seemed to put him at odds with colleagues. Head's ideal of a career that harmoniously combined clinical with scientific work was all too often subverted by the bland, dreary, and exhausting routines of practice and teaching to which he was obliged to conform. His patients – especially those he encountered in his hospital practice – tried his tolerance; sometimes, indeed, Head was unable to conceal the anger and disgust that they provoked. Moreover, the urban environment in which Head was obliged to spend so much of his time was also a source of spiritual gall. His letters often complain of the soul-destroying effect of the metropolitan life.

This negativity was, however, complemented and contested by a drive to transcend the deficiencies of the mundane world.

These archival sources thus provide an exceptional, perhaps unique, insight into the inner life, as well as the public presentations, of a man of science and of letters whose life spanned the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first four of the twentieth. They offer an opportunity to contribute to the history of consciousness. This biography is therefore an attempt to take the occasion of this rich resource to explore aspects of self-fashioning in the modern era. The notion that selfhood is not an essential entity but the outcome of negotiation, resist-

ance, and accommodation between the individual and his or her cultural matrix has been essayed by historians.<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault's later works have provided a critical impetus to this historiography.<sup>6</sup>

In some respects, Head's worldview is typical of the late-Victorian epoch. For example, in his publications he rehearsed familiar tropes of the hierarchical relations between men and women and between the civilized and the savage. In his private utterances he subscribed uncritically to the militarist and imperialist discourses of the era. Among Head's most bitter regrets was that he was in 1914 too old for active service. But other aspects of his persona seem to challenge and contradict such conventional postures.

In seeking to unravel the various strands of Head's own sense of self I have found the concept of 'modernism' a valuable resource. Dorothy Ross has provided an insightful analysis of the term and its cognates: in particular, she has distinguished between the notions of 'cognitive' and 'aesthetic' modernism. Aspects of Head's work – especially his rewriting of the physiology of sensation – place him as a cognitive modernist. His emphasis upon the contingent nature of the way that human beings experienced their world contributed to the questioning of the relationship of subject and object that Ross sees as definitive of the cognitive modernist.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Head's deliberate fashioning of his own identity through the literary medium of the letter itself betrays a sense of the contrived nature of the self.

But he can also be viewed as an aesthetic modernist in his recoil from the vulgarity and constraint of bourgeois norms, and in his distaste for the metropolis. Head's insistence on historical discontinuity in science can also be seen as a rendition of the modernist reconfiguration of historical time to which Ross alludes.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, although Head's tastes in art were eclectic, he displayed a bias toward the avant-garde in music, drama, and the novel.

There was an obvious sense in which Head's character was stamped with traits that were explicitly anti-modern – although still consistent with a modernist outlook. 'Modernity' and 'modernization' are terms that historians use to refer to the interrelated series of economic, social, and political transformations that occurred in western societies during the period of the long nineteenth century. Urbanization, industrialization, and the spread of market capitalism were among the most salient features of these changes. New political ideologies and dominant classes emerged, at the expense of established elites and to the detriment of their value-systems. Such upheaval provoked a mixture of resistance and nostalgia among those who saw what they considered their rightful place thus usurped and their morality challenged.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Head was no social or political philosopher. With rare exceptions, he did not aspire to convert his standing as a man of science into the cultural capital that would allow him to make authoritative public statements on the

great issues of his day. For most of his life, indeed, he showed a studied indifference to the political. But Head did articulate an almost instinctual account of his own place and loyalties within the social order. He identified himself with the 'educated' or 'professional' middle class. This was a cadre that based its claims to status and authority not upon wealth, whether derived from commerce or from the land, but upon its intellectual endowments. These endowments were in large part hereditary: in response to a questionnaire he received from Francis Galton, Head was proud to detail the eminent men of science (including Thomas Young and Joseph Lister) among his ancestors. His own sense of identity was thus to an extent contingent on this lineage.

Although he engaged in no sustained social analysis, it is apparent from many passing comments in his letters and other manuscripts that Head felt that the values of this professional class made up of individuals of exceptional talent was being undervalued and undermined by developments in modern society. Moreover, the general tendency of modern western societies was also the cause of concern and even anguish for him. The time he spent in central Europe and his exposure to trends in late-nineteenth-century Continental culture had a marked impact upon the way in which he viewed British society.

