ASTHMA

The Biography

MARK JACKSON
ASTHMA
This page intentionally left blank
ASTHMA

The Biography

Mark Jackson
For Ciara, Riordan, and Conall

L'amour c'est l'espace et le temps rendus sensibles au cœur.

Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière*
This page intentionally left blank
Unlike asthma, this book has a relatively straightforward history. Approximately two years ago, Bill and Helen Bynum asked me to contribute a volume on asthma to a new edited series entitled ‘Biographies of Disease’, to be published by Oxford University Press. Since it seemed an excellent idea, I agreed, and the book was born. I am deeply grateful to Bill and Helen for their constructive, and astonishingly swift and generous, advice and support throughout the process of preparing the manuscript. I am also indebted to Latha Menon from Oxford University Press for her careful coordination and management of the project.

The research on which the book is based was funded by the Wellcome Trust, and I am grateful both for the Trust’s financial support and for the advice and friendship of key figures within the Trust, particularly Mark Walport, Clare Matterson, Tony Woods, and Liz Shaw. Since the chronological and geographical range of the subject extended well beyond my usual terms of historical reference, I am afraid that I relied on the generosity of many colleagues, who shared their work, time, and ideas in order to facilitate my access to the previously hidden depths of ancient and modern, Western and Eastern, histories of medicine. In particular, I would like to thank Guy Attewell, Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Siam Bhayro, Roberta Bivins, Jeremy Black, Maarten Bode, Tse Wen Chang, Philip van der Eijk, Alison Finch, Ali Haggett, Rhodri Hayward, Harry Hendrick, Carla Keirns, Ian Gregg, Tak Lee, Vivienne Lo, Gregg Mitman, Glen Needham,
Carol Parry, David van Sickle, Matthew Smith, Akihito Suzuki, and John Wilkins. I am also grateful to staff in the inter-library loan section of the University of Exeter Library for obtaining copies of otherwise inaccessible articles and books, and to Asthma UK for allowing me access to the early records of the Asthma Research Council.

I am grateful to the following sources for the illustrations and permission to reproduce them: Figure 1: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Marcel_Proust_1900.jpg; Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10 are reproduced courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London; Figure 6 is from Clyde Henderson Thompson, ‘Marin Marais, 1656–1728’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1957); Figures 9 and 11 are reproduced courtesy of the Advertising Archives, London; Figure 12 is provided by the Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, Templeman Library, University of Kent, copyright Mirrorpix, 1958, reproduced by permission of Mirrorpix; Figures 13 and 15 are Crown copyright, reproduced from the Lung and Asthma Information Agency Factsheets 97/3 and 2001/1, http://www.sghms.ac.uk/depts/laia/laia.htm; Figure 14 is a scanning electron micrograph of an American house dust mite reproduced by kind permission of Glen Needham, Acarology Laboratory, the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. I have made every effort to contact all copyright holders. If proper acknowledgement has not been made, I ask the copyright holders to contact the publishers.

Of course, my heart belongs to Siobhán, who breathed fresh life into me many years ago and who will always be the fulcrum of my world. The book is dedicated, however, to our three children, Ciara, Riordan, and Conall, who have so beautifully filled our space and time.
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations xi

Prologue 1

Classical Asthma 10

Asthma Redefined 47

Asthma, Allergy, and the Mind 100

Asthma in the Modern World 152

Epilogue 199

Glossary 205

Notes 209

Further Reading 235

Index 241
This page intentionally left blank
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Marcel Proust, 1871–1922 3
2. Aretaeus, c. AD 50–150 20
3. Chinese medication chart, 1341 42
4. Girolamo Cardano, 1501–76 48
5. The title page of A Treatise of the Asthma (1698) by John Floyer 60
6. ‘Allemande l’asmatique’, composed in 1717 by Marin Marais 68
7. Illustration of an asthmatic from Henry Hyde Salter, On Asthma (1860) 94
8. John Hutchinson’s spirometer, 1846 97
9. Advertisement for the Carbolic Smoke Ball, c.1891 102
10. Advertisement for Potter’s Asthma Cure, c.1910 105
11. An American magazine advertisement for stramonium cigarettes, c.1959 132
12. A cartoon by Reg Smythe from the Daily Mirror, 1958 149
13. Asthma mortality rates in England and Wales 160
14. Scanning electron micrograph of an American house dust mite 178
15. Asthma mortality according to social class 183
This page intentionally left blank
In a brief letter written to his devoted mother in 1900, the French novelist Marcel Proust complained that the previous day he had suffered from an ‘attack of asthma of unbelievable violence and tenacity’, which had obliged him to spend all night on his feet in spite of extreme tiredness. Such episodes of acutely debilitating asthma were not unusual for Proust during this period of his life. In another intimate note to his mother, dated 26 August 1901, Proust described how, having travelled to Versailles to visit some distant relatives, he had been ‘seized with a horrifying attack of asthma, so that I didn’t know
what to do or where to hide myself. A few days later, his misery continued unabated:

