

# Sketches of Otohistory

## Part 5: Prosper Ménière: Physician, Botanist, Classicist, Diarist and Historian

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Unlike so many of the myriad eponyms of medicine, the name Ménière, like the vertiginous and deafening disorder with which it is linked, enjoys almost instant recognition, not only by otologists and other physicians, but by many of their patients as well. Nevertheless, the man himself, his extraordinary career and his voluminous writings, both scientific and literary, are for the most part either unknown or forgotten, even in his native France. He deserves to be remembered and not only for his famous four clinical papers that were published during the last 12 months of his life. In those remarkable discourses, originally given at meetings of the Imperial Academy of Medicine in Paris, he called attention to a little-understood malady, characterized by attacks of vertigo, tinnitus and gradually diminished hearing. His medical colleagues were not entirely unfamiliar with the disorder, but they had always attributed it to a disorder of the brain, diagnosed it as a manifestation of an 'apoplectiform cerebral congestion', and treated it in vain with their customary bleedings and violent purgations. Ménière reported several cases from his own experience, and made his daring leap of diagnostic insight by assigning the disturbance to the inner ear. Although his identification of its site was not immediately accepted by his colleagues, it soon came to be generally known and widely debated as 'Ménière's disease' or 'Ménière's syndrome'. Its etiology is still uncertain, even though the hydropic distortions that it produces in the membranous labyrinth were revealed more than 40 years ago. In spite of the wide variety of medical, dietary and surgical measures that have been tried, there is still no cure, and even a satisfactory system of palliative treatment has yet to be devised.



**Fig. 1.** Dr. Prosper Ménière. From Legrand, N: Les collections artistiques de la Faculté de médecine de Paris. Paris, Masson, 1911.

Prosper Ménière (fig. 1) was born in Angers, the provincial capital of Anjou in western France, on the 16th day of June, 1799, only a few years after the close of the Revolution and the Terror. The bitter civil and religious strife that continued on in the neighboring region of the Vendée did not end until the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul. Prosper was the third son of a linen draper of modest means and social position, but his parents were ambitious for their children, recognized talent,

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and saw to it that the scholarly young Prosper received 4 years of rigorous education in the classics at the *Lycée Impérial d'Angers*. At the age of 17, he entered the *École de Médecine d'Angers*, where he clearly had excellent teaching, not only in anatomy and medicine, but also in botany, in which he developed a keen interest.

When the youth's intellect and industry had won him honors and prizes during his 3 years of medical study at Angers, his teachers urged him to apply for entrance to the *École de Médecine* in Paris, which was granted. There, at the Hôtel-Dieu, he obtained the *internat* in 1824, won the *Medaille d'Or des Hôpitaux* in 1826 and received his medical degree in 1828. Among his teachers who became his life-long friends and staunch supporters was the Spanish physician and pioneer in forensic medicine, Mateo Orfila, who was dean of the medical faculty. Orfila has sometimes been called 'the father of toxicology' for his voluminous *Traité des Poisons* and his method of detecting the incriminating presence of arsenic, a historic favorite in cases of poisoning. Another was François Guéneau de Mussy, who was a physician of the Hôtel-Dieu and a member of the Imperial Academy of Medicine. From those mentors and from others Ménière received sound instruction and training in general medicine, surgery, obstetrics and hygiene, but virtually none in the nature, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the ear. At that time, in France as in other countries, aural medicine and surgery barely existed. They still had no recognized place in a respectable medical curriculum, and in practice they remained largely in the careless, unskilled hands of charlatans and quacks.

In 1826, his third year of study in Paris, Ménière published his first paper, on a case of malformation of the pericardium, in the *Archives générales de médecine*. Before 1830, 10 other contributions of his, on a wide variety of clinical subjects, followed in the same journal. Then, he entered his first competition for academic rank, that of *professeur agrégé*, with a 20-page thesis in Latin, bearing the title '*Num epilepsia aliaequé convulsiones semper a laesione organica pendent?*' ('Do epilepsy and other convulsions always depend upon an organic lesion?'). His review of the ancient and modern literature revealed no evidence of such a lesion in the central nervous system of epileptics. He had none to add from his own brief clinical experience. The jury were not sufficiently impressed by that first attempt, but he did obtain his assistant professorial title two years later with a thesis on the importance of the pulse in the diagnosis of disease. In the meantime, he had become *aide-de-clinique* to the famous, innovative and demanding *chirurgien-en-chef* at the Hôtel-Dieu, Guillaume Dupuytren. Many years afterward Ménière

wrote of him, 'I was one of the internes whom the great surgeon treated with the utmost kindness'.

