

The historical and neurological influences of Professor Martí i Vilalta

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ABSTRACT

Professor Josep Lluís Martí i Vilalta (1946-2014) was a pioneer in the modern field of cerebrovascular disease. In his remarkable contributions to science and the humanities, he was inspired by three colleagues from the past: Dr Falp (1873-1913), Dr Robert (1842-1902), and Dr Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928). Dr Falp was doctor to the poet Jacint Verdaguer as well as an early figure in the study of cerebrovascular disease. His survey of stroke cases in Solsona (*Estudio general de la apoplejía —feridura— en Solsona*) was awarded the gold medal in 1900 by the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia (RAMC). Dr Robert, mentor to Barraquer Roviralta, was triply influential in his time: he was an outstanding clinician and professor of internal medicine, president of the RAMC, and mayor of Barcelona. Dr Barraquer Roviralta, the founding father of Catalan and Spanish clinical neurology, was tireless in his pursuit of science and clinical medicine. He was known for his unassuming modesty and respectful attitude toward his colleagues; his introverted tendencies set him apart from many other well-known doctors of his time.

Martí i Vilalta urged his students to examine the lives of these three great individuals as references and role models in the areas of both science and ethics. Professor Martí i Vilalta died in September 2014 at the age of 68.

KEYWORDS

Barraquer Roviralta, Falp, Robert, Martí i Vilalta, history, Catalan neurology

Introduction

Professor Josep Lluís Martí i Vilalta (1946-2014) was one of the first modern scholars of cerebrovascular disease. In 1984, he set up Spain's first hospital stroke register at Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau (Barcelona); this undertaking provided the basis for his doctoral thesis. He founded the Spanish Society of Neurology's study group for cerebrovascular diseases in 1989, in addition to launching the expert committee on cerebrovascular diseases within the Catalan Society of Neurology in 1995 and serving as that society's president from 1982 to 1984. He edited *Enfermedades vasculares cerebrales*, a textbook on cerebrovascular disease whose third edition was published in 2012.¹

Professor Martí-Vilalta had stated expressly that he did not want any specific recognition or remembrance

ceremonies because he believed, like Thucydides (460 BCE-395 BCE), in the "memory of men graven in people's hearts, and not in stone".^{2,3}

As a researcher and humanist,⁴⁻⁶ Professor Martí i Vilalta (Figure 1) often referred to three great neurological precursors as his ethical and scientific role models: Drs Falp (1873-1913), Robert (1842-1902), and Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928). He also stressed that these pioneers were, strangely enough, not very well known.

In honour of our colleague, we would like to review the outstanding facets of these historical figures by drawing from the memories and anecdotes that Martí i Vilalta would often share. We also consulted bibliographic sources kept in the Academy of Medical Sciences of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, Barcelona.



Figure 1. Photo of Professor Martí i Vilalta

Development

Dr Josep Falp i Plana

Josep Falp i Plana (1873-1913, Figure 2) was a multifaceted Renaissance man who displayed great civic and social engagement. He excelled in medicine and writing (especially poetry); as a man of letters, he was also well-versed in the wisdom of classical Greece and Rome. His well-deserved prestige was such that Jacint Verdaguer, the author of “Canigó”, “La Atlántida”, and other works of poetry, made an appointment. Falp became Verdaguer’s general practitioner in 1896, and their relationship was characterised by mutual admiration and friendship that ended only with the poet’s death from tuberculosis in 1902.⁷

Dr Falp showed a particular interest in *feridura* (‘stroke’ in Catalan), one of the main causes of death in the elderly in that doctor’s time. His most important study was a local medical topography, *La topografía médica de Solsona y distritos adyacentes*; it included an appendix on stroke (*Estudio general de la apoplejía —feridura— en Solsona*). This appendix is hugely relevant, both scientifically and historically, as the first analysis of a large series of patients with stroke, one of the most typical causes of death at the turn of the nineteenth century. This study was awarded the gold medal by the RAMC in 1900.⁸ As a conscientious scientist and scholar, Dr Falp i Plana cited prestigious authors with a demonstrated knowledge of the disease in the discussion section of his book: Nothnagel, Gowers, Letamendi, Charcot, Bouchard, Cruveilhier, Gautier, Cajal, Brown-Séguard, Bichat, Graves, Stokes, Claude Bernard, and Trousseau.