Yesterday after I wrote to you I had an attack of asthma and incessant running at the nose, which obliged me to walk all doubled up and light anti-asthma cigarettes at every tobacconist’s I passed, etc. And what’s worse, I haven’t been able to go to bed till midnight, after endless fumigations, and it’s three or fours hours after a real summer attack, an unheard of thing for me. Such a thing has never happened outside the usual season for my attacks.¹

Marcel Proust was born in Paris on 10 July 1871, at a moment of widespread political unrest in France following the disastrous Paris Commune earlier that year. His Roman Catholic father, Dr Adrien Proust (1834–1903), was a prominent doctor who had chosen to remain in Paris to treat those wounded during street battles between the revolutionary National Guard and the Versailles army. Renowned particularly for his work on cholera and public health, Adrien was one of the founders of the International Office of Hygiene and the co-author of a treatise on neurasthenia, in which he suggested that maternal over-affection might cause nervous diseases. Significantly, Marcel was deeply attached to his Jewish mother, Jeanne (née Weill), who remained his closest carer and confidante, and to whom he wrote almost daily messages, until her death in 1905.²

Marcel Proust suffered his first severe attack of asthma when he was 9 years old, while out walking with his family in the Bois de Boulogne. From that moment, asthma and hay fever, along with many other recurrent complaints such as insomnia, indigestion, back pain, headaches, dizziness, and fatigue, began to plague his life: during early adulthood Proust became a chronic invalid, often confined to his room, and indeed his bed, as he
attempted to cope with persistent ill health and maintain his intellectual creativity. Having graduated in law and philosophy in the early 1890s, Proust published his first book *Les Plaisirs et les jours* in 1896 and began work on *Jean Santeuil*, which was published only in 1952. After the death of his father in 1903, and of his mother two years later, Proust’s health declined further. In 1906, following the publication of his celebrated translation of Ruskin, he retreated to his Parisian apartment at 102, Boulevard Haussmann to compose his finest work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, translated into English as *In Search of Lost Time*. Comprising seven volumes, three of which were published after his death by his younger brother Robert, this sequence of novels exploring interlocking themes of space, time, memory, love, and jealousy established Proust as perhaps the greatest modern French writer.
As Proust’s letters to his mother and his friends testify, asthma was a constant companion until his death in 1922. Violent attacks of coughing, gasping, and choking dominated his life. In 1907, in a letter to his loyal friend Madame Straus, on whom he later based the character of the Duchesse de Guermantes, Proust explained why he had not been in contact: ‘And ever since that moment up to today (and until I don’t know when in the future), I haven’t stopped choking and having incessant attacks. And that is why, although you were in my thoughts practically all day long, I haven’t written; I haven’t had the courage to take up my pen.’ Similarly, in 1920, he wrote to his fellow author Marcel Boulenger, describing how he had ‘been gasping for breath so continuously (incessant attacks of asthma for several days) that it is not very easy for me to write’.3

In addition to demonstrating the enormous impact of asthma on his life, Proust’s correspondence provides evidence of the range of contemporary theories about the causes of asthma. According to Proust, episodes of asthma were most frequently precipitated by physical triggers such as dust, flowers, cold, damp, odours, certain foods, and changes in the weather. Indeed, his anxiety to avoid exposure to harmful pollutants and variable environmental conditions not only led him to remove gas from, and forbid cooking in, his apartment, but also encouraged him to construct a cork-lined bedroom that effectively protected him from pollen and perfume. Proust’s compulsive reading of medical texts also prompted him to consider alternative and less conventional explanations for his asthma; in 1901, having read Édouard Brissaud’s work on asthma, the preface to which had been written by his father, Proust feared that his troubles might be caused by threadworms, and asked his brother, who was a urologist, to recommend an appropriate enema as treatment.4
Proust was also aware that his asthma and hay fever were exacerbated by psychological and emotional factors. In a letter to his mother in 1904, for example, he reported that he had gone ‘to bed in a state of great agitation, in consequence of which, I think, I had an attack of asthma. I went to sleep all the same, but had dreams of not being able to breathe, and at last woke up.’5 Proust’s family and friends were more critical. Much to Proust’s dismay, they regarded many of his illnesses as the product of nervousness, indolence, and hypochondria, believing him to be a ‘malade imaginaire’.6 In a letter written to his mother in 1899 from Evian-les-Bains, a popular health resort on the southern shores of Lake Geneva, Proust dejectedly contrasted his own experience of the perils of asthma with his father’s dismissive interpretation of his illness:

