

Oliver Wolf Sacks

Neurologist and author

Oliver Wolf Sacks (b 1933; q Oxford 1958), died from cancer on 30 August 2015.

Strictly speaking, Oliver Sacks was a physician who took up writing. But his authorial impact was such that it makes equal sense to think of him as a writer who happened to have a broad knowledge of medicine. He mined that knowledge for insights into what it is to be human, whether in sickness or in health. His most celebrated medical achievement was the use of L-dopa in the treatment of a group of patients affected by the epidemic of encephalitis lethargica in the 1920s. It was also this, chronicled in his 1973 book *Awakenings* and the subsequent film, that brought him to public attention.

Awakenings

Readers of his many books unfamiliar with the medical literature of years gone by may have thought Sacks had created a new genre in his writing about illness. He hadn't, of course. What he had done was resurrect an approach that once characterised much of the content of medical journals: the case history. He modernised it, enlivened it with his literary skills, and embellished it with his own humanity.

A century or more ago—when medicine's grasp of disease was still rudimentary—the physician's principal investigative tool was a thorough observation of the patient and their circumstances, followed by a careful account of everything that might be relevant to an explanation. As it was hard to identify what might be relevant, much detail was necessary.

The rise of science brought not only a better understanding of disease but the possibility of reducing an overview of the patient's physical condition to a list of descriptors, an image or two, and set of numerical values for various physiological parameters. Hardly the stuff of literature.

Despite attempts to deploy such an approach in mental illnesses, trying to explain aberrations of behaviour solely in terms of serum this or that or neurotransmitters X and Y was a hopeless enterprise. It did not take account of the experiential aspect of psychiatric disease. Many of the behavioural eccentricities that make up the greater part of Sacks's raw material still remain to be explained—which is why his case histories are so detailed, covering anything that might eventually reveal itself as having causal significance.

The strangeness of so many of the people Sacks wrote about makes compelling reading. Hence the much quoted *New York Times* epi-



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that “poet laureate of medicine.” For my money that's a bit too highfalutin. “Balladeer of medicine” might be more apt—almost literally so in the case of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, the case history that became an opera.

Bringing patients alive

Fascinated by science as a child, Sacks studied physiology at Oxford before joining the Laboratory of Human Nutrition. Bench science was a task at which he proved disastrously inept; he returned to the university, this time to read medicine. A couple of years after graduating he moved to California—partly, he suggests in his autobiography, to escape the mismanaged schizophrenia of his brother, but also to explore such illnesses in his own way. In San Francisco and Los Angeles he got to grips with neuropathology and neurochemistry, then moved to New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine to refine them. It was at the nearby Beth Abraham Hospital that he worked with patients with encephalitis lethargica.

New York became his permanent home, the setting for his clinical work, his teaching, and, above all, his writing. Two New Yorkers—whose friendships with him go back over 20 years—take similar views of his influence. “The general public learned from him about neurology and brain science as it did from no one else,” says Erik Kandel, Fred Kavli Professor in the department of neuroscience at Columbia University. “He could make the front page of the *New York Times*.” The impact on the profession of his illuminatingly romantic view of illness has been less pronounced, Kandel adds. “But in his writing he brought patients alive. He saw new dimensions in their characters, and showed in his magical way how illness brought out new strengths in individuals.”

Orrin Devinsky, professor of neurology, neurosurgery, and psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine, echoes that view. When Sacks started out, only a small number of behavioural neurologists and psychiatrists appreciated how remarkable he was. But he believes that over time his influence has grown. “He invigorated interest in the meticulous study of individual patients, and in understanding them not just from the medical perspective, but from their perspective, and in a much more vivid and fuller sense. When I was a student at Harvard, doing a paper on Tourette's syndrome, I was told I must read *Awakenings*. I did, and that's what sold me on a career in neurology.”

Outside work

Sacks's autobiography—presciently published earlier this year and titled *On The Move*—tells of an emotional rollercoaster of a life. He realised as a teenager that he was gay, but a profoundly negative response from his mother condemned him to years of sexual guilt.

“He was a fabulous swimmer,” says Kandel. “He had a Russian trainer who helped him. And he'd been in analysis for the past 46 years with the same person. He once told me there were certain things in life you needed to have a tutor for: swimming, piano lessons, and your mind.”

Not all Sacks's pleasures were intellectual. They ranged from weightlifting to drug taking (prescription and otherwise), and included a lifelong fascination with motorbikes. He met his final and most fulfilling love when he was 75. He died in a self proclaimed state of contentment.

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David Ernst



Medical practitioner Portugal (b 1942; q Birmingham 1974; FRCS), d 23 May 2015.

