



Rita Levi-Montalcini e il suo Maestro, Una grande avventura nelle Neuroscienze alla Scuola di Giuseppe Levi

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BOOK REVIEW

Marco Piccolino, ed. *Rita Levi-Montalcini e il suo Maestro, Una grande avventura nelle Neuroscienze alla Scuola di Giuseppe Levi*. Pisa, Italy: E.T.S., 2021, 316 pp., €29.00 (paperback), ISBN-10: 8846758234, ISBN-13: 978-8846758231.

On December 5, 1897, Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934) gave a speech at the *Real Academia de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales de España*, to acknowledge his inclusion among the members of the Institution. He took the occasion to provide students and young scientists with recommendations and advice about their professional progression, and especially to stimulate their commitment to research. Ramón y Cajal's discourse was printed soon afterward, and many editions have subsequently been published. It is perhaps the most popular of his general science works (Ramón y Cajal 1899, 1999).

The second chapter of this book, generally known by the subtitle, *Los tónicos de la voluntad*, deals with the “demoralising worries of the beginner,” and particularly with the apparent “exhaustion of research themes.” According to Ramón y Cajal, this represents a difficulty that prevents many beginners from initiating studies in research fields that, they believe, have already been widely investigated. Against this difficulty, he wrote, “surprising things can indeed emerge unexpectedly even in those fields that seem have been fully explored.”

This reflection seems appropriate for the book *Rita Levi-Montalcini e il suo Maestro, Una grande avventura nelle Neuroscienze alla Scuola di Giuseppe Levi* (*Rita Levi-Montalcini and Her Mentor, A Great Adventure in Neuroscience at the School of Giuseppe Levi*), edited by the Italian neurophysiologist Marco Piccolino. Indeed, it seems that everything has been said about the brilliant human and scientific life of Rita Levi-Montalcini (1909–2012), culminating with her Nobel Prize in 1986. Her rich scientific, social, and institutional vitality continued until the last period of her long life (her last scientific paper was published in 2012, the year of her death, when she was 103 years old). Many members of the International Society of the History of the Neuroscience likely remember the extraordinary energy radiating from the lecture she gave at the meeting of the Cajal Club in Pavia in 2009, when she was 100 years old.

On numerous occasions Levi-Montalcini narrated her life in articles, books, interviews, and conferences. Even more numerous are the instances in which her story has been narrated by journalists, scientists, writers, and filmmakers. It might, therefore, appear unnecessary to retrace again the life of this protagonist of twentieth-century neuroscience. Almost all seems to have been already said, and what might possibly remain seems to belong only to the dimension of the marginally significant details.

At the outset, the appearance of a new book on Levi-Montalcini does not, therefore, particularly invite potential readers, not even those interested in the history of the neurosciences. It suffices, however, to browse the new book, perhaps because of the beautiful cover photo, or the great numbers of images inside, most of which are published here for the first time.

The richness and variety of themes of Levi-Montalcini's life and science are ably dealt with by the authors. These include a family portrait written by Levi-Montalcini's niece, Piera Levi-Montalcini, containing an important and unpublished manuscript of her mother, Maria Gattone, with the Levi-Montalcini's family story during the wartime. In addition, there is a chapter on the particular significance of the family and home in the Jewish Italian world (by Italian historian Alberto Cavaglion), and another (by Italian literary scholar Giacomo Magrini) on the cultural and literary context of Turin at the time of Levi-Montalcini and her mentor, Italian anatomist and histologist Giuseppe Levi (1872–1965). The final chapter, written by one of

Levi-Montalcini's collaborators (Pietro Calissano) deals with the modern phase and the impact of her many discoveries, and moreover with her institutional creativity, and particularly with her role in the foundation of the European Brain Research Institute.

However, the central part of the book—with various chapters written by the editor, Marco Piccolino—is possibly the main attraction for historians of science (and particularly of neurosciences). Through a careful analysis of the initial research by Levi-Montalcini, and especially her apprenticeship and first investigations in Levi's laboratory in Turin, as well as through new documents discovered in her archives, Piccolino deconstructs Levi-Montalcini's narration of her own life and science, especially that contained in her main autobiography, *Elogio dell'imperfezione* (*In Praise of Imperfection*; Levi-Montalcini 1987, 1988).

Piccolino shows that, to a large extent, Levi-Montalcini's recollection is a form of literary fiction with often a poor correspondence to historical reality. This is particularly the case for her relationship with Levi, and also for the way she narrated the beginnings, in her home laboratory during wartime, of the research path leading many years later to the discovery of the nerve growth factor (later recognized by the Nobel Prize).

Before *Rita Levi-Montalcini e il suo Maestro*, it seemed that nothing truly new could be written on Levi-Montalcini's life that was not already included in the *Elogio*. With the new book, we learn that the *Elogio* pertains more to literature than to the history of sciences, and a great work is still needed to unveil the life and science of this elegant and intelligent “princess” of the twentieth-century neurosciences (as she was called by Primo Levi). A scientist is not necessarily a good historian, particularly when he or she writes an autobiography.


From many viewpoints, this volume opens new, unexplored paths in a field that, according to Ramón y Cajal's original expression, seemed already *agotado* (exhausted). My personal hope is that it will soon be translated from Italian into English.

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