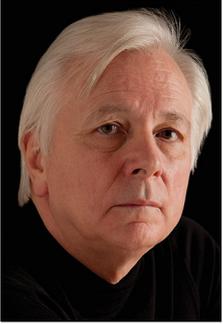




## Profile

### Being Andrew Lees



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For more on **Andrew Lees' academic credentials** see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew\\_Lees\\_\(neurologist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Lees_(neurologist))

**The Hurricane Port: A Social History of Liverpool**  
Lees AJ, Edinburgh, UK: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2011

**Mentored by a Madman, the William Burroughs Experiment**  
Lees AJ, Devon, UK: Notting Hill Editions, 2016

The idea of interviewing Andrew Lees, Professor of Neurology at University College London and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Queen Square (London, UK), troubles me. He is different. Physician, teacher, writer, biographer, autobiographer, renaissance man of undoubted intellectual stature; the normal approach won't do. Wikipedia can tell you all you need to know about his academic and medical achievements: about his being the most highly cited researcher in Parkinson's disease, his string of awards from learned bodies, his membership of this and that academy, his presidency of the International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society, his introduction of apomorphine into clinical practice, his fashioning the most widely used criteria for the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. But this is also the man who wrote (among other things) *The Hurricane Port: A Social History of Liverpool*, and an autobiographic work *Mentored by a Madman, the William Burroughs Experiment* in which he describes the guiding influence of Burroughs—junkie, artist, postmodernist author, self-experimenter—on his career as a neurologist. This is a man who has written that physicians need to look outside the scientific box—to art, to literature, to other people's experiences—to find new creativity in their medical thinking. This is a man who tells me that his own experience of trying a psychedelic drug in the Colombian jungle freed him of some “hard wired negative circuits in his brain” and set his thinking free, improving his later research. I am not sure I understand what he means, nor what it must be like to be him.

I ask if being so intellectually gifted is not isolating. He has already told me that as a boy he “wandered lonely as a cloud”, absorbed in botany, and of his admiration of physicians “who ploughed a lonely furrow”: John Charnley, Patrick Steptoe, Barry Marshall. Yet almost in the same breath he is talking about his love of Liverpool Football Club: *You'll Never Walk Alone* is its anthem. He leaves me behind when he speaks of the Oslerians who influenced him, but he does so with no affectation of manner or speech. His thoughts may be exclusive, but he includes me, all at the same time.

The enigma grows. As a leading medical researcher he is no stranger to the scientific method, statistics, and data, the bigger the better. But he surprises me, saying, “I see the strengths of big data but am not drawn to it personally, and am sceptical of an overreliance on metrics, something so prevalent now. William Burroughs was an invisible mentor who made me aware of the destructiveness of control systems in science. He encouraged me to take risks and search for freedom in an attempt to wrest back a degree of freedom in research.” I wonder what sort of freedom he

means, but then comes something of an answer: “I think formal, carefully controlled self-experimentation in the context of one's research is not unreasonable, and ethical even if there is an element of danger to it.” A 21st century medical scientist advocating a 19th century method of experimentation? The mean and standard deviation relegated by personal experience? Computer power replaced by Sherlock Holmes? I am struggling to believe.

But if this mysterious (to my mind) intellectual activity works for him (read that Wikipedia page!), might it not work for others? Might we all have a Lees rabbit hole down which we can learn to look? But how to find it? “Young people going into neurology should choose their teachers carefully, and learn from them, but be a light unto themselves”, he tells me. “They should also read the original 19th century descriptions of disease rather than modern textbooks, and try to read a novel every month. Art can help one understand the human condition better. You don't need to be a culture buff, but [at least understand how] Henry Walter Bates, who loved his work in the Amazon collecting bugs and marvelling at Nature's diversity, eventually found that he needed something more to sustain him. That is where Mendelssohn and even woodwork come in for a doctor.” Does he mean science can move forward through a serendipitous finding, through an analogy understood, through a metaphor—something that a prepared mind might notice? Before I ask I remember a quote from Burroughs on the cover of his *Mentored by a Madman*: “The time has come for the line between literature and science, a purely arbitrary line, to be erased.” I wonder how deep his rabbit hole may go, and whether new science or Wonderland lies at the bottom. Wait. Maybe they are the same.

Now semi-retired, he spends more of his time writing, later walking to give himself “time to think”. I picture him alone with his thoughts; his real walking is in his mind. He appreciates I have noticed something melancholic in him, and he shares with me that he is looking for someone I believe he fears may be lost: “I am trying hard to regain my childhood entrancement with the natural world, but it now only comes in occasional golden moments”, he laments.

He's been charming, cordial, and, if a bit perplexing, jovial and helpful, so I dare ask: how do you think others see you? “Probably as complex, contradictory, and a maverick trying to get out”, he answers. Spot on, I concur. I leave believing I may have scratched the surface of Andrew Lees, but suddenly question whether I have learnt more about him or myself.

Adrian Burton