

found medical insights in works of literary genius (I never did discover what Hamlet's madness *really* was).

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**George S Rousseau,** *Nervous acts: essays on literature, culture, and sensibility*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. xii, 395, £17.99 (paperback 1-4039-3454-1).

By any standard this is an unusual collection of essays. Reproducing, in part, eight articles first published between 1969 and 1993, it stands as testimony not only to the importance of discourses on the nerves in medicine and literature, but also to the acknowledged importance of George S Rousseau as an historian of the nervous system. The essays' combined effect is to demonstrate how, from the beginnings of neurology in the 1660s, theories of the nerves fed into and nurtured wider discourses on social and emotional experience. This book was produced primarily to provide greater availability to students of several of Rousseau's articles that have deservedly become core reading in the humanities. These include 'Science and the discovery of the imagination' (1969), 'Pineapples, pregnancy, pica and *Peregrine Pickle*' (1972), and 'Nerves, spirits and fibres: towards defining the origins of sensibility' (1975). Each of these articles is preceded by a discussion of its place in Rousseau's own intellectual evolution, and in terms of its contemporary originality and reception. Of his widely-read 'Nerves, spirits and fibres', for instance, Rousseau observes that "The essay was frequently cited during the first five years after its publication. However, it came into its own in the 1990s", and has been cited "over one hundred" times since the year 2000 (p. 159).

As this statistic demonstrates, Rousseau is conscious of the influence of his writings on interdisciplinary studies since the 1970s. Thus the author's introduction leads the reader

through the course of his own biographical and intellectual development. We learn how Rousseau was first inspired in graduate school by a passage about neurology in John Evelyn's *History of religion*, and had subsequently "stumbled" and "fumbled" through a variety of disparate texts in his struggle to define a new theoretical territory that could encompass both science and the humanities. The interdisciplinary student was, at that stage, something of a misfit: "although mesmerized by the sciences, especially anatomy and astronomy, I was of the party of the humanists . . . I had briefly dipped into medicine, especially philosophical writing about the body, healing and suffering, and even contemplated defecting to medical school and becoming a brain surgeon" (p. 6). Yet it was not mere intellectual voraciousness that led Rousseau towards his goal: he had spent his youth training as a concert pianist, serious application to which "made me aware at that young age that instrumental virtuosity depended on the muscles, ligaments, tendons, arms, shoulders, neck—the whole anatomical maze of the upper torso", and subsequently the importance of the "perfect balance of the whole human nervous system" (p. 7).

Fuelled by such graphic awareness of the need to understand the history of the nerves, and yet blighted by circumstance—"set the dials to approximately 1965 or 1970 in the Anglo-Saxon world, and the picture was unclear: a blank slate waiting to be framed" (p. 8)—Rousseau's search for connections between discourses of the body, memory and the imagination stretches from the early modern period, when people had little to say about the nerves (though their medieval counterparts did), through to the nervous ubiquity of eighteenth-century culture. This shift reflected, amongst other things, the rise of a new morality which equated nerves and communal sensitivity, a morality which (as other historians have subsequently noted) was skewed by assumptions of class and gender.

Where this book succeeds is in its depiction of the growth of a nervous culture, one linguistically charged and populated by "nerve doctors", in which neurophysiology came to account for

character, feeling and the sentiments by the time of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental journey* (1768). In this context the re-presentation of Rousseau's path-breaking essays provides students with an easily accessible series of articles from an author who has contributed, perhaps more than any other, to the identification and development of nervous theory and its role in a range of medical, scientific and literary texts. Where the book is, perhaps, less successful is in its attempt to colonize a new territory for these seminal articles by stretching out the centrality of nerve theory—in linear style—from the eighteenth century to the present day.

Describing the post-eighteenth century in terms of a “nervous civilization”, without any clear reference to Freud's original usage of the term, Rousseau argues that the concept of “nervousness” cumulatively increased in cultural capital—“the working classes—even farmers and rustics—began to ape the upper classes; it was only a matter of time before nerves—especially damaged and shattered nerves—would become mankind's common lot” (p. 54). By the 1800s, then, “nervousness” had reached the scale of a new national identity, most particularly applicable to collective groups of urban dwellers living in “the rat race” (p. 64). If this leap seems dubious, reflecting as it does a filter-down model to the dynamics of psycho- and socio-development that is now relatively outmoded, still more so is his claim that the world we inhabit today is “paradoxically far more ‘nervous’ than it was in the eighteenth century”. Furthermore, “doubtlessly there is even more nervous fatigue and stress, and perhaps even more depression and mental illness, than ever before in history and with no sign of improvement” (p. 345). And yet a crucial footnote here undermines the validity of Rousseau's statement: “the evidence is divided on this point, with roughly half of demographers believing there is more” (p. 349, n. 9). Roughly half, in other words, do not.

It is not sufficient to shift from “nervous acts” of the eighteenth century (with their undeniable “discursive, literary, rhetorical, metaphorical, epistemological, ontological, and even

theological profile” [p. 69]), to a coda on “discursivity and the pharmacological future” (p. 68), which treads a clear path between Dr Jenner's nineteenth-century ‘Neuropathic remedy’ and the “arrival of the large pharmaceuticals, the Glaxos and Pfizers” in meeting the needs of modern peoples, their lives “ever more stressful in late capitalism” as “personal depression of many protean shapes disguises its earlier versions” (p. 69). Leaving aside the problem of the lack of evidence for Rousseau's claims, then, there is the equally important point that—as historians of emotion are increasingly acknowledging—we cannot identify “depression” or “mental illness”, or “stress” as stable categories that are comparable across time and cultures. Stress, anxiety and nervousness (the latter of which Rousseau's earlier essays demonstrate) all exist within their own cultures of time, space and belief. Retrospective diagnosis of eighteenth-century peoples—holding “similar attitudes, albeit still inchoate and anticipatory of what was to come”—does little to help us understand “modern nervousness” (pp. 347–8). Nor does it do justice to the relevance and innovativeness of Rousseau's own articles to concepts of nerves and nervousness in specific historical contexts.

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**Robert Richardson and Hilary S Morris,**

*History of medicine: with commentaries.*  
Shrewsbury, Quiller Press, 2005, pp. viii,  
278, £16.95 (paperback 1-904057-76-4).

This volume's vague title and anonymous cover art conceal a deeply unusual premise. In the words of the accompanying press release, Richardson and Morris attempt “an imaginative account of the progress of medical knowledge told in the form of the autobiography of a physician born some 2700 years BC”. The result is a triumphant (not to say triumphalist) sight-seeing trip through the scenes of western