

Book of the Day.

WILLIAM OSLER.

PHYSICIAN AND SCIENTIST.

SIR WILLIAM OSLER. By HARVEY CUSHING. (Oxford: University Press. London: Milford. Two Volumes. 37s. 6d. net.)

Sir William Osler achieved the rare distinction of becoming a legendary figure two decades before the time of his death. Criticism, where he was concerned, was suspended, as if by mutual consent, on both sides of the Atlantic. Physicians old and young received his teaching with reverence, and spoke of him as of a seer endowed with supreme gifts of wisdom.

It was all rather strange, even a little mysterious. For Osler was a simple and very kindly man, who pretended to no special knowledge, and exhibited few of the vanities of greatly successful physicians. His outlook on life was not that of a pioneer, certainly not that of a reformer of the iconoclastic type; he enjoyed his success, his work, his teaching, his friends, his gifts as an orator, his Oxford professorship with the keen, boyish enjoyment of a man unspoiled by life's rewards, yet by no means insensible to their value. He trod on few toes; he helped innumerable lame dogs over innumerable stiles; he never refused his sympathy to sorrow or suffering, nor ever failed to encourage young men in their early work, nor ever showed himself careless of the claims of his colleagues or contemporaries. He had a vast respect for the "Old Masters" of his profession, and indeed for those of all professions. But seldom, or never, did he fare forth alone to "carry war into the enemy's country."

Wherein, then, lay the secret of his power? The answer to this question, we believe, will take shape, though slowly, in the mind of every reader of Dr. Harvey Cushing's book. Dr. Cushing has dared greatly in producing a two-volume biography so soon after the death of its subject. He has not been less daring in the manner of his compilation. But he has presented a great figure so that his greatness shines forth. The Osler of his pages is a man worthy of all the reverence which the instinct of two continents so readily accorded to him.

Perhaps the secret can be expressed by saying that Osler loved humanity with a generous and also an ingenuous affection. He could not hide this regard, and he never tried to hide it. Thus he always, and instantly, saw the best side of everything and of everybody. Nor could any revelation of the worst side shake his faith in the essential goodness of the world. Thus he was able to become an apostle of the "new scientific medicine" without arousing the animosity of the most old-fashioned. He bade the professions of America and Britain do honour to their great pioneers, and at his mere bidding honour was readily accorded. Disputes which must have lasted a lifetime, had he not appeared, were settled overnight.

It was a tremendous service to medicine because it was rendered at the most critical moment of the growth of this science. Osler saw that the doctor has need of the scientist just as the scientist has need of the doctor. In his great book, "The Principles and Practice of Medicine," he "wedded" chemistry, physics, statistical science, and biology to clinical study. He made the humblest practitioner a freeman of the "new world."

And he did it artlessly, without apparent effort, without even seeming to know the magnitude of the gift he was conferring. It was so natural, in his view, that all men should desire to render the best possible service to their fellows that he assumed, as a matter of course, a universal eagerness to forge new weapons against disease. Nor was his assumption ill founded. Osler's life is a shining example of the power of sympathy. His success came to him because humanity responds always to those who love it and believe in it. That success surprised some of his contemporaries. It is probably true that it never surprised the great doctor himself.

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