Commemorative Article

Louise Eisenhardt, M.D.: First editor of the Journal of Neurosurgery (1944–1965)

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This is a literary portrait of Louise Eisenhardt, M.D., associate of Harvey Cushing, scholar, investigator, editor, teacher, and curator of the Brain Tumor Registry at Yale. She was a Charter Member of the Harvey Cushing Society which she served as President, long-term Secretary-Treasurer, and Historian. She achieved many “firsts” for women in medicine. A figure in the Homeric tradition of observing accurately and reporting honestly, Dr. Eisenhardt set high standards for both colleagues and students as well as for aspiring medical authors. She left a tradition worthy of emulation.

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Dr. Louise Eisenhardt, the first editor of the Journal of Neurosurgery, set a literary standard that established the Journal as one of the world’s outstanding scientific publications. The literary guidelines she set have helped succeeding generations maintain that distinction for the Journal of Neurosurgery. Her zealous and jealous devotion to the Journal was legendary. Were that her only accomplishment, her place in the annals of neurosurgery would have been assured. Yet, although not a neurosurgeon, Dr. Eisenhardt achieved many notable distinctions among neurosurgeons as well as in her related field of neuropathology. She was a lady unique in her day. Her association and collaboration with Harvey Cushing and his long-standing involvement with the organization that bore his name, the Harvey Cushing Society, were familiar to an older generation of neurosurgeons but apparently not so to the younger generation. This will be a literary portrait of a distinguished lady in neurosurgery with just enough background to be supportive but not distracting of the subject.

Louise Eisenhardt was born in Ramsey, New Jersey, somewhere around the turn of the century and died on January 22, 1967, in Rockport, Massachusetts. In that life span she attained many first honors not generally accorded women in those days. She was the first woman to specialize in neuropathology and to become President of the Harvey Cushing Society, of which she was a Charter Member, and the first Secretary-Treasurer as well as its first Cushing Orator.

It all began in 1915, when Dr. Cushing appreciated the potential of this very young woman and took her into his office as an editorial assistant. While working on the material for Cushing’s Tumors of the Nervus Acusticus, her talents became so evident that he left the book in her hands to be seen through the press when he was called to active duty as Director of United States Army Base Hospital No. 5 in May, 1917. In the preface dated May 6, 1917, his acknowledgment is clear: “To my secretary, Miss Louise Eisenhardt, whose assistance has been invaluable during the preparation of this monograph, I must leave the task of preparing the Index and seeing the book through the press.”

Scholar and Investigator

As Louise Eisenhardt became more involved in the neurosurgical aspects of Cushing’s work, she determined that a medical education was necessary. While at Tufts Medical School she continued some of her editorial responsibilities, and in 1922 started a cumulative log on the results of operations on intracranial tumors. In 1925 she was graduated with the highest record ever attained at Tufts Medical School.
Her first flirtation with New Haven came when she was accepted for internship at the New Haven Hospital, but Cushing persuaded her to change to the Boston Hospital for Women and Children. Apparently, even this busy appointment did not liberate her from editorial and statistical duties relating to the expanding flow to Cushing's care of intracranial tumors. She first reported the operative mortality of these cases in 1929.6

From 1928 to 1934, Dr. Eisenhardt was a Junior Associate in Surgery on Cushing's service. During this period she published scientific papers with both junior and senior associates as well as singly. The earliest of these was with Cushing and Bailey in 1928 on angioblastic meningiomas1 and one on meningiomas of the tuberculum sellae was published with Cushing in 1929.3 A second paper with Bailey in 1932 was on spongioblastomas of the brain.7

Not to be ignored is her supravital technique for immediate diagnosis of surgical biopsies taken from intracranial tumors, a technique supplanted today by frozen section biopsy but still worthy of rediscovery. The method was first described in an article with Cushing2 and expanded upon later.3

When Percival Bailey left Harvard for the University of Chicago, Louise Eisenhardt was the best qualified to take over the section of neuropathology that he had established at the Brigham. Thus launched upon a career with which she was to be so long identified, she became both nationally and internationally recognized as an authority. In this position she was able to keep an even closer watch on what today would be termed "outcomes of surgical intervention" for intracranial tumors at the Brigham. These statistics were meticulously kept in a little black book in the true Homeric tradition of observing accurately and reporting honestly. Few saw and none touched the book. This may have represented an early sign of her independence and possessiveness.