Head showed no animosity towards the landed aristocracy; indeed in many ways he sought to connect with them and to mimic their cultural practices. The 'manufacturing classes' he associated with the north of England, and deemed the fitting object of mild condescension and amusement. However, the moneylenders he encountered as a young man in central Europe excited real loathing. Head saw them as the most egregious agents of an encroaching capitalist system that was destructive of traditional societies and of the values those embodied. He appreciated the fragility of even respectable professorial prosperity in the face of the vagaries of the market. Head was in no doubt about the ethnic identity of the capitalist vanguard, referring to them simply as: 'the Jews'.

For Head the most obnoxious aspects of the metropolitan environment he was obliged to inhabit for most of his career was the urban proletariat. His work at the London Hospital, situated in one of the poorest parts of London, brought him into regular contact with this class. He made no secret of his disgust with their corporeality – lamenting having to endure the stench of the outpatients' waiting room – or of his contempt for their moral characteristics. Although he did not use the word himself, Head, like so many of his class, uncritically rehearsed many of the tenets of the discourse of degeneration.<sup>10</sup> He saw the poor of London as a symptom of social pathology. Because so many of the poor inhabitants of Whitechapel that he encountered were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, this class hostility was commingled with a further strain of anti-semitism.

Head claimed that for as long as he could remember he had wished to pursue a career in medicine. Yet he did not feel entirely at home in the late-Victorian medical profession that he eventually joined. Head was of the persuasion that the intellectual foundations of clinical medicine lay in experimental science. This was an orientation he ascribed in part to the example of such 'kinsmen' as Joseph Lister and Marcus Beck, but also to his early indoctrination in German laboratory medicine in Halle and Prague. This understanding of the proper roots of medical practice was, however, far from uncontroversial in the London medical culture in which Head was obliged to operate.<sup>11</sup> At the London, Head's attempts to institutionalize the ideals of scientific medicine were too often frustrated by those of his colleagues who insisted that it was more important to appoint a 'practical man' to the staff than one who was versed in the ways of the laboratory. As a consulting physician, he also encountered attitudes among elite doctors in private practice that he found no less repugnant. The 'typical' Harley Street doctor seemed more concerned with appearances and fees than with the pursuit of scientific knowledge.

Head thus experienced the kind of alienation from his society that many other intellectuals of the period manifested. T. J. Jackson Lears has characterized this recoil from *fin de siècle* civilization as 'antimodernism'. Such a posture was associated with a repudiation of the supposedly artificial, over-refined aspects of modern life and a corresponding quest for primal, more 'authentic' experience, often involving extreme physical exertion.<sup>12</sup> It was also manifest in an interest in the past, especially in the medieval period. Such late nineteenth-century initiatives as the arts and crafts movement represented an attempt to recover something of the orientations and values of that lost world through a return to pre-industrial methods of manufacture.

Head manifested many of the characteristics of this antimodernist persona in his own self-fashioning. His revulsion for metropolitan life was matched by a passion for an idealized countryside. When his work commitments permitted, he would seek spiritual solace in some rural setting. Head took delight in the English landscape. But he also sought out wilder, more exotic settings in which he could touch the sublime. He took a keen interest in the people who inhabited these places, especially when there appeared to be a 'primitive,' elemental, aspect to their existence. During his stay in the Bohemian forests Head even tried to live for a while the life of the peasant.

Head was also fascinated with medieval art – and in particular sculpture. Although an avowed secularist, he showed an erudition in matters of church architecture that amazed some of his auditors. Chartres Cathedral was among his favourite buildings. Through his friendship with C. R. Ashbee, Head became associated with the English Arts and Crafts movement.

Head saw bodily exertion as a necessary complement to intellectual application: as a young man he rowed and engaged in various other competitive sports. Even in middle age he would occasionally play tennis and other racquet sports. But perhaps his greatest enthusiasm was for cycling. He found that the vigorous effort that this activity entailed invoked states of consciousness that were themselves as worthy of contemplation as the delights of the scenery he traversed.

This contrast between 'external' sensory stimuli and 'inner' states of consciousness is, however, misleading. Head was always aware that the outer world only existed in so far as it impinged upon the mind. Each individual's impressions of that world were to a degree unique and determined by his or her psychological makeup. By meticulously documenting his perceptions and responses to nature, Head was thus seeking additional insights into the character of his own mind.

He thus sought solace from the egregious aspects of modernity by a withdrawal into an inner world. Within this secluded psychic sphere the highest value was the pursuit of beauty. Art in all its forms provided the most refined source of such stimuli. On his numerous trips to galleries, museums and churches, Head pursued the beautiful in as methodical and determined a fashion as he sought scientific truth.