Born into a traditional Jewish family in South Africa, David Ernst gradually turned his attention to left wing politics and fighting injustice. In early 1966 he was arrested and tortured by special branch in Pretoria and held without charge. In protest, he began a hunger strike, demanding to be released or charged. He was on strike for 32 days and was eventually charged—alongside fellow activists—and imprisoned for three years. After his release in 1969 he left South Africa on a permanent exit visa. He remained politically active in the UK. With his wife, Teresa, and their new family, he relocated to Lisbon in 1983 and spent the rest of his life running a successful Anglo-Portuguese medical practice. David leaves Teresa, three sons, and seven grandchildren.

Joseph Ernst

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James Leo Gibbons

Emeritus professor of psychiatry University of Southampton (b 1925; q Durham 1948; MD, FRCP, FRCPsych, DPM), d 17 June 2015.

James Leo Gibbons developed his interest in depressive illness while at the Maudsley Hospital. In 1963 he returned to his native Newcastle, and in 1970 he was appointed foundation professor of psychiatry at the new medical school at the University of Southampton. He also took responsibility for postgraduate training and his research interest turned to service provision. His department's research produced numerous publications. Gibbons retired on health grounds in 1986. Predeceased by his first wife, Joan Farrall, in 1971, he leaves his second wife, Jane Bunch, and a son from his first marriage.

Timothy Gibbons

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Janet Mary Hellier



Former anaesthetist and palliative care doctor (b 1941; q St Thomas' Hospital Medical School, London, 1966), d 23 April 2015.

Janet Mary Hellier followed her father, Sir Geoffrey Organe, into anaesthetics, training in Southampton. She practised in England and, for a short time, in India. On the family's return to England she switched to running school clinics, in order to give more time to bringing up her children. Together with two other doctors, she helped establish Swindon's first hospice, the Prospect Hospice, where she worked for 15 years. During this time she trained in gastroenterology and did weekly clinics as a clinical assistant in the department of gastroenterology in Swindon with her husband, Michael, a fellow doctor. She loved singing, sang in many choirs, and ran the local church choir for many years. She leaves Michael and two sons.

Michael Hellier

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Anthony James Moon



Consultant chest physician Harefield and Hillingdon Hospitals (b 1920; q St Bartholomew's Hospital 1943; MRCS Eng, FRCP Lond), d 26 January 2015.

At the time he qualified, Anthony James Moon ("Tony") self diagnosed pulmonary tuberculosis, which was to shape his whole professional life. From 1948 to 1952 he was senior registrar at the London Chest Hospital and then became consultant chest physician and deputy superintendent to Pinewood

Hospital, Crowthorne, Berkshire, a large TB sanatorium. A fellowship with the World Health Organization in 1958 enabled him to visit hospitals in Scandinavia to study their treatment of TB and other chest diseases. In 1964 he was appointed consultant chest physician to Harefield and Hillingdon Hospitals, and subsequently Mount Vernon Hospital, where he remained until he retired in 1985. Predeceased by his wife, Jean, in 2010, Tony leaves three children, four grandchildren, and two step grandchildren.

Janet Squire

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Roger Moss



Consultant psychiatrist (b 1939; q St Thomas' Hospital 1964), d 6 September 2014.

Roger Moss was appointed to a consultant post in Torbay in 1973. He was a strong supporter of Devon's pioneering approach to community care, which led to the closure of Exminster and Digby hospitals between 1986 and 1988. A keen psychotherapist, Roger took a holistic approach to the treatment of mental health problems. He also had a strong interest in understanding the place of the soul in psychiatry and pastoral care. After retiring from the NHS in the early 1990s, he became a senior psychiatric adviser to the Centre for Mental Health Services Development, which had been established by the Department of Health in 1991. Diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2008, he leaves a wife, three children, and five grandchildren.

Martin Briscoe

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Nicholas John Murrant

Consultant ear, nose, and throat surgeon North Cumbria (b 1958; q Guy's and King's College hospitals 1981, FRCS), died from pancreatic cancer on 24 May 2015.



Nicholas John Murrant ("Nick") was appointed consultant ENT surgeon to hospitals in North Cumbria (in Carlisle and Whitehaven) in 1993. He was part of a team providing general ENT services in a large rural area of the UK. His special interest was in otology, as well as the management of children with severe and profound hearing loss. His lasting legacy is the multidisciplinary team he built and led to manage, support, and rehabilitate many hundreds of these children in North Cumbria. He served as associate medical director for surgery during a time of transition for the trust. He leaves his wife, Felicite; his father; four children; and a daughter in law.

Donald Clark, Andrew Robson

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Huw Owen Thomas



Consultant orthopaedic surgeon Arrows Park and Clatterbridge Hospitals, Wirral (b 1941; q Cardiff 1966; FRCS Eng, FRCS Ed, MChOrth), d 4 January 2015.

Huw Owen Thomas trained in orthopaedic surgery in Liverpool, even working as a registrar on his father's firm, to the awe of many fellow trainees. He was proud to serve time as a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps. His calm, sensible, and approachable manner made him a popular colleague. Among his many hobbies, his greatest passion was for classical music, his knowledge of which was encyclopaedic. He leaves a wife, Judith; two sons; and a granddaughter.

Judith Thomas

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