Figure 2. Photo of Dr Josep Falp

In 1908, Falp i Plana founded the Vegetarian League of Catalonia and served as its first president; he also directed the journal *Revista Vegetariana* between 1908 and 1909.⁹

He also showed tremendous civic and social engagement, with contributions to the First International Congress on the Catalan Language and the First Congress of Catalan-Speaking Doctors, and his cooperation with the Regionalist League of Catalonia. Additionally, he was a follower of Pi i Margall and a proponent of the Republican movement that sprung up in the Athenaeum of Barcelona.¹⁰

However, on 4 October, 1913, Dr Falp i Plana died in Tarragona of meningitis secondary to otitis. He was at the height of his intellectual and professional output and only 40 years old.

Josep Falp i Plana’s neurovascular studies were both remarkable and significant. He was one of Spain’s earliest experts in the clinical study of cerebrovascular disease.⁷

Dr Bartomeu Robert

Dr Robert (1842-1902) was an exceptionally honest and unselfish man who enjoyed great social and

professional prestige (Figure 3). In addition to being a professor of internal medicine, he was a history enthusiast with a remarkably complex personality, devoted to science and society alike. As the leading authority on medicine in his time, he was summoned to examine Alfonso XII in 1884; the king was terminally ill with pulmonary tuberculosis.¹¹

Although Dr Robert was neither a politician nor a statesman, he decided to enter politics from a desire to serve the community and address his civic concerns. This forward-looking proponent of Modernism intended to change the face of Spanish politics within a movement that historians have dubbed 'Regenerationism'. During the short but intense political phase occupying the last four years of his life, he often cited medical topics and examples in his speeches.¹² In 1899, he became mayor of Barcelona and launched an ambitious reform programme aiming to do away with *caciquismo*, a type of feudalism, and eliminate irregularities from the electoral census. That same year, Raimundo Fernández Villaverde, Minister of Finance, drew up a series of austere budgets and exponential increases to the tax rates in an attempt to offset the expenses of the colonial wars and the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. These measures were flatly rejected by merchants in Barcelona. Their objection was not admitted, and Dr Robert supported them by refusing to hand over the quarterly taxes in a protest known as the *tancament de caixes*, or 'closing of the cashboxes'. The central government in Madrid, led by Francisco Silvela, replied with the drastic measure of ordering the merchants' goods seized, but Dr Robert, in his capacity as the mayor of Barcelona, refused to sign the order and resigned. These events kept Dr Robert firmly in the public eye, and he thus became the main representative of Catalan society in his time.¹³

Dr Robert, mentor to Luis Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928) showed a strong interest in the study of neurological diseases. For that reason, he promoted and encouraged the founding of the first 'neurology and electrotherapy dispensary' at the former Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona in 1882.^{10,11} This hospital would boast the first unit in Catalonia and Spain dedicated exclusively to the care of patients with nervous system disorders.

On 10 April 1902, Dr Robert died of a heart attack in Barcelona. He was 59 years old, at the summit of his intellectual and professional success. His colleagues and society at large expressed their love and admiration; to



Figure 3. Photo of Dr Robert

date, Dr Robert's funeral remains the second best-attended act of public mourning in Catalonia after that of the poet Jacint Verdaguer.¹³

Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta

Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928, Figure 4) was the founder of clinical neurology in Catalonia and Spain. At the age of 27 and only four years after obtaining his medical degree, he was entrusted with the first department of nervous system diseases to be created in Catalonia or Spain. The administrators of Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona set up this position with the encouragement of Barraquer Roviralta's mentor, Dr Robert. Therefore, 1882 is regarded as the year in which clinical neurology first emerged in Spain.¹⁴ Barraquer Roviralta would subsequently set up the neurology department at Hospital de Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón, known today as Hospital Universitari del Sagrat Cor.

Initially, Barraquer's department at Hospital de la Santa Creu was known as the Neurology and Electrotherapy Dispensary. Barraquer became a member of the RAMC in 1922, joining such eminent figures as Drs Cardenal, Fargas, Ribas, Suñé, and Molist.¹⁵

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was known throughout his lifetime for his tireless pursuit of excellence, whether studying or working. His humble attitude was one of his many virtues, and explains why he was not keen on giving speeches or lectures. Nevertheless, his talks were so packed with content, and had such profound clinical implications, that they were unforgettable.¹⁶ His efforts and his tremendous capacity for work bore fruit in the form of a personal archive in which he documented a large part of his experience in clinical neurology in images and writings. His photography collection included some two thousand plates, making it unrivalled in its time.¹⁷

Barraquer Roviralta's mentoring would have an impact on such eminent surgeons as Salvador Cardenal, Enrique Ribas, and Antoni Reventós, who were among the first to operate to correct certain brain lesions. Thanks to the father of Spanish neurology, neurosurgery began to emerge as a separate surgical specialty.¹⁷

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was held in very high esteem by patients and colleagues alike. He was known for being extremely respectful and kind when dealing with his colleagues, and he made no distinction between junior doctors and more experienced professionals.¹⁷ Barraquer Roviralta was a humble man who never boasted about his education or knowledge despite being the head of the neurology department. This only added to his undeniable greatness.