Moreover, for him natural science in its most exalted forms, could produce effects that emulated those derived from natural or artistic beauty. Head found satisfaction in various aspects of the scientific way of life – even in those that might seem humble and mundane. Thus the manual facets of laboratory life – the preparation and manipulation of microscopic slides and laying the electrical wiring necessary for certain experiments – gave their own pleasure. Science too had its craft skills that were to be valued and relished. But the moment of scientific discovery, the instant when the mind gained a sudden and profound insight into nature, gave a higher kind of fulfilment: at such moments the scientist attained the same creative ecstasy as the artist.

For Head the path of natural science was, moreover, a momentous life choice. Science represented one of the principal means by which a 'refined mind' could confront and meet the challenge of existence. Head recognized that religion offered an alternative road; at an early age, however, he had made the decision that the truths of natural science were incompatible with the claims of revealed religion. He never had any doubt which of these competing claims should take precedence. His commitment to science was central to Head's sense of self. The degree of that commitment was perhaps most evident in a readiness, verging on the heroic, to suffer the self-mutilation involved in the extended experiment on nerve regeneration that he undertook in collaboration with W. H. R. Rivers.

Head was unabashedly elitist in his view of his place in the world. He maintained that few people possessed the highly refined sensibility with which he was equipped. When, however, he did encounter a kindred spirit he rejoiced.

Ruth Mayhew in particular he regarded as an equal in taste and erudition. The attraction was reciprocated. In the face of the constraints of bourgeois Victorian conventions, however, Ruth and Henry found it difficult to maintain the kind of intimacy to which they aspired. Because of Ruth's importance in Henry's life, this is necessarily for much of its length a joint biography. Indeed, by the final chapter Ruth has arguably become the protagonist. Drawing on the work of Lydia Ginzburg,<sup>13</sup> I have tried to show how, as their relationship developed, these two engaged in a process of mutual self-fashioning.

One challenge facing anyone writing a biography of Henry Head is the fact that in his sixties he developed Parkinson's Disease. This affliction cut short Head's medical and scientific career. The strenuous physical activities in which he had previously delighted were denied him. For the final fifteen years of his life he was indeed obliged to live the secluded life of an invalid. The nature of his affliction prevented him even from holding a pen. From the mid-1920s Head was therefore obliged to rely on others – and above all on his wife – to write letters in his name but eventually even the act of dictation became too tiring for him to sustain for any length of time. Head's own voice was in effect silenced by his disease: the historian is obliged to rely upon what others said about and for him.

In writing this book I have for the most part attempted to maintain the detached neutral voice of the academic historian. I have not concealed aspects of Head's persona that many will find distasteful. As the work progressed, however, it became ever more difficult not to develop an emotional engagement with my subject. In particular, it has proved impossible not to be moved by the courage and dignity with which Henry for many years faced the 'foul disease' that possessed his body while leaving his mind untouched. Ruth's fidelity to him in these years is also humbling.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is chiefly concerned with Head's youth and his professional activities. Chapter 1 covers Head's early years, his school days, and his time as a student at Halle, Cambridge and Prague. I have made an unfinished autobiography the starting-point for this account, supplementing the recollections Head set down in 1926 with contemporary letters and other sources. Chapters 2 and 3 deal respectively with the clinical and scientific aspects of Head's public persona. Given the nature of Head's scientific research, this is necessarily a somewhat arbitrary distinction, but one convenient for purposes of exposition. The second part is more concerned with the Head's private self, although no strict demarcation of the various aspects of his personality is possible. Chapter 4 documents the development of his relationship with Ruth and culminates in their marriage. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of Head's artistic interests with special attention to his aspirations to write poetry. The final chapter is more narrative in character. It begins with a discussion of the

peak of Head's career as physician and scientist and deals with his social and recreational activities during this period. Later sections describe Henry's growing incapacity as Parkinsonism tightened its grip upon him. The book ends with an account of Ruth and Henry's last years as exiles first at Forston House and then at Hartley Court.

Medical biography is currently something of a derided form of writing. Somewhat unfairly, it is often associated with an outdated form of historiography that too often amounted to little more than ancestor worship and the celebration of the great man or – more rarely – woman.<sup>14</sup> I hope that the present monograph will do something to rehabilitate the genre. Among other things, biography provides a unique opportunity to explore the subjective side of the medical life – to gain some insight into what it was to be a doctor in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Because of his penchant for self-reflection, Head is of special value in this regard. As a contribution to the history of science Head's life, moreover, illuminates what might be termed the existential import of the scientific way of life at the dawn of the modern era. That is, the way in which a dedication to the exploration of the natural world could serve to provide meaning and direction in a Godless and indifferent cosmos.

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