By the summer of 1830, France had had enough of the efforts of the reigning monarch Charles X, fraternal successor to the less autocratic and more conciliatory Louis XVIII and younger brother of the unfortunate Louis XVI, to complete the restoration of Bourbon absolutism. Toward the end of July, revolution broke out anew in Paris, bringing with it the 'three glorious days' of bloody battles at the barricades. The unloved Charles and his family fled to England, and his Orleans cousin, the 'Citizen King' Louis-Philippe, was chosen to succeed him. Meanwhile, several hundred of the 2,000 wounded in the street fighting were brought to the Hôtel-Dieu. Ménière was an active member of the surgical team organized by Dupuytren to take care of them. In addition to the chief himself, it included Louis Sanson and Gilbert Breschet, the latter now remembered mainly for his excellent anatomical studies of the ear. Ménière recorded the experiences of those hectic days in his first book, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Paris en juillet et août de 1830*, which was published that same year. In its 368 pages, it contains his reports of individual cases and his observations on the reasons for fatal or favorable outcomes of treatment for gunshot wounds and other types of injury.

Three years later came the most remarkable experience of Ménière's life. At the recommendation of Prof. Orfila he was appointed by the French government to be the personal physician-in-residence to the beautiful and ambitious Duchesse de Berry (fig. 2), widowed daughter-in-law of the exiled Charles X. Having fled with the royal family in 1830, but determined to put her own son on the throne as Henri V, she had returned secretly to France, only to be captured after the failure of her tragicomical attempt to mount a rebellion against her uncle, Louis-Philippe. As punishment for that fiasco she was imprisoned in the Citadel of Blaye, the Vauban-built fortress that still guards the Gironde on its right bank, downstream from Bordeaux. Ménière found himself serving not only as her medical adviser, but as a diplomatic mediator as well, between the temperamental prisoner and her stern military guardian, General Robert Bugeaud. With his charming personality, considerate attitude and exemplary manners, Ménière soon became her trusted confidant, while he also stayed on excellent terms with the general. To keep the Duchesse entertained, he took her for walks about the grounds of the fortress, explaining the local flora, rock formations and fossils. In the evenings, he chatted with her and her attendants about literature and music. At the same time, he was able to satisfy the government ministers in Paris with his regular reports about the state of her health and spirits and on

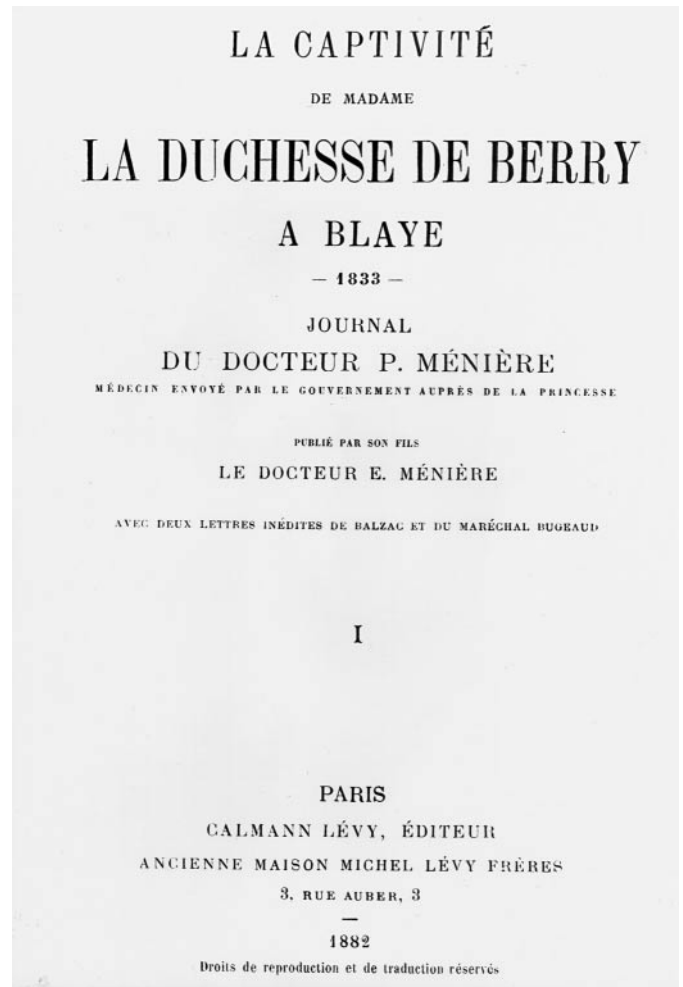


**Fig. 2.** La Duchesse de Berry. Painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence (detail). Vicomte de Reiset: Marie-Caroline Duchesse de Berry 1816–1830. Goupil & Cie, Paris, 1906, after p. 168.

one occasion he was summoned back to the capital to give such an account to Louis-Philippe himself.