Working tirelessly, he led the life of a perfect gentleman, a superb clinician, an insightful researcher, and a reference for neurology in Catalonia. In addition to his being a creature of habit and courteous bearing, he was an enthusiastic outdoorsman.^{2,3}

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was also known for his modest attire and for remaining unchanged and unspoiled by his fame and his impressively long list of patients.

He displayed an almost hermit-like streak that pushed him to spend countless hours surrounded by books and patients. He lived unpretentiously, rejecting ostentation in all its forms. His ascetic tendencies contrasted starkly with the more lavish and extroverted natures of some of his contemporaries. Despite his social limitations, he left an indelible mark on the history of neurology.¹⁷

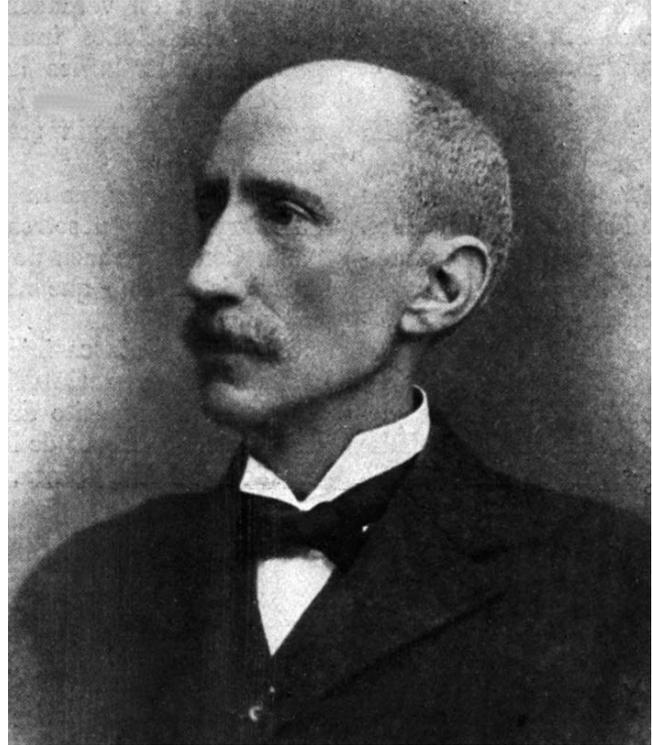


Figure 4. Photo of Dr Barraquer Roviralta

On 12 October 1928, Dr Barraquer Roviralta died at his country home in Sant Climent de Llobregat (Barcelona). He was 73 years old.

It is important to note that the three historical figures described in this article —Dr Falp, Dr Robert, and Dr Barraquer Roviralta (Table 1)— were contemporaries of Dr Artur Galcerán i Granés (1850-1919). In 1911, Galcerán i Granés became the founder and first president of the Barcelona Society of Psychiatry and Neurology,¹⁸⁻²⁰ which was the first neurological society in both Catalonia and Spain.

Conclusions

Martí i Vilalta encouraged his students to examine the lives of these three great historical figures, Dr Falp, Dr Robert, and Dr Barraquer Roviralta, as references and role models in the spheres of both medicine and ethics.

In an echo of *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch (45 CE-120 CE), in which that author presents the lives of exemplary scholars of classical antiquity as models for young people

Table 1. Historical figures in neurology with an impact on Professor Martí i Vilalta**Dr. Josep Falp i Plana (1873-1913)**

Pioneer in clinical and epidemiological stroke research
Humanistic and civic influences

Dr. Bartomeu Robert i Yarzabal (1842-1902)

Internal Medicine specialist and department chair
Mentor to Barraquer Roviralta
Civic inspiration

Dr. Lluís Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928)

Brilliant scientific output
Founder of the Catalan and Spanish schools of clinical neurology; director of Spain's first neurology department (at the former Hospital de la Santa Creu, Barcelona, 1882)
Wisdom, humility, modesty

in his time, Professor Martí i Vilalta recommended that young neurologists learn the stories behind these three great precursors who had inspired him in his own studies of neurology.²²

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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