"A Mysterious Little Black Book"

Although out of chronological order, the story of the little black book makes a diverting digression. Already reported in German's obituary notice8 and in Harvey Cushing's 70th birthday volume, it is interesting enough to be repeated here, especially since details recently acquired enhance the tale. Existence of the little black book, not its contents, was known around the Brigham. At his 70th birthday celebration before the Harvey Cushing Society, on April 8, 1939, Cushing spoke of it as follows:8

"Since I have never been good at tables and graphs and calculations of percentages, the task would have been impossible had it not been for a mysterious little black book in which day by day and year by year Louise had neatly and methodically entered every tumor as soon as it was histologically classified. While you were discussing head injuries this afternoon, I secretly removed it from her desk and shall pass it around as Exhibit A, so that you can see for yourselves how she knew when the 2000th tumor mark was reached, and much else beside. As I have never ventured to handle the object before myself, I trust you will treat it tenderly...."

Dr. Cushing later completed his playful remarks about Louise and the little black book:

"Had it not been for this confounded little book which she was prone to consult at awkward moments, the operative and case mortality percentages for the meningiomas would have been found much lower and the end results much better. For had I been left to myself, the temptation to exclude a case here and there to improve the figures would have been irresistible. But you can't cheat in your own favor when someone else checks the record. The moral is never try to keep your own score if you want to be trusted by others."

Additional revelations from an interview on October 19, 1993, with Louise Eisenhardt's secretary, Mrs. D. Harold Dennis (Betty McCarthy), were that, on the afternoon in question, Dr. Cushing stopped by Dr. Eisenhardt's office which was down a long corridor around the corner from his own and asked young Miss McCarthy to get the black book. Though overawed by his request and his very presence, she told him in clear terms that no one but Dr. Eisenhardt ever touched that book. He replied: "My child, I shall take full responsibility and I will stand guard at the door while you get the book." That he took full responsibility for the purloined book is evident from his remarks at the dinner and from his expression of gratitude in a handwritten note of that same afternoon addressed to "Dear Betty McCarthy" for "those birthday posties. . . . They are greatly appreciated."

The Rape of the Lock

Cushing died in New Haven on October 7, 1939. Dr. James C. Collias (interviewed September 10, 1993) related a little-known story that occurred immediately after Dr. Harry M. Zimmerman had completed the autopsy on the late Harvey Cushing.9 The diener was putting the finishing touches on the remains when he heard the quick patter of feet approaching the table. He looked up to recognize the lady doctor, Louise Eisenhardt, who occupied the office above his mortuary quarters. Without a word or undue ceremony she picked up a scissor, cut a lock of the Chief's hair, and as silently vanished. Touched by this act of remembrance, the diener did likewise. He respectfully enclosed his trove in a glassed frame and ultimately passed it on to Collias who was working in the Department at the time.

The Teacher

While in Boston, Dr. Eisenhardt had been conducting a course in neuropathology at Tufts Medical School. So loyal was she to course and students that, even after moving to New Haven, she made annual teaching pilgrimages to Tufts for many years. It came to an end when the Dean at the Yale Medical School learned of the dual appointment and "fist the ceiling," to quote Betty McCarthy. By this time Dr. Eisenhardt was becoming engrossed in editorial responsibilities for the Journal of Neurosurgery and in teaching the constant stream of students who came to study at the Brain Tumor Registry, so while she herself could not relinquish
her teaching appointment at Tufts on her own initiative, someone with authority fortunately made the decision for her.

The Brain Tumor Registry had been brought together between 1933 when Cushing left Boston and 1934 when Louise Eisenhardt came to New Haven with the collection of 2000 specimens and 50,000 pages of case records. She became the guardian of what Davidoff called "that unique institution, the Brain Tumor Registry." There were still some 800 living patients in Cushing's tumor series, and these were diligently tracked so that her office and laboratory were kept busy with follow-up letters as well as the daily routine of neuropathology for the new cases at Yale. Ray's said of this Registry: "Nowhere is there anything comparable to these completely documented chronicles."

Her laboratory and the Brain Tumor Registry became a magnet for a long list of mostly young neurosurgeons and neuropathologists who came to study the pathology of intracranial tumors. To the older generation of the Harvey Cushing Society she had been "our dear Louise" but to this younger group she was Dr. Eisenhardt. Collias relates that in his day those studying in her laboratory had a custom of asking her to lunch. The ritual around the noon hour was to stand silently by her desk as she was poring over manuscripts for the Journal of Neurosurgery until she chose to acknowledge that presence. Then, her intended host would ask if she cared to go out to lunch. She would act pleasantly surprised and say how happy she would be to do so. In 1959 this group of admiring fellows, current and past, of her laboratory held a special luncheon in her
Louise Eisenhardt: First editor of the *Journal*

honor at the meeting of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons where she had given a special course in neurosurgery. There, it was announced that her portrait had been commissioned to be done by Deane Keller of Yale. This portrait (Fig. 1) was illustrated in the March, 1965, issue of the *Journal of Neurosurgery* dedicated to her.