Mysteriously enough, the Duchesse turned out to be a few months pregnant. Some 10 years earlier she had lost her husband, the Dauphin, to an assassin's knife, but she explained that on her most recent visit to her native Palermo – she was the daughter of the King of the Two Sicilies – she had been married to a Sicilian diplomat, Count Hector Lucchesi-Palli. Not all were fully convinced by her story. Eventually disgraced in the eyes of her legitimist supporters and no longer regarded as a threat to the French government, the Duchesse was finally released from her imprisonment and permitted to return home to Palermo. Ménière's difficult and demanding task, as medical mediator to the Duchesse, her military guardians and the government, was finished. He had maintained his neutrality and emerged with honor and with the friendship and gratitude of all parties involved.

During the long months at Blaye, Ménière had faithfully and painstakingly recorded each day's happenings and conversations in his journal, noting all the varying moods and complaints of the Duchesse, the reactions of her attendants, servants and warders, the heated comments by her ardent supporters in the legitimist wing of the French press and his own exchanges with the government in Paris. These accounts, published after his death by his



**Fig. 3.** Prosper Ménière: *La Captivité de Madame La Duchesse de Berry à Blaye*. Paris, Ancienne Maison Michel Lévy Frères, 1882.

son Émile, with the title *La captivité de Madame la Duchesse de Berry à Blaye*, 1833, fill two octavo volumes of almost 500 pages each (fig. 3). They give a delightful and highly personal, eye-witness account of a little-known fragment of French history.

Upon his return to Paris in 1834, Ménière resumed his clinical duties, serving as *chef-de-clinique* to Prof. Auguste Chomel. He taught the course in hygiene, and sometimes substituted for Chomel in teaching the course in medicine. Later he was called upon to be a temporary substitute for Prof. Dubois in obstetrics. In 1835, his academic and clinical routine was interrupted by a mission to the *départements* of Aude and Haute-Garonne in the south of France to prevent the spread of a cholera epidemic. As a result of his achievements on that public health mission, he was named a *Chévalier* of the Legion of Honor.

Further academic advancement, however, proved strangely elusive. In 1837 Ménière entered the competition for the professorship of hygiene. With a thesis that dealt with clothing and cosmetics, he was accorded first place, but another applicant received the appointment. Similarly, he was denied a major position with the central administration of the Paris hospitals, although he was ranked above the candidate who was successful. In both cases, academic politics seem to have triumphed over academic fitness. Without question, however, his standing in the social world of Paris was significantly enhanced when he married Anne Pauline, daughter of the celebrated physicist, Antoine Becquerel. It may not always have been the happiest of marriages, to judge by a few wry mentions of his wife in Ménière's unpublished letters. However, the year following their wedding saw the birth of their son Émile, in whom the father apparently delighted, and who eventually became a well-regarded otologist himself.

The year 1838 also brought the death of Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard, the well-known physician to the deaf and dumb at the *Institut Royal des Sourds et Muets à Paris*, and author of *Traité des maladies de l'oreille et de l'audition*. Ménière's powerful friends Prof. Orfila and Guéneau de Mussy tipped the unreliable and unpredictable scales of academic justice in his direction, and Itard's vacant post was awarded to him. Not surprisingly, his appointment raised a major storm of professional protest, because Ménière was still entirely innocent of instruction or training in matters aural and acoustic. Furthermore, among the other candidates for the post were two of the very few experts on such matters. One was Nicholas Deleau the Younger, a serious and respected practitioner whose treatment for deafness and other ailments of the ear was by catheterization of the eustachian tube. The other was the surgeon Gilbert Breschet, who had written at length on aural anatomy. Legent's recent book on Ménière includes an enlightening account of the bitter controversy.

