



REVIEW: Aaron A. Cohen-Gadol and Dennis D. Spencer,
The Legacy of Harvey Cushing: Profiles of Patient Care

Author(s): Delia Gavrus

Source: *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2010) 280-282.

Published by: The University of Toronto

DOI: [10.4245/sponge.v4i1.13946](https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v4i1.13946)

EDITORIAL OFFICES

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology
Room 316 Victoria College, 91 Charles Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7
hapsat.society@utoronto.ca

Published online at jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/SpontaneousGenerations
ISSN 1913 0465

Founded in 2006, *Spontaneous Generations* is an online academic journal published by graduate students at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto. There is no subscription or membership fee. *Spontaneous Generations* provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

REVIEWS

Aaron A. Cohen-Gadol and Dennis D. Spencer. *The Legacy of Harvey Cushing: Profiles of Patient Care*. xxv + 568 pp.
New York and IL: Thieme and American Association of
Neurosurgeons, 2006.*

Delia Gavrus[†]

At the turn of the twentieth century, the American surgeon Harvey Cushing (1869–1939) chose to focus his surgical attention on the brain, an organ that had previously proved rather intractable to successful intervention. Over the course of the following decades he made this type of surgery a much safer procedure, reducing the mortality rate from a staggering 50% at the end of the nineteenth century to about 10%. Working first at Johns Hopkins and later at the Peter Bent Brigham hospital in Boston, Cushing established a world-famous school of neurosurgery by training numerous residents and fellows. He also left an extraordinary collection of records and specimens that document his work in surgery: the Cushing Brain Tumor Registry.

The Legacy of Harvey Cushing offers a fascinating glimpse into this collection by presenting selective patient profiles—75 of them. Correlating patient records with information from the Registry, the book's editors have compiled not only patient histories, radiology and pathology reports, operative and discharge notes, but also, more remarkably, pre and post-operative photographs, letters from the patients themselves or from their families, and pictures of resected tumors and autopsy specimens. Rounding out this dynamic tableau are Cushing's sketches, often made immediately after the surgery, and several photographs showing the patient wards and the operating room in action—refreshingly, these photographs document not only Cushing's work, but also that of various orderlies, nurses, and residents.

The book is organized thematically according to various diagnoses—pituitary tumors, gliomas, spinal tumors, etc.—and each

* Received 10 June 2010.

[†] Delia Gavrus is a PhD candidate at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto. She is currently working on a project that investigates the development of neurologists' and neurosurgeons' professional identity in the first half of the twentieth century.

chapter is preceded by a helpful overview that describes Cushing's surgical technique, among other things. While there is plenty of technical language in these introductions, as in the operative notes themselves, the reader needs only a basic understanding of surgery and anatomy to appreciate a broad outline of the case studies. Indeed, although at first I thought this book would function best as a reference text, I quickly found myself wholly engrossed in the stories of these patients, and I proceeded to read them sequentially.

The book's introduction by Michael Bliss, Cushing's most recent biographer, is an eloquent and concise sketch of both Cushing's life and his professional achievements. Bliss locates Cushing's success in "his personal conservatism," a temperament characterized by "caution, attention to detail, deliberation, small achievements, and great patience, combined with a willingness to break from convention" (p. ix). A short history of the Registry itself, coauthored by three surgeons and by Terry Dagradi, who is now in charge of the maintenance and organization of the Registry at Yale University, chronicles the peripatetic life of the collection over the past century. Started by Cushing at Johns Hopkins following an incident in which the hospital misplaced one of his specimens (to his unrestrained fury), the collection moved with Cushing to Boston, and then later to New Haven. The authors very nicely highlight the communal effort that went into the creation and maintenance of the Registry: Louise Eisenhardt, Percival Bailey, and many other residents laboured on it over many decades.

Although the short preface briefly touches upon the methodology involved in selecting these particular patient profiles from among the almost 2,000 available (for example, the editors write that the images chosen were those that "carried a special message about [the patients'] disease" [p. v]), this reader craves a more detailed articulation of the methods and a lengthier reflection on the project's *raison d'être*. The arresting—at times haunting—photographs of the patients raise fascinating historical questions about the utility and uniqueness of this photographic record (a mystery compounded by the fact that Cushing, according to the editors, never wrote about it), but also about the decision to display it to a broad audience. Of course, the book cleared a thorough ethics review, but there seems to be here a missed opportunity to engage with deeper and more fraught questions about the spectacle of medicine and about the place of this particular kind of visualization in the history of medicine. Such a discussion would have been particularly timely in light of other recent books that present graphic, potentially disturbing medical photographs, but which are more reflective and eager to acknowledge uncomfortable questions (see for example, *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage*

in American Medicine, 1880–1930 by John Harley Warner and James M. Edmonson, 2009).

The editors suggest that Cushing's practice of taking photographs could have been an earlier iteration of the kind of diagnostic imaging scans that doctors might order today. At the very least, this cannot be the most important part of the story: there are close-ups of the faces of patients who suffered from spinal conditions, pictures which obviously did not serve a diagnostic or didactic purpose. Historians would also disagree with the editors' assertion that "while neurosurgery changed so much over this past century, the experience of being a patient has not" (p. xxi). There is much that has changed over the past century that would have invariably altered the patients' experience, from the doctor-patient relationship, to the authority of medicine, to practices such as informed consent—to say nothing of the changing technology with which patients have to interact.

It is evident that for the editors of this book—both neurosurgeons, one of them the Harvey and Kate Cushing Professor at Yale—writing and thinking about Cushing is an important aspect of their own professional identity. This book is in itself a vehicle for the instantiation of a contemporary neurosurgeon's identity, and it thus becomes doubly interesting. In the introduction, the editors reverently refer to "Dr. Cushing" several times. The debt of gratitude they feel, not only to Cushing himself, but more importantly to Cushing's patients, is clearly expressed and very touching. The Tumor Registry itself has become the stuff of legend and ritual for several generations of doctors-to-be. It is said that Yale medical students would routinely break into the basement where the Registry was kept until recently (it is a minor mystery in its own right how these students could stand, for more than a few excruciating minutes, the noxious smell of formaldehyde exuding from compromised jars of specimens in that unventilated place). The centrality of this enterprise is powerfully captured by one of the editors who dedicates the book to "my family and the family of Neurosurgery." Although it lacks an in-depth historical framework, this book is a moving testament to the patients of the past and an equally touching testimony to contemporary neurosurgeons' attempt to understand their own professional identity by turning their gaze upon that past. The book seems to have been intended primarily for such a professional audience, but historians will find it equally absorbing.

DELIA GAVRUS
IHPST, University of Toronto
91 Charles Street West, Room 316
Toronto, ON M5S 1K7
delia.gavrus@utoronto.ca