

BOOK REVIEWS, NOTES AND COMMENTS

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STORIA DELLA MALATTIA DI ALZHEIMER

Matteo Borri
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[*History of Alzheimer's disease*]

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, sometimes early-onset neurodegenerative disease, which is increasingly challenging public health systems, particularly in wealthy countries where longevity has been progressively elongating in the last fifteen-twenty years.

With the cogent presentation of the well-known science historian Paolo Rossi, this book *Storia della malattia di Alzheimer* by Matteo Borri may profitably enlighten physicians, social scientists, caregivers, and all the composite world of people involved in managing patients affected by this and similar neurodegenerative and neurocognitive disorders.

The text starts from Alzheimer first clinical case (patient: Auguste Deter) hospitalized at Irrenanstalt Psychiatric Hospital in Frankfurt am Main, on November 25, 1901. The physician Alois Alzheimer was the director of a section within that institution. He characterized and depicted the cluster of symptoms and presented his clinical observations in November 1906 at a minor local German meeting held in Tübingen. His talk went practically unnoticed. The book illustrates very convincingly which was the changing framework in which Alzheimer's scientific work thrived, including the role played by the "Zürich school" and Carl Gustav Jung's methods for approaching psychologically a composite variety of mental pathologies.

Such a presentation of this critical tract of the history of neurology and scientific characterization of neurodegenerative traits is one of the most original parts of this book. Also the concomitant laboratory contributions by Ugo Cerletti at Rome University "La Sapienza" are well reported. The converging histopathological studies by Franz Nissl also contributed to some characterizations of the causative neurodegenerative processes. Finally,

the role of the Italian scientists/physicians Francesco Bonfiglio, Gaetano Perusini and Umberto Sarcheschi are shortly but vividly presented and critically illustrated. In that, this book really adds an original contribution to the field.

In the second chapter this approach, describing the general framework around the understanding of neurodegenerative diseases, progresses by analysing the medical textbooks used in those years, which revealed an unexpected degree of interdisciplinary connections. Hyper-specialist and technologically-assisted clinical approaches were inexistent or very limited, however the attitudes towards confronting different theoretical and even philosophical deterministic theories were usefully enhanced. Such an integrative melting eventually produced new and original insights leading to the firm establishment of sound nosographies, still representing fundamental steps in the present-times management of neurodegenerative conditions in their variable spectrum of pathological severity.

It is also quite interesting to note, from one hand, how epistemological evolution and transformation was sometimes very slow, sometimes quite abrupt and, from the other hand, the relevant role played by the progresses of the emerging structural neuroanatomy discipline on those years.

The effort by Borri to disentangle the various components (e.g. in paragraph 3 of chapter 2, page 99 *The formation of a physician (and of) a scientist*) provides a vivacious description of Alzheimer's original figure. The importance of the early stages of his studentship and clinical and scientific career well explains his successive capabilities and performances in providing neural and mental disciplines with original and pivotal contributions.

A book depicting the history of the "discovery" and characterization of a widespread and now increasingly common disease are a relevant, often indispensable, step in the formation of a clinician or of a scientist. Public health in general should not dismiss more holistic approaches which eventually result not only in a better understanding of the causes and determinants of a given disease, but also of the social-anthropological contributions which regularly represent a non-secondary component of its solution or way to fight or at least to confront it.

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