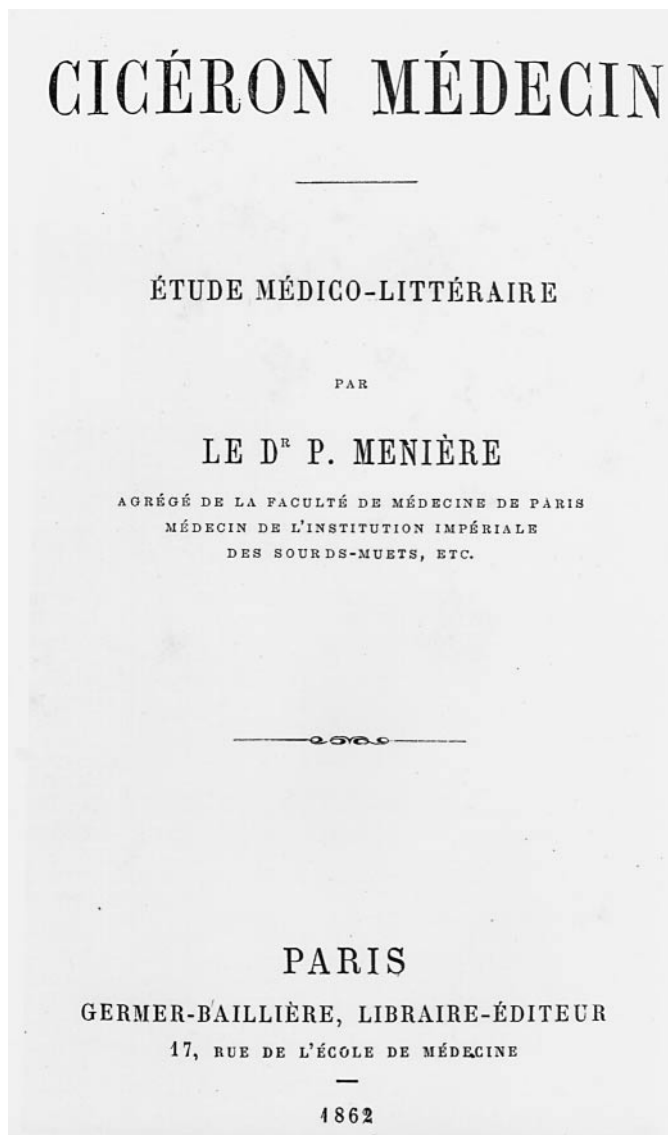
Regardless of the furor, Ménière, with his customary thoroughness, set about acquiring the knowledge and skills required by his new responsibility. Not surprisingly, he found few useful authorities on whose writings he could rely. In addition to Itard, there was the original but opinionated autodidact aurist Wilhelm Kramer of Berlin whose *Ohrenheilkunde*, then highly regarded, had first appeared in 1836. Ménière did not know German, but since an English translation had appeared, he was able to translate that version into French. However, not content to be a mere translator, he added many sensible comments and corrections to his rendering of Kramer's text,

which he published in 1848 under the title, *Traité des maladies de l'oreille*, as a volume of 532 pages.

During this same period, consonant with his title and the sad affliction of so many of his patients, Ménière contributed several articles to the *Gazette Médicale de Paris* on the causes of deaf-mutism, including at least two lengthy discussions of the causative role of consanguineous marriage. He also wrote about the underlying pathology of deaf-mutism, and prescribed methods for examining the ear in the clinic as well as at autopsy. What struck him especially was the frequency of deafness in tuberculous patients and in those who had had typhoid fever. He protested the barbarous methods recommended and practised by others in their attempts to cure the deaf of their affliction. Instead, Ménière agreed with what his predecessor had once written more wisely, viz., that deaf-mutism is incurable, but that the deaf should be educated. However, he was not willing to choose by which method they should be taught, pointing out that both spoken language and sign language had their merits. His monograph *De la guérison de la surdi-mutité, et de l'éducation des sourds-muets* was published in 1853, and his *Du mariage entre parents, considéré comme cause de la surdi-mutité*, in 1856.

