

WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS
SANTIAGO RAMÓN Y CAJAL?

E. HORNE CRAIGIE

1981

Presented to The Toronto Medical Historical Club
November 27, 1981

WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS
SANTIAGO RAMÓN Y CAJAL?

MEMORIES, MEMOIRS AND MEMENTOS.

I am going to talk about the unknown Spaniard who came to be described in a recent publication as "The great master to whom modern neurology owes the finest discoveries and who enjoyed the maximum admiration and the sublime devotion of the world," Don Santiago Ramón Y Cajal. Even the tremendous advances of the 1st half-century have not made his work obsolete but are based essentially on his doctrines and his micrographic techniques. Beyond that statement I am not going to refer to his scientific work nor to narrate his biography, but only to try to depict him as a human being.

He himself wrote that in the eternal changes of things only true facts survive the outrages of time and the indifference or injustice of humanity, and with the facts possibly just a little of one's personality. His personality is likely to survive as well as most. What kind of man, then, was Santiago Ramón y Cajal?

In the year 1926 I had been a full-time junior member of the teaching staff in the Department of Biology of the University of Toronto for ten years. In that time one of my assignments had been to originate an elementary course in Comparative Neurology. As a result, I had become acquainted with the reputation and with some of the works of Santiago Ramon y Cajal as one of the principal founders of knowledge of the structure of the central nervous system. I possessed a copy of his monumental Système Nerveux de l'Homme et des Vertébrés. I knew that he had received a Nobel Prize in 1906, and I had found a copy of his Recuerdos, or Recollections, in the University Library.

I asked for and was grudgingly granted leave of absence for the spring term of 1927 and, after submitting my credentials, was accepted as a visitor by Don Santiago Ramón y Cajal in Madrid and by Dr. Ariens Kappers in Amsterdam. Cajal, however, would not receive me as a student until he should have seen me at work in his laboratory for some time. Thus it was only after I had been with him for a few weeks that the arrangements were completed to our mutual satisfaction.

I arrived in Madrid for the first time at the beginning of January, 1927, and naturally proceeded next morning to number 13, Paseo de Atocha, to present myself at the Institute Cajal, a research centre separate from the University, established in 1920. I found it housed on the second and third floors of an old mansion, where one ascended by a worn stone stair with a worn iron railing to a large door bearing a blue and white enamel plate with the two words, DOCTOR CAJAL.

I was aware of the Spanish custom of appending the mother's maiden name to the surname of the father, so I knew that Cajal was the mother's name and Ramón that of the father, so I was surprised by the use of the former alone. Apparently this had arisen partly from the failure of scientists in other countries to recognize that Cajal was not really the inherited paternal surname and partly from Ramón being a common name and

Cajal being a much more distinctive one. The monument erected in Retiro Park in Madrid when Don Santiago retired from the University in 1922 bears only the one word, CAJAL, and his children have some times retained the name, though their mother's name is Fananas.

Incidentally, Don Santiago objected strongly to the monument in the Park, but only because it depicts him in a Roman toga and semi-nude. He apparently had no objection to another statue, erected in the patio of the San Carlos Medical School on his eightieth birthday, in which his figure is so elongated that the students nicknamed it "The Pencil", or to a conventional portrait statue in the Zaragoza Medical School (1925).

I was surprised, upon my arrival, to find the door of the Instituto locked, but there was a bell, which I rang, and I was duly admitted by a one-armed caretaker, who inquired my business and informed me that Don Santiago would not be there until seven o'clock in the evening. When I returned in the evening, he had not come in, but I might come back the next night. On the third night he was there.

The business of obtaining admission was always the same, and I soon learned that it was the same for everybody. I believe that even the Director himself did not carry a key, but always rang the bell to have the door opened for him by the old concierge, Tomás García, who had been a faithful retainer for many years.

When Dr. Cajal stepped into the dark entrance hall to receive me, I beheld a short, heavily-built, grey-bearded, old man, somewhat stooped and with a rather lumbering gait, wearing a shabby overcoat and with little suggestion remaining of the athletic youth of eighteen whose photograph appears in the autobiography. He at once burst into a perfect torrent of French from which I got the drift at first with a little difficulty. I had gathered from our preliminary correspondence that he would probably speak little English, though he read it, and I knew that my feeble Spanish might be in trouble, but the unexpected flood of voluble French rather overwhelmed me. However, I survived, and in the whole time that I spent with them, neither Cajal himself nor his assistant, Dr. Castro, ever spoke to me other than in French, though everybody else used Spanish.

Cajal at that time was approaching his seventy-fifth birthday but continued to direct his research institute, as he did until his death seven years later. Fernando de Castro, his assistant, was much younger. A former pupil of the Master, he was now a professor in the University but spent some time in the Institute every day. There were also three technicians, a young man and two girls. Besides these, several practicing physicians came in irregularly but frequently and did a little work, as did the Director of the adjoining Museum of Anthropology, Dr. Sánchez y Sánchez. [See Figure 3.]

One of the young girl technicians, Katie (Srta. Enriqueta L. Rodríguez), was later to become Cajal's devoted confidential secretary for the last years of his life, and has recently published a book about him. In it she states that he taught her to seek knowledge, to love work, never to lie, and to defend the truth valiantly. This girl was the only person who on one or two occasions spoke English to me in the laboratory.