The *Journal of Neurosurgery*

In early 1943 Alfonso Asenjo, the neurosurgeon of Chile, stopped in New Haven to see John Fulton, whose laboratory was in that day the crossroads of the world in neurophysiology. He stressed to Fulton that a journal in English devoted entirely to neurosurgery was sorely needed. Fulton agreed but felt that it should be sponsored by the Harvey Cushing Society. Soon, in a flurry of activity, he obtained the concurrence and consent of the Society and by November 2, 1943, was able to publish a memorandum announcing the *Journal of Neurosurgery* under the auspicous of the Harvey Cushing Society. Through his previous contacts with Banta Press and the publisher Charles C Thomas, he was able to have released enough paper in that time of war scarcities to start the first issue in January, 1944. He could not be convinced to take on the job of editor as he was involved in so many wartime committees. He suggested Louise Eisenhardt for the job which she accepted and held for the next 21 years. To quote German: "It is unlikely that any journal has had such editorial excellence for such a long period. Be it bibliographic errors or split infinitives, Louise hunted them down and eradicated them."

Betty McCarthy described her boss as "a tough task master" and said that she was more intimidated by her than by Cushing. One of Betty's jobs was to read all articles aloud to the editor who followed word for word on the galley proof. She described Dr. Eisenhardt as always formal, addressing her only as Miss McCarthy. It was not until years later in a letter dated April 19, 1956, from the Reef Hotel in Waikiki that she finally saluted her as "Dear Betty." The letter was written friendly, relaxed, and even gossipy. It might be noted here that Betty went to work for Dr. Eisenhardt in 1935 at the age of 17. She thought that Dr. Eisenhardt herself went to work at about the same age for Dr. Cushing.

The Harvey Cushing Society

Around the time that Cushing was retiring from Harvard, the Harvey Cushing Society was formed. Little did Dr. Eisenhardt realize how much a part of her life that organization would become, how much more she would do to earn the accolade "the midwife for modern scientific neurosurgery not only in America but the world over." She served as Secretary-Treasurer from 1934 to 1938, giving up the position for one year to serve as President of the Society from 1938 to 1939. Then, she resumed as Secretary-Treasurer from 1939 to 1952. From 1952 to 1965, she was the Historian of the Society. In that last year she received its highest tribute when she was selected to give the First Annual Cushing Oration. Although she was showing signs of ill health, she gave a perfectly charming recital of reminiscences recorded in her diary over a 50-year period of activity in the field of neurosurgery. With her speech slightly dysarthric, she still held the audience in rapt attention.

Winding Down

Upon returning to New Haven she resumed the task of the *Journal* which was now amassing a large number of manuscripts. Publication was falling far behind. The time had come to offer her relief from this increasingly burdensome task. While she recognized the need for additional help, giving up was not in her nature. At first, this was done by alternating issues with the new editor Dr. Henry L. Heyl, but it was her failing health that ultimately made the decision for her to give up the *Journal* entirely. Interestingly, when the changing of the guard was obviously taking place, her form of denial was such that she never volunteered a word about it to her secretary, her constant companion in the office.

The year 1966 found her in very poor health, requiring prolonged hospitalization. I recall her comment: "Isn't it ironic that I should have a neurologic disorder." With determination she improved temporarily and moved to Rockport, Massachusetts, where she died in her sleep at the home of her sister Mrs. Albert N. Dangerfield on January 22, 1967.

The Louise Eisenhardt Library

While he was still at Yale, Dr. Stevenson Flanigan had helped in the care of Dr. Eisenhardt in her last years. Soon thereafter he was appointed Chairman of Neurosurgery at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. He recently wrote (personal communication, July 19, 1993): "Dr. Eisenhardt's sister from Rockport, Massachusetts, very generously awarded me the monographs and volumes from her library." This gift enabled him "In the interest of the history of neurosurgery" to dedicate "the neurosurgery library to Louise Eisenhardt." Before Dr. Flanigan turned over the relics to Dr. Sam Al-Mefty, the neurosurgical residents from over the years honored him with a dinner and made a substantial gift to the Library, I know of no other such tributes to her.

What remains at Yale are her portrait and the Brain Tumor Registry which now needs some refurbishing. Dr. Louise Eisenhardt, nonetheless, represents an important chapter in the history of neurosurgery, and, above all, in the history of the *Journal of Neurosurgery*. Her story portrays an enviable past that should remain as a strong influence on both the present and future of neurosurgery.

References


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