Ménière's addiction to writing was such that he kept the pages of the *Gazette Médicale de Paris* well supplied with medical articles and with a variety of *feuilletons* (serialized contributions) from his pen. Some of these later appeared as books. Among them were his comments on the eighteenth-century medical correspondence between the great Swedish botanist, physician and taxonomist Carl von Linné and François Boissier de Sauvages, a professor at Montpellier esteemed for his classification of human diseases. Ménière also displayed his classical learning and scholarship by seeking out and analyzing all the medical lore and references in the works of the major Roman poets, from Ennius to Horace. Later, he did much the same for Cicero by citing and commenting on the abundance of medical advice, beliefs and superstitions to be found in the famous Roman's letters, orations and philosophical works (fig. 4). His *Études médicales sur les poètes latins* emerged from the press in 1858. After the first chapter of his *Cicéron médecin: étude médico-littéraire* was printed in the *Gazette* in 1860, the book itself was published posthumously, in 1862.

Welcome in the salons of the Parisian *beau monde*, Ménière, during the last 10 years of his life, kept up a delightful correspondence with a young lady of Calvados in Normandie. His letters were filled with his views, anecdotes and gossip about authors, artists, literary critics, politicians, military men and other prominent figures of



**Fig. 4.** Prosper Ménière: *Cicéron Médecin*. Paris, Germer-Baillière, 1862. Note the different spellings of Ménière's name here and in figure 3.

the Second Empire. With a standing invitation to the best salons, he knew them all personally, including even the Emperor Napoleon III, the Empress Eugénie and other members of the Imperial Family. Most of the letters, carefully edited by Émile, appeared in print some 40 years after Ménière's death, with the title *Journal du Dr Prosper Ménière. Mémoires anecdotiques sur les salons du second empire, publié par son fils, Dr É. Ménière*. (The accent aigu was a touch of elegance, now thought to have been Émile's addition to the family name, although it does occasionally appear in some of Prosper Ménière's own contributions to the *Gazette Médicale*.)

At one time, Ménière was an admired friend of Balzac, who did him the honor of patterning a young medical character after him in the novel *La Peau de Chagrin*, to the point of naming him *Prosper*, at least in the first edition of the novel. In the next edition Balzac punished Ménière by changing that name, because he objected so strongly to Ménière's new friendship with his enemy, the critic Jules Janin, who figures often in Ménière's *Journal*.

At the height of his career, Ménière died unexpectedly on the 7th of February 1862, during a sudden attack of what seems to have been an influenzal pneumonia. Despite his contributions both clinical and scientific, for reasons that still pass all understanding but are probably attributable to the intricacies of medical and academic politics in France, he had remained a mere *professeur agrégé*. He had never been made a full member of the Faculty of Medicine, nor had he been elected to the Imperial Academy of Medicine, although he was, on more than one occasion, the first-ranked candidate for both honors.

#### References and Notes

Ménière is now remembered chiefly for the long-term influence of his four academic lectures, given at sessions of the Academy of Medicine and published in the *Gazette Médicale* during the year 1861. For those who are interested in Ménière's disease but may not have read the papers in which it was first described, Miles Atkinson's centennial publication 'Ménière's Original Papers', in *Acta Oto-laryngologica* 1961 (suppl 162):1-78, makes them readily available, in both the original French and an English translation.

'J'ai vu une jeune fille frappée de surdit e complete, absolue, dans le court espace de quelques heures. Voyageant sur une voiture decouverte, elle fut exposee, la nuit,   un froid tr s vif dans le temps de ses r gles, et l'ou ie fut perdue sans que les oreilles eussent  t  le siege de douleurs. La mort, qui survint promptement, me permit de diss quer avec soin les deux temporaux, et je trouvai dans tout le labyrinthe une sorte de lymphe plastique, rouge tre, qui paraissait le produit d'une exhalation de toutes les surfaces membraneuses tapissant l'oreille interne. Dans un cas tr s analogue, mais qui ne s' tait termin  par la mort que beaucoup plus tard (deux mois apr s la perte subite de l'ou ie), je trouvai cette m me lymphe plastique d'un jaune clair, parsem e d'une multitude de petits points gris, opaques, et ressemblant assez bien   des granulations tuberculeuses commençantes.'

[I have seen a young girl struck with complete, absolute deafness, in the short space of a few hours. Traveling at night in an open carriage, at the time of her menses, she was exposed to extreme cold, and lost her hearing without having had any pain in her ears. Her death, which occurred soon afterward, gave me the opportunity of carefully dissecting her temporal bones. Throughout the labyrinth I found a sort of reddish, plastic lymph, which appeared to be a product of secretion from the membranous surfaces lining the inner ear. In a quite similar case, but one not terminated by death until much later (two months after the sudden loss of hearing) I found this same plastic lymph, clear yellow in color, with a scattering of tiny grey, opaque specks, more or less resembling incipient tuberculous granulations.]