Case histories
Autism

Adrian Roots

For more on **Case histories** see **Comment** *Lancet* 2016; **387:** 211 and **Perspectives** *Lancet* 2016; **387:** 217, 737, 1265 and 1711

Does the story of autism begin with early modern holy fools, or brilliant but socially awkward natural philosophers like Isaac Newton, or the "Wild Boys" beloved of late-Enlightenment *philosophes*, or the travails of an obscure Scottish nobleman? In a thoughtful and meticulous case study, the psychologist Uta Frith and the historian Rab Houston have argued that we can understand the life of Hugh Blair of Borgue within the frame of modern autism. Though he lived with his family and could dress and feed himself, Blair took no interest in conversation and friendship, preferring to live by strict routines—attending every burial in the parish, for instance. After a legal dispute with his younger brother John in 1748 a court ruled that Blair was incapable, and annulled his marriage.

But what does it mean to say that Blair, or indeed any historical figure before the coining of the term and the diagnosis early in the 20th century, was autistic? The cultural critic Stuart Murray argues that "such speculation is probably best seen not as a desire to engage with autism in the historical record, but rather as a peculiarly contemporary fascination with neurobehavioural difference in which we look for the condition everywhere". Until the early 20th century, social or linguistic difficulties were not a major object of medical interest. People with these impairments could often, like Blair, live and work with their families and, unless they also suffered more violent kinds of disturbance, they did not come to the attention of medical or legal authorities. When physicians did encounter patients who could not speak or engage, they tended to label them as "idiots"—"a symbolical repository", in cultural historian Martin Halliwell's words, "for that which defies categorisation".

Through the 19th century, western states embodied a new concern for the regulation of public order in new institutions—workhouses, prisons, asylums, and, crucially, schools. In all these places people with behavioural difficulties became newly visible, subjects for the expertise and authority of a host of new professions and specialties: psychiatry, education, speech therapy, child development. For the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, who coined the term in 1911, autism was a symptom of his major new category of schizophrenia. Bleuler saw autism—from the Greek *autos*, "self"—as an attempt to escape from symptoms of schizophrenia into a state of profound self-absorption.

By the 1930s, British and American psychologists and psychiatrists, working under the influence of psychoanalysis, were seeking to define the normal developmental course of childhood, and to pathologise those who deviated from it, typically linking these deviations to social or emotional deprivation. When the Austrian–American child psychiatrist Leo Kanner published an account of autism in his young patients in 1943, he framed the condition as a developmental disorder expressed in a lack of "affective contact". Though Kanner's own views on the aetiology of the condition were more nuanced, best-selling books like the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress* (1967) blamed autism on the emotional chilliness of "refrigerator mothers". Behavioural therapy based on this view proved costly, time-consuming, largely ineffective, and sometimes bewildering for those who underwent it.

Responding to this stigmatisation, the parents of children with autism, and later autistic people themselves, established patient advocacy groups, arguing that they were the real experts on the nature and meaning of the condition. Since the 1960s this campaign has run alongside deinstitutionalisation, improvements in education, and pop-cultural representations of autism in films like *Rain Man* (1988) and Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). Clinical views of autism have moved on, too, with Uta Frith, Simon Baron-Cohen, and their colleagues' influential 1985 proposal that people with autism lack a theory of mind. In the early 21st century, the rapid spread of concepts like neurodiversity and the autism spectrum are transforming cultural attitudes to the condition, forcing us to ask: is autism a disorder to be treated and cured, or simply another way of being human?

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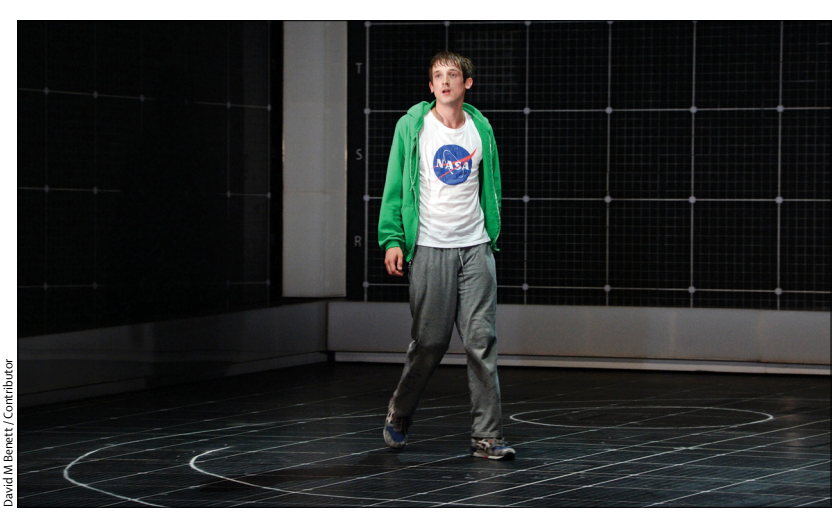
Further reading
Hacking I. Humans, aliens and autism. *Daedalus* 2009; **138:** 44–59
Houston R, Frith U. Autism in history: the case of Hugh Blair of Borgue. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000
Murray S. Autism. London: Routledge, 2012



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Graham Butler in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* at the Gielgud Theatre, London, UK, in 2014