By the way, as they wanted to bring me back in the car, Constantin said it was all in my imagination that cold air was bad for me, because Papa told everyone that there was nothing wrong with me and that my asthma was purely imaginary. I know only too well when I wake here in the morning that it is very real.7

Proust experimented with a wide variety of treatments in an attempt to alleviate or cure his asthma. While living at home before his parents died, he would retreat to a designated smoking room, in which he smoked medicated cigarettes or burned and inhaled Espic, Legras, or Escouflaire powders, all of which contained stramonium, an ancient remedy derived from thorn apple or jimson weed; his letters are replete with references to regular ‘fumigations’ with these patent remedies and other substances, such as carbolic acid. In addition, he was prescribed morphine, opium, caffeine, and iodine, had his nose cauterized as a child, adopted a milk diet, and attempted to avoid pollen
and fumes either by living largely in isolation or by escaping to coastal or mountainous resorts, initially with his grandmother or mother, where the air was supposedly cleaner and healthier. On several occasions, particularly after his asthma had worsened following his mother’s death, Proust sought advice from clinicians who specialized in treating nervous diseases, such as Édouard Brissaud (1852–1909) and Joseph Babinski (1857–1932), and spent six weeks in isolation in a clinic run by Paul Sollier (1861–1938) in Boulogne-sur-Seine. Such efforts to relieve his distress proved in vain. Asthma remained an integral part of his life, leading some of his doctors and certain historians to suggest either that ultimately Proust did not want to be cured or, as his housekeeper Céleste Albaret admitted, that his asthma served a psychological or practical purpose, allowing him to avoid military service or to shun society in order to write:

I think the truth is that he used even his illness as a further means of shutting himself up in his work and cutting himself off from the world outside. He wasn’t afraid of illness. The only thing he feared was dying before he had finished his work. So he did all he could to erect as many walls as possible around himself.9

Asthma not only dominated Proust’s daily existence but also infected his literature, colouring his characters and, according to some critics, even dictating his syntax. As Proust himself acknowledged, there were close correlations between the description and analysis of events in his major literary work, In Search of Lost Time, and the details of his own life and the lives of those around him: the fictional narrator was also named Marcel and suffered from a similar range of symptoms, including periodic shortness of breath. Shaped by his familiarity with the latest medical theories as well as by his own experiences of
illness, Proust’s creative writings offer additional insights into both contemporary strategies for moderating asthma attacks and broader social perceptions of the disease. Proust’s portrayal of asthma was characteristically astute. In the first volume of the series, Du côté de chez Swann, translated either as Swann’s Way or as The Way by Swann’s, Proust not only acknowledged the possibility that asthma could affect the working classes, contrary to contemporary medical opinion, but also recognized the manner in which a tendency to asthma could be exploited by others for personal gain: the kitchen maid was eventually forced by the cook to leave her employment because she was ordered repeatedly and deliberately to prepare asparagus, which precipitated her asthma.11 Equally, in the second volume, In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower, in addition to recounting popular medical approaches to treating asthma, Proust hinted at the manner in which asthmatics themselves could, on occasions, embroider their symptoms to influence those around them:

For years I had suffered from attacks of shortness of breath; and our doctor, despite the disapproval of my grandmother, who was convinced I would go to an alcoholic’s early grave, had recommended that, in addition to the caffeine already prescribed as an aid to my breathing, I should have a drink of beer, champagne or brandy each time I felt an attack coming on. The ‘euphoria’ brought on by the alcohol would, he said, ‘nip it in the bud’. Rather than conceal the state of breathlessness I was in, I was often obliged almost to exaggerate it, before my grandmother would allow me to have such a drink.12

Marcel Proust’s traumatic experiences and literary portrayals of asthma were clearly contingent, shaped not only by the peculiar circumstances of his life but also by the composition and boundaries of medical knowledge at the